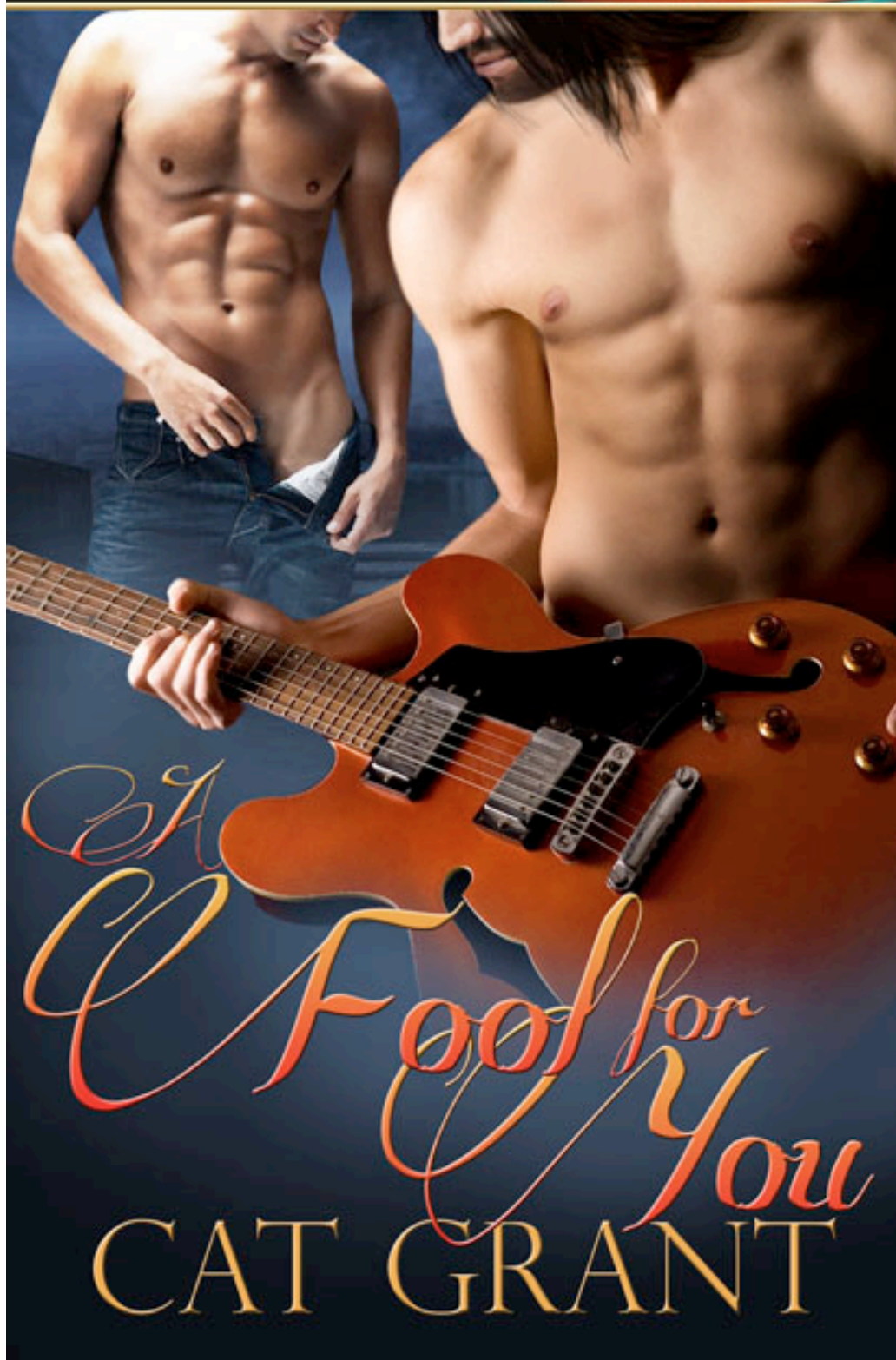


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



A Fool for You

Cat Grant

Book three in the Icon Men series.

Sexy Chase Aubrey plays blues guitar like nobody's business. One look at him performing at a New York nightclub, and twenty-year-old keyboard player Brian Barclay's smitten.

However, Brian remains true to his boyfriend Kit—until Kit cheats on him and steals all the songs they've written together. With nowhere else to go, Brian turns to his estranged father, Trevor, and Trevor's partner, Cameron. But even Cameron can't smooth over the tension between father and son.

Brian's in need of a friend, and Chase fills the role nicely—and quickly heats up the sheets with him as well. The passion between them is mind-blowing, until Brian discovers Chase's secret past. A past he's run from for years. And when the past threatens the present, Brian can't help wondering if the love of his life has played him for a fool.

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A Fool for You

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A FOOL FOR YOU

Cat Grant

Author's Note

This is the third installment in my *Icon Men* series. The first two stories, *The First Real Thing* and *Appearing Nightly*, take place in late 2010. This story, however, is set five years in the future, because our hero, Trevor Barclay's son, Brian, was a mere lad of fifteen in the first book.

I like my heroes young sometimes, but not *that* young!

Enjoy!

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Chapter One

April 2015

Chase Aubrey played blues guitar like nobody's business, his long, supple fingers strumming the twelve-string with a skill that would've done Clapton proud. The Metronome's audience hung on every note, heads bobbing and feet tapping as he swung deftly into a soulful version of *Alberta*.

Brian watched from the wings, joining in when everyone started to clap along to the tune's infectious rhythm. Chase's sly, sideways glance sent a thrill of anticipation up Brian's spine right before he launched into the last verse, caressing each word with his smooth, smoky baritone. *Jesus*. The day God doled out talent, Chase must've gotten in line twice. Wasn't fair to have that voice and be able to play like a fucking god too.

Oh, Brian could play, but not like that. Guitar, clarinet, flute—he could do a perfectly serviceable job on all three, but his first love was the piano. Any kind of keyboard, really. Even so, he couldn't deliver the goods like Chase, with an intensity that commanded an entire room's attention, and had kept him riveted to the spot for the past forty minutes.

The audience burst into applause, whooping and cheering as Chase finally stood, mumbled, "Thank you, and have a great evening" into the microphone, then scooped up his guitar and bottle of water and sauntered offstage. Right in Brian's direction.

Brian should've headed back to the musician's communal dressing room. Kit and Stewart were probably wondering where he'd disappeared to, especially since their set was due to start in a few minutes. But when Chase's deep blue gaze landed on him, he froze, finally forcing a smile. "Sounds like they want an encore."

Chase pondered it for a second, then shook his head. "I'd better not. Don't want to cut into the next band's time." His lush lips quirked upward. "Unless you don't mind?"

But that would mean... "You've heard us?"

"I stuck around for part of your set last week. You guys are pretty good—for Canadians." He winked, his smile widening. He had a soul patch, and some peach fuzz on his chin. It'd look damn sexy once it grew into a proper goatee, not that Chase needed much help in that department. Tonight he'd left half the women in the audience swooning—and probably half the men too. Brian couldn't help feeling a stab of envy. "Where'd you learn to play two keyboards at once?"

God, he'd not only heard them play, he'd actually paid attention! Brian wasn't sure whether to be flattered or run screaming. He settled for telling the truth. "Tori Amos."

"Really? You know her?"

"Shit, no! I've just watched all her concert DVDs a gazillion times."

"That's cool. Tori rocks." Applause roared on, but now the audience started to pound on the tables, chanting Chase's name. Chase peered around the curtain, letting out a slow whistle. "You'd think they'd never heard anybody play guitar before."

Most musicians would've jumped for joy at such an enthusiastic response, but Chase acted like it was old news. Like he didn't give a fuck. "Might as well give 'em one more," Brian said. "It's gonna be hard enough following you without everyone thinking we kicked you offstage."

"If you insist." He slung his guitar strap over his head. "I'll make it short and sweet." And with that, he ambled onstage, settled his wiry frame back on his stool and launched into *Rollin' and Tumblin'*.

He'd only gotten a few bars in when someone tapped Brian on the shoulder. It was Lou, the Metronome's stage manager, wearing his usual sour, exasperated expression. "Where's your pals? You guys need to be ready to go on once he's done."

Now that he'd mentioned it, where the hell were Kit and Stewart? Usually they couldn't wait to get onstage. Reluctantly, Brian headed for the dressing room. Its musty sawdust and linseed oil stink crawled up his nostrils a second or two before he noticed his band-mates standing huddled in the corner next to their assigned dressing table,

caught up in conversation with Clive, their new agent. The three of them glanced over as Brian approached, plainly startled—and was it his imagination, or did Kit and Stewart look the tiniest bit guilty too? Like he'd caught them jerking off or something.

Brian waited for them to continue talking. When they didn't, he prompted, "What's going on? You're having a meeting without me?"

Kit just shrugged and reached for his shiny, white Stratocaster. "We looked for you. Couldn't find you."

"Dude, I was right out there in the wings. You couldn't have looked that hard." Not that Brian believed him for a minute. Kit was an incredibly bad liar. He was so fucking transparent, most of the time Brian found it silly, even endearing. Other times—like now, for instance—it made him want to grind his teeth. "What were you talking about?"

"I gotta take a leak," Stewart muttered, practically racing from the room. He usually beat a hasty retreat whenever it looked like his band-mates were about to get into it again. Brian couldn't blame him. He and Kit had always had a stormy relationship, but it'd gotten ten times worse in the last few weeks since they'd arrived in New York. The three of them being all crammed together in a tiny studio apartment hadn't helped.

Clive sniffed and shot Brian a withering look. "Kit will fill you in. I should be going. Late supper with a client downtown." With that, he turned and swept out, wafting a cloud of sickly-sweet cologne behind him.

Brian's hands balled into fists. He and Clive had rubbed each other the wrong way from day one. Brian couldn't stand his arrogance and ridiculous affectations. Like he was fooling anybody with that bright-blond hair, when he had to be at least fifty. And what was up with that fake British accent? He sounded about as English as everyone else in this crappy city. "What's his problem? He couldn't wait to sign us when he heard us play in Toronto, but now he acts like I'm not worth his fucking time."

"Give him a break, he's a busy guy. Besides, he usually only deals with front men."

Brian stared up at him. "I'm a member of this band too, Kit. You've got no right to have a meeting with our agent without me present."

"C'mon, babe, don't get mad." Now Kit moved closer, snaking his arm around Brian's waist, his voice a soft, seductive croon. Usually that was all it took to make Brian melt, but not this time. He put both hands on Kit's chest and pushed him away. "Jesus, Bri, stop acting like a little bitch. You know we didn't mean to leave you out."

He'd adopted that pouty, wounded-puppy look he could switch on and off at will. It might've been more effective without the spiky, bleached-blond hair tips, guyliner and gold glitter makeup. Up until six months ago—around the same time they'd met Clive—Kit had sported multiple facial piercings and a sleek, dark curtain of hair that hung halfway to his waist. Brian had cropped his hair short too, but he drew the line at turning himself into a clone of the last *American Idol* winner.

"What were you talking to Clive about?" Brian repeated, folding his arms across his chest.

Kit looked like he wanted to give the hug another try, but instead he just sighed and rolled his eyes. "He said something about a possible gig in LA next month. It's no big deal."

"Are you kidding? It sounds like a pretty big deal to me."

"Don't get excited. Nothing's set in stone yet. I didn't want to get your hopes up."

"So you weren't gonna tell me at all?"

"I'm telling you now, aren't I?" Another sigh. "Look, babe, I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't mean for you to get all upset. You know I'll take care of you, right? I mean, I always have, haven't I?"

That much was true. In five years together, Kit was the only person in Brian's life who'd been there for him no matter what. He'd seen Brian through his parents' divorce when he was fifteen, kept him from losing it when his father moved away. After one disastrous semester, they'd dropped out of college together to start their band, Black

Rain. Yeah, Kit could be a self-absorbed jerk, but despite everything, he was still here. That counted for a lot.

Stewart poked his head back in. "Save the rest for later, guys. Lou's gonna come kick our asses if we don't get out there."

They traipsed onstage to an anemic round of applause. Brian's heart sank when he saw the full house in attendance for Chase's set had dwindled to a scattered handful of boozy, mostly disinterested customers. *Shit*. That's what they got for leaving the stage vacant for the past ten minutes.

The Metronome was a relatively small, intimate place, with about twenty tables and a long bar spanning the right-hand side of the room. A painted mural depicting jazz, blues and rock greats of the last fifty years adorned the left wall. Coltrane. Charlie Parker. Muddy Waters. Elvis. Janis. Hendrix. Lou Reed. Iggy Pop. Bowie. Morrissey. Robert Smith. The club was well-known for presenting an eclectic array of talent. Which explained why they'd scheduled a goth-metal trio right after a blues guitarist.

Brian stifled a sigh. Well, they'd done okay last week. They even got called back for an encore. They'd just have to do their best to win over tonight's crowd.

The keyboards and drums were set up at the back of the stage, twin spotlights overhead now trained on him and Stewart. Sweat broke out on Brian's forehead and upper lip as he played a few experimental notes on his electric piano, nodding at Kit as he did the same on his guitar, making sure they were both in tune. Then he laid down a bass chord on his funky old Vox organ with his left hand, picked out the opening notes on the piano with his right, and they swung into their first song.

Kit wailed away on his Stratocaster, spitting out the lyrics in his best surly, bad-boy manner – which was exactly the wrong way to go with this audience. A bunch of them got up and left before they made it through the first verse. Kit shot a panicked look in Brian's direction and he immediately took over, playing the next verse as a piano instrumental before segueing into the goth classic *Bela Lugosi's Dead*. This time Kit sang in a gloomy monotone that made them sound like Bauhaus on fucking tranquilizers,

but at least the few remaining stragglers in the audience stayed put. They were probably either drunk or half asleep.

Luckily, they were only scheduled for a short set—six songs and out. A couple people applauded when they were done, but everyone else's booing and hissing drowned them out. Kit didn't take it too well. He flipped the audience off with both hands, then stomped back to the dressing room right past Lou, who stood in the wings skewering them all with a disgusted glare.

"What a bunch of morons!" Kit fumed. "We should've stayed in Toronto. At least they knew how to *appreciate* us there!"

"Yeah, well, you might just get your wish, you stupid dick!" Stewart fired back, leaving Brian so stunned his own angry words caught in his throat. In the two years he'd known Stewart, he'd never heard him tear into Kit like this before—and Kit had given him plenty of chances. "You think they're gonna book us again after the way you just acted? We worked our asses off landing this gig, and you go and screw it up on our second night!"

"No big loss, if you ask me. Jesus, they fucking hated us! Didn't you hear 'em?"

"And whose fault is that? If you weren't so in-your-face all the time—"

Brian's mouth went dry, his head starting to pound. This reminded him too much of what he'd left behind at home—his mother and stepfather shrieking at each other day and night. He couldn't listen to it anymore. Pure instinct taking over, he bolted down the hallway toward the stage door.

It opened onto a narrow landing above a short flight of stairs leading down to the parking lot behind the club. Brian started shivering the moment he stepped outside. Mid-April, but it still got damn chilly after midnight. And of course, he'd left his jacket in the dressing room. Well, fuck that. No way was he going back for it.

"Hey," came a familiar voice, close enough to make him jump. It was Chase, leaning against the railing a few feet away, a cigarette between his lips. Brian's gaze zeroed in on his left hand, thumb dangling casually through the belt loop on his jeans.

God, how could he look so relaxed and nonchalant, like nothing in the world bothered him? Brian would've given his right arm for that kind of inner calm. "You okay? Your friends are really going at it in there."

As if their shitty performance tonight wasn't embarrassing enough. "Sorry you had to hear it."

"I've heard worse, believe me." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of smokes. "Want one?"

Brian shook his head. "I don't smoke, but thanks for offering. Now if that was a joint, I'd be all over it. I could do with some mellowing-out."

Chase laughed. It was a nice laugh, easy and sincere. "I'll keep that in mind for next time."

"If there is one."

"Don't worry about it. You should've seen the first night I played here. *Nobody* applauded."

"That's still better than getting booed."

"Not really. You got a reaction, even if it was negative. Proves a few of 'em were paying attention." He took a long, last drag on his cigarette, then tossed the butt on the ground and crushed it under his boot. "Takes awhile to build up a new audience. Be patient. You'll get there."

Brian chuckled ruefully. "I think you've got more faith in us than we have in ourselves right now."

"You guys are pretty good. But you need to tell your pal Kit to chill the fuck out. He's not impressing anybody with that Sid Vicious act—on or offstage."

"I'll give it my best shot, but he doesn't always listen to me."

"Well, he should. You're twice the musician he is."

Brian's eyes went wide, his stomach doing a weird little flip-flop. He had no idea Chase thought so highly of him—or even thought of him at all. “Th-Thanks. It's nice of you to say so.”

“It's the truth,” Chase replied with a shrug, stepping closer. They were about the same height—five foot ten or thereabouts. It was strange, having a conversation with someone Brian could meet eye-to-eye. He was used to looking up at Kit. “Ever thought of singing lead?”

Chase's gaze bore into him so intently, it took Brian a few seconds before he realized he hadn't answered. “Not really. I like staying in the background. It lets me concentrate on my playing.”

“Speaking of, that was a sweet save you made tonight, taking over with that impromptu instrumental. Do you guys write all your own material?”

“Me and Kit do, yeah. Except for a few covers.” He grinned. “Hope you're not gonna tell me they suck.”

“Not at all. In fact, you've got some interesting chord progressions. Where'd you study?”

“You mean composition? I didn't.” Now his palms had turned clammy, like they did whenever anyone mentioned school. Terrific. Nothing like shivering and sweating at the same time. “I never even had piano lessons, I just...taught myself how to play.”

Chase let out a slow whistle. “Wow. That's pretty fucking impressive.” He reached into his back pocket for his wallet and pulled out a business card. “I teach part-time at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. If you ever want to take some classes, let me know.”

Brian stared at the card for a long moment before tucking it in his own back pocket. “Wish I could, but I'm sure the tuition's way out of my budget.” *And thank God for that.*

“It doesn't cost much to audit.”

Just then the stage door banged open and out came Kit, looking twice as pissed as before. "Jesus, Bri, I've been looking for you for the last ten minutes. C'mon, we need to get all our shit offstage before that stupid fucking blues guy does his next set."

A blazing-hot wave of embarrassment rolled over Brian, fresh sweat prickling up the back of his neck. Chase, on the other hand, didn't seem fazed in the least as he stepped into Kit's line of sight with a bemused smirk. "How's it goin', man?"

Kit's expression crumpled, his face flushing bright pink. It was pretty damn funny, even if laughing was the furthest thing from Brian's mind right now. "I, uh...sorry. Didn't mean for it to come out like that. No offense, huh?"

"None taken."

"Cool." Kit turned back to Brian. "Let's get the fuck out of here before Lou gets up in our grill again." Then he disappeared down the hallway, leaving the door wide open.

"Guess I'd better go help 'em," Brian murmured. Still, he couldn't help hanging back. This was the most enjoyable conversation he'd had in weeks. He didn't want it to end. "If we haven't gotten ourselves fired, I'll probably see you here again next week."

"Count on it," Chase replied, holding out his hand. "Good talking to you, um... You know, I didn't get your name."

"Brian Barclay. From Toronto." A sharp but far from unpleasant jolt shot through him as Chase's fingers closed over his. Small, hard calluses on his palm and fingertips tickled Brian's skin. Chase had nice hands. Musician's hands, gentle yet strong and well muscled from years of guitar playing. Lean and sexy, just like the rest of him.

Reluctantly, Brian stepped toward the door. Chase flashed him a parting grin, revealing a mouthful of dazzling white teeth. Jesus, talk about a showstopper. Brian smiled back as best he could, his knees turning instantly to jelly.

Chapter Two

It was closing in on two in the morning when they pulled into the garage behind their Brooklyn apartment building in Kit's rickety old white van. Brian wanted to bring his keyboards upstairs, but he'd had his fill of dragging heavy equipment around tonight, and Kit and Stewart weren't falling all over each other offering to help. In fact, the three of them hadn't spoken a word the entire ride over the bridge. Well, whatever. It was a quiet neighborhood, and the van's back windows were blacked out. Their stuff would be safe until tomorrow morning. They locked everything securely, then trudged inside.

Their apartment made a postage stamp look huge. One room, with a twin bed in the far-right corner, a puke-green sofa in the far left, a tiny kitchen with a stove, fridge, sink, table and chairs and a short, narrow hallway leading to the bathroom. Stewart made an immediate beeline in that direction, slamming the door behind him.

"So much for kissing and making up," Kit grouched, his breath coming out in steamy puffs as he padded over to the thermostat and switched it on. When Brian shot him a pointed look, he added, "I'm not gonna run up the electric bill. Let's just leave it on for a few minutes so we don't turn into fucking ice cubes, okay?"

Brian shrugged, biting back a retort about Kit's bad habit of spending money they hadn't earned yet. After all, how else were they supposed to warm up? Climb into bed and spoon? To hell with that. No way was he letting Kit near him tonight, not after the shit he'd pulled. He'd rather curl up alone on the cold floor.

Kit sat down at the table and began flipping through the morning paper, despite the fact he'd already read it. The kitchen was a disaster area, two days' worth of dirty dishes stacked in the sink and spilling onto the counter. It was Kit's turn to wash up, though he usually just ignored it until Brian got tired of the mess and did it himself.

And he probably would've done it tonight anyway, if he weren't ready to drop. Screw it. It could wait 'til tomorrow.

A few minutes later, Stewart emerged from the bathroom clad in a pair of flannel pajama pants and a gray sweatshirt emblazoned with McGill University's red and white crest. He stretched out on the ratty thrift-store sofa, yanked a blanket over him and promptly began to snore.

When Kit didn't bother looking up, Brian decided to take the next turn in the bathroom. He longed for a shower, but he was so damn tired he'd probably nod off as soon as the hot water hit him. He settled for wiping himself down with a damp washcloth and brushing his teeth. He caught a quick glimpse of himself in the mirror and cringed. His roots had grown out, an unsightly half inch of blond showing close to his scalp. Made his black dye job look twice as fake. He'd have to do a touch-up once they got paid. Or hell, maybe he'd buzz the whole thing and go bald for a while. Might be worth it just to see the look on Kit's face.

Brian left the bathroom, then Kit went in. Sighing in gratitude at being left alone for a few precious minutes, Brian grabbed a blanket from the bed and spread it out on the narrow strip of dingy, gold shag carpet between the bed and the sofa. He lay down and closed his eyes. Surprisingly, it wasn't too uncomfortable. But of course, now that he was ready for sleep, his mind began to race. The entire evening replayed in his memory, driving him fucking crazy. Only one cure for that.

He sat up, reached for his acoustic guitar and began strumming. Instantly his mind went quiet, now focused on the strings under his fingers. He played as softly as he could, trying not to wake Stewart.

