

ROAD TO
OCTOBERFEST
2023

Rocking

KARMA

KAJE HARPER

Rocking Karma

The Road to Rocktoberfest 2023

Kaje Harper

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Content warning: For adult readers over the age of 18 only. This book contains explicit sexual situations between two men, emotional abuse, and coercion.

Dax

I've cut and run on my life more than once in my thirty-one years, leaving everything behind, even my name. Now I'm Dax Crow, long lost half-brother and mixing technician for Jameson Crow, the lead singer of Corvus Rising. I'm using my hard-won skills to help my brother make it big. The rest of the band are incidental to me, although new bass player Lane Bennett is a hot mess of young talent who urgently needs someone to take him under their wing. Not my job. I never get close to anyone. Until some douche of a boyfriend begins jerking the kid around, and I've been there, done that. Maybe I can at least give him some advice.

Lane

Playing with Corvus Rising is my dream come true, and I can't believe in October we'll play for sixty thousand fans at Rocktoberfest. I just hope I can measure up. The last six months have been a steep learning curve, but I have my secret boyfriend to encourage and direct me whenever he's around. I wish we could go public, but he's with the record label and it wouldn't look good. I also have my secret joy—performing drag as Ms. Fox, when I get the chance. It's hard juggling everything while touring with the band, but I think I have it under control. Then my worlds collide and my boyfriend shows his true face. I find myself getting surprising advice and support from Dax, the gorgeous, secretive guy behind Corvus's sound. But I doubt even Dax can turn this disaster into a triumph.

Rocking Karma is a book in the multi-author Road to Rocktoberfest 2023 series. Each book can be read as a standalone, but why not read them all and see who hits the stage next? Hot rockstars and the men who love them, what more could you ask for. Kick back, load up your kindle and enjoy the men of Rocktoberfest!

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Thanks to everyone who read *Hidden Blade* and loved Cam and Erik – your enthusiasm for that story made me eager to revisit Rocktoberfest. (I hope you enjoy the little cameo for those guys in this book.)

Chapter 1

Dax

As I stepped up into the band's tour bus, I realized I wasn't alone. I froze, listening. The door alarm had been set when I arrived— I'd turned it off myself— which should've been comforting, but someone else was definitely onboard.

Not the band members. They were at a VIP after-party, and the label would skin them alive for cutting out this early on paying fans. Not the driver, who was taking our two days in a hotel to visit his daughter.

So who the fuck?

One time, a few years back, we'd had a couple of paparazzi manage to get onboard, and they'd taken pictures of the band coming back to the bus plastered.

Should I call security?

The sound came again, louder, a thump and then a man's low chuckle. Something about that laugh set the hairs on the back of my neck rising, but I couldn't identify him. As I listened, I heard a voice I did know, though.

“—right. Enough. Just do it—” followed by a sexual groan coming from the main compartment at the end of the bus, where the band's lead singers shared a queen bed behind closed doors. Except that wasn't my half-brother Jamie, known as Crow, lead singer of Corvus Rising. Nor his co-star and girlfriend, Val.

What the hell is Lane fucking Bennett doing screwing around in Jamie and Val's bed? And with a man, if I'm hearing right. That laugh sounded like someone older than Lane.

Jamie had paid for insulation to muffle noise from back there because, despite years as a rock star, he still liked to keep his private shit private. But it was a bus. There was only so much you could do. Those rhythmic sounds from the suite were someone getting fucked.

Now what? I was tempted to go pound on the compartment door and tell them to get out, but A— it was no more my space than Lane's; B— I had a solid policy of keeping my nose out of shit that didn't involve me; and C— I'd been watching Lane in the six months since he'd joined the band, replacing Jamie's old bass player. The kid struck me as shy, solitary, and almost innocent. I hadn't once seen him date or even pick up a groupie, female or male. If Lane was finally getting laid, why should I wreck that for him?

I debated sneaking off the bus and coming back later, but fuck that. I wanted my blue notebook and while I wasn't going to stop Lane from getting some, I wouldn't cater to him either. I went to my bunk and pulled the curtain aside, searching the built-in shelves for the book I wanted. I hadn't found it when the thumping crescendoed and stopped. Someone grunted loudly. Then voices, too low to make out, a few random noises, followed by Lane. "You're just leaving?"

A sudden reluctance to get in the middle of his mess made me roll onto my bunk and close the thick curtain. I lay silent as heavy footsteps scuffed down the aisle past me. I heard Lane call, "Let me get the alarm," and the sounds of him letting his evening's fuck out the door. Then his lighter steps came back toward me.

I figured he'd dress and split. The bus was stuffy with the AC turned off, and the label had sprung for some decent hotel rooms. But instead, I heard Lane sit in the table nook area, and then not move.

I stared at the ceiling above my bunk in the dark behind my curtain. Lane would get off the bus eventually. I could handle a little boredom.

Except after what felt like an hour but was probably ten minutes, I hadn't heard him get up from that seat. He'd taken a few shaky breaths loud enough to hear, but nothing more. He hadn't even pulled a beer out of the fridge, although with the power to the bus down to a minimum, maybe the fridge was emptied out. He hadn't ducked into

the front bathroom, which should've been handy if he'd been the one getting his ass reamed. As far as I could tell, he was just sitting there.

Fuck it. I had a song nagging me to finish it, and that wasn't happening without my guitar, my notebook, and light to see by. If Lane got embarrassed? Too bad, so sad.

I shoved the curtain aside, rolled out of my bunk, and stretched, not looking at Lane. Maybe he'd think I napped through the whole episode.

When I turned, Lane was staring at me, gray eyes wide and pretty lips parted, clutching the table. Not sure what he thought I was going to do.

I said, "Better wash those sheets."

His face went from pale to red, and he dropped his gaze to his feet. "I will. For sure."

"Y'know, you can bring someone back to your hotel room. No one's going to judge. Although if you sneak out on making nice with the VIPs to fuck around, I make no promises about what Streetcorner'll do to you. There's a time and a place for sex, but during a party where people are paying through the nose for your company ain't it."

Lane just shook his head. I figured I'd given him warning enough. He was new at this rock-star bullshit. Jamie had led Corvus Rising for ten years, and I'd been my half-brother's top sound tech for four of those, but Lane hadn't done jack shit before he auditioned to replace Matt on bass. Corvus was his first successful pro band. He was painfully green behind the ears, and we'd all tried to help him get up to speed fast. The music part, he managed at near-genius velocity. The star part was a work in progress.

"You aren't back there either," he managed after a moment.

"I'm not supposed to be." Yeah, much of the band's recent success was due to my mixing and effects, and I say that without ego. But I was invisible, off to the side. The star-power band was the five people onstage, not all us support staff. If Jamie didn't have a "we're family" bug up his brain about his poor, long-lost half-brother, I'd have been

riding in the crew bus, not this one. “No one pays to be with me.”

Not anymore, anyway. I shoved that unwelcome memory down into the dark.

Lane sighed, picking at something on the knee of his jeans. “The label knows I left.”

Good enough. His problem. I didn’t like the defeated look on his face, though. For someone who’d gotten what sounded like thoroughly fucked, he was damned far from blissed out. I knew how that felt, of course.

I turned away, located my blue notebook and set it on the table ready, then dug in the narrow closet and found a set of double sheets for Jamie’s bed. Ignoring Lane, I slid the door to the bedroom open.

A wave of unmistakable odor hit me. *Yeah. Someone got their rocks off in someone’s ass.* I hoped he’d at least enjoyed it at the time, whatever regrets were hitting him now. Whistling the tune to Ariana Grand’s *fuck me* lyrics, because I couldn’t resist tweaking the kid, I stripped the bed and stuffed the dirty sheets into one of the pillowcases. By the time I shook out the fresh fitted sheet, he’d come to the other side of the bed to help stretch it over the mattress.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, as I tossed him the second pillowcase and eased Jamie’s memory-foam pillow into the one I held.

“I like Jamie, and he likes things tidy.” Jamie was the only human being in the world I cared about.

“You could’ve just made me clean up.”

“You’re here, aren’t you? And more people moving around in the air space will get rid of the stink.” I waved the pillow like a fan.

He flushed again, the color blotchy on his pale skin. “Sorry.”

“You mad at my brother or something?” Jamie wasn’t perfect. He could be a jerk sometimes, especially when he was working on his music and it wasn’t going well.

“No. The guy. He wanted...”

“Bit of advice from someone who’s been in this biz a bunch more years than you.” I was only thirty-one, to his twenty-two, but the gap felt like a century. I’d grown up fast. “Groupies come and groupies go. Any one of ’em who cares more about Crow’s bed than your ass is someone you should cut loose ASAP.”

“It’s complicated.”

Sure it is. Folks said that a lot, meaning they didn’t want to do what they knew they should. On the other hand, who was I to preach? I’d never had a relationship worth the name, beyond my first toxic mess. “You do you. Just stay out of Jamie’s stuff doing it.”

“Yeah. Won’t try that again.” He ducked his head, letting his long dark hair swing forward around his face. The back of his hair was mussed, like someone had fisted a hand in there. I hoped he’d wanted that. Lane was a slim five-nine, and despite some muscles in his arms, I could’ve taken him down in a hot minute. I remembered what it was like to be the little guy on the receiving end, back when.

Not my problem. He sounded like he was into it.

I set the freshened pillow in place, plumped the comforter, and stretched it over the top. The bus had been thoroughly cleaned after we’d gotten off that morning. Jamie would never know this was a different set of new sheets, and I wouldn’t tell him.

I handed Lane the full pillowcase, grabbed his elbow, and drew him toward the door, leaving the bedroom open wide to air out. “Come on, let’s head out.” I picked up my notebook on our way past the dining nook.

Lane didn’t resist as I ushered him down the steps and reset the alarm. Standing on the pavement staring at his feet, he looked sweaty and tired in the overhead lights, despite a welcome breeze lifting his hair. I glanced around. The hotel was two blocks away on the other side of the chain link fence, and the day’s heat had eased. An easy walk. I didn’t let go of his elbow as I tugged him to the gate and entered that code from the scrap of paper I’d stuffed in my pocket.

“How’d your trick get out? Did you give him the code?” I pushed Lane through and shut the gate, resetting the alarm.

Double security was maybe overkill, but we'd left most of our stuff on the bus, and the label was always careful. They'd parked our ride here to pump out the tanks, take on water, refuel, and clean, but they'd given us an access code, just in case. *Like in case I left behind a vital notebook, or Lane got horny.* "Never, ever give out info."

He yanked his arm free. "I'm not stupid." But instead of answering my question, he headed off down the sidewalk at a good clip.

I caught up to him easily enough. He was six inches shorter than me, since I reached a skinny six-foot-three at age twenty-one. I adjusted my strides to his and kept my mouth shut.

The doorman in front of the hotel obviously recognized Lane and waved us in while intercepting a woman who started charging our way, digging out her phone for a photo. Corvus Rising wasn't Pearl Jam or the Stones, but after a concert earlier that same night, the band was pretty recognizable. Lane ducked his head, letting his hair swing forward. I stuck to his side while crossing the lobby, staying between him and most of the people, since no one gave a fuck who I was.

As soon as an elevator opened for us, Lane hurried on and stuck his room key in the reader to access the security floor. Someone acted like they were going to get on with us, but I gave them my resting I'll-fuck-you-up face, and they decided to wait for the next one. *Smart.*

As soon as the doors closed, Lane slumped against the far wall. The elevator moved upward smoothly, as you'd expect for a classy hotel. The faint scent of someone's takeout lingered. Mirrored walls reflected us, my tall, tanned, bleached-blond image seeming like a stranger despite all the years I'd been Dax Crow. I frowned at my reflection, which frowned back in an infinite series, fake-green eyes brightened by my contact lenses. Lane stared down at his sneakers, and I let him be.

When we were decanted on our floor, I followed him to his room. Mine was three doors farther down. I gestured to the stuffed pillowcase. "The hotel offers express laundry service."

Lane shrugged. "Or I might pitch it all and buy him new ones. I have money, after all. I'm a rock star." He turned his back on me, tapped his

key to the lock, and let himself inside. The door swung shut behind him.

I blinked. I'd never put Lane in among the folks who looked down on me as "just" crew, but I sure as hell wasn't a star. Or paid like he was. Nagging irritation made me want to knock on his door and have the last word, but I was drawing a blank on anything both satisfying and not too mean.

Fuck it. I had my notebook, and my guitar was waiting in my room. I had better things to do than argue with a little boy who was letting fame go to his head. No matter how pretty that head was.

Chapter 2

Lane

I let the door to my room latch and leaned back against it, counting breaths. That was my first ever walk of shame, and if I had my way, it'd be my last. *And in front of Dax Crow, of all people.* I'd always been intimidated by Jamie's brother. He had this way of staring at people as if he knew the insides of their skulls and didn't like them much. Now I'd given him a reason to sneer at me.

I dropped the pillowcase of dirty sheets. *Trash. Definitely.* My mom would've smacked me for wasting money, but she wasn't here. *Thank God for that.*

Richard had been weird tonight. This wasn't the first afterparty he'd pulled me out of for quick sex. One time, he'd led me up one hotel floor from a throbbing ballroom to the dead quiet of the conference level, unlocked a bathroom, and fucked me right there over the sink. I'd felt sexy and rebellious, going back to my required schmoozing with my ass aching and Richard across the room with another label VIP, pretending he barely knew who I was, then flashing a secret grin when he caught my eye.

Tonight, I'd suggested my room, or his which wasn't on the band's floor. But he wanted to fuck in the bus for some reason. He'd had the codes, of course, being important enough with the record label to get anything he wanted, and he'd led me two blocks down the road and into the tour bus, acting like he didn't know I was half a block behind him. Then, when I offered to kneel on my bunk for him, he insisted on using Jamie's bed.

He'd said, "They're going to service the bus anyhow, and I want to

be comfortable. Crow won't care."

I was pretty sure Jamie wouldn't like it if he knew. I'd pointed out the bus looked cleaned already, but Richard overrode my objections. Normally, I liked his forceful confidence, enjoyed obeying him. I loved it when he pushed me to my hands and knees and told me to be a good boy. Except usually he drew the process out, fingered me, smacked my ass, said filthy hot things as he pounded into me, and made sure I finished. This time, he fucked fast, came, and was already getting dressed while I brought myself off into my hand. Then he left with barely a word.

He'd be back at the party now, like nothing happened, slapping Jamie on the back and eyeing Val's cleavage.

I pushed away from the door, ignoring the twinge of sore muscles. I wanted a shower, although I'd have to put on the same shirt afterward since I didn't have a matching one. Heaven forbid some photographer picked up on a change of clothes in the middle of the party. I could do fresh jeans, though. I had half a dozen identical pairs.

The hot water was awesome, flowing down my back and steaming the air I breathed. The soap stung a little on my asshole, but not enough to worry me. Richard hadn't been rougher than usual, just... absent. I stopped myself from ducking all the way under the flow at the last moment. Wet hair would be impossible to hide, and mine was long enough it was a pain to blow-dry.

Once I was redressed, with the silky blue shirt still damp with stage sweat clinging to my shoulders, I grabbed wallet, phone, and key, and headed back downstairs.

Music pounded out from the second-floor ballroom as I nodded to the door guy, one of the two bodyguards who covered the band, and slipped back inside. I heard Jamie's booming laugh. He was a big guy, as tall as Dax but twice as broad, his hair dark and curly where Dax bleached his platinum and kept it in a neat, straight fade. Really, other than height, the two men weren't much alike.

Not in attitudes either. As I came farther in the door, Jamie's attention flicked over to me, like he'd noticed I was gone. He gave me a

warm smile and nod, before he turned back to the VIPs demanding his attention.

The hotel AC wasn't keeping up with the crowd, and raised voices competed with our latest album playing on hidden speakers. Hands holding glasses of champagne gestured. I was reminded of the hot, crowded, noisy, fake-it-till-you-make-it parties I used to attend in high school, always wishing I was somewhere else. Or that I could figure out how to belong— one or the other.

A woman laid her hand on my arm, and I jumped. "Sorry." I turned to her. "I didn't see you there." She had the right badge around her neck, so I focused on her. "Are you having a good time?" lame, but I was terrible at this stuff anyhow.

"I've been looking all over for you. I wanted to tell you how awesome your solo was in 'North Wind' tonight. You blew me away."

I manufactured a smile. "Awesome" suggested I wasn't going to have a deep conversation about music theory. "Thanks. We were all on fire tonight."

She told me about her favorite songs and how she wished we'd played "Under the Bridge" tonight, but she loved that we finished with "Solstice Dance." I signed a T-shirt for her, one of the VIP perk ones that they got with the band's expanded logo on it.

As soon as she turned away, a tall, heavysset man took her place. "You're Lane, right? I haven't seen you before. The band's really missing Zeng. No one plays bass like he did."

Saying that to the guy who taken Zeng's place seemed harsh, but I said, "Matt was incredible. I hope to be as good for Corvus in my own way."

"Too much ornamentation. You need to step back and just groove. Matthew Zeng was like a solid rock the band stood on. It takes a strong man to create that sound."

I know a fair number of women bass players who'd argue with you. I just shrugged and tossed my hair back over my shoulders. I wasn't out to the fans as gay, but I knew rumors floated around. As far

as I could tell, they were based on me being a slim five-foot-nine guy with long hair who was awkward around female groupies, and therefore must be gay. I was awkward around male fans too, but that seemed to make no difference.

Over the fan's shoulder, I saw Richard. His dark hair was perfectly styled and his white shirt looked as crisp as ever, despite the heat and having been draped over a corner of the bed while he fucked me. He drifted nearer, tilted his head, and gave me a quick smirk. Tonight, of all nights, I didn't want Richard to listen in on a rant about how crap my playing was.

"Come on out of the traffic," I suggested to the Zeng fan-guy. "Tell me what you loved most about Matt's work." I led the way off to a corner of the room, not caring if he followed me or not, because either choice would solve my problem.

He did, though, and spent several minutes telling me about his love of a heavy bassline.

I spaced a bit, nodding along, then jolted and flinched at a touch on my back. *Go away, Richard.* But instead of my sometimes-boyfriend, Jamie laid a meaty arm across my shoulders.

"Hey, Howard," he said to the guy. "Long time no see. You missed our last gig here."

"Daughter was having a baby," the big man said. "Little boy. Chip off the old block. Sorry to have missed my last chance to see Zeng, though."

"Well, I'm glad you could make it tonight." Jamie rocked me lightly, gripping my shoulder. "This kid's something special, isn't he?"

"He's no Zeng."

"Course not. No one can do Matt like the man himself. But Lane's got a touch, a new sound. Matt was our rock, but Lane here lifts us up. Lighter, more complex, fun. You know the biz after all these years, Howard. Gotta fly or you sink. Corvus Rising's on the wing."

"I guess."

“Wait till our next show here. Give us a year to really gel. We’re gonna blow your mind. Here.” Jamie dug into a pocket and came up with a little novelty thumb drive with our band image. “Extended copy of our latest album with a couple of live tracks. Play it a few times and listen. First time, you’re gonna say, ‘Ugh, this just isn’t the old Corvus.’ Second time, you’ll say, ‘This crap is different, but it has something.’ Third time? You’re gonna bookmark your calendar to buy tickets the moment they go on sale, and a couple of these songs will hit your favorite playlist. Guaranteed.”

Howard took the drive. “Just promise me you’ll still play ‘Don’t Rock the Boat’ next year.”

“For you?” Jamie let go of me to pull out his phone and make a note. “I put it into our playlist. Gotta keep our best supporters happy.”

Howard grinned. “Okay. Yeah, maybe I’ll give the new stuff another listen. Hey, I’m gonna go talk to Hawk. Great show, Crow, like always.” He held out a big fist, and Jamie bumped it with his matching one.

We both watched as Howard made his way across the crowded floor toward Val. When he was out of earshot, Jamie said, “Don’t let him get you down. We didn’t pick you as a substitute for Matt, we picked you to make the band better in your own way. You’re doing fine.” He nudged my shoulder.

You think so? I didn’t want to be pathetic, begging for approval. I was a damned good bassist, and Jamie had been encouraging me to put my own mark on the songs. That was all the sign of approval I should need. Still, I couldn’t deny I was grateful for him backing me up.

Jamie raised his head, looking past me. “Oh, hey, you know Richard Kensington from our label, right?”

Biblically. I turned. Sure enough, Richard was coming our way, cutting a path through the crowd with that unwavering confidence of his well-dressed, six-foot-tall, personal-trainer-maintained presence. He was the image of a powerful middle-aged businessman, a guy who knew his own mind and liked to have his own way. I’d always been attracted to that kind of man. *Why is his attitude grating on me*

tonight?

He stopped in front of us, his focus on Jamie. “Great shows on this tour, Crow. I’m hearing from a lot of *satisfied* fans.” He gave me a brief glance, then added to Jamie, “Of course, a few folks are still mad at Zeng for going his own way but I’m sure you’ll whip the kid into shape fast.”

Did he really put an emphasis on “satisfied”? Was that meant to be funny? And I’m not a fucking kid, Richard. Unless you’re a pedophile. That thought made me cringe. Things a guy shouldn’t think about his boyfriend. Anyway, I didn’t mean it. I was well past being of age, and Richard was probably diverting suspicion from us.

Like we had to, because if folks knew we were together, they’d think I got into the band through nepotism. We didn’t actually meet until after I’d been granted my live audition, but people always imagine the worst. If I had issues now with getting respect, I’d get none if they thought I was Richard’s boy toy. I knew that, but it didn’t make ignoring each other in public fun, especially the way Richard did it.

Two could play that game. I asked Richard, “What do you say, sir? Have I schmoozed enough for one evening? I’d like to get an early night, spend some time in a nice, soft bed for a change.” I cocked my hip and lowered my eyes. I doubted he’d come up to my room. I rarely saw him twice in one evening. But maybe I could rile him up a little. “I wonder if any of the fans here might want an early night, too. That girl in the red dress is hot.”

Richard’s lips thinned. “The label wants you to satisfy the fans with your playing, not your bed. It’d be a shame if we had to start worrying about your reputation, when your position’s still so tentative.”

Jamie looked back and forth between us, a frown growing. “There’s nothing tentative about Lane’s position. And he can hardly get more of a rep than Brody.”

Our wind player was a force of nature, able to wring brilliant music out of anything from a flute to a bagpipe, and he loved the ladies. Lots of ladies. Often.

“Brody’s a solid player with a lot of fans. Lane is still working on

building his fan base. He should be *careful*.” Richard eyed each of us, then turned away. “Now I’d better make sure Ms. Somerset has everything she needs. Goodnight, guys.”

Jamie grimaced as he tracked Richard across the room toward a middle-aged woman dripping in jewelry. “That was weird. Don’t you think?”

“I guess?” I couldn’t tell him I’d been pushing Richard’s buttons. Or that I was mad because Richard’s push-back turned into some sort of threat to me staying in the band. I thought he’d make a sideways comment about us, not bring the label into it.

“Well, Kensington’s on the talent end, so he won’t be around much now we’re settled. I never expected him to have that much of a stick up his ass.”

Richard never bottoms. “Maybe something put him in a bad mood.”

“Maybe.” Jamie shrugged and his expression smoothed out. He bumped my shoulder again, a grin appearing. One of the best things about him was how non-dramatic and chill he was, for a lead singer. “Come on. Time for me to ‘fight’ with Val again. You want to be my beard?”

It was tempting. The label liked Jamie and Val to pretend to be hot and cold, not a settled couple. It kept the fans’ fantasies about getting with them alive. Letting Jamie hit on me would probably piss Richard off effectively, but I didn’t have the energy for that game. “Nah. I’m going to bed for real. You two have fun.”

“See you tomorrow.”

I stayed where I was by the wall, watching as Jamie made his way around to his girlfriend’s side. Val, who went by Hawk onstage, was stunning to look at— all long copper hair and flashing dark eyes and sculpted cheekbones. She could also do drama like a queen. As Jamie approached, she drew herself up to her full five-foot-three height, a foot shorter than him, and tossed her head. “So you finally have a little time for me, huh? An afterthought, like always.”

“I’ve been busy with paying supporters.” Jamie didn’t have her

acting chops, but he managed an annoyed grumble.

“Busy, huh? I saw you getting *busy*. Who was the blond...?”

I left them to their mandated bickering and made my way to the door, giving the folks who approached me with compliments a brief smile and thanks and nothing more. Kevin, the bodyguard at the door, asked, “Going out? Do you need anyone with you?”

“Just headed to my room,” I told him. “I’m the boring one.” Val’s voice rose behind me. I heard Jamie bark a comeback, and Brody’s laugh echoed.

“Good night then.” Kevin held the door for me.

A couple of the fans came out after me, and we chatted and took a few selfies while we waited for the elevator. When it arrived, I moved to the rear, putting my back to the mirrored wall, and they faced me, eyes bright, saying, “You guys totally rocked!” and “When will your next album come out?” and “Will you tour through Atlanta again next year?”

I got by with “Thanks,” and “To be announced,” and “I’m just the bass player. Those decisions are above my pay grade.”

The first woman scrambled out at her floor, laughing about facing backward and almost missing her exit. At the second stop, the other fan used her foot to hold the doors long enough to give me an unmistakable up-and-down look and a suggestive lick of her lips. “Well, this is me. Not as fancy as your floor, I bet, but all the rooms are nice. Big soft beds.”

I pretended not to notice the invitation. “That’s cool. I hope you sleep well.”

She lingered for a moment, then moved back and let the doors slide shut. I used my key card to access the executive level, slumping back on the wall as the car glided upward. The doors opened on a quiet hallway and I took a breath of relief. Might not be as silent later, if Brody brought a party back to his room, but for now, the throbbing in my head that I’d tried not to notice backed off a notch.

At my door, I hesitated. I was strongly tempted to go find Dax and

explain, excuse, ask him not to tell anyone anything. Even if he'd stayed out of sight on the bus and not watched Richard leave, if he paid any attention at all, he had to have heard two male voices. And I had the impression Dax Crow *always* paid attention.

So he knows I'm gay or bi. So what? Jamie's bi. If I knew anything about Dax, it was his loyalty to his brother and how much he respected Jamie. He wasn't likely to be a 'phobe.

The only real risk was if he'd recognized Richard. Even then, he'd have to care enough to bother mentioning him to someone and letting our secret out. As far as I could tell, Dax only cared about music and Jamie. Snitching on us wouldn't help either of those, might even hurt. He might tell Jamie, to keep him in the loop, but he'd never go to the media.

He'd think less of me, of course, if he'd found out I bent over for a guy who could sign our paychecks. He might even think I did get into the band via the casting couch. But so what? Did it matter what Dax thought of me?

Yeah, it does.

Realizing that sucked. I took a couple of steps past my door, stopped, and came back. The safest thing for me to do was keep my mouth shut and pretend the whole mess on the bus never happened. Good odds, Dax would do the same. I tapped my key card and let myself into the room.

One more hotel room, in one more city. Despite the luxury, it smelled of stale air and faint traces of cleaners. My bed was turned down, a wrapped chocolate mint on the pillow. Sitting on the side of the mattress, I ate the offering and winged the crumpled wrapper into the corner. Then I got up and tidied it into the trash— the maid shouldn't have to work extra because I was in a pissy mood.

Out in the hall, I heard a faint sound, then voices coming closer. Despite the solid door, I could make out Brody's laugh and a woman's voice as they passed. *Someone's getting laid tonight.*

Well, I'd gotten laid, too. For the all-of-ten-minutes it took Richard to come. I wondered if Brody's date would sleep with him through the

early hours, would kiss him in the morning and tease him about bed hair. Would he get more from a one-night stand than I got from my boyfriend?

I pulled out my phone and texted Richard. *~I'm alone in my room with a big, soft bed. ;)*

Staring down at the screen in my hand didn't make an answer appear. I had time to undress, brush out my hair, and put on a loose pair of sleep pants before the phone chimed.

~Working on an important deal tonight. No time for fun.

Well, that sucked. Wasn't unexpected, though. *~How about tomorrow?*

~Be a good boy, and I might show up at your room before checkout.

I told myself that was great, definitely promising. I wasn't sure my ass would be up for another round that soon, but I loved kneeling for him, sucking him off while he tugged my hair and called me his sexy slut. I'd been so inhibited growing up, I got off on letting loose. At least in private. Someday, I'd be settled in the band, so well-established no one cared how I got there. Then Richard and I could have something more. For now, this would have to do.

I texted, *~I'll look forward to it. Good night.*

After splashing my face with water and brushing my teeth, I pulled off the comforter, eased under the sheets, and punched my pillow a few times. Setting the silent phone by my bed, I laid my head down and tried to relax into sleep.

I guess Richard didn't have anything else to say.

Chapter 3

Dax

Atlanta felt like the asshole of Satan in the August sun. Why the label thought a summer tour through the South was a great idea, I'll never know. At least only two shows were outdoors. You might even say it was my fault I wasn't in the nice AC, but I had a craving I needed to satisfy, right now. There was a convenience store a block down from the hotel, and half an hour till the bus was due to show up for us. I had time.

Luckily, the SpeediFoods store was big enough to have what I needed. *Ah, my little package of delight. Come to Papa.*

I set the pack on the counter. The cashier held it up, joking, "It's a hot one out there. Better eat these fast before they melt."

I handed over cash. I liked being anonymous. "They'll be fine. Those things could survive a nuclear apocalypse."

"No." He hefted my treat, crinkling the cellophane, and grinned. "I meant, snowballs. Y'know? Snow?"

I pushed my sunglasses down my nose enough to stare at him over the top and held out my hand. "Give. Now."

He blinked, looked down, and handed over my snack cakes.

"Thank you." No one could claim I didn't have manners.

Although as I went out the door, precious little, round cakes in hand, I thought I heard him cough "Asshole" behind his hand. Everyone was a comedian.

There was a time when I'd have had a pack of smokes in my hand. A

time before that when I'd have picked up the half-smoked butt I saw on the sidewalk and snuck it into my pocket for later. So fuck anyone who made fun of my love for indestructible sponge cake, artificial cream, and dry flaky coconut. I ripped open the package as I walked back and stuffed the first one in my mouth. Heaven in one giant zero-nutrition bite.

The heat beat up from the pavement as I rounded the corner. Our tour bus was already parked by the hotel doors, and I saw Kevin, one of the bodyguards, standing between a group of onlookers holding their phones out and the entry.

Crap. Left it a bit too late. Luckily, I wasn't recognizable unless someone was an obsessive fan.

I stuffed the second snowball into my mouth, took time to enjoy its impossible sweetness, and chucked the wrapper in a corner trash can. A quick wipe of my face and shirtfront— a graphic T with an old Metallica cover— made sure if I did end up in any pics, it wouldn't be with flaked coconut on me. I pushed my sunglasses higher up my nose and headed for the bus.

A tall, business-suited figure coming out of the hotel doors made me pause, a little jolt hitting me in the gut. *Fucking Richard Kensington.* I'd heard he'd been at the after-party, but I figured he'd be winging his way off ASAP to whatever barely legal singer he was fucking this time. Corvus Rising was an established band, not one that needed the attention of L.A. Streetcorner's director of acquisitions. His job was flying around the country following up on their talent scouts' reports, deciding which up-and-coming star might be worth a little casting couch session. Either gender. Richard wasn't picky.

I turned away and ducked my head as he pushed through the crowd toward a waiting taxi. Odds were he wouldn't recognize me. I'd grown another three inches after I turned twenty, cut my hair and bleached it in a great fade, kept my skin tanned, pierced my ears. I wasn't the skinny, young black-haired bassist he'd once fucked. But I wasn't taking any chances. If Streetcorner hadn't been Jamie's label before we met, I wouldn't have come within a mile of Richard ever again, but staying with Jamie won over my paranoia, every time.

Richard got into the cab and slammed the door. They headed off down the drive— *good riddance, motherfucker*— and I fixed my sights back on the bus. The crowd was growing, but I had no problem nudging people hard enough to wiggle through. I got a couple of growls of “Hey,” but no one paid me attention until I reached the front and said, “Hey, Kev?”

“Dax.” He folded his huge arms. He wasn’t my number one fan.

I ducked around him and he didn’t stop me, which made the crowd both curious and antsy, but I ignored the “Who’s that?” murmur as I hurried up the bus steps.

Apparently I wasn’t that late, because only Tanisha, our drummer, sat in the lounge area, her usual extra-massive coffee in one hand. She raised the cup to me as I approached. “Here’s to life back on the road.”

A *thump* from underneath us showed the crew was loading our stuff. I’d left my one bag and my guitar in the hands of the concierge staff before heading out on my snowball expedition. This far into the tour, the crew knew what to load in baggage and what to bring up top. Sure enough, a young woman appeared with Jamie’s favorite Martin acoustic and a bag slung over her shoulder. She took both along to his room, then returned empty-handed and nodded to us before hurrying out for her next load.

I stretched. “Gonna check that they changed my sheets.” Heading down the back aisle, I did pause at my bunk, although I knew from last night it’d been cleaned. Then I stuck my head into Jamie’s compartment. A quick sniff told me the air had cleared enough to hide Lane’s screwing around. I went in and double checked that the guitar was safely latched into its wall rack. Jamie would have a fit if his instrument went flying in a sudden lane change on the interstate.

A young guy came onboard with a bag and my guitar as I returned up front. I held out a hand. “I’ll take that.” He passed my Gibson over and stowed the bag in the locker under Brody’s bunk.

Sitting beside Tanisha, I began noodling around on my guitar. The B string was a bit off, and I tuned it by ear. People coming and going at load-up followed a familiar routine by now. I ignored them, plucking a

thread of melody to go with the words that'd flared in my head last night.

Leghold trap

Teeth bite deep

Shit to do

Before I sleep

Tanisha cocked her head. "Does Jamie even realize how much you do for him?"

I looked up, startled. "I do my job. He appreciates that."

"You make us sound great, yeah. You write our songs—"

"*Collaborate* on his songs," I said, because Jamie and I always polished things up together. Had since that day six years ago when he heard me secretly composing and stopped to make me play that song for him again. Then he ran and grabbed his own guitar. That one became "Under the Bridge." Since then, some songs were more him, some more me, but we worked best together.

"Sure. And you stand between him and the paps—"

"I don't!" I did my best to stay out of the limelight and not get my face plastered around. "Jamie can handle the paparazzi just fine without me."

"Except on those rare times he doesn't want to, and you distract them. You make sure we have his favorite food, favorite beer."

"Keep the lead happy. It makes sense."

"Double-check that his fucking guitar is safe." She grinned at me.

"You want to deal with Jameson Crow in a moment of inspiration and no working guitar?"

"You could loan him yours, in a pinch."

"He loves that old Martin."

"Uh huh." She sipped her coffee, eyeing me over the rim.

I waited for her to say, *you love him*, which would be my cue to throw brotherhood into the conversation. I didn't do love, but ever since Jamie invited me to join his band, I sure as hell did brothers. Funny, the first sixteen years of my life I'd resented the hell out of him from a distance—the legitimate son who had everything, when my mom and I had nothing. Then I was too busy surviving to give him brain space. And then the first time I talked to him, my life changed.

I heard shouting from the crowd outside and the man himself came onboard, followed by Val, putting an end to whatever point Tanisha had wanted to make. Jamie threw himself down into the seat nearest mine and Val sat beside him. Jamie lounged, his long legs stuck out. "You missed our fight at the party, Dax. It was epic."

"Don't you ever get tired of that?" Tanisha asked. "You guys ever thought about making the label quit jerking you around?"

Val shrugged. "It's acting. We don't mind. Keeps those parties from getting too boring. Keeps the sex from getting boring too."

"How was that guy you picked up last night?" Jamie asked her.

"Great abs, lousy technique." She pushed her copper hair further off her face and asked a crewman going by, "Hey, can we get the AC cranked? It's not doing much with the door open."

"Sure, I'll ask. We're just about done loading, though, and then you can close the door." He stuffed more things into Brody's cubby and hurried out.

"Well, I went to bed alone." Jamie buffed his nails on his shirt.

Val grinned. "Pretty girl in the red dress said no, huh?"

"Has a fiancé."

Val licked her lips seductively. "I'll make it up to you later."

Tanisha shook her head but said nothing. She didn't understand how Val and Jamie could have an open relationship and stay madly in love.

I did, though. Sex had nothing to do with love. Fucking felt good. Probably felt even better with someone who cared about you coming

first, in both senses. But sex was physical, love was all in the brain, as far as I could tell.

I'd had lots of sex, reams of it, every kind, but not once had it been related to love. Val and Jamie liked variety in the sack, liked winding each other up with stories of their one-night stands, and that was fine. I had a feeling, once they quit having to pretend the hate part of love-hate for the label's promo, they'd switch exclusively to threesomes. But not monogamy. I could imagine them an old married couple in their fifties, inviting home some sexy dude or lady or enby for a bit of fun.

Brody stumbled up the steps and down the aisle, his eyes bleary. "Who picked this fucking early start?"

"It's noon," Jamie pointed out.

"Like I said, fucking early." He headed for his bunk. "Wake me when it's dark out."

I felt obliged to call after him, "What are you, a vampire? Is that bite on your neck more than a hickey?"

"Fuck you too," Brody called back, climbing onto his bed and pulling the curtain closed.

Jamie chuckled. "Did I ever say thanks for hooking us up with him?"

"I ain't no pimp," I hedged.

"Platonically, bro. He keeps saying no to anything more."

"Smart man." I plucked a note on my guitar.

"Seriously, though, his sound took us up a whole new notch." Jamie nudged my ankle with his foot. "Connecting with you at Dad's funeral was the best thing I ever did." Val cleared her throat, and Jamie added quickly, "*Second* best, darling. You know that."

I grunted and moved my foot away. "Just chance. Working as a session player, a musician figures out quick who's a real talent and who's paint-by-numbers. I knew Brody was gold. Glad he worked out for you."

I hadn't noticed Lane come onboard. Or rather, I noticed but didn't

care until he asked, “The label didn’t recruit Brody?”

“Nah,” Jamie said. “They don’t have that kind of imagination. I met up with Dax at our dad’s funeral. Pretty much the first thing out of his mouth was, ‘I can make your band better.’”

“Bullshit.” I kicked him. “I was a lot more fucking subtle than that.”

“Subtle. Like a rock. He comes up to me, sticks his hand out and says, ‘Hey there, I’m Dax Crow. Your father’s other kid.’”

Lane’s pretty gray eyes went wide. “You didn’t know each other before then?” At a warning beep from the driver, the doors winged shut. Lane sat in the farthest seat. The driver beeped a few more times, probably to get the crowd out of the way. Through the one-way windows, I could see they’d multiplied out there. Then we inched our way down the hotel drive.

Jamie said, “I guess Dax knew I existed.”

Sure as hell did. Jameson— named after our daddy, James Crow— the one in the cute publicity pictures of guitar, flag, wife, and kid, on our father’s country music promo. The kid who had no idea that three years later, his father got his side chick— one of his side chicks— pregnant too.

“But I didn’t have a clue,” Jamie continued. “I mean, by the time I was a teen, I knew he hadn’t been faithful to my mom all those years, all those tours, but I didn’t know he had another kid.”

“Maybe several,” I put in. “But no one else has come out of the woodwork, and with how much money Jamie makes, I bet they would.”

Jamie flinched and Val laid a hand on his arm. I was a bit sorry I’d tweaked him like that, but sometimes my feelings for Daddy Dearest overrode even my instinct to protect Jamie. *Those promo pictures didn’t show the booze or the girls or the coke, did they?* Our father had never made enough money to support two families, and a bunch of what he *had* made he put up his nose. The rest went to his real wife and kid. My mom had refused to ask him for a thing, and by the time I was seven, he’d stopped coming around even when he was in town.

To make up for mentioning Dad's failings, I said, "I wasn't gonna go to the funeral. Figured it wasn't my place. But by then I was a fan of Jamie's from a distance, and I'd mostly gotten over the rest of our father's shit. I was curious to meet Jamie. So I showed up." *In a borrowed suit.* "Went through the whole funeral, got to the reception, was just going to introduce myself as Dax, and then that shit came out of my mouth. Total stupid-ass moment."

"I bet you were more shaken by your dad's death than you thought," Tanisha said generously.

"Nah. I never knew the guy, not really. Three visits a year, max, and none since I was little. It just occurred to me that if I wanted Jamie to take my ideas for his band seriously, I needed him to listen to me, and that might be my one shot. I figured he'd make time for family that he wouldn't for a random stranger."

Watching him with his widowed mother. The way he took care of her, paid attention, steered away the people who were stressing her, like she was the center of his world that day. Val stood back, hugged him a few times, but didn't intrude with his mom. I watched what family should be like, and ached.

No, not ached, but saw a lever I could use, if I was his family too. A way to get the inside track back into music that meant something. "I'd been working as a session player in a local studio, along with some mixing shit. I'd played with Brody a few times on some folk-y stuff. I knew he'd take Corvus to a different level, if Jamie would give him a chance."

Lane looked along the aisle of the bus, as we picked up speed. "Well, however you figured it out, Brody was a stroke of genius. I've been a Corvus fan for years, and the old stuff was good basic rock, but after Brody signed on, the band definitely leveled up."

"A fan for years?" I pulled my unneeded sunglasses lower and eyed him over the top. "Like when you were in diapers?"

He colored, but sniped back, "Yeah, Grandpa. I bought you old dudes' first album with my lemonade stand money."

Jamie sighed. "Guys, guys, I don't know if I should say, 'Lay off the

kid' or 'Lay off the old dude.'”

Lane and I snapped, “Neither,” together, and Jamie laughed.

Lane asked, “So you hired a new band member, just like that, because your secret half-brother asked?”

It'd taken four months of hanging out together, sometimes jamming, while Corvus recorded an album, before I suggested Brody. Four months of nudging and suggesting and tweaking songs a little here and there, for Jamie to see me as more than a responsibility for him to take on.

Not that I'd let him *take me on*. I'd quit my job, yeah, but lived off my crappy savings and worked a bunch of coffee shop hours around Jamie's rehearsal schedule, to be nearby when it counted. I'd heard Val once, soft-voiced in the corridor of the studio, telling Jamie, “Dax's a bit creepy, the way he's always around. What do you really know about him? Are you even sure he's your half-brother?”

I'd casually offered to do a DNA test a few days later, in case she'd shaken his belief in me. He'd laughed and said no need, I had our father's eyes. Since I was wearing the green contacts I'd used for years by then, I thought he was deluded. But only in that lovely, trusting, Jamie-style deluded that was the best part of him, so I just made sure I'd always put him first.

Val told Lane, “Not right away. Dax jammed with us a bunch, to the point where Jamie tried to get him to join the band. He wouldn't, said he had a better idea for our sound than two bass guitars, and asked us to give Brody an audition. I swear, the first notes Brody blew on the panpipes on 'Distant Hills' sent a shiver down my spine.”

“You should be grateful,” I told Lane. “I coulda had your job.”

“Why didn't you, then?” His gaze turned unfriendly. “When Zeng left the band, why didn't you step in?”

Because Richard Kensington could care less about a weird guy pushing faders offstage. But he knows music, for all his doucheness, and if he heard me play bass, he'd remember me. I won't do that to Jamie. “Because I heard you audition and, much as I hate to admit it,

you're better than me. The band deserves the best." That was also the truth. I set down my guitar and got to my feet.

Lane stood too, reaching toward me. "I didn't mean—"

Bang! The bus lurched and spun. Momentum flung me into the corner of the table, then I hit the floor, but I knew how to take a fall. "Jamie!"

We shuddered to a halt, rotated around from the direction we'd been going. The power went out, leaving emergency lights flashing over the door and window exits, but plenty of daylight came in the windows.

I pushed up to my knees, shaking my head. My side ached but I ignored the pain.

"I'm okay." Jamie staggered out from his seat and bent over me. "Are you hurt?"

"Nah." Bruises. Nothing that counted. "Val? Tanisha?"

"We're fine," Val said.

A groan beside me reminded me Lane had been thrown the way I was. I turned. He lay flat on the floor face down, but he was moving in scrabbling, ineffective motions.

I planted a hand between his shoulder blades. "Stay put, kid. Let me check you out."

"Not a kid," he mumbled, which was reassuring.

Oleg, the driver, yanked open the door from the cab. "Anyone hurt? I'm so sorry. Idiot changed lanes without signaling, caught the front of the bus."

"Lane's down," Jamie said. "Someone check Brody. Oleg, how about you?"

"Bruises from the belt, tweaked my arm. I'm fine. I called 911."

Lane was still wriggling so I leaned over him and said into his ear, "Settle down! I'm not letting you up till we do this by the numbers. What's your name? Who am I?"

“Lane. You’re Dax, Jamie’s jerk of a brother. Let me up.”

“Not yet. Move your fingers, one at a time.” When he’d wriggled each hand, I said, “Now feet.” Those seemed to be working too. “Any pain in your back or neck?”

“No.”

“Any difficulty breathing?”

“Not if you get off me.”

I eased back and sat on my heels. “Head pain?”

“Whacked my forehead, maybe.” He raised his head and rolled onto one elbow.

Jamie said, “Maybe you should wait for the paramedics.”

“I did worse on the playground when I was six.”

Lane was clearly going to sit up, so I put a hand behind him till I was sure he was steady on his ass.

He rubbed his right temple, his voice shaky. “I just need some aspirin.”

“Bullshit. Sit. Stay,” I told him, keeping a fist locked in the back of his shirt.

Jamie reached out and took Lane’s chin in his fingers, turning his face to the window. A red patch over his eye was already swelling in the filtered light. “You’re getting that looked at properly.” Jamie glanced over his shoulder. “Brody?”

“I’m here, I’m good,” Brody told him from behind me. “Hell of a way to wreck my nap.”

“I’m so sorry,” Oleg repeated.

“Not your fault, dude.” Jamie turned to me. “You stick with Lane, make sure he stays put till the paramedics get here. I’m going to see what the situation is outside.”

“I don’t know if the door will open.” Oleg hit the control but nothing happened. “No power.” He stepped down to pull the manual handle,

then let out a pained grunt.

Jamie leaped his way. “Hang on. Let me do that.” He managed to wrestle the door halfway open and squeezed through. Oleg followed and Val hurried out after them.

Tanisha grumbled, “Well, this’ll fuck with the tour schedule.” She pulled out her phone and dialed. “Hey, honeygirl. You might hear about Mama’s bus being in an accident on the news. Just letting you know we’re fine, it’s minor. I didn’t even drop my coffee.” The lie was obvious in a damp splotch over her green dress, but she met my eyes and did a slow wink. “No, I’m not coming home. We’re goin’ on to play the next show as soon as we get a new bus that ain’t dented.” She gave her rich laugh. “No, you can’t get out of school tomorrow to come see me. Nice try, though. Now let me talk to your father.”

As Tanisha reassured her husband that she’d told her sixteen-year-old the truth and promised to call later, Lane, being that kind of idiot, decided to stand up. And promptly lost his lunch. Right on me.

“Fuck.” I grabbed his arm as he bent over, looking green. “Sit the hell down. I’m already wearing your lunch. Don’t want last night’s dinner added.” I eased him back to the floor.

“Sorry. Jesus, I’m sorry.” Lane leaned on his hands, breathing hard.

“Yeah? Well, next time stay put when I tell you.” I pulled off my shirt, managing not to get too much puke on me, and wiped my chest with it. *Ouch. Fuck.* I casually held the dirty shirt in front of my bruised ribs and kept my back to the wall.

Our tour manager stuck his head inside. “Hey, guys. Doesn’t look too bad but this bus isn’t going anywhere. We can load you all into the crew bus. Bring all the gear. It’ll be a bit crowded, but we’ll probably only lose an hour.”

Jamie loomed over his shoulder. “I told you, George, we’ll wait till we see what the paramedics think. Particularly about Lane.”

“He puked,” I tattled.

“Fuck.” Jamie frowned. “Lane, you stay real still and tell Dax if you feel worse. CAT scan’s in your future, for sure.”

Several sirens approached outside. Jamie said, "I'll send in the medics," and disappeared.

George lingered. "I'll call the venue, but we won't cancel yet. We have plenty of time. If everyone's all right, we can still make it."

"Don't tell us," I snapped. "Tell Jamie." Because I was pretty sure Jamie would say, "*Yeah, no, everyone's shaken up and bruised and we're not leaving Lane behind in small-town...*" I pulled out my phone to check where we were. We'd just cleared the Atlanta suburbs. Only two and a half hours to Nashville, so yeah, we had time. But I didn't like how white Lane looked, or the fact that he was actually obeying me and sitting still.

George left the doorway, and a pair of medics appeared. They wrestled the damaged door wider open, then came inside. I backed off to give them space next to Lane, my side twinging as I stood, still holding the dirty shirt strategically to hide my chest.

Brody and Tanisha began gathering some of their things. I noticed Tanisha was wincing when she moved, especially when reaching with her right arm, and I caught her wrist to check. She gave me raised eyebrows but didn't pull free. Her mahogany skin tones made bruising harder to see, but I made out a fat purple-red welt swelling along the outside of her forearm.

"Ouch. You might want an X-ray, make sure nothing's broken."

One of the paramedics looked up from where they were running through a concussion protocol with Lane and came over. "Let me see."

Tanisha held out her arm. "Hit the edge of the table. It's just bruised. Snowboy here's a worrywart."

Only Tanisha got to call me that. Folks assumed it was for my bleached-white hair, but she and I knew she'd found a stash of my favorite snacks one time. A reason I now bought and ate them on the fly, so no one less trustworthy would know. I stuck my tongue out at her to make her grin.

The paramedic pressed and felt her arm, and had her move her fingers. "Can't promise it's not broken without rads," he said, "but

there's a good chance it's just deep muscle bruising. Try ice, rest, elevation. Get an X-ray if it's not feeling better."

"And no drumming tonight," I told her. "George can shove a drumstick up his—" I cut myself off and smiled as the man himself stuck his head back in the bus. I thought George pushed Jamie too hard, especially on all the promo shit, and he thought I was an ego-drunk sound tech who used nepotism to land a cushy role with the band. We loathed each other, but I tried not to antagonize him, for Jamie's sake.

Tanisha patted me on the head with her good hand. "I can take care of myself."

I batted her arm aside, very gently, and sucked a breath as that pulled my side. *Fuck*. But I had long practice hiding pain. I grinned back at her. "Watch the hair. Takes me an hour to get it perfect."

George asked the paramedics, "Is everyone all right? Can we start clearing the bus."

The paramedic who'd assessed Tanisha turned to Brody and me. "Anything I should check?"

We both shook our heads.

He told George, "We're taking Lane in for some imaging. You don't want to take a chance on head injuries."

George looked sour but backed out of the doorway. Lane's paramedic asked the other one, "Carry chair? If we can get it through that broken door."

"Hey," Lane said. "I can walk."

"Yeah," I put in. "But can you not puke while you do it?"

Tanisha had been watching out the window and she said, "If he goes out under his own power, there's gonna be a lot less hysterical stories on the news. Folks are parking on the shoulder across the way, cell phones out. This bus isn't exactly anonymous."

She had a point. Anyone driving by would see the full wrap, band name and logo with music notes turning into crows rising in the dawn

light. “*Corvus Rising bus got smooshed*” would be going up on a lot of folks’ Twitter-X-whatever and Instagram about now.

“I’m fine. Just a headache.” Lane pushed up to one knee.

“All right, sir,” the taller paramedic said. “I’m gonna put an arm around you and we’ll try a few steps. My partner’s goin’ in front of us. Let us know if you get dizzy.” He wrapped his arm around Lane’s waist.

I watched closely as Lane made it to his feet. He swayed but looked less green than the last time. The paramedics guided him out of the lounge area and down the bus steps. One went outside first, and between them, they eased him past the damaged door.

Once he was out, I took a breath— was gonna take a deep one, but *fuck no, bad idea*. I tossed the puke shirt out of the way in a corner, my other elbow clamped to my side. Hopefully someone would wash the shirt for me. My guitar lay under the table and I scooped it up, wincing with the bending. Couldn’t see any major damage. There was a scratch on the soundboard and the first string had snapped, but it could’ve been much worse. Carrying the guitar vertically by the neck, I got us both through the door gap and out into the fresh air. Or the hot armpit-of-Satan air, anyhow.

Our bus had come to rest on the shoulder of the highway, facing back to Atlanta. The right front fender was a mess, and in the ditch, I saw a big rental truck, its hood up and warped, front door open wide. Our crew bus had parked behind us, and the ambulance in front. Two cop cars, lights flashing, guarded the bus’s butt where it stuck out into one lane, and the cops in question were out there directing traffic. They were moving along the would-be looky-loos on our side, but across the grass median, folks had pulled over on the other shoulder to gawk and take pictures.

I checked for Jamie, standing talking to George, looking pissed but healthy. Val was fanning herself with a piece of paper and gorgeous as ever, despite strands of hair glued to her damp forehead. *Lane?* I saw the paramedics were easing him into the back of the ambulance. *Good. Taken care of.*

I went over to stand by Jamie, holding my guitar in front of the worst of my bruising and the marks I didn't want seen. *Should've grabbed a fresh shirt.*

George said, as if continuing an argument, "You keep telling me Dax is a great bassist. Why can't we stick him in for Lane tonight? You put his name on half your songs. He must know how to play them."

Jamie opened his mouth to reply when George decided to deliver his approval of me as substitute-bassist with a solid thump to my back. On the same side as whatever I'd done to my ribs when I fell. I wasn't braced for the blow, and couldn't hold back a gasp, almost dropping my guitar and grabbing my side.

Jamie clutched my arm. "You said you weren't hurt."

"Some bruises." I tried to pull free, but taking off my pukey shirt had left my secrets exposed. Looking down, I could see the whole left side of my ribcage was turning a nice deep purple with redder bits in the center.

Jamie could see it too. "Fuck." He grabbed hold of my free wrist, dragging me toward the ambulance.

"Cut it out." I tried to put on the brakes, but Jamie had fifty pounds on me and wasn't stopping. Resisting hurt too fucking much anyway.

They had Lane on the stretcher but turned our way as we arrived.

"You need to take this bozo in, too," Jamie said. "Look at his ribs."

The paramedic I'd talked to gave a low whistle. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Didn't feel it," I lied. "Adrenaline."

"We're a small clinic. It'll be a while for another ambulance. Our second unit was transporting that truck driver."

"How was he?" Jamie asked.

"Still alive's all I can tell you." The paramedic eyed me. "We can take you on the bench seat if you two don't mind sharing medical info in front of each other?" He turned to Lane.

“Hell, no, I don’t mind.” Lane gestured with a hand. “Get him in here. We’re not leaving him behind.”

“Right.” The paramedic climbed out. “Let me help you, sir.” His partner joined us, reaching for me, which was way overkill.

Since I apparently had no say, I thrust my Gibson at Jamie. “Here. Guard it with your life. You don’t want to know what’ll happen if I find a scratch on it.”

Jamie took the guitar and started to promise, “Of course—” Then blinked down at the soundboard. “Wait, there’s already a scratch.”

“Sucks to be you.” I turned back to the paramedics. “Where do you want me?”

They eased me up into the back with practiced moves. The older guy said, “You think you can sit on the bench seat? Otherwise we can lay you down with a backboard.”

Sitting wasn’t going to be my favorite position for a while, but I shrugged my good shoulder. “Sitting’s fine.”

Jamie called up to us, “I’ll come see you as soon as things are settled.”

“Yeah, go smile for the paps,” I told him.

When he was a few yards off, the younger paramedic whistled. “Crow of Corvus Rising. Guess you really do never know who-all you’re gonna meet on the job.”

I gestured at Lane. “He’s in the band too. What is he? Chopped liver?”

“Nah. But he’s a patient so we’re not allowed to be starstruck. Who’re you?”

“Just tech support,” I told him.

The older guy nudged his partner. “Go drive, and take it easy. No one’s dying, right? Let’s keep it that way.”

The young guy laughed, shut the doors, and headed up front. I heard his door slam and the engine start.

The other guy got me strapped in on a seat, clipped an oxygen meter on my finger, then turned back to Lane as we began to pull out, siren wailing overhead. “Right. Name, birthdate, insurance.”

Lane stumbled on the insurance, but I knew the answer to that one since the label paid for it. The paramedic went through medical history, allergies, medications. I could see why he’d asked if we were comfortable. Lane had no allergies. When it came to meds, he named his by brand, not looking my way.

So the kid was on PrEP. That just meant he was smart. When the paramedic turned to me with the same questions, I ended with, “Allergic to cepha antibiotics.” *And wasn’t that fun to discover, the first time I got the clap. “Just one shot will fix you right up.” Uh huh. And then give you three days of steroids and Benadryl and a face that looks like the worst sunburn ever.*

I’d snuck out of that hospital. The ID I’d used had been fake anyhow, and there was no way in hell I had so much as a dollar extra to pay them. Somewhere in New York some collection agency had a deadbeat entry for Shane Samuels. Well, I’d never actually been Shane, and I’d made it as right as I could later.

“And PrEP,” I added, my eyes on Lane. Might be overkill in my case, since unlike the kid, I wasn’t fucking anyone right now, but after years of walking that knife-edge of risk, I wasn’t taking any chances. Lane didn’t look at me, but I thought he relaxed a little.

The paramedic continued with, “Any chronic health conditions?”

“Healthy as a horse,” I told him.

“Let me check those ribs.” He tilted a bright overhead light to shine on my side and touched the bad spot with careful fingers.

I sucked air but held still.

“Might just be deep bruising,” he said. “Might be a nondisplaced fracture. I don’t feel anything moving.”

I figured he was right. I’d had broken ribs twice, and the bad time, I couldn’t breathe without wanting to scream. This was nothing by comparison.

“They’ll get some X-rays to make sure.” He glanced at a readout. “Pulse Ox says you’re breathing well. That’s the main thing.” His fingers slid farther toward my back, then paused. “Got some scars here.”

“I’ve had an interesting life,” I told him.

“Right.” He moved over to Lane. “Time for another neuro check. Bright light in one, two, three.” He shone his penlight into Lane’s eyes.

“Ouch.” Lane flinched.

“Well, your pupils are nice and equal, doing the right things. You’re really some kind of rock star?”

“They played to sixteen thousand people last night,” I told him, so Lane wouldn’t sound like he was boasting. “Ask that guy driving.” The ambulance swayed and I braced a hand on the seat. “Maybe after he gets us to the hospital without crashing again.”

The guy chuckled and reached for a radio mic. “Medic unit two,” he said into it. “Inbound from an MVA with two PTs. Patient one, male, twenty-two, head trauma, lucid, pupils equal, reactive, pulse seventy-one, respirations twenty-four...”

I closed my eyes, tried to sway with the ambulance instead of fighting the motion, and listened to the paramedic tell someone on the other end of the line in med-speak that Lane was stable, and doing all right.

