

**BACKLASH**  
**WINTER'S WRATH #1**  
**BY**  
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*Chapter One*

Fucking Poe. *Again*. His brother was going to ruin the band before they ever got to headline a goddamn venue. Not that Edgar Allen's poetry wasn't great and all, but how much inspiration could the lead singer of a metalcore band get from the ratty old book he'd read a thousand times?

Back braced on the wall at the head of his top bunk on the tour bus, Alder Trousseau continued polishing the dark wood of his guitar, breathing in the rich aroma of maple and the sweet scent of carnauba wax. Holding his metal pick between his lips, he began humming the melody he'd been toying with for a few days now. Between practice and travel and appearances, he hadn't gotten a chance to pull out the sheet and jot down the notes. But as soon as they got back on the road, he was getting the guys together and writing this shit down. If it was still in his head after this long, it would stick with the fans.

Which covered the guitar, and the bass and the drums were easy enough to pull into a mind-blowing harmony, but without the lyrics, they had nothing. Braver "Brave" Trousseau, lead singer of Winter's Wrath and Alder's brother, was the lyrics guy. And he was a fucking god at whipping together terrifyingly beautiful phrases out of nowhere.

Only, considering how much time Brave had spent staring at that book during this tour, their next album was gonna be all ‘Ravens’ and ‘Nevermore’.

“Stop staring at me, asshole.” Brave pushed off the opposite bottom bunk and tossed the book at Alder’s head. His long, wavy black hair covered half of his face as he glared at Alder. “You’re not the only one working his ass off for this band.”

Alder picked up the book, pitching it back to his brother. “Is this work?”

Rolling his broad, heavily tattooed shoulders, Brave nodded. “Yeah. Poe was a master at using words to freak people out.”

*Great. I was right.* Alder sighed. “So we’re singing about the birds?”

“That’s Alfred Hitchcock, dumbass.” Brave rested his forearms on the side of Alder’s bunk, amusement slanting his lips. “We’re singing about Santa Claus.”

*Shit.* Alder scowled and dropped his gaze to his guitar. No use in asking Brave if he was joking. If he was, he’d make Alder feel stupid for believing him. If he wasn’t...well, that was a scary thought.

*Horror poetry and Old Saint Nick. Wouldn’t Krampus make more sense?*

Smacking the mattress, probably just to make Alder jump, Brave let out a gruff laugh. “Pussy. You just stay there, stroking your wood. I’m gonna go fuck your boyfriend.”

*Yeah, and I’m the asshole?* Not even blinking, Alder waited until Brave was about halfway across the bus before he spoke. “Daphne Du Maurier wrote *The Birds*. Evan Hunter did the adaption for Hitchcock’s film. Jesse isn’t my boyfriend, but if you wanna get him fired from the crew, go for it.”

“He’s not getting fired for letting me fuck him.”

“No, he’ll get fired for not getting the van loaded. Damn it, Brave, go get a groupie to suck your dick. You’re a real bitch when you haven’t gotten laid in awhile.” Alder had to fight to keep his hands from shaking as the rage he’d suppressed bubbled to the surface. They’d been on the road, on this fucking bus, for way too long. They were usually on their way home from a gig before he and Brave started on each other, but they’d had twice as many shows booked this time. Their manager was pushing them to another level, which made tolerating his dick of an older brother more than worth it.

Their hard work would pay off. If they didn’t kill one another first.

Thing was, Brave would probably be easier to deal with after he fucked Jesse, but even though Jesse was one of their best roadies, their manager, Zach Cole, wouldn’t hesitate

to fire him for slacking off. No matter whose fault it was. A roadie like Jesse was a lot easier to replace than a vocalist.

*Right, and wanting him around has nothing to do with the fact that you're in love with the man.*

The narrowed eyed look Brave gave him meant one of two things. Either he was gonna have a cold comeback, or he'd figure out his comment about fucking Jesse had actually gotten to Alder. Either way, Brave was gearing up for a fight.

The front door of the bus slid open, cutting through the tension. Alder grinned when he saw the band's lanky young drummer, Tate Maddox, bounce onto the bus with his usual wild energy. The long part of his golden brown, semi-mohawk fell over the close shaved side of his head as he gave them a sideways look.

"Are you guys at each other again? Three more shows before we're in Vegas, baby! I'm putting all my savings on the tables. Need you guys to keep Cole off my ass so I can win enough money for us to make our first epic music video! No more cheesy lyric shit." Tate made devil horns with one hand and brought it to his lips to wiggle his tongue between his fingers. "I'll put on black lipstick or whatever he wants, but I need my pretty mug all over MTV!"

"MTV hardly ever shows music vids anymore, Tate. Not sure you were even born when they did." Brave rolled his eyes, sidling past the drummer to make his way off the bus.

*Nice.* Alder slid off the top bunk to sit on the one Tate had claimed beneath it. Of the five guys in the band, Tate was the only one who still had his head in the clouds after years of hard work and little reward. The band was doing well, taking where they'd started into consideration. They opened for huge names and none of the guys needed steady jobs to make a living. So what if they didn't have mansions and guitars that cost more than most cars? They were living the dream.

The dirty, endless days and sleepless nights dream.

Reality as a metalcore band wasn't what they'd all imagined as kids, but they had fans. People who bought their shirts and screamed their names. Who knew all the words to the songs on their debut album.

Granted, Winter's Wrath had a few chart toppers, but they'd only reached the top 10 on iTunes. Very few radio stations would play their music, because it was too intense. Brave had gotten an interview in the Metal Spade magazine, but nothing they'd done so far was very mainstream.

But they'd made enough money to upgrade from a makeshift sleeper van to a bus for the last two tours. They all had new guitars and Tate had the drum set he'd been drooling over for years. The poor kid had been using a second hand set he'd gotten in high school for the first three years the band was together. He kept it in the best shape he could, but in an interview for their debut album, a journalist had asked about it. Tate's face had gone red and he'd talked about his drum instructor, the man who'd given it to him. Said he wouldn't have gotten this far without him and having the kit on stage was like dragging a comfy blanket on tour.

He had one of those, too. Said blanket was draped over the small couch in the front lounge of the bus. A quilt his grandma made for him the first time he joined them on the road when he was just seventeen. The thing was fucking cool, with photos of all his favorite bands and their albums for the squares. Everything from Slayer to Motionless, surrounded with a drum pattern border.

Tate's grandma was one of the coolest ladies Alder had ever met. She'd had the whole band over for dinner the last time they were in Detroit and had taken four requests for quilts. They had her business cards on their merchandise table at every show and she had plenty of orders to keep her busy, but she'd insisted on doing blankets for the members first.

One of the *many* reasons Tate was a great addition to the band.

Resting his elbow on his knee, Alder grinned as Tate pulled a box of cookies from the side of his mattress. Cookies were Tate's go-to when he was having a good day. On bad days, he'd be chugging vodka or smoking some rank shit.

First tour, when Alder wasn't much older than Tate's twenty-one, he'd have been toking right along with him. After a couple years on the road, it was rare he even touched a beer outside of the after parties.

Crumbs sprinkled all over the bed as Tate yanked out the plastic cookie tray. The drummer groaned when he found only one inside. "Shit. Do you think I have time to run and grab a few boxes?"

Alder frowned. "Send one of the roadies."

"Why?" Tate looked over, then rolled his eyes. "We're in Ohio. Last night was a fluke. I'll be fine."

Maybe, but Alder wasn't willing to risk it. They'd opened for Horizon at a new venue whose owners had the ambition to pull off big shows, but didn't know the first thing about

preparing for one. Metal and hard rock could mix quite well in most cases, and the majority of fans had seemed to enjoy themselves. But there wasn't enough security, and dozens of fans had crashed the stage. One nut had slammed into Brave and grinned in his face, wrapping one hand around Brave's neck as he'd whispered 'You'd be immortal if you died today.'

The cops had been called in, and after ejecting the crazies in the crowd, the show had been allowed to go on. But Brave had been shaken and Cole had told them all to stick close to the bus. Smart move.

Tate was the youngest member of the band. The restriction was gonna mess with him, but too bad. Either a roadie went for cookies, or Alder would go with him. Not getting cookies wasn't an option. During the band's first tour, Tate had been offered hard drugs by several fans and only intervention from Alder and the bass guitarist, Malakai Noble, had kept him from falling down that particular black hole. His sugar addiction had Alder wondering what exactly was in the joints Tate used to smoke, but since Jesse handled all the weed the band used now, he wasn't too worried. Jesse looked out for them better than any of the venue security they dealt with on the road.

Clearly, since no one would have gotten that close to Brave if Jesse had been backstage. Unfortunately, he'd been stuck in the roadies van when Cole found out he wasn't feeling well. Probably just bad takeout, but Cole was paranoid about any member of the band getting sick. Threats didn't really register with him, which was probably why he hadn't commented until the clip ended up on YouTube around midnight.

And even then, he'd just stood in front of them all, arms crossed, a sneer on his lips. "Let the media have their fun with this. We all know there are morons looking for their fifteen minutes of fame at every show. You good, Brave?"

Brave had nodded and let out a hoarse laugh. "Always."

There were bruises on Brave's neck today. Alder felt like an asshole for thinking shit about his brother reading Poe. Whatever, Brave would tell him to fuck off if he showed any sympathy.

Tate, however, wouldn't recover from this shit as quickly, and he'd be an easy target. He had his 'pretty mug' up on all the magazine covers the band hit. With their long hair covering their faces in most pictures, Alder and Brave might have a few seconds when a fan might not be sure if it was really them. With his golden brown hair shaved on the sides and a

spiked semi-Mohawk on top, Tate was easily recognizable. Never mind those fucking eyes of his, which were such a pale blue-grey they didn't seem real.

Wrinkling his slightly crooked nose—the only thing on his face that wasn't model perfect—Tate waved his hand in front of Alder's face. “Dude, why you looking at me like that?”

Alder shrugged and stood. “Just thinking of you getting jumped on the way to the store. You're too cute for me to not give a fuck. Come on, we can ask Jesse to make a run. I need some shit anyway.”

Tate licked his bottom lip, cocking his head slightly. “You think I'm cute?”

“Everyone thinks you're cute.” Alder ruffled Tate's spiky hair to shift the mood before the kid got the wrong impression. “Kinda like having a puppy on the bus.”

“Gee, thanks.” Tate knocked his hand away and popped off the bunk. “I get it. Shit, I'm gonna have to pay to get a guy to fuck me, aren't I?”

*Not this again.* Alder sighed as he followed Tate out to the parking lot. Brave wasn't the only one suffering from blue balls. Malakai and Connor Phelan, their rhythm guitarist, had both hooked up with chicks at the after party last night. Bathroom stall and back alley quickies just weren't Alder's thing, so he'd checked out early, a little surprised when both Brave and Tate joined him on the bus.