Random notes reshaped themselves into one of the songs Chase had played that evening. Brian repeated the opening bars several times, trying to get the hang of the rhythm. Chase made it look simple, when in reality it was anything but. Brian got so caught up in trying to figure it out, he didn't notice Kit was back until he plopped down next to him on the floor.

"C'mon, babe. You can't sleep down here tonight. You'll freeze your ass off."

Brian kept on playing. "I'm not talking to you."

"You just did."

"You might as well go to bed. I'm not in the mood for a conversation."

Kit didn't reply, but he didn't move either. At last he murmured, "You're fucking amazing, you know that? I'd give my left nut to be able to hear something once and play it back note-perfect like you can."

"It's not perfect, not by a long shot. It doesn't even sound right on this guitar." He set the instrument aside with a sigh. "I need to learn how to play the twelve-string."

"That should take you about two days."

"I wish." Now Kit reached for his hand, resting his head on Brian's shoulder. It was nice, sitting together all quiet and serene for a change, even if Brian knew it wouldn't last. Why couldn't Kit be sweet like this all the time, the way things used to be? Was it really too much to ask? Well, of course it was. It would mean they were happy, and that was something reserved for other people. People he'd never met. Brian couldn't think of anyone he knew who'd been happy and stayed that way for very long.

"I need a favor," Kit whispered finally.

And down came the boom, right on schedule. "I should've known you had an ulterior motive."

"I meant to ask earlier, but we got all...distracted."

"No shit."

Kit sat up straight, giving him a sheepish look. "Clive wants us to get our songs down on paper."

"And why the fuck should I care what Clive wants?"

"Because when we go to LA, he's planning to get us in for meetings with a couple of record companies. We need to show 'em we've got enough material for an album."

Holy shit! All he could do was stare at Kit like a fucking idiot with his mouth gaping. “W-We’ve got enough for three, easy. But won’t they want to hear us play some of it?”

“Sure they will, but Clive says publishing rights are important too. Who knows, maybe somebody’ll want to cover *us*. Wouldn’t that be cool?”

Brian’s heart promptly plummeted. “Yeah, except for one thing.”

“The guitar and drum parts are pretty simple, but I’m gonna need your help with the keyboard stuff. We’ll bring your instruments up from the van tomorrow and run through everything. You just play, and I’ll write it all down.”

“Okay.” His momentary surge of excitement abruptly faded, and now he couldn’t stop yawning. But when he started to stretch out on his blanket, Kit stood, pulling him up with him. “Kit, c’mon. I’m not in the mood for —”

“Don’t tell me you’re still mad about tonight. I was an ass, okay? I admit it. But you know I didn’t mean it.”

That was the problem. Kit never *meant* it, yet he kept on doing it. Every damn day. “Let’s talk about it in the morning. I just want to go to sleep.”

“Me too. And we’ll be a lot more comfy in bed than on the fucking floor.” A gentle push, and Brian landed on the mattress, with Kit climbing in beside him. The bedframe shimmied and squealed under their combined weight.

Brian tried to get up, but Kit scooted in closer, pulling the covers up over both of them. The flannel sheets with tiny evergreen trees printed on them felt so soft and warm. Suddenly Brian’s last drop of resistance drained right out of him. Smiling, Kit leaned over him, kissing his forehead, his nose and finally his lips.

It was a soft, sweet kiss, full of tenderness and promise. Reminded Brian of their first kiss back when they were fifteen, in his bedroom with the door locked so his parents wouldn’t walk in on them. *Jesus*. All they’d done that time was make out, and he’d still come in his pants.

And how shallow was he that, despite everything, Kit still had the power to turn him on? Their kiss quickly turned passionate, triggering a flood of raw lust that pooled in Brian's crotch and severed the connection between his brain and vocal chords. Still, he should've had enough common sense to roll over when Kit's chilly fingers started fumbling with the drawstring on his pajama pants. He should've shaken his head before Kit ducked under the covers to take his hard cock in his mouth, sucking him down like a cold beer on a hot day. He should've done something, *anything* to stop him. But it felt so fucking fantastic, he just dug his fingers into the sheets and held on.

Kit worked him to the brink with his lips and tongue, then eased off and started all over again. Finally Brian couldn't take any more. He grabbed Kit's head and began to thrust. A few seconds later he cried out, spurting into Kit's mouth. When the room stopped spinning he realized Kit was now spooned behind him, arms wrapped around his waist. He rolled away as far as he could in the narrow twin bed, practically hugging the wall.

Kit heaved a loud sigh. "You're still pissed at me, huh? After I tried to apologize?"

God, why couldn't he get it through his skull that they weren't teenagers anymore? Things weren't that simple. "One blowjob doesn't fix everything."

"Well, you can give me one if you want. Maybe that'll help balance the scales."

Oh, nice try. Brian burst out laughing. He couldn't help it. At last he flopped onto his back and stared up at Kit, shaking his head. "You're such an asshole."

"Yeah, but you love me anyway."

No, he didn't. Not anymore. But he couldn't say it. Kit was his first love, the only guy he'd ever been with. The only person in his life who'd stuck by him. In spite of all the shit Kit had given him lately, Brian just couldn't bring himself to hurt him.

* * * * *

Brian's cell phone beeped, signaling he'd received a voice mail. Another one. From his mother. Groaning, he hit the "ignore" button and stuck the phone back in his

pocket. He hadn't talked to her in a couple weeks, and he really didn't want to. All she ever did was beg him to come home – and for what? To listen to her and Richard argue? No thanks. He'd had enough of that special hell when she'd divorced his father.

Zippering up his frayed army jacket, he paced back and forth on the stage door landing. Almost ten o'clock, and Chase hadn't shown up yet. He usually played his first set around nine thirty, but tonight some double-bass player had taken his spot. Since his black SUV wasn't parked in the lot, Brian figured he wasn't coming in tonight. Bummer.

Shoulders slumped, he headed back to the dressing room and flopped down in a chair. Other performers traipsed in and out, but except for the occasional nod or wave, they pretty much ignored him. Where the hell were Kit and Stewart? They were supposed to go on in about half an hour. Running late wouldn't score them any points with the management, not after all the smoothing-over Clive had to do to convince the club to give them another chance.

They weren't anywhere backstage either. He finally tracked Lou down over by the sound board, where he stood chatting with the engineer. He rolled his eyes at Brian's question. "How should I know where they went? Check out front."

The club had a rule against musicians drinking on duty, but since when had that ever stopped Kit? Tamping down a sigh, Brian shoved his hands in his pockets and made for the fluorescent-lit corridor that led from the backstage area to the kitchen, and through there to the front of the club. The door opened near the bar. It was so dark Brian had to blink hard until his eyes adjusted.

Kit and Clive straddled a pair of stools at the far end of the bar, trying to carry on a conversation over the jazz combo wailing away onstage. Why the hell were they out here, instead of in the dressing room? At least back there they wouldn't have to lean in so close, it looked like they were kissing –

Except that's exactly what they were doing. The entire world tilted on its axis as Brian stared, blinked and stared some more, his gaze zeroing in on Clive's papery-white hand cupping Kit's cheek while they engaged in a major lip-lock. With tongue. In *public*.

They didn't even realize Brian was there until he cleared his throat. Instantly they broke apart, jumping in their seats as if they'd just touched a hot stove. Clive recovered pretty quickly, licking his lips, alarm replaced by his usual haughty sneer. At least Kit had the good sense to blush. "B-Bri, what're you doing out here?"

Oh God. Oh Jesus. Oh *shit*. Suddenly it felt as if the floor had dropped out from under him. Brian flailed, catching hold of a nearby chair to steady himself. How could he have been so fucking stupid? The clues were right there in front of his eyes the whole time, he'd simply chosen to ignore them. After all, no matter how badly Kit behaved, he'd never actually *betrayed* him.

Then he remembered another red flag he should've picked up on and didn't. A flash of adrenaline surged through him as he bolted from the bar and back down the corridor to the dressing room. Kit's knapsack hung in his locker at the rear of the room. Luckily, Brian had watched him open the padlock so many times he'd memorized the combination.

Inside was a large manila envelope crammed full with all the songs they'd written down over the past couple of weeks. Two years of work, boiled down to a bunch of pages with notes scribbled on them—notes that swam and shimmied before Brian's eyes, making his temples throb. But these were photocopies, not originals. And at the top of the page, there was only one composer's name listed—Kit's.

"I'm sorry you had to find out like that," Kit said from the doorway. He stared at the floor, hunching over to make himself look as small and pathetic as possible—or maybe he was just bracing himself in case Brian tried to slug him. "I didn't mean for—"

"*Shut up.*" Brian slammed the pile of papers down on the dressing table. They spilled onto the floor, scattering all over the place. "What the fuck is this? First you

screw around on me, then you *steal* from me? They're my songs too, Kit. I don't know what you did with the originals, but I want them back."

"It's too late for that. I already gave 'em to Clive."

Brian just stared at him. "So you've been planning this for a while, huh? You and your new boyfriend." Jesus, he still couldn't believe it. "What's the attraction? Did he tell you he was gonna make you a big star once you got rid of me and Stewart?"

"Not Stewart, just you. Clive says you've got no stage presence. All you do is stand there. You don't even make eye contact with the audience. He says we need a real bass player. Girls in LA go for guys with guitars, not pianos."

Now he got it—part of it, anyway. "What were you gonna do, skip out one day and leave me in that crappy apartment all by myself? You weren't even gonna warn me, were you?"

"I wanted to tell you, I really did. But Clive said—"

"Who the fuck *cares* what Clive said!" Sucking in a breath, he stepped closer to Kit, fists clenched tightly at his sides. "You don't need him, Kit. We can make it on our own, just like we were doing back home—"

"Nobody here gives a shit how popular we were in Toronto. And I'll never make the big-time without help, I know that for a fact. I can't pick up any instrument and start playing it like you can. You're fucking brilliant, Bri. No way could I ever keep up with you."

"So you decided to string me along and steal my work?"

"It's just a few songs. You'll write more."

The cavalier way he said it made every muscle in Brian's body go taut. When exactly did it happen? When did Kit start thinking of him as competition—or worse, a sheep to be fleeced—instead of a friend and lover? "Congratulations. You sure as fuck had me fooled. Did Clive teach you how to lie too? Because frankly, you sucked at it before. But I guess you've learned how to suck a few other things lately."

Kit finally looked up, his jaw tightening. "You calling me a whore?"

"Well, it's a good thing you like old men's dicks. You'll probably be sitting on a lot of 'em once you get to LA."

And that did it. Kit took a swing at him, though Brian scooted out of the way just in time. But there was only so far he could retreat. Before long Kit had him backed up against the lockers, punching him. Brian countered with a hard right to Kit's belly, and down they went, rolling on the floor, slapping and tearing at each other.

Their grunts and yells brought everyone running. Lou and Stewart reached them first and managed to yank them apart, but not before Brian's fist accidentally smacked Lou in the face.

"Jesus!" Stewart goggled at both of them. "I leave for five minutes to go buy a pack of smokes, and you two almost end up killing each other? What the *fuck*?"

"He started it!" Brian fired back, struggling in Stewart's grip. "He stole my songs, and he threw the first punch—"

"He's crazy. I did no such thing!" Kit cried.

"*Enough.*" Lou looked like a bull about to charge, breathing hard, a bright red mark blooming on his right cheekbone. His enraged gaze darted from Kit to Brian and back again. "I've had it with you fuckers. You can tell your story to the cops."

* * * * *

"Twenty-five hundred's a fairly standard bail for a first-time assault charge," Brian's court-appointed attorney murmured after the judge swung the gavel at his and Kit's arraignment the next morning. "I'll contact a bondsman—"

"Don't bother," Brian replied. "I don't have that kind of money."

He stopped in mid-scribble, looking up sharply. "But your trial's not for another month."

The bailiff escorted Kit from the courtroom, with Clive and his attorney trailing behind them. Up the center aisle and out the door. Kit didn't even bother looking back.

Brian's eyes stung, but he blinked until the sensation passed. Well, that made it official. He'd lost his boyfriend and his band all in the same night, and something told him he wouldn't be welcome back at the apartment either. Hello, rock bottom. "I'll have to be a guest of the city for a while."

"Mr. Barclay, that is *not* a good idea. A night in a holding cell's one thing, but general population... I'd sooner chop off my arm with a rusty knife and no anesthetic than spend a month in there." He pushed his glasses up his nose and took another look at Brian's file. "I'll see if the judge is willing to reduce it to a thousand –"

"It might as well be a million. I don't have it."

"Isn't there anyone else who could advance you the money? What about your mother?"

"She's in Toronto. Besides, things aren't going so great for her right now. Hearing about this won't make her life any easier."

"How do you think she'll feel if she finds out you're in jail and you didn't call her?" He sighed. "Look, I'm trying to help you here. Can't you meet me halfway?"

Brian rubbed a hand over his face and closed his eyes. God, he was so exhausted he could barely think. He'd spent all last night staring at the holding cell floor, avoiding eye contact with this huge, tattooed skinhead who kept blowing him kisses and staring at him like he was a rare steak. The lawyer was right. He'd never survive another month in this place.

"My dad lives here in the city," he said finally. "But I haven't talked to him in a while."

"Would he be willing to help you out?"

"He'll give me major shit about it, but...yeah."

"Believe me, it's better than the alternative. Do you want to call him, or shall I?"

Brian hung his head, an awful ache of dread curling in his stomach. He might as well make the call and get it over with. His dad was going to be pissed enough about the situation without hearing about it from a stranger.

Chapter Three

Brian wiped his clammy hands on his jeans as the guard escorted him from the holding cell. His whole body clenched when he saw Trevor, his dad, standing at the front desk, signing off on some paperwork. He didn't look too different from the last time Brian had seen him, except for a little more gray mixed in with his blond. God, had it really been two years? He was forty-something by now, though it was hard to believe he could be that old. People used to say they looked alike, but that was before Brian's goth threads and black hair dye.

Which must've been exactly what went through his father's mind when he swung around and froze, his green-eyed gaze sweeping Brian from head to foot. "Good Lord," he murmured. "What the hell have you done to yourself?" Then Trevor walked right up and threw his arms around him. "I'm so relieved you're all right."

Stunned, all Brian could do was stand there. Then his hands slowly slid up the back of his father's khaki raincoat, hugging him tight. "I-I thought you'd be mad at me."

"Obviously I'm not overjoyed about your current situation, but we can discuss that later. C'mon, let's get you home."

Rain poured down in sheets outside. With only his thin jacket, Brian was almost soaked through by the time they hailed a cab and piled inside. Close to noon, which meant midtown traffic was a bitch. Took them almost forty minutes to travel a dozen blocks south, but the downpour had eased up a bit when they finally reached his dad's Tribeca condo.

Actually, it was Cameron's, his dad's partner's, condo—a fact that slapped Brian in the face every time he walked through the front door. Dad would never have chosen those ugly Hockney prints on the wall, or bought a fifty-inch plasma screen. And he sure as hell wouldn't have tricked out his kitchen like a five-star restaurant, with

gleaming chrome everywhere and an espresso machine that looked like something out of a fucking steampunk novel. Not that he couldn't afford it on his ad executive's salary, but it was just...stupid. Overblown and pretentious. It didn't fit the dad Brian knew at all.

"So where's Cameron?" he asked, trying to keep his tone neutral. Last thing he wanted right now was another fight. "Working the day shift at the bar again?"

"Yup. Hey, are you in the mood for some soup?" Trevor was already reaching into the cupboard for a can of tomato. "I burn everything else."

Brian remembered all the times his father had tried to make him pancakes for breakfast, and ended up triggering the smoke alarm. "Sounds good. I could use something to warm me up." He shivered in his damp clothes, though the room wasn't that chilly.

"There's some dry clothes in your old room down the hall. Go change. This'll be ready by the time you're done."

Didn't have to tell him twice. Brian headed through the living room and down the hallway, past the bathroom and exercise studio to the small bedroom at the end. His old double bed, bureau and TV were still there, along with a new, large modular desk, laptop computer and printer. Bankers boxes were stacked all over the place, labeled in bold black marker. Apparently Dad and Cameron had converted the room into an office. Geez, did they think he was never coming back?

His heart sinking a little, Brian found a t-shirt, hoodie and sweatpants in the top bureau drawer and put them on. Amazingly, they still fit. His sneakers were soaked, so he slipped on a pair of thick socks, then put the shoes in the bathtub to dry before padding back to the kitchen.

They sat down at the table and dug in. Cream of tomato with buttered saltines and a big glass of milk. Same thing Mom used to make for him when he got sick as a kid. Brian slurped down one spoonful after another, absolutely fucking ravenous. They'd

offered him coffee and cold cereal in jail this morning, but he'd been too twisted up in knots to eat.

Finally he pushed his bowl away, covering his mouth to stifle a burp. "Okay, go ahead. Let me have it. I know you think I deserve it."

"It's not about what I think, Brian." Trevor sat back and downed the last sip of his water. "It's about your mother calling me up a few days ago wondering if I'd heard from you, because she couldn't get you on the phone. Imagine my surprise when she told me you've been here in New York for nearly two months."

"I-I meant to call her back, but things got busy." Jesus, now he sounded like Kit.

"That's an excuse, not a reason."

"I'll call her this afternoon, I promise."

"Please do. But be tactful when you break the news about your arrest. No point upsetting her when we don't know the final outcome yet."

Brian fiddled with his spoon for a few seconds, then stuck it back in his bowl. "My lawyer says there's a good chance I won't have to go back to jail. The thing with Kit was self-defense, and I didn't mean to hit Lou at all. He just got in the way."

"And you're taking some overworked public defender's word for it? You'll probably end up sentenced to ten years."

"He said he was trying to help me. I mean, why wouldn't he? Isn't it his job?"

"The US isn't like Canada, Brian. The criminal courts here are a crapshoot if you don't have a private attorney. I'll call mine once I get back to the office." He got up to carry his dishes over to the sink.

Brian hesitated before asking his next question. Maybe this wasn't the right time, but he'd have to deal with it eventually. Best to bring it up now and get it over with. "Could you, um...ask your lawyer what I have to do to get my stuff back? Kit's still got my clothes and my instruments. Not to mention my songs."

Trevor blinked. "What songs?"

"Kit and I composed some for our band over the past couple years. He wrote them all down, but he didn't put my name on them. If he publishes or records them, I won't get any of the money."

"I think that's the least of your worries right now."

"But they're *my* songs too, and all I want is equal —"

"Maybe you should've thought of that before you threw in your lot with Kit. He's taken advantage of you since you were fifteen."

"I knew you'd say that. You've never liked him."

"And after what's happened, it looks like I was right."

"Dad, c'mon —"

"I'll ask my attorney what our options are, but let's concentrate on getting you free of these assault charges first, okay?" He grabbed his suit jacket from the back of his chair and put it on. "You look exhausted. Why don't you go take a nap? I'll be home for dinner around six."

"Will *Cameron* be joining us?" This time Brian couldn't keep the contempt out of his voice.

"He'd better. He's doing the cooking." Trevor gave him a wistful look, then reached over to ruffle his hair. Brian hated it when he did that. Made him feel about five years old. "Be nice, all right? Cameron always goes out of his way to be nice to you."

As if that made up for his father moving to another fucking *country*. "Fine. See you later," Brian replied dully, then stood and marched off to his room.

* * * * *

Brian napped the rest of the afternoon, waking to the faint bump and clatter of someone bustling about in the kitchen and dining room. But he didn't hear voices, which meant his dad wasn't home yet, and the last thing he wanted was to have to make small talk with Cameron. So he grabbed his phone and dialed his mother's number.

She picked up on the first ring. "Brian? Oh thank God! I thought you'd fallen off the face of the earth."

"Not quite." He smiled at the sound of her voice. He'd forgotten how much he missed hearing it. "Sorry I haven't called. Things have been crazy, especially over the past couple of days."

"Crazy how?"

"Well, it's not what I'd call great news." Then he explained, as quickly and gently as he could. Dead air crackled over the line once he finished. "You there?"

"Give me a minute. I'm still absorbing it." She sighed. "I'm surprised, although I don't know why. When you took off with Kit, I knew it wouldn't end well."

Jesus, couldn't anyone give him the benefit of the doubt? "That's what Dad said too."

"Oh, so we finally agree on something. Will miracles never cease?"

Now he sighed. "Mom, c'mon. I didn't call to argue. I just wanted to let you know I'm okay."

"I appreciate that. But tell me the truth—how much trouble are you really in?"

"I don't know yet. Dad's going to talk to his lawyer about it. Let's hope it's good news."

"Yes, let's. But now I need to... No, I don't. It can wait until next time."

Brian sat straight up. "Is this what you were calling me about?"

"You mean, aside from trying to find out if you were still alive?"

"Mom..."

"All right, all right, I might as well tell you." Another sigh. Between the two of them, it sounded like they were standing in a fucking wind tunnel. "Richard and I have separated."

The initial shock hit Brian like a punch to the gut, though after all the fighting he'd witnessed over the past year, he should've expected it. Still, he'd always liked Richard.

He was easy to talk to—more like a big brother than a stepfather. They'd gone camping together every summer while he was in high school, restored an old Camaro together. Stuff he'd never done with his real dad. First he'd lost Trevor, and now he was losing Richard too. It wasn't fucking *fair*.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he answered at last. "That really sucks."

"To be honest, I'm relieved. Things have been going downhill for a while. It feels good to put an end to it."

"You don't think you'll get back together?"

"I doubt it. Sometimes you just have to accept that a relationship's run its course."

Hint, hint. "Don't worry, I'm not giving Kit another chance. If that's what you're afraid of."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. This...altercation of yours obviously happened for a reason. Consider it a wake-up call."

"Isn't that what they call all crappy experiences these days?"

That made her laugh. "Well, despite everything, I'm glad you're staying with your father. At least now I know you're safe. When do you think you'll be home?"

Just the question he'd hoped to avoid. He wished he could tell her what she wanted to hear, but there was nothing left for him in Toronto anymore. No school, no band, no job. He'd already suffered through one divorce. He wasn't about to go back for a front-row seat to another one. "I'm stuck here until my trial next month. After that, we'll see, I guess."

"Let me know what happens. Which means I expect another call no later than next week, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned. "Love you."

"Love you too, sweetheart. Take care."

He lay back down and dozed for a little while longer, until there came a soft tap at the door, and his father poked his head in. "Dinner's ready, if you want some."

Brian's stomach growled, the soup he'd had for lunch now a hollow memory. Even so, he considered pleading exhaustion and staying in his room for the rest of the evening. But that would only fly so far. He couldn't hide back here for a whole month. Eventually he'd have to come out and talk to Cameron whether he liked it or not. Might as well break the ice now.

The dining room table was already set. Lasagna tonight, with tossed green salad, a bottle of red for Cameron and his dad, water for him. The good china and silverware, rather than the plain yellow ceramic plates he and his father had used at lunch. Brian took it all in with a roll of his eyes. Who the hell did they think they were impressing? He would've been perfectly fine with microwaving some frozen pizza and sitting down at the kitchen table to eat it. But of course, Cameron had to make this a big production, just to prove he could.