Chapter 4

Lane

I stared down at my phone, squinting because my head hurt. I'd texted Richard ten minutes ago, figuring he might hear about the crash and worry. *~You might hear the bus was in an accident. I'm OK, waiting for CT scan, sure it'll be fine.*

So far, Richard hadn't replied.

Dax sat in the soft chair at my side in the hospital ER cubby, while I had the lounge-bed thing. He'd asked for a gown right off, to replace the shirt I'd wrecked, but he'd put it on open in front, giving me a distracting view of his smooth chest and abs. He wasn't ripped, but he had a little definition going on. More than I'd have expected, never having seen him working out. I realized that despite being a month into the tour, sharing bus space and hotels, I'd also never seen him without some kind of shirt on. *He's hotter than I realized.*

He had his phone out, browsing, so I could look without feeling awkward. *He's also gay. Or bi. Probably.* Being on PrEP didn't mean for sure he fucked guys, but it was a pretty strong clue. Not that I should care, but Dax was a mystery, one that I realized I wanted to understand.

I'd never seen him with a date, not once, even back when we were rehearsing in L.A. On the other hand, I knew perfectly well how possible it was to slip out and do something on the sly with no one knowing. And not just Richard, but my hidden joy. Which reminded me, I should text them, because while we might be celebrities, with nurses peeking in to "see if we're doing okay" at five-minute intervals, that didn't mean we were getting express-speed service.

I dug through my contacts and pulled up the one I wanted. For a moment, I hesitated, because *damn* I'd waited two weeks for this rare opportunity, and I *needed* it. Except my face hurt, my head hurt, and the thought of belting out a song made my brain throb.

I texted, *~This is Ms. Fox. So sorry, I'm not going to make it tonight. Car accident. Minor concussion. Can't sing. Can I contact you next time I come out this way?* I took a quick selfie and sent a closeup of just my bruised forehead.

Holding my breath, I waited for an answer. *That has to look painful enough, right?* I'd been lucky to get this chance and it sucked so bad to have to miss it.

My phone pinged back, *~Ouch, girl, that looks nasty. Yeah, touch base next time you're in town.*

I let out a sigh of relief. Hadn't burned that bridge.

Dax said, "Your boyfriend suitably sympathetic?"

"Just a friend." My relief deflated as I realized I didn't have any answer from Richard. *Should I send him the forehead picture?* But I wasn't that pathetic. I texted my mom instead, playing things down.

She immediately offered to fly out, sent a list of a dozen headache remedies, and demanded I call her when I had a chance. Along with a bunch of hugs.

Kind of what I wished Richard would do. I knew better, though. That wasn't who we were, and he was a busy man, and it wasn't as if I was dying.

I got a text from him at last. *~I'm at the airport. Feel better soon. See you in a couple of weeks.*

Huh.

Maybe if I'd said I broke my ass, he'd care. Except part of me knew he'd just say, "Tell me when you're back in service so I can adjust my schedule." We weren't boyfriends, no matter how much I liked to use the label. I was a convenient fuck buddy for Richard. My head throbbed and my eyes watered from the strain of the small screen. I

stuck the phone back into my pocket.

Dax got up and turned off the overhead light. I hadn't realized how much it'd bothered my eyes until the dimness came as a cool relief. "Thanks."

"You looked painful. I've had a concussion."

"Really?" I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. The pain retreated a little. "What happened?"

"Meh. Tripped and fell. Nothing that makes me sound clever or graceful." He hummed a note. "The bus accident's out on social media. Some great pictures of Jamie looking angry and Val looking gorgeous on Instagram. That truck's cab got pretty munged. I wonder if the driver's gonna make it." He sounded more casually curious than worried.

"Jesus, I hope so!"

"Change lanes without looking, get a stupidity prize." I heard him shift on the vinyl chair. "He's lucky we didn't end up damaged worse or the label would sue him for lost revenues. Hell, they still might, for the concert we'll miss."

"Would they do that?"

Dax scoffed. "You have met the record execs, right? Money's their god."

They're not all that bad. Richard spent money on me sometimes, and never asked for a dime, even though by now I might be making more than he was. Although maybe not, since his last promotion. Still, Dax had been in the business a lot longer than I had. He'd probably seen the ugly side, while I was still high on being signed to a band as incredible as Corvus Rising. "I guess."

"I hope the driver has great insurance."

I heard a noise, then a woman asked, "Why's the light out in here?"

Dax's voice answered, "He's got a possible concussion and your CT folks are off with their thumbs up their asses. I figured you didn't want him screaming in pain before you got round to him."

I flinched, because the nurses were just doing their jobs, as fast as they could. Mom was a nurse, and I knew how stacked up the ER could get. “Sorry,” I said, opening my eyes to squint at her. “He’s just impatient.”

She came over beside me to check the readouts on the screen over my head. At the touch of a button, the blood pressure cuff on my arm inflated, then deflated. “Well, you seem pretty stable. I’m sure the imaging tech will be here for you soon. I’ll leave the light off for now.” She hesitated, then pulled a note pad out of her scrub pocket. “My sister’s a big fan. Would you mind...?”

“Signing something? Absolutely, my pleasure.” Being asked for an autograph wasn’t the total thrill it’d been a few months ago, but it wasn’t old hat either. I took her pen and pad. “Made out to whom?”

“Um. Anita?”

“Your... sister?” I pointed at her “Anita” name tag with the pen.

“Okay, no, it’s me, but we’re not supposed to.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell.” I wrote, “*To Anita, who saved my sanity by keeping me in the dark. Lane Bennett, Corvus Rising,*” and added the little stylized flying bird that the label had suggested as part of my signature. “Secret message, but we’ll both know what it means.”

She smiled widely as she tucked the pad into her pocket. “Thanks! You guys are awesome! I’ll go see what’s keeping imaging.”

When she’d hurried out, I rolled my head enough to see Dax. “See. You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.”

“That assumes you want flies. In which case, shit would work even better.”

“Who pissed in your cereal?”

“You like lying around here in pain, waiting for people to bother to take care of you?” He waved a hand before I could answer, grunting as he cut the gesture short. “Forget it. I hate hospitals is all.”

“You don’t have to stay with me.”

“I’m not staying with you. It might’ve escaped your concussed brain, but I’m waiting for an X-ray myself.”

It hadn’t escaped me that, when they tried to put him in a separate cubicle with a lounge to stretch out his sore ribs, he’d refused and insisted on sticking in that chair with me. I decided not to mention it. “Do you think you broke anything?”

“Cracked at worst, and I hope not even, because that shit takes six fucking weeks to heal. I have gear to haul around. I don’t have time for that.”

“The roadies would help if you need it.” I was used to seeing him carrying and setting up his mixing console and gear racks, but that was what roadies were for.

“Eh. I’ll be fine.” Dax shifted in his seat again. “I wonder how Jamie’s making out. And I want to get out of here and see how badly my Gibson got fucked up. That guitar’s been through a lot with me.”

Yeah, it’s the guitar you’re worried about.

Kevin’s familiar face poked round the door curtain. “Hey, Lane, Dax, you guys doing okay in here?”

“Hey, hi.” I waved the bodyguard in. “I’m impressed they let you come on back.”

“I loomed over them a bit.” He slipped through the door. “You’re the biggest name they’ve seen here in years. I suggested they might be grateful for my help, since the paps are starting to gather out front.”

“Well, fuck,” Dax grumbled. “I hoped we’d be out of here first.”

“Not likely,” Kevin told him. “Lots of fuzzy pictures of Lane getting helped into an ambulance. Fans are worried. Paps are thrilled.”

“Of course they are.” Dax sat up straighter with a grunt as a nurse came in pushing a wheelchair.

“Dax Crow for X-rays?”

“That’s me, but I can walk just fine.”

“It’s procedure.” She looked up as he stood. “If you get dizzy and fall,

you'd squash me, goin' down."

He smiled at her, a flirty expression he occasionally used in public. "You're far too pretty to squish. At least, accidentally." He eased himself into the chair and added to Kevin, "You keep an eye on pretty-boy there. Make sure they treat him right and he doesn't do anything stupid."

When the nurse had rolled Dax out and down the ward, Kevin asked, "You need anything?"

A bowl full of ibuprofen and a dragon to eat the dwarves hammering on my skull? "No, I'm good, just waiting for a CT scan. Is everyone else really all right?"

"Just some bruises. Filipe's there if they need him, but they're going to a hotel to freshen up and wait for a new bus. You and Dax are the two most exposed right now. Mostly you, because the paps don't really care about Dax."

Was that good for me, or good for him? My fuzzy brain couldn't decide. But having Kevin around always made me feel safer. "Thanks for coming."

"It is my job. I'll stand outside your room here, keep an eye open."

"Thanks."

When Kevin had slipped back out and the curtain dropped into place, I closed my eyes. It should've felt more restful to lie here alone, no noise, no fidgeting, no Dax muttering about the slow service. Instead, I missed the distraction. My phone pinged now and then, and I squinted at the bright screen, but other than sending back a reassuring message to Jamie, I didn't bother to answer anyone yet. The couple of friends I'd left back home could wait, and the unknown numbers were probably reporters.

It occurred to me that Dax hadn't texted anyone. No parent, no friend, no boyfriend. Maybe he was just biding his time. Or maybe he didn't have any of those around. I'd spent a month in tight quarters with the man and I was coming to realize that I knew nothing about him at all.

Dax

The Kansas City venue we played a week out from Atlanta was one of the weirdest I'd set up in. The stage was cramped and stuck out at an odd angle into the audience, which meant I'd placed my mixing console and transponder racks behind the stage, not to one side. There was a booth for the front-of-house tech, but it was high in the air at the far end of the arena, and I'd needed to be in close to my people. Crow and Hawk both loved to improv and go off the plan onstage, and we had hand signals for that. One of the things fans liked about Corvus was that they'd mix up the set order on a tour and sometimes add a solo or pull one. Every show was different.

Not randomly, of course. Since we'd added a lot of backing tracks and instrumental voices to the Corvus sound, most of each performance was tightly scripted. But Jamie left a few slots where he could go with the evening's flow. I loved that he trusted me to mix it right, to emphasize the appropriate mic for a solo the second he signaled for one, to add the reverb or delay that made a chorus sound different, if he went for a repeat. It was almost like jamming onstage myself, except I was the master who decided how the whole thing sounded.

And tonight, Corvus Rising had *rocked*.

Crow and Hawk, voices battling, then entwined, then chasing each other through the songs; Brody coaxing the most out of each instrument he played; Lane, putting his full soul into his bass for the first time since he'd gone onstage at the Nashville replacement show two days after the crash wearing dark glasses with his in-ears dialed way down. Lane hadn't had a concussion, but the headaches had clearly been fierce.

It'd been good— for the sake of the band— to see him smiling and putting everything into a performance tonight. Three encores, pushing eleven p.m., and the audience still hadn't wanted to let them go. Even

now, a bunch of fans lingered in the seats, like they didn't want the night to end.

I grunted as I hefted my biggest console onto the wheeled rack. *Fuck. Ouch.* A week hadn't been enough to heal my bruised ribs, though they were better. *Just bruised, not broken, luckily.* I'd gone back to handling my own shit without the roadies or arena staff tonight, but maybe I could've waited another show or two. I rolled the console along the corridor to the loading bay, where our tech support bus stood waiting. Darius, our guitar tech, slapped me lightly on the back as I got done stowing my board away. "Hell of a show. Band's never sounded better."

"That's on Crow," I muttered. "I just mix the shit."

"Yeah, tell that to someone who doesn't know what the raw sound is like."

I shrugged. Okay, I knew my contribution wasn't nothing. I worked hard to make Jamie never regret the day he'd said, "Hey, you know some music. Want to jam with my band, just for laughs?" But I preferred invisibility.

On my next trip, carrying just the stand, I spotted a figure in a dark hoodie with a duffel bag over their shoulder, slipping through the hallway ahead of me toward the loading bay. Something furtive about their movements made me suspicious. *A thief? Someone looking to get close to Jamie?*

I picked up the pace, but when I reached the bus, I couldn't see them. I set the stand on the pavement and called, "Hey, Darius, you seen any strangers lurking about?"

He stuck his head out the door. "Nah, man. Problem?"

Over by the chain link fence, a flicker of movement told me where my suspect had gone. "No, hopefully not. Hey, can you guys catch the rest of my stuff?"

"Sure. Ribs sore?"

"Not bad. I want a walk, though."

He gave me a wave and I set out across the pavement, glad I'd worn my usual dark stage-side clothes. Nothing much I could do about my white hair in the parking lot lights, but the figure ahead of me didn't seem to be looking back.

The parking area had security, and a young woman staffed the booth at the gate. I saw the guy with the bag slow, talk to her, then head on out to the sidewalk and turn left. I jogged a bit to catch up.

"Hey," the gate guard said. "Hold up."

I showed her my badge. "Just walking to the hotel. It's too nice out to get back on a bus."

"Not so nice you can't get mugged," she told me. "Be careful."

"Who was the guy ahead of me?"

"Him? Don't know. He had a badge too." She eyed me. "Problem?"

"Hopefully not. Thought it might be a guy I work with." I gave her a nonchalant wave and hurried on.

I figured the guy would get in a car or call for a ride, but he just walked quickly, his shoulders a little crooked from the size of the bag he was carrying. Something about his build and stride rang bells for me. *Lane? Surely not.* There was no afterparty scheduled, but the band would be headed back to the hotel to crash after the drain of a performance like that.

Still, the farther we went, the more certain I became.

Which meant I had no business following him. Except he could get mugged out here too. He was smaller than me and a whole lot less mean. Anything that happened to Lane affected Jamie and the band.

Sure, that's why you're following him. Admit it. You're curious.

Maybe he was meeting the secret boyfriend. I had a hate going on for that guy, though on very thin evidence, mostly a few expressions that'd flitted across Lane's face in the past week. Well, and him ditching Lane in the bus post-fuck without a backward look. Which would've been fine if all they were doing was scratching an itch, but nothing about Lane suggested casual was his thing. You don't text a

fuck buddy first from the hospital. You also don't look like your puppy died when they text you back. Lane should never fucking play poker.

We crossed a busy street, heading into downtown, and reached a club ringed in rainbow neon. Lane hefted his bag and headed for the front. The doorman spoke to him briefly, then Lane went inside.

So maybe it was a date. A night out at a gay bar with his BF. Or maybe I'd underestimated Lane, and he was picking up someone else for a quick fuck. Although, unless he was planning on murdering and dismembering the guy afterward, I wasn't sure what the big bag was for. I counted to five, then headed to the door myself.

The doorman gave me a quick up and down check, brow furrowed. I pursed my lips and fluttered my eyelashes at him, and he laughed. "Right. In you go. Forty-dollar cover tonight. You're just in time. Gonna be a good show." He held out his hand.

That was fucking high for a cover, but I had the money and he'd said, "*Show*," so I passed over a couple of bills and he held the door for me.

The AC hit me like an ice cube to the face after the humid night. I shivered and looked around. The bar was already dark, although the stage that ran along the back had a set of rainbow gels running lights around the floor. The place was crowded, and I couldn't spot Lane with his dark hair and dark clothes anywhere. I picked a seat back by the door and ordered a Sidecar. I got a slow blink from the server, a young man in booty shorts and a tuxedo shirtfront that left his slim arms bare.

I gave him a narrow, hard stare, and he seemed to remember he was in the drinks delivery business and the bartender could worry about the mixing. "Ten for a cocktail. Coming right up."

Before my drink arrived, a spotlight hit the stage. The stunning, blond-wigged queen who strolled out, hips swaying in a white satin gown and silver boa, was greeted with whistles and applause. She held a mic to her red lips and purred, "Thank you, my children. Welcome to The Palace. Tonight, we have some new ladies for you to meet. Treat them the way you would me." She lowered her tone. "Meaning, if you

throw tomatoes, don't mess up the wigs.”

The crowd laughed. Someone yelled, “What if we throw underwear?”

“Off your skinny ass? Gonna be invisible. Better borrow from that hot guy next to you.”

The man sitting next to the joker gave him a shove and he had to clutch at the table.

“Anyhow, we have a great lineup. Enjoy, and drink up, 'cause Mama needs the money. Now, first lady of the night— did I say that? Oh, dear. Put your sweaty palms together for Miss No ReGretta!” She waved a hand toward the wings and swept off, trailing boa feathers. The spotlight followed her till she vanished, then swung back to the drag queen coming out toward the stage-front to a burst of applause.

She was shorter than Mama, but still on the imposing side. Ample curves spilled out of the top of her low-cut red dress, and the height of her blond wig, coupled with four-inch heels, made her plenty tall. A stage tech scurried out to place a mic in a stand for her, and she patted his ass as he went by.

“A girl could get used to being waited on by that tasty tidbit.” She leaned close to the mic. “Good evening, Kansas City.”

I watched as she ran through a quick patter that got her a few laughs, then launched into a lip-synched stripped-down version of Christina's “Candyman.” The lady had some moves, and the hot young thing she called up from the floor to jive with her had to be a plant, with the way he used his hips. They finished triumphantly and I applauded, almost forgetting why I was there. It'd been years since I'd come to a drag show, and as she bantered her way into the next number, I couldn't remember what kept me away. She finished her set with “Work Bitch” by Britney, and got some well-deserved whistles and cheers mixed in the applause.

The Sidecar the server brought had triple-sec instead of Cointreau, but it wasn't bad. The kid ran off before I could tip him, and I was a bit sorry for making him nervous. But not a lot. That cute ass probably got him lots of tips.

I kept an eye on the folks coming and going, in case I saw Lane, but I wasn't giving my surveillance much effort. If a young gay man wanted to enjoy a night at a drag show without the paparazzi all up in his business, it was no affair of mine either.

The second queen wasn't as polished, but she did a good job with a Cher persona that let her work a cooler style. She ended with "If I Could Turn Back Time" and got a solid send-off from the audience.

Then the third lady sashayed out onto the stage, and by her second step, the big duffel bag I'd seen made sense. Lane, in her drag persona, wore a straight red wig down to her thighs, black elbow gloves, and a slinky, black Audrey Hepburn dress slashed up past one hip. Her crimson heels had to be six inches high, and the flashes of leg as she walked showed silver tights around shapely calves. Her makeup was dramatic but not overdone. From my back table, I couldn't make out the bruise I knew still shaded around her left eye. She stalked onto the stage, moving like flowing water, smoothed her hair back over her shoulders, and purred into the mic, "Hellllloo, Kansas."

The guys around me hooted and whistled.

"I'm Ms. Anastasia Fox, and I'm going to sing 'Toxic Boomerang' for you." She cast a smoldering look around the room without stopping on me. I'd bet the stage lighting made the audience a blur. Then she lifted the mic out of the stand, held it in front of her crimson lips, and began.

I had no idea Lane had that voice, and I didn't recognize the song, which was remarkable since I pride myself on my memory. The tune was low and sultry, almost jazz but with more kick. Ms. Fox owned every word of that ode to bad love, to the man you keep letting come back even when you know he's using you, because it's better than being alone. She alternated a smooth middle register and a falsetto that had a true tone and a breathy quality. When she was done, head bowed, hair falling around her face, I found myself pounding on the table.

Ms. Fox looked up, tossed her long hair, and smiled. "Thanks, boys. Here's something happier. What girl doesn't dream of 'Sweet Revenge'?" She gestured for the music to begin. This wasn't the John

Prine song, but a litany of broken daydreams, dark and seductive. There was a moment of silence when she finished, then wild applause.

“Last one for the road,” she said. “Something you all know this time.” She launched into Heart’s “Alone.” She’d slowed the tempo and transposed the chorus down enough to get some power into it, and I saw most of the audience mouthing along. When she was done, she blew some kisses, gave an elegant wave, and sashayed off, working her hips and pert rear end. The black curtain swung behind her.

Another drag queen in a Britney Spears blond wig and suntan appeared in her place, but I pushed to my feet. Finding the server and stuffing a twenty into his front pocket took a couple of minutes. Then I made my way out, the strains of “Toxic” following me to the street.

Where’s he likely to be? Lane would need some time to get his makeup and wig off, and pack away his things. Eventually, he’d come out to the street to get a ride to the hotel— *What the fuck am I doing?*

I wanted to tell him how great he was as Ms. Fox. That meant admitting I’d followed him here, like some kind of creepy stalker. If he’d wanted any of us to know about the drag, he’d had loads of time to tell us. Which meant this was a secret he wanted to keep.

Is there any way this could hurt Jamie?

Maybe. If Lane’s alter-ego was splashed across the media, some fans would get pissed. Drag was taking nasty hits from the “Little girls should twerk in toddler pageants, not be read to by queens” brigade. But if I hadn’t seen Lane go inside, would I have recognized him? I couldn’t say for sure. Ms. Fox didn’t move like Lane, or sing like him. I like to think I’m more observant than most, but she was her own person.

Now, if it were me keeping this secret, I’d come and go to the venue in drag. Stop and change somewhere else. If I was as recognizable as Lane, I wouldn’t trust the other queens as far as I could throw them. Like on the street, the other boys might be your friends, and be in your same boat. Didn’t mean they wouldn’t sell you out for a baggie of pills, or some imaginary insult, or nothing at all if they were high enough.

But the queens were Lane’s problem. I didn’t want to be another

one. I pulled out my phone and started walking down the block with my back to The Palace. I'd get an Uber to the hotel and let Lane make his own way back. And I'd keep a bit closer watch from now on. Mostly so Jamie didn't get blindsided, but I wouldn't mind seeing Ms. Fox perform again sometime.

Chapter 5

Lane

We staggered into our hotel in Phoenix after another pull-out-the-stops performance. Jamie's hair still hung damp around his face, and Val's glittery copper dress clung to her thighs. Kevin and Filipe walked between us and the few guests in the hotel lobby.

"Woo-oooh." Jamie grinned and danced a few rough steps as we headed for the elevators. "We left it *all* on the stage, boys and girls. Party's in my room. Not ready to come down yet."

We piled onboard. As the doors were about to close, I saw someone stand up from a lounge chair in the lobby. *Richard*. He cocked a finger at me, then pointed upward. At the same moment, Dax grabbed my elbow, pulling me around to face him, between him and the closing doors. I glanced out over my shoulder too late to even nod to Richard.

"Hey, what was that?" I pulled my arm free of Dax's grip.

"Sorry. Lost my balance." He met my eyes for a second, then looked away.

There was something different about the way Dax watched me lately. Maybe since the accident, although I hadn't noticed at first. Definitely since Kansas City. It felt like he was peering under my skin and trying to figure me out. I wasn't sure I liked the sensation, but his close attention intrigued me. Tonight was different, though. If anything, I'd have called his expression haunted.

"You okay, dude?" I murmured.

"Huh? Yeah. Thought I saw someone I knew long ago, but it wasn't him." He gave me a grin that didn't quite work. "And now it's party

time.”

Brody said, “I got the most excellent weed and I’m happy to share.”

“Hell, yeah.” Tanisha grinned.

“I had them stock my suite,” Jamie said. “Bring whatever.”

The elevator sprung open on our floor. Val stepped out first, hauling Jamie close by the front of his shirt. “Don’t get stupid, don’t get busted, and drink some fucking water.” She laid a wet kiss on him. “See you in the morning.” Whirling on a sneakered heel, since she’d taken her high heels off the second she hit the wings, Val marched off down the hall.

Jamie called after her, “Sweet dreams, love. Don’t do anyone I wouldn’t do.”

She waved without turning. “Not cutting my choices by much.” Tapping her card on a reader, she let herself into her room.

“What was that about?” I asked Dax.

“Once in a while, Jamie likes to cut loose. Val grew up with druggie parents. She’s okay with booze but doesn’t like to be around us when we get high.” To my surprise, he tucked his arm through mine. “I, however, can’t wait to see you wasted. Come on.”

I glanced back toward my room as Dax pulled me the other direction toward Jamie’s suite. Richard was here, and if I knew anything, that gesture of his had meant “Wait for me in your room.” I hadn’t seen him, had barely heard from him, in two weeks. I was more than ready to get laid, but part of me was also pissed off.

I didn’t expect him to be all romantic, but was it too much for him to at least have *asked* how my CT scan had gone? To inquire how I was doing on stage after a head injury? To even bother to tell me he’d be here, at this hotel tonight, instead of showing up and expecting me to be available?

What if I’d had a drag show lined up?

I didn’t. Timing those was hard when we rarely spent more than a day in most cities, and I needed a show that’d let an amateur take the

stage. Most places had an occasional talent night, and my audition video usually got me in, but finding ones that fit with the tour timing took an act of God. I'd managed three shows in the last two months, one of which I'd had to bow out of after the accident.

Would I have ditched a show for Richard? The answer to that was a resounding no. *So why should I run and wait for him now, just because he pointed a finger? If he wants a piece of my ass, he can wait.*

I wouldn't stay at Jamie's party long. Just enough to prove I liked hanging out with my bandmates. Enough that Richard would know I didn't always jump when he told me to.

Sure enough, my phone pinged with a text. I took a peek. Richard. *~I'll be up there in 30 min. Want you naked and...* I didn't click on it. He couldn't prove I'd seen it. I turned off my phone.

Jamie had scored a great suite— perks of being the star, I guess, plus the label would know Val often shared with him. Someone had set out food and booze on the table, and we made short work of grabbing some. I took a beer, because I'm not much of a drinker, and a big plate of nachos, and retreated to one of the loveseats.

To my surprise, Dax followed me, although he sat on the floor with his back to the seat beside my knees. He raised a glass of something amber. "To one fucking awesome show."

"Hear, hear." Jamie tossed back a full glass in one long chug, his throat rippling. He coughed. "Damn, that burns." He held the glass out to Brody who refilled it.

"Smokes, folks?" Brody took a metal case out of his pocket and held up a joint.

Tanisha took the first one he lit, sucking in the smoke and then blowing it out in a long stream. She picked up a brew and found an easy chair with a table next to it, stretching out her legs. Brody lit another.

Dax waved a hand without getting up. "What the hell, yeah. Been forever. Send one my way."

Jamie took the joint from Brody and passed it down to Dax, but said, “Not for me. Throat’s too dry.”

“More for the rest of us.” Brody lit his own and took a slow drag. “Ahhh. Good stuff.”

Dax tipped his head back and blew a smoke ring. “You and Val were on fire tonight, Crow. Flying.”

Jamie dropped into the other loveseat and toasted us with his glass. “This fucking tour gets better every week. Can’t believe there’s just three weeks left.”

Tanisha sipped her beer. “Won’t mind seeing my kid and my husband, but it’s been a good one. Other than the smooshed bus.”

“The temporary one’s okay,” I put in. In a way, I liked the replacement. No echoes of guilt when I looked at the star suite, because it didn’t have one. Jamie and Val were roughing it in bunks like the rest of us, till our regular bus got fixed.

“How’s your head doing?” Jamie asked.

“Fine.” Which was the truth, mostly. I still got the occasional headache, sometimes triggered by bright lights, which had me wearing shades onstage even though it made me feel pretentious. By now, what bugged me most was the lingering purple, green, and yellow bruising over half my face. People still stared when I walked by. Makeup was fine onstage, but I didn’t like to wear it in the daytime. “It’s been almost two weeks. I’m good.”

“The kid’s tough,” Dax drawled, taking a long hit. “Pass me an ashtray, somebody.”

I didn’t see any, but I got up and passed him a saucer from the food layout. I handed down a plate of his own nachos too, because they were cooling and greasy and somehow awesome. “You should eat. You’re too skinny.”

He chuckled. “Pot calling the kettle hot, there, Junior.”

“I’m not a kid.” I dropped to my seat and stuffed my mouth with chips, because see what you get for doing someone a favor?

Dax patted my ankle with the pinky of his hand holding the drink. “Nah. Just winding you up.”

“He does that.” Jamie stretched out his legs, rotating his feet. He was working his way through the second glass of whatever he was drinking. “Pushes people to see what happens. Did that to me when we first met.”

“I beg your pardon?” Dax raised an eyebrow. “I’ll have you know I was a perfect gentleman at my sperm donor’s funeral.”

“I was thinking about the next time.”

“You asked me what I thought of your music. I told you I liked it.”

“And then told me the dozen ways it wasn’t as good as it should be.”

“I told you a dozen ways to make it better.” Dax alternated a sip of his drink and a toke. “Perspective, dude. It’s everything.”

“My perspective is here’s this little shit of a brother I never knew I had, telling a professional musician with a label and a tour how to run his business.”

“Was I wrong?”

“Shit, no. You weren’t wrong. Which is why we’re here, in this fine establishment, living the good life.” Jamie saluted the room and took another drink.

“I figured I had one shot.” Dax sounded more relaxed than I’d heard him before. “I told you I played bass and had a bunch of mixing and recording experience, and you said, ‘That’s cool,’ with your attention already wandering. So I whacked you across the face with everything I had. It worked, too.”

Jamie laughed, sounding rueful. “I was all hung up with how Mom was doing and grieving my dad, even if he wasn’t much of a dad to me either, and there you were, ripping my career to shreds.”

“Jamie.” Dax stared at his brother. “Is that really what it felt like? Should I be sorry?”

“Nah.” Jamie waved him off. “Was good, really, to jolt me out of my

wallowing into something productive I could work on.”

“I’ve never been great with emotions,” Dax said. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t. Made me mad, a bit, like, who’s this punk kid who thinks he knows everything? Then you played that version of ‘Wild Skies’ that you’d remixed and blew me away.” Jamie emptied his glass. “I *wanted* that sound, and what had become going through the motions on tour became exciting again. So thanks for being a little shit at the right moment.” He held out his empty tumbler. “Now you can make up for it by pouring me another one.”

Dax set down his glass, grabbed what appeared to be tequila off the table, and poured for Jamie. “Your head’s gonna hate you in the morning.”

“So’s my stomach. But we have tomorrow off, and my brain is loving me tonight.” Jamie saluted him and chugged, then coughed. “My throat, not so much.”

“Protect that thing,” Tanisha said. “That’s our moneymaker right there.”

Brody took a long drag from his joint. “Well, I’m grateful he was a little know-it-all, or I wouldn’t have this gig.”

Jamie saluted him too. “Best thing I ever did for the band. Well, minus half a dozen others. Dax said from the start that we needed more diverse sound, more in the upper registers, and something to stand out. I told him sax was so 1980s.”

“Not the way I play it.”

“Truth,” Tanisha agreed.

I lounged back in my loveseat and listened to them banter about shows they’d played before I joined them. The time the crew bus with the equipment trailer got diverted off the freeway due to an accident and got stuck in unmoving traffic. The band had gone onstage with borrowed equipment from their warm-up act and ended up rocking the house down and getting a bunch of encores. Or the food poisoning story. A friend told me every band had one, and I wasn’t sorry to have

missed theirs. I found myself breathing in the smoke that drifted up from Dax's joint, and relaxing deep into the cushions.

Brody got up after a while, snagged a plate of cookies, and headed out to, as he put it, "Find a lady who wants to worship my body with her tongue all night, since we get to sleep in."

After one more round of drinks, Tanisha left too, claiming sleep in a real bed was a precious thing.

That left me, Jamie, and Dax. I played with my third beer, which shouldn't have been enough to account for the buzz in my head. Dax tapped ash from a second joint out on his saucer, and mumbled, "You been writing anything for the new album, James, old boy?"

"Don't call me James. That was our father."

"Sorry." His voice turned a bit clearer.

"Is that why you're Jameson?" I asked, realizing too late the beers had taken the brakes off my tongue. "Better than Junior, I guess."

"Hell, yeah." Jamie swung his legs up on the loveseat. "James Crow was old-school country, and he lived the stereotype as well as sang it. Trucks and booze and gambling, a son named after him and a woman in every state, each one blonder than the next. He was gone a lot more than he was home, and drinking when he wasn't gone. My mom kicked him out when I turned eighteen. Never lost her soft spot for Dad though. She took his death hard."

"He had a fuckton of charm," Dax said by my knee. "My mom was a tough lady, no nonsense, but he'd come round our place with flowers and a smile after months with no word, and suddenly it was, 'Daddy's here.' She kicked him out a lot sooner, though. I was seven. I didn't care. He never gave me *shit*."

I thought I heard a lie in his voice, but was smart enough not to challenge it. "Except his last name, I guess."

"Hell, no. I *stole* that." Dax laughed. "Wanted to ditch my old name, and there his was, just asking to be used. So I did." He hesitated. "Don't spread that around. It's not a secret, but... don't. I think the weed's getting to me, making me sloppy."

I looked down. His eyelids drooped, and despite the secret reveal, a lazy smile crept across his face.

Brody got baked pretty often, and Tanisha sometimes joined him, but I'd never seen Dax stoned. It looked good on him. I hadn't realized how much tension he must be carrying until I saw him all relaxed now, the lines smoothed from around his eyes, his hands drooping off his knees with the joint sagging between his fingers. He seemed younger and more approachable.

"I've never really gotten high," I confessed, for something to say. "I can't smoke. I tried cigarettes for, I dunno, six months maybe in high school? Thought I'd look cool, but when I was still hacking up a lung whenever I tried to take a drag, I gave up. Same problem with pot, when I was with my first band."

"You're just doing it wrong," Dax told me. "Here, bend down."

I blinked, but did as I was told. I liked doing what I was told.

He got up on his knees. "I'm gonna take a drag, and when I breathe out, you breathe in. But your mouth has to be close to mine."

I bent lower.

"Closer than that."

Sliding to the floor, I got to my knees beside him.

Dax turned so our faces were just inches apart. "Oh, yeah, I like that. Ready?" He pulled in a drag, put his mouth near mine, and breathed out.

I opened my mouth, breathed in, and coughed. "Sorry."

"Nah. Try it again. Breathe in through your nose, maybe."

Jamie murmured, "Kinky," from his chair, but I wasn't listening to him.

"Tell me what to do," I begged Dax, swaying a little because he was right there up close and something in me like that. A lot.

"Right." He gripped my shoulder, then slid his hand up to cup the back of my head. "In through your nose, okay? One, two." He took

another drag, then turned back to me. His mouth hovered above my upper lip. He sighed out smoke.

I breathed it in. The pot curled up inside my nostrils, the smell musty and dark. I didn't cough. "Hey."

"Let's try it again."

Puff. Breathe. Puff. Breathe. Puff. Breathe.

"Again. Hold it this time."

I breathed in the smoke, tried to hold it, counting, then lost it in a quick cough. "Sorry."

"You're fine. You're more than fine, pretty boy. How do you feel?"

My head spun, floating two feet above my shoulders. I laughed. "Great. Awesome."

"You're such a lightweight." Dax let go of my head, and I wished he'd kept holding on to anchor me. Our thighs still touched.

Jamie said, "Hey, little brother. You done corrupting my virgin bassist? Not everyone has your experience."

I felt a jolt go through Dax, and he pulled back. Picking up the saucer, he stubbed out the joint. "No worries. I was gentle with him." He gave me a smoldering look that promised filthy, sexual things, then stood, set the saucer on the table, and let himself out of the room.

"I'm not a virgin," I protested, feeling my lovely high go a bit wistful. "Why'd he go away mad? I've had sex before."

"But not pot, apparently." Jamie sighed. "I don't know why he left. Something I said. There's a lot about Dax I don't know."

"You really were strangers at your father's funeral?"

"Really were. He's three years younger than me, and I didn't know he existed. Then he played for me and fuck, he had talent. A great ear and a unique vision. But he was just a session player, doing a little tech work too, because he didn't have contacts in the biz. My dad at least gave me some of those, but not him."

"You invited him to join your band. That was huge. Lots of folks

would've never done that for a stranger, relative or not."

"He earned it. Originally, I was gonna pat him on the head, give him some bucks if he needed 'em, and never think about him again."

"Hard to do with Dax," I mused, leaning back against the loveseat. Since that moment in the hospital, where I'd noticed his body, I'd had an awful time shaking my awareness. He didn't hang around me more than anyone else, but when he was nearby, I always knew where. In the close quarters of the bus, I felt the heat of his body when he passed me. Sometimes I looked up from whatever I was doing to find his startlingly green eyes fixed on me. I'd bet those were contacts, but that didn't change the intensity of his stare. Every time, he just raised an eyebrow, or lowered his shades, and it was me who turned away.

"He's got something all right." Jamie eyed me sideways. "Don't go falling for him, though, right? Not just because band romances can wreck a tour—"

A laugh escaped my suddenly tight chest. "Like you and Val?"

"I guess I shouldn't preach, but yeah, we've nearly blown up for real a time or two. And Dax. In six years, I've never seen him with anyone, guy, girl, nonbinary person. Nobody."

"Maybe he's just private." I was pretty sure he was at least bi.

"He's a secretive bastard. But maybe he's ace. Or yeah, maybe he's just not telling. Neither of those add up to a guy you should be falling for."

"I'm not falling for him," I protested. "I have a boyfriend— oh, shit."

"What?"

"I should go." How long had I left Richard waiting? Take off a half hour for the time he told me, and... I pulled out my phone, but I couldn't make sense of the numbers, and I didn't know when we got back here anyhow. "I gotta go." I stood up, staggering only a little, and set my greasy plate and empty beer cans on the table.

"Take some food," Jamie said. "You'll want it. Are you okay to get to your room?"

“Sure.” I giggled, because that was silly. “It’s just down the hall.”

He pushed out of his chair, smoothed the wrap back over a plate of cheese and crackers, and held it out to me. “Take that with you.”

“Thanks.” A sudden weepiness tugged at me and I sniffed. “Really, thank you, for inviting me tonight and talking to me and letting me in your band and—”

Jamie thumped my shoulder, and I almost dropped the cheese. “Dax is right. You are a lightweight.”

“Dax is usually right,” I agreed.

He laughed. “Come on, I’ll let you out. Don’t get lost out there.”

“I’m fine.” I fumbled in my pocket and found my key card. “See? I’m in twenty-four... twenty-four-oh-seven. I wrote it.”

Jamie was still laughing as he steered me out into the hall. I noticed that he leaned in his doorway, watching me, but I wasn’t drunk or anything. Seven was easy to find. I let myself in the room.

And dropped the plate.

“You call that half an hour?” Richard lounged on the bed, fully dressed except his shoes, eyes glittering in the low light.

“How did you get in here?”

“The label pays for the rooms. You ignored my texts.”

“My phone was off. I was with Jamie and the band.” I knelt to pick up the bits of cheese, stacking them on the plate which at least hadn’t broken. My fingers shook, for no good reason. “I couldn’t just ditch them.” I searched for a term he’d like. “We were team-building.” I aimed a smile his way.

“Right. I can smell the *team* from here.”

“It’s just pot. You manage bands. You must be cheering if a band just does pot.”

“But you’re not a *band*. You’re mine, and I don’t like you smelling of stale weed.”

I had most of the food picked up. *Tip the cleaners extra in the morning.* I stood and set the plate on the luggage rack by the door. “I’ll go shower.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Richard rose to his feet and stalked my way. “You wanted to come to me dirty? I can work with that. On your knees.”

I usually loved kneeling for Richard. Tonight, something in me resisted. “Let me shower first. I’m all sweaty from the stage too.” I’d thrown on clean clothes in the dressing room, but a quick clean-up hadn’t cut it tonight.

“I said, kneel.” He stood there between me and the bathroom.

Maybe it was the pot, but inappropriate giggles bubbled up from inside me. “Ooh, sure, Daddy. I’ll get right on that.” I threw myself to the floor, a hand dramatically to my forehead. “How about this? This work?” I rolled over to hands and knees. “Or this one?”

His face darkened and he strode over and set one foot on my ass, right above my tailbone.

I froze. I’d never been afraid of Richard, but in that moment, something inside me wanted to run.

He kept a little pressure on me as the seconds ticked by, not enough to force me flat, just weight. Then he stepped back. “What a pity. I thought I’d give you a nice surprise, show up and fuck you the way you like it. Flew all the way here. And you’re too stoned to know who I am.”

I know who you are. Words had deserted me.

“Well, there are lots of pretty boys and girls in this town who’ll do as they’re told with no back-talk.” He slid his feet into his polished loafers and turned at the door. “Maybe some she-men too. I don’t mind if a skirt has a nice dick and ass underneath it. Ms. Fox.”

I flinched hard and he smiled.

“Yeah, I’ve seen the way you flaunt yourself in a dress and heels. Gives me some real good ideas. But not tonight. I’m going to go find a

willing ass that doesn't reek of pot. Next time?" He put his hand on the doorknob. "Keep your phone on and do what you're told. It'd be a real shame if your band tanked because it's been hiding a cross-dressing drag queen."

"My band—?" I couldn't make sense of that.

"If the paps find out. Take pictures of Lane Bennett in a corset and heels."

"The paps... but... Corvus Rising makes your label a ton of money." My voice shook. "You wouldn't risk that."

His eyebrows rose. "Wouldn't I?"

I still couldn't make this feel real. "I'll be here all day tomorrow. We have the day off."

"But I'll be flying out in the morning. What a shame. I'll fuck you next time." He let himself out. The door closed with a soft, well-mannered click.

For a long time, I stayed there on my knees, trying not to breathe. What was that? *What the hell was that?* Richard didn't have to blackmail me into sex. I'd been ready to suck him off or whatever he wanted. Was it so terrible if I'd wanted to shower off the sweat first?

Okay, yeah, I'd kept him waiting. If he'd really flown here to see me, and then spent an hour sitting around while I smoked pot, he had a good reason to be irritated. But his reaction was over the top. *Wasn't it?* And then heading out to what? Pick up a rent boy instead of letting me shower? Threatening to out me as Ms. Fox?

I turned over to sit on the carpet and put my head in my hands. *He knows about me.* The floaty pot high couldn't overcome the cold dread in my stomach, but it kept trying. My head swam up and down and I felt nauseous.

Shower. Bed. Think about it tomorrow.

That was sensible advice. Just impossible to follow. In the bathroom, I stood under the streaming water until my hands turned to prunes, unwilling to shut off the flow because as long as I showered, I

had an excuse not to do anything else. I counted my heartbeats, counted tiles, until the world ran together in a jumble of numbers. When I got out at last and dropped naked on my bed, nothing made any better sense than it had an hour before.

Chapter 6

Dax

I should never have shotgunned pot with Lane. What the fuck was I thinking? I couldn't even deny I'd been flirting. Ever since I'd seen him perform as Ms. Fox, I'd been aware of how hot the kid was. Sure, I'd seen him making magic with his guitar on stage for months, but there was always something impersonal about his playing. He fell into the music and was swallowed by it, the music everything and the man nothing. As Ms. Fox? She took the music and fucking made it part of herself. Sexy as hell.

Of course, that kid was not for me. I shouldn't have led him on last weekend. He'd been super quiet since then, and not just with me. The last thing I wanted to do was mess with the stability of Jamie's band.

Onstage, the opening act headed into the climax of their set. In a few minutes, we'd be swapping out equipment. This venue was full of odd reverb, maybe because it was a hockey arena in the winter, but I thought I'd nailed it down pretty well at the soundcheck.

Standing near me in the wings, Jamie chatted with Val, guitar straps over their shoulders. Tanisha twirled her drumsticks with both hands. Brody held the sax he'd lead off with, its brass catching a flicker from the lighting effects of the band onstage. Lane was missing.

I went over to Jamie. "Have you seen Lane?"

"Not in the last half hour." He looked around. "He's got a little time yet."

"Has he seemed... off to you lately?"

"A bit. It's hard to maintain the energy of a tour all the way through."

We all have our off days.”

“I guess.” I peered over my shoulder to see the opening band’s lead singer driving into the second-to-last chorus. “I’ll go make sure he’s all right.”

Jamie blinked at me like he was surprised, and yeah, okay, I wasn’t known for my general altruism. But hell, if Lane screwed up, that would reflect badly on Jamie and Corvus Rising. So it was only logical I’d care.

On that note, I hurried back down the concrete tunnel that led to the dressing rooms. I passed the other band’s roadies with their dollies and hand trucks, waiting to clear the stage. Beyond them, the backstage space echoed with the power of the band but at a remove, the higher register muffled and the bass beat dominating. I couldn’t see Lane anywhere.

He probably had to pee. It wasn’t like me to be melodramatic. I found my way to Corvus’s dressing room space and headed into the bathroom.

Sure enough, there was Lane, with his bass standing safely against the wall. *See, stupid.* Except he wasn’t peeing or washing his hands or doing a last-minute touch-up on stage makeup. He stood with his hands braced on a sink, peering into the mirror with wild eyes like it was the gate to the underworld. I gave him a minute to shake it off, but he still stood there as the distant song wound to a climax.

Applause broke out, long and loud. When Lane still didn’t move, I murmured, “Sounds like a good crowd tonight.”

He jumped, blinked, and seemed to come back from a distant place. “Dax! You scared me.”

“Sorry.” I moved up beside him, letting the mirror bring my gaze to his. “Is there a problem?”

In the background, I heard the opening act launch into another encore. That was good. An enthusiastic audience, and a little more time for Lane to get his shit together.

Lane closed his eyes for a moment. “You ever suddenly look at

yourself and wonder, ‘What am I doing here? How is this even my life?’”

“Sure.” Lane had no idea how often, but it wasn’t like I’d had other great choices. “I bet even Jamie does sometimes.”

“I don’t know if I’m cut out for this.”

“This meaning touring? Being part of Corvus Rising?”

Lane just shrugged a slim shoulder. He was dressed in a tight blue silk T tonight, and it clung to his arms where the definition of his biceps showed the hours he spent playing.

“There’s always gonna be low times.” I didn’t want to tell him how bad “*low*” could get, but maybe I could share a small glimpse. “I was in a band once. We cut an album, toured, although we were the opening act.”

That distracted him a little from his reflection. He met my gaze. “You were? Who?”

“Doesn’t matter. We crashed and burned.” I crashed us, but that son of a bitch Richard lit the fire. “When we were on tour, there were times I felt on top of the world, and times when I looked around and didn’t recognize myself at all.”

“What did you do?”

“I went on and fuckin’ played. The best I could. Some performances weren’t as good as others, but there were four of us out there. On a bad day for someone, the rest of us carried them.” I was lying with a straight face, at least about the end when we were secretly at each other’s throats and I’d walked away and never looked back. Back in the beginning, though, that’d felt like the truth. It sure was now for Corvus Rising. “You’ve got four other musicians on that stage who can support you if you’re having a hard night, but they can’t do shit if you don’t go out there.”

“You could play instead. You’re probably as good as me.”

“No, I fucking couldn’t.” I ticked off fingers. “One, I’m needed on the mixing console and if you think I’m going to let you get your grubby

hands on my faders, you've got another think coming. Two, the fans would flip out." *Two-and-a-half, I'm never exposing myself that way.* "Three, no, I'm not as good as you. I'm competent, but you shine like a supernova on your good days, and like a sun on your bad ones. No one puts a candle onstage when fans are expecting sunlight."

He blinked at me. A little flush rose on his neck. "That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Don't let it go to your head. You can pay me back by doing your fucking job." I picked up his bass and held it out. "Get up there and help Corvus Rising fly. Worry about the rest afterward. It's music time."

Slowly, he took the bass from me and slung the strap over his neck. "Right. Okay."

I cocked my head, listening. "Fuck, I need to be up there working. You coming, sweet thang?"

"I'll be right behind you." Lane actually smiled. "You're not as tough as you pretend, are you? You just swear a lot."

I took two steps, grabbed the front of his T-shirt in my fist, and stared into his eyes. "Don't get fucking cocky, kid." I smoothed down the shirt, maybe with an extra stroke, because I didn't mind my hands on him, then whirled and hurried out. But I listened as I jogged up the concrete ramp, to make sure I heard his steps coming behind me.

I don't know if it was my pep talk— although it turned out I was awesome at that, when I decided to put in the effort— but by the time he hit the stage, Lane was in the zone. The whole band rocked out with an almost manic energy. Jamie signaled for Lane to take a solo on "Solstice Dance" and he *killed* it. Brody turned his sax into the devil's voice on "Dark Desires" and everyone was having so much fun on "I Told You That Wasn't My Name" that Jamie ran the last chorus twice.

I played my board like a virtuoso, best fucking night of the tour. The audience screamed the house down, and the band did four encores before finally taking their bows.

After we'd cleared the stage, leaving the roadies and techs to take

care of the instruments, I made a point of sticking close to Lane. I knew how those highs and lows could chase each other, especially when something was gnawing at you. Whatever was bugging the kid, it probably was less heavy than the deal I'd had going with Richard back when Card Crimson fell apart into four once-cute young men with nothing to say to each other, but that didn't mean he was fine.

There was a VIP meet-n-greet again. The label rarely missed the chance to pimp out the band for extra bucks. The arena had suites upstairs for the mega-rich to schmooze while pretending to watch hockey. I usually didn't bother to clean up after a show, since I hadn't performed under the lights and in front of the flares, and no one was paying to shake my clammy hand. Tonight, I went into the second dressing room with Brody and Lane. They both glanced at me but didn't comment, pulling off sweaty stage outfits.

Brody had a hairy dad-bod that did nothing for me, but Lane? I turned away enough to catch him in a mirror, where he wouldn't notice I was staring. The random body bruises from that fall in the bus had faded. His lean muscles moved under pale unmarked skin. Once down to his briefs, he ducked into the en suite bathroom and when he came out, he'd stripped all the way. I couldn't resist watching his pert ass flex and curve in the mirror as he wiped himself with a towel and pulled on clean clothes, including a blue silk T to match his stage one.

I caught Lane starting to turn and bent to fix my sneaker so he didn't notice me staring. Straightening, I kicked the shoe straight and looked his way. "Ready to give the fans the moment of their dreams?"

"Right." He gestured at himself. "Totally the stuff dreams are made of."

"Would be for some people." I shrugged. "If you like the young, skinny, pretty type with more talent than sense."

Lane blinked, as if trying to work out whether that was a compliment or an insult. I raised an eyebrow at him.

Brody laughed and slapped Lane on the back. "Come on, hot stuff. Booze to drink, boobs to sign, what's not to like?"

He slung his arm around Lane's shoulders and steered him toward

the door. As they went out, Brody glanced at me over his shoulder, and I nodded toward Lane. *Keep an eye on him.* I wasn't sure about the wink Brody gave me, but I hoped it meant he had Lane's back.

Cleaning up wasn't my job, but I tidied the clothes off the floor, folding them in a pile as an excuse to linger in the dressing room. Lane's T-shirt held a hint of his body heat and the damp sweat of his performance. I caught myself raising it to my nose to take a whiff of his sharp male scent and tossed the shirt on top of the rest.

What kind of stupidity am I falling into?

I whirled around and strode out the door, digging for my phone. The bus would wait for the band members when they were done schmoozing, but I could get an Uber to the hotel. Have a long, hot shower. Eat a good room service meal. Maybe even jerk off to the thought of someone who *wasn't* Lane Bennett.

I did all that, orgasmed my brains out to the thought of a famous actor with great forearms. Lay in bed naked, the hotel sheets cool against my skin. And couldn't sleep.

By now, Lane should be free of his VIP duties. Probably was back here at the hotel in his own room. Hopefully he'd managed to eat something. It hadn't escaped my notice that he'd picked at his food before the show.

Or maybe his secret boyfriend had made it into town, and they were heating up the sheets together. That idea should've been a good one—I was all in favor of my friends getting some, even if I stuck to taking care of myself. But the thought of Lane getting busy with douche-dude sat sour in my mind.

I fell asleep at last, but roused off and on through the night, drifting out of uneasy dreams. I couldn't catch the trailing remnants to remember them as I woke. Anxiety dreams. Fear dreams. Hiding from someone. Wanting to protect someone. The details escaped me, but the low-level buzz in my brain made it hard to relax and let them go.

Around five, I gave up for the night. Nothing new. I'd slept like shit for fifteen years. The hotel pool on the lower level opened to our room keys and the sign said, "No lifeguard on duty" which suited me just

fine. I stripped to swim trunks and dove in.

My first stroke told me that my bruised ribs still didn't like a crawl. Or a backstroke when I rolled over to try that. I'd worked through pain plenty of times, but I wasn't a masochist and this wasn't life-and-death. I eased into a sidestroke that didn't hurt much and made my way to the end of the pool, skipped the fancy flip turn, and swam back.

Swimming was something I made sure I learned after the yacht episode, when the guy who'd paid for me joked about dropping me overboard if he didn't get his money's worth. I laughed and didn't tell him I'd sink like a stone, or like a flailing monkey, because I'd go down fighting, but I'd sure as hell go down. When we got back to dry land, I saved my pennies for YMCA swimming lessons. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a slow learner.

Once I started staying in hotels with pools, swimming became my favorite form of exercise. The regular rhythmic pattern was like meditation, and in the early mornings, I usually had the place to myself. Anyone else who showed up at that hour was also working out, not socializing. I would swim for an hour, sometimes more, until my muscles ached pleasantly and my heart rate had stayed high enough to count as cardio. Fitness kept me pretty. Fitness kept me safe. And as a bonus, my brain would shut off and relax for a while, dropping into the strokes and the pattern, the breathing and the water.

I'd rolled over and started a no-arms backstroke that took a lot of leg effort, so I missed hearing the door open. The first I realized I wasn't alone was when I reached the wall and looked up into Lane fucking Bennett's face peering down at me. I jolted, sputtered, and swung myself upright.

"Sorry," Lane told me. "I did say hi but I guess you didn't hear me."

"Nope." I hooked my good elbow over the side of the pool. "What are you doing here?" Band people tended to be night-owls, and I would've said Lane didn't know the hour of six a.m. even existed.

He shrugged, glancing away. "Couldn't sleep."

It was none of my business what kind of existential angst or stupid decisions were keeping Lane from his rest. I swam off, made my turn

at the far end, doing the flip now there was someone watching, and kicked back up the pool. When I got close, he jumped in, and on the next lap he swam alongside me doing some crappy kind of crawl my YMCA teacher would've laughed at. I could've beaten him by a mile, even in backstroke, but I stayed alongside. After all, I'd been working out almost an hour already. There was no reason to kill myself.

When we reached the wall, Lane tried a flip turn and floundered, putting his feet down to cough. I hovered for a moment. The band didn't need to lose another bassist. When he was done choking, he looked at me, red-faced. "It's been a while since I tried that. High school, probably."

"You don't need to impress me. I already know I swim much better than you do."

He blinked, staring at me, but at least his face returned to a normal color.

"Come on," I said. "I've got another bunch of laps to do." I'd been thinking of stopping, but I didn't want him to worry he'd chased me away. I turned and glided off in a side stroke. That required a little work to keep up with Lane's best crawl.

We swam for perhaps fifteen minutes before Lane stopped, hanging out where the water reached his chest just below the height of his nipples. A trickle ran from his wet hair down his cheek and neck, then over his hairless chest past one pink nub. I *didn't* watch its path.

He cocked his head. "What are you doing down here at this hour anyway?"

"Working out. Before the screaming kids infest the pool."

"It's so early, though."

"I didn't have a party or a boyfriend keeping me up late after the concert." Okay, maybe I was fishing, but something about that secret fuckbuddy of his rubbed me the wrong way.

"Just the party this time," he said.

I controlled my satisfaction so he wouldn't notice. Didn't want him

to think I cared.

Lane flicked the water surface with his fingers, watching the droplets land and disappear. “Sometimes the whole promo thing gets so weird, these people wanting to be seen with me, take pictures, have me sign stuff. I want to say, ‘I’m just some guy from Ojai. Why do you care?’ but there I am with Hawk and Crow and all these fans and the tour manager and the label guys. A product for public consumption.”

“Don’t think about it that way. The music’s the real thing. The rest’s a performance. It’s the price you pay for that incredible high, on stage with thousands of people screaming and the amps cranked till you feel the music in your bones.”

“Do *you* ever want to play onstage again, instead of sitting in the wings with the mixing board?”

Been there, done that. “I like controlling *everything*.” I gave him my best shark grin. “Whatever you do, or Crow, Hawk, Brody? All that music goes through my hands before it hits the air. I *am* Corvid Rising, and I don’t care if most folks don’t know it.” That was partly bullshit. Jamie had creative control, and whatever I did with mixing we’d hashed out long before the show. But the line sounded good and distracted Lane from his question.

I headed for the steps because pushing up on the edge of the pool was something my ribs wouldn’t appreciate. Lane got out on the side and was waiting for me when I headed for the lounge where I’d left my shirt. He stepped into my path, staring at my chest. My bruises had mostly shaded into yellow and green by now, but a few patches remained deep purple.

“How were you even swimming? You sure you didn’t break any ribs?”

“Nah. Been there, done that. This is almost healed.”

He reached out as if to touch me, then pulled his hand back and his eyes widened.

I could guess what he’d seen. *Shit*. The scars wrapped around my ribs from my back across the bruised area, five almost-parallel stripes,

the ends dug in deep and knotted, because the bastard deliberately wrapped the tails of the flogger. One scar had a thick ugly ridge to it where it got infected and healed badly. Luckily just one. It'd still almost done me in.

Of course, Lane had to ask, "What happened?"

I grinned and raised a hand, my fingers clawed. "One of my buddies had this tiger."

His pretty mouth twisted. "You can just say none of my business."

I should've echoed that back. Would serve him right. Instead, I heard myself say, "Stupidity happened." *Or overconfidence, or desperation. Take your pick.*

"I'm sorry." His eyes met mine and widened again.

Yeah, another of my secrets. He'd noted the bright blue of my eyes that I usually hid behind unnatural green. Except in a chlorinated pool. Another reason I only swam alone. I'd brought this on myself by not leaving the moment he showed up, but I hadn't wanted him to feel unwelcome. And... I didn't for the life of me know why I kept giving this kid little pieces of myself that I *never* shared. Somehow, my secrets felt safe in his hands.

That right there is dangerous. I'd had other guys I thought were my friends sell me out for the price of a meal or a bed for the night, or out of jealousy or boredom. I didn't even trust my brother with half my shit. Although in Jamie's case, it was more because I didn't want him upset or worried. I didn't know Lane well enough to be moving him from the arm's-length box to the almost empty trust-him box.

I toweled off and pulled my shirt over my head, emerging from the cotton to find Lane still close, looking at me. "What?" I asked. "Never seen a T-shirt before?"

Strangely, that made him smile. "I don't think you're as tough as you pretend."

"Oh, no." I grabbed the waistband of his board shorts and pulled him up close, staring into his eyes. "Don't get confused, Princess. Just because I cut you some slack doesn't mean I'm soft somehow. I can

break your pretty face or put you on your knees any time I like.”

He met my gaze, his pupils blown wide, his breath coming short. Somehow, his reaction didn't seem like fear, but like want. And I liked that. Liked it way too much. I shoved him back and tugged my shirt down over my wet trunks before he could notice my reaction. “Finish your swim, kid. I'll see you around.”

Turning my back on him, I grabbed my towel, kicked on my flip flops, and left the pool room. I didn't know if he watched me go, but my unruly dick was pretty sure if I glanced over my shoulder, I'd see those big gray eyes fixed on me. And maybe a hint in the front of his shorts that he'd be okay with ending up on his knees for me.