Brave seemed to have gotten sick of being pawed by barely legal groupies, and he'd been pissed off about the crazy fucker at the show, but Tate usually had no trouble finding a nice, older woman to teach him a thing or two. He was going through a weird phase lately, hitting on guys and getting in trouble with Cole. Cole was pretty cool about most things. Yeah, he didn't want them getting plastered and acting like assholes in public, but when they slipped up, he usually just reminded them that they were supposed to be professionals. This wasn't the fucking 70s.

Their manager hadn't gotten with the times on the whole ‘Love is love’ thing though. Metal equaled *straight* to most fans and Cole wouldn't let any of them fuck up that image.

Which was kinda funny, considering not a single member of the band was completely straight. Cole'd had high hopes for Tate—the kid hadn't had much experience with either sex when he'd joined them.

*He should have known we'd corrupt the boy.* Alder caught up with Tate and put his arm over the drummer's shoulders. He wouldn't fuck Tate just to satisfy the kid's curiosity, but

there were other ways he could help. “You’ll get everything you want in Vegas, Tate. I promise.”

“Yeah?” Tate grinned, brightening up instantly at just the mention of his favorite city. “Cole can’t watch us all the time, right?”

“Fuck no. And we’re there for a few days, so we can finally get a bit of a break.” A *much* needed break. Maybe Alder would be less inclined to murder his brother once they got some time away from one another.

Rounding the corner of the trailer, where there was a frame tent set up, Alder stopped in his tracks, spotting Brave pressed close to a shirtless man against the side of another band’s bus. Ripped jeans and wavy, dirty blond hair...*Jesse*.

Maybe fratricide wasn’t such a bad idea after all.



“Shotgun? I don’t want much.”

At Brave’s request, Jesse Vaughn almost choked on the smoke he’d inhaled and dropped his joint in the dirt. He’d gotten most of the equipment loaded in the trailer and was taking a quick break. Brave wasn’t usually up this early—early being before noon. He still looked fucking good though. His long, black hair spilled wild down his back in soft waves, and the black liner he hadn’t bothered to wash off last night was smudged, making his golden brown eyes even more brilliant. He didn’t look tired though. More like a dirty, rugged angel that had just crawled out of the trenches. Hot and sweaty and ready for all kinds of trouble.

Trouble Jesse should avoid if he wanted to keep his job.

Crushing the joint under his boot, Jesse pulled out his cigarette pack to get some rolling paper. He had to roll a fresh joint now, so he’d keep it low on tobacco so it didn’t fuck with Brave’s voice.

“You sure this is a good idea?” Jesse couldn’t remember the last time Brave had smoked anything.

“No.” Brave let out a throaty laugh. “But we should do it anyway.”

*Yeab. Trouble.*

But he *really* loved his job. Even though he hadn’t been with the band the longest, Jesse pretty much ran the crew. Not the career path he’d originally planned on, he’d grown

up with dreams of becoming a rock star. Or a professional wrestler. He'd gotten a wrestling scholarship for college, so his life had been set.

Until an assault charge against a rich kid and a year in jail royally fucked all his prospects. Jesse was lucky he had connections in the music world to fall back on. He'd worked as security at a venue in Detroit for a few years, where he'd met Brave and Alder at one of their first shows.

One of their roadies had fallen off the stage and broken his arm, so Jesse filled in. During the show he'd restrung Alder's guitar and tuned it for him when the man's stupid metal pick snapped a string. The band decided they needed him. And he'd been with them ever since.

Keeping his head low and doing his best not to piss off their manager, Cole. He didn't give them shit about using their position to get as much pussy as they could, but they weren't supposed to get too friendly with the band.

Fair enough, but Brave made it hard. Real fucking hard.

There'd been a time or two Jesse had come close to crossing the no-fucking-the-band line. With both brothers. What could he say, they were hot. Both tall, with black hair and similar features, but other than that, very different.

Brave was long and wiry, his hair reaching to the center of his back, his eyes a golden brown that practically glowed with anger or lust. He had a way of moving that made it impossible not to think of sex.

Alder had broad shoulders, a nice build, but not like a man who obsessively worked out. Or carried around band equipment every day. He wasn't as muscular as Jesse, but he had the roundest fucking ass.

Off limits. Both of them. But after a few drinks, shit happened. He'd made out with Alder once when the bus broke down in the middle of nowhere in Kentucky and they had to walk to get cell reception to call for repairs. Alder had been plastered and Jesse was a little stoned. And they were tired and the side of the road looked like a good place to lie down for a few minutes.

Alder's phone had rung just as Jesse began seriously considering fucking his best friend in the dirt. Thankfully, things weren't weird between Jesse and Alder after. He'd have hated to fuck up their friendship because he'd been stupid.

But it was different with Brave. Whenever they were alone, Brave would do or say something that made it almost impossible to care what Cole thought.

Like right now.

Cole had gone ahead to the next venue in South Dakota, which had been a late add to the tour, to check out the place and make sure security was tight. With him out of the way, Jesse had one less reason to keep his distance.

He lit the tip of the fresh joint, drawing in the smoke as Brave braced his hands on either side of him against the metal siding of the bus. With the joint between his lips, Jesse smiled, then took the blunt away from his mouth, letting out the smoke slowly.

“You have to sing tomorrow.”

Brave shrugged. “That’s why I wanna share. I’ll be fine.”

“*That’s* not why you wanna share.”

“Maybe not.” Brave gave him a hooded look. “But you’re playing hard to get.”

Laughing, Jesse sucked on the joint, blowing the smoke off to the side. He hadn’t gotten high enough to dull the effect Brave had on him, but he wouldn’t let it show. Even though he could feel the length of Brave’s dick against his thigh. And the thick stench of weed couldn’t drown out the heady smell of sweat and faint cologne. Just having Brave close made him hard, but this wasn’t a game to him. Brave would respect him more if he didn’t give in.

“I’m not playing.” Jesse slid his hand to the side of Brave’s neck. He ran his thumb along Brave’s tense jaw. “Open your mouth.”

Brave’s eyes drifted shut, his tongue running over his lips as they parted.

Taking a deep haul on the joint, Jesse brought his mouth close to Brave and breathed out the smoke. His lips were practically touching Brave’s. Another inch and he could kiss the man. He wanted to, wanted to take all Brave could offer, but it wouldn’t last. The fans and the fame had spoiled Brave. He’d grown arrogant. And distant.

The closed off man he was to everyone else wasn’t good enough for Jesse. As he worked one hand into Brave’s hair, offering another exhale of smoke, he met Brave’s eyes.

*Not a good idea.*

Those fucking eyes had him ready to trash all the reasons his brain came up with to avoid becoming another of Brave’s playthings.

Until they stopped seeing him at all. Brave glanced over his shoulder as footsteps approached, his lips slanting in a cold smile. “Need something, bro?”

“No.” Alder looked ready to kill his brother. “Sorry to bother you.”

Another fight. Nothing new. Jesse sighed and nudged Brave aside, looking from Alder to Tate. “You’re not bothering me. What’s up?”

“Forget it.” Alder brushed Tate’s hand away when the drummer tried to grab his arm, then headed back the way he’d come.

Not sure what was up with the man, Jesse handed Tate the rest of his joint and followed Alder, latching on to his wrist before he could climb back onto the bus. “Hey, you wanna chill out? Did you need something?”

Alder’s jaw ticked. He squared his shoulders. “Tate needs cookies.”

“Okay. You want me to go, or you just need a lift?”

Inhaling roughly, Alder leaned against the side of the bus. “Seriously? Right now, I don’t give a shit about that. What the fuck are you doing? You know what Brave’s like. Maybe it’s none of my business, but—”

“You’re worried.” All right, that made sense. Jesse grinned as he put his hand on Alder’s shoulder. He couldn’t blame Alder for being protective. He was that kind of friend and Jesse would do the same if he saw Alder messing with the wrong guy. “I get it, and I love you for caring, man.”

Alder snorted. “You’re full of shit.”

“I mean it. But I know what I’m doing, okay?” Jesse hooked his arm around Alder’s neck. He grinned when Alder relaxed at his side, keeping pace as Jesse returned to the back of the bus to fetch Tate.

Malakai had joined Tate and Brave, taking over the joint—and not sharing much if Tate’s pout was anything to go by. All the guys looked out for the young drummer, but Malakai tended to treat him like a kid brother, with more affection and watchfulness than the Trousseau brothers shared. He’d also known the boy the longest, so he’d been around when Tate had dealt with some serious addictions as a teen.

As far as Jesse knew, other than him, only Malakai and Cole had any idea how bad his drug addictions had been. Tate’s grandmother checked in with Cole regularly, having gotten Tate away from his sister’s guardianship when he was fifteen. She was the one who got her grandson clean and interested in playing drums rather than shooting up.

Cole had explained the situation to Jesse so he could help keep an eye on Tate. Which was almost impossible on the road. So long as he didn't do anything stronger than pot, Jesse wasn't too concerned, but Malakai tended to pull an intervention even with mild drugs.

The cold look he shot Jesse as he approached made him rethink his stance. He'd have to be more careful lighting up around Tate if he wanted to stay on the bassist's good side.

"You heading to the store?" Malakai asked as he dropped the joint and crushed it under his heel. He arched a brow at Tate when the younger man cursed under his breath. Running his hand over his close shaved head, he smiled tightly when Jesse nodded. "Good. Let's go."

*Oh, this is gonna be fun.* Jesse pulled out the keys to the van and glanced over at Brave. "Coming?"

"Naw, just pick me up some orange juice and a few snacks. You know what I like." Brave smirked as he passed his brother, who'd gone still at Jesse's side. Their shoulders slammed together and Jesse was almost positive one of them growled.

Be good to separate them for a bit. Connor was usually the one that pulled them apart when they came to blows, but he was hanging out with one of the other bands this morning, probably working out. Out of all the guys, Connor was the most down to earth, the calming presence that kept the others sane. Bringing him along would make the shopping trip easier, but Jesse hated to admit he hated dealing with the guys in public.

Inside the van, Tate claimed shotgun, practically bouncing in his seat. "We should go to Walmart. Stock up."

*Shoot me now.* Jesse met Alder's eyes in the rearview mirror.

Alder shrugged as though to say "What's the worse that could happen?"

*You want a list?* Jesse sighed and pulled out of the parking lot behind the venue. The Walmart was only about a five-minute drive without traffic, and there was none since all the people who earned money doing sane office jobs were sitting behind their desks. Then again, Jesse didn't have much to complain about. He loved the guys, and even though he didn't make a ton of money, he'd be miserable at a job that didn't revolve around music.

Besides, Alder and Malakai were easy to manage when they were sober. So the only one he really had to keep an eye on was Tate.

Who bolted from the van the second Jesse parked.

“What’s the rush?” Malakai shouted after the drummer, who was dodging strollers and old ladies.

Tate spun around for a split second, face red, and held up two fingers. Then he was gone.

Fair enough. There were some things you couldn’t do on the bus. Even Tate couldn’t get in trouble in the bathroom. He wasn’t a child.

But Jesse still hesitated when they passed the entrance, feeling like a parent not quite ready to let their kid out of their sight.