And in he came right on cue, a pair of wineglasses in his hands, sporting the world's fakest toothy smile. Painted-on jeans and t-shirt, shoulder-length dark hair that lay so perfect it must've been cut one strand at a time. Thirty-five, and he still looked like he'd walked out of an Abercrombie & Fitch ad. "Hey, Brian, how you doing?" At least he knew better than to try to shake Brian's hand – or, God forbid, *hug* him.

"Not bad for someone who just got out of jail," Brian replied, pulling out his chair to sit down. "But I guess you know how that goes, huh?"

Cameron traded a quick glance with Trevor, then opened the wine and poured the two of them each a glass. "I wouldn't know. I've never been arrested."

"Really? Isn't that unusual for someone in your old line of work?"

"Brian, knock it off," his father snapped. "I told you to be nice."

"It's okay, Trev. I don't mind answering. The truth is, Brian, yes, it is unusual. Even the most careful prostitutes get arrested at least once or twice during their careers. In my case, I just got lucky." He sat down, scooped up his glass, swirled it and took a sip, his clear blue gaze meeting Brian's over the rim. "Satisfied?"

Talk about a loaded question. Smart, poised, good-looking—on the surface, Brian could understand what his father saw in Cameron. He was literally the whole fucking package. He was also completely honest about his past as one of Manhattan's most successful male escorts, at least around family and friends. He'd come clean about it five years ago when Brian stumbled across his website and outed him to his father. At first, Trevor rejected him, but they soon reconciled and decided to build a life together here in New York.

And that was something Brian still couldn't accept. His parents' divorce was enough of a betrayal without his father moving hundreds of miles away for a guy who used to peddle his ass for a living. How could *anyone* ever trust someone who'd do something like that? Made no difference that Cameron had retired from hooking and now owned a popular bar in Chelsea. It didn't change the fact his dad not only trusted Cameron, he'd chosen him over his own son. Even now, it fucking *hurt*.

All conversation halted while they stuffed their faces. It was pretty good lasagna, Brian had to admit, with thick meat sauce and lots of cheese. He devoured one helping then started on another, keeping his eyes trained on his plate until his father busted out laughing. "Listen to him, Cam. I think he likes it."

Suddenly Brian realized he'd been making noises. *Yummy* noises. *Loud* yummy noises. Every last drop of blood in his body rushed into his cheeks. "Gimme a break. I've been living on Mickey D's for the last two months."

"Not exactly a rave, but I'll take it." Cameron grinned. "Have as much as you want. There's more in the kitchen."

Tempting as it sounded, Brian forced himself to push his plate away. "I'd better not, unless you want me hogging that treadmill in your exercise room. A month of eating like this and I'll pack on ten pounds, easy."

"Oh, what a tragedy," his father retorted. "You've always been skin and bones."

"I have a fast metabolism. So sue me."

"Speaking of, I got in touch with my lawyer this afternoon. He's agreed to take your case."

Good news, but for some reason it left Brian feeling weirdly deflated. "Did you ask him about getting back my stuff?"

"I can see your priorities are in order." Trevor shot him an exasperated look. "Martin says we should let it go for now. We'll see about retrieving your things once the criminal charges are settled."

"But what if Kit trashes my keyboards, or sells them?"

"Look, I'm not ecstatic about it either—I'm the one who bought them for you, remember? But the last thing we need to do right now is rock the boat. Don't worry, we'll get you some new clothes. And if Kit damages or disposes of any of your things, he'll have to pay for them. But aside from that, you'll simply have to be patient."

A white-hot surge of anger set Brian's teeth on edge and curled his hands into fists. Why was he the one who had to be patient, when Kit had screwed *him* over? "Fine. I'll stop by the apartment some night while they're at the club and get everything back myself."

"Don't you dare." A bright pink flush crept up his father's face, all the way to his hairline. "My God, Brian, do you *want* to go back to jail? Risking another confrontation with Kit is a horrible idea. In fact, it could jeopardize your whole case."

"Weren't you even listening to me? I said I'd go when they're not home."

"That doesn't matter. You don't live there anymore, which makes it breaking and entering. What if you get caught? You want to add another charge to your current list of offenses?"

"Stop talking to me like I'm a twelve-fucking-year-old!"

"Then stop *acting* like it!"

"Calm down, okay?" Cameron interjected gently, his gaze bouncing from Brian to Trevor and back again. "There's no need to shout. I'm sure we can all discuss this like rational human beings."

Brian stared into his plate again. "I just wish you'd treat me like an adult. I'm twenty, for fuck's sake."

"Fine." His father knocked back his last sip of wine. "One thing responsible adults do is pay their debts. Which means you owe me twenty-five hundred dollars for bailing you out today, not to mention all the money I'll be spending on your defense. How did you plan to pay me back?"

Brian blinked, his brain whirling as he tried to come up with a plausible answer. "I, um... I guess I'll have to get a job."

"When you get back to Toronto? No one's going to hire you here."

"They will once I get my keyboards back and I can start auditioning at clubs again."

"Or you could come work at the Icon," Cameron cut in. "I can always use another broom-pusher."

Brian didn't need a mirror to know his expression had just crumpled. "What about openings for musicians?"

"We do a drag show. All the music's prerecorded." Cameron shrugged, then got up and started clearing their plates. "The offer's open anytime you want it."

Not exactly a dream job, but better than sitting around the apartment twiddling his thumbs for the next month. As for having Cameron as a boss... Well, he'd worked with plenty of people he couldn't stand before. At least in this case, he was pretty sure Cameron would treat him well, if only for his dad's sake.

He met their expectant gazes with a sigh and a nod. "Okay. Sign me up."

Chapter Four

"Wow." Brian walked through the Icon's front door and stopped dead, gaping at the giant showroom and long, oak-paneled bar with photos of famous movie queens and rock divas hanging above it. "You remodeled. Again."

Cameron laughed, shoving the keys in his pocket as he ambled past him. "I guess it's been awhile since you last dropped in. We've expanded the showroom and added a kitchen. Not exactly five stars, but you can have a hamburger or grilled cheese when your lunch hour rolls around. C'mon back and we'll get you started."

Brian followed Cameron to the office, taking in his surroundings in greater detail. About forty tables now, up from half that number the last time he'd been here. They'd traded in the rickety, mismatched furniture for upholstered chairs and stools, red and white checkered plastic cloths draped over all the tables. No drippy candles stuck in old wine bottles, but it still reminded Brian of the Italian restaurant in *Lady and the Tramp*.

Must've cost a bundle to turn this dive into a respectable establishment. No wonder his father was always complaining how he couldn't afford to come visit him in Toronto anymore. Every extra dime he made was probably getting funneled into this place. One more thing Brian had to thank Cameron for.

He hung his jacket on the coat rack in the office, then trailed Cameron into the storeroom. Its damp, musty odor smacked him like a drunken kiss. "It's a little, uh..."

"Rank, I know. That's what happens when you mix spilled booze and a shitload of dust. No matter how often we clean, the smell never goes away." Cameron shrugged. "You'll get used to it. There's a broom and a face mask in the corner. Sweep up as best you can before our next liquor order gets delivered this afternoon." He turned and went back in the office.

Brian stared after him, then glanced around at what he was supposed to clean up. Jesus, the place was a fucking pigsty, with muddy footprints tracked in from the back door and dust bunnies as big as his head. Obviously no one had cleaned in here for a while. What the fuck was Cameron trying to pull?

He marched back into the office to find Cameron behind his desk, working on some accounting program. He didn't even bother looking up.

"Okay, I get it," Brian said. "Ha, ha, very funny. Is this your way of getting back at me for all the shit I've given you since...well, *ever*?"

Cameron turned his head slowly, giving Brian a puzzled look. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't. So when you said you needed another broom-pusher, you meant it literally?"

"What else would I mean? Is there anything else you can actually *do*?"

Brian shoved his hands in his pockets and thought about it for a minute. "I can wait tables. I did it a couple of summers during high school."

"Not here, you can't. You're not old enough to serve alcohol."

"I'll be twenty-one in three months."

"Then we can talk about it again in three months, if you're still here. Right now cleanup work's all I have available." He turned back to the computer.

So that was it? No, it couldn't be. "B-But...couldn't I help out with the show? There must be something I can do backstage."

"Not unless you want to put on an evening gown and high heels. Then you'd have to pass inspection with Mike and Ryan. They're in charge of entertainment."

Now Cameron was just making fun of him. Exactly what this had been about from the start. "Okay, fine," Brian huffed, stomping off toward the storeroom. "Whatever."

There was a moment of deadly silence, and then, "Get back in here, Brian. I have a couple more things to say to you."

He'd never heard Cameron use that tone before—quiet, yet completely chilling. It shot up Brian's spine like a lightning bolt, setting his hair on end and spinning him around against his will.

"Sit down." Cameron pointed at one of the chairs in front of his desk. Brian couldn't plop himself down fast enough. Then Cameron stood. He wasn't that big of a guy, but he looked pretty fucking imposing right now. Brian could've sworn his eyes had gone darker. "I'm not your enemy, Brian, even if you insist on treating me like one. But if you weren't Trevor's kid, I would've booted your spoiled-brat ass out of here five minutes ago."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because I believe in second chances. Hell, I'm living proof that a person can turn his life around if he really wants to. You've got an opportunity to do that here. I'd hate to see you throw it away."

"An opportunity to get black-lung from inhaling a fuckton of dust? No thanks." Brian started to get up.

"You realize you could be rotting in jail right now? And you would be, if you didn't have a dad who gives a shit about you. Who knew you'd rather get raped in the showers than do a little manual labor?" He stared at his hand as if he'd just noticed there was a pen in it, then tossed it on the desk with a sigh. "If you don't want to work, fine. Get on the subway and go home. I'll think of something to tell Trev."

"Something that'll put me in the doghouse for the next month," Brian spat.

"You're already in the doghouse." He stole a glance at his watch. "And now, no thanks to you, I've got about half an hour to get this bank deposit ready before we open." With that, he sat down and got back to work.

First chewed out, then ignored. Brian had had enough of this shit. He grabbed his jacket, then beat a retreat through the storeroom to the back door, flipped the deadlock and slipped out into the alley. Right next to the dumpster. Bye-bye, stale, dusty stench. Hello, ripe stink of rotten food and dog piss. At least, he *hoped* it was dog piss.

Shoulders slumped, he made his way to the corner newsstand and started flipping listlessly through the latest issues of *Green Lantern* and *Superman*. God, he hadn't even looked at a comic book since he'd left Toronto. He hadn't done a lot of things since then. He hadn't laughed much, or slept too well. Every morning he'd woken up around four and spent the next hour or two staring at the ceiling while Kit and Stewart snored away. No matter how exhausted he was, he couldn't escape this awful weight-of-the-world feeling. First it was because no club wanted to hire them. Then once they'd landed the Metronome gig, every night became make-or-break time, a whole different kind of pressure. When he was in high school he couldn't wait to get out on his own, but this first taste of real adulthood hadn't turned out the way he'd expected. In fact, it pretty much *sucked*.

* * * * *

He walked around Chelsea for a couple of hours, but every now and then he'd spy a couple strolling hand in hand, and it got too fucking depressing. So he headed east on Eighth Avenue, in the general direction of Cameron's condo.

It started drizzling, which soon turned into a downpour. Luckily, there was an old revival movie house up ahead. Brian ran under the overhang, then squinted up at the marquee to see what was playing. An old music documentary called *Woodstock*. He'd heard of it, but he'd never seen it before. Well, what the hell. He had the whole day to kill, and twenty bucks from his last Metronome check in his wallet.

It was a great movie, but a long one. Crosby, Stills and Nash. Jefferson Airplane. Santana. Joplin. Hendrix. Not the kind of music he was used to listening to, yet it had a familiar power and magic that kept him riveted. He'd come in around the halfway mark, so he decided to stay through the start of the next showing to catch up on what he'd missed.

As soon as Richie Havens hit the stage and began singing and strumming his guitar, Brian realized who he reminded him of. Folk music rather than blues, but with

the same soulful passion and intensity that made every bone in his body ache. And suddenly he knew exactly where he needed to be.

* * * * *

Chase darted out the Metronome's stage door around midnight, guitar case in hand. He stopped to light a cigarette before continuing down the stairs, eyes widening when he saw Brian leaning against his SUV's rear bumper. When that dazzling grin spread across his lips, Brian's heart promptly flip-flopped. "What're you doing here?" Chase asked. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"Me neither." Brian grinned back, but kept his shaky hands in his pockets. What was it about this guy that made him so nervous? One look, and every part of him started to tingle. "Would you believe I just happened to be in the neighborhood?"

"Nope. But nice try." He opened his trunk and stowed his guitar inside. "I heard about what happened. Just figures, I take off one night and miss the big floor show." When neither of them laughed, he added, "Sorry, man. Lame joke."

"S'okay. That's why I didn't come inside to say hi. I'd rather not run into Kit. Or Lou. Or Clive."

"Which reminds me, they went on a few minutes ago with their new bass player." Chase rolled his eyes.

Didn't take them long to replace him. Not that Brian was surprised. "That bad, huh?"

"Well, Bill Wyman's not losing any sleep. They're shooting themselves in the foot, in my humble opinion. Without you, they sound just like a hundred other mediocre bands."

"Thanks. I think."

"It was a compliment, believe me." He shut the trunk, then tamped out his half-smoked cigarette on the sole of his boot. "You heading home, or do you have time to stop in for a cup of coffee somewhere?"

All Brian could do for a very long moment was stare. “Um, don’t you have to go back on later?”

“Nah, I’m only booked for one set tonight. So...” Here came the smile again. “How about it?”

Good thing Brian had gone home that afternoon for a nap and dinner, even if he’d had to sit through another lecture from his father after Cameron broke the news about the job not working out. Then he had to wait until they went to bed—and there was an image Brian had to scrub out of his brain with bleach—before he could slip out and catch the subway downtown to the club. He’d left his dad a note saying he’d be home late, though it still wouldn’t save him from another ass-chewing tomorrow morning. Might as well make the punishment worth it. “Lead the way.”

They walked down to the all-night diner at the end of the block and took a booth in the back. The lone waitress on duty filled their mugs and left a thermal carafe on their table. It was okay—not thick as mud, or dishwasher-weak—but Brian pushed his aside after the first couple sips and forced himself to lean back and relax.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you don’t seem too bummed about getting kicked out of your band,” Chase remarked.

“I was yesterday, but not anymore. It was a real toxic situation, all three of us playing together, living together...”

“So did you find another place to stay?”

“Yeah, I’m with my dad right now.”

Chase shot him a puzzled look. “You’re from Toronto, but your dad’s American?”

“No, he’s Canadian too, but he moved to New York a few years ago, to be with his partner. He’s gay.” Crap! Why did he have to go blurting it like that? As if Chase was too dumb to figure out what “partner” meant.

“You mean, he’s gay *too*?”

Wow, that shiny white tabletop looked *really* interesting. “I-Is it that obvious?”

"No. But I'm pretty good at picking up the vibe." He reached over to take Brian's hand. The touch of his skin felt warm and reassuring, but it didn't stop Brian's heart from thumping so hard he could barely catch his breath. Every part of him was on fire. "You're a sweet kid, and I'm flattered. But I'm way too old for you."

First his father, then Cameron, now Chase. Wasn't *anybody* ever going to treat him like an adult? "I'm not that much younger."

"Really? What are you, eighteen, nineteen?"

"I'll be twenty-one the first week of July."

Chase burst out laughing. "God, that's like an entire fucking lifetime ago. You don't want to know all the shit I went through at your age. It's amazing I've lived this long."

"How long is that, exactly?"

"Twenty-eight. Going on fifty."

"Nothing like making yourself sound ancient."

"Sometimes that's how I feel." He slumped back in his seat. "So what's next? You looking for another band to join, or are you gonna start your own?"

"Pretty hard to do either without my keyboards. Kit's still got 'em at the apartment. No idea when I'll get them back, or even if."

"Can't you just call him up and ask him?"

"Dad doesn't think it's a good idea. Neither does his lawyer."

"Of course the lawyer doesn't want you two talking to each other. They make more money if you do it through them. Then they stir up all kinds of shit so it takes years to get anything resolved."

"Sounds like you've had some experience with lawsuits."

"More than my fair share." He poured himself another cup of coffee and sipped it slowly, drumming his fingers on the table. "You got your apartment key on you?"

It was tucked in Brian's wallet, right there in his back pocket. "Why?"

"Your buddies have another set to do tonight, which means they probably won't be home 'til two or three. If you want, we can drive over now and get your stuff."

Exactly what Brian had been champing at the bit to do last night. So why was he hesitating? Because the prospect was exciting, but the reality was too fucking scary? Jesus, what kind of a wuss did that make him? "It's in Brooklyn. That's a pretty big detour."

"Not for me. I live in Park Slope." He stood, pulled a few bucks out of his pocket and tossed them on the table, then zipped up his leather jacket. "C'mon, let's go."

Brian glanced down at his hands, amazed to discover they'd stopped shaking. Maybe this was the most idiotic thing he'd ever done—in a long, storied history of idiotic things—but right now he didn't care. He needed his keyboards back, and Kit wasn't going to hand them over without a fight. Besides, he couldn't exactly schlep them home by himself on the fucking subway. He needed an extra pair of hands and a car, which Chase had generously volunteered.

"Fuck it," he muttered, following Chase out of the diner. If he was an idiot, so be it. He'd be an even bigger one if he turned him down.

Chapter Five

They pulled around the back of the apartment building and parked in the lot. Chase started to climb out of the car, but Brian just sat there, thumb flicking the door latch. "Um...maybe we should rethink this."

Chase stared at him. "We drove all the way over here, and now you don't want to get your stuff?"

"Sure I do. I just don't want to end up in jail again."

"Look, we'll try your key. If it works, fine. If it doesn't, we walk away. I'm sure as hell not gonna break in. Okay?"

"Okay." Deep breath, then Brian got out and followed Chase to the building's front door. Luckily, the foyer was deserted, with nobody hanging around the candy and soda machines or picking up their mail. First time Brian had ever been grateful the management was too damn cheap to hire a doorman.

The elevators were working—for once—but they took the stairs instead, three flights up, then crept down the hallway as quietly as possible. Brian's fingers had gone ice-cold, so Chase took the key from him and stuck it in the lock. The tumblers clicked as he twisted the key with one hand and the knob with the other. The door swung open.

They waited until they were both safely inside before flicking on the lights. "Jesus," Chase muttered. "Welcome to slob central."

Brian's eyes practically popped out of his head. Looked as if a tornado had torn through the place. Dirty plates, beer bottles, soda cans and a couple of empty pizza boxes littered the kitchen table and counter. Clothes were scattered all over the sofa, floor and bed. A whiff of body odor wafted up from the nearest rumpled pile, making his eyes water. If any of his things had gotten mixed up in there, too bad. No way was he pawing through that mess.

His keyboards leaned against the far wall, still in their cases. A quick look inside told Brian they were exactly as he'd left them. Thank God. "They're fine," he said as Chase came over to give him a hand. "If you find an acoustic guitar, it's mine too."

"I'll look for it. Why don't you gather up your clothes while I start carrying your instruments down to the car? It's gonna take a couple trips."

Brian nodded and trudged over to the closet, relieved to see his jeans, t-shirts and leather jacket still hanging there. He grabbed his old army surplus duffle bag off the top shelf and started throwing all his stuff in it, including his extra pair of sneakers and black-patent Docs. He'd finished packing up by the time Chase returned from his first run down to the car. While Chase carried his piano, Brian slung his duffle bag over his shoulder and grabbed his guitar case. Then they headed out.

Their walk back down the hallway felt like some weird, surreal dream. Any second Brian expected one of the other apartment doors to fly open and someone to start screaming, "*Stop! Thief!*", but nothing happened. They took the elevator down this time, and even then it was deadly quiet, except for the distant whirr and clunk of the cable. He was half convinced they'd find themselves face-to-face with Kit and Stewart when the door opened, but they weren't there. The coast really was clear.

They stowed everything securely in the back of the SUV then climbed into the front seat. Brian let out the world's most relieved sigh. "I can't believe we just did that. Or that it was so easy."

"After the shitty last couple of days you've had, you deserve easy." Chase laughed. "In a manner of speaking."

Brian laughed too, until he caught a glimpse of something familiar out of the corner of his eye, and immediately froze. A battered old white van with blacked-out windows. "Shit! That looks like Kit's car." It passed by close enough for the driver to see them. Brian slumped in his seat, yanking up the hood of his jacket. "C'mon, let's get the hell out of here."

"I can't back out, they're blocking me."

Oh God. Oh Jesus. He should've known better than to let Chase talk him into this. "I'm dead. I'm fucking *dead*. My dad's gonna kill me, if Kit doesn't pound my ass into dust first —"

"Just chill, okay? They're turning around." Chase leaned forward, trying to get a better look out of the SUV's rear window. "Where'd he buy the van?"

Huh? "What the fuck difference does that make?"

"Just answer me. New York or Toronto?"

"Toronto. We drove it down here."

"It's got New York plates. It's not him."

For a minute Brian thought for sure he'd pissed his pants. Then, when Chase winked at him, he realized he'd just been punked. He let out a bark of relieved laughter, punching Chase hard in the shoulder. "You fucking *jerk*! You knew it wasn't him from the start, didn't you?"

"I figured it was fifty-fifty. This neighborhood's lousy with white utility vans." His tone sounded perfectly casual, until he had to go and smile that gorgeous, knee-melting smile that made Brian glad he was sitting down. "Sorry to make you squirm. Even if you are pretty damn cute doing it."

He'd leaned in close enough for Brian to feel the soft, warm puff of his breath on his cheek. It tickled, and sent a blush creeping up from his throat. "Y-You think I'm cute?"

"Like you haven't noticed."

"But...I'm too young for you. That's what you said, anyway."

"My exact words were, 'I'm way too old for you.' But I've had time to reconsider. You drove out here with me tonight to reclaim a piece of your life. That took guts. Wish I'd been more like you when I was your age."

"I'm not so sure that's a good thing."

"I am." And then he hooked a finger under Brian's chin and kissed him.

At first Brian was more stunned than anything else, but when it finally dawned that yes, Chase actually *wanted* him, Brian wound his fingers in his hair and held on. Chase was one hell of a fine kisser, passionate yet patient, his tongue flicking against Brian's lips before teasing its way inside. He had a sharp, bittersweet flavor, just like the coffee they'd drunk earlier. He delved deep, then eased off, giving them both room to breathe. Offering Brian an out. When Brian refused to let go, Chase kissed him again, arms wrapping around his waist. *God*. A few moments of contact, and they were both rock hard.

All the blood in Brian's brain had rushed toward his cock. It felt incredible. Hot and true and *right*. Because Chase *got* it. Got *him*. He wasn't trying to seduce him into giving him what he wanted. Chase knew this wasn't all about him. It was about give and take. Being a real lover, for however long it lasted.