I didn't look back.

Chapter 7

Lane

I gazed out past the footlights at the audience. The bar was crowded and dark, so all I could see was an impression of small tables and people of all kinds sitting around them, a flash of bling catching the light here and there. I leaned my mike closer to my ruby lips and crooned into it, hitting the emotional climax of my song.

Lots of queens lip-synced and that was performance art too, but part of what propelled me up on stage in a slinky gown was the chance to sing *my* compositions. My songs weren't a good fit for Corvus Rising, even if I'd wanted to share them. They harked back to a different era of smoky bars and men in suits and dangerous women. *Cabaret*, not Dolly Parton or Kylie.

Nothing that would've sold these days, except when I performed them as Ms. Fox. The whole package had the audience leaning forward, watching me. I fed off that energy, belting the last chorus, then falling away into the sad, soft ending.

The applause lifted me high. Even better than ten thousand people making a stadium shake. This was my place, my people, my art. Corvus was too, don't get me wrong. I walked off that big stage with the band ten feet off the ground some nights. But drag fed a different part of my soul.

Miss Dolly Part-Em was waiting in the wings, though, blond hair towering, eyelashes perfect, so I waved to the crowd, blew a sultry kiss, and headed toward the back. Dolly murmured, "Killing it, sweetie," as I passed, then she sashayed into the spotlight. I waited for a moment, watching her start her patter. In a way, I envied her the size of her

personality. I'd never be that kind of queen, full of sass and charm, larger than life.

For a moment, I deeply missed The D-Spot back in L.A. where I'd learned the art. Mother Kissa had a similar style that carried the world along with her. I was homesick for her and all the girls. *I'll be back in a little over a week.* Corvus Rising had shows this weekend back-to-back in Albuquerque, then Wednesday night in Tucson, Thursday in Flagstaff headlining their Hot Rockin' Daze festival, then Vegas, Sacramento, and L.A.

After the tour, we'd have a couple of weeks off before Rocktoberfest in the desert in mid-October. Man, I was looking forward to that. Sixty-thousand-plus people, three nights, bands I loved, some so big that we were just one among an elite group of headliners. I couldn't imagine the high of performing to a crowd that size, sometimes couldn't believe this was my life.

But before that insanity, I'd get to go back to The D-Spot. A tiny crowd, a dark room, but I'd be at home. Not a rock star, and not a newbie queen desperately seeking approval, like tonight. Mother Kissa even knew my real identity and she would never tell. Here, unless a club had a single-use bathroom I'd scoped out and found safe, I wouldn't transform back into Lane Bennett until I was well away from where Ms. Fox performed. I'd been lucky in Kansas City, but tonight I had to come and go from the club with Ms. Fox locked in place. I felt so alone sometimes—

“You were phenomenal.”

I jumped as a queen I recognized as Ineda from the second performance linked her arm with mine.

“Come on, meet everyone. Are you local? Dolly might offer you a regular slot. She has a soft spot for the gals who sing their little hearts out.” She tugged me toward the dressing rooms.

I went along willingly enough. “Nope, just traveling through town. I loved having the chance to get onstage, though.”

“I bet—” Ineda broke off as she pushed open the door of the big communal room to the sound of sobbing. “Hey, bitches, what's

wrong?”

Three queens who'd clustered around a slender man broke apart, revealing his tear-dampened face. One of them said, "Joel might have to give his dog up to a shelter."

"Oh, no." Ineeda let go my arm and hurried forward, with me tailing behind her. "Why? What happened?"

"My mom had a stroke. I've got to go home right now. But she has two dogs, and Princess doesn't tolerate other dogs, like, at all. I've been trying all day to find someone to take her, but it's so hard."

"Can't you board her for a bit?" I asked. "I could—" I'd forgotten for a moment I was the outsider. "We could take up a collection to help pay for it." I had plenty of money to chip in. It'd ripped my heart out when the neighbors next door moved, taking away the dog I'd walked daily and considered almost mine. I'd been eleven and I'd cried for days.

Joel shook his head. "Mom's going to need help for months, maybe forever. I have to move in with her."

"You shouldn't have to give up your dog." I reached a finger toward the tiny white mop cradled in Joel's arms. The dog wiggled her whole butt and licked my hand. Whatever her problem was with other dogs, she seemed friendly enough.

"She's really my ex's dog, but he ditched her with me two months ago and moved to France." Joel hugged her tighter and the little dog licked his chin. "She's super-sweet with people, and housebroken and everything." He looked around the room. "I hoped one of you would take her. Even just for a while, till you can find her a forever home? I know it's asking a lot, but I have a red-eye flight in three fucking hours." His breath caught. "Besides Mom, you're the only family I have."

The four queens in varying states of undress eyed each other. Ineeda said, "My kid's allergic. Maybe for a few days, if I kept her in the bathroom. Lucy?"

Lucy shook her lush dark curls. "My Shepherd would eat that little

mop for breakfast.”

The tall blond whose name I’d missed said, “I have two dogs and three cats. How does Princess feel about cats?”

“Not respectful enough.” Joel pressed a kiss on top of the little white head. “She wants to chase them.”

Priss, the short, plump blond, said, “I have a no-pets lease and a neighbor who would *love* to have a reason to get the gay filth out of their building. Maybe Dolly could?”

“She has cats, though,” Ineeda pointed out.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Joel held the dog to his cheek. “All the shelters are closed for intake at this hour. But I guess surrendering her wouldn’t be so bad. They say small dogs get adopted, although she’s ten, so she’s older. They’re supposed to screen the families, so she shouldn’t end up with anyone evil. Can one of you take her overnight, and run her out to the Humane Society in the morning?” He sighed raggedly. “I was hoping she’d end up living with a drag sister, and I might get a photo or an update now and then. I’m so sorry, baby girl.”

“Oh, man,” Lucy said. “I can’t imagine how I’d feel if I had to give up Tex. I can take Princess overnight. Tex will probably bark, but hopefully that won’t scare her too much.”

Joel tried to laugh. “Get her fighting spirit up, more likely. She’ll bark back for all she’s worth.”

“I can handle it for one night.”

The little dog squirmed around and resumed licking Joel’s face. He closed his eyes and let her go to town on him.

The other queens put their arms around him and each other. Something inside me yearned for that sisterhood, yearned to do more than stand around being useless and an outsider.

My mouth opened and I said, “I can take her.”

Joel jerked his head up. “You what?”

What did I just say? But I couldn’t bear to shut down that look of

hope dawning on his face. “I mean, I’m traveling a lot, but she’s tiny and I can afford to take her with me. I have a nice apartment back in L.A., when I’m home, right by a park. And I wouldn’t mind the company.” That was the truth. As I reached out to stroke her silky ear, memories of little Boomer next door cascaded— how safe and warm it felt to have someone thrilled to see me, no matter who I was or what I’d done. The uncomplicated love of a dog was something I suddenly craved. “I know it’s not the same as one of your local sisters—”

“But a hell of a lot better than the Humane Society.” Joel stared into my face. “You mean it? You wouldn’t just dump her later?”

“No! I don’t ditch my responsibilities, ever. Anyhow, I want her.” I made myself add, “I’ve been lonely.”

Ineeda rubbed my back above the low-cut zipper.

Joel said, “She’s a great little dog.” He held her toward me, and I gathered her into my arms.

“She’s tiny.” She panted into my face, with a waft of less-than-fresh dog breath, but her dark eyes fixed on me made my heart speed up. *I always wanted to fall in love, right?* I cuddled her against me. “Does she have any allergies, medications? Is there stuff I should know?” A trickle of panic began to leak through my euphoria. *What am I getting into?*

“She’s pretty healthy.” Joel went over to the side door and hauled a big canvas bag forward. “I brought her bed and her toys and her bowl and stuff. Her medical records are in there, what I could find of them. They’re in my boyfriend’s name, though.”

My breath sped up and my chest tightened. *Am I really going to step onto the band bus and say “Hey, guys, I have a dog?” What if she barks all the time? What if she gets sick?*

I told myself to keep it together. Worst case, I’d rent a car and drive separately. We only had another ten days on tour. I could do this.

“Can we make up a bill of sale?” I asked. “So she’s legally mine?” I doubted Joel was the type to come after me for kidnapping his dog, but what if I got attached, and then his mom didn’t need him anymore,

and he wanted her back? With one blink of those big eyes, she already had her dainty paws on my heart. Giving her up after months together would kill me.

“I suppose.” Joel eyed me, his empty arms wrapped around himself. “You’re from L.A.?”

“Yes.” With Princess cradled to my chest, I hurried to where my own bag was stowed beside a dressing table and dug out my phone. “Here.” I thumbed back through photos, most of them too revealing of who I was. “This is my place right after I moved in.” I’d taken some pictures to have when I was shopping for housewares. I showed him the living room and the kitchen, then one of the park next door.

“That’s real nice for L.A.”

“I have some money.” I flipped through more pictures. “This is my mom and dad.” There was nothing more wholesome than Dad planting a kiss on Mom’s cheek while she tried to look displeased.

“Okay. I guess—” Joel’s phone beeped in his pocket. “Hell, that’s my alarm. I have to get an Uber to the airport.”

“I can drive you,” Ineeda said. “You finish up with Ms. Fox, there, and spend some goodbye time with Princess.”

Lucy dug in a drawer of her dressing table and came up with a flyer, which she flipped over, and an eyebrow pencil. “Will that work.”

Joel kissed her cheek. “Thanks, sis.” He wrote quickly: *I, Joel Eovaldi, sell my Multi-poo Princess to—* He paused and turned to me. “I need your legal name.”

I hesitated. Lane Bennett wasn’t a rare name, but we were playing in town, ads had been running, and combined with singing my own songs, someone might put two and two together. I wasn’t ashamed of doing drag, at all, but Richard made it pretty clear the label wouldn’t be happy. “Dax Crow,” I said in desperation. Dax’s name was even less common, but he didn’t appear in any of the band’s promo, and he couldn’t be mistaken for a five-foot-nine drag queen. *Dax can turn around and sell her to me afterward. We’ll be fine.*

Joel wrote the name down without hesitation and continued the bill

of sale. “I’ll put in the sum of one dollar—”

“Make it a hundred,” I said. I kept cash in my wallet for these occasions, so I could pay a cab anonymously. “My contribution to you and your mom.”

“You don’t need to.”

I fumbled in my bag and got out my wallet, liberating five twenties while Princess wiggled and licked my chin. “Here. Seriously.”

Joel eyed the money. “Well, okay. I can’t deny it’ll help.” He took the twenties, signed the bill of sale, and held it out. When I reached for the end, he didn’t let go. “You promise you’ll be good to her?”

“She’ll have the life of a Princess.” I picked up my phone again. “Give me your number.” Joel recited it, and I entered the digits, took a selfie of Princess that included just my chin, and texted it to him. His phone chimed in his pocket. “There. Now you can get hold of me, and I can send you Princess updates.”

Joel sighed and passed me the receipt. “Okay. I... thank you. So much.” He rubbed his eyes.

“Here.” I held Princess out, although it was already hard to let go of her. “You should take all the time you can.”

He scooped her into his arms and snuggled her, kissing her head and cheeks. “Hey, girlie, this is Dax-Anastasia. They’re going to be your mommy and daddy, and take good care of you. I’m so sorry I have to leave you too, right after douchebag Nico did...” Joel pressed his lips tight and closed his eyes.

Ineeda touched Joel’s shoulder. “How’s your timing? I can head out whenever you’re ready. Do you need to pick up your bags?”

Joel took a couple more breaths, then passed Princess back to me. “Those two by the door are it. Hopefully, I’ll be back eventually to take care of loose ends.” He raised his head, put a smile on his lips. “Bye, bye, ladies. Don’t be strangers, and don’t do anything Mama Dolly wouldn’t do.”

The others chorused, “Which means, do *anything*,” like it was a kind

of catch phrase.

“Right.” He hugged them all in turn, dragged a wrist across his eyes, crossed the room, and hefted a backpack and a suitcase. “Onward.”

Ineeda, carrying a big purse over her shoulder, slipped past him into the hall.

In the open doorway, Joel paused one more time to look at Princess, blew her a kiss, and then they were gone.

Lucy sighed. “Gonna miss her. Bitch was *fierce*.”

“She didn’t die,” Priss said acidly.

The tall blond turned to me. “What was your other name again? Dax?” She scanned me up and down with her eyes narrowed. “Are you around town much? A spot just opened up in our roster, and you brought down the house tonight.”

I wanted to get out of there before the queens got too curious. Juggling Princess arm to arm, I swapped my stilettos for black sneakers, stuffed my phone and wallet in the outer pocket of my duffel, and slung my bag over one shoulder. Then I got Princess settled in the crook of that arm and hefted her big bag over the other shoulder. “I should head out. Lots to do to get this little girl settled with me tonight.”

“Do you need a lift?” Priss asked.

“Nah, I have a friend picking me up,” I lied. I would call an Uber once I was out of sight. “Thanks for having me tonight. I had a great time, and I won the best prize.” I gestured at Princess with my chin.

“Yeah, she’s pretty cute.” Lucy ran a finger over my cheek. “So are you, sweetness. If you’re in town longer, maybe we could get together.”

“Sorry, taken.” Richard might scorn monogamy, but at least I could use him as an excuse.

“All the best ones are,” she muttered. “Here, let me get the door for you.”

The side hallway led to a door labeled “*staff parking*.” I bumped the

bar with my ass and I let myself out into the warm night. Princess wiggled and I hooked a finger more securely into her harness. She might only be four or five pounds, but I wasn't going to underestimate her. "Hold still, baby. That concrete's a long way down."

I walked to the end of the block and around the corner, then set the bags on the sidewalk and called for an Uber willing to transport a small dog. "What do we do now?" I asked Princess. Usually, I'd take one car to a halfway location with a bathroom. Sneak into the men's room as Ms. Fox, straight into a stall, come out as Lane. Then I'd take a new car to the hotel and stroll in the front with my secret identity in my bag. I wasn't sure anyplace would let me bring a dog into the john, though, and little as she was, there was no pocket on this slinky dress to hide her.

"You're going to complicate my life, aren't you, baby?" She whined and I rubbed my chin on her silky head. "Not complaining, just a fact." I paced a few steps, rocking her in my arms, and she settled against me. I had ten minutes to run through options in my head before the Uber SUV pulled up. I still didn't have any bright ideas, though. "The Regina Marquis Hotel," I directed. To hell with complicated schemes. No one had ever recognized Ms. Fox as Lane, and hopefully I could walk in without drawing attention.

But when I arrived, there was a fashionable crowd of folks my age around the main entrance dressed in stylish clothes, all talking and laughing and milling about. Just the kind of people who might blow my cover if they took a close look. "Drop me by the end door around the back," I directed the driver.

He pulled around the building obediently, leaving me, my dog, and my bags at the most remote exit. I swiped myself inside with the key card, swinging the bags inside while holding the door with my foot. Once the door swung shut, I slumped my ass against the wall, heedless of the red silk dress, and sighed. "Okay, now we just need to get to my room. I can do this."

I juggled my dog to readjust the straps of both bags over my shoulders and turned to the stairs. "We'll go up one floor and then find the elevator." Thank goodness I worked out to keep my legs looking

good in stockings. My feet were complaining about a performance in five-inch heels, but at least I had sneakers on now. I made a good pace up two half-flights of stairs and ran my card through the reader.

Nothing.

I tried again, three times, before remembering that one of the security features touted by the hotel was stairway access only to your own floor.

Damn. I really don't want to go round to the front. I peered upward. Floor seventeen. Thirty-four half-flights. No, thirty-two, because no floor thirteen. Wait, thirty, because I was on the second floor now. "Piece of cake. My calves are going to be killer after this, Princess."

By about the tenth floor, my steady climb had become a slog. I tucked my chin down, pinned the dog's bag to the wall with my hip to get the strap higher on my shoulder, and trudged on. The number *17* on the top floor lured me upward until I reached the highest landing at last, balanced my burdens, reached in my pocket, and saw the sign. "Security floor. Access by code only." With a numerical number pad. "Crap!"

I punched in my room number out of desperation, but the red light laughed at me with "No way, Jose." I didn't think running through random combinations would get me anywhere, and didn't want to trigger a "too many tries" alarm. I let the bags slide off my shoulders and leaned on the wall. "Now what?"

Princess whined but didn't seem to have lock-picking expertise to offer. Thirty-two half-flights down would be easier than up. *I climbed the damned stairs. Giving up and going back down would suck.* And I'd still be left with the sneaking-in problem. I wondered if there was a security camera in the stairwell. Glancing around, I didn't see one, but these days they could be small.

If there is, it's likely pointed at the door. I picked up my own bag, hugged Princess close, and retreated to the half-floor landing below, dropping the bag harder than I meant to. The stairwell echoed emptily. "At least, no one in their right mind will come out here with

us, huh, girl?”

Digging in my bag, I found a scarf and used it to tie Princess’s harness to the stair rails. Then I got out my regular jeans and T-shirt. I stripped, giving the wig and dress less care than they deserved, flinching as I stuffed them away, but every minute increased the risk of discovery. I quickly pulled my Lane-clothes over the top of my tuck panties and corset. *Not untucking on a public staircase.*

I had makeup-remover pads in my bag, and a compact with a mirror. Ten minutes and a bunch of scrubbing later, I’d removed almost every trace. If my lips looked a bit red, hopefully no one would notice. I put a dab of product in my hair, finger-combed it into place, and repacked the bag. *Okay, now who to call.* I stared at my phone.

Smoothing my life was in theory, part of George’s job as tour manager, but only to the degree it made the band’s life easier too. He’d insist on knowing where I got the dog and the reasons for my being locked in a stairwell. Same for the bodyguards, who probably assumed I was in my room. Jamie would come help, but if he and Val had precious downtime, they liked to spend it together, and I didn’t want to disturb them. Brody wouldn’t ask questions, but he was a straight guy and casual, used to his privilege. I didn’t trust him to keep my secrets. And Tanisha hadn’t been feeling well...

The answer had been a foregone conclusion even before I ran through the list.

Dax and I had been weird around each other since that morning at the pool. We’d spent the last six days putting extra space between us and pretending to be strangers. I’d wondered if he felt exposed by having let me see some of his secrets. Or was he, as I was, remembering that last exchange, his hands on my swim trunks, his eyes boring into mine, and my body trembling with a willingness to go to my knees?

Either way, I realized I trusted him at some cellular level I couldn’t explain. I tapped his contact.

“This better be good, sugar pie,” Dax growled. “I just sacked out with a slice of cake and a movie.”

I froze, trying to figure out his mood. Was he really pissed? Was he just being Dax?

“Come on, out with it.” Something that might’ve been worry changed his tone. “What’s wrong?”

That gave me the courage to take a breath and say, “I need your help.”

“Where?” The immediate sharpening of his voice, alert and competent, shouldn’t have made me as happy as it did.

“No big deal. I just locked myself in the south stairwell and it doesn’t open from this side on our floor.”

“Ah.” He chuckled. “That’s simple. Let me get some pants on.”

Don’t bother. I’d noticed his toned calves and strong thighs at the pool, and another look would be the opposite of a hardship. I wasn’t dumb enough to say so, though. “Thanks.”

I hefted the bags and my princess back up the half flight, hoping that any camera only got checked if a problem was reported. Three minutes later, the door swung open. Dax grinned at me and held it wider for me to get myself and bags through. “What have you been up to— Well, hello, cutie.” He held out a hand to Princess. “Are you being kidnapped? Is this mean man stealing you?”

She wriggled in my hold, trying to lick him, and I hugged her harder, sticking out a hip as one bag’s strap slipped down my arm.

“Let me.” Dax snagged the bag off my shoulder with ease. “Let’s take this circus to your room, and you can tell me what’s going on.”

I might’ve figured just opening the door and letting me disappear was too much to ask for. I couldn’t let Dax in my room, though. A couple of my dresses were still draped across the bed, from when I’d laid them out side by side to make my choice. I dawdled, dragging my feet, my thoughts racing. “I bought the dog off this guy. It was that or let her go to the pound, and she’s older and has bad teeth. I was worried they might put her down.”

“Do you have bad teeth, sweetheart?” As Dax confidently lifted the

little dog's lip, I wished that warm croon had been aimed my way. He chuckled, at her not me. "Yep. I see a tooth cleaning in your future."

"Do you have dogs?" I asked.

"Nope. Always wanted one. I worked as a dog walker for a while, among a variety of jobs. Never had the time and place, though."

Do you want this one? But no, I was already too attached to give my Princess to anyone, even Dax. "I wasn't planning on getting one, but she's so sweet."

Dax hefted the bag he carried, eyed my duffel, then he checked me out head to toe. "What *were* you planning?"

Instead of answering, I said, "That's all her stuff in your bag. Her owner had to leave town to help his sick mother."

Dax's eyebrows rose. "Are you sure you didn't get scammed? How much did you pay for her?"

"I'm sure," I snapped, since I couldn't explain why. Stopping at my room, I pulled out my key. "Thanks for your help. You can leave the bag there."

"Maybe I don't want to."

"I'm fine," I repeated, not tapping the key. "*Thank you.*"

"Hey, who invited who to this little party? You could still be stuck seventeen floors up in the stairwell."

"I'm grateful, okay? But I also want to get this little dog settled in her temporary home with no more stress."

That was a sad excuse. Dax's grin said he knew it, but he set the bag beside my door and bent to rub Princess's ear, murmuring, "You tell the naughty liar man that if he doesn't treat you right, you're going to march on down to my room and stay with me." Straightening, he stared right into my eyes, the green of his contacts bright in the hallway lighting. "Let me know if you need any more... help."

Dax was built almost as lean as I was, but somehow his stride as he walked away reminded me of a big cat, silent and powerful. At his

door, he paused, looking back. Seeing I hadn't moved, he gestured to his own door, mouthed "This one," clearly aimed at Princess, and let himself inside.

As soon as his door shut, I got me, one small dog, and two big bags into my own room, put my back to the door, and slid to the carpet. Princess jumped out of my arms, now the floor was within reach, and began sniffing around. "Uh oh, do you need to go out to pee?" *Downstairs? Again? Now?*

I blinked away some stress moisture from my eyes and pulled her bag close to dig in it for a leash. A pack of something labeled "*Puppy potty pads*" sat on the top of the jumble in the bag. I pulled them out and peered at the front of the box. *Really? Does that work?* Princess's sniffing seemed more agitated so I scrambled up and hurried to the bathroom. "Come on, girl, over here." I laid a pad out on the floor and smoothed it flat.

She sniffed all around the bathroom, ignoring the pad, paying particular interest— *yuck*— around the toilet. Then as I was about to go dig out her leash, she stepped daintily onto the pad, piddled, and stood up, wagging her tail at me.

"Good girl. Wonderful girl." I didn't have a treat to give her, but I knelt to provide tummy rubs and chest scratches and all kinds of praise, before bundling the used pad into the bathroom trash and setting out a new one. *This might actually work out okay.* "Now let's get you set up on the bed or something, while Daddy takes sticky tape off delicate places and showers himself clean. Okay?"

Her head tilt and small yip seemed like an affirmative. Stripping off my shirt, I led her back to the main room. Her bag contained a small plush bed, which I set on the floor beside mine, and an array of toys of all kinds. I was too tired to pick through them, so I just tossed the whole lot around the room. *Help her feel at home, right?* I found a water bowl, which I filled and set in the bathroom, and a food bowl, along with cans of food but no opener. *It's so late. She must've eaten earlier, right?*

"Did you have dinner yet? And I'm talking to you already." Her

bright eyes and the funny way she cocked one ear made that seem reasonable. I scooped her up and kissed her head. “You don’t seem starving, anyhow. There. There’s a chew bone toy.” I set her on the floor next to it. “Have fun while Daddy gets clean.”

That shower was about the best thing I’d ever felt. I kept the bathroom door ajar and listened as I worked conditioner into my hair. If Princess was making any noise, it was softer than the flow of the water. I rinsed my face twice, making sure I got all the foundation away from my hairline, and stood for an extra minute with the hot water pulsing on my shoulders. *Poor man’s massage.* My emotions were all over the place, and I wondered if I’d sleep like a rock or toss and turn all night.

As I shut off the taps, my cell phone pinged from where I’d set it on the counter. I figured it was Dax, asking how the pup was. He seemed like the kind of guy who’d care. I toweled off, then checked the phone.

Richard. *~I’ll be up to your room in fifteen minutes. Which one are you in?*

I froze, staring at the screen. *Now? Seriously?* It’d been a week since I’d seen Richard. I should be eager to get naked with him. Instead, I struggled to raise the energy. *~I’m pretty tired,* I tried. *~How about in the morning?*

~I’m already here. I’ll get you woken up. Which room?

I glanced around wildly. There was a faint odor from the pad in the trash, and a new pad on the floor by the water dish. The other room was strewn with dog toys. I could maybe put her in the bathroom with her stuff, tell Richard the toilet was out of order—

Stepping into the main room as I toweled my hair, a scene of disaster hit my eyes. Scraps of foam lay scattered everywhere across the carpet. Over by the bed, Princess fought a valiant battle to destroy the last of the pillow she must’ve pulled down, shaking it with tiny ferocious growls.

“No! Princess!”

She glanced up, then went back to disemboweling the pillow. I

rushed over and scooped her up. She kept her teeth sunk into the pillowcase until I had her in my arms, then dropped the remnant to pant happily up at me.

“Oh, baby, what a mess.” Richard would have a fit. And a second one when he saw the actual dog.

I hurried to the house phone, dialing the desk. “This is Lane Bennett in seventeen-oh-six. I’d like to add a second room for tonight. Is there anything available?”

“Let me check, sir.” The clerk hesitated, then said, “We’re pretty full up tonight, but we did have a cancellation on the third floor. A basic room, two double beds—”

“Anything up here?” I demanded. Richard would never believe I had a regular room on a non-security floor. “On seventeen?”

“No, Mr. Bennett. That whole floor is reserved.”

“Of course. Thanks.” I hung up. Princess bounced in the crook of my arm, trying to lick my face again. “You’re cute, hon,” I told her, as she managed a swipe across my mouth, “But I don’t want to French you. Yuck.”

~Room number??? Richard was clearly getting impatient.

I did the only thing I could think of and texted Dax. *~Can I borrow your room?*

~Why? Did the dog pee on your carpet?

~No. But my BF’s coming over and he doesn’t like dogs. I didn’t know if Richard did or not, but I’d bet my last dollar he didn’t like the kind of dog that destroyed pillows.

~You sure this guy’s worth ditching your new dog for?

No. No, I wasn’t. But I also didn’t have the energy for the kind of argument that would turn into. *~Just for an hour.*

~I guess. I can swap with you, for a while. I’m in 1704. Don’t expect fresh sheets.

That gave me a new worry, but I was juggling too many eggs to care.

I texted, ~1704 to Richard, and ~*Thanks! So much.* to Dax.

A knock on my door a minute later made me jump. *Can't be Richard yet.* I opened the door a crack on the night latch, to keep the dog from running out, and peered through the gap.

Dax looked up from his phone, scanned my towel-clad body up and down, and grinned. "Hey there, love the outfit."

"I had a shower." *Well, duh. He can see that.* "Give me a minute."

"Let me in and I can help you pick an outfit for the BF."

"I don't need any help. I won't be wearing it long anyway."

"Oooh..." Dax's grin faded as I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Okay, that didn't sound all eager and full of lust."

"It's been a long day. I have a lot going on."

"Tell the BF some other time."

"He flew in to see me." He probably hadn't, really. Odds were, he had some other label business that brought him into town. I was a side benefit, a perk. *When did I get so cynical?* I used to be thrilled when Richard could make it out to see me. I'd fix my hair, agonize over outfits. When had that changed? *Maybe when he said, "It'd be a real shame if your band tanked because it's been hiding a drag queen."* Or if I was honest, some time before that.

"Okay, I guess that's worth making a bit of effort for," Dax said.

What is? Oh yeah, I told him this was a romantic flying visit.

"My room's pretty clean, actually. Take as long as you like. I'll hang out with the little princess." Dax squatted to where the dog had her whole head and half her tiny shoulders through the gap. "Hello, baby, you're so cute. What's your name?"

"Princess, actually," I told him.

"Fitting." He cranked his head to look up at me. "No hardship to spend some time with her."

Now what? My dresses were still laid out, my secrets bare. But how could I send him down to the lobby to wait around while Richard

fucked me? I bent and scooped the dog up, to give myself time to think. “Don’t want her little head caught in the door.”

“For sure.”

“Um, my room’s a mess.”

“Doesn’t bother me.” Dax eyed me, and when my uncertainty about what to do next held me silent, he ran a hand over his bleached-white hair. “Listen, sweetness, I should probably come clean about something.”

“What?”

“If this is why you’re not inviting me in, I know you do drag.”

I gasped, air leaving my chest like someone punched me.

Dax sighed. “See, I figured you’d be upset. That’s why I didn’t say anything.”

A frantic impulse to deny everything choked me. *Stupid. This is Dax. If anyone’s going to be cool with drag, he will.* “How?”

“How did I know? I was in a club a few cities back and saw a gorgeous queen with long red hair, classy, a sexy Audrey Hepburn look. And then she opened her mouth.”

“I sing differently as Ms. Fox.”

“You modulate your head voice to be more breathy, more sultry, but I write for Corvus Rising. I’m very familiar with all our instruments, including your voice.”

“Oh.” I stood there like a lump, until my phone chimed.

Richard. *~Wrapping up this meeting. You’ll want to prep yourself. This was a boring waste of time and I’m very ready for something to feel good.*

I thought, *Wow, so romantic.* I texted back, *~OK*

Given the evils of Richard arriving into this mess, or Dax coming in my room, I chose the lesser option. After sliding the latch off, I pulled the door wide. “Come on in.”

Dax chuckled as he walked past me. “You weren’t kidding about the mess, but looks like it wasn’t all your fault. Princess, you’ve failed to uphold the dignity of the crown.” He reached for her. “Here, I’ll take care of her and defend your pillows while you get ready.”

There was an unexpected comfort in doing what I was told, passing her over, gathering up clean sexy briefs, a pair of jeans and a shirt, and heading to the bathroom to dress. Glancing over my shoulder before I closed the door, I saw Dax stretch out his legs on the bed with Princess cradled to his chest and reach for the TV remote.

The guy looking out of the bathroom mirror at me had dark smudges under his gray eyes. I considered my concealer, but Richard would probably never notice or care. Then, almost begrudgingly, I got out the lube. Richard used to like prepping me, or so he’d said, but now I was in favor of anything that would get him finished fast. Once I was dressed and I’d brushed and blown my hair sleek and tangle-free, I left the small damp sanctuary, my toiletry case in one hand.

Dax sat on top of the covers, his long legs crossed at the ankles and his feet bare. My gaze somehow stopped at those feet, jolted as if he’d stripped naked. Heat flushed my face. *Yeah, because you’re stupid. Feet. Jesus.* I dragged my attention up to his face.

I expected him to be smiling, but his gaze met mine, dark and serious. “You know you don’t have to meet your boyfriend, even if he did fly all this way. Not if you don’t want to.”

I waved an airy hand. “I want. Just not in the middle of the Princess disaster field.” The bits of foam still littered the carpet, which made that half-lie feel like truth.

“Fair enough. Have fun.”

“I won’t dig through your things,” I promised.

“You can’t find my secrets that way anyhow.” He leaned back harder into the stacked pillows. “Text me when you’re heading back. And call housekeeping for the sheets when you’re done.” He rubbed Princess’s ears. She’d moved to curl up against his hip on the bed. “Does the girlie need to go out?”

“She has a piddle pad in the bathroom.” I went and petted her too, my fingers brushing against Dax’s on her fur. “Just don’t let her eat my gowns.”

Dax laughed. “Can do. By the way, you’re an *awesome* drag queen. Ms. Fox slays in all the best ways.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t know what to do with that. No one else in my life besides Mother Kissa knew both sides of me.

He lifted one hip to dig into his pocket. “Here. Key.”

I took the card from his fingers. “Thanks again. I’ll... see you soon?”

“Have fun.” Dax ran his tongue over his lips. I followed its motion. He pretended to cover Princess’s ears and said, “*All* the fun. Fuck your dude in every hole, or vice versa, whatever floats your boat. All that jizz.”

I was smiling as I made my way to 1704 and let myself in. The room was almost pristine, the bed still made although a wrinkle in the covers showed Dax had probably been lounging on it when I called. *Relaxed, stretched out, like he is on my bed now...* I yanked my thoughts back to preparing for Richard.

In the bathroom, Dax’s toiletries case was a fifth the size of mine. I stowed it under the counter with a crumpled towel draped over it. *Not that Richard’s likely to know it’s not mine.* I set my own by the sink and pulled out a few items, taking the lube and condoms to the bed. When I opened the bedside drawer, I spotted a different lube. *No condoms, though.*

Maybe Dax wasn’t hooking up or maybe he kept one in his wallet. *Or maybe he goes bare, since he’s on PrEP.* That shouldn’t have been a turn-on, but the idea of taking Dax’s— well, any guy’s— cock bare, spunk oozing out of my well-used ass, made my dick twitch. Not Richard’s cum. I knew damned well we weren’t exclusive. But someday, someone’s.

As I tucked Dax’s lube out of sight and put Richard’s preferred brands in handy reach, I heard a knock on the door. *Showtime.* I let myself imagine that scene, a man’s naked cock, my waiting ass, as I

went to let Richard in. The idea made me hard inside my jeans, and sure enough, when I opened the door, Richard's gaze went straight to my groin.

“Eager little boy, aren't you?” He pushed me backward as he entered, slamming the door and throwing the privacy lock behind him. “Did you prep? Are you ready to bend over for me, boy?” He grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me into a hot, wet kiss.

I liked being manhandled. The confident way he moved me and took my mouth was a reminder of how we'd started, and of the revelation sex with Richard had been to my virgin ass. I shoved all my doubts and dissatisfactions down deep and focused on sex. *Just sex. Hot, hard, now.* I moaned as he turned us to press my body up against the door. *Don't think. Bodies, not brains.* My dick was onboard with that.

Chapter 8

Dax

Not snooping was damned hard for me. There'd been times when digging deeper was what kept me safe.

Like the john who'd had handcuffs, duct tape, and a knife in his briefcase. I'd checked inside his bag in the two minutes he was in the bathroom taking a piss while thinking I was safely immobilized, my wrist fastened to a bedpost with his necktie. *"Just a game, you can always say no, I pay well."*

I was limber and my toes were damned near prehensile. Once I'd dragged the case to me and discovered my cold feet were justified, the knife made short work of that tie. I took the blade with me. An anonymous weapon could be useful. Left the briefcase— wasn't like I could give it to a cop who'd care. I let myself out of that motel room and ran. Warned the other boys about a big maroon Lincoln.

That was far from the only time snooping out secrets had saved my ass.

So it was some kind of fucking miracle that I was still sitting in that same place on the bed, a sleeping dog in my lap, when Lane let himself in the door an hour later.

"You were gonna text," I said. "I might've been jerking off."

He huffed a tired breath. "Sorry. Forgot."

"You look thoroughly fucked out." He was walking gingerly and his long, dark hair hung damp to his shoulders, fresh from another shower.

“Yeah.”

“Glad you had a good time.”

He blinked as if that didn’t make sense, but then said, “Yeah,” again, and dug my key card out of his pocket. “Here. Although you might want to wait for maid service. The sheets aren’t pretty.”

“I’ll do that.” I set the little dog onto the comforter well away from the nearest draped gown, stood, and went to Lane.

He blinked tiredly. “They said they’d send someone up. Didn’t say how soon.”

I glanced at the bedside clock radio. “It’s almost two a.m. It’d take a pretty drastic housekeeping emergency to get them up at this hour.”

He looked upset. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think— I was going to blow him, but he wanted more.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I wanted to touch his cheek or that full lip he was chewing. Instead, I took the card from his fingers and slipped it into my pocket. A touch of mischief made me say, “I can just sleep here.” *Ooh, that made those pretty eyes wake up and widen.*

“Here?”

“Sure. The bed’s wide enough.” I’d made the suggestion to tweak him, but the more I thought about it, the better it sounded. I had no real desire to crawl into a bed while avoiding some douchebag’s wet spot, and I was pretty sure Lane’s boyfriend qualified. Plus, staying here, I’d be around for Lane. I wasn’t sure what’d happened tonight, or how he’d acquired a dog, but something told me he could use a friend.

You don’t do “friends.”

Shut up. It’s just temporary. And the dog’s cute.

“Platonically, of course,” I went on. “You have space. I’ll even help you pick up the shredded foam off the carpet. Unless you want to Instagram it first.” The mess was making me twitchy, but it wasn’t my mess, so that made it less irritating. And the dog would no doubt be an Instagram hit, if Lane was hoping for more exposure. She was super cute.

“No, I don’t want to do any promo with her.” Lane knelt to begin picking up the chewed-up bits. He looked up at me. I liked him on his knees there in front of me, a bit too much.

“Why not? Not macho enough for your brand?”

Lane snorted. “I don’t have a brand. And no, my masculinity isn’t insecure. I like my femme side. But I got Princess when I was in drag. Those ladies don’t know my real name, but if, on the same night, Lane Bennett picks up a new pup with the same name that looks just like her? They’re not stupid.”

“Got it. Makes sense.” I knelt to help him round up the tiny shreds of foam.

Princess woke with a yip, bounded down off the bed, and began trying to get Lane to play, nipping at the foam in his hands and wiggling her butt. Lane fended her off, scolding her gently for the mess in a voice that just made her prick her ears up and bark.

That’s adorable. Someone should video that. I kept picking up foam.

After a while, I suggested, “Why don’t you get your gowns hung up before they wrinkle? I can finish here.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks.” He stuffed his handfuls of scraps into the trash can I held out and went to wash up, returning to ease the dresses onto their hangers and drape them in the closet one by one.

“Why the dog?” I asked after a minute, rolling her over to rub her little belly. She wriggled and waved tiny paws and piddled a drop or two, but I used the foam to wipe her and threw it away. No need to worry about bladder issues unless it became a habit. No doubt she was overexcited tonight. “We have nine more days on the road. You couldn’t wait till we got home?”

“Like I said, it was an emergency. The guy had to catch a plane, and none of the other queens could take her. They all knew him, and they were worried about Princess. It wasn’t a scam.”

I held up a hand. “I believe you. Just saying, the bus is tight quarters.” Although not as tight as some. We didn’t have to use the upper births, so we each had our own little bunk that wasn’t too

claustrophobic.

“You think Jamie will be mad?” Lane smoothed a crimson silk dress over and over, his gaze fixed on his hands. The way his fingers caressed the fabric suggested the feel soothed him. “I wanted to do something good, helpful, you know? Something the other queens would appreciate.”

If they didn't appreciate your performance, they have zero taste. But I understood wanting to belong in a group. I'd done some really stupid things to stay popular with the other rent boys I'd hung out with for two years. “Nah,” I drawled. “Jamie's laid-back. He'll be fine.” I'd catch him first and make sure of that. Lane had been stressed all month, but every time he focused on Princess, the lines of his face relaxed. Worth every bit of inconvenience.

Lane hung up the last gown, then looked around the room. “I should pick up my other stuff, but I'm so tired.”

“That's fine. There'll be time tomorrow.” We were playing at nine p.m., with a sound check at six-thirty, but that left the whole day.

“You're sure? Your room was so tidy.”

I should've just said, *I like my things put away.* But I was tired too. I told him, “When you've had basically nothing, you treat everything you do have like gold. This mess is your stuff, not mine. Doesn't bother me.” *Much.*

Lane sighed and his shoulders slumped. “Oh, good. Do you want the bed or the couch?”

I eyed the couch, which was more like a loveseat, set between two armchairs. These might be this hotel's luxury suites, but that thing was not made to be slept on. “You too prissy to share a bed?”

“No! I wasn't sure you'd want to.”

I gave him a long up-and-down appraisal and drawled, “You're not that ugly.”

He blinked at me, gray eyes glazed as if he wasn't sure what I was suggesting. I took pity on him. Poor dude had been on stage, then

handed a dog, then fucked within an inch of his life, if I was reading his winces correctly. No wonder his brain had begun short-circuiting.

“Not too ugly to sleep next to,” I clarified. “In a no-sex way. On the nice big bed that has room for two grown men without having to grope each other.”

“Oh. Right.” He picked up a crumpled shirt off the floor and made a half-hearted attempt to fold it.

“Come on.” I went to him, took the shirt out of his hands and tossed it onto an armchair. Then I lifted the hem of the one he was wearing and said, “Hands high.” He reached up obediently, and I skinned the shirt off him, slinging it after the other one. “Now your jeans.”

He unbuttoned before jolting to a stop at my nearness.

I grinned, stepped back, peeled off my own shirt and cargo shorts, and folded them neatly on one nightstand. Lifting the covers, I slid underneath still dressed in my boxer-briefs. I saw Lane sneak a look at me, then leave his sexy little briefs in place, too. *Yeah, no objections to the full Monty, but I'm not planning to fuck you, so underwear's a good choice.*

He turned off the main light, checked the door, then got in on the other side. Princess trotted to his side of the bed and yipped. He bent over the side to pet her. “Your bed’s over there.” He pointed at a plush dog bed against the wall three feet away.

She yipped again, gathered herself, and jumped up on the bed. Lane scooped her up and set her on the floor. “No, sweetie. Your own bed.”

I rolled up on one elbow to watch. I had a feeling this was going to be entertaining.

The dog rebounded off the floor the moment her paws touched carpet, landing by Lane’s leg. He sighed, picked her up, and got out of bed. “Over here, Princess.” Setting her on the center of the purple plush, he sat on the carpet beside her, stroking her. She curled up under his touch, eyelids drooping. “Yeah, go to sleep, sweetie. You’ve had a long day but I promise, you’re safe now.” Lane slowed his petting, eased to his feet, and sneaked back to the bed.

He slid under the sheets, the cotton whispering over his slender, waxed-hairless legs. The dog's eyes popped open. She trotted over, stood on her hind legs to sniff his way, then jumped. Good thing she was tiny, since she landed squarely in Lane's lap.

"Ouch, baby, watch the paws." He lifted her down.

She jumped back up.

"Time to admit defeat," I told him. "The dog wants on the bed."

"It's bad precedent." But he petted her gently.

"You're not going to change her in one night."

"I suppose." Lane nudged her toward our feet. "Down there, where we're less likely to roll over on you."

Princess gave him a little yip, but turned three circles and curled up alongside his knees.

Lane watched her as she tucked her nose under one paw. "You think she'll be okay?" he asked. "We're her third owners in a year. Joel said she was his boyfriend's first, and the dude dumped her."

That "*we*" had to be the result of too little sleep and diminishing brainpower. I decided to ignore it, no matter how much I'd always wanted a dog. *She's not mine*. I said, "She seems amazingly chill. Other than the shredded pillow."

Lane turned on his side to face me, and I eased down off my elbow. Princess whined once, then settled. "She does, doesn't she? Maybe this'll be one thing I ended up doing right."

That nudged me back from the edge of sleep. "What do you mean, the one thing? You do lots of things right. Corvus and your bass playing, Ms. Fox and your singing. You've got a boyfriend flying miles to be with you. You're not even that bad of a swimmer."

"I guess." He didn't sound convinced. I didn't like the way a fuck session with his BF, which should leave him flying high, seemed to sink him with doubts instead.

Whoever the bastard is, he's not good enough for Lane. I lightened

my tone. “Now if we could just add ‘doesn’t snore’ to your credentials, you’d be about perfect. Sadly, we share a bus. I know that’s a pipedream.”

“Hey, I don’t snore. Brody snores.” Lane blinked at me from the other pillow. “Your eyes are still green. I thought...”

“Extended wear contacts,” I told him. “My solutions and stuff are in my room, and I’m not going over at two in the morning to fetch them.”

“Why, though? I liked your blue eyes.”

I like green. For some reason, I kept wanting to give this kid the truth. “I wanted to escape who I used to be. I changed every detail I could.” *Cut and bleached my hair, worked out to add muscle and definition, picked some visible piercings, kept tanning my skin within an inch of melanoma whenever I got the chance.* That thought annoyed me. *I have reasons. It’s not vanity, or fun and games.* But maybe the reasons that were so strong back when I was twenty weren’t so important, more than ten years later.

I’ll think about that. Someday. Dax Crow was who I’d become when logic and necessity demanded it. I wasn’t ready to backtrack yet. Not even for a cute twink bass player who liked my natural eye color.

“Who’d you used to be?” Lane’s tone dragged, and I wondered if he’d even remember if I told him.

Ashton Samuels, stupid kid, apprentice sound tech, and rent boy going by Shane. Ace, bass player for Card Crimson and fuck toy for Richard Kensington. Asher King, session player and studio gofer. Dax Crow, half-brother to Jameson Crow, songwriter and live effects mixer for Corvus Rising.

I’d done enough truth for one night, though. “Go to sleep, Lane.”

“Yess’r.” His eyes closed between one breath and the next.

I pushed up enough to reach the switch for my lamp. As I stretched out my arm, Princess popped up her head to watch me. “Don’t worry, sweetie,” I whispered. “The kid and I aren’t going anywhere.” She sighed and laid her chin back on a paw, but her big dark eyes were still open as I shut off the light.

In the faint glow of the clock radio, I watched her for a couple of minutes, then reached across Lane's relaxed, sleeping body to scoop up the tiny dog. I turned my ass to Lane's front and settled the dog against my chest under my chin. "There. You're safe. Now sleep."

She murmured a tiny sound, stuck her damp nose into my armpit, and closed her eyes. I was more tired than I expected for a half-day of travel and no performance, but I spent quite a while feeling the dog's tiny, slow exhales and listening to Lane's soft sounds before drifting off myself.

Lane

I came awake to the realization someone was sleeping in my bed. My first thought was *Richard* but immediately afterward, memories of last night came back to me and I sighed with relief.

Then realized what I'd felt. *Relief. I'd far rather share a bed platonically with Dax than sleep with Richard after sex.* Admitting that brought back the unease I'd shoved out of sight when Richard and I were getting hot and heavy in Dax's room.

I should break up with Richard.

That was easier said than done, though. Safer thought than said. I'd never been the one in control around Richard. He'd picked me up the first time, and he'd called the shots every time since. Telling him we were through didn't feel easy.

Well, he's satisfied for now. I probably won't see him again for a week. I don't need to make any decisions right now.

I turned my head to look at Dax. Lying asleep in the thin morning light, he appeared older—the thirty-one he claimed, rather than the mid-twenties people would assume when his face was animated by his strong personality. A haze of stubble on his usually smooth skin softened the edges of his polished persona. I liked that bit of imperfection.

His toughness was also undermined by the fluffy dog curled up under his chin. At some point in the night, Princess had come and slept by my hand, but later she'd deserted me for Dax. When I moved, ever so slowly, she opened her eyes to watch me without lifting her head.

I bent to press my lips to her forehead, and then, driven by God knows what impulse, shifted to brush a kiss on Dax's cheek. But he woke as I moved, and turned so my lips met the corner of his. I froze, staring into his eyes, their green a little hazy with sleep. He smiled wickedly and grabbed the back of my head with one hand. "That's barely a two out of ten, sweetie pie." Pulling me down, he took my mouth in a hot, hard, sleep-sticky kiss.

Then he blinked and let go, turning and sitting up with a ripple of his tight abs. He rubbed his mouth. "Sorry. Damn. You woke me out of a dream."

About me? I went for nonchalant. "I hope we at least broke the two out of ten barrier."

Dax laughed, eyes bright. "Six, sweet cheeks. Would've been higher, but morning breath is a thing."

Can we try for ten? I licked my lips, unsure how to ask, but I was reminded of morning breath. And all the reasons we shouldn't. "Yeah, let me go clean up." I slid out from under the sheet.

Princess bounced to the floor and leaped around, yipping at me.

"I think someone wants to go out," Dax said.

I told her, "You can wait ten minutes. There's a pad in the bathroom. I'll leave the door open." I needed a shower desperately. I'd taken one in Dax's room once Richard was gone, but lube had still leaked into my crack overnight and my ass felt sticky and sore. I found clean clothes and headed to the bathroom, remembering my manners at the door. I turned back to Dax. "Unless you want it first?"

He lounged on the pillows, smiling faintly, his usual cool in place. "Nope. From the way you're walking, I'd say some hot water's definitely needed. Looks like you put my room to *gooood* use."

I plastered on a return smile. “Yep. Sure did. Thanks.”

Leaving the door cracked open for Princess, I stepped out of my briefs and turned on the shower. The mirror showed bruises coming up on my neck, pecs, and hips, the marks of fingers and teeth. *I like it that way. Or used to.* When I’d started seeing Richard, I used to stand in front of the mirror and press on my new bruises, enjoying the twinge that reminded me of our hot sex. Now... I couldn’t be bothered.

Under the flow of the water, I rinsed my face and mouth, eyes closed, taking long, damp breaths. A hint of scent rose from my wet hair, cloying and musky— Richard’s cologne. I grabbed my shampoo bottle out of the niche and rubbed a palmful into my hair, digging my fingertips in deep to my scalp. Eucalyptus and coconut replaced the musk. Sighing, relaxing into the heat, I washed myself all over with it, rubbing suds into my hairless groin and pits. A hint of regrowth around my balls reminded me I’d need to wax again when we got home.

Home. I was ready to be there, back off the road on my familiar ground. We’d be recording a new album after Rocktoberfest. I’d heard bits and pieces of the songs, as Dax and Jamie worked together on the bus while the miles rolled by, and there was good stuff coming. I’d have The D-Spot and Mother Kissa, the lovely Hoa to pull my hairs out by the roots and make me not-scream, my own apartment, my books, my full wardrobe. Now I’d have a dog, too.

And Dax? Will I have him?

I reminded myself that I didn’t *have* Dax now. We were friends, maybe. That wasn’t too much of a stretch, between the great dog caper and sharing a platonic bed. He’d be around at Rocktoberfest and later while we recorded in L.A., in the thick of the process. Our signature sound was as much due to his backing tracks and mixing as to our instruments and voices. But it wouldn’t be like now, like on the tour bus knowing he was sleeping two bunks back. It wouldn’t be like waking up sleepy-eyed this morning to find him there—

Crap. I gave my cheek a sharp slap. One night of expedience, because I and my *boyfriend who isn’t Dax* had messed up his sheets,

was not a trend. *This is not some kind of relationship.*

I rinsed myself ruthlessly, ignoring the way the shampoo stung my overused asshole. As I turned off the water and yanked the curtain aside, the bathroom door opened and Dax appeared, Princess in his hands.

He set her on her pad. “There, little girl. That’s the spot.” She sniffed around and he turned to me. “She was acting suspicious. I didn’t want an accident.” A corner of his mouth curved up as he gave me an unabashed once-over. “Nice bruises. Nice balls.” As Princess peed, he looked down and said in the same tone, “Nice job.”

I grabbed a towel and draped it over myself, but couldn’t help laughing. “Thanks for keeping an eye on her.”

“Reputation of the band, y’know. Wouldn’t want a rumor going around that Corvus Rising likes to piss on hotel floors.”

Princess finished and yipped up at me.

“You may still want to take her out to crap,” Dax suggested.

“Of course. Here.” I snatched my things off the counter. “I’ll let you have the shower.”

He grabbed my arm to stop me. “I can go back to my own room.”

The touch of his hand on my skin jolted me. My gaze flew to his. I saw his eyes widen, the hint of blue in the center vanishing into dark pupils and bottle green rims. I licked my lips and swayed closer, letting the towel fall from my hand.

“Playing with fire,” Dax murmured, not letting go of my forearm.

“You said we could do better without the morning breath.”

“Mm.”

“Let’s go for ten.” I wasn’t sure where my reckless words were coming from. Maybe some lingering bit of Ms. Fox, rising to the surface. “Unless six is the best you can do?”

Dax let go of me and I had a moment of regret. Then, eyes fixed on me, he filled a glass at the sink and drank a slow mouthful at a time

until it was gone. He set the glass aside. "Game on?"

The cautious bit of me that let Richard approach me first and call the shots wanted to back off, but who I was with Dax wasn't who I was with Richard. I tossed my wet hair back and cocked a naked hip. "Think you can manage an eight?"

Dax closed both hands on my biceps, pulled me close, and bent his head.

I expected him to dive in, but he began softly, light brushes of his lips against mine. I opened my mouth and tried to capture his, asking for more. He nipped my lower lip.

"Slow down. Ten takes time." He kissed me again, firmer but still leisurely, his breath warm against mine, his tongue tracing where he'd pinched me. Gradually he upped the heat, changed the angle, pressed into my mouth.

I groaned and sagged against him. He was almost naked, his skin against my wet chest, the thin fabric of his underwear little barrier to feeling his morning wood pressed to my stomach. He shifted his hands to hold me up, cupping my ass. Raising me on my toes, he pulled me against him. Our dicks met. Dampened fabric dragged past my cockhead. His tongue stroked over mine, then plunged in and out of my mouth. I gasped, ready and willing, humping against him.

Dax let go, stepped back, and grinned. "Nine."

I clutched the edge of the counter and blinked hard. "What would ten be?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" He tapped my cheek with two fingers, slipped out of the door, and closed it in my face.

I stood there, staring at the white surface. *Yes. Yes, I would like to know.*

At my feet, Princess whined, then began barking at the closed door.

"Right. That's a pretty conclusive brush-off, isn't it, girl?" Although preceded by one hell of a come-on, so the definition of a mixed message. I had my pride, though. I wasn't going to yank open the door

and charge after Dax like I wanted to.

I took the time to towel-dry and blow my hair a bit, ignoring Princess's whuffing and snuffing and whining at the crack under the door. Once I'd pulled on shorts and a T-shirt, I let myself step out into the room.

Dax was gone, of course. Cracked-open curtains leaked daylight across the room. The bed had been made, my clothes looked less strewn about, but there was no sign of the man.

Princess trotted to the door and barked, so I found a pair of sneakers, stuffed my feet into them, dug through her bag for her leash and finally located her harness on a shelf in the closet. Getting the harness on her as she wiggled and tried to lick my chin was a big ask for me at that hour, before coffee or food, but I managed. I scooped her up, checked I had my key card, and let us out into the hall.

The door to 1704 remained shut as I passed. I didn't see the heap of dirty sheets I'd piled outside the door, so I figured housekeeping had done their job before Dax had gone back.

Filipe sat in a chair by the elevators, reading something on his phone. He tucked it away and stood as I approached. "Going out?" He raised his eyebrows at Princess. "Who's the mutt? I didn't see it arrive."

"I brought *her* in with me last night. Princess is my new dog."

"Okay. Does the boss man know about her?"

Jamie's door behind me opened. "Know about what?" He stretched in the doorway. Behind him, I could see Val dressed in briefs and an open button-down shirt lounging on an armchair. Jamie's attention focused. "Hey, you have a puppers!"

"A what?" Val came over too, buttoning the shirt so it covered most of her. "Aww. Cute."

I turned and handed Princess to Jamie's grabby hands, and smiled as he babytalked her. He eventually passed her to Val. "What's the deal? You dog-sitting?"

“A friend had to give her up.” I could call Joel a friend. “No one else could take her. She won’t be much trouble. We have barely a week left on the tour.”

“I guess she’s little enough. As long as she’s housetrained.”

“She’s perfect,” I said, crossing my fingers because ten hours wasn’t a big sample. “Uses a pad when she can’t go outside.”

“That’d work. You want me to let the hotel know?”

“Please.” They’d bend over to accommodate Jameson Crow, I was sure.

Val cuddled Princess, then passed her back to me. “Hey, she could be the band mascot. Maybe if we bring her to the afterparty we won’t have to do another boring fight.”

I dodged the suggestion. “Another fight?”

“Yeah, some fan took a bunch of pictures of us out to dinner last night looking too friendly. The label wants us to *keep the mystery alive* at the afterparty.” She sighed.

“Can’t you just tell the label to back off? You’re Crow and Hawk. You have, like, a million fans. Will they really care if you’re a happy couple?”

“Some of them, I guess,” Jamie said. “Particularly the ones who want to get into Val’s pants.”

“Enough to keep going through this bullshit?”

Jamie shrugged. “The label thinks so.”

A thought occurred to me. “Do you think the label would care if I was with someone?”

Val’s face brightened. “Yeah? We wondered if you were sneaking off to be with somebody. Are you and your girlfriend, boyfriend, themfriend, getting serious?”

“Boyfriend,” I admitted, my heart racing although I’d already told Jamie I was gay. Val hadn’t been there, but he probably didn’t keep secrets from her, and anyway, the two of them regularly had

threesomes so I had no reason to worry. Except for Filipe, of course— I threw a quick look at the hunky bodyguard, but his expression hadn't changed.

“Good for you,” Val said.

“But no,” I rushed to add. “We’re not serious. Not with him. That’s more a friends with benefits thing.” *Without actually being friends.* “I meant, someday.”

“I don’t know.” Jamie leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Don’t spread it around, but we’re thinking about ditching L.A. Streetcorner. We’re committed for this tour and Rocktoberfest, but we haven’t signed a contract for the new album yet. I was going to discuss it with all of you, once this tour’s over.”

“What about rights to our songs, though? Would we be able to sing the old stuff if Streetcorner has the copyrights?” I should know more about this than I did, but I’d been so thrilled to get signed with Corvus Rising, I hadn’t paid enough attention.

“We can perform them,” Val said. “The venues buy blanket licenses. Our re-recording restriction is ten fucking years, though, because we traded that for other considerations. It’ll still be worth it, to ditch Streetcorner.”

Jamie nodded. “Our four-year contract, the second one, we made the label well over a million dollars, and took home around ten-k each per year. Hell, the first contract, year one, we ended up in the hole, owing them money on the merch advance. We ran our current contract through a good lawyer, and we’re making decent money now, but they still screw with us over the artist warranties clauses and some of the tour costs.” Jamie stopped, looking sheepish. “Sorry. Sore topic, and not one I should be discussing in a hotel hallway. Let’s just say, we’re biding our time. If you do get serious about someone, you’ll probably want to do the same.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I said, a little blindsided.

Val reached past Jamie to rub Princess’s ears, as the dog squirmed in my arms. “Hang in there, Lane. When we were young and stupid, we got fucked over, like every other band out there, but we’re on a roll

now.” Princess licked Val’s fingers and she smiled. “Take this little girl out. Filipe, you go with him. Jamie and I aren’t going anywhere until sound check. Other than to get ice.” She scooped up a Styrofoam bucket Jamie had dropped and tapped it against his chest. “Remember, big man?”

Filipe pressed the elevator call button and, as Jamie headed off toward the ice machine, he ushered me inside, taking up a position between me and the doors. “Lobby or parking garage?”

“Which do you recommend?”

“Let’s go via parking. The lobby will be busy and the garage has three exits to outdoors.”

“Sounds good.”