Alder laughed and punched him in the arm. “He’ll be fine. Come on, this will go twice as fast if we get his cookies for him before he gets to browsing.”

“Very true.” Jesse grabbed a cart, following Alder and Malakai to the food section. Halfway there, both men made a detour and grabbed some socks. A bit further and a display of DVDs caught Malakai’s eye. He stopped to check them out, picking a few new ones to kill some time on the road.

The book section was what grabbed Alder. He picked up two true crime novels; his literary drug of choice, then paused with his eye on a Game of Thrones box set. Not his style. As far as Jesse knew, only Brave had read any of the books. Just the first one actually. He’d mentioned wanting to get the others, but he hadn’t had time.

Brow furrowed, Alder picked up the set. He put it down, then picked it up again, shaking his head before tossing it in the cart.

Neither Jesse, nor Malakai, said a word. Alder and Brave had the most fucked up relationship of any siblings Jesse had ever met. He could tell they cared about one another, but it was like they were afraid to let it show.

Safest thing was to pretend not to notice.

They finally hit the snack aisle. Malakai took off to get some “Real food”, leaving Jesse and Alder to fill the cart with chips and cookies and cereal. The cookies, which were the priority, took the longest. Alder had all Tate’s favorites memorized, but the aisle was crowded. He waited patiently behind a family of seven, a tired looking mother with children ranging from newborn to thirteen. The teenage girl was the first person to recognize him, and let out a piercing scream.

Her mother looked ready to cry as her daughter leapt on Alder, babbling about how much she loved him.

“Wendy, please!” The woman grabbed her daughter’s wrist. The baby strapped up in a car seat attached to the cart began to cry. Two of the toddlers climbed onto the shelf, knocking over a dozen packages of cookies. The woman gave Jesse a helpless look. “I’m so sorry.”

“That’s quite all right.” Jesse caught one of the toddlers as he slipped off the shelf. He bent down to the kid’s level. “Wanna help me pick these up, buddy? I’ll give you a dollar?”

The little boy nodded. His—twin?—joined in while their mother picked up the hollering baby and scolded her eldest child.

To his credit, Alder had managed to gently pry Wendy’s hands off him, all while chatting with her about the band’s latest album and offering to sign something for the girl if she promised to help her mother.

Naturally, Alder didn’t have anything on him to give the girl. Or a pen.

Jesse laughed when Alder opened his wallet, looking totally lost. He took pity on the guitarist and plucked a guitar pick out of his pocket, handing it over.

Wendy took it with a big smile. She squealed when her mother found a pen in her purse. “Can you sign my bra?”

“No!” Both her mother and Alder exclaimed in unison.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Malakai asked as he ambled over, his arms full of frozen fruits and vegetables.

The scream the girl let out drew the attention of every shopper in the area.

Likely the entire store.

“Is Brave here? Please tell me Brave is here too!” Wendy latched on to Malakai’s shirt, her eyes wide. “I would do *anything* to meet him.”

Malakai tried to back away from her. “Letting me go would be a great start.”

“Excuse me, ma’am. Are they bothering you?” A heavysset man who looked like he’d walked straight out of ‘The Worst of Walmart’ strode up behind the woman, glaring at Malakai as though the bassist was some kind of predator.

Jesse wasn't sure if he should laugh or save his boys. When Malakai's eyes narrowed and the woman didn't answer—not her fault, her baby was screaming again and Jesse was pretty sure she'd lost a kid—Jesse decided they'd had enough 'fun' for one day.

He put his hand on Malakai's arm, nudged him toward the cart, and smiled at the big guy with the pizza sauce stains on his shirt. "Just a little issue with an avalanche of cookies. Wendy was about to help us pick up the rest of them." He glanced over at the teen. "Weren't you, sweetie?"

Her lips parted, her cheeks went red, and then she knelt beside her brothers to pick up the rest of the boxes. Pizza man grunted, grabbing a few boxes of sugar free cookies before storming down the aisle.

During the distraction, Alder had managed to get all Tate's favorite cookies. The woman retrieved her children, apologizing again before doing a quick head count. She went white.

"Where's Bobby?"

Jesse patted her hand. "What does he look like?"

She held up her hand to chest level, tears spilling down her cheeks. Malakai headed to the toy aisle. Alder headed to the electronics.

And Jesse stayed where he was as the woman ditched the carriage, taking only the baby as she began calling for her son and darting through the food section.

One of the kids was playing on a phone, another was sitting on the floor, talking to himself, so Jesse focused on the twins and the teen. Wendy chattered happily about everything she knew about the band. The twins tore open a box of cookies and started chowing down. He considered stopping them, but they were staying put and he had no idea of the protocol on telling someone else's kids what to do.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He checked the text.

**TATE: 911**

"Are you fucking serious?" He looked at the kids. He couldn't just leave them. So he quickly replied.

**JESSE: WHAT'S WRONG???**

No answer. His blood went cold. Tate was a lot of things, but he wasn't a drama queen. He wouldn't text something like that for nothing.

“Can you watch them?” Jesse groaned when Wendy stared at him like he was completely fucking insane. “My friend needs me.”

Her face brightened. “Brave?”

“No.”

“So he’s not here?”

“No. But you’re a big girl, right? You must help your mom sometimes?”

Wendy blinked at him as if he must be stupid. “Hell no. They’re not my kids.”

*Great.* Jesse texted Brave.

**JESSE: CAN YOU COME TO WALMART? TATE’S IN TROUBLE. I’M STUCK WITH A BUNCH OF KIDS.**

He held his breath, waiting for the reply.

**BRAVE: ALREADY HERE.**

All right, at least Tate wasn’t alone. Jesse hated not being able to help him, but what was he supposed to do? He put his hands on the handle of the shopping cart, tightening his grip until his knuckles went white.

He held his breath, waiting for the reply.

Seemed like forever before the mother returned. He inclined his head, acknowledging her thanks quickly before half running to the front of the store. With the cart. Which he left by the cash when he saw flashing red and blue lights outside.

Both Brave and Tate were sitting on the curb. Bleeding.

Jesse cursed and knelt in front of Tate, ignoring the cops who were arresting three men off to the side. “What happened?”

Tate shook his head, his whole body trembling. “I came out to bum a smoke. This dude was all like ‘You were checking out my ass!’. So I said, ‘Well yes, you’re a good looking guy.’” He wiped a trail of blood off his bottom lip. “I started going back in when he called me a fucking fag. He followed me with his buddies, so I sent a text out to you guys. He dragged me back out here and him and his friends started hitting me.”

One of Tate’s eyes was already swollen shut. He had an arm pressed to his side like he was in pain.

Jesse glanced over at the men being helped into the back of the cop car, wondering if he could make it there before the doors closed and kill the fuckers. No matter how stupid Tate had been, he didn’t deserve this.

“Hey.” Brave put his hand over the one Jesse had braced on his bent knee. “He’s gonna be all right. I handled it.”

“I shouldn’t have—”

“Jesse.” Brave’s tone dropped to the one that went straight to Jesse balls. Which was messed up, considering everything, but he had a way of bulldozing over all Jesse’s defenses. “Shit happens. Where’s Alder and Malakai?”

“Probably still looking for that kid.” Jesse ran a hand over his face. “Neither of them keep their phones on. They don’t know—”

“Go get them. Tate and I’ve gotta talk to the cops.” Brave’s lips twisted into a wry grin. “Thankfully, there are witnesses. I’m hoping we don’t get delayed. I want to bring Tate to the hospital to get checked out, but—”

“I’m fine!” Tate scowled. “I hate hospitals.”

“I know.” Brave put his arm over Tate’s shoulders. “And I don’t care. You’re going.”

*Fuck, I love this man.*

“I’ll get the guys back to the bus. Give me a call when he gets checked out?” Jesse smiled at Brave’s nod. A lot of people thought Brave was a complete asshole, but they didn’t see this side of him. The leader who took care of the band. Who was aware of everything going on with the guys, whether they were sick or depressed or just having an off day. He didn’t know all of Tate’s past, but he still kept an eye on the kid, treating him like a little brother. More so than his *actual* brother.

But the reasons for that were complicated and Jesse stayed out of it. Alder clearly didn’t need anyone, so Brave gave him space. Yeah, Alder worried about Jesse lusting after his brother, but that was because he didn’t really know the man. There was five years between them. Brave was closer to Jesse’s age at thirty, so they’d both lived enough to show the younger members of the band a few things. While Alder had been in college, getting a degree in early childhood education, Brave had been on the road with his first band, Live on Satan’s Time. Brave had once confessed he’d been a lot closer to the oldest brother in the Trousseau clan, Valor, and all his hopes and dream had ridden on LOST making it big.

Valor’s death had been tough on the whole family. Alder and Brave probably wouldn’t even speak now if they hadn’t figured out how fucking good they sounded together.

Jesse found Alder and Malakai, gave them the news, and then had to calm them down. The checkout lines were insane and by the time they got outside, the cops and Brave and Tate were gone. Jesse loaded up the groceries in the back of the van while telling the story of what had gone down in as few words as possible.

Malakai, predictably, looked like he wanted to hunt down the assholes who'd jumped Tate and dismember them. Alder didn't say much, but he was tense the whole way back to the bus. Once all the bags were unpacked and put away, he disappeared into his bunk with the curtain closed.

The crew was all done packing up the open tent and folding chairs, drivers picked for the van and the bus, and everything running right on schedule. All they had to do was wait to hear from Brave on Tate's condition.

A few hours passed. The other bands left the lot and the quiet was oppressive as night fell. Jesse perched on the edge of a picnic table behind the venue, waving the rest of the crew off when they asked if they should wait up with him. Whether it was twenty minutes or a full night, they had to grab whatever sleep they could. It was gonna be a long drive, either to the next show or back home to Detroit if they had to cut the tour short.

A cab pulled up and Jesse let out a sigh of relief as Tate stepped out of the backseat. Brave rose from the other side and his gaze locked on Jesse. Pulse stuttering at Brave's broad smile, Jesse pulled out another cigarette, knowing full well he'd regret all this chain-smoking tomorrow. He let the smoke out slowly, staring up at the clear night sky and the scattered stars that shone brightly for being so close to the city. He heard Brave approach, but didn't look at him. He needed a few seconds to raise his defenses before he faced the man.

He could deal with Brave being seductive—wasn't easy, but he'd managed for a while. But the man who'd rescued Tate was harder to resist.

"He's got a couple bruised ribs and the doctor wants him to take it easy, but Tate's got his go ahead to do whatever he wants so long as the pain's bearable."

Jesse winced, glancing over to see Brave was probably thinking the same thing he was. "Tate's got a pretty high pain threshold. Does the doctor know he's a freakin' drummer?"

"Yep." Brave sat on the table beside him. "He's been told to breath normally and not lay around too much. But get plenty of rest." His lips slanted with amusement. "He

asked if I was Tate's dad. Not sure if I should be insulted or flattered. Mom said I was born a ladies man, so who knows what I was getting into when I was nine."