Kit had never kissed him like this, with such heartfelt sensitivity and affection. Not once in five fucking years.

"It's pretty late," Chase whispered once they finally broke apart, both panting as if they'd sprinted to Manhattan and back. "Maybe you should stay at my place tonight."

No way was Brian about to argue with him.

* * * * *

Chase's Park Slope apartment lay ten incredibly horny, frustrated minutes away. They left everything except Brian's duffle bag and Chase's guitar in the SUV and raced up two flights, kicking the door open the moment Chase got it unlocked. Brian barely had a chance to register a glimpse of the foyer and living room before Chase grabbed his hand and dragged him down the hall.

Framed posters of jazz and blues greats decorated the cream-colored bedroom walls. Clapton. Buddy Guy. Charlie Parker. Coltrane. A tall oak bureau stood directly across from the wall closet with double sliding doors. Another door led to the bathroom.

Brian kicked off his sneakers and thick, plush beige carpet sprung up between his toes. And then there was the bed. Didn't look like a standard size, though it was more than roomy enough for two. Chase gave him a gentle nudge, and he landed flat on his back in the middle of the dark blue comforter. Soft and comfy, like sinking into a marshmallow. Then Chase landed right next to him.

More kisses, and this time Chase didn't hold back. No restraint, just pure passion as they drank each other down like a bottle of wine they'd been waiting years to crack open. Brian's brain whirled, his lungs on fire. Too intense, too soon. He had to put his hands on Chase's shoulders and push him away.

Chase peered down at him and smiled. "Worn out already, huh?"

"G-Gimme a minute, okay? A guy's gotta breathe."

"Breathing's overrated. So are clothes." Chase rolled to his feet and yanked his t-shirt over his head, then unbuckled his belt, unzipped his jeans and let them drop. Brian's mouth watered at the sight of all that smooth skin stretched over powerful shoulders and arms, with a single tattoo of a guitar and rainbow flag right over his heart. Not too much hair, except for small dark tufts at his underarms and a thick treasure trail leading down to a stiff, rosy cock Brian couldn't wait to suck on.

So he fell to his knees and did just that. Chase let out a startled gasp, but didn't try to stop him. One lick, and the salty-bitter taste exploded onto Brian's tongue, reminding him how long it'd been since he'd last done this. Kit had always liked fucking better than getting sucked off. Brian had forgotten how much he loved having a cock between his lips, gliding over his tongue. Chase was just the right size, big enough to give him a luscious mouthful without fear of being choked.

He licked and flicked, then opened wide, taking all Chase had to give—which was apparently too much for Chase. With a groan, he started pumping into Brian's mouth, coming a few jerky, erratic strokes later. Brian held onto Chase's well-muscled thighs, savoring the cream in his mouth for a few more seconds before swallowing, then finally let him go.

Chase stumbled to the bed and collapsed. "Jesus Christ! I wasn't expecting that."

Brian grinned, then pulled off his own clothes — preening a bit at Chase's approving whistle — and stretched out next to him. "Didn't think you invited me here to play checkers."

"But who could've guessed beneath that innocent face lurks the mad skills of a master cocksucker?" They both laughed. "Sorry I came so quick. It's been awhile."

"Really? I would've thought guys were throwing themselves at you all the time."

"Why would you think that?"

"Well, you're so hot and talented, I just assumed —"

Suddenly Chase sat straight up, his mouth going tight. "Don't talk to me like that."

Brian's heart lurched. What the hell did he do? "L-Like what? I don't understand."

"Like some starfucker. If that's all you're interested in, you can leave right now."

"No! *God, no.* Where'd you get that idea?"

Chase gave him a hard stare, as if he couldn't believe Brian's denials were anything but an act. "Lots of struggling musicians hang out at the club. They're all looking for a way to the top, even if it means climbing on somebody else's shoulders to get there."

Or in other words, fucking their way there, like Kit. But how could Chase think he'd do something like that? On the other hand, how could he not? After all, they barely knew each other.

The truth was his only defense. "I've only been with one other guy, Chase. And I never fucked around on him, even when he gave me plenty of excuses to. Sure, you're a great musician, but that's not why I'm here. I really do like you." Shaky breath. "But if you want me to go, I will."

Chase didn't say anything, just stared at the comforter as if it held the secrets of the entire fucking universe. Finally Brian figured that was his answer. He started to get up, until Chase grabbed hold of his wrist and pulled him back.

"Sorry," he murmured with a contrite smile. "Didn't mean to come off so paranoid. I've got no reason to believe you'd lie to me, it's just...habit, I guess." Before Brian had a chance to ask what he meant, Chase leaned in for a deep, brain-melting kiss. "I'm glad you're here."

Talk about relief. Brian closed his eyes and sent up a silent thank you. "Me too."

They crawled under the covers and lay together skin to skin, kissing, touching and exploring. Chase's tongue glided over Brian's skin like warm, wet heaven, bathing him from shoulder to thigh. His eyes nearly rolled back in his head when Chase took his cock in his mouth and slurped him down, making these yummy moans, as if he tasted just like his favorite dessert.

On it went, until Brian's tortured whimpers apparently convinced Chase he'd had enough. A moistened finger pushed gently inside him right as Chase started sucking him in earnest, swallowing him to the root. A few seconds later, the world exploded in a blinding-bright cascade of sensation, every cell in Brian's body throbbing.

When he opened his eyes, he was alone. A momentary panic tore through him until he heard footsteps padding down the hall, and in came Chase, smiling and carrying a glass of water.

"Jesus!" Brian let out a relieved breath. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry. I was thirsty, and I figured you'd be too."

Come to think of it, he was. He took the glass from Chase and chugged down half of it in one long gulp, then set it on the nightstand. Chase crawled in beside him and wrapped his arms around his waist. They settled against each other and just *breathed* for a few minutes, in absolute perfect silence. Brian had never been with anyone he felt so comfortable *not* talking with. It was weird, but kind of awesome at the same time.

"Sounded like you enjoyed yourself," Chase said at last, kissing Brian's shoulder. His goatee tickled, but it felt nice. Better than nice. A hundred times better.

Brian chuckled. "Are you kidding? That was the best orgasm of my life, and we haven't even fucked yet."

"Then I guess I should ask... Top or bottom?"

"Bottom. *Definitely* bottom." He grinned, until he thought of something. "Hope that won't be a problem."

"Nah, I can go either way. And to be honest, I've been fantasizing about your ass all night."

"My ass is so skinny, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

"You could stand to put on a few more pounds, no doubt. But you'll have plenty of padding once we get a pillow under you."

"Never tried that before."

"Then you're in for a treat. Roll over and I'll show you."

He moved onto his stomach, lifting up as Chase slid a pillow under his hips, and another under his head. At first it felt a little strange, being elevated at both ends, until he let himself relax, sinking into the pillows with a soft sigh. His eyes drifted shut.

Chase laughed. "Guess you like it, huh?"

"If you're not careful, I might just fall asleep."

"Well, I'll try not to bore you too much."

He started with tiny kisses dusted along Brian's shoulders and the nape of his neck, giving him sweet, tingly shivers all over. Kit had never touched the back of him—at least, not above his ass—which made it literally virgin territory. Every touch thrummed along his nerve endings. No danger of nodding off now—in fact, it was all he could do to lie still.

Then Chase began to anoint each vertebra with moist, rapid tongue-flicks and the hard edge of his teeth, and that was it. Critical mass. "*Oh God,*" Brian whispered in between groans, pounding the mattress with both fists. "Why don't you just kill me and get it over with?"

"Is that a complaint I hear? I thought you'd be snoring by now." Chase raked his nails along the length of Brian's back, making him shudder and bite down hard on his lower lip. "Sounds like you're still awake."

"You're enjoying this way too much."

"No such thing. But I can take a hint." Another kiss, soft and soothing this time, right at the small of Brian's back. "On to the main event."

Then he parted Brian's cheeks and kissed him right there on his hole, licking him until he opened enough for Chase to stick the tip of his tongue inside. Kit had done this for him, but only as quickly as needed to get him ready to be fucked. Chase, on the other hand, took his time with it, savoring each tongue-stroke, wetting first one finger, then another, before working them inside him. At last Brian lifted his hips off the pillow and started thrusting onto Chase's hand.

"Easy, tiger, I get it. Give me a sec, okay?" Chase bumped around in the nightstand for supplies, then came a telltale crinkle of foil and the pop of a bottle cap. Two fingers entered Brian again, cool and slippery this time. Then something blunter and thicker pressed against his hole and pushed inside.

It burned at first, but it didn't take long to fade, leaving Brian with this delicious, aching sensation. Full, but not so much it hurt, like it had sometimes when Kit fucked him. It felt different, because Chase was different. Because he'd taken the time to drape himself over Brian's back and kiss him on the shoulders and neck *before* he started moving. As if everything in the whole fucking world didn't revolve around his dick.

But God, it was a *great* dick, and it fit like they were made for each other, molded together perfectly. Every stroke hit Brian's sweet spot dead-on, driving his own cock deep into the pillow. It felt as tingly and fantastic as before, though without jerking off he probably wouldn't come. But he was fine with that. This time was for Chase.

And a good thing too. Chase's breath blew hot and ragged on Brian's neck, picking up desperate momentum the faster he drove into his ass. Soon he let out a broken gasp, gave a couple more jerky thrusts and crumpled onto Brian's back. The tingly sensation

abruptly spiked, then faded away, leaving Brian adrift in sweet, dopey euphoria. It felt good, if a bit sweaty, at least for the first few minutes. Then Chase got so heavy Brian couldn't breathe. Brian had to poke him with his elbow to make him move.

They rolled onto their sides. A big, goofy smile spread over Chase's lips as he leaned in for a kiss. "That was pretty fucking amazing – literally. If I do say so myself."

Brian tried to sit up, but every muscle in his body screamed in protest. Jesus, that'd never happened before. Then he looked down, his mouth falling open at the milky streaks of semen smeared all over his thighs and belly. He'd come without even touching himself. From the simple, intense sensation of Chase kissing and fucking him.

Suddenly he burst out laughing and couldn't stop. It rolled over him in a huge, endless wave until his sides ached and tears poured down his face. Chase rubbed his back and arms until it subsided, then pulled him close. "Mind telling me what that was all about?"

"I can't believe I wasted five years having lousy sex with a self-absorbed asshole like Kit. Or that I never even knew the difference. God, what the fuck was wrong with me?"

"Maybe you just hadn't met the right guy yet," Chase replied with a grin.

Brian grinned back and reached up to kiss him. "Yeah. That must be it."

Chapter Six

Brian woke to find a tall thermal mug sitting on the nightstand. He grabbed it and took a sip. Tasted like French roast, still piping hot. Two sugars and a little milk. Wow. Chase had actually paid attention at the diner last night. There was a yellow Post-It stuck to the other side, with “living room” scribbled on it. As if the twang of blues guitar wafting down the hallway wasn’t enough of a clue.

He yanked on his clothes and ventured out, bringing the mug with him. And there was Chase, sprawled barefoot on the long leather couch, working his way through one of the songs Brian had heard him play the other night. He picked it apart note by note, then stopped to adjust the tuning before trying again. It was like watching somebody build a wall, one brick at a time.

He looked up as Brian approached, flashing him a smile. “Morning, sunshine. Sorry to desert you again, but I didn’t want to wake you with my practicing. There’s more coffee in the kitchen if you want it.”

“I’m fine.” There was more than enough room for both of them on the couch, but instead Brian slid to the floor and sat cross-legged at Chase’s feet while he polished off his coffee. Same plush beige carpet in here, partially covered by funky Turkish throw rugs. More jazz and blues posters. Bookshelves and CD racks paneled the opposite wall. No TV, but a pretty impressive sound system in what looked like a custom-built black oak cabinet. Brian recognized the high-end brand names on the components, and had to stop himself from whistling aloud.

Four guitars hung on the wall beside the couch, both electric and acoustic. Brian’s eyes bulged at the sight of a gorgeous mahogany number with a shiny ebony fretboard. Jesus, he had a Gibson Firebird. Looked like one of the classic sixties models. Must’ve

set him back a few grand – and that was just for one instrument. How the hell could he afford it?

“Nice apartment,” he remarked. “*Really* nice, in fact. Guess the academy pays pretty well. The club sure as hell doesn’t.”

Chase broke off playing and set the guitar aside. “I’m not rich, if that’s what you’re hinting at. I inherited the apartment and some money from my grandmother a few years ago. Before that, I was living above a dry cleaner’s in Queens, barely scraping by.”

Not that it’s any of your business, his tone clearly implied. Brian stared down at the floor, his cheeks instantly hot. *Shit*. Why did he have to go asking personal questions? Last night had ended perfectly, with sweet kisses and falling asleep in each other’s arms. But that was last night. Just because they’d fucked didn’t give him the right to know every intimate detail of Chase’s life. “Sorry. I was just curious.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He picked up the guitar and started to play again. It was a different song this time, one Brian hadn’t heard before, with some jaw-dropping rapid chord changes.

He had to sit on his hands to keep from breaking out in applause before Chase was done. “That’s an amazing song. Did you write it?”

“I tried my hand back in the day, but now I leave it to the masters. You can blame Robert Johnson for this one. *Hellhound on My Trail*. He only wrote about thirty songs, but they’re all standards. No way I could ever top that.” Then he played another one straight through from start to finish, without so much as a single flubbed note.

“Jesus.” Brian shook his head. “How many hours do you practice every day?”

“A couple hours in the morning, and again in the evening if I can swing it.”

“Do you really need to? You’re already pretty fucking perfect.”

“If I slack off once, I can hear the difference. If I slack off twice, the audience can.” He nodded at the guitar. “Want to give it a try?”

Brian's pulse began to race. Talk about intimidating! Still, he couldn't resist. In fact, his fingers were itching to run through that *Hellhound* song. Chase swung the guitar to him by the neck and handed him a pick. Brian settled it in his lap and rang the strings. Warm, mellow-sounding nylon, rather than the steel twelve-string he usually played onstage. After a few seconds he realized he'd never be able to match Chase's tempo, so he slowed down, making it more melancholy, taking care not to stumble over any notes. Not a great rendition, but at least he got through the whole song without embarrassing himself.

Chase gave him this weird look, as if he'd just witnessed something unexpected. "You sure you've never heard that song before?"

"If I did, I don't remember. Why?"

"Well, you didn't make a single mistake. That's pretty damn impressive."

"I've got a good memory, I guess. Makes up for lot of other stuff."

"Like not being able to read music?"

How the hell did Chase figure it out? Well, duh—he was a music teacher. He could probably spot poseurs like him a mile away. God, where was a crack in the floor when he really needed one? "Y-Yeah."

"That's even more impressive. I remember you saying you've never had lessons. Why not?"

"I sort of lied about that. I took piano in grammar school, but the first time I looked at sheet music, everything went all blurry and swam around on the page. So from then on I'd just go out and find a recording of whatever piece of music the teacher wanted me to learn. I'd listen to it and pick it up that way. She never even knew I was faking."

"There's nothing fake about what you played for me a couple minutes ago. You didn't just copy what I did, you interpreted the song in your own way. Not too many people can do that, especially after only one hearing." He scooted over, patting the sofa cushion. Brian hesitated, then moved up to sit next to him. When they clasped hands, Brian's jitters started to fade. "Are you dyslexic with regular reading, or just music?"

"Both."

"Do you have as much of a problem with regular reading?"

"Not anymore. I mean, I don't read too fast, and some letters still look flipped around and weird, but I can handle it okay for everyday stuff like reading menus and street signs and surfing the net. Most other people don't even notice it."

"Sounds like you've gotten pretty good at disguising it."

"After all the crap I took at school, I had to. Getting called 'moron' every day really fucking hurt."

"I'll bet." Chase put his arm around him and pulled him close. Brian snuggled into his shoulder, inhaling his warm, spicy scent. "If you want, I'd be happy to teach you."

"Don't bother. It'll just be a waste of time."

"There's at least two instructors at the academy who specialize in teaching students with learning disabilities. Let me talk to them and see what they say. Can't hurt to ask, right?"

Brian sighed. "I've been through this shit with special ed teachers before. Didn't do any good. Why do I need to learn now anyway? I've gotten along fine without it so far."

"Except for Kit stealing your songs because you didn't know how to write them down. You want to leave yourself open for someone else to screw you over like that?"

He opened his mouth to reply, but a loud chirping sound came out. Oops, that was his ass—or rather, his cell phone in the back pocket of his jeans. He fished it out, though he already knew who it was before he saw his dad's number flash across the display. His thumb hovered over the "answer" button for a few seconds until it stopped ringing and cycled to voice mail.

"Three guesses, huh?" Chase asked. "Why didn't you pick it up?"

"And listen to him tear a strip off me for staying out all night? No thanks. He's probably waiting at home so he can do it in person anyway." He switched the phone off and shoved it back in his pocket. "Jesus, you'd think I was still in fucking high school."

"You should be grateful he cares enough to get mad. A lot of parents don't give a shit." Chase rolled off the couch, stretching like a long, lean, *sexy* cat, then went to hang his guitar up on the wall next to the other four. "Guess we'd better get you home."

What? He couldn't be serious. "You don't need to come stand in the firing squad with me. I can just hop the subway."

"What about all your stuff? It's still down in my car."

"Oh. Good point." Brian forced a sheepish smile. But how were they supposed to get everything upstairs without his father seeing it? Confessing to their little adventure in property reclamation probably wasn't the best idea right now.

"C'mon, let's see if I can help smooth things over with your old man. It is partly my fault you've been such a bad boy." With a grin, he walked right up and planted a soft kiss on Brian's lips. A hot little *zing!* shot through him, leaving him dizzy and swaying on his feet. He had to grab Chase's waist to steady himself. "He'll like me, I promise."

"A-As long as you don't do *that* in front of him."

Chase laughed. "I'll be a perfect gentleman."

* * * * *

Trevor sprang up from the couch, tossing aside his morning paper the second Brian walked through the door. "You took your sweet time getting home. This is the second day this week I've had to take time off work on your —" But when he saw Chase, he did a double-take. "I wasn't expecting you to bring company."

Brian shoved his hands in his pockets and bit back a sigh. Good thing they'd left his clothes and instruments down in Chase's car. "Dad, this is my...friend, Chase. He's a musician too."

Chase held out his hand, flashing his megawatt smile. "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Barclay. Brian talks about you all the time."

"I'm sure he does." He shot Brian a *just wait until he leaves* look, then turned his attention to Chase, his eyes narrowing a bit. "You look familiar. Have we met before?"

"Not unless you hang out down at the Metronome. That's about the only place I go, other than work."

"I see. Well, speaking of work, I'm overdue there myself. So if you'll excuse us?"

Brian cringed at his father's abruptness, but if Chase was offended, he didn't show it. "No problem. Hope we'll have another chance to talk soon."

Half relieved, half embarrassed, Brian walked Chase to the door, leaning in close to whisper, "Would you mind holding onto my stuff for another day or so? Sorry I have to ask, but —"

"S'okay. Gives you a good excuse to come over again." For a second Chase looked as if he were about to kiss him—and, his dad be damned, Brian wanted him to. But instead he gave Brian's hand a quick squeeze before scooting out the door. "Call me tonight and let me know how it goes."

"Will do." He shut the door and took a deep breath, then turned to face Trevor. "Go ahead, yell at me. I know you're dying to."

Trevor rubbed a hand over his face. "Brian, what the hell are you doing? You only broke up with Kit two days ago. You trying to win a medal for the fastest rebound on record?"

Fresh anger pumped through him, hot as acid. As if his dad had any room to talk. "No, of course not. Wouldn't want to strip you and Cameron of the title." With that, he marched down the hallway to his room and slammed the door.

But there was no lock, nothing to prevent his father from barging right in—which he did. "I'm not done talking to you yet. *Sit down.*" He pointed at the foot of the bed. Brian stared at the spot for a few stonily silent seconds, then sat. "How many times do I have to tell you, I didn't leave your mother for Cameron. She left *me* for Richard."

"And you didn't exactly go out of your way to stop her, did you? The ink wasn't even dry on the divorce before Cameron turned you gay and you two decided to shack up together."

"*Turned me gay?* What, the same way Kit turned *you* gay? Jesus Christ, don't be so fucking stupid!"

Brian's next salvo froze in his throat. He'd never seen his father get mad enough to use the F word before. "Th-That's not what I..."

"I've always been gay, Brian. It wasn't until I met Cam that I finally got the courage to admit it to myself. I'm sorry you can't accept that I have the right to be happy, but I'm done trying to justify my life to you. If you don't want to be a part of it, that's your call."

Seeing him walk away hurt as much now as it had five years ago. It still made Brian feel as if he were coming apart inside. He couldn't just stand here like an idiot, saying nothing while he watched his whole world disintegrate again. "I know you didn't mean to abandon me, but you still did. It's harsh, but it's the truth. I was a kid and I needed you, and you weren't there."

His father stopped, then turned slowly around. "I'm here now. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"And you're always looking at me like I'm some problem you need to solve. Or ship back home to Mom."

"I'm worried about you, that's all. You need to think things through, stop making bad choices —"

"They're *my* bad choices to make!"

"Not when *I'm* the one who's stuck cleaning up the messes you leave behind." Sighing, Trevor ambled back in and sat down on the bed next to him. "Look, I just don't want to see you get your heart broken again. Not so soon after Kit."

It was nice that he seemed to care, even if it made Brian want to grind his teeth. "It wasn't Kit that broke my heart so much as him stealing from me. But Chase is a good guy. He wouldn't hurt me like that. Besides, we're just friends right now."

"You might've sold me on that one if you'd bothered showering. You reek of sex."

God, he'd blushed so often these past couple of days, he was amazed his face hadn't gone numb. "It's not serious."

"Not yet, you mean, but I can tell you're falling for him. He's older than you, you know."

"Only by eight years. You're eight years older than Cameron."

"He was thirty when we met, not twenty. There's a big difference."

"I like Chase, and he likes me. He's even offered to teach me how to read music."

"Really?" Up went his eyebrows, along with a corner of his mouth. Brian could've sworn he actually looked impressed. "He's got his work cut out for him."

"That's what I told him. But he seems to think I'm not a lost cause."

"In that case, maybe I've been too quick to judge him. It certainly sounds like he cares." He stood. "If you want to keep seeing him, fine. But I don't want you spending every night at his place, or going over there without letting me know. I'm forty-three now. My old heart can't take the stress the way it used to. Deal?"

He held out his hand, and Brian took it. It felt good – warm and strong. And was it his imagination, or was that a glint of respect in his father's eyes? "Deal. And thanks. I know you'll like him once you get to know him better."

"I'm looking forward to it. But now I really do need to get to work. Try to stay out of trouble, at least for the rest of today, all right?"

Brian smiled. "I'll do my best."

