

The background of the cover is a photograph of two men. On the left, a man with long, light-colored hair and a slight beard looks directly at the camera with a serious expression. On the right, another man with dark, curly hair is shown in profile, looking down and playing a black electric guitar. He is wearing a dark tank top and a patterned guitar strap. The lighting is dramatic, with a bright light source from the upper right creating a strong highlight on the second man's hair and a blueish tint across the rest of the image.

MLRPress

Black
Heart
Down

S.J. Frost

For Robbie Russo, only one man has ever owned his heart, Kyler Christenson. The years at each other's sides never diminished his love for him, but with the rise to fame in their rock band, Black Heart Down, more than a few challenges hindered their relationship. Now, he's reached a crossroads, either he'll have all of Kyler, or he'll walk away from everything they've built together.

Kyler may be fearless on stage, but if there's one thing to send his heart crashing down, it's losing Robbie. When Robbie delivers his ultimatum, Kyler's willing to do what it takes for things work. But change doesn't happen quickly, and when he makes a terrible mistake, all their history together might not be enough to save their future.

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S.J. FROST

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CHAPTER ONE

Robbie walked out of the airport. He glanced to his left, to his right, and exhaled a heavy sigh. He turned and went to lean back against the building, sliding down the wall until he sat on the ground. He lowered his head so his Michigan Wolverines cap covered his face, though it was already nearly impossible to recognize him with the dark sunglasses he wore. Still, the last thing he needed was fans in his face hounding for pictures and autographs.

Right now, he didn't feel like being Robbie Russo, the lead guitarist for Black Heart Down. He just wanted to be Robbie Russo, the guy who grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, who had never dreamed of becoming a rock star...until *he* entered his life.

Robbie pulled out his cell phone and glanced at the time. He had rushed through getting his bags, worried about making Kyler wait, but he should've known Ky would be late picking him up.

He let his head fall back on the building, letting out another sigh. He didn't know why he expected things to be different. One week away wouldn't change anything. It wasn't like they hadn't spent time apart before. Hell, even when they separated, they were together. Being in the same band, they could never fully break away from each other. Anytime he walked away, it was only a matter of time before he had to come back to Kyler.

And he always did. Even more, he always ended up falling back into bed with him. So what did that say about him? Why couldn't he come back and *not* want Ky's lips on his, Ky's hands exploring him, his cock buried inside him?

Robbie closed his eyes. He could see him in his mind, young and arrogant on the first day Kyler transferred to his high school in their senior year. Kyler's family had moved from Indianapolis to Ann Arbor with the hopes that taking him out of a big city would keep him out of trouble. Drinking, partying, getting into fights, even at seventeen years old, Ky had a bad boy rock star attitude.

Moving him to a college town really wasn't the best solution, but since Kyler's father had a brother there, they thought having more family around would work to keep him in line.

But it was more than teenage rebellion that caused Kyler's parents to move him. Kyler had been caught doing something his family never forgave him for, and to this day it had left a mark on him. Of course, it was just one of many scars Kyler's family had left on him.

Back on that first day, when Kyler walked into his school, people flocked to him as much as they did now. Robbie didn't, though. At the first sight of him, Kyler made him feel things he wasn't ready to face, and those feelings made Robbie want to avoid him, pretend he didn't exist. But as in all things, Kyler wasn't about to be denied.

The first time they spoke, he was sitting on the porch of his parents' house, playing his guitar, and when he looked up, there was Ky standing on the sidewalk watching him. Without waiting for an invitation, Kyler took a seat on the porch beside him. He stopped playing to ask what Kyler wanted, but before he could get a word out, Kyler started criticizing his guitar skills. Robbie became instantly pissed at his arrogance, and yet at the same time, found himself unable to turn away from Kyler's hazel eyes, captivated by the flecks of green shining in them.

After that day, Kyler would find him in the halls at school, sit by him at lunch, come over to his house. It seemed wherever he went, Ky would appear. Before he knew it, he found himself seeking out Kyler during the rare moments he didn't show up on his own. He had to admit, it was an amazing feeling being swept up in Kyler's popularity. People wanted to be his friend because of how close he was to Ky. Only, no one knew how close they really were.

Thinking back on it now, he realized how stupid he'd been. He let Kyler do anything he wanted. He'd like to say it was youthful naivety, but after eleven years, nothing had changed. He still let Kyler do whatever he wanted and forgave him for all his wrongs. But the memories of how devoted Kyler was to him in

high school, and even afterward when they moved to New York together with the hopes of building a band, carried him through. During those early years, Ky's beautiful eyes gazed only at him.

Maybe it was wanting to recapture those old feelings that sent him running back to Ann Arbor for a week. He told Kyler he wanted to visit his family before Black Heart left on tour. Really, he just needed some space. Too bad for him the trip hurt more than helped. Staying in the place of so many happy memories made his present life feel all the more messed up.

Not to mention, he let his sister drive his Porsche after she begged him for two days and she managed to blow the transmission, which blew his freakin' mind. She'd told him she could drive a stick. Clearly she couldn't. Either way, rather than rent a car and drive back to Chicago, he decided to catch a flight. Another bad idea. Between all the damn delays, it took twice as long to fly than it would've to drive. Plus, it left him dependent on Kyler, a position he didn't like being in these days.

"Can I ask why you're sitting on the nasty ass ground?"

Robbie's heart jumped at the sound of the voice, the deep baritone bordering on being a bass. After all their years together, off again and on again, his body still reacted to it the same way it had when he was a teenager.

Robbie turned his head, his gaze traveling up the long legs clad in dark brown leather pants, pausing for a moment on the full crotch and mentally kicking himself when he did. He looked higher. With his brown leather jacket open, the black shirt Kyler wore conformed to his body, giving glimpses of the lean muscle beneath.

Robbie's gaze reached Kyler's face, his features slender, sharp, and beautiful. He couldn't help himself from staring at Kyler's lips, so perfectly shaped, and envision how they had moved over his body so many times. Kyler's golden blond hair was bound back in a ponytail. Sunglasses shaded his eyes.

Robbie shook off the feelings Kyler raised in him. "I'm sitting on the nasty ass ground because I got tired of waiting for you.

You're late."

Kyler offered a hand to him. "I'm not that late."

Robbie ignored his hand and stood. "Either way, it shows you didn't care enough to be on time."

Kyler let out a frustrated huff. "Christ, there was traffic, okay?" He reached for the black duffel bag on Robbie's shoulder. Robbie twisted, attempting to evade his grasp. Kyler snatched the duffel bag's strap regardless and yanked it off Robbie's shoulder, carrying it toward the silver Land Rover parked close by. "I don't know why everything has to be a battle."

Robbie watched him walk away. With a sigh, he followed after him. He climbed in the SUV and gazed out the window as Kyler pulled away from the curb. After several minutes of silence, he glanced at him. Kyler drove with his right hand resting atop the steering wheel, his left elbow propped against the door with his cheek on his fist, his posture, his expression, all revealing he was tense and upset.

Robbie broke the silence by clearing his throat. "I'm sorry. I was being shitty back there. I'm just pissed about my car and all the crap trying to get back here."

Kyler looked at him, a forgiving smile on his lips. "It's alright. You should've let me come and get you, though."

"There wasn't any reason for you to drive all that way."

"Yeah there was."

"What?"

Kyler reached across the distance between them and brushed Robbie's cheek with the backs of his fingers. "You."

Robbie gazed at him. "What about your vow never to go back there again?"

"If it was for you, there's nowhere in the world I wouldn't go."

A slow smile curved Robbie's lips. "Why do you make it so damn hard for me to stay pissed at you?"

Kyler rested his hand on Robbie's thigh. "It's not my fault you can't resist my charm. Besides, just being late isn't worth getting pissed about. Save it for when I do something really worthy of being pissed over. I'm sure it'll happen before the day ends."

Robbie rolled his eyes and laid his hand over Kyler's. That was the simple truth of things; he couldn't resist him.

"I know what we can do that'll put you in a good mood," Kyler said. "Let's hang at my place. We can order a pizza and watch a movie."

Robbie shifted beneath Kyler's hand. The idea sounded great, the words meant to be kind, and yet to him, it screamed at how separate they really were. They lived in the same building, but had separate homes. It'd been that way for a long time. Pretty much ever since they struck their fame and fortune. But then, that's when everything changed. Together, but separate. That's what their lives had become.

Robbie shook his head slightly. "I'm really tired, Ky."

"That's fine. You can crash at my place."

"And how's that going to help me?"

Kyler grinned at him. "I'll be good. Promise."

Robbie shot him a doubtful look.

"Seriously." The tone of Kyler's voice softened with a concerned edge. "You look really tired. I'll let you rest."

Robbie stared at him, trying to tell if Kyler was being genuine. That was always the trick with him. Kyler was a master at knowing the right things to say and the right way to say them to get what he wanted. He usually could tell when Kyler was trying to pull one of his stunts on him, and right now, it seemed like he was being honest.

"Alright. Have you heard from Adam and Kevin? I haven't talked to them in a couple days."

"Yeah, I talked to Adam last night. They're hanging in Vegas for an extra couple days. Kevin's sister's wedding was yesterday and they haven't stopped partying since. I told him they better

cool it or else they'll be burned out for the road, but I don't think he could hear me over the slots. He's going to come back broke, I know it."

"He always loses his ass in Vegas."

Kyler laughed. "And not in a good way."

Robbie chuckled with him. "I'm still surprised you didn't go."

"Why would I? You weren't going."

"Yeah, but since I went to see my parents, you could've gone off with them rather than stay here by yourself."

"A little quiet time once in a while isn't a bad thing. Besides, I wanted to stay close in case you needed me. And you did."

Robbie gave him a skeptical glance. "You're starting to freak me out. I can't figure out if you're full of charm or bullshit today."

"Maybe I'm just trying to say I missed you," Kyler said softly.

Robbie stared at him for a moment longer. He tightened his hold on Kyler's hand. "I missed you, too. And I'm sorry for our fight before I left."

Kyler took a deep breath. "No, it was my fault. I shouldn't have been flirting with Alanna after I told you I wouldn't. Even though I never intended to follow through with anything, I shouldn't have been doing it. It's just, flirting is such a habit, I don't realize I'm doing it half the time."

Robbie looked forward. And that just shot what little bit of a good mood he'd gathered straight to hell. Of course, it was the truth. Kyler flirted with every attractive man and woman who crossed his path, and sometimes that path led to the other person's bed. Kyler managed to not take that step when they were actively together, proof he was capable of some semblance of faithfulness. But then, he already knew that from their early days together.

The constant flirting, even if Kyler had no intentions behind it, was normally what pushed him to the edge to walk away for a while. During those "breaks," he'd go off on his own, finding other people to have flings with, and Kyler would do the same.

Ultimately, whether because they truly loved each other, or their history together, or they couldn't fully get away from each other with the band, they always ended up sleeping side by side again.

He liked to think it was because they truly loved each other. Though, sometimes it seemed like wishful thinking. He didn't doubt the love he had for Kyler. He could feel it inside him, so deep he knew it had to be entwined with his soul. Feeling it from Kyler wasn't always as easy.

But putting the blame on Kyler for their problems *was* easy. Kyler made it so. Sometimes, when he thought back to how they'd gotten to this point, he wondered if the fault was really his own. The first time they'd separated, they had just released their first album. Overnight sensation was the exact definition of Black Heart Down. They dominated the charts, fans pounced on them wherever they went, and a tour playing major venues was booked.

He got caught up in the rush. Everywhere he went, people fawned over him. And the men, so many men hit on him. Kyler had been his first kiss, his first touch, his first everything, and he'd been the only one since. He couldn't deny he was curious about what it'd be like to experience someone else, and he made what he now believed was the worst mistake of his life; he told Kyler how he felt.

They had gotten into a raging argument that ended with "maybe they'd be better as friends rather than lovers." They broke from each other's beds, the apartment they still shared, and separated, but never fully severed, their relationship. In time, they hit a point where it was almost as if they had an understanding between each other, and they'd simply walk away from each other's beds with hardly a word and fall back in the same way.

Except now, he was tired of walking away, and if he had to one more time, he wasn't sure he'd have the strength to come back.

"You're really quiet," Kyler said. "I said something wrong, didn't I?"

“Don’t worry about it. I was just thinking.”

Kyler nodded and pulled out his cell phone. “The usual on the pizza?”

“That’s fine.”

As Kyler ordered the food, Robbie continued his thoughts. He didn’t want to walk away. It was the last thing he wanted. What he wanted most was a life with Kyler, and not just any life but one in the open. It seemed an impossible dream. Kyler wasn’t out publicly on being bi, which really, even though he flirted with women, actually sleeping with them was rare and had become even more so in recent years. It was just more publicly accepted for him to look like the rock star stud with women, and if there was one thing Kyler did love, it was his rock star image.

Kyler liked his men, though. *A lot*. And that’s where so many problems lay.

Another sigh escaped Robbie. Really, the problem could be with him, too. Where before he was content to have any part of Kyler in his life, now he wanted all of him again.

Recording the last album at the Phoenix Records studios hadn’t helped, either. They went in at almost the same time as Conquest, and while it was great becoming good friends with their guitarist, Kenny Cooper, and better friends with lead singer, Jesse Alexander, there was a downside. Superstar singer, Evan Arden, was also with Conquest as not only their new manager, but Jesse’s husband. Seeing them together, witnessing their care and devotion to each other, it made him look at all that was missing in his own life.

Robbie glanced down at Kyler’s hand resting on his thigh. All those missing things could be his if only the man he wanted would be willing to give them. He turned his gaze back out the window. Hope could be a hard thing to keep hold of, and he wasn’t sure how much longer he could cling to it before it finally slipped free.

CHAPTER TWO

Kyler opened the door to his penthouse and let Robbie walk in first. His gaze went to Robbie's ass. After not having seen him for a week, it looked so small, tight, and delicious. His cock started filling at just the sight, but he forced himself to look away.

It seemed despite their week apart, Robbie was still pissed at him, and just when he thought the tension between them was relaxing, Kyler said something to annoy him again. He didn't know what it was that set Robbie off. He'd been so careful with his words, trying to tell him he'd missed him, to show him he was glad he was back. But somewhere in all that, he'd said something wrong.

That's how it was between them lately. Sure, they had their on and off moments before, but hell, with what they did for a living, a committed relationship was a damn tall order. For him, he was happy knowing Robbie would always be there for him, and he'd always be there for Robbie. All the others they played with were nothing more than little bursts of good times. What he and Robbie had for each other was true love and so much more important.

At least, that's what he thought. He always used to think Robbie felt the same way, but lately, Robbie was moody, easily agitated, and they were fighting more often than they ever had. He figured they were just going through a bad spell. Things would work themselves out. They always did.

Kyler tossed Robbie's bag into the black leather recliner. "I'm getting so sick of living in this place. I think after this tour, I'm going to buy a house."

Robbie glanced at him over his shoulder. "Yeah, right. That'd mean you'd actually be planning on staying here long term."

Kyler walked across the spacious living room toward him. "Well, aren't we?"

"I am, at least."

"Why do you always have to say things like that? You know if you're staying, then I am, too."

Robbie gave a tight nod as he dropped down on the couch, pulling off his baseball cap and slapping it down on the couch's arm.

Kyler stood in front of him. He ran a hand over Robbie's black hair, fairly short all around, but long enough for him to comb his fingers through and grip a fistful during more intimate moments. Robbie glanced up at him. If the sight of Robbie's ass was enough to start arousing him, then his blue eyes outlined with thick black lashes, his beautiful features at once soft and masculine with stubble shadowing his jaw, finished him.

Kyler fought to focus his thoughts away from his desire. "You look like you have a headache. Do you need some aspirin?"

Robbie shook his head. "No, I'm fine."

"How about a beer?"

"That'd be better."

Kyler turned toward the kitchen. He grabbed a couple Budweisers from the refrigerator. Not the most exotic of beers, but it's what he drank as a teenager and it still remained a favorite. He opened both, then took a long drink from one. He lowered it and leaned back against one of the counters, wondering why he'd told Robbie he could crash here and he wouldn't touch him. He wanted to grab him, drop him to the floor, and work their tension and frustration away with their bodies wrapped around each other.

The call buzzer rang through his apartment to break his thoughts, which he was glad for. If they continued, his hard-on would never go down.

Kyler went to the monitor and confirmed with the doorman that the pizza was his, then went back to the living room and handed Robbie the beer. "I'm going to change out of these things." He gave the top of his pants a tug.

Robbie caught his movement, and also the large bulge pushing against Kyler's pants. He flicked his gaze up to Kyler's. "Alright."

Kyler slowly turned away, walking toward a hall to go to the master bedroom.

Robbie couldn't resist sneaking a look at Kyler's ass in the leather pants. He reclined back on the couch, unconsciously running his hand over the supple black leather, then realized he was doing it and let out a frustrated groan, since he knew exactly what the gesture mimicked. He gazed around the room, attempting to distract his mind.

The tables were glass with stainless steel accents, the décor consisting of concert posters, Gold and Platinum records, two electric guitars, one acoustic. Everything cool, hard, rock star, like Kyler himself. Yet there was style and softness to the place also, like in the chairs and couch.

Robbie closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. Now his thoughts had gone from bad to weird. He was analyzing Kyler's furniture trying to gain insight into him. He had officially lost it.

A knock sounded on the door. Robbie started to get up, pausing halfway to standing as Kyler came back down the hall wearing an Indianapolis Colts T-shirt and blue workout pants. He'd taken his hair out of the ponytail and shook his fingers through the golden strands as he walked toward the door.

Robbie dropped back to sitting. When Kyler was dressed in trendy clothes, he always looked hot. But when he was like this, to him, Kyler was even more stunning.

Kyler paid for the pizza and dropped it off on the coffee table on his way back into the kitchen to get plates. "Go ahead and throw in whatever movie you want." He smirked over his shoulder. "You know where the porn is."

Robbie couldn't help but chuckle. "Yeah, but unless you've bought some new ones, we've already watched them all."

Kyler returned with the plates, offering one to Robbie. "True, but we've also never made it all the way through one. The second half of any of them would be like a whole new movie."

Robbie stared at him. His heart pounded quicker. His cock, which he was sure hadn't gone all the way down since getting around Kyler, hardened to its fullest. The intensity in Kyler's eyes was a look he knew well, and it always defeated him. He'd never understand how he could want to deny him and have him at the same moment. But he couldn't do both, so he'd have to choose which path to follow; his heart telling him to surrender to Kyler's smile, or his mind telling him to keep things cool.

Robbie reached up to take the plate, but laid his hand more over Kyler's. "You never gave me a welcome home kiss."

Kyler wet his lips. "I was under the impression you didn't want me to kiss you."

Robbie pulled the plate from Kyler's hand and set it on the table. He stood, leaving only inches between them. He angled his lips toward Kyler's. "I always want you to kiss me."

Kyler lifted one hand, sliding it to the back of Robbie's neck as he leaned forward, whispering before their lips touched, "That's good, because I always want to kiss you."

A hushed moan sounded in Robbie's throat. He wrapped his arms around Kyler. As their bodies pressed together, his chest met with Kyler's, his hands explored the muscle of Kyler's back. Kyler's kiss was tender, his tongue gliding over his own in slow, deep thrusts. Each time they had tension between them, when they finally allowed their hearts and bodies to succumb to what they truly wanted, it was always like this, as if they were starting over, again and again. And yet even though things would feel fresh, underneath it all was comfort and familiarity.

Robbie moved one hand up Kyler's back to toy with the ends of his hair. The gentle kiss was wonderful, but he wanted more. He wanted Kyler to unleash his hunger, his aggressiveness. Robbie dropped both hands to Kyler's ass, grabbing hold of each cheek and jerking him forward so their hips pressed tight together.

Kyler broke the kiss, his voice breathless. "You won't be getting any rest if you keep this up."

Robbie lightly nipped Kyler's neck. "I've changed my mind about that."

Those words were all Kyler needed. He spun Robbie and pushed him down to the couch, following after him. As Robbie tried to get situated on his back, he could hardly move from Kyler's weight on top of him, and the rough and frantic kisses Kyler was placing on him as he pushed his shirt up. A laugh slipped from Robbie as he attempted to wiggle out of his shirt.

Kyler stopped kissing him, giving him a playful glare. "Are you laughing at me because I'm so hot for you?"

"Pretty much."

Kyler finished pulling Robbie's shirt off. "I guess I'll have to show you that's not a very nice thing to do."

Kyler covered one of Robbie's nipples and sucked hard. Robbie groaned between clenched teeth and arched up to Kyler's mouth. Kyler lightly pulled at the nipple with his teeth. Robbie moaned louder. He tried to grip Kyler's back, but the shirt blocked him. Seeming to sense Robbie wanted to feel his skin, Kyler sat up and tore his shirt off, then went down again to cover Robbie's smooth torso with licks and kisses.

Kyler reached Robbie's jeans, quickly opened them, and dragged them down, his gaze on Robbie's hard cock. He rubbed his palm along the shaft and glanced up at Robbie. "Were you with anyone while you were gone?"

Robbie shook his head. "No. You?"

"No."

Robbie let his doubt show in his expression.

Kyler took his hand from Robbie's cock and fixed him with a serious look. "Don't look at me like that. You know I'm always honest about it, even when I know it's not what you want to hear."

It was true. If there was one thing Kyler was always wholly honest with him about, it was when he slept with someone else, and he returned Kyler's honesty with his own, always telling

him when he'd been in a different person's bed. They were both diligent in using protection with other people and in getting tested regularly, but it'd been a long time since either of them had strayed. Even though they'd had some good fights in the past few months, they managed to work through them.

Though, that was another common thing in their relationship. It seemed like it was so much easier being together when they weren't on the road. Maybe because the temptation was less, things were quieter and they could almost live normal lives. It made him dread leaving on tour next week.

Kyler cupped Robbie cheek, looking into his eyes. "I'd never do anything to risk your health and safety."

Robbie laid his hand over Kyler's. "I know. I'm the same way. You mean too much to me."

A crooked smirk quirked up one corner of Kyler's lips. "Now look who's being charming."

Robbie chuckled and gave him a bump on the side with his knee. "Before you ruin the mood with talking, I think you better just put your mouth to work in a different way."

Kyler started to lower himself down again. "I just want you to remember you're the one who started this. I was all for letting you rest."

Before Robbie could retort, half his cock was buried in Kyler's warm mouth, and words became lost to him. His body relaxed as all sensation focused on his cock. He lay still for several moments, enjoying Kyler's movements, the slickness of his saliva, the softness of his tongue, then he opened his eyes and looked at him.

Kyler was trying to hold his hair back with one hand while keeping himself over Robbie's cock, but a few strands still fell loose to rest along his cheek. Robbie reached down and gathered Kyler's hair to hold it for him.

With his hand free, Kyler drifted it up the muscled ridges in Robbie's abdomen, over the curve of one pectoral to pinch a nipple. The spark of pain made Robbie jerk his hips. His cock

head hit the back of Kyler's throat, but rather than back off, Kyler pushed it deeper. Robbie's breathing quickened at feeling Kyler's strong throat muscles swallowing him. His cock felt more sensitive with every motion of Kyler's head. Heat burned through him. His muscles tightened.

Robbie yelled out as he came. He gasped and writhed as Kyler sucked him harder through it, as if trying to forcefully draw his cum out. Even when his climax subsided, Kyler continued to suck him, sending jolts of pleasure through him. When he finally eased back, Robbie lay unmoving save for the rise and fall of his chest as he fought for breath.

Kyler crawled up Robbie's body and grinned down at him. "Now do you know I missed you?"

"I don't know anything other than I feel really fucking good right now." Robbie opened his eyes and guided Kyler down to his smiling lips. His taste on Kyler's tongue made him hungry for Kyler's cum. He brought the kiss to an end, whispering against Kyler's lips, "But now I want to show you how much I missed you."

Kyler placed a soft kiss on Robbie's lips, then got off the couch to take off his pants. "That's a relief. I was starting to worry you hadn't missed me at all."

Robbie chuckled, his laughter stopping as Kyler pushed his pants down. He gazed at Kyler's long cock, the shaft thick, his full sac, all his pubic hair shaven. It was still the most perfectly formed package he'd ever seen.

Kyler climbed onto the couch again, straddling Robbie's waist and kneeling above him. He placed one hand on his hip, the other on his cock, giving it a few long strokes. "So are you going to show me you missed me, or should I jerk off and come on you to show you a second time how much I missed you?"

Robbie started sliding down the couch on his back. "Like I'm going to let you waste it." As his chest reached Kyler's thighs, he lifted his head up to place a kiss on the cock's tip.

Kyler reached down with one hand, supporting Robbie's head

for him. He nudged Robbie's lips with his cock. Robbie opened his mouth wide, letting him slide it in himself.

Kyler's cock filled Robbie's mouth. The taste of pre-cum spurred his desire for more. Robbie gripped the shaft in a tight fist, pumping it hard and fast while vigorously sucking. He heard Kyler's quick breathing, could feel it in the tightness of his body; Kyler was already close.

Kyler clenched his fingers in Robbie's hair, forcing him to stop moving. Robbie held still, knowing what Kyler wanted to do. Kyler's hips rocked forward. Robbie closed his eyes, his pleasure sounding in a moan. He couldn't help it. He loved it when Kyler took full control like this.

Kyler looked down at him, watching how he pumped his cock into Robbie's mouth. Robbie accepted it so readily, his expression lost in pleasure. Just watching how he took it pushed his orgasm closer. He thrust deeper, wanting his cock head to go down Robbie's throat. For as tight a hold as he had on him, Robbie still managed to move forward and take it down himself.

Kyler sucked in a sharp breath. His climax was coming. He wanted to hold back, but knew he couldn't. He pulled his hips back slightly, letting out a long moan as ecstasy spun through him.

Robbie swallowed quickly to take all Kyler's fluid, but he couldn't swallow fast enough and some escaped out the corners of his mouth. When no more came from Kyler's cock, he eased back, cleaning his lips with his tongue.

Robbie ran a hand up Kyler's thigh. "Didn't you even jerk off this week?"

Kyler grinned at him. "No. I saved everything for you."

Robbie returned his grin. "Well, aren't I the lucky boy?"

Kyler wiped some cum from the corner of Robbie's mouth with his thumb. "More like I am."

Robbie took his hand and gave it a downward tug. As Kyler lay over him, Robbie brought their lips together in a slow kiss.

Throughout it, he caressed up and down Kyler's spine, just as Kyler's fingers brushed his cheek, down his neck, and danced over his arm and chest. The hunger and desperation from moments before was gone, replaced by warmth and tenderness.

Robbie lost himself in savoring the feel of Kyler's body on top of him. When Kyler's hips moved to press their hard cocks together, he knew Kyler was ready to start a second round. He drew his lips slowly from Kyler's. "Let's go to the bedroom."

"You knew exactly what I was thinking."

"You make it pretty obvious." Robbie rolled his hips so his cock ground against Kyler's.

Kyler got off him and stood up, holding a hand down to him. "Just remember I'm not to blame for this. I was—"

"Going to let me rest. I know." Robbie took his offered hand and got up with a pull from him. "You can stop saying that now."

"I'm only doing it to make sure you remember for later."

Robbie stepped close to him, letting his cock slide along Kyler's. His voice deepened to sensual timbre. "Why don't you make it so I'll remember in other ways?"

Kyler's brushed his lips across Robbie's. "I can definitely do that."

Robbie turned for the bedroom, Kyler following, his hands on Robbie's waist.

The king-sized bed with its headboard of twisted stainless steel bars was positioned in front of tall windows that were coated so they could be viewed out, but not in. Even after so many nights in Kyler's bed, it still weirded him out having sex in front of the windows, knowing people were below going about their daily lives while he was in the throes of pleasure above with nothing but glass to guard their privacy. Of course, he also had to admit there was a certain thrill to it, and he knew Kyler got a rush out of it.

It was strange, really. Kyler so closely guarded his sexuality from the public, and yet behind panes of glass, with the world in

view, he showed his most hidden, most intimate side.

Robbie shook off the thoughts. He'd already analyzed Kyler's living room, he sure as hell wasn't going to do his bedroom next. A bedroom was meant for two things, sleeping and fucking. No deep thoughts belonged here.

As he reached the edge of the bed, he turned and found Kyler's lips in a passionate kiss. Kyler guided him down to the bed, drawing back from the kiss to get the lube. Robbie moved to the center and lay back, gazing at the city covered in dusk's purple and gray haze. He brought his attention to Kyler as he moved between his legs and lifted each to rest on his shoulders. When he felt Kyler's slicked fingers massaging his hole, he closed his eyes, letting himself succumb to the sensations Kyler delivered, first with one finger slowly entering him, then two.

Kyler gently worked Robbie's gland. He fondled Robbie's sac with his free hand, then went up his cock to smear the wetness filling the slit across the tip. He heard a rough groan from Robbie, saw and felt him roll his ass on his fingers. He knew Robbie's pleasure was peaking again. After so many years of intimacy, spoken words were less articulate than the way they could read each other's bodies.

Kyler pulled his fingers out. He lined his lubed cock up with Robbie's hole and watched it push in, feeling at the same moment Robbie's heat and muscles squeezing him. He kept moving forward until his body met Robbie's. He paused, waiting for Robbie to show him what he wanted.

Robbie stretched both arms back and gripped a steel bar from the headboard in each hand.

Kyler gazed at Robbie's sleek, lean torso stretched out, the movement telling him exactly what Robbie wanted. He placed his hands under Robbie's thighs, spreading them wider and pushing them back as he started driving into him hard and fast.

Robbie used the bars to brace himself against each pounding thrust. This was what he needed from Kyler, to burn their tension away with his passion. Kyler's heat always rekindled their

relationship.

Robbie's moans grew louder, leaving him on each exhale of his rapid breathing. He released one of the steel bars to grab his cock. A few quick strokes was all he needed. He bucked up, rocking on Kyler's cock as he came.

Kyler opened his eyes to see the cum leave Robbie's cock. The sight of it, the salty, bitter scent of it, triggered his own release. All his breath left him in a hard groan. He continued thrusting, slower and gentler, for a few moments before stopping. He sat still, knowing he had to pull out, but not wanting to. Robbie's legs slipped off his shoulders to fall heavily to the bed, telling him Robbie was just as spent. For the moment, at least.

Kyler gradually pulled his softening cock from him. He crawled up to lie at Robbie's side and dropped down onto his stomach, grinning at him. "So, are you ready to rest now?"

Robbie laughed and gave him a light shove. "Will you quit with that already? It's your fault, anyhow, that I can't resist you."

Chuckling softly, Kyler flipped onto his side toward him. "And I'm damn glad for that."

Robbie laid his hand on Kyler's cheek. As he gazed into Kyler's eyes, he could see so clearly what he so often doubted; Kyler's love for him. Still smiling, he brought their lips together. As the kiss ended, he rested his arm across Kyler, Kyler's went around him, and sleep covered them both.

CHAPTER THREE

A contented sigh passed over Robbie's lips as he started to wake up. He opened his eyes to see Kyler lying on his back beside him, still sleeping. Robbie inched closer to him. Just the small movements reminded him of their night together. He had told Kyler to show him how much he missed him, and from how fatigued and well-used his body felt, Kyler had missed him *a lot*.

Robbie ran a hand over Kyler's smooth chest and nuzzled close to his ear. A soft groan hummed in Kyler's throat. Robbie sucked on Kyler's diamond studded earlobe, then gave it a light tug with his teeth. "I'm going to get a shower. I think you need to join me."

Kyler smiled, his eyes still closed. His voice came out raspy with sleep. "Good morning to you, too."

Robbie chuckled softly and kissed his cheek. He rolled onto his other side, slung his legs over the edge of the bed, and sat up, stretching his arms up and back behind his head.

Kyler gazed at the flexed muscles in Robbie's back. He reached for him, his fingers traveling lightly over the hard lines down to the soft crack of Robbie's ass. "You're so beautiful."

Robbie glanced back at him with a smile. "What brought that compliment on?"

"It's something I always think, but admiring you right now, I felt the need to say it."

Robbie turned more toward him, laying his hand on Kyler's cheek. "Thank you. I think the same about you. Especially right now. I've always thought you're at your most beautiful in the mornings, right when you wake up." He moved his hand to brush his fingers over Kyler's hair. "When your hair is still tousled." He traced a soft line down Kyler's temple near his eye. "When you still look a little sleepy." His touch moved over the rough stubble on Kyler's jaw. "And you haven't shaved yet."

A playful smile curved Kyler's lips. "So you like me looking rough."

"I like you looking like you."

Kyler laid his hand overtop Robbie's resting on his jaw. He drew it to his lips, placing a kiss in the palm. He gave Robbie's hand a light tug. Robbie went down to him, their lips touching in a soft kiss.

The phone rang, interrupting their solitude, though their kiss continued. The ringing stopped right before Kyler's answering machine would pick up. Robbie smiled through the kiss. "Someone knows your machine."

"Seems so. Since you're here, that only leaves about three other people who would know it. And there's no way I'm picking it up in case it's Rosa. She'll just want to put us to work."

Robbie nodded at the mention of their manager. Rosa excelled at all things when it came to the business end of the band. Even during down time, she never stopped working on ways to keep them in the public eye.

The phone started ringing again.

Robbie drifted his fingers down the center of Kyler's chest. "How long do you think we can hide from her?"

"I don't know, but I'm willing to go on the run if you are."

Robbie laughed, pausing as he heard Kyler's answering machine pick up. A voice he recognized came on, not Rosa, but their drummer, Adam.

"Ky, pick up the phone. I know you're there. It's too damn early for your ass to be out of bed. Pick up, pick up, pick up. It's an emergency. Pick up, pick up, pick up..."

"It better be an emergency," Kyler grumbled, rolling toward the phone on the nightstand.

Robbie launched across Kyler, stopping him from grabbing the phone. "I'll answer it. You'll do nothing but yell at him."

"You're damn right I will. He deserves to be yelled at being

that obnoxious. Listen to him”

“...pick up, pick up, pick up...”

Robbie snatched the phone, interrupting Adam with, “Hey, what’s going on?”

“Robbie? Let me guess, Ky’s pissed right now and you’re saving my ass from getting bitched at.”

“You got it.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it, because I really can’t deal with his attitude right now, not after the night we had. I’ve been sitting in the freakin’ hospital all night with Kevin.”

Robbie froze at hearing their bass player’s name. “Hospital? What happened? Is he okay? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, we’re both okay. Well, he’s not really. It’s nothing life threatening, well it may be after Kyler finds out, but Kevin fell and broke his wrist.”

Robbie sat quiet, letting it sink in exactly what that meant.

Adam continued, “We were leaving a casino, and he was a little drunk, we both were, and he went to step off the curb, I don’t know if his foot slipped or what, but he fell. He must’ve tried to catch himself, but you know, the reflexes weren’t working so good, and his right wrist twisted under him when he went down. The doctor said it’s not a bad fracture, but he still needs to be in a cast. The good thing is, right now it doesn’t look like he’ll need surgery so long as he doesn’t do anything to screw it up more.” Adam’s voice quieted. “So, uh, I think you know what this means.”

Robbie rubbed his face with one hand, then ran it through his hair. “Yeah, I do.”

Kyler interrupted. “What the hell is going on?”

Robbie glanced at him. “I’ll tell you in a minute.” He spoke again to Adam. “The important thing is he’s okay. Make sure you tell him that. I’m sure he feels like shit right now.”

“Yeah, he does. Kyler is going to fucking kill him.”

"No, he won't. He'll understand. That, and he'll have time to cool off until you guys get back. When are you coming home?"

"We got a flight out later tonight."

"Alright. We'll catch you guys tomorrow. Text me when you land so I know you got in okay. Have a safe flight."

"We will."

Robbie hung up the phone. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, staring out at the city.

"Well?" Kyler said, his impatience expressed in his tone.

Robbie looked at him. "Alright, now keep in mind the main thing is Kevin's okay and he's going to be okay." He relayed the story as Adam had told it to him. When he finished, Kyler sat staring at him in disbelief. Robbie knew once it all sunk in, an eruption would follow. Just as he finished the thought, Kyler spun and hopped off the bed.

"That fucking idiot! I knew I shouldn't let them go to Vegas alone! Neither one of them could find their own asses with each other's help!"

"It was for his sister's wedding."

"And I should've told them to get back here as soon as it was over! How long until he'll be able to play his bass?"

"I didn't ask, but probably not for a while. When my brother broke his wrist playing football, it took about four months to heal. He could do some things with it before then, but I don't know how his fracture compares to Kevin's."

"Four months! We're supposed to hit the road next week!"

"Yeah, well, that's obviously not going to happen."

Kyler shot him an annoyed glare. "You think?"

Robbie scowled back at him. "Don't get shitty with me about this. I'm just the messenger." His gaze went to Kyler's cock. "Besides, it's hard to take you serious when you're yelling and storming around naked."

Kyler stopped all movement. He glanced down at himself,

as if he'd forgotten he was nude. He lifted his head, a crooked smirk on his lips. "Yeah, I can see how that'd be difficult. But to be honest, I'm a little disappointed you were able to keep talking and it didn't just strike you into speechlessness."

Robbie gave Kyler a smirk of his own. "Well, I have seen it once or twice before."

Kyler laughed softly as he went to the bed. "So you're saying it's the same old boring thing, huh?"

Robbie took Kyler's hand. "Maybe the same old, but definitely never boring."

Kyler moved to lie down, pushing against Robbie to get him to lie back also. He rested his head on Robbie's chest, a sigh escaping him "What the hell are we going to do?"

Robbie gently stroked Kyler's hair. "The only thing we can do. Put off the tour."

"That's shit. There has to be another way." Kyler thought in silence for a few moments. "Wait. Which wrist did he break?"

"His right one."

Kyler popped his head up to meet Robbie's gaze. "Then that's not so bad! It's not like it was his fingering hand. He should still be able to pluck the strings."

"But he has to bend his wrist to play. He might be able to play before he's fully healed, but the last thing we want is for him to do permanent damage or need surgery. And you know playing live is more intense than in the studio. It's not like he could take a break whenever he'd want. We can't ask him to do that."

"He seems perfectly fine asking us to cancel our tour," Kyler growled.

"First, he didn't ask that. Second, we don't have to cancel it, just postpone it. We're not the first band to have something go wrong where they have to put things off."

Kyler huffed. "You don't see Conquest putting things off, do you?"

“When they lost their drummer, yeah, they did.”

“Not for long. They got a new one and picked up right where they left off.” Kyler bolted up. “That’s it! We’ll dig up another bass player to take his spot until he’s ready to roll.”

Robbie gave him an exasperated look. “We can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s our friend, our family,” Robbie said, as if the answer was obvious. “We’re all in this together, and right now, we need to stand by him. It’s not like he did this on purpose.”

Kyler stared at him for a moment. His expression softened. “I guess. I’m still going to hang his ass when he gets back, though.”

Robbie gripped Kyler’s shoulders and guided him down again. “Listen, I think there’s only one ass you need to worry about.” He smiled. “Well, two actually, depending on what you want me doing to yours.”

Kyler laughed and shifted to be more on top of him. “I never worry about my ass when it’s in your hands.”

Robbie slid his hands down Kyler’s back to grip his ass. “I’m glad you trust me so much with it. I try to take good care of it.”

“You take the best care of it.”

As their lips touched, Robbie pushed his tongue deep into Kyler’s mouth, working to recapture their earlier passion and to also to keep from admitting to himself that he wasn’t exactly sad to see the tour postponed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Robbie walked beside Kyler toward the skyscraper containing the Phoenix Records corporate offices. After deciding they'd have to put the tour on hold, he called their manager, Rosa Martinez, to let her know what had happened. She said she'd get a meeting with their producer, Greg Hansen, who was on his way to being the VP for the label, so they could work out their plan of attack.

They stepped into the lobby, Robbie thinking it felt unfamiliar and cold. Since coming to Chicago, they spent all their work time in the studio, which was in a different building elsewhere. They only came down to the corporate offices when Greg had business things for them to deal with.

Robbie caught sight of Adam's coppery red hair on the other side of the lobby near the elevators. Adam had it bound back in a short ponytail, a guaranteed sign he was tired since he usually wore it down and always had it styled to be smooth and glossy. Sunglasses hid his green eyes, emphasizing even more he was whipped as he never wore them indoors.

Robbie looked beside Adam to Kevin. Their bass player usually managed to keep his curly dark brown hair under control, but this morning it was an unruly mess. Kevin didn't bother to hide his brown eyes, and as they got closer, Robbie saw the fatigue in them and the circles beneath. He also saw the dark purple bruise on Kevin's cheek, topped off with a bright red scuff. He took in Kevin's somber expression and glanced down at his wrist, sympathy filling him at seeing the cast.

Robbie lifted his arms to hug him. "Hey, it's good to see you're in one piece. Looking beat to shit, but one piece nonetheless."

Kevin met him in a rough hug. "Yeah. It's like I said to Adam, better my wrist than my neck."

"I'm not so sure about that," Kyler said.

Robbie shot him a scolding glare.

Kevin looked at Kyler. "Man, it's not like I wanted this to happen."

Kyler leaned toward him. "*Man*, maybe you shouldn't have been partying so hard."

Adam jumped in. "I don't think you have any room to criticize anyone on partying, Mr. I-fell-my-drunk-ass-off-the-stage-during-a-concert."

"That was five damn years ago! I don't drink on concert nights anymore, and you know it!"

Robbie spoke in a loud whisper. "Ky, lower your voice. People are looking at you."

"Let them look! All I have to do is take one look at these two," Kyler flicked his hand toward Adam and Kevin, "and know they didn't do anything but drink, fuck, and gamble all week."

Robbie looked at them. "Well, you guys are looking a little rough."

Kevin glared at him. "Yeah, I'd figure you'd take his side now that you've kissed and made up."

"Hey!" Robbie said. "I'm not taking anyone's side, and what's between me and him doesn't have anything to do with this."

"Whatever." Kevin turned away and stomped toward the elevators. "Let's just get up there. We're late as it is."

Adam shook his head at Robbie as he followed after Kevin.

Robbie turned to Kyler. "I thought you said you could keep your cool."

Kyler sighed. "I thought I could. I just got so pissed when I saw how they looked. I'm sorry."

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to."

Kyler glanced at Kevin and Adam standing inside an elevator, Adam holding the door for them. He looked back to Robbie, a smirk touching his lips. "What will I get if I smooth things over and apologize to them?"

"Satisfaction at knowing you did the right thing and feeling

like a good person because of it.”

Kyler made an unenthused noise in his throat. “Yeah, that’s not really going to cut it for me.”

Robbie edged closer to him and hushed his voice, grinning as he met Kyler’s gaze. “Then how about me riding your cock until you’ve got no cum left?”

A broad smile claimed Kyler’s countenance. “That’ll work.”

“Then let’s go get this over with. And if at any point you feel like you’re going to throw something or yell at someone during this meeting, just remember what you’ll get if you behave.” Robbie walked into the elevator.

Kyler hastened after him. “I thought that’s what I got for apologizing. I should get something else for not throwing anything or yelling.”

“We’ll figure that out after you get your first reward.”

No one spoke as the elevator ticked its way up to the tenth floor. Robbie nudged Kyler with his elbow. Kyler glanced at him, and reading Robbie’s expectant expression, sighed and turned to Kevin. “Hey, I’m sorry for being a dick. I’m glad you’re okay and I know you feel like shit for this happening. It was wrong of me to rub it in your face.”

Kevin continued staring forward at the elevator doors. “You’re only apologizing because Robbie told you to.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But he reminded me to not be an ass, which I realize was wrong of me to do.”

Kevin looked at him with a smirk. “Then I guess I should be pissed at Robbie since if he’s supposed to be reminding you not to be an ass, he’s been slacking off big time for a few years now.”

Robbie held up his hands in a hopeless gesture. “I’m only human, man. Even I need to sleep and eat sometimes.”

Adam and Kevin laughed, Kyler chuckling with them, all tension between them easing away. The elevator stopped and opened to the office assistant sitting behind her large desk.

She smiled at them. "Welcome, gentlemen. I'll let Mr. Hansen know you're here." She picked up her phone, informing Greg of their arrival, then directed them down a hall to his office.

Robbie trailed after Adam and Kevin, Kyler behind him. He saw Greg Hansen behind his desk, and sitting in front of it was a young woman with brunette hair and crystal blue eyes, who he recognized as Greg's daughter, Krista. It still made him grin when he remembered how she "bought" Kenny Cooper during a charity auction Evan Arden and Conquest had put on, and that he'd taken part in.

Kyler had also been involved in the auction, by force after he stormed in and crashed it. One thing with their relationship, Kyler had a tendency to not pay attention to detail, and that little problem had left him misinterpreting what the auction was about. In all his bullish glory, Kyler burst in to stop Robbie from auctioning himself off, not realizing he was really just auctioning off one of his guitars. It made for more than a little of an embarrassing situation. But in the end, he did feel touched at Kyler not wanting him to sell himself to the highest bidder.

Beside Krista, their manager, Rosa Martinez, stood to greet each of them with a hug. She'd been their manager for several years, and it was thanks to her efforts they'd been able to break away from their old label and get in with Phoenix. In her mid-forties, not much taller than five feet, fuller in figure with black hair falling to her shoulders, she had a maternal way about her when dealing with them.

But that wasn't to say she was easy on them. She didn't hesitate putting any of them in their place, especially Kyler, and when it came to the business side of things, nothing got by her. She was sharp, efficient, confident, and had a take-no-crap attitude. Above all things, though, she always had their best interests and well-being at the top of her priorities.

Rosa went to Kevin first, her sympathy showing in her expression as she hugged him. "Oh honey, you look awful. Are you in a lot of pain?"

"Only from what Kyler's been giving me." Kevin aimed a

vindictive smirk at Kyler.

Rosa released him to round on Kyler, pointing her finger at him. "Have you been giving him a hard time?"

Kyler held up his hands in a gesture of innocence. "All I did was make a couple of wisecracks!"

Rosa continued to glare at him, her eyes speaking to how she knew better.

Kyler rolled his eyes. "Okay, so I was a little bit of a dick. But come on, Rosa! Look what this is going to do to the tour."

"There are more important things than tours, records, and money," Rosa said. "That's something you've never learned, but it's about damn time you did."

"Yeah, yeah. I get it." Kyler turned, his gaze settling on Krista. A bright smile shone over his face as he walked toward her and held out his hand. "Hey, Krista. It's been a while. How're things going?"

Robbie clenched his teeth at the flirtatiousness in Kyler's voice.

Krista took his hand. "Busy, as usual, but good."

Kyler laid his other hand over top hers. "You're too young and pretty to be busy all the time. Someone needs to take you out to have some fun."

Krista smiled at him, though it held an icy edge. "Oh, I have someone for that. I'm still seeing Kenny Cooper from Conquest. I know you know him."

"Yeah, he's a good guy." Kyler's gaze moved down and back up her. "And a lucky one, too."

His voice tight, Robbie spoke up, "Are we going to get on with this meeting, or what?"

Everyone glanced at him. Kyler gazed at him for a long moment, a chastised expression falling over him.

"I think that would be a good idea," Greg said. He stood up from behind his desk, moving to Krista's side and spoke to her

while gesturing to the band members. "I know you're already familiar with singer, Kyler Christenson and guitarist, Robbie Russo, but don't think you've spoken with the other guys since you first started working here, so let's get you reacquainted. Standing next to Robbie is drummer, Adam Hunter. And beside him is the cause of this meeting." He smiled at Kevin. "Clumsy bass player, Kevin Moore."

Kevin chuckled. "That's no way to introduce a person."

Krista shook Kevin's left hand. "But it looks like you've earned it."

"Yeah, I can't deny that."

Greg patted Kevin on the shoulder. "At least you're in one piece, even if it's a temporarily broken one."

"Thanks for saying that." Kevin looked at Kyler. "It's nice when people are understanding about accidents."

Kyler shook his head. "Let it go already. I said I was sorry." His gaze moved to a wall where framed concert posters for superstar singer, Evan Arden, hung with Gold and Platinum records for all his albums. Beneath those, a glass case held awards earned by Evan. Hanging to the side of Evan's display were two concert posters for the band Conquest. Kyler let out a huff. "You know, Greg, it's really not cool for you to show favoritism among your artists."

"I'm not showing favoritism. It just happens that out of all the recording artists we have, Evan has accomplished the most for us, and after him, Conquest. And since Evan has no desire to hold onto his awards, I keep them for him." Greg pointed to the opposite wall where records, awards, and posters of other bands were displayed. "I'm proud of all my artists and I'm proud of you guys, too. Your Gold and Platinum records for *Walking Away* just haven't come in yet, and the poster I have for your tour is at the framing store as we speak. Of course, now it looks like all your merchandise will be sitting on ice for a while."

Greg's words brought everyone back to why they were there, and all headed toward the two black leather couches. When Kyler

sat next to him, Robbie had to restrain himself from getting up and moving. Just feeling Kyler next to him irritated him. Why did he have to flirt with Krista? Things between them had been amazing since he came back. Kyler's full attention was on him, making love to him, being playful with him, even holding him, which was huge for Kyler since he wasn't much of a cuddler. Then as soon as an attractive person was put in front of him, Kyler went right back into flirty rock star mode. It was like he wasn't even the same man.

Greg looked at Kevin. "So, what's the prognosis on your wrist?"

"According to the doctor in Vegas, I need the cast on for at least four weeks. She said I should stay away from doing anything with it. It won't be healed by that point, but I might be able to start doing some light playing again so long as it doesn't hurt. If it starts to hurt, I need to stop right away."

"The length and strain of performing live is completely out of the question for I'm guessing twice that long," Greg said. "That sums things up. You guys aren't going to be touring for a while, unless you want to bring in a road musician."

Robbie and all others turned their gazes to Kyler.

"Hell no," Kyler said. "We'll wait for Kevin. How could we do anything less?"

Greg nodded slowly. "It's nice to hear that kind of loyalty from you, Kyler, even if I have a feeling Robbie's the one who instilled it in you. And in all honesty, I don't foresee delaying the tour for two or three months causing damage to it. You're not the first band that's had to hold off going on the road, some for even longer periods than what we're looking at. Whenever you hit the road, your fans will be there for you. Of course with saying that, it wouldn't hurt to keep you guys in the public's eye as much as we can during the interim."

Rosa looked at each of them as she spoke. "Krista and I are going to work together on lining up some publicity for you guys to make that happen, mostly interviews. But also," her eyes

stopped on Kevin, “your little boo-boo was caught on someone’s cell phone video. I was contacted with an offer to buy to keep it from getting leaked to the media. I turned it down.”

Kevin coughed in shock. “Why?”

“Because it’ll create a buzz, which is free publicity. Within a week, your drunken face plant into the street will be all over the media. Will it be embarrassing for you? Of course it will be. But you’ll also survive it.”

“But, what happened to all that matters is I’m okay?”

“Baby, that *is* all that matters. Embarrassing you has nothing to do with it. This is about publicity. You’re a rock star. Public drunkenness and doing embarrassing things come with the job. *And*, this might also be a lesson for you to not party yourself into senselessness.”

Kyler turned a triumphant look on Kevin.

“Kyler,” Rosa said, her voice unenthused, “gloating isn’t attractive on anyone.”

Kyler flopped back against the couch with an indiscernible mumble.

“As I was saying,” Rosa continued, “you’ll live through it, Kevin. This video will be all over the entertainment shows and Internet, and it’ll be a nice boost while Krista and I work out more official publicity.”

Adam nodded and turned to Kevin. “She has a point.”

Rosa reached over and laid her hand on Adam’s knee. “Oh, I should probably tell you, you’re on the video, too. Looking a little less than pristine, I might add.”

Adam’s eyes widened. He rapidly shook his head. “I think this is a bad idea.”

“Of course you do, but just like Kevin, you’ll get over it. It’s not like this is going to damage any of your reputations. Remember when you were caught passed out in a women’s restroom?”

“That was a long time ago!” Adam said.

“Six months ago isn’t a long time, and one Google search will bring those photos up forever. Don’t forget I tried to protect you from that one. Really, between the four of you, it’s amazing there’s not more out there with the stunts you guys have pulled.” Rosa paused. She cocked her head as her gaze rested on Robbie. “I take that back. Between the *three* of you. Robbie’s never done anything I’ve had to cover for.”

Robbie shrugged. “I just figure you have your hands full enough with everyone else.”

Rosa gave him a warm smile.