Cuffing Brave shoulder with the back of his hand, Jesse made a face. "That's sick, man."

"It really is, isn't it?" Brave's brow furrowed slightly. "I don't want to cancel the show tomorrow, but I won't let the kid hurt himself worse. He might have trouble sleeping tonight. I'm gonna take a shift behind the wheel if that's all right?"

"That's fine." Jesse dropped his half smoked cigarette and crushed it under his heel. They might as well head out. He'd planned to drive the bus through the night, but sharing the duty would be a hell of a lot better. "I guess I can crash in one of the empty bunks."

Brave shook his head. "They're all full of junk. You can sleep in my bed."

"No." Jesse wet his lips, trying to keep his tone light as he turned to see Brave frowning at him. "I'm not up for this tonight, Brave. The kid got hurt on my watch. Even if I didn't give a shit about being used, I'm not in the mood."

Before he could reach the door, Brave fisted his hands in Jesse's shirt and pushed him against the side of the bus. He held him there, breathing hard, bringing his lips close to Jesse's.

"I don't know where you got the fucking idea in your head that I just want to use you." Brave pressed against him, brushing his scruffy cheek against Jesse's smooth one as he whispered. "Being around you drives me fucking insane."

Swallowing hard, Jesse nodded. "You're used to getting what you want."

"Yeah, I am. And you're a challenge." Brave rested his forehead on Jesse's shoulder. "But that's not why I can't stop thinking about you. I wanna prove you wrong. I wanna prove I can have something good and not fuck it up."

Defenses completely wrecked, Jesse fisted his hand in Brave's hair, jerking him back enough to look into his eyes. What he saw there sealed his fate. He inhaled roughly and nodded. "Okay."

Brave blinked at him, his lips splitting into that heartbreaking smile he wore so well. "That mean you won't turn away if I try to kiss you?"

With a soft laugh, Jesse closed the distance between them, brushing Brave's lips with his own in a soft kiss. "That's what it means."

Claiming his lips, Brave tasted him with the same wild abandon he had for everything he was passionate about. The pressure of his lips, his grip on Jesse's shirt, the way he moved his body, all showed Jesse the lust he'd been holding back. His attempts at seduction had been cautious before, but now they'd come in full force.

Not ready to go all in, Jesse drew away, gentling the kiss as he cupped Brave's face in his hands, taking in the flavor of honey and ginger and smoke. Brave's lips were hot, but his cheeks were cool under Jesse's palms. The night was cold for October in Ohio. The last thing they needed was Brave getting sick on top of Tate being injured.

He could go on kissing Brave all night, but instead, he let his hands fall to his sides and grinned. "Don't hate me, but we gotta go."

"I couldn't." Brave gave his head a rough shake, then laughed. "Hate you I mean. But you're right. Do you want me to drive first, or—"

"You check on Tate. I've got this." Jesse hesitated, running his hand over Brave's tousled hair before forcing himself to move. He got on the bus and immediately noticed Alder, sitting at the table in the front lounge, ear buds in his ears and a pad of paper set up where he was jotting down music notes.

As Brave went to the bunks to check on Tate, Jesse stepped to Alder's side and waited until he looked up. He wasn't sure what to say. Wasn't sure if he should say anything.

But one glance at Jesse and it was like Alder knew everything. His lips thinned and he let out a heavy sigh.

"I'll be fine." Jesse wasn't sure why he needed to explain, but he did. And he was desperate for Alder to understand. "You can say 'I told you so' if I'm wrong. But I don't think you'll have to."

Alder set his black pencil down on the paper, rubbing at the graphite smeared on the side of his left hand. "I'd never say that, Jesse. If he can make you happy..." He pressed his eyes shut. "That's all I want for you. You deserve to be happy."

"I am." Jesse said it without thinking. And realized it was true. He'd been waiting to see if the risk was worth putting his heart in Brave's hands. Now, he truly believed it was.

Smiling, Alder took a firm hold of his hand. "Then go for it. But don't forget, I'm here."

Jesse turned his hand to squeeze Alder's. "I've never doubted that, man. I love you."

With a rough inhale, Alder nodded. "I love you too."



## Chapter Two

Screaming and singing were very very different. Danica Tallien sat in her hotel room in Vegas, listening to the playlist her agent had sent her. Everything from hard rock to death metal. Some of the music was like a little man in leather and metal studs cracking the inside of her skull with a pickaxe, but she listened anyway. She couldn't very well dive into the metal culture if she'd never listened to the music. This was kind of like studying the guest list before a party attended by the most influential fashion designers in the industry.

*Only, a bit more fun.*

A couple of bands had her relaxing and bobbing her head, taking in the complicated riffs and the deep, tri-tones that made the hairs rise on the back of her neck. For these songs even the screams added another layer, like a different range of the instrument a voice was supposed to be. The way the lyrics were snarled and growled made the lead singer sound like an animal. A beast barely under control, restrained only by the message in the aggressive music.

She could picture herself in the pit, jumping and cheering and punching her fist in the air along with the crowds who worshipped these bands. The very idea of being caught in the middle of all those bodies slamming together was invigorating. And terrifying. But so was this whole insane plan to change her image for the media.

Bullet came on and Danica smiled. She'd loved them for a while, even though she tended to stick with lighter pop tunes. Singing along, she finished touching up her makeup. The threatening headache faded away and she was able to listen to the next song without wanting to throw her iPod across the room. She didn't know the words to this one, but it was good. She checked her iPod for the name of the band. Her pulse sped up and she nibbled on her bottom lip.

Winter's Wrath, one of the bands she'd be meeting at the after party tonight. She was excited to see them live on stage, but hanging out in the private area reserved for VIPs was a completely different story. And it wasn't like she could just show up and hang out.

She had to be noticed.

Tightening her jaw, she gave a firm nod and looked down at her tight black jeans, stylishly ripped, and her black 'Merete' Wornstar t-shirt which had cuts in the material of the

arms, back, and along the bottom edge. More the type of shirt you'd see on stage than in the crowd, but she couldn't blend in too much. Her waist-length, dark brown hair fell in loose waves, tumbling over her shoulders, held away from her face on one side with three rows of tight braids. Not too revealing, but not cutesy.

She didn't look like the little girl who'd done commercials and modeled kid's clothes for companies like J Crew and DNKY. No one would recognize her as the child who'd had backup roles in a couple of shows.

Those accomplishments filled her portfolio. And the experiences were fond memories, but had ended up hurting her career as an adult. She didn't have the edgy appeal so many designers were looking for.

*But that will change. Tonight.*

After lacing up her beige heels, she grabbed her purse, double checked for her room key, and strode out. She had about two hours left before the concert started and she needed to grab a bite to eat. Probably takeout in her car, because she wasn't in the mood to be gawked at. One would figure there were enough hot women in Vegas that guys wouldn't even notice anymore, but they did. And many forgot their manners under the bright lights of sin city.

Halfway down Tropicana, on her way to the little In and Out burger joint on the edge of town, there was a loud *Pop!* The steering wheel jerked in her hands. She bit into her cheek, tightening her grip to hold the wheel steady as she accelerated slightly to regain control. She eased off the gas, cruised into the other lane, then pulled off the road in front of a closed office complex.

All those lessons and warnings from her grandfather when he'd taught her to drive when she was sixteen had seemed excessive at the time. Now? Damn, she loved that man. He'd be so proud.

Even more so if she used the other skills he'd taught her.

She'd changed tires for friends before—guys and girls—so it didn't take long before she had the spare secured in place. And aside from a bit of dust, she managed not to get dirty.

It wasn't until she had her food and was chewing a huge mouthful of the fully loaded burger—her agent would kill her if she caught her eating all this cheese and bacon—that she noticed one of her acrylic nails was broken.

*Damn it!* She stared at the stupid nail, which with its one little flaw, screwed up her entire schedule.

When she was a kid, chicks freaking over a broken nail used to make her laugh. As she got older, and started modeling, she learned to treat her appearance like a valuable asset. Her grandfather hadn't had the money to put her through acting classes. He'd helped her pay for a modeling portfolio and she'd repaid him shortly after she'd done her first commercial. Then she got a small part in a TV movie, playing the Native American friend of a girl in an early settlement town in California.

Once she hit her late teens, both modeling jobs and even callbacks for commercial auditions lessened. Her grandfather had his first stroke when she was eighteen, so she'd ditched her plans to move out of Bay Mills, Michigan and head to New York where she'd thought all her dreams would come true.

She didn't regret not going though. Half the models in places like New York and Los Angeles ended up working as waitresses and barmaids. Staying home, she'd helped her grandfather get healthy, found a job at the local boutique, and built a pretty decent online platform. Between her job, and the money her grandfather made working part time at the casino, they hadn't done too bad at first.

Unexpected things, like her car breaking down, the roof of their house needing repairs, and a pipe bursting in the basement, threw them from living comfortably to struggling to pay for the barest necessities. Her grandfather wanted to take on more hours, but she was so afraid he'd push himself too hard again. She couldn't lose him; he was the only family she had left.

An offer of representation from the talent agency, Diverse Faces, came a few days after she turned twenty-one. Like some kind of angel, Sophie stepped in, finding her several high paying photo-shoots, which brought in enough to pay the bills. Danica had to quit her job to keep up with all the traveling, and she hated leaving her grandfather, but he wouldn't let her stay. He'd been almost as excited as she'd been at her getting back to doing what she loved.

Two years later and Danica had an amazing career. One she was proud of. But Sophie believed Danica could do even more. She wanted to get Danica in front of the 'right people'.

The contract she'd signed was very strict about maintaining her figure, as well as how polished and respectable she had to appear in public. Which was funny, considering what Sophie had asked her to do. Either way, Danica felt a little guilty about the burger, since she knew her dietitian wouldn't have approved this much red meat in a week, never mind one meal. And if she gained weight, there'd be some explaining to do. Sophie would question how serious she was about her future as a model.

So yeah, no way was she going anywhere with her nails messed up.

Finishing up the last, delicious bite, Danica Googled nail salons near the venue. The show was happening at the Hard Rock Hotel. There was a salon a couple of blocks away with great reviews.

She still had enough time if she hurried, so she headed out, pleased to find the salon was off the strip and not too busy. She had her nail fixed within twenty minutes and left a nice tip to the sweet lady who didn't speak a word of English.

Hitting the sidewalk outside, she smiled as the sun slipped behind a few of the taller hotels, giving her a break from the blinding light. It was still warm out, but nowhere as bad as she'd expected. Then again, it was almost November. Sophie, who'd been born and raised in Vegas, had told her it actually got cold here.

Danica would have to see it to believe it.

Turning to get back to her car, which she'd left in a small parking garage, she almost ran into a man that was standing in front of the salon, staring at it with the same dread one might have before going into the emergency room of a hospital. He looked down at something fisted in his hand, then sighed and took a step forward.

Then took a step back, spun around, almost slamming right into her.