Chapter Seven

By noon Brian was going quietly insane. After showering, changing clothes and making himself a bowl of microwave oatmeal, he had literally nothing else to do. His fingers itched to practice. Now he could've kicked himself for not bringing his guitar with him. He could've told his dad he'd borrowed one of Chase's.

Or maybe he should've just brought all his things upstairs and told the truth. He hated lying. All it ever did was get him into more hot water. Dad was right—he needed to start making better choices. He'd come clean tonight and take his lumps.

But now there was something else he needed to do. Something that had been eating at him since yesterday. He threw on a jacket and hopped the subway across town to Chelsea, his stomach twisting in knots as he trudged up the street to the Icon. He hesitated at the front door, then shoved it open and ambled inside.

The place seemed pretty quiet, except for a handful of early-afternoon customers gathered at the far end of the bar, sipping beer and watching a *RuPaul's Drag Race* rerun on the forty-inch plasma screen. Cameron stood at the sink, rinsing glasses. He swung around to grab a towel, eyes popping wide when he saw Brian. "Thank God you're all right. Have you been home yet? Your dad was pretty fucking frantic this morning."

He'd expected Cam to chew him out, but at least he sounded more concerned than pissed off. "Yeah, it's fine. We talked—or actually, he let me have it. Which I totally deserved."

"Well, it's good to hear you admit it. And for the record, I was worried too."

For the first time ever, Brian believed him. "Thanks, Cam. I appreciate it."

Cameron smiled. "Since I can't serve you a beer, I'm assuming there's some other reason for this visit?"

"Yeah, I, um..." Deep breath. "I'm sorry for the way I behaved yesterday. You were just trying to help me out, and I was a real asshole about it. If you can see your way clear to giving me another chance, I'd like to have that job back. I won't give you any more trouble, I promise."

"Hmm." Cameron tapped his fingers on the bar, the space between his eyes going all crinkly. "I guess I could give you a trial run. Go on back and get started. You remember where the broom is, right?"

"How could I forget?" Brian headed for the office door.

God, the storeroom was an even bigger mess than he remembered. Every sweep of the broom kicked up more dust. Good thing he'd put on the face mask, although he still had to stop every few minutes to wipe the grit from his watery eyes. He kept at it until he'd filled up a ten-gallon trash bag with dust bunnies, scraps of paper and cardboard and shards of broken glass. Then he got down on his knees with a dustpan and hand-broom to dig into all the corners and hard-to-reach spots.

Awhile later, Cameron poked his head in. "You okay in here? I haven't heard a peep out of you all after —" His mouth dropped open. "Wow! Not bad. In fact, it hasn't looked this clean in ages."

"Thanks." Brian beamed, running a hand through his dust-encrusted hair. He'd need another shower when he got home tonight. "Feels good to stay busy, get stuff done."

"Glad to hear it. When you're finished here, the backstage area could use some sweeping up too. After you've had your break, of course. Take half an hour and go relax and have a soda."

"Oh, okay. But isn't there something I could do out front? Just to mix it up a bit?"

"I think there's a grease trap in the kitchen you can scrub out."

Brian's happy expression crumpled. "Y-You're kidding, right?"

Cameron laughed. "You've apparently never heard the old expression, 'Never do anything well that you'd rather not do at all.' Looks like you've lucked into a job, kiddo. Sure you still want it?"

Yeah, it was dusty and dirty, but what were his alternatives? Flipping burgers at Mickey D's? Not that he could even get that kind of a job here. At least Cameron was family—sort of. Until he got with another band, this was the best he could hope for. Might as well keep his head down and get it done. "Yeah, of course I do. Thanks for giving me a chance."

Compared to the storeroom, the backstage area was a snap to clean. It was pretty much deserted this time of day, so it didn't take Brian long to sweep up behind the stage and inside the dressing rooms. There was an upright piano in the largest dressing room, the one with the big gold star on the door. He stared at it, wondering if he dared touch it. But there was no one around right now, and he doubted Cameron could hear him out in the bar. Just a few notes. What could it hurt?

He could tell from the very first note it was slightly out of tune, but he kept playing, running through scales, his fingers fumbling over the keys as if he'd had one too many beers. Jesus, Chase was right. A couple days off, and it was like starting over. He'd never taken two days off practicing, not since he'd started playing professionally. He'd gotten into the habit of sitting down at his keyboard every morning and playing until his stomach grumbled so loud he couldn't ignore it anymore. He'd stopped thinking of it as work a long time ago. Making music was something he loved doing. Something he'd keep on doing, even if he never got paid for it again.

Once he'd warmed up, he segued into one of his own songs. The last one he'd ever played onstage with Black Rain. It sounded hollow and tinny on a regular piano, even more gloomy than the way he'd originally written it. *Written*. Oh, that was funny. He couldn't actually *write* anything. He just fucked around until he found a tune, added a few variations and spun it out for three or four minutes. It was crap, not real music. Not like the stuff Chase played.

Unawares, he'd launched into that *Hellhound* song Chase had taught him. It had a toe-tapping beat, especially when he sped up the tempo a bit. He'd made it halfway through before he sensed there was someone behind him and whirled around, a jolt of fear and embarrassment tearing through him. "Sorry, I know I shouldn't have—"

"No need for apologies, sugar. I was enjoying it." A tall, burly guy leaned in the doorway, wearing jeans, an Icon t-shirt and a big, friendly smile. From all the salt mixed in with the pepper in his short ponytail, Brian figured he had to be around forty. Soft-spoken, with a soothing twang to his voice. "You got a righteous set of chops on you. Haven't heard the blues played like that since I left Texas."

Brian's gaze flicked to a framed photo of a guy in outrageous drag hanging above the dressing table. Long red wig, silver lamé gown, stiletto heels. Guess who? "Hey, Mike," he said, holding out his hand as he stood. "You probably don't remember me, huh?"

Mike studied him for a few seconds before the light bulb over his head blinked on. "Oh my fuckin' God. You're Trevor's boy. I didn't recognize you with that black hair."

"Yeah, I've had it for a while now."

"Well, if you don't mind me sayin,' you were a lot cuter as a blond. But you're not bad now either." He winked.

"Jesus, Mike, quit flirting with the help. Cameron's gonna strangle us both if you make another one run off screaming." Another guy strode into the room. Shorter than Mike, blond, mid-thirties, good-looking. Nice smile. "Don't worry, I'll keep him in line. I'm Ryan, by the way."

"My *cheri amour*," Mike interjected, looping an arm around Ryan's shoulder and planting a kiss on his cheek.

Talk about an odd couple. Still, they seemed happy together. Envy's claws pricked at Brian, but he shook it off. "Cameron said you were in charge of entertainment now."

"That we are." Mike dropped onto the stool in front of the dressing table with a gusty sigh. "We got shows going five nights a week, Tuesday through Saturday. And

let me tell you, by the time Saturday rolls around, my middle-aged ass is draggin.'” He shrugged. “But I shouldn’t complain. Wasn’t that long ago we were barely getting by. Besides, how many other guys get to live out their diva-by-night fantasies every fuckin’ night?”

“We don’t all have what it takes to pull off a Marilyn Monroe wig and four-inch heels—thank God,” came Cameron’s voice from the doorway. “JoJo’s here, so I’m heading out,” he informed Mike and Ryan, then turned to Brian. “C’mon, hard-workin’ man. Time to get dinner on the table for your dad.”

Brian grabbed the broom and gave Mike and Ryan a quick wave goodbye before trailing Cameron back to the office. “Hard-workin’ man, huh? I like the sound of that.”

Cameron smiled. “I thought you might.”

* * * * *

A hot shower never felt so good. Brian soaped and rinsed his hair twice, then slumped against the tile and let the spray pummel him until every muscle in his body went limp. It took his last shred of will to climb out and dry off. He stretched in front of the mirror, wincing at all the places that ached and smarted. And he thought sex with Chase was strenuous. *Jesus*. He’d be lucky if he could move at all tomorrow.

He put on a pair of nice, comfy old sweats, then padded barefoot into the kitchen. Cameron bustled around trying to get dinner ready. He had a large soup pot and two different skilletts cooking on the stove, and apparently all of them needed to be stirred at once.

“Looks like you’ve got your hands full,” Brian said. “Anything I can do to help?”

Cameron shot him a surprised look, then pointed at a cutting board on the counter. “You can finish cutting up those carrots and onions. They need to go in the pot pronto.”

“You need ’em fine or coarse?”

“Anything, as long as it’s quick. The meat’s getting overcooked.”

"No problem." He stepped over to the counter, grabbed a chef's knife and started chopping. The onions made his eyes sting and water, but he barreled through until he had a nice, big pile of veggies. "Is this enough?"

Cameron eyeballed it and nodded. "Perfect. Bring it over."

Brian scraped the carrots and onions into the pot, then leaned over to take a whiff. It smelled great, but Cameron's cooking always did. Good thing they had that home gym, or Cam and his dad would probably weigh three-hundred pounds each by now.

"Thanks." Cameron put down the wooden spoon he'd been using to stir the meat and wiped his hands on his red and white striped apron. "Where'd you learn your knife skills? Every time I ask your dad to help, he nearly slices off a finger."

"I've been helping Mom out in the kitchen for a while. My stepdad's not much of a cook either." As if he needed to be reminded. "Anything else you want me to do?"

"I think I've got it all under control, but if you wouldn't mind setting the table, that would be great. And Brian..." he added with a smile, "thanks for your help today, here and at the bar. You really went above and beyond."

Wow. Talk about opposite day. The first time he'd ever offered to help, and the first time Cameron had ever thanked him. Seemed as if the whole world had flipped on its ear lately. Maybe he should go check to make sure the sky hadn't turned green.

He wanted to say "thanks" too, but his throat was all clogged from the onions. So he grabbed plates, bowls and silverware and took them into the dining room. No sooner had he finished setting the table when he heard the front door open. His dad trudged in, tossed his coat and briefcase on the couch, and continued on into the kitchen.

A soft murmur of voices floated forth, then faded. Brian took a quick peek around the corner. Cameron and his dad stood in front of the stove with their arms around each other, foreheads pressed together. So peaceful and calm, it looked almost as if they were praying. Brian had never seen such a simple, beautiful display of contentment before.

His parents had never acted like this. Neither had his mom and Richard. Or him and Kit.

And suddenly, he understood. He *got* it. He knew why his father had been willing to move to another country. The kind of love he had with Cameron didn't come along every day. The fact it had survived five years was a miracle. What kind of fucking jerk was he to begrudge his dad happiness just because he'd never had it himself?

Knees wobbling, Brian yanked a chair out from the table and sank down on it about three seconds before his father poked his head out the kitchen doorway. "Oh, there you are. Cam just gave me a glowing review of your job performance today. What made you change your mind? I thought you didn't want to work at the Icon after all."

Brian shrugged. "I've got plenty of time to kill, and no gigs to fill it up with. Might as well keep busy at the bar until I can start auditioning again."

"Hold that thought. I've got some good news."

He ended up holding it until dinner was ready a little while later. Cameron had made stew, thick and hearty, with big, tender chunks of beef and lots of veggies. Brian got a tiny twinge of pride at the thought he'd helped add some flavor to it. There was applesauce too—homemade, with fresh cinnamon sprinkled on top—and skillet cornbread served with real butter.

They all dug in like starving lumberjacks. Brian inhaled a whole bowl and helped himself to another, then decided to give the cornbread a try. It was good, if a bit coarse and chewy. He'd chugged down a whole glass of water by the time he finished his small piece.

At last his father sat back and smiled. "Martin called this afternoon. Kit's lawyer says he's willing to drop the assault charges against you, if you'll do the same."

So apparently this was the good news. Not all that surprising—Kit couldn't leave New York with those charges hanging over his head. Clive and Stewart were probably pressuring him to resolve things so they could take off for LA. Well, fine. If Kit was getting a reward for ending this clusterfuck, why shouldn't he?

"Okay." He set down his spoon. "I'd be happy to drop the charges. When Kit gives me my songs back."

"Just your songs? What about everything else? Or don't you care about your clothes and instruments anymore?" *Oh God. Moment of truth.* Brian's stomach clenched. Then Trevor's gaze locked on his, and that was all it took. "Oh don't tell me you went and did it anyway. After I begged you not to!"

"Look, I didn't break in. I had my key and it still opened the lock, so I used it. Don't worry, nobody saw me."

"So where are your guitar and keyboards? I didn't see them in your room."

"In a safe place. I'll bring them home in the next day or so, okay?"

"Fine. But I still think you should drop the charges. You can always address the song issue later, once things cool down. Seems to me that's the smartest way to go."

"And take away their incentive to cooperate? This is the only leverage I've got, Dad. I can't let it go for nothing."

"Getting sentenced to jail for a year or more is hardly nothing. Besides, how likely is it that Kit will actually record them or make any kind of money off them?"

"What difference does that make? Maybe they are crap that nobody in their right mind would pay to hear, but they're my songs and I want them back. I don't like the idea that Kit can steal from me and there's not a damn thing I can do about it."

His father sighed, but at least this time it sounded more like commiseration than anger. "I know it's not fair, but don't you think it's better to put this incident behind you and move on? You've got some good things going for you now. New job, new boyfriend—"

"There's a new boyfriend? *Already?*" Cameron's wineglass halted in midair right in front of his mouth. "Where have I been?"

"I met him this morning. He's a musician too, and quite good looking. That smile of his reminds me of someone. I've been trying to figure out who all day." Trevor snapped

his fingers. "I've got it! Tommy Winters. You remember him, don't you, Brian? He was that teen idol who dropped out of sight a few years ago."

Brian racked his brain, but came up with only a vague recollection of some kid with a blond bowl cut and a string of syrupy-sweet pop hits. The thought of Chase being compared to *that* made him want to vomit. "Give me a break, I was ten. All I remember is that I got a bike for Christmas that year."

"Whatever. I'm sure it must be a coincidence. But please, Brian, give some more thought to what we've talked about. Don't throw any more monkey wrenches into your life just because Kit's a thieving jerk."

He helped clear the table, then went back to his room and stretched out on the bed. Despite his exhaustion, he didn't nod off. His mind whirled, unable to shake loose that worm his dad had planted. Finally he opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. "Aw, fuck it," he muttered, then got up and went over to the desk, switched on the computer and typed "Tommy Winters + photos" into Google.

As usual, it pulled up thousands of hits, though Brian was surprised to find his memory wasn't that far off. Blond kid with bowl haircut, check. Syrupy pop songs, check. Vanished off the face of the planet in the mid-2000s, double-check. Looked like all his albums had gone out of print. Not surprising for a flavor of the month, even if Tommy Winters' fifteen minutes of fame had dragged on for almost five years. A has-been at eighteen. Well, no wonder he hadn't resurfaced. Who wanted to be reminded of that every damn day?

He really didn't look that much like Chase, except in a couple of early photos with a younger boy and girl, all with dark hair, holding guitars and wearing dazzling, toothpaste-ad smiles. A click on the caption told him they were Winters' brother and sister. The three of them resembled Chase so uncannily, a bone-deep chill shot along Brian's nerves.

Then he pushed his chair back from the desk, shaking his head. This was stupid. So Chase looked like some ex-teen idol. So what? It didn't mean anything. As if Chase

would be caught dead playing that insipid bubblegum-pop crap. It was too fucking embarrassing to even consider.

Brian had no sooner turned off the computer when his phone rang. It was Chase. *Shit*. He'd completely forgotten about promising to call him.

Brian hit the "answer" button. "Hey. I just remembered something."

"I was wondering about that." Chase laughed. "Busy day, huh? How'd everything go with your dad?"

"We had our moments, but between this afternoon and tonight I think we've gotten it all smoothed out."

"Glad to hear it." There was this soft, rustling sound, and then, "So what're you doing? Lying in bed thinking about me?"

"No, but I could be in about thirty seconds."

"Or you could be in my bed, doing a lot more than thinking. If you know what I mean." His tone dropped to a low, dirty-old-man growl. "I got a nice, fluffy pillow here with your name on it."

And when Brian remembered where that pillow had gone last time, half the blood in his body raced into his cheeks—and the other half below his belt. "Getting there'll take a lot longer."

"I promise to make the trip worth it."

Didn't have to ask him twice. Up he sprang, already yanking off his sweats. "Keep the covers warm. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Chapter Eight

Chase greeted him at the door, clad in nothing but a pair of low-slung jeans and a smile. He tugged Brian inside, then pushed him against the wall and yanked down his jeans. His hot, wet mouth felt so fucking incredible, Brian almost came on the spot. He closed his eyes and did multiplication tables in his head, trying desperately to hold on. But the second he gave into the temptation to look down and saw Chase's gorgeous lips wrapped around his cock, that was it. He let go with a joyful yell, his legs turning to rubber. Chase had to grab him around the waist to keep him from keeling over.

Soft, sweet, come-flavored kisses. So good they made his head spin. "Th-That's what I call a surprise attack," he rasped, running his fingers through Chase's hair. "Have you been planning this all day?"

"How could you tell?"

They both laughed. "Well, it was fun, but now I'm too wrung out to make it to the bedroom."

"Not a problem." Flashing a wicked grin, he picked Brian up, heaved him over his shoulder and staggered down the hallway. *Holy shit*. Brian teetered and swayed, then gripped Chase's shoulders and hung on tight. He thought for sure they'd end up crashing to the floor, and braced himself for it when he began to slip. Instead, the breath whooshed from his lungs as he bounced safely onto the mattress. Then Chase plopped down next to him, doubled over with laughter.

Brian just gaped at him. "You fucking idiot! You could've broken my neck. *Both* our necks."

"Sorry. You weigh a lot more than you look."

"Oh thanks. Remind me again why I dragged my *fat* ass all the way over here?"

"C'mon, don't be like that. We're both okay, aren't we? And your ass is *not* fat. In fact..." He swooped in for a kiss so amazingly toe-curling, it almost convinced Brian to forgive him. *Almost*. "Fuck Disneyland—your ass is the happiest place on earth."

"You sweet talker, you."

"I speak only the truth." Then he tugged Brian's t-shirt up and over his head and proceeded to show him how much he meant it. By the time Chase kissed, nipped and licked his way down Brian's throat and chest, he was a fucking goner. He shivered and shuddered, digging his heels into the comforter as Chase swirled his tongue inside his navel, then *blew* on it. The half-hot, half-cool-and-moist sensation was so unbelievably delicious, his cock sprang straight up in his boxers.

His final ounce of resistance drained right out of him. It was all so clear now. Chase was a fucking *god*, and gods got whatever they wanted. Who was he to deny him? If Chase handed him a bright pink bunny suit and told him to hop down the street singing *Here Comes Peter Cottontail*, Brian would've done it gladly, so long as Chase promised to fuck him into oblivion later.

Luckily, neither of them had to wait that long. Chase finished skinning Brian's jeans down and off, then rolled to his feet to take care of his own before reaching into the nightstand for condoms and lube. But when Brian started to turn over, Chase put out a hand to stop him. "On your back tonight. I want to see your face while I'm inside you."

Then, as if the sexiest thing anyone had ever said to him wasn't enough to crank his libido into overdrive, he had to contend with Chase sliding a pillow under him and teasing his hole with a pair of lube-slicked fingers. One fingertip gently breached him, followed by the other. But when Chase pushed in to the last knuckle, Brian had to imagine his dad and Cameron in bed together to keep from losing it.

"Jesus!" He panted. "Will you just *fuck* me already?"

Chase grinned down at him. "Somebody's impatient. All good things, remember?" Then he crooked his fingers, still planted in Brian's ass. One brush across his prostate, and Brian jumped so high he was amazed he hadn't hit the ceiling. The world's most

agonized moan followed suit. "Oh you poor, poor thing. Guess I should put you out of your misery, huh?"

The room started to shimmy in front of Brian's eyes, as if he'd just downed a whole six-pack. He'd never been this lust-drunk before. Blood pounded between his temples and made his cock throb. Felt like a fucking eternity until Chase took his fingers away and replaced them with his hot, hard dick.

Seeing Chase's face made all the difference. One thrust, and he looked as if he'd fallen into paradise, eyes half closed as he let out a soft groan. His lips curled up at the corners, smiling a smile of pure, dreamy pleasure.

Biting back his own smug grin, Brian seized Chase's hand and pulled him down to lie on top of him. Felt a bit awkward at first, until Chase adjusted his angle, slid both hands under Brian's ass and drove in deep, his mouth covering Brian's at the same time. His tongue spread Brian's lips open and plunged inside, mirroring the rhythm of their fucking.

Brian ached and burned, arms looped around Chase's waist to hold him close. But soon the heat and friction of Chase's belly rubbing against his cock became too much, and he spilled hot and sticky all over both of them. His spasms sent Chase sailing over the edge. He gave a jerky final thrust and sank his teeth into Brian's shoulder before rolling off.

"That was fucking hot." Chase collapsed onto the mattress, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "Literally."

Brian blinked hard and scooted off the pillow, then flipped it over and tucked it behind his head. "Feels like I've been run over by a train." His hand floated up to rub his shoulder, tracing the imprint of each individual tooth with his fingertips. It smarted enough to put a hitch in his breath. "And got caught in one of the wheels."

"Oh God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bite that hard."

"S'okay, you didn't break the skin. Besides, I like having your marks on me. Makes me feel special."

"That you are." They lay there together, cradled in each other's arms until their hearts stopped racing and their breathing returned to normal. At last Chase grabbed a handful of tissues and cleaned them both off, then got up and tossed Brian his jeans before reaching for his own. "C'mon in the living room. I've got a surprise for you."

His keyboards were set up in the corner, by the wall where Chase's guitars hung. There was a music stand too, with several sheets of music on it. Only it didn't look like any printed sheet music Brian had ever seen before. The staff was drawn at twice the regular size, on blue paper. Looked like something out of those large-print books for people with crappy eyesight. "What's all this?"

"Remember we talked about me teaching you to read? Tonight's your first lesson."

Suddenly Brian had the distinct feeling he'd been punked again. "Oh, I get it. You invite me over here for a booty call, when this was your plan all along. Very funny, but it won't work."

"Why not?" Chase came up behind him and wrapped his arms around his waist. "Let's just try one song. What harm could it do?"

"I told you, I've tried to learn, but nothing sinks in. My stupid brain doesn't want to absorb it."

"Stop that. You're not stupid, and you know it. You've got a learning disability, but there are ways around it. It'll take some work, but I'll be here with you every step of the way. Besides, how're you supposed to play gigs with your new band if you can't follow charts?"

"New band? What're you talking about?" He twisted around, meeting Chase's grin. "You don't mean—"

"I've been thinking about putting together a small combo for a while now. How's guitar and keyboards sound?"

Oh God, Chase. Brian didn't know whether to kiss him or slap him. Now his eyes stung worse than when he'd chopped all those onions. "What, no bass player?"

"The White Stripes didn't have a bass player, and they did okay."

"That depends. Didn't they just break up?"