Greg moved into the conversation. “Well then, with that settled, let’s agree we’ll meet again in four weeks after Kevin has his wrist checked out, unless he learns anything different when he follows up with a doctor here. I say let’s go out to lunch so Krista and Rosa can give you guys the info on what publicity gigs they’re looking into for you.”

As Robbie stood with the others, he felt Kyler’s hand brush his. Whenever Kyler knew he’d done something wrong in a public setting, at the first chance he’d give him a subtle touch, trying to show he was sorry. Robbie turned for the door, not able to meet Kyler’s gaze. Touches that no one else noticed weren’t enough anymore.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kyler closed the door to his penthouse after Robbie walked in. The whole ride back from the meeting, Robbie had stared out the passenger window, only speaking to him when asked a question and his answers entailed nothing more than, “yeah,” or “no.” During lunch, he noticed Robbie made a point to not sit beside him and refused to look at him.

He’d screwed up. Again.

He’d realized it seconds after it happened. Okay, it took Robbie saying something to snap him to attention, but really it seemed Robbie was blowing things out of proportion. There were certain expectations that came with being who he was. Robbie knew that. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen Robbie all over other guys before. And did Robbie care if that pissed him off? Did he care how he hurt lying in bed alone knowing Robbie was in someone else’s arms? Since he never apologized for those things, it sure as hell seemed like he didn’t care. But where he was expected to always forgive Robbie for everything, he got hung for the smallest thing he did wrong.

Kyler looked at Robbie as he stood in front of a window staring over the city. He could see the hurt on his face. He’d seen it during the meeting and through lunch even though Robbie tried so hard to hide it.

His moment of anger faded, replaced by an ache that he’d put such a look on Robbie’s face. Even though Robbie should know he wasn’t serious when he flirted with Krista, he’d hurt him, and that was something he never wanted to do, despite doing it so frequently it seemed.

Kyler walked across the living room to him and wrapped his arms around Robbie’s waist. He kissed the side of his neck and rested his chin on Robbie’s shoulder. “What do you feel like doing tonight? You want to go out to dinner?”

Robbie’s voice left him in a mumble. “Not really.”

Kyler started swaying him back and forth as they stood. "Do you want to catch a movie? Or would you rather stay here?"

"Doesn't matter."

Kyler swallowed his growing annoyance. Patience. He needed to be patient. He was the one who'd put Robbie in this mood. He kissed Robbie's neck again, lingering to suck at the curve, then licking up to Robbie's ear. He deepened his voice to a huskier timbre. "Do you feel like giving me my reward for apologizing to Kevin?"

"No."

Kyler dropped his arms from around Robbie's waist and took a step back from him. "Well, at least there's one thing you're sure on."

Robbie faced him, his anger and hurt more visible than before. "Just because you couldn't get Krista in bed, do you really think I want to play second best?"

Kyler spun away with an agitated sigh. "Here we go again."

"Yeah, that's right. And why? Because you don't have a goddamn bit of respect for me! After the past couple days we've had, even up until five minutes before we met everyone, I thought we were finally going good. But the first hot person you see and I'm right back in the same position I always am with you, second place."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

"No, I don't. How could I know any different when it's all you show me, over and over again?"

Kyler turned to him, standing with one hand on his hip in a stance of frustration. "You should know it because you're the one I always come back to."

"And you think that makes what you do right?"

"I didn't say it makes it right. I said it's how you should know you're the number one person in my life."

Robbie flung up both hands. "You have the most fucked up

logic I've ever heard!"

"Well it must not be that fucked up and you must believe it because *you* always come back to me, too."

Robbie's mouth dropped open. Only a stuttering breath came out. *He* always came back to Kyler? Was that how Kyler looked at it? That no matter what Kyler did, he'd always accept him back, if not crawl back to him?

Robbie felt some of his anger deflate as hurt took over. Of course Kyler would think that. It was the truth. He always did go back to him. Whether Kyler initiated it or he did, he always went back to him. And this last time, *he* was the one who started things up.

Robbie whirled around and stormed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Kyler called.

"To my place. I need some time to myself."

"Fine," Kyler snapped.

Robbie slammed the door behind him. He stomped to the elevator and took a small margin of his anger out by rapidly stabbing the down button with his index finger. Before the elevator door finished opening, he shouldered his way inside and attacked the button for the next floor down in the same way.

When he reached his penthouse, he unlocked the door and slammed it behind him, then stood in the middle of his living room and exhaled a sigh. As immature as it was, he had to admit all the slamming and stabbing of buttons did make him feel a little better. He wondered if he should change and hit the building's gym to vent out more frustration.

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He ripped it out, hitting the answer button while lifting it to his ear.

"If you want to talk, get your ass down here and we'll talk!"

A pause came from the other end, followed by a hesitant male voice. "Uh, yeah, I guess I could come over. But I think I'll wait until you don't sound so pissed."

Robbie startled at the voice of Conquest's guitarist, Kenny Cooper. "Shit, Kenny, I'm sorry, man. I didn't look at my phone when I answered it. I thought you were somebody else."

"I'm damn glad I'm not them." Kenny laughed. "You sounded scary."

Robbie joined Kenny's laughter. "Yeah, right. So what's going on? How's the tour going?"

"It's kicking ass! Every show's been sold out!"

"That's awesome, and expected."

"Yeah, I guess it is. So hey, I was wondering if you felt up to going out for some drinks and dinner tonight."

"You're in town?"

"Yeah, we're on a week long break right now. Evan set up this tour to give us more time off. Well, actually, none of us really needed a break this early in the tour, but Jesse's birthday is this week, and you know how him and Evan are. Whenever it's one of their birthdays or their anniversary, the world comes to a stop so they can celebrate together. They're just a little on the extravagant side like that. But the break really is nice and it's let me come back to see Krista, so I'm not complaining."

"Aren't you going out with her tonight?"

"I'm catching her later. She said she's got to work late tonight trying to book some publicity gigs for some pain in the ass band. I think she said they were called Black Heart Down, or something like that."

Robbie laughed again. "I won't deny we're a pain in the ass. I'm guessing she told you about what we got going on."

"Yeah, that's some tough shit about Kevin's wrist. I hope he's going to be okay."

"He should be fine if he takes it easy. And doesn't piss Kyler off."

"That's good. So, I figured with all that going on, you could probably use a few drinks."

As Kenny spoke, an idea started forming in Robbie's head, one where it shocked, and even frightened him that he would think of it. He focused back on Kenny. "I definitely could. How about in a couple hours, at seven?"

"That works."

As they worked out the details of where they'd meet, Robbie couldn't pull his mind fully away from the idea that struck him. If he could pull it off, it could be what he needed to move forward. And yet at the same time, he wasn't sure if he *wanted* to pull it off. Doing so would really mean walking away.

CHAPTER SIX

Robbie stepped into the steakhouse to find Kenny waiting for him. With his short, spiky blond hair and honey brown eyes, Kenny had boy-next-door good looks and charm, and if it wasn't for the fact that he was plastered all over the media as Conquest's guitarist, no one would ever guess he was a rock star. Laidback, a little ditzzy at times, but always caring, Kenny was a great guy to have for a friend. Robbie could be himself around him and didn't feel like he was being judged.

Except, he wasn't fully himself around Kenny. He'd never told him he was gay.

It wasn't that he thought Kenny wouldn't accept him, Kenny was in a band with two gay men after all, but really, it just never came up. They talked guitars, music, about people they mutually knew. Kenny didn't push to know the more intimate side of his life, and he only knew about Kenny's because he volunteered the information.

Maybe that was it. Since he'd never offered anything about his personal life, it could be Kenny didn't feel right asking and respected his privacy about it. Having experienced the hardships Jesse and Evan went through when they were keeping their relationship quiet from the world, it could be Kenny didn't feel it was his place to ask. But as their friendship grew deeper, it felt wrong not confessing to Kenny, especially if he was going to go through with his plan.

Robbie put on a bright smile and met Kenny in a rough hug. "You look great! The tour's not wearing you down at all."

"Yeah, it hasn't been too bad." Kenny pulled back. He tipped his head to the side, giving Robbie a concerned look. "You're looking kinda rough, though. Is everything okay?"

Robbie waved a hand as if brushing away Kenny's concern. "Yeah, I'm fine. Same shit, different day."

Kenny turned to follow the hostess to their table. "It has to be hard on everybody getting the tour pushed back."

"It is for Ky and the guys. I'm not too brokenhearted over it, though. I'm not a big fan of being on the road."

"I hear that. I had a good time on our first tour and when we were on the road with Evan, but this one, even though it's bigger and kicking major ass, feels more like work. I think because I'm not allowed to party as much."

Robbie slapped him on the back before taking a seat at their table. "She's already got you under her thumb, man."

"Tell me about it. I think a chick should have to give you a contract before you agree to a relationship so you know exactly what you're getting into." Kenny looked at Robbie over his menu, adding quickly, "Not that I'm not happy with Krista. I totally am. It's just, there's a lot of hot women out there, you know."

"Yeah, but take it from me, all those other people aren't worth losing the one most special. They might seem exciting and new, but in the end, they never can compare."

Kenny tipped his head to the side, contemplating him. "Are you okay? I never heard you say anything like that before."

Robbie exhaled a sigh, shaking his head slightly. "I guess I'm just feeling philosophical."

The waiter walked up and took their beer orders. As he left, Kenny looked at Robbie. "So who were you pissed at when I called earlier?"

"Kyler," Robbie grumbled.

"No surprise there."

Robbie let out a grunt of agreement. For the rest of the afternoon he had waited for Kyler to knock on his door, or at the very least, call him. He nearly broke down and went up to Kyler's place to talk things out, but remained strong and refused to be the one going to him again. If Kyler could be stubborn, then so could he.

The waiter returned with their beers and to take their orders.

When he walked away again, Robbie glanced at the other restaurant patrons sitting close by. All seemed occupied with their own conversations. He focused his attention on Kenny. "Yeah, I guess you've seen Ky and me bickering a few times."

"A few? Dude, you were always storming down the hall in the studio to get away from him."

Robbie took a sip of his beer, the memories of those moments causing a burn of embarrassment to course through him. "He's not easy to work with."

"I've gotten that impression."

Robbie took a deep breath. He'd say it on three. One. Two. Three. He exhaled, his words following in a rush. "He's not easy to be in a relationship with either."

"Yeah, I wouldn't think so with the way he flirts around." Kenny lifted his beer, taking a drink.

Robbie stared at him, stunned at Kenny's casual response. "I mean, in a real relationship with him. An intimate one. I'm gay, Kenny."

Kenny grinned at him and folded his arms on the table, leaning toward him, looking into Robbie's eyes. "I know I'm not always quick on the uptake, but I kinda already figured that out."

Robbie's eyes widened. "When? How?"

Kenny sat back in his chair again. "Well, I'll admit I didn't know at first. I was pretty oblivious. But the way you and Kyler were always at it seemed too intense for just friends. Though, me and Jesse can really get bitching at each other. But I started to suspect it after we listened to you guys in the studio that day and I heard the lyrics to the song you wrote. And I really figured it out at the charity auction when he came storming in all jealous thinking you were prostituting yourself."

Kenny's smile faded slightly. "I'm not going to lie, I was hurt you hadn't told me, so I went to Jesse about it. I asked him if he knew for sure if you were gay and he said it wasn't his place to say anything about it. That got me even more upset, then he

laid his hand on my shoulder and said, 'He'll come to you when he's ready. *If* he's gay, it's not always easy to talk about, even to someone you trust and care for.' It was like he was saying yes *without* saying it, so don't be mad at him for that."

Robbie quickly shook his head. "No, I'm not." He paused for a long moment. "Then, we're still cool?"

"Did you forget what band I play in and who my best friend is? Hell yeah, we're still cool!" Kenny took another drink of his beer, shaking his head. "I don't know what it is about me, I attract gay guys like I'm made out of honey." He paused with the bottle near his lips. "Wait, I don't think that sounded right."

Robbie chuckled. "It sounded fine. I'm just glad you're okay with it."

Kenny shrugged. "I look at it that the last thing I should use to judge someone on whether or not they're a good person is who they sleep with. What difference does it make to me? It's not like it affects my daily life. Well, unless it's Jesse. Then it affects my daily life since he's always trying to pull Evan's clothes off whenever I look at them."

"Hey, speaking of Jesse, you said it's his birthday this week and that's why you guys are back, didn't you?"

"Yeah, it is."

As the waiter walked up and deposited their food, Robbie paused to say more until he left. "So he's in town, too?"

Kenny nodded as he worked on cutting his steak.

"There's something I want to run by him. Do you think he'd meet with me for a little while?"

"Probably. What do you want to run by him?"

Under the table, Robbie rubbed his damp palms on his jeans. "It's something pretty big. Promise me you won't tell him until I meet with him."

Kenny gave him a suspicious look as he chewed his food. "Why can't I tell him?"

“Because I don’t want you to influence his opinion and I want his honest reaction when I come to him with this.”

“Whether he knows about something ahead of time or not, one thing you’ll always get from him is honesty, but okay, I promise.”

“Alright. Here’s what I’m thinking...”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Robbie sat in a recliner, his phone in hand. He stood up and paced toward a window. He glanced down at the phone. Jesse's number glowed back at him, given to him by Kenny. All he had to do was hit send and put the call through. But now he was having doubts if this really was the right thing to do.

Then again, he had spent the night alone in his penthouse. Tyler had tried to call him, but he ignored it and Tyler didn't bother trying again. That hurt bad enough, and he also felt if Tyler really gave a damn about him, he'd get in the elevator and come down to see him.

Thinking of everything strengthened his resolve. Robbie hit the send button and put the phone to his ear. At hearing the first ring, he nearly tore the phone away and hung up. A second ring. He should hang up. A third ring. Maybe Jesse wouldn't answer. A fourth ring. Jesse wasn't going to pick up. A fifth ring...

"I don't know who this is, but please tell me my number didn't get leaked onto the Internet because that'd be a major pain in the ass."

Even speaking through the phone, Jesse's tenor voice had a honeyed pitch. It was no wonder he'd become the most notable singer around, other than his husband, Evan Arden. Robbie cleared his throat to call upon his own voice. "Hey, Jesse, it's Robbie Russo, from BHD. Don't worry, I got your number from Kenny, not the Internet."

"Robbie! Hey! And that's good to know about my number. I thought I was going to be hanging up to call our attorneys. What's going on?"

"Not much. I had dinner with Kenny last night and he said your birthday was this week, so I wanted to give you a call and say happy birthday."

"Thanks! I'm surprised you were able to get him away from

Krista long enough for dinner.”

“Well, he did call it an early night.”

Jesse laughed. “Krista keeps him on a short leash, even when they’re hundreds of miles apart. How’re things going with getting your tour ready?”

“There’s been a little hitch to that.” Robbie told Jesse about Kevin breaking his wrist.

As Jesse spoke again, Robbie could hear the sympathy in his voice. “I’m really sorry. I hope he heals up okay. I’ll have to get his address from you so we can send him a get well present.”

“Yeah, I’ll get it for you.” Robbie took in as deep a breath as his lungs could hold. “Um, actually, I was wondering if I could talk to you about something.”

“Of course you can. What is it?”

“If I can...if it’d be okay with you, I’d like to talk to you in person about it. I know you guys are only in town for a short while, and I hate taking up your time, but I don’t know where else to go.”

“Don’t worry about it. When do you want to get together?”

“Is today too short of notice?”

“No, we didn’t have any plans.”

“How about meeting somewhere for lunch then?”

“Well, Ev and I are trying to lay low this week. We don’t really feel like dealing with the paparazzi. How about you come to our place?”

“Are you serious?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? This way we can talk in private without worrying about anyone overhearing, since I’m getting the impression you want to talk about something personal.”

Robbie’s voice softened. “Yeah, it is.”

“Then why don’t we plan on around two o’clock. I should be able to get out of bed by then.” Jesse paused, and Robbie could

hear the smile in his voice as he spoke again. "Maybe."

A rich, smooth baritone laughed on the other end, Robbie instantly recognizing Evan's voice.

Robbie chuckled. "Alright, if you're slow answering the door, I'll know why and be patient."

Jesse laughed again. "Thanks for understanding. Here's our address."

Robbie went into the kitchen to jot it down on a dry erase board hanging on the refrigerator. "Got it."

"Then we'll see you in a little while."

"Cool. Thanks for this."

"It's nothing. Talk to you later."

"Bye."

Robbie hung up. He slowly sank down on one of the kitchen chairs. It was so strange. Once he started talking to Jesse, his anxiety vanished. Now it returned just as strong as before. Maybe it was the sound of Jesse's voice, his playful demeanor or his kindness, but there was something that made Robbie comfortable with him. He always had liked him since he first met him. That alone told him he just might be on the right track with his plan after all.



Robbie slowed his blue Lexus SUV as he scanned the area. He'd passed through Evanston a while back, and his GPS said he was close to Jesse and Evan's home, but he didn't see any houses. He glanced at the GPS again, seeing it was asking him to turn soon, then looked forward and saw the end of a single lane road peeking out from a patch of woods. He swung the SUV onto the road and was instantly confronted with tall steel barred gates bearing signs that said Private Property and No Trespassing. Two security cameras, mounted atop white brick pillars supporting the gates, stared down at him. Something told him he was in the right place.

Robbie pulled next to a security keypad and found a call button. A minute later, the gates started to open. After passing through, he glanced in his review mirror and saw them closing again. He drove slowly through the small woods, taking in the brilliant reds, oranges, and yellows of the leaves freshly turned with early October. Living so much in the heart of the city, sometimes he forgot the beauty of nature when the seasons changed.

The trees gave way to open space. Fields stretched out on both sides; the one to the right dropped down to the beach and Lake Michigan. As Robbie looked ahead, he nearly hit the breaks to stare at his destination. Though a white brick wall enclosed the estate proper, it didn't fully block the view of the two-story white brick mansion, built to replicate an English Victorian manor. A tower rounded the left side, and to the right was what looked to be a huge garage resembling a coach house.

The size and beauty of the place amazed him. The penthouses he'd lived in since hitting it big weren't small by any means, but this was a whole other level.

Robbie turned into the drive just as the gates were opening. He noticed security cameras were spaced across the top of the wall, which had upward pointing jagged gray stones. He'd always heard Evan was fierce about his privacy and it seemed those rumors were absolutely true. He fully understood why Evan, and it seemed Jesse too, were that way. When you were in the public eye as much as they were, or he and Kyler were, it was good to have a sanctuary.

What he would give for a place like this. But Kyler always wanted to live in the heart of cities, whether it was New York, or now Chicago. Being around more people meant more attention. It was no secret Kyler thrived off it, whereas Robbie'd like to be able to go a few days without seeing a single person except for those he wanted to.

As Robbie coasted the SUV down the long driveway, he gazed over the manicured lawn, the trimmed shrubbery, the fall blooming flowers. Everything about the place spoke of serenity.

He followed the drive to the circle in front of the double oak front doors and drew to a stop. As he climbed out, one of the doors opened with Jesse stepping out onto the porch. Even dressed casually in jeans and a long-sleeved dark blue shirt, there was a vibe around Jesse that radiated his talent. It could be he was picking up on it because he knew Jesse's musical gift firsthand, but he'd felt it the first time he'd met him, too. Not to mention, with his black hair layered in sharp angles, his indigo eyes, his soft facial features, Jesse was one of the most beautiful men he'd ever seen.

And also that Kyler had ever seen, as Kyler silently expressed by not hiding how he was mentally stripping Jesse whenever they were in the same room.

Evan stepped out behind Jesse. Robbie's heart did a nervous flutter at the sight of him. He didn't know why, but he tended to get flustered around Evan. He assumed it was because for years, Evan had dominated the music world and to be around anyone so talented was slightly intimidating. Just like Jesse, Evan had that aura of specialness around him. The two of them together made for a phenomenal and unstoppable couple.

The sight of Evan also brought a memory from several years ago of watching Kyler leave one of their concerts with him. They had been in one of their off times. After a show, they walked backstage to the surprise of the world's hottest rock performer waiting to greet them, but as Kyler and Evan interacted, it was clear why Evan was there. For the first time, he felt genuinely threatened that another man could take Ky away from him permanently. Evan was someone he simply couldn't compete with.

As it turned out, Evan was too much for even Kyler to handle. Strong and dominant, Evan didn't tolerate Kyler's need to be in control. Robbie learned their night together hadn't gone far, and for him, Evan not bowing to Kyler's whims put Evan in a position of high respect.

It also put things into a new light for him. He understood Kyler's issues for needing control in the bedroom, but the fact

that Ky so often surrendered control to him spoke to how much Ky really trusted him. Thinking on it now made him feel even more like shit for coming to Jesse in this way.

Robbie let out a sigh. The whole drive here, he wondered if he was doing the right thing. Even now, he couldn't make up his mind. It all came back to how he and Kyler were together, but separate. How could he see anything clearly when not even the most important thing in his life was defined? He couldn't. He needed one or the other. He and Ky either needed to be fully together, or not together at all. Living in limbo wouldn't work for him anymore. Since it seemed Ky was content with things as they were, it left him only one choice.

Robbie summoned as bright a smile as he could and walked toward Jesse and Evan. "Hey, you guys! Your place is amazing!"

"Thanks!" Jesse said, opening his arms to give him a hug. "It's good to see you. You look a little beat, though."

Robbie chuckled as he hugged him, then went to embrace Evan. "Kenny said the same thing last night."

Evan released him from the hug. "What's Kyler done now?"

Robbie fought to keep his smile. "Sometimes I really wonder if you're psychic, Evan."

Jesse grinned at Evan. "Me, too. I don't even need to speak for you to know what I want."

Evan turned a playful smirk on Jesse. "And since you usually only want one thing, all I have to do is figure out which method you want me to use to give it to you. Lucky for me, you like them all."

Robbie laughed with Jesse, then followed them in. Their dogs, Achilles, a German Shepherd/Collie mix with a long coat of tan, white, and black, and Iris, a young black and tan German Shepherd, greeted him with wagging tails. As he petted the dogs, he gazed around the entrance room with wood panels running from the hardwood floor up to the vaulted ceilings. "And I thought your place looked incredible on the outside."

"You haven't seen all if it yet," Jesse said, walking toward a Gothic peaked open doorway.

Robbie trailed after Jesse and Evan into the family room, decorated in rich browns and tans to give it a warm feel. He took a seat in a plush brown leather chair. "How do you guys maintain all this when you're on the road?"

Jesse sat at the end of the couch closest to him. "My brother, Brandon, and his partner, Shunichi, help out. They come over whenever we have the housecleaners, pool people, and gardeners coming."

"You want something to drink?" Evan asked, already heading toward another open doorway.

"Just water is fine, thanks," Robbie said.

Jesse took a breath to speak.

"I already know what you want," Evan said.

Jesse leaned toward Robbie. "See? He *is* psychic."

"No, you're just predictable," Evan called from the kitchen.

Jesse chuckled as he sat back. "And like mine, his hearing is superhuman. So what'd you want to talk to me about?"

Robbie glanced up at Evan as he entered again carrying two bottles of water and a Pepsi. He handed him one water and gave Jesse the Pepsi. As Evan sat beside Jesse, he draped his arm behind him. At the angle he sat at, Robbie could see Evan's fingers were buried in the back of Jesse's hair, toying with it, and Jesse shifted on the couch more toward Evan, leaning into him.

He'd noticed during their mutual time in the studio, neither of them could be in the same room without touching each other, and playing with Jesse's hair seemed to be a habit Evan had. The small, subtle gestures they made, so many of them most likely unconscious, spoke to how deep their affection and love were for each other.

Seeing it made him wish for it in his own life all the more.

Robbie took a drink from the water, ending it with a sigh. "It's

about Kyler...and me.”

Evan fixed him with his sharp blue eyes. “We figured that much out already.”

Robbie met Evan’s gaze. Evan had a way of looking at a person that made it seem as though he already knew all their secrets, and he was looking at him in that exact way at this moment. His voice soft, Robbie said, “Yeah, I guessed as much.”

This was it. All he had to do was say the words, to open up and let it all out. He’d thought about it for so long, not this plan in particular, but just being able to talk with someone about everything he felt. He didn’t have anyone in his life he could talk about his and Kyler’s relationship. Not his family, not Adam or Kevin, no one. For years he’d bottled things up. But now that he had the chance to speak, he didn’t know where to begin.

“If it makes it easier,” Jesse said, “even though you’ve never told us outright, Ev and I already know you and Kyler are together.”

Robbie nodded slowly. “Yeah, I knew you guys did. Maybe that’s why neither one of us said anything specific to you guys, because we assumed you already knew.” A humorless laugh left him. “Or maybe because neither of us knew at any given moment if we’d *still* be together. That’s how it is, day after day, I never know if he’ll be my boyfriend or if I’ll be left on my own again.”

He looked up at them. “Do you know what that’s like? To want to be in a relationship with someone and even get to have it, but then to have it constantly taken away? It’s been this way ever since we hit it big. On again, off again, we break up, we get back together, all while trying to make music together. I can’t do it anymore. It’s driving me insane. And if I stay in Black Heart Down, I *will* keep doing it. I *will* keep taking him back. And that’s why I’m here.”

Robbie looked directly into Jesse’s eyes. “Jesse, if you’ll have me, I want to join Conquest.”

Silence followed Robbie’s declaration.

Jesse sat unmoving, unblinking, staring at him. After several

long moments, he pulled in a deep breath. "Maybe I wasn't fully paying attention, but did you just say you want to join my band?"

Robbie nodded. "Yeah, I did."

"Okay, then I was paying attention."

"I don't expect you to give me an answer right now. I know you'll need to think about it."

Evan said, "And we appreciate that, but what concerns me are your motives."

Robbie gave him a confused look. "What do you mean?"

"I think it's obvious you're not looking to join Conquest because you have a great passion for the music Jesse's making. You're looking at it as an escape. Which in turn means your dedication and loyalty are compromised right from the start. Let me ask you, what happens to Conquest when Jesse lets you in, then the second Kyler whistles to you, you decide to run to him?"

"I can understand why you would think that, but it wouldn't happen. Once I'd be with you guys, that's it. Conquest would be my top priority."

Jesse shook his head. "I don't know. It's not that I don't want you to play for me, I'd love to have you in the band, but I'm with Ev that I'm not sure your reasons are the right ones. And what's more, I'm worried about how delusional you are."

"Delusional? How am I delusional?"

"You're delusional about your relationship with Kyler. You're making it sound like all the blame is on Kyler, and maybe most of it is, there are a lot of details I don't know so I'm not going to pass judgment on that. But I'm pretty sure somewhere during all the years you guys have been together, you've had the chance to talk to him about how you felt."

"You said it all started when you guys hit it big. So I have to ask, that first time you saw Kyler flirting with someone else, the first time he came to you and said he wanted to see other people, if you loved him so much, why didn't you tell him no? Why didn't you say you wanted to be with him and only him, and you wanted

him to stay with you and only you?”

“I...” Robbie started, then stopped to gather his will in order to force out the truth. It was a confession he’d faced in the privacy of his mind, but never thought he’d reveal it to anyone else. “The truth is, I...I was the one who was curious. I was the one who broke things between us the first time.”

Jesse and Evan quietly gazed at him, their expectant expressions revealing they knew he had more to say.

“Kyler was my first. I’d never even kissed anyone else. And I was fine with that. But after we hit it big, there were all these men and women hitting on me. It was no big deal with the women, I could brush them off without a thought, but with the men, it was different. And it’s not that I thought they were hotter than Kyler or better than him in any way, I just started to wonder what it’d be like to...*experience* someone else.”

“So basically,” Jesse said, “you guys found fame and fortune, forgot what’s really important in life, went off fucking other people, and since then, you’ve both been trying to pull your heads out of your asses but haven’t been able to.”

“I don’t think it’s necessary to say it so bluntly,” Robbie mumbled.

“Whether I say it bluntly or sugarcoat it, what I said is the truth, isn’t it?”

Robbie gave a grudging nod. “Yeah, but come on. You know how things are, all the temptation out there when you’re in acts as big as we are.”

“What I know is if you really love someone, temptation can’t take you away from them. Since I earned my fame, I’ve been with one man, and he’s sitting beside me. I’m not saying you and Kyler don’t love each other. Probably back then, you weren’t able to recognize what you had together, and now that you do, because of all that’s happened in between, you guys keep playing the on/off game and can’t find your way back to that point, so now you’re looking to run. You think it’ll be easier to leave all your baggage in the middle of the road and walk on alone, rather than

for you both to try carrying it down the same road together.”

Robbie could only nod, his throat too tight from words at hearing his situation laid out so honestly. What Jesse said was the truth, and put in a way better than even he could.

Jesse’s voice gentled. “I’m not trying to hurt you by saying these things. I just think you need to hear them and really think about what you’re doing. I don’t want you to walk away from something that deep down, you know you want. Have you ever asked Kyler to be committed to you?”

Robbie cleared his throat to find his voice. It left him sounding ragged and worn. “He knows what I want.”

“But have you *said* it?”

“No.”

“Then before making this jump, you need to. If you ask him directly to be with you and only you, and he still screws up, then yeah, you’ll have grounds to walk away. But I think you owe it to him for the history you guys have together.”

Robbie nodded, swallowing his emotion down. “Yeah. You’re right.”

Evan took his turn to speak. “But you also have to keep in mind you’ve laid the foundation of letting him get away with whatever he wants, so expecting him to change overnight isn’t going to happen. And you also need to admit to him that you’re no saint either. You wanted to screw around with other people and still have him there for you just as much as he did.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t wanted to screw around with other people in a very long time.”

“That’s great. It still doesn’t make you any less guilty.”

“I know,” Robbie said, his voice rough. “I want to fix things, I really do, but I don’t know where to start.”

Jesse stretched across the distance between them and laid his hand on Robbie’s forearm. “By talking to him. When you leave here, go to him. Talk to him, openly and honestly. Hear what he has to say. If he says he’s willing to give commitment a shot, then

there you go. You'll have what you want. But if he says he can't do it, then call me and I'll welcome you into my band."

Robbie's head snapped up. "Are you serious?"

Jesse smiled. "Yeah, I am. But only if you give Kyler a fair chance first." He looked to Evan. "Do you agree?"

"Yeah." Evan looked at Robbie. "But the big question is, do you really think you'd be happy in Conquest?"

Robbie sat quiet, contemplating the question. "In all honesty, no. I wouldn't be. Not in the beginning. I'd be heartbroken. But I know every day it would get a little better and I'd get a little stronger. I can't do that if I stay in Black Heart and so close to Kyler. Unless Kyler's willing to take our relationship to the next level."

"Then it's settled," Jesse said. "You go home and talk to Kyler. Hopefully things will work out in the best way and you guys can be together. If it's the worst scenario, you have my number. Sound good?"

"Yeah, it does." Robbie shook his head slightly. "I don't know how to thank you."

Jesse waved his words away. "It's nothing. Besides, if things go the way we're all hoping, you won't have anything to thank me for because you'll still be the kickass lead guitar for BHD with the man you love as your lead singer."

"I hope so." Robbie stood up. "But I better get out of your hair now so you guys can enjoy your time off."

Evan also stood. "You're welcome to stay longer."

Robbie smiled at him as he walked toward the entrance room. "Thanks, but I think it'd be good if I went home and talked to Kyler while everything's still fresh." He let out a small laugh. "And while I'm still feeling strong enough."

Jesse opened one of the front doors for him. "Sounds like a good idea."

Robbie turned to him. "Thank you, and not just for being willing to take me on, but for talking things out with me. You

guys said a lot of things I needed to hear.”

Jesse laughed and hugged him. “I already told you, it’s nothing. Now go home and kick Kyler’s ass into commitment.”

“I’ll try my best.” Robbie gave Evan a hug, then turned to leave. He stopped and looked at them before getting into his SUV. “You know, you guys have the most amazing relationship I’ve ever seen. If Ky and I can get ourselves even halfway to where you guys are, I’ll be happy.”

Evan wrapped both arms around Jesse’s waist as he stood behind him. “You already have the love, so you’re well on your way. But don’t settle for halfway. Go all the way.”

Jesse nodded. “You guys will have what we do. Just let everything else go and throw yourselves fully into each other.”

“Good advice. All of it has been. Talk to you guys soon.”

Robbie waved and climbed into his SUV. He pulled down the drive, tapping a quick beat on the top of the steering wheel, a smile still in place on his lips. For the first time in a long time, he felt positive, strong, full of spirit. He laughed softly. It was no wonder there wasn’t another artist around who could touch Conquest. In just a single conversation, Jesse could make the impossible seem possible. Now all he had to do was make it happen by getting Kyler to agree to be his one and only.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kyler unlocked the door to Robbie's penthouse and flung it open. He saw his grand flourish was wasted on an empty living room. He marched inside, which he was well familiar with not only from all his hours there, but also because the layout cloned his own place. Only the décor made it feel like a different home, earth tones and leather furniture gave it a close, comfortable feel despite large space, oil prints of landscapes hung on the walls, all so opposite from his home.

Kyler stood in the middle of the room, his hands on his hips. Silence greeted him.

Robbie wasn't home. Not only had he stormed off on him the day before, spent the night away from him and ignored his phone call, now he was gone and hadn't told him where he was going. It was complete bullshit. Kyler knew he did wrong by flirting with Krista, but it didn't mean Robbie had to go stomping off and not talk to him. These disappearing acts were becoming far too regular. When he saw him again, he was going to let him know.

If only he knew where the hell Robbie was.

Kyler walked toward the couch and dropped down. Then again, what if the reason Robbie hadn't spent the night with him was because he'd spent it with someone else? It would explain why Robbie had ignored his phone call. True, Robbie ignored his calls a lot, but what if he couldn't answer because he was lying underneath another man's body?

Jealousy erupted through Kyler. He shoved off the couch and rushed toward the master bedroom. The heavy brown curtains were drawn back, allowing light to brighten the room of earthy colors. Kyler went to the four-poster bed, neatly made as usual. He gripped the suede comforter and ripped it back, tearing the top sheet down with it. The sheets were clean. No telltale white stains marked a recent visitor. But then, Robbie always changed the sheets after their nights together.

Kyler spun around to the hamper and flipped open the lid. Some clothes lay in the bottom, but no sheets. His shoulders sagged as relief passed through him. Then poisonous whispers came from the back of his mind. Nothing said Robbie would've had sex in the bed. He could've done it anywhere in the penthouse and cleaned up. And nothing said he even did it here. He could've spent the night at the other guy's place.

The last thought tightened Kyler's heart. If Robbie went home with someone, what if he didn't answer his call because he was in trouble? Robbie was tough, but he could also be too trusting. Kyler rushed toward the master bath. The instant he stepped in, he saw streaks of water on the glass shower doors. Once again, relief surged through him. At the very least, Robbie had been there to shower.

Kyler leaned back against a wall and closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips. He was so tired of living like this, but he didn't know what to do to fix it. He never liked knowing Robbie was off with other people, but at the same time, he couldn't ask him to not sleep around when he was doing the same thing. But now it seemed like Robbie was growing more distant from him, and he felt like he was doing all he could to hold onto him. Somehow, he needed to pull him back so things could be the way they used to be between them.

Kyler heard the apartment door opening. He hastened out to the living room. As he reached the end of the hall, he was brought to a short stop by Robbie's blue eyes staring at him in confusion. A tendril of embarrassment crept through him.

"What are you doing here?" Robbie asked.

Kyler cleared his throat. "I was looking for you."

"In my bedroom?"

"Well, I didn't see you in here and, uh..." Kyler's voice faded as words evaded him.

Robbie walked past him. Kyler turned to follow him to the bedroom, stopping behind him as Robbie surveyed the messed up bed and hamper lid on the floor.

His back to him, Robbie said, "So you were checking to see if I was fucking around last night."

Kyler stayed quiet since Robbie's tone was more of a statement than a question. Besides, the answer was obvious in the disheveled bedroom.

Robbie let out a single, soft chuckle. "You've hit an all new level of crazy with this one. I thought you wouldn't be able to top the stunt you pulled at Evan's charity auction, but I think this might." He grinned over his shoulder at him. "Just tell me you didn't do anything real freaky like sniffing my dirty underwear for another guy's scent."

"I'm not that psycho."

Robbie faced him, still smiling. "Not yet, anyway."

Kyler stepped closer and laid his hands on Robbie's hips. "Are you still mad at me?"

Robbie wrapped his arms around Kyler's neck. "I was more hurt than mad, and I still am, but I want to talk to you about some things."

Kyler's voice hushed as he brought his lips nearer to Robbie's. "Can I kiss you first?"

Robbie shook his head. "No."

Kyler startled back, a wounded expression on his face.

Robbie moved one hand to the back of Kyler's head. "Because I'm going to beat you to it."

Robbie pushed Kyler's head forward and pressed their lips together. Each opened their mouths as they touched.

Kyler felt the emotion in Robbie's kiss. Robbie thrust so deeply into his mouth, he pressed so tightly against him, it was almost as if there was a sense of desperation to it. He decided Robbie must feel bad for their ruined night and wanted to make it up to him. Kyler ran his hands down Robbie's sides, around his hips to his ass and grabbed each cheek.

Robbie pulled back from the kiss, his breathing coming quick

and heavy. “Ky, I want to talk.”

Kyler ground his hard cock against Robbie’s. His voice lowered to a gravelly tone. “It feels to me like you want to fuck.”

Before Robbie could answer, Kyler covered his mouth in another deep kiss.

Robbie took in Kyler’s tongue. Kyler wasn’t wrong. He did want him, but he couldn’t give in. He always did and that’s why things never changed. After every fight, as soon as they felt forgiveness between them, they were in bed again, slamming and ramming against each other. He wouldn’t allow that same pattern to happen. He had to break the cycle.

Robbie broke the kiss by snapping his head to the side and took a quick step back, though Kyler’s reflexes didn’t react as fast and he held onto to him.

“What the—”

Robbie stopped Kyler’s words with an upraised hand. “I told you, we had to talk.”

Kyler dropped his arms from holding him. “Yeah, we do.”

“If you’re going to act pissed, then forget it.”

Kyler took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “No. No, I’m not pissed. I was a little annoyed because you got me hot, then stopped, but you’re right. We do need to talk.”

Robbie smirked at him. “I *know* this is a first. Not only do you *want* to talk, you’re willing to hold off on sex to do it. When did you become mature?”

Kyler gave him a playful shove. “It’s still a work in progress.”

Robbie snickered as he took Kyler’s hand and led him toward the bed. He sat on the edge of the bed, turning to face him. “Do you want to go first?”

“Not really. But if you want me to, I will.”

“Go ahead.”

“Alright. Then I’ll start by saying the stunt you pulled yesterday really pissed me off. I want to know why you didn’t call me back

and where the hell you were last night and all day today.”

“I didn’t call you last night because I was pissed at you. And why the hell did you call, anyway? You should’ve just come down here.”

Kyler’s voice rose a notch. “Why would I? You’re the one who ran off, like you always do. As it was, I tried to be the bigger person and call you, but you ignored me and that was a shitty thing to do.”

Just as Robbie was about to retort with anger fueled words, he remembered Jesse’s. Kyler wasn’t the only one who’d done wrong in their relationship for all these years. Even now, Kyler had a point. He took a deep breath to help his voice come out calm. “You’re right. Running off on you and ignoring your call was shitty and immature. I’m sorry.”

Kyler stared at him for a long moment, his surprise and confusion at the apology showing in his face. “Thanks.”

Robbie reached for him. “You don’t have to thank me, Ky. The truth is, I’ve fucked a lot of things up between us, just as much as you have, and one thing I think our relationship has run short on is apologies.”

Kyler took Robbie’s hand. “I say I’m sorry all the time.”

“But how often do you really mean it?”

Kyler gave a grunt in response.

“And that’s what I mean,” Robbie said. “Apologizing when you don’t mean it is just as harmful as not apologizing at all, and it’s something we’ve both got to get better at because I do it, too.”

Kyler nodded. “Yeah. So, is my turn over with shit that’s been bugging me, or should I go on?”

Robbie’s eyes widened. “There’s more?”

Kyler took one of Robbie’s hands in both of his and sat on the bed beside him. “Lately, I’ve been feeling like I’m losing you. When we’re together, you’re always riding me over things I do wrong, like nothing I do is good enough for you anymore. It’s just like you said, I tried to call you, but that wasn’t good enough.

I should've come down to see you.

"But you have to think of how things are from my perspective. I didn't really feel like coming down here and having the door slammed in my face. It's not like I can read your mind, Rob. I don't always know what you want. And when I try and get it wrong, maybe it'd be better if you just met me halfway, acknowledge that I tried, and tell me how you'd like me to do better. And hell, you still haven't told me where you've been."

Robbie sat quiet, his gaze cast downward as he absorbed Kyler's words. He slowly looked up, meeting Kyler's eyes. "I had dinner with Kenny Cooper last night. Today, I went to see Jesse and Evan."

Kyler startled at the news. "What? How? They're on the road."

"Conquest is on a break for Jesse's birthday. Kenny called me last night asking if I wanted to go out to dinner. I got Jesse's number from him. I just...I needed someone to talk to, who could understand what I'm going through. He and Evan helped me see the truth of a lot of things with our relationship."

Kyler let go of Robbie's hand and stood up. His voice hit a higher pitch with anger and disbelief. "You took our dirt to them? To *Evan*?"

"Who else was I supposed to go to? It's not like you and I have a lot gay friends either of us can talk to, so I had to go where I could."

Kyler jabbed himself in the chest with his thumb. "Me! I'm the one you're supposed to come to!"

"You don't always make that easy. Look at you now. You're about to erupt."

"Because look who you laid out our personal business out to!"

Robbie stood up. "You might not like Evan, but I know you like Jesse. A little too much, I might add."

Kyler folded his arms across his chest. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Robbie's voice turned accusatory. "You know damn well what it means. You think I'm so goddamn blind, and that's why you feel like you're losing me. Because the truth is, Ky, you are. I can't keep doing this, sitting by while you flirt around, which leads to you fucking around."

Kyler let out a shocked cough. He took a breath to speak, pausing as Robbie stopped him by laying a hand on his chest.

Robbie sighed, his voice leaving him softer and calmer. "I know. I've fucked around, too. It always happens when we're on the road. It has since our first tour. Somehow, we fell into a twisted pattern of being together during down time, running wild when we're on the road. You know in the beginning, I was the one who started it. I was the one who was curious about being with other people. But I was young and stupid. I didn't realize or appreciate what we had together. I didn't know what I wanted in a relationship. Now I do, and it's you."

Robbie brought his other hand up to gently touch Kyler's face. "I want to be only with you. I want you to only be with me. I want one hundred percent commitment from you. No more screwing around. No more flirting. And I'm going to take things a step further. I'm ready to come out openly about being gay if you'll do it with me. I think half the problems we have is because we're both trying to put up images for the public that don't match who we really are or what we want.

"You said a little bit ago that it seems like nothing you do is good enough for me. And that's true, because I know you're not giving me all that you can. I know you're not giving me all of you. I've had all of you before, so I know the difference. If you do that again, if you give me all of you, I really believe we can have a happy life together."

Kyler stood silent. His only movement, the occasional blink.

Robbie shifted his weight as uneasiness set in. Maybe he said too much too quickly for Kyler. He started to draw his hands away. As if feeling his touch leaving snapped him out of his trance, Kyler's hands jumped up to catch his.

"Don't pull away," Kyler said. "I just need to take in everything you said."

Keeping Robbie's hands in his, Kyler moved back to the bed and sat. Robbie eased down beside him, unable to deny his surprise at Kyler taking his words seriously enough to think about them. Normally, Kyler spit out answers to a question before he was finished asking it. Seeing him contemplative wasn't a side he was used to.

"Okay," Kyler said slowly, "first I'm shocked at hearing you say I'm losing you. Even though I've been thinking that, to actually hear you say it, I..." He shook his head, seeming to not want to finish his thought. He looked at Robbie, a strained smile coming to his lips. "But at least you followed up with saying ways I can keep you. That's what I'm working on coming to terms with. You kind of blindsided me asking for a total commitment."

"You don't want to?"

"I didn't say that. I said you caught me off guard." A few forced chuckles worked their way free of Kyler's throat. "It's strange, I know. In our early years, we were totally committed to each other, and I never wanted to break from that. But since we have, trying to go back...I don't know. I don't want to say I don't think we can go back to that point, it's just I don't think it's going to be easy."

Robbie glanced away from him. "Part of me is afraid it's too late. I should've asked this from you years ago."

Kyler placed his fingers under Robbie's jaw and turned his head toward him. "You've haven't been the only one in this relationship. I could've asked the same thing from you."

"Yeah," Robbie said softly.

Kyler rested his forehead against Robbie's. "There're a lot of things right now I don't know, and I'm still trying to piece together everything you said, but I can tell you, I do want this with you. I want you beside me every night. I can be yours one hundred percent."

Robbie lifted his head, a bright smile shining over his lips.

“Are you serious?”

Kyler caressed Robbie’s cheek. “Yeah. But, the one thing I’m not ready for yet is coming out publicly. It’s not that I don’t want to, but think about it. If we came out now, it’d look like a publicity stunt following right after Jesse and Evan. People would be calling us copycats.”

His burst of joy ripped from him, Robbie fixed Kyler with a cold stare. “Since when do you care what people say?”

“I don’t. I’m just saying it could look bad, is all. Like our feelings aren’t genuine for each other. Is that what you want? To have to face that criticism?”

“Personally, I don’t give a shit what other people say or if they question our feelings for each other. I’m not in a relationship with the world. I’m trying to be in one with you. Knowing *your* feelings are genuine is all I care about. Why don’t you just admit that you don’t want to be open about our relationship because you’re not ready for that much of a commitment?”

Kyler pushed off the bed and stood up, walking a few paces away to the window. He stood with his hands on his hips, his back to him. “So we’re being totally honest, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what you said is partially true. But it’s not because I don’t want to make that much of a commitment. It’s because I don’t want to make that much of a commitment, then a week later, have it blow up in my face because you’ve decided you’re sick of me again. Then it’s not just two people you’ve brought our dirty laundry to, it’s the whole world, and I’m not going to deal with that.”

“First off, I never get sick of you. What I get sick of is you always chasing ass.”

“I thought we already established neither of us are going to get the Saint of the Year award for shit like that and we’re working on moving forward.”

“We are.”

"Then quit bringing it up."

"I'm bringing it up to make a point. If you can stop your flirting around, I'll be able to stop getting pissed at you. There won't be any dirty laundry for the media."

Kyler shot a doubtful look over his shoulder at him. He looked out the window again, one hand resting up on the wall. "I'm starting to regret saying I wanted to talk."

"We should've talked a long time ago. That's why it's so hard now."

Kyler tapped a slow beat on the wall with his index finger, creating the only sound in the room. Minutes ticked by, and he let out a long sigh and shook his head. "You're asking me to give you the world in a day, and I don't know if I can do that. I'm not saying I don't want to, but you're laying an awful lot of stuff on me all at once. Can't we just see how things go with really giving us a fair shot before throwing it at the public? For Christ's sake, we're not even living together, but you want to go in front of cameras saying we're a couple. Don't you think we need to work on us first before doing that?"

Robbie gazed at him. He couldn't see his face, but Kyler's body betrayed his tension in how rigid and tight his back and shoulders looked. Robbie nodded. "Yeah, I do."

Kyler snapped his head around to look at him. "What?"

"You're right. I'm pushing too hard. I want everything to happen right now, and I *am* asking too much from you all at once." Robbie grinned at him. "I guess I'm just feeling impatient because I've been waiting for so long. But we do need to live just for us, get ourselves secure. So, I guess, we'll do things as we have been, but just know we're committed now."

Kyler turned from the window to face him. "That's not exactly what I meant. We can still take another step. If you want to, we can move in together."

Robbie rushed toward him. "Of course I want to!"

Kyler wrapped him in his arms. "You act like it's a big deal.

It's not like we haven't lived together before, or like we don't practically already."

"It *is* a big deal. Those years where we lived together after leaving home were the best of my life. Maybe you don't look at them like I do since we were living in that crappy apartment, just trying to keep three meals a day in us while working with our music. But even though we had only had one chair in the whole damn place, it was always filled with our laughter because we were happy just being together. I want to get back to that."

Kyler guided him back to the bed and sat, pulling him down beside him. "I want to get back to that too, and I really believe we can. We just have to understand change takes time. I'm willing to do that for you, if you're willing to do that with me."

"I am."

Kyler's crooked smirk rose to his lips. "And you know, I think half the reason we were so happy back then was because we *did* have only one chair. It forced you to sit on my lap all the time."

Robbie stood up and moved in front of him. Knowing what he wanted to do, Kyler slid back more on the bed. Robbie brought one knee up to the bed by Kyler's hip, then the other, and sat straddling his lap. He wrapped his arms loosely around Kyler's neck. "So when we decide which place we're moving into, we won't bother with the furniture, and we'll toss out what's already there, too."

"That's a plan."

Kyler brought their lips together, pulling Robbie against him at the same moment. For some reason, it felt different holding him. It was as if hearing Robbie say he wanted him to be fully his touched something inside Kyler he didn't realize he wanted.

Robbie was right. The memories of their early days together were the best he had, too, as far as their happiness went. Back then, bologna was about the only meat they'd get to eat in a week, and he sure as hell would never go back to that, but if he and Robbie could capture their former happiness with the lifestyle they had now, things would be perfect.

They could do it. He knew they could. All he had to do was quit hitting on other people. All Robbie had to do was stop being so temperamental with him, and since Robbie said his flirting was the cause of that, they both should be able to be happy again. It was all so easy. He wondered why they had tortured themselves like this for as long as they had. Kyler smiled through the kiss and eased to his back, bringing Robbie down on top of him.

Robbie drew back from the kiss. "What has you all smiles?"

"Everything. I'm feeling really good about this."

Robbie stroked Kyler's cheek. "So am I."

Kyler moved to kiss him, then paused. "There's just one thing I have to know."

"What?"

"What's Jesse and Evan's house like? Don't even tell me it's cooler than my place."

Robbie chuckled and combed his fingers through Kyler's hair. "I think I better tell you about that later. Right now, I'm in less of a talking mood and more in that one you wanted me in earlier. And if I tell you how cool their place is, you won't be in the same mood as me, so I'd rather get what I want out of you first."

"I'll go with that."

Kyler put their lips together, sliding his tongue into Robbie's mouth as he slipped one hand up his shirt. His touch floated down Robbie's back to his ass. As he caressed the solid curves of it, Robbie slowed in kissing him until the kiss ended, but Robbie's breath blew quicker against his lips. Kyler brought his hands up, stroking Robbie's lower back before sliding forward around his hips. Robbie lifted his lower body, giving him access to open his jeans.

Kyler pulled the button and zipper loose, and tugged them a few inches off Robbie's hips. He rubbed his hands to Robbie's back again, and dipped the fingers of both hands into his jeans, his briefs, to feel the soft skin of Robbie's ass.

A deep groan hummed in Robbie's throat. He tipped his head

back to pull in a breath, and Kyler took the opportunity to lick and suck at his exposed throat. A breathless moan left Robbie, and as he brought his head forward again, he covered Kyler's lips in a kiss heated with more urgency.

Kyler dragged Robbie's shirt up his back. As it reached his shoulder blades, Robbie broke the kiss to slide out of it, returning to Kyler's lips as soon as he was free. Kyler wrapped him in a tight embrace, squeezing him for a long moment, then in a smooth movement, rolled them both over, putting himself on top of Robbie. Robbie took his turn to move his hands over him, though his movements were quicker, as if he was getting more desperate for them to bring their bare bodies together.

Robbie tugged at his shirt, and Kyler lifted up, discarding it and deciding to do the same with his pants. He stood at the bed's edge and kicked them off, and at seeing Robbie hurriedly pushing his own down, Kyler yanked them off for him. Grabbing the lube, he crawled onto the bed again and leaned over him, his lips to Robbie's ear. "You want to roll over for me?"

Robbie nodded and eased over to his stomach. Rather than lie flat, he lifted his hips off the bed so the muscles in his ass worked to show it at its round and firm best. Kyler sat back on his heels, admiring the display Robbie presented for him. He kneeled tall behind him, settling his heavy, hard cock along Robbie's crack. Placing his hands flat on Robbie's lower back, he rubbed up either side of his spine and back down, beginning a gentle massage.