"Shit." He put his hand on her arm to steady her. "Sorry about that."

She smiled at him, trying to see past the long, black hair falling over half of his face. "That's all right. Are you waiting for someone?"

He shook his head. "No, I...have to go in."

"*For...?*" She bit back a smile as he ducked his head. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a presence she'd noticed in some of the most talented actors she'd come across in the business. The ones the camera loved, who you wanted to be near, but whose art meant more to them than all the glamour, fame, and money.

His hands were rough for an actor though. She noticed them as he held one up, showing her nails with chipped black polish. His fingertips were strangely calloused. He worked hard, whatever he did.

He pushed enough hair away from his face for her to see his sheepish smile. “Tate usually does them for me—I suck at it. I’m kinda avoiding him today, so I got to find another way to fix ‘em. They look like shit.” His brow furrowed. “Sorry. I swear too much.”

“You’re fine.” She noticed he had something clenched tight in his other hand. “Did you bring your own polish?”

“Paint.” He laughed when she arched a brow at him. Opening his hand, he showed her the bottle, which had the words ‘ManGlaze’ and ‘Matte is Murder’ on the label. “My brother calls it ‘nail paint’. Supposed to be more manly or something.”

She shrugged. “So I’m guessing you’re not comfortable going to a salon. Not manly?”

“It’s not that, it’s just...” He shook his head and grinned. Damn, he had a nice smile. A quick flash of white teeth, with warmth that reached all the way to his dark brown eyes. “Okay, it’s that. My manager has these rules and I’m not sure if I’m breaking them by getting a manicure.”

“I completely understand. How about you don’t take a chance and come with me.” She continued up the sidewalk, glancing over when he hurried to keep up. “I keep an emergency nail kit in my car. Not enough to help me with a broken acrylic wrap, but I can take care of your nails if you want.”

He didn’t speak until they reached her car. Bracing his hip on the hood, he waited while she fetched her small kit from the backseat. “I appreciate this, but it wasn’t really smart of you to bring some strange guy to your car. What if I was dangerous?”

Chuckling, she hopped up on the hood and pulled at his hand until he let her set it on her knee. Pulling on a pair of disposable gloves to protect her nails, she wet a cotton ball with some acetone and went to work on cleaning the thick layer of polish.

“If you’re a dangerous guy using your nails to get me alone, props for creativity.” She laughed and peeked up at him. “I’m armed and my grandpa taught me how to defend myself. There’s no way he’d let me come down to Vegas otherwise.”

“So you’re not from here?”

“No, I grew up near Bay Mills, Michigan.” She held her tongue between her teeth as she finished with his pinkie. “My grandfather owns some land right off the reservation.”

“Oh...” The man looked confused. “I didn’t think many... Fuck, I don’t know enough to say shit. Never mind.”

She put the cotton balls in a small waste bag in her kit, then took the ‘nail paint’ from him. “He inherited it from a man he worked for since he was a teen. An opportunity not many have, but there are good people out there.”

“I know.” He held still as she began painting his nails. “You just hear a lot about land disputes with the...Native Americans?”

She cocked her head, not sure why she couldn’t stop smiling at this guy. “You’re really caught up in being PC, aren’t you? Yes, you can call us that and there are issues. I’m luckier than most. My grandfather raised me, made sure I got a good education and still experienced traditional stuff. I even know some Ojibwe, but I’m not as fluent as I’d like to be. I take classes when I’m home long enough.”

“He didn’t teach you?”

“He couldn’t. He went to boarding school.” She swallowed as her throat tightened. They needed to change the subject. Grandpa’s stories of his education weren’t pleasant. “What about you? You mentioned a manager. Are you an actor?”

“Something like that.” He watched her carefully stroking the brush over his nails. “Is it shitty of me to not want to tell you much? Talking to you like a normal person is kinda nice.”

Letting out a soft laugh, she nodded. “I get it. I’m usually just a pretty face.”

“Really?”

Her eyes widened. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Withdrawing his hands, he held them up. Which was funny considering how careful he was with them. “I’m not saying you’re not pretty. You’re gorgeous. Stunning. I’ve never met a more beautiful woman in—”

Smacking his arm, she reached for his wrist so she could get started on the second coat. “Shut up. I don’t believe a fucking word.”

“I meant you’re easy to talk to. And nice. And smart.” His smile was all charm now. “Forgive me?”

“I’ll think about it.” She realized they were smiling at each other like a couple of idiots and turned her focus back to his nails. Being near him, touching him, didn’t trigger the instincts she had fine-tuned to men who were just looking to get laid. There was no stupid-making spark between them either, which would have brought her guard up. She felt light. Happy. She could imagine drawing out these moments with him to hours, even days, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Except she was here for work and she didn’t have days to make new friends. Or even hours today. Her last runway job had made her enough to buy her some time, but she needed to land a decent contract before she could allow for any distractions.

Finishing his last nail, she closed the bottle and handed it back to him, checking the time on her phone. “I’ve got tickets to a concert, so I have to go. Let your nails dry for about twenty minutes and you should be fine.”

“Thanks.” He leaned over to look at her phone. “Shit. The concert’s in less than an hour?”

“Yeah?” She studied his face, which was drawn with worry. “Are you going too?”

“Yep.”

“Hard Rock?”

He nodded. “And I kinda walked here. I’ll never make it in time.”

She smirked. “Need a lift?”

Exhaling noisily, he grinned at her. “I owe you. When my nails are dry, I’ll give you my number. You can text me when you’ve got time to go out? Maybe get a coffee or something?”

“Maybe.” She hopped off the hood and opened the passenger side door for him. Once she was behind the wheel, she caught him awkwardly trying to put on his seatbelt and chuckled. “Let me get that.”

Leaning over him, she had to fight not to press closer. He was solid, all muscle under his black t-shirt. He held very, very still as she drew the strap over his chest. She forced herself to start the car without teasing him for acting all nervous. They were both in a hurry. If he was going to the same concert, maybe he’d be at the after party. She wasn’t supposed to be ‘seen with’ actors—especially those she didn’t recognize, putting them on the same undistinguished level as her—but she’d like to spend more time with him.

“You mind if I put on some music?” She cursed herself as the words left her mouth. Since when did she ask? Unless her grandfather was in the car, she played whatever she wanted. Which, for the longest time, was modern country music.

He lifted his shoulder in a distracted shrug. “Go ahead.”

At a red light, she plugged in her iPod, starting over the last song she’d been listening to. She bopped her head to the music, checking once to see if the heavy sound bothered the man. His face reddened, and the second their eyes met, he turned to stare out the window.

As soon as she pulled into the parking by the hotel, the man reached for his pocket, then gave her a questioning look. She nodded. His nails should be dry.

“Damn it.” As soon as he had his phone out, his face lost all color. “I gotta go, but...maybe I’ll see you inside?”

“I hope so.” Not at all what she’d wanted to say, but he’d already taken off running. She rested her hip on the side of her car, giving herself a minute to regain her composure.

She’d met hotter guys. Men who graced the covers of magazines. Fitness models with bulging muscles and athletes doing their first centerfold. Many of them had hit on her, but she rarely got involved because this was her career and she wasn’t about to fuck it up with all the drama involved in relationships with men whose egos were their first love.

Come to think of it, she hadn’t gone on a real date in almost two years. Which meant she hadn’t been enjoying much down and dirty fun since...ugh, no way was she going to start thinking about her first boyfriend. They’d been high school sweethearts. He’d gotten a scholarship to play football. Been drafted before he graduated. Having a pretty girl on his arm—AKA *her*—had been great until he gained a few fans. Then Danica was in the way.

He’d been her first and her last. She’d been heartbroken for a while, but Grandpa had set her straight. No boy was worth losing all she’d worked for. The distraction had lost her a few auditions. She’d gotten drunk once and that was the only time Grandpa had ever lost patience with her.

Understandable, considering he’d lost his daughter, Danica’s mother, to alcohol poisoning when Danica was just a baby. And it wasn’t a secret that many on the reserve turned to alcohol when life seemed hopeless.

Not that Danica didn’t drink, but never when she was stressed or depressed. And she refused to let herself forget all her grandfather had done for her. She wouldn’t risk her future for anything or anyone.

About twenty minutes later, she handed over her ticket and made her way to the front of the stage. Since she had a VIP ticket, there was a gated off area that she had access to, but the pressing crowd made her nervous, so she stuck close to the edge where she could clearly see the security in their yellow shirts.

The first band didn't seem to excite anyone, even though she thought they were pretty good. A few feet away from her some teenage girls wearing Winter's Wrath t-shirts took selfies and flirted with security, each loudly trying to one-up the other with their knowledge of heavy metal bands. One pulled down the collar of her shirt to show off a tattooed signature. She swore Randy Taylor had signed her boob after fucking her. Her exact words.

Randy Taylor was in his forties. The girl *might* be sixteen. Danica doubted very much the well-known singer and author would even go there. She'd seen some of his interviews while getting familiar with the metal scene and he seemed like a smart guy. Messed up, but smart.

Considering how many guys had claimed to have fucked *her*, Danica didn't give the girl's claims any credit. Actually, she felt a little sick listening to some of these chicks talk about the guys. Two of the teens mentioned wanting to 'rape' Brave Trousseau. Because, yeah, that was cool.

Danica had never felt more out of place. She moved closer to a group of ladies that looked to be in their thirties. They weren't that much more into the opening band than the rest of the crowd, but they seemed normal enough. One looked over at Danica and smiled.

"Hey, sweetie. Are you here alone?"

Danica nodded, her cheeks heating as the five older women surrounded her. "I was in the area, and I've heard some of Horizon's music, so I figured I'd check it out."

"Nice! And they put on an awesome show." The woman glanced around at the others. "Drinks on me! Hurry up, because I don't want to miss our boys!" She took orders from all the ladies, then turned to Danica. "Do you want something?"

"A rum and coke would be great." Danica reached into her purse for her wallet.

The woman shook her head. "It's on me. We're all authors, except for a couple of *amazing* readers that came to hang out." She pointed at two of the women. "After a few, we may start telling you crazy stories about the people in our heads. If you can put up with us, you deserve a drink or two."

Being around these women put Danica at ease. Her face was hot from blushing as the authors gave her a few details about their books when the band took a short break, but she'd taken a few names down in the notes on her phone to look up later. She'd never read the kind of books these ladies wrote, but she had a feeling she was missing out.

The author buying all the drinks, whose name she learned was Melanie Marchande, wrote about sexy billionaires. She was wearing an emerald corset and a long black skirt and had such a confident presence Danica found herself hanging on to her every word.

Until Winter's Wrath took the stage. The first strum of the guitar and the screams around her became deafening. All chatter stopped. Every head turned to the stage.

Danica let herself be pushed in tight with the crowd. Everyone else was throwing up devil horns, so she followed their lead.

But once her eyes hit the stage, she dropped her arm and pressed a hand over her mouth. The guitarist, the one starting the riff for a song she'd listened to for the first time today, whipped his head back to throw his long black hair over one shoulder. His fingers, with freshly painted black nails, moved in a blur over the fret board.