Chase gave him a sour look. "Stop trying to deflect. I'll teach you how to read, then we'll work up some new arrangements and try to land some bookings. Unless you're saying you *don't* want to make beautiful music with me?"

"But I don't know anything about the blues."

"That's not true. You did a great job with *Hellhound* the other day. You've got a real feel for the rhythms and chord changes. I'll teach you the rest. And who says we can't mix it up a bit, integrate different styles? When you get your songs back, we can —"

"I don't think that's gonna happen." Brian hung his head, his mouth growing tight. "Kit's offered to drop the charges if I do the same. I thought about holding out until he gives me equal songwriting credit, but my dad thinks it's a bad idea."

"To be honest, I agree with him. It's not worth risking jail."

"Still doesn't solve the Lou problem."

"I'll have a word with Lou after my gig tomorrow night. I get the feeling he's tired of the whole situation. Probably wouldn't take too much persuading for him to drop the charges."

"Thanks." Wow, what a relief. The eight-hundred pound gorilla squatting on his chest had suddenly disappeared. "I don't know what I did to deserve this, but —"

"I care about you. That might have something to do with it." Chase planted a soft, deep kiss on Brian's lips. It was the kind of kiss he could sink into and never be heard from again. The kind that made him forget his own name. Brian closed his eyes for a moment, practically swooning. "Go sit down at your keyboard and let's get started."

The notes still swam around on the page, though the larger print did help. At least he could pick out the individual notes more easily. Chase held up a ruler to highlight one small section at a time, but after an hour Brian had still only gotten through a few bars. Felt like creeping through a damn minefield.

There was one phrase he just couldn't get right. After his fifth time through with the same flubbed note, he'd had enough. "Look, I told you, I can't do this!" Hopping up, he folded his arms across his chest. "The whole page looks like a big fucking blur. And why'd you print it on blue paper? What am I, ten years old or something?"

"I thought it might help. My colleague at the academy said some dyslexics find white paper too bright and distracting." Chase sighed. "Will you do me a favor and try one more time? I've got another song here I think will work better." He pulled some pages from the back of the stack. "C'mon, don't give up so easily. You're already a great musician. You just need to brush up on some basics."

"Can't we do it in the morning? All I want is to curl up in bed with you and fall asleep."

"And we will. Ten more minutes, okay? I want you to see something."

Okay, fine. Ten more minutes. He could do that standing on his head. Or sitting on his stool. He sank down, glanced at the new page and started picking out the notes. It went as slow as before, until he realized he knew this song. The *Hellhound* song. The one he'd played with Chase the other morning.

And suddenly, everything clicked. Now that he knew which notes came next, deciphering them became a lot easier. He had to battle the temptation to play from memory and concentrate on the page instead, but eventually he made it to the end with only a handful of mistakes. Chase kissed him on the cheek once he was done. "That was great. See, you can do it."

"Well, it wasn't really fair, since I already know the song, but... Wow! Now I'm starting to understand how all those black dots on the page translate into sounds."

"Not bad for a first lesson, huh?"

"Thanks, teach. I appreciate you putting up with my stupid tantrum."

"All part of the job." Chase stood. "I need to put coffee in the maker for tomorrow morning. Meet you in the bedroom, okay?"

Brian switched off his keyboard, then got to his feet and stretched, sighing as the kinks in his back and neck popped. Felt good after sitting on that piano stool for the past hour.

His gaze wandered over to the bookshelf. He hadn't had a chance to check it out before. Ambling closer, he squinted at the titles. A lot of music scores, mixed in with novels and history books, and a few composer and artist biographies. Some framed photos sat on top of the tallest shelf. One was of Chase and an older woman Brian assumed was his grandmother, smiling with their arms around each other. A couple more were of Chase in performance, hunched intently over his guitar. The second one looked like it had been taken at the Metronome. But it was the last one, at the very end of the shelf, that made Brian go perfectly still. The same photo he'd seen on the internet, of young Tommy Winters with his brother and sister. And suddenly it was as if all the air in the room had evaporated.

"You're still out here? I thought you were tired." Chase emerged from the kitchen, wiping his hands on his jeans. Concern crinkled his forehead when he saw Brian's face. "What's wrong?"

For a long moment, all Brian could do was point. "I-I've seen that picture before."

"Have you?" No surprise, no denial, in his tone or his expression. Almost as if he'd known this shoe would drop sooner or later.

"So...is that you? The kid in the middle, I mean—"

"I know which one you mean."

God, he couldn't believe what he was about to ask next. "Then it's true? You really are Tommy Winters?"

Chase looked up at the photo with the most heartbreaking expression Brian had ever seen. "That was a long time ago."

Chapter Nine

Chase made them coffee and they sat down across from each other at the kitchen table. But instead of talking, they stared into their mugs. "There must be a zillion things you want to ask me," Chase said finally, "so go ahead."

Brian glanced around, taking in miles of stainless steel and white countertop. Didn't look all that different from Cameron's kitchen, other than the stove being so shiny, it clearly hadn't been used in a while. And what was it with musicians and pizza? The empty box on the counter told him all he needed to know about Chase's eating habits.

"I guess all I really want to know is, what happened? You had everything going for you, and then you just fell off the map."

"Well, that's what it looked like. The truth's a little more complicated."

"I've got all night."

"We'll probably need it." Chase took another sip of coffee. "Short answer, I fell in love. And I was happy about it, but nobody else was, especially my parents. It cut too deep into their bottom line. That's what happens when a kid becomes the sole support for an entire family. Got to keep that gravy train pulling into the station. But I was tired of it. In five years, I hadn't spent a single Christmas or birthday at home. I was always either touring or recording. It was a fucking grind, and I wanted out."

"So how'd you get into show business in the first place?"

Chase smiled wryly. "What's the matter, haven't you read my Wikipedia page?"

"Oh." Another boundary breached. Maybe he should've asked for a list of off-limit topics before they'd started this conversation. "If that's your way of saying you don't want to talk about it—"

"No, it's fine. It's actually kind of sweet that you're so oblivious. The people I used to hang out with knew my life story better than I did. The official version, anyway." He rolled his eyes. "Josh, Kristin—my brother and sister—and I auditioned for this stupid kids' talent show about fifteen years ago. We didn't make it past the first round, but this record company executive saw us perform and thought I had something. So I cut a demo, and it tested through the roof. Then came a single, and an album, and my career just blew up. From zero to hero in six months." He sighed. "My dad quit his job at the auto plant to become my manager. Mom was my publicist. They bleached my hair and changed my name and made me into a walking wet dream for fourteen-year-old girls."

"So is Chase Aubrey not your real name either?"

"It's the most real thing about me. Chase Thomas Aubrey. I was named after my grandpa on my dad's side. I don't know where 'Winters' came from. It was the record company's idea. They thought 'Aubrey' sounded too country-western or something." He knocked back the last of his coffee, then pushed his mug aside. "After that, my family was never the same. Our entire lives became focused on making me a superstar. Josh and Kristin got so jealous. They didn't realize they were the lucky ones. At least they had a normal childhood."

"That sucks. I mean, I see kids singing on TV all the time, but I never thought about how awful it must be for them."

"Nobody does. They see the glitz and glamour, but not the hard work that goes into it. The constant pressure to do ten times better than you did last time. They don't know what it's like growing up gay in the public eye. You can't even think about coming out, because it'll sink your career in a heartbeat. Since I was thirteen, I'd had it drummed into my head that there were hundreds of people depending on me—my family, my agent, my road crew, the entire fucking record company. And if I screwed up, I'd be screwing up their lives too."

The sadness and pain in Chase's voice tore right through Brian. And he thought his childhood was bad! At least his parents hadn't pushed him onstage and made him

support his whole family and an entire company-full of strangers besides. Swallowing hard, he went over to Chase and threw his arms around him. "I'm sorry you had to go through all that."

"S'okay. I've lived to see better times. That's what's important."

"So who's this guy you fell in love with? I want to hear about him."

Chase laughed. "I was wondering when you'd get around to that."

"C'mon, spill. It's not fair to mention him once and then drop it."

"Why don't we get in bed first? This enforced march down memory lane's wearing me out."

They put their mugs in the sink and padded down the hallway hand in hand. The warm sheets whispered over Brian's skin like a kiss as he and Chase rolled onto their sides to face each other, arms looped around one another's waists. If he let his eyes drift shut he'd probably be asleep within a minute, but no way was he nodding off without hearing the rest of Chase's story.

"His name was Trent," Chase began. "He was an ex-Navy SEAL my dad hired to be my driver and bodyguard. Six foot three, gorgeous, sculpted muscles, blond crew cut. A fucking Nordic god. I took one look, and *bam*. Totally smitten. Except I was seventeen at the time, and he was thirty."

Brian didn't mean to laugh, it just slipped out. "I can see the problem."

"So did I, not that it stopped me. I kept throwing myself at him, but Trent was an honorable guy. He didn't touch me until I turned eighteen. After that, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. Even though it was a bitch trying to be alone together while I was on tour with my dad breathing down my neck."

"Your dad didn't know you were gay?"

"Sure he knew. Guess what he got me for my sixteenth birthday? An LA street hustler. I got my first blowjob from a damn prostitute. But Trent was my first for

everything else, and I was glad I waited. I really, really loved him. In fact, if it wasn't for him, I'd probably be dead by now."

That made Brian sit straight up. "You're not gonna leave me hanging on that, are you?"

"You sure you really want to know?" Brian hesitated a moment before nodding. If Chase didn't tell him, the not-knowing would eat him up inside. "Trent's job was to escort me places and keep me safe. So we were seen out in public together a lot," Chase went on. "Every now and then I'd grab his hand or try to kiss him when I thought no one was looking. Trent didn't like it. He kept telling me to be careful. After ten years in the navy, he was used to being in the closet. But I was getting pretty fucking tired of hiding."

"One night this *paparazzo* snapped a photo of us in a lip-lock. My dad nearly shit himself when he found out. He ended up paying a huge wad of cash to keep the photo off the internet and the tabloids. Then the record company got wind of it and called me on the carpet. Literally. The company president summoned me to his office for a royal ass-chewing. And I lost it. I screamed at him until he had to call security to throw me out. Three months later, when it came time to re-up my contract, I wouldn't sign. I was fucking *done*. All I wanted was to walk away."

"Jesus. I can imagine what your dad said about that."

Chase rolled onto his back, one arm flung over his eyes. "Throughout the whole thing, not once did my parents ever ask me how I felt. I tried to tell them Trent and I were in love, but they wouldn't listen. That's when I realized they didn't care about me at all anymore. I was just a fucking cash register to them." Deep breath. "One night my dad put a pen in my hand and tried to force me to sign the contract. When I wouldn't, he hauled off and hit me. Punched me right in the jaw and knocked me down. He would've kept going too, if our housekeeper hadn't come running into the room."

Brian gaped at him, stunned. Despite all his problems with his own father, Trevor had never raised a hand to him in anger. "D-Did he ever hit you before?"

"Just a few spankings when I was really young, but nothing bad. Nothing that made me scared of him. But that night... I mean, I'd never seen him so angry or out of control. I was terrified he was really gonna hurt me. So I ran to my room and called Trent to come get me. He and Dad almost got into it too, until Dad realized Trent could wipe the floor with his fat, middle-aged ass and not even break a sweat. I packed a bag and left the house with Trent that night, and I haven't seen either of my parents since."

"God, now *I'm* tired." He lay down next to Chase and rested his head on his chest. "That's one fucking incredible story."

"You don't believe me?"

"Sure I do. Who'd make something like that up? But how'd you end up in New York?"

"What, you don't recognize my Joisey accent? I grew up in Linden, before they shut down the auto plant and practically killed the whole town. This part of the country's always felt more like home to me than fucking Hollywood." Chase sighed. "Besides, I knew I had to do something constructive with the rest of my life. It'd always been my dream to go to Juilliard and study real music. I applied, and they accepted me. So Trent and I headed east. But when time came to enroll, I got another big slap in the face."

"My college fund was frozen, along with my checking and savings accounts. I thought my parents signed sole control of them over to me when I turned eighteen, but apparently they 'forgot'. And let's not forget the house, the five cars in the garage, the private plane, the limo and a huge stock portfolio. It all belonged to me, at least on paper. But my parents stole every dime of it literally overnight."

"You're kidding me. How the hell could they get away with it?"

"By all rights, they shouldn't have. I got an attorney, and the lawsuits started flying. But everything dragged on for-fucking-ever. Two years went by, then three, and still no resolution. The stress was eating me alive, so I said to hell with it and told my lawyer to drop the suit. It's only money. If it means more to my parents than I do, they can have it. It never made me happy."

"What about your brother and sister? Do you stay in touch with them?"

"We try to exchange phone calls on Christmas and our birthdays. They still don't understand why I gave it up. My parents shipped them off to boarding school once my career got going, so they weren't around when all the bad shit went down. They've constructed this little fantasy in their heads of a perfect life of fame and fortune I threw away. I still can't convince them that they both dodged a bullet. It could've just as easily been one of them that record exec 'discovered'." He shrugged. "And that's it. End of story."

"What, no happily ever after?"

Chase cracked open one droopy eye. "You still believe in fairy tales, huh? That's cute."

"Go ahead, make jokes. If I'd been through half the shit you have, I would've taken a dive off the nearest tall building."

"Oh believe me, I was tempted. On more than one occasion."

And on that downbeat note, they fell silent. Brian closed his eyes and tried to process everything Chase had told him, but it was way too much for one evening. Maybe in another month he'd be ready to sort it out. So he draped an arm around Chase's waist, kissed him gently on the chest and did his best to drift.

Then one last question popped into his brain. "Hey, what happened with you and Trent?"

Chase heaved an exasperated sigh and rolled over to face the wall. "It didn't work out. Go to sleep."

* * * * *

The soft, insistent patter of water running in the shower pried Brian's eyes open. Or maybe it was his bladder screaming. With a yawn, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and padded into the bathroom to relieve himself. Then he cracked open the shower door and poked his head inside. "Mind if I join you?"

Chase finished rinsing soap out of his hair and swung around. Christ, he looked ten times as gorgeous wet, every muscle rippling and glistening. His cock rose up between his thighs, already half hard. He glanced down at it and smirked. "Looks like you've got your answer."

Brian wasn't sure which was hotter—the water, or Chase shoving him against the tile and giving him the world's deepest tongue-kiss. His own cock went instantly stiff as they slipped and slid against each other. Then Chase's fingers wrapped around his dick and started stroking. Dizzy from lust and lack of air, he came within seconds, huffing a tiny, disappointed groan.

"What's wrong?" Chase whispered. "You don't like the way I say good morning?"

"Not when you say it so damn fast."

"Patience, sunshine. I've got bigger plans for you today." Another hot, wet kiss that made Brian sway on his feet, still lightheaded. Chase hadn't come yet, he realized. But when he tried to sink to his knees to take care of it, Chase snaked his arms around his waist and shook his head.

"What, you don't want me to say good morning back?"

"Not in here." With that, he turned off the water and slid open the door.

Brian shivered in the chilly air until Chase flicked on the heat lamp overhead and wiped off the fogged-up vanity mirror. "C'mere, I want to show you something." He grabbed Brian's hand to tug him closer, then spun him around to look at their shared reflection. "I want you to see what I see when I look at you."

There was a surefire way to make him blush. "Quit fooling around."

"Oh, you don't want to? I didn't get that impression a couple minutes ago." Chase grinned and dropped a kiss on his shoulder, right where he'd bitten him last night. It was weird, watching him do it and feeling the physical tingle of contact at the same time. The mark smarted too, but it didn't matter. It'd probably be gone in a few days. "I like watching your face when you come. You ever seen it?"

Brian burst out laughing. "You think I jerk off in front of the mirror all the time?"

"Some people do."

"Have you?"

"Once or twice, in my younger days. Back when I thought I was hot shit."

"You *are* hot shit."

"Well, thanks. You are too." Then Chase whispered into his ear, "I want you to watch yourself while I fuck you."

The mother of all shivers shot through him. Only he wasn't the least bit cold, not with the sun lamp and Chase standing behind him, radiating heat. Chase's hands skimmed over his still-damp skin, smoothing and soothing, his cock's velvety tip grazing the small of Brian's back. Why was he so nervous? If they were in the bedroom right now, he'd be begging for Chase's cock. What was so scary about doing it in here?

Chase had already started kissing a warm, wet trail down his back, licking and nipping at his spine the way he had their first time together. Groaning, Brian grabbed hold of the edge of the sink, gritting his teeth when Chase sank to his knees and began tonguing his hole.

Not wanting to distract him from his task, Brian yanked the vanity drawer open and fumbled inside for supplies, which Chase grabbed out of his hand. Slicked fingers soon eased inside him. Sweet, delicious pressure, but not enough. Not yet. "C'mon, Chase, I'm ready," he rasped. "Get the fuck inside me."

Wrapper open, condom on. But then Chase just stood behind him for a few silent, endless seconds before sliding his arms around Brian's torso and pulling him up close. "Open your eyes. That's the point of all this, remember?"

He hadn't even realized they were closed. "Sorry," he said sheepishly.

"That's the problem with you cute little bottoms. You just want to lie back and take it. You think the rest of the world exists to service your asses." But when Brian laughed,

he added, "You might not think it's so funny once I get done fucking the shit out of you." Then he grabbed Brian's hips and plunged inside him.

It hurt for the first few seconds until the shock of entry faded, leaving a delicious, pounding ache that grew stronger with each new thrust. Brian gripped the sink and stared into the mirror, his mouth falling open. He was afraid he'd look stupid, and to anyone but him or Chase, he probably did. But he also looked amazed. Ecstatic. Scared to death.

With his eyes open, he had nowhere to hide. No escape from the raw, beautiful sensations flooding his body. He was vulnerable, exposed. Naked, emotionally and in every other possible way. Chase fucked him faster, bending him over to slam into him, banging his thighs against the vanity. He felt like a rag doll suspended on Chase's dick, a hole for him to come in. It was dirty, degrading. Fucking *hot*.

He'd no sooner grabbed his own cock when he spurted all over his hand and into the sink. Still floating down from that blissful high, he heard Chase's groan echo in his ear as he drove in deep one last time and followed suit.

They didn't crumple to the floor, but it was close. This time Chase had to grab hold of Brian to keep from falling over. "Oops," Brian said. They both dissolved in laughter. "L-Looks like we need another shower."

They rinsed off, got dressed and poured themselves some coffee, then went into the living room to practice. Chase warmed up with some riffs, then ran through a few blues standards. Brian followed along, first on his acoustic guitar, then on the piano. Picking stuff up by ear was still a lot easier than trying to sight-read, but now he understood why he needed to learn. Sooner or later he'd get that itch to compose his own songs again, and he couldn't depend on someone else to write them down for him. No way would he ever give anyone that kind of control over his life, not after the way Kit had screwed him over.

They were having so much fun playing, he didn't realize the entire morning had flown by until he glanced at his watch. "Shit! It's almost noon. I'm late for work."

"You got a gig?" Chase put down his guitar and stood. "When did this happen?"

"Oh, it's not a gig, just a part-time thing at my dad's partner's bar. Cleanup work, and any other odd jobs they throw my way. Doesn't pay much, but it'll keep me busy."

"Cool. So where is this place? Maybe I'll drop by."

"It's called the Icon, on Eighth Avenue in Chelsea. But that's a pretty long subway ride. Don't go out of your way on my account."

"Why shouldn't I?" Chase strode over and planted a soft kiss on his lips. "Is there some law saying I can't visit my boyfriend at work?"

Brian grinned the world's hugest, most idiotic grin. Sure, Dad and Cameron had called Chase his boyfriend, but that didn't make it official. This did. "Well, if you really want to..."

Chase kissed him again. "I really do."

Chapter Ten

Chase called later that afternoon, just as Brian finished cleaning out the grease trap under the kitchen sink. He stripped off his rubber gloves, then ambled out to the bar for a soda as he hit the “accept” button. “Hey. I thought you were planning to come by.”

“Sorry, got sidelined by stuff at school. But I’m totally free this evening, if you want to go grab dinner someplace.”

“Wow, an actual *date*. I’m pinching myself. Unless you mean pizza and beer in bed.”

Chase snorted. “No, I mean a real dinner in a real restaurant with our clothes on and everything. You game?”

“Sure, why not? Who knows when I’ll get an offer like this again?” Cameron was waiting on customers at the other end of the bar, so Brian darted behind the counter and helped himself at the soda dispenser. “But we can’t go anywhere too pricey. I don’t get paid ‘til Friday.”

“Don’t be silly, I’ll pay. What kind of food you in the mood for?”

He took a moment to think about it while he circled around to the front of the bar and climbed atop a stool. “Italian sounds good, or maybe —” Then Cameron waved him down. “Hold on a minute.” Geez, what the hell did he want? And why couldn’t it wait five minutes? “I’m on the phone, Cam.”

“I can see that.” Since he wasn’t getting off the stool, Cameron came over to him. “Not that I’m trying to eavesdrop, but please let Chase know he’s welcome for dinner at our place anytime.”

Wow. He hadn’t expected that. “Really?”

"Of course." Cam grinned. "Unless you think it's too soon for him to break bread with the in-laws."

"I'll ask him." He put the phone back to his ear. "Did you hear that?"

"Most of it. And sure, I'd love to have dinner with you and your folks. What time?"

"We usually eat around seven."

"Okay then. See you tonight, sunshine."

God, he loved it when Chase called him that. Sent these sweet, electric tingles dancing through him – that turned to sheer terror the instant he hung up. What the fuck had he just agreed to?

He hit the shower as soon as he got home, scrubbing off the day's accumulated dust and grime. Then he threw on a clean t-shirt and jeans and went to set the dining table. He walked back in the kitchen afterward, his eyes nearly bugging out of his head when he saw Cam pull a plate of thawed steaks from the microwave. "Wow. Didn't know we rated so high on the sirloin-o-meter."

"Might as well take advantage of a special occasion." On cue, the doorbell buzzed. "I'll let you play host while I take care of things in here."

Chase had gotten all dressed up too – if black jeans, a black dress shirt and a black leather jacket qualified. He'd even trimmed his goatee and combed his hair back in a neat, shiny ponytail. Brian blinked, momentarily dazzled. "Y-You look really nice."

"So do you." He stepped inside and gave Brian a quick kiss before nodding at the paper bag in his hand. "I've got a little something here for the gentleman of the house. Do you want to take it, or..."

"That's okay. You might as well come meet Cameron and give it to him yourself." Hand in hand, they walked back to the kitchen. Cam looked up from sliding a casserole dish into the oven and flashed them both a welcoming smile. For a few awkward seconds, nobody said anything. Which of them was supposed to go first? At last Chase

and Cameron both looked at him. *Oh great.* Well, here went nothing. "Cameron, this is Chase Aubrey. Chase, meet my stepdad, Cameron Donovan."

Cam's mouth dropped open, obviously just as surprised as Brian at what'd popped out of his mouth. Then he wiped his hands on his apron and extended his right hand to Chase. "Good meeting you, Chase. Glad you could make it."