We got off into the echoing concrete hallways. Filipe guided me through one level full of parked cars to an exterior staircase that led down to a sidewalk. Turning left, he led the way to a grassy area on the edge of the outdoor parking. I set Princess on the grass, where she sniffed around happily.

“How did you find this spot? This is perfect.”

“Kevin and I check out all the entrances and exits around any hotel Jamie and Val are staying in. It’s our job.”

“Oh. Sure.” I watched my little girl pounce on a moth fluttering in the grass. “Hey, baby, that’s not food.”

“Won’t hurt her,” Filipe said.

I realized I’d miss him and Kevin when the tour was up. We didn’t spend a lot of time together, since Jamie and Val were their main responsibility, but there’d been more than a few times this guy had been the rock at my elbow when crowds got overwhelming. “If Corvus goes to a new label, you won’t be able to work for us, will you? Aren’t you paid by the label?” It occurred to me that Jamie’s secret might’ve been better off not aired in front of the label’s bodyguard.

As if he’d read my mind, Filipe grinned. “We’re independent contractors, Kevin and me, through the firm we work for. The label

pays our boss, but not enough to spill anyone's secrets. Ain't enough money for that. Nothing would get us blacklisted faster in the biz than tattling. If Jamie and Val move on, we'd be happy to take their new label's money."

"Oh." I felt happier. "That's cool."

Filipe pointed to my left. "Time to pick up your poo."

I glanced at Princess, flushed, and dug through my pockets. *Knew I forgot something. I could pick it up with dollar bills out of my wallet...*

Filipe pulled a plastic bag out of his hip pocket, dumped half a dozen hair ties in his palm, and handed me the bag. "There. Don't say I didn't never get you nothing."

I laughed and bent to deploy the bag. "Hair ties?" His dark curls were cropped military short.

"For Val. Keep all that hair out of her eyes, if need be."

"Always be prepared."

"Boy Scout motto."

I glanced around for a trash can. "You were a Boy Scout?"

"Nope." He peered at me over the sunglasses he'd put on when we left the shadows of the garage.

If that'd been Dax, I'd recognize a joke lurking in his eyes. With Filipe, I couldn't tell. "I don't suppose your super reconnaissance skills told you where there's a trash bin?"

He pushed the glasses higher on his nose. "Sure did. Your girl done with her walk?"

Princess had stretched out in the grass, panting lightly, eyes half-shut against the sun. "Looks like it." At least she wasn't going to be a demanding pet.

"This way, then." As I scooped her up one-handed, he added, "What are you going to do with her during the concert? Will she be okay in your hotel room?"

She licked my chin and I wanted to say I'd bring her along, but the concert noise levels would be painful and I'd have my hands full. *How many pillows can she destroy?* "I'll put her in the bathroom," I decided. "Dog-proofed." *See, I have my life together. Everything's working.*

But as we turned to head around to the front of the garage, the shape of Filipe's ass under his slacks made me think of Dax's, revealed by snug boxer-briefs. Made me think of how he'd left me hard and wanting and confused. A thread of scent on the air reminded me of Richard and last night, the way he fucked me six ways from Sunday, but not before he got off on making me give him every last bit of control. And then he strutted out, and I went back to Dax...

I so do not have my life together.

Chapter 9

Dax

Every venue, every concert, had its own energy. Albuquerque's arena had even more reverb than most from big expanses of concrete, but it also had brand-new electronics and a good-sized stage. There was room for me to do the vocal and guitar effects and backing tracks from the wings and send the submix to the venue's front-of-house technician. I'd met up with their FOH and she seemed smart and prepared.

Corvus Rising was halfway through their sound check, and already I could tell this was going to be a great show. I don't know if Lane was responding to getting laid or kicking back with Princess, but his bass was crisper and more powerful than usual. Jamie and Val seemed stoked too. No doubt, they'd put a free day in a hotel to good use.

I told Jamie to give me a minute and checked my settings for "Echoes in the Deep." The delays could be tricky to get the echo effects without making the sound muddy. I wouldn't need as much reverb as usual either. Climbing the steps with my iPad in hand, I found a place in the thirtieth row center front and waved the band on. They launched into "Echoes" with enthusiasm.

Lane's arms carried more muscle than you'd expect for his slender size and he played his bass like it was a piece of him. The stage was just lit by the overheads, but his dark hair showed hints of red as he tossed his head. I wondered if he'd ever play a big stage as Ms. Fox, red hair gleaming, his husky voice rising as Val's clear one did now...

Jamie stopped after the chorus and called up to me, "What do you think?"

I flushed, realizing I'd spaced. "Try once more," I called down.

This time, I paid close attention. The song sounded pretty good. A little crowded in the upper registers. I'd need to EQ those frequencies a bit to clean it up, but the delay worked.

"Twice more," I called when they paused again. "Stage left and right." I made my way along the row to the far side.

By the time soundcheck was done, all the musicians had sweat beading on their faces. They filed off the stage to the thumbs up from the roadies, and a call or two of "Sounds great" from the opening act waiting their turn to go out. Lane handed off his guitar to the tech and ran a wrist over his forehead. "Hotter than hell out there. I hope they crank the AC tonight."

"Eighteen thousand fans in those seats? They'd better." Jamie passed over his instrument too. "I hope the dressing rooms are cooler."

I stuck around to make sure the gear was all moved and stowed properly, ready for tonight. Procrastinating, I put the cover over my mixing desk and straightened it twice, before following the band into the bowels of the venue.

I'd avoided Lane all day, and I wasn't sure if I should show up in his field of view now. Because what the *fuck* did we do when we woke up this morning?

I wasn't sure if Lane had kissed me first or I'd kissed him. Hardly mattered, since we'd both gone on with plenty of enthusiasm. I'd been shocked by how right Lane felt between my hands and taking my tongue. I'd bullshitted him about nine out of ten, but that kiss in the bathroom had been a fucking eleven. One of the hardest things I'd ever done was to back out and close the door, instead of nailing his hot ass over the bathroom counter.

So where do we go from here?

I was damned if I knew, and three hours to showtime didn't feel like the moment to bring it up. Instead of heading to the dressing rooms or the catering room where the crew would be hanging out, I wandered

back into the concrete labyrinth and found a quiet offshoot leading to a utility room. Putting my back to the painted wall, I slid to sit on the floor.

The concrete isolation felt familiar, almost comforting. I'd spent a lot of hours, hell, a lot of years, finding some quiet nook to sit and catch my breath and work on music. Whether I'd had a home that didn't want me anymore, or no home, or a room with five other guys in it, spaces like this had been my refuge. I raised my knees, set my phone on them, and stuck a pod in one ear.

Jamie and I didn't have one single working style. Sometimes music came first, sometimes words, sometimes a mashup of both. I pulled one of our recent music-first works in progress and cued it up, closing my eyes to listen. Images spooled through my head as the notes played.

Ice breaking, maybe. Or a spring rising from the ground. The relief when a fight is over. No, not a hot fight, the coldness after a fight. Or during, when you fight someone with ice in their heart.

I opened a note-taking app and began throwing out lines.

Cracked your ice
Cold as hell
When we fight
I can't tell
Is it fuckin' over yet?

You freeze up
When I yell
Walk away
Empty shell
Is it fuckin' over yet?

That felt like the beginning of something. A bit trite, maybe, but it held the kernel of that doubt and fear. I began just listing random lines, not worrying about how they fit in. Stuff we could pick through the next time Jamie and I worked together, fumbling around for the right twist. Was that feeling of relief at the end a reconciliation, or knowing when to walk away? The second option felt better, less

obvious. I knew that moment intimately, relief so strong you almost passed out when you cut ties that were wrapped around your neck—

“What?” I jumped, grabbed for my phone, and glared up at... Lane? Standing five feet away, between me and the exit from my niche. Past and present collided for a moment, tangling my tongue, and my heart thudded.

“Sorry!” He held up empty hands. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

I shoved to my feet as I subdued that instant of panic. *Fourteen years later. I’m not that guy.* I found a sharp grin with some teeth in it, plastered it on my face. “What *did* you want then?”

I regretted the sharpness when Lane’s expression faltered. “I just wondered where you were. Catering’s awesome here and I didn’t think you’d eaten. Everyone else is there.”

“Except you.” I stretched so my shirt rode up and my arm muscles tightened, taking my tone toward seductive, my other fallback mode. “Look where *you* are.”

Lane blinked. “Um, trying to get you to come have quesadillas?”

“Jesus, kid, don’t you recognize a come-on when it smacks you in the dick?”

He laughed softly. “I guess not. Is this really the place?”

We were secluded enough, but I could hear the hum filling the building as thousands of fans invaded. Which meant dozens of employees would be walking around, so no, probably not. I let the seduction go. “I suppose I could eat.” After all, he was here, which meant avoiding him was already borked. “Hey, what did you do with Princess? Is she hanging out in the dressing rooms?” I wouldn’t mind a little dog time. Writing that song had put me in a weird place.

“No. I was going to leave her in my hotel bathroom with all her stuff, but Kevin talked to the concierge and they offer a dog-sitting service. She’s being spoiled by some middle-aged woman who runs it, while we’re out making noise that would offend her delicate ears.”

“Did they give you a hard time about having her in the room?”

“Nope. Although I think they’re going to charge extra.”

“Fair enough.”

“They asked if she had a vet and stuff. That’ll be top of my list when we get home.” Lane fell in beside me as we strolled up the corridor, our tension gone with talk of the pup. He turned an odd little smile on me. “Of course, I’ll have to get your permission.”

I stopped, staring at him. “My what?”

Lane chewed his lower lip. I wanted to touch him, tell him to quit that. Wasn’t sure he’d welcome it. He was the one who’d backed off, a moment ago. He said, “About that. She’s kind of... yours? Just for now. I put your name on the bill of sale.”

That hit me somewhere down inside, like a blade melting to honey. “Mine? Like, a present?” No one gave me presents, well, except Jamie these days, on my birthday or Christmas. But not just because. And never the kind of furry ball of love I’d dreamed of since I was five. “She’s mine?”

“Just on paper,” Lane hurried to say. “Her previous owner wanted a legal name to put on the bill of sale. I was standing right in front of him, dressed as Ms. Fox, and I didn’t want to say ‘Lane Bennett’ when my face was in ads for the show all week. So I told him ‘Dax Crow.’ I figured we could fix it any time.”

“Fix it. Right.” I schooled my face to perfect stillness. I’d mastered that before I was sixteen. *Not mine, not a present, not really.* I patted my pockets. “I don’t have any paper.”

“Oh, not right this moment.” Lane thumped my arm, like he hadn’t turned that honey-blade back to steel. “Whenever it’s convenient.”

I turned away, heading for the food I suddenly didn’t want. “Before you get her teeth done, anyhow. That’s gonna cost you half a Rolls Royce, and it ain’t in my budget.”

“Worth it,” he said. “Whatever she needs.”

And see, there? I couldn’t even be mad because he was going to take great care of her, and I had a feeling he needed a dog more than I did.

There was something lost inside Lane, and I should be glad he had Princess to help. I *was* glad. I bumped his shoulder. “So food, right? I’m just happy no one on this band hurls before performances. This one band I was with, the lead guitar used to puke in the john before every performance. In fact, we were lucky when he made it to the john.” *Joker was more screwed up than me. More screwed, too, maybe. I was certain Richard was doing both of us back then, but I knew how to play hard to get. Joker was this naive kid from Wisconsin.*

“What band was that?” Lane asked.

I waved a hand. “Back in the Paleolithic era. Broke up fast.” *Richard’s fault. I didn’t desert Joker and the others, I saved myself. Necessary.*

“You don’t talk about other bands much, or the stuff you’ve done. Val and Jamie and Brody, even Tanisha, tell all kinds of stories about being newbies in the music world. You don’t.”

I fished my totally unneeded sunglasses out of my shirt pocket, set them on my nose, and stared at him over the top. *I don’t talk, period. Except to you, for some reason.* “I was *never* a newbie.”

Making Lane snort-laugh as we rounded the corner into the busy part of backstage was an accomplishment I treasured.

“Now, get some calories in you,” I ordered, like he wasn’t the one who’d dragged me here. “Maybe some caffeine. I want you all fueled up so you don’t come in late on the bridge of ‘Wild Skies.’”

“I never come in late.” He waved to the rest of the band who were gathered along one big table with plates of food. Brody waved back.

Jamie looked up at us and a flicker of something that relaxed him crossed his face. I gave him a nod, glad of any stress we could take off his shoulders. “Of course not. Your timing’s perfect. Keep telling yourself that, kid. I can always cover for you.” Moving a safer distance away from Lane, I picked up a plate and began loading it with stuff I was never going to eat. Maybe I’d pile it high with Lane’s favorites, and then swap it for the modest servings he was taking. Make him laugh again.

Anything to help Corvus Rising have a great show.

Lane

“Sorry, what?” I leaned closer to the elderly woman trying to talk to me over the noise of the after-party.

“I said, this concert was even stronger than yesterday’s.”

“Oh! Yeah, I agree.” I was stunned that a little grandmother in a sweater with pearl buttons not only came to hear us once, complete with VIP access, but had apparently come twice. She wasn’t wrong, though. As great as last night’s performance had gone, tonight we’d blown the roof off the stadium. Three encores, because after two, the crowd was still screaming for more.

“Crow was smart, picking ‘Shivers’ to end on. Sent folks out with a smile.”

“I guess.” We rarely used that as an encore, preferring to leave a crowd rocking hard in their seats, but this time the slow sweetness had ramped the crowd down from their screaming high. Had worked on us, too, as we gave up everything we had on the stage. After I handed off my guitar, I could’ve slept for a year. Except for this party, which I kept spacing out on. “Sorry?”

“I said, can you introduce me to Tanisha next? As a woman whose been in the business longer than she’s been alive, I’ve got some advice for her.”

“Sure.” I must’ve seemed surprised, because the woman reached up and patted my cheek.

“They had rock-n-roll back in the stone age, child. I played guitar, drums, harmonica, even sax in my day. That’s one reason I like your sound, but Brody North doesn’t need advice from me. Tanisha? Woman to woman, I’ve got some things to pass on.”

Tanisha had always seemed like the one of us who had her shit

together. She played drums like that Hindu goddess of strength with all the arms. Then she got off stage and ran her life like deep water, not ruffled by anything. But I wasn't going to contradict some octogenarian with, I now noticed, a flame tattoo on her wrist peeking out of her pastel-knit sleeve. I led her over to where Tanisha was holding court, excused us through the crowd, and presented her like royalty— "someone very important" seemed better than "this lady whose name I forgot a moment after I heard it"— before backing away.

A passing server held a tray of champagne flutes and I took one, even though I'd have been better off with water. The spinning of my head was a combo of fatigue and post-performance high, and it sure wouldn't be helped by more alcohol, but I was thirsty enough I gulped the drink and left the empty glass on a stand. Three fans immediately converged on me, holding merch and talking a mile a minute. I patted my pocket to make sure I still had my Sharpie and tried to focus on names this time.

George and the venue staff shut the party down around one. Richard hadn't showed up, which made the night even better. My hand was cramping, my eyes wanted to close, but everyone seemed to have had a great time. Despite how tired I was, I still rode a performance high that made everything worthwhile. When we were ushered through a back exit into the bus for the ride to the hotel, Tanisha began singing "Round the Bend" a cappella and we all joined in, our voices husky in the quiet darkness.

Dax wasn't there. He'd gone back to the hotel as soon as the show was over to liberate Princess from her daycare. Or nightcare. The lady watching her told him yesterday that Princess mainly slept, but even so, I liked knowing she was doing it in my room, among my things. Liked even more knowing that a sleepy Dax was there keeping an eye on her. Last night, we hadn't exchanged so much as a kiss when he passed her to me in the doorway, slipping out to his own room. Tonight, I hoped things might be different.

Jamie came along the aisle of the bus and stopped by my seat. "Hey, dude, can I see you in the executive suite?" He gestured at the private room he and Val shared at the back, now we had our own bus again.

A flash of worry stabbed my floating happiness. *Did I screw something up?* I thought I'd played well, one of my best performances ever, but maybe I'd missed some flub.

The back room was tiny, with nowhere to sit but on the bed. Jamie lowered himself on one side and gestured me to the other. I sat gingerly, perching on the edge, and waited for him to speak.

Jamie rubbed his beard, coughed once. "This is a bit awkward."

"Did I screw up somewhere? I missed that."

"No! Hell, no, you played great. At least as good as Matt ever did, maybe better. We were on fucking fire tonight." He grinned at me, and I answered his smile, deeply relieved.

"No, this is me butting in where I probably shouldn't but..." He trailed off, rubbed his beard again.

But what? The dog? The drag? Not knowing what was coming made my stomach churn. "Just say it."

"Dax is my brother," Jamie said, going in a direction that hadn't been on my radar. "But he's not an easy person to get to know."

I laughed, because that was an understatement. I'd picked up tidbits now and then from what Dax said, but I'd never claim to know him.

Jamie smiled ruefully. "Yeah, news flash, huh? Anyhow, I'm pretty sure he had a rough past. Maybe really rough. When I met him, I thought he was the coldest bastard on the face of the earth. Took a long time to see someone who'd been hurt before and protects himself."

That's what I think too. I nodded.

"He's never hung out with anyone in the band but me. Except now, he hangs out with you."

"Not that much."

Jamie rolled his eyes at me. "A lot, for Dax. I don't know what you two have going on, don't want to know, honestly. Not my business. But I do want to make sure neither of you are going to get hurt."

I remembered Jamie's past warning. Wanted to say Dax wasn't asexual or straight, but I wasn't going to out him. "He's a big boy. I think he can take care of himself. Anyhow, we haven't done anything." *Other than one nine-out-of-ten kiss I hope to upgrade to a full ten.* "He wouldn't like us talking about him." I could be pretty sure about that.

"You're right." Jamie sighed. "I wasn't around when he needed a big brother, and I can't make up for that now. I just care about both of you, and I have a hard time not butting my nose in."

Try harder. Whatever I had going with Dax, fragile and uncertain as it was, wouldn't go easier with Jamie hanging over our shoulders. "I don't want to hurt him."

"Or let him hurt you. Which would hurt him." Jamie ran his fingers through his long dark-blond hair. "Yeah. Yada yada, songwriter addresses feelings. Just... you can come to me if you want someone to talk to. I haven't missed the fact that you're almost as solitary a bastard as he is."

"I have Princess," I pointed out.

Jamie's lips quirked. "I'm glad. Well, let's get back before Val asks if I'm inviting you to a threesome."

"Yeah, no." My life was complicated enough and Jamie's big hairy masculinity wasn't my type.

I took my seat again, moments before the bus made its turn into the hotel's front drive. We stopped by the doors. Kevin and Filipe got off first, checking out the few folks hanging around at one a.m., before ushering us off and through the lobby, fending away a few autograph seekers. The seven of us crowded into the elevator, and Val used her key card to access our floor.

"Whew." Tanisha pulled the binders out of her hair, letting her braids hang loose. "There's a nice, long bath in my future. And some IcyHot for my shoulders. What time are we leavin' in the morning?"

"Eleven," Jamie said. "And we don't play Tucson till tomorrow night, so it'll be an easy day."

“I am *ready* for one of those.”

Brody said, “Stop by if you want something to relax you.” At Jamie’s frown, he added, “Just weed. Come on, Crow, folks would think you didn’t know me.” He grinned. “These days it’s even legal. Go progress.”

“Sorry,” Jamie said. “Long day.”

The elevator doors opened, letting us off, and as one we headed for our own rooms. I hesitated at my door, listening, hearing nothing. Dax would be in there, watching Princess so we didn’t add to my chewed-up-bedding bill, or worse, have the little girl choke on a piece. Last night, I’d knocked to give him privacy before entering. What I’d given him was enough time to scoop up the dog and be ready to escape past me.

This time, I tapped my card and had the door open in a flash, stepped inside, and shut it. Dax looked up at me from where he lounged on the bed in boxers and a T-shirt, his phone in his hand and Princess sleeping on his legs, naked belly up. Dax stuck his phone in his shirt pocket. Princess wriggled herself upright, flew off the bed and danced over to me, yipping.

I picked her up and let her lick at me, dodging the dog breath. “Oh my God, how can something so cute smell so rancid?”

“It’s a talent.” Dax grinned up at me, not running for the hills yet.

I set Princess on his lap again. “Hold her for a second. I promised her former owner a picture now and then, and it’s been a couple of days.” When he tensed, I added, “Just the dog, I swear. No dick pic unless you get super happy to see me.” *No face.*

He relaxed as I bent closer to narrow the angle, his long fingers rubbing Princess’s belly so she sprawled out, waving little front paws. I took a couple of shots, sneaking one of his face gazing down at her as I pulled back. I chose a dog-belly-pic that had barely a hint of hands and shirt in it, pulled it up, and showed him my screen. “Okay?”

“Sure.”

I flopped on the bed next to him, my shoulder on his as a kind of anchor while I texted Joel. *~She’s in clover, loving the good life. How’s*

your mom?

Got an immediate reply. *~Not great. Hanging in there. Thanks for taking care of Princess. You're a good guy, Dax.*

The real Dax probably felt my inadvertent flinch. He snorted. "Yes, I am. You, on the other hand, owe me for dog sitting."

"How is it sitting when—" I managed not to joke "*it's your own dog*" because I remembered the moment when he said, "*She's mine?*" and the way something bright in his eyes shuttered closed when I'd replied, "*just on paper.*" That was a mess I didn't need to rip open tonight. I converted on the fly to "—when you're lying on the bed? It's dog snoozing. Dog lounging around. I think the going rate is twelve cents an hour." I tucked away my phone.

Dax snorted. "Okay, where's my twenty-four cents?"

I leaned my head back slowly enough not to whack my skull on the headboard and let my eyelids droop. Sleepy warmth grew inside me. Dax wasn't leaping up and away, which was a start. "A nickel a kiss."

"Who's paying who?"

I rolled my head to peer at him from under lowered lashes. He stared at me from behind those green contacts, then leaned closer. His lips brushed mine. Dax set a hand on the side of my jaw and deepened the kiss. His mouth stayed soft on mine, gentle, little plucking moves and nibbles with no force behind them as he played with my lower lip. Then he pressed home and I opened for him. His tongue swept in, owning me. I relaxed into whatever Dax wanted, my breathing catching as he slid his hand further up into my hair, holding me still.

When we separated, he stayed inches from my face, looking at me as if he wanted to see deep inside my head.

I said inanely, "Was that worth twenty-four cents?"

Dax snorted and sat back, guiding my head against his shoulder. I felt like I should protest the change of pace, but I was barely half-hard and the long day was catching up with me. This was good. I rubbed my hair against his neck and let my eyes close.

“I used to do that.” Dax’s voice came soft in the darkness behind my lids. “Sold sex, I mean.”

My body tensed before I could stop myself, but when Dax would’ve pulled away I half-rolled to press my head on his chest and pin him with my arm. I didn’t say anything, just plastered myself to him and tried to show with every inch of me that I was okay with whatever he wanted to tell me.

Dax was silent for a long time before he went back to threading his fingers through my hair. I thought maybe he was done sharing, but eventually he said, “Sold it, traded it for a place to sleep or a job, used it to get what I wanted. I don’t know what we’re doing here, but you need to know that about me. I’m not a good guy.”

“Selling sex doesn’t make you a bad guy,” I protested. “Lots of gay kids do that when they don’t have a choice. I had a gay classmate whose parents kicked him out of the house. He dropped out of school, and the grapevine said he was seen down in Ventura turning tricks.” I don’t know if that was true or homophobic lies from the jerks who dominated the school, but it’d sure felt possible. You couldn’t get much more liberal than Ojai, but I still hadn’t come out in high school. Rock musicians were cool. Gay guys, not so much.

“There’s a difference between bad and not-good.” Dax moved his hand from my hair to my back. “One time, I convinced this guy I was a scared virgin, to con him out of something. I’d been tricking for four years by then.”

“How old were you?”

“Nineteen.”

“You— Jesus.” He’d started at *fifteen*. I knew there were guys with stories like his, but Dax seemed so strong, so in control, it was hard to imagine him as a desperate kid. “If that guy was willing to trade something for sex with a scared teen virgin, he deserved to be conned,” I said firmly.

“He was a sleazebag, no doubt.” Dax shifted under me, his body tense. “I’ve never had a relationship. The sleazebag was the closest thing and I ditched him without a backward glance. I’ve never told

anyone about him either. Figured it was no one's business."

"It isn't. Not even mine. Although I'm glad you trust me enough to tell me." I kept my eyes closed and didn't move. I was worried if I did the wrong thing, this confiding version of Dax would disappear, and I'd be back at arm's length again.

"Trust. Yeah. Never did any of that either. Had a shit-ton of sex, a few friends I kept at arm's length because we all had our own demons and our own priorities."

"I'm sorry." I wanted to ask a hundred questions but knew better. I couldn't help saying, "Jamie trusts you."

"Jamie's soft. But yeah, he's the closest I've had to someone I knew wouldn't turn their back. Probably. He doesn't know all the truth about me."

I chuckled against his chest. "He warned me you might be ace, or straight, when he thought I might be getting attached."

Dax shifted under me so I could feel his dick half-hard against my thigh. "Are you... getting attached?"

Before I could answer, Princess wriggled between us, her furry tail landing in my mouth. I spat dog hair and laughed. "Blech. Dogface." I eased her down beside Dax, where we could pet her and still breathe. Our fingers tangled in her soft fur.

After a couple of minutes, Dax said, "What about the guy you're fucking?"

I tried not to wince hard enough for him to feel it. "He's probably off having sex with someone else tonight." At one point, that idea was painful. Now, it felt like a relief.

"Sounds like he's not serious about you. Are you serious about him?"

"No!" I tried to soften that instant reaction, because it wasn't quite the truth. "He was my first guy, in most ways. I fell hard but I knew from the start we weren't like that. We never dated, for real. Everything centered on sex. And he never pretended he'd be exclusive." *Other than the first month, when I had stupid stars in my*

eyes and I was his “boy” and he actually seemed sweet.

Dax rubbed his calf against mine. “You planning to break up, or is the sex that good?”

Is it? I tried to think back two nights. Was it just two? I felt like a different person from the guy with an ass full of lube who showed Richard into Dax’s room. The sex had been okay, but Richard had been frustrated by his day, impatient and taking some of that out on me. I didn’t mind being stress relief for a partner, but I wanted to feel like he cared whose body he was using, and that night, I’d wondered.

“No, it’s not that great. Not anymore. I think we’ve run our course, really.” But did Richard feel the same? He’d said, “*See you next time, boy,*” with a smack on my ass when he left. No indication we were coming to an end, and he liked to call all the shots. “I’ll try to convince him.”

“Can’t you just tell him, ‘Hey, dude, it was fun, but you’ll have to take me out of the fuck roster. I’m done?’”

I flinched at that phrasing.

Dax quit petting the dog to wrap his arm around my shoulders. “Sorry, I’ve always been a tactless son of a bitch. And I’ve never broken up with someone. Except the douchebag.”

“How did you do that?”

“Heh. You don’t want to follow my lead. It included a legal name change and a move across the country.”

I held back my “*Wow!*” But seriously, wow. What kind of douche had that guy been? Was he a stalker? How young had Dax been then? He said nineteen when they started, so he was probably younger than me when he walked away. I wanted to hug him back, but from my position plastered across him, all I could do was press a kiss under his jaw and shove my face against his skin.

He tousled my hair. “Don’t worry. I’ve been fine for a long time. Not a poster child for healthy relationships. But…” His voice trailed off. I kept scratching Princess’s belly and waited for him. Finally, he said, “I’ve been the other guy a hundred times, I bet. Some of the men I

tricked didn't bother to take off their wedding rings when they bought a piece of ass. But I don't want to be your other guy. It'd be different if I thought you were up for having two fuck buddies side by side. I don't get that impression?" The rise of his tone made that a question.

I wanted to say yes, sure, I was a guy and guys like sex and no one thought we were exclusive so let's fuck. But Dax wasn't wrong. Richard could be sleeping with all the guys he wanted to, girls too, probably, but I still felt guilty when I thought about dating two men at the same time. Guilty and incompetent, because I hadn't been enough for Richard when I gave him all my focus, outside music. No way I could please two very different men. And I didn't want Dax to be a fuck buddy the way Richard was. I shook my head against Dax's chest.

"Right. What's your plan?"

I couldn't think. The obvious answer was to dump Richard. Except when I thought about actually doing it, cold things slithered around in my belly. He'd be angry. Not because I thought he loved me, but because he was sure he owned me. A piece of me, anyhow. I'd never really said no to anything he told me to do. I remembered the glitter in his eyes, the one time I tried, as he trotted out my drag name with the veiled threat to our band. Or maybe not so veiled. I'd been high, and couldn't remember his exact words, but the aura of menace and retribution had lingered long after I came down.

Dax said, "I suppose breaking up by text is rude."

"Yeah." It also felt likely to provoke Richard. "I need to see him. Do it in person."

"We're playing Tucson, Flagstaff, Sacramento, and then L.A. to wrap up the tour. Can you ask him to meet you at one of those?"

Can I? Richard showed up when he showed up, breezing into my life to claim me with a confidence I used to find sexy. Sometimes he told me in advance, but I couldn't count on it. "I can ask." I'd ask his plans. "*Will you make it to any of the remaining shows?*" A question, not a demand.

"Do that. Until then—" Dax pushed me lower to lay a kiss on my hair. "—we don't fuck. I'll be your friend, even the kissing kind of

friend, but we'll go slow." He slid his hand from my back to my ass. "When I tap this, you won't be worrying about any other guy owning a piece of you."

His hand on my ass made me horny, despite my tiredness. "I don't wanna wait." I squirmed on him more purposefully.

He slapped me, a firm little pop that sent warmth through me. "You'll do as you're told. Incentive. Now behave."

I liked those words from him way too much. They sounded different from how Richard said them, warmer and with less bite. I was exhausted, though, and my eyes kept drifting shut. "Will you spend the night? Like last time?"

"Trying to kill me, huh?" He chuckled in my ear. "Sure. Long as your dog doesn't breathe in my face all night."

"Our dog," I said, the idea I'd come up with floating to mind. "I want you to sell me half of her. Like, co-owners."

He let go of me and eased sideways on the bed, separating us. "She's yours. I'm fine with signing whatever."

"No, I mean it." I reached for him, flinging my arm across his chest. "It's better for her, too. If one of us isn't available, the other has the authority to, you know, run her to the vet or bail her out of the pound or whatever."

"You planning on letting her run loose around the dog catcher?"

"No." I thumped him peevishly. "Y'know what I mean." It all made sense. Why couldn't he say yes and let me go to sleep?

Dax sighed, then fished out his phone, set it on the nightstand, and gathered me close again. "We'll talk in the morning. You're gonna regret sleeping in these clothes."

"I'll have to get up to pee," I told him, not opening my eyes. "I'll take 'em off. Soon."

Dax tugged a sheet free and pulled it over us. Princess snorted and moved to a spot behind my knees. "Sure you will," Dax murmured into my ear. "You keep telling yourself that."

As I drifted off, it occurred to me that Dax had gifted me with some of the secrets he guarded so closely and not once had he warned me not to tell. *It's not just about a man you can trust. It's about someone who trusts you.* I closed my fingers around a fold of his T-shirt and swore to myself he wouldn't regret his faith in me.

Chapter 10

Dax

“Hey, careful with that!” I hurried to steady Tanisha’s drum kit as the venue’s crew began swapping Corvus’s gear in place of the band ahead of us. House lights were up and the stage was dim, but that was no excuse. Our two roadies were busy getting mic stands and cables set up on the correct marks, and Ulrich, our drum tech, was down with a stomach bug. I wasn’t sure what gutter this L.A. venue dug their help out of, but they acted more like bricklayers than techs. “You break it, you buy it, and I doubt you’ve got the cash.”

“I been doin’ this job for ten years,” the guy growled.

“Then why aren’t you better at it?” I checked the marks to make sure Tanisha would be in the right spot.

The guy seemed stumped for a comeback and just huffed away. I hurried to make sure he wasn’t putting his clumsy paws on my mixing desk.

The crowd noise rolled over us, loud and excited. The earlier bands had done a great job warming them up, and those last guys and gals had some stellar pyrotechnics. Smoke still floated on the air, catching stray beams of light. We were set to blow this final concert of the tour out of the water.

I saw Darius in the wings, handing off Jamie’s guitar to him. There was Val, her halo of long hair unmistakable even in the dim light, taking up her mark. Lane brushed past me as he headed onstage. I murmured, “Kill it,” and inhaled a whiff of his scent, shaded by the coconut of his shampoo and a hint of sweat. *So familiar already.*

We'd spent the last week together, sometimes sharing a bed but never bodies, playing with his dog that he insisted on my keeping half-rights to. On the bus between Flagstaff and Sacramento, he'd passed me a sheet of scribbled lyrics, saying, "What do you think?" and I realized they were one of his Ms. Fox torch songs. I almost gave them a blanket pass, I was so flattered he'd trusted me, but he said, "Really, tell me." So I'd read them like they were something of Jamie's and suggested a word change. He thanked me.

We kissed, a lot, when we were alone. I'd revised the numerical scale upward. We'd passed eleven and were heading for fourteen, by my calculations. It wasn't as if Lane had mad skills, but he threw his whole self into a kiss. Total focus on me. The novelty sometimes made my head spin. I'd never kissed a guy when we weren't halfway toward screwing. My body was all sorts of fucking frustrated, but I was loving it in a totally ass-backward way.

As the house lights dimmed, I surveyed my board one more time, hands on the faders. The crowd stilled to a buzz, like a hive of bees ready to fly. In the dark, Jamie's voice said, "Heya, L.A., it's late, it's hot, it's wild, and it's time for Corvus—" A white spot hit him, outlining his beefy arms cradling the guitar, glinting off his hair and beard. "—Rising!" The rest of the spots came up, the pyrotechnic gerbs ringing the stage fountained sparks into the air, and the crowd screamed as the band launched into "Round the Bend."

That was one kickass concert. Going into it, we'd had a weird energy. Some mix of relief the long tour was over and sadness it was over and excitement to finish up here on our own turf. Somehow, that blended into one of those nights when everyone blew their personal bests out of the water. Lane *killed* the bass solo in "Solstice Dance." Tanisha was on fire and Jamie gave her all the time she wanted in her drum solo, waving her on when she looked at him, sweat beading her forehead and a manic grin on her face. The crowd was wild, screaming the lyrics with the band, going nuts in the mosh pit. At one point, I think they had like ten people crowd surfing, not that I had time to watch.

The whole band seemed to want to improv, any place where backing tracks didn't prohibit it, and I was kept busy balancing the sound and

using the delays and reverb to keep our tone ‘Corvus.’ By the last encore, as the final flashes ushered us into darkness, we were all wrung out. The band went to take a bow up front. Jamie waved to me to come out, his curly hair flattened with sweat, but I just waved back. I was the mixer, not the band. When the crowd finally let them go, they filed offstage. I stuck around to make sure loading out went without a hitch. When all our gear was safe, I headed to the dressing rooms.

There was no afterparty this time. The VIP meet-n-greets had been set up for before the concert. Jamie’d told the label when we were done, everyone would be ready to crash.

Rounding the big dressing room door which stood open, I could see he’d been right. Usually just Jamie and Val would use the big room, but tonight the whole band was crowded in there. Val sprawled across a chair, her skirt rucked up to her hips, a bottle of cold water pressed to her forehead. Jamie sat on the floor by her, his head tipped back against her knee. Tanisha sat in front of the big mirror, wiping the last traces of stage makeup off her face, and Brody had claimed the loveseat. But my gaze flew to Lane.

He sat in a chair, strands of hair stuck to his sweaty forehead and his eyes closed. His expression seemed more exalted than exhausted, like he was flying high. I didn’t smell pot, so I figured it was the post-performance buzz lingering. He was entitled. They all were.

Someone behind me squealed and I turned, then stepped aside for Tanisha’s daughter. The teenager rocketed into the dressing room and into her mother’s arms. “You were fire tonight, Mom! Wow.”

Tanisha hugged her tight and rocked her back and forth. “Glad you saw that one. But I am *ready* to go home.”

Tanisha’s husband came past me too. He gathered Tanisha in his arms and kissed her. “Hey, baby. I have the van. Say the word, we’ll get you out of here.”

Tanisha looked around the room at everyone, including Lane who’d opened his eyes. “If I hug y’all we’ll be here another hour. It’s been awesome and don’t take it the wrong way when I say I can’t wait to *not*

see your shining faces for a whole week.”

Jamie laughed and waved a hand without raising his head from Val’s knee. “You are a goddess of percussion, and yeah, enjoy the week off. We’ll see you at the studio next Monday.”

“You got it.” She grinned. “Gonna crash and sleep and spend time with my man and eat Mama’s cooking and teach my girl some new knitting stitches. Bye, folks.”

Her daughter said shyly, “Hi. Bye,” and her husband waved to us all as they headed out. They’d no doubt pick up her personal stuff at the bus parked in back of the venue. Instruments and gear would get distributed later.

Her departure broke the spell in the room. Jamie pushed to his feet and held a hand down to Val. “Come on. Sherry texted me ten minutes ago she’s down at the bus. Let’s grab our ride.”

Val let him boost her to her feet as her face brightened. Sherry was a neighbor, and I was willing to bet someone they played with in bed on occasion. I’d only met her a couple of times, but they both treated her like someone they wanted to protect, with a side of appreciation. If they hadn’t shared a bed yet, it was coming.

Brody waved a bottle of beer he’d grabbed from somewhere. “I’m riding the bus to my place. How about you two?”

“So am I,” Lane said. “Although tomorrow, I’m heading to my folks’ for a week, so I’m just going home to crash for one night.”

“Bus for me,” I agreed. I could Uber, but why, when the tour bus would deliver me and my two months’ worth of crap to my door. “You guys ready to head out?” The roadies would do a quick run through the dressing rooms when we were gone and collect anything the band had left behind.

Lane waved a hand at me and whined, “I don’t wanna get up.”

We’d been playing it cool around the other band members, not that they hadn’t figured out something was going on, but hauling him out of a chair wasn’t like fucking in public. I strode forward, grabbed his sweaty hand, and pulled. He stood and staggered into me, laughing

like he was drunk. I fended him off and peered into his eyes. “Did Brody give you something?”

“High on life, dude.” Lane giggled. “The tour is over. I didn’t fuck it up. The critics didn’t wish Zeng was still on bass more than a couple of times.”

“Of course not,” I told him. “You’re as good as Matt, in your own style, maybe better. Come on, we’ve got a bus ride before you can fall apart. Where’s Princess?”

“Should be at the bus. Ulrich said since he was sick, the least he could do was watch the dog. Darius was going to bring her to our bus once he got the guitars safely loaded.”

Princess had become something of a mascot to everyone with the band. She was happy to see any human, not afraid of noise, and other than breath that could knock over a rhino at ten paces, you could say she was pretty much perfect. Well, and her love for chewing up anything with stuffing. Still, the crew all adored her. If her delicate ears hadn’t needed protecting, she’d probably have been stageside at every show.

Brody set down his beer, stood and stretched, and led the way out. Lane followed him, and I brought up the rear, where I had an incidentally nice view of Lane’s ass. The bus stood waiting in the performers’ lot, lights low.

Oleg hissed the door open as we approached. I could hear calls from some diehard fans outside the fence, yelling Lane and Brody’s names, but we were all too wiped to cater to them. Lane turned their way and I almost put a hand on his back to urge him inside, but the fans all had cell phones out, and he didn’t need a photo of me touching him out on social media, looking like more than it was. “You’ve earned some time off,” I said instead. “And I want to get home.”

“Right.” He waved to them, but then climbed the bus steps. Princess was sitting in Oleg’s lap. When she saw Lane, she jumped to the floor and trotted over to him. He scooped her up and buried his face in her fur.

I told Oleg, “Hey, thanks. You didn’t have to dog-sit.”

“Nah, she was no trouble and Darius had places to be. Are we waiting for anyone else tonight?”

“No. Tanisha’s riding with her family and a neighbor came for Val and Jamie.”

“Got it. Who’s first?”

Brody lounged in one of the chairs. “Whatever makes driving sense, dude.”

“You, then,” Oleg told him. “Then Dax and Lane last. I’ll end up half an hour from the depot and home.”

Half an hour might sound like a lot, but in L.A. freeway terms, that was practically next door. I dimmed the interior lights, dropped into another chair, and tugged at the hem of Lane’s shirt. “Park your ass and let the man drive.”

As Lane took a seat, Princess on his knees, Oleg closed the door to the cab and pulled out across the parking area. A moment to get through security, and then we were cruising the L.A. streets, headed for the freeway. Despite being close to midnight, traffic was still insane. I’d lived in the city for almost seven years and I still wasn’t used to it. Not that I was complaining. Teen-me would’ve fallen over at the idea of being chauffeured through traffic in our private band bus. Teen-me had big dreams, but not that big.

I asked Lane, “You sure you don’t want to take Princess to your folks’ place?”

“I thought you said you’d keep her?” He turned big gray eyes on me, like he’d have to beg. “Just for this week. Mom’s cat isn’t a fan of dogs.”

“I don’t know...” I drawled, to watch what he’d do, but I couldn’t keep it up when his expression clouded. “Of course I will, you dork. Not a hardship.” I’d just noticed the comfort he got from having the dog in his arms, and wanted to make sure.

I was looking forward to a week of blessed solitude in my own space. No one snoring seven feet away, no one watching me, no acting cool, no Teflon attitude to maintain. Hell, I could leave my contacts out and

walk around without my shirt for a week if I wanted to. Princess wasn't people. She wouldn't care about my scars and was too colorblind to even notice the contacts.

"Thanks." Lane bumped his knee against mine.

"Do your folks know you're gay?" He was out to the band now, but online, his persona was all about the girls hanging off his arms at the VIP parties. I wondered how things were at home.

"We haven't really talked about it. I'm sure they'll be fine." The little crease between his eyebrows said he wasn't as confident as he pretended. "I figured I'd come out when I had someone important enough I wanted to talk about them without fudging pronouns."

I liked that his douchebag fuckbuddy hadn't been all that. "Reasonable."

"What about your mom?" he asked. "You never talk about her. Do you have a step-dad?"

"Mom's dead," I told him. "Had a string of men she dated, but none of them had much time for me." Especially the last one, who kicked me out at sixteen before her body was cold, despite all I'd done to bring home money that last year. Mom had crappy taste in boyfriends, but she'd at least taught me by example what to watch out for. Richard and I had been a disaster, but not because I had any illusions about who or what he was. Not because I was soft, or too attached.

"I'm sorry." Lane leaned forward and passed me Princess, as if I might need an emotional support pet.

I laughed, although I took her because I wouldn't reject a bit of furry loving. Not from an actual dog, anyhow. I'd done the fetish kind once, and it wasn't my thing. "Don't worry. It's been a lot of years and a lot of water under that bridge." I cradled the little dog to my chest and raised my head so her licks hit my chin and not my face. *Teeth cleaning. Soon.* I murmured, "Good girl."

Two seats down, Brody said, "Even so. My folks are straitlaced Christians who don't like my music or my lifestyle, but you know what they say about home. It's the place where, when you have to go there,

they have to let you in. Sucks not to have that backup.”

I shrugged. Yeah, I missed Mom sometimes. The mom she was before the last year, anyhow, when the illness sucked all of her attention and energy, and she gave what little was left to keeping Tim happy and a roof over our heads. But fifteen years was a long time. I was used to standing on my own two feet, no matter how bad life got. I couldn't imagine anything that would've made me go crawling back home with Tim around.

The conversation lagged as we each succumbed to the comfy seats. I was staring blankly out at the night when the bus slowed, turned, and stopped. The interior lights came on.

Oleg opened the divider and called, “Here we are, Mr. North, sir! Home sweet home.”

Laughing at the exaggerated courtesy, Brody stretched, and got up. After checking his bunk, he hauled out his carry-on cases from the storage bin underneath.

Oleg told him, “I'll get your other bags out of the luggage compartment.”

Brody held out a hand to Lane, who gripped it for a moment. “It's been real, dude,” Brody told him. “An honor to play with you, and I'm looking forward to the next album.” He aimed a vague salute my way. “Later, Dax. See you in a week.”

“Watch out for swimming pools,” I told him.

He chuckled, gave me the finger, and headed down the steps out into the warm night. Thumps from underneath us marked the unloading of his other bags.

“Why swimming pools?” Lane asked.

“A couple years back, Brody got stoned, decided he could probably walk on water if he tried hard enough. He gave it a shot on a buddy's swimming pool, fell in, and cracked his arm on the concrete side. Six weeks in a cast and three months before he was back to full use. I like to give him a hard time now and then.”

“Poor guy.”

And that, right there, is a guy who's too soft for his own good. I kind of liked that about Lane, but it meant he needed a keeper.

Oleg climbed back onboard and said, “You're next, Dax. Still the same place off Burlington?”

“Yep.”

“You ever gonna upgrade?”

No. “I'm not earning the big bucks. It works for me.”

“Okay. Twenty minutes.”

Lane dozed off as we wound our way through the city streets. He sprawled in the chair, slumped low so his head could rest on the seatback. I petted the dog in my lap and watched as the white lights and neon filtering through the bus's one-way windows flickered across his skin. I'd known the guy for six months, and already every plane and angle and line of his face was written into my memory. Lyrics nagged at the back of my mind as red light chased yellow along his jaw, catching the faintest hit of evening stubble.

I almost pulled out my notebook, but I was tired and the mood felt fragile. Instead, I set myself to remember. *This moment, this feeling, those lights, and the shadows as they move on, the limp sleep of exhaustion, the vulnerability of an exposed throat, the stillness of hands that are so often in motion.* I breathed it in, let the moment settle deep in my veins. I'd write it someday.

Maybe I dozed too, because Oleg's voice startled me, as the interior lights came up. “Here we are. The dog's stuff's going with you, then, Dax?”

“Might as well. Lane can collect everything when he comes to get her in a week.”

“Where are we?” Lane sat up, looking out at my building.

“I'll text you the address,” I told him. I had Princess in my arms as I stood, and Oleg was right there, so it made sense that I didn't reach for Lane. Still, I hesitated.

Lane got to his feet, ran a hand over Princess's head and then touched my shoulder. "I'll call you, okay? See you in a week."

"Right."

"Send me lots of pictures of Princess."

"Will do."

Our eyes met. It occurred to me this would be the first time in the six months that I'd go a week without seeing him. Even before the tour, we never took more than a weekend off practice and recording.

I like solitude. It should be a relief. We're not joined at the hip. I stepped back, slung my duffel over one shoulder, my guitar over the other, gave him a nod, and maneuvered down the bus steps. That hot dry L.A. air with a hint of exhaust blew over me. Princess had her harness on, but no leash, and I gripped the strap, holding her against my shoulder. On the road behind the bus, cars squeezed around with a honking of horns.

Oleg pulled my big bag and the smaller case out of the luggage compartment, checking the tags. "That's all of yours, right? Wait, the dog bag." He hauled out Princess's duffel.

"Yeah. That's the lot." I held out a hand. "Thanks. We couldn't make the magic happen without you."

"Want help getting your bags inside?"

"Nah, I got it." I didn't add any cash to that handshake. The band would tip the hell out of him, one of the many things I liked about Jamie, and I'd add a bit to the check. Well-paid people are loyal people.

He said, "Sorry about that crash and your ribs—"

"Not even slightly your fault," I told him. "See you when we head to Rocktoberfest."

It was only when the bus pulled away, leaving a couple of people on the sidewalk watching it go, that I realized six months ago, I might've had the same thoughts, but I'd have given him a cool nod, not words. Empathy wasn't a Dax Crow trait, at least not where anyone could see.

Reaching into the dog's bag, I found her leash and hooked her up, setting her on her feet. "I can't carry all the luggage and your runt ass," I told her, working out how to balance all the bags and my guitar in one trip. At least as far as the locked lobby. I wasn't dumb enough to leave anything out here on the sidewalk.

As I staggered up the front walk, bags draped over my shoulders and the little dog doing her best to trip me, I thought about how spending time with Lane Bennett was already changing me without my notice. *Making me soft in public. Gotta work on that.* "Let me open the door, you ridiculous dust mop," I told Princess, nudging her aside with my foot. Probably it would be good to have a week apart from Lane, to regain my balance.

Chapter 11

Lane

“Another cupcake?” My mother leaned across our familiar kitchen table and held the half-full cake plate out to me. She’d been feeding me up for the last three days. Sure, I’d lost a bit of weight on tour— I think everyone had— but the mothering was getting ridiculous.

“I think two’s plenty.” I was stuffed and warm, slouched into the chair where I’d done homework as a kid, where I’d grunted monosyllabic answers to her questions as a preteen. The place where I’d listened to Mom and Dad discuss their days with gentle teasing, and wondered if a guy like me could ever have a relationship like that. I still didn’t know that answer. Wasn’t sure what I wanted my future to look like. *Not Richard*. I was certain of that, at least. *Dax*? I felt greedy, hoping maybe I could have everything— music and Ms. Fox and Princess, and Dax, too.

Mom set the cake plate down. “Some fruit, maybe?”

“I’m not about to keel over and wither away.”

She patted my arm. “Then you can tell me about them.”

“Them?”

“Him or her? The person who has you so distracted you’re walking into walls.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Then the rest of what she said caught up with me. “Him or her?”

“Well, we always figured you were gay, but there are all those pictures online of you with pretty women.”

I blinked about thirty times. “You thought I was gay?”

“Probably?” Mom tilted her head. “I mean, you never brought anyone home, but your posters leaned toward guys.”

“Musicians.”

“Who happened to have sweaty T-shirts and veiny forearms.”

I buried my face in my hands. “That’s so embarrassing.” My heart was beating uncomfortably fast.

“It’s what teenagers do. Your father asked if he should have the gay sex talk with you, but I thought the condoms and lube in the bathroom were probably enough. You’re a smart boy, and what if we were wrong?”

I remembered those condoms and lube appearing in a drawer one day when I was sixteen. It was a small house and we all shared the two bathrooms. I did have plans to sneak a few if I ever needed them. “I thought they were Kaitlyn’s.” I peered into the darkness behind my eyelids, thinking back. My sister had been eighteen then. *Or maybe they were yours, but as a teen I hadn’t wanted to let that idea cross the event horizon of my mind.*

“Your sister had her own stash.” Mom sighed. “Lane, sweetie, you’re going to have to look at me at some point.”

I peeled my hands off my eyes. “I’m looking.”

“Sorry, hon, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. You’re twenty-two now. I figured we’d be past that.”

“Right.” I took a long, steadying breath. “Mom, I’m gay.”

“Not bisexual?”

“No. Those women were the label’s idea. They think fans will like us better if we look like we might date them. Wish fulfillment stuff.” I couldn’t believe my coming out moment had arrived and gone just like that, lost in posters and label promo. I folded my hands together, because they were stupidly shaking.

“Well, your father was right then.” Mom got up and began clearing

the lunch table. “He said you looked too uncomfortable to be really interested in any of those girls.”

“Oh, great, not even a convincing fake.”

Mom patted my cheek in passing. “I’m sure the pictures were fine for anyone who doesn’t know you like we do. I admit, I was kind of hoping you were bisexual. As far as we could tell, you didn’t date anyone in high school, and that would double your options, if you’re that hard to please.”

Was she for real? “I wasn’t out in high school.” My voice cracked and I swallowed hard. “I couldn’t exactly date.”

“Are you out now?”

I am to you, apparently. “Not... exactly. The label isn’t really into that.” Richard had told me to play straight whenever possible. They let Jamie be out as bi, but they tweaked his image so that when he wasn’t with Val, he was seen with other women. The occasional man was in a threesome with Val and mostly there was a second woman, so everyone’s fantasies stayed as palatable as possible. “Part of the game,” Richard had said, right before he fucked me up the ass.

“But you do have someone special?”

And boom, we’d circled back to the bit I’d hoped had been buried by the non-surprise of me coming out. “I’ve dated a couple of guys. Neither one serious.” *After all, how serious can I be about Dax if I haven’t ever had sex with him, haven’t dumped Richard for him?*

“Who’s the one making you smile when you look at your phone?”

“That’s the friend from the band who’s watching Princess.” I’d told Mom about my dog and shown her a few pictures when I first arrived. I pulled out my phone now and scrolled to the latest— Princess asleep in a ray of sunshine, lying on tiles that must be Dax’s floor with her head pillowed on one of her stuffed toys. I clicked on it to hide the surrounding text conversation and held my phone up.

Mom stopped to look as she returned for a second load of dishes. “She’s very cute. And this is just a friend?”

“I’ve never slept with him.”

Stacking my icing-smearred saucer on hers, Mom raised an eyebrow. “But do you want to?”

“Mo-o-om!” I recognized the whine in my voice from my teen years. Three days in this house and I’d regressed all the way out of adulthood. “My love life is none of your business.”

She nodded as if that was an answer. “I remember when you took Emily to prom, and I told you to stand close together for photos. I could tell you were just friends. Is she a lesbian?”

“Mom, don’t ask me stuff like that. Anyhow, no, she’s engaged to some dude who owns a shoe store.” I had to laugh. “I can’t wait to meet this guy, because he sounds so not her type. The whole reason she went with me to prom was because she was meeting Olly Carnegie there. Her parents didn’t let her go with him.”

“I wouldn’t have let you date Olly either. He stole cars.”

“For kicks. He wasn’t that bad. The worst drug dealer in our class was so clean-cut he had a scholarship to Yale.”

Mom shrugged. “So you and Emily were, what do they call it, beards?”

I winced. “I think I was happier when you thought I was straight.”

“I never thought you were straight.” Mom set down the plates, grinned, and opened her arms.

I was on my feet and hugging her before I even realized I’d moved.

She squeezed me. “Baby, you’re shaking. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I just... I spent hours on the train out here trying to decide if this was the time to come out to you and Dad.”

“Oh dear.” She kissed my temple, then pushed me away. “I should’ve let your dad do that talk, I guess.”

It would’ve been excruciatingly embarrassing at sixteen, but would’ve saved six years of wondering. “Can’t change what’s past. Just move forward.”

“What a smart boy.”

I grinned, because I’d reflected back one of her favorite sayings when I was a kid. The last of my shakes had vanished in that hug, and all I felt was overwhelming relief.

Mom reached for her coffee mug. “Do you want me to tell Dad, or do you want to do it?”

“I will.” Despite everything Mom had said, I wanted to see his face when I said the words.

“Fair enough. He’ll be home around five. Do you have plans for the rest of the day? I have an overnight shift and I have to be at the hospital by six-thirty, so I’m going to grab some sleep.”

“You should’ve said something. I could’ve gotten my own lunch. You’ll only get five hours.”

“I’ve done fine on a lot less. It’s been so long since we’ve seen you, I’m greedy for every minute we can spend together. And you’re too thin.”

“I’ll wash the dishes, anyhow. You go lie down.”

“You’re a good boy.” Mom set down the mugs, came over to me, and laid a hand on my shoulder. “Lane? Gay or bi or straight, you’ll always be my son and I love you.”

“Thanks.”

“Dad and I practiced that years ago, so if he says the exact same thing, he still means it.”

They practiced how to tell me I was okay, before I even truly believed it myself. My chest was flooded with relief and pain. So much time wasted, so many almost-lies, but now... now I could be me for real, here in my parents’ home.

I took a shaky breath, kissed Mom’s cheek, and breathed in the familiar scent of her never-changing perfume. “I love you too, Mom. Get some sleep.”

“Thanks, sweetie.”

I rinsed the dishes and stacked them in the dishwasher, hearing Mom moving around upstairs, and then silence. When I was done, I retreated to the downstairs family room. Mom's huge cat, Mittens, glared at me from the back of the couch, so I dropped into the armchair instead. Arguing with Mittens was seldom worth the scratches.

I pulled out my phone and texted Dax. *~Hey. I came out to my mom.*

A moment later my phone rang. I answered, "A voice call? I'm flattered." My voice rasped and I coughed behind my hand.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Very okay." *I am. I truly am.*

"It went well?"

A laugh bubbled up in my throat. "Apparently, they've suspected since I was sixteen, and were responsible for a stealth box of condoms appearing in the bathroom. And lube, oh my God."

"And they never said anything?"

"No. I guess they were waiting on me, and figured I should know I'd be fine whenever."

"Assumptions will trip you up, every time."

"Yeah. In this case, Aunt Alice and her occasional visits, complete with trying to bring her wayward brother back to God. My folks went to church with her when she was here. I never knew if they were keeping the peace or agreed with her." *I should've asked, should've at least hinted and paid attention.* I hadn't given my folks half enough credit.

"And now you know." Dax's tone warmed. "Are you sure you're okay? The end of stress can be a shock, even when it's a good one."

"I was a bit shaky for a while, but I'm settled. It is a relief. Although I still have to actually tell my dad. I asked Mom to let me do it. I dread to think what she'd say to him."

“Dread?”

“Something along the lines of, ‘I was right, dear, Lane and Emily were each other’s beards to prom.’”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t know. Hearing Mom say the word *beards*? Knowing they were speculating? I’m hoping the whole concept of my sex life will fade right off her radar again.”

Dax chuckled.

“I’ll tell Dad when he gets home, but Mom says he was the one who snuck the condoms and lube into the bathroom for me, so I’m probably safe.”

“Nice of him.”

“But embarrassing. I thought they were my sister’s.” I slumped farther into the chair, feeling fatigue sucking me down. I’d been sleeping fourteen hours a day and didn’t seem to be caught up yet. Relief was settling over me like a warm blanket, but I needed to stay awake to hear Dad arrive. “Tell me about Princess. What’ve you been up to?”

I listened, chuckling now and then, as Dax told me about the little dog’s day. Apparently, one of the neighbors in his building was her willing slave already, to the point of keeping treats in his pockets just for her. An elderly lady across the hall had scolded Dax for taking her out when the day seemed too warm and offered her a cookie. Our Princess was developing an entourage.

I couldn’t keep my mind from drifting back to coming out, though. “Do you think I should tell my sister now, too? Rip off all the Band-Aids?” I only realized I’d interrupted when he paused. “Sorry, go on.”

“No, that’s more important than where Princess hid her ball this time. Although since I know zero about your sister, I don’t have advice.”

“Kaitlyn. Two years older than me. Real smart. Got a degree in physics because she said watching Mom and the other nurses taught

her she didn't want to go anywhere near icky sick human beings. We get along okay but we're not real close. She's the science and grades kid, I'm the arts and blowing off school kid."

"Does she live in Santa Barbara near your folks?"

"No, she works for Boeing up near Seattle."

"So you'd have to call her, or travel to talk in person. Sounds like there's no rush."

"I'll have to ask Mom not to tell her first. But yeah, I'll think about it." I closed my eyes, the phone pressed to my cheek. "Were you out to your mom, before she passed?" That wasn't my business, really, but I wanted to know everything about Dax.