Robbie moaned softly, settling his hips fully on the bed. Kyler's touch was tender, his fingers bringing heat and relaxation wherever they traveled. Robbie closed his eyes, the pleasure of Kyler's touch nearly making him forget his hard cock. What seemed so long ago now, Kyler used to rub his back regularly. It always led to lovemaking, but it was one of the favorite foreplay moves Kyler would use on him.

Somehow, in the past couple of years, they had gotten away from it. Maybe because they were always so needful to just be with each other, they didn't spend as much time wooing one another like they used to. He hoped this was a sign that would

change, too.

Kyler brought his body over him, bowing his head and placing a soft kiss at the base of Robbie's neck. Robbie's heartbeat quickened. That kiss, how many times had he felt Kyler kiss him there, so softly? More than he could remember, and still the single soft touch could arouse him more than almost anything else.

Kyler drifted down his back, his tongue and lips moving over the smooth skin, his hair brushing across it. Robbie breathed a little faster. Hushed moans escaped him without his realizing it. He couldn't stop from shifting on the bed, letting his cock rub the sheets. Kyler's massage with his fingers may have relaxed him, but this massage with lips, tongue, and the tickling of his hair, sent desire burning through him.

Kyler grabbed the lube. He lay beside him, half covering Robbie's back with his own body, draping a leg over one of Robbie's as he pressed two slick fingers into him. He nuzzled into Robbie's hair as he stretched him, kissing behind Robbie ear, his neck, the side of his face.

Long moments passed as Kyler took his time stretching him. When he pulled his fingers away and positioned himself over him, Robbie turned his head. Kyler met him in a slow, sensual kiss as he pressed his cock to Robbie's hole.

The broad head stretched his rim, and Robbie passed a rough groan into Kyler's mouth. The pleasure of Kyler's cock opening him made it so he had to stop kissing him.

His cock fully buried inside Robbie, Kyler pushed one arm under him and settled his body on top of him, not moving other than holding him and placing tender kisses everywhere his lips could find bare skin.

Robbie reached back with one hand, sinking his fingers into Kyler's hair. This wasn't like their usual sex. Kyler was making love to him. It wasn't the first time, but it'd also been longer than he wanted to remember. Robbie felt a hint of reproach at the thought. It was another thing that wasn't all Kyler's fault, but his too for not telling him what he wanted.

Feeling Kyler's weight on top of him, the heat from Kyler's body covering his own, Robbie smiled. At least it seemed he would get what he wanted now that Kyler was finally his.

Kyler pressed his nose into Robbie's hair, breathing in his scent. With their bodies joined, feeling the heat of Robbie inside, the firmness of him beneath him, he wondered how things had gone so far astray in their relationship. How had they lost what was most important to them, and in turn, making it so he was about to lose Robbie completely?

He tightened his hold on Robbie, pushing to go deeper into him even though their bodies were already flush. He couldn't lose him. Even during their separate times, Robbie was his source of sanity. Losing Robbie would mean he would also lose himself. A life without him at his side would be pointless. But that wasn't going to happen. Robbie was still his. He always would be.

Robbie shifted his ass, grinding Kyler's cock inside him. Kyler took over, rolling his hips in small circles, then started to slowly thrust. Robbie closed his eyes, concentrating on the pleasure building with each glide of Kyler's cock. But it was more than that. He felt closer to Kyler than he had in so very long. It reminded him of the early days, when they would spend an entire day or evening in bed together, talking, laughing, touching, and making love. To recapture that feeling now, after he thought it'd been lost forever, reinforced to him no matter what hardships they faced, he and Ky were meant to be together.

Kyler slid his hand down Robbie's arm to take his hand. Robbie's breath fled from him. It'd been so long since Kyler had done that. He turned his head, whispering Kyler's name.

Kyler held him tighter. "You know I love you, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do. And I love you too, Ky."

Saying the words they rarely spoke heightened both their desire. Kyler thrust harder. Robbie lifted back to meet him. Together they found their harmony, their bodies moving in perfect sync with each other.

Robbie felt his orgasm growing, but wished he could hold

it off. He wanted to stay like this with Kyler. Though, he had a feeling even after they finished, it wouldn't be the last time tonight. They'd be together again and again until they exhausted their bodies.

Deep, short groans left Kyler on every thrust, a sign Robbie knew well that Kyler was fighting his climax as he tried to bring him there first. He decided to give in. Robbie bumped against Kyler. Pleasure built to ecstasy. He moaned as he came, and almost as soon as his orgasm started, he felt Kyler's following. Kyler pushed as deep as he could into him, his hold on him constricted with near crushing force. Robbie savored each second of feeling their bodies so closely melded together.

As the pleasure subsided, Kyler grudgingly lifted himself off him and fell over to his back. He reached for Robbie, pulling and guiding him to snuggle against him. Robbie curled into Kyler's side, laying one arm across his chest.

Kyler rolled his head to the side, resting it against Robbie's. "What do you think about staying in bed for the rest of the day and night? Or at the very least, staying naked?"

Robbie exhaled a contented sigh. "I'd think that you read my mind."

Kyler smiled at him, touching their lips together once again in a tender kiss.

CHAPTER NINE

Kyler dropped a box on top of two already stacked in Robbie's bedroom, which was now *his* bedroom, too. He leaned over the boxes, letting them support his torso as he tried to catch his breath. "This is a lot of freakin' work."

Robbie stopped and bent toward him. "But it's worth it, right?"

Kyler smiled and gave him a kiss. "Absolutely."

Kevin walked in carrying one of Kyler's suits slung over his left arm. "That's what years of smoking will do to you."

"Smoking doesn't have a damn thing to do with it," Kyler said. "And are you doing okay there, carrying that one little thing? You need some help? I wouldn't want you to strain yourself."

Kevin brandished his casted right wrist at Kyler, his middle finger raised slightly more than the others. "You're the one who said you didn't want your suits wrinkled."

"I didn't mean for you to carry them all down one by one."

Adam entered with a large box and set it in front of Kyler. "It's all fine and good you guys are going to give the whole monogamy thing a shot, but seriously, you only live a floor away. What's the point of moving in together?"

"We only live a floor away, so what's the point of not?" Kyler said.

Robbie couldn't help but grin at hearing Kyler defend their decision.

Adam shrugged. "I guess. But now explain something else to me. Where the hell did all these clothes come from? I know in the whole nine years I've known you, for at least six of them I never saw you wear the same thing twice, but really, this is a little excessive, don't you think?"

Kyler stood up straight and stretched his arms over his head.

“You’re exaggerating. Just be glad I’m not bringing down my furniture.”

“I think Robbie’s the one more glad for that,” Kevin said.

Kyler smiled at Robbie. “Well, I won’t argue that he’s got better taste.”

Kevin turned to walk away. “In everything except men. Go figure.”

Kyler glared at the back of Kevin’s head. “I know he’s got good taste in musicians, especially bass players, and could easily find someone to fill a soon-to-be empty slot.”

Kevin lifted his good hand, his middle finger raised high.

Robbie gave Kyler’s ass a slap. “Let’s finish this up so we can have living together sex.”

Kyler put his arm around Robbie’s shoulders. “I think I just got my second wind.”

Robbie chuckled. “Just be sure to save some of it.”

Two more trips brought the rest of Kyler’s clothes and a few other items down. With the last box dropped off in the bedroom, Kyler collapsed back on the bed, his legs hanging over the side, his arms spread out.

“I’ve changed my mind about wanting to have living together sex. Let’s just skip that and go to living together napping.”

Robbie stood between Kyler’s legs and braced his torso over him on both arms. “You’re just worn out from last night.”

Kyler smiled. “You might be right. It’s been a while since we’ve done that.”

“Done what?” Kevin asked, walking in carrying another suit to hang.

“Fucked each other into oblivion,” Kyler said.

Kevin stepped out of the closet from hanging the suit. “I’m happy for you guys, really I am, but let’s cool it on all the fuck talk.”

Adam dropped down on the bed beside Kyler and Robbie, grinning at them. "Ignore him. He's just pissed because the same night he broke his wrist he was supposed to hook up with some stripper."

"Excuse me, she wasn't a stripper. She was a showgirl."

Adam rolled his eyes at him and spoke again to Kyler and Robbie. "Either way, he didn't get laid, and now his jerk-off hand is out of commission."

Kyler smirked at Kevin. "Sounds like it's time to become ambidextrous."

Kevin pointed at Adam. "First off, I'd like to know exactly how you know which hand is my jerk-off hand. And second," his gaze went to Kyler, "what I need is a hot woman who'll take pity on me and do all the work. Let's all go out tonight so you guys can help me find one. I'll have better luck if you guys are with me."

Kyler gave him a flat look. "I'm not going to lure some unsuspecting woman into your clutches."

"As if any woman who gets into my clutches doesn't like it there."

Robbie spoke up. "Considering you've only got one clutch right now and it's not your good one, she might not."

As Kyler and Adam snickered, Kevin glowered at Robbie. "I thought you'd be the most willing to help."

"I don't know why. I want to stay in tonight. Besides, just have Adam stroke you off. What difference does it make who does it so long as you get there?"

"Sorry, I'm looking for a little more than just stroking."

Adam winked at him. "Well, I have been told I've got a pretty mouth."

Kevin looked at him in exasperation. "Will you guys just come on?"

Kyler glanced up at Robbie. "It's your call."

"I guess going out for a couple hours couldn't hurt. At least it'll let us get dinner, and it would be too cruel to not help him out."

"Thank you!" Kevin said.

Kyler laid a slap on Robbie's ass. "Then let's get ready."

With a plan made to meet in an hour, Adam and Kevin left to get ready. Robbie walked toward the bathroom. "I'm going to grab a quick shower."

Kyler stood in the middle of the bedroom, staring at his boxes of clothes. "I'm going to try and find something to wear. If I can remember what's in which damn box."

Robbie chuckled as he stepped into the bathroom. It was a good thing his bedroom had two walk-in closets and he'd only filled one of them. Although, since Kyler had both closets overflowing at his place, with more clothes in one of his extra bedroom closets, it looked like Kyler would be taking up all the extra closets here. The penthouse was nice, and it certainly was big enough for just the two of them, but after seeing how Jesse and Evan lived, he knew he wanted something like that. He only hoped Kyler would want it too someday.

Robbie climbed into the hot shower and stood under the flow. He hadn't talked to Kyler about buying a house, or moving out of the city. Kyler was already meeting him on so many things he wanted, he didn't want to push too hard. But then, it was *not* pushing that had gotten them into such a rough state. He shook his head as he scrubbed shampoo through his hair. He didn't know why everything had to be so confusing.

A breeze blew across his back. Robbie didn't need to turn to know Kyler had entered the shower.

Kyler stood back, watching a trail of sudsy shampoo course down Robbie's back and flow along his ass crack. "You have the most beautiful ass."

Robbie smiled over his shoulder. "I thought you were finding some clothes."

"I thought this was the outfit you liked best."

Robbie's gaze moved over Kyler's lean, muscled body, stopping at the long, thick cock jutting out in a ready state. "I do. When we're home, I think it's the only one you should wear. But in public, maybe something just a little more covering."

Kyler wrapped an arm around Robbie's waist and slid his cock along Robbie's soap slick crack. "Are we getting possessive already?"

Robbie stretched both arms up and back to wrap around Kyler's neck while pushing his ass against him. "I've always been possessive of you. I'm just not going to keep it to myself from now on."

"I kinda like the sound of that."

Kyler ran one hand down Robbie's chest, then reached for the soap. With his hands lathered, he embraced Robbie again and wrapped Robbie's cock in a soapy fist.

Robbie tipped his head back to rest on Kyler's shoulder. "We'll be late."

"I don't care. I'm not going to sacrifice my sex life for Kevin's."

A husky chuckle left Robbie. "It's not like you won't get as much as you want."

"Yeah, but I want it now." Kyler shifted his hips so his cock head hit hard against Robbie's hole.

Robbie sucked in a sharp breath.

Kyler licked the edge of Robbie's ear, his voice deeper as he spoke. "Did I make you sore last night?"

Robbie turned his head toward him, brushing his lips on Kyler's cheek. "A little. But not enough for me to say no."

An approving groan rumbled in Kyler's throat. "Well, let me see if I can make it feel a little better."

Kyler kissed Robbie's neck, his shoulders, and started leaving a trail of soft kisses down his back. As Kyler went to his knees, Robbie bent forward, placing both hands on the shower wall

and widening his stance. Through the heat of the shower, he felt Kyler's moist breath near his hole.

Kyler dipped his head down, licking the back of Robbie's sac and up to trace the bottom curve of one ass cheek. He kissed the soft skin, then nipped hard. Robbie flinched, his breath stuttering in his throat. He inched back more, trying to show with his body what he wanted. He hadn't stopped moving when Kyler grabbed his hips and jerked him back to his mouth.

Robbie dropped his head down between his outstretched arms. Like everything he did with sex, Kyler was a master at rimming. Sucking, licking, tongue fucking, Kyler didn't hold back. Within only a few rapid heartbeats, the sensual assault on his ass made Robbie's cock so stiff it couldn't even twitch, though it leaked clear drops of pre-cum.

When he thought Robbie couldn't take it anymore, Kyler reached under him and took his shaft, pumping it in a tight, wet fist. Robbie heard his own moans filling the shower, but when he heard Kyler start moaning and felt the vibration of his voice, it finished him. He moaned loud as his orgasm rocked him, Kyler continuing to stroke him through his pleasure.

Robbie felt him sit back and get to his feet. Kyler released Robbie's cock to take hold of his own. Robbie glanced back, watching him pump it fast and hard. He could already see Kyler's abdomen was drawn in tight, a sign he was seconds from coming.

Kyler gripped Robbie's hip with his free hand, his fingers clenching onto him. He brought his cock close to Robbie's back, his hips working in sync with his hand. He moaned low in his throat, his body shuddered with climaxing.

Robbie felt the thick fluid splash across his lower back. He closed his eyes in a long blink, a quiet groan escaping him. He didn't know why, maybe it was some primordial thing inside him, but he loved it when Kyler came on him. He always had, ever since they were teenagers. Feeling Kyler's fluid on his skin always sent tremors of exhilaration through him.

Kyler took a deep breath to help calm his more rapid ones

and steady his pounding heartbeat. He ran his hand over Robbie's ass to his back. Dipping his fingertips into his cum, he smeared it over Robbie's skin. He leaned over him, smiling with his lips to Robbie's ear. "Right now, I'm really wishing we would've told Kevin to go practice with his left hand."

Robbie chuckled softly. "Me too."

"I guess we'll consider this to be round one of our living together sex."

Robbie looked back at him, smiling. "With many more to follow, for a very long time."

Kyler brought his lips closer to Robbie's, whispering, "forever," before kissing him.

Robbie turned toward him, his lips staying on Kyler's and still smiling as he wrapped him in his arms.

CHAPTER TEN

Robbie sipped the same beer he had ordered half an hour before. He regretted the decision to go out as soon as they walked through the club's doors. Word flew through the club that Black Heart Down was there, and before he knew it, they were surrounded by people wanting autographs and pictures, paparazzi arrived, and of course, women were hanging all over Kyler. Their guards kept people from getting too touchy, except for those that Kevin and Adam wanted to. But now Kyler was part of it.

Robbie watched Kyler dancing with a woman. He wasn't sure what would happen first, her boobs flying out of her tight shirt, or her ass popping out of her leather pants hanging dangerously low, but one or the other was bound to happen soon with all her jiggling.

Kyler told him it was just for show. Since the paparazzi were there, it'd be some of that free publicity Rosa talked about. It didn't lessen his jealousy and hurt. Really, it was just typical Kyler. If people were around, Kyler would strut and flaunt.

He didn't understand why Kyler had to be like this. Why couldn't he be the man he was when it was just the two of them alone together? Why did he always have to change in public? The Kyler who told him he loved him was the true Ky, he knew that. But when this side of him came out, it threatened to overshadow all the good they built between each other.

Robbie watched as the blonde spun toward Kyler, throwing her arms around his neck as she straddled his thigh, her hips gyrating on him. His hurt drowned under nausea. He felt weak, sick in his heart and stomach. Robbie pushed away from the table and stood, turning his back to Kyler. It might be for show, but it was one he couldn't watch. It was wrong on so many levels, especially after all they'd talked about.

Robbie made his way to the restroom. It was packed with

men, but he found a vacant sink and turned on the cold water. He leaned over the sink and wet his hand, then held it to his forehead, moving it next to the back of his neck. He really felt like he was going to throw up and needed to snap himself out of it.

The restroom door flung open.

Robbie slowly turned his head to the side, though he already knew who'd entered. Kyler shouldered his way between male bodies, his bodyguard trying to catch up to him. Robbie looked away as his gaze landed on him.

Kyler stopped beside him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Robbie knocked his hand off with a sharp shake of his shoulder. "I'm fine."

Kyler's hand hovered between them, confusion on his face. "What's wrong?"

Robbie glared at him. "You really have to ask?"

Kyler rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me this is about the skank I was dancing with."

"Oh, see? You do know. Good for you."

Kyler's voice rose a notch. "Why are you giving me attitude? I'm just doing what Kevin wanted me to do."

"And there's your twisted damn logic at work again. We're here to help Kevin get laid. Not you. Why the fuck are you the one on the dance floor?"

"Because I'm the one who gets all the attention. The women come to me. I direct them to Kevin. And in the mean time, the paparazzi are taking some front cover photos to keep us in the spotlight."

"I don't want to be a part of publicity that involves some slut humping your leg!"

Laughter broke out close by them.

Robbie and Kyler turned to a tall, muscularly built guy

snickering at them, with two others who nearly cloned him with strong physiques.

"You're those guys from Black Heart Down, aren't you?" the guy said.

Kyler pointed at him. "Listen, I'm not in the mood to give an autograph or take a picture right now, so back off."

Robbie saw the frustration from their argument was fueling Kyler's temper. He took a step toward him. "Ky..."

The guy flipped his hand at Kyler. "Whatever, dude. Your music sucks, anyhow."

Kyler's bodyguard moved toward the guy. "I think you better watch your mouth, bud."

Kyler placed a hand on his guard's arm. "I got this." He rounded fully on the guy. "If you were somebody, I might give two shits about your opinion. But since you're nothing but a little bitch in a club trying to look cool in front of his boys, I don't. So shut up and leave me alone."

The guy took a quick step forward, getting in Kyler's face. "I'm a bitch? Looks to me like you're the one having a fight with his."

Robbie didn't see Kyler's strike. Kyler moved too fast. But he did see the guy fly backward, crash into a stall, and fall onto the toilet. Kyler lunged to dive into the stall. Kyler's bodyguard grabbed him, hauling him back in an attempt to keep him from fighting. One of the guy's friends turned for Kyler.

In the span of one quick heartbeat, Robbie realized the guy's friend was going to attack Kyler, but with Ky restrained by the guard, he was open and helpless. As the guy's friend jumped forward, so did Robbie. He blocked him from Kyler, throwing his right shoulder into the other's chest and his left fist into the guy's stomach. The other man caved around his fist. Robbie pulled back and whirled around for Kyler.

Kyler struggled harder against the bodyguard. The guard lifted him off his feet and spun him away to face the door. Kyler

elbowed him in the ribs and flung the guard's arms away.

"Get the fuck off me!" Kyler spun back around. "Robbie!"

Robbie shoved around a couple guys and grabbed Kyler above his elbow. "Come on!"

Kyler followed Robbie with no fight or words.

Robbie burst into the club, dragging Kyler behind him. He looked to their table, saw it was empty, and scanned the dance floor. He caught sight of Adam's coppery hair at the bar and rushed across the dance floor toward him. As they neared, he saw Kevin was beside him, talking with a tall brunette.

Adam glanced at them, confusion and concern instantly taking over his bright expression. "What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"No, we need go," Robbie said. "You guys can probably stay, but Ky and I need to get out of here since someone decided to start a brawl in the restroom." He shot Kyler a glare.

Kevin opened his mouth to say something, paused as if he'd changed his mind, and shook his head. "Figures. Get your asses out of here before things get worse."

Robbie turned for the doors, still keeping a hold on Kyler. They walked out of the club to the limo that had brought all of them there. Robbie pushed Kyler to make him get in first, and climbed in after him.

"What the hell was that in there, Ky? Why do you always have to—" Robbie stopped talking as Kyler cupped his face in both hands.

Kyler looked intently into his eyes. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. But—"

Kyler pulled Robbie against him, wrapping him tight in his arms. "Christ, Rob, don't do shit like that. When I saw you jump in, it scared the hell out of me. That guy was a lot bigger than you and the third one was right there, ready to make a move."

Robbie couldn't help but relax into his arms. "It's not the first

fight I've been in."

"Yeah, well, the last one was when we were in high school. You can't do things like that."

"But you can? You're constantly doing crap like this and it's wrong."

Kyler nodded. "I know. It's just, when he called you a bitch, I saw nothing but red."

"He was nothing but a punk running his mouth."

Kyler strengthened his hold on him. "Either way, I won't let anyone disrespect you like that. I never have, and I never will."

Robbie sighed. He wanted to keep his defenses up against him, but like always, a gentle touch, a smile, the right words, from Kyler broke them down. "It's alright. But you have to know I'm not going to stand by and let you get your ass beat."

Kyler sat back to look in his eyes. He smiled. "I do know that, and I will say you're damn sexy when you're protective."

Robbie chuckled softly. "I guess I'll admit you are, too."

Kyler leaned more toward him, whispering with their lips nearly touching. "No going out for a while. Agree?"

"Agree," Robbie said, and touched their lips together.

Kyler's kiss, tender and passionate, told him more about how Ky felt than any words he could say. Kyler loved him, he wanted him, he needed him. Robbie didn't doubt these things from Kyler were true, and in his own heart, he'd already forgiven him for the dancing stunt.

The problem was, how many more publicity stunts like tonight's would he have to watch? Things like this were why he wanted them to follow in the footsteps of Jesse and Evan, announcing their love publicly. It would be the only way to put an end to it, to stop Kyler from feeling like he needed to carry out his playboy rocker persona.

Robbie pushed the thoughts away. Now wasn't the time. Ky was already giving him so much. Tonight was a little hiccup, but

Ky *was* trying, and like they both agreed on, change wouldn't come overnight. He could let this go so they could keep moving forward. He just hoped this would be it for a while.

Robbie brushed his fingers through Kyler's hair. "Are you hungry? Do you want to stop and get something?"

Kyler rested his forehead on Robbie's, his eyes closing. "No, I'm fine. I think I just want to get home unless you want to grab something."

Robbie ran a hand up Kyler's thigh. "I'm good with heading home."

Kyler spread one leg further out, inviting Robbie's touch to move between. Robbie took the invitation and rubbed the black leather pants at Kyler's balls. Kyler pulled in a breath, his hips rolling to press more into Robbie's hand. He placed a chaste, but sensual kiss on Robbie's lips, his voice a whisper as he spoke. "Do you want to tonight?"

An understanding smile rose to Robbie's lips at Kyler's question. It was Kyler's way of asking him if he would be on top. Because of his past and what had been done to him, Kyler had always struggled with directly saying he wanted to bottom for as long as he'd known him.

The first time Kyler asked him, they'd been having sex for about two weeks, and he phrased it in almost the same way, "Do you want to?" At first, Robbie hadn't known what Kyler meant. They were in the middle of making out, heavily, and his brain wasn't firing like it usually did. He asked him, "Do I want to *what*?" and then saw a new side to Ky, flustered and stuttering as he tried to explain. Luckily, he caught on quick and saved Kyler from too much embarrassment, though, he didn't understand why Kyler acted like it was something to be ashamed of wanting.

But later that same night, after they made love, Ky opened up to him about what had really brought him and his family to Ann Arbor, and what his father and brother had done to him when he had gotten picked up by the cops in a gay club. Then he fully understood why Kyler held a deep inner shame.

Robbie blocked the rest of the memory, not wanting to relive Kyler's pain. He focused on him and smiled, giving him a single nod. "Yeah, I do."

Kyler put his lips to Robbie's in another deep kiss.

The limo drew to a halt in front of their building. Not waiting for the driver to open their door, Robbie hopped out, Kyler following close behind. Striding quickly through the lobby, they stepped into the elevator. Robbie turned to him, and Kyler caught Robbie's face in both hands, cupping it gently as he delivered a hungry kiss. Robbie wrapped his arms around him, sucking Kyler's tongue deeper into his mouth.

The elevator door opened, and Robbie backed out to their penthouse. Forced to break the kiss to get his keys, he turned for the door, Kyler moving behind him and making him fumble with the lock by licking, sucking, and kissing on his neck. As soon as the lock clicked, Robbie shoved open the door, spinning for Kyler at the same moment and capturing his lips once again as he backed into their home.

His shirt fell to the floor, Kyler's following immediately after. Their soft chuckles interrupted the kiss as they stumbled trying to kick off their shoes, each holding onto the other to keep from falling. Their smiling lips met again, Robbie's fingers opening Kyler's pants as he and Kyler turned for the bedroom.

At reaching the bedside, Robbie pushed both his hands down the back of Kyler's pants, his palms massaging over Kyler's ass cheeks. As Kyler tipped his head back, a pleasure filled groan escaping him, Robbie licked up his throat, his ears savoring the rumbling sound of Kyler's voice as he finished shoving the pants down.

Robbie lightly kissed and nipped at Kyler's lips while working his own jeans off. Kyler bent to bring Robbie's jeans down for him, and Robbie moved with him, still trying to shower him with kisses.

Kyler laughed softly. "Can you hold up until I get your pants off?"

“No.”

Robbie stepped quickly from his jeans, and as Kyler straightened, he knocked him down to the bed. Kyler fell to his back, laughing harder. Robbie lay over him, smiling as he claimed Kyler's lips again.

Light, playful touches gradually turned firmer and more demanding. Kyler wrapped his arms tight around Robbie's lower back, pressing him down while grinding their cocks together. Robbie stopped kissing him, focusing on the pleasure from Kyler's hips working beneath him. His own hips started moving in harmony with Kyler's.

Knowing he had to stop or else he wouldn't make it to being inside him, Robbie pulled against Kyler's hold. Kyler slowly loosened his grip. Robbie gave him another light kiss, then eased off him to get the lube.

Kyler slid up the bed to lie on his side, his back to Robbie. The heat of Robbie's body blanketed his back as he returned to him. Robbie's hand moved over his hip to his abdomen, caressing up to Kyler's chest and back down.

Kyler closed his eyes, a quiet moan leaving him. Kisses, touches, sex, it always amazed him how Robbie knew what kind of attention to give him. Hard and rough, sweet and playful, gentle and loving, Robbie knew him so well, it seemed their emotions were shared.

And at this moment, he was grateful for Robbie's quick and easy forgiveness for what happened that night. He hadn't wanted to go out to begin with, but when they arrived at the club and saw the paparazzi, and not just minor league guys, but heavy hitters for some of the biggest entertainment mags and shows, he knew getting their attention would mean instant publicity. If only the whole act hadn't put him in such a piss poor mood with everyone getting on his nerves except Robbie. It did make him think, Robbie might be right about throwing the whole charade behind them and coming out.

His heart pounded faster, not from rising desire, but with

anxiety. Kyler shoved the thought away. Now sure as hell wasn't the time to think on it. He wasn't ready. He knew that, Robbie understood it, he didn't need anything else. All that mattered was he had Robbie.

Kyler laid his hand over Robbie's, which was stroking up and down his abdomen, and guided it down to his hard cock. Robbie wrapped his fingers around the shaft, and Kyler groaned, pushing into his hand. Robbie pumped him a few times, then slowly drew his hand away to open the lube.

Kyler's breath left him as Robbie's slick fingers pushed between his ass cheeks. He adjusted his one leg more forward, giving Robbie better access. Robbie massaged the outside of his hole with two fingertips before pushing one inside him. Kyler bit his lower lips, breathing quickly through his nose.

Every time they did this, he was reminded again how much he loved the feel of Robbie inside him. It seemed recently they'd fallen into a pattern of him usually being on top, but now he made a silent promise to himself he'd ask for it more from Robbie, even if he did feel awkward about it, which he knew was ridiculous. It was just hard sometimes, admitting what he wanted. Though there was no one else he would admit it to except Robbie.

Kyler reached up and back with one hand, resting it in Robbie's hair as Robbie kissed his neck and pushed two fingers into him. He already felt ready for him, his hole slick and stretched. He moaned low in his throat and rocked back on Robbie's fingers, trying to tell him with his body he wanted all of him. Robbie smiled against his neck. The small sign told Kyler that Robbie understood his desire, but rather than listen, Robbie curled his fingers to find his gland.

The gentle touch sent pleasure humming through him. Kyler closed his eyes, falling into it. The sensation continued to build; his cock ached for attention. He found himself moving on Robbie's fingers, his body greedy for more. He couldn't ignore his cock any longer and took it in hand, but as he did, Robbie's fingers left him.

His heart beating at a rapid pace, Kyler squeezed against the

hardness of his cock. It felt so solid in his hand, and touching it sent a tremor of exhilaration through him, but his focus shifted as the wet tip of Robbie's cock touched his hole.

Robbie's hips pushed forward, his cock head moving past the first ring of muscle deeper into Kyler's channel. Feeling Robbie filling him, Kyler exhaled a breathy moan. He released his cock to reach back, rubbing and touching every part of Robbie he could find. He stretched to take hold of Robbie's ass cheek, pulling him forward while pushing back, trying to get all of Robbie's cock buried inside him.

Robbie gave in to Kyler's desire this time. He brought his hips flush to Kyler's ass, rolling them as he ground into him. He wrapped one arm around Kyler's chest, holding him tight as he licked and bit at Kyler's ear. His voice deep, he said, "You're so tight, so hot inside. You always are. I love it."

Kyler smiled. Usually, dirty talk was his role when he was on top, but he liked Robbie showing his assertive side. "Show me how much you love it."

Robbie groaned low in his throat. "I will. I want you to feel me all day tomorrow."

With the end of his last word, Robbie started thrusting, slow at first, but his urgency grew by the second.

With his arm still stretched back, his hand on Robbie's ass, Kyler clenched onto the solid cheek. "Rob..."

Robbie heard all that Kyler wanted from him saying his name. He thrust faster, harder, and slid his arm down from holding Kyler around the chest to grip his cock. Kyler's voice, smooth, deep, powerful, left him in a pleasure filled moan. The sound heightened Robbie's lust, Kyler's body constricting with his building orgasm fed it more. Knowing Kyler was seconds away, he pumped Kyler's cock faster and drove his hips against his ass harder.

Kyler rocked against him, shouting as he came. Robbie felt the hot and slick fluid on his hand. He squeezed their bodies tighter together, moaning as he released his cum inside Kyler.

Breathing heavily, Kyler concentrated on the feel of Robbie, his thrusts slowing. After a few seconds, Robbie lay motionless behind him, his breath blowing on his neck. Kyler noticed Robbie still held his cock, and he moved his hand down to wrap it overtop Robbie's. He pulled in a deep breath to find his voice and turned his head toward his shoulder. "I think I'll definitely be feeling you tomorrow."

A winded chuckle left Robbie. "Yeah, I think so, too...since I'm not done yet."

Kyler laughed softly. "We'll both be feeling it tomorrow then."

"You're the one who always says the mark of good sex is to still be feeling it the next day."

"I do say some pretty smart things sometimes, don't I?"

Robbie kissed Kyler's cheek, keeping his lips on it as he grinned. "Yeah, you do."

Smiling, Kyler let out a contented sigh and closed his eyes, enjoying Robbie's closeness and warmth as they rested. If this was what living together again would be like, it could easily be a life he'd be beyond happy with.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Robbie walked into the restaurant behind Kyler, wearing a smile that seemed hadn't left his lips in days. The past two weeks with Kyler surpassed his expectations of happiness. It was like they had warped back to their old days, but even better because they had the money and comfort from their success. They could fully enjoy each other without being tired from working dead-end jobs while struggling to get gigs.

Now their days were spent doing whatever they wanted, including making love anytime the mood hit, and it hit *a lot*. Kyler had become attentive to him again, even holding him in the evenings when they'd watch movies. He still wondered how they had gotten so far away from what they'd always had. It proved to him just how important it was to be open and honest, to truly communicate wants and desires. If he'd never told Kyler he wanted him to commit, they'd still be living in misery, trying to find their way to what both their hearts wanted.

It was terrible for him to think it, but Kevin breaking his wrist was probably the best thing that could've happened, for them at least. It gave him and Kyler a chance to discover themselves again. Part of him wished they wouldn't have to go on tour at all, but he wasn't as worried as before. He and Kyler were building a strong foundation, so he knew the temptations of the road wouldn't be an issue. It was more because he was getting so comfortable with falling into a daily routine. He hated to break it.

Thinking of the tour reminded him to call Jesse. He had to tell him how good things were going and it looked like he wouldn't be joining Conquest any time soon. Not that he thought Jesse really believed he would. He realized now Jesse was probably humoring him that day, which now thinking back on it, he felt embarrassed that he'd gone to Jesse and Evan with his problems. He just didn't know where else to turn. Either way, he was pretty sure Jesse wouldn't be disappointed with his decision to stay in

Black Heart Down.

Robbie sat at the table across from Kyler. As the hostess handed them their menus, a busboy filled glasses of water for them. Both walked away, and Robbie smiled at Kyler. "This was a good idea."

"I thought it'd be nice for us to get out." Kyler grinned over the top of his menu. "We can't always order in takeout, then have sex. It's good to change things up by going out to eat, then heading home to have sex. The drive back will build the anticipation."

Robbie chuckled. "Or maybe I could just suck you off in the car during the drive."

"I like that idea."

Robbie leaned over the table closer to him. "Or we could really change things up, go for a walk in a park or on the beach, find a secluded spot, and get naked."

Kyler wet his lips as he also leaned forward. "Now I *really* like that idea. You're getting adventurous."

"I always used to be. Remember..." Robbie paused as he saw someone approaching out the corner of his eye. He turned to see it was their waiter walking with purpose toward their table.

Robbie felt his heart tighten with old and still familiar anxiety. The young man, looking hardly out of his teens, was achingly hot. Wavy blond hair, bright blue eyes set in a face of soft features, moving with a tantalizing sway in his hips, the twink was exactly the type Kyler would go after during their down times.

Robbie glanced at Kyler and caught his gaze moving down the young man's nubile body. Kyler quickly looked away, as if he'd realized he'd been checking the waiter out, and focused on his menu. Robbie relaxed slightly. He knew he'd never be able to stop Kyler from looking, but the fact that Kyler stopped himself said a lot about how far they'd already come.

The waiter stopped at their table. "Hi, I'm Jay. I'll be taking care of you guys. How are you both today?"

Kyler muttered “fine” into his glass of water before taking a sip.

Robbie noticed he was keeping his gaze forward. He felt a little burst of pride for his efforts. Robbie looked up at Jay. “We’re great.”

“Wonderful! Then let me tell you about some really fabulous specials the chef has right now.”

Robbie listened to Jay rattle off different dishes. He couldn’t help but notice as Jay talked, he was directing his words toward Kyler. He was annoyed at the guy’s boldness, but also overjoyed at Kyler ignoring him.

Their orders given, Jay excused himself to place them, promising to return quickly with fresh bread.

Robbie snorted. “He’s friendly, isn’t he?”

“He’s doing his best to be.”

“You think he’s hot, don’t you?”

Kyler’s expression turned cautious. “Why would you ask me that?”

“Because even though you tried to hide it, you didn’t do a very good job. I saw you checking him out. Just admit it.”

Kyler shrugged. “Alright. Yeah, he’s hot, with some totally fuckable lips.”

Robbie scowled at him. “You didn’t have to go that far.”

“Well where did you want me to go? You’re the one pushing me to admit I think he’s hot. You should’ve just left it alone.”

Robbie tapped a finger on the table. Kyler was right. He should’ve left it alone. So, why didn’t he? The answer drifted to the front of his mind. Because even though things were going great, he was still insecure over whether it was for real and if it would last. But he had to stop being like that. Things were different now. Ky was trying to do better. It wasn’t fair to Kyler or their relationship for him to keep doubting him.

“You’re right. I should’ve let it drop. I just got jealous, that’s

all.”

Kyler gave him a warm smile. “It’s okay to be jealous. Just don’t take it so far that you push me away and we get in a fight over it.”

Robbie glanced up as Jay returned with the bread. He watched him set down the basket of bread and a bowl of oil sprinkled with parmesan cheese and seasoning, his gaze never leaving Kyler. Robbie considered educating the boy in how rude it was to drool over another guy’s man, but since no one knew Ky was his, and Kyler wanted to keep it that way for now, it left him feeling as though his hands were tied.

As Jay walked off, Robbie focused on Kyler. “You did say you liked it when I was being possessive.”

“Possessive is one thing. Suffocating is another.”

Robbie flinched as if Kyler’s words had physically struck him. “I’m suffocating you?”

Kyler dipped a piece of bread in the oil and took a bite, talking around the mouthful of food. “No, you’re not. I only meant let’s not get to that point.”

“I can go with that. But where exactly do you consider that point?”

“Getting bent out of shape over me looking at another person would be getting close. I’m sorry, part of me is always going to find other people attractive. It doesn’t mean I want to sleep with them, but I don’t think there’s anything wrong with looking at someone in appreciation.”

“I can agree to a point, but you have to agree too, looking can cross a line.”

Kyler took another bite of bread. “No, I don’t.”

Robbie gave him a doubtful look. “You don’t? Then you’d be fine with me looking at someone in the same way you were looking at Twinky?”

“Since I’d know there wouldn’t be any intentions behind it, yeah, I would be.”

"You're just saying that so you can do it and not get in trouble."

"No, I really mean it."

"Uh huh. Then what if I told you when we walked in, I checked out the sexy businessman in the black pinstripe suit who's sitting a couple tables behind you, and he's been making eyes at me ever since?"

Kyler laughed softly, shaking his head at him. "I'm not falling for that. I know there's no businessman."

"Oh no, there is. He just smiled at me. Again."

Kyler turned in his seat, his gaze resting on a dark-haired man who balanced rugged, masculine good looks with sophistication in the fine suit he wore. The businessman's eyes met his and the congenial expression he wore dropped away. He looked beyond him to Robbie and a small smile returned to his lips.

Kyler spun back around. "Fucking prick. I looked right at him and he gave me a dirty look, then smiled at you. If he wants to play in the big dick league, I'll be more than happy to welcome him to it by kicking his ass and showing him he doesn't have what it takes to belong."

Robbie snorted as he fought against laughing. "Man, is it just me or did it just get really suffocating in here?"

Kyler chuckled. "You're not funny."

Still smirking, Robbie reached under the table, laying his hand on Kyler's knee. "It's probably twisted, but I'm glad to see you get jealous. I like it better than you saying you don't care if I look at other people."

Kyler rested his hand over Robbie's. "Well, I was trying to play things cool."

"I think we're past that point these days."

Kyler squeezed his hand. "So do I."

Robbie saw Kyler's glass was almost empty and reached for the water pitcher to refill it. As he gripped the handle, he felt something sticky and pulled his hand away to see some sort of

food goo had gotten left on the handle from the busboy.

“Nasty. When our waiter comes back, have him bring a new pitcher. That one’s got crap on it. I’m going to wash my hands.”

Robbie pushed away from the table, stopping when he felt Kyler’s hand lay over his. He looked down at it in surprise. It was one thing for Kyler to hold his hand under the table where no one could see, but where a glance from others could catch it was something Kyler never did.

Kyler’s crooked smirk quirked his lips. “Don’t be gone long. I want to get this meal over with as soon as possible so we can start our adventure.”

Robbie turned his hand under Kyler’s so he could hold it. “You could always follow me to the restroom and we could start it now.”

“Don’t even tempt me like that.”

Robbie let his middle finger tickle Kyler’s palm as he drew his hand back and stood. “I already am.”

As he walked away, he knew Kyler’s gaze was on his ass. He grinned to himself. That should keep Kyler’s mind occupied.

Robbie walked toward the restroom, hearing people muttering his name and Black Heart Down as he passed a few tables. At least in a restaurant this high-end, people restrained themselves from pouncing on him and begging for autographs and pictures. He went into the lavish restroom, washed his hands, and retraced his steps. Not yet halfway to their table, his strides slowed.

Kyler had one arm slung across the back of his chair in a casual posture that also let the top of his shirt fall open to show a hint of his smooth, toned chest. His gaze was focused on their waiter, who was standing at their table talking with him. Kyler laughed at something Jay said, Jay joining in.

Robbie couldn’t decide if he wanted to storm to the table or out the door. He took a deep breath. It couldn’t be what it looked like. After the things Kyler just said, there was no way he was flirting with waiter boy.

Robbie took a deep breath and moved toward the table. Jay tore off a piece of paper from his small notebook and offered it to Kyler. He watched, his heart twisting and his stomach doing a sick flip, as Kyler took the paper from him. Right before he reached the table, Jay turned to leave, giving him a snide smile.

Robbie took his seat, looking directly at Kyler. "I'm back. Disappointed, but back."

Kyler took up his knife and fork, his gaze on the food in front of him. "Why are you disappointed?"

"Because I didn't get ravished in the restroom."

"That's probably good since I wasn't there."

"And that's why I'm disappointed."

"I didn't think you were serious."

"When am I ever not serious when it comes to sex?"

Kyler cut into his chicken marsala. "True."

"But maybe you would've followed me if our waiter had been with me."

Kyler paused. He slowly looked up.

"I saw him hand you something. It's a little early for the bill, I think. What was it?"

Kyler gazed at him in silence. He cleared his throat as he lowered his gaze to his food again. "His phone number."

Robbie stared at him, hurt stopping all words, all thought, for several moments. "You asked for his number?"

"No. He just gave it to me."

Anger turned Robbie's voice sharp. "And you took it."

Kyler dropped his knife and fork to the plate with a clatter, revealing his growing frustration. "What the hell else was I supposed to do when he held it out to me?"

"Tell him you didn't want it! Tell him you're in a relationship!"

Kyler leaned over the table, his voice dipping to a hushed tone. "Lower your voice. I didn't think it'd be that big of a deal,

okay? I figured I'd take it to not be rude, then throw it out."

Robbie's mouth hung open. He closed it with a shake of his head and pushed away from the table.

Kyler scowled up at him. "Don't even go storming out of here."

Robbie turned his back to him. He hastened through the dining room toward the doors, quick footsteps chasing him. He pushed through the doors, stopping when Kyler's hand caught his arm.

"Rob, stop. Didn't we say we were done with this kind of shit? You always storming off whenever there's an issue?"

Robbie rounded on him. "You also said you were done with flirting, but twice now you've gone back on it, even getting some little waiter slut's phone number!"

Kyler shook his head in confusion. "Twice? When was the other time?"

"At the bar with that skank!"

"Christ, you know what that was all about. I wasn't flirting with her. It was for Kevin and publicity. And as far as this goes, I told you why I took his number and what I was going to do with it."

"Right, you didn't want to be rude to him. Why don't you try being that goddamn courteous to me? And don't you think it's a hell of a lot more rude to take a number knowing you're not going to call the person?"

Kyler stood silent.

Robbie took a step back from him, pain tightening in his throat to where he could hardly get words out. "After everything between us lately, after all we've talked about."

"You're jumping to conclusions. I wasn't going to call him until we had another fallout, because let's face it, you know even with the steps we're trying to take together, we weren't going to get it right the first time around."

“So this whole time while I’ve been thinking we’d finally hit that endless point together, *you* were waiting for it to end.”

“That’s not exactly it.”

Robbie turned away from him and flagged down an oncoming cab. The cab slowed. Robbie moved for it.

Kyler caught his arm again. “You’re not leaving.”

Robbie jerked his arm out of Kyler’s hand. “Yeah, I am. You should be glad. Now you don’t have to wait anymore.”

“Fine. Go. We’ve got the whole damn restaurant watching us, anyway. We’ll talk at home.”

Robbie slammed the cab door closed. He gave the driver his address, then pulled out his phone. Finding the number he wanted, he put the phone to his ear. He closed his eyes against the burn of tears as a lovely tenor voice answered. He cleared his throat, trying to will his voice to be steady. “Jesse...”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kyler stood outside the penthouse door, one hand on the knob, his head down. He wasn't looking forward to this. After Robbie ran off at the restaurant he got to suffer the embarrassment of going back in to pay for a meal that wouldn't be eaten. He left and drove around the city for a couple hours, needing the time away to sort things out, and he knew if he went chasing after Robbie right away, it'd only lead to another fight.

Distancing himself for a while did him good. It took him flipping the situation around to make him understand Robbie's reaction. Hell, he got pissed at the businessman making eyes at Robbie. If the ass had been bold enough to walk up and hand Robbie his number, he'd have punched him. And if Robbie took the number from him, he would've been livid.

Kyler grinned to himself. At least it should make Robbie happy hearing him 'fess up to being wrong.

He took a deep breath and opened the door. It was quiet inside, but his other sense told him Robbie was home. Not seeing him in the living room, he turned toward the bedroom. As he neared, he heard him moving around.

"Hey, I'm..." Kyler's words trailed off as he stopped in the bedroom doorway. A suitcase lay on the bed, nearly overflowing as Robbie pushed the top down and zipped it shut. "What are you doing?"

Robbie kept his gaze averted from him. "I think you can tell."

"Yeah, I can, but I want to know why. One fight and you're out the fucking door?"

"It's not one fight. It's one on top of a hundred, and I can't do it anymore."

Kyler let out a huff. "So you're going to run. Again. After everything you said and all we agreed on, just like always, you're going to run away."

Robbie turned on him, his anger unleashed in his face and voice. "Don't even put this on me! You're the one who did nothing but feed me empty lines and false hope that we had a future together. Then the second my back is turned, you're trying to get your dick in the first guy who smiles at you!"

"You're blowing this whole thing out of proportion. I understand what I did was wrong. I shouldn't have taken his number. I'm sorry, okay? There's nothing I can do about it now except apologize."

"That's all you ever do, and nothing changes!"

Kyler's expression softened. He walked toward him, reaching for him. "It'll be different this time. I promise. No phone numbers, no flirting."

Robbie stepped back from him, shaking his head. "No. That's what you always say."

"Maybe, but things are different now. We both know what we want from each other. We laid it out in the open."

"Exactly. And even knowing that, you've still been doing the same shit. I can't take it anymore, Ky. I just can't."

Kyler moved toward him again, his voice deepening to a soothing tone. "You won't have to. I know what I did was wrong, and I'll watch what I do in the future more closely. We both knew when we started this that one or both of us were going to stumble in the beginning. We're going through a lot of changes right now, but the important thing is when one of us stumbles, the other helps steady him again."

Robbie stared at him in silence.

Kyler took in Robbie's expression, sadness and hurt so deep it was visible. His heart ached. How could he have done this to him? How stupid was he to have taken that waiter's phone number? He realized now how wrong he'd been. He mentally called himself a string of insulting names and stretched to touch him again. "I'm so sorry, Rob."

As his hand laid on Robbie's arm, to his surprise, Robbie

stepped forward and embraced him.

His voice trembling, Robbie said, "So am I. I know it was wrong of me to leave you there, but I just couldn't take the hurt. I still can't, and I won't." He pulled back and cupped Kyler's face in both hands. "I do love you. I always will. But you've broken me, and I know I can't heal with you. Every time I start to, you break me again. I can't keep doing it." He touched his lips softly to Kyler's in a chaste kiss and whispered against them. "Goodbye, Ky."

A chill ran through Kyler. He felt a sudden sickness in his stomach. Robbie never said goodbye. He'd say, "later" or "see ya," but never goodbye.

"Rob..."

As Robbie drew back, Kyler met his gaze. He saw tears lingering at the edge of Robbie's eyes. No matter what they went through with each other, even when they were parting on one of their breaks, Robbie never cried.

Robbie slowly backed out of Kyler's touch and turned for his suitcase.

Kyler watched him drag it off the bed. He couldn't move, could hardly breathe.

His gaze cast downward, Robbie walked by him toward the door.

Kyler snapped out of his daze and whirled. He rushed after him, catching a glimpse of Robbie's back as he turned out of the hallway. "Robbie!"

Robbie bent to pick up the case of his favorite and most cherished guitar, a custom Gibson Les Paul. Kyler's heart clenched, and he really couldn't breathe. If Robbie was taking the guitar, then he truly meant to not return.

As Robbie straightened, Kyler slammed against him from behind, wrapping his arms tight around him. His voice left him, breathless and desperate. "Stay. Please. Just stay and we'll talk."

Robbie closed his eyes, hanging his head. "We've already

talked, and nothing changed.”

“A lot changed.”

“For a little while, but then the same old song got played again.”

“But even if you leave here, it’s not like we won’t see each other, so you might as well stay and we’ll work things out.”

Robbie’s voice softened to a ragged whisper. “I’m leaving the band.”

Kyler’s strength drained out of him. So much so, he couldn’t keep holding Robbie. His arms dropped from around him. He staggered a step back. “What?”

Robbie half turned toward him. “I know it’ll be hard on you and the guys at first, but really, it won’t be too bad with Kevin being laid up. It’ll give you plenty of time to find a new guitar player.”

Kyler shook his head. “No. I don’t want a new guitar player. I want you!”

Robbie looked up at him. “And that’s the problem. You only want me as your band member.”

“That’s not true!”

“Yeah, it is. It’s the only thing you show respect toward me for. And you don’t see it, and I don’t know how to show you. So the only thing I can do is walk away.”

“So that’s it? You’re going to walk away from me, the guys, and music?”

“No, I’m only walking away from you and BHD. I found a new band.”

Kyler stood in stunned silence until he managed to choke out, “Who?”

Robbie pulled in another deep breath, this time holding it for a second. He slowly turned to look directly at Kyler. “Conquest.”

Kyler’s strength waned further. His legs felt dangerously unsteady, making him think he might drop to the floor against

his will. "I don't...I don't understand."

"When I got together with Jesse, it wasn't just to talk to him about us. It was to ask him if he'd be open to the idea of me joining Conquest."

Anger gave Kyler a burst of strength. He marched a step toward him. "So you lied to me! You've stood there throwing shit in my face when all this time you were working on a way out behind my back!"

"It wasn't like that. Yeah, I was looking for a way out when I first went to him, but it was him and Evan who told me I needed to try and work things out with you before taking such a drastic step. After you and I talked, I didn't even give joining Conquest a second thought. I was happier than I've been in years. But now I know things can never go back to the way they used to be. We'll never be able to live like we did before."

"Yes we can! You just have to give us chance!"

Robbie rested his hand on the doorknob. "All I've done is give chances. I don't have any more left in me. You're not even trying."

"But we moved in together! What more do you want?"

"You know what I want."

Kyler rubbed his face with one hand in exasperation. "And I told you, after we get settled together, in a few months or a couple years, then we'll be open about our relationship, but we need to work on us first."

Robbie opened the door. "There isn't an us anymore, Ky."

Kyler's voice turned accusatory. "You want to know what I think? You're the one fucking this up because you can't let yourself be happy with me. I'm giving you all I can, and it's still not good enough for you. You expect me to be the same person I was eleven years ago, and I can't do that." He jabbed a finger in the air toward him. "You're the one who said we needed a break the very first time. You're the one who wanted to see other people. You're the one who started this whole fucked up situation

to begin with!”

Robbie opened the door wider and took up his suitcase and guitar. He paused at the threshold, turning his head, but still not fully looking at Kyler. “You’re right. I’ve already accepted the blame in our relationship failing. But you know, you went along with everything, too.”

As the door closed, the last of Kyler’s strength left him. He stumbled back into a wall and slid down to the floor, listening to the silence, feeling the emptiness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Watching Miami drift by from the back of the limo, Robbie laid a hand over his heart. It was pounding. He felt nervous, anxious, but didn't know why. It wasn't like he didn't know the Conquest guys. But it was a change from what he'd felt since leaving Kyler, though not one he liked better.

Every minute since he'd said goodbye, and even before leading up to it, his heart was a knot of pain. He hadn't made it to the elevator in their building before breaking down, and part of him wished Kyler would've come running after him. But he understood why Kyler didn't. He'd said goodbye to him.

Goodbye, the word kept sounding in his head. He couldn't believe he said it, and he didn't want to keep hearing it. The word haunted him all the way to the airport and on the flight to Miami. He was grateful when he called Jesse to see if he could still join Conquest, that Jesse offered to arrange having the Phoenix Records private jet fly him down rather than taking a public plane. He really didn't want people to see him crying the whole flight.