"Thanks for inviting me." He shook, then handed the bag to Cameron. "I didn't know what we were having, but Pinot Noir usually goes pretty well with anything."

Cam unsheathed the bottle, his eyes widening. "This is a fine vintage. Thanks. It'll go great with the steaks." He set it on the counter. "We'll eat as soon as Trev gets home, which shouldn't be too much longer. So, Brian, if you'd like a chance to give Chase the dime tour..."

He knew a hint when he heard it. Grabbing Chase's hand, he showed him the living room, then tugged him down the hall, past the bathroom and gym, to his own room. "Here's where I sleep, squeezed in between five years' worth of tax records."

Chase laughed. "At least it's nice and cozy." Then he tugged Brian close and gave him another kiss. "Jesus, you're shaking. Calm down, okay? It's just dinner, not the Spanish Inquisition."

"Because nobody ever expects *that*, right?" Nervous chuckle. "Thanks for bringing the wine. I didn't know you knew anything about that stuff."

"Oh, c'mon. I'm not a *complete* caveman."

"Even if you do fuck like one." Two steps back, and they tumbled to the bed. More kisses, hotter and heavier this time. Chase's beard chafed a little, but it felt good. For a few precious, blissful moments, nothing else mattered.

Until suddenly Chase rolled off, brushing back a lock of hair that had come loose from his ponytail. "We'd better cool it. Your dad's gonna be home any minute."

"Actually, he's already home," came Trevor's voice from the hallway.

Brian sat up straight, now acutely, painfully aware of his flushed face and the hard-on trapped inside his jeans. "H-Hey, Dad. You remember Chase, right?"

"How could I forget?" Trevor tried to look so damn stern and disapproving, but Brian could see the laugh lines crinkling around his eyes and mouth. "Cam's sent me to tell you dinner's almost ready, so..."

"We'll be along in a couple minutes," Chase interjected.

Brian sprang up as soon as Trevor disappeared down the hallway, running to the bathroom to check himself out in the mirror. His heart lurched at the bright pink hickey on his throat. *Shit*. He dashed back to the bedroom and tore open the closet, searching frantically for something with a collar high enough to cover it. He found an old blue turtleneck and pulled it on.

Chase snickered as he turned around. "You got a little problem." Then he pointed.

There was a big-ass hole near the hem with a bunch of threads dangling from it. He tried tucking it into his jeans, but the sweater was so snug, it popped out every time he moved. Oh screw it. No one would notice once he sat down at the table. "Just what I needed. Thanks a whole fucking lot, Chase."

"Hey, you're the one who dragged me in here, remember?" Still laughing, he came over and put his arms around him. "Breathe, okay? Everything's gonna be fine. I've already met both your dads, and we're all still standing. So let's put on our big-boy pants and go have dinner."

Cameron had done a fine job with the food, as usual. He'd cooked the steaks medium-rare, tender and juicy. Potatoes au gratin and Caesar salad rounded out the meal. Brian even had a small glass of wine, which helped relax him a bit. It was pretty good wine, even if he didn't have much to compare it to. He leaned back in his seat and marveled as Chase charmed the pants off his dad and Cameron, regaling them with stories about playing at the club.

Then the conversation took a more serious turn, as Chase very candidly revealed his past as Tommy Winters. He repeated the same story he'd told Brian, though he

glossed over some of the more personal parts, including his relationship with Trent. The room fell silent for several moments once he was done.

"That's quite a story, Chase," Trevor said finally. "You're an admirable young man. I don't know if I would've had the courage to strike out on my own the way you did, especially at such a tender age."

"Well, when you don't have a choice, that makes it a bit easier."

"No doubt. I'm glad you told us. Rest assured, we'll keep it in utmost confidence."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. But please don't paint me as some kind of saint. I did a lot of things I'm not proud of back in the day. But it's been good for me to start looking at myself through Brian's eyes." Smiling, he leaned over to give Brian a kiss on the cheek. "I'm pretty lucky to have him in my life."

God, this had to be the most surreal evening ever. Brian still couldn't believe what he'd just seen and heard. His father had not only accepted Chase, he'd pretty much welcomed him into the family. And Chase... Well, Brian had no idea his feelings ran so deep. In two weeks, they'd gone from passing acquaintances to damn near inseparable. It was a lot to take in.

"I know how you feel." Trevor reached over and took Cameron's hand. "In fact, there's something we've been waiting to tell Brian for a while now. Do you want to do it, Cam, or shall I?"

"You go ahead." Cameron smiled, pouring himself another glass of wine. "Brian should hear it from his dad first."

"All right." Trevor stood, scooping up his own wineglass. "This fall Cam and I will have been together six years. So we've decided it's high time we made it official. We're getting married."

Brian's gaze flicked from his father to Cameron and back, but since neither of them yelled "April Fool!" he figured it must be true. A huge grin split his face as he jumped to his feet to hug them both in turn. "How long have you guys been planning this?"

"We first talked about it over the holidays," his father admitted. "But when you arrived, things seemed so up in the air, we thought it best to wait before breaking the news."

Which was apparently code for *we thought you'd hit the roof, so we didn't want to tell you*. Well, that was then. Down was up now. Cameron was his friend and boss, not his enemy. He'd traded in a bad boyfriend for a good one. Brian's whole world had turned on its ear – and he couldn't have been happier.

Chase reached across the table to shake their hands. "That's terrific news. Maybe Brian and I can play something at your wedding. We've got plenty of time to work up a killer set list between now and next fall."

"You two are in a band together?" Cameron asked, glancing at Brian. "How come you never mentioned it?"

"It's pretty new," Brian replied. "We're still working stuff out."

"What kind of music?"

"I play mostly blues these days," Chase said. "But I don't see why we can't mix it up. Classic rock, maybe a little jazz and R&B. We're still experimenting, trying to find our own style."

"Well, when you're ready to make your public debut, let me know. We might have an opening at the bar."

Brian exchanged a quick glance with Chase before turning to Cam. "I thought you were all booked up with the drag show."

"We've decided to diversify. Mike's getting a little long in the tooth for sashaying across that stage five nights a week. Our Sunday night crowd's pretty low-key – and sometimes pretty nonexistent – but they might be a good test audience for a more mellow type of group like you two. We could start you out there and see how it goes."

Chase's face lit up like the Fourth of July. "That would be great! God, we've barely started rehearsing, and we've already got a gig lined up."

"But we don't know how long it'll be before we're ready," Brian added cautiously.

"Take your time," Cameron said, getting up to start clearing the table. "It's not like we've got anything else scheduled."

Brian helped Cam clean up the kitchen, then they all gathered in the living room for coffee and dessert. When his father started giving him let's-wrap-this-up signals around ten o'clock, he took Chase by the hand and walked him to the door. "You were pretty jazzed about Cameron's offer. For a minute there I thought you were gonna hop up and kiss him."

Chase grinned. "What's the matter, you jealous?"

"Look, the last thing I need is more pressure. We don't even have an act worked out yet. I've barely learned how to sight-read."

"It won't take long to teach you, believe me. You already pick things up at lightning speed. We'll be ready in a few weeks, tops."

"Might as well keep my instruments at your place, then. No point schlepping them back and forth."

"Too bad you can't come over now for some late-night...rehearsing," Chase purred.

God, why did he have to stand so close? His warm, spicy aftershave tickled Brian's nostrils and sent his blood racing to embarrassing places. "Chase, c'mon. Dad's gonna get pissed if I start spending every night at your —"

A hand on his shoulder nearly jolted him out of his skin. "It's fine with me if you want to go to Chase's," his father said. "Just make sure you get to the bar on time tomorrow, okay?"

Brian stared at him. "Y-You sure?"

"Who am I to stand in the way of young love?" Smiling, he reached over to shake Chase's hand. "Take good care of him for me."

Chase nodded and smiled back. "I will."

"All right then. Good night, you two." He turned and headed down the hallway.

Brian stood there watching him go, wondering if he should pinch himself. "We'd better get out of here before he changes his mind."

He dashed to his bedroom for his jacket, then he and Chase took off hand in hand for the subway station. He closed his eyes and rested his head on Chase's shoulder during the long ride to Brooklyn, his heart bursting with happiness. *Jesus*. How the hell had he gotten so lucky?

* * * * *

Weeks flew by—happy, productive weeks. They ate, they slept, they practiced, they fucked. God, how they fucked! Every night Chase rode him so hard Brian could still feel the delicious ache in his muscles when he woke up the next morning. There were always a few new bites and bruises too. Brian treasured each one as a prized souvenir, then bent over and begged for more.

At last, one morning near the end of May, Chase rolled over and said, "Why don't we just admit it? We're living together."

Brian grinned up at him. "Just like that, huh?"

"You haven't spent a single night at your dad's place in a month and a half. I think that makes it official. Why don't you drop by there today and pick up the rest of your stuff?"

"There isn't much left, but I guess I should break the news to Dad and Cameron in person. Not that they didn't figure it out themselves a long time ago. Cam keeps joking about throwing us 'newlyweds' a housewarming party. And speaking of..." He scooted up on his pillows. "I think I'd like to try writing them a song as a wedding gift."

"I wondered if the composing bug was ever gonna bite you again."

"Well, I'll take my best stab at it. If it doesn't work out, I've still got time to come up with something else."

"We can do it together if you want. It's been awhile since I tried writing anything, but I'd be happy to help."

Oh God. How could he keep this from coming out wrong? "I know you would, but..."

Chase's smile faded. "But you want to do it yourself."

"Yeah, I really do. And I'm sorry, I don't mean to disappoint you —"

"It's okay, I get it. I mean, he is your dad, after all. You want to give him something special, something from you and no one else."

"That's part of it. The other part is that this'll be the first time I've written down my own stuff. It's like your first time with someone new. Once the experience is gone, it's gone, and you can't get it back. I want to know what it feels like to create something all by myself, just this once."

"You know, I don't even remember writing my first song. Or the first time I played it in front of people. And you're gonna get to do both for your dad. For your family. A family that actually *loves* you. God, how I envy you."

He sounded so fucking sad, Brian couldn't stand it. Lately he'd realized that, deep down, Chase was still a scared little boy who didn't think he was good enough to be loved. Sometimes Brian wondered if he'd ever convince him otherwise.

"They're your family too. Dad and Cameron are nuts about you. Why do you think they haven't objected to me spending so much time here?"

"They're probably glad to have their place to themselves again. And let's face it," Chase added with a chortle, "compared to Kit, anyone's an improvement."

"Oh stop. There's no comparison, and you know it." Brian bent down and kissed him soundly, to make it clear he meant it. "I want to play music with you and write songs with you and live here with you as long as you want me. But if we're gonna be ready for our first gig at the bar this Sunday, we'd best get our lazy asses out of bed and *practice*."

Chase grinned. "No objections here."

Chapter Eleven

"Not a bad crowd for Sunday night." Ryan peeked through the red velvet curtain, then stepped back to give Brian and Chase a look. The ten or so tables ringing the front of the stage were packed, and there was a respectable crowd gathered at the bar, where Mike handled tonight's beer-pouring honors.

Brian sucked in a breath, though it didn't do much to calm his roiling stomach. He'd taken two bites of the grilled cheese he'd fixed himself back in the bar's kitchen, then dumped it in the garbage. Good thing he'd managed to talk Dad and Cameron into waiting to see them on another night, or he'd be tossing his cookies right about now.

"You okay?" Chase murmured, reaching for his hand. "Christ, you're freezing. What's the matter? You don't usually get this nervous before a show."

"I haven't performed anywhere in two months, remember? Plus, it's the first time I've been backstage here without a fucking broom in my hand." Another breath. "And the first time I've tried to work off charts. What if I screw it up?"

"Oh c'mon, you did great at the rehearsal this afternoon."

"Still doesn't mean I won't fall flat on my face."

Chase gave him a mock roll of his eyes and pulled him close. "Do you trust me?"

Quick, shaky nod. "Y-Yeah."

"Then believe me when I say you've got nothing to worry about. We're gonna kill it out there. And if you happen to get lost—which you won't—just give me a signal and I'll take over 'til you find your place."

"Okay." Closing his eyes, he concentrated on his breathing until the restless flutter in his belly subsided. "Okay. I'm gonna be all right."

Chase squeezed his hand as Ryan took the stage to introduce them. A weak round of applause, and zero hour had arrived. Pasting on a smile, he trailed Chase onstage, blinking into bright footlights that effectively bleached out everything beyond them. Well, at least if they got booed, he wouldn't have to look at the audience's scowling faces while they did it. Chase scooped up his Gibson Firebird and gave the microphone a quick test while Brian cued up the bar's drum machine. Then, one hand poised on his piano, the other on his Vox organ, they launched into a rockin' version of *Layla*.

He was still scared to fucking death, but autopilot kicked in after a few bars, and suddenly it was as if they'd never left Chase's living room. When they got to their five-minute piano-guitar duet, they were both firmly in the groove, riffing off each other like they'd been playing together for years. The audience actually whistled and stomped their feet when they were done. They took a couple seconds to flash each other silly grins before swinging into *Key to the Highway*.

Over the next forty minutes they ran through a fairly standard rock-blues set list, culled mostly from old Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan hits. Still, the crowd seemed to dig it. They started clapping along to *Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out*, then sent up a disappointed groan when he and Chase left the stage for a short break.

"Not bad, huh?" Chase beamed once they were safely backstage. "Always leave 'em wanting more."

Brian sighed in relief and slumped against Chase's shoulder. "It's a good thing you're doing the next few songs by yourself. I'm already worn out."

"But you did fucking fantastic. What'd I tell you?" He gave him a slow, deep kiss that helped quell the butterflies in Brian's stomach, but did absolutely nothing for his still-thumping heart. "Go sit down and relax for a while. You've earned it."

"Good idea." A quick kiss goodbye, and he headed for the exit at the left-hand side of the stage, near the bar. No sooner had he swung onto a stool when Mike planted a tall glass of soda in front of him. "You look like you could use this, sugar." With a wink, he scurried off to take care of actual paying customers.

The place was a bit more crowded now than when he and Chase went onstage. Not standing-room-only, but still a pretty decent turnout for their first night. The audience filled up about twenty-odd tables now, along with a handful of people loitering at the bar. And to think he'd been afraid they'd have such a poor showing, they wouldn't get invited back.

Toting his twelve-string, Chase retook the stage to enthusiastic applause about ten minutes later. Everyone kept on clapping as soon as they recognized the opening notes of *Little Wing*, then the room fell totally silent except for Chase's guitar. He played it as if he'd been born with it in his hands, fingers dancing over strings that rang out like silver bells. Brian watched, mesmerized, just like that first night at the Metronome. A month and a half of living and practicing together, and Chase could still dazzle the hell out of him. He didn't take another breath until the song ended, and the audience came up out of their seats.

One stubbly-faced guy didn't bother sitting back down, even after Chase started his next song. Empty beer glass in hand, he wandered as close to the stage as he could get, then stood there, weaving on his feet. He had on a pair of out-at-the-knee jeans and a t-shirt that looked like he'd rinsed it out in a toilet. Scuffed sneakers, no jacket. Obviously homeless.

"Aw shit," Brian heard Mike mutter. "I told that asshole to get out of here half an hour ago."

And then the guy opened his mouth and shouted, "Hey, Tommy! Play us one of your old hits, huh?"

Oh Jesus. Brian gripped the edge of the bar, his pulse rocketing into overdrive. Chase faltered for a split second, though Brian was fairly sure he was the only one who noticed. Ever the professional, he kept on playing, even when his heckler wouldn't shut the fuck up. But his shoulders had gone tight with tension by the time he reached the end of his song, and he shot Brian a look that plainly screamed, "What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

And still the guy wouldn't stop whining. The entire audience snapped around to glare at him. Another guy piped up with, "Sit down and shut up, you jerk!" Then Mike reached under the counter and pulled out a baseball bat. *Shit*. This was going south faster than a fucking tornado.

Then Chase leaned forward and said into the microphone, "Dude, give it up, okay? There's no Tommy here."

"Aw c'monnnn." God, he sounded like a whiny kid who'd just been told there was no Santa Claus. A whiny, shit-faced kid. "Just one, for old times' sake, huh?"

"Go sit down. You're ruining the show for everybody else."

"But Tommy —"

Chase's hands curled into fists, his face going bright red. Brian had never seen him so furious, or so close to losing it. "Sit the fuck down before somebody tosses your ass out of here!"

Too late. Ryan emerged from the right-hand stage entrance, and with Mike's help, they hustled the guy to the front door and threw him out. Everyone gaped through the big picture window as he went sprawling onto the sidewalk. A few people clapped, giving Mike and Ryan the thumbs-up.

Brian cast an anxious glance at Chase. Even from this distance, he could tell he was shaking. Brian jumped off his stool and headed backstage, then onstage. Chase let out a gusty breath when he saw him, then nodded, and they launched into their final set. The audience settled down as soon as they started, though obviously the thrill was gone. Several tables cleared out before they were done with *The Sky Is Crying*.

"Thank God that's over," Chase muttered as they trudged backstage half an hour later. "Nothing like a fucking debacle to liven up our first show."

"I'm really, really sorry, guys," Ryan said. "Mike eighty-sixed that asshole awhile ago, but he wouldn't leave. We usually keep better tabs on potential troublemakers, but when we're so busy —"

"Don't sweat it, man. It's not your fault," Chase replied. "I wouldn't be much of a performer if I couldn't handle a stupid heckler. Not that I did such a great job."

"It won't happen again, I promise." Then he darted onstage and started breaking down the equipment.

"You sure you're okay?" Brian asked once they'd reached their dressing room.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." Chase put his Gibson back in its case, then sank down in the nearest chair, raking a hand through his hair. "I used to get people recognizing me at the Metronome every once in a while. It's no big deal."

"Really? Because you seemed pretty upset."

"Must've been that whiny voice of his. Talk about nails on a fucking chalkboard..." He shrugged. "Don't worry, when they're that hammered, nobody takes 'em seriously."

They packed up their instruments and carried them through the storeroom to the back alley, where Chase had parked his SUV. Brian left him to finish loading up the car while he dashed inside to say good night to Mike and Ryan and collect their whopping two hundred dollar performance fee.

He heard voices in the alley on his way back. Chase and someone else. Oh Jesus, it was the whiny guy. The fucking heckler.

"Ya don't remember me, do ya? Or maybe ya do, and ya just didn't wanna say so in front of everybody, huh?"

"Get the hell away from me, man." Now Chase didn't sound upset so much as apprehensive. "I don't know what your problem is, but —"

"What's the matter, ya too good to talk to me now? Ya weren't too good to suck my cock on camera ten fuckin' years ago."

What? Brian ran into the alley, but Chase and the guy were standing on the opposite side of the car, sandwiched between it and the dumpster. Damn it, why did Chase have to pull in so close? No way could he squeeze around the front of the car to reach him.

Cold silence, and then, "H-How did you even know I was here?"

"Sheesh, it don't take a fuckin' rocket scientist. They've got your picture up in the front window, ya know."

"Look," Chase replied slowly, "if you want money, you're shit out of luck. I don't have any."

"Ya expect me to believe that? Tommy fuckin' Winters, big-time pop star, doesn't have a dime to his name. Yeah, right."

"Why do you think I did that sleazy video in the first place?"

Brian stared straight ahead at the grimy brick wall, his jaw falling open. He couldn't have heard what he'd just heard. There had to be something wrong with his eardrums or his brain or something.

"Get the hell away from me," Chase repeated, "or I'm calling the cops. I'm getting my phone out right now. I'm dialing the number."

"Jesus, have a fuckin' coronary, will ya? All right, I'm goin'." He shuffled away from the car and farther out into the alley, pausing under a streetlamp while he went through his pockets, fishing out a handful of lint and loose change. In the harsh light he reminded Brian of a walking skeleton, his high cheekbones jutting out like razor blades. Still, it wasn't too hard to see that he'd been a good-looking guy once upon a time, before the booze got him.

Brian waited until he'd disappeared down the alley, then climbed into the SUV's front passenger seat. Chase was already behind the wheel, drumming his fingers on it. He flashed Brian a tight smile. "Ready to go?"

"Y-Yeah." God, wasn't he going to say something? *Anything*? Or did he think he hadn't overheard?

Chase swung out of the alley onto Eighth Avenue before switching on the radio to the local blues station. He didn't say another word the entire drive back to Brooklyn.

* * * * *

It was just after midnight by the time they got home, unpacked the car and brought their instruments inside. Too wired to sleep, Brian got out his acoustic guitar and sat on the living room floor strumming it. But it was pretty hard to concentrate with Chase stomping around like an angry bull while he put their stuff away, muttering and grunting under his breath.

Finally Brian sighed and glanced up. "You want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" Chase perched on the arm of the couch and started tuning his Gibson. Didn't even bother looking at him.

"Whatever's eating you. Because it's obvious something is." Again, he didn't say anything. Jesus, was he going to have to pull it out of him with pliers? "I heard you talking to that guy out in the alley."

"So?"

"So he acted like he knew you from somewhere."

Now Chase looked up, fixing Brian with an exasperated glare. "He was drunk off his ass. He didn't know what the hell he was talking about."

"Well, he sounded pretty damn specific to me."

"He's a fucking nutjob! You should've seen all the stalker fan mail I used to get back in the day. The world's full of crazy assholes who dream up fantasy relationships with celebrities. How the fuck is that *my* fault?"

"I didn't say it was. But what about that video you mentioned?"

"Which one? I made a shitload. Haven't you ever watched MTV?" With that, Chase hung his guitar back on the wall and strode toward the hallway. "I've had it with this fucking third degree. I'm going to bed."

Brian got up to follow him, then changed his mind. Best to wait until they'd both calmed down. God, he *hated* fighting. Hated listening to it, hated being on either end of it. Somehow he and Chase had managed to get through the past month and a half

without a blowout, so maybe they were due. But maybe a little time and space would keep it from turning into a major fucking disaster.

He pulled his guitar back into his lap and started playing. Soon he found himself picking out notes that formed a brand-new melody. He'd better write it down before he lost it.

Chase had drawn him up some large-size staff paper, but there was also that new composition software on Chase's laptop, which just happened to be sitting on the coffee table. All he had to do was open the program and let the computer's microphone pick up the notes while he played, then he could go back and revise the song later. Way simpler than having to stop every couple of bars to scribble it down on paper. Besides, his notation skills weren't all that great yet.

So he opened the laptop, fired up the program and let the notes flow. He lost all track of time as the music poured out of him, filling up several pages by the time he started yawning and decided to call it quits. No doubt it was mostly crap, but he'd give it another look tomorrow and sift out the not-so-awful parts, then try to cobble it into something.

He saved his file and shut down the program, but hesitated before switching off the laptop. His finger hovered on the track pad, cursor paused right over the web browser icon. Google was only a couple of clicks away. Should he?