"Kind of? I'm pretty sure she knew, but we didn't really talk about it. She warned me about no-good men now and then, so I figure that was a good sign."

"How old were you when..."

"When she died? Sixteen."

I blinked, remembering math I'd done in the past. "I thought you started tricking younger than that. Sorry. You don't have to tell me."

The silence on his end was long enough to worry me, before he said, "I don't really tell anyone. It sounds much worse than it was, and people get weird about this shit."

I won't get weird. Not a promise I could be certain of, but I'd try. I said, "I'm listening, if you want."

"Why would I want to talk about that crap? It's sixteen years ago." I figured that'd be the end, but before I could change the subject, he said, "Mom had a bad last year. We lived in this old house that was broken up into apartments. When she started working less, her latest boyfriend moved in and took over the lease, if there was a lease. Don't know. Might've been an envelope slid under the landlord's door. Anyhow, he paid rent, and she sometimes made enough for food for her and me, but sometimes she came up short. He'd bitch and threaten to toss me out for eating up his money, she'd cry and beg."

Damn. I didn't know what to say, so I made some sound of encouragement. *Jesus, Dax. That sucks.* Nothing sounded right, but at least I could listen.

"I looked for work, but I was fifteen, no driver's license, no skills, no jobs. I'd already been screwing around with guys at school for a year by then. I figured I could earn some bucks doing the same thing. It worked. I put food on the table when she couldn't. End of story."

I gritted my teeth to not say I was sorry. Clearly Dax didn't want that. I managed, "Sounds like you were a resourceful kid."

"Right?" He sounded relieved. "Exactly. And the experience came in handy later. I wasn't some green newbie when I hit the streets in New York."

I ran a hand over my head. I wanted to be there with him where I could put my arms around him, not two hours south. I also wanted to be the cool boyfriend— *not boyfriend yet*— the cool friend, then, the one who didn't make things worse by "getting weird." "Why were you in New York?"

"Fame and fortune?" Dax chuckled. "This old Black dude lived in the other downstairs apartment in that house all my life. Mr. Robinson. He was awesome. I think I was maybe five, the first time I wandered over to his place when he was playing guitar. He could play anything, any instrument, any style. I didn't have an instrument, so I started singing along. He stopped, stared at me, then said, 'Again.' Turns out, it was his own composition. I'd heard it through the walls a few times, and he was impressed I remembered and could hit the notes."

"At five? Yeah, I'd be impressed too."

"I always had perfect pitch. After that, he took me on, like a kind of mentor. Taught me all kinds of shit. Instruments, though mostly guitar where I seemed to know what I was doing. Never could get the embouchure quite right for the winds."

"I tried sax once, for middle school band. It was not a success."

"Mr. Robinson had a friend with a recording studio. He let Mr. Robinson lay down some indie tracks there for free, and when I hit my

teens, he'd bring me along. Taught me to know a TS from a TRS cable and the treble knob from the bass. I had something of a knack. He even let me play a bass backing track for one of his saxophone pieces and then help mix it."

"That's where you learned all the cool stuff you do for Corvus?"

Dax laughed. "Not hardly. He died when I was sixteen, two months before Mom. But he used to be someone in the music biz. His local friend was selling his studio, but Mr. Robinson wrote this letter of intro for me, to a guy he knew in New York City. Talked me up a whole lot, how much I'd already picked up. The idea was that when I graduated high school, I'd head out there and ask about an internship."

"But your mom died too."

"Yeah. Sped up the timetable. I had a fake ID, a pretty good one. I lit out for New York ahead of schedule."

I was pretty sure he'd said he'd been thrown out by his mother's boyfriend. I didn't mention it. "Brave of you."

"Sometimes you gotta grab the moment. The guy in New York gave me an internship in honor of Mr. Robinson. All the worst scut jobs, of course, not much more than janitoring and fetching coffee at first, and unpaid. But that was okay. I knew I could prove myself, even if it took time. Unpaid was a problem in the city, though."

"How did he expect you to live?" My chest hurt for sixteen-year-old Dax.

"Second job. I told him I was waiting tables. With fake ID, I was actually bussing them, along with the immigrants who did all the crap work citizens didn't want. ICE would sometimes come scoop someone up out of the kitchens, and the next day, there'd be a cousin or a niece or someone at the back door, taking the job."

"Sounds scary."

"Nah. I was white and sounded pure-born American. They never hassled me. But it paid worse than shit, no tips, and I couldn't get enough hours because of the internship. So I went back to what I

knew.”

It took me a second to make the connection. “Turning tricks.”

“Yeah. Better money by far, and I knew how to make myself look real young. Lots of New York chicken hawks were happy to spend their money on boy ass. When I turned eighteen, I got my real ID updated, told my boss there’d been a mistake and here’s my actual social. He started paying me, which I’d deserved for a year by then. I was able to stop selling ass, did some mixing and some session playing, and a year later, I spotted the chance to audition for a band.”

I tried for the lightest tone I could manage. “A real American success story.”

“You bet. With a few detours along the way. But here I am, working for a top band, making decent bucks, a nice clean apartment, and a cute little dog who’s... fuck, destroying the chair cushion!” His voice rose. “Hey, fluff bitch, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” Then to me, “I gotta go.” The line went dead.

I took the phone away from my ear and stared at it. Dax’s life had been so different from my own. My folks were still together, living in my childhood home, the mortgage paid off out of my first three months with Corvus. In this family room, I’d bitched about school, eaten Mom’s home-baked cookies, complained about my dad’s choice of TV shows. I’d worried about being gay and coming out, and about zits on my face, and whether my high school garage band would get a chance to play at the homecoming dance. I never worried about having enough to eat, or a place to sleep.

Dax would hate me pitying him. But seriously, to hell with everyone who thought a fifteen-year-old kid should have to make his own way.

My phone pinged. I tapped open the text from Dax. *~She’s not even sorry.* Plus a photo of Princess hauling the cushion down off a wooden kitchen chair, bits of stuffing fluff sticking to her face.

I almost texted back that I’d pay for a new cushion, but realized just in time how patronizing that would sound, on the heels of everything he’d told me. Instead, I replied, *~We have a bad, bad child.*

~My kind of girl.

Before I could reply, another text came in.

~Congrats again on coming out. I'm glad it was a nothing much event.

~Thanks.

~Good luck with your dad.

~I'm sure it'll be fine.

~Call me if it's not. Later. Got to wash the cushion fluff off the dog.

~Good luck to you too.

I waited, but nothing more popped up. After a few minutes, I opened a browser and changed chairs. The bad spring in the recliner would keep me from getting too comfy while I wandered online, and I'd hear the rumble when the garage door opened. I'd go on up then and greet Dad, tell him that he won his bet with Mom. I was gay.

Somehow, that felt a lot simpler than it had just half an hour ago.

Of course, simple didn't keep my heart from speeding up when that faint vibration eventually came through the wall, but I was able to stand, tug my shirt straight, and go upstairs without hyperventilating.

Dad stuck his head into the kitchen. "Ah, it's you. Is your mom getting some sleep?"

"Yeah. I'm making coffee. Want some?" I was pretty sure that was an invitation he'd never turned down in his life.

Sure enough, he came in and set his briefcase on a chair. "I could drink a cup."

"How was your day?" Then I flushed because wow, channeling some fifties family sit-com much?

Dad's eyes twinkled. "Just fine, and yours?"

"I came out to Mom." That wasn't even close to how I'd planned to ease into things, and I put the kettle down with a thump, wrapping my arms around myself.

His humorous expression softened but his smile didn't disappear. "Congratulations."

"Thanks. Mom said you already pretty much knew."

"We guessed. That's not the same thing." He held his arms wide. "Hug?"

Hell, yes. I took four fast steps and let him pull me in. He rocked me back and forth, squeezing hard, then set me back to meet my eyes. "Did your mom give you the 'I love you no matter what' speech?"

"Yep."

"Then I won't repeat it. But same goes for me. Bi, asexual, pansexual, furry—"

"Just gay, Dad."

"Yes!" He did a fist pump, then grinned. "Sorry, won a bet with your mother. So is there a man in your future, or your present?"

My head was spinning. I said, "It's complicated."

"Yeah, love is complex. Life. Sex. Speaking of condoms—"

"Don't go there. You're my father. You're supposed to pretend I never have sex."

"That's not how parenting works, kiddo."

I wasn't about to mention PrEP. There were things my dad didn't need to know. "I'm careful. I promise." But I could imagine a future where I wouldn't have to be, where there was just one trusted man in my life. I wanted that future. Maybe with Dax someday. Was that too much to hope for?

"Whatever or *whoever* you were thinking of just now, it looked good on you." Dad touched my arm. "Anyone you care about will always be welcome here."

My throat tightened. "Thanks."

"Just one thing."

"Yeah?" I refused to let that make me nervous.

“Where is that coffee of which you spoke? You lured me in here on false pretenses. Get your priorities straight, kid. Coffee always comes first.”

I barked a laugh, the last of my worries slipping from my shoulders, and reached for the kettle. “Right here. I’ll even let you have the first cup.” I poured hot water over the grounds and the comforting aroma rose.

“*Let* me. Huh,” Dad grumbled in a curmudgeonly voice. “Mine by right. Age. Respect. Whatever is this younger generation coming to?”

I might’ve outgrown this house and have a life of my own now, but a once-scared teen down inside me basked in the warmth of my dad muttering and joking and carrying on, as silly and corny as ever, alongside his out gay son.

Chapter 12

Dax

I looked up from my mixing desk when the studio door opened again. This time it *was* Lane, and something inside me unwound, like taking the tension off a string. *Like that's a good thing? Stupid. Loose strings are no use to anyone.*

Lane's nose was chapped and red and he held up a hand my way, even though I hadn't made any move to go to him. "Keep your distance. I'm still virus city."

Across the room, Brody made the sign of the cross with his fingers in Lane's direction. "Begone, foul spirit."

Lane chuckled hoarsely. "I've tried every cold remedy there is, but I didn't think of exorcism."

Tanisha said, "I hope you had a good time with your folks before the plague hit."

"Yeah. It was great to be home for a bit." He turned to Jamie. "What's the schedule for today? I'm gonna be pretty useless."

"We need to talk about the set list for Rocktoberfest. You haven't been there before, have you?"

Lane shook his head. "My last band never made it that far."

"It's a shorter set than we're used to, headlining our own shows. We're up third to last on Saturday, right before Social Sinners and Maiden Voyage. Ours is one of the longer slots, but we still can only fit in maybe ten songs so we need to make each one count." He waved at the couple of empty chairs left. "Park your ass and let's get to

planning.”

I’d sat in the corner as usual, where I could see everyone easier than they could see me, and one of the empties was nearby. Lane came over and sat down, his back slumped. He really did look like shit, even his pretty hair a little limp and stringy. “Sorry I didn’t come get Princess,” he said.

“Like I told you when you called, get yourself healthy first. I can afford to feed a five-pound dog a few more days.” I admit, I’d been disappointed not to see him, but he’d sounded like he’d been gargling acid when he phoned me from the train.

“Well, she is half yours.” His attempt at a smile was pretty pathetic.

“On paper,” I said, because I didn’t dare think about her any other way.

He seemed about to reply, but Jamie cleared his throat. “You two can flirt on your own time.”

Lane quickly shifted his attention away from me but didn’t blush. I wondered if he was losing his shyness, which would be a good thing for his future, but I’d miss it. Or maybe he just didn’t have the blood pressure to turn red today. He looked awfully pasty.

Jamie continued, “Songs, people. ‘Don’t Rock the Boat.’ It’s getting old. Do we keep it in or out?”

“It gets the crowd dancing,” Brody said.

“But it’s not really our current sound,” Tanisha pointed out, “and they dance to ‘Round the Bend’ too.”

I let the discussion wash over me, keeping an eye on Lane. I really didn’t like his color, and while I cared about which songs we took to Rocktoberfest, we’d be hashing out the set list for the next couple of days. There’d be time to have my say. Right now, I was watching Lane’s eyes drift shut and jolt open. He gripped the edge of the chair with white-knuckled fingers and said nothing, even when Jamie brought up “Solstice Dance” which had Lane’s favorite solo.

About half an hour in, I’d had enough. I stood up in the middle of an

argument over which slower ballad we should put in the fourth slot and crossed the five feet to Lane's chair. After laying my hand on his forehead for all of three seconds, I cuffed his head lightly. "You're burning up, you idiot. Why are you even here?"

Lane jerked his head away and wobbled on the chair. "This is important. Quit being a jerk."

"So's not falling over and giving yourself a concussion."

"I'm not *falling over*."

"What happens if you let go of the chair?"

Lane glared at me.

Before he could retort, Jamie said, "Lane, if you're really crashing, go home and sleep. We'll text you and keep you in the loop. Tomorrow, we'll start rehearsing and reorganizing and we'll need you up for that."

I said, "I'll give the kid a ride home and be back later."

"I'm not a kid." Lane shoved to his feet. "And I can drive myself—" A greenish shade came over his face and he ran out of the room.

"Sure he can," I murmured to the others. "I'll be back later. Make sure you include a bass solo in the list. 'Solstice Dance' works."

Jamie grinned at me. "Not two solos?"

"Wouldn't want the kid to get a swelled head."

Lane reappeared five minutes later, sweaty hair plastered to his forehead. I handed him a plastic bag from dozens stuffed in a cabinet. "Keep that handy. No puking in my car."

He tried to give me a glare that wouldn't have melted a snowflake. "We'll take my car."

"No, we won't." I was already regretting not having offered to pick him up this morning, even if it would've added half an hour to my drive time. I could've saved us a whole lot of trouble by marching him right back to bed. "If you're healthier tomorrow, I'll pick you up."

"We don't live anywhere close."

“I’m capable of driving a freeway or two.” I gave the rest of the band a wave, took hold of Lane’s elbow, and steered him out into the bright sunshine of the parking lot.

He slumped a little, once there was no one else to see. “Which is yours?”

I pointed at my rusting Camry wagon.

“That?”

“Still runs. Has room for a lot in the back. Why would I change?”

“The holes in the fenders?”

“Adds character. She was built before Toyota really got the hang of rustproofing but the engine’s sound.” I unlocked the passenger door. “Get on in.”

In the sweltering interior, he leaned his head back on the rest and closed his eyes. I started the car up and convinced her to give us some AC.

I’d steered out of the industrial district where the rehearsal studio was located and onto a main road before he mumbled, “Thanks.”

“What was that?” I pretended to cup my hand behind my ear, not taking my eyes off the road for more than a fraction of a second because I swear, half the local drivers had a death wish. “You said something?”

Lane thumped me on the thigh halfheartedly without opening his eyes. “You’re right. I feel like useless crap. Might as well be in bed.”

“I’m always right.” I merged and increased our speed to the awesome thirty-seven miles an hour the freeway traffic was achieving.

“I just hope I don’t give this crud to you.”

“Me too,” I agreed. “There’s a blanket on the floor behind your seat, if you want something to lean on.”

He bent to the side and fumbled around, managing to snag one corner. After hauling the plaid Goodwill-sourced comforter into the front, he stuffed it up against the side window, leaned his head on it,

and sighed. “Do you need directions?”

“Nope.” I didn’t tell him I’d scoped out his place a month after he joined us, when he seemed likely to stick with the band. Just like I knew where Tanisha and Brody lived now, though I’d never visited them. Jamie and Val had the party house for the band, so that was where we always went. But I knew where our tour manager Hank and the roadies and techs lived, too. Information’s power, and I made sure to stay well informed.

“Okay.” He clutched the comforter in one hand and seemed to fall into a drowse, propped against the door. I drove carefully, even forsaking some prime passing opportunities to keep our progression smooth.

Lane rented an apartment in a decent building. Not upscale enough to have a security desk, so I figured he’d need to upgrade soon. With the success of the album and the tour, fans would start showing up sooner or later. I parked in a visitor spot and went around to open the door for him. Despite his sleepy resistance, I took his keys out of his pocket, opened the lobby doors, and let us through to the elevator, my hand under his elbow.

He woke further as we ground slowly upward toward the fifth floor. “You didn’t have to come in.”

“Sure I did. Don’t want to spend the day imagining you passed out in the hallway.”

“I survived getting the flu before you came along.”

“Without your mommy?” He jerked his arm away and I added, “Sorry. That was a bit much. Just let me finish what I started.”

“Yes, Mommy.”

I winced. “Okay, I’ll give you that one. Bear with me. Caring if someone lives or fucks off the mortal coil is new to me. I might be overdoing it.”

Lane leaned his shoulder on mine. “Nah, you were right, I might’ve crashed my car. I feel awful. Also, how slow is this elevator?” He rustled the plastic bag in one hand.

“Give me fifteen seconds. Grit your teeth.”

I didn't know the layout of the building— I wasn't that much of a stalker— but it didn't take a college degree to figure out where 507 was. I opened the door in time for Lane to rush through and disappear. Sounds from the bathroom were an echo of my past. Didn't bother me much. I'd lived with guys who drank, detoxed, got strung out, or were bulimic. I'd eaten out of dumpsters more than once. I had a cast iron stomach. I went digging through Lane's fridge for soda and through his cupboards for crackers.

He hauled himself out of the john after five minutes and put his head around the kitchen doorway. “I'm going to bed.”

“Good plan. I'll bring you some things.”

“You should get back to the studio.”

“After I bring you some things.”

Lane clearly didn't have the energy to argue. I hunted around and assembled my tray of remedies in the lid of a pizza box from his recycling. When I went into the bedroom, he was stretched out on his bed, a sheet dragged over his middle hiding whether he still had briefs on. Nothing else covered his smooth, slim legs or his lean back and shoulders, but the clammy, pasty look never made me want to jump a guy. For once, I could stand next to a mostly naked Lane and not get a chub.

“Here.” I set the lid on the nightstand. “Lime soda, 'cause you've got no ginger ale, and water with ice. Crackers, for when your stomach settles a little. Cold pack for that headache I know you've got.” Lane's smooth forehead wore a groove of pain. “Tylenol, as soon as you can keep them down—”

“Crap!” He struggled out of bed and disappeared again.

I steadied my makeshift tray, sighed, and took out my phone. Two texts.

To Jamie. *~Lane's puking up a storm. I'm gonna stick around till I'm sure he doesn't need an ER.*

To Mrs. Lopez across the hall. *~Can you watch Princess through the night? She gets 1/2 can of her food at 5, and again at 8 a.m. I'll pay you double.*

Jamie texted back right away with good wishes for Lane. Mrs. Lopez was silent. She might be busy on her sewing machine. Her granddaughter's quinceañera—the reason she was happy to dog-sit for extra cash— was coming up, which apparently meant a lot of dressmaking. I wasn't worried, though. She'd watched Princess for me a couple of times already, and that dog had her wrapped around one minuscule paw.

When Lane staggered back in and collapsed onto the bed, I glanced up from where I sat on his dresser, juggling lyrics on my phone. “Look at what the cat dragged in.”

“Kill me now.” He rolled to one side and squinted my way. “Why are you still here?”

“You can't die until you write into your will that Princess becomes mine.”

“Hah. I knew you liked her. But she's still in your name too.”

“Drink some soda. Small sips. You need to replace fluids.”

He pushed a pillow to the floor to lie flatter on the mattress and waved a hand. “Later. Seriously, I'm better now. You can go.”

“I told Jamie I'd be back tomorrow. I'll hang around for a bit.”

“What about Princess? Will she be okay locked up till you get home?”

“Locked up?” I scoffed.

“Joel said he kept her in the bathroom when he was gone so she didn't chew stuff.”

“Joel didn't have Mrs. Lopez next door. Your mutt is currently in clover, being doted on by a grandmother who knows her way around a stove. You'll be lucky if she hasn't gained a pound by the time you get her back.”

“*Our* mutt.” Lane’s eyes seemed glazed, but he said the words firmly.

“Right.” I wasn’t going to argue with the sick guy. “Did you check your temp while you were in the john?”

“Nah. Do you even know how high is too high?”

“Sure. Over one-oh-four.” Or something. It’d never been relevant. If you got so sick you might die, you went to the ER. Otherwise, you didn’t bother with a doctor. No one would see guys like us anyhow. When that lash mark on my ribs got infected, I was seeing pink elephants for a couple of days till it broke open and drained. No one bothered to check my temperature. I could still drink water, walk to the john, and take my bootleg antibiotics. That was our threshold in my dysfunctional, crowded rent boy squat. And after I’d worked my way up to health insurance, I’d never been that sick again.

Lane shifted around on the mattress, maybe searching for a cool spot. “I’m not that bad off.”

His color did look better than before he’d puked. I relaxed a bit. “You do you. I’m gonna write love poetry for Jamie to sing.”

“Seriously?”

“You think ‘Shivers’ just popped out of thin air?”

“You wrote that?”

“Fair bit of it. Me and Jamie together.”

“I thought... because he and Val...”

“Because they’re in love? Nah.” I eyed the jumble of words on my phone that might eventually be a song. “Y’know, I think actually being in love might be a drawback for writing ballad lyrics. I mean, real love isn’t birds flying over rainbows, is it? It’s watching your lady flirt and leave with some dude because the label says she should, and kissing her just the same when she comes back home. It’s about making up after a fight, because splitting is unthinkable.” I’d seen Jamie and Val do that, more than once. “About cleaning up their puke—” I cut myself off, because that was maybe too close to home. “There’s songs that real kind of shit goes into, and we both write ’em, but the sweet ballads are

probably better written as myths, by someone who doesn't give a fuck about love."

"You."

"Right."

Lane groped toward his nightstand without raising his head. I set aside my phone and slid off the dresser. "What do you need? You're gonna knock shit over."

"Water and Tylenol?"

I scooped up his discarded pillow, folded it in half, and said, "Sit up a bit and let me stick this under, or you'll choke." When he was settled with his head raised, I opened the pill vial, passed him a couple, and then the glass of water. He shivered and the water sloshed, so I helped guide it to his mouth.

After a couple of sips to wash the capsules, he pulled back. "Better stop."

I put the glass down and used the cool rag I'd wrapped the ice pack in to wipe away the hair glued to his forehead.

He looked up at me and if he'd been healthier, I'd have called his expression a smirk. "Someone who doesn't give a fuck?"

"I can take care of a friend without descending into mush," I told him. "You want the cold pack on your forehead or up your ass?"

"Forehead." He sighed when I set it there, and his eyes drifted closed. "I was so eager to get home and see you again. I missed kissing you and being with you. Just a week, and I was counting the minutes, until the virus hit me."

I didn't tell him I'd been jonesing a bit too, for those kisses, at least. *The closest I've come to sex in a long time, right? No wonder I missed it.* "You're healthy. You'll shake this." A sudden worry hit me. "You *are* negative, right? That douche of a fuck buddy of yours uses rubbers?"

"Yeah." His voice sounded floaty. "I think so. Mostly. When he fucks me. Not for blow jobs."

If he was telling the truth, his risk was low, but I didn't like *mostly*. "When you're healthy, we're going to head to a clinic and get you tested for everything."

"I started PrEP three months ago and I was negative then. I'm sure I'm fine."

"I'm sure you should retest."

"Don't wanna. It's embarrassing." That came out soft and a bit petulant. I gave him half a pass for feeling like shit right now. But only half.

"Having an STD isn't some kind of character flaw. Hell, I've had the clap twice, had chlamydia, had crabs. Was lucky as hell to avoid HIV and herpes. Does that make me some kind of defective human?" I rushed on, because I didn't want to hear him thinking yes. "I was as careful as I could be." *No drugs to fuck up my judgment and make me desperate, no three-hundred-dollar barebacking, although I'd wanted that money real bad sometimes.* "But if someone breaks their leg skiing, folks don't go, 'Serves you right, shoulda thought of that before you hit the slopes.' They just fix it. You do something with your body for fun that has some risks? You take care and test, and when you need to, you treat."

"I guess."

"No guessing." I snagged the sheet up off the floor from where he'd kicked it and folded it at the foot of the bed. Good odds an hour from now he'd be freezing and want it. "I'll go with you. Never hurts to check and it's been a while." *Because I haven't had sex in a long time.*

I didn't tell him that— how I'd wondered if maybe I'd become asexual, until I saw his ass walking away from me one warm, summer day. I just picked up the blanket too, set the trash can I'd emptied in easy reach beside the bed, and went back to finding a close but not too perfect rhyme for *silken*. One that wasn't *chicken*, despite the temptation to go off the rails. I had a feeling I'd need a sense of humor in the next twenty-four hours.

Chapter 13

Lane

Three days after my embarrassing night that included vomiting all over the bed at one point, I still didn't have Princess back with me. Part of that was spending two days feeling like death only halfway warmed over, part was needing to line up some kind of daycare for her half as good as what Dax had across his hall. He'd sent me a picture of Princess standing on her hind legs begging for some home-baked treat from his elderly neighbor and it'd be hard for a doggy daycare to top that.

At least the virus had backed off at last. I'd woken this morning feeling like a functional human being. I had a long shower and tidied my apartment before Dax stopped by to pick me up for rehearsal. It'd made no sense at all for him to be coming all this way. I'd told him that firmly the first day, and grouchy the second. This morning he'd texted me from a few blocks away, by which time there was no point in complaining.

But as we pulled up outside my building coming home after rehearsal, I decided it was time to put my foot down. "Thanks for the ride. I'm fine to drive my own car home tomorrow, though. Then you can quit picking me up."

"Meh. I leave early to beat traffic anyhow." Dax didn't look at me.

"It makes absolutely no sense for you to drive all this way. Global warming, dude. Think of the planet."

"I bet my car gets better mileage than your SUV."

I tried a different tack. "You probably want to stay at the studio late

and write with Jamie. You shouldn't be tied to my schedule."

"We already have enough songs to dive into the new album after Rocktoberfest. Jamie's busy working with his agent putting feelers out for a new label, without letting Streetcorner find out we're considering jumping ship." Dax parked and turned to me, an eyebrow raised. "But if you don't *want* me around..."

What I *wanted*, now my body was coming back online, was to drag Dax up to my apartment and let him use some of that annoying pushiness in a far better way. But I still hadn't resolved things with Richard, so I had no right to go farther with Dax. Which made me grouchy as hell.

The only good thing about the virus was having an acceptable excuse for saying no to Richard when he'd texted two days earlier. But if I kept just putting him off, then Dax and I were stuck in limbo. I really needed to tell Richard our arrangement was over. I didn't think he'd care about losing me all that much, but he liked to make all the rules and all the decisions. A little shiver of doubt went through me.

No time like the present.

Thinking about Richard made my argument about riding with Dax seem stupid. I leaned toward him. "Willing to risk the virus?"

Dax set a hand under my chin and tilted my head. "You sound a lot better today."

"I am—" My voice ended muffled against Dax's mouth.

When he was done kissing me, he sat back. "Doing anything tonight? We could get dinner."

"I'm going to bite the bullet," I told him. "Call my ex and tell him we're through."

Dax's expression darkened. "Do you want me to stick around, just in case?"

"No!" I lowered my tone. "No. I'll be fine. He's not dangerous or anything. Worst he'll do is yell." *I hope.* "He might even be relieved. I think he's getting tired of me." I'd seen less of Richard in the last few

months. That might've been because I was touring the country, versus the early days when we were both in L.A., but he'd become impatient and distant when I did see him. *Fingers crossed.*

"I don't like anyone yelling at you."

"Well, I don't *like* it either, but I'm perfectly capable of surviving it."

"Okay." Dax's gaze bored into me. "Promise you'll call me after. Or during, if you want a witness on the other end of the phone."

"Why are you so worried?" I resented that he was making me even more nervous.

"I've seen how shitty people can be." He blew out a breath, set his hands on the wheel at ten and two. "Well, go on then. I'll head home and spoil your fur child."

"*Our* fur child." I was glad she wouldn't be underfoot tonight. Dealing with Richard was going to be hard enough without Princess adding to his annoyance.

Of course, he might not even come over. I'd have to make it clear I was simply obeying his orders, not demanding anything. I slid out of the car and shut the door. Dax waved two fingers at me without taking his hands off the wheel and pulled out of the lot.

Inside my apartment, I ate cold leftover pizza, vacuumed, showered, cleaned the bathroom again.

You're stalling.

Yes. Yes, I am.

I pulled out my phone. Richard's annoyed reaction to my snot-driven refusal two days ago lurked at the end of our text chain, not encouraging me to reach out to him.

Chicken.

Maybe he isn't even in town anymore.

I hovered my finger over the screen, typed, erased, typed again. Finally, I sent, *~Hi, Richard. I'm pretty much healthy again. Not perfect, but I'm ready to see you whenever you want.*

No answer pinged back to me, but I didn't expect one. Even if Richard had seen the message right away, making people wait was part of his style. He'd told me once, when his phone rang while I was blowing him, that there was no one's call he'd jump to answer. "Let them wait, let them sweat. Whoever's less eager to come to the table holds more power."

Well, if lack of eagerness was the key tonight, I'd be winning. Sadly, his simplistic rule didn't apply.

My hair was dry and I'd cleaned the whole kitchen by the time my phone pinged.

~Long day of meetings. I'll stop by around eleven.

The lack of "glad you're feeling better" was the opposite of a shock. The clock on the microwave said it was just after seven, and I was tempted to go out. Maybe run down to The D-Spot and watch whomever was on tonight. I hadn't made it back there since the tour, and I could use a dose of Mother Kissa's acerbic comfort. But traffic was so unpredictable, and Richard might show up early without warning, if his meetings ran short.

The acoustic guitar in my bedroom tempted me, but my fingertips were tender from our long rehearsal. I turned on the TV instead and tried to get interested in some baking show. When my phone pinged an hour later, I grabbed it.

Dax had sent a video of Princess with her head inside a small trash can. *~She also likes making confetti.* The video panned out to show a bathroom floor littered with fragments of Kleenex.

I sent back, *~Next she'll be demanding her own ticker-tape parade.*

A second video showed her pulling her head out, topped with scraps of paper. *~And a coronation.*

~As a true Princess should have.

~Hah. She already considers me her servant. I'm not buying her a wardrobe.

~Good thing I outrank her as a Queen.

~Shh. Don't tell her there's anything about Princess. She'll be angling for a promotion, and we know there's only one way, among royalty. She'll have to smother you in your sleep.

On the TV, some guy was agonizing over a souffle that failed to rise, but Dax's banter was far more interesting. Grinning, I tried to come up with something clever to send back.

Sometime later, I was jolted away from my phone by a buzz from the intercom. *Already?* But a look at the time showed it was ten-thirty. I signed off from Dax, with a last good luck reply, and went to release the lobby door.

My mouth had gone dry and I paced a few steps back and forth behind my door. I suddenly didn't want Richard yelling at me in here, where Dax had cooked me canned soup and forced me to drink ice water till I was awash in it. *I should've rented a fancy hotel room and told Richard it was a gift.* Too late now, though.

His rap on my door managed to sound impatient. Or maybe I just knew the man behind that short sound. I took a deep breath and opened for him. "Come in—"

Richard caught the front of my shirt in one fist and backed me up a step, kicking the door closed and throwing the deadbolt behind him. I had a moment of panic but he pushed me against the wall and kissed me hard. "There," he said when he was done. "That's what I needed to get rid of the taste of that meeting. My boy's hot mouth." He grinned.

At one time, I'd have flushed with pride for making him feel better. Now, I realized I didn't care one way or the other.

Before I could speak, he kissed me again, then set his hands on my shoulders and pushed me down. "On your knees, boy. Show me what a great cocksucker you've become."

I resisted. "Richard, we should—"

"Later. Suck me now, boy. That's an order." His grin slid sideways and his eyes glittered.

Refusing orders was the one thing guaranteed to make him get cold and furious. And after all, Dax and I weren't a thing yet. I hadn't tested

yet. Nothing would change going forward, if I blew Richard one more time. He was always more mellow after an orgasm.

I let him push me to my knees, there in the entry, and undid his jacket buttons one by one, then opened his suit pants, still immaculate at this hour. Under the pants, his soft dick barely stretched the fabric of his briefs.

He tangled a hand in my hair. “Been a long day. Get me hard, boy. Make it good.”

As I did what he wanted, using hands and lips and tongue, but *never* teeth, I felt detached. I was a spectator, watching myself, noting the techniques Richard had taught me and when they worked or didn’t. In the moment before I took his now-erect cock into my mouth, I wondered what he’d say if I asked for a condom. A laugh shivered in my chest. Not worth the reaction.

This is nothing new, nothing different. But I was different. His muttered praise left me cold. His demands and tugging fingers didn’t make me shiver with delight. When he eventually came down my throat, I realized my dick was still soft. *Job done. That’s all.*

Is this how Dax felt, selling sex? There was an odd power in it, knowing that Richard hadn’t touched anything inside me, emotionally anyhow. Not caring felt heady, and I smiled as I stood and went into the kitchen to drink water and wipe my mouth.

Richard followed me, and I passed him a wet paper towel without looking. *Basic courtesy for a stranger.* I liked thinking he was about to become a stranger.

He grabbed my arm, spinning me around. “Hey, don’t turn your back on me.”

I pulled free. “Hard to run water and look at you, unless you want to sit in the sink.”

“Are you getting mouthy?” He raised an eyebrow. “Does my boy need to be taught a lesson?”

I slid out from between him and the counter and moved back, not liking the trapped feeling. “I’m not your boy. Not anymore.”

“My cock down your throat says different.”

“This was the last time, though.”

“What?”

“I’m breaking up with you.” I forgot all my strategies, the way I was going to try to make him think he was bored and ditching me was his idea. I didn’t want to waste another minute. “You have plenty of other guys. You don’t need me. Some of them are probably sexier and better in bed...”

I trailed off as he stalked toward me. A brief impulse to run was swamped by anger. *This is my apartment, dammit. I won’t let him make me afraid.*

He stopped a foot in front of me, his gaze boring into me. “Yeah, hotter, more obedient. That doesn’t mean you’re free to go.”

“I’m not your—” *Servant? Slave?* “—property.”

He slowly raised a hand and brushed my shoulder, then my chest, as if flicking dust off me. “Yeah, you are. Mine, till *I* say otherwise.”

No way! I backed up a step and he followed me. “Don’t be stupid.” I hated the tremble in my voice almost as much as the narrowing of his eyes. “I mean, no one owns anyone else. Not even Dom and sub. This is me safewording.”

“I never gave you a safeword,” Richard growled. “And you know why? Because when I found you, you were a little, ignorant, whiny bitch with no talent and not a clue how the world works. You think you got the job with Corvus off your playing? Think again.” He tapped my chest hard. “*I* got you that job.” Another tap. “*I* decided I could make something of you and took you on.”

“I’m a good bassist.” I clung to that knowledge. Jamie would never have taken me into his band if I couldn’t meet his standards, Richard or no Richard.

“Mediocre. There are a thousand like you out there. *I* picked you, because you have a pretty mouth and you could be taught to obey.” He came forward again and I couldn’t help recoiling, until he had me

backed against the fridge. He slapped a hand into place on either side of my head, caging me with his arms.

I fumbled for something to say against the harsh gleam of his eyes.

His lips thinned. “I can get you dropped from Corvus, as fast as I got you hired.”

“You can’t.” I found my voice. “That’s Jamie’s call.”

“And the label’s. Remember that morality clause in your contract? They can drop you in a hot second if you offend them.”

“I haven’t done anything. Except with *you*.” I blinked. “Are you threatening to tell them about us?” That made no sense. He’d have more to lose, if the label cared about nepotism, than I did, no matter who his dad was.

“There is no *us*, little boy. There’s you, doing what I say, or Ms. Fox becomes a star of Twitter and Instagram under your real name. Drag’s a big brand-killer right now. Corrupting the kids. My father and the other Streetcorner execs won’t like that one bit and nor will the fans.”

I fought to breathe. “Rock music has songs half-composed of the word fuck. They won’t care.”

“Not care about pedophiles?” He leaned even closer, his breath fanning my face. “Think again.”

“I’m not a *pedophile*! I do drag in adult clubs for adult audiences, and even if I didn’t, drag’s not...” My burst of anger was smothered by the knowing smirk Richard gave me.

“No one gives a fuck about the truth. I can ruin you with a word. I can give Corvus the choice of ditching you or being dragged into your stinking sewer. You hear me?” He stared into my eyes, his pupils wide.

He’s enjoying this. He gets off on his power. That didn’t make his threats less real.

“You can’t beat me, little girl. I own you. And *I* say when we’re through.”

He pushed away, and I sucked in a shaky breath.

Button by button, he closed his jacket, then shot his cuffs, his eyes on me. “I’d make you blow me again, but it’s getting late.” I remained frozen as he crossed the kitchen and turned back in the doorway. “You keep your mouth shut except when I want it, and you obey when I give you orders. You answer your phone when I call.” He raked his gaze over me. “I won’t make you give up the drag. Someday, you’re gonna blow me with the wig and lipstick on and smear your makeup on my dick. Until then, be a good little boy. Oh, and you better lock up after me. Wouldn’t want the wrong people finding out where you live and harassing you, would we?”

I heard his footsteps, the five feet to the door, then the lock opening, the door shutting. Then silence. Legs shaking, I slid down the refrigerator to sit on the floor.

Now what? What do I do? I found my phone in my hand and fumbled my way to Dax’s texts. I couldn’t catch my breath to speak to him, but I texted. *~He’s gone.*

~Are you okay? pinged back immediately.

It took me longer than it should’ve to decide. *~Not really.*

~I’m coming over.

~Don’t. He didn’t hurt me. I’m going to bed.

~Doesn’t take a punch in the face, to hurt.

I stared at that truth for a while.

Until Dax responded again, *~I’ll be there in half an hour. Hang tight.*

~You don’t have to.

~Princess would chew my arm off if I left you to brood. Half an hour.

I wasn’t sure what Dax could do, wasn’t sure there was anything *anyone* could do, but I sat on my kitchen floor, clutching my phone, and watched the numbers on the microwave clock tick their way through the minutes.

Dax

I tucked Princess under my arm as I rode the elevator up to Lane's floor. I'd thought about voice-calling him, but fuck that, it'd only slow me down. For Lane to admit he was "*not really*" okay suggested his douche ex had left damage in his wake. I was going to find out exactly what, do whatever Lane needed, and then maybe it'd be time to discover the douche's name and work out a secret revenge.

Lane was too sweet a guy to get his own back at the bastard. I wasn't, and what Lane didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

At his door, I had to knock twice before he opened. I stepped inside, raking my gaze over him. No bruises I could see, no obvious tears, but a flat, lost look that echoed something old and painful deep inside me. I shut the door, handed Princess into his arms, and wrapped him in a hug. For a second, he felt stiff. Then he melted into my hold, laughing shakily as the little dog licked under his chin. I rocked him back and forth with her between us, keeping my hands off his ass because who knew what'd gone down.

When I felt Lane begin to tense up, I let go before he could ask. "Come on. I'll make coffee and you can tell me how Douchy McDoucheface reacted to being told to take a hike."

His expression did something complicated I couldn't read. *Yeah, I figured it wasn't that easy.* Pretending I hadn't noticed, I headed to the kitchen, tugging a folded dog potty pad out of my hip pocket to lay in the far corner. Lane and I needed a heart-to-icicle chat— me being the one who'd keep my cool— and I wasn't going to let Princess interrupt. Girl had a shrill bark when she wanted something.

I put coffee in the coffee maker and turned it on.

"Coffee? I'll never get to sleep," Lane complained, setting Princess on the floor.

Like you were going to anyhow? I just hit the button for two cups

and turned to lean my ass against the counter. I'd planned to be all gentle and understanding, but a hint in the air when I hugged him led my asshole tongue to say, "Did you fuck him first?"

Lane looked away, color chasing up his neck and jaw. "I blew him. Not that it's any business of yours."

Ouch, on both counts. But I'd asked for that. I said cheerfully, "Right. Was that strategy or you felt like you had to?"

A shrug of one shoulder meant Lane either wasn't sure or didn't want to say. Another surge of rage at McDoucheface went through me, but I hid it. "At least it's done."

"Yeah... not exactly."

"Meaning what?"

"I broke up with him, but he didn't break up with me."

"Sorry, douche-dude, it doesn't work that way. You don't want him, Lane? He's toast."

"He said I was his. And if I didn't obey, he'd..."

I waited, but the end of that sentence seemed to be missing in action. Princess came over from her exploration of the floor to put her front paws on Lane's knee. He scooped her up and hid his face in her fur.

The coffeemaker had quit dripping. I got out two mugs, familiar from my night of forcing liquids into Lane, and poured them full. Added milk and sugar to his. My hands were perfectly steady. When I was done, I gestured with my chin. "Couch?"

"Sure." He led the way and sat on one end, playing with Princess in his lap.

I put his coffee on the end table and sat in the middle, sipping mine. And waited. If I stayed silent, most folks eventually felt compelled to say something to fill the empty space. I'd used that technique a hundred times on people who didn't matter, letting my silence draw out their words. I wasn't sure it was right to do the same with Lane, but I was certain if I started asking questions, he'd clam up and

pretend nothing happened.

I had a few sips left in the bottom of my mug and was beginning to think about other tactics when Lane said down to Princess, “I’ve always found a kind of... peace in people telling me what to do. Too many decisions are stressful.”

“Okay.”

“I wasn’t looking for a relationship when me and him started. Especially not with someone who works for the label. But he knew exactly what I wanted to hear, how to order me around the way that felt good, how to make me feel sexy and interesting, instead of geeky and clumsy.”

“You are sexy.” The other piece caught up with me. “Your ex works for the label?” A sick feeling rose, deep in my gut.

“Yeah. So he has power over the band, and me.” Lane raised wide eyes. “He knows I do drag and he says it breaks the morals clause in my contract. And the way drag’s controversial these days could be big publicity trouble for Corvus, if fans find out. He said if I tried to stand up to him, he’d get me fired, or get the whole band dropped by the label.”

A swoop of nauseating certainty came over me. That emotional blackmail from someone with the label was too damned familiar. *Why didn’t I guess?* “His name?” My words seemed to come from far away. “What’s this douchebag’s name?”

“Richard—”

“Kensington,” I finished in unison with him. “*Motherfucker!*”

Someone should’ve given me a medal for placing my mug on the table instead of shattering it against the far wall.

Lane stared at me. “You know him?”

“Remember that one relationship I said I had? The one I walked away from and napalmed in the rearview mirror?”

“When you changed your name?”

“Yeah.”

“That was... Richard?”

“In the hopefully now sagging and decrepit flesh.” Richard was in his early thirties when I knew him. He must be in his forties by now. Way too old for Lane, and even more too slimy and mean and—
“Aaaargh.”

“Sorry?” Lane shrank back into the corner of the couch, clutching his mug in front of himself. “I didn’t know?”

“No, hey, I’m not mad at you.” I tried to steady my tone, despite the steam leaking from my ears. “I’m mad at Richard, and at myself for not warning you.”

“Why would you have warned me?”

“You’re exactly Richard’s type. Young, pretty, inexperienced, submissive, easy to fuck with.”

I waited for Lane to deny any of those, but instead he said, “I can’t imagine you being submissive.”

“Hah. No. But I played the part well.” I turned to meet Lane’s eyes. “Richard was using me, back then, but I was using him too. I wasn’t his victim, up until he tried the same kind of blackmail bullshit on me. He thought he had me trapped, but you can’t trap someone willing to blow everything up and walk away.”

“You think I should... what? Quit the band before he can make me?”

“No!” I laid a hand on his knee. Princess looked back and forth between us and whined softly. “Shh, girl,” I told her. “We’re okay. The bad man’s gone and won’t be coming back.”

“You can’t promise that.” Lane rubbed his eyes with his wrist, cuddling Princess closer. “He left here planning to come back any time. And if I say no, I bet he’d wreck me out of spite.”

“This is where his power trip ends.” My words sounded like the promise they were. “At least, the beginning of the end.” Because Lane was right. We needed a plan. “I don’t suppose you recorded him on your phone or anything?”

“No. I didn’t even think of it. Crap. I could’ve.” Lane sounded miserable.

“Why should you? You didn’t know he was going to turn Cujo. Anyhow, California’s a two-person consent state. Anything you recorded without his permission, he could sue you for.”

“How do you know that?”

Because I have a recording from California I never dared to use. “Now, Nevada’s one-person consent.” I’d researched all the rules, back then, and still kept track. “If we could lure him to Rocktoberfest and record him there, you’d have a good weapon.” Lane shuddered, and I rubbed his knee. “Just brainstorming. Look, we need to take this to Jamie.”

“No! I don’t want anyone to know.”

“He’s threatening the whole band. Either you do what he tells you, or we’re all getting smacked with his retaliation.”

“Would he really? Corvus Rising is a big name. Surely the rest of the execs wouldn’t want him to drag down a moneymaker?”

“I don’t think Richard cares a lot about what the others think. Except his dad, who owns the label. Anyway, knowing Richard, he’d find a way to make us look bad and him look like the hero. Pretend to have nothing to do with any leak and be helping us, while spreading it far and wide. It’d be your word against his.”

Lane rocked back and forth. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to tell Jamie. I don’t want to tell anyone. I just want Richard to go away.” He sounded like a scared, small boy.

I had a moment of insane impulse to say, “*You want him dead? I can do that.*” I probably could too, but among all the illegal things I’d done, murder wasn’t one of them. I couldn’t protect Lane if I was in prison, and I didn’t want Richard to have that kind of power over my life, even if he’d be too dead to enjoy it. “Working on it,” I said instead.

“I don’t know what I ever saw in him.”

“He has charisma and talks a good game.” To give the devil his due.

“He’s good-looking, if you like older guys. He has a boatload of confidence. If you’re looking for someone to Dom you, he’s got that in spades. Not a *good* Dom, but if you don’t have experience, it’s hard to tell dominance from abuse.”

“He didn’t abuse me.” Lane sounded offended, which was better than wrecked.

“He’s done it to others.” I could’ve told Lane about Card Crimson and how we’d foundered on that rock, but I’d have to tell Jamie tomorrow, and I only wanted to say it once. “Anyhow, lots of people fall into relationships with bad guys. That’s not your fault. The question is how to get you out without a disaster.”

“Maybe I *should* leave the band.”

I made a chopping gesture with my hand. “Not an option. He likes having someone famous on a string, no doubt, but I don’t think he’d leave you alone no matter how much you give up.” Even when Richard started his own young, pretty harem with Card Crimson, there’d been a poor guy he’d kept coming around, long after he was done with him, just to see the guy jump when he said frog. I’d met his older sub a time or two, and felt superior because I was using Richard, not a victim. I won’t say my dramatic end was karma, but it did teach me how far Richard would go.

Lane pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Right now, bed. You’ve only been mostly healthy for a day. You must be ready to crash.”

“I guess. And you have to drive home.”

“Oh, hell no. I’m not leaving.”

He looked down at his feet. “I know I broke up with Richard now, but I’m not up for anything—”

“Jesus, Lane, you think I’m going to push you for sex after what that douche just did?”

“I’m not damaged, just tired—”

“Three ways from Sunday, yeah.” *Exhausted, body, brain, and*

heart. “I can take the couch, or we can share the bed to sleep, but sex is off the table.”

“I don’t have Princess’s bed here. You said she likes to sleep in her little one now.” Lane hugged her tighter, though. “Or food for her breakfast.”

“We can rig up a bed to please Her Highness. And I can get up early and run out for dog food.” I slid over closer to him on the couch until my thigh and shoulder were pressed up against his. “We both need to rest, and I’m not leaving. Make the best of it.”

He sagged against me as if my certainty relaxed something inside him. “I should argue.”

“But you won’t.” I eased my arm behind his back and pulled his head to my shoulder.

He sighed like a child at the end of a long day, closed his eyes, and rested in my hold. I didn’t kiss his hair, but I thought about it. Princess squirmed around until she was tucked between his arm and my chest and shut her eyes too. Minutes flowed by in the steady in and out of his breathing. I let my mind work through strategies, options. Not memories. There were some live wires in there I didn’t want to touch tonight. But Richard Kensington had reached the end of his immunity from consequences.

I hadn’t seen Richard close up in almost a decade. I’d worked hard to make the same true for him. Once or twice, he’d passed through the periphery of some industry gathering I was at, and I always left. I’d seen him leaving a hotel, or at a distance in some venue. I figured he’d never associate the white-blond, tanned, lean-muscled guy I now was with the skinny, dark-haired kid he’d raised to the big stage and then driven off it. Not at a distance. But I didn’t want to risk him getting a close look.

Now? Now I craved a moment up in Richard’s face. I wanted to laugh at his expression when he realized he hadn’t broken me after all. I wanted to spit in his eye for what he’d done to Lane.

Not yet. Be smart. Be cool.

I'd survived the streets intact by listening to that inner voice. The one that weighed the risks and the benefits, that knew when to walk away, even if there was money on the table. The one that knew some bad things were still better than being dead, and easier to endure if I called it strategy. And the one that could come up with a plan of action that delivered, even if the revenge was very, very cold.

I'm coming for you, Dickface.

Lane stirred and pulled away from me. "Wow, I'm falling asleep. I didn't think I'd be able to, but now you're here..."

"You're beat." I squashed a flash of pleasure that I'd given him the safety to rest. "Come on." Easing us apart, I scooped Princess up in one arm and held my hand to him. "Let's go get ready. You clean up in the bathroom and I'll make Her Highness a new bed."

"Okay." Lane stood obediently at my pull and turned toward the john. He sure seemed to like being told what to do, and I had no objection to taking charge.

When Lane closed the bathroom door, I headed for his bedroom. The last time I was in here, I was stripping his bed to wash the sheets for the third go round. The room looked and smelled a lot better tonight. I set Princess on the rug and pulled the comforter off the bed. *He won't need that, even with the AC. I'll keep him plenty warm.* I folded the quilt into a thick square and set it on the floor on the left side, about where Princess's bed usually lived next to my own. "There. That work for you, bitch?"

She trotted over to inspect my offering, got on and off it a few times, then stood beside it, tail wagging.

"What? Not cushy enough for your delicate butt?" I eyed it. The cushioning should be even thicker than her real bed. However, the folded quilt was flat and she liked to rest her chin on the raised edge of her plush nest when she slept. "Too basic? Madame needs the advanced model?"

Snagging a pillow, I set that on the carpet, then twisted the comforter into a fat rope and wove it around the pillow, tucking the ends in to approximate a bed and bolster effect. "There. Is that to

Madame's satisfaction?" I waved at the result. "Just don't eat the damned stuffing."

Princess jumped in, tromped the pillow in a circle a few times, then settled down with her chin propped on the surrounding quilt.

"Success!" I threw up my hands and faked a French accent to her. "Ze most deeficult of customers 'az been pleased."

A soft chuckle made me look up. Lane stood in the doorway in just his shorts, dampness highlighting his chest. "She has you wrapped around her tiny paw, doesn't she?"

When caught doing something embarrassing, my policy was to brazen it out. I raised an eyebrow. "You may appreciate dog breath that can slay an elephant huffed in your face at two a.m. I don't. If she's down there—" I pointed at the contented dog. "—she's not up here." I pulled the sheets lower. "By the way, I gave her your pillow."

Lane's chuckle became a laugh. Then he launched himself at me. I caught him awkwardly, changing my grip to hold him tight as he huffed and snuffled against my neck. Maybe the laugh held some tears. Didn't matter, I was here for whatever.

"I'm so glad I texted you," he mumbled against my neck. "So grateful you came."

"Of course I came." I steered him to the bed and pushed him onto the mattress. "I'm gonna go piss. When I come back, I want you stretched out here, starting to relax. And no stealing my pillow."

"Yes, boss." Lane sounded steadier as he laid his head down flat.

"That's right. If you're very good later, I'll share."

I waited for some complaint, for him to point out that it was in fact, his bed, and both his pillows. But he just shut his eyes and tucked a hand under his cheek. His skin still looked pale in the lamplight, and his long lashes didn't mask shadows under his eyes, but his lips curved upward.

You try to hurt him again, Richard, and I'll rip your liver out.

I bent to give Princess a few ear scratches, then hurried to get ready

to join Lane in his bed. Tomorrow was another day. Tonight, I'd share Lane's space and keep him safe. A hollow place inside me I hadn't acknowledged the last few days filled with simple relief.

Chapter 14

Lane

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I asked as Dax turned into the gated community where Val and Jamie lived and showed his ID to the guard.

“Don’t you trust me, grasshopper?”

“Grasshopper”? That show’s even older than you are.” I only knew because my grandpa liked it.

“We didn’t have cable. I watched a lot of old crap in reruns.” He steered us through the gate and picked up speed again.

Dax had arranged for the band to meet at Jamie and Val’s house, instead of the rehearsal studio, and I worried about what he had in mind. I mean, I gathered he was going to talk to them about Richard. Since he’d promised to keep my secrets, that meant he was going to tell them about his own past with the man. Which left me torn. After the few hints he’d shared, I was desperately curious. But if Richard had left Dax feeling anything like as slimy and trapped as he left me, Dax shouldn’t have to talk about it.

He’d brushed off my concerns over breakfast, and handed me Princess to keep me company on the drive. She stood on my knee, front paws on the window ledge, as we slowed and turned in at Jamie’s drive. I recognized Tanisha’s SUV and Brody’s sports car, parked up by the house.

Dax said, “Good. Everyone’s here.” He pulled in behind Tanisha and got out.

I scooped up Princess and followed him.

He tapped his code into a panel by the door and then opened it, stepping inside. I paused. I always felt a bit awkward simply walking in on Jamie and Val, even though they'd said that was why they gave us the lock codes. Dax didn't hesitate at all, just strode off down the hall, leaving me to close the door and follow.

The others had gathered in the kitchen, sitting on bar stools around the big, raised island. The smell of coffee filled the air, a better quality than the communal pot at the studio. Val looked over as we came in. "About time. You two want coffee? And help yourselves to bagels and all." She waved at the counter. "Hey, you brought the baby." She stood to scratch Princess's chest. "Hi, little girl."

Dax said, "Thanks." He headed for the coffee, doing a fist-bump thing with Jamie as he passed.

My nerves were jittering by the time he'd filled mugs for both of us and taken a sesame bagel on a plate. I waved off the food. No chance I could eat, and I wanted Princess in my lap, which meant not setting food in front of her.

Dax took the open seat at the end of the island. Brody got up and scooted over one stool so I could sit on Dax's left. I nodded thanks, although that was pretty telling. *Of course they know something's up between Dax and me. We haven't been subtle.* I raised my mug and took a steadying sip.

Brody said, "Hey, Snowboy, if you're here to tell us you got Lane pregnant, I win fifty bucks."

I snorted out some coffee. Princess yipped and licked at my face.

Dax passed me a paper napkin without cracking a smile. "Good guess, but not the winner."

Jamie said, "So what's up? You sounded serious."

Dax turned his mug around between his hands. "How close are we to finding a new label?"

"Pretty close," Val told him. "Our agent's in early negotiations with two options. Neither one's as big as Streetcorner, but they have good reputations. Why?"

“Because I’m going to say we need to burn our connection to Streetcorner, and I’d love to know we have other choices.”

“We should.” Jamie focused on Dax’s face. “Streetcorner sucks, we’ve known that since year one, so what’s changed?”

Dax spun his mug again, staring into it. “To explain, I’m going to have to go way back, spill some personal history that none of you know. It won’t be pretty.”

“Go on.” Jamie reached across the island to touch Dax’s forearm. “We’re with you. You know that.”

A twisted grimace crossed Dax’s face. “Might be harder to say that after today, but I’m tired of hiding shit.”

That expression, the words, as if he expected the others to turn on him, made me say, “Dax. You don’t have to. You could tell them—”

“Shush.” He flashed me a frown. “My decision. You get your turn after, if you like.” His grim expression softened. “It’ll be okay.”

I looked around at Tanisha, Brody, Val. They all eyed Dax but the worry on their faces seemed to be for him, not about him. I nodded.

Dax pushed his stool back and stood, pacing two steps, then back. “Once upon a time, there was a Streetcorner band named Card Crimson. You can look them up. They did a couple of tours, ten years back, released one mediocre album, and vanished from the music scene.”

Brody pulled out his phone, searched, scrolled. After a second, Val did the same.

“Hey, dude,” Brody said. “That one guy. Is he another brother of you and Crow’s?”

Val shook her head slowly, tilting her phone for Jamie to see. “That’s you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Dax barked a short laugh. “Ace Samuels. Bass player for Card Crimson. Jack was our lead guitar and singer, King played drums, Joker was rhythm guitar. The names were a stupid gimmick. The music was written for us. We sucked.”

“You got some decent reviews here,” Brody said, scrolling. “Charted with a song called ‘Bird in a Coalmine.’ Opened for Zane Marcus once. That’s pretty bigtime.”

“Maybe we weren’t terrible. But we were a vanity project, put together by the acquisitions department of Streetcorner records. Like a boy band, picked as much for our looks as our talents, to meet specifications. Which included the good old casting couch.”

Jamie stared at Dax, a frown carving his forehead. “Whose couch? How old were you?”

“I was nineteen. And not close to a virgin. Relax, bro. The who?” Dax hesitated, then said, “Richard Kensington.”

Brody whistled. “The fucking VP of acquisitions?”

“He wasn’t the VP then. He’s the boss’s son, so he’s been fast-tracked, but back then he was just one of their talent scouts. Of course, being in the royal family of the business, he had a lot more leeway to put the bands he liked onto the roster. He decided boy bands were coming back, what with K-pop and all, and he was going to create one. And since he had a taste for young, inexperienced guys, the audition process was a feast for him.”

“I didn’t know you played onstage,” Tanisha said. “I thought you were just on the recording and mixing side.”

“I’ve done both.”

Jamie held Val’s hand to steady her phone, swiping through images. “You have dark hair and blue eyes here?” He glanced up at Dax. “Not that both versions don’t look good.”

“I needed a change.” Dax leaned against the counter, folding his arms. “I don’t know how many musicians Richard interviewed for Card Crimson, or how many he suggested could blow him to improve their chances.”

“Bastard,” Val muttered.

“Sadly not, or his old man wouldn’t have lined him up to inherit the company. Anyway, Richard’s always had certain tastes, and they

weren't hard to figure out. After my audition, he took me back into his office. This was in their New York studio, by the way."

"Why were you in New York?" Jamie asked.

"Long story." Dax waved him off. "Point is, I'd used sex to get what I needed before, and I was good at telling when a trick just wanted a good fuck and when they wanted a nervous boy to boss around. Richard gave off the thickest bad-Dom vibes, so I played up to that. Pretended to be a virgin. Pretended to be flattered a handsome guy like him was going to teach me to give a blow job. Gave him a half-amateur job that still got him off like a rocket. He liked it. Signed me to the band, and imagined he was teaching me all about sex and life for the next year. Of course, he was fucking Jack and Joker, too. I don't think King. Not sure what was going on there. The other three of us played a game of don't ask, don't tell."