He shook his head. When was the last time he'd cried? It'd been years. Yeah, he'd get emotional, but to let tears flow, it just didn't happen. He felt embarrassed by it now. At least no one except the cab driver in Chicago saw him. He wondered if Kyler had shed any tears over his leaving. Doubtful. Ky looked hurt when he was leaving, but not close to crying. Chances were, he was on the phone with slut boy from the restaurant within an hour.

Robbie's fingers curled into a fist over his heart. He didn't want to think of that, but it could be Kyler thought this time would be like all the others. For a while, he'd have free rein to do as he pleased, then a smile, a laugh, would pass between them easing the tension, followed by a soft look, next a touch, and things would be right back to where they were before. He hoped Ky realized soon those days were over.

The limo cruised through the parking lot of the stadium toward the back. It stopped, and Robbie bounded out before the driver had a chance to open his own door. For some reason, he felt a sudden and desperate need to see Jesse. It was strange. He thought Kenny would be the one he'd want to see most. Maybe it was because he wanted to feel accepted, and Jesse was the leader of Conquest. If Jesse welcomed him, all the guys would.

As the driver hauled his bag from the trunk, Robbie took his guitar himself. A massively built African-American security guard stepped out of the building to help. He smiled at Robbie. "Jesse said to keep watch out for you. Glad you made it in alright, Mr. Russo."

"Thanks. And just call me Robbie. Are you the security head?"

"You got it. I've been watching Mr. Arden's back for years. Name's Sam."

Robbie took Sam's offered hand, his own becoming swallowed in it. For as enormous of a man as Sam was, there was a gentleness to him also. It struck him how even the security staff had a different feel to him than Black Heart's.

"You've guarded Evan for years?" Robbie grinned. "I bet that wasn't always easy."

Sam laughed. "He did like to keep me on my toes, no doubt about that. But let's get you in with the rest of the guys before any lurkers spot you. They're rehearsing right now. They did a show last night, but they've got back-to-backs."

Robbie nodded and followed Sam inside. It felt so strange to suddenly be in the middle of a tour, and even more so one with staff and people he didn't know. It wasn't like he was on personal terms with many of their staff, but he did have a certain comfort level with a few who'd worked for them for a long time. Even when it came to Conquest, he was good friends with Kenny, he knew Jesse fairly well, but their keyboardist and pianist, Julian Forrester, and drummer, Brad Delfini, he'd only had light conversations with.

His nervousness returned full force. What if Julian and Brad

didn't like him? What if he couldn't stand one of them? Being thrown into the middle of a band of established friendships, what if he was held at a distance, treated as the odd man out?

He supposed the last would be expected. Hell, even Kenny might treat him different. Sure they were friends, but now he was coming into Kenny's territory, and doing it as another guitarist. What if Kenny viewed him as a threat and didn't want him in the band? Even though Kenny had known it was possible he could join, he could've also thought it wouldn't really happen. There hadn't been enough time for him to call Kenny and talk to him. Besides, Jesse told him he'd handle it.

His thoughts ricocheting in his mind, Robbie snapped to attention when he heard laughter and realized they were almost to the stage. His heart pounded quicker. He didn't think it was possible for it to beat any faster.

Robbie climbed the stairs to the stage and stopped. At the sight before him, a snort burst out as he caught his laughter from escaping. Jesse was upside down, standing on his hands in the middle of the stage. His shirt had fallen toward his face, exposing his torso of lean muscle.

"Okay, here I go," Jesse said.

Robbie saw Jesse's chest expand as he took a breath, then his sweet tenor flowed out singing Conquest's hit ballad, "Shattered."

*"I yelled for you as you walked away,
My voice a whisper...in the crowd...
And I watched our memories fall with the rain,
Breaking...on the ground...
I want to take it all away,
And believe the truths in the dark.
I want to live the fantasy,
The sweet delusion,
And keep you in my arms..."*

Jesse stopped singing. "There! How's it feel to be proved

wrong?”

“You only sang one verse,” Kenny said. “It still doesn’t prove you can sing just as good standing on your head.”

Jesse walked a couple paces on his hands. “Yes it does! But I’ll argue with you after I flip over. This isn’t the head I’m used to blood rushing to.”

Evan started across the stage toward him. “Let me help you before you hurt yourself.” He stepped close to him, using his body to support Jesse’s, and smirked down at him. “You know, this has given me an idea for later, acrobat boy.”

Jesse chuckled. “I think I can guess what it is and I’m so game.”

Laughing, Evan gently and carefully guided Jesse down to the stage floor.

Lying on his back, Jesse sprawled out on the stage. He raised one hand, pointing toward Kenny. “Now like I was saying, it’s obvious if I sound just as good in one verse standing on my head, then I’m going to sound just as good through the whole song.”

“No it doesn’t,” Kenny said. “You probably would’ve gotten out of breath halfway through the chorus. Besides, you were standing on your hands, not your head.”

“Close enough. And if you want me to do the whole song to prove you even more wrong, I will.”

Losing his last bit of control, Robbie burst out laughing. Everyone on the stage looked toward him.

“Dude, you made it!” Kenny said, rushing toward him.

“Yeah...” Robbie started, stopping as Jesse’s microphoned voice filled the stadium.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm welcome to guitar god, Robbie Russo.”

Applause broke out. Robbie glanced around, seeing the smiling faces of roadies gathered around. He looked back to the

band, all wearing the same bright expressions and joining in with the applause. Robbie felt emotion tightening his throat again, but this time, it was from the warm welcome.

Kenny spun his black and white Fender Stratocaster on the strap to lie across his back and slammed into him with a rough hug. "This totally kicks ass! Jesse told us a little bit about what you're going to be doing with us, playing rhythm guitar in the sections he usually plays. That's awesome!"

Robbie laughed at Kenny's excited rambling. "You're sure this is cool? Because if it's not, I totally respect that. I don't want you to think I'm coming in to take your spot."

Kenny pulled back to look at him. "Is it cool? Hell yes, it's cool! It freakin' rocks!"

Jesse snickered as he walked up to them. "And hey, maybe Robbie can teach you to not be so absentminded. But I know that'd be asking a lot."

Kenny released Robbie to glare at Jesse. "This coming from the guy who *forgot* he wasn't wearing underwear a few nights ago when he went to change in his dressing room."

"I didn't forget. I just figured in the seventeen years we've been at each other's hip, I don't have anything you haven't seen before." A mischievous smirk curved Jesse's lips. "Besides, Ev was acting as my curtain."

Kenny rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I know. I *was* in the room when he said we're going to have to arrange longer breaks between sets if you keep going commando."

Brad moved to Jesse's side. "And where was I when you were flaunting your goods?"

Robbie looked the drummer up and down. The white T-shirt Brad wore not only showed off his muscular torso and powerfully formed arms, but also accentuated his skin's lovely olive tint. With black hair cut short and spiky, and dark brown eyes, Brad was a vision to admire.

Jesse turned to Brad. "It was during your solo. Kenny was

catching his breath in my dressing room while I was changing into another hot outfit to dazzle the crowd.”

A smirk slid onto Evan’s lips as he glanced at Brad. “And why are you asking about his goods, anyway?”

Brad shrugged. “Isn’t everybody interested in seeing what the magic wand that enchanted you looks like?”

Kenny raised his hand as if in a classroom. “Uh, no.”

“And where was *I* when this was going on?”

Robbie looked to the new speaker, keyboardist and pianist, Julian Forrester.

Jesse’s gaze moved to Julian. “Probably getting a quickie from Morgan.”

“Most likely,” Julian said, stopping to stand by Morgan.

Morgan laughed. “I don’t know if it’s necessary to confirm his dirty thoughts.”

Julian gave Morgan a playful wink. “Everyone already knows I rock your world. There’s no harm in letting the naughty details out.”

Morgan put his arm around Julian’s shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. “That’s true.”

Robbie faced Julian and the other man, who he’d never met before, but recognized as Julian’s partner, Morgan, from seeing them together recently in an interview and in some paparazzi photos. He didn’t know Julian very well other than before coming to the rock scene, he was a Juilliard graduate and famed classical pianist. With his pale blond hair cut to a tousled look, eyes of very light blue, Julian definitely could be called a fair beauty. Robbie could see the sophistication in Julian, but also sensed a little attitude to him.

Robbie looked at Morgan. He was tall, over six feet by a few inches, his medium build fit and well-muscled. Trimmed stubble shadowed his jaw and lined his lips. The auburn highlights in his dark brown hair were captured in the stage lights, and his brown eyes had a soft look to them.

Jesse motioned to Morgan. "You guys haven't met yet. Morgan, this is Robbie Russo. Robbie, this is Morgan Chandler, Julian's partner. Not too long ago, Jules was being mean and hadn't told us he was seeing him until a few weeks ago, so don't worry, you're not the only newbie here."

Julian sighed in exasperation. "I wasn't being mean."

"I don't know," Morgan said, giving him a teasing grin. "I think you kind of were."

Julian gasped in pretending offense. "I can't believe you'd side with Jesse!"

Chuckling, Morgan extended his hand to Robbie. "Welcome to the madness."

Robbie shook Morgan's hand. "Thanks. I'm pretty used to it with where I came from."

Julian stepped forward. "Ah, but Morgan doesn't care for popular music all that much, so he probably doesn't know you came from Black Heart Down." He glanced at Morgan. "Do you?"

"I've heard some of their music, but yeah, I never paid attention to who was in the band."

Robbie looked at Morgan again. "You're not into rock, but your partner's a rock star? Talk about opposites."

"Yeah, I know." Morgan threw a smirk at Julian. "But he's given me a new appreciation for it. And my crush on him started back when he played classical." He pointed at Jesse with his thumb. "Plus, the singer in this band is pretty good. Even singing upside down, he's better than anyone else out there these days."

Kenny leaned toward Julian, hushing his voice, but still keeping it loud enough for everyone to hear. "I think that was taking his side again."

Morgan laid a hand on Jesse's shoulder. "I can't help it. My dog likes him."

As the others laughed, Robbie forced a smile and shifted his weight slightly from one foot to the other. That sense of feeling

like being on the outside was steadily creeping in. Maybe Morgan hadn't been with the guys for very long, but he still had the easy camaraderie they all shared with each other.

Julian rolled his eyes at everyone, though a good humored smile rested on his lips. He moved closer to Robbie and lifted his arms to hug him. "Welcome to the family, Robbie."

Robbie hugged him back. "Thanks."

As Julian released him, Brad came forward. "Yeah, and like any family, we're a little on the crazy side."

As Brad held up his hand, Robbie locked his own with it in a fist and joined him in a hug, their fists between their chests.

"But most importantly," Jesse said, stepping forward, "we're always here for each other."

Whether it was the sincerity in Jesse's voice or the words themselves, Robbie felt his emotions rushing far too close to the surface.

Brad backed away from him, and Jesse took his place. Though Jesse's embrace was gentle, he found himself squeezing Jesse, as if he needed to draw some of Jesse's strength into himself. Jesse leaned back from him, looking into his eyes. He could see in Jesse's gaze, Jesse knew he was about to break.

Jesse tossed his arm around Robbie's shoulders, guiding him away from everyone. "Alright guys, play nice for a while. I've got some things I need to talk to Robbie about."

Kenny started after him. "We all do! I mean, what about BHD, and—"

"We'll get into those details later," Jesse said.

Kenny nodded, as if he understood something else was going on.

Only Evan followed Jesse and Robbie as they left the stage.

As Jesse led him through the backstage, Robbie said softly, "Thanks, Jesse."

"There's nothing to thank me for." Jesse swung into a dressing

room, closing the door after Robbie and Evan walked in. "It's pretty obvious you're not handling this well."

Robbie went to a couch and sat heavily, his elbows on his knees, his head bowed and held in his hands. "I don't want you to think I'm not grateful for all you're doing for me. It's just...it's hard, that's all."

Jesse sat next to him and laid his hand on Robbie's back. "Have you talked to him since you left?"

"He called a couple times, but I didn't answer."

Evan sat down on Robbie's other side. "Jess said you didn't give a lot of details when you called him, other than saying it's over. Do you want to run by us what happened?"

Robbie gave a small nod and started his story back on the day he'd visited them and the talk he had with Kyler afterward. He finished with a sigh, listening to the silence that followed.

Jesse slowly sat back. "Well, what's done is done. All you can do is move forward now."

Robbie looked at him. "What do you mean? You sound like you're not happy with what I told you."

"I'm just wondering if maybe you overreacted," Jesse said. "But then, he did pull the same shit, which says he's still not taking you and your relationship together as seriously as he should. I don't know. Maybe it's hard for me to relate because I can't imagine walking away from Ev. I was forced to do it once, and I vowed I'd die before doing it again."

Evan got up and went to Jesse, holding his left hand out to him. Jesse lifted his left hand, and their fingers interlocked, placing their wedding bands beside each other. With his other hand, Evan brushed Jesse's cheek with the backs of his fingers. "We have a much different relationship than what they have. What's worked for us isn't always what would work for others."

"I know, but it should be. Love, loyalty, honesty, respect, those are things all people should hold dear, regardless of what their relationship with another person is." Jesse looked at Robbie.

"I can speak as someone who also has a tendency to storm off when hurt or angry, it doesn't solve anything other than give you some space to think. And I can understand if you need that. I'm just not sure leaving Black Heart Down is the way to do it."

"So you're saying you don't want me in Conquest?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all. What I'm saying is I think you need to slow down. It's fine to let Kyler think you've quit BHD, it might shake him up a little bit, but what if in a couple weeks or months, you're looking at things differently? I want to help you as much as I can, but I also have to think of what's best for my band. It's going to really screw with our fans if one month you're with us, then the next you're back with your boys."

Robbie stared at him, then lowered his gaze. "I get what you're saying. I just don't know what to do, where to go. But I also know this is it between me and him. I did all I could."

"I'm not so sure," Jesse said. "There's no doubt you've given Kyler a lot, but just when he started giving back, you gave up at the first sign of conflict. I'm not saying what he did was right, but I think by now, you know more than anyone he's not perfect and it takes him a few tries before he gets something right."

"Yeah," Robbie said softly. "And it's not like he doesn't have reasons for being the way he is about a lot of things."

"Like what?" Evan asked.

Robbie shook his head slightly. "They're really personal, and probably better coming from him than me." A sad smile touched his lips. "He was upset enough that I took our *dirty laundry*, as he called it, to you guys. If I told you about his past, he'd go through the roof."

His voice gentle, Jesse said, "It sounds like you still love him enough to want to protect him."

"I'll always love him. No matter how much time we spend apart or how much distance is between us, nothing will change that. But, it just feels like it's not enough, anymore."

Jesse exhaled a long sigh. "There are so many people who

dream of having love in their life. But here you are, in love with someone, knowing he loves you in return, and you say it's not enough. Love is a treasure, something to be cherished and cared for, and yeah, it does *need* to be cared for. It needs to be nurtured, to have energy and attention put into it. It's really sad yours and his got neglected for so long that it brought you to this point."

Robbie gazed at him. Silence fell over all of them.

Jesse broke it first, speaking cheerier than before. "But you know, there's also nothing that can rebound like love. If you start showing it a little attention again, it'll bounce right back."

Resting his elbows on his knees, Robbie bowed his head and held it in his hands. "Damn it. You guys have me second guessing everything."

Jesse laughed. "Of course we do! I want you to *really* think about what you're doing. And you don't have to give me an answer now on if you want to be a permanent member of Conquest. You can take as much time as you need and still hang with us. We just need to figure out how to roll things."

Evan paced a couple steps away, his visage revealing he was lost in thought. He turned back, his attention on Jesse. "What if we say he's guesting with Conquest while Kevin's laid up?" His gaze went to Robbie. "I think it'd help to make a smoother, less controversial transition if you do decide to make the jump. Fans can start adjusting to you being with another band without getting slammed by the news, then when everything would be done and signed, it could be announced during your time as a guest, you were invited to join."

Robbie nodded. "That sounds like a good way to go. But I know what my decision will be." He looked at Jesse. "If the offer will stand for joining permanently."

"You know it will," Jesse said. "I just want you to take some time, cool down, and think it over."

Robbie fell back against the couch with an exhausted sigh. "I'm sorry for bringing so much drama with me."

Jesse waved Robbie's words away. "This is nothing. You

should've been here for all the drama we had going a little while ago. Since that's all cleared up now, we were due for some more coming in."

"Can I ask what the drama was?"

Jesse smiled at him. "You don't have to ask if you can ask. Even though things aren't settled with you joining us, I'm still counting you as one of my own."

Once again, Robbie felt emotion filling his throat. He forced out a rough, "Thanks."

Seeming to notice he was having a tough moment, Jesse launched into a story about Julian hiding his relationship with Morgan because he believed Jesse would be against it for fear it would cause tension with the staff. Robbie found that to be a wild tale enough, but then it got topped with Jesse telling him how their now ex-staff manager had a strange obsession with Julian and had been trashing his pianos. That guy was locked up, and Conquest now had a freshly promoted staff manager, Remmy Laurent.

"Remmy's really cool," Jesse said as he finished. "You'll like him. And it's pretty amazing how things are running smoother already with him in charge. Speaking of which, we should probably get you introduced to some of the key people around here." He took Evan's hand as he walked toward the door. "And don't worry about the guys. I'll explain what's going on to them if you don't want to."

Robbie stood to follow them. "I'd appreciate that."

"The only thing is, I can tell them to take it easy on you with questions, but they still might want to talk to you one-on-one. Kenny especially."

"I'm cool with that. I just don't know how I'd deal if I had to lay everything out to everyone." Robbie took a deep breath and forced a smile. "Now, when do you want me to start playing with you guys?"

Jesse paused at the door. "How well do you know our songs?"

"I've got the leads down in 'Shattered,' 'No Fear,' 'Twisted Destiny,' and 'Euphoria,' so I could probably learn the rhythm sections pretty fast. I know 'Shattered' is a single lead guitar, though."

"I'll have you jam with us for a couple days to hear how you're flowing, then we'll go from there. And even though some of our songs don't have a second guitar, I'm pretty sure we can work you in for a little extra dynamic on most of them."

Evan smirked at Jesse. "You do know what this means, don't you?"

Jesse looked at him. "What?"

"That if you work him into other songs and he decides to go back to BHD, you're going to want a second guitarist for your future albums. I know you can play, but we both know it'd free you up."

Jesse chuckled. "Well, I won't say no at the moment."

As Robbie followed them out, he found himself struck again by the difference between Conquest and Black Heart. Jesse managed things with quick and sure confidence, never hesitating in taking control of a situation. Kyler was confident too, but had a tendency to let things go until he was forced to address them.

Everyone in Conquest seemed to have such an easy, comfortable way with each other. Whereas in BHD, even though they were all close, sometimes it felt like they were two separate cliques, him and Kyler, Adam and Kevin. It didn't mean one band was better than the other, just different. He couldn't help but wonder with where he came from and what he was used to, if he'd be able to adjust. Or if he truly wanted to.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

An incessant pounding beat through Kyler's mind. Was someone at the door? Robbie! He came back! But, why was he banging on the door and not using his key? He must have forgotten them. Robbie did that sometimes. He forgot a lot of things. And forgave a lot of things, too. But that's why he needed to take care of him. Because of the forgetting...and the forgiving.

The pounding grew louder and faster.

Kyler started to push himself up from the couch. "I'm coming, Rob. Don't go. I'm coming."

He walked forward, then the next he knew, he was lying on the floor, his body ringing from the shock of falling. He opened his eyes, watching beer absorb into the carpet from the bottle he'd been carrying.

The knocking stopped.

Robbie was gone. But then, he already knew Robbie was gone. He'd left a long time ago. How long? A couple hours? A day? A week? He wasn't sure. He didn't even know what day of the week it was.

With nothing but silence around him, Kyler laid unmoving on the floor. Getting up was beyond his strength, beyond his motivation. There wasn't anything worth getting up for, anyway.

The silence broke with what sounded like keys banging against the doorknob. Kyler heard the door opening, but didn't bother looking to see who was coming in.

"Pounding on the door for five freakin' minutes, then it hits you you've got a key," Kevin said.

Adam pushed open the door. "Do you have to be so damn crotchety about everything?" He stepped inside and stopped short, in shock at the sight before him. "Kyler!"

Adam rushed across the room, Kevin behind him. He slid

down to his knees at Kyler's shoulder and placed both hands on his back, giving him a couple small, but vigorous shakes. "Kyler! Wake up!"

Kyler groaned and shifted slightly. He rolled his head toward Adam. "Stop."

Adam sat back on his heels, swiping one hand across his own face as he let out a relieved sigh. "Shit, you looked like you were dead."

"Not that lucky," Kyler mumbled.

Adam stared at him, then looked up at Kevin. "What the fuck is going on? First that weird message from Robbie, now this."

Kevin shook his head. "Something's really fucked up. But we need to get his ass off the floor." He squatted down by Kyler's head, gripped his shoulder, and gave him a hard shake. "Ky, you need to get up. Kyler. Kyler!"

Kyler's head jerked as if being snapped out of sleep.

Adam took him by the arm and pulled. "Come on. Get up."

With Adam tugging on his one side, Kevin pushing on his other, Kyler dragged his knees under himself and got unsteadily to his feet.

Adam directed him to the couch, letting him lean against him. When he turned him to sit, Kyler tripped over himself, falling toward the couch. Adam's strength gave under Kyler's weight, and he tumbled forward with him. He managed to catch himself on the couch, but Kyler went down hard on his rump, one arm draped on the seat cushions. Seeming content with where he had landed, Kyler laid his head on the arm that rested on the couch.

Kevin gazed down at him. "He's really fucked up. I've seen him smashed before, but not like this. He's totally out of it."

Adam kneeled down in front of him. He took Kyler's head and held it up for him so Kyler was looking at him, or would be if he opened his eyes. "Ky, do you hear me?"

Kyler's eyelids fluttered in an attempt to open. They lifted heavily, and closed again.

"How much have you drank? And what have you been drinking?"

Kyler gave a barely noticeable shrug.

"Have you taken anything else? Any pills? Even something like Tylenol?"

His words a slur, Kyler said, "Just two...or five. They're Robbie's. Sometimes he doesn't sleep good. He keeps 'em around."

Adam leaned closer. "He keeps what around? Where is he? Where's Robbie?"

Kyler's face contorted with pain. "He's...gone."

"Gone where? Where did he go? Ky. Kyler!"

Adam's hold couldn't keep Kyler's head up. He dropped it down, burying it into his arm.

Adam sat back, his gaze fixed on him.

"This is really fucked up," Kevin said, a hint of panic in his voice. "We don't have any idea what he's taken or where Robbie is. Maybe we should call 911 or something."

"We're not calling the cops. I don't think that's the kind of publicity Rosa was talking about."

"This is bigger than publicity! He just said Robbie's gone! What kind of gone was he talking about? He could be floating in the Chicago River for all we know! You heard that message from Robbie. He kept apologizing and saying how he couldn't take it anymore and had to go. Why isn't he here? Why wasn't he answering his phone? We need help!"

Adam stood up. "Settle the fuck down! What we need to do first is find out what he's taken so far." He walked quickly toward the bedroom and master bath. On the counter, a pill bottle was knocked over, pills scattered across the countertop and some down in the sink basin. He grabbed the bottle, reading it was for a prescription sleep aid. Seeing it should contain a quantity of thirty, he scooped up the pills and started counting. "There's twenty-seven here, so that's not bad. He didn't take much."

“Yeah, but how much has he drank?”

Adam rushed to the kitchen. The trash was pulled out from a cabinet, and at first, looked like it held nothing but beer bottles, then he saw it was only the first layer with six on top. There was a six pack on top of the counter with three missing. Walking back to the living room, he saw two bottles on an end table, plus the one Kyler had spilled. He turned to Kevin. “Alright, so he’s taken a couple sleeping pills and drank a few beers. He’ll be fine.”

Kevin flicked his hand at Kyler, having fallen unconscious again. “You call that fine? I still think we should call 911.”

“Just stop and think about it. The paparazzi would jump all over this. Alcohol, sleeping pills, they’ll be calling it a suicide attempt. And when he’d come out of this, he’d kill us.”

“Who cares! This is how famous people end up dead! Because people are too damn worried about their public image. Somehow I doubt he’d want his last photo shoot to be done at his funeral.”

“You’re overreacting. Let’s just lay him down and keep an eye on him. If he starts to look bad, we’ll call. And we need to get hold of Robbie.”

Kevin moved to Kyler’s side. “I already told you. He’s probably floating—”

“Will you stop with the goddamn melodrama? Robbie’s not floating anywhere. Now help me lay him down.”

Kevin took hold of Kyler’s arm with his good hand and helped Adam guide him down to the floor. Kyler’s head rolled, and he let out a small groan. With him on his side, Adam returned to the bedroom and grabbed a pillow and blanket. He gently lifted Kyler’s head and slipped the pillow underneath, then covered him with the blanket. Adam sat on the floor and collapsed back against the couch.

Kevin sat on the couch at Adam’s shoulder. “Now what?”

“Now we wait and watch him. And try to get hold of Robbie to find out what the hell is going on.”



Kyler started to wake up, thanks to an agitated voice talking close by. Who was it? Adam? It sounded like him. But why was Adam in his bedroom? Wait. Was he even in his bedroom? Kyler shifted, his stiff muscles protesting the movement. He was on the floor. Why the hell was he on the floor? He groaned and rolled onto his back, listening to Adam's voice.

"This is some fucked up joke, right? You can't be serious?"

Adam paused.

"Robbie, this is nuts. Whatever happened between you guys, you have to be able to work it out. You always have. Just come back."

Kyler froze, even his breathing stopped. Robbie. Adam must be talking to him. Kyler bolted upright. Pain and dizziness shot through his head. He ignored it and turned to Adam, reaching toward him. "Is that Robbie? Let me talk to him."

Adam glanced at him before turning his attention back to his cell phone. "Well, in case you give a shit, he just woke up and he wants to talk to you." He waited, then looked at Kyler. "He doesn't want to talk to you, but he said to not be stupid and cool it on the booze."

Kyler stretched for the phone. "Just give me the phone."

"Robbie, he really wants to talk to you. Robbie? Are you still there?" Adam pulled the phone away and looked at the screen. "I don't believe it. He hung up on me." He snapped his attention to Kyler. "What the fuck is going on? He said he's quit the band."

"What?" Kevin said, getting up from the couch. His gaze snapped from Adam to Kyler. "What the hell did you do?"

Kyler glanced at Kevin, having not realized he was there. His arm, still outstretched for the phone, dropped heavily to the floor. "He said he didn't want to talk to me? Those were his exact words?"

"Yeah," Adam said.

Kevin stood over Kyler, glaring down at him. "Busted wrist or not, I will kick your goddamn ass if you've done something to

screw up our band. Now what did you do to him?”

Refusing to look up, Kyler shook his head slightly. “I...I didn’t think it was anything big at the time. We went out to lunch, and this waiter gave me his number—”

“And you took it right in front of him,” Kevin said more than asking. “You *fucking* moron.”

Adam jumped into the conversation. “I thought you guys were going to do commitment from now on, no more screwing around.”

“We are...were,” Kyler said softly.

“And you still took some waiter’s phone number?” Adam said. “What were you thinking?”

Kevin answered for Kyler. “He wasn’t, obviously. Just out of curiosity, Kyler, do you even have a brain, a heart, and a soul? Or are you just ruled by your damn dick?”

Adam let out a snort. “Like you said, it’s obvious he wasn’t thinking, so the answer to the other question is pretty freakin’ clear.”

Kyler stayed silent, taking the reprimand.

“I mean, it was just a couple weeks ago you let that skank hump you,” Kevin continued. “Again, right in front of him. How much shit do you expect him to eat? You’re damn lucky he’s put up with you for as long as he has!”

Adam laid a hand on Kevin’s arm. “Calm down. You’re starting to yell.”

Kevin shot Adam a sharp look. “No! I’m not going to calm down! This is shit that needs to be said to him. Things I’ve wanted to say for years, but never did.” He looked back to Kyler. “I always thought it’s none of my business how you guys want to fly in your relationship. You’re not the first couple I’ve known that runs hot and cold with each other. But over and over, I saw you acting stupid and him just sighing and taking it. It was so obvious he cared a lot more for you than you ever did for him, and I never understood why he’d even bother with you.”

Anger exploded in Kyler, giving him the strength to get to his feet. Slightly unsteady, he jabbed his index finger toward Kevin's face. "You need to shut the fuck up about shit you don't know a goddamn thing about."

With his good hand, Kevin slapped Kyler's finger out of his face. "And you need to back down before I hit more than your hand. You don't have any right to jump in my face when you've just fucked up all our lives!"

Adam pushed between Kyler and Kevin. "You both need to cool it! We can't work through this if you two are at each other's throats. Yeah, Kyler's been a shithead. But so has Robbie. He's fucked around on Kyler just as much as Ky's fucked around on him. Hell, sometimes I think he was doing it even more. There were a lot of times I know Ky spent the night alone and Robbie didn't. And just because he said he's with Conquest now, doesn't mean we can't get him back."

Kevin snapped his head back as if avoiding a slap. "What did you just say?"

Adam turned to him. "You guys started bitching at each other before I could tell you. He said he's joined Conquest."

"Bullshit," Kevin said. "Jesse would never take him in knowing he should be with us."

Kyler turned away from Kevin and Adam, his anger washed away by hurt. "It's true. Apparently Robbie had it in the works since right after you broke your wrist."

Kevin shook his head in disbelief. "That doesn't make sense. Why would he do that after you guys were trying to work things out?"

Kyler dropped down on the couch. He attempted to run his fingers through his hair, only to meet a mess of tangles. "He had talked to Jesse before talking to me."

Kevin's uninjured hand balled into a fist. "And that little bastard Jesse was ready to take him in even then. There's another obvious one for you. He stole Robbie from us to take his competition down."

Kyler shot Kevin an annoyed glance. “Cool it on the insults to Jesse. None of this is his fault.”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I’d expect you to defend him. You had a constant hard-on for him the whole time we were in the studio.”

Kyler stared at Kevin for a moment, then looked to Adam. “Please, let me pop him in the jaw, just once.”

“I’ll think about it,” Adam said. “But what went down with Jesse? Did Robbie tell you?”

“Yeah. Jesse was actually the one who encouraged him to work things out with me.” Kyler retold what Robbie had shared with him. As he finished, Adam and Kevin were quiet for several moments.

“So that’s it,” Adam said, his voice subdued. “He’s completely left, without hardly saying a word to me or Kev. I guess that shows how much he cares about us.”

Kyler reached a hand toward Adam, setting it tentatively on his shoulder. “Don’t look at it that way. I’m the one who pushed him to this point. I’m the one to blame. He just needed to get away.”

“So what do we do?” Adam asked.

Kevin walked toward Kyler. “*We* don’t do anything.”

Kyler looked up at him.

“You’re the one who fucked this up. You’re the one who’s going to have to fix it.”

Kyler felt his anger starting to return. “Which again, brings about the question of how.”

“Which again, is up to you. But let’s get out some answers. First, do you want to keep this band going?”

“Not without Robbie.”

Kevin sighed. “I was really looking for more yes or no answers, but I guess that’s close enough. So second, do you want to be in a relationship with him?”

"Yes."

"Do you want him to be faithful to you?"

"Yes."

"Do *you* want to be faithful to him?"

"That's what I was trying to do when he flew off the deep end!"

Kevin's expression filled with exasperation. "Yes or no, Kyler."

"Yes, of course."

"Do you love him?"

Kyler spoke between clenched teeth. "Don't my other answers answer that?"

"Yes, or no, *please*."

Kyler took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Say it."

"Say what?"

"Say that you love him."

Kyler let out a frustrated huff. "I just did!"

Adam turned to Kyler. "No, I get what Kev's doing. You can answer yes to the question, but he wants to hear you actually say the words, and now that I think about it, I've never heard you, in all these years, tell Robbie you love him."

"Well I have. I'm sorry I'm not the sentimental type that goes around telling my partner I love him in front of other people. I've told him behind closed doors, he knows it, what more do you guys want?"

"It's not an issue of what we want," Kevin said. "It's what Robbie wants. Has he ever said he wants you guys to be more open with your relationship?"

Kyler lowered his gaze. "Yeah."

"And your response?" Adam asked.

"We should wait."

Kevin huffed. "Figures. I'm sure you had some fucked up reason behind it, but let's be honest here, among the three of us. You told him that because if the whole world knew you were in a committed relationship, then the paparazzi would be trying to tag your ass while you'd be trying to tap someone else's, and it'd be guaranteed Robbie would find out."

Kyler's eyes narrowed at him. "That's not even close."

Adam folded his arms across his chest as he paced away to look out the window. "Well, let's face it. You've always had a fear of committing."

"That's not true, either," Kyler said. "I used to be happy with no one in my life but Robbie. Even though I always wanted more in my life as far as possessions, money, comfort, I was content with him as my one and only. But after we got signed and were promoting and touring, I noticed he was looking at other guys."

"When he came to me, wanting to see other people, I only agreed because I thought after he got to experience a couple of other guys, he'd be happier with me knowing I was the right one. He always said I have twisted logic, and in that case, I did. I just didn't want him wondering 'what if' his whole life since I was the only person he'd ever been with. But things didn't work out the way I thought they would, and we could never find what we once had."

Kevin sat beside him, his voice gentler. "And you never will. That part of your relationship is over. What you both need to do is let the past go and move forward."

"Yeah," Kyler mumbled.

Adam glanced back at him. "But it'll probably take something big to get Robbie back. Damned if I know what, though."

Silence filled the room as the three sank into their thoughts. After several minutes, Kyler pushed off the couch, walking quickly toward the bedroom.

"What are you doing?" Adam called after him.

"To get my computer. I need to find out the next city Conquest's hitting."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Robbie climbed onto the tour bus. He was used to traveling in comfort when on tour, but Conquest's house on wheels was even more extravagant than anything Black Heart Down ever had. Plush suede seats were on his left, behind those a table and booths. To his right, a long leather couch, more seats behind it faced a TV with a DVD player and gaming systems. A kitchen was across from the entertainment area, followed next by the shower and bathroom. Beyond, a pulled back curtain showed the bunks.

Robbie watched as everyone situated themselves. Brad and Kenny went to the entertainment area, debating on video games. Julian and Morgan moved toward the bunks and lay together on a long couch running across the back of the bus. Evan sat at the table, his cell phone and a leather ledger in front of him like he was going to work on managerial things. Jesse got situated on the couch, holding an eReader in one hand, his other arm lying over his dog, Achilles. Iris carried a chew bone over to Evan and lay at his feet, while Morgan's Golden Retriever, Chopin, curled up on the floor by Julian and Morgan.

It seemed like everyone had a place, even the dogs...except him.

"Hey, Robbie."

Robbie looked toward Jesse. "Yeah?"

"Since we were rushing to get back to the hotel, I didn't get a chance to ask last night what you thought of the show."

Robbie moved toward him, feeling Jesse had noticed how lost he looked and was reaching out to help him. He sat on the couch, Achilles between him and Jesse. "It was unbelievable. I couldn't believe it when I saw you guys have a mini orchestra and a whole team of professional dancers. I've seen you guys perform at award shows and I was always amazed at how good you all sounded and what a showman you are, but those were

nothing compared to a full concert.”

Jesse smiled at him. “Thanks. I like adding in the extras to our shows, dancers, pyrotechnics, the orchestra. I think it makes people feel like they’re at something even more special than seeing their favorite band. I want our fans to walk away with memories that replay in their heads years later. And I take a lot of pride that we sound as good live as we do in the studio. I know you can relate to how hard it is to duplicate that sound, unless you lip sync, and I’ll die before I do that.”

“Tyler’s the same way. I don’t think BHD sounds quite as sharp as Conquest live, but he’d always say he’d rather sound like shit than mouth along to a recording. I was never sure if that was the right mentality, but he also had a point with saying if people want to hear a recording, listen to the studio track. If people want a show, buy a concert ticket.”

“It sounds like he has some intelligence floating around in there.”

“Yeah, he has a lot, actually. But you and him are totally different types of front-men. He was always content to stand front-and-center and sing. He’d walk from one end of the stage to the other, play guitar, but never got much into dancing. You blew me away with the moves you were doing. And I don’t think I saw you walk during the whole show! I can’t count how many times you ran across the stage, and then up on that big walkway thing extending over the crowd. I got exhausted watching you.”

A deep chuckle came from Evan. “His energy knows no bounds.”

Jesse blew Evan a kiss. He looked back to Robbie. “But really, I run three to five miles almost everyday, depending on how much of a workout I got the evening before.” His gaze drifted back to Evan. “And I’ve been dancing for years, thanks to my brother, Brandon. If you think I’ve got moves, you should see him.”

“I met him at the charity auction. He was really cool. He and his partner looked so happy together.”

"Yeah, two more soul mates who managed to find each other."

"Thanks to you," Evan said.

Jesse looked to Robbie. "I gave Brandon the card to Shunichi's dojo. That's how they met. I didn't know I was hooking them up at the time, but I would've been all for it. I did hook Kenny up with Krista, though."

"And I thank you for it!" Kenny called.

Jesse leaned around Robbie to see Julian and Morgan, raising his voice so it carried to them. "And I would've hooked those two up if Julian hadn't been acting mean."

Julian let out an exaggerated sigh that carried through the bus. "Am I ever *not* going to be mean again in your eyes?"

"No."

"Fine. Then since I'm so mean, I'll say you couldn't have hooked us up since I was already on it before you knew who he was."

Jesse laughed. "Yeah, we all know you didn't waste any time getting *on it*."

As everyone joined in with Jesse's laughter, Julian turned to Morgan. "Aren't you going to defend your man?"

Morgan wrapped his arms around him and squeezed. "I would, except he's telling the truth."

Julian gasped in pretending offense. "Now look who's being mean!"

Robbie turned to see Julian. "Jules, I have to admit, I'm kind of surprised at all this dirty talk about you. I always had the impression you were so quiet and proper."

Jesse spoke before Julian could. "Don't you know it's the quiet ones you have to watch out for?"

Julian shook his head at him. "You're making me out to be some kind of wild, kinky boy."

Jesse held up both hands in innocence. "I didn't say anything about you being kinky. But since you brought it up, do you still

have that riding crop you took from me when I was going to throw it out?”

“He does,” Morgan answered for Julian, the simple reply implying much more.

As chuckles filled the bus again, Julian joining in with them, Robbie turned his attention back to Jesse. “So you’re the resident matchmaker.”

“I enjoy seeing people happy together. Maybe because I want everyone to experience something close to the happiness Ev and I have together.”

Brad raised his voice. “You just keep your matchmaking self away from me. I have plenty of happiness as a single man.”

“No, you have plenty of sex,” Jesse said. “There’s a difference.”

“Not in my world.”

“If that’s the case, then it’s all the more reason you to be in a relationship. Because I guarantee I get more sex than you.”

Brad turned in his seat to see Jesse. “Yeah, I’m sure. But that’s because of the sex addict you’re married to.”

Evan looked up from his work, speaking to Brad while pointing at Jesse. “I’ll have you know, I’m not the only sex addict in our marriage.”

Kenny chimed in. “I think everyone knows that.”

“I don’t think Robbie knew,” Jesse said.

Robbie smiled at him. “Actually, I did. Sorry, Jess.”

“Yeah well, I guess it’s not much of a secret. But who wouldn’t be a sex addict when that’s who you get to have sex with?” Jesse pointed back at Evan.

Evan winked at him before putting his attention back to his work.

Robbie nodded toward Jesse’s eReader. “What’re you reading?”

Jesse held up the device to show him. “*The Phantom of the*

Opera by Gaston Leroux. The original, long before the play was ever thought of.”

Robbie stared blankly at the screen.

Jesse chuckled as he lowered the reader. “You look surprised.”

“I guess I am, a little bit. I didn’t know you were into things like that.”

Evan spoke up. “He loves literature and classical texts. He rarely reads anything new unless it’s historical fiction. It’s the history lover in him.”

Jesse grinned at Robbie. “He knows me so well. But he’s right. I read *The Phantom* for the first time a couple years ago when Brandon landed the role. I really liked it, so I thought I’d read it again. I’m kind of tired today, so I don’t want anything I have to concentrate real hard on.”

“You call that something you don’t have to concentrate on? You’re not the typical rocker boy, you know that?”

“Of course I do. Just my musical talent alone sets me above and apart.”

A loud snort came from Kenny. “Robbie, man, don’t get his ego rolling. It’s hard to stop once it starts.”

As everyone snickered, Jesse shot a good-humored glare at Kenny. He leaned over the couch to his Chicago Bears duffel bag. Opening one of the side pouches, he pulled out a second eReader. “Here, since you’re running short on stuff right now and it’s going to be a long drive to New Orleans, you can borrow Ev’s.” His gaze moved to Evan. “You don’t care if he borrows yours, do you?”

“I have one of those things?”

Jesse laughed under his breath and handed it to Robbie. “I think it’d be safe to say you can keep it, too. Just change the account info, and...” he raised his voice, “ignore all the gay erotica I downloaded for him.”

Evan looked at Jesse, a smirk on his lips. “Now, gorgeous, why would I waste my time reading about sex when all I have to

do is grab you and actually have it?"

Robbie nodded at Jesse. "He has a point."

Smiling at Evan, Jesse said, "Yeah, he does. Guess it all comes back around to the whole sex addicts thing."

Robbie tapped Jesse on the arm with the eReader. "Thanks for this." He held it up. "And thank you, Evan."

Evan lifted his hand in acknowledgement, while he typed something into his phone.

"It's nothing," Jesse said. "When we hit New Orleans, you'll be able to pick up everything you need. And I'll go shopping with you. I've been there twice, once for our first tour, then again on Ev's, and I had a blast shopping there. I found some really awesome stores I'll take you to."

"That'd be cool." Robbie stood and moved across the aisle to one of the seats. He fired up the reader, checking the titles already on it to see if any would interest him, and burst out laughing. "You really did put gay erotica on this thing."

Evan chuckled. "If you guys keep talking about it, there's going to be some live gay erotica going on in about five seconds."

"Maybe you should read some of those stories out loud, Robbie," Jesse said.

Kenny spun in his seat. "No, really, don't. Spare the two of us." He flicked his head at Brad.

Brad shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me. I can get off just as easily listening about two guys going at it. Sex is sex, and it's all hot."

Jesse's gaze slowly turned on Brad. "Oh really? You can get off listening about two guys doing it?"

Evan abandoned his work and glanced back at Brad. "Well, isn't this an interesting revelation. Not one that's much of a surprise to me, though."

Brad flicked his hand through the air, gesturing back and forth between Jesse and Evan. "Don't you two even start ganging

up on me. I was just talking. All I was saying is sex in any form is hot. That's all."

"Right," Jesse said, his tone revealing his lack of belief in Brad's words. "So, just how much gay erotica *do* you read in a week? Or how much gay porn do you watch? Since if you said it's hot and you can get off on it, you must have some experience with it."

Only a stutter came from Brad's agape mouth.

Julian's voice rose from the back of the bus. "Uh, boys? Don't forget Jesse and Evan aren't the only ones who can perform live gay erotica."

Jesse leaned forward to see Julian curled up with Morgan. "So why don't you show us, Jules? Come on. Get *on it!* And nice save for Brad, by the way."

With laughter filling the bus again, Robbie realized that as odd as it was, for all his life, he'd never had gay friends. He'd known and interacted with gay guys, but not like this, just hanging around and joking. Kyler didn't have much interest in making friends outside of celebrities, and even then, he never got close with anyone.

As he thought about it, he wondered if part of Kyler's reluctance to be open with their relationship wasn't so much because he didn't want to commit to him, but maybe it was because Kyler wasn't fully comfortable with his own sexuality. Behind closed doors, there was no doubt he was confident about it, but couldn't it be possible for a man to be comfortable in the privacy of a relationship, then not comfortable about it in the world beyond?

If that was the case, then it made him leaving Kyler beyond wrong. More than anything, he should stay by him, help him accept and love himself. But, would Kyler ever admit to his insecurity?

In some ways, Kyler being insecure made sense, his flirting with women, his aggressive stud routine, it was all a cover-up. But then his flirting with men, his openness with Jesse and Evan,

didn't make insecurity seem an issue. Though, Kyler usually waited for other men to show interest first, and yeah, he had attempted flirting with Jesse in the studio, but that could've been because he knew nothing would come of it. It was a safe zone. On top of all that, Kyler's family life when he was young made him feel his sexuality was something to be ashamed of.

Robbie closed his eyes tight and pressed his fingertips to his forehead. Hundreds of miles apart, and Ky still managed to give him a headache and make him feel knotted inside. And yet despite it, the urge to see him felt strong. More than anything, he wanted to fall into Kyler's arms, wrap his own around him, feel the security and solidness of his body against him.

He felt someone sit beside him and opened his eyes to Kenny. "Hey. You done with your game already?"

"Yeah, Brad was kicking my ass. I swear, if it's not Jesse, it's Brad, and don't even get me going on Evan. The only person I can beat is Jules. 'Course, maybe you'll suck at video games, too."

"Probably. I haven't played one since high school."

Kenny leaned closer to him, his voice hushed. "So, what went down with BHD? I know you said things were rough with you and Kyler. Did you guys have a final blowup?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Robbie spilled everything that'd happened up until he walked out on Kyler.

As he finished, Kenny sat quiet for a moment, then took a breath. "Don't get mad at me for saying this, but it doesn't seem like he did that bad of a thing taking the waiter's phone number."

Robbie's mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?"

"Well, he said he wasn't going to call him."

Jesse's voice intervened. "And how would you feel if you saw Krista smiling with a hot guy and take his phone number?"

Kenny looked at him. "Shouldn't you be reading, not eavesdropping?"

"I'm doing both. Multitasking in another one of my talents, so answer the question."

"I'd be pissed, but I wouldn't leave her over it."

"What if it had happened a hundred times before and you guys were trying to fix your relationship to keep it from happening anymore?"

Kenny's expression turned thoughtful. He nodded slowly. "Yeah, that could make me walk." He looked back to Robbie. "Sorry. I've still got a lot of single dude mentality on things, you know."

"It's alright," Robbie said. "It's not like I haven't thought the same thing over and over again. Part of me feels like I walked out too fast, that I'm giving up too easily. Then I remind myself this shit has been going on for years. I needed to get away for a while...or more than that, really."

Robbie heard the uncertainty in his own voice. He sounded like he didn't know what the hell he was doing or what he wanted. And in reality, he didn't. He was more than just lost in trying to find where he fit into Conquest. He was lost in everything with his life.

Kenny patted him on the shoulder. "Then it's probably for the best you got away. We'll have a kickass time together!"

Robbie forced a smile and managed to find his voice enough to whisper, "Yeah. We will."

Kenny stood and walked back to Brad, challenging him in another game.

Robbie stared blankly at the eReader in his hands, his mind feeling too numb to read. He turned his gaze out the window and watched the scenery streak by, mile after mile, carrying him to a destination where at the end, he felt like nothing, no one, would be waiting for him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Robbie meandered through the backstage of the stadium. After driving all day and into the night to reach New Orleans, the rest of the band was sleeping in or taking the morning to relax. Since he found sleep evasive and it was hard to relax with the fits of anxiety that would hit his heart hard and sudden, he thought he'd come down to the arena. He wanted to walk the city, but didn't feel like dealing with bodyguards and fans shadowing him. Since he always enjoyed watching a stage get built, he thought all the activity here would be a good distraction.

He climbed up the bleachers and took a seat in front. Roadies and staff bustled around, wheeling crates of equipment from one spot to another, the high pitched whine of power tools filled the large space as piece by piece the stage was put together. He thought back to when Black Heart had played the halftime show at the Super Bowl. He had been so freaked thinking the stage was going to collapse from how fast it was put together. But Kyler joked that if it started to go, he'd be sure to grab him so they could go down together. After those words, Kyler had flung his arms around him and tackled him to the floor.

Robbie closed his eyes. The noise around him quieted as his mind filled with the sound of Kyler's deep laugh. He had the sexiest laugh and voice, whether speaking or singing. He could see him so clearly in his mind, his crooked smirk, his golden hair, his green flecked hazel eyes. And his hands, always so warm, with their slender, graceful fingers that would travel over his body with such knowledge and without hesitation.

Robbie felt his anxiety returning, his throat closing with emotion. Why was he doing this to himself? It was the worst form of self-torture. He was the one who walked away. Why was he fantasizing about him? The answer burst to the front of his mind, almost screaming before he could stop it. Because he loved him. He loved Kyler. He loved him so much.

"You must be really tired if you can take a nap with all the noise around here."

Robbie jumped, his eyes flew open. Conquest's staff manager, Remmy Laurent, stood to the side of him. He met had Remmy a couple days ago and was impressed by how someone so young managed with such efficiency and competence. He was so shocked when Jesse introduced them, he'd blurted out, "How old are you?" He hadn't meant to, but Remmy looked like he was barely out of high school. Luckily, Remmy was good natured. He'd laughed, answering he was twenty-four and he got the same reaction from a lot of people.

There was also no denying Remmy was easy to look at; shaggy blond hair, pretty features, full lips, with an almost shy way about him. Though he had a feeling Remmy wasn't as shy as he seemed once he got comfortable with someone.

"Sorry," Remmy said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Robbie shook his head. "No, it's cool." He gave a soft laugh. "This isn't really a place to chill, anyhow. I just didn't feel like hanging at the hotel."

"I hear that. I get so tired of hotels. I never feel like I have enough privacy. But that's life on the road, right?" Remmy moved to sit down, then paused. "Do you care if I sit up here for a minute with you?"

"Go ahead."

Remmy dropped down in the seat beside him and smiled. "I'll admit, I was floored when Jesse said you'd be playing with Conquest. BHD is such a kickass band. I've always wanted to work with you guys."

"You still might get that chance. I just won't be a part of it."

Remmy tipped his head to the side. "Are you really leaving them?"

Robbie shrugged. For some reason, even though he talked about it to Jesse and Kenny, he couldn't fully confess his departure from Black Heart Down to someone else. It made him wonder,

what he was going to do when the time came to hold a press conference? Would he be able to get any words out, or would he sit there doing nothing but nodding and shaking his head?

"It's probably hard trying to learn the ropes in a new band," Remmy said.

"Yeah."

"And you leaving BHD is going to really hurt them. You were the main force behind them. Well, besides Kyler, but where would he be without your guitar?"

"I'm sure he won't have any trouble finding a replacement."

"I don't know, man. You've got a unique sound. Either way, they won't be the same band anymore. I always got the impression you and Kyler were really close."

Robbie took a deep breath and cleared his throat as he exhaled. "We are. *Were*. We were, I mean."

Remmy gazed at him for a moment, then gave a small nod and spoke in a gentle voice. "I'm sorry."

Robbie's anxiety, his discomfort at speaking about Kyler, and hearing how Remmy understood messages unsaid, made him shift in his seat. "There's nothing to be sorry for."

Remmy leaned on the armrest of the seat between them. "That's good, at least. I never met him, but he came off pretty arrogant most of the times I saw him interviewed."

"He has his moments."

"Well, one thing I've learned working with famous musicians is they pretty much all of them have those moments, some more than others." Remmy grinned. "Present company excluded."

"I'm pretty sure I could be included. I've been known to throw around an attitude when it'll get me what I want."

Remmy gave him a playful nudge with his elbow. "I don't believe it. You come across so quiet and sweet."

Robbie smiled at him. "Yeah, but another thing with famous musicians is we're not always who we appear to be on the surface."

“Yeah, that’s true, too. Look at the Conquest guys, and even Jesse. A lot of people think he does nothing but act silly, but no one works harder than him. And when all that crap was happening to Julian with Kurt, the last staff manager, I’d always see Jesse walking backstage like he was lost in thought with a concerned look on his face. He just rocks all around once you get to know him, but you probably already know that.”

“You sound like another closeted Jesse fanboy.”

Remmy laughed. “I’m not closeted anything. But yeah, I do admire him. And Evan too and what they have together. I’d give anything to have a relationship someday like what they got. But that’ll never happen. I’m not as lucky as them, or Julian.”

Robbie gave him a confused look. “Julian?”

A slight flush colored Remmy’s cheeks. “I, uh, sort of had a crush on Morgan. It’s so bad, I know. I think it’s because I haven’t gotten laid in forever. I’m crushing on guys left and right.” He ended his sentence with a nervous chuckle.