No wonder they'd been such a mess.

The woman at her side nudged her. Melanie grinned and pointed at the guitarist, practically shouting to be heard over the music. "Alder Trousseau. One of the best guitarists in the business. I'm trying to get in touch with his people to get him on a cover."

Danica nodded, not sure what to say. She tried to let the music absorb her, but she couldn't take her eyes off Alder. He'd changed since they'd sat together on the hood of her car, now wearing tight black jeans and a black dress shirt with the sleeves ripped off. The buttons weren't going to make it through the show. The second he'd picked up his guitar, a few had popped open, baring half his chest.

She would have been fine with their encounter being nothing but a fond memory. Granted, she might have wondered what would have happened if she hadn't brushed him off. If she'd given him her number and told him to call. But life would have gone on.

This changed everything. He was one of the very people she was supposed to be seen with. There was no way she could avoid him at the after party. Not that she wanted to.

But she couldn't be all casual now. Flirting and hoping for a photo opp. He'd become a real person. He'd treated her like one. When she saw him at the after party, could

she play fast and loose and treat him like a complete stranger? The alternative was letting the photographers catch her with him. Which she wouldn't do.

Not without telling him why she was really here.

*He didn't tell you who he was. You don't owe him anything.*

True.

*Actually, he owes you.*

Very true.

After a few songs, the lead singer picked up the microphone and stared out over the crowd. An evil smile spread across his lips. "I'd ask you how you're doing, but we're in fucking Vegas! Are we ready to go fucking wild?"

The crowd screamed. The teens Danica had escaped could be heard over the rest crying out to the singer—who Melanie told her was Brave Trousseau—about how much they wanted him. He blew the girls a kiss.

"I'm sure a few of you will recognize this song, but I need to see you moving!" He put down the mic and put his hands together before him, then spread them wide. The crowd parted like the red sea and the drummer began to pound out a familiar beat, joined by the bassist. "If you don't know what's going on, get the fuck out of the way!"

Several men stayed in the cleared out area, some pacing, some bouncing in place. One did a flip, then gestured like he wanted the surrounding crowd to come at him.

Melanie backed Danica right into the guardrail. Laughing, she looked over her shoulder. "Stay right there! Things might get a little rough!"

"Wait... Wait... Wait..." Brave growled into the mic. "Go!"

The song began and the throng ran to meet in the center, all those not joining in pressing back to avoid flailing bodies. Danica had to fight to tear her eyes away from the violent scene so she could watch the show on stage. Brave threw his body to the very edge of the stage, his gritty screams making the words of the song nearly incoherent, but that didn't seem to matter to anyone. The temperature rose as Danica found herself moving to the music, bobbing her head in time to the aggressive rhythm, and by the time the second song ended, her hair was sticking to the sweat on her skin.

The drumbeat stopped suddenly and both Brave and Alder turned their backs on the crowd. Silence spread around the venue as the bassist dropped his guitar and ran to the

drum kit. A low thrum of unease spread around her, and she bit her bottom lip as the rhythm guitarist stepped up to Alder's side. Alder nodded and picked up the mic.

"Those of you who follow us online know some shit went down last week. At *Walmart*." He gave the crowd that same sheepish smile he'd given her earlier. A few people laughed, but the low murmurs were full of concern. "Tate's toughed it out for the last few shows, but now he needs to listen to the fucking doctor and get some rest. What do you think?"

The crowd roared and a chant started. "Tate! Tate! Tate!"

"That's what I thought." Alder glanced over as a roadie helped the drummer off the stage. The drummer gave the crowd a parting thumbs up. Alder inclined his head at his young band mate. "His buddy, Derrick, is the drum tech and he's got some mad skills. We'll probably lose him to another band before long, but you wanna see what he can do while we've still got him?"

By the deafening response, the crowd approved. From the side of the stage, a teen with messy, bleach blond hair wearing a black *Winter's Wrath* t-shirt ambled over to the drums, giving a shy wave halfway there.

Brave took the mic from his brother, a wicked smile on his lips. "That boy's so getting laid tonight. Am I right, ladies?"

All the women in the crowd screamed in accord.

The woman standing beside Danica, another author whose name she was pretty sure was Sasha White, leaned close. "Total sub. Not my type, but if I ever write a *Domme*, she could so teach that boy a few things."

Danica's cheeks were blazing. She ducked her head. "I swear, you all could find inspiration anywhere."

"Absolutely." Sasha grinned at her. "The way you're looking at the guitarist is definitely going in a book."

Thankfully, the band started playing before Danica had to make some lame-assed protest. The fans didn't seem to notice the new drummer didn't have the unique sound of the man he'd replaced. Then again, the guitarists were giving it their all, lengthening their solos and pulling off some crazy antics that drove the fans wild. The rhythm guitarist swung his guitar around his neck, never missing a note. The bassist dropped to his knees during

Alder's solo, curving his hands around the back of Alder's thighs as Alder threw his head back and thrust his hips.

Of all the things Danica had fantasized about, two guys hadn't really hit her radar. But watching the men toss all sexual restraints aside changed that. She covered her mouth with her hand when Brave grabbed the bassist by his hair and bit the side of his neck.

Shoving Brave, Alder growled something his mic didn't catch. The bassist stood between them, smiling at the crowd as he continued to play. Brave didn't miss a beat as he roared into the mic, but Danica caught the absence of Alder's vicious riffs. They returned so quickly, she might have imagined the slip, but part of her wondered if the animosity was completely staged.

After Winter's Wrath finished their set, the group of authors and readers asked Danica to join them at the bar. She went, not as drawn to the music with the next band as she had been with 'their boys'. She chatted with the women for a while, downing a couple more rum and cokes before asking the bartender for a water so she didn't get wasted. As much fun as she was having, this was still part of her job and the night was only beginning.

The attention of the women around her shifted and she turned to see what they were all looking at. She took a gulp of her water as her mouth went dry. A door at the other end of the bar had swung open and several members of the band came out. First was the bassist, with the drummer who looked a little pale, and was moving slowly. He covered his mouth as he coughed and the bassist patted his back, gesturing to the bartender.

"Can you fix my boy a hot toddy?" He watched the drummer sit on a stool, then leaned on the bar. "One more night, Tate. If you're not better by tomorrow, you're going back to the hospital."

Tate muttered thanks to the bartender as a steaming mug was placed in front of him. "I'll be fine. Just lost my breath a bit." He took a sip and grimaced. "Ugh, this is nasty. Can't I just have a shot of whiskey?"

"Nope. Drink up."

The rest of the guys joined them, all focused on the youngest member of the band. Danica tried to follow the hushed conversation of the other women, but she couldn't shift her gaze from Alder. He looked so worried; she wanted to go hug him. And then hug Tate—very carefully, considering the way he pressed his hand to his side and cringed.

Handing out hugs. Yep, that would be the *perfect* way to approach them.

Alder put his arm over Tate's shoulders. "You need to get checked out. I'll go with you. Won't be that bad."

"Will you guys lay off already? Malakai's been on my case since you got off the damn stage. Bad enough I needed to be fucking replaced during the fucking show." He tipped the mug to his lips, his throat working as he swallowed fast. "I'm not missing the after party because you all wanna play mommy. Like it or not, I'm getting my freak on tonight. YOLO, bitches."

Brave groaned and waived the bartender over. "I need a drink. You promise to never say that again and you can do whatever you want."

Once they were all served, the guys changed the subject, discussing everything from their next album to how they planned to spend the next few days in Vegas. Danica found it easier to pay attention to the authors brainstorming than listen in on how many strippers the band planned to fuck. She did notice Alder wasn't taking part in the conversation, but there was no way she could casually go over and say 'Hi' now. There were groupies hovering, waiting for their chance to pounce, and Danica refused to be counted among them.

Did that make her stuck up? Maybe, but she'd been conditioned for years to focus on appearances, physical and otherwise. Kinda funny, considering how her perceived appearance would change if all went well tonight. Either way, her best bet would be to wait for the right opening.

"You're not gonna find what you want at the after party, Tate. And Cole would have your head." Alder exchanged a look with Malakai that Danica couldn't read. "Come on, there's a place not too far you might like."

A nod from Tate and Alder led the way out the exit by the bar.

Danica sighed. So much for that plan.

*Looks like I'll be attending the after party all on my own.*

Hitting on strange men and hoping they didn't expect too much. She'd been telling the truth about knowing how to defend herself, and she'd had to prove it in the past, but rather than worrying about fending off horny guys, she'd been looking forward to spending time with Alder.

She hadn't known him when this had all started though, so really, nothing had changed.

Except the twinge of disappointment that didn't fade as the headlining band finished their set and it was time for her to leave her new friends with a promise to connect online. She made her way to the Vanity Nightclub, which had been taken over by the bands, allowing entry to only those with special passes—like the one she had. After showing the bouncer her card, she slipped in, happy that she'd at least managed to get here before the crowds.

Choosing a corner booth so she could observe before she dove in, she ordered a stiff drink and settled in, doing her best to look relaxed.

She had a feeling if Alder had been here, she wouldn't have had to pretend.

## Chapter Three

The Piranha Nightclub was definitely the most colorful club Alder had ever been to. Dropping the cash for the bottle service that would get them into the VIP section, he followed the server through the lounge lined, outdoor patio, up to their private table in the skyboxes with Tate on his heel. Theatre smoke drifted around them as they made their way up the stairs, heavy technopop pounding an irritating beat that made him wonder how long he could put up with being here.

A few drinks and five minutes of Tate doing his thing on the dance floor should give them some good prospects. If Tate hit it off with some guy, they could bring him to the after party. And then whatever Tate decided to do with the guy in his room was his business.

Maybe.

*Unlikely.*

Serving himself and Tate some rum and coke from the supplies on the table, Alder studied the younger man. Tate had been pretty open about wanting to experience all kinds of wild sex with men, women, and maybe a combination of the two. The kid wasn't a virgin, but how much of his talk was just that? Even now, he held his glass to his lips and stared at the crowd on the edge of the balcony overlooking the dance floor in horrified wonder. There was no telling if it was because of the blatant sexuality displayed between the men, or simple inexperience. Either way, he was in *way* over his head.

Good thing they weren't downstairs.

If Alder let Tate take off with some guy, Malakai would kill him. No doubt about it. The rest of the band might jokingly treat Tate like a little brother, but the bassist seriously considered him family.

Not that Alder would let anything happen to Tate, but it was hard to figure out how much supervision the kid needed. His brothers never gave two shits where he disappeared to when they used to hit the clubs together. Valor, the eldest, had always hooked up with some chick early in the night. Then kept her around to show off before taking her home. Brave liked a bit of a challenge, so he'd work the crowd, looking for the first guy or girl that wasn't tripping over themselves to get with him.

Alder had done all right, but he didn't have Tate's messed up past. What if someone offered Tate drugs? What if...?