"That's gross," Tanisha muttered.

"Tell me about it. We had a different band manager who reported to him. Richard was still supposed to be a talent scout. But he had the company jet and he'd fly into towns where we were performing. He'd pick one of us to fuck before the show, one to fuck afterward. Only two of the three of us. He probably imagined we were fighting for the privilege. Or maybe he knew we were all hoping he'd skip us that night. Not sure which he'd have gotten off on more."

"Why would you *do* that?" Jamie sounded pained.

Dax grinned, showing a lot of teeth. "For the money. For the chance to play, and the hope of something better down the line, sure. But mostly for the money. If you've never been skipping-meals-and-digging-through-trash poor, you don't know what you'd do, given the choice. Maybe Jack and Joker thought he was their boyfriend or their Dom. Open relationship, all that pseudo-mature stuff to make what he was doing okay. I never had illusions."

"What happened?" Val asked.

Dax took a breath and raised his chin. From the look in his eyes, something hard was coming. I wished I was close enough to hold him, like he'd done for me when things got rough. But this was Dax. He

wouldn't have taken comfort, even if I'd been beside him.

"He saw a porno I'd done and realized that my scared virgin sub to his master Dom was all an act."

Everyone greeted that statement with a moment of silence.

I was trying to come up with a way to break the freeze when Brody asked, "Was it a good porno?"

"Nah." I saw Dax's shoulders relax, and I blessed Brody in my head. "Crappy production values, no story, just ass-fucking, some bondage, hardcore enough. Made some money when I needed it."

"What happened?" Dax might've lost some tension, but Jamie seemed to be grinding his teeth. "With Kensington?"

"He was majorly pissed. Told me he had me in his power now. He could leak the porno at any time, tank the band, get me fired for morals."

"Fuck," Tanisha breathed.

"Yeah." Dax's feral grin was a weapon. "I told him I'd call the cops and tell them he had underage porn on his computer."

"Underage?" Jamie demanded.

Dax waved him off. "I was sixteen back then. But that's not the point."

Jamie's expression said it was one of the points, but he shut up and let Dax go on.

"His face went practically purple. He told me I'd be his bitch for real, no more kid gloves, if he wanted me to rim him or bareback for him or crawl on my knees, I'd do it. Or he'd destroy me, and the other guys along with me."

"Did you call the cops?" Jamie asked.

Val, Brody, and Tanisha all laughed painfully, and Dax scoffed. "Only if I wanted to get arrested for making underage porn and threatening a nice rich white guy. Cops don't rescue people like me from people like him. I thought about options all night, after he left

without the fuck he thought I'd have to give him." He chuckled. "I had no more fucks left to give, literally. I told him I'd bite his dick off. Anyhow, I decided he was right. He had all the power on his side. Exposing him wouldn't save the rest of us from a crash and burn. So I ran."

"Ran?"

"Literally. Well, power-walked. I pulled out the pitiful amount of cash I had, packed my bags, texted the guys to tell them Richard just blew us up and I had to get out of town, and left. Took a bus well out of California, since we'd moved to L.A. by then, and found a place to settle. Cut my hair and dyed it. Used a letter of introduction I still had to land another unpaid internship in a small recording studio, and then changed my name."

Jamie frowned. "That's when you became Dax Crow?"

"Eventually. I changed it twice."

"Okay. All right." Jamie dug his fingers into his hair, pressing the heels of his hands to his temples, then peered at Dax. "But then why'd you help us with our sound? Why join Corvus? You knew we were under long-term contract with Streetcorner."

The look Dax gave Jamie made me want to shout, *He joined up for you, dumbass! Even with his nemesis around, he wanted to help his brother.* I clenched my teeth.

Dax said, "I was four years in at the new studio, paid position, everything going well, when I saw a story about the death of musician James Crow, and how there'd be a bunch of country stars at his funeral Sunday, along with his ex-wife and son. I got curious. You know how that went down."

Jamie nodded. "I'm glad you did. That you came and stayed, despite everything. But... why would you risk it, and why are you telling us now? I mean, yeah, that adds to the ditch-Streetcorner weight. I won't re-sign with them now if they offer me a billion bucks. But you didn't need to tell us stuff you've kept secret all this time. You just had to say, 'Jamie. Don't sign with them again. They fucked me over once and I hate them.' That would've been enough."

“The topic came up.” Dax shrugged. “I figured if you know how they operate, forewarned is—”

“No.” I didn’t want to hear him twist himself into knots to keep me hidden, when he’d ripped down his walls. “He did it because Richard’s doing the same thing to me.”

“He’s *what*?” Jamie rounded on me.

Dax said, “Lane, that’s not necessary.”

“Yeah. It is.” Princess whimpered and I realized I was holding her too tightly. I set her on the floor and went to stand next to Dax. His shoulder inches from mine was a comfort. I cleared my tight throat. “In my case, it’s not porn, it’s me doing drag.” I held my breath to see what they’d say.

Jamie’s brow furrowed in confusion. “But drag’s not illegal.”

“But it’s controversial,” Dax said. “There are states that are spreading the hate. And you know Streetcorner doesn’t even like you standing next to a guy you and Val are fucking. They put up with the bi image in a controlled way, but a dress and makeup probably would be a step too far for Kensington Senior.”

“If there’s some stupid video he found—”

“It’s not one video,” I snapped. “I still do drag.”

“And it’s not stupid,” Dax seconded. “He’s awesome as Ms. Fox. Writes her own material and everything. No one gets to shit on that.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.” Jamie ran a hand over the back of his neck. “But why’s Richard Kensington blackmailing you? What does he gain from that?”

I lost my breath in the realization he hadn’t put two and two together yet. From the compassionate look on Tanisha’s face, she had. No point in putting it off. I couldn’t quite manage Dax’s nonchalance. “We’ve been sleeping together. Me and Richard. For a while now.”

“A while.” Val’s eyes narrowed. “How long? Before you started with us?”

“Right when I started.” I hurried to head off her dawning anger. “It wasn’t like Dax. He didn’t tell me I had to blow him to get the job. But he brought me the offer to audition personally, and he said he liked my style. He wanted to help me get picked to replace Matt Zeng. He gave me a recording room in the studio free of charge, two days before my audition, and let me work with some of your master tapes so I’d be prepared. And then the audition went great.”

“Because you’re a fucking good bassist,” Dax growled. “Not because the douchebag helped you.”

I shrugged. “He took me out for a meal afterward, got me a glass of wine, made me feel so good about my talent. Didn’t touch me wrong once. And then, when it was official, he took me out again. I got a bit smashed and he kissed me, told me how adorable I was.” My skin crawled at that word now and I shuddered. *Did he just see me as gullible, someone he could use, all that time?*

Dax bumped my shoulder with his. “Long story short is, Richard knows how to make himself seem like the real deal to a guy looking to be taken care of. At first. Lane’s a long way from the first person to fall for his act. But…” He stopped talking and flicked a sideways glance at me.

I took a deep breath. “I told him I wanted to break it off. He has other guys and women too, I know that. He said from the start we had an open relationship. I figured he wouldn’t care. But he got mad, got —” My throat closed. I didn’t want to admit I’d been scared.

“Did he hurt you?” Val asked urgently.

“No. Not like that.”

Dax said, “Apparently, he trotted out his evil mastermind act. ‘Do as I say or I’ll release the flying monkeys.’”

I managed to laugh, grateful to Dax for putting it that way. “Yeah. He’s going to out me as Ms. Fox.”

Jamie asked, “What did you tell him when he gave you the ultimatum? Should we get ahead of that story, or does he think he won?”

I chewed on my lower lip until Dax nudged me and said, “Quit eating your face. Spit it out.”

“He thinks he won. He expects to come back the next time and have me however he wants.” On my knees or with my ass in the air. Obedient. My stomach clenched at the thought.

“So that should be the first thing,” Jamie said. “Tell him to fuck off. Wipe the smirk off his fat face—”

“No,” Dax said. “We need a weapon against him. I have one, but I can’t use it.” He pulled out his phone, clicked around, and then switched it to speaker. Over the thin audio, I heard Richard say, “I’ll break you. I’ll turn you into poison not one record label will touch. You’ll be back in the gutter selling your little boy ass to eat.”

“If I don’t what?” Dax sounded different, younger, sharper, but clearly him. “Suck you off on command? Kneel for you?”

“If you don’t do exactly what I say.” Richard’s voice went softer, but still clear. “You’re mine now, little whore bitch. I have you right where I want you.”

Dax tapped the phone to shut it off. He leaned against the counter, crossing one leg over at the ankle, the image of studied calm. Except I could see the muscles in his jaw twitching. “I worked in sound recording for three years before Card Crimson. And on the streets, I learned caution. I recorded him, every time he came over to fuck me, for a year. I’d seen guys go to prison for supposedly ripping off johns, or hurting them, when they were the victims. I had insurance.”

“Why didn’t you use that?” Jamie stared at the phone in Dax’s hand like it was a scorpion. “You had proof.”

“Nothing he did was violent. Sextortion, yeah, but that’s hard for a lily-white virgin girl to get the cops to care about, let alone an ex-street punk who made underage porn. The cops have busted twelve-year-olds for sending some pedophile naked pictures of themselves.”

“Seriously?” Jamie looked shocked.

“Hell, yeah, look it up. Plus, that fight happened in L.A. Two-person consent for recording with an expectation of privacy in California. He

could've had me arrested and fined, maybe jailed, for recording him in the first place. Revenge wasn't worth ending up broke or in prison."

"And since then?"

"Hey," I intervened. Dax looked stoic as a rock, but I think what Jamie implied hurt him. "It's not that easy to step up and say something, even when it's over."

"Statute of limitations doesn't start until someone finds out they were affected. He could still get me busted. I checked." Dax smiled thinly. "And the studio might consider my unsavory past a reason to cut me loose, even if they didn't back him all the way. I like my job."

Val said, "There has to be something we can do. That bastard needs a faceful of karma."

"For sure," Tanisha agreed. "I've got some drumsticks that would love to beat a solo on his skull. He messed with Dax *and* Lane. He needs a double dose."

"We got your backs." Brody nodded.

I blinked my stinging eyes. *How'd I get lucky enough to end up with these people?* "I feel bad making trouble for Corvus. If I'd never dated Richard, or if I hadn't snuck away to perform while we were on tour—"

"No would've, should've," Dax interrupted. "Looking back sucks and makes you trip and fall on your face. Time to look forward."

"And do what?" Jamie asked.

"Depends." Dax swept his gaze around the room. "I spent last night thinking up scenarios. Some satisfying but illegal, like arson; some a bit tricky." He glanced at me. "Training a pigeon to fly overhead and shit on him every time he steps out of doors might be a challenge."

Despite a tight throat, I snorted.

"I came up with a couple of options. But it depends on whether we're all willing to burn our bridges with Streetcorner. And whether a new label will take us on if we're troublemakers."

"Who do drag," I added, because lately that had to be added to the

risks. “Well, one of us does, though I could always leave—”

“No one’s leaving!” Jamie thundered, thumping his hand on the countertop. He turned to Dax. “What kind of trouble do you think we should make?”

“Richard’s always been careful. Nothing really illegal. I was nineteen when he cast me, Joker was too, Jack was twenty-one.”

“I was twenty-two,” I said. *Slow learner.*

“If he’s smart, he’s ditched that old porno. Could he have underage stuff on his phone now? Maybe, but I’d bet he sticks to the barely legal. He’s not stupid. And we can’t get our hands on his devices, or show probable cause for the cops to check them.”

“The law won’t do a damned thing,” Tanisha muttered.

“Nope,” Dax agreed. “Karma’s gonna have to come from exposing him as a douche. Social media’s an option, but I’m not sure the evidence we have now will get much traction. Streetcorner will work to bury anything we put up. I’m not a big name. Lane is, but he doesn’t want to look like a crybaby, complaining that Richard was mean to him with nothing to back that up.”

I swallowed because no, I could imagine Richard twisting anything I said to make me seem young and stupid and naive. He’d laugh and deny and walk away. “What do we do?”

“We get more evidence.” Dax caught my arm and turned me to meet his gaze. “If you’re up for it.”

I nodded.

“Good. Then we present it when it won’t be ignored. At Rocktoberfest.”

“At... how?”

“Second question.” Dax looked back at Jamie. “We all don’t give a shit that Lane does drag, right? Except that he’s fucking awesome and you all should see one of his shows sometime.”

“You knew?” Jamie asked.

“I know lots of things.” Dax smirked, although the expression looked forced. “Anyhow, if we don’t care, a future label may, given the insanity around the topic. And if it *comes out* later, like it’s some kind of dirty secret, that’s not a good look. We don’t want a new label making him hide like he’s ashamed.”

I shivered. “You have an idea?”

“I have a plan. We were going to play ‘Bad Karma’ anyway. We put it at the end, dedicate it to Richard in a whole special way. The label will have a hard time burying something sixty thousand fans heard and saw. And Lane can do Val’s lyrics, in drag.”

I stared at him. *He’s kidding, right? He wants me to do drag in front of all those people? All of them knowing who I am? Singing a Corvus song?* Surely Jamie would shoot this crazy idea down.

Jamie tilted his head. “I don’t think he has Val’s range.”

Wait, what?

“You’d be surprised. Although we’d have to transpose down a few steps.”

Val said, “Why? I understand trying to get ahead of the story, but why put it into the show?”

“Like I said.” Dax pushed away from the counter and paced. “Exposure. But also pride. Richard thinks he can own Lane and me because he assumes we’re ashamed of what we’ve done, who we are. Well, fuck that. No shame. We need to show that large and clear. For Lane, especially.”

Brody said, “Drag’s cool.” He held up a fist, waiting until I took two steps to bump it.

“Right.” Dax was on a roll. “But it’s not enough to just say so. How many times have we seen corporations saying, ‘We love our queer employees,’ with their fingers crossed behind their backs? We can say, ‘Corvus Rising is proud of Lane and Ms. Fox,’ like it barely touches us, or we can prove it. Right there on stage.”

Tanisha frowned. “We’re planning this as a one-off, right? We don’t

want prospective labels to think we're going to feature drag in every show?"

"No!" I jumped on that idea. "Ms. Fox is mostly a torch singer. Not Corvus vibes at all. I just want to play bass."

"One time only," Dax agreed. "We'll make that clear. But that way, no one can stuff Lane back in the closet, either. A new label can't say, 'we'll sign you as long as that drag thing disappears.' But everyone has to be onboard, because maybe it'll be hard to find a label that won't back off."

Jamie was staring at Dax, his brow furrowed. "In that special intro to Karma, were you going to play your recording of Richard? How's that going to work?"

"I'm hoping Lane and I can trick him into something better, and legal, in Vegas. But if not, yeah, I'll play that one and let the chips fall." Dax rubbed a fist across his lips. Princess trotted to Dax and stood on her hind legs to whine up at him. He bent to pet her, focusing on his hands running through her fur. "Maybe if I'd spoken up earlier, thought about someone other than myself, there'd be some young musicians out there less broken, less used, by Richard fucking Kensington."

"Don't." I went over and tugged him upright. "You said don't look back. That means you too."

Jamie said slowly, "This is what you want, Dax? For real?"

"To get up in front of sixty thousand people and tell them Richard's a douchewease, drag is cool, and Lane and I aren't ashamed of who we are and what we've done? Yeah. I do."

Their eyes met and held for a long time. Jamie was bigger, older, richer, and more powerful, but Dax was the one who stood taller. A lot of the time, I didn't see the similarities between them, but in that moment, Jamie was a darker shadow of Dax's brilliant light.

At a soft murmur of "Brothers," I turned to see Val eyeing Jamie with a tiny smile on her lips. "Jamie always wanted more family. Dax walked into a place that had been waiting for him all of Jamie's life."

He'll back his brother anywhere."

Jamie went to Dax, held out a hand, and when Dax reached for it, pulled him into a tight hug. Dax staggered, off balance, but his arms closed around his brother's wide shoulders. After a silent moment, they separated, and Jamie turned to the rest of us. "I'm going to ask each of you privately, because if we do this, it needs to be unanimous. It's going to be a big fuckin' gesture we can't take back."

You don't need to for my sake.

Before I could articulate that, Brody drawled, "Don't need private to say, hell, yeah. Stick it to the man."

Tanisha kicked his ankle. "You're a relic of the sixties. But yes from me too. Bringing down a user and abuser will be the highlight of the festival. If Rocktoberfest doesn't invite us back, well, they're getting boring anyhow."

Sixty thousand fans are boring? "You think they won't invite us back? That doesn't sound good."

"Remote possibility," Val said. "Venues don't like artists getting too political. At the same time, they do like publicity. And Jamie?" She nodded to him. "Yes from me too. Let's make sure Richard Kensington finds out what being powerless feels like."

I sucked in a breath through my nose and turned to Dax, scooping up Princess, hiding my face by lifting her into my arms and bending over her. I wanted a hug but couldn't say so. Dax skimmed a hand up my back, tousled my hair. Then, to my shock, he pulled me to him with the dog between us, cupping my head onto his shoulder. As I slumped against him, grabbing the front of his shirt in one fist, he said cheerfully, "Right. Ten minutes for coffee and breathing. Then Operation Karma enters the fine-tuning stage. We've a fuckload of practice to do, before we hit the road to Nevada."

Chapter 15

Dax

“This is it.” I swung my apartment door open to let Lane in past me with Princess in his arms. I couldn’t blame him for not wanting to go back to his own place. Richard would consider it his right to show up unannounced. But my small apartment wasn’t much like Lane’s modern open space. “Kick off your shoes, make yourself at home.”

He headed inside, ending up in the kitchen. When he set Princess down, she trotted to her food dish and yipped demandingly.

“Yes, Your Highness,” I called to her. “I’m aware that shaved fillet of steak was not considered a real dinner. Your Highness’s servant will fix the oversight forthwith.” We’d stayed late at Jamie’s, talking strategy and practicing in Jamie and Val’s rehearsal space. Princess had been given a big bathroom full of dog toys from Val’s supply for dog-sitting her brother’s retriever, two walks, and a plate of minced actual steak at her dinner time, but from the dirty looks she was swinging between me and her bowl, I was not forgiven for messing with her routine.

At least she made Lane laugh. I closed and double bolted the door, dug under the counter and found dog food, and pushed the can and opener to Lane. “You laugh, you feed her.” Giving Princess what she wanted was always fun.

She danced at Lane’s feet as he opened the can. “Should I wash her bowl?”

“It’s clean. I do it right away.” Spend years in apartments with roaches and rodents? You learned not to leave any food-smear-

anything lying out.

Lane lifted the bowl, smiling as Princess pawed at him with her tiny feet. Her dances became leaps as he set her dish on the counter and scooped out half of the can. Personally, I thought a spoonful would've been enough after the steak, but I didn't say so. When he bent to feed her, she dove in, making tiny growls of satisfaction as she slurped up the food. He looked at me, his eyes bright. "She loves that."

"Yep. Nothing takes away her appetite." Unlike his. We'd ordered in food at Jamie's, but he touched almost nothing at lunch, and only half his usual at dinner. In my case, I made sure to eat well. Thinking about Richard might make my gut clench, but I'd be damned if he or anyone else from my past got between me and good Pad Thai. Hunger makes for bad decisions, too.

As Lane watched the dog eat, I opened the fridge. I didn't keep a lot of snack things around, but there was some fruit. Leftover soup. "You want a bite?"

"No. I'd love a shower, but I don't have anything else to put on." He tugged at the hem of his T-shirt.

"I can lend you stuff. Let me just wash Princess's dish and I'll get you some towels."

She gave me the side-eye when I slid the bowl out from under where she was obsessively licking up the last traces, but trotted to her nearest bed when I set the dish into the sink. I washed it out, refreshed her water, and turned out the kitchen light. Lane still stood there, facing Princess, but with a distant look in his eyes.

I took his elbow. "Come on, bathroom's this way."

My apartment might not be big, but I kept everything tidy, so I had no reason to be embarrassed by letting him use the john. *He didn't grow up with money either.* The water pressure wasn't great and the sink had a little rust around the plug, but I'd scoured it clean as always. I ushered him in and left the door ajar while I went to fetch towels.

When I got back, he'd stripped off his shirt and stood eyeing himself

in the mirror. No bruises marked his smooth pale skin tonight, and his hair hung in a dark curtain against his shoulder blades. The faint purple around his eyes betrayed a night we'd both spent mostly awake, although I'd left the tossing and turning to him. Fatigue gave him an ethereal look, like a fae changeling in a world he didn't understand.

I set the towels on the counter. "Let the water run for a while. It takes time for the hot to make it up here."

"Will you stay?" His gray eyes met my gaze in the mirror.

"Stay?"

"Shower with me?" He licked his lips and his eyes darkened.

"Naked shower?" *What a stupid thing to say. No, with clothes on.* "I mean, just shower?"

"Maybe more? I'm broken up with Richard now. I don't care what he thinks or what we encourage him to say, I'm done. I'm free."

"Don't you want time to breathe before you start something with another man?" I was arguing against my own interests, which wanted to grab Lane and skip the fucking shower, but I needed him to be sure.

"Not another man. *You.*" He turned toward me and began unfastening his jeans, his gaze lowered.

Fuck, yeah. Hell, yeah. Whatever you have in mind. I closed the door to keep out curious canines. "Sure. Yes. Shower first and then... whatever."

We undressed ourselves. I went slow, waiting for Lane to pull back, but he got naked, dropping his clothes on the floor. When he pushed down his briefs, his slender cock was soft, above completely hairless balls. I liked the sleek look on him, and I guessed it made tucking easier. He stepped out of the briefs and raised his gaze to my face. Something in his eyes seemed anxious, waiting.

"Mm, very nice," I murmured. "Pick up your clothes and fold them, then start the shower for us." I wasn't sure if telling him what to do was right, when he'd just ditched a guy with control issues, but his shoulders relaxed at my words.

He arranged his clothes next to where I was setting mine and gave me a sideways look under lowered lashes. “You’re picky.”

“Very.” I ran a hand over the curve of his ass, and he shivered but didn’t move away. “Now get the water going.”

I had a regular tub-shower combo and he pulled the clear curtain around, then turned on the taps. As the water gurgled and then flowed, I stripped off my own briefs, feeling his eyes on me. The small patch of my pubes where I didn’t wax was bleached as white as my hair. *I might not have to do that anymore.* I pushed that thought away into a dark box for later, and gave my dick a tug as the waistband cleared it. I was half hard just from watching Lane, and it wouldn’t take much to get all the way there.

“You’re big,” Lane said, then a little color splotched his chest and neck. “Not that I have a lot of experience.”

“Long hands, long feet.” I raised an eyebrow at him and left him to finish the thought. Yeah, I did okay. Used to seem even more impressive before I grew into my final height at twenty-one. “How’s that water coming?”

He turned and stuck his hand under, adjusted the taps, then said, “Feels good.”

“Get in, soap up, let me watch you.”

Lane blinked, then stepped in past the curtain. The spray darkened his hair and slid in rivulets down his skin as he turned to face the front. Beaded drops on the curtain refracted my view like a very artistic porn scene as he located the soap, pumped some into his palm, and lathered his smooth chest.

Okay, enough watching. I pulled the curtain open enough to step in behind him, then enclosed us back in our steamy space.

Wrapping my arms around Lane from behind, I kissed him below the ear, breathing moisture and the scent of his skin, and took over the job of smoothing soap on him. As I ran my hands across his pecs, he leaned back against me. My dick was very happy to be pressed to the top of his bare ass.

“A clear shower curtain’s weird,” he said, a breathless quality to his voice suggesting he wasn’t as into the small talk as he meant to be. “Do you watch yourself in the mirror?”

“I like to see what’s coming.” I nipped him on the earlobe and softened that truth to, “Especially if it’s you, or me, coming.” Despite that, I kept my hands in the safe zones, soaping his arms and fingers, then stepping back to do his shoulders, spine, ass cheeks, thighs, and close again for his stomach. He shivered and I laughed, because he had most of the water on him. “Don’t tell me you’re cold.”

He trembled again. “Not that kind of shiver.”

“No?” I ran a soapy fingertip down the center of his chest, over his soft flat stomach to the top of his dick, and felt a twitch there. “Turn around.”

He rotated obediently in my arms.

Judging the spray, I palmed his cheek to move his head to one side and kissed him. The feel of his lips, the taste of his mouth, the scent of his skin, filled our little cocoon of safety. I threaded my fingers into his wet hair, cupped his ass in my other hand, and pulled him close as we explored each other’s mouths.

I felt him stir and harden against my thigh. He made breathy little sounds as I deepened the kiss. When we broke apart, he asked, “Have you ever had shower sex?”

“Sure. Can be fun, can be awkward, can be a disaster if someone slips. And one guy usually ends up chilled or with water up his nose. Still.” I kissed him again. “I’ll let you explore it sometime. Not tonight.”

“Why not? It’s something Richard never did.”

That almost made me agree, but I was pretty sure I could keep his mind off Richard without a nose full of water. “Some other time.” I stepped back enough for a quick lather and rinse, while Lane’s wide eyes tracked the movement of my hands. I gave my erection an extra glide, moved Lane’s shoulders aside so I could grab a little spray, and grinned. “Turn it off now.”

When we stepped out, I grabbed the biggest towel and wrapped it around Lane. Now I had the money, I indulged in soft, thick terrycloth in bath-sheet size— one of my rare luxuries— and Lane sighed as I rubbed his back through the towel. I grabbed a small towel to squeeze the extra water out of his hair, pressing the dark thick mass between the layers till its black lightened to the usual brown.

“What about you?” he asked.

“Hush,” I told him. I was pretty sure what Lane needed was a caretaker Dom, and while I’d never wanted to be that for anyone, I could fake it for Lane. “Let me get you dry.”

When I’d made him as comfortable as three minutes and two towels could manage, I picked up the other towel and tended to my goose-bumped skin. Then I pulled the wet bath sheet off Lane and replaced it with a dry one. He looked over his shoulder, and I popped him lightly on the butt. “Bedroom’s out the door to your right. Spread that towel on the bed and lie down on it.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re bossy?”

I took his chin in one hand. “Are you complaining?”

“No.” His gaze dropped.

I rewarded that with a kiss. “Good. Go lie down on your back.”

He left the bathroom, and I heard him say, “Down, Princess. You need a manicure worse than I do, baby girl.” Then the sound of a door opening meant he was in my bedroom.

Lane’s in my bedroom. That shouldn’t have felt as momentous as it did. The moment I ran from Richard, I made a vow that my space would be my own. Since then, the occasional guys I fucked around with never crossed my threshold. They definitely never lay down on my bed.

This is Lane. I want him. And anyone less threatening was hard to imagine.

After draping my wet towel and his over the shower rail, I picked up the hand towel and walked naked to the bedroom.

Princess stood by the bed eyeing Lane, her tail wagging. I called her. “Here, girl. I’ve done my share of voyeurs, but I draw the line at dogs.” When she trotted over, I picked her up, set her in the hall, and closed the door.

A small whimper greeted that move. Lane turned to me from where he’d been laid out, gloriously naked but posed rigidly, on my mattress. “She sounds unhappy.”

I gave an exaggerated sigh. “All right, I will cater to Her Highness. Just remember when your balls turn blue, you asked me to.” I squeezed through the door, keeping Princess out with my foot, and closed it behind me. Princess bounced, giving happy squeaks. “Yes, you,” I murmured. “You’re going to be so spoiled. Lane will have to take you for ten-mile runs to work off all the extra calories.”

Still naked, I padded to the kitchen with Princess on my heels, opened the freezer, and got out one of her rubber Kong toys with peanut butter in it. I set it into her bigger bowl, which would contain the mess. “There. Don’t say I never gave you anything.”

I washed my hands at the sink, taking my time to make Lane suffer. Princess nosed and licked at the toy, which was just too big for her to grip and carry off. Her little pink tongue slurped away at the hole in the toy as it rolled around. “Yeah, eat its ass,” I encouraged her. “Have fun.”

When I came back in the bedroom and closed the door, Lane was propped up on his elbows. “What did you do?”

“Locked her in a closet—” I sighed as a shadow of doubt hit Lane’s face. “I gave her a chew treat. Jesus, boy, don’t you know me well enough yet?”

Lane flushed. “Sorry. But... don’t call me boy?” His voice squeaked on the last part.

I remembered Richard, and how he always used that word to mean his possession. “Sure. And Lane?” I sat next to him on the bed, the terrycloth soft under my ass, and put my finger under his chin to raise it. “If you need me to do something, or not do something, you say so. Don’t think I might explode if you tell me off. Say, ‘Dax, my fuckwad ex

used to call me that and I don't want to hear it.' Firm tone. Right?"

"Okay..." After a second, he added, "Do I need a safeword?"

"Do you want one?"

"I..." His voice trailed off again.

I took that to mean yes. Probably seemed easier than raising his voice. Richard never used safewords. His boys didn't realize how much he was Domming them until they were deep in the weeds. "Traffic lights. Red, yellow, green. You know how that works?"

"Yes. I've read a bit."

"Good." I took a breath. Lane's dick had softened again, but he looked totally edible spread out there. "Now, my plan is to suck you till you're hard as a rock and then have you fuck me. Green? Red?" I saw his dick lurch upward and hid a grin.

"I'm going to fuck *you*?"

"Yep. Been a while since I had a good dicking." I hadn't let anyone have my ass since Richard, and it was a long time before that to the last time I called *good*, but Lane needed something new and unfamiliar. Something to make him feel his own power in ways he hadn't with Richard. I knew for damned sure Richard never bottomed.

Lane's eyes widened, his dick hardening as I watched. "Green. I mean, if you want to."

"I don't offer things I don't want. Lie back."

He dropped onto the pillows, his hands at his sides. The bedside light sent shadows chasing across his stomach as he breathed in and out. I swung over him to cage him between my hands and knees, and waited, looming over him to see how he reacted. One flinch that was half shiver, and then he relaxed into the bed. *Good enough.*

Bending lower, I kissed his mouth, licking my way inside as he opened for me. I took his lower lip in my teeth and tugged gently until I got a whimper. Then I licked the spot over and over until he writhed, silently asking for more. I took his mouth again, deep and wet, then began my downward progress.

Everywhere except his jaw where the faintest hint of stubble was erupting, his skin was gloriously smooth, waxed and conditioned and pampered. *A benefit of fucking a drag queen, I suppose.* I trailed my tongue from his collarbone to his flat, firm pecs, then sucked one pink nipple hard, pulling upward. A deep groan rattled his chest. *Sensitive tits. Good to know.*

Easing down the bed, I kissed his smooth stomach, hollowed out in this position. Between being sick and the stress, he hadn't put back on the weight he'd lost on tour. *We can fix that.* I rubbed my rough chin against his side and he stifled a giggle. *Ticklish. Also good to know.*

He muffled a gasp when I reached the head of his cut cock standing up against his stomach. Breathing a warm puff on the rounded tip, I avoided my prize to kiss and then suck hard on his hipbone. That got me another groan. I said, "I'm going to mark you here," to give him time to say *red*, but the way his hips bucked up told me he liked that idea. I wanted to bite hard, to maul him and leave marks with teeth and mouth that would last a month. But we still needed to lure Richard in, and in the worst scenario, Lane might end up naked. Richard had never been violent, but I was taking no chances. Cursing the bastard for intruding into our bed, I sucked Lane's skin hard enough to leave a faint blush of broken capillaries.

He'd still see that in the morning, but not much longer.

"Can you...?" Lane cut himself off.

"Can I what?" I licked the insides of his thighs, already gaining a little clean sweat and musk despite his shower. Then swiped around the base of his cock, without touching shaft or balls.

"Please."

I moved to the groove that cut from hip to groin, running my tongue there, ignoring the slick red cockhead dripping a fine strand of precum beside my face.

"Suck me, damn it!"

Bracing myself on one arm, I fisted the base of his dick, raised it, and sucked it to the back of my throat in one deep move, letting go so

my mouth could graze his naked groin.

“OhmyGod!” Lane arched under me, his hips thrusting up.

I had a hand free to shove him flat to the bed while deepthroating him over and over. When I pulled off to breathe, I told him, “Save that move,” and went down on him again.

It'd been so long since I enjoyed sex. I'd almost forgotten the heady pleasure of a man's erection against my tongue, listening to him pant and gasp and moan as I sucked him. Lane's taste made me hungry for more, and his sounds had my own dick rock hard. I lowered my hips while pumping my mouth over him. A little positioning, and I could push the head of my cock against his smooth leg as I blew him. Each suck and stroke and rub and gasp wrapped round and round, spiraling higher, a coil of heat building in my groin. Lane leaked salt-sweet slick, so far back in my mouth I caught just the faintest taste—

“Red!”

I yanked my head back so fast Lane's spit-slick cock slapped against his belly, my heart pounding. “What?”

“Sorry!” Lane had his eyes squeezed shut and he waved a hand in the air. “I just... I need a second. I'm gonna come.”

“Oh.” A laugh of relief caught in my throat. “Pooooor baby. No control.”

“Fuck you.” Lane still waved aimlessly. “It's you and your mouth throat thing.”

“Only the best for you, baby.” I patted his stomach right beside his dick, watching the head bob and well another drop of precum.

“If you still want...” He opened his eyes. “I shouldn't come yet.”

“You're twenty-two. You can probably get hard again if a breeze blows the right way. Do you want to come in my mouth?”

“Ack. Don't *say* that.” He scrunched his eyes tight again.

I laughed, heady with my power to give Lane *exactly* what he needed. One rub of my nose into the crease of his thigh, inhaling the

musky scent of his groin, then I nudged his thighs wider. I ringed the base of his cock with one hand to steady it, and with the other, reached between his legs and cupped his silky, hairless balls in my fingers. Then in one move, I sucked him to the root while tugging on his sac.

With a wordless groan, he came like a fountain in my mouth. I swallowed eagerly, milking him for every drop, rolling his balls in my fingers. He gasped and shivered and spurted until a hard shudder shook him. “Enough.”

I let him slide from my mouth. Reaching over the edge of the bed, I found the damp hand towel, picked it up, and wiped his groin and my chin. Then I climbed back up over him on all fours and kissed him.

Lane shivered again at his taste on my tongue.

Working the kiss leisurely, I licked the smooth surfaces of his teeth and the plump softness of his lips, dipped in to slide along his tongue, then pressed our mouths together at just the right angle, our noses brushing. He opened his eyes to gaze into mine from inches away. His blown pupils eclipsed all but a narrow ring of gray, and he blinked slowly.

I broke the kiss. “Hi, there.”

“Wow. You.” He shuddered through an aftershock. “That was awesome, but you didn’t come.”

“You can fuck the cum out of me when you’re recovered.” I laughed at the eager twitch of his spent dick. “Which may not be as long as you think.”

“Would you lie down with me?” he asked. “Richard never—”

Never cuddled. I put my palm over his mouth. “His name shall not be uttered in our bed.”

“M’kay.”

I lifted my hand.

“Our bed’?” Lane added.

I gestured between us. “Any bed containing you and me,” although I

liked the sound of “our bed” far too much. “Or other horizontal or vertical surfaces used for fucking purposes.”

Lane laughed, his eyes bright. “Got it.”

My cock wanted to protest any delay in the *coming* part. Tight skin and aching need in my groin reminded me that Lane probably had some oral skills too. He could blow me, then we could fuck— *Shut up. You’re a dick.* I didn’t want Lane doing anything for me that he did for Richard. Not tonight, anyhow. Not till we’d purged his memory.

I stretched out alongside Lane, throwing a leg and an arm across him, my erection riding his hip. Propping my head up on the other hand, I gazed down at him. As the color ebbed from his face and neck, his eyelids drooped over eyes regaining their soft gray. He looked sweet and young, and I was glad of the faint haze of stubble on his jaw and upper lip that marked a man and not a boy. The aching need to protect and coddle and please him was unfamiliar. *Unwanted.* I knew I was lying to myself with that word. Yeah, maybe I’d never wanted a relationship. Maybe I’d spent half my life putting my own survival first. But I couldn’t manage to regret changing that for Lane.

He dropped off between one breath and the next, his jaw going slack, mouth opening. His breaths carried a little vibration, not quite a snore. I held still and watched him. Lane needed sleep, and if this was how our evening ended, I didn’t mind one bit.

But ten minutes later, he stirred. Eyelashes fluttering, he moaned and shifted his hips, rubbing his ass against the towel. Scanning his body, I saw his cock beginning to fill. Another moan, and his eyes snapped open to stare into mine.

“Oh! You *are* here.” He smiled, the softness of sleep still curving his lips. “I dreamed you were with me.”

“Man of your dreams, babycakes,” I said, to head off any mushy feelings trying to escape. Sliding my hand lower, I patted his dick, which stirred under my touch. “I do love a short refractory period.”

Lane blinked and his jaw firmed, the sleepiness leaving his eyes in exchange for dawning heat. I told myself that was even better as I bent to kiss him.

“Do you still want me to, um, top?” he asked when I pulled back. I could see his cock growing harder.

Sliding my hand to my dick, I let him watch me jack myself back to straining anticipation. “The thought of you in my ass has been keeping me awake while you got your beauty sleep.”

“I’m sorry—”

I leaned over and took his mouth firmly, kissing him breathless, then moved my hand to his cock, beginning soft, slow strokes. “That wasn’t a complaint, just anticipation.” *Yep, waking up nicely.* “Feels like you’re anticipating, too.”

Lane pumped his hips up, driving into my fist. “Yeah. Nngh.” He shifted, spreading his legs as I switched my touch from pumping his cock to rubbing his balls. “How... I mean, what do you want me to do?”

I’d thought about that while I watched him sleep. Originally, I’d planned to keep him flat on his back and ride him. Easy for him, safe for me, sure to work. But I’d been in that position a time or two where the guy on top, despite the dick up his ass, was in total control. Hell, that was a reason I’d planned it that way. Now, I wondered what would make Lane fly on his first time topping. I had a feeling being pinned down wasn’t the answer, even though he had a submissive streak. Maybe before Richard had gotten his claws into my man, but not tonight.

“Hands and knees,” I said. “I’ll call the shots. You just fuck me like you mean it.”

“Oh!” His eyes brightened, telling me I’d chosen right. “I can try.”

“There is no try,” I intoned. “You’re gonna do what I say, and we’re both going to come like rockets.”

His lips curved upward. “You have a lot of faith in me.”

I bent and kissed him hard. “Yeah, I do. Now let me get past you to the drawer on your side. We need supplies.”

“I should’ve tested,” he muttered as I dug condoms and lube out and set them on the bed. The box was new, but already opened so the

length of my dry spell wouldn't be obvious to him.

"We should," I corrected. "After Rocktoberfest. We'll test and then spend a weekend breeding your ass. But tonight, you wear a condom." *And damn Richard's open-relationship dick to hell.*

I wasn't about to let that break the mood, so I reached over and pinched Lane's nipple, rolling the bud between my fingers until he arched his back and whined. Then I licked a stripe up his neck and bit his earlobe. "Kneel on the end of the bed, ass down on your heels. Put your hands on your thighs and don't move till I tell you."

"Okay." He scuttled back, taking the position I'd ordered. His dick stood up hard, pointing at me.

I gave the cockhead a pat. "Looking good. My turn for some fun." After globbing some lube on my fingers, I rolled to knees and elbow, with my ass aimed at Lane, and pushed inside myself with one finger. He took a sharp breath and I grinned to myself. I didn't need much prep. I might not have let anyone fuck me in years, but I had a very complete collection of toys. For Lane, I drew things out, fingering myself with one and then two fingers, moaning aloud when I stretched my rim or reached my prostate.

What started as a performance turned real, though. Having Lane waiting obediently, watching me, making his small sounds in echo of mine, started a low hum of arousal inside me. I'd been hard, but now sparks of desire arced through me, ass to dick, turning merely erect into fucking *sprung*. I dripped precum, and I'd never been much of a leaker. "You like this?" I kept my tone steady with an effort, pumping three fingers in and out. "Like watching my fingers up my ass where you're gonna go?"

"Yeah." Lane's voice wobbled. "Yes, it's hot."

"I'm dripping. Want to clean my dick off first?" I cranked my head over my shoulder to look at him.

Lane's cheeks were flushed, his eyes fixed on my ass. "Please."

"Get up here, then. Lay down and lick me."

Lane hurried up the bed on his knees and paused, trying to work out

how to obey. I kept up my steady fingerfucking, breathing harder as my prostate begged for *more, more, more!* My ass felt full and achy in the best way, and Lane's warm body so close, his heaving chest and parted lips, made everything better.

He lay on his side with an elbow under him and got his mouth where I needed it. The swipe of his warm tongue over my cockhead made me swear. "Yeah, like that, clean it all."

Lane hummed, licking harder, tonguing my slit—

"Enough!" My orgasm beat against my control like floodwaters on a dam. I hadn't been this close to losing it without meaning to in seventeen years. "Time to fuck me."

He wriggled out from under me. "What do I do?"

"Put on the condom, use lots of fucking lube, and when I pull my fingers out, you fuck me. It ain't rocket science." I quit moving because the stretch of three fingers and the sight of Lane fighting with the condom wrapper already had me breathless.

He gloved up, slicked the outside with enough lube to sink a battleship, and paused.

"Behind me," I told him. "Get close. One hand to steady your dick and grab around my thigh with the other."

Lane scrambled out of sight, climbing over my calf to get set. His fingers shook against my leg and he was murmuring something that I made out as, "Oh fuck. Oh fuck." Given how little he swore, I was taking that as a compliment.

I slid my fingers out, wiped them on the towel, and braced both elbows. "Fuck me, Lane."

The first pressure of his sheathed cock against my hole came at an awkward angle. I widened my thighs to account for our heights, and the angle got a whole lot better. With the ease of long practice, I leaned back, impaling myself the first inch. His loud groan drowned out mine.

"Come on," I told him. "You've got the leverage." I could fuck myself back on him, but I wanted him to move. Everything inside me needed

Lane Bennett to put some muscle into it and fucking fuck me.

“I don’t want to h—”

“If you say you don’t want to hurt me, I’ll kidnap your dog. Come on, you’re pretty but not huge. Do what comes naturall—y!” I yiped a bit as he shoved in hard, but reached back to grab his thigh when he would’ve retreated. “Good. Do that again.” When he pumped tentatively, I moaned. “Yeah. Again.” A better thrust. “Again.”

On the next push, I bore down and he sank to the hilt.

“Fuck, yeah,” I grunted. “Grab my hips and go.”

Lane picked up the pace and the depth. Some of his thrusts were awkward, but enough grazed over my prostate, sending electric waves through my body from deep inside. I groaned and grunted, letting go of his thigh to plant both elbows as he gained confidence. “Yes, yes, yes,” I encouraged him, sparks gathering in my vision. My knees shook and the bed rocked under us.

“Oh, fuck.” Lane let loose, hammering into me without rhythm or control. “Can I come? I have to come.”

“Do it!” I managed to get a hand around my dick, jerking for all I was worth. “Go!”

Lane shoved in hard, grinding against me, gasping, whimpering. Then he let out a wordless shout and his fingers clamped onto my hips. I felt him shudder against me, his breath rasping as he kept banging me in stuttering jerks.

My balls wanted to explode. I slicked the leaking precum along my cock, stroking, squeezing, jerking, hovering on the brink. My fingers rasped, skin on skin, an ache throughout my groin so visceral it was the only thing I could feel. My balls drew up tight below my pumping hand.

Lane murmured in a voice of wonder, “Wow. I fucked you.”

I blew apart. Shuddering, I unloaded into my fingers and down my wrist and all over the towel in a blinding rush. *Oh, fuck.* My thighs trembled and a firework of sparkles filled my vision. The world faded

in a dark rush of blinding relief.

It'd been years since I'd come so hard I lost track of time, but when I heard Lane saying, "Dax? Are you okay? Dax?" I realized it wasn't his first repeat.

"Peachy." I coughed, because that wasn't the answer he deserved, and scrambled to get my brain back online. "Great. You did exactly what I asked. Wow, nearly simultaneous orgasms. Gold star."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"No." I softened my voice. "Really, that was awesome. In fact, hold onto the condom and pull out. I'm gonna fall over."

"Me too." Lane left my ass a bit abruptly, but I didn't care at that point. As soon as his dick was gone, I let myself collapse on my stomach. With a john, I wouldn't have gone full limp noodle, but I trusted Lane. I could stick my face into the pillow, lie smashed on the towel, and just drift.

I heard some fumbling, then he lay down beside me, one arm across my back. Scooting higher, he got his head onto the pillow next to mine. I opened an eye to look at him blearily.

Yep, that's a smile on his face.

"Go ahead, be smug," I murmured. "You earned it."

He chuckled. "That was incredible. And the best part was making you come."

"Best part for me too," I noted.

He cuddled closer, wrapped over my back. I'd need to clean up eventually, but I liked having him there. I reached back to cup one lean ass cheek and pull him tighter against me. He breathed across my jaw and his hair tickled my temple.

We dozed for a while. He woke me with a kiss against my neck.

"Mmf?" I mumbled.

"Sorry, are you asleep?"

"Well, I'm not now."

“Are we, like... this is a relationship, right?”

I fought off the temptation to get sarcastic, and rolled in his hold so I could see his face. “Yeah. It is. For however long we want it to be.”

“Okay.” He was silent for a while, and I was starting to drift off, when he said, “What was your first time like? Bottoming, I mean. If you don’t mind telling me.”

I didn’t mind that one much, but habit made me deflect. “Yours was with Richard, right?”

“Yeah. I liked it. He was good to me back then.”

“I’m glad.” Richard had always liked psychological dominance over physical, and preferred a slowly tightening grip. “I pretended to chicken out twice before I let Richard fuck me. Playing the scared virgin. I was testing his patience, figuring out how far he’d go. He got pissy, but he didn’t hurt me when I finally said yes.” I laughed. “That was probably one of the reasons he was so mad when he saw the porno. Here, I’d made him wait, and there I was taking two different guys up the ass.” I felt Lane stiffen against me and regretted bringing up my sordid past. “Never mind.”

“It just bothers me that you had to do that when you were so young. The porn, I mean.”

“I didn’t have to. It was a choice. I wanted the money.” I liked that word he’d used once. Resourceful. Yes, I was, always had been, when the only resource I’d had was me. “I wasn’t close to a virgin then. My first time was with a guy I knew at school. I was fourteen, he was sixteen.” We’d had a moment of *Hey, he’s checking me out, he’s gay too*, at school, and followed up on it behind the equipment shed at the football field, and other convenient spots, for a few months. Not a relationship, but plenty of orgasms.

I told Lane, “He had my ass the first time in the back seat of his car parked behind a warehouse.”

“Was it... okay for you?”

“Not too bad. We were too ignorant for lube, but he used lots of spit, and he blew me afterward.” It wasn’t a bad memory. Mitch was a

decent guy, even if he ditched me a month after that when he found a gay bar he could drive to that didn't card worth a damn. "No complaints." I'd met guys with much worse stories than a sore ass for a few days.

"It feels weird to be grateful to Richard for being decent."

"You don't have to be grateful. I promise, it was strategy on his part. Lowering you into the boiling water slowly. But it's okay to be glad he bothered to make it not hurt."

Lane shrugged. "I guess."

"I do want to fuck you sometime, if you want that."

"Hell, yes."

"Good." I pulled him closer.

He snuggled in, then stiffened. "Princess is whining."

"Probably wants her favorite bed. She likes the one in here best."

"I should let her in."

"I need to get up anyway. I'll do it." I eased out of the bed, stood, and stretched. "Get your butt up." I tugged on the big towel until I had it out from under Lane, and scooped the small one off the floor, passing it to him. Then I balled the bath towel up under my arm and crossed the room naked, liking the idea that he was watching my ass. When I opened the door, Princess barked sharply at me, as if to complain about the slow service. "Same to you, Peanut Breath," I told her.

Lane laughed.

I wagged a finger at him. "Now don't let her sleep on the bed. She has her own plush sleeping spot and I've gotten her to like it. I don't want to risk rolling over and crushing her."

Of course, when I came back from the john after cleaning my ass and dick, and brushing my teeth, plus clearing a used potty pad and setting out a fresh one, the dog lay curled up on my pillow with Lane fast asleep, one hand lying along her back. Princess eyed me without

moving. “*My* pillow,” I whispered as I scooped her up and set her in her purple plush nest. “Your pillow.”

She blinked at me as if considering making a fuss, but tromped around and then settled with her chin on the edge, because she really did have a thing for velvet bolsters.

“Sleep well, Your Highness.” I lifted the covers and slid in beside Lane.

Without opening his eyes, he rolled on his side and glommed onto me like a barnacle on a ship’s hull. Or, as he flung a leg over me and threaded the other between mine, like a demented octopus. I’d never liked to be pinned down. For some reason, in this bed with this man, I didn’t mind.

Chapter 16

Lane

“Wow, it’s... bright.” Tanisha’s daughter knelt on the seat beside me, peering out the window of the bus. The neon of the Vegas Strip flashed and chased and glowed at us as we drove sedately by.

“Sure is,” Jamie said from across the table. “Artificial city, plunked down in the middle of the desert, but they make it work.”

“Cool.” The sixteen-year-old peered around with wide eyes. I’d only met Naomi a few times at band events and parties, but Tanisha had brought her along on this road trip, saying her husband deserved a break and if we were going to stir things up, Naomi deserved to see it happen and not get the story second hand on social media and gossip from her friends. It was kind of nice to not be the youngest person on the bus for a change.

I let my eyes glaze over, turning the passing lights to a blur. I’d never been to Vegas and I was curious, but I was also overwhelmed. This trip and this concert would change my life again, and I wished I could be sure it would be for the better.

Everyone else was encouraging me, standing behind me, helping. Even Mother Kissa. I’d gone to The D-spot last night, dressed as Ms. Fox even though I wasn’t planning to perform. That was the only way all the girls there had seen me, and even Mother, who knew my name, hadn’t met me as Lane.

Maybe next time. I imagined being able to get changed in the big dressing room, bantering with the other queens about foundation colors and tight shoes and dishing tea about boyfriends and breakups.

Then I imagined some paparazzi sneaking in to get pictures of me half-naked in the dressing room...

I'd set that worry at Mother's feet. *"I'm thinking about coming out," I said. "In my other life, I mean, as Lane Bennett, telling them I do drag. But I'm scared about what might happen if that turns out to be a big deal. Like, you might get crowds showing up here looking for Lane the rock star, instead of true drag fans."*

Mother tossed her head, raising perfectly styled eyebrows. *"You're worried we might get too many people coming in the club? Girl, I don't think you're right in the head. Mother's bank account is not scared of that."*

"The wrong kind of people," I tried to explain. "Ones who look at drag as shock value."

"And you don't think we can handle them? Child, I've been dealing with the 'wrong kind of people' since before you were born. I've got Willis and Leroy on the door to make sure they pay to come in, and a club full of fierce queens and their fans to toss out any that shouldn't get to stay. Bring it on." She rubbed her thumb and fingers together in the money gesture.

I chewed on my lip, not sure how to explain my deep unease.

Mother tapped my jaw hard with her finger. *"You're wrecking your lipstick. Quit that."*

"Sorry."

"You should be. Tell me, Anastaaaaasia Fox." She dragged out my name. "Are you embarrassed to be seen doing drag?"

"No!" That was the truth. This club, being Ms. Fox, was the place where I could shed the last of those rules that said boys don't cry, don't giggle, don't love satin and velvet and sashay their hips. Drag was freedom.

I couldn't get the words out, but Mother Kissa seemed to see inside me, because her next tap was a gentle pat. "Then show the bitches who's queen. I'll be rooting for you, whenever the time's right."

Grabbing the box of tissues on her dressing table, I pulled one out and dabbed at my eyes. Mascara was the worst and I was not going to let it smear.

“Aw, honey, give Mother a hug.” She folded me into her sweet-smelling, softly padded embrace, then squeezed hard enough that I could feel the steel in her arms. “You want to go on stage tonight? You could take ten minutes between Frannie and LaGold.”

I realized how much I wanted that. To stand up there and sing my songs and let Ms. Anastasia Fox fly for just a little while. “Yes, please.”

“Consider it done. And Ana, girl, if the rock ’n roll thing doesn’t work out, I can always use a pretty little queen like you to round out the roster.”

“Thank you.”

“Now get out of here before you make me emotional. Send LaGold to me on your way out. And good luck with whatever you’re planning to do.”

I’d bowed my head because my throat was tight, and hurried out to do Mother’s bidding and prepare for my turn in the spotlight...

Beside me on the bus, Dax gave my knee a nudge. “You look dazed. What’s up?”

I shrugged. “It’s just a lot.” Then I hurried to add, “Vegas, I mean. The Strip. I’m a small-town kid from Ojai and sometimes it hits me, how my life is nothing like I thought it would be when I was young.”

“When you were in diapers, you mean?” Brody teased. “Vegas is a blast. I don’t mind having a few days here before the show, even if the reason sucks.”

The reason being to try to trick Richard into giving us some nice solid evidence against him. I shivered, because I was *not* looking forward to that scene. Dax put a hand on my knee and squeezed. The lights of the Strip rolled on by.

Jamie had insisted on covering the cost for all the hotel rooms, since

this side trip wasn't sponsored by the label. We'd picked out a four-star hotel off the main drag. Dax said we didn't want Richard telling me to come to him, and a nice luxury room was a good way to get him into my space. He could afford the same himself, of course, but Dax said Richard always pinched his pennies.

The bus let us off at the main entrance. As soon as they scoped out who'd arrived, the hotel staff and security came out in force to make our checking in smooth as silk. Jamie and Val ended up on the VIP floor, while the rest of us had rooms one floor down. Kevin took off to check out the security situation, and Dax opened the door next to mine.

"Go on." Dax nodded to my room. "Make sure it meets our specs."

"Meets'? Oh, right." One reason for this floor was that Dax had insisted on a connecting door. I knew that. I pressed a twenty-buck tip into the hand of the doorman who'd brought up my bags and went in, closing him out. The quiet in the room was a sign of its luxury, outside noise muffled by solid walls, thick carpet, and heavy drapes. It took me a moment of wandering around to spot the right door. When I unlocked and opened it, and knocked on the one behind it, Dax pulled his open.

"Hi, there." He took hold of my shirt and tugged me into a kiss.

I melted against him, loving the fact that he was taller than me, and when we broke the kiss, my head landed naturally on his shoulder.

"How're you holding up?" he murmured against my hair.

"Okay. I'm glad I have a day to get ready, though." Richard had texted me hours earlier to say he was heading over to my place tonight, and I'd been so relieved to be able to say the band had decided on a few days in Vegas and we were in the bus heading out of town. He wasn't pleased I hadn't let him know I wouldn't be home, but finished with, *~I don't mind a stop in Vegas before the Fest. Not tonight though. Text me your hotel and room number. And when I say to be there, you be there.*

I'd answered, *~Yes, sir*, which I figured would please him. It was just like Richard to not make a definite plan, insisting I be ready whenever

he wanted to show up. We'd slipped into that pattern gradually, but now I was sure he figured he could take the gloves all the way off. A thought that didn't help my nerves. I shivered.

"It'll be okay." Dax squeezed me, then moved past me into my room. "I'll have all the surveillance set up by tomorrow. I got some awesome nanny cams. Whenever he shows up, we'll be ready to go. Trust me."

"I do." That was the truth. It was Richard, and my own acting abilities, that I didn't trust.

Dax eyed the layout of the furniture. "Yeah, we can make this work. We'll get the cameras and recording devices set up and figure out where the blind spots are. Record your consent, and we'll be ready to rock 'n roll."

I watched him stalk around. There was a light in his eyes and his head was high, his shoulders back. "You look like you're, um, not happy exactly but..."

"Enjoying this? Fuck, yeah." He turned to face me. "Getting the better of Richard, after all these years? Bring it on."

"I'm still surprised you didn't make a move before now." I wanted to bite my tongue, because Dax's face fell.

"Right? I... I don't know. That feels like my biggest failure. Running was nothing new. I'd done it before when it made sense. I'd ditched a shared apartment to live on the street for a week when one of the guys made meth too appealing, although that left the others scrambling for the next month's rent. I ducked out on a bill at a hospital once. Couldn't pay, wasn't eighteen, whatever my ID said. So I cut out in the middle of the night and left them holding the bag." He shot a look at me. "And I ditched my band. I'm not some kind of good guy."

"Those weren't your fault."

"I made my choices. Fault doesn't matter. When I abandoned Card Crimson to get away from Richard, I screwed over the other guys."

"Were you supposed to stay and be blackmailed? Would they have had your back, if you told them what Richard was doing?"

Dax lifted one shoulder. “He had his claws into Jack and Joker just as much, and King was hooked on the coke and pills by then. So probably not. But I didn’t give them a chance.”

“You’re allowed to save yourself.”

“That’s what I told myself, yeah. But I should’ve checked up on Jack and the rest once I was safe, instead of telling myself I didn’t want to know. Either way, I should’ve done something about Richard sooner. Remember how you described me that one time? Resourceful? I figure shit out. I should’ve figured a way to get at Richard before he touched you.”

“Hey.” I stepped forward to face Dax. “You’re not responsible for me. Yeah, he gaslit me and I’m glad of your help getting rid of him. But I made my own choices. I bet you met a lot of other users and abusers in your past. It wasn’t your job to be a vigilante and hunt them all down the moment you got free.”

“I guess.” Dax looked down, rubbing a sneaker toe over some faint spot on the carpet. I couldn’t tell if he believed me.

“You know it.”

That got me a silent nod.

I had to ask, “Did you consider not joining Corvus Rising? You knew they were with Streetcorner.”

“Jamie,” he said, as if that was a complete answer, but after a moment of silence, he added, “I couldn’t have one without the other. They were in a long contract.”

“If you’d told Jamie what Richard did, he’d have left the label.” I was as sure of that as anything. They may have grown up apart, but Jamie was all-in with treating Dax as his brother now.

“They’d have paid a huge penalty, maybe ended up blackballed. Anyhow, I didn’t want Jamie to know about me. Besides, even though Corvus was with the label, I hadn’t seen Richard for years before you joined us. He’s acquisitions, new talent. Corvus was an established band. Even when Brody joined, Jamie did it on my rec and there were no auditions or talent search. Until Matt left and Jamie needed a

bassist, there was no reason for us to ever set eyes on Richard.”

“Sorry—”

“Not your fault.” Dax moved closer, set a hand behind my neck, and kissed me lightly. “In fact, I’m grateful for anything the bastard did to bring you to Corvus. Just mad he used you and I couldn’t stop him sooner. And…” He grinned. “I’m going to enjoy the hell out of bringing him down.”

That brought back some of my nerves. “What if this doesn’t work? What if I can’t make him say anything clear enough?” *What if I can’t stand up to him when I never really have before?* The thought of facing a furious Richard made me shiver.