“I get what you’re saying. There’s nothing wrong with crushing on someone.” Robbie grinned and bumped into Remmy’s shoulder with his own. “Especially if you’re horny as hell.”

“I guess so. I’m over it now. It wasn’t much of a crush, anyhow. But that just seems to be my trademark, you know? Crushing on guys I shouldn’t.”

Robbie gave a small nod, his mind drifting back to Kyler, how he’d felt about him when he first saw him all those years ago. He took a long, deep breath, sighing as it left him. “Yeah, but sometimes the guy you shouldn’t want is the guy you were meant to have.”

His voice barely a whisper, Remmy said, “It would be amazing if that’s true.”

Robbie glanced at him and noticed Remmy’s attention was focused down by the stage. He followed Remmy’s gaze and saw Brad clapping one of the roadies on the back, who was opening a crate holding his drums. “You *are* crushing on guys left and right,

aren't you?"

Remmy blinked as if snapping himself out of a reverie and snapped his head toward him. An embarrassed chuckle slipped from him. "There's no way he'd be into me. He's always got women hanging on him. It's just...well..."

"He's damn hot. I know." Robbie smiled at him. "There's nothing wrong with looking with appreciation at a hot guy, even knowing you can't have him."

As his words left him, a sting went through Robbie's heart. What he just said reminded him of his and Kyler's fight, how the tension first began. Here, talking casually, he'd said the exact opposite of what he'd said to Kyler that day. Why? Is that how he really felt? He knew it was, and yet he had wanted to give Kyler a different set of rules to play with, not allowing him to do what he himself did all the time.

Robbie felt like getting up and walking away, going back to his hotel room and hiding, not just from the world, but from himself. It seemed everything around him, every thought he had, blared how wrong he'd been. Remmy talking brought him from his thoughts.

"It's like going to a museum, huh? You can look at all the beautiful things, but no touching."

"Yeah." Robbie paused as a young woman approached them.

"Hey, Remmy," she said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but we're...um...we're kind of missing a crate. Like, a big one. With stage stuff in it."

Remmy blinked at her in silence for a brief moment. "That's not possible. They were all accounted for when we left."

"Yeah, but one's gone."

"Alright, I'll be right there." Remmy turned back to Robbie. "Looks like duty calls." He laid his hand on Robbie's forearm. "Catch you later."

Robbie managed a nod as Remmy walked away. He sank down in the chair, closing his eyes. Damn, Kyler. He was made to

feel this way because of him. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

He opened his eyes and let his head fall back as he stared up at the ceiling. He needed to move on. He was certain Kyler already had. Maybe a night with someone else would be what he needed to rebound.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kyler looked out the cab window to the massive parking lot overflowing with cars. Simply getting into the parking lot had been a fiasco with the cars creeping at a snail's pace in the long traffic jam to the stadium. Some people were tailgating, but most were already streaming toward the stadium doors.

It'd been so long since he drove through a parking lot like an average concert goer, he'd forgotten how insane it could get. Even with cops directing traffic on the street and the handful of attendants in the parking lot, it was basically a free-for-all. He found himself wishing for more security than only the cab's door lock. Though it was probably better this way. If he came sailing though in a limo with security trucks around, everyone would know who he was. Then again, no one was here to see him.

Kyler sat forward and knocked on the clear plastic shield between him and the driver. "Hey, drive around to the back."

"I don't think they'll let me back there, sir."

"Trust me, they will."

As the cab neared the back of the stadium, the mass of parked cars thinned with there being no place to park, but people were still everywhere, hoping to catch a glimpse of Conquest, and settling for taking pictures of the trucks used to haul the equipment. Security covered the grounds, making sure no one got too close, and blocked the one way for a car to drive back. Even before the cab stopped, two guards marched forward to halt its progress. One guard went to the cabbie's door, the other to the back passenger.

Kyler rolled down his window and smiled up at the guard. "Hey, I'm here to see the guys."

The guard let out a snort. "You and everyone else."

Kyler's smile dropped away as annoyance filled him. "I'm a little more than just everyone else. Don't you know who I am?"

"Yeah, I recognize you. Kyler Christenson, lead singer for Black Heart Down. Doesn't matter, though. You're not going back there."

Kyler's patience broke. "Listen, I don't have time to deal with some rent-a-cop on a power trip. I need back there. Now!"

The guard stood up straight, folding his arms across his chest as he glared into the car. "No one, and I mean *no one*, gets back here. Orders from Mr. Arden himself, and I'm a lot more inclined to listen to him than I am to you."

Kyler caught himself before letting out an audible growl of frustration. Goddamn Evan. It'd figure he'd lock things down airtight. Since it was obvious force wouldn't work on the stubborn behemoth in front of him, he willed some calm into his voice. "I get Evan gave those orders, and you're doing a fantastic job at holding them up, but I don't think he meant to take it so far as to keep one of his friends out."

He knew saying he and Evan were friends was *really* pushing the truth, but it's not like the guard would know that.

"If you're such good friends, why didn't he let us know you'd be coming?" the guard asked.

Speaking through clenched teeth, Kyler said, "It's a surprise."

"I don't think Mr. Arden is a fan of surprises."

Kyler pulled in a deep breath. "You know what? Why don't you take your hard-assed self and go get Jesse. That way I can laugh when he tears you down for not letting me back there."

"What's Mr. Alexander got to do with this? I thought you said you were here to see Mr. Arden. And I'm sure Mr. Arden...no wait, *now* it's Mr. Alexander, would be just as surprised to know you're here if you called him and said you're outside the door. Then you could pass your phone to me, I'll talk to them, and I'll let you in. Since you're all such good friends, you have their numbers, right?"

Kyler collapsed against the back of the seat and rubbed his face with his hand in complete frustration. "Just go get Jesse,

or Evan, or your head of security. I don't give a fuck so long as you get someone who can do more than stand there busting my goddamn balls."

The guard pointed at him. "You don't have a very good attitude, you know that?"

"That's it." Kyler whipped open the cab door. He didn't give a shit if the guard was three times his size. He was kicking his ass. And he'd kick the ass of every guard who got in his way of seeing Robbie.

As Kyler sprang out of the cab, he stopped at seeing a powerfully built African-American guy coming toward them. He wore the standard black staff T-shirt, and Kyler hoped he was the security head.

"Is everything okay, Bill?"

The other guard who'd spoken with Kyler turned to him. "Yeah, Sam. I've just got Mr. I'm-a-celebrity-and-should-be-allowed-to-do-whatever-I-want, here."

Sam looked at Kyler. "So it seems. Guess you're here to see Robbie."

Bill gave Kyler a cold smile. "You going to change your story about who you're here to see again?"

Kyler advanced a step on Bill. "Who I'm here to see isn't any of your goddamn business."

Sam stepped in between them, laying a hand on Kyler's chest. "Easy, easy. I don't need to be trying to get ambulances through that madness in the parking lot." He focused on Kyler. "I know you're upset about not being let backstage, but you got to understand the band's safety is top priority. You obviously know Robbie, and I'm sure you know the other guys, too. Whether or not you're friends with any of them, I can't say, especially since Robbie's playing with Conquest and not your band anymore. But I'll tell you what. I'll go find Jesse and tell him you're here. It'll be his call on whether or not you're allowed in."

Kyler exhaled a relieved breath. "Thanks. It's nice to talk to

someone with sense.” He shot Bill a withering look.

Sam shook his index finger at Kyler. “Don’t criticize my man. He’s doing exactly what he should be.”

Though Kyler’s lips curved upward, his smile held no friendliness. “Right.”

As Sam turned to leave, he said to Bill, “You can bring him up to the door, but not inside.”

Bill glanced at Kyler, then walked away as if he expected him to follow.

Kyler turned to pay the cab driver and collect his duffel bag from the backseat. He’d left home so quickly, he hadn’t bothered with taking the time to pack much. Besides, he didn’t expect to be gone long. Once Robbie saw him and they talked, they’d be back on a plane to Chicago together. Of course, it might be nice to hang out a couple days in New Orleans. It was a lot warmer here and the change of scenery might be good for them.

Kyler trailed behind Bill. Really, he didn’t know why he hadn’t thought of it before. When the tour got postponed, he and Robbie should’ve taken the chance to go somewhere together. The Caribbean, the Mediterranean, wherever Robbie wanted. After the rough time they had getting this last album down, they more than deserved it. Hell, all the stress from recording was probably still affecting Robbie. At least he’d thought of it now, and once things were good between them again, he’d take Robbie somewhere.

With Bill blocking the door, Kyler stood a few paces away, waiting. He figured it’d be pointless trying to have small talk with Bill. They’d already said all they needed to, and besides, the guy would feel stupid enough once he walked past him to go inside.

After what seemed several minutes, Kyler glanced at his watch. What was taking Jesse? Or actually, what was taking Robbie? He didn’t expect Jesse to be the one to come get him. As soon as Robbie heard he was there, he’d be at the door. His heart pounded with anticipation. He couldn’t wait to see him. It’d only been a couple days, but it felt like so much longer, probably

because of how Robbie had left.

He was used to Robbie storming off. He didn't like it, but he was used to it. But something about this time felt different. He didn't want to think it, but couldn't deny it felt more...*permanent*.

Kyler shook his thoughts away. It wouldn't be permanent, though. Robbie only needed some space. Now he'd had it, so everything would be fine.

Kyler spun around as he heard the door open, a bright smile on his face, but the person he wanted to give the smile to wasn't the one standing in the doorway. Jesse stood with his hands on his hips, dressed for the stage in black leather pants and a red button down silk shirt, unbuttoned to the top of his abdomen. The golden sun pendant on the choker Jesse always wore shone in the fading light. Evan stepped through the doorway to Jesse's side, fixing him with a harsh glare.

"What do you want, Kyler?" Jesse asked.

Kyler moved toward him. "I want to see Robbie."

"Yeah well, he doesn't want to see you."

Kyler stopped short. "Does he know I'm here?"

"Why do you think I'm standing here and not him? He knows you're here, he said he doesn't want to talk to you, and now here I am telling you to go to hell for him when I should be getting ready to hit the stage. So, see ya." Jesse turned to go inside.

Kyler rushed forward. "Bullshit! Let me see him!"

Bill lunged and blocked him, giving him a hard shove. Anticipating the push, Kyler braced himself and threw his shoulder into Bill. As Bill went to grab him, Jesse's commanding voice stopped them both.

"Knock it the fuck off!" Jesse walked around Bill, Evan close to his side. He looked at Bill. "Let him go."

Bill gazed at Jesse for a moment, then reluctantly released Kyler.

Jesse faced Kyler. "And you, back up."

Kyler took a step back.

"I don't have time to deal with this crap," Jesse said. "Robbie doesn't want to see you. Accept it. Get your ass on a plane and go back home."

Kyler's desperation pushed him forward a step. Instantly, Evan was between him and Jesse. He could see the threat in Evan's piercing blue eyes. He knew Evan was protecting Jesse, but he didn't want to fight with Jesse. He just wanted to get through to him how badly he wanted to see Robbie.

Kyler softened his voice. "Jesse, come on. If the roles were reversed and it was you wanting to see Evan, you know you'd do everything in your power to get to him."

Jesse moved around Evan to stand at his side. "But that's just it. The roles would never be reversed because I'd never treat him the way you've treated Robbie. I love him, but also respect him. And that's the problem with your and Robbie's relationship. You don't have a damn bit of respect for him." He turned around.

"Jesse, please. Don't walk away. Just let me see him. I'll make it quick, I promise. I just want to see him." Kyler heard the pleading tone in his voice. He never begged anyone for anything, except Robbie when asking for forgiveness. But if begging to Jesse would get him closer to Robbie, he was willing to sacrifice a little dignity.

Jesse paused at the door to go inside. His back to Kyler, he shook his head. "I feel for you. I honestly do. And if there was anything I could do to help you guys, I would. But you've pushed him too hard, too far, too many times. Now he's one of mine and I have a responsibility to take care of him. I asked him three times before I came out if he was certain he didn't want to see you. I have to respect his wishes, just as you should."

"But if we could be together, just for a minute—"

"Go home, Kyler. The only thing you can do now is wait for him to come back to you." As the door slowly closed behind Jesse, he added, "If he ever does."

Kyler watched the door shut, leaving only Bill and the other

guard with him. He staggered back, staring at the door. Loss fell over him, so palpable even his vision blurred. He turn, walking blindly the way he'd come, though the cab was gone. He stared over the parking lot beyond. It felt as though it'd taken all his strength to get this far, and he didn't know where to go. He didn't want to go home, not without Robbie. He leaned on one of the blockades, his head bowed. A hand touched his shoulder, making him jump.

"You shouldn't go walking out there," Bill said. "I'll call the limo around to take you to your hotel. The guys aren't going to be needing it for a while, anyway."

Kyler gave a slight shake of his head. "I don't have a hotel. I thought Robbie..."

"Well, I shouldn't do this, but I guess I can have the limo take you to the hotel where we're all staying. But I'd need you to give me your word that once you're taken there, you'll have the concierge call around to find you another place to stay."

Kyler nodded.

Bill gave Kyler's shoulder a small squeeze and shake. "C'mon. I'll let you sit inside the door. It'll be safer for you there. But don't try anything stupid, like trying to run off."

Kyler let Bill lead him toward the arena. "I won't. The person I came to see doesn't want to see me, anyway."



Robbie looked at Jesse as he walked into the dressing room. He met Jesse's gaze for a brief moment before lowering his own.

Jesse continued to stare at him. "I did your dirty work for you. He's gone."

Robbie's head bobbed in a barely noticeable nod.

Jesse walked past him to a full length mirror, straightening the gold pendant of the sixteen-rayed Vergina sun so it rested centered in the hollow of his throat. "He looks like shit, in case you care."

Robbie snapped his head up. "Of course I care. I know it probably doesn't look like I do, but that's not the case. Did he handle it okay when you told him to go?"

Jesse's voice softened. "I don't know if you really want to know that."

"Yes, I do. Please."

"Then no, he didn't. He was begging me to let him see you. When I told him you didn't want to, he looked crushed and heartbroken."

"I *did* want to see him. I just...I don't feel like I'm strong enough right now."

Jesse looked at him in the mirror. "I know how you feel. When Ev and I had to break up, whenever I saw him, I felt like my strength would vanish. But it wasn't because I didn't want to see him. It was because when I did see him, the pain of how much I loved him would break me down."

He turned and faced Robbie. "We were forced apart because we wanted to protect each other. But then we realized we're so much stronger together than we are separate, and our love for each other refused to be denied. I just hope the reasons you're forcing yourself away from Kyler are more selfless than selfish, because right now to me, it looks like the latter."

Robbie's mouth fell open, though no words left him.

Evan moved in front of Jesse. He touched the fingertips of both hands to Jesse's throat and caressed down. "You need to start warming up. And you're so tense, you need to relax before hitting the stage. What's done is done between them." He looked at Robbie. "And it is done. I'm pretty sure he realizes that too since he flew all the way down here to see you and you rejected him."

A pained breath left Robbie.

"But now," Evan said, turning back to Jesse, "I need to help him get ready."

Robbie understood his cue to leave and walked out the door,

closing it softly behind him. Selfish? How could Jesse think that? He thought Jesse understood why he left Kyler. Jesse even defended him doing it when Kenny said it didn't seem like the things Kyler had done were all that big. But maybe he'd asked too much of Jesse in having him be the one to tell Kyler he didn't want to see him. Jesse probably thought he was a coward. And would he really be wrong in that thought?

Robbie walked through the backstage area. He should've gone out to see Kyler and told him himself to go. But if he saw him, all his strength, all his willpower would dwindle away. Sure, there were times he thought it might not be such a bad thing for that to happen. The problem was, would anything change? Would Kyler change? No was the answer to both questions. The same cycle would repeat itself just as it had so many times before. Until Kyler was ready to devote himself to him, openly and honestly, he couldn't go back to him.

Still, would it hurt to see him? For only a few minutes?

Robbie glanced up, seeing he was nearing the back of the stadium. It seemed his legs were carrying him to Kyler regardless of what the rest of him wanted. His heart raced, but strange as it was, for the first time in days it wasn't with anxiety, but excitement.

He looked back and forth, waiting to catch a glimpse of Kyler. He wasn't sure which backdoor Jesse had gone to, but headed toward the main one where he'd entered with the guys earlier. Robbie rounded a corner and saw the door closing. He walked quicker, flung it open, and stepped out.

A black limo was pulling away. Though he couldn't see through the dark tinted windows, he knew Kyler was inside. Robbie gripped the door handle for support. He'd missed him, and once again, Kyler was gone. Maybe this time, forever.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“I didn’t see *you* here when we came in last night.”

The golden tenor roused Kyler from his shallow sleep. He opened his eyes, blinking back the light in the hotel lobby, and was able to make out Jesse’s blurry form standing over him. He closed his eyes again and let his head drop back on the chair with a groan, already feeling soreness in his neck. To be expected, he supposed, since he’d slept in the chair.

When the limo dropped him off, the hotel’s concierge called around to find him another place to stay. It took a while since many hotels were booked up, thanks to Conquest being in town, but she did manage to find him a room not far away. True to his word, he went without trouble to the other hotel and stayed there...for a few hours. Once the clock passed midnight, he called a cab and came back here.

He figured even if he ran into Bill, he could use the excuse that the promise to stay away was for the day before. Yeah, it was weak, and the guard would have every reason to throw him out the door, but his luck held out that Bill didn’t see him and being who he was, the hotel allowed him to stay in the lobby. Albeit, not without giving him a few strange looks.

The only downside was by the time he’d gotten back, everyone had returned from the concert, and he knew trying to get up to Robbie’s room would get him tossed out without question. So he decided to wait and watch for him, certain at some point Robbie would have to come down.

Now, though, he faced a bigger obstacle.

Kyler opened his eyes, his vision clearer this time. “Good morning, Jesse.”

“You look like shit.”

Kyler smiled at him. “And you’re as hot as always. Well, maybe not as hot as last night. A Chicago Bears T-shirt and running

pants isn't quite the same as red silk and black leather. Evan must've been walking around with a constant hard-on."

Jesse tapped an annoyed beat on his hip with his index finger. "And you wonder why Robbie walked out on you."

Kyler tried to hide the sting Jesse's words caused, though he knew the hurt showed. He extended a hand toward Jesse's two dogs, and both pushed forward to be petted. "I'm just trying to pay you a compliment."

"Yeah well, it's a messed up one. What are you doing here?"

"What do you think?"

"You didn't get it yesterday that he doesn't want to see you? How much more clear do I need to be?"

Kyler put both hands on the chair and pushed himself forward. "I don't give a shit how many times you tell me he doesn't want to see me. I'm going to keep following him and you guys until he says it to my face himself."

Jesse contemplated him in silence. He glanced away as the elevator doors opened.

Kyler followed his gaze to tall, well-built guy. Trimmed stubble darkened his jaw, and he dressed in a way similar to Jesse. A Golden Retriever pranced at the man's side.

"Hey, Morgan," Jesse said. "Looks like we won't be going for a run this morning."

Morgan stopped by Jesse. He looked Kyler over, then settled his gaze on Jesse with a concerned expression. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. But it looks like I've picked up another stray."

Morgan smirked at Kyler, though he spoke to Jesse. "I think you might want to take this one right to the pound. He looks bad tempered."

"I'm considering it," Jesse said.

Kyler frowned at them. "Funny. Can I at least have the name of who's joking about me?"

Morgan offered his hand to Kyler. "Morgan Chandler. I'm Julian's partner."

Kyler shook Morgan's hand. "Well, even though I look bad tempered, it's nice to meet you. Julian's a good guy."

"He's more than good. He's phenomenal." Morgan turned to Jesse. "So I'm guessing you're not going running."

"Doesn't look like it." Jesse handed Morgan the leashes to his dogs. "If you still feel like going, will you take 'Chilles and Iris with you?"

Concern entered Morgan's countenance again. "Are you sure you'll be alright?"

Jesse smiled at him. "I'll be fine. Besides, I'm getting ready to call Ev."

Kyler let out a snort. "Yeah, he wouldn't want you to be alone with me. It's a shame he doesn't trust you."

Jesse pulled out his cell phone. "Ev trusts me completely. I'm only calling him because he likes being around you to see if he'll get a chance to hit you."

Kyler collapsed back in the chair. "Just warn him I hit back."

"That's hard to do from the ground." Jesse turned to leave. "Now get your ass up and follow me."

With reluctance, Kyler pushed out of the chair. He threw a glance at the elevators, as if hoping one would open and Robbie would step out, but all remained closed. As he reached the lobby exit, he heard Jesse saying, "I love you, too," then pull the phone away. He saw Morgan jogging away with the three dogs and two bodyguards. Two more guards flanked Jesse as he started across the street toward a café with outside seating.

At Jesse's approach, an instant buzz started around the café. People held up cameras and cell phones, rapidly snapping shots of him, some called out his name, and Kyler heard his own name thrown in, too. He became all too aware of his unkempt appearance. The last time he'd looked in a mirror was at the other hotel before leaving, and even then he thought he looked rough

with not having shaved in two days and his last shower being back in Chicago. He attempted to finger-comb his hair, but the tangles called for more attention.

The host presented an outdoor table to Jesse, who pointed at one of the chairs. "Sit down."

Kyler yanked out the chair and dropped into it. "Do you order Evan around like this?"

Jesse sat and took up a menu. "Sometimes, but the situation and orders are different. They're more along the lines of, suck this, lick there, insert here."

Despite himself, Kyler laughed.

Jesse grinned at him, then looked up at his guards. "Have you guys eaten?"

One shook his head. "Not yet."

"Then why don't you steal that table over there and get something to eat. You'll still be close enough to pounce if anyone tries to grope me."

Thanking Jesse, the guards took a seat at a nearby table.

The waitress approached, doing a poor job of concealing her giddiness as she asked for their order.

"I'll take two orange juices," Jesse said, still looking at the menu, "an order of blueberry pancakes, two sides of bacon, two sides of sausage, and scrambled eggs."

Kyler's eyes widened. "Are you going to eat all that?"

"No, I'm ordering for Ev. I figured since my run got screwed up, I might as well go all the way and bloat out. What are you having?"

"I'm not hungry."

Jesse looked up at the waitress. "Make that another order of pancakes and three of everything else." As she walked away, he shook his head at Kyler. "You have to eat. Starving and not taking care of yourself isn't going to bring Robbie back to you any quicker."

Kyler lowered his gaze to the table. "I don't think that's going to happen, anyway."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

Kyler snapped his head up. "What do you mean?"

Another flurry of excitement passed over the café patrons. Jesse turned, and at his face lighting with a bright smile, Kyler looked to see Evan walking toward them. He expected Evan to glare at him. Instead Evan's attention was on Jesse, smiling with equal brightness.

Jesse stood as Evan approached, wrapping his arms around him and meeting him in a kiss. "Hey."

"Hey, gorgeous." Evan licked his lips, as if trying to take in every last bit of Jesse's taste. He took the seat beside him and tossed his arm across the back of Jesse's chair, his fingers sinking into the Jesse's hair as he toyed with it. His gaze went to Kyler. "So you felt you didn't cause enough trouble last night, you had to bring it into today?"

"It's not like that. I just want to see Robbie."

The waitress returned with their food, and as she left again, Evan focused on him. "Which is the problem. Between your usual asshole self and him being selfish, you're both disrupting everyone who comes close to either of you."

"He's not selfish."

Jesse rolled his eyes as he took a drink of orange juice. "He wouldn't see you last night after you went through the effort of flying down here. I call that selfish. Or cowardice, since it was obvious he really wanted to see you, but wouldn't let himself."

Kyler's heart fluttered with a spark of hope. "He seemed like he wanted to see me?"

"Yeah, he did," Jesse said.

As if the tension in his body had been released, Kyler sagged in his chair, unable to deny the relief he felt. It wasn't much relief, but it was more than he'd had in days.

"You know," Jesse continued, "when Robbie first came to us, I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, even though I still believed you were at fault for most of what was wrong in your relationship together. I wasn't surprised when he called saying things between you guys failed. I felt bad for you both, but to be honest, I was expecting it.

"Last night, I was thinking on things with you guys, and I actually felt really pissed at myself for what I did to you. This whole time, I've been judging things from only having heard Robbie's side, and that was wrong of me. I should've listened to your side, too.

"Along with that, I've come to realize you're both equally to blame for the failure in your relationship. He's acted immature and selfish. You've acted without consideration or respect. But despite it all, he still loves you, and now I'm seeing you still love him. That alone tells me you guys belong together. Even though your relationship has gotten distorted along the way, what you have with each other is very special." Jesse grinned at him. "And...*unique*."

A slight, crooked smile rose to Kyler's lips. "I think what you and Evan have is a little more unique to the world, but thanks for saying that. You're right. Everything you said is right. The thing is, we've been like this for so long. I don't think either of us are able to trust the times when things are good between us. We just keep waiting for the next explosion."

Jesse took a bite of the pancakes, speaking around the food. "If you're waiting for it, then it's going to happen."

"Yeah," Kyler said softly.

Evan added, "But there's also the problem of you both being in two different places in your lives. He's done with an open relationship, and you're not ready to give it up yet."

"We didn't have an open relationship."

Evan gave him a look saying he believed otherwise. "Did you screw other people?"

"Yeah, but not when me and him were together. Only when

we had breaks.”

Jesse moved into the conversation. “No matter what you call it, taking breaks, being open, quasi-open, whatever, it all comes down to you guys saw other people from time to time.”

Kyler watched Jesse and Evan eat. He took a deep breath as he prepared to ask the question he dreaded the answer to. “So how do I fix it? How can I get him back?”

Jesse sighed before taking a bite of eggs, his expression contemplative as he chewed. “I don’t know. He’s also been hurt so many times, he’s clinging to what he feels are his last bits of pride and dignity.”

“So you’re still taking my side in this?”

“No, I’m putting the blame on both of you. But Ev’s right. You’re both in two different places in your lives, or at least, you were up until a few days ago. If you’re ready to move into the same place he is, I really believe you guys can make things work, since there’s no denying you love each other. But I’ll also say, it’s going to take a lot for you to get him back. You’re going to have to prove to him so there’s no doubt in his mind that this is it, your lives are one and the same from that moment forward.”

“How?”

Jesse shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Evan spoke. “I think the first step would be you getting more comfortable with who you are as a gay man.”

Kyler let out an irritated huff. “I’m not gay. I’m bi.”

Jesse rolled his eyes at him. “You’re gay, Kyler. Just accept it.”

“I’ve slept with women.”

“So have I,” Jesse said. “You don’t see me calling myself bi, do you?”

Kyler’s lips parted as a stunned expression crossed his face. “You have?”

Jesse looked at Evan. “Why is everyone so surprised when I say that?”

A smirk curved Evan's lips. "I think because everyone expects you to be a gold card carrier, like me."

Kyler's head snapped toward Evan. "You've never slept with a woman?"

Evan turned his smirk on him. "No. I always knew what I wanted and I got it for the first time when I was sixteen." He laid his hand over Jesse's. "And now I have my present and future."

Kyler absorbed Evan's words. He shook his head slightly as if he doubted the truth of them. "Well, either way, I have slept with women and I still do regularly."

Jesse took his turn to adopt a look of doubt. "And when was the last time? Was it Alanna?"

Kyler almost laughed at the thought of having slept with the feisty songwriter from the last album. "If Al was going to do anything with my dick, it wouldn't have been anything pleasant, so that's a no."

Evan's sharp blue gaze locked on him. "So, when was the last woman?"

Kyler shifted in his chair. Evan, how the hell did he do that? Make it look like he could see the truth before it was spoken? Kyler cleared his throat. "I guess maybe it hasn't been all that regularly."

Jesse asked, "When was the last time you were with anyone other than Robbie?"

"It's been a while."

"And the gender of the last person other than Robbie was..." Evan continued.

Kyler took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Male."

A triumphant grin shone over Jesse's lips. "And there you have it."

"And there you've got nothing," Kyler said. "But goddamn, you two are tough when you start double-teaming. I used to think it'd be hot to have a threesome with you guys. Now I'm pretty

sure I wouldn't survive it."

Jesse and Evan chuckled.

As their laughter faded, Evan focused on him again. "Alright, I think I've got a full grasp of what's the big issue here and it all comes down to if you're going to get Robbie back, you need to first come to grips with your sexuality. If you want to keep calling yourself bi, go for it. But you need to be open and honest about it, and accept the part of you that's attracted to men, and one man in particular.

"I hit the rock scene before you did, but I'm guessing if your agent or manager is anything like the people I've worked with, namely Greg, then you were told to keep it on the down low. But things are changing now. Jess and I proved that. So if you've been concerned coming out could hurt your career, we've proved sexuality is second to talent."

"I just don't want it to look like I'm doing it because it's the flavor of the month following after you guys," Kyler said.

"And there again," Jesse said, "you're worrying too much about what other people think. You've been doing that your whole life and you've forced Robbie into hiding with you. That alone could break a relationship."

"Not to mention," Evan added, "the stress of it and the strain it's put on you and Robbie is a clear connection to why you haven't been able to write music on your own for the past two albums. Your heart, your mind, your body and soul are all in discord and opposing each other."

Kyler propped his elbow on the table and laid his forehead in his hand, muttering, "Yeah."

"There *is* one thing I'd like to know, though," Evan said.

Kyler kept his head down. "Yeah? What?"

"Robbie mentioned there was a reason for you having issues with accepting who you are. He didn't say what, claiming it was too personal and it'd be better coming from you, just that it was something in your past. I'm curious to know what it is."

Kyler stayed silent, his gaze focused on the table. He knew what Robbie had alluded to, and he was glad he hadn't told Jesse and Evan. Not so much because he didn't want them to know, but more that it showed Robbie still cared enough about him to not betray all his secrets. Of course, he really didn't want them to know about his past, but at this point, with all the other dirty details of his life laid out before them, what difference did it make?

Kyler filled his lungs with a deep breath and let it out slow. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure he was talking about my family. I haven't seen them since I left for New York, right after high school. Even though Robbie's gone back to Ann Arbor to see his family, I've never gone with him. My family wouldn't want to see me, anyhow.

"I think you guys know Indianapolis is my hometown. I loved that city, still do, actually. But my parents moved me out of there when I was seventeen because they felt like they couldn't show their faces to anyone because of me. I had gotten brought home by the cops one night, and that in of itself wasn't so unusual, but the circumstances kind of were.

"The cops had raided a gay bar, looking specifically for underage guys, believing the bar was selling them booze, and they found me, in a back room, in a...*compromising* position with two guys, both about ten, fifteen years older than me. We had our own music blasting in the room, and never even heard the cops coming."

He glanced up to Jesse and Evan, a self-mocking smile on his lips. "You probably would've liked me a lot better back then, Evan. I was *really* slutty. I'd take it any way from anyone. I didn't care so long as I got it."

Evan chuckled softly. "Well, that was about the only quality I looked for in guys."

Jesse aimed a smirk at Evan. "And it was still one of the top qualities you looked for even when we met."

Evan wrapped his arm around Jesse's shoulders and pulled him close, placing a kiss on his cheek. "And lucky for me you

possessed it, but in a unique way; being slutty with only me.”

Kyler couldn’t help but chuckle as Jesse laughed with Evan, their comfort and playfulness with each other easing some of his own tension.

Jesse looked toward him. “So what happened when the cops took you home?”

Kyler took a deep breath and sighed, the moment of lightness washed away by his memories being called back. “They didn’t spare my parents any details about what I was doing when they found me. I remember standing there, listening to them, thinking, ‘You fucking assholes. Why don’t you just pull out your guns and shoot me? It’d be more humane and I’m going to be dead soon, anyway.’ But they didn’t, and they left me there, and I think they knew what was going to happen. They just had a look, little smirks, as they walked out the door.”

He stopped talking. The pain of his past, having long since laid quiet, now welled inside him. He would’ve thought after all these years, it would’ve lessened, but reopening the scarred wounds made them hurt with renewed force. The only person he’d ever told about what happened to him was Robbie, and that wasn’t long after they had started seeing each other. So much time had passed. Why didn’t he feel any stronger from it? Why did it still hurt?

Kyler cleared his throat as he continued. “You guys might be surprised to learn my father is a pastor. Back then, he had a fairly good sized congregation in the suburb we lived in right on the outskirts of Indy. But he wasn’t real good about practicing what he preached. Everyone around him believed he was such a good man, so kind and gentle-hearted. No one ever saw how he’d yell at my mom when dinner wasn’t the way he wanted it, or the house wasn’t clean enough. No one saw him drunk off his ass, stumbling and rampaging through the house.

“He expected everyone, me, my mom, my brother, to bow down to his every whim. And my mom and brother did, with my brother being his biggest crony. But me, the more he wanted me to bend to him, the straighter I tried to stand. No matter how

many times he beat my ass, when it was over, I'd get to my feet and stand as tall as I could." Kyler's voice hushed. "Except, after the last one, I couldn't stand on my own."

He swallowed hard, trying to loosen his throat from the emotion tightening it. His hands tucked under the table, out of sight for all eyes, he wrung them together. "You know, I grew up constantly being told what a sin homosexuality was, whether in church or at home. And maybe that's why I was so slutty before I got caught, because it was supposedly so forbidden. But, I also never walked away from being with any guy not feeling sick to my stomach with guilt. Despite everything I did, there was a part of me that believed it was one of the worst wrongs to feel the way I did about men.

"My father and brother worked really hard to make sure they put that lesson home. I might not be on the small side myself, but my dad's a *really* big guy. Tall, thick, and my brother, Kenton, takes after him exactly. He played football in high school and college, a defensive lineman, if that tells you anything. I took more after my mom's side.

"When the cops left that night, I knew what was coming to me. I took off for the backdoor, figuring if I went out the front, the cops might see me and drag me back in. But my brother caught me as I was trying to get the door unlocked and threw me across the kitchen into the cabinets. My dad jumped in at that point, to help Kenton, not me. And together, they beat the living hell out of me."

Kyler sat quiet for a long moment. His right hand moved in an unconscious gesture, rubbing along his left collarbone. "They broke my collarbone and half the ribs on my left side from Kenton stomping on me. My right forearm got fractured, from trying to block them.

"But I couldn't block them, and I couldn't stop them. The only thing I could do was lie on the floor and try to squeeze in a corner in the kitchen. But when I got tucked too far in the corner, they dragged me back out to the middle of the floor again. It only stopped when my mom entered the fray to protect me. Or

save me, since I'm pretty sure they weren't going to stop until I was dead. They were either going to 'beat the faggot out of me or kill me trying.' I remember them saying that, over and over again, along with calling me names and so many other things.

"I don't remember my mom jumping in. I was already unconscious at that point. I vaguely remember being put in the car, things in the emergency room are still a blur of lights and faces, and it seems like the only color I remember is white." Kyler shook his head slightly. "Everything was white. But when I was finally alert the next day, the first thing my dad said to me was they had told the hospital I had gotten jumped and mugged, and I had better stick to the story, *or else*. It wasn't an all out lie, really. They *had* jumped me.

"But, it was the final straw for my dad. Already, some rumors were starting to slip out of me getting in trouble. He thought that looked bad enough for him. If people found out his son had gotten busted in a gay bar, that would've been a scandal he couldn't bear. So, he told his congregation he was moving to Ann Arbor to be closer to his family. His brother has a farm on the outskirts of town, and I guess he figured if him and my brother needed an extra hand whipping my ass, well then, Uncle Frankie would be right there."

Kyler took another deep breath, his exhale trembling as he released it. Jesse and Evan sat quiet, Jesse pushing food around on his plate with his fork, Evan staring down at the table. Kyler rubbed over his heart. His chest felt so tight, but his heart also pounded at a frantic pace. He realized it had started racing as he started talking about the fight, and anxiety roiled through his stomach.

Now that he'd told them everything, he wished he could take it back, keep his secrets locked up for no one but Robbie to know. Along with the anxiety, he felt embarrassed, ashamed. He wanted to get up from the table, walk away and pretend he hadn't just laid all this out in front of them. What were they thinking of him right now? Probably that he was pathetic for always getting whipped by his father and brother.

Jesse's voice, hushed and gentle, called him back from his thoughts.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that. I can relate, a little bit. My father was pretty bad to me and my brother, Brandon. He'd get physical with us, too. Not as bad as your dad, and Brandon *always* protected me, but I know what it's like to have your family reject you.

"My father threw me out after high school, and he had done the same thing to Brandon a few years before. My mother always ended up taking his side, and even though I know she cared about Brandon and me, I haven't talked to her or my father since before hitting it big, and they haven't tried to contact me. Though, I don't think they'd be able to if they wanted since my address, my email, and my numbers have changed since then, but somehow I don't think they've tried, anyhow."

Kyler stared at Jesse, his mouth slipping open with surprise. "Seriously?"

Jesse lifted his gaze to him, an understanding smile on his lips. "Yeah. So you don't have to feel like you're alone when it comes to things like that."

Kyler inclined his head, trying to express his gratitude to Jesse for his words without speaking, as his voice was lost beneath emotion.

Evan reclined back in his chair, stretching his arm to rest across the back of Jesse's with his fingers sinking into Jesse's hair once again. "And for me, this explains a lot about you. It makes it clearer why you are the way you are."

Kyler felt his defenses rising. "And how exactly am I?"

"Breaking it down to its most basic and throwing out other personality issues, it explains your insecurity."

Kyler gave Evan a flat look. "I have personality issues? Really?"

Jesse took his turn to speak. "Yeah, you do. But so do I. So does Ev. So does Robbie. And so does everyone else in the world. What matters is you don't let those issues control you and get in

the way of your happiness, but you have. But it also isn't your fault. You were hurt, very badly, in your past and that would leave its mark on anybody. What you need is help to get you moving further away from your past and walking toward your future."

"Robbie," Kyler said softly.

Jesse nodded. "He would be the main one, since he's the one you want in your future."

"And I'm guessing it was Robbie who helped you start healing initially after everything happened," Evan said. "But you got comfortable with him, so you never fully finished getting over what happened."

A slow smile spread over Kyler's lips. "Yeah, it was all thanks to him. I hated Ann Arbor when we moved there. But I hated everything around me, my family, myself. Man, when I showed up to my new school, I had attitude to spare, which the other kids thought was super cool. Except Rob." A quiet laugh left him. "He wasn't much impressed by my attitude. But I was damn impressed with everything about him. He tried to keep his distance from me at first, but I was drawn to him. He was so beautiful, I wanted and *needed* to be close to him."

Realizing his words had flowed out, ruled by emotion and not thought, Kyler stopped talking. He saw Jesse and Evan grinning at him, and dropped his gaze. Warmth crept up his neck to his cheeks, and the fact that he was blushing embarrassed him further.

"That was beautiful," Jesse said. "You were speaking from your heart."

"Yeah." Kyler took a quick drink of orange to wet his suddenly dry throat.

"You really love him, don't you?" Evan asked.

Kyler nodded and looked up, meeting Evan's gaze. "Yeah, I do."

His voice cheerier than before, Jesse said, "Well then, we'll just have to find a way to get you guys back together again."

Kyler's eyes widened. "You're going to help me?"

"We're going to help *both* of you. But how we're going to do it, I have no clue. All we can really do is talk to him. Actually winning him back is going to be up to you. Since you already know it's going to take a lot on your part to get his trust back, when you think you've come up with something that'll do it, we'll support you in any way we can."

Kyler shook his head in disbelief. "I don't know what to say. Thank you, both of you."

"I wouldn't really thank us," Evan said. "You've got a damn long road ahead of you, and there's no guarantee what you want will be at the end of it."

"But I'm willing to take it."

Jesse reached across the table and patted Kyler's forearm. "I'm happy to hear that. And at least I can tell you what the first half of your road needs to be, accepting yourself. If you love yourself, the love of others will follow. Once you have that, it makes everything else easier, like coming out publicly." He sat back, flashing a mischievous smirk. "And just think, when you're out and you have your man, you can do things like this in public."

Jesse snatched the front of Evan's shirt and yanked him toward him. Their smiling lips sealed in a kiss, intensifying in passion with each second it lasted.

Kyler stared at them, knowing he wasn't the only one watching. He'd seen them kiss lightly and slip each other a little tongue, but nothing to the heat level they were showing now. As they slowly drew apart, he could tell by how Evan's breathing was quicker and the haze of desire in Jesse's eyes, they would pick up from that exact moment once they were alone together.

"I guess coming out could have its positives," Kyler said.

Jesse grinned at him. "It does. But besides doing things like that without giving a damn what other people think, the biggest positive is simply having the person you love at your side, where you can offer love, support, and protection against any challenges at all times." He pushed away from the table and stood, Evan

copying the movement. "And with that said, we're out of here." He pointed at Kyler's plate of untouched food. "Make sure you finish that."

Kyler chuckled. "Yeah, yeah. Go give your orders to Evan."

Jesse laughed, and got a curious look from Evan. He took Evan's hand in his as he spoke to him. "I'll tell you on the way back to the hotel." He glanced at Kyler. "We've got the second show tonight, but later this afternoon, we were all going shopping. Now I want to try and make it a two-on-one trip just me, Ev, and Robbie. Maybe we'll be able to get him thinking on things so when you do figure out how to try and get him back, he'll be more understanding and open."

Kyler nodded in appreciation. "Thanks, guys." As they turned to leave, he called out with a teasing grin on his lips, "Hey, Evan. This doesn't mean you and I are becoming friends, does it?"

Evan let out a single laugh. "I'd call it more like payback for when you helped me a few months ago with a certain group of punks." He slid his arm around Jesse's waist and started walking away. "But it could also be one step closer to friendship, I suppose."

Kyler smiled as he watched them leave. They did have one hell of a relationship, the kind he'd like to have with Robbie...if only he could...

His smile faded. Could he do it? Could he put everything on the line for Robbie? And if he did, if he came out publicly, would such a huge step convince Robbie he loved him and was ready to give his life to him? But what if doing something like that still wasn't enough for Robbie? What if he stood before the world saying he loved Robbie, and Robbie still walked away, leaving him completely alone?

Nausea turned his stomach. Kyler laid his hand on his abdomen as if it would settle it. He stared at all the food in front of him. It looked like a mess waiting to be thrown up. He wanted to leave it, but Jesse had told him to eat, and since Jesse seemed intelligent in more things than music, he should probably listen to

him. Besides, he was determined to see Robbie before Conquest left New Orleans, and he knew he'd need all his strength just to be able to stand while looking into Robbie's eyes.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“This would look awesome on you.” Jesse pulled a black T-shirt adorned with faded gray skull and red roses off a rack and held it up to Robbie’s torso. He glanced at Evan. “What do you think?”

Evan nodded. “It’s cool. And it looks like it’s fitted so it could show off your body.”

Robbie gazed down at the shirt. “I don’t know. I think it might be a little too trendy for me.”

Jesse rolled his eyes at him. “You’re a rock star. You’re supposed to be trendy. You can wear whatever the hell you want and get away with it.” He tossed the shirt over Robbie’s arm to finish the debate.

Robbie smiled, shaking his head as it seemed he had no choice but to buy it, along with all the other clothes Jesse and Evan were picking out for him.

“Wow, look, Ev,” Jesse said. “I think he just smiled. Did you see? It was only there for a second, but I swear I saw it.”

Evan put his arm around Jesse’s shoulders, smirking at Robbie. “I thought I saw it, but then figured it was a trick of the lighting or something.”

A few soft, but spiritless, chuckles left Robbie. “Funny, guys.” He breathed out a sigh. “I’m sorry for being such a downer. I guess I’m not really into shopping today.”

Taking Evan’s hand, Jesse walked along the displays of couture filling the upscale clothing store. “Well, that’s not surprising since you basically told the man you love yesterday to go to Hell. Or, actually, you had me tell him.”

Robbie winced internally at Jesse’s sharp words. “It...it wasn’t quite like that.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it was since I was there.”

"I didn't have you tell him to go to Hell. Just to go back home."

"Same thing in his eyes, I'm sure." Jesse paused at a display of designer jeans, rubbing the material between his thumb and index finger. He glanced to Evan. "Feel how soft these are. I wonder if they have my size."

Evan pulled out a pair. "Yeah, they do."

Robbie watched Jesse and Evan look at the jeans. He didn't understand how it was possible for Jesse to say such stinging words in such a casual way. But then, maybe Jesse really was saying them casually. All the sting came from within himself because he knew the truth of what Jesse said, and the truth hurt him so much and he was ashamed of what he'd done to Ky.

Robbie cleared his throat. "Do you think he really felt that way? That I was telling him to go to Hell?"

Still looking at the jeans, Jesse said, "If the roles were reversed, wouldn't you?"

Robbie lowered his gaze and nodded.

"And that's the problem with you and him," Evan said. "Or one of them, anyhow. Neither one of you ever bother to put yourself in the other's place to try and understand what they're feeling. You're both so wrapped up in taking from the other, you never stop to think of what you can give back."

Robbie felt heat rising up his neck, caused by both embarrassment and anger. He should've known something was up when he came down to the hotel lobby and the big shopping trip planned with all the guys had been reduced to just him, Jesse, and Evan. He never would've thought it was a set-up for them to attack and ridicule him.

Robbie turned his back to them and started to walk away. "I don't need this right now. I've got enough bullshit in my life without you guys putting more on me."

A firm grip on his arm stopped him. From the assertiveness in the hold, he thought it had to be Evan, then startled as he met

Jesse's indigo eyes.

Jesse released Robbie's arm. "You've done enough running away. I'm not going to let you do it from us. You might think what we have to say is bullshit, but one thing I know for damn sure that's bullshit, is what you did to Kyler last night."

Robbie stared at him for a long moment. He glanced to Evan, but saw no sympathy in him and only agreement with Jesse. His moment of defiant anger deflated. He sagged back on a display table, his voice quiet as he spoke. "I know it was. And I've felt like shit every second since then. You don't know, after I left the dressing room, I went to the back doors, hoping to catch him, but he was already gone. And I thought of calling him and saying, 'I'm here! Come back!'," but I was too damn chicken-shit to do anything but stare at his number on my phone.

"And as usual, I kept thinking he would call, he'd come back on his own again, and then I was hurt when he didn't, which is about as asinine as anything. I mean, why the fuck would he call or try to see me again? But you know, your heart and emotions aren't always the most logical things. And maybe that's another reason why he and I have messed things up so bad. We both went by our hearts and emotions, and never stopped to really think anything out."

His voice gentler, Jesse said, "But it sounds like you're thinking now."

Robbie choked out a single, rough laugh. "When you hardly sleep there's a lot of time for that." He rubbed his hand over his head, the gesture showing his fatigue. "I've had problems sleeping for years, but it's been hell the past few days, and I left my damn sleeping pills at home."

"Your problems sleeping are probably tied to a lot of other things," Evan said.

"Like my screwed up life? Yeah, I figured that one out already." He looked at Evan in apology for his sharp tone. "Sorry. That didn't come out good."

Evan stepped closer to lay a reassuring hand on Robbie's arm.

"It's fine. You're going through a lot right now, but what you need to understand is that Jesse and I aren't here to attack you. We're here to help you. We might be a little blunt in our way of doing it, but all we're trying to do is wake you up to what you're doing. To be honest, I'm not sure anyone's ever done that for you. I think even Kyler has let you get away with doing whatever you want, and yeah, you guys might fight about it, but what does he always do in the end? He forgives you and takes you back."

Robbie shook his head. "He's done a hell of a lot more to me than I have to him."

"Is that what you really believe?" Jesse asked. "That's he's the guilty one in all this? Because to me, looking at it from the outside, you're both equally to blame. If the glimpse you gave us last night is any indicator of how you've treated him in the past, then you've got a hell of a lot to own up for, too. And until you do, you guys will *never* be together again."

Robbie dropped his gaze again, now shame more than any other emotion filling him. "I know. I've fucked a lot of things up. And no matter what I did, no matter how bad I hurt him, when it came down to me needing him, Ky never hesitated in wrapping his arms around me and giving instant forgiveness. Maybe it's because of all the mistakes I've made and how much I know I've hurt him, that I've wanted to somehow recapture what we had before our first tour. Those days when it was only us living for our dream."

Jesse rested a hand on Robbie's shoulder, trying to offer him comfort the same as Evan had done. "All this time, you've been trying to rebuild your past, when what you should've been doing is working on your future. You can't ever recapture the past. It's gone. It can't be changed and it can't be brought back. And if you keep looking back on it, you'll never be able to move forward. Those mistakes you talked about making, you've already made them and you can't undo them. All you can do is say you're sorry and work to do better with each new day."

Robbie managed to nod, his throat too tight for his voice to escape.

Jesse moved in front of him and wrapped him in a hug, giving him a few pats on the back. "Come on. We've got more shopping to do. And I mean *a lot* more. You're part of my crew now. I can't have you running around frumpy looking like you just came out of BHD or some other lesser band."

Laughter broke from Robbie, easing his shame, though not his sadness. "Yeah, we can't have that."

Evan added a few more pats to Robbie's back. "Then let's get this stuff paid for. There're a few more shops we need to take you to before we head over to the stadium."

Robbie stood up straighter and started walking. "I'm still not sure about this shirt with the skull and roses."

"Maybe you aren't, but I am," Jesse said. "It'll look hot on you. Trust me."

Robbie smiled at him. "I do. Thanks."

Jesse gave him a grin and tossed his arm around his shoulders. On his other side, Evan followed Jesse's example and did the same in putting his arm over Jesse's and resting his hand on Robbie's other shoulder.

Walking with them on either side of him, Robbie let go of his earlier feelings of being under attack, now only feeling the strength of their support, and he knew that'd been their intention from the start. He also knew for as bad as it hurt to hear the things they'd said, he needed to hear them. Now he just needed to figure out what to do with all the truths they'd handed him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Pounding drums, wailing guitar, sharp keyboard, and Jesse's voice seemed to follow Robbie as he walked through the backstage area. Even though the concert was going strong, he was in no mood to watch. He knew he should to learn more of the live performance. Jesse told him since he'd rehearsed so well with them, he might put him on stage for a few songs in Houston for their next show, but he couldn't muster the excitement.

Depression weighed him down. He hadn't heard from Kyler. Not a phone call. Not a text. After shopping with Jesse and Evan, and all the things they'd said to him, he thought about calling Kyler, but just like the night before, he was afraid Kyler wouldn't talk to him, and he'd have every reason not to.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon and evening, Jesse and Evan's words continued to replay in his mind, and with them came the same sense of shame so deep, he wished he could hide from even himself. As he thought of how he'd treated Kyler, his fits of storming off, his accusations against him for things he himself had done, he wondered if he would ever be able to face him again. He wanted to ask Ky for forgiveness. To not just call him, but to go to him, pull him into his arms and pour out his apologies.

He didn't understand it. Why was it he loved him so much, but yet could hurt him? Why was it he could act and say things toward him that he'd never dream to do to another person? Wasn't love supposed to bring out the best in someone, not the worst?

The answer whispered within his mind. He could do all those things because he knew Kyler would always forgive him. Their love was so strong, it always overcame those things. But with what he'd done this time, not only walking away from Kyler, but the life they'd built together in the band, would their love be able to rise above even that?

Robbie shook his head. It really didn't even seem right to ask Ky for forgiveness this time. He'd hurt him too badly, how could he? In a way, it would be selfish, too. Maybe Ky would be better off with someone who wouldn't bring him so much pain.

For himself, he thought he was moving forward by leaving Kyler. Instead, he found his heart and mind more stagnant than ever. He kept telling himself he needed more time to get over him. Eleven years he'd spent at Kyler's side, five of them exclusive. To expect to be over him in a few days was asking too much. Then again, he hadn't really done anything to get over him, and maybe that was the problem. Jesse was right. He was trapped by the past. With or without Kyler, he didn't know how to move forward.

Robbie took a deep breath. It felt stuffy in the stadium. He saw he was near the back exits and headed for them. Guards were at the doors, so it should be safe enough for him to step outside. One guard opened the door for him, and he walked out to the sound of voices, one familiar.

Turning, he saw Remmy chatting with some security guards and roadies. He met Remmy's gaze, and Remmy waved at him. Robbie lifted his hand in a half-hearted wave and turned away. A moment later, he heard quick footsteps coming up on him.

"Better not wander too far," Remmy said. "People are really sneaky. They're always trying to find an opening to one of you guys."

Robbie gave him a slight smile. "I'm not one of the guys yet."