Not that he didn't trust Chase, but there was clearly something weird going on. It was probably no big deal. That heckler guy had rattled him, and Chase just didn't want to upset him about it more than necessary. But he'd heard something in Chase's voice when the guy mentioned the blowjob. Something that sounded a lot like recognition.

Oh, but that was crazy. He had to be imagining it. Still, a couple of clicks, and he could have peace of mind. How was that a bad thing?

He opened up Google and typed in "Tommy Winters + porn." Jesus Christ, there were over half a million hits! Most of them were fan-fiction sites, along with some creepy stalker-type blogs that turned Brian's stomach. He back-clicked out of them as

quickly as he could. But at the top of the fifth page there was a link to a torrent site labeled, “Tommy Winters Gets Nailed – XXX!” He hesitated a second before clicking on it.

He had to register for the site before he could go any further, then the link opened onto a download page for a twenty-minute porn clip. No description other than the title. There were a couple of blurry thumbnail photos that didn’t reveal much, other than the two guys in the video were white, naked and had dark hair. What a fucking rip-off! This “Tommy Winters” had to be a lookalike. And yet, he hit the “download” button anyway. What could it hurt? If nothing else, it’d be good for a laugh, and after tonight, he could use one.

He strummed his guitar until the download finished, then clicked on the video file. No opening credits, no music, just a room with a bed and two guys sprawled on it, one husky, the other kind of skinny, caught on handheld digicam. The camera zoomed in on the husky guy, and Brian hit the freeze-frame. He actually did look like the heckler guy, albeit about ten years younger, forty pounds heavier and a lot less drunk. Brian hit “play” again, and the camera started to pan down the guy’s body, stopping when it reached his huge, erect cock. He pumped it in his hand a few times, then rolled to his knees next to the other guy and shoved it in his mouth. The other guy didn’t handle it too well. He started choking, but the husky guy didn’t stop. In fact, he started pumping harder, grunting and groaning like some farm animal, then pulled free and came all over the other guy’s face.

Then the other guy sat up, the camera zooming in on him – and Brian’s breath froze in his lungs. No goatee and much shorter hair, but he’d know those eyes and that lush mouth anywhere. The guitar and rainbow flag tattoo on his breast confirmed it. Jesus Christ, it was Chase. It was really him. In a fucking porn video with come dripping off his chin.

God, he looked so young. Couldn’t have been more than nineteen or twenty. Not much older than Brian was right now. He closed his eyes as a sudden wave of nausea

swamped him, nearly doubling him over. He should've stopped the clip. He didn't want to watch anymore. But his hand wouldn't move. All he could do was stare at the laptop screen as the video skipped ahead, and there was Chase on his hands and knees, getting fucked by the husky guy. From the tight, agonized look on his face, he plainly wasn't enjoying it at *all*.

"What the hell are you watching? I can hear it all the way in the bedroom." Chase stood naked in the doorway, blinking at him. *Oh God. Oh shit.* Why hadn't it occurred to him to turn off the fucking sound? Then Chase caught a glimpse of the screen, and every last drop of color drained from his face. "H-How did you find that?"

Oh God, he was going to be sick. Leaping to his feet, Brian ran into the kitchen and bent over the sink, heaving his guts out. Only he hadn't had any dinner, so there was nothing to bring up, other than sour bile. He stood there coughing and spluttering until Chase came up and started rubbing his shoulders, and finally the spasms subsided.

Chase led him over to the table to sit down, then dropped to his knees in front of him. "I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean for you to find out like that."

He was *sorry*? Where did he get the fucking nerve? "Then why didn't you just *tell* me?" Brian croaked, his throat still scratchy and burning from the bile. "All those questions I asked you earlier, and you lied to my face!"

"I-I didn't lie, I just didn't—"

"Tell the truth?"

"You should see your face right now. You're looking at me like I'm Charles Manson and fucking Hitler all rolled into one. Why do you think I didn't want to tell you? I knew this would happen. The same thing happened with Trent when I told him."

"So you weren't going to tell me at all? *Ever*?"

Chase heaved a sigh and stood. "Can you honestly say you're happier now than before you clicked on that video?"

"It's not about that. It's about you being honest with me. If I hadn't recognized that photo, you wouldn't even have told me about Tommy Winters, would you?"

"Sure I would've." He swallowed hard. "Eventually."

"What the hell does *that* mean?"

"Oh for fuck's sake, we'd barely started seeing each other when you found out. How many other guys would've spilled their life stories so soon?"

"You know everything there is to know about me. You met my *dad* after our first night together. My family's all but adopted you. But everything I know about you, I've had to drag out of you. Which pretty much says you don't trust me." Oh, that made his eyes go wide. "And I can't trust you either. How do I know you're not gonna screw me over the way Kit did? Took you a grand total of two days to con me into forming a new band. Now you're encouraging me to write songs again. Am I gonna wake up someday and find out you've taken it all and slapped your name on it?"

"I wouldn't. I know what it's like to be stolen from, remember? I couldn't do it to anyone else. Especially you."

Chase sounded desperate now, his voice a ragged whisper. Any other time, it probably would've worked. Not this time. "I wish I could believe you. But all I've got to go on is your word, and it's not worth shit."

Chase flinched as if he'd slapped him. "Then I don't know why we're still talking."

So that was it. All over, just like that. Brian stared at him, what was left of his heart cracking in two. "Neither do I," he replied, then went back to the bedroom to pack his stuff.

Chapter Twelve

Dad's and Cameron's jaws dropped when Brian turned up on their doorstep around three that morning, duffle bag and instrument cases in tow. To his relief, they held back from pelting him with questions, and instead helped him carry everything to his room. But even after that, their expressions were still so stunned, Brian could barely bring himself to look at them.

At last his father pulled him into a hug. "I can see you're upset. When you're ready to talk about it, we're here."

Except he couldn't talk about it. There was this giant fist inside his chest, cutting off his air every time he tried to form the words. Besides, how could he explain to them what he'd seen? It was too disgusting. He couldn't bear seeing that in his dad's eyes, not when things were finally good between them again.

So he sat silently at meals, picking at all the great food Cameron had cooked while he listened to them plan their wedding. And he was glad for them, he really was. Even if seeing them happy when he was so fucking miserable made him want to burst into tears.

A couple days later, Cameron came and leaned in the storeroom doorway, arms crossed over his chest. "You ever going to tell us what happened?"

Brian looked up from the liquor order he was checking in, suppressing a sigh. He should've known they'd start putting on the pressure eventually. "Short answer? *No*," he snapped. "Not that it's any of your fucking business."

"Wow." Cam did a double-take. "Call me an idiot, but I didn't think I'd ever hear you talk to me like that again. I expected better from my stepson, and my friend."

God, why couldn't he just go away? Brian squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before turning around. "You don't want to hear it, believe me. It's pretty harsh."

"Try me. I've seen some rough stuff in my day. I doubt anything you say could shock me."

"Then you'll just run home and tell Dad. No thanks."

"I won't breathe a word unless you tell me it's okay. Like I said, we're friends. I won't betray your confidence, I promise."

And there was that fist again, burning and tightening in his chest. It hurt so fucking bad, he couldn't stand it. Would the pain ever fade? Or would it just sit there and eat away at him, killing him a little more every fucking minute? He couldn't go through the rest of his life like this, or even the next couple of days. He just couldn't.

"C'mon," Cam said once Brian finally glanced up at him, "It's lunchtime. Let me fix you a burger."

Mike took over at the bar while Cameron cooked them lunch, then they sat down in the office to eat. Brian was so fucking ravenous, he wolfed his burger down in five bites. It was actually pretty good. Cameron could even make greasy-spoon food appetizing.

Once they'd both finished eating, Brian sat back and gripped the arms of his chair, took a deep breath and started talking. The tightness inside him loosened bit by bit as he stumbled through his story. He'd expected Cam's eyes to go wide by the time he reached the part about the video, but instead he just nodded and rubbed a hand over his mouth.

"You don't look all that surprised," Brian said, though he wasn't sure whether to be relieved about that or not. "It's almost like you were expecting it."

"Well, when someone says they've done stuff they're not proud of, that's usually code for, 'I got into some heavy shit.'" Cam shrugged. "Chase made a mistake. A big one, no doubt, but it's in the past. Now the question is, are you ready to forgive him?"

"How can I? I mean, he didn't even have the guts to break it to me himself. How can I trust him when he won't tell me the truth?"

"Can't you give him the benefit of the doubt? He was obviously scared to death of losing you."

"But he *lied* to me! He stood right there in our living room and told me that guy was nuts, and everything he said was untrue, when he knew damn well it wasn't. How can I believe anything he tells me now?"

"That's why it's called taking it on faith." Cameron smiled. "If you love the guy, it shouldn't be too hard."

"But how do I know he loves me? He's never said so. And how do I know he hasn't done some other heinous shit that's gonna blow up in our faces later on? Even worse than what I already know about?"

"Why don't you just *ask* him?"

Oh, this was pointless. Cameron didn't get it at all. Brian jumped up and headed for the door. "You don't understand."

"What, about a guy being too fucking petrified to tell the love of his life about his past? No, you're right. How could I possibly understand that?"

Brian froze with his hand on the doorknob, then swung around slowly. "And I was the one who outed you. I'm still amazed you don't hate me for it."

"You did us a favor by bringing everything out in the open. It was touch-and-go for a while, but your dad and I are a hell of a lot stronger for it. We're living proof that it's possible to get past shit like this and be happy together. I'd hate to see you and Chase throw away a good thing because you're too scared to talk to each other."

"Okay, fine. I'll talk to him when I see him again. Whenever that is."

"It'll be this Sunday. You've got a gig here, remember?"

Brian gaped at him. "You're kidding, right? Consider it cancelled."

"Uh, no. I don't think I will." Cam stood, shoving his hands in his pockets. "You're booked here for the next four Sunday nights. You signed a contract and everything. I'm not letting you out of it. Either of you."

Suddenly the room lurched. He couldn't see Chase again, not yet. He wasn't ready. "Damn it, Cam. I can't believe you'd do this to me."

"I'm not doing anything, except expecting you to live up to your obligations. Looks like you and Chase are stuck with each other one night a week for the next month." He grinned. "Sooner or later you'll have to talk about something."

* * * * *

Next Sunday was every bit as tense and awkward as Brian had feared, and a little more besides. He kept his head down and his eyes on his keyboards once they took the stage, playing pretty much on autopilot, then took a walk outside while Chase did his solo set. He tried to move his stuff into another dressing room so he and Chase wouldn't have to face each other after the show, but they were all locked. So was the office. And the staff bathroom. His only other option was the storeroom, but no way was he leaving his keyboard cases and acoustic guitar in that musty, dusty cavern.

He went out to the bar to ask Mike about it, but all he got was a breezy, "Sorry, can't help you, sugar," before Mike conveniently dashed off to fill another drink order. Ryan was nowhere to be found either. Well, that was strange. Even a bit suspicious.

Time for the show's final set. Brian trudged onstage to scattered applause and they launched into *The Sky Is Crying*. About two bars in, he realized Chase was playing a different song—one they'd never even rehearsed. Heart leaping into his throat, he followed along as best he could. He sounded totally lame, though the audience still clapped enthusiastically once they'd finished.

Next song started off fine—until they got to the second verse, when Chase decided to change key. Again, Brian scrambled to keep up, a hot, angry flush creeping up his cheeks. What the fuck was Chase trying to pull? Brian cleared his throat, trying to get his attention, but Chase ignored him. Okay, fine, if that's the way he wanted it. Brian could play this game too.

Rollin' and Tumblin' was their last song. Brian cued up the rollicking intro, then sped up the tempo until Chase had no choice but to follow him, his fingers flying over the Gibson's strings in an unholy blur. *Holy shit*. Brian had never seen anybody play that fast. Adrenaline pumping, he barely kept pace. It was like riding a rollercoaster on the verge of jumping its track. By the time they got to the end, he was dripping wet, exhausted – and absolutely fucking *furios*.

No sooner had they stepped offstage when Brian lit into him. "What the hell was that? How *dare* you change things without telling me first?"

"Just making sure you were awake." Chase strode into the dressing room and sank down on the creaky old couch in the corner. "First half of the show, it was hard to tell."

"So you try to make me look like an incompetent asshole out there? Thanks a lot."

"Oh please, I knew you'd do fine. Besides, you heard them all applauding. It's not like they could tell the difference."

"Well, *I* can. Jesus, it's just like you to –"

Suddenly the dressing room door swung shut behind him, its lock turning with an audible click. Three guesses as to who was responsible. *Enough*. He was fed up with these idiotic games. Pounding his fist on the door, he called, "C'mon, Mike. Quit screwing around."

"I'd be happy to, sugar, once you two kiss and make up." A pair of voices giggled on the other side. "Take your time. We still got a couple more hours 'til we close."

"Oh, you're not fucking serious..." Their footsteps grew fainter in the distance, but that didn't stop Brian from continuing to bang on the door and call for help.

"You might as well knock it off. Nobody else can hear us back here. C'mon over and sit down."

Punked again. God, he had to be the most gullible jerk on the face of the planet. "Nice little conspiracy you got here. So did you put them up to it, or was it the other way around?"

Chase flashed him his patented knee-melting smile. *Oh God*. It still worked. "Let's just say it was a mutual decision. Cam's in my corner too, by the way."

"I'll bet he is." Chase patted the couch beside him, but Brian took the chair in front of the dressing table instead. If he had to stick around another two hours, there was no reason he shouldn't be comfortable. "You go to all this trouble to talk to me, when I begged you to the other night, and you wouldn't. What changed your mind?"

"The fact that my life sucks without you around. My apartment's like a fucking tomb without the sound of us practicing together every day. I miss hearing your voice and waking up every morning with you next to me. Before you, it'd been a long time since I'd had anybody in my life. I got tired of sleeping with starfuckers who only wanted me because I used to be Tommy Winters. It was better being alone. But I didn't realize how empty my days were until I had someone else to help fill them up. I was happy with you, sunshine. I miss you, and I want you back."

Simple, sincere words, straight from the heart. This time it was impossible not to believe him. "I didn't know you'd been alone for so long. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I thought I'd scare you away if I started in with a lot of heavy relationship talk, but I guess the real reason is that it scared *me*. The last conversation I had with Trent was when I told him about the video, and he blew a gasket and walked out on me. I never wanted anything like that to happen again. But I just couldn't stop myself from making the same fucking mistake." He laid his Gibson on the table and leaned forward, rubbing his palms on his jeans. "And to be honest, I was amazed you stuck around after the Tommy Winters confession. That's way too much emo to dump on anybody at once."

They both chuckled. "Looks like I survived," Brian replied softly.

"Whatever you want to know now, just ask. *Anything*. I mean it. I'm an open book."

Brian studied his fingernails for a long moment. "I just can't figure out why you'd do it. The video, I mean. Why would you put your relationship with Trent in jeopardy? Did you really need the money that bad?"

"They paid fifty grand for three scenes. Seemed like a lot of money at the time, but what did I know? I was eighteen, and I'd never had any other job except being Tommy Winters. I'd never handled my own money. I had no idea what things cost in the real world. All I knew was that I'd had to put off enrolling at Juilliard for a year when my parents froze my accounts. I thought my lawyer would've gotten it straightened out by then, but nothing had happened. I got turned down for every scholarship I applied for. My whole fucking future was circling the drain. I had to do something."

"Couldn't Trent help? What about your grandmother?"

"He was already working his ass off on two different private security jobs. As for Gram...shit, she was seventy years old and had cancer. No way was I taking her money. My only other option was this talent agent who kept trying to convince me to sign on for a Tommy Winters comeback tour. But that would've meant months on the road, and going back in the closet. I just couldn't do that. Trent and I were living together openly. Thirty years old, and he'd finally come out. I wasn't about to turn back the fucking clock and make us both miserable again." He slouched back on the couch cushions, dragging a hand through his hair. "So when I got the offer for the video, I jumped at it. I didn't think of what would happen when Trent found out. I thought I could explain it all away, but he was so fucking devastated. I'd betrayed him. I never meant to, but I did. And that was the end for us."

God, every part of him ached, listening to this. He'd thought he could never understand Chase's motives, but the way he'd laid it all out made it sound perfectly reasonable. A young guy faced with limited options and an uncertain future... Well, hadn't he been there himself? Maybe not in such desperate straits, but he knew what it was like to have no good choices in front of him. If not for his dad, he'd probably be in jail right now. In every way that counted, he'd been incredibly lucky.

But Chase had ended up making his own luck. Still, it was a miracle he'd not only survived his awful childhood, but had grown into this amazing, strong, *sexy* man, and an absolutely brilliant musician.

An amazing, strong, sexy man who got up from the couch and came over to him, falling to his knees beside him. "I love you, Brian. I'm sorry I never told you that either. I was always so afraid you wouldn't want me once you found out who I used to be. Then once you found out, I was afraid you only wanted me because of it. I didn't realize until you left that you were mad at me because you didn't care about any of that. You're the first person since Trent who's loved me for *me*."

And God, he did. He so, *so* did. Eyes stinging, Brian threw his arms around him. "I should've told you too. This'll teach us to stop trying to be mind-readers and just *talk* to each other."

"Don't have to tell me twice. From now on, it's full disclosure." Chase stood, pulling Brian along with him. "Anything else you want to know?"

Actually, there was. Something that had been nagging at Brian ever since he'd seen the video. "The guy in the clip...it looked like he was hurting you."

"Well, it wasn't fun, but I got through it. Let's just say I earned every penny of that fifty grand."

"Any chance this'll come back on us again?"

"I hope not. The company that made it went out of business years ago. There'll probably be clips floating around the 'net forever, but there's not much we can do about that."

"I guess I can live with it, if you can live with my overprotective father, stepfather and two fairy godmothers out there." Grinning, Brian nodded toward the door.

Chase grinned back. "Sounds like heaven to me."

Then they kissed, long and slow and deep. Brian's head swam and knees trembled as he clung to Chase, afraid to let go both because he didn't want to and for fear he'd crumple to the floor if he did. Finally Chase grabbed him by the hand and tugged him over to the couch.

They rolled around on the cushions, tearing at each other's clothes. Chase pulled Brian's t-shirt over his head and began anointing his chest with his hot, wet tongue. Then, once he'd wrestled open the button-fly on his jeans, he dove into the crisp, dark thatch of hair at Brian's crotch and sucked down his hard cock. It felt so fantastic Brian couldn't hold on. Chase swallowed every drop he gave him, blue eyes gazing up at him, bright and eager for more.

Now it was Chase's turn. Brian pushed him flat on his back and *pounced*, straddling his thighs as he yanked down his zipper. Bitter salt skidded along Brian's tongue as he licked the plump, juicy tip of Chase's cock, then took it between his lips. Instantly Chase started moving his hips, trying to get deeper into his mouth. Brian had to grasp his cock at the base to keep him from thrusting too forcefully and choking him. He'd intended to make it a slow, leisurely seduction, but they were both too deprived and on edge tonight. A few desperate strokes and Chase came with a yell, fingers tangled in Brian's hair.

Wrung out, they lay there together for a few minutes, then started putting their clothes back in order. No sooner had they finished when there came a familiar click, and a pair of equally familiar faces peeked in at the door, grinned and disappeared.

"Thank God for fairy godmothers," Chase murmured, leaning over for another kiss.

No way was Brian about to argue with him.

Epilogue

November 2015

Red and white streamers festooned the bar, with matching rose and carnation flower arrangements on all the tables. The packed showroom echoed with the sound of a live twelve-piece swing band accompanying Mike as he sashayed across the stage, crooning a heartfelt version of the Etta James classic *At Last* to the happy couple sitting in front.

And damn if he didn't look half bad in that long brunette wig, four-inch heels and red spangled gown with the slit up to *there*. One hell of a powerhouse voice too. Impressed, Chase sat straight up in his chair, pushed his dinner plate aside and refilled his glass with champagne. Now he understood what Ryan saw in the guy.

As if on cue, Ryan darted out from left-hand stage entrance and waved Chase over. "Brian's having a mini-meltdown. Would you mind?"

"No problem, man," he replied, trying hard not to laugh. It wasn't like he hadn't expected it. Brian had been a bundle of nerves all week, trying to get himself psyched up for this. Never mind they'd been playing here every Sunday and Tuesday for the past six months. Serenading your dad and his new husband with a love song you'd written yourself was obviously a show that trumped all other shows.

He found Brian pacing a trench in the floor, hands shoved in his pockets. God, he looked so damn cute in that tux, even if between the two of them they couldn't tie the fucking tie right to save their lives. He'd let his hair grow out, and now all the black was gone, replaced by soft blond spikes Chase itched to sink his fingers into. Instead, he walked up behind him and wrapped his arms around Brian's waist.

Jesus, he was shaking worse than he had their first night here. "Calm down, okay? You could go out there and play *Old MacDonald* on the fucking kazoo and your dad would love it."

"And if it was just him, that'd be fine. But I've never played to a full house like this before. There's got to be two hundred people out there!"

"You should know. You helped Cam address the invitations."

"I didn't think they'd all show up. Don't people have better things to do on Thanksgiving Day?"

"Other than watch their friends get married? I'd give up a turkey dinner for that anytime."

"Lucky none of us had to." Mike tottered off the opposite end of the stage, fluttered his fingers at them and headed for his dressing room. "Looks like I'm up next," Brian said.

Chase squeezed his hand. "Just think, in five minutes it'll be all over."

He slung his guitar over his head and rang the strings with a pick. "Sound okay?"

"Sounds fine." Parting the curtain, Chase peered out into the front row. Trevor and Cam looked so damn happy, sitting together holding hands. Proof positive that, with love and perseverance, two guys could make it over the long haul. Someday, he hoped, that would be him and Brian.

He gave Brian a quick kiss. "Go on, sunshine. You're gonna kill it."

"From your lips..." Brian sucked in a breath. "Okay. Here goes nothing." Then he stepped onstage to a huge swell of applause and started to play.

Chase hadn't heard the song before. Brian had been so secretive about it, working on it late at night or when Chase had class. Now he knew why. It wasn't just a song for Trevor and Cameron, it was for them too, telling the story of a once-in-a-lifetime love that had almost slipped away. He'd never heard Brian sing before either. He had a

sweet, pure lyric tenor, the notes pouring out of him like gold, plaintive and full of longing. Chase was blinking back tears by the time he'd finished.

The audience went fucking bananas, stomping and pounding on the tables. Brian took a bow, then charged offstage, right into Chase's waiting arms. "Dad and Cam want me to sing it again – with you."

Chase laughed. "Jesus, I've only heard it once!"

"Don't worry, I'll play it slow, so even you can follow along." He winked. "C'mon, you can't turn down a request from your family."

His family. The two sweetest words he'd heard in ages. "No, I guess I can't," Chase replied with a grin, then followed him onstage.

The End

About the Author

Multi-published author Cat Grant lives by the beautiful sea in California with one persnickety feline and entirely too many books and DVDs. She's now hard at work on another hot, sexy tale for Ellora's Cave.

Cat welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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