*Bringing him out was fucking brilliant. What was the plan again?*

Well, avoiding fucking the kid himself just to shut him up was part of it. Rejecting Tate's teasing advances was starting to feel like kicking a puppy. Because he knew exactly why Tate reached out to him, why Tate had decided to open up to him about the urges that had become more than curiosity.

Tate slept around almost as much as Brave did, but he was sweet to the groupies he messed with. A few of them he'd actually met online and still kept in touch with. If anyone was getting used, it was Tate. But cute little college girls and cougars would only break Tate's heart.

Men could do some serious physical damage. Tate had spent the last three years with either the band, or venue security, shielding him from the rowdy metal fans. Safe behind his drum kit, he didn't even make contact with the nuts in the pit. Alder wasn't sure the drummer could even throw a punch.

"We don't have to stay if you don't want, Alder." Tate refilled his glass, staring at the ice floating around the fizzing Coke as he cleared his throat. "It was cool of you to bring me here, but I know you hate this kinda music, and there's too many people and—"

"Tate." Alder smiled when Tate looked up. The mix of eagerness and fear in the younger man's eyes made his mind up for him. "We're here for a few days. Maybe you meet someone, maybe you don't. You've got a better chance here than at a gig."

Tonguing his bottom lip, Tate eyed the group of men closest to their table. He blushed and dropped his gaze when several gave him appreciative glances. "Am I looking for someone just to fuck me though? Like, aren't I supposed to wear something special to make it obvious I'm...available?"

"First of all, I can't tell you what you're looking for, kid. Second, no one's gonna think you're available if you're sitting here next to me." Alder leaned back, propped his ankle on his knee, and made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Go dance."

"You afraid people will think I'm yours?" The fear disappeared as Tate gave him a slow, provocative smile. "You know, this would be a whole lot simpler if you'd just—"

“No, Tate.” Alder rolled his eyes, reaching out to snatch Tate’s glass before the boy got *too much* liquid courage. “Keep it up and I’ll tell the first guy that asks about you that you’re a top.”

“What if I *am* a top?”

Alder snorted.

Tate gave him the finger, but he managed to get to the railing without any more stalling. Resting his hands on the barrier of the skybox, he began to sway a little to the music, transfixed on what he saw below. According to what Alder had been told about the club, the Go-Go boys were probably down there. Yet another thing Tate hadn’t experienced.

It didn’t take long before Tate lost his uncharacteristic shyness and started moving in a way that was gonna get guys stuffing bills in his waistband. Shimmying low, he worked his hips in a slow thrust as he rose, lifting the bottom of his shirt to bare his tight abs, showing off the cut lines of his pelvis as he shoved his jeans down an extra inch. He ran one hand over the solid length pressing against his zipper and his eyes drifted shut.

A man slid onto the bench at Alder’s side. Alder gave him a bored look.

“He’s something else.” The man, built like a bear with a shaved head and thick arms that could snap Tate like a twig, watched Tate with a dark, predatory look in his eyes. “If he was mine, there’s no way I’d let him put on a show like that.”

Pulling out a pack of smokes, Alder took his time lighting one, then shrugged. “He’s happier when I don’t keep him on a short leash.”

“Yeah?” The man scratched his clean-shaven jaw. “So...do you let him play? I’ve got a boy. Cute like him. Wouldn’t mind lending him to you for a couple hours.”

The man pointed at a preppy young blond with pale skin and big eyes. He was cute, in a clean-cut, jean ironing kinda way. Brave would have taken the deal in a second, even though Tate wasn’t his to trade off.

But Alder wasn’t his brother.

“Sorry man, but I’m possessive.” Alder let the smoke out between his lips slowly, hoping the dude didn’t press the issue. As confident as he was in his fighting skills, this guy was built like a damn dump truck. He could run Alder down without breaking a sweat. And he’d have to, because Alder wasn’t letting him anywhere near Tate if he was still standing.

The man simply grunted. “Not that I blame you, but...*damn*. You’re one lucky man.”

After the big guy left, another shortly took his place. Sleazy-looking creep. Tate wouldn't have liked him. Or the one after, who knocked over Alder's drink and smelled like tequila and ass.

Finally, a man that looked close to Tate's age approached Tate, rather than Alder. Alder sat forward as Tate stopped dancing and the two started chatting. The man was only a bit taller than Tate, wearing a snug grey tank top that showed off some damn tight arms. He probably played some kind of sport. He had an earnest smile and he wasn't being pushy, just showing interest.

So when Tate brought him back to the table, Alder decided not to scare him off. Or pretend Tate was already taken.

"This is Mitch." Tate practically bounced onto the padded bench, grinning like a moron when Mitch slid in beside him. "He only listens to country music and he plays baseball. He can't believe I never watched a game. He asked if I was from Canada."

Alder chuckled, holding out his hand to shake Mitch's. "Nice to meet you."

"Tate says you work together?" Mitch's brow rose, as though he was silently asking if there was more between them. "He was pretty vague."

"He would be, but yes. We're coworkers."

"And you're leaving here to go to a party?"

*Really?* Alder glanced over at Tate. The vagueness made sense, if Tate didn't want his new friend treating him like some kind of celebrity, but there was no way to keep that secret while schmoozing with some of the biggest names in the industry. Bands that had performed all week had hung around for the party, so the guest list was pretty impressive. One of the reasons Alder didn't want to miss it completely.

"Nothing much is happening now, but we could drop in after..." Tate bit his bottom lip. "Umm, well, Mitch invited us to his place for a couple of drinks."

*Us?* That was...unexpected. Alder arched a brow at Mitch, whose cheeks immediately went red. Was this Tate's idea? If it was, then Alder could provide some awkward backup until the kid was comfortable, then ghost out when things got hot and heavy.

Alder checked the time on his phone. "Yeah, I guess we could swing by. Have a drink and you can get changed if you want."

“Me?” Mitch looked down at his clothes, then at Tate and Alder, who were both wearing black jeans and black dress shirts, Tate’s with the sleeves ripped off. “What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“Nothing, Alder’s being a fucking snob.” Tate shot Alder a dirty look, leaning close to Mitch to whisper in his ear. “I think you’re perfect.”

*I hope these two fuck quick.* Alder suppressed the urge to gag as Mitch put his arm around Tate’s waist and whispered something back to him. *Otherwise, I’m ditching the kid and telling Malakai there’s no way someone this sappy can be a serial killer.*

“I brought my jeep—I haven’t been drinking or anything.” Mitch started walking, his hand on the small of Tate’s back. “Usually I come here, watch the dancers for a bit, then go home alone. I think I got lucky tonight.”

*Hell, can we trade him for a serial killer?*

Fifteen minutes later and they were all in Mitch’s condo, a fancy place there was no way a man Mitch’s age should be able to afford. Only, Mitch was apparently the son of a plastic surgeon. And played pro-baseball. He made more money than most rock stars.

Nursing his beer while the two made out, Alder checked his phone again. It couldn’t have been just five freakin’ minutes since they’d gotten here?

He really didn’t *need* to be here at all. “Look, guys. It’s been great and everything, but—”

“Wait.” Mitch pulled away from Tate and shot to his feet. “Please stay. I’ll make it worth your while.”

Tate blinked up at Mitch like he’d never seen the man before. Unfortunately, Alder had a feeling he knew exactly what kind of man Mitch was. Rich, pro-athlete used to getting whatever the fuck he wanted.

“How are you gonna do that, Mitch?” Alder rose from the loveseat he’d been reclined on while the pair had been making out. “I only came for the drink.”

“Let me suck your dick. You don’t seem like the type that needs to be seduced. You want a good fuck? I can give you that.” He approached Alder, dropping to his knees and reaching for his zipper. “I’ll let you use me however you want. You fuck me, we’ll both fuck him. It will be a wild night.”

“You touch me and you’ll have to give your daddy a call to fix your face, pretty boy.” Alder couldn’t even work up the energy to get mad. He should have figured something was up when Mitch was so damn nice.

What kind of guy picked up another guy and asked his friend to come back to his place? Fuck, if Alder hadn’t been so worried about Tate, he would have been suspicious.

Letting out a tired sigh, Alder looked over at Tate. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Without a word, Tate turned his back on Mitch and made his way out the front door. Alder stiffened when Mitch put a hand on his arm before he could make his own exit.

“I handled this all wrong. Get him to come back.” Mitch tightened his grip when Alder tried to pull away. “I didn’t mean to be so blunt. I just thought you’d appreciate me being honest.”

“Oh, I do.” Alder peeled Mitch’s fingers off his arm. “Good night, Mitch.”

Mitch’s eyes narrowed. “Seriously? You’re going to give up a sure thing for that fucking twink?”

Hand on the man’s neck before his brain had a chance to catch up; Alder held Mitch up against the wall and forced himself to breath slow and steady. He’d had a temper as a teen, but he’d outgrown that shit. Somewhat.

Five years ago, he’d have laid Mitch out on the floor in a bloody mess. Lucky for him, Alder had learned to restrain himself. This asshole wasn’t worth the jail time.

“Lock up when I leave. Some of Tate’s friends aren’t as nice as I am.” He released the man and took a step back. “If the boy isn’t his usual, happy self, I have no problem giving them directions to your front door.”

Out on the curb, Alder lit another cigarette, the thick taste of ash in his mouth making him reconsider the sponsorship he’d been offered by the e-cig company. Quitting while on tour never seemed like a good idea, but he was sick of feeling like shit every time he leaned on the addiction for relief from all the stress.

Tate bummed a cigarette and sat cross-legged beside him on the pretty white rocks lining the edge of the sidewalk. “Thank you.”

“For what? Letting that dick play you?”

“No. For just being here.” Tate rubbed a hand over his face. “I know I’m a pain in the ass. I just...the rest of you know what you’re doing. You take what you want and you

don't give a fuck. I want that, but...well, obviously, I'm the same loser I always was. People keep giving me chances, and I keep screwing up."

"Don't talk like that. You're doing just fine." Alder put his arm around Tate's shoulders. "Fucking a dude isn't going to change much."

"You don't know that. I'm...I don't know. Like, lost or something. I thought focusing on the music would be enough."

"The touring schedule is just getting to you. We all need a break." Alder palmed his phone. "Let me call a cab. We'll hit the party and have some fun. Get this shit out of your head."

"Don't bother." Tate pointed at a van cruising down the street toward them. "I called Jesse."

A small smile crept across Alder's lips as he stood, then grimaced the second he spotted who else was in the van. He quickly cut Malakai off on the passenger side before the fuming man could get too far.

Malakai slammed the heel of his palm into the center of Alder's chest. "I suggest you move, Trousseau."

"Drop it, Malakai."

"Are you fucking kidding me? You were bringing him to the club. What the fuck are you doing here?" Malakai motioned to the mixture of lavish condos and massive houses around them. "You think he needs to be messing with people like this?"

Tate tried to step between them. "Mal—"

Alder shoved him aside. "Like what? Am I suppose to screen his boyfriend's incomes before handing him a condom and saying 'Make me proud, son?'"