"But you're still a rock star, celebrity, world famous guy. Besides, I heard you were going to make your Conquest debut in Houston."

"So Jesse says."

"That's awesome! Congrats."

Robbie nodded, his gaze traveling over Remmy's slender body. This could be his chance to take the first step forward. After all, Remmy said he hadn't gotten laid in a while and with the easy way they talked to each other before, getting him in bed

probably wouldn't be too much of a challenge.

Robbie glanced at Remmy's face, seeing a slight flush to his cheeks, as if the way he checked him out had brought Remmy's shyness to the surface. Remmy was so different from Kyler, as were all the men he slept with. He didn't know if subconsciously he sought out guys with personalities and body types opposite from Kyler because he wanted a totally different experience, or because he knew he wouldn't be at risk for falling for them. Maybe both, with a higher percent on the latter.

The truth of it was, no one he'd ever slept with, or even talked to, equaled Ky. He was just so *perfect*.

Remmy shifted under Robbie's scrutinizing gaze. "So, you're not into watching the concert?"

"I'll see plenty more."

Robbie looked Remmy over again. Did he really want to do this? Get Remmy in bed? One word blared through his mind; *No*. So why was he even considering it? All he could think was he wanted a distraction, and any distraction would do. Just something to make him forget his shame, his hurt, his sadness, even if for only a couple hours.

The last thought finalized his decision. Robbie took a step closer to him. Remmy shifted back.

Robbie paused. It was all the sign he needed. Remmy might want sex bad, but not badly enough to take it from just anyone. He retreated the step he'd taken, giving Remmy more space. "Sorry. I thought..."

Remmy lifted both hands, waving them to stop him. "No, no! It's cool! It's my fault, anyway. I think with how we talked the last time, maybe I gave the wrong impression." He added quickly. "Not that I wouldn't want to! It's just...um..."

Robbie smiled and laid a hand on Remmy shoulder, giving it a squeeze and small shake. "You don't have to explain. I'm not really in the right state of mind to be taking someone to bed, anyhow."

Remmy's blush returned more crimson than before with Robbie laying out his exact intentions. "Yeah, I got that impression. That you're in kind of a funk at the moment."

"You could say that." Robbie let out a sigh. "Anyhow, I'm sorry, man." He turned to walk away, stopping when he felt tentative fingers grip his shirt sleeve. He glanced back, meeting Remmy's light blue eyes.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Remmy asked. "You seem so down. Maybe I can help." A shy, but bright smile came to his lips. "You know, in any way other than sucking you off or giving up my ass."

Robbie's tension broke with a laugh. "For as good as I'm sure those things would've been, I'm also pretty sure they wouldn't have helped me. Probably the opposite." He sagged back on the building wall, his brief moment of lightness leaving him. "But I don't think you can help. Nobody can. I did something really wrong to someone I love and there's no way to fix it."

"What about saying you're sorry?"

Robbie couldn't help but smile. Just that one suggestion proved how sweet, and also how innocent, Remmy was. "I don't think sorry is going to cut it this time."

"Yeah, but it's the only thing you can do, right? I mean, when anyone messes up, that's the only option. You can do it in different ways, take someone out to dinner, buy them something nice, but it's all basically saying you're sorry. You probably just need to figure out how you want to say it."

Robbie stared at him, stunned. Remmy's words were simple, they still had an innocent ring to them, but they were some of the truest words he'd ever heard. He shook his head slightly, feeling like he'd made his entire life more complicated than it ever needed to be. "You're right. You're absolutely right. That's the only thing to do."

"And I'm not saying it'll be an easy thing to do," Remmy continued, "but with all you and Kyler have between you, I'm sure he'll accept your apology."

Robbie gave him a curious look. "Who says this is about me and Kyler?"

Remmy rolled his eyes at him. "It's so obvious, man. Besides, the entire staff knows he was here for you last night and you sent him packing."

Robbie's mouth hung open, not a breath, not a sound, leaving him for several seconds. "I didn't...I didn't send him packing. Well, I guess I did. Shit." He closed his eyes and lowered his head, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips. "I screwed up so bad."

Remmy stepped forward and rested his hand on Robbie's shoulder. "But you can still say you're sorry."

Robbie dropped his hand away and looked at him. "Yeah, I guess I can, can't I?"

Remmy nodded. He turned and leaned back on the building beside him, tipping his head up with his gaze fixed on the stars. "It'll be okay. You and Kyler have so much together. He'll listen to you, I know it."

Robbie caught a more somber quality in Remmy's voice and from his expression, it seemed his thoughts had drifted to something else. He had a feeling Remmy was thinking on his own unrequited love, not that he could really call what he had with Kyler unrequited. Kyler definitely loved him. It was just Kyler's delivery wasn't always the best. Of course, neither was his own, as he was learning.

Robbie nudged Remmy with his elbow. "You were cool enough to be my sounding board. Anything or anyone I can help you with?"

Remmy shook his head, wearing a weak smile. "I don't think so. My situation's pretty hopeless. Which you would think would make me give up hope, but I seem to just keep on pining."

"Maybe that's a sign you're not supposed to give up hope."

Remmy snorted. "Yeah, that or I'm a glutton for punishment."

One of the guys from the group Remmy was with called out,

“Hey, Rem! We’re heading in.”

Remmy nodded. “I’ll be there in a few.” He turned back to Robbie. “I should probably head in and make sure all’s good. You doing a little better now?”

Robbie smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I am. Thanks for listening. You’re a really sweet guy, you know that?”

Remmy shrugged. “I wish I wasn’t. Nice guys don’t get their men. So between that and being shy, I’ve got two things working against me.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Do you know how many tours I’ve been on? How many people I’ve met? I still can’t get anyone to want to hang with me for longer than a night. And you’re the first rock star who’s ever given me a second look.”

“Well, the scene isn’t exactly overflowing with gay rock stars.”

“But it should be.”

Robbie laughed. “I won’t argue that.”

Remmy’s let out a sigh. “I guess my fruitless quest for my rock star prince continues.”

Robbie put his arm around Remmy’s shoulders and started walking toward the door. “You might want to reconsider getting yourself a rock star. We tend to make shitty partners.”

“I don’t know. Look at Jesse and Evan.”

“They’re more of an exception than a rule.”

“Yeah, but I still want a relationship like what they have together.”

Robbie smiled at him. “So do I.” He stopped as they reached the doors. “I think I’m going to take off, head back to the hotel, and relax for the rest of the night.”

“Cool. I’ll let Evan know so he won’t wonder where you’re at.”

Robbie opened his arms to hug him. “Thanks, man. For

everything.”

Remmy stepped into Robbie’s embrace, wrapping his arms around him. “I didn’t do much.”

“You did more than you know.” Robbie kissed his cheek. “And you’ll find someone, Remmy. I know you will.”

“It’s good one of us is a believer.”

Remmy started to pull away, but before completely releasing Robbie, he slid his hands over Robbie’s ass and squeezed one cheek. Robbie flinched at the unexpected groping, looking at Remmy in surprise.

Remmy winked at him. “Couldn’t help myself. I’ve always wanted to touch a rock star’s ass.”

Robbie burst out laughing as Remmy smirked, then turned to the door. He watched him go inside. Remmy would make someone very happy someday, he was certain. Now if only he could figure out his own way to happiness. Kyler stepped to the front of his mind, as if he was ever anywhere else.

Robbie shook his head and turned for the limo parked close by. There was no point staying at the stadium. If he couldn’t use music or sex to distract his mind, he might as well go back to the hotel and give alcohol a chance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Robbie tipped his head further back to get the last drop of margarita from the glass to his mouth. A rush of dizziness swirled through his head as he brought it forward again. He'd only had two so far, but he'd downed them quick and he hadn't eaten much at dinner. And he had started out with a vodka shot. And he had another in between.

He would need a few more drinks to hit the level of drunkenness he wanted, but that should be easy to do. Unlike beer where he could usually only drink three before the taste got to him, or wine which he had no taste for at all, he could down margaritas all night. Kyler would often playfully tease him about it, like so many other things.

It was one of the things he missed most, the teasing. It seemed strange to miss it. Sometimes it would annoy him, and he'd tell Kyler to knock it off or get new jokes. Now he felt terrible for doing that. It was one of the ways Kyler showed affection for him. In his mind, he could see the warmth in Kyler's eyes as he'd taunt him. He'd give anything to hear one of those tired jokes now.

"There you go, trying to get drunk on your chick drinks again."

Robbie's breath left him in a rush. Lifetimes could pass and he would still know that deep, sensual voice. He slowly turned on the stool, his gaze locking with hazel eyes he'd looked into so many times, each green fleck in them familiar. "Ky."

"Hey," Kyler said, warm smile on his lips. "Care if I sit down?"

Robbie shook his head. "No." He reached to pull out the stool next to him.

Kyler sat and spoke to the bartender as he stepped up. "I'll have the same as him, and bring him another."

Robbie gazed at Kyler as he spoke. He looked exhausted. His

eyes were drawn, at least two days of stubble was on his face. He had his golden blond hair pulled back, and he wore only a green T-shirt and faded jeans. Robbie couldn't remember the last time Kyler had gone out in public dressed so casually.

Kyler reached in his back pocket and retrieved a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

Robbie looked down at the pack. "I don't think you can smoke in here."

Kyler rubbed a hand over his face. "Yeah, I wasn't thinking. I guess I'm a little out of it right now."

"I'm surprised you started smoking again."

"Not much. Just a couple. Sorry, I didn't—"

"It's alright." Robbie glanced away, his voice soft. "It was never right of me to hound you about it and force you to quit. I only did because I was worried about your health. But if it's something you really enjoy, I shouldn't have told you not to do it anymore."

Kyler tossed the pack aside. "Sometimes it's good to be told not to do something, even if you enjoy it."

The bartender dropped off their drinks. Robbie took a long sip, noticing Kyler ignored him. He slowly set his drink back down. "I...I thought you probably had gone back home."

Kyler slowly rotated his glass on the bar. "I didn't want to go back without seeing you. Besides, it's not home without you there."

Robbie felt his heart tighten with an ache at Kyler's words. "I'm sorry, about last night. I should've come out to see you."

Kyler shook his head once. "There's nothing to apologize for. I should've warned you. But I wanted to surprise you. Guess I did, just not in a good way."

Robbie turned toward him. "No, it was good. And I did try to go out to you, but the limo was leaving with you, and I thought I was too late."

Kyler smiled at him. "You're never too late to see me."

Robbie saw Kyler's smile had more life in it than before, but it still looked as though it took effort for him to hold it. "You look so tired."

Kyler's smile faded. He closed his eyes in a long blink. "I've hardly slept. The first night you were gone, I took a few of your sleeping pills, drank a few beers, and that helped."

"I knew you got drunk, but I didn't know you took some of my pills. You should never take more than one. Those things are potent."

A weak chuckle left Kyler. "Yeah, tell me about it. You know when you finally talked to Adam, I don't know if he told you, but he and Kevin found me on the floor and thought I overdosed. They almost called the cops. Now there would've been some publicity, huh?"

Worry took over Robbie's countenance. "Ky, that's not funny."

"It sort of is, since I'm okay."

"You don't look okay."

Kyler brought his gaze to him, his voice gravelly with emotion as he said, "You do. You look wonderful, fantastic...beautiful."

Robbie inhaled a trembling breath. His throat tightened, warm moisture built in his eyes.

"I'm happy to see you looking good," Kyler said. "Conquest, Jesse, they're all treating you well?"

"Yeah," Robbie choked out.

"Good. I'd hate to have to go around beating all their asses if they weren't. Especially Jesse since I'd have to go through Evan. But I would, because it would be for you."

"Ky..."

Kyler spun away. "I should go. I just wanted to see you, and talk to you, one more time to know you're okay."

Robbie slid off his stool at the same time Kyler did. "Don't go. Come up to my room. Please."

Robbie saw Kyler tense. He couldn't believe what he'd just asked him. But he also didn't want Kyler leaving.

Kyler kept his back to him. "I don't think that'd be a good idea."

Robbie took a step toward him. "Just to rest, nothing else. You need to sleep. You look like you're ready to drop. I can sleep on the couch, but I want to make sure you get at least one good night of rest before I have to leave tomorrow."

Kyler paused for a long moment. He slowly extended a hand toward him. "Okay."

Robbie stared at Kyler's hand. Kyler wanted him to take his hand? To hold it? In public? He glanced around the hotel bar, noticing a few people attempting to watch them inconspicuously. He looked back to Kyler and saw him starting to draw his hand back. Robbie snatched it. "Let's go."

Kyler squeezed Robbie's hand and led him from the bar.

Robbie fell into stride at Kyler's side, and as they headed through the lobby, even though the few people there only spared them a glance, to him it felt as though they were all openly gawking. It was the first time he'd held hands with Kyler in public, with any man, for that matter. But why did it have to be now, when their relationship was over?

As they stepped into elevator, Robbie wondered what'd gotten into Kyler. Why had he suddenly wanted to hold his hand openly? He was positive Kyler wasn't drunk, or even tipsy. He hadn't even taken a sip of his drink at the bar. Had his leaving shook Kyler up so much he was willing to move forward? But Kyler hadn't mentioned getting back together. He could tell Kyler missed him. Still, he had expected when he did finally see him, Kyler would be asking to get back together. That's what he always did. Why wasn't he this time?

The elevator stopped at his floor. The whole ride up, Kyler stood quiet, holding his hand, hardly moving. Robbie's mind raced trying to figure out what was going on. This wasn't like Kyler. Only one thing made sense. Kyler didn't want him back.

Yes, Kyler was hurting. And yes, Kyler had sought him out. But if Kyler wanted him back, he would've said so by now.

Robbie unlocked the door to his room. Kyler moved into the center and stood there, as if waiting for Robbie to direct him to what he should do. Robbie's chest constricted. It was so opposite from all he knew with Kyler. Usually when Kyler walked into any space, he claimed it as if it were his own, never uncomfortable anywhere.

Robbie walked past him, not looking at him. "Have you eaten? I can call up room service."

"I think I'd just rather sleep."

"Okay. I'll take the couch. I saw some extra blankets somewhere around here."

"We can share the bed. I'll keep to my side. I promise."

His back to Kyler, Robbie laid a hand on the back of a chair and clenched it against the pain Kyler's words caused. He knew Kyler hadn't meant to hurt him, but the thought of Kyler not wanting to have sex with him ripped at his heart.

Robbie managed a tight nod. "Okay."

He went to one side of the bed, Kyler the other. He pulled off his shirt, hearing Kyler doing the same. Robbie couldn't resist. He glanced over his shoulder, catching sight of Kyler bending over to take off his jeans, leaving his boxer-briefs on. Kyler's underwear got pulled down with his jeans, revealing the tops of his firm ass cheeks, the lines curving in toward his tailbone to his crack. As Kyler straightened, he gave the boxer-briefs a tug up into place, then lifted his hands to free his hair from the ponytail.

Robbie watched his long fingers slide the band down his hair. The movement was simple, yet so sensual. Robbie couldn't stop gazing at how the muscles in Kyler's back shifted beneath his smooth skin, his arms up as he shook his fingers through his hair. His cock hardened as the memory came to him of how Kyler's hair felt, the silken softness of it sliding through his fingers, tickling down his body as Kyler kissed his chest and abdomen.

Kyler lowered his arms and started to turn toward the bed. Robbie whipped his head around, trying to slow his breathing. He shoved his jeans down, flicked off the light, and climbed into bed quickly to hide his hard-on. Kyler slid in beside him, lying on his back. Robbie listened as Kyler drew in a deep breath, and exhaled long and slow, ending with a soft groan.

Robbie rolled his head toward him. "Are you comfortable? Do you want another pillow?"

"No, I'm good. It feels like it's been forever since I've lied down."

"When was the last time?"

Kyler paused. "It's been a couple days. Between the plane and spending last night in the lobby."

Even his voice sounded exhausted. Robbie wanted to touch him, hold him, comfort him. "You can't do that to yourself."

"It was for you, Rob. I'd do it all over again and more for you." Kyler's words slurred as he spoke. His breathing became deep as the last word left him.

Robbie slid closer to him. He placed a whisper of a kiss on Kyler's bare shoulder and laid his hand on Kyler's arm beneath the sheet. He closed his eyes, sleep blanketing him faster than it had in days.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Robbie woke to the room filled with daylight and Kyler's arm around his waist. He shifted, feeling Kyler's stiff cock pressed to his ass, his own equally hard. He closed his eyes again. He wanted it so bad. His body ached with the memory of being stretched and filled with Kyler's cock, of Kyler driving him to come again and again.

Almost without realizing it, Robbie pushed his ass against Kyler's cock. He laid his hand over Kyler's, ready to slide it down his abdomen to his own cock.

Kyler let out a small groan and rolled away from him.

Robbie caught himself before a whimper of protest slipped out. He lay motionless, not even certain he could move he felt so wounded.

"Sorry," Kyler said.

Robbie startled at the sudden apology. He found enough strength to turn his head toward him. "For what?"

"I promised I'd stay on my side of the bed."

"Don't apologize. I didn't mind. I liked being held by you again."

Kyler pushed himself up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, holding his forehead in one hand. "Don't say things like that. Not now."

Robbie sat up, pulling the pillows behind him and covering his lower half with the blankets. "I can't help it. I missed you. I know it's messed for me to say it since I was the one who walked, but hell, *I'm* messed up in general, so it's probably not much of a surprise."

"We're both messed up. Don't blame yourself. I just meant, I'm trying to work through some things right now, so please don't

say anything that's going to turn me away from the path I've started walking."

Robbie looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Kyler swiped his jeans off the floor. He slipped his legs into them, then stood to finish pulling them on. "When I came down here, it was to bring you back with me. I thought you'd see me, and like all the other times, everything would be forgiven with a look. But it wasn't. You didn't even want to look at me."

"But I told you, I tried to go out to you."

"I know, but you not coming out to me told me a lot. Mainly, how bad I've fucked up."

Robbie slid across the bed. He put his hands on Kyler's hips, pulling him to sit down on the bed again. When he did, Robbie slid closer, his knees on either side of Kyler's hips. He wrapped his arms around Kyler's chest. "You're not the only one who's done wrong. I told you I wouldn't run away again, but the first time things get rocky, what did I do? We're apart right now because of me."

Kyler laid his hands on Robbie's arms. "We're apart right now for a lot of reasons. Even though we thought we were taking steps forward in our relationship, all we were really doing was putting a band-aid over the bigger problems, the main one being how I feel about myself.

"I'm not happy, Rob. I haven't been for a long time. I blow money like crazy for that little burst of happiness at getting something new. I flirt around for that little bit of excitement to mask how miserable I am. I fight with everyone who looks at me wrong because I'm too afraid to fight the issues in myself. You've put up with it all for so long, but now it's gotten to the point where it's made you crack, and something has to be done." Kyler moved to stand up.

Robbie was forced to let him go. "I don't understand what you're saying, Ky."

Kyler pulled on his T-shirt. "I don't expect you to. Just know it has to do with one of the things you asked of me that I couldn't

give you.” He faced Robbie and bent down to him, resting his forehead against Robbie’s as he cupped his cheek. He closed his eyes, his voice soft. “You’re the only person I’ve ever loved. But I’ve lost you because I can’t love myself. Until I can do that and give you one hundred percent of me, I don’t deserve to be with you.”

Kyler tipped Robbie’s chin up and touched their lips together in a tender, chaste kiss. He eased back, caressing the side of Robbie’s face before turning to leave.

Robbie caught Kyler’s wrist. “Don’t go. Whatever you’re trying to work through, let me help you. I think I know what it is. I can be there for you, support you.”

Kyler lowered his head and shook it once. “You don’t know how bad I want to say yes, but I can’t. If I did, it wouldn’t be long before I’d fall back in the same pattern of leaning on you and thinking I didn’t need to do anything different so long as I had you. And then, it wouldn’t be long before you would be miserable with me, again.” He covered Robbie’s hand with his own, softly rubbing it. “I don’t expect you to wait for me. I don’t know how long this will take. But when I’m ready, I’ll come to you and I hope you’ll still be able to love me.”

Robbie laid his other hand on Kyler’s. “I’ll always be ready to love you, because I’ll never stop.”

Kyler looked back at him. Robbie saw moisture at the edges of his eyes.

Kyler forced a smile. “Kick some ass in Conquest, okay?”

His voice a rough whisper, Robbie said, “Yeah.”

Kyler stepped forward.

Robbie’s hands fell away. He watched Kyler open the door. Kyler glanced back at him once more, then stepped out, closing it softly behind him. Robbie slumped down to his side, holding the pillow Kyler had slept on to his chest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“I think I’m going to get one of my nipples pierced. Or maybe both. I haven’t decided.”

Robbie lifted his head, pulled out of his thoughts by Jesse’s out-of-nowhere statement. Or was there a conversation going he hadn’t realized since he was lost in his thoughts, replaying Kyler’s words from that morning through his mind. He looked toward the bus’s bathroom, where Jesse stood with the door open looking at himself in the full length mirror with his shirt pulled up to his neck.

Kenny shook his head at Jesse. “Do I even want to ask why you want to get your nipples pierced?”

Jesse released his shirt, letting it fall into place, and turned to him. “Because look at us. Four guys in a rock band and not one pierced nipple between us. How lame is that?”

“Not very,” Kenny said. “There are a lot of bands where nobody’s got a pierced nipple.”

Jesse pointed at him. “Exactly. We need some pierced nipples to show how much more edgy we are. Hell, I’m the only one with any piercings at all.”

Kenny tugged at his own left earlobe adorned with a diamond stud. “What do you call this?”

Jesse dismissed it with a wave of his hand. “One little pierced lobe isn’t enough. It’s hardly noticeable.”

“Well sorry I don’t wear ten earrings like you.”

“Seven. I wear *seven* earrings. Not ten.” Jesse turned to Julian. “You’d look cute with a couple earrings and a nipple or two pierced.”

Julian gave him a skeptical look. “I’m not as certain.”

Morgan nuzzled into Julian’s hair. His hand slid across Julian’s chest with his thumb brushing one of Julian’s nipples through

the shirt. "I'm pretty certain."

Julian turned a playful grin on him. "In that case, I could be persuaded."

Jesse whirled around to face Brad. "And you've been talking about getting a tattoo. You can get your nipple pierced along with it."

Brad laughed. "What, like a package deal?"

Jesse grinned at him. "I'm sure a good parlor would work something out for you. Get a tattoo and have two nipples pierced for the price of one."

"Maybe. I was checking out Remmy's nipple piercings a while back, and they looked really cool." Brad paused, his gaze still on Jesse. "What? Why are you looking at me like that with that little smirk of yours?"

Jesse gave a nonchalant shrug. "I just find it interesting you were *checking out* Remmy's nipple rings."

Brad rolled his eyes at him. "They're kind of hard to miss. It was during setup for one of our outdoor shows and he was working with his shirt off."

"Uh huh," Jesse said, his tone revealing he was far from convinced by Brad's innocent sounding explanation. He turned his attention to Robbie. "You don't have any piercings either, do you?"

Robbie shook his head. "No, sorry."

"Then you're getting your nipple pierced, too. We can all do it together. It'll be like a band bonding kind of thing."

Despite his heavy emotions, the silliness of the conversation made Robbie laugh. He heard a soft chuckle from the couch and looked at Evan, who was smiling as he watched Jesse.

"You're not getting your nipples pierced," Evan said.

Jesse turned to him. "Why not? Wouldn't you like to play with the rings?"

Evan lifted his hand and beckoned Jesse to him with his

index finger. He parted his thighs as Jesse neared. As Jesse stood between his legs, Evan put both hands on Jesse's hips, sliding one around to his ass as his other pushed Jesse's shirt up. He kissed Jesse flat, firm abdomen. "No, I wouldn't."

Evan drifted his lips up Jesse's body, pausing at one of Jesse's nipples. "I don't want anything coming between me and your skin." On his last word, he licked Jesse's nipple, then covered it with his mouth.

Jesse's eyes closed, he buried one hand in Evan's hair.

Robbie realized he was staring, and that he was turned on. He looked away to see what the other band members thought of their bold behavior. Kenny played on with his video game. Brad turned the page of the motorcycle magazine he was reading. Julian and Morgan were lost in their own affections. From everyone's reactions, it seemed normal for things like this to happen.

It made his heart ache for Kyler even more. He wanted to be able to do that, be on the bus with Adam and Kevin around while Kyler touched, kissed, and got heavy with him. It wasn't like he had an exhibitionist streak in him, or maybe he did. It was more after being repressed for so long, he wanted to let it all out.

Kyler's words returned to his mind. Kyler said he needed to love himself before they could be together. Was Kyler really working on coming to terms with his sexuality? Did it mean he was going to come out publicly? And if he did, would he come for him then? Kyler made it sound like he would, but it could also take a long time. How long should he wait for him? A month? A year? Longer? If he knew at the end he would have Kyler and the life he dreamed for with him, he'd wait for as long as it'd take. But *not* knowing was the problem.

Robbie saw Jesse moving down the aisle toward him. Evan shuffled behind him, his arms around Jesse's waist.

Jesse grinned down at him as he passed. "It was good to see you finally smile this morning."

Robbie blinked at him in response. Jesse's grin, the tone in his voice, all of it said Jesse had sparked the silly conversation

for no other reason than to brighten his mood. He felt a rush of gratitude. Jesse might be younger than him, but he was more mature in a lot of ways. He wondered if the hardship of losing Evan had done that to him, and if it would do the same for him and Kyler.

“Thanks, Jess,” Robbie said.

“Thank me by kicking some ass at tomorrow’s show.”

Robbie watched Jesse and Evan go to the back, Evan closing the curtain behind them. He faced forward. Kyler had asked the same thing of him, to kick ass with Conquest, and he would, for Kyler. And he would wait for himself, too. It didn’t matter how long it took. There was no one else he wanted to be with, so there was no point in seeing anyone else.

Robbie turned to look out the window, knowing he wore a large smile. He couldn’t help it. For the first time in days, he knew what it was to feel hope again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kyler stood outside the club's door. Despite it being solid wood and windows bricked up, hard bass and fast beats still pounded their way through. He reached for the door handle, took a deep breath, then pulled his hand back and wiped his palm on his jeans.

"Okay," Kevin said. "That was attempt number three. Just let me open the damn door."

"No!" Kyler blocked him. "I have to do this myself."

Kevin rolled his eyes and looked at Adam. "We're going to be here all night. I knew we should've eaten first."

"He'll be alright." Adam turned to Kyler and patted him on the back. "You can do this, man. It's just a gay bar."

"Yeah, but I haven't been in a gay bar since I was seventeen."

"How'd you get in being underage?" Kevin asked.

Kyler looked at him as if the answer was obvious. "I was as hot then as I am now."

Kevin snorted. "Well, hot or not, you look like a dork standing out here trying to open a door."

"Maybe we should wait for the others," Adam said.

As if his words spurred his determination, Kyler grasped the door handle. "I can do this without them."

He ripped open the door and three quick steps carried him instead. He came to an abrupt stop. Lights flashed with a rhythm of their own, highlighting hard bodies bumping and grinding on each other. The smell of sweat and alcohol lingered in the air. The dance floor overflowed, the bar was packed. Even when he was a teenager, the bar he'd gone to hadn't been so filled with men. He took a half step backward, bumping into Kevin.

Kevin put his hand on Kyler's back. "Dude, I said I'd come here with you, but don't back into me thinking I'm going to grind

on you like these guys are doing.”

Kyler snapped his head around. “As if I’d want you to.”

Adam took hold of Kyler’s arm and pulled him forward a step. “Come on. We should move away from the door in case someone wants to come in.”

Kyler let Adam steer him around the undulating wave of bodies to an open spot at the bar. He gripped the bar rail with both hands. “Why did he say to meet him here, of all places?”

“Because you told him you wanted to go to a gay bar,” Kevin said.

“But still, he could’ve eased me into it. Being who he is, why do I get the feeling this is a big joke to him?”

Adam signaled for the bartender. “I doubt it’s a joke. And I don’t see anything wrong with this club. It’s pretty damn hot.”

Kevin looked at him. “How many gay bars have you been in to be able to tell if this one is hot?”

“None. But just looking at it as a dance club, not taking into account it caters specifically to gay guys, it’s hot.”

Kevin nodded. “Okay, I’ll go with you on that.”

Kyler felt someone brush against his arm and turned, meeting stunning green eyes set into a lovely face with make-up applied with an artist’s skill. He looked down at her silky black dress forming to her curves, the high slit up one leg revealing the black lace top of thigh high nylons. Her thick auburn hair, half pulled up with large curls, lined her face. Without a doubt, she was one of the most beautiful drag queens he’d ever seen.

“My goodness,” she said. “What do we have here? You look like a little lost kitten.”

Kyler faced forward as the bartender slid a beer to him. “I’m pretty far from a kitten.”

She nudged him playfully with her elbow. “Well, maybe a tiger kitten then, because I know exactly who you are, Mr. Kyler Christenson, lead singer of Black Heart Down. But the question

is, *why* are you here?"

Kyler sipped his beer. "Just having a drink."

"All the bars in Chicago and you pick this one? You *do* know what kind of bar you're in, don't you, tiger?"

"Yeah, I caught on to that pretty quick."

"We're meeting some friends here," Adam said, as if attempting to rescue Kyler from his discomfort.

The drag queen looked at Adam. She slapped a hand over her heart. "You have the most beautiful hair I've ever seen!"

Donning a bright smile, Adam moved closer to stand to her. "Thank you. Yours is gorgeous, too."

"Oh, aren't you sweet? But mine's nothing like yours." She drew her finely manicured and long nails through the ends of Adam's hair. "What shampoo do you use?"

"I use all Tigi products, the Bed Head and Rockaholic lines. I shampoo, condition, then a put in a little smoother and shine enhancer—"

"Dude!" Kevin said, looking at Adam as if he'd lost his mind.

Adam stared back at him. "What? I like talking about my hair. And it's nice to meet someone who appreciates it and good products."

A baritone voice broke into the conversation, talking easily over the music as its speaker had trained to his voice to carry through large theatres. "Delilah, you're not giving these boys a hard time, are you?"

All turned to the man standing a few feet away, his black hair finely styled, his blue eyes holding the humor also showing in his smile. His attractiveness caused some men to slow in their dancing to look at him, though their gawking was pointless as he held the hand of a man as equally beautiful, but with elegant Japanese features.

"Brandon!" Delilah said. "It's been too long, baby! And you've got your sweet Shunichi with you."

"Of course. I never want him anywhere but at my side." Brandon moved forward to give Delilah a hug. "But it *has* been a long time. I don't hit the clubs anymore."

Delilah winked at Shunichi. "Married life will do that to you."

Shunichi slid behind Brandon and wrapped his arms around his waist. "Yeah, but sadly we're not married...yet."

Brandon laid his hand over one of Shunichi's. "But we will be someday." His gaze went to Kyler. "Kyler, it's nice to finally meet you without seeing you yelling or trying to start a fight. Are you handling things okay so far?"

Kyler turned to him. "Actually, I'm trying to figure out why the hell you decided this would be a place I'd want to go to."

Brandon gave him a confused look. "What're you talking about? You're the one who said you wanted to go to a gay bar."

"Yeah, but this is a little extravagant, don't you think?"

"No. Actually, this club is pretty tame. Besides, this is where Delilah performs."

Delilah blew Kyler a kiss. "That's right. And you haven't seen anything until you've seen me on stage."

Kevin loudly cleared his throat.

Kyler glanced at him. "Sorry, I forgot you guys haven't met." He gestured toward Brandon. "Kevin, Adam, this is Brandon Alexander, and yeah as his pretty boy looks and last name indicate, he's Jesse's older brother, the stage actor. And wrapped around him is his partner, Shunichi Miyamoto, who I'd recommend not picking a fight with since he owns a karate dojo and is the head instructor." He flicked his hand between Adam and Kevin. "Brandon, Shunichi, this is my drummer, Adam Hunter, and my bass player, Kevin Moore."

After everyone shook hands, Kevin turned to Kyler. "So, I don't want to sound rude, I know when we were heading out you said we were meeting up with them, but why exactly?"

Kyler took a deep breath, followed by a long drink of his beer.

Seeming to sense Kyler was trying to find words, Brandon spoke up. "We're here because my brother asked me to help Kyler with what he's going through. You could say Shunichi and I are acting as chaperones to him. Back when Jess was first coming out, I used to bring him to clubs with me and watch over him to make sure he stayed out of trouble and no losers took advantage of him. He thought I could do the same for Kyler."

Delilah held up her hand, waving it for attention. "Hold on. It just hit me. There're only three of you here. Where's your guitar player? The cute black-haired boy with the tight, little ass."

Kyler's gaze lowered. Only silence came from Adam and Kevin.

Delilah slowly nodded. "So that's how it is."

Kyler shot her a sharp look. "So that's how what is?"

"Tiger, if I had a dollar for every time I saw boys looking like you do right now, I'd be living in a million dollar condo on Lakeshore instead of a loft around the corner from here. You're in love with your cutie guitar player, but for some reason you're not together. Considering how tense you are in this place, I'd say that reason is you're not comfortable with the fact you're gay."

"First off, I'm bi."

"Uh huh. And if I had a dollar for every time I heard that, to hell with the condo, I'd be living in a mansion. Now let me take a wild guess on something. In your mind, when you open up to someone and tell them you're bi, you believe they think, 'Oh, he sleeps with women.' But honey, the truth is, no one thinks that. When you say you're bi, the only thing other people think is, 'Oh! He sleeps with men!' So you see, all this time when you've been saying you're bi, you're subtly telling people you like dick, so you might as well just say you're gay."

Brandon laid a hand on Delilah's arm. "Hey, take it easy on him."

Delilah turned to Brandon. "I'm sorry, baby, but you know I say it like I see it."

"It's alright," Kyler said, his voice barely audible over the music. "She's not saying anything that isn't true."

Delilah took Kyler's hand. Her voice gentled. "Trust me, I know all about trying to get comfortable in your own skin. This," she motioned to her dress, "isn't what I do just on weekends for a little extra attention and cash. This is who I am. If you saw me at the grocery store, I'd be dressed the same way. Okay, I might not be in six inch stilettos, but you know what I mean."

"Yeah," Kyler mumbled.

She patted his hand. "You'll be okay, tiger. It just takes time. But speaking of time, I've got to get ready to take the stage and dazzle all these boys. It was nice meeting you."

Kyler nodded.

Delilah put her arms around Brandon and Shunichi. "And don't you two don't be strangers."

"We won't," Brandon said. As Delilah walked away, he turned to Kyler. "I'm sorry. It looks like you're right. This place is probably too much for you right now."

Kyler shook his head. "It's cool. Sink or swim, right?" He rotated on the stool, gazing over the dance floor. "I guess I just feel like I don't fit in. All these guys look so happy and comfortable with who they are."

"Don't let them fool you," Brandon said. "They might look like that here, but notice there aren't windows in this place. What goes on here, stays here. After some of these guys walk out the door, they'll go home to wives and girlfriends who have no idea they just had their brains sucked out through their cock in a men's room by another guy. Or Monday morning, they'll put on their suits and go to their high dollar jobs where if the boss found out they were dancing shirtless in a gay bar, they'd at best be sent down to the mailroom for the rest of their careers."

Kyler continued to look at the men, but this time, seeing them more as individuals than a mass of bodies having a good time. "I never thought of it like that."

"You should," Shunichi said. "I know you probably think you have more to lose with being a celebrity, but the truth of it is, you don't. Unless you haven't been very smart with your money, you have enough to live off of for the rest of your life. But some of these men could lose everything for no other reason than wanting to be with another man."

Kyler nodded thoughtfully.

Brandon flicked his head toward the exit. "Let's get out of here and go somewhere quieter." He smirked at him. "Unless you want to dance."

For the first time since entering the bar, a smile rose to Kyler's lips. "With you?"

"Sorry, I only dance with one man."

Brandon backed into Shunichi, stretching one arm up and back to place his hand on the back of Shunichi's head. He rolled his hips with the music, no space between his ass and Shunichi's crotch. With his one arm raised, the bottom of his shirt lifted up, revealing hard abdominals. Shunichi's hand found the bare skin, sliding across Brandon's stomach as his other hand gripped Brandon's hip.

Brandon stopped his brief dance, though remained standing in the same position. "But I'm sure finding someone for you to dance with wouldn't be a problem."

"Well, just like you, there's only one guy I want to dance with, but he's not here."

"Good answer. I'm not really interested in helping you hook up with random guys. I'm only helping because Jess said this was all for love."

Kyler smiled. "Yeah, it is."

Brandon moved forward, taking Shunichi's hand. "Then let's get out of here."

Kyler stood, and with Adam and Kevin at his side, followed Brandon and Shunichi from the bar. The heat from inside was instantly blasted away by a chill wind, reminding him how close it

was to winter. It was his favorite time of the year. Not so much because he enjoyed the snow, but because the cold gave him an excuse to stay inside, curled in bed or on the couch with Robbie. Feeling the ice in the air now, he made a silent vow to himself, before winter was over, he and Robbie would be in each other's arms again.

He glanced to Brandon and Shunichi walking ahead of him, then lowered his gaze. He didn't know what felt more awkward, hanging out with Brandon and his partner, or being in Boystown. He'd heard of this part of the city even before he moved here, but had never come down to see the gay-centric neighborhood. He didn't know where to go, what to do, but that seemed to be the consensus for everything in his life at the moment.

He looked at Brandon and Shunichi again. He'd only met them once before, at Evan's charity auction, and that situation hadn't been the best since he'd made an ass of himself there. They'd given polite smiles when they met back then, but Brandon was known to be one of the best stage actors in Chicago, so either he hadn't hid it well or hadn't bothered to try and hide it, but Kyler could tell Brandon hadn't thought highly of him.

It wasn't the first time he'd encountered such a reaction, and like the other times, it was justified. Since returning home from seeing Robbie, he'd done a lot of looking at the past, seeing so many mistakes, reminding himself of incidents that now made him cringe at his behavior. Yet through it all, Robbie always stood by him. Robbie would chastise him at moments, but he never turned his back on him. He wanted, needed, to have that back in his life.

Kyler glanced at two men walking by, arms around each other. In front of him, Brandon and Shunichi held hands. They all made it look so easy. So why the hell couldn't it feel that way to him?

Brandon and Shunichi turned into a restaurant. With sophisticated décor, the tables were mostly occupied by couples engaged in quiet conversations. A host took them to a table lit with candles, their waiter appearing as they all sat. After ordering drinks and appetizers of bruschetta and fried mushrooms, Kyler

put his attention on Brandon. "We didn't talk much when we made these plans, but I'm guessing from the things you said, Jesse filled you in on everything."

Brandon smiled at him. "That would be a good guess."

Shunichi laid his arm across Brandon's shoulders. "Just as it's a good guess that anything Brandon knows, Jesse knows too, and vice versa."

Kyler turned his gaze to Shunichi. "So you're saying he's going to give Jesse a full report of tonight and any other times we spend together?"

"Exactly. They share so much with each other, there are times I think Jesse knows more about our sex life than I do."

Brandon laughed. "I have to brag to someone about all the dirty things you do to me."

Kyler broke into a chuckle with Shunichi, his gaze going back to Brandon. "It's fine by me if you tell Jesse everything. And really, even though it feels kind of weird hanging out with you since we hardly know each other, I appreciate what you're trying to do for me."

Brandon sipped his wine. He shook his head as he lowered the glass. "Thanks isn't necessary. I know what it's like to not want to face your sexuality, so I'm happy to help."

Kyler sighed. "Yeah. But I can't help but wonder what the hell's wrong with me where these two are more comfortable in a gay bar than I am." He flicked his head toward Adam and Kevin.

"Nothing's wrong with you," Shunichi said. "They're not going there trying to learn about who they are, but if I can say something, you're not going to find yourself in a bar, and if you do, I'm pretty sure you're going to lose Robbie forever. I know I don't know him, but I think I can safely say he's not looking for a party boy. If he was, then the way you guys have rolled in your relationship up until now would still be fine by him."

Brandon nodded in agreement. "I didn't understand what your motivation was in wanting to go to a bar either, but I think

I get it now. Strange as it may sound to say this, you've actually lived a pretty sheltered life. Yeah, you've been around the world a few times, I'm sure you've partied twenty-four/seven, but when it comes to being an average guy, you haven't got the first clue how. But you know what else? Shunichi's right. The only thing that'll come of you going to bars is trouble.

"There are men who never go to clubs, but who are perfectly secure with their sexuality. Some guys need friends to help them through it, some can do it on their own. You need to figure out what's the best path for you. But if you can do this, I know you'll become a happier person, then you can give that to Robbie and everyone else around you, including your fans."

Kyler paused in lifting his glass to his lips. "Jesse really does tell you everything. Sounds like he let you in on my songwriting problems."

"Yeah, but I think now with you taking a deeper look at yourself, you can figure out why you've had trouble with that."

"Yeah." Kyler took a drink. "So let me ask you this since you know all my dirty details thanks to Jesse. Does he ever get to top Evan?"

Brandon and Shunichi burst out laughing. Adam chuckled softly. Kevin shook his head at him.

"Yeah, he does," Brandon said. "A lot and often. But why do I have the feeling you asked that for more reasons than to get on a more equal standing with Jesse on personal details?"

Rather than answer, Kyler took another drink of beer.

Kevin spoke up for him. "He's always admired Evan. Even after he tried to hook up with him and found out Evan was more than he could handle, he still kept looking up to him. But he'll never let Evan know that, so he acts like an ass to him. I'm sure knowing Evan takes it from Jesse will make him feel okay about taking it from Robbie." He leaned around Adam to see Kyler. "That's why you asked, isn't it? You probably have some mental thing about not being cool anymore if you're lying on your back with your legs in the air, and—"

"Keep it up and you're going to end up with both wrists in casts," Kyler snapped.

Brandon snorted in attempt to hide his laughter. "Well, I was thinking the same thing, just not in those exact words. But Kyler, topping, bottoming, sucking, rimming, using toys, no matter what it is, if it's between consensual adults, there's nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed of. And if you have a man you trust and who is good at what he does, then give yourself up to him." A smirk touched Brandon's lips. "And I have a feeling Robbie's very good at what he does."

Kyler lowered his gaze, feeling heat rise to his cheeks.

"Dude," Kevin said, "are you blushing? Holy shit, all the years I've known you and I've never seen you blush."

"Shut it," Kyler growled.

Adam bumped his arm against Kyler's. "Guess Brandon's right, huh? I could see it. Robbie's always pretty low key, but I bet when he gets naked, he's wild."

Kyler turned on him. "Do you want a cast to match his?" He jabbed a finger toward Kevin.

"Don't worry, Kyler," Brandon said, taking a bite of a fried mushroom. "In time, you'll be bragging to them about how the night before, Robbie had you on your back, pounding into you, hitting your gland on every thrust, and making it so the only movement you could do was squirm in pleasure, the only noises you could produce were moans of ecstasy, until he had you screaming and arching off the bed as you shot so hard you thought you were going to pass out."

Adam and Kevin stared at Brandon, wearing equally stunned expressions. Kyler took his turn to attempt holding back laughter.

Adam blinked and took a quick breath. "Wow, um, speaking from experience there?"

Brandon leaned into Shunichi. "Absolutely."

Smiling, Shunichi met Brandon's lips in a deep kiss.

As they drew apart Brandon looked at him, and Kyler saw a

mischievous look in his eyes that reminded him of Jesse.

“So you see what fun you can have once you get comfortable with yourself?” Brandon said.

“Yeah, I do. I’m starting to feel even more motivated now. Especially since I’ve had experiences exactly like that with Robbie.”

As Adam and Kevin turned their wide eyes to him, Kyler smirked at them.

Brandon chuckled softly. “Looks like you’re starting to get comfortable already.”

“Well now that I think about it, I’ve missed out on years of bragging about all the amazing sex he and I have had.”

Adam looked at Kevin. “Why do I have a feeling if things go right with him getting Robbie back, the band’s never going to be the same ever again?”

“It won’t,” Kyler said. “It’ll be even better.”

As the conversation shifted to karate with Kevin asking Shunichi about his dojo, Kyler ate and half-listened, lost in his thoughts. The way Brandon spoke, the way he acted, was so relaxed, so comfortable. He wanted that for himself. He knew it without doubt now. Though he wanted it for Robbie too, the thought of living in such way made it seem as if the unknown before him had become illuminated. He might not know what the future held for him and Robbie together, but for the first time in longer than he could remember, he knew what direction he wanted his life to go in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Kenny beside him, Jesse, Evan, and the rest of Conquest behind him, bodyguards flanking all around them, Robbie walked down the sidewalk, admiring Dallas at night. They had arrived in the afternoon, and with the show not until tomorrow evening, Jesse decided they should hit the town. With the guys laughing at jokes he was now familiar with, situations he knew because he'd been a part of them, for the first time he was starting to really feel like a band member. Of course, part of it could be hitting the stage with them in Houston.

Robbie smiled to himself remembering the frantic screams in the arena when Jesse had introduced him and he walked on stage. He swore he didn't get cheered for that loudly even at BHD's shows. But for Conquest's fans, his being there seemed like a special treat. Little did any of them know they'd soon be seeing his face alongside Conquest's in everything the band did.

What he thought was strange, though, was how content he felt in his heart. It was as if knowing Kyler was working on himself and there was hope for them having a future together brought him peace. He could handle being away from him now if it would mean eventually never parting again.

The best of it was, Kyler continued to feed his hope, keeping it strong by calling him to see how he was, sending him texts for no other reason than to say he was thinking of him. He treasured each effort Kyler made. He hadn't even been able to bring himself to delete any of his texts, keeping them stored in case he ever needed a reminder of what he was waiting for.

"Hey, this looks like a good one," Kenny said, pointing ahead to a tattoo studio.

Pulled from his thoughts, Robbie shook his head and laughed under his breath. But maybe even stranger than him feeling content was going to a tattoo studio so Kenny could get his nipple pierced. With Kenny's good boy looks, he just couldn't see

him with it, but apparently Krista could, since when Kenny told her about Jesse's joking conversation about it, she said he'd look hot with one, and so, here they were. Then again, maybe it was time for him to consider ditching some of his good boy image, too.

Jesse's voice sounded behind him. "I'm still betting you'll get one look at the needle and pass out like you did when we were in high school and gave blood for the blood drive."

"I didn't pass out!" Kenny retorted. "I just got a little dizzy. But I still say that was from all the blood they took from me."

"You were dizzy before they started! The nurse had to get you a chair while we were waiting in line."

Kenny grabbed the door handle to the studio and pointed at Jesse before pulling it open. "You'll see. I'm just gonna be sitting there so cool, you won't even be able to tell it's getting done."

"Yes I will," Jesse said. "Because I'll be watching the big ass needle sliding through your nipple."

"It's not going to be that big," Kenny cast a glance at Robbie. "Will it?"

Robbie shrugged. "I don't know, man. Adam has both his nipples pierced, but I wasn't there and when we asked him about it afterward, he didn't even remember getting them done because he was drunk off his ass."

Brad moved to Kenny's side and slapped a hand down on his shoulder. "Maybe we should grab a few beers and come back. You know, build up your pain tolerance and courage."

"I don't need to build anything up. It's probably just like getting a shot."

Evan spoke up. "Yeah, but if I remember right, when we all got flu shots before hitting the road, you had your head turned away and eyes squeezed shut until it was over."

Julian stepped forward, Morgan's hand in his. He grabbed the door handle from Kenny and pulled it open. "Don't worry, Kenny. I'll hold your hand through it since I'll be in the chair next

to yours.”

Kenny gaped in surprise. “You’re getting one, too?”

“I am. Someone thinks it’d be sexy.” Julian threw a smirk at Morgan. “I do believe he’s starting to like rock star styles over classical.”

“I like *your* style,” Morgan said, walking in with him.

Jesse looked at Evan. “Can you believe this? I make a couple jokes and everyone jumps on it. I feel like I have so much power.”

Evan tossed his arm around Jesse’s shoulders, steering him inside. “As if you ever feel like you don’t.”

“That’s true.”

Brad walked in after Jesse and Evan, leaving Kenny and Robbie the only ones outside.

Robbie glanced at Kenny, thinking he already looked queasy. “You sure you want to go through with this?”

Kenny nodded quickly. “Yeah. It’s no big deal.”

“You should probably go in, then. Start picking out what kind of ring you want.”

Kenny blinked at him, quiet for a moment. “Oh. Yeah. Right.”

Robbie patted him on the back, giving him a push on the last pat. He walked in after him, seeing a young Latino guy, his mocha skin marked with artful tattoos running up his arms, coming out from the back with another guy whose nose, bottom lip, eyebrow, and ears were adorned with piercings. Both stopped short. The Latino tattoo artist shot a hand to his mouth, his eyes wide.

“Holy shit! Holy damn shit! Evan Arden! Jesse Alexander! Conquest! I can’t believe you guys just walked into my studio!” The artist’s gaze went to Robbie, and he pointed at him. “Robbie Russo! I can’t freakin’ believe it! I heard you played with these guys in Houston! You’re all here! You’re all really here!”

Jesse stepped forward, wearing a bright smile. “I take it you’re a fan.”

“Hell yes, I’m a fan!” The artist rushed forward, holding out

his hand to shake Jesse's. "You kick ass!"

Jesse shook the guy's hand. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

As Jesse, Evan, and Brad made small talk with the tattoo artist, Robbie saw the piercer was already showing Julian rings. He looked around the place, the walls covered with tattoo designs, the glass counter filled with jewelry and different styles of piercings. Most importantly, the studio looked and smelled very clean. He moved closer to the guys as Jesse turned to Brad.

"So are you finally going to break down and get a tattoo?"

Brad shook his head as he went to a book of designs lying on the glass countertop. "I still haven't really decided what I want. Besides, there wouldn't be enough time to get one done. We won't be in town long enough."

"There would be if you got a small one," Evan said.

"Yeah, but I think I want something bigger, like on my shoulder or bicep."

The tattoo artist walked behind the counter to stand across from Brad. "Starting out small is a good thing. It'll give you a taste of what it's like for when you do go all out."

Robbie looked at the guy and saw his dark gaze roaming over Brad, as he wasn't bothering to hide his interest.

"Yeah, maybe," Brad said, still leafing through the book. "I still don't know what I'd get, though."

"I could design something special for just you," the artist said.

Brad glanced up from the book to him. "That'd take a while, wouldn't it?"

A flirtatious smile lifted the guy's lips. "I could do it fast. I think you inspire me."

As Brad stared at him, Robbie did his best to swallow a laugh since from Brad's expression, it seemed he finally realized the guy was trying to flirt with him. And from the mischievous smirk on Jesse's lips, it seemed he realized it, too.

Jesse slid next to Brad and put his arm around his shoulders,

his gaze on the tattoo artist. "So he could be a muse for you."

The artist wet his lips, looking Brad down and back up. "Definitely."

Brad let out a laugh. "Wow. I'm flattered."

"You should be," Jesse said. "And now's your chance to move away from watching gay porn or reading gay erotica and take it live."

Brad laughed harder. "You did not just say that!"

"Oh yes I did. And it starts with flirting. See how he's flirting with you? Now it's your turn to flirt back."

Still chuckling, Brad said, "I don't even know what to say."

"That's fine. I'll play Cyrano to your Christian."

The humor on Brad's face faded with confusion taking over. "You'll what?"

Jesse waved his hand in the air. "Never mind. Just repeat what I tell you." He nodded to the artist. "You start."

"Okay." He stood, one hand on his hip, and checked Brad out again. "I really hope you'd like to get a tattoo because I'd love to work on you."

Jesse hushed his voice, but kept it loud enough for everyone to hear. "Yeah? What part of me would you like to work on?"

Brad snapped his head to the side. "I'm not saying that!"

"Oh, come on, Brad," Evan said, trying to control his laughter. "It's all good fun."

Exhaling a sigh, but still wearing a good humored expression, Brad repeated, "Yeah? And what part of me would you like to work on?"

Jesse patted him on the back. "Good, but you were a little flat. Put some heat into the next line."

Brad rolled his eyes.

The artist placed both hands on the counter, leaning toward him. "All of you looks so good, I can't make up my mind."

His voice soft again, Jesse said to Brad, "Maybe if you saw the bare canvas, it'd help you decide."

Brad burst out laughing and flung up his hands, stepping away from Jesse. "Man, no way I'm saying that!"