“Then we’ll use my old recording. I told you that.” Dax folded me into his arms. “I’ll be right on the other side of that door, I’ll do whatever recording magic it takes, and you’ll be safe. I swear.” He kissed my hair. “If I have to, I’ll edit up something good out of whatever he does say. Make him sound like the raging asshole he is.”

“That doesn’t seem honest.”

“Honesty’s optional when dealing with bad guys. I’ve taken all the cash out of a john’s wallet if he was a bastard. Keyed the hell out of a guy’s car when he thought he was safe and high and mighty. Richard doesn’t worry about honesty, and lucky you— you’ve got a guy on your side who doesn’t either.”

Something about the last part rang hollow. I could believe that Dax broke laws he disagreed with, and delivered payback when justified, but that was different from not having honesty. I remembered something from the little biography details he’d dropped, and played a hunch. “What if I asked whether, once you had money, you went back and paid that hospital bill you skipped out on?”

Dax froze. Then he began laughing. “God, I can’t hide from you, can I? Yeah. I gave them a donation equal to what was owed.”

I stood on tiptoes and kissed his jawline. “You’re honest where it counts. But flexible enough on the letter of the law to bring down Richard. Best of both worlds.”

Dax turned to bring our mouths together. “Mm. And now we have an evening with no schedule and two big beds. Your place or—” His phone chimed. “Hang on.” Dax let go of me to pull the phone out of his pocket.

I tried not to be unhappy that he put answering some caller over taking me to bed, but... his laugh shook me out of my pouting.

“Look.” He held out the phone for me to see. “Mrs. Lopez sent a video of Princess.”

There our little girl was, straddling a red plush pillow bigger than her, shaking a corner of it back and forth and growling, a puff of stuffing on the top of her head like a bad eighties’ hairdo. I had to laugh too. “I hope you warned her about the ravening pillow-monster.”

“I also promised you’d pay for replacements. Maybe this is her chance to redecorate.”

Another picture came through of Princess fast asleep in the remains of her disemboweled victim. The text said, *~I went to cook for just ten minutes.*

~So sorry, Dax texted back. ~We’ll pay for it, of course.

~Meh. Was seven dollars at the discount store. But she’s lucky she’s cute.

~She is stinking cute. Thanks for the pics.

I told Dax, “It’s been less than one day and I miss her.” We’d decided a bunch of driving, desert heat, and a very loud three-day rock concert weren’t dog-friendly, but I couldn’t believe how fast I’d gotten used to having her sweet little face around. Got used to rooming with Dax too in just a few days, waking up in his bed, hearing him moving around the place, kissing the grumpy off his morning face.

“Me too.” Dax slid the phone back into his pocket and turned to me. “Doesn’t mean I won’t take advantage of not having anyone snuffing along the crack of the door or whining to go out for the next two hours.” He tugged me toward the connecting doors. “Come into my lair.”

“Only two hours?” I teased. “Where’s your ambition?”

Once he’d pulled me into his room, he closed the connecting door, shutting out the scene of the future crime. I barely had time to make out a similar layout, similar luxury, before he maneuvered me to the bed and tipped me onto my back. “Just for that,” he said, “I’ll spend the first hour edging you.” Lowering my zipper one tooth at a time, he proceeded to make good on that threat. Or promise. Make that, definitely a promise. Wow.

Dax

Lane vibrated against my grip on his upper arms, as if the text from Richard had triggered every nerve in his body. He’d calmed down during the band’s practice in a hired local studio, finetuning the new Rocktoberfest program, but now his anxiety was back. “You’ll be fine.” I flexed my fingers, rocking him back and forth. “You’ve got this. I promise, I’ll be listening closely.”

“I’m worried I’ll screw up and tip him off.” Lane bit his lower lip, which looked pink and puffy because this wasn’t the first time.

“Leave your poor face alone.” I let go of one arm to run my thumb over his lip. “Just pretend you never told me anything about his blackmail. Pretend you gave in. Trust me to get you out of there before he goes too far.”

“How?”

I shook my head. “I need you to not anticipate and to be as surprised as he is. I have four levels of interruption options. Grant you, the fourth one is me marching through the connecting door and kicking Richard in the face, so hopefully we won’t get that far, since it’d screw with everything else we’ve planned. Still, if he doesn’t let you go, his nose will become intimately acquainted with my foot.” *Damn, that’s tempting.*

“Let’s try to stick with options one through three,” Lane agreed,

seeming less tense.

I stepped back and gave him a little push. “Now, go do whatever you would do to prepare before your ex arrives.”

A touch of sass came back as he tilted his head. “Including lubing up my ass?”

“No,” I snapped. “Your ass is mine.” Well, we hadn’t gone there yet, but we would and Richard could keep his limp dick away from my Lane.

That let Lane smile at last. “I’m going to anyhow, in case he touches me there to check, but yeah, my ass is yours.”

“If you want it to be.” I softened my words, because Lane had spent enough time with a possessive bastard.

He stepped forward and kissed me. “I want. Soon.” A soft breath and he straightened his shoulders. “Okay. I’m going to get ready.”

“I’ll go, um, monitor and watch you.” I cleared my throat. It suddenly felt intrusive, having all those spying eyes and ears on Lane, even for a good reason.

“I gave full consent, remember? I trust you.”

There weren’t many folk in the universe who could say that and be safe, but I was for damned sure gonna live up to it for Lane.

I backed off through the connecting doors, shut his, shut mine. Then opened them again a couple of times to make certain neither locked unexpectedly. All good.

Are you freaking out just a little, Dax, old boy?

I shrugged off my inner critic. *This is important.* My laptop on the desk in my room showed multiple screens. I had nanny cams aimed at the room door— I was very well acquainted with how Richard liked to shove a guy up against it— and the entry area, the bed, the bathroom. Richard didn’t hesitate to use kneeling on a hard floor as one of his Dom things.

I’d suggested having another witness watching with me, one of the

security guys or Jamie, but Lane had gone pale at the thought and begged me not to. He didn't want them to see him live with Richard. He said the videos would be bad enough. I vowed to get every second safely stored in the clearest views and stereo sound, but not let anyone see the stuff unless Lane approved. I knew just how slimy and small Richard could make a guy feel.

Nothing was currently recording, but Richard's text to Lane had set his arrival only half an hour away. Knowing Richard, that might mean ten minutes. Catching a guy off guard was another Dicky-douchebag thing.

Lane began undoing his shorts in the bathroom. I blanked that view, but started a brief recording on the others, tested each playback, and started them up again. Tiny cameras, advanced technology. Fifteen years ago, when I'd been a reckless sixteen-year-old desperate for money, I'd stripped and let myself be handcuffed to earn bucks off a sleazy old white dude with a camcorder and a bodybuilder friend.

Would Richard have kept that video? He did like to have a handle on people, but it was a risky thing for him to have saved...

Mind on the game. I tugged myself back to the present. The video feeds were working well. I also had multiple mics planted, because audio from those cams was distorted as hell, and I flipped between audio channels, although all that came through was the faint sound of water behind the bathroom door. They were top quality mics for the size. I was going to nail Richard with crisp, clear audio. My reputation was at stake. Not that I was putting my copyright on this. I laughed, feeling the sound catch in my chest.

A knock on the door made me whip my head around, until I realized that was Lane's door. *Showtime.* I waited till he came out of the bathroom, buttoning his shorts, then turned on the john's camera too.

Lane peeked through the peephole, gave himself a shake, then opened the door and stepped back. "Hey. Richard."

Richard fucking Kensington strutted into the room, and I got my first close look at the bastard in ages. *He looks older.* A childish part of me did a little dance of glee. Richard's face now carried deeper lines

from nose to jaw and creases around his eyes he hadn't had before. His skin seemed coarser and slacker, his nose more prominent. *Not so perfectly handsome anymore, huh, Dick-face?* His six-foot height and toned, medium build hadn't changed though, with the width of his shoulders less than Jamie's but still outbulking Lane. I'd been a skinny twink back when I knew him too, but not as small as Lane.

You'd better not touch him. You'd better not hurt him. My hands were shaking. I rubbed my palms on my thighs and focused on the screen.

"Lane." Richard shut the door behind him and leaned back on it, staring at Lane, his arms crossed. "You ran off on me."

"I didn't." Lane's voice wavered, then strengthened. "Jamie wanted to give the band a vacation, all expenses paid, between the stress of the tour and Rocktoberfest. How was I going to say no? You don't want me to tell anyone about us, so I couldn't say, 'My boyfriend—'"

"No." Richard straightened. "You don't call me that. You do what I say, and you come and go when I tell you, but I'm not your *friend*. I'm your boss, your Dom, your..." He gave a smile I didn't like. "Your handler."

Lane stepped back a couple of paces. "If you don't want a boyfriend, why don't you just leave me alone?"

"Because you're mine. No one takes away what's mine. And secretly, you like what I bring to the bedroom."

"I don't." Lane shook his head. "Not anymore. You're not a Dom, you're a bully."

I hissed a breath through my teeth. *Lane, be careful.* I wanted him to provoke Richard into words we could use, but not too hard too fast.

"I'm *what?*" Richard strode toward Lane who backpedaled farther. That put them out of the entry camera, but into the bed-space one.

I toggled the main screen over. Lane looked nervous, winding his fingers together. Richard loomed over him, glowering.

"Repeat that, boy. I dare you."

Lane shook his head, but managed to say, “What else do you call threatening me if I don’t obey you?”

“Threatening?” Richard laughed. “Little boy, that wasn’t a threat, that was a promise.”

“You could just go away. There’s lots of young naive guys out there who would su—” Lane hesitated. “Would do whatever you want.”

I liked that evidence he was still thinking, not caught up in the moment too deeply. I’d told him to avoid sex talk and actions as long as possible, so whatever we got wouldn’t have to be censored. “Suck your cock” wouldn’t fly with an all-ages audience.

Richard reached out and patted Lane’s cheek. I saw Lane shiver. *Can’t rip Richard’s arm off. Not yet.*

“But I’m keeping you.” That was not affection on Richard’s face. Ownership, maybe. “I put a lot of time and effort into you.”

“So I have to submit to you? Or what?”

Good job, Lane. I watched the nearest mic input scroll across the screen, spiking in response to Lane’s words. *Recording? Yes.* For all my experience, paranoia had me checking and double checking. We only had one chance to do this right.

“Or what?” Richard cocked his head. “Are you ready to have the whole world find out you’re a drag queen? Wearing dresses and heels, seducing little kiddies away from—”

“Drag queens don’t seduce kids!” The suggestion put color in Lane’s pale cheeks and his eyes narrowed.

Richard tapped Lane’s cheek again, then stroked a finger from his jaw down his neck to the opening of his shirt. “I know that. You know that. But the public out there, the tone-deaf groupies?” Richard waved toward the outside world. “I can make them believe anything I want. Corvus Rising’s harboring a pedophile, one of those queer men who hide in women’s dresses and stalk decent women—”

“*You’re* a queer man. How can you play into the hate like that?”

“Ah, but I won’t have to. Will I?” Richard set both hands on Lane’s

shoulders. “I won’t have to bring down your band around your ears—”

Lane swallowed hard but seemed to lock his knees. “We’re a top performer for L.A. Streetcorner. Your boss, your father— they’d be mad if you wreck a moneymaker.”

“They’d never know where the leak came from. A girly-boy making random accusations about a label VP? A nobody whose claim to fame was one teen-pop single with a dissolving band, before I found you, raised you up, made you a star? No one will believe you, Lane.” Richard leaned closer and lowered his voice, but my mic still picked it up perfectly. “Now do as I say. Be a good boy, and you can keep your precious career and your precious band. All you have to do is get on your knees.” I saw him push Lane’s shoulders hard enough that he staggered. “Kneel, boy!”

Fucking enough! I hit the fuck-this-shit message on our preset phone chat.

Two seconds later— too long for watching Lane on his knees at Richard’s feet, but as quick as Jamie could move— the fire alarm began blaring in the hotel hallways.

Lane jolted, staring wildly around. Richard glared at the door, then back down at Lane who was trying to get up under Richard’s heavy hands.

“Ignore it,” Richard ground out. “It’s always a false alarm.”

I typed in, *~Brody Tanisha go*

A few seconds later, above the bleep of the alarm, the mics picked up Tanisha’s banging on Lane’s door. “Hey, fire, come on, get out!”

This time, Richard let Lane stand. Lane waved at the door. “I just want to check.”

“It’s some idiot who scorched their pants with the iron,” Richard snapped. “Ignore it.” But he turned around too.

Tanisha thumped again. “Smoke! Come on, get going!” Then there came the sound of her thumping on my door and shouting, “Fire,” as planned, moving on down the hall.

Lane hurried over, cracked his door open and turned with wide eyes. “It smells like smoke!”

Yes, go Brody.

Richard strode over, sniffing the air. “Fuck!” He pushed the door shut for a second. “Count to three, then head out. Don’t follow me. Don’t act like you know me.” Richard slipped out and shut the door behind him.

Lane leaned his forehead on the door as if counting off seconds, then turned toward my room. “Dax? What should I do?”

I left my laptop to open the connecting doors. When Lane would’ve hurried my way, I waved him off. “Go on out like a real alarm. If he sticks around, he needs to see you believing it, running out like you would. Go!”

With a nod, Lane grabbed his wallet off the dresser, yanked his door open, and rushed out. I hurried into his room. A faint acrid scent came under the door from the hall. Moving through the room methodically, I collected the cameras, the mics. Five minutes, while the siren throbbed a victory song in my ears, and I had that room stripped clean. Back in my own room, I stashed the equipment into its suitcase, then checked to make sure everything was backed up to thumb drives and Dropbox, where it was supposed to be. I didn’t trust the cloud for this.

My phone rang. Brody. I picked it up. “Hey, good job with the smoke.”

His deep chuckle rang out. “You know me. Expert with a lighter and papers. Hey, I see Kensington. Some hotel dude in a uniform is talking to him.”

“Good. Excellent.” I’d paid one of the staff big bucks to wait by the nearest fire exit, and if a man like Kensington came out, to tell him it would be hours before we were let back in the hotel. Hell, that might be true, and I owed a big apology to anyone else I’d cock-blocked, but I didn’t want him hanging around waiting to come back in and harass Lane. “Tell me what Kensington does.”

“He’s looking pissed. Staring around. Uniform guy is going up to some other folk, chatting...”

The guy was smarter than I’d expected, making it look like he didn’t single Richard out. Might be due a tip. I held my breath. *Come on, Richard. Give it up. Leave.*

“He’s getting out his phone. Doing something.”

A moment later, my phone pinged from Lane. *~Richard just texted me to meet him at his hotel.*

~Don’t answer. You can tell him later you left your phone in your room.

~Oh. Good idea.

~I have other good ideas too. Now stay out of his sight. I went back to my call with Brody. “What’s the doucheweasel doing now?”

“Standing around, frowning at his phone... Now he’s shoving his phone in his pocket, heading toward the front parking lot.”

Yes! Get far, far away from Lane. “Tell me when he leaves.”

“I have to follow him around the building. Hang on... Okay, still stomping off... Yes, got in a black SUV and he’s heading for the road.”

“Halle-fucking-lujah. Good work, dude.”

“Always wanted to be double-oh-seven.”

“North. Brody North.” I laughed. “You rock, dude.”

“That I do.” Brody hung up.

The alarm stopped blaring a couple of minutes later. I opened my door, staying out of the range of any hallway cameras, and held my electric fan pointing in the direction of Brody’s door across the hall, then Lane’s beside mine. The faint acrid scent of smoke from the paper Brody had lit up faded, dissipating down the hallway.

My phone chimed. Jamie. *~Did it work?*

~Perfectly. Got what I needed. Richard got pissed about the fire alarm and left.

~You're sure no one will know I triggered the alarm?

~I disabled their hallway camera. Relax. They'll be pissed, but they won't know who did it. I'd planned this operation out like an assassination, and it'd gone smooth as silk. Which wasn't a comforting thought, when your boyfriend was a public figure, but hey, we'd hope he never had a stalker as detail-oriented as me.

~Now you want me to get Lane out of town? Jamie asked.

~Yeah. I wasn't happy about spending the next two days before we headed to Rocktoberfest without Lane, but I also didn't want Richard summoning him and getting mad, or suspicious, when Lane refused to show. Jamie had called in a huge favor, and a feature writer at a well-known music publication had agreed to set up an interview and photo session for the newest Corvus, Lane, along with Crow and Hawk, in New York, whenever Jamie asked for it. Great band promo, something Richard couldn't argue about, farther away than he'd want to chase after Lane for just a couple of days.

Jamie texted, *~I'll let Melissa know we're coming into NY on the late flight. While you enjoy Vegas. The things we do for family.* I flinched a little at that, but as if he'd seen me, Jamie added, *~And I meant Lane. Band is family too.*

A good band was. Something in my chest ached for what Card Crimson might've been, if four young guys had been given the chance, back before I ever knew Jamie. *I need to look those dudes up. After we deal with Richard.*

I went to the USB hub attached to my computer and disconnected my treasures. One went in the safe, one in my pocket, one in the secret compartment in my suitcase. Nothing was getting between me and karma for Richard Kensington. *Then Lane'll be safe, and as for me? Maybe there'll be one less nightmare to creep up on me in my sleep.*

Chapter 17

Lane

I'm not sure what I expected from Rocktoberfest, but its mix of the wildly high-tech and the rustic was beyond my imagination. The venue had been specially built out in the Nevada desert, miles and miles along remote blacktop roads between rocky, scrubby, sandy landscape of nothing much. I'd stared out of the bus window on the drive, wondering if Oleg had somehow gotten lost.

Then there it was, looming up out of the desert. Tall stages with towering screens, a forest of electric poles and lights, and a town of sorts, plunked down in the middle of nowhere. Buses, travel homes, campers, SUVs, vans, eighteen-wheelers, lining the road behind a variety of fencing.

Jamie chuckled. "Nothing else like it, huh?"

"It's wild." I pressed closer to the window as we turned at last, pulling into a section of parking behind tall, wire-topped chain link. In here, the slots were filled with band busses with an array of names. There were still open spaces, no surprise since we'd arrived a day early in order to head off Richard. He'd been *pissed* about my New York trip, but as far as I could tell, accepted the excuse of valuable promo at short notice. "You think Richard will show up? This doesn't seem like his kind of thing at all."

The forecast called for unseasonably hot weather in the middle of the day, despite being well into October, and the kind of luxury Richard loved was probably confined to the fanciest of the buses. The buildings I saw seemed utilitarian.

“Yeah, he’ll be here,” Dax said. “I heard he comes every year. Rocktoberfest features a lot of new bands making their first big appearance, looking for a break. All the labels will have someone here, sniffing around, hoping to sign the next Taylor Swift or Metallica. Richard likes to think of himself as a star-maker, best ear in the business, yadda, yadda. He doesn’t delegate this one.”

I nodded, noticing the logo on a bus we pulled in next to—*Hellsbane & Blade* written in flame-reds and ice-blue. A tarp-draped thing the size of a phone booth by the steps rang a bell. Erik someone leading Hellsbane, and Blade, the gorgeous longhaired singer with the huge range who’d performed in the booth. I’d watched them online last year breaking out of the newbie pack at Rocktoberfest, back when I was waiting for my own break. I’d admired their sound and envied their bass player’s stage presence. Now here I was, playing a headliner spot to sixty thousand people. The bus on our other side wore the logo for Damaged Saints, which rang a faint bell. *Are they looking out and going, “Oh look, it’s Corvus Rising,” like we’re the cool neighbors?* Everything felt surreal.

Oleg lined us up neatly in the open space, hit the brakes, and the engine shifted to low idling. The door forward into the cab swung open and Oleg stuck his head through. “We’re here, parked. This site has almost no amenities, so I’ll be going offsite daily to pump the tanks, pick up water, and refuel. I’ll post the times for that on my notifications, but my first run will be tomorrow morning around ten. Anyone who wants a ride into town can come along, but I can’t guarantee how soon I’ll be back. Competition for amenities at the depot can be fierce during the Fest. I’ll alternate with our crew bus. They’re parking two rows back, so there’ll always be a private space for Corvus here with AC, bathroom, and so on, even when I’m gone.”

“Thanks,” Jamie said. “I hope you can enjoy the downtime otherwise.”

“That’s my plan.” Oleg nodded to him and closed the connecting door.

Jamie bounced to his feet. He always had a lot of enthusiasm for our performances, but I’d never seen him quite so hyper, or grinning so

wide. “I love Rocktoberfest,” he told me. “I got my first big break here, me and Val, when we were signed to do our debut album. Came back the next year and killed it, and I’m sure that was a big part of why we got resigned longer-term.”

“Well, that and the fucking awesome sales,” Dax drawled from where he sat.

“Sure. Yeah.” Jamie pivoted to peer out of the other side window, then took a ball cap off the shelf by the door. “I’m going out, see who’s here that we know. Kevin’s meeting us. Who’s coming?” He flipped the badge on a cord round his neck. “Don’t forget your laminate, Lane. They get serious about security here, with the number of fans, and the bands living on site. And if you go through to the audience side, keep your eyes open, maybe call for Kevin or Filipe. If you’re going to get spotted and recognized by fans anywhere, it’ll be here.”

“I guess.” My nerves hadn’t stopped vibrating for the last two days. Bad enough we were playing to a crowd three times as big as our usual, but with performing in drag and the retribution we had planned for Richard, and all the ways that could become a disaster? I was a mess.

“We should go out.” Dax stood and grabbed my arm. “Come on. Let’s enjoy the fuck out of this place.”

Jamie opened the door and jumped down the steps in two bounds. Val put away her makeup mirror, eased on dark shades and a wide-brimmed hat with a feather on it, and followed him. Brody said, “I’m gonna find a place to smoke. Catch you all later,” and headed out.

Tanisha sighed. “I tell you, it is *nice* not to have to worry about anyone getting busted for that shit anymore. At least, in the sane states. Naomi-girl, what do you want to do?”

“Can we go look at the merch before the crowds get bigger?” Naomi grabbed her purse and slung it over her shoulder.

“Yeah, child, we can, but you’re spending your own money and we’re here three days, so be smart with that.” Tanisha stood, stretched, and dug out her own purse. “I’ll take Filipe with us. See you two around.”

When they were gone, Dax turned and eyed me. Something shifted

in his expression, and I felt a zing of heat. After all, the bus was empty. We'd managed a hot but fast sixty-nine between me getting back from New York, and all of us heading out in the bus from Vegas, but Dax's expression said he had other things in mind for us. A shout and yell of reply from outside reminded us of the Fest taking shape beyond the door, though. Dax shook his head. "Come on. Your first Rocktoberfest. You should take in the experience, check out the venue. I don't think the shred-off for best guitar player happens till tomorrow this year. You could sign up for that, if you want."

I swallowed, slung my laminate around my neck, and jammed a ball cap on my head. "Not this year." Probably not any year. I was a bassist not a lead guitar, and there were some seriously awesome musicians here. "Lead the way."

Dax ushered me off the bus, tapped the door closed and locked, and set one hand on the small of my back, guiding me forward. I relaxed under his touch, glad of the reminder I was here with a veteran. We could see through the gate out of the performers' area into the main venue. Even though we were still a couple of hours from the first performance of the day, a huge crowd milled throughout the grounds.

Dax gestured. "Food. Merch. Portapotties. Media. Info and Event staff. Medical. Come on, let's take a look at our stage." He led the way around the backside of the stages. I tugged my hat down low and followed him.

The venue ran three stages, and ours was at the end of the widest arc of open space, where the ground sloped away enough to give a good view. That might not be the biggest stage we'd ever been on, but it seemed larger, silhouetted against the empty desert instead of inside a building or surrounded by bleachers. A band was running a sound check over there, and a few hundred or maybe few thousand fans were already camped out nearest the stage, grabbing the prime viewing spots. Fences separated our zone from the hum of the crowd, but the sound felt like a hungry sea lapping up against our borders.

"That's wild." I moved closer to Dax as we walked around behind the fence.

The stage was mostly open, but I was relieved to see curtained areas on both wings big enough for a performer to fix a costume malfunction or throw up in a bucket out of sight of any audience. I'd need that for what we were planning... the reality of it hit me and I bent over, grabbing my stomach.

Dax wrapped an arm around me. "Are you okay?"

"Just the heat, I think," I lied, although it was only about eighty, despite the bright sun. I pushed myself upright. *Breathe. It's just a performance. You've performed hungover and with the flu.* Somehow, those facts didn't help much. "Maybe bad eggs at breakfast."

Dax didn't call me on the lie. "Let's head back to the bus." He turned us away from that looming stage, hugging me against him.

The walk back to the parking area settled my stomach some. We got a few waves from people going the other way, which I returned without paying attention. Unlike Jamie, I didn't expect to meet many friends here. Heading back along the row of gleaming coaches, some wrapped in logos I recognized and others I didn't, I found more stability and was able to move out of Dax's strong but overwarm grip.

There was more shade here, and we stayed in it, walking close to the fronts of the buses. Some were closed and silent, others leaked a bass beat or cheerful voices. As we approached ours, I heard Jamie's laugh boom out and jerked to a stop before opening the door.

Dax cocked his head as another sound followed, a lighter male voice maybe, though muffled beyond recognition. "Sounds like Jamie found some friends."

"Crap." I ran a hand down my damp face and backed up, my stomach twisting again. "I don't want to meet anyone right now."

"We could sneak in. No one's going to care—"

"No!" I bit back the rest as the Hellsbane and Blade bus door opened right at my elbow to reveal a young guy with long red-brown hair and high cheekbones about to exit. *Crap, that's...Blade, right?*

The guy hesitated on the lowest step. "I, um, sorry, was going somewhere. Can do it another time." He advanced one foot to the

ground awkwardly and turned right around.

“No, I’m sorry. My fault,” I said. “The heat. But Jamie’s having a party or something in there.” I waved at our bus, feeling lightheaded. “I’ll get out of your way. Somewhere.” As if in answer, a low riff of sound echoed from inside our bus and I swayed, wiping my forehead.

Blade paused, his foot on the bottom stair, eyeing me. “You don’t look great.” He swept a glance over me. “Do you... You’re Lane Bennett, right? Corvus Rising’s bassist? Do you, um, want to come inside mine for a moment? It’s quiet, ’cause the others are off getting food, and the AC’s running.”

When I hesitated, Dax stepped up to me, setting his hand under my elbow. “Come on, Lane. Take the nice guy up on his invitation before you fall over.”

“I look like crap. I’m a mess.” I was sure I’d sweated out the pits of my shirt, and my hair was damp around my face.

For some reason, that made Blade smile. “I’m frequently a mess. Come on in.” He led the way up into his bus and, with Dax’s hand on my back, I followed. Once we were in, Blade reached past to close the doors. “Here, sit down. Can I get you some lemonade?”

“Seriously?” I blinked at him as I sank into one of the seats in their front lounge. “That sounds awesome.”

“Coming up.”

Dax sat beside me. “I’m Dax Crow, mixing and effects tech. You’re Blade, right? Lead singer?”

The guy hunched a little as he reached into their fridge, but said, “Yeah. One of them. You can call me Blade but I prefer Cam in private. Here.” He passed out two green glass bottles to Dax and me, and sat across from us with his own.

I pressed the cold bottle to my forehead and Cam tilted his head. “You okay?”

“Better now. Thanks. You’re a lifesaver.”

“I didn’t think it was supposed to be that hot out today. Warm for

the season, but not bad.”

I closed my eyes and rolled the bottle to get a cold spot onto my skin. “The heat’s kind of an excuse. It just hit me, what we’re doing tomorrow night, performing in front of all those people.”

“I can *totally* understand,” Cam said, and I heard a vibration of sympathy in his tone. “But don’t you guys play to big stadiums all the time?”

“Not this big. And I’ve only been with the band six months. Plus…” I couldn’t tell him the scariest part, but I could share a little piece. “I’m going to sing solo on one song. I haven’t done that before. I’m, like, third choice back-up. They don’t even mic my voice, normally.”

“Oh, man, and they sprang that on you at Rocktoberfest?”

“No, no, we all made the choice together,” I said quickly. I didn’t want Jamie looking bad. “This’ll probably be my only chance. I want to do it. But it’s still scary as hell.”

Dax rubbed my knee. I opened my eyes, screwed the cap off the lemonade, and drank.

Cam said, “Well. I’m not going to tell you to picture the audience naked or anything.”

“Ew,” I muttered.

“Yeah? Like, the worst advice ever. Secondhand embarrassment to the nth degree, am I right?” Cam brushed clinging strands of his hair back over his shoulder and flashed a crooked smile at me as he opened his own lemonade. “I got all kinds of terrible advice on how to get over being afraid to get up on a stage.”

“What worked?” I asked, before remembering the reason this band had stood out was that Cam performed as a hologram. “Sorry. I forgot.”

“No problem.” Cam took a long swallow, peering down at his hands so his hair swung around his face again. “What worked was an end run around the problem, and not getting up there, ever. Probably not the answer that will do it for you.”

“No. I have to be up there in person.” But the reminder that other folk struggled too wasn’t a bad thing. “It’ll be okay. I *have* sung before, just not this material and not before this kind of crowd.”

“You’ll kill it,” Dax told me. “We’ve got all our ducks in a row and it’s gonna be epic.”

I had to laugh. “Not sure about epic.”

“No, it will be. A rain of karma and you up there, doing what you were born to do.”

I felt my face flush and turned to Cam. “He’s biased.”

“Probably.” Cam’s lips curved in a secret smile. “But it’s kind of great, isn’t it, having someone biased in our favor?”

“I guess it is.” I slid my leg over so my knee bumped Dax’s. “I couldn’t do this without him.”

“Erik does that for me,” Cam said. “Makes it all possible, even though the tech stuff is all Drew’s work.”

“I’d love to meet your tech guy sometime,” Dax said. “I’ve seen a couple of other performers with holograms, but the way he integrated you into the rest of the sound—” He broke off, his head coming up.

A moment later, we heard the bus door open. A deep voice said,

*“There once was a guy who’d been cockblocked,
“Till he dreamed about getting the door locked,
“With his man waiting there,
“And ten minutes to share—”*

His voice cut off as he came into view. I recognized the tall, blond, bearded lead singer of Hellsbane, blinking at us. “Wow, sorry,” he said. “I didn’t expect to have company.”

Cam grinned at him. “And so of course you came in limericking. These are Lane and Dax from Corvus Rising. Guys, this is Erik.”

Erik held out a big hand. “Good to meet you.”

I let Dax stand and do the polite thing while I downed more lemonade.

“I missed your performance last year,” Dax told Erik. “One downside to only showing up when we’re about to perform. But I saw the videos. You had that crowd flying in a whole new way.”

“Thanks.” Eric turned to fumble in his fridge, came up with a beer, and dropped into the chair next to Cam which creaked as he landed. “We’re still small fry, nothing like you guys.”

“You’ll get there,” Dax told him. “Your playing, Cam’s voice? You stand out.”

“Maybe.” Erik raised his bottle and took a long pull. “Or maybe this is where we’re going to stay, middle of the pack. I’d love to go big, but not if it means touring twelve months a year. Not if Brandy couldn’t get time home with her kid. We’re making a living, if only just, and making damned good music. No complaints.”

“None,” Cam agreed, his eyes on Erik.

“When are you on this year?”

“Sunday, eight o’clock. We need the darkness, but we’re ahead of all the headliners.”

“Still a good day. Biggest crowds of the fest.”

I saw Cam shiver, and Erik nudged his knee. “We’re looking forward to it. Most of us. Blade’s part is in the can already and he killed it. I hope we can live up to that.”

Cam nudged him back. “Don’t be stupid. You always do.”

The last of my lemonade went down cold and tangy and perfect. My stomach had settled from that momentary freak-out, and if I wasn’t mistaken, we were now the ones cockblocking Erik. I stood and set the empty bottle on their small counter. “Thanks so much for inviting us in. You’re a life saver, but I think I’m good to go now.”

“Glad I could help.” Cam stood too. “When are you singing?”

“Saturday, right before Maiden Voyage and Social Sinners.”

“Sweet spot,” Erik said. “We’ll be listening.”

“And you’ll do fine.” Cam fixed me with an intense stare. “I know it.”

“Thanks.”

When Dax got up, Erik said, “By the way. Cam’s apparently told you his real name, but he’s still not out there on social media except as Blade.”

“Lips are sealed.” Dax gestured, a pinch-fingered swipe across his lips. “I understand all about keeping identities separate.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you out.”

When we were on the ground and their door had closed behind us, Dax glanced back. “Nice guys. I hadn’t realized the hologram was a necessity, not a gimmick.”

“I bet he likes people to think otherwise.”

“Probably.” Dax headed around to the far side of our bus. “But damn.”

“What?” I asked, following him.

“Now I really want to know what the rest of that limerick was.”

It was a gift to be able to climb into our bus laughing my ass off, and to meet the guys from Chaser Lost who were hanging with Jamie and Val with a grin on my face instead of a look of panic.

Chapter 18

Dax

Moment of truth. I took my place on the side of the stage, checking my mixing console by the small light from my phone. Across the venue on Stage Three, a hard rock band worked their way to a frenzied climax, the low thuds of lighting effects carrying loudest to where I sat. The crowd in front of them heaved and chanted and sang and shouted, pumped up and ready after two days of music. I don't know what headcount the organizers had, but it looked like the biggest Rocktoberfest yet.

All the better. More witnesses. I suppressed any weakness, any doubts. All the pieces were coming together at last.

In the darkness on the other side of our stage, Lane took his guitar from Darius and slung the strap over his shoulder, smoothing his shirt under it. Val moved to the front, ready at her mic stand. I saw the pyro tech duck over to Jamie to discuss something, gesture to one of the spotters, then scuttle to her post.

The band on Three hit the end of their last chorus, pyrotechnic gerbs and flame mortars punctuating the final crescendo. When the stage went dark, the crowd gave them one hell of an ovation. I took that as a good omen. A loud, happy crowd made for a good show. As the towering house lights brightened above the open ground, their crowd headed our way to join the thousands already camped out in front of us.

Jamie appeared at my side, squeezing my shoulder as he bent down to murmur, "Richard's here and he said yes to Val."

Icing on the fucking cake. There in the dimness, I didn't try to suppress a fierce grin.

On stage, Jamie wandered from Tanisha to Brody to Lane. I made out some kind of gesture and heard Lane laugh nervously. *You'll be okay.* I wanted to hug him, offer reassurance, but I'd done all of that I could through the long hours of Friday, and all this morning. No time left now.

The venue's front of house tech gave us her countdown, and then the go ahead. The big overheads went dim.

Jamie stepped up to his mic, raised his hand. One pump of his fist and the pyro tech set off the first flash pots, the bangs and sprays of sparks lighting up the darkness. I felt rather than saw the surge of the crowd toward us. A second gesture from Jamie and the spotlight hit him, as the big screen behind us came to life with our logo, ten feet tall. On the video screens on either side of the stage, the audience would see Jamie, guitar in hand, crowned with light as the flame mortar flashed an orange fireball behind him. The heat rolled across the stage.

Jamie leaned into his mic. "Hello, Rocktoberfest. Hell of a night, and it just got *better.*" He launched into "North Wind," and the others took up the music, lights hitting them too. I hovered my hands on the sliders, listening, deciding Val was miked lower than at the sound check, despite all my care. I adjusted the mix, waited for the chorus, added a little more reverb. Here outdoors, the song could handle it. The crowd bounced in place, arms up, shouting the lyrics along with us.

As Jamie and Lane hit the final notes, the gerbs fountained white sparks and the crowd whistled, stomped, and screamed, a prolonged roar of sound.

One glance my way, then Jamie took his mic in hand. "Thank you, Rocktoberfest. That was an awesome hello. We're Corvus Rising, with Tanisha on drums." She tapped out a roll to the cheers of the crowd. "Brody on a bit of everything." Brody made the sax he was currently holding wail. "Lane on bass." His quick slide brought laughs and

cheers. “And you all know my beautiful Hawk who joins me on lead guitar and vocals.” He’d wandered close enough to lean her way as if to kiss her. She ducked and played a quick riff and he chuckled. “And I’m Crow. We’re here to blow your evening out of this world. But hey, before we start...”

He looked away from me toward the other side of the stage. “A band like the five of us is what you folks see on the stage, but it takes a lot of people to make it happen. From the roadies to the tour manager, to the folks who make the flashes and bangs, it takes a team. And you know who you don’t ever hear about? The acquisitions team.”

Jamie gestured at Lane. “Those of you who saw us last year remember Matt Zeng, who was crazy talented on bass. Losing Matt was tough, but we can’t wait for you to see the range of talent we have now in Lane. And you know who finds that perfect new fit for a band? Acquisitions guys like...” Tanisha laid out a drumroll. “Richard Kensington.” Jamie waved at the wings on the other side. “Come on out of the dark and take a bow, Richard, say a word.”

A spotlight shone on that side of the stage as planned. I held my breath. But of course, he couldn’t resist. A brilliant spot and sixty-thousand people? Richard stepped out from where Val had invited him to watch, with a bribe of being honored in our show, and waved to the crowd. A stagefront gel lit his face. Our roadie, Ian, reached out of the darkness to stick a microphone in Richard’s face, and Jamie encouraged, “Say hello.”

Richard’s voice, amplified and as clean of distortions as I could make it, came clearly. “Hi, folks, and thanks, Crow. It was my pleasure.”

The crowd applauded with a hint of confusion.

Jamie gave Richard a thumb’s up. “Sit down. Enjoy the show.”

Ian pushed Richard’s chair forward from the wings to where the stage lights would make him visible, sitting off to the side. I’d have bet my whole savings the man was smirking with satisfaction at the attention. *Just you wait, motherfucker.*

“And now let’s rock ’n roll!” Jamie blasted into the intro for “Round

the Bend” with the whole band lifting him up, shaking the stage under our feet. The crowd screamed its approval, moving to the beat. I spared one glance for Lane, playing with his head high, and one for Richard, sitting at his ease, legs crossed at the ankles. *Just you wait.*

Then I submerged into my concert trance, becoming one with the sound, the songs, the acoustics of this open space with this huge audience in it.

We weren’t tight or controlled tonight. Brody’s sax wailed up a flight of notes I’d never heard from him in his solo. Val’s guitar playing screamed, harsher than her normal. But damn it, we made it work. There was an energy, a passion building, that papered over mistakes as if they were nothing.

Song followed song. We had them leaping like maniacs for “Kickass Yesterday,” shivering to Brody’s notes in “Dark Desires,” shouting out the lyrics to “I Told You That Wasn’t My Name.” As the time for our last three songs approached, I tried to ignore the herds of stomping butterflies in my stomach.

The last notes to “Shivers” wound softly down, and Jamie took his hands off his guitar and gripped his mic. “Now, we’ve got something new for you, folks. A couple of new things. Hold onto your— hell, no one’s wearing hats tonight. Grab the person next to you and buckle up. You’ll be saying you were at Rocktoberfest 2023 when.”

As he went through that intro, I slid out from behind the mixing desk. Everything was automated for the next song. *I’m nuts. I have a good thing going. Why would I wreck that?* But some part of me knew if I didn’t do this, Richard Kensington would always own a part of my soul. A spotlight found me as I stepped onto the stage. After one deep breath, I went to Lane. He lifted his guitar strap off his neck and passed her to me, unplugging his in-ears. I saw his lips move in “Good luck,” and said the same back. Then he was gone, and there I was for the first time in ten years, standing on a big stage with a bass in my hands. I plugged in. My hands did *not* shake.

Jamie said, “We have a new song for you, and who better to show it off than the man who helped write it. This is ‘Is It Over Yet?’ and on

bass, meet my brother Dax.” As the crowd roared a welcome, Jamie watched me, waiting. I took another breath and nodded.

My brother added, “Those of you who’ve been on the music scene for a while may know him as Ace, from Card Crimson.”

I’d turned to watch Richard, so I saw the moment when that info hit him. He whipped his gaze my way. I bet he was squinting, eyes narrowed, trying to confirm who I was past the brightness of the lights. Wondering no doubt, why I was up here, putting that name out into the daylight after ten long years. *Not yet. Wait for it.* I could feel a fierce grin stretch my face. *Keep wondering, motherfucker.*

He was sitting in view of the audience. Getting up and leaving would be noticeable. And I bet he wasn’t too worried, not yet. Hell, maybe he was enjoying what kind of hold he’d now have on Crow as well, to not tell the world his brother was a whore. *Not this time, you bastard.*

Jamie tapped a three count and launched us into our new song. I hadn’t consciously been thinking of Richard when I wrote it, but the lyrics plunged deep into a dysfunctional relationship. By the second chorus, we had the audience screaming, “Is it fucking over yet?” along with us.

We’d put a bass solo in, but only a short one, because Lane was twice the player I was. I hammed it up enough to buy a little extra time, to keep attention on me and remind Richard that I’d been a competent bassist before he wrecked Card Crimson. Luckily for my sanity, I was even more of a kickass mixing and effects tech and had found my musical home there, but there was a power in playing to a crowd I did miss. I let myself enjoy performing, driving my voice through the backup lyrics, headbanging on the chorus. *One time only. I’m entitled.* Plus, I figured it would be giving Richard ulcers to see me having fun.

When we hit the final note, the crowd roared.

The stage went dark except for a spot on Jamie, and the one on Richard. I wondered when Richard would notice we were keeping him pinned in place. As soon as the light was gone, I set the bass in its stand and hurried toward my desk. Lane came out from the wings

adjusting his wig. I saw his fingers trembling and said, “You’re awesome. Gonna blow it out of the water.” I held out my hand. He clung to me for a moment, fingers damp, then let go.

I sat at my console, my hands hovering. The next part was the payoff. *Ten years of payoff, coming from what I do best— recording, mixing, combining canned sound with the live band. Are you flattered to be canned content for a hit show, Richard?*

Jamie, who’d been telling the crowd a funny story about him and Hawk, flicked a look over his shoulder and said, “Now, the best part of tonight. What we’ve all been waiting for.” He waved to me. “Take it away, Dax.”

The side video screens flanking the stage were under the control of the Rocktoberfest techs, and they still showed Jamie, his fingers strumming a low, minor line on his guitar. But the big screen at the back lit up with our recording, and on it, Richard appeared, a black bar I’d inserted across his face masking him for shady legality, and yet a looming, threatening figure. *“You’re mine. No one takes away what’s mine.”*

Jamie let his notes build. The crowd quieted, moving restlessly, watching.

Richard again. *“Repeat that, boy. I dare you.”*

And Lane’s voice, but not his face. *“What else do you call threatening me if I don’t obey you?”*

“Threatening?” Richard laughed, and I’d zoomed the video in until we were practically living in his nostrils. *“Little boy, that wasn’t a threat, that was a promise.”*

“There’s lots of young naive guys out there who would su—” Lane’s hesitation. *“Would do whatever you want.”*

“I put a lot of time and effort into you.”

I was keeping an eye on Richard, sitting bolt upright now. He’d half stood as if to go at the second line, then sat back down. I’d wondered why until I saw Kevin’s bulk just behind the curtains. *Thanks, dude.* I didn’t think he’d actually lay hands on Richard, but I’d bet Richard

didn't know that.

On the screen, Richard's head tilted. It hadn't been hard to tweak the lighting so he looked grim and washed out. *"Are you ready to have the whole world find out you're a drag queen?"*

Tanisha hit a rimshot, the sound ringing out.

On the screen, Richard grinned, his glee obvious despite the obliterating black across his eyes that somehow made him seem more menacing. *"The public out there, the tone-deaf groupies?"* He waved toward the camera, toward the watching crowd. *"I can make them believe anything I want. Corvus Rising's harboring a pedophile, one of those queer men who hide in women's dresses."*

I'd harshed Richard's voice, not enough to obscure it, but making the tonal quality a fraction more shrill and unpleasant, as he said, *"Be a good boy, and you can keep your precious career and your precious band. All you have to do is get on your knees."* The shot angle opened up to show Lane from the back, Richard's hands shoving Lane down. *"Kneel, boy!"*

The screen flashed black, then burst in arcs of flames. The band dove into "Bad Karma" and a spotlight hit Lane. Or rather, hit Ms. Anastasia Fox. The five minutes of "Is It Over Yet" hadn't been enough time for a full transformation, but Lane had been wearing his tuck and stockings on stage under his jeans. In the wings, Naomi and Ian, our younger roadie, had helped him shed the jeans and put on a corset, a slinky black gown, the long auburn wig, high heels, and crimson lipstick.

Now, our stunning queen strutted into the pool of brilliance, grabbed her mic out of the stand, turned to Jamie, and sang.

Lane

Allowing only four minutes and forty-three seconds for me to transform into Anastasia hadn't been a bad thing. In the struggle of

sucking in my gut so Naomi could zip the corset and tucking my hair up under the wig, I hadn't had time to think about what I was doing. The slide of lipstick across my mouth with its subtle waxy scent settled me in my skin. No time for lashes, although I'd gone out from the start with eyeshadow, some contouring, and a little blusher already on. Under my jeans, I'd been tucked and ready. The slide of draped satin over my stocking-clad legs and the stretch of my calves in five-inch spike heels brought out my queen.

We're gonna slay them, honey, and Richard won't know what hit him.

I'd had a moment of shakes, even so, as I walked across the dark stage to my spot. Dax was there along the way, hand held out, and I grabbed his fingers for a moment.

I'm not alone. Got Dax, and a whole band at my back. That carried me to my darkened mic.

I didn't watch the video on the big screen behind me. I'd seen it all too many times as we decided what to include. The scene felt distant now, like it happened to someone else. I waited as the sound played out, as the crackle of flames signaled its end. Then around me, the band launched the intro to "Bad Karma." My bass part was recorded, and everyone hit the tempo perfectly. The spotlight came on in front of me, blinding and white.

Anastasia stepped forward, curved our fingers around the mic, and we sang.

This song wasn't my usual sultry, bluesy fit for my head voice. We'd had to transpose a bit— I didn't have Val's upper range— and we'd tweaked some of the words to put a little more revenge element into them, but the song poured out of me. I heard some roughness in my tone as I drove for emotion and volume that I might pay for later, but my pitch stayed true.

Lights dazzled me, heat made my face damp as the pyrotechnics punctuated the chorus. Val, Brody, and Tanisha stayed half-lit, driving the song forward, as Jamie and I stood in the bright glare, sharing the story of the man who couldn't beat well-deserved fate.

Jamie sang, “Got my hand around your throat,” and I returned, “I can stab you from my knees,” with a toss of my long red hair. Val, Tanisha, and Brody backed us up on, “Gonna regret that bad karma,” as we swung into the second chorus.

A verse where Jamie carried the song gave me a moment to glance over at Richard. He sat frozen in his puddle of light. I wondered what he was thinking, then decided I didn’t care. He didn’t matter. What mattered was the music, the performance, letting Anastasia have this triumph in front of all these people. Never again being held back by fear of someone finding out.

I screamed “—Can’t build a cage around me, can’t control my dreams with yours—” We went into the instrumental break and I headbanged, ass out, hands on my knees, swirling my hair as Anastasia never did. But here and now, this was right, this was rock ’n roll and it deserved celebrating with every fiber of my high-heeled, slit-gowned being.

Sweat poured down my face now. Thank God for waterproof makeup and black satin that wouldn’t change color. I swung my hips, vamping with the mic, angling my body to sing toward Richard now, all subtlety forgotten. *A drag queen has no need of subtle.* I brought the curve of the mic to my mouth, shaping my lips in a parody as Jamie sang, then answered him back. “Can’t undo it, wouldn’t change.”

Fuck no. Wouldn’t change a thing.

Brody’s sax wailed, Tanisha shook the stage with her bass drum, and we all screamed the last line. “Said that you’d regret bad karma!”

The flame mortars sent rolling clouds of brilliance and heat skyward, and the big screen echoed them. The crowd screamed. Stage lights dropped for a moment, other than spots on Val and Jamie, leaving the shimmer of aftereffects. I stuck my mic in the stand and ran for the wings.

“Quickly.” I yanked off my wig as the pounding applause went on and on, and tossed it aside, kicking off the heels. Naomi worked the zipper of my gown down my back while Ian held a pair of Jamie’s

around-the-house chinos ready. I stepped out of the gown and into the pants, hemmed but large. A cinch on the belt, and then I grabbed the T-shirt Naomi held out. Corset underneath and stockings over my bare feet because I couldn't spot my damned sneakers, but no one would care. Ian passed me a comb and I took a quick swipe at my hair. Ready.

After one deep breath, I jogged back out and lifted my bass out of its stand. The weight and feel were comfortable in my hands, the strap hugged my neck, and I plugged in. *Lane Bennett, bassist for Corvus Rising, ready to rock.*

Richard's chair was empty. He'd taken advantage of the darkened moment to run away. We'd talked about keeping him lighted, but Rocktoberfest's main stage wasn't the place for a nasty showdown, so we'd given him the chance to go. My heart lifted and I wanted to cheer and shout. *Let him run. He can't silence me now.*

Jamie said into his mic, "You've been a fantastic audience tonight, and we're gonna leave you with one of our favorites." At his signal, we launched right into "Solstice Dance." The audience roared out the first words and started leaping, headbanging, arms in the air.

We'd decided that the best end to our Richard-reveal was to remind the audience who we were and slide back into our niche. I think the whole band was feeling the loopy relief of having crossed the karma bridge, because we *killed* that song. I had a bass solo, to show that I wasn't going to stick to being a drag queen in Corvus, and the notes flew from my fingers. Sweat dripped off my nose, and I hammed it up as I played, swinging the guitar around. Timing, tone, speed, everything clicked in one of those magical moments high on a mountaintop of sound.

Then the others came back in and that was perfect too, that was awesome. I felt a manic grin spread across my face and didn't care. We played and sang and danced and *flew*.

When the last notes and gerb-sparks rang out, we got a bigger response than I ever remember. Sixty-fucking-thousand people, as Dax liked to say, stomping and shouting and clapping and throwing

horns into the air. I looked over to where Dax sat in the wings, and the grin on his face echoed mine. When the stomping picked up a rhythmic, insistent beat, Jamie leaned into his mic. “I guess you want one more. What should we sing?”

Shouts and screams named a dozen songs, a cacophony of sound.

Jamie raised his guitar and played the opening riff of “Feathered Edge” and the crowd roared back.

We launched into just plain fun. Tanisha tossed her drumsticks. Val and Jamie hammed it up, mouths almost touching in front of her mic. Brody sent the flute climbing piercingly high, ending with a wolf whistle. Dax upped the reverb and delay on a couple of lines, till the echoes sounded like music in a well. And I played some of the best bass of my life, synced with my band, bringing the concert home.

When the song ended, we were done. Like, flat out, stick a fork in me, done.

Jamie had us bowing before the applause was close to petering out. I got more sound from the crowd than I ever had before and chose not to wonder if any of it was angry. Dax stepped out from the wings for once to wave at Jamie’s command.

Finally, Jamie moved to his mic again. “Rocktoberfest, y’all are the greatest. Coming here each year is a trip we never want to end. This is the home of rock ’n roll— of play it loud, scream it out, *no one* tells us what to do, or say, or be. Thanks for taking that trip with us.” The audience screamed and applauded again. He added, “Now, stick around. In fifteen minutes, you’ll get to rock out with one of the great bands of our time, Social Sinners, followed by Maiden Voyage. The night’s not over yet. Rocktoberfest rocks! Rocktoberfest...” He held the mic out to the crowd and they screamed, “Rocks!!” back at him.

He grinned, waved, and signaled for the lights to drop.

I stumbled into the wings and handed my guitar and in-ears to Darius, my legs feeling like cooked spaghetti. You’d have thought I was wearing the damned heels. Speaking of... I peered around and spotted Naomi with my pumps dangling from one hand, my wig in the other, my dress draped over her arm. I wavered over to her. “Sweetie, I’m

gonna name my first child after you.” Oops, that was an Anastasia line, but Naomi smiled.

Dax came up beside me and wrapped his arm around my back. Despite both being sweaty and gross, that support was incredibly welcome. I leaned into him. “There you are. We did it.”

“Sure did.” He kissed my temple. Someone brushed past us, and I realized we were probably in the way of the stage change-out.

Dax must’ve realized too, because he guided me toward the back and then down the wooden stairs to the ground. I looked at the sky, wiping my hair off my face. A thump on my back staggered me and I glanced over my shoulder to find Jamie grinning.

“We aced it.” He spoke louder than normal, ears no doubt buzzing from the sound. “Come on back to the bus. I have all kinds of booze and munchies ready to break out. Ce-le-bration time.”

I couldn’t get my mouth to wrap around an answer.

I don’t know what Dax picked up on, but he said, “We’ll be back there soon. Gonna walk off the performance first.”

“Sure. See you there.” Jamie spotted Val and grabbed her, dipping her into a deep kiss. She giggled and clutched his arms but went with the moment. Brody wolf-whistled and we all laughed, pulled back into that incredible performance.

Naomi came over and told me, “I’ll bring your stuff back to the bus but you might want these.” She dropped my sneakers by my stocking-clad feet before heading out, my wig dangling from an upraised finger and my dress flapping in the breeze.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks,” I called after her. The grit of the dirt under my toes barely registered.

Roadies came and went, our techs and the event staff. Somewhere, the musicians from Social Sinners would be arriving, and I was still fanboy enough to wonder if I might catch sight of Joey or Stoli, but it was a passing thought. As much as I loved their music, this was *our* night, and I didn’t need anything else to make it complete.

“Here,” Dax said, releasing me. “Hold onto my arm and pick up your foot.”

I obeyed.

He dusted off my stocking-clad sole, then nudged my sneaker ready. “Put that on.”

Another time, I might’ve reacted to being babied, but tonight I was dazed enough to appreciate it. I put on that shoe, and let him clean my foot for the other one. “Thanks.” I kicked into the second sneaker.

He held out his hand. “Come on.”

Our fingers met, linked. I’d never in my life held hands with a guy in public. Richard would’ve turned blue at the very thought. But here, in the bustling backstage lit by arc-lamps overhead and full of folks who didn’t care what we did as long as it wasn’t under their feet, holding Dax’s hand felt so right.

He tugged and I followed him away from the stage toward the back of the fenced enclosure. Beyond the people and parked trucks and buses, the Nevada desert stretched out dark and mysterious. The lights of the festival played over sand and rocks and scrub brush, and faded into a velvet black. We came up to the chain link and stopped.

A dry breeze blew across our faces, chasing away the lingering scent of pyrotechnics. Overhead, a thousand stars gleamed, their numbers building toward the horizon where the festival lights couldn’t reach. Behind us, the hum of Rocktoberfest rolled on like a wall of sound, but ahead, all was still.

I squeezed Dax’s fingers, all the things I wanted to tell him tumbling around in my head.

Before anything could emerge, Richard said from behind us, “The transvestite and the whore. Might’ve known you were in it together.”

Dax pulled his grip free as we turned, shoving both hands deep into his pockets. I was angry he let Richard come between us, until I saw his fingers moving behind the denim and realized he probably had his phone in there. *If anyone can get a phone recording without looking at it, I bet it’s Dax.*

To draw Richard's attention, I said, "Of course you should've realized. We were on the same stage, showing off the same evidence against you."

"Evidence, hah." Richard's lip curled. "Role-play, boy. You always liked that, submitting to me, being given your orders. That's all it was, and you can't prove otherwise."

"Then why're you here?" Dax leaned his shoulders against the chain link and crossed one ankle over the other, the image of indifference. "If you can simply deny anything went down."

"You made me look bad." Richard took a step closer, but Dax didn't tense up or move an inch. "That stunt was damned close to libel. I should sue you for every penny."

"Including the ones you conned me out of in Card Crimson?"

"I *made* you. You were nothing, a little street whore with a shred of talent and I made you a star. And you spat on that."

"The only spitting was you on my asshole."

Richard made a sound in his throat. He turned to me. "If you're fucking that *thing*, you should know his ass has seen more traffic than the New Jersey Turnpike. For the price of a drink, anyone could fuck his face."

Dax laughed, cutting off my reply. "Richard, Richard. Really? You want to go there? Yeah, I sold my ass. And you know what? Those guys paid cash price. You paid for the use of my mouth and my body in instruments and travel costs and band promo and recording time. I set my price a lot higher for you, out of all my johns, and you paid it."

"I didn't pay you a *thing*." Richard took another step forward, glowering, and Dax set his other foot on the ground and straightened. "You think I paid? I made a mint off you and the other three losers in Card Crimson."

"And yet we finished our first tour and album in debt." Dax shook his head. "Funny how that worked out. Maybe a lawyer should have a look back at those books and the contracts."

“They’d find nothing. That’s how the music biz works. Ask any band. You don’t stick around long-term? You don’t get paid shit.”

“Oh, I know how the labels screw over every act. But that doesn’t usually include a casting couch and actually screwing the whole band.” Dax’s matter-of-fact tone and raised eyebrow managed to make him seem simply curious. “Did you ever nail King? I knew you were fucking me, Jack, and Joker, but I figured maybe you just supplied King with all the coke he wanted and that did the same job.”

“That’s *enough!*” Richard got in Dax’s face, slamming his hand against the chain link by Dax’s head. “I *will* see you in court for slander.”

Dax didn’t flinch, just laughed again. “I worked on the recording side for three years before Card Crimson. Think back, waaaay back, and try to remember what you said. Because I have it all recorded for posterity, every word, every grunt and boast and incautious confession, every threat and stupid pretend-Dom move you made. All on a thumb drive or two or three.”

“Bullshit.” But Richard looked worried.

“He’s telling the truth,” I said. “I heard one part of it. The bit where you said you had underage porn on your computer.”

“I never—” Richard backed up a step. “Recording without consent’s illegal.”

“Only in some states. Only one person has to consent to being recorded in New York. Not everything was from L.A., and I consented the hell out of all of those. Oh, and?” Dax pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Nevada’s also one-person consent. Say hello for the camera.”

Richard lunged for his hand, but Dax danced nimbly backward. “Ah, ah, ah. That’s assault.”

“And I’m a witness anyhow,” I put in. “Destroying it won’t help you.”

“Who’d believe the likes of you two?”

“Over a pedophile?” I asked. “I’m betting most people.”

“I am *not*—”

“Watching underage porn, baby,” Dax said. “And I know, ’cause I was underage when I was forced into it.”

“‘Forced’? Bullshit.”

“Poor little me, a homeless teen, used by adult perverts like you.”

“You gloated about the porn.”

“Can you prove that?”

Richard stood still, breathing heavily, glancing back and forth between us. An odd thread of compassion tried to rise in me, a remnant from the time when I truly cared about Richard and wanted to please him. *He brought this on himself.* I dug my fingernails into my palms.

Dax’s tone went cool and sharp. “Listen up, Dickie. I have no plans to go public with anything more, unless you push us. Our secrets are in the open now. Nothing left to blackmail with.”

“It wasn’t blackmail.”

I suggested, “Extortion? That’s illegal too.”

Richard turned on me. “You wanted it. You were gagging for it, scared virgin, looking for a Daddy to tell you what to do and what your ass was good for. *‘Oooh, Richard, you’re so big and strong, teach me to suck your cock.’*”

I blinked, surprised how much that stung. Yeah, I knew right from the start that what happened between Richard and me meant a lot more to me than to him. But that cold evaluation destroyed any hope he’d cared, once upon a time.

Dax growled, “Motherfucker. Are you trying to make me blow your shit to hell and gone? Because I can.”

Richard didn’t answer, didn’t leave, just stood there, hard-to-interpret expressions chasing each other across his face in the dim light.

“Look,” Dax said after a minute of silence. “We have a plan. You fuck off and leave us alone, and I mean *alone*. No coming after Lane,

nothing in the press, no drag queen insults.”

“Nothing about Dax’s teen years,” I added, because he might not be ashamed, but I bet he didn’t want that out on social media either.

“Right.” Dax gave me a nod. “Keep your face shut, and I won’t leak any more fun little recordings.”

“What about tonight?” Richard scowled. “You can’t undo that. Sixty thousand people saw it, even if I can get some kind of court order against the video.”

“You want to parade through a court for that? Admit that was you behind the obscuring mask? A whole lot more details might leak out.”

“That.” Richard pointed at Dax. “That’s as much blackmail as anything I did.”

“The difference?” Dax raised his phone. “Evidence. Witnesses.” He held out his other hand and I took it, staring back at Richard.

“You’re done with Streetcorner.” Richard jerked his chin up. “You and your brother and the whole band. You’ll be blackballed across the industry. You’ll never work again.”

“I don’t think so,” I told him, floating on a growing high. *I don’t have to listen to Richard. I don’t have to care what he says or does.* “Jamie and Val and Corvus Rising are money in the bank. If you can have a guy who punches people still filling stadiums, I bet there’s a label happy to have a bassist who does drag as a band’s biggest flaw.”

“They’ll blackball a band who breaks their contract.”

“Cool thing?” I said. “Our contract with Streetcorner ended with this performance. Buh bye.” I waved. *I’m a little punchy.* I hadn’t slept much the last few nights.

Dax said, “You definitely don’t want to bring this fight public. We don’t particularly either. Your best bet is to walk away. Corvus finds another label. You explain that to your dad however you want to. We don’t cross paths again.”

Richard paced a couple of steps left and then right. Dax watched him. Dax’s expression was cool, but the dampness where his palm

clasped mine wasn't just heat on this mellow October night.

Finally, Richard stopped and glared at us. "I want the recordings. All of them. Then we'll have a deal."

"Not a chance," Dax said. "Insurance. You keep your head down and leave us alone, and they stay safely hidden."

I could almost hear Richard gritting his teeth as the muscles in his jaw twitched. "If someone asks you about the video tonight, you tell them it was a lie, a performance."

"We'll tell them any resemblance to real people, living or dead, is purely coincidental."

Richard paced again. This time, at the farthest point, he turned and stopped. If eyes could set someone on fire, Dax and I would've been toast. Richard growled to Dax, "I should've left you in the gutter. You weren't even a good fuck." Whirling on his heel, he strode off between two big trucks and was gone.

Dax stayed frozen for a dozen heartbeats, watching the spot Richard disappeared, before he blew out a harsh breath and tapped his phone. Then he grinned crookedly at me. "Best part? Being a crappy virgin fuck was the whole point. If he'd just been willing to pay fifty bucks, he could've had the pro version."

Then before I could respond, Dax pulled me into a tight hug. I was surprised to feel him shaking against me. He'd been so cool, so ingenious and organized through this whole thing, I'd thought he wasn't worried. The tremors that ran through him said otherwise. I wrapped my arms around his back and squeezed hard, laying my cheek on his shoulder, rocking us together.

We were still like that when his phone rang with Jamie's tone. We separated so he could answer. After his first, "Yeah, what?" he switched it to speaker.

Jamie said, "I don't want to interrupt, but our agent's lawyer called. She wants to give us shit about intentional torts or something, and whether that video could be called inflicting emotional distress."

"Fuck," Dax said. "Sorry."

“I’m not worried.” Jamie chuckled. “It was so worth it. Did you see the bastard’s face? I can’t imagine he wants to sue and give us a chance to play the full recording in a court.”

“Guess not.”

I leaned close to the phone. “He just pretty much promised us he wouldn’t.”

Jamie said, “You saw him after the show?”

“Yes, a few minutes ago,” Dax told him. “He was pissed, but I think we reached an agreement. No publicity, no lawsuits, he takes his claws out of Lane, we find a new label.”

“Well, you might have to come on back and tell our lawyer that. I could practically hear the steam coming out of her ears. And after that, we can break out more good bubbly.”

“We’ll be there soon.” Dax hung up and pocketed the phone, turning to me. “That okay with you? You could wander around, catch your breath, while I talk to the lawyer. That whole thing was my doing, my idea—”

“No way.” I nudged him. “We’re in this together. Anyhow, I won’t mind getting out of this tuck and corset.”

“Oh. Sure.” Dax ran a hand from my shoulders along my spine to the exaggerated curve of my ass. “I might help you with that.”

I shivered. Dax was right there, close enough to touch, to kiss, and no threats loomed over our shoulders. My dick tried to perk up in its tight confines. Except. “We’re all sleeping in the bus. Dammit.”

Dax brushed my earlobe with his lips. “If the champagne’s flowing, everyone will sleep hard once they crash. The bathroom’s small, but not impossible, and I can go very slowly and very silently. Can you?”

Heat flashed through me, and the tuck became acutely uncomfortable. “Order me to be silent,” I said recklessly, feeling light as a feather. A turned on and strapped down and sleep-deprived feather, but still light. “Gag me with your cock. Tell me what to do. I’ll do anything for you.”

Dax kissed me like he wanted to inhale my soul. When we separated, he said, “For us. Do everything for us.”

That right there was why I’d ask Dax to Dom me if he wanted to, because I’d know in the depths of my soul it wasn’t just for his sake. “Us.’ I like the sound of that.” I shifted uncomfortably. “I also like the sound of setting my dick free. Arrgh. Fuck!”

Dax laughed and grabbed my hand again. “Poor baby. Come on, let’s go home and release the kraken.”

Chapter 19

Dax

The round of applause that greeted us back at the bus was loud and already rather tipsy. Lane flushed and I gave a two-finger salute, although the gesture felt false. The walk back to the bus had seeped away some of my self-satisfaction. I'd tried not to let that show, but Lane had done the hard part, getting the sound bites we'd used against Richard, while I'd sat on what I knew for a decade.

Jamie shoved a tumbler full of fizz my way, and I took a gulp, letting the bubbles prickle my sinuses. His slap on my back made me choke. "I don't care what the lawyer says," he rumbled. "That was damned satisfying."

Val toasted with her glass Lane's way, lounging barefoot on the couch. "Bringing down the predators, one asshole at a time."

"I didn't actually use my asshole this time." Lane grinned and accepted his own champagne from Tanisha. Then he glanced at Naomi. "Oops, sorry."

"I *have* heard the word before," she retorted, then looked down at her mother's admonishing gesture.

"And Richard's not all that down," I pointed out. "I mean, he promised not to go after Lane, but he's still prowling the world."

"Can't you get him arrested or something?" Naomi sipped at the inch of champagne in her glass and wrinkled her nose.

"No DA would take that case." We'd talked about that, choosing our path forward, but Naomi hadn't been in on those conversations. "He's a powerful figure who can pay great lawyers, none of his boys were

underage, he didn't use physical violence, and he could easily claim it was all role-play. Lane had been dating him voluntarily for months." *And going to his knees for the bastard.* I vowed again to show Lane that if he still wanted to sub, it was the sub who held the true power in a healthy relationship.

Lane said, "Is tonight's video trending online yet?"

Brody waved his phone. "Yep. Got some fan videos. Putting him at the mic before the show to reveal his voice was pure brilliance, if I say so myself. They're putting one smarmy bastard and one blackmailing asshole together, despite our 'good faith effort to hide his identity.'" He licked his finger and marked a point in the air, eyes sparkling.

"You're a genius, of course." Tanisha reached over and ruffled his hair.

"We want his name to go viral," Lane told Naomi. "So if some new kid gets an offer from him or a call to audition, and they Google him, our video tonight pops up in the hits."

I said, "We can't keep other guys from falling for his bullshit, but we've done our best to make sure they're forewarned." I hoped like hell that would be enough. *If Lane had seen that video first, would he have walked away from Richard's sneak-friendly approach?* He said he would've. That'd have to do for me.

"He's Streetcorner's problem now," Jamie said. "Our contract's up, and FlyingNotes already pinged me to confirm our meeting for tomorrow."

"To talk about signing us, or to hold their noses and walk away?" I asked.

"Let me read it to you." Jamie pulled out his phone and stabbed at the screen. "No. Not that. Wait. Here. 'Congratulations on a spectacular performance. Please confirm 11 a.m. tomorrow at our hotel suite in Fenley.' And then the address and suite number, yada, yada."

"'Spectacular' doesn't sound like 'Sorry, you're too messy for us,'" Val suggested.

No, it doesn't. A little of my worry eased. I'd asked Jamie to take a

risk with his band and his livelihood for me and Lane, and if anything marked how far my priorities had shifted, it was that. And Jamie had come through anyway. “Thanks, bro,” I told him, meaning it. “For everything.”

Jamie waved a lazy hand, sticking his phone back into his pocket. “We all agreed. And that was one hell of a great show. Gonna remember that one a long time.” He dropped onto the couch beside Val, lifting her feet to his lap, and squinted up at me. “You sure our band doesn’t need two bassists? You rocked, dude.”

“Positive. What you need is my magic on the mixing desk.”

“Did you enjoy performing?” Tanisha asked.

“Yeah, sure.” I took another sip, trying to grasp my thoughts. “Especially in front of Richard one more time, to show him he didn’t silence me forever, didn’t choke off my voice when he thought he had his boot on my throat. Long-term?” I shook my head. “It’s not just that I’m rusty. I never had the talent Lane does, or Matt either. I’m decent. I can hold a place in the middle of the pack. Maybe if I put in the work, in the top quarter.”

“You did better than top quarter tonight,” Lane protested.

“How would you know? I bet you barely heard me play while you were squeezing into that dress and heels.”

“Which looked superb, by the way,” Val said, to my relief taking the attention away from me playing bass. “Ms. Fox stepped a whole level up from practice. Girl, you *shone* on that stage.”

“Hell, yeah.” Brody tipped his glass Lane’s way. “Let me know your next drag show. I’ll be there to cheer you on.”

“We all will,” Jamie agreed.

Lane flushed and looked down. “Thanks. You don’t have to.”

“Just tell me we won’t lose you to the club scene,” Tanisha said. “I need you holding up that bass line.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier if I left, though?” Lane asked. “You could find someone else.”

Before I could correct that stupid idea, Val waved vigorously at him. “No! Fuck! Oops.” She glanced at Naomi, then Tanisha. “Do we have a swear jar?”

“I’m sixteen, not six,” Naomi told her.

“Might still think about setting one up,” Brody drawled. “A few days around us could pay your college tuition.”

Tanisha laughed. “Seriously, Lane, not a lot of people can do two very different kinds of music that well. Just remember we need you.”

“Hear, hear,” Jamie agreed.

“I want to stay.”

“Then it’s settled.” Jamie waved his phone. “New label, new look, onward and upward, Corvus the fuck *Rising*.”

We all toasted that idea.

Lane set his glass aside. “Speaking of a new look, I’m gonna go to the john and take off this corset.”

“I’ll help you,” I said instantly.

Brody laughed, but no one else made any wisecracks.

“Use Val’s and my suite if you like,” Jamie offered.

Lane met my eyes and his face colored. I wondered if he was remembering when Richard fucked him back on Jamie’s bed as a power play. *Time to exorcise that bastard out of another part of our lives.*

“Good idea,” I said. “Thanks for the space, Jamie.”

Lane hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah, thanks.” He went to his bunk, pulling out the drawer under it to get at his toiletries bag and clean clothes. He flashed a look over his shoulder as he picked out some things, then headed to Jamie’s private compartment at the back of the bus.

I followed him in, slid the door shut, and took him in my arms in the narrow space beside the bed. “Here we are, with full permission to fool around. To hell with Dick-face. This is you and me, babe.”

Lane shimmied his hips and hummed the Cher tune but didn't relax against me. "Do you think people are upset about the drag part of my performance? What do you think they're saying?"

"If they have any sense at all, they're saying the same as Val and Brody. 'Damn, that's hot.' Although I'm sure some of them are saying, 'Val sings those lyrics better,' because you know she's got megafans."

He shook his head. "Richard could be right that Corvus fans won't like it."

"Richard is never right."

Lane chuckled halfheartedly, then closed his eyes. "I wish I'd realized that sooner."

"Stop." I kissed his temple. "Quit beating yourself up for falling for a smooth predator. He's been exploded on the big screen, gone and dusted. We're free, and I'm sure this room has been thoroughly fumigated of his presence when they did the repairs. Are we really going to waste precious alone-time on that turd?"

"No?"

"Say it like you mean it." I kissed his mouth this time, hard and wet. "Gonna help you forget he ever existed."

He kissed me back but pulled away immediately. "I *have* to get this tuck off."

"Oh, of course, poor baby." I made sure that didn't sound sappy by giving him an evil grin and running my hand down his side.

He shivered. "You said you were going to *help* me, not torture me."

"Isn't this helping?" I felt the rigid shape of the corset beneath his T-shirt and slid my fingers under to stroke the silky material.

"Bastard."

Chuckling, I stopped teasing and tugged his T-shirt off over his head so I could get at his corset. "Damn." I unzipped the tight satin and eased it off him. "You're gonna fuck me with this on sometime."

"Anytime. Except tonight because my body needs freedom. Ouch."

He pulled off his briefs, reached behind his ass, freeing something, and the shape of his dick appeared. Turning his back to me, he worked around with the occasional hiss, then pulled a wad of clear tape free and shimmied his hips. “Oh my God, that’s better. Look, you sadist, I’m half hard already.” Turning, he showed me his hand stroking his smooth cock which, yeah, looked eager, the head glistening as it squeezed through his fist. I thought about dropping to my knees and making that pretty cock stand tall, but his cast-down eyes and the slow tongue swipe across his lip gave me other ideas. A drop of sweat rolled from his hair despite the air conditioning of the bus, and I wiped it away with one finger.

“Have a shower,” I told him. “Fast, though. Three minutes. And then... want to show me how silent you can be on your knees?”

He raised his eyes to mine and nodded, then squeezed past me into the tiny en-suite.

That miniscule shower had no hope of holding two, so I did a quick cleanup of my sweaty groin and pits at the sink while he stood in the spray. He finished in under three minutes and pulled the curtain aside, grabbing the towel I handed him.

“Eager?” I murmured. The noise from the front of the bus had risen, with someone— Val, from the touch— playing guitar to raucous fandom filk songs, the current one a *Lord of the Rings* tribute with four hungry hobbits, the improvised lyrics staying PG-13. So far.

Still, despite the musical cover noise, I was very aware that my brother and an impressionable teenager were on the other side of two flimsy doors. Keeping my voice low, I told him, “Knees on the folded towel. Hands behind your back.”

Lane did as I asked, his head high and back straight, looking up at me with dilated pupils.

“I want to fuck your mouth. Green light?” I asked.

“Very green.”

“No noise, no jerking yourself off till I tell you. If you need me to pull back, tap my thigh three times.” I demonstrated. “Show me you can be

silent and get me off with an audience twenty feet away.”

Lane’s gaze flashed toward the door and he flushed, but nodded.

I’d left my jeans unzipped and I pushed them open enough to expose the cotton of my briefs, tented by my straining erection, damp around the tip. *Yeah, you do that to me every time.* Reaching inside, I freed my cock, shoving the elastic low to ride under my balls. “Open up.”

His curved pink lips, still tinted with a hint of crimson lipstick, parted for me. I guided the fat head of my cock to his open mouth. Lane sucked eagerly as I pushed inside, his cheeks hollowed and his tongue doing excellent things to the sensitive underside of my dick.

“Mm.” I kept my voice barely above the distant singing and laughter. “So good. Going deeper.”

Lane nodded, tugging on me with his mouth.

I cupped his head in my hands. His wet hair slid under my fingers, catching in my calluses. Holding the back of his skull, I began fucking his sweet face. Each stroke went deeper, and he still sucked me enthusiastically. He gave no sign of resistance or distress as I slipped into the top of his throat, held for a second, then eased back.

Lane pulled in a quick breath through his nose, but used his lips and tongue as if he loved his mouth stuffed with my cock.

Good boy, sweet boy. I wouldn’t use the word while Richard had tainted it, but one day, perhaps Lane would reclaim it. *Sweet, sexy man.* “Again?” I gave him a chance to tap out, but he kept those shining eyes on mine.

Thrusting deep, I held and then retreated. Again. Again. Spit ran down Lane’s chin but his expression looked exalted despite a sparkling of moisture in his eyes. He held his pose, kneeling so perfectly, his fast breaths making his damp chest heave.

Fuck, I’m close. I’d done this professionally. I could fuck a guy for an hour, if needed. Lane had me close to busting a nut in minutes, just with the look in his pretty eyes and the heat of his gorgeous mouth. *And the trust he gives me.*

I shivered and fucked faster, not as deep now but unrelentingly, taking everything Lane was offering me. He grunted a couple of times, marking the rhythm, and I froze, my cockhead barely between his lips. He flashed a questioning look up and I murmured, "Silence."

Lane gave me a fraction of a nod, and I eased forward, pushing in over his tongue till I could feel the constriction of his throat around me. Then he hummed, vibrating against my dick and fuck, goddamn, that hurtled me over the brink. I clutched his head between my palms and spurted jets of spunk down Lane's waiting throat, my teeth clenched to silence a groan of pleasure. Lane swallowed and the ripples made me come harder, shaking.

He needs to breathe. I pulled out just as Lane brought a hand around to my thigh to tap out. Instead, he scraped his fingernails down my leg and even through the jeans, that touch made me spill one last helpless drip. Lane put out his tongue and licked it off my cockhead, meeting my gaze wickedly, letting his tongue linger.

I dropped to my knees, hauled him into a kiss that mashed his mouth to mine, and wrapped one hand around his cock. The taste of my spunk on his lips made me wild. Using his precum to slick the way, I pumped him fast and hard while kissing helpless little sounds out of his mouth.

Lane shivered and bucked, thrusting into my fist. I nipped his lip and pulled off to murmur, "Quiet. Gonna make you come."

His nostrils flared, his neck straining as he sucked air, and he nodded.

Kissing him again forcefully, a hand behind his skull to cushion him from the wall, I set about teaching his pretty cock what *need* really meant, stroking and squeezing, swiping my thumb across the head and probing his slit with a rough touch. Lane groaned into my mouth, arched his back, and came all over my fingers in pulse after pulse. I used that jizz to lube up my last strokes, fast and hard, root to tip, until he shook and shivered and eased back on his heels.

Eyeing him, I raised my hand and licked the flavor of him off my fingers, one by one. Lane squeezed his eyes and mouth shut so only a

faint whimper emerged as his cock jumped and spilled a few more drops.

When he opened his eyes, he fixed his gaze on mine. I wasn't sure what he needed, but Richard had never been big on snuggling or aftercare once he got his rocks off. "You were perfect," I whispered, to be answered by a light in Lane's eyes. "Perfect. So sexy, so good letting me fuck your throat."

"I liked it." Lane's murmur sounded hoarse. I tugged my underwear up, then took Jamie's cup from the side of the sink, rinsed it and filled it with water, and passed it to Lane. You'd have thought that cup was the Holy Grail, the way Lane looked as I handed him a simple drink when he needed one.

He drained the cup, never taking his gaze from mine.

Oh, sweetheart, you do need someone to spoil you. I took the empty cup from him, set it back on the sink, and sat cross-legged on the tiny floor space, pulling Lane into my lap. He sighed deeply and clung to me, dropping his head to my shoulder. My dick complained about my briefs still being twisted, but I wouldn't move Lane unless my balls were about to fall off. Wrapping my arms around him, I rocked us together and kissed what bits of wet hair and smooth skin I could reach.

After a few minutes, he said, "We need to go back out or they'll figure out what we were up to."

"I'm sure they know exactly what we were up to. Maybe not Naomi." Although I'd bet no daughter of Tanisha's would be ignorant about sex. "But we shouldn't rub their noses in it."

Lane stood first and held a hand down to meet mine.

I let him pull me to my feet and yanked his naked body against me for one last kiss. "I'm going to wash my hands and go out. Give you space to get dressed."

"Okay."

I set a palm on Lane's cheek, thumbing a flake away from his mouth. "You are..." *The best thing that ever happened to me, including Jamie*

and the band. I couldn't say that, not yet. "...a very special man, Lane, enough and more than enough for anyone, just you, without the guitar or the gown and heels. And I'm so glad Richard was too much of a fool to realize what he had when he had you."

"Me, too." Lane turned his head and kissed my thumb.

I tucked my dick away, washed my hands, very aware of his skin inches from mine, and slipped out of the tiny bathroom. Crossing the private bedroom took three strides, then I eased through the sliding door, closing it behind me.

The group at the front of the bus looked up but didn't stop their argument about which fandom was the best. I called, "*Star Trek*," as I made my way up the aisle to join them.

"Did you like *Strange New Worlds*?" Brody asked. "I haven't watched it yet."

I dropped into one of the open chairs. "More old school than that. *DS9*."

"Wasn't that, like, before you were born?"

"Nope. Lane's the fetus of this bunch." *Not that Brody's far wrong. I mostly watched it in reruns on one of the few local channels our piece-of-shit TV could pick up.*

"Wait." Brody blinked at me. "Wait." He blinked some more. I figured at least one joint had given the booze a head start on fuzzing his brain, even if the pot wasn't out for Val's sake. "Wasn't there a Dax on *Star Trek*?"

One entity, many lives. "Was there? I don't remember." I picked up the nearest champagne bottle and poured more into his glass. "Anyway, *Game of Thrones* was fucking depressing and they call that an ending?"

"At least they could all act, unlike the wooden puppets on *Star Trek*, and the stories were complex." And Brody was off defending his favorite, while Val pushed Sam and Dean Winchester and Naomi championed some show I'd never heard of.

I sat back and sipped my own champagne, listening to them argue good-naturedly. At some point, Jamie decided *Doctor Who* needed more fandom filk songs and he had to write one forthwith. He and Brody got into an argument about rhymes and near-rhymes for scarf, with Brody insisting that barf was the only logical choice. Lane came into the lounge from the back, clean and dressed in his own T-shirt and jeans, and squeezed in beside me. I put my arm around him and found myself laughing for pure pleasure of being with these people—simply laughing, in a way I couldn't remember ever doing.

"You sound happy," Lane murmured.

"I am." I was shocked to hear myself admit it, but it was only the truth. Loner Dax, who never needed anyone, sat in a group of people I couldn't imagine my life without.

Despite needing to get going in the morning, we stayed up late, opening the bus door to take in the distant sounds of Social Sinners and Maiden Voyage, and the screams of applause from the huge crowd. Sometime later, we heard a hubbub, and the wail of multiple sirens outside. Lane, who'd migrated into my lap when the second bottle of tequila came out, stiffened. "I wonder what's wrong."

Jamie sighed. "Sixty thousand people in one venue? Good bet someone's had a heart attack or passed out or ODed or got in a fight. If it was a fire, they'd be sounding the alarm."

"I hope they're okay." Lane stared out past Naomi at the dark night.

I'm just glad it's not you. Or Jamie. The old Dax might've said something flippant, something cold, to remind everyone how little I cared. The new me, turned into a ball of total mush by the man in my arms, said, "Yeah, hope everyone's okay."

Chapter 20

Lane

Oleg hefted the last of my bags down the hall to Dax's apartment and glanced around. "That's the lot, right?"

Jamie said, "Better be. They don't pay me to be a pack mule."

"You made half a million dollars last year." Dax punched Jamie's arm. "Least you can do is a little honest work."

Jamie grinned. "I noticed you only carried the guitar."

"It's Lane's prized possession."

Turning to me, Jamie said, "Hey, is Princess here? Can I get a puppy snuggle?"

I was eager for puppy snuggles too, but safety first. "She's with Mrs. Lopez. We'll go get her once we're done opening and closing the door."

Val tugged at Jamie's arm. "Puppies another time. There's folks starting to crowd around the bus. We should head out."

"Fuck." Jamie told me, "Bring her to rehearsal sometime. And you, Dax, I need two more songs for the new label. This album has to blow the last one out of the water."

Dax wrapped his arm around me, tugging me against him. "Get out of here and let me start having some inspiration."

"Is that what they call it now?" Jamie stuck out a hand to me, then pulled Dax into a quick hug. "Rest up, guys. Don't fuck all your brains out. See you tomorrow."

The small apartment felt a bit larger without the dynamic presence

of Jamie and Val. Dax pushed the door shut behind them and grinned. "Alone at last."

"So we can go get Princess."

He pretended to huff. "Scorned for a dog."

"It's been a week since I saw her. I blew you in the bathroom last night."

Dax laughed. "Okay, let's go get the baby." I did notice he was the one leading the way, reaching Mrs. Lopez's door two long strides ahead of me.

She opened cautiously at our knock, peering out through the crack, then swung the door wide. A little arrow of white fur zipped across her apartment and leaped at my knees, barking and pawing on my bare knees. When I bent to scoop her up, she dodged and gave Dax the same treatment, whirling in circles at his feet. He snagged her and lifted her in his arms, grinning as she tried to lick his face. I couldn't resist digging out my phone to take a picture.

"She was a good girl," Mrs. Lopez said. "Ate well, not too much barking, sleeping in her little bed just fine. Only destroyed one slipper."

"We owe you, bigtime," Dax told her. "Figure out what it'll cost to replace the slippers and we'll cover it."

"I needed new slippers anyway." She shrugged. "Yesterday, I bought seven yards of exactly the pink silk Anita wants, and it wasn't even on sale. Do you still want me to watch Princess every day for you? The cash is useful."

"If it's not too much trouble."

"No, she's easy. Sleeps a lot. I can put her in the bathroom when I have to go out, and she's fine."

"Then yes." Dax glanced at me, something unreadable in his expression. "Tomorrow, anyhow, around nine? We'll talk about it more after that."

"Nine is good. Now take her away. And brush her teeth."

Dax carried the squirming Princess back to his apartment, murmuring, “Brush your teeth. I wish. You smell like you ate a dead rat, yes, you do, baby.” I noticed he wasn’t dodging her tongue too vigorously.

“When did the vet schedule her teeth cleaning again?” I asked as we entered the apartment and closed the door.

“Three weeks.” Dax set Princess down. “And not a moment too soon for Medusa-breath. Strikes you dead at first contact.”

“Aww.” I picked the dog up. “Is Daddy being mean to you?”

I only realized what I’d said when Dax repeated, “Daddy? I’m not that dog’s father.”

I froze, which gave Princess the opening to lick me right across the mouth. “Oh, gag.” I lowered her to the floor and wiped my lips. “The dog breath, I mean, not you.”

Dax raised a skeptical eyebrow, although I had the impression he was hiding a smile, and said, “You’re Daddy. I’m just Uncle Dax.”

“You’re not *just* anything.”

“But you’ll be going back to your nice big apartment soon. I’ll get to visit now and then.” The humor faded from his eyes.

No! I hadn’t realized how much I didn’t want to give up this closeness with Dax until he said the words. Sure, living here had been meant to be temporary, but it had turned into everything I wanted. Waking up next to Dax in bed, sharing breakfast, complaining about the heat, laughing at Princess’s antics, tossing song ideas around as we sat in ridiculous L.A. traffic on the way to Jamie’s or the studio. *Going back to bed with Dax in the evenings and coming together, in every sense. Waking in the night to find his arm slung over my shoulders, his thigh pinning mine.*

I said, fumbling stupidly, “Princess would miss Mrs. Lopez. I’d be worried about her at doggie daycare, with how little she is.”

“She’d figure it out. Your place has much more room for her to run around in.”

“She’s five pounds. She doesn’t need much space.” I shook my head. “Anyhow, it’s really not about her. It’s about me. I like... this apartment.” *Coward.*

“Did we not exorcise Richard from your place enough?” Dax touched my arm. “You can stay here a bit longer if you need to.”

“It’s not about Richard, either.” I took my courage in both hands and said, “It’s about you and me.”

Dax watched me fumble my words, not offering any help.

I licked my lips. “Even with Richard threatening me, and worrying about the performance, I’ve never been happier in my life than the few days I spent staying here with you.”

Dax tilted his head and leaned back against the kitchen counter.

Fuck all the dodging. “Except maybe last night, sitting in your lap on the bathroom floor, with our heartbeats coming down together. Or perhaps after that, drinking and laughing around that little lounge table, writing stupid songs with Jamie and sharing the one glass you gave me of tequila.”

“For which you should be grateful. Brody’s hangover this morning was epic.”

“I am grateful.” Brody had been squinting painfully when we signed the new contract. “I was grateful then, too. You take care of me in all the best ways. You’re bossy, but you don’t just expect me to blindly obey you. You’re hot and great in bed, and you always make sure I’m enjoying what we’re doing.”

“That’s a minimum standard for a decent boyfriend, Lane. You should never settle for less.”

“You’re not just a decent boyfriend. And I don’t ever want to settle for anyone else.” I took a deep breath.

“Say what you mean.” I’d have winced at Dax’s flat tone, except I noticed he looked pale, and he gripped the edge of the counter on either side of him until his knuckles turned white. *Does he feel the same? Why can’t he say so?*

For once, Dax wasn't making life easy for me, but maybe it was time for me to make it easy for him.

"I love you." Three little words that almost choked me, until I saw Dax's eyes light up and his grip relax. I took a shaky breath. "That's what I mean. I've been falling for a quite a while. Maybe since the morning at the pool. Maybe since you helped me smuggle Princess into the hotel. Maybe when you said you saw a gorgeous queen and meant me. I'm not sure. All I know is, sometime in the last few weeks I landed. Splat. Totally in love."

"Splat'?" Dax quirked an eyebrow. "And you're a songwriter." The lightness of his tone made my heart rise.

"Totally in love. Helplessly. Hopelessly—"

"No." Dax came over and cupped my face in his hands. "Not hopeless. Never that." A soft look warmed his eyes. "I've been falling too. Against my will, against all my resistance to let anyone be important to me, you worked your way in. If you were going splat, I was desperately stitching the featherbed for you to land on."

"You love me." I let a little tease color my words.

"Well..."

"Dax, the untouchable iceman, loves me."

"Could be a momentary delusion. A fever of some kind."

"Is it?"

"No." He brushed his lips against mine. "Too powerful, too real."

I went up on tiptoe to kiss him properly and he slid his hands down to my ass, pulling me against him and finding my mouth with his. When we broke apart, I grinned. "You love me."

"Brat. Yeah, I do." Princess whined at Dax's feet and he laughed. "You and your murder-breath mutt."

"At least I came first in that declaration." I scooped up Princess and passed her to Dax. "Here. Comfort the baby. What happens next?"

"I don't know." He rocked her in his arms. "I want you to stay. I like

having you here where I can... everything. But this place is small and cheap compared to yours. You earn more than me, and if the band continues to take off, that gap will grow. Except, I don't know if I can live bigger than this. I save every penny. Maybe more than is healthy."

My heart hurt for him, knowing how much desperation had shaped that habit. Maybe time and security would change it. But if not... "I like this place too. Remember, I grew up working class with no more luxury than this. I love having Mrs. Lopez around for Princess. I don't need more space." I smiled. "I want to be here where you can... everything with me."

"There's no doorman, limited security. Mrs. Lopez may not care that you're a rock star, but some of the other neighbors might. Things could get uncomfortable for you."

I wanted to say he was wrong, but I'd never win over Dax with lies. "If that happens, maybe we reevaluate. Hell, maybe we get Jamie to buy the building and install a doorman." That got me a snort, at least. "Maybe by then, the Princess and I will be your safe zone, and we can find a compromise."

"Maybe." Dax rubbed his face in Princess's fur and said against her small body, "You've already changed me more than I expected."

"Should I be sorry?"

"No. Absolutely not. Just don't expect it to continue. I'm a bossy fucker." He raised his eyes to mine. "That won't change. I don't need a formal Dom-sub relationship but I like being in charge."

"I think I figured that out when you offered me a safeword." I set a hand over his on Princess's fur. "I'm a subby fucker. I like when you're in charge."

"Ah, hell." Dax slung an arm around me and pulled me close with Princess between us. She took the opportunity to lick both our necks and I giggled. Dax kissed my temple. "I had no idea when Jamie and the rest of us picked the pretty skinny guy with the great bass licks that we were changing my life."

"I knew you were changing mine, but never expected this." I

snuggled up against him. “So we’re boyfriends now, right?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’d like a better word, but that’ll do.”

“And I’m living here and not taking my stuff back to my stupid apartment.”

His arm tightened around me. “Absolutely no leaving.”

“I’m still doing drag.”

“Hell, yeah. Can I come watch?”

“Sure.” I rubbed my temple against his neck. Knowing Dax was out there watching when I sang my songs to the darkened room at The D-Spot would be even better. “You can help me untuck afterward.”

“It’ll be an honor to assist the illustrious Ms. Anastasia Fox.”

“Okay.” I nodded firmly. “That’s all I need.”

Dax pushed back and looked at me. “My conditions. If you’re staying here, you’ll let me take care of you.”

“Within reason,” I hedged, but knowing that was his first consideration warmed me.

“If I push too hard, in bed or out, you safeword.”

“Green.” I nodded.

“I don’t have to meet anyone’s parents.”

My heart ached. “Not till you want to.”

“If you decide to record your Ms. Fox songs, you let me mix them.”

That hadn’t even occurred to me, but a sudden excitement rose. *I could do that now*. New paths opened for my future. “No one else I’d want.”

He glanced around, as if searching for other roadblocks to throw my way. “You’ll clean up after your dog.”

“We’ll clean up after *our* dog. The one you’re holding like a baby.”

Dax’s laugh rang out, happy and free. “It’s a deal. Oh, and one more thing.” His smile faded, and he drew a slow breath, shoulders tensing

again.

Despite everything, a hint of worry chilled me. *What could be making him so serious, now?*

He set Princess on the floor, licked his lips, raised his eyes to meet mine, and mumbled something.

“What?”

“I love you, okay? You’re not the only one who can say it.” He stuck his chin out.

Saying Dax was adorable would annoy him. It wasn’t quite the right word either. That wasn’t bashfulness. That was courage. He’d left home at sixteen, with the only people he’d cared about— his mother and his musical mentor— dead. Then he’d dived into turning tricks where any words of love were a lie and a mockery. Perhaps he’d said them if a john asked him to, with hollowness behind each syllable.

From me, with caring parents and a safe childhood and nothing worse in my past than the mistake of falling for Richard, *I love you* was an easy revelation. From Dax Crow, it was a miracle.

He was watching me now, waiting for my reply. I didn’t know what that should be, so I went with my gut and slid to my knees in front of him, licking my lips dramatically. “We’re done with the sappy words now, huh? Are you bossy enough to put me on my back and fuck me?”

A grin of relief shading into desire crossed Dax’s face, lighting those unhidden blue eyes below the sweep of his white hair. “Bossy enough? You brat. Get your cute ass into the bedroom and find out.”

Well, we had to pause for a moment to find a chew-treat to pacify Miss Spoiled Greedyguts. But then Dax chased me down the hall, dumped me onto the mattress, and proved he was enough and more than enough for me, forever.

Epilogue

Six months later

Dax

On the stage at The D-spot, Ms. Anastasia Fox caressed her microphone, crooning the last words of her song in a honey-sweet voice. Her long legs flashed through the slits in her gown and her red hair rose around her in a crackle of static. The backing instrumental track soared and then cut off, leaving her true tone holding that last long note. When she was done, the club burst into applause, whistles, and calls of “You go, girl.”

Beside me, Jamie pounded the table and hooted. Brody said, “You sure we can’t trade Lane in on her? Get some sex appeal in the band—Ouch!”

Val purred, “You’re saying Tanisha and me aren’t sexy?” She raised a foot in his direction.

“Watch out for the family jewels, woman. You’re gorgeous, perfect, dripping with sex.”

Val laughed and removed her stilettoed toe from the seat of Brody’s chair.

Ms. Fox took one more bow, then made her way off the stage and between the tables till she reached ours. I took her hand and kissed her knuckles under her long black glove. “Superb, my lady.”

She smiled and sat gracefully in the chair Jamie pulled out for her.

On stage, a statuesque Black queen in a red gown began lip-synching to Beyoncé. The dim house lights didn’t keep a couple of guys

from coming over to congratulate Ms. Fox, and the second man glanced at Val, then did a double-take and stumbled over his words. When he headed back to his seat, he whipped out his phone.

Jamie sighed and nudged Kevin with his elbow. “Probably time for us to leave, huh?”

“Would be smart.”

Val leaned over to kiss Ms. Fox on the cheek. “You were incredible. Sorry to applaud and run.”

“I totally understand.”

“See you in a bit.”

“We’ll follow you soon,” I told Val. “We have a new song ready for you tomorrow, too.” Lane and I didn’t collaborate much. Our styles were too different. But Jamie had been fussing about needing another ballad for our second FlyingNotes album. Lane had overheard me putzing with false starts for “Another Word for Fall” and made a suggestion. Then another. And a word switch that made the rhythm work a lot better. Two hours later, we’d whipped up the bare bones of a Corvus ballad we were both proud of. I couldn’t wait to hear Jamie and Val sing it.

When the queen onstage finished a number to wild applause, Jamie and the others took advantage of the noise to make their way out, the fan who’d spotted them taking a couple of flash photos of their backs. The queen called after them, “Room got too hot for you, honeys?”

Jamie waved without turning, but Ms. Fox shouted up from the seat beside me, “It was your high C, sweetheart, that their musician ears couldn’t handle.”

The queen pouted and postured. “You got a problem with my notes? You take it up with Beyoncé herself.”

Ms. Fox laughed.

I’d loved seeing her open up in the last few months now her secret was out, bantering with the other queens, sharing the dressing room. She said there was a feeling of family she’d missed when she couldn’t

let down her guard with the others. Now Lane regularly met up with several of the queens for late Saturday brunch and dishing the tea, unless we were touring. They tolerated me when I joined them as a cis gay man with no alter-ego. I was happy to sit back and watch Lane slip back and forth into Ms. Fox, being fabulous among other fabulous people.

The fan who'd taken those pictures stood again and barged over to our table just as the queen on stage started her next song. "Hey, are you really Lane Bennett?" he asked, loud enough to be heard over the queen's vocals.

Lady Fay stopped her song and turned to him. "Now that's just rude. Isn't it folks?" People hooted and jeered. "She's *really* Ms. Fox, dude. Carlos, I think someone needs to leave."

The fan sputtered but when Carlos turned out to be two-hundred-and-twenty pounds of muscle in a tight Army T-shirt, he let himself be escorted out without too much protest.

"Sorry," Ms. Fox called up to Lady Fay.

"Not your fault, child. Now where was I?" Lady Fay pursed her full lips, waved to the DJ booth, and launched back into "Suga Mama."

She was good, working her hips and the crowd with a practiced flare, but I had my own queen. When the current act was done, I put a hand on Ms. Fox's arm above her glove and said, "Come on. Let's head out. We have a party to go to."

"Krystal's next." Despite her protest, Ms. Fox stood gracefully. "I'll go change. I won't be a minute."

"Hah. Thirty minutes, more likely."

She fluttered her long lashes, pouted, and swayed her hips as she headed for the back of the club.

I sat back and relaxed, watching Krystal come on stage and banter with the guys at the front tables. Ms. Fox was different from Lane, sassier, more confident in her skin, and I liked that look. I'd brought her home with me in full drag a couple of times, and she was no submissive in the bedroom in her gown and heels. But I also loved my

sweet man whose joy was to kneel and let me drive.

Lane appeared after only ten minutes, a record for him. He hefted the garment bag in his hand and I took it from him. I'd have kissed his cheek, but he'd been identified by name fifteen minutes ago. We didn't want to give people an excuse to take photos and raise new speculation about who he was dating.

The first two weeks after he'd revealed his drag name, The D-Spot had done a roaring business, with paps and fans waiting for Ms. Fox to show up. We'd decided to let the interest die down, and after several nights of disappointment, the crowds had dropped off. When Ms. Fox did go onstage the first time, Kevin and Filipe had insisted on coming, and I'd gone with them, letting the public see me as one more bodyguard. There'd been a few incidents of paps and overenthusiastic fans in the following weeks, and twice some guy got in Lane's face outside the club for "*perverting children*," but between the club bouncers and Kevin, none of them had been trouble for long.

The formidable Mother Kissa seemed more pleased with the increased business than upset. A friendly judge gave her a restraining order for the bigot dude, and I got the feeling she was disappointed he hadn't violated it yet. Waving to him in the back of a cop car was apparently on her bucket list.

To my hidden relief, Richard hadn't ever been among the pursuers. I'd shadowed Lane, senses alert for any sign, any text or email or lurking shadow, but there hadn't been a single douchewasel sighting, nor the lawsuit I'd half anticipated either. Richard had vanished off the music scene online too, no doubt waiting for people to forget about our show. Googling "Richard Kensington" still brought up the Rocktoberfest video right at the top of the results. As long as he stayed away from us, we'd done all we could.

I'd tried to get hold of Jack, King, and Joker, to see if they'd watched the video and how they were doing. King had vanished, his real name ordinary enough to be hard to trace. I hoped he'd kicked the drugs, but didn't want to search hard enough to find out I was wrong. Joker never replied to my efforts, although he seemed okay in his public posts, but Jack and I texted or messaged now and then. He was doing

construction these days, married with two kids, and seemed content enough. He'd sent Lane a big thank-you card, so I guessed that Richard had been a regret Jack didn't mind seeing face some overdue karma, but we never talked about the past.

A few magazines and blogs had chased after Lane, asking for interviews. Drag was in the news these days. He'd given a couple of short statements to queer-friendly sites but declined to be spotlighted. He really didn't want his rock fame to overshadow other, more experienced queens.

Since then, things had quieted down. We'd gone on a short tour for our first album with the new label and sold out every show. By the time we got back to L.A., Ms. Fox was old news. I still came along to the club every time she performed, bodyguard in public, biggest fan in private. So far, the paps hadn't figured out Lane was living with me, so my apartment stayed under the radar. He kept his place for the mailing address, sublet it quietly, and lived with me in our own small, perfect space with our own small pillow-eating monster-child.

"How do you think Princess did with Naomi?" Lane asked as we stepped outside the club.

"Probably disemboweled another stuffed tiger." Naomi had decided the best use of her ratty and outgrown childhood stuffed animals was to let five pounds of white fury rip them to shreds while she videoed the destruction. *Death by Princess* had a following on Instagram. Mrs. Lopez shook her head over it and muttered about "*encouraging bad behavior*" but I happened to know she'd watched quite a few of them.

The night outside the club was warm and dry, April basking in the eternal summer of L.A. We'd parked in an off-street garage a block away, and I escorted Lane along the sidewalk, a hand in the hollow of his back. He swayed his hips as we climbed a flight of stairs to the second parking level. "You're sure you want to go to the party, not home? We could tell them we had car trouble."

I swatted his ass. Performing always made him horny, and since our tests all came back negative, he loved to end a drag night with my spunk inside him. But he liked Naomi too, so the idea of missing her

party was just a tease. “Behave. We’re late as it is. I’ll take care of your sweet ass later. Anyhow, we need to go fetch the problem child.”

“I guess.” He pouted, opened his door, and swung into the passenger seat, his movements still fluid and exaggerated, as Ms. Fox slowly settled back into Lane.

I allowed myself glances as I drove. The streetlights outside the car flickered over Lane’s fine features and caught occasional glints off the shimmering eye shadow he hadn’t removed. His full lips moved in time to the tunes on the stereo, although I didn’t hear any whisper of his voice. When the next song came up and turned out to be one of ours, he grinned and mimed air guitar.

How is this my life?

I woke sometimes at night, fast breaths catching in my throat, imagining I was still in the squat on the top floor of the old tumbledown hotel, with Joey ODing in the next room. Or from a nightmare of hands and ropes that I’d agreed to, but desperately wanted to escape. Some nights, what woke me was the impact of five pounds of dog, jumping from her bed to my stomach, licking my face with her thank-God much improved breath, whining at my sounds until soothing her calmed me as well. Sometimes it was Lane, his touch gentle on my skin, murmuring, “You’re dreaming. I’m here. Everything’s all right.”

He never asked me what I dreamed about, and I never told him. The details didn’t matter. Truths and lies and fears from my past life might chase me in my sleep, as they had for my whole life, but this was my awake reality. Something I never dreamed of, back when the height of my ambition was the chance to make music and a private room with a locked door. Instead, I had the world of sound at my fingertips, a whole apartment, and a man who brought the sunshine in with him. Who loved me, even when I got short with him, or said something insensitive, or refused to let him see my thoughts.

Lane was patient and calm, and the worst I got was a flash of hurt in the depths of his gray eyes. That was always enough, and more than enough, to make me mend my ways. And in the bedroom, this jaded,

seen-it-all whore who'd lost interest in sex was now hornier than I'd ever been in my life. My sweet, obedient man turned every crank I owned.

"You'll miss the exit," Lane prompted.

I blinked, yanked my attention back from autopilot home, and took the exit to head to Jamie's place.

"What were you thinking about?" Lane asked.

"Nothing. Spacing out."

"You were thinking about me, weren't you?" When I flicked him a look, Lane grinned and licked his lips. "You were imagining me naked."

"I was imagining you gagged," I lied.

"But naked."

A laugh escaped me. "Brat."

Lane set his hand on my thigh, and we sang along to the last chorus of our song.

Jamie had his place decked out in rainbow lights, draped over the front of the house and running along the fence. Lane laughed as we keyed through the gate and turned in. "I wonder if the neighbors complained again."

I snickered. Jamie had put a flagpole in his front yard when we ditched Streetcorner and raised the American flag above a big progress pride flag. When his neighbors complained, he'd added a rainbow banner over his front door.

Now that he and Val weren't forced to tone down their relationship or their bisexuality, he was standing up and speaking out. Luckily, the new label seemed to think that whatever fans we lost to bigotry, we'd gain more through visibility. The last tour suggested they weren't wrong.

The drive in front of the big house was parked full. Looked like we were the last ones to the party. Not surprising. Lane had filled in last-

minute for a queen who'd called in sick, and while Val and Jamie had come to cheer Ms. Fox on, the party had been getting underway. Music and laughter called to us from behind the house. I reached into the back, grabbed our gift bag, and followed Lane around to the backyard.

Someone had started a fire in the pit, and flames danced in the mellow spring air. A sniff made my stomach rumble. *Chili*. Lane didn't eat before performing, and I wasn't about to pig out in front of him, so we were both hungry. I held up the glossy gift bag and called to the crowd, "Hey, tell me where to put the loot. I want food."

Naomi separated herself from the herd and ran toward us, Princess scampering at her heels. "Hey, what'cha bring me, huh? Gimme, gimme."

Princess leaped at Lane's knees and he scooped her up.

Tanisha said from a lounge on the patio, "Is that how we raised you, girl?"

Naomi folded her hands under her chin and made big eyes, anime style. "Please, sir, may a humble child see the gift which you have brought?"

Brody snickered. "Humble."

I waved the bag and told Naomi, "Show me the food and you can have this."

"Come on." She led us across the lawn to a long table groaning with food.

"Look, Snowboy," Tanisha called, waving at the dessert end. "Snack cakes."

I did a double take at the small heap of paired, cellophane-wrapped snowballs, alongside all kinds of home-baked goodies. *Bought specially for me, without a doubt*. A joke the whole band was in on these days, but also a gift and a sign I'd been on her mind in the middle of creating a party for her kid.

"We want you to feel at home. Wouldn't want to shock your system with real cake," she teased and I flipped her off, pretending I was

peeved instead of touched.

“I need actual food before dessert.” Lane headed for a big crock-pot of chili.

I inhaled the glorious aroma. “Smells almost as good as Mrs. Lopez’s.”

“Well, it should,” the elderly woman said from off to my right. “Since I made it.”

“Oh, wow.” Lane turned to her. “I can’t wait to eat, then. So glad you’re here.”

“A girl should have some old person at her seventeenth birthday to tell her to enjoy her youth and mutter about bunions and arthritis.”

From farther down, Naomi’s grandmother called, “Yep. I’m waaay too young to have those things.”

“You’re a mere child,” Mrs. Lopez returned.

Naomi laughed. They’d met at my place, when Naomi had come over to dog-sit a few times that Mrs. Lopez was busy or had family over. The two had bonded quickly, a recognition of kindred spirits beyond just affection for Princess. Naomi wanted to go into clothing design, and Mrs. Lopez had been sewing for her large family for decades.

Princess left off kissing Lane’s neck to wiggle in Mrs. Lopez’s direction, so he set her on the ground. She romped over to bounce in front of Mrs. Lopez, then circled back to Naomi.

“What am I?” I muttered. “Chopped liver?”

Naomi picked Princess up and said, “Trade her for the gift bag.”

“You’ve got a deal.” I handed over the bag and accepted Princess. She kissed me, perfectly happy to be with another of her devoted slaves. “Remember, I’m the one who gives you bacon bites,” I murmured. “I’m not just another guy.”

“No, you’re not.” Lane slid an arm around me and leaned against my shoulder. “You be nice to Papa, Princess.”

“I am not this dog’s father,” I muttered, out of habit.

Lane’s attention was pulled away by Naomi opening the bag and squealing about the contents— some kind of jacket thing she’d pined after when she and Lane had gone clothes shopping together. Lane had needed a new gown for Ms. Fox and invited Naomi to come along. He said he’d never had someone to share dress shopping with, and Naomi’d been thrilled. Two hours of me sitting in an uncomfortable chair, watching the two of them obsess over fabrics and stitching, had been somewhat rewarded by ducking into the dressing room to see Lane in a variety of slinky gowns. Someday, I was going to fuck him in the high-cut silver-blue number he’d ended up with.

Naomi danced over to us, the jacket clutched to her chest. “Thanks! I love it.”

“Thank Lane. I just signed my name on the card. If it was up to me, I’d have brought you a dollar candy bar.” The jacket had actually been my idea and I’d paid half, but that wouldn’t do my rep any good.

Naomi patted my arm and kissed Princess on the head. “You tell your papa he’s not fooling anyone. He’s a wonderful guy with a squishy warm heart.”

I mock-growled at her, and with a grin, she whirled away to show the jacket to her grandmother.

Lane chuckled and leaned harder on my shoulder. “She has you figured out.”

“There’s nothing squishy about me.” Princess whined and panted up at me as I scratched her chest. “You tell your daddy I’m super mean. I brush your teeth and trim your nails. Cruelty, oh yes.” Then I blinked and coughed, because where the hell did that come from? Yeah, I babytalked the dog in private sometimes. Five pounds of white fluff. Who wouldn’t? But I was not that uncool in public.

The fire’s flames and brilliant floodlights shone in Lane’s clear gray eyes as he looked up at me. “I like this look on you.”

“What look? Dog hair?”

“Comfort. Like you’re relaxed in your skin and feel safe with us.”

“I’m always relaxed in my skin.”

“Bullshit,” he coughed into his hand. “Babe, you were the most rigidly controlled man I ever met, back when I joined Corvus. Silent, isolated, judgmental, narrowly focused on just one thing— making Jamie’s band the best it could be. I was as scared of you as I was attracted to you.”

“You were scared of me?” I didn’t like that idea.

“Just till I got to know you. But the man I met then wouldn’t have rocked a dog in his arms and bought an expensive gift for a teenager. Or at least, not where anyone could see.”

Wouldn’t I? He was right about folks seeing me, though. I hadn’t wanted anyone to look below the surface of the Dax Crow I’d created. Those deeper layers were vulnerable and not pretty.

I surveyed the crowd on the lawn— the band and their family and friends. Naomi was having another party with her classmates tomorrow, so tonight I knew everyone here. And Lane was right, I trusted them enough to let them see bits of me I’d hidden a long time.

“Family,” I said.

“Are you still worrying about meeting my mom?” Lane rubbed my back. “I promise, she’ll adore you.”

“Well, I *wasn’t* until you reminded me that was coming up.” His mother was traveling to L.A. for some work thing, and we’d promised to meet her. I’d video-chatted with Lane’s folks enough by now that the idea didn’t completely turn me inside out, but I wouldn’t be sorry when Monday was over. “No, I meant these people. This is my family.”

“Yeah.” Lane laid his head on my shoulder. “We are.”

I’d never had more family than Mom and me, and then I’d lost that. Then, years later, it’d become Jamie and me, with his bigger-than-life presence filling that empty place partway. I hadn’t realized I had space in me for this many people, but now, I’d give anything I had to keep them all like this, safe and happy and together.

“They’re my family.” I hugged Princess to my chest and turned to

look Lane in the eyes. “You’re my heart. The man standing at the center of my world.” Then, despite knowing everyone was watching, I said the three words I still struggled to set free. “I love you.” I kissed him until the hoots and cheers and “Get a room,” from our family around us broke us apart, laughing.

But that was good too. That was perfect. Tonight, we’d get a room—our own room in our own place, safe and clean and comfortable—the place where heat flared and love grew. Right now, we could hand our furry child off to any one of a dozen willing arms, grab plates, eat amazing chili, and laugh and no doubt later sing, with our family, under the starry L.A. skies.

the end

Remember Cam and Erik from *Hellsbane and Blade*, whom you met briefly here, sharing the quiet of their bus and limericks? You can read their story in my *Road to Rocktoberfest 2022* novel.

As Cam puts it, while facing the severe social anxiety that keeps him off the stage where his music belongs, “No heart (even Erik’s) or dick (even Erik’s) is big enough to carry me past my limits, but God, I wish there was a way.”

Discover Cam and Erik’s way forward, through music and life, in [***Hidden Blade***](#).

...

Or check out another man whose life is full of challenges, but who rises above them to reach for humor and adventure and love in my **free** paranormal novel [***Unacceptable Risk***](#).

Simon’s walking the edge of his werewolf pack’s tolerance as the only out gay man. Falling in love with a human is a risk he shouldn’t take, but playing it safe just isn’t in Simon’s nature. When he meets shy, isolated veterinarian Paul, they figure out how well they fit together, only Simon can’t share the truth about himself without risking his pack’s ruthless and deadly response. Then, Simon makes a mistake...

A realistic, opposites-attract werewolf novel with danger, some on-page violence, and two men discovering the power of love. (No MPreg).

About the Author

I get asked about my name a lot. It's not something exotic, though. "Kaje" is pronounced just like "cage" – it's an old nickname, and my pronouns are she/her/hers. I was born in Montreal but I've lived for 30 years in Minnesota, where the two seasons are Snow-removal and Road-repair, where the mosquito is the state bird, and where winter can be breathtakingly beautiful. Minnesota's a kind, quiet (if sometimes chilly) place and it's home.

I've been writing far longer than I care to admit (*whispers – forty-five years*), mostly for my own entertainment, usually M/M romance (with added mystery, fantasy, historical, sci-fi...) I also have a few Young Adult stories (under the pen name Kira Harp).

My first professionally published book, *Life Lessons*, came out May 2011. I have a weakness for closeted cops with honest hearts and teachers who speak their minds, and I was delighted and encouraged by the reception Mac and Tony received.

I now have a good-sized backlist in ebooks and print, including Amazon bestseller *The Rebuilding Year* and Rainbow Award winner for "Best Mystery-Thriller" *Tracefinder: Contact*. Readers can find a complete list of my books with links on my website at <https://kajeharper.com/books/>

I'm always pleased to have readers find me online:

Website: <https://kajeharper.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/KajeHarper>

Facebook group: Kaje's Conversation Corner:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/208207893795147/>

Goodreads Author page:

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4769304.Kaje_Harper

Other Books by Kaje Harper

Self-Published/Indie:

Changes

Changes Coming Down (Book #1)

Changes Going On (Book #2)

Tracefinder

Tracefinder: Contact (Book #1)

Tracefinder: Changes (Book #2)

Tracefinder: Choices (Book #3)

Finding Family

The Family We're Born With (Book #1) – free novella

The Family We Make (Book #2)

Necromancer

Marked by Death (Book #1)

Powered by Ghosts (Book #2)

Bound by Memories (Book #3)

Trapped by Greed (Book #4)

Beset by Demons (Book #5)

Consumed by Fire (Book #6)

Found by Jasper (Book #7)

Magic Burning (Carnival of Mysteries)

Hidden Wolves Re-released

Unacceptable Risk (Book #1)

Unexpected Demands (Book #2)

Unwanted Appeal (Book #3)

Unjustified Claims (Book #4)
Unsafe Exposure (Book #5)

Hidden Wolves New Stories

Undeniable Bonds (Book #6)
Unplanned Coda (Book #7)
Unseen Past (A Hidden Wolves Prequel)

Rebuilding Year Re-released

The Rebuilding Year (Book #1)
Life, Some Assembly Required (Book #2)

Rebuilding Year New Stories

Building Forever (Book #2.5)

Life Lessons Re-released

Life Lessons (Book #1)
Breaking Cover (Book #2)
Home Work (Book #3)
Learning Curve (Book #4)
And to All a Good Night (Book #1.5)
+ *Bonus Story Getting It Right* (Book #1.8)
Compensations (Book #3.5)

Stand-alone Books:

Rejoice, Dammit

Unfair in Love and War

(in the charity anthology *Another Place in Time*)

Not Your Grandfather's Magic

(in the charity anthology *Wish Come True*)

Don't Plan to Stay

Love and Lint Rollers

Second Act

A Midnight Clear

Alec: Single Dads of Gaynor Beach

Hidden Blade: The Road to Rocktoberfest 2022

The Distant Hills and Other Stories

Magic Burning (Carnival of Mysteries)

Audiobooks:

Into Deep Waters – Narrated by Kaleo Griffith

The Rebuilding Year – Narrated by Gomez Pugh

Life, Some Assembly Required – Narrated by Gomez Pugh

Building Forever – Narrated by Gomez Pugh

Life Lessons – Narrated by JF Harding

Re-releases:

Sole Support

Gift of the Goddess

Fair Isn't Life

Nelson & Caleb

Where the Heart Is

Re-releasing soon:

Full Circle

Ghosts and Flames

Possibilities

Tumbling Dreams

Stand-alone Free Novels:

Into Deep Waters

Nor Iron Bars a Cage

Chasing Death Metal Dreams

Lies and Consequences

Laser Visions

Stand-alone Free Short Stories:

Like the Taste of Summer

Show Me Yours

Within Reach

Shooting Star

**A full list with blurbs, and download and
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<http://www.kajeharper.com/books/>

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