Laughter filled the studio. Robbie tried to catch his breath with his laughing and saw Jesse go back to Evan's side, a pleased grin on his lips.

Jesse slipped his arm around Evan's waist. "Well, it was fun while it lasted."

Evan touched his smiling lips to Jesse's cheek. "I'm just glad you didn't try any lines like that on me when we met."

"I didn't have to. You knew what I wanted just from looking into my eyes."

Evan caressed Jesse's cheek, gazing into his eyes, and met him in a kiss.

Robbie smiled at their moment of affection. He stepped up to Brad's vacated spot at the counter, seeing the artist had flipped to a section in the design book of musically inspired tattoos. His heart nearly stopped as his gaze fell on a tattoo of a black guitar with flames radiating around it. He pointed to it and looked up at the tattoo artist, who was still eyeing Brad.

"Can you do this with a different style guitar?"

The artist pulled his attention from Brad and glanced down at the design. "What'd you have in mind?"

Robbie took out his cell phone and lit the screen to show his wallpaper set with a picture of his custom Gibson Les Paul, the wood of it a light, natural finish with a black pick-guard. "This."

The artist nodded. "Yeah, no problem."

Kenny peered over Robbie's shoulder. "Dude, you have your guitar saved as your wallpaper? And I thought I was obsessive about my favorite Strat."

"Yeah, I kinda love it, you know. It was the first thing I bought with my rock star cash, and I've never played a guitar that sounds

sweeter.”

Jesse moved to Robbie’s side. “It does have a beautiful sound. That tattoo would look awesome with it. Are you going to get it?”

“Maybe.” Robbie’s attention went to the artist again. “How long would it take to have it done? We’re not going to be in town long.”

“Since it’s not that big and doesn’t have a lot of real intricate work, I’d say I could get it done in a few hours.”

Robbie flashed a big smile. “Then I’ll do it!”

“Sweet. Let me double check my schedule, but I’m pretty sure my morning and early afternoon are open.” The artist leaned toward him, whispering, “And if you get him to come in back with you for one, I’ll give you a discount.” He pointed with his chin toward Brad looking at tattoo designs on a wall, his back to them.

Robbie laughed softly. “Sorry, man. I got a feeling I’ll be paying full price.”

“Can’t blame me for trying.”

As the artist turned to check his schedule, Robbie faced Kenny, Jesse, and Evan. “Where do guys think I should get it?”

Julian and Morgan joined them, Brad heading over as well.

“What about your chest?” Kenny said.

Robbie touched his chest over his shirt. “I don’t think I have big enough pecs to pull it off.”

“How about your bicep, up by your shoulder,” Brad said.

Robbie pulled up his shirt sleeve and turned, looking into a mirror on the counter. “That could work.”

“Or your hip line?” Jesse said. “You could get it done at an angle lying on the inside of one of your hips.”

Robbie paused. He lifted up his shirt and tugged the top of his pants down slightly, touching his fingers to the inside of his right hip. “I kinda like that idea.”

The artist returned. "I'm open tomorrow morning through mid afternoon. Do you want to schedule it?"

Robbie let his shirt drop. "Yeah, I do."

"Cool. I'll write you in. And can I see that pic of your guitar again? Like to start getting an idea of colors."

"Sure." Robbie handed him his phone. The artist took it, dragged the design book over to himself, and started jotting down notes. While Kenny and Julian paid for their soon-to-be new piercings, Robbie glanced down in the glass case in the spot the book had blocked, his gaze locking on two large emerald stud earrings. His eyes widened. He pointed to them, snapping his eyes toward the artist. "Are those real emeralds?"

The artist nodded and handed him back his phone. "Yeah. We carry some really high-end jewelry since we're one of the *première* shops in town. Though, a lot of people still buy the cheap stuff most of the time."

"Can I get my ear pierced with one of them? I'll buy both, but just have one put in for now."

"We could do that."

Jesse started laughing. "You're getting a tattoo *and* your ear pierced? You're bad boying up all in one shot."

Robbie laughed with him. "I know. I'm way overdue for it."

With Robbie scheduled for his tattoo the next morning, the artist flipped his head toward the back of the shop. "Alright. If you guys have picked out your rings, we'll get your piercings done."

Julian followed after him with Morgan, Brad next to watch. Kenny stayed in place.

Jesse put his hand on Kenny's back and pushed, making him stumble forward. "Come on. Let's sit you down before you pre-faint."

Kenny shot him a glare. "I'm not going to pre-faint or real faint."

Robbie moved to Kenny's other side. "I'm sure you won't either. But your face is a really nice shade of white right now."

Kenny turned his glare on Robbie.

Evan slapped both hands down on Kenny's shoulders, giving him a couple rough shakes. "You can do it, Kenny. Just picture Krista flicking the ring around with her tongue and you won't feel a thing."

Kenny started forward. "Okay, I'm totally there now."

Evan winked at a snickering Jesse, and they all walked after him.

Julian was already in the leather piercing chair, his shirt off as the piercer swabbed his left nipple to disinfect it.

The tattoo artist started toward a door, speaking to the piercer. "I'm going to get Kelly. She should be done with her break, then these guys can get it done at the same time."

Robbie placed his hand on Kenny's shoulder and pointed to the chair next to Julian. "Why don't you sit down?"

Kenny's head bobbed in a quick nod. "Yeah. Yeah, I should."

The tattoo artist returned, and at his side was a young woman. She had her blonde hair piled up on her head in a messy but sexy style. Dark make-up shadowed her eyes and a small diamond adorned one side of her nose. Black leather boots ran up to her shins, fishnet stockings covered her long legs up to a black leather mini-skirt. Her midriff top resembled a corset, her ample breasts cupped and spilling out.

Robbie smirked at Kenny's gaping mouth as he stared at her.

The tattoo artist pointed to the young woman while looking at Kenny. "This is Kelly. She'll do you."

Kenny muttered a hushed, "Oh God."

Kelly patted the leather chair. "Take a seat. And don't you worry. I'm gentle."

His voice slightly higher in pitch but still a whisper, Kenny mumbled another, "Oh God."

Robbie leaned toward him. "You should probably take your shirt off now."

Kenny's reply came in him tearing his shirt over his head and rushing to take a seat in the chair.

Kelly faced him and looked him over while pulling on white latex gloves. "Well, somebody works out, doesn't he?"

Kenny gave her a smile and touched his bicep. "Yeah, I do. I like staying fit."

Jesse's laughing voice followed. "Rolling your ass out of bed and down to the tour bus doesn't count as working out."

"I work out a lot!" Kenny snapped. He looked back to Kelly, giving her another smile, his voice softer. "I'm kinda naturally ripped, actually."

Jesse spoke up again. "I don't know if I'd call you ripped. You'd need to have, you know, muscles for that."

"Dude, look at me. I've got lots of muscles."

Jesse squinted as if he was trying to see something from a great distance, even though he stood only a few feet from Kenny. He nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess you do have a few. I must've been standing too far away to see them."

Kenny gave Evan a pleading look. "Can you shut him up for five minutes? Please!"

Evan put his arm around Jesse's waist and pulled him closer. "There's only one sure way I can do that, and I don't think this is a good place for me to be dropping my pants."

Jesse gave him a light kiss on the lips. "Everywhere is a good place for you to drop your pants."

Kelly took a seat on a stool in front of Kenny. "Okay, babe. Which one are you having done?"

"Oh, um, I don't know. My right, I guess. No, wait. Maybe my left." Kenny looked at Julian. "You're getting your left done, aren't you?"

Julian nodded. "And it's all set and ready to go. I'm just waiting

on you.”

“Okay. Um, yeah.” Kenny looked at Kelly. “I’ll get my left one done.”

“Left it is,” Kelly said, reaching toward his nipple with a cotton ball dipped in antiseptic.

Kenny lashed up both hands, waving them to stop her. “No, no, wait! I just thought of something. My guitar strap lays across my left when I play. It could irritate it, don’t you think?”

Kelly nodded. “It might be a little tender if the strap rubs on it a lot.”

“Then let’s do my right. My right would be better.”

She started toward him with the cotton ball, pausing before touching him. “You’re sure this time?”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

Robbie looked at Brad beside him, lowering his voice as he spoke. “I can’t believe he’s really going through with it.”

Brad grinned at him. “He hasn’t yet. I’m saying he jumps out of the chair and runs for the door when he sees the needle.”

Kenny watched as Kelly swabbed his nipple. “So, this isn’t going to bleed much, right?”

Julian spoke before Kelly could reply. “You’re worrying too much. I’m sure Kelly is very skilled and knows to not hit the artery in your nipple.”

Kenny’s eyes went round. “There’s an artery in my nipple?”

“You didn’t know that?” Brad said, as if he couldn’t believe Kenny’s lack of knowledge. “Why do you think people bleed so much when they get shot in the chest?”

As Kenny’s expression turned more horrorstricken, Kelly slapped him on the knee. “They’re screwing with you. There’s no artery in your nipple.”

Snickering with Jesse, Evan, and the others, Robbie turned his attention to Julian. His piercer already had his nipple marked for where the ring would go. Holding small steel forceps, the piercer

gripped Julian's nipple and pulled it out.

"Shit," Kenny said, watching what was happening with Julian. "Does that hurt?"

Julian shook his head. "Not much. Doesn't feel all that different from nipple clamps."

"Damn, Jules," Jesse said. "You really *are* a kinky boy, all broken in to nipple clamps, handy with a riding crop. What exactly do you and Morgan do to each other every night?"

Julian took Morgan's hand and smirked at Jesse. "Things that could make even you blush."

Everyone's chuckling got interrupted by a high pitched whimper as Kelly pulled out Kenny's nipple with her forceps. Kenny's face lost the last of its color when she took up the needle.

"Whoa, that's a whole lot bigger than I thought it'd be," he said.

She winked at him. "I get that a lot."

Julian offered his hand to Kenny. "Here, I promised you could hold my hand. Go ahead and squeeze if it hurts."

Kenny placed his hand in Julian's. "Okay, I'll hold it. But just to humor you."

Kelly brought the needle closer. "Now get ready, because I'm about to do it. You might want to look down."

Kenny gave a confused shake of his head. "Why should I look down?"

Kelly shifted on the stool, giving him a full view of her breasts. "Because that's where my boobs are, and they'll distract you."

"I like your methods," Kenny said, his gaze dropping to her chest.

"On three. One. Two. Three."

"Fuck!" Kenny yelled, tossing his head back on the chair, his eyes shut tight. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Not all the titties in the world could make that not hurt!"

Robbie nearly buckled when Brad leaned into him, needing his support because he was laughing so hard, and Robbie could hardly stand already with being in equal hysterics.

Kelly held up both hands. "All done."

Kenny froze. He glanced down at the steel ring running through his nipple. "You're done?" He turned to Julian, who was already standing and admiring his iridescent steel ring in a mirror. "I didn't even hear you yell."

"Because I didn't. Though, if I had, I doubt anyone would have heard me over yours." Julian shook out his hand. "And I'm grateful to Kelly for being so quick. If it would've lasted any longer, we would've been canceling concerts for my broken hand." He faced Morgan. "What do you think?"

His gaze on Julian's nipple, Morgan lowered his head to kiss him. "Very, very hot."

Kenny turned away from them, grumbling, "I didn't squeeze that hard." He looked to Kelly, presenting her with a smile. "Thanks. You did awesome."

Kelly took a slight bow. "I try."

Brad slapped Robbie on the back. "Your turn, man."

Robbie stepped forward. "Yeah, I guess it is."

The tattoo artist handed Kelly the velvet box holding the emerald studs. "He's getting his ear done with one of these. They're not starter rings, but with how clean you are with the needle, it should be okay."

Kelly took the box and gestured to the chair. "Welcome to my chair of torture."

Robbie sat and got situated comfortably. "You know, usually I'd say I doubt that, but since I just saw the last guy in it screaming his head off, I might have to agree."

"Well, I've loved BHD since you guys came out, so I'll be as gentle as I can."

Kenny let out an offended huff. "What? No love for the

Conquest guy?”

Kelly gave him a flirtatious look. “Oh baby, I’ll give you all the love you want.”

As Kenny glowed, Jesse coughed, saying “Krista” at the same moment.

Grinning at Kenny’s guilty expression, Robbie turned his head so Kelly could swab his left earlobe. A quick prick and a slight push was all it took. She handed him a mirror, and he held it up, taking in the shining emerald decorating his ear.

“It looks awesome,” Jesse said. “And I’m betting you have a sentimental reason for choosing an emerald.”

Robbie nodded, still admiring it. “Yeah, I do.”

“You can tell us over some drinks, then.” Jesse lifted a fist high in the air. “Drinks on me! You guys have earned it!” His gaze went to Brad. “Except you. You didn’t do what I told you to, so I’m not buying your drinks.”

“Man, that’s not fair!” Brad said. “I started to. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“I’ll think about it.” Jesse walked forward, his and Evan’s arms around each other.

With everyone laughing, Robbie followed them back to the front of the shop, one thought playing through his mind; he couldn’t wait to show Kyler the earring and his soon-to-be tattoo.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Kyler glanced up from the sheet music propped up on the keyboard to the clock in the office. Almost seven o'clock. Jesse had called him earlier in the day to tell him Robbie had done a solo interview that would be airing tonight, in case he wanted to see it. Jesse's tone implied he *should* see it. He knew Robbie performed with Conquest for the first time a week ago. It was all over the media. Evan must've scheduled the interview to let all the questions people would have be answered, knowing the hype would be insane.

Kyler stood and stretched, letting out a groan as he did. He couldn't believe other than getting up to eat and use the bathroom, he'd sat at the desk and keyboard all day. Well, he had also sat in the living room for a while with his guitar. He didn't know what was going on, but the music was playing louder and clearer in his head than it had in over two years. He also felt... *good*, oddly enough. That one he really couldn't explain.

In the week since he met with Brandon, he'd talked to him on the phone several times, had dinner with him and Shunichi, hung out at their house, which was on the same property as Shunichi's dojo, then over the weekend, went with Shunichi to see Brandon in his role as Billy Flynn in an elaborate production of *Chicago*. He was a little embarrassed it was his first time ever seeing a professional play, but the feeling quickly vanished as he became engrossed in the story and acting. He still couldn't believe what an amazing singing voice Brandon had, and damn, the man could dance!

Part of him was concerned with how much he pestered them, if he was going to burn Brandon and Shunichi out on him. He even told them if he started to get on their nerves to tell him, but Brandon laughed and said he didn't see that happening. It felt kind of strange, getting to know Jesse's brother better than Jesse, but actually, he related to Brandon really well. Brandon shared

a lot of his experiences of what he went through when he was trying to come to terms with his sexuality. The feelings Brandon described, the insecurity, the desire to be accepted not only by other gay men, but by all people, and nights of passion followed by mornings of guilt, reflected his own emotions exactly.

Except for him, his mornings with Robbie were never filled with guilt. It was only the mornings he walked away from different men.

Kyler sighed as he sank onto the couch and grabbed the remote. Being around Brandon and Shunichi, and talking with them both, was helping him to gain confidence in his sexuality, but again, it was all in private. The thought of standing before hundreds, thousands of people, saying loud and clear he was... he was...

Kyler shook his head. Hell, he still had trouble just thinking the thought. How was he supposed to actually say it?

He fell back against the couch. Maybe seeing Robbie would give him the final boost he needed to finish the thought, and even better, say it aloud.

Kyler turned on the TV and switched to the channel Jesse told him. An entertainment show was just starting with the commentator saying, "And now for the *shocking* and *revealing* interview Lisa had with rock guitarist, Robbie Russo."

Kyler rolled his eyes. So melodramatic. This was why he avoided watching entertainment shows, even when he'd been on them. They did nothing but fuel gossip, and half the time didn't have their facts right unless it was coming directly out of the interviewees' mouth. He'd been on this one several times, solo, with the guys, and with just Robbie.

Kyler's thoughts slammed to a stop as the show's theme played with the image of Robbie sitting in a chair on an empty stage with the interviewer, Lisa. Robbie looked amazing, his smile so bright, his black hair styled to be a little spiky. Kyler recognized the jeans Robbie wore, faded with frayed tears on the thighs purposely made by the designer to make them look worn, and sinfully tight.

He found himself wishing Robbie was standing for the interview so he could see how they conformed around his thighs, cupped his crotch, and hugged his ass.

The shirt Robbie wore was new, black with a faded image of a gray skull surrounded by red roses. So was the short, thin black leather jacket. Robbie usually dressed rock star for interviews, but there was an extra touch of style about him. It seemed hanging out with Jesse and Evan was rubbing off on him.

As a close-up of Robbie came on, Kyler's eyes widened in shock. A large emerald, the rich green bottomless and sparkling even on camera, decorated Robbie's left earlobe.

When the hell had Robbie gotten his ear pierced? And why had he? And why was he wearing an emerald? Kyler's thoughts slowed as realization hit him. Robbie's birthday was in January, making his birthstone the garnet. But Kyler's birthday was in May, the month for the emerald. Was Robbie trying to make a statement to him? Some kind of silent message?

Not knowing what to think, Kyler tried to focus on Robbie as the interviewer finished her polite chatter of how nice it was to talk to him.

"You and Conquest surprised thousands people a few days ago when you walked onto the stage in Houston. And you've been in every show since. I have to go right to the big question. Have you left Black Heart Down for Conquest?"

A perfect smile in place, Robbie said, "I'm just guesting with Conquest and having a good time with them. You know Kevin broke his wrist, so all of us in BHD were all laid up with him. When this chance came up, it seemed like a good way to keep my skills sharp."

"And how do you like your new front-man? How does Jesse compare to Kyler?"

Kyler's heart constricted. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Jesse's awesome. He knows how to rock hardcore, but he's also a lot of fun to just be around. He's a lot different from Kyler,

but each of them are masters at what they do, so they can't really be compared."

Kyler grinned. Nice one, Rob. A perfect politically correct answer that really didn't answer much of anything. Evan must've coached him. So far, there wasn't much shocking or revealing in this interview other than it now being known Robbie was playing for Conquest and his earring, which no one but him would catch on to.

"So how'd you end up with Conquest? It's no secret they're a tight-knit group."

"I was actually really good friends with Kenny before this, and we were all recording at the same time in the same studio with our last albums. They're all amazingly talented, so to have this chance to play music with them, learn from their different styles, it's an incredible experience. Not to mention, for me as a gay man, it's really cool playing in a band with two openly gay members, Jesse and Julian, and of course Evan, who even though he isn't part of the band, as their manager and Jesse's husband, he's as close as a person could get."

Kyler froze, mentally and physically. Did Robbie just... No, he heard him wrong. He misunderstood because Robbie was talking about Jesse, Evan, and Julian. Robbie didn't say what he thought.

Lisa cleared her throat and did a shake of her head. "I'm sorry, Robbie. I'm not sure I caught the last part."

Robbie smirked at her. "Which part? The part about Evan practically being a member of the band? Or the part that I'm gay?"

Kyler stopped breathing. Robbie just publicly announced he was gay. Without talking to him about it. But then, why would Robbie talk to him about it? Robbie was free to do whatever he wanted, wherever he wanted, with whoever he wanted.

Kyler doubled over. The last thought sickened his stomach. With announcing he was gay, all men would think they had a shot with him and come after him even harder than before. But, he

thought Robbie was going to wait for him. He said he would.

Lisa giggled. "The part about you being gay. It's not often I get caught off guard in an interview, but you've got me! Is this your big coming out?"

Robbie chuckled. "It is. Sorry for the surprise. When I was talking to the guys about feeling I was ready, Evan told me if I felt right about it, to just let it out. Hope I haven't upset you."

"No, no. Not at all. But now the question begging to be answered is does your sexuality have anything to do with you leaving Black Heart Down?"

"Well, like I said earlier, I haven't left BHD, but my sexuality won't come as a surprise to my band members there. Coming out at this exact moment might, but nothing else."

As Lisa wrapped up the interview thanking Robbie, Kyler stayed sitting forward, his head bowed, his hands buried in his hair. He felt exhausted, as if he'd run a marathon only to get the crap beat out of him at the end.

And there was no doubt Evan had coached Robbie. Robbie had waited until the last minutes of the interview to drop his confession, making it so the interviewer couldn't drill him with a ton of questions. He just hoped Evan hadn't orchestrated the whole thing and put Robbie up to it for publicity. One thing about Robbie, he could be easily persuaded into things, especially if under the hand of someone as skillful at bending people to his will as Evan.

Anger started to rise in him against Evan, then deflated as he envisioned Robbie's earring. That wasn't something Evan would do. That earring showed a clear sign Robbie had *wanted* to come out, he'd planned on it.

Kyler rested back on the couch. Leave it to Robbie to set the bar even higher than it'd been before. He smiled and pushed himself up to standing. There was nothing to be done about it now, and he had a song to finish.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Robbie flipped onto his side, laid still for a moment, then tossed onto his other side. He sat up, fluffed the pillow a couple times, and dropped back down on it. The bed covers felt hot and agitating against his skin. He rolled onto his back and kicked them off. The cool air in the hotel room washed over his bare body.

Robbie flung one arm above his head, his gaze fixed on the ceiling. It felt like his heart hadn't stopped racing since his interview that morning. He couldn't believe he did it, saying he was gay for the entire world to know. Jesse told him he'd feel freer than ever before afterward. Maybe that feeling would come after the anxiety and fear quit beating on him.

Evan arranged the interview to mainly get the immediate questions people would have about him playing with Conquest out of the way. Neither Evan nor Jesse knew he was going to take the opportunity to come out until a couple hours before. He considered not telling them at all, but when fear and doubts started settling in, he needed to talk to someone. He was glad he went to them. They supported him, and Evan guided him in how he should do it, waiting until the interview was almost over so he wouldn't have to answer a ton of questions about it.

Sure when the cameras were turned off, Lisa begged him for an instant follow-up to get those answers, but one other good thing about telling Jesse and Evan his plan, they came with him to the interview. Evan had stepped in, politely telling her to back off and Robbie wouldn't give any more info until an offer for an exclusive was accepted. He was grateful for Evan's intervention, especially since he was slightly trembling and wanted nothing more than to get away from the interviewer and cameras. While Evan handled Lisa, Jesse led him away.

What amazed him most was how all the Conquest boys threw their support behind him; even Kenny, who he knew had a hard

time when Jesse and Evan had gotten married, but it seemed that experience opened his eyes even wider to acceptance. After the concert, they all went out to celebrate with him. He had fun, despite his mind being haunted by the image of one man.

Kyler. Had he seen the interview? He doubted it. Ky couldn't stand entertainment shows, magazines, or websites. He avoided all critics like they could give him the plague, never reading reviews of Black Heart's music.

Robbie rubbed his hand over his heart. He missed him, and yearned to hear his voice, even if it was only him saying hello.

Robbie looked at the clock on the nightstand. Just after two in the morning. His gaze moved from the clock to his cell phone. He was insane. He couldn't call him now. But if all he wanted was to hear his voice, he could get that listening to Kyler's voicemail.

Without another thought, Robbie snatched his phone and speed dialed Kyler. The phone rang four times, then stopped as it connected. Kyler's recorded voice didn't come through. Only silence, until a sigh ending with a groan sounded in Robbie's ear.

"You know, I never used to mind when you'd wake me up in the middle of the night, but that was because your hot ass and pretty cock were within reach. It's not very nice to do it when you're miles away."

Kyler's voice, deep and gravelly with sleep, shot directly to Robbie's cock as if it physically stroked him. And the words caused a small whimper of want to slip past his lips before he could catch it. He cleared his throat to cover it. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Just tell me everything's okay. You've got me worried calling this late."

"Everything's fine. I wanted to hear your voice, that's all. I didn't mean to wake you. I didn't think you'd pick up."

"As long as everything's alright I don't mind." Kyler paused for moment. "So, you just wanted to hear my voice? Why? Are you hard and need help getting off?"

Robbie wet his lips. "I was just missing you."

“Right. Well, you’ll have to forgive me if my mind’s on nothing but sex right now because I was about to have it with you in a dream until you woke me up.”

Robbie closed his eyes tight. This was a bad idea. Thinking of Kyler got him hard. Hearing him got him harder. And with Kyler saying things like that, he could explode with only a few strokes. He took a breath and mumbled, “Sorry” again.

“*That* I’ll let you apologize for.”

Robbie swallowed another groan before it could leak out. He needed to change the subject. If Kyler kept this up, he’d have him panting and moaning into the phone as he jerked off. “I, um, I’m playing with Conquest now. It’s going good.”

“Yeah, I know. You told me last week, remember? But even without that it’s been all over the place. I’m glad it’s going good, though.”

“Yeah,” Robbie said softly. “I guess I forgot I told you.” Maybe that wasn’t the topic he should’ve changed to.

“I saw your interview today.”

Stunned, Robbie needed a second to find his voice. “You never watch those shows.”

“Since it’s the only way I can see you, I plan to start.”

Robbie closed his eyes again. Hurt, regret, loneliness, all silencing him.

“I’m proud of you, Rob. What you did, coming out, it took a lot of courage. You’re a braver man than me. I guess that’s one of the other reasons we can’t be together.”

“Ky...”

“I just want to know one thing. Did you do it because you wanted to, or were you put up to it by Jesse and Evan? The way it went down, it had Evan written all over it.”

“They didn’t have anything to do with it. I was the one who wanted to do it. Trust me, they were pretty surprised when I went to them about it. The thing was, I wanted to come out so bad, I

felt like I was ready to, but I didn't feel like I was ready to handle all the questions at the same time, you know? So Evan did coach me in how to keep control of the interview. Maybe that's why it seemed like he was involved. But Jesse, Evan, and all the guys put their full support behind me." Robbie told Kyler everything that'd happened after the interview. When he finished, he wasn't sure Kyler was still on the phone, he was so quiet.

"I'm glad they're taking care of you," Kyler said softly. "It was the one thing I asked from Jesse, and it sounds like he's holding up to it."

"He is."

His voice sounding more playful, as if he was trying to lighten the conversation, Kyler said, "So, when the hell did you get your ear pierced? You didn't tell me about that."

Robbie let out a soft chuckle. "You noticed, huh? I just got it done a couple days ago. Earlier last week, Jesse was joking around on the bus about wanting to get his nipples pierced and how everyone else should, too. Well, Kenny told Krista about it and she told him she thought he'd look hot with a pierced nipple. Julian decided he wanted to get his nipple pierced too, so when we were in Dallas, we all hit a tattoo studio and on the spur of the moment, I decided to get my ear done. And you're really not going to believe this, but I got a tattoo."

"Are you serious? Of what? Where?"

"Yeah, I'm totally serious. I got a guitar that looks like mine and it has flames around it. I have it on the inside of my right hip. It looks really cool."

Kyler fell quiet for a moment. "It sounds cool. I just can't believe it. I'm in shock, I think."

"I can't wait to show you."

"I can't wait to see. And, I have to say, that was a really beautiful emerald you were wearing in your ear."

Robbie paused, the moment of lightness disappeared under the truth of their separation. "Yeah. I wanted to wear it as a way

of keeping you close. I know it sounds ridiculous, but no matter what happens in our futures, I know I'll never be able to fully let you go, and I don't want to."

Silence answered him for several heartbeats.

"I don't want you to," Kyler said. "I want you to hold onto every good memory we've created together, and I hope, from time to time, you think of ones you'd like to make with me in the future."

"I do."

Quiet seconds ticked by, yet to Robbie, it didn't feel uncomfortable. Even through the phone, there was a sense of Kyler being close.

Kyler took an audible breath and chuckled. "You know, I can't see Kenny with a nipple ring."

Robbie laughed softly. "It's a sight, let me tell you. He's so boy next door, but he pulls it off pretty good."

"So with getting your ear pierced and a tattoo, did you get your nipple done?"

"No, I thought I was doing enough for now."

"That's too bad. You'd look hot with one, or both done."

"Really?"

"Yeah. And it'd be fun to play with them, teasing them with my teeth, giving them little tugs, flicking them with my tongue, and sucking on them. I can almost feel the smooth metal in my mouth surrounded by the taste of your skin." A soft, deep groan came through the phone. "Sorry. I shouldn't say things like that."

All of Robbie's earlier desire burst back to life. His cock, having dejectedly gone half down during their talking, filled again. He didn't try to catch the hushed moan that left his throat this time. "It's fine. You can still say things like that."

"Well, if you're going to give me permission, then should I tell you what I was dreaming about when you called?"

Robbie drifted a hand down his chest toward his abdomen.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“I think the dream was probably sparked by what I was fantasizing about before I fell asleep. I was lying here, hard as fuck because it’s been so long—”

“How long has it been?” Robbie’s senses snapped back to him briefly. He couldn’t help it. He wanted to know if Kyler had been with anyone else.

“Let’s see, the last time was the morning you left, and I’m pretty sure you know who I was with.”

“Same here.”

“See? I knew there was more to why you were calling than just wanting to hear my voice. You know, I’ve made you come with my hands, my mouth, my ass, even my own cock on yours. But I’ve never tried to get you there without touching. You want me to see if I can?”

Robbie touched his fingertips to his hard shaft. “Yeah.”

“Then as I was saying, I was lying here in bed, hard as fuck, thinking of you, of all the things we used to do, and of all the things I wanted to do, but we never did. My mind got focused on one of those last things. You know, in all our time together, I never just knocked you to the bed, ripped off your pants, sat on your cock, and rode you senseless.”

Robbie let out a soft gasp. He wrapped his fingers around his cock.

“I love having you inside me, but you know I’ve struggled with being assertive about taking it. Now I wish I had, a lot. You’d think I would’ve learned from watching you, all those times lying on my back with you fucking yourself on my dick, you always looked like you had surpassed heaven.”

Robbie’s hand moved up and down his cock in a steady pace. “I had, because you were the one inside me.”

“I always felt the same way when you were on top. I just never told you.” Kyler let out a throaty moan. “Fuck, Rob, you filled me so perfectly. And the things you could do with that cock of yours,

milking my gland as you fucked me.”

Robbie moaned louder. His hand moved faster.

“You’re stroking yourself right now, aren’t you?”

“Y-yeah,” Robbie said, his voice breathless.

“And you’ve already leaked a little, haven’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Then do me a favor. Rub your thumb through it, smear it all over your tip.”

Robbie did as Kyler said, the slick moisture of his own pre-cum heightening his pleasure.

“Now, put your thumb in your mouth and taste yourself for me.”

Robbie paused, but only for the span of one quick breath before he slipped his thumb into his mouth. He dragged it across his tongue, then closed his lips around it and sucked, groaning as he did.

“I can almost taste you myself,” Kyler said. “A little salty, a hint of bitter, and always so good going down my throat.”

Robbie pulled his thumb from his mouth to grab his cock again. “Just like your taste.”

“Well, we always did have similar diets.”

Robbie smiled. “We did.”

“You sound a little out of breath. You’re getting close, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Hearing you say those things, pretending my taste is yours, it’s got me right there. I can hear it in your voice, how it’s getting deeper, more breathless, you are too.”

“I can’t stop myself from pumping it faster and harder hearing you moaning into the phone. And I can see it in my head, me riding you, and stroking myself for you to watch. Getting closer, and closer...”

“Ky...”

"Then arching back, twisting and squirming on your dick..."

Robbie gasped. He could feel the rush of heat ready to burst out.

"Shouting as I let loose, shooting cum onto your stomach and chest..."

Robbie let out a loud moan as he came. His warm fluid splattered onto his stomach. Though his body could feel nothing but pleasure, his ears picked up Kyler groaning and he knew he'd climaxed also.

Robbie listened to Kyler's heavy breathing. He took a deep breath to slow his own. "Looks like you succeeded in making me come without touching me."

"It's just a shame I wasn't at least in the room to see it."

"I was thinking the same thing. That's something we never did either, just masturbated for each other."

"I know. I put that on my list today."

Robbie chuckled. "You're making a list? Like actually writing these things down?"

"Yeah. I want to make sure if I ever get the chance to be with you again, I do everything I've dreamed of with you."

Robbie heard the seriousness in Kyler's tone, and it sobered his own mood. "You always were good at dirty talk, but this was a whole new level. And all the things you're saying about wanting me inside you, what's gotten into you?"

"Regret, mostly. But I'm working on getting comfortable with a lot of things, and there's no one I'd rather work on that with than you."

"And I'd like to help you."

"I wish you could."

"Maybe I can if you give me the chance. Come see me. Spend a few days on the road with me. I know Jesse won't mind."

Kyler sighed. "I want to, so bad. The thought of being with you, lying next to you again..." his voice trailed off into a brief

silence. "But I don't think I'm ready for you yet. I need to get a little stronger on my own first. You understand?"

"I'm trying to."

"Then that's all I can ask."

Robbie nodded, knowing Kyler couldn't see him, but he couldn't find words to answer him.

"Are you feeling better now that you heard my voice?" Kyler asked.

"Much. Thanks, Ky. After all the shit I've done, you're still there for me like this."

"I'll always be there for you in any way. You should try to get some sleep now, though. I'm guessing you guys are heading out early."

"Yeah. You should get some rest, too."

"I'll be able to now. But I promise, I'm not going to disappear on you. And if you need to hear my voice, I want you to call me."

"I will." Wanting to end the conversation on a light note, Robbie willed some humor into his voice. "Especially since I've been fantasizing about having you buried balls deep inside me. I'm going to have to call you again so we can switch."

"We need to do both in one night. Another thing we never did."

Robbie's cock again stirred at the thought. "Well, at least it'd be one workout plan I'd actually enjoy."

"You're getting my mind going on what kind of workout program I could come up with for you." Kyler sighed. "But I better let you go or else you won't get any sleep tonight."

"I wouldn't mind. I miss nights like that with you."

"I miss them, too. But you can't deny they were better when we could physically feel each other."

"I'll take what I can get. I know you need to rest, though."

"Yeah, I'm still having trouble sleeping. Sometimes I get up in

the middle of the night to work on songs, even when I go to bed late or get up early. I've been trying to nap during the day, then get up and start writing again."

"You're writing new songs? That's awesome."

"It's not bad. I still write thinking of you playing them, which is probably stupid. But I want you to hear them. Even if you stay with Conquest."

Robbie softened his voice. "I want to hear them. Now that I know what you're up to, I'm really going to let you sleep so you can have a fresh mind to work."

Kyler gave a husky chuckle. "We just keep starting new conversations, don't we? Like neither of us wants to hang up."

Robbie smiled. "Yeah, at this rate, we'll be sleeping with the phone on the pillow next to us and saying good morning."

"I do want to say good morning to you."

"You could call me in the morning, if you want."

"Okay, I will." Kyler exhaled a long breath. "I guess I'll be the first to say it then. I'll talk to you soon. Good night."

"Good night." Robbie listened to the silence on the other end of the phone. The hand holding it to his ear dropped to the bed. He sighed and closed his eyes. "I love you, Ky."

A soft voice came from the phone. "I love you too, Rob."

Robbie snapped his head to the side in time to see "disconnected" light up on the screen. He smiled and shut his eyes once again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Robbie dragged himself through the lobby of yet another hotel. After driving all day, they were getting in late, but at least they didn't have a show. They'd rock Denver the next night. Ahead of him, Jesse and Evan walked with their arms around each other's waists. He found out they'd spent their first Valentine's Day in Denver back when Conquest was Evan's opening act, so the two of them were in an extra romantic mood.

It made him miss Kyler even more.

Two days had passed since their phone adventure. The memory of Kyler's words, the tone of his voice, him moaning into the phone, floated through his mind several times since, always leaving him with a sense of yearning and a hard-on. What truly made him ecstatic was the next morning, true to his word, Kyler called him. They'd talked a couple more times since, and he couldn't help but feel with each conversation, they were laying down more foundation for getting back together.

But he needed to see Kyler. On the band's next break, he thought about going home for a couple days. Kyler would be so surprised when he walked in the door. Hopefully. And hopefully he wouldn't walk in to Kyler doing something he wouldn't want to see.

Robbie shook the last thought away. He had to quit thinking about that. Ky said he hadn't been with anyone else. He had to trust him. If there was one thing Kyler had always been honest with him about, it was when he slept with someone else. Plus, he sounded different over the phone. He was still very much the same Ky, but there was something in his voice.

The only thing he could compare it to was when he spoke, Kyler sounded like every word was sincerely genuine. Ky never held back with saying what was on his mind, but when it came to his emotions, that was different. But the night they talked, Kyler laid his emotions bare for him.

"Mr. Russo! Mr. Russo!"

Robbie turned toward the male voice calling his name.

The concierge jogged up, smiling at him. "I apologize for flagging you down like that, sir, but a package arrived for you this morning and I wanted to get it to you before you went up to your room." He held a small brown package toward Robbie.

Robbie looked at it in confusion, then slowly took it. His gaze went directly to the return address, but nothing was there. He looked at the concierge with a wry grin. "You haven't heard it ticking or anything, have you?"

The concierge gave a nervous chuckle. "No, sir. It came through FedEx and seemed legitimate, if not a bit odd. But I thought maybe a fan was sending you a gift."

"Maybe. It's happened before, but most fans put their addresses and name all over things hoping to get a personal thank you back." Robbie tucked the package under his arm as he turned for the elevators. "Thanks."

Robbie stepped into the elevator, where Jesse, Evan, and the others waited for him.

"Looks like you got a present," Jesse said.

Robbie turned the box over, hearing something inside bumping against the sides. "Yeah, but it doesn't have a name on it."

Kenny looked at the package with suspicion. "Maybe you shouldn't open it."

"But I'm curious."

The elevator opened, and Evan stepped out with Jesse and their dogs. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Just keep your phone handy in case someone decided to pull a Van Gogh and send you their ear...or other body part."

"That's not funny, Evan," Robbie called at his retreating back.

Evan threw him a smirk before disappearing into his and Jesse's room.

Kenny walked at Robbie's side as they headed for their rooms. "You want me to hang out while you open it?"

Robbie shook his head. "I'm sure it's fine."

Kenny broke off at his room door. "Alright. See you at dinner, then." He added in a foreboding voice. "I hope."

Robbie laughed and unlocked the door to his room. He closed it behind him and walked through the room, not noticing much of it with his gaze on the package. He tossed his duffel bag to the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. He wondered if he should open it. What if it was something nasty? He was sure he'd pissed plenty of people off with the suspicion he might leave BHD for Conquest.

He lifted the box closer to his ear and shook it. It sounded like more than one thing was inside, clunking together. What unsettled him was someone had tracked down where he was staying ahead of time to be able to get the package to him as he arrived. It wasn't easy finding out what hotels they were at before they reached a town, unless a worker let it slip. Maybe it was a hotel staffer. An obsessed, creepy one.

Robbie lowered the box to his lap. What the hell? There couldn't be anything that bad in it. And if there was, he'd just call the cops. Or pass out. One or the other.

Robbie reached for his duffel bag and dug out a small pair of scissors. He sliced the tape on the box and flipped it open. Lying inside was a small white envelope, a bottle of lube, and something in a black silk sack. He tore open the envelope to the simple blue card, reading,

Your new workout program starts now.

Love, Ky

A wide smile sprang to Robbie's lips. He tugged the drawstrings open on the silk sack and reached in, pulling out a long, thick, veined dildo. He burst out laughing.

Grabbing his cell phone, he speed dialed Kyler's number, still smiling as he listened to it ring.

Kyler picked up. "Hey. Having a good time in Denver?"

Laughing through his words, Robbie said, "Not yet, but I plan to later tonight."

"Then my surprise reached you?"

"It did. Thanks." Robbie held the dildo up, turning it as he examined it. "And you know, the length, the size, it's all very familiar."

"Well, that was my intention. I think I spent an hour in the adult store looking at every dildo they had. And holy shit, even I got an education on what some people can put in their bodies. I still don't think some of them were humanly possible, and if someone can do them, I want to see the freakin' video."

"Wait. You went to a sex store? By yourself? And bought a dildo?"

"Yeah. You sound surprised."

"I am. I never thought you'd go to a sex store in person and buy a dildo."

"I wanted to hand pick it for you. And I figured it was nobody's business what I was buying, and if someone decided to make it their business, I really don't care."

Robbie mouth dropped open. That was definitely his Kyler speaking, the same voice, the same attitude he loved so much, but it was the first time he'd ever heard Kyler using his "screw 'em" attitude toward something like this. Robbie took a breath so he could find his voice. "Then it means even more since you went out specially to get it for me."

A knock on his door interrupted.

"Sounds like you've got company," Kyler said.

Robbie stood, moving toward the door. "Must be one of the guys coming to get me for dinner."

"Then I guess I'll let you go." Kyler exhaled a sigh into the phone. "I might as well get dressed now."

Robbie paused in mid-stride. "Are you naked?"

"Yeah. I wanted to be ready for your first workout, so I've been lying in bed, drinking a beer and watching TV while I wait, teasing my dick to keep it ready for you."

Robbie wet his lips and lightly bit on his bottom one, incapacitated by the mental image of Kyler lying in bed nude, stroking himself.

Knocking pounded on his door again, louder than before, followed by Kenny calling, "Dude, are you okay?"

Kyler's voice came through the phone. "You should probably answer the door."

Robbie snapped back to his senses, or as much sense as he could grasp hold of with his attention focused on his hard cock. "Um, right. Hold on for a second."

He lowered his phone and opened the door to Kenny standing outside it with Jesse, Evan, and the others all giving him expectant, and some concerned, looks. He offered a bright smile. "Hey, guys. We're already heading out?"

"Yeah," Kenny said. "Is everything okay? Did you open that box?"

Robbie cleared his throat. "Yeah, everything's cool. Turned out to be a present from Kyler and he wanted to surprise me."

Evan nodded slowly. "So he really is capable of being thoughtful. Good for him for acting like a big boy."

Robbie caught Evan's gaze drift to the phone and the smirk on his lips. There was no doubt Evan knew Kyler was still on the phone and couldn't let the opportunity to taunt him go by. "Yeah, he gets things right every once in a while. If you guys don't care, I'm probably going to skip out on going to dinner tonight."

"That's cool," Jesse said. "Just make sure you order some room service after Kyler finishes getting you off."

Robbie choked out a gasp, his mouth dropping open.

Jesse laughed and turned away, Evan's hand in his, the others chuckling as they followed.

Robbie shook his head, grinning at their retreating backs, and closed the door while lifting his phone to his ear. "I'm guessing you caught most of that."

"Yeah, but you might as well go out with them. Evan and his smartass 'big boy' remark made me lose my hard-on."

"Then I'll just have to see what I can do to get it back for you. Hold on again." Robbie set the phone on the bed and tore his shirt off. He stepped out of his shoes, stripped away his jeans, underwear, and socks. Picking up his phone again, the dildo, and lube, he grabbed the bed's comforter, flinging it down toward the foot with the top sheet.

He dropped to his back in the bed's center, setting the toy and lube beside him, and put the phone to his ear, hearing soft laughter coming through. "What's so funny?"

"You. I swear I could hear your clothes flying through the air."

Robbie rubbed his fingertips down his abdomen toward his hard cock. "At least you know I'm as eager as usual for you to make me come."

"Oh, we're jumping right into the dirty talk, are we?"

"I thought it'd be a good place to start. Or, you could tell me what you want me to do. I'll need your help, anyhow, since the only time a toy's been inside me is when you've been in control of it."

A low, rumbling moan came from Kyler. "That sounds like a good plan, since I know just how much prepping and stretching your tight, hot little hole needs before anything goes in."

A soft whimper slipped from Robbie's throat. He closed his eyes. His fingers wrapped around his cock and he squeezed the hard shaft.

Kyler spoke again. "I'm thinking the first thing you should do is take your hand off your dick and put the phone on speaker. You're going to need both hands with what I'm going to have you doing."

Robbie kept his grip tight around his cock. "How'd you know my hand was on my dick?"

"Because I couldn't stop from touching mine after you let out that sexy little whimper, and we always were of similar minds on things like that."

"You're hard again?"

"So hard I think it's going to take shooting two loads before I go down."

"I know how you are when you're like that. I always love those times. I just wish you were here so I could take those loads from you like I usually do, one in my mouth, one in my ass."

Kyler let out an appreciative groan. "And you always take it so good. Since you've been gone, I keep coming up with new ways to give it to you."

"More for your list?"

"Exactly. Now put the phone on speaker. I need to get this first one off soon."

"Hold on." Robbie glanced at his phone and hit the option to put it on speaker. He set it on the pillow beside him. "Can you still hear me?"

"Perfectly. Can you hear me?"

"It's like you're lying beside me."

"Good. Do you have your presents close by?"

"Yeah, they're right here." Robbie lifted up the dildo. "I should probably wash this thing before we get going, though."

"I already took care of that when I wrapped it. I wanted it to be ready for you."

Robbie chuckled softly. "You really *are* being thoughtful."

A few deep laughs left Kyler. "You just got me hard again. Don't kill it."

"Of all the things I want to do with your hard-on, killing it isn't one of them."

Kyler laughed harder. "And I'm damn glad for that. But now we need to get this workout going before I lose control and just start stroking the hell out of myself. Open the lube and put some on your fingers."

Still smiling, Robbie picked up the lube and opened it. "Alright. My fingers are slicked."

"Your right hand?"

"Yeah."

"And you're on your back?"

"Uh huh."

"Shift a little onto your left hip so you can reach your hole easier and touch it with your middle fingertip. But *don't* enter yourself until I tell you. Just...*touch*."

Robbie followed Kyler's instructions, angling his body more toward his left. He could feel how more exposed his hole was, and even without Kyler having told him to, with how needful he felt, he wouldn't have been able to resist touching his hole. He pressed his middle fingertip to it, but not enough to penetrate. "I'm there. I'm touching it."

"Rub it on the outside. Slow circles, back and forth. Massage the outer muscles and get it nice and wet on the outside. You can use two fingertips if you want."

Robbie circled his hole with his fingertips, smearing the slick over it. On each rotation, he pressed a little firmer, wanting to breach himself.

"How do your fingers feel?" Kyler asked.

"Not as good as yours."

"I think the exact opposite. I love the feel of your fingers on me, whether they're playing with my hole or caressing my arm, my chest, my back. The tips have a rough, kind of scratchy feel from the toughness they've built up with all the years of being put to the strings. And you're so agile with them, so graceful and skilled. With what you can do with your hands, I swear they're my favorite part of you. You're so fucking good with them."

Only a moan left Robbie in response.

“Are you ready to feel one of your fingers inside you?”

“Y-yeah.”

As Kyler spoke again, his smile came through in his voice. “You’re already breathless. You’re not going to last long, are you?”

“I don’t think so. But I’m sure I’ll be able to go for two, like you.”

“And I can’t wait for it. I want to shoot my cum all over my stomach and chest, rub it over me and lick it from my fingers pretending it’s yours.”

Robbie answered with a moan pitched higher with need.

“You’re *really* ready now. Push a finger into yourself. Slow. Ease it in so you can really feel it waking your body up.”

Robbie pushed the tip of his middle finger to his opening, wanting to shove it in, but as Kyler told him, he pressed it in slowly. Pleasure, and almost a sense of relief, sparked through him at just the tip entering, as if his body was finally getting what it wanted. He moved deeper into himself. His first ring of muscle was tight around his finger, his channel warm and soft inside. It reminded him of being in Kyler, how good he always felt on the inside.

“Are you in deep now?” Kyler asked.

“As deep as I can. But it’s not enough. I already want another one inside me.”

“In a moment. Take some time to feel yourself. Move your finger in and out. Tease yourself. Make yourself moan for me.”

Kyler hadn’t finished his last sentence before Robbie moaned loud, having already started thrusting his finger into himself.

“You’re moving faster than I told you to, aren’t you?”

“I can’t help it,” Robbie said. “Even just the little bit of friction on my rim feels so good. Tell me what you’re doing. Are you playing with your hole, too?”

"No, just my cock. I'm rubbing the sweet spot under the head right now. A little pre-cum is already leaking out."

"Will you taste it for me?"

A second later, Kyler groaned. "It's good."

"I know it is. Your taste...I want it in my mouth again so bad."

"We'll get there again. But right now, let's make each other come. Get your fingers lubed again and put two in."

Robbie quickly withdrew his finger and grabbed the lube again, anxious to get two inside him. With freshly slicked fingers, he reached down to his hole again, driving two inside, making himself arch even more on his left side, his mouth opening wide in a short, choked cry of pleasure.

Kyler tsked through the phone. "You went fast and rough."

"I...I had to. I want it so bad."

"And you know I'm going to give it to you. How do you feel right now? Are you getting that nice and stretched feeling you love?"

"Yeah. But I still want more."

"You always do until you finally get my dick in you. It's one of so many reasons we're great together. And you'll get more soon, I just want you to fuck yourself with your fingers for a little while. You gotta get looser so you can take that big dildo."

Robbie pushed his fingers in a steady, quick pace. He could feel himself stretching, his body accepting what he was doing to it. Desire was building to have his channel filled by more than his fingers. He heard Kyler breathing and noticed it was quicker, deeper than before. "Are you still stroking that beautiful cock I love so much?"

"Yeah. And now I'm the one starting to lose control. You better get three inside you."

Robbie worked a third finger into his body, moaning at the same moment, "Oh God, Ky."

"You like how it feels?"

"Yeah. But, I want to do this for you. With you watching. And have you pull my hand away and put your dick in its place."

"We'll do that. I promise. Do you feel ready for your present?"

"I'm so far beyond ready."

"Then lube it up. But don't put it in. I want to guide it in you with my voice."

Robbie pulled his fingers out of himself and snatched the dildo. He coated it thick with lube and brought it around to his hole. "I'm ready. It's right there."

"Move it against your hole in short thrusts. You know, like how I do when I'm teasing you by not putting my dick in you right away."

Robbie nudged at his hole with the dildo. Only a handful of seconds went by before it seemed like his hips moved on their own, bumping his ass down to take it in. "Ky, I have to put it in. I can't wait any longer."

"Go ahead. But not deep. Just the head to start with. And tell me about it, what it feels like."

Robbie thrust the dildo harder. The slick head moved inside him. He let out a high moan and gripped the bed sheet with his free hand. "It's in. Just the head. It's so wide, so big. Just like yours."

Kyler spoke between panting breaths. "Deeper. Push it deeper."

"Ky, oh, I'm pushing it deeper. It's about halfway in. It's opening and stretching me wider, just like your cock does."

"Keep going, Rob."

"It's...it's in all the way. The balls are against my ass. Ky, it's good. So good to have something hard inside me again."

"That's why I had to get it for you. I wanted you to stay used to the feeling until we're together again."

"That was a damn good idea. What do you want me to do

now?”

“Fuck yourself with it till you come. Stroke your dick. Do whatever you have to. I’m getting so close, I don’t think I can keep talking.”

On Kyler’s last word, Robbie pulled the dildo back and shoved it in again. He clamped the fingers of his other hand around his cock, stroking it fast and hard, matching it to the force and speed of how he thrust the dildo into himself.

He writhed on the bed. His hips moved forward and back with his body, seeking pleasure from both his cock and ass. He heard himself, the high needful moans blending with Kyler’s panting groans.

“Rob...I’m about to. Are you close?”

“I’m right there, Ky. Go ahead, come for me.”

Kyler’s powerful baritone sounded through the phone moaning and gasping. Robbie heard it shuddering, just as he knew Kyler’s body was, overwhelmed in his climax. Envisioning him, listening to him come, Robbie lost himself in the throes of his own orgasm.

Seconds ticked by before he started to come down from it. He smelled the bitter and salty scent of his own cum, and he kept his eyes closed, imagining it was his and Kyler’s fluid combined. He heard Kyler’s breathing, still heavy, through the phone. Robbie glanced down at his hand, covered in cum, with it splashed further up on his torso. He rubbed his hand through it and over his chest, the same way Kyler did whenever he came on him.

Robbie shifted. The dildo still rested inside him. At some point during his climax, he’d let go of it. He reached back, slowly drawing it out, giving a hard groan as it left his body.

“Did you just take it out?”

Robbie’s body warmed at Kyler’s voice, low and gravelly with a satisfied tone. “Yeah. And right now, I’m thinking I might’ve overestimated in going for two.”

Low chuckles came from Kyler. "Yeah, I wasn't expecting to come so hard either. It was so hot listening to you. You got really into it."

"It was all you. You always get me this way, even if you're not in the room."

"I'm glad I can still do that to you. I'm guessing you like your present?"

"I love it." Robbie rolled to his side, his gaze on the phone still on the pillow next to him. "But as good as it felt, it doesn't even begin to compare to you. It might have the same size and shape, but the real you is warm, your skin soft over your hard cock. And, it can't come inside me. You might think it's crazy, but that's my favorite part, feeling you let go in me, even more than my own orgasm."

His voice dipped to a whisper. "Maybe that's another reason why I'd get so frustrated with our up and down times. Every time we'd get back together, I'd have to wait until we both got a couple of clear tests before we could ditch the condoms again. I never said it, but that was always so hard for me. After knowing you so much with nothing between us, those times of having to go back... they...they hurt."

Kyler's voice reflected Robbie's hushed tone. "I know. It was the same for me. It seems like every time it was taking steps back. Not that we didn't take a lot of steps forward together. I guess maybe we just didn't realize how much we were holding our life together back all those times we'd break away from each other for a while. And now that we do..." Kyler stopped, as though not sure if he should say what he wanted.

"And now that we do, we can fix it and start walking forward again, beside each other, like we should be," Robbie finished for him.

Kyler's voice trembled slightly, as if he were trying to restrain emotion. "That's what I wanted to say, but I wasn't sure if it was what you wanted to hear. Is that...do you really want that? To walk beside me again?"

"You know it's what I want. It's all I've ever wanted."

"It's what I want, too. So incredibly much."

Robbie smiled at the phone, wishing Kyler could see it and know his true feelings simply from looking into his eyes. He took a breath. "And you know what else your present can't do?"

"What's that?"

"It can't hold me. I want your arms around me so bad right now."

"Then I promise whenever we see each other again, I'll hold you for an extra long time, and I'll hold you whenever you want. Anything you ever want from me and everything I am, will be yours."

Robbie slid his hand across the phone, touching his fingertips to it as if it were Kyler's cheek. "Then we've already taken so many steps forward together."

"Yeah, we have. So now, we just have to keep moving forward."

"And we will. I love you, Ky."

"I love you too, Rob."

Silence followed for several seconds before Kyler took a deep, audible breath and spoke in a lighter tone. "So, you ready for that second one now?"

Robbie laughed. "I'm pretty sure I can work it up."

"Good, but you know how I am. It's time to change positions. Get on your hands and knees."

Laughing to himself, Robbie flipped over to his stomach and lifted himself up, thinking if things were this good over the phone, when the time came for them to be together in person, nothing would be able to stop them from living in happiness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Kyler took a seat in the booth near a window where he could watch people strolling by as he waited for Brandon and Shunichi. He picked up the menu, but as he skimmed over it, he saw movement out the corner of his eye and his other senses told him someone was looking at him.

He glanced to his side, his gaze meeting with the brilliant green eyes of a guy sitting at a nearby table. Kyler's mind locked up for a second at how stunningly attractive the man was. Even sitting, he could tell the other was tall, and his designer suit couldn't fully hide the fit body beneath. His chiseled features were model perfect. His black hair styled similar to how Robbie wore his, but slightly longer.

The thought of Robbie dimmed the man's attractiveness. Kyler looked back to his menu. Standing side by side, Robbie's hotness would blow that guy away.

Kyler sensed movement coming toward him. Delicately scented cologne floated near him.

"Mind if I join you?"

Kyler looked up at the guy standing at the table's edge. "I'm waiting for someone."

A slight grin curved the other's lips. "A boyfriend?"

"Well, they're both boys, and they're both my friend, but no, not the two words together."

"Then I'll keep you company until they get here."

Kyler fixed him with a look showing he didn't appreciate his self invitation.

Ignoring the glare, the guy offered his hand to him. "I'm Todd."

Kyler grudgingly shook it, not bothering to offer his name in return.

Todd's smile remained in place. "I have to say, it was quite a surprise when I turned around and saw the lead singer of my favorite band walk through the door."

Kyler lifted a glass of water to take a drink. "And why is that?"

"It's not every day male celebrities come down to this neighborhood."

"Their loss, then. Boystown seems like a cool enough place to hang out to me."

Todd's smile broadened. "Is it okay if I call you Kyler?"

"Better than if you call me Mr. Christenson. That makes me feel like I should be looking around for my father."

"I hear you on that." Todd leaned on the table closer to him. "So, I know you said you were meeting some friends, but how would you feel about having some company later."

"I don't think so."

Todd sat back, his smile disappeared for the first time since he'd started talking. "I hope I wasn't wrong in my assumption about you."

Kyler met Todd's gaze directly. "If your assumption was that I'm gay, then no you're not wrong."

Todd's smile returned full force. "Sorry if I wasn't sure. You have a slightly different public image, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do."

"So if we can't get together tonight, how about tomorrow? I'm free all day."

Kyler shook his head. "Not going to happen. Besides, I'm leaving town tomorrow."

"Then it has to be tonight. We could get together anytime and I promise I won't keep you up too late." Todd added in a more flirtatious tone. "Or maybe I will, but it'll be worth your while. I promise."

Kyler let out a humorless snort. "You're persistent, aren't you?"

Todd leaned forward again, wetting his lips with a slip of his tongue. "Can you blame me? Just look at you. You're gorgeous. And everyone knows, no one fucks like a rock star. I want to experience that. I want to feel your cock pounding my ass, fucking me as hard as you want. I'm game for anything."

Kyler stared at him. Goddamn, the man wasn't shy. And he was so horny. The phone sex with Robbie was great, but it'd been over a month since he'd felt Robbie's body pressed against him. He couldn't remember when the last time he'd gone so long without sex. He felt almost desperate to feel Robbie wrapped around him.

He smiled. And that was all he needed. Here was this sinfully hot guy, laying it out that he wanted to sleep with him, but all he could think of was Robbie.

"Sorry," Kyler said. "The answer is still no."

"Are you seeing someone?"

"I have a hope to."

"Well, a hope isn't actually having, is it? I'm not asking for a relationship here. Just a little fun. And he'd never have to know."

Kyler took his turn to lean forward, locking his gaze with Todd's in a sharp glare. "Listen, I've been trying to be polite, but you don't seem to be catching on, so let me be real blunt. I'm not interested. It's not going to happen. If you want to get off, go jerk off. Got it?"

Todd continued to stare at him for a long moment. He nodded slowly. "Well, then I guess there's no point in keeping you company anymore."

"No there isn't. So, bye."

Without another word, Todd slid out of the booth and turned for the door.

Kyler watched him leave. Shaking his head, he looked down at his watch. Brandon and Shunichi were ten minutes late. His stomach rumbled, and he decided to not wait on them any longer. He lifted his hand to signal the waitress, pausing as the

door opened again. Brandon and Shunichi walked in, and with them, Todd, who was wearing a large smile.

As they reached his table, Brandon grinned down at him. "Hey, Kyler. How's it going?"

His gaze on Todd, Kyler replied with caution in his voice. "Fine."

Brandon tossed his arm around Todd's shoulders. "I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine and fellow actor, Todd Delacroix."

Kyler looked from Brandon to Todd. He glanced at Shunichi, noticing how his grin matched the other two's. His gaze rested on Brandon. "This was a set up."

Brandon dropped his arm from Todd's shoulders to applaud softly. "And congratulations, you passed the test."

Brandon sat in the booth across from Kyler, Shunichi sliding in beside him.

Todd pushed Kyler on the shoulder. "Move over. I don't act gratis. These two are buying me lunch for that stellar performance I just put on."

Kyler scooted closer to the window, giving Todd space to sit next to him. He eyed him with suspicion, glancing again to Brandon and Shunichi. "Test? Performance? You guys want to let me in on what the hell is going on?"

Brandon folded his arms on top of the table. "Just what I said. We were testing you, at Jesse's request."

Kyler let out a snort. "Figures."

"And at Evan's," Shunichi added.

"That figures even more."

Brandon shook his head at him. "But there's no reason to be upset at either of them. They just want to make sure you're ready for what you're about to do, but even more, that you're ready to give all you have to Robbie."

Kyler looked into Brandon's eyes. "I'm more than ready for

that.”

Brandon nodded, waiting to say more as their server approached. After giving her their orders, he focused on Kyler again. “I believe that. I truly do. The only thing I’m concerned about is if you’re moving too fast. There’s no denying you’ve made huge progress in the past month in getting more comfortable with yourself, but I still think you’ve got a ways to travel on that road.”

Shunichi spoke up. “Though, finally being able to say you’re gay to another person is a huge step in of itself.”

Kyler lowered his gaze to the table. “Yeah, but that’s easy enough saying it to another gay man. Saying it to the world is a whole other game.”

Shunichi smiled at him. “Yeah, but a month ago, you weren’t able to say it to anyone, even yourself. So be proud.”

Kyler returned Shunichi’s smile with his own and nodded. “You’re right. It’s just with what I have planned, I’m feeling a little freaked.”

Their waitress stepped up to the table, dropping off their burgers, salads, fries, and drinks.

Brandon took a sip of his Pepsi before speaking. “If you feel that way, maybe you should wait. You don’t want to push too hard, too fast.”

Kyler sighed. “That’s the thing. I don’t want to wait. Not any longer to be with him, anyhow. I know what I have to do to get him back. At least, I think I do. And if it works, I’m willing to push myself to do it. All I want is to have Robbie beside me every night again. Anything with myself is secondary.”

“I don’t know if I’d agree with that,” Shunichi said. “But then again, he might be able to give you what you need to carry out the last steps of your self-acceptance. Either way, what you’re doing proves you’re more ready than even you believe.”

Brandon flicked his head at Todd, smirking at him. “And the fact that you turned him down says a lot.”

Todd spoke around a mouthful of food. "It says a hell of a lot! No one ever turns me down. And I played it beautifully, too. I had a nice balance of hotness and ego stroking for him going on."

Kyler laughed. "Yeah, you did. You did come on a little strong, though."

Todd huffed in disagreement. "Please, there's no such thing as coming on too strong when you're looking to get laid."

Brandon pointed a French fry at Todd. "Why do I have a feeling you slipped out of character during your scene?"

Todd glanced to his side, his gaze moving down Kyler. "It's possible I might've added a little more of my own personality than I should've, but damn, like I was going to say no if he said yes. You guys would've been waiting for me to show up at your car to tell you how things went, and all you would've gotten was a phone call with me saying, 'I've got good news and bad news. The bad news is he failed the test. The good news is I'm about to get laid. Catch you guys later.'"

Laughing with Brandon and Shunichi, Kyler looked at Todd. "Well, now I feel a little more flattered knowing you weren't fully acting."

Todd tossed his arm across the back of the booth, a flirtatious grin on his lips. "So does that change your answer?"

Kyler shook his head at him. "No, it doesn't."

"Damn," Todd said, turning back to his food. "And I really did want to know what it'd be like to fuck a rock star."

"You want to know what it'd be like to fuck just about anybody who's male, so I don't know where this rock star bullshit matters," Brandon said.

Kyler broke into laughter with everyone again. It was so strange. When Robbie had left him, he never felt more alone. Losing Robbie made him realize how shallow everything else he always valued was. The clothes, the cars, money, fame. None of it meant anything without being able to share it with the one he

loved.

But what he found so strange was how out of his loneliness, he'd gained new friends, Brandon and Shunichi, and Jesse and Evan, who were by far the biggest shocker. He even had a feeling he'd found a new friend in Todd, and he knew he was closer to Adam and Kevin now. It amazed him how when he hit the lowest point in his life, so many people stepped forward to lift him up again.

Above everyone, though, was Robbie. Whenever they talked, Robbie told him he loved him, he would support him, be there for him in all ways. So often Robbie asked what he could do to help him. All he could tell him, Robbie already was. Just knowing Robbie still cared for him kept him motivated to embrace himself as the man he was, and that was a man who'd been gay for as long as he could remember. No amount of denial, no experience with women, could ever change that.

It took more than a few hours of soul searching to reach the realization. He had to look back and find again the young man he was before his father and brother had beat him so bad. He remembered how even as a boy, it was other boys he had crushes on and wanted to kiss on the playground.

He thought of sitting in church, listening to his father's sermons, and how when his dad would preach on homosexuality, the confusion that would cover him. It was supposed to be wrong, a sin, but he didn't understand. If that were true, why couldn't he control his feelings to not like other guys?

He recalled his thoughts from back then, believing his attraction for men was as much a part of him as his very soul, and it was just as deep within him, and how it could only mean one of two things; it was natural or he'd been born evil. While his father, his brother, and so many other people might believe the latter, he now knew it was the first. There was nothing evil or wrong with being gay. He was the exact person he was born to be. Or at least, he was becoming the exact person, now that he understood his sexuality was something to be embraced, cherished, and celebrated.

“You’ve gotten really quiet.”

Kyler glanced up to find Brandon, Shunichi, and Todd all looking at him. “Just thinking.”

“About Robbie?” Shunichi asked.

Kyler nodded. “Him, me, our relationship, pretty much everything.”

Todd grinned at him. “That’s a lot of thinking.”

Kyler chuckled. “Tell me about it. It’s making my head hurt.”

Brandon pointed at Kyler’s plate. “Well, one of the best things for that is a full stomach. You better eat now. You might not have much of an appetite tomorrow if your nerves get to you.”

“Not that you have anything to be nervous or worried about,” Shunichi added. “It’s going to go beautifully. I know it.”

Kyler took a deep breath as he picked up his cheeseburger. He let it out in a quick rush of air and forced a smile. “Let’s hope so.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Robbie stood on stage, laughing as Jesse joked with the crowd, and took the moment to let his fingers rest. He thought he was used to this. Playing to packed stadiums had become as much a part of his career as studio work, but the way Conquest put on a concert was a lot different than BHD. Jesse's high energy, the mini orchestra, the dancers, the light show, pyrotechnics, all created a much different atmosphere. Even Kenny would sprint across the stage with his guitar, playing to all sides and going out on the extended platform over the crowd.

What he thought was most cool, rather than just have him play a few songs, Jesse had worked him into their entire show, even given him a solo portion and let him and Kenny take the stage together to rock the crowds with their dueling guitars. He had to admit, it was the most fun he ever had performing live.

Robbie gazed over sold-out arena, packed wall to wall with rowdy fans desperate for every note Conquest played. Oddly, this arena was setup different than previous ones. The floor section between the stage and stadium seating was split with barricades to create an aisle. At other arenas, the floor was filled with people shoulder to shoulder with no space between. He asked Jesse what was up with the aisle, and Jesse told him he thought it might be cool to sing on the floor surrounded by fans.

Robbie was more than a little surprised at the idea. Yeah, it'd be cool for the fans, and he'd seen artists do it before, but it also wasn't the safest thing. The floor was a crazy place at any concert to begin with. Dropping the lead singer in the middle of it was an accident waiting to happen. Fans could break through the barriers, Jesse could get mauled, crushed, seriously hurt by people rabid to get close to him. He saw they had additional security, but still couldn't believe Evan would let Jesse do something so dangerous.

Two stagehands shot past him, running toward Jesse. One

handed Jesse a headset mic, the other an acoustic guitar. Knowing the cameramen could project him onto a large screen at the back of the stage at any moment, Robbie did his best to hide his confusion. What in the world was Jesse doing? This wasn't something they rehearsed. It wasn't something he'd *ever* seen Conquest rehearse.

Jesse pulled the guitar strap over his head, got it comfortable on his shoulder, and took the pick from the stagehand. He adjusted the headset mic, then put his fingers to the frets, playing a soft melody with a Mozart-esque flair. He strolled across the stage, his fingers moving as if on their own, yet every chord sounded with artful perfection.

"I hope everyone doesn't mind, I'm going to slow things down for a few," Jesse said. "As I'm sure everyone here knows, a little more than two and a half years ago, I was blessed with the greatest gift a person could ever have in their life, true love, given to me by my soul mate, the love of my life, Evan Arden."

Jesse looked off stage. A camera followed his gaze and projected a smiling Evan on the screen. The crowd, having hushed when Jesse started speaking, erupted at him saying Evan's name, then seeing him on screen.

Jesse's chuckling voice floated through the stadium. "Yeah, I react the same way when I see him, too." His voice sobered to serious once again. "The road for us wasn't the easiest. We stumbled over a few bumps, but we also held each other's hands to keep from falling.

"I know what it's like to be separated from the one you love. And I also know the joy of being reunited. That's why I'm going to take a step back and give the spotlight to a friend with the hope he'll get to experience that same sweet joy."

As Jesse finished talking, he also stopped playing the guitar. The stage lights blackened. A single spotlight turned on a doorway at the back of the arena aligned with the aisle on the floor. Robbie glanced at Kenny, standing with his arms resting on his Fender Stratocaster hanging from its strap. He looked at Julian, sitting at the black grand piano with a small grin. Robbie

turned to Brad behind the drums, his eyes also focused on the same spot as everyone else's. Why did it seem like they all knew what was going on, but he didn't have the first freakin' clue? Did they hold some band meeting and forget to invite him?

Just as hurt started to sting Robbie's heart, Jesse played a few gentle chords on the acoustic, different from the ones he'd played moments before. A husky baritone lifted over the notes; the voice, one Robbie knew so very well. His breath fled in a soft gasp as the doors opened and Kyler stepped into the spotlight, singing,

*"Since the day you've been gone,
I've spent each hour alone.
Minutes stretching out so long,
Sleeping with my hand on the phone,
Waiting for a call that won't come.*

*I know why you walked away,
Closed the door,
Saying you couldn't stay.
The hurt was more than you could take,
And it was all I could give.*

*It's not enough,
Surviving off my taste and touch.
You told me that once.
I didn't hear you.
But now I'm listening,
And I'll do anything,
To stop you from hurting."*

Kyler walked down the aisle as he sang, his gaze locked on Robbie. The crowd had erupted at his appearance, but now quieted as he sung the ballad new to all ears. Kyler took a breath to enter the chorus, and right before he let his voice blast out, Brad pounded the drums in a deep beat, Kenny's Fender

Stratocaster blended with Jesse's acoustic, Julian struck keys on the piano, adding a rich harmony to the song.

*"I've been wrong,
For so long.
Truth and lies,
Were the same in my eyes.*

*I've been wrong,
For so long.
But I want to make things right,
With you sharing my life.*

*Show me the path,
Show me the way.
Walk beside me,
Every day..."*

Conquest carried out the song for a few notes, then the rest of the band dropped out, leaving only Jesse's acoustic and Kyler's voice as he started the second verse. Kyler neared the stage, and stagehands wheeled a set of metal stairs to the front.

*"I don't want to live each day,
Thinking of the dreams we lost.
Watching memories slip away,
From not being able trust.*

*I'll give you all you asked,
And hand you all your dreams.
I'm dropping the mask,
Showing the real me,
With nothing but hope,
That it'll set us both free..."*

Kyler climbed the stairs and stepped on stage. He walked to

Robbie, stopping in front of him. Rather than the rest of the band joining him for the chorus again, only Jesse's acoustic played on as Kyler softly sang,

*"I've been wrong,
For so long.
Truth and lies,
Were the same in my eyes.*

*I've been wrong,
For so long.
But I want to make things right,
With you sharing my life.*

*Show me the path,
Show me the way.
Walk beside me,
Every day..."*

Robbie stared into Kyler's eyes. Kyler couldn't be doing what he thought. He'd said so many times he wasn't ready. But the song, the lyrics, the way Kyler was looking at him, he was laying everything out in the open...for him.

Kyler lowered the mic, his words not meant for the crowd. "I know this is a little extravagant, and you might be royally pissed at me right now, but this was the only thing I could think of to let you know just how much I love you, how much I need you, how much I'm willing to do to have you again." He reached out to take Robbie's hand, letting it hover between them. "If you don't want me, say so and I'll leave. But if you do, then take my hand, and we'll leave together."

Robbie stared into Kyler's eyes for a moment more, then looked down at his hand. He saw it was trembling ever so slightly. Despite how confident he sounded as he sang and when he spoke, Kyler was a mess of nerves, and, he imagined, fear.

Robbie lifted his hand and set it in Kyler's, squeezing it tight.

He looked up with a bright smile. He saw the tension in Kyler's face drop away, replaced by relief, and a heartbeat later, the same happiness he felt inside was reflected in Kyler's expression. With joy surging through him, Robbie slipped his hand under Kyler's hair, the silky softness of it against his skin sending a tremor of desire through him. He cupped the back of Kyler's neck as he leaned forward. Kyler placed a hand on Robbie's cheek, meeting him in a passionate kiss.

Jesse was the first to let out a cheer, a split second before the crowd erupted. As the kiss slowly ended, Kyler rested his forehead against Robbie's, still smiling. "Let's get out of here."

Robbie nodded, then snapped his head toward Jesse. "But the rest of the show..."

As if knowing his concern, Jesse flicked his hand at him in a shooing motion.

Robbie smiled and nodded his thanks, and with Kyler's hand in his, turned to leave.

Jesse's voice sounded through the stadium. "And there you have it. Love. Is there anything more beautiful? Let's give those guys a huge round of applause in wishing them a happy future together."

Raucous cheers and applause erupted.

A stagehand rushed out with Jesse's favorite guitar, a sunburst Fender Stratocaster. Jesse handed him the acoustic and slipped on the electric, striking a loud chord that resonated through the stadium. "And now, let's end this night by blowing the roof off the joint!"

As Conquest launched into their older Number One hit, "Euphoria," Robbie and Kyler walked off stage. A roadie rushed up to take Robbie's guitar, and after seeing it secured in its case, Robbie turned with Kyler to Evan, who was standing close by.

"And just how long have you guys had this in the works?" Robbie said.

Evan smirked at him. "A while. Jesse knew from the start you

weren't going to be a permanent band member. In his words, 'You know I have a thing for strays, but I don't plan on keeping this one. I know where his home is and plan on getting him back there.'"

Robbie burst out laughing. "So I was just a little lost pup to him, huh?"

"Something like that. Didn't you think it was odd how I was dragging my feet on getting you signed as a band member?"

"Now that you mention it, with how efficient you are on everything else with Conquest, it did seem weird." Robbie shook his head slightly. "I can't believe he did this, went through so much with bringing me into the band even for a short while, working me into the concerts, knowing none of it would be permanent just to help us find our way."

"He didn't look at it that way," Evan said. "He saw it as doing his part to help you guys make things right by each other. Everyone's known all along you two are meant to be together. All we were doing was waiting on you guys to figure it out."

Kyler wrapped his arm around Robbie's waist. "We always knew. We just lost sight of it for a while."

Evan turned his gaze on him. "And now you have it in your direct line of sight. Keep it there."

Kyler tightened his hold on Robbie. "Don't worry. Nothing's ever going to make us look away from each other again."

Movement behind Evan caught Robbie's attention. Adam and Kevin walked toward them, beaming with wide smiles.

"Hey!" Robbie said, stepping forward to embrace them. "I can't believe you guys are here, too!"

Adam laughed as he jostled Robbie. "I don't know why. You didn't think we'd leave it to just Kyler to try and woo you back to us."

Kevin hugged Robbie next. "Yeah, we had to be here to run damage control against anything stupid he'd do."

Kyler shot Kevin a glare. "You know, now that you're out of

your cast, I can kick your ass and put you in a bigger one.”

Robbie rocked Kevin back and forth in his embrace. “Man, I missed you two bitching at each other so freakin’ much.” With Kevin chuckling, Robbie let him go, looking between him and Adam. “But why didn’t you guys take the stage to play for Ky instead of Jesse and the guys?”

Adam flicked his thumb toward Kyler. “Because he wanted to surprise you. If we would’ve walked out, then you really would’ve known something was up.”

Robbie turned a warm smile on Kyler. “He did a good job.”

Kyler pulled him into his arms again.

“Euphoria” drew to a close. Jesse said good night to the crowd and jogged off stage. He slid to a halt beside Evan, looking from Robbie to Kyler. “Is everything good? Are you guys back together? That wasn’t just for show out there, was it?”

Robbie chuckled. “No, it wasn’t just for show.” He stepped away from Kyler and flung his arms around Jesse in a tight hug. “I’ll never be able to thank you enough for what you’ve done.”

“Of course you can,” Jesse said. “You’ll do it every day you guys are living happily ever after.”

Robbie smiled at him as he drew back, then turned to hug Evan and give him his thanks. The others walked up, and as Robbie went to each one giving hugs, Kyler went to Jesse.

“What you’ve done means the world to me, Jesse. If you ever need anything from me, all you have to do is ask.”

“It was nothing. It’s just what friends do for each other. And it’s not like I acted alone.” Jesse laid his hand on Evan’s back.

Kyler’s smile broadened even more at Jesse’s words. Friends. Jesse truly considered him a friend. He put his arms around Jesse, whispering another soft “Thank you.” As he released him, he turned to Evan.

Evan offered his hand to him.

Kyler knocked Evan’s hand aside and wrapped him in an

embrace. "Whether you like it or not, you're always going to be a friend to me from now on, too."

Evan slowly raised his arms, giving him a couple pats on the back. "Well, I suppose there are worse things in the world."

Kyler laughed with the others, then the crowd chanting for an encore demanded Jesse's attention. Before turning for the stage, Jesse moved in front of Evan, putting his arms around his neck while looking at Kyler and Robbie. "And now, you guys get out of here and go have make up sex. I don't want to be the only one keeping the entire hotel awake with my shouts of passion."

Julian leaned back against Morgan, who wrapped his arms around Julian's waist. "As if you'd ever be the only one."

"Well yeah," Jesse said, "with your nipple clamps and riding crop, how could anything but shouts be coming from your room?"

With everyone laughing, Robbie included, Kyler looked at him. "Since it seems you know what he's talking about, you're going to let me in on it, right?"

Robbie nodded, still chuckling. "Yeah, I will. Later."

Kyler took Robbie's hand. "It sounds like it's going to be one noisy night. Thanks again, guys."

Jesse lifted his hand in a wave, unable to speak with his lips on Evan's.

Kyler bumped lightly against Robbie. "Is that what you had to look at every day since you've been with them?"

"Yeah. They're not exactly shy in showing affection."

Kyler glanced back at Jesse and Evan. "Damn, and you're still coming back to me. Guess you really do love me."

Robbie snickered under his breath. "I'm glad the important parts of you haven't changed." He noticed Adam and Kevin weren't following. He stopped and faced them. "Hey, aren't you guys coming?"

Kevin looked at him. "I know it's been a while for you two,

but seriously, don't tell me you need us to hold your hands through it."

Adam knocked Kevin on the chest with the back of his hand. "What he means is, we're going to let you guys get reacquainted and we'll all catch up tomorrow. The important thing for us is knowing you've come back to us."

Robbie smiled and nodded in understanding. He led Kyler from the stadium to a black limo waiting to take the band back to the hotel, figuring by the time Conquest wrapped up with their encores and were ready to leave, the limo could take him and Kyler to the hotel and return for them. He jumped in back, Kyler following after.

Kyler took Robbie's face gently in both hands and kissed him. "Does this mean what I think it does? Have you really taken me back?"

"I took you back a long time ago. The question is, do you really want me back?"

Kyler lowered one hand to take Robbie's hand. "You never did anything wrong for me to have to take you back. I'm the one who's been screwing up for years."

"That's not true. I've been selfish and wrong on so many things. All the times I'd run away from our problems instead of standing with you and facing them. And worst of all, I was so wrapped up in what I wanted from you, I never saw what you *needed* from me. I should've seen you were giving me all you could, even though you needed help giving to yourself. I'm the one who messed things up, Ky. Not you."

Kyler gave him a tender kiss. "Then how about we call things even and agree we both could've done better."

Robbie squeezed Kyler's hand. "I'll go with that. This is a new start for us. We can still hold onto the good parts of our past together, but I've come to realize how wrong I was always wanting to get back to where we used to be in our relationship. I should've been looking at all the things we have ahead of us in our future."

A soft smile touched Kyler's lips. "You did hang out with Jesse a lot, didn't you?"

Robbie chuckled. "Yeah, I did. But I really believe what I said."

Kyler stroked Robbie's cheek with his thumb. "It's what I believe, too." He took a deep breath, his joyful expression becoming more stressed. "I just hope you know I'm still working on some things with me. I might freak out tomorrow morning when the whole world is talking about me being gay and the stunt I pulled tonight."

Robbie laid his hand over Kyler's and moved it to his lips, placing a kiss on the back and one in the palm. "It's going to be okay. I promise, no matter how much of a freak out you have, I'm going to stand at your side." He smirked and nipped one of Kyler's knuckles. "I'll even handcuff myself to you to keep you from trying to get away from me."

Kyler bowed his head, resting his forehead against Robbie's. "I'm not going to try to get away, but I kind of like the idea of you handcuffing yourself to me."

Robbie gave him a light kiss. "Is that on your sex to-do list?"

"It's about to be added."

Robbie grinned and kissed him again. He eased back, looking into Kyler's eyes. "After my interview, you told me you were proud of me for coming out. Now it's my turn. I can't tell you how amazed and proud of you I am. When I came out, I did it in front of one interviewer and a couple cameramen. You did it in front of a stadium packed with thousands of people. I always knew you were fearless, but what you did took it to a whole new level."

Kyler lowered his gaze. "I'm not fearless. I'm far from it. I was so terrified before going out, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to do it. The only thing that drew me out there was seeing you at the other end of the stadium. The sight of you, knowing what I wanted to have with you in our future, gave me the courage to step out there and sing. Jesse, Evan, Brandon, Shunichi, they

were all worried I was moving too fast too soon and I should give myself more time to fully come to terms with everything. But the thing is, I know I can't walk the final steps to accepting myself without you, because," he met Robbie's gaze, "you're my partner. You're the other half of me. I'm not whole without you."

Robbie lost his breath as emotion stole his words. He fell against Kyler, holding him tight. "I love you, Ky."

Kyler buried his nose in Robbie's hair. "I love you too, Rob."

The limo halted, and they climbed out to the hotel front doors. Walking through the lobby, Kyler's hand in his, filled Robbie with the same rush it had in New Orleans, only it felt stronger because now he knew this was how things would be from this day forward.

Kyler stopped at the front desk to collect his bag, then they turned for the elevators. Robbie led him to his room, and when they stepped inside, their lips met before the door finished closing behind them.

Robbie slipped both hands under Kyler's shirt, feeling his warmth, the smoothness of his skin, the firmness of his wiry muscles. Kyler moved one hand under Robbie's shirt, sliding it across his lower back as he embraced him tighter to his own body.

His lips on Kyler's, Robbie whispered, "I know you have a lot of things you want to do on your list, but I want to be with you in my favorite way tonight, you on top, buried deep inside me, feeling your weight pressing down on me, your body rubbing against mine."

Kyler let out a rumbling groan and sucked on Robbie's neck. "I'm fine with that. We'll have a lifetime to do everything on my list, and I have a feeling that list will never end."

Kyler's words, *they'd have a lifetime*, intensified all the joy and desire Robbie felt. He found Kyler's lips, kissing him with even more passion while pushing him back to the bed. As they reached it, Robbie ended the kiss to rip his shirt over his head. Kyler reached to unfasten Robbie's jeans, but before his hands could

touch him, Robbie had them open and was pushing them down, kicking his shoes off at the same moment.

Kyler chuckled under his breath. "You know, I had planned to be all sweet and romantic, but you're flinging clothes off like a stripper working for his dinner."

Robbie started undoing the buttons on Kyler's shirt. "You can be sweet and romantic after you're inside me." He smirked at him. "Is me doing a striptease for you on your list?"

"I had me doing one for you on it, but we can add you doing one."

Robbie pushed Kyler's shirt down his arms and bowed his head to kiss the top of Kyler's chest. "I really need to see this full list."

"Trust me, I'll have it posted on the refrigerator of our house so we can look at it every day and decide what we'd like to do. When we have a house, that is."

Robbie paused. He slowly lifted his head. "Are you serious?"

Kyler rubbed his hands over Robbie's hips to grip his bare ass cheeks. "So serious I had Evan give me the number of the real estate agent he used when he moved to Evanston, and I've had her sending me info on houses. But I did just go off the assumption you'd want to live in the Chicago area. We don't have to. We can live anywhere you want."

"No, I want to live there. I'm just stunned, and surprised, and," a wide smile glowed across his features, "so incredibly happy. You're giving me everything I've always wanted in one night."

Kyler's crooked smirk turned up one corner of his lips. "Well that's good. I was afraid I was setting the bar really high on making you happy and I'd have to keep trying to top it, but if I'm giving you everything in one night, I guess I can slack off now."

Robbie laughed and lightly shoved him. "I don't know about that."

Kyler squeezed Robbie's ass and jerked him forward. "Don't

worry. I still plan on trying to top it. My happiness is tied to yours, and all it takes is seeing you smile to make me do the same.”

Robbie wrapped his arms around him, pressing their lips together. He went down to the bed, bringing Kyler with him. As he started to lie back, Kyler eased away from the kiss and smiled at him.

“Hold up a second. You’ve been moving so fast, I’ve hardly gotten a glimpse of your tattoo. I need to check it out.”

“I sent you a picture of it.”

“Yeah, but like I said when you sent it, I was too distracted by your hard cock that you included in the shot to notice.”

Grinning, Robbie reclined back on his elbows. “You still might have that problem now.”

Kyler glanced down, his gaze going first to Robbie’s cock, hard and flushed, lying on his lower abdomen, the tip near his navel. He forced his eyes to look left, where on the inside of Robbie’s hip was the finely detailed and colored tattoo resembling Robbie’s cherished guitar with flames burning off it. Kyler touched his fingertips to the small guitar head and traced down the length of the tattoo. “It’s beautiful. And I love where you had it put.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

Kyler moved his gaze up to Robbie’s left ear and the emerald shining there. He slid his fingertips gently under Robbie’s earlobe. “And I especially like this.”

Robbie laid his hand over Kyler’s other one. “So do I. Whenever I’d think of you, I’d reach up and touch it.”

Kyler lowered his head, bringing their lips together in another passion filled kiss. Robbie slid to the center of the bed and lay on his back, moaning softly as Kyler eased down on him. Kyler’s leather pants, warm and supple, rubbed against Robbie’s inner thighs, the sensation so familiar to Robbie from their nights of making love after concerts. He settled one leg across Kyler’s ass, and drifted his fingertips up and down Kyler’s back.

Feeling Kyler on top of him, Robbie didn’t understand how

it was possible to be so excited and so calm at the same moment. The anxiety that had existed constantly inside him was gone. Kyler had brushed it from his heart the moment he began to sing and replaced it with a sense of peace at having him once again.

Kyler moved his lips to Robbie's neck and lower to his chest. He flicked his tongue over one nipple, then covered it with his mouth, sucking hard. He breathed Robbie's scent, the freshness of his regular body wash combined with a light tint of sweat from being on stage. It was a smell he knew well and loved.

Kyler's mind still whirled at one thought; Robbie was his. But with that thought whispered a second; he was lucky to have him in his arms again. Were it not for the love Robbie had for him, Robbie's kind and forgiving heart, he would be alone. He knew he had pushed Robbie to his breaking point so many times, and with each time, the distance to his breaking point grew shorter. He made a silent promise to never let Robbie reach that point ever again.

Kyler kissed down Robbie's abdomen, then slid off the bed to remove his pants. He gazed at Robbie lying spread across the bed, the lines of muscle in his chest and abdomen, the flush to his cheeks. Robbie had his legs spread wide, one arm tossed back. Robbie's expression, his posture, his quick breathing, all showed he was willing and wanting anything Kyler'd give him. A deep groan hummed in Kyler's throat without him realizing it, triggered by the thought that he would get to have him like this for all the rest of their days.

Kyler let his gaze slide down the length of Robbie's cock to his heavy sac. He focused on Robbie's hole, and his own cock ached with memories of being buried deep in Robbie's tightness and heat. Kyler's fingers went to his leather pants, opened them, and shoved them down.

The whole time Kyler gazed at him, Robbie took in the hunger in Kyler's eyes. He didn't realize how much he'd missed that look. No one could give a look as sensual as Kyler. It was one of the things he loved about him, how with only a glance, Kyler could arouse him.

As Kyler straightened from removing his pants, Robbie's gaze went to his cock. Despite how close a match his dildo was to it, having the real thing in front of him sent a rush of heat through him. Unlike the dildo, Kyler's skin would be soft, his hard rod warm, and best of all, it would fill him with cum again and again. Just the thought of Kyler releasing inside him was enough to make his own slit moisten. Robbie scooted to the edge of the bed, putting his ass in easy access for Kyler.

Kyler grinned as he pulled lube from his bag and moved to stand between Robbie's legs. "I guess you really did miss me, didn't you?"

"It's that obvious, huh?"

Kyler nodded. He slid one hand along one of Robbie's thighs, then under his knee so it rested in the bend of his arm. "Do I need to use anything?"

"Not unless you haven't been as satisfied from our phone sex as I have."

"I don't know if I'd call myself satisfied, but those conversations kept the edge off until I could get to you again. I wanted you back too much to risk doing anything that could push you further away."

"It was the same for me. All I wanted was to have you touching me again."

Kyler smirked at him with wicked humor. "Well then, I'll just have to make sure I touch you everywhere several times tonight."

He gave Robbie a hard yank closer to him, pinning his cock between their bodies, and thrust against him slowly.

Robbie closed his eyes, and a moment later, Kyler's slicked fingers touched the outside of his hole. One slipped into him. He exhaled a long breath. The slightest touch from Kyler always brought sensations of pleasure, whether he was pushing into his hole, or simply holding him. One more of the many things that told him he and Kyler had always been, and would always be, meant for each other.

Kyler spread Robbie wider with a second finger easing inside him. He gripped Robbie's cock in his other hand, stroking it while rubbing the sweet spot just under the head with his thumb. Robbie moaned and rocked his hips. It felt unbelievable having Kyler work him again. He might've gotten pretty handy with the dildo, but it wasn't the same as what Ky could do to him.

Kyler's fingertips hit his gland. Robbie arched his lower back off the bed, a purring groan leaving him. That was the feeling he'd wanted, the burst of pure ecstasy rushing through him. He felt Kyler smearing fresh drops of pre-cum across his cock head, then Kyler's hand moved away from his cock. Robbie opened his eyes in time to see Kyler lick the fluid from his thumb. The sight made his cock twitch; his hole clenched around Kyler's fingers. If Kyler did something like that again, he'd come before Ky could get inside him.

Always an expert at reading him, Kyler pulled his fingers out. Robbie shifted closer to the edge of the bed, as if the couple inches would get Kyler inside him quicker.

Kyler put one arm under Robbie's thigh again, then reached between them, touching his slick cock head to Robbie's hole. Robbie's breathing quickened, and Kyler could feel in how tight his muscles were, Robbie was doing all he could to keep still rather than drive his ass onto him. He grinned at Robbie's eagerness and pushed forward, thrusting his hips in small movements. His cock went in, pushing past the first ring of tight muscle.

The heat and tightness of Robbie's body almost overwhelmed Kyler. He set his free hand on the bed and braced himself over Robbie, the action letting him push back the leg he held and slip in deeper. He closed his eyes, groaning as he sank into him.

As their bodies met, Robbie laid his hands over Kyler's on the bed. Kyler turned one of his hand, gripping Robbie's, and started thrusting. Robbie fell into the slow, long movements of each thrust. He felt so stretched, so full, so at peace.

Kyler bowed his head closer to Robbie's, his voice already breathless. "This is what I want our lives to be from here on, the two of us, together, like this and in all ways."

“That’s what it’ll be, because it’s what I want, too.”

Robbie lifted off the bed as much as he could. Kyler lowered to meet him in a kiss, sealing their promise. As Kyler drew back, the need to drive each other to greater pleasure took hold. Robbie started rocking against him. Kyler thrust harder and faster.

Robbie watched the muscles in Kyler’s torso working with every movement. Kyler’s skin shone with a light sheen of sweat. Watching Kyler fuck had always been the most beautiful thing he’d ever witnessed, and now, it pushed his orgasm nearer to the surface. Robbie pulled one hand from Kyler’s to take his own cock. As he gripped it, Kyler laid his hand over top, and they pumped it together.

Robbie felt Kyler’s hold on his hand tightening. Kyler’s breathing was deep, his moans getting louder. Kyler was close, so very close, and so was he. But he wanted to feel Kyler come first.

Robbie spoke, his voice panting and pleading. “Come for me, Ky. I need to feel you come, deep inside me.”

Kyler groaned louder, his muscles constricting, and as if he was helpless to disobey Robbie’s command, he closed his eyes and tossed his head back, moaning loudly as he came.

Robbie felt Kyler’s cock pulsing his cum into him. The sensation finished him. He was in the throes of his own climax almost before realizing it hit. It seemed to last for minutes, with how Kyler’s cock continued to stroke his gland; he knew it was seconds, but they were the sweetest of his life.

Kyler pulled his arm out from under Robbie’s thigh and laid his leg gently on the bed. He leaned down, resting his head on Robbie’s shoulder and embracing him. Robbie wrapped his arms around him, curling Kyler’s hair around the fingers of one hand.

After a few long moments, Kyler slowly pushed himself up and took a step back from the bed. As soon as Kyler’s cock left him, Robbie missed it, but he knew it’d be inside him again soon. He shifted around on the bed to lie at the head, but as he went to pull the covers over him, Kyler grabbed them and yanked them down.

Robbie looked at him, confused, then saw the lust in Kyler's eyes hadn't dimmed, and like his own, Kyler's cock was still hard.

Kyler crawled onto the bed, straddling over Robbie's thighs on his hands and knees. "What do you say to knocking a couple things off my list?"

"I'd say I'm all for it."

Kyler's gaze dropped to Robbie's cock, wet with cum. "That's the answer I was hoping for." He lowered his head and took Robbie's cock deep in his mouth, groaning in pleasure as Robbie's taste claimed his tongue.

A high moan burst from Robbie. With having just come, his cock felt extra sensitive, and feeling the head slide down Kyler's throat was enough to revive him from any fatigue he might've felt. It wasn't unusual for them to go for two back to back, and with how long it'd been, he knew their bodies were more than willing. His certainly was, at least, and judging from the hard cock pressed against his leg, he could safely guess Kyler's was, too.

Kyler slowly lifted up and released him. He stretched across the bed for the lube and kneeled over Robbie's hips. Robbie watched, entranced as he realized what Kyler was about to do. With his fingers coated in lube, Kyler reached back, penetrating himself with one.

Robbie stared at Kyler's finger pushing in, pulling out, of his tight hole. He glanced up to Kyler's face, seeing his eyes closed, his brow creased in an expression of concentrated pleasure. He had to feel the same thing as Kyler. He snatched the lube, slicking his own fingers. As he joined one finger with Kyler's inside his body, Kyler groaned low in his throat. Together, they found a harmony, pumping into him, both working to stretch him.

Kyler's breathing turned heavy and quick. He started pulling his finger from himself. "I can't wait any longer."

Robbie drew his finger from Kyler's hole. "Then take it, Ky. It's yours to do with whatever you want."

Kyler squeezed more lube into his palm and grabbed Robbie's cock, quickly stroking up and down it a couple times to coat

it. Keeping it in hand, he lowered his ass down, pressing it to his hole. As Robbie's cock breached his rim and he sank further down on it, Kyler closed his eyes tight, his breath left him in a gasp. He slapped a hand down on Robbie's chest, gripping him. "Fuck, Rob. You feel so good."

Robbie swallowed hard. Heat burned through him at Kyler's words. Kyler was letting everything go, all his inhibitions, allowing himself to be assertive in what he wanted for his pleasure. Robbie wet his lips as Kyler finished taking him in. "So do you. Ride me. Make us both come again."

Kyler had never forgotten how Robbie felt inside him, and now he savored the full and stretched sensation of finally having him again. With his hands on Robbie's chest, he started rocking his hips slowly, though even just the small movement made him want to ride Robbie hard and fast.

He gazed down at Robbie, looking into his eyes. To see love, all he had to do was gaze into Robbie's beautiful blue eyes. It's all he ever had to do. Now he would never let a day go by without cherishing that look, and reminding himself how fortunate he was to see it.

Kyler straightened his posture, moving up and down Robbie's cock in longer motions. He took his cock in one hand, his balls in the other, and stroked his shaft while gently fondling his sac. He saw Robbie watching him, and a tremor of exhilaration went through him. The lust in Robbie's expression made him want to show off for him, to get him hotter until Robbie couldn't take it and came inside him.

Kyler let a wanton moan slip from his throat, following it with another. He couldn't stop himself from picking up his pace, both on Robbie's cock and with his hand. Pleasure raced through, making his muscles tighten. It wouldn't be long before he erupted again.

Robbie placed his hands on Kyler's hips, gripping them tight. Understanding his signal, Kyler grudgingly slowed. Robbie lifted him a few inches, keeping his cock inside him, and started raising his hips, thrusting in and out of him. Kyler focused on pumping

his own cock, letting Robbie take over. Each glide of Robbie's cock ignited more pleasure. It coursed through his body, filling him to the point where it couldn't be contained.

Furiously stroking his cock, Kyler dropped down on Robbie's, arching as he came. Robbie felt his cock being squeezed, and watched the white fluid spray across his abdomen. The scent of Kyler's climax, the sight of it, the feel of it, all took him over the edge. Robbie bucked his hips up against Kyler, emptying his cock inside him.

Kyler slowly moved his hands from his cock and sac, laying them on Robbie's stomach. He pushed one hand through his cum, smearing it across Robbie's skin, and evoked another moan from Robbie. With effort, Kyler lifted up from Robbie's and eased down to lie beside him.

Robbie sat up and tugged the covers over them both. He rolled onto his side, and as he reached to pull Kyler into his arms, Kyler did the same for him. Robbie snuggled against him, the thought passing through his mind that the warmth and security he felt in Kyler's arms was even better than what they'd just shared.

Kyler grinned as he kissed Robbie on top of his head. "You're going to make a snuggler out of me."

A drowsy chuckle left Robbie. "You always have been. It was just one more thing you never wanted to admit."

"Yeah. But this one I think we'll keep only between us."

Robbie lifted his head to look at him. "I'll agree to that."

Kyler held him tighter as their smiling lips touched in another kiss.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Robbie watched the mansions pass by out the window of Kyler's SUV. Each home rested on no less than five acres, all were walled and gated, allowing for only glimpses of the hidden luxury. In fact, the entire community was gated with only one way in and security guarding it.

Old oak trees lined the sidewalks. Groomed evergreen shrubbery added greenery to the early winter dreariness. Robbie imagined in the spring and summer, the entire place must burst with color. And the fact he was picturing it in the summer was a good sign this could be the one.

The red Jaguar they followed turned into a drive, the real estate agent climbing out to open the gate. Robbie looked beyond the black iron gates and red brick wall to the home. He knew it would be large from reading about it in the listing, but seeing it in person still stunned him. Only a few years old, the modern construction also had accents of classic sophistication, with white columns lining the porch and it being made from red brick. Large windows ran across both floors, and a long garage was attached.

Kyler glanced at Robbie as he followed the Jaguar through the gates. "What do you think so far?"

"It's beautiful. What do you think?"

"I really like it." Kyler glanced at him with a grin. "And judging from your smile, you're already falling in love with it."

"That depends if it's as awesome on the inside, but if it is..." Robbie left the sentence hanging, knowing Kyler knew what he was going to say, and from the squeeze Kyler gave his hand, he felt the same way.

Since the night they reunited two weeks ago, things were a constant flurry of media and interviews. Rosa and Krista worked at a frantic pace setting up publicity and interviews for them.

One surprise they got was Greg calling them to personally say congratulations and ensure them Phoenix would stand by them with the strongest of support. Kyler actually handled himself well in the interviews, despite holding his hand so hard he'd lost circulation during their first one. It was worth it to sit beside him as Kyler told an interviewer, and in turn the world, that Robbie was the only person for him.

Of course, they couldn't walk out of their building without being tagged by paparazzi. Fans bombarded them with congratulatory wishes and support whenever they tried to have a quiet meal out. While they both appreciated their fans' support, they also needed some time to themselves.

His coming out and playing for Conquest had started a buzz around Black Heart Down. Kyler coming out and singing to him at Conquest's concert turned the buzz into a roar. Videos of the performance had gone viral. People were already demanding the single for "Walk Beside Me." They certainly managed to give Rosa the hype she wanted to keep the band in the public eye, even if it wasn't quite what she was expecting.

For the most part, both their coming out and relationship were well received, though it wasn't without some criticism. As Kyler predicted early on, a few critics called them copycats after Jesse and Evan, others going so far as to say they weren't a real couple, but that it was all a publicity stunt. He'd learned a long time ago to not take critics too seriously, but that wasn't to say their words didn't hurt. With that hurt, though, came determination to prove they were for real and forever.

As for their tour, they postponed it indefinitely, which was the polite way of saying they canceled it. Kyler told him he wanted to work on them first, the fans and music could wait. Robbie was speechless over that. For the first time in so long, Kyler wasn't just saying he was number one in his life, he was proving it to be true.

Kyler stopped the Land Rover near the mansion's front door. Robbie climbed out, extending his hand as Kyler came around the SUV. Kyler took it, looking at the garage. "Six cars. That'll be

fun filling up.”

Robbie grinned at him. “Shouldn’t we see inside before you start planning what cars we’ll be keeping here?”

Kyler gave him a playful bump with his shoulder as they walked up the steps to the front door.

The agent unlocked the door. “The owners just moved out two weeks ago, so you’ll be able to get an idea for the full space. And with it being on this side of the road, you have a nice view of the lake.”

Kyler turned to the agent. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to walk through it on our own to really get a feel for it.” He looked at Robbie. “Wouldn’t you?”

Robbie nodded and glanced at the agent. “Yeah, if that’d be okay.”

“Since it’s empty, that’s fine. If you have any questions, I’ll be in my car.”

“Thanks,” Kyler said.

Robbie moved further into the front room of the house, gazing at the tan marble floor, then up to the crystal chandelier. A staircase curved to the second floor. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows, illuminating the woodwork to a rich golden brown.

Robbie felt Kyler’s hand rest on his lower back. He slid his arm around Kyler’s waist and walked with him toward an open doorway into the spacious family room. Even through his shoes, Robbie could feel the plushness of the chocolate colored carpeting. A grand brick fireplace was centered on one wall. Windows lined the back wall with French doors opening into the yard.

Robbie stepped up to the door with Kyler, looking at the in-ground pool with built in whirlpool. Tiered flowerbeds outlined it. Robbie glanced back to the family room, then out the door again. He was certain sitting down in the house or in the pool, seeing Lake Michigan wouldn’t be a problem.

Kyler wrapped his arm around Robbie's shoulders. "So how much in love with it are you now?"

"A lot." Robbie faced him. "But what about you? This is more house, more yard, and more suburban than you've ever wanted."

"Yeah, I've changed my thoughts on that. I used to want to be in the heart of a big city, close to the clubs and action, but not anymore. It's funny when I think about it now. I always thought being famous meant partying, living in a chic penthouse, shopping every day I wasn't working. But for how many years did I do that and wasn't happy? I was living for other people and their expectations of me, trying to uphold an image. I'm done with all that now." Kyler laid his hand on Robbie's cheek. "In all these years, I was only happy when I was with you. When I was looking back on my life, I realized the happiest moments of it were when we lived together in our little apartment in New York when we were just getting started. So I know I'll be happy wherever we live so long as we're together."

Robbie took Kyler's other hand in his. "We're always going to be together. I'm always going to be walking beside you."

"Me too. I love you."

"I love you, too." Robbie brushed his lips against Kyler's and grinned. "So, should we do our first kiss in our new house?"

Kyler laughed. "Yeah, we should. A kiss to christen it and our future here."

Kyler wrapped Robbie in a gentle embrace. Robbie slipped his arms around Kyler's neck. He touched his lips to Kyler's, their kiss a promise of the happy life they would share together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.J. FROST resides on a mini-ranch in Ohio with her husband and son, as well as a kind-hearted German Shepherd, a Collie who is the anti-Lassie, a few kooky cats, and some very special horses. She enjoys experimenting with her writing and dabbling in different genres, though it's guaranteed that no matter what she writes there will be hot erotic action appearing somewhere in the story. She's a romantic at heart, which is reflected in her writing. The majority of her work is m/m, though she's had the occasional m/f piece published too. Her short stories have been featured in several erotic and romance anthologies including, Best Gay Romance 2007 Edition, Girls on Top, and Surfer Boys, all published by Cleis Press, Ultimate Gay Erotica 2008 and Best Gay Love Stories: Summer Flings, both published by Alyson Books, and Honey Flava published by Atria Books.

You can find out more about the author and upcoming works at: <http://www.sjfrost.com/>

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