"He doesn't need you getting him laid."

The second time Tate tried to interrupt, Jesse pulled him back. "Don't bother. They're both too smart to keep this going for long. Give them a minute to figure out how ridiculous they're being."

*How the fuck am I being ridiculous?* Alder scowled at Jesse, then sighed. "I was his goddamn wingman for the night. Jesus, Malakai, he's not a fucking child." Screw good intentions. Alder could be at the after party, chilling with an ice-cold beer, talking music with some of his idols. Instead, he'd wasted his night, Tate felt like shit, and Malakai was flipping out.

And just to make things even more perfect, he was pretty sure he heard sirens in the distance. Getting closer.

“These people don’t take guys like us seriously, Alder. He was slumming.” Malakai’s anger had lost some energy. He massaged his temples with his fingers. “Shit, I’m not even mad at you. Just...I promised his gran I’d take care of him.”

“So did I, asshole.” Alder grinned when Malakai’s lips quirked up at the edges. “How about neither of us tell her about the rich dick. That way we still get brownies next time we visit.”

Malakai inclined his head. “Deal.”

They both turned to find Tate gapping at them and Jesse smirking like he wanted to say ‘I told you so.’ Alder shrugged. So, he wasn’t babysitter of the year. He and Malakai were good. Despite how smart Jesse seemed to think Alder was, the plan to get Tate a random hookup had been stupid.

Oh, and the cops were coming. Maybe they should make themselves scarce.

Jesse climbed in behind the wheel, starting the van as the rest of them took their seats. They cleared the upscale district and reached the hotel parking not long after. Whatever Malakai had been chatting with Tate about seemed to have cheered the kid up, so maybe their fucked up little side trip hadn’t ruined the night after all.

The music in the Vanity Nightclub sucked, but at least it wasn’t the techno crap that grated at the inside of Alder’s skull. He spotted Connor at a booth with another band and dragged a chair over to join them, Jesse, Tate and Malakai squeezing in at either side.

Connor, as usual, didn’t waste any time. Or care who was there listening. He gestured at Tate with his bottle of Coors light. “So how sore are you?”

Malakai’s jaw ticked. Alder braced himself to intercede if the bassist decided the band didn’t need a rhythm guitarist. Or a conscious one anyway.

“What makes you think I’m the one who’d be sore?” Tate swiped a drink off the table, earning a dirty look from the lead singer of a local indie punk band. Taking a swig, Tate gave Connor a smug smile. “You want details?”

“Not really.” Connor reached over to pat Tate on the shoulder like he was a proud daddy who’d just been told his son hit a game winning homerun. “You seem like you’re in a good mood. Tell me you ain’t gonna call him in the morning and I’ll consider that some damn good progress.”

“I didn’t even get his name.” Tate polished off the drink, then waved over a waitress to order another round. He was putting on such a good act, it wasn’t hard to figure out why it had taken his grandmother so long to see the dangerous path he’d been headed when he was younger. If Tate didn’t want you to worry, he’d convince you everything was unicorns pissing rainbows.

Alder knew better, but the kid seemed fine for the moment, so might as well leave him be and enjoy the rest of the night. He thanked the waitress when she brought him a fresh beer, then took a slow, refreshing drink of the rich microbrew. Not his favorite kind of beer, he was a simple man, but Tate had probably ordered Malakai’s favorite to get the bassist in a better mood.

The conversation around him was relaxed, with the members of the punk band asking questions about the business and soaking up all the information they could. The lead singer asked Jesse if he’d consider sticking around and helping them hire some roadies.

Without taking his eyes off the dance floor, Jesse chuckled. “You don’t need roadies yet, man. Do the work yourself for the first few years, at least until you start hitting bigger venues and have too much equipment to handle. No point in spreading your budget too thin before you’re even close to a living wage.”

“I wish we’d hit it as fast as you all. You must be swimming in dough.”

The punk band wasn’t gonna make it very far if that’s what they believed. Alder exchanged a look with Malakai. Tate choked on his beer, he was laughing so hard. Malakai’s firm pat on the back came off as less helpful, and more to shut him up.

Curious to see what Jesse couldn’t seem to stop staring at, Alder glanced over at the dance floor. First, all he saw was Brave, dancing with some chick.

Then, *all* he saw was Brave, dancing with *the* chick. The girl he’d met in front of the nail salon. The one who’d painted his nails. He hadn’t thought much about her since he’d rushed off to start the show, because he hadn’t even gotten a chance to ask her name.

And now, here she was, with Brave.

Brave, who had a boyfriend.

That’s what Jesse was to him, right? Alder could accept Jesse being in love with someone else. He could even accept that person being Brave. No accounting for taste, but most people didn’t see his brother for the asshole he was. But Jesse didn’t play Brave’s games and he deserved better than to be passed over after less than a week for some...

Damn it, Alder refused to believe the girl was some groupie, just looking to get with as many rock stars as she could.

Jesse's fist slammed into his shoulder and he jumped.

"What the fuck, man?" Alder punched Jesse in the arm, hurting his fist on the man's thick arms and making him laugh. "Asshole."

Rubbing Alder's knuckles with his thumb, Jesse flashed one of those smiles that could soften even the hardest of hearts. "Stop glaring. Brave isn't interested in the woman. You've got to stop assuming he's gonna fuck me over."

"I'm not." Alder paused to take a sip of beer, wishing Jesse didn't know him so fucking well. "But how do you know he doesn't want her?"

"They've been dancing for too long."

"Maybe she's playing hard to get." Alder liked that idea. He could respect anyone making Brave work for so much as a dance. Be the challenge Brave enjoyed without giving an inch.

Placing his hand casually on the back of Alder's wrist, Jesse shook his head. "They're having fun. Talking and laughing this whole time, and he's not even trying to seduce her."

Now that was surprising. Alder leaned back in his chair, surveying the room, trying to find a single woman in the club hotter than the one in his brother's arms. Sure, a few were cute, but none had the same draw as the beauty with the long black hair.

A gorgeous woman, but he'd known plenty of those. And could fuck one every day of the week if he wanted to. He didn't because a chick riding his dick, then wanting a selfie with him in whatever bed—or more likely wall of a bathroom stall—they'd fucked on, wasn't one of his turn-ons.

The woman dancing with Brave had long legs, nice tits, and a laugh that went straight to Alder's balls. But there was something more to her that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Damn it, he wanted to though. She'd been kind and so easy to talk to he'd really wanted her to take him up on that coffee date. His crazy life had him missing out on a lot of opportunities, so he tried not to dwell on them.

This was a second chance. One he'd damn well seize.

He'd stepped aside for Brave once. For Jesse's sake. He wasn't doing it again.

Standing, he ignored Jesse's mumbled curse and the questions from the rest of the band. He crossed the dance floor, then stopped a few feet away from the woman and his

brother. He wasn't usually so fucking indecisive, but what the hell was he gonna say to her? 'Don't mind me barging in on the fun you're having with my brother. I think you're...special? Damn hot? Really sweet because you painted my nails?'

*Ugh. You've been out of the game too fucking long, Alder.*

Yeah, but games weren't his thing. And cutting in on her and Brave would come off like a pissing contest, no matter how cool he played it.

*So stand here like a loser. Much better plan.*

Before he could turn around and go back to the table, where he'd only have to face the guys, she glanced over and trapped him with her brilliant green eyes. The color reminded him of the one time he'd seen the Northern lights, slashing across the night, leaving him breathlessly gazing into the mesmerizing glow.

He managed to suck in some air as she pulled away from Brave and came toward him.

"Hey you," she said. A pretty pink blush spread across her cheeks as he quickly ran his tongue over his bottom lip. She kept her eyes locked on his mouth as she cleared her throat. "I wasn't expecting to see you again."

"Neither was I." Okay, that was slightly better than what he'd considered saying. But that was it. He had nothing else.

Which was weird. He'd never had trouble talking to a woman before. And he hadn't had trouble talking to her earlier today. What had changed?

She let out a soft laugh and reached for his hand. Her touch had even more of an impact than her hypnotic gaze. His pulse picked up a notch, matching the rhythm reached during his most intense guitar solo.

Checking out his nails, she let out an exaggerated sigh. "You ruined them."

He looked down and grinned. She was right. As usual, shredding on the guitar had chipped half the polish. Cocking his head, he gave her a crooked smile. "Guess I'll need to beg you to fix them again."

"You don't need to beg. Or come up with excuses to spend time with me." Her lips slanted with amusement. "You still owe me a coffee."

"At the very least."

"Don't start with the lines. You'll ruin the nice guy image I have of you."

A snort tore her attention away from him and Alder couldn't help but tense as Brave stepped up to her side and casually hooked an arm around her shoulders. "Danica, sweetie, don't let him fool you. He's just as fucked up as the rest of us."

Arching a brow, Danica—now Alder had a name, which he'd been too slow to ask for—tipped her head up to Brave. "Right. That whole rock star image, huh? Don't worry, I won't tell anyone you're both 'nice'."

"I'm not worried about you telling anyone." Brave shot Alder a look cold enough to shatter glass. "I'm worried you'll believe it."

Alder wasn't sure how to respond to that little jab. Arguing with Brave wouldn't win him any points. Even when Alder was right, he came off as the asshole when they took cheap shots at one another. Brave was too smooth and he always said the right thing. Which meant he'd be all calm and reasonable while Alder lost his cool.

"And that answers that question." Danica laughed and slipped her small, soft hand into Alder's. "Being trapped on a bus together for so long must put a strain on you all. Alder, why don't we make it a beer instead of coffee? All that dancing made me thirsty." She flashed Brave the sweetest smile. "Thank you for making sure I didn't spend most of the night sitting in the corner by myself."

"My pleasure." Brave's brow furrowed, and his lips thinned. He probably wanted to say more, but Danica had efficiently put them in the position of either acting like adults, or looking really immature.

Not that they always acted like grown ups, but Brave liked people seeing him as the calm, collected leader of the band. That front was worth more to him than whatever pleasure he got out of tearing Alder down.

There was a short, awkward silence, and then Alder found himself being led to the bar. His brain finally caught up and he ordered them each a beer. Bud light, after asking Danica what she preferred.

They found an empty booth away from the crowd and settled in, Danica sitting across from him, her attention on tearing the wet label off her bottle.

She'd gone from being relaxed to completely distracted. There was something on her mind, but he didn't know her well enough to start digging. So he jumped on the first topic he could think of that he hoped would break the ice.

"Did you enjoy the show? I should have offered you a backstage pass."

“You were running late.” She took a deep breath. “But, since you brought it up, maybe my request won’t be too weird.”

He tongued his bottom lip, not sure what she was getting at. “Our next show’s in L.A. Will you be there? I’m sure I could—”

“Damn it, you really are too nice. You’re gonna hate me.” She held up her hand before he could object. “My agent had this plan, and it seemed like it could work, but now I feel like an opportunistic bitch.”

*Okay, I’m not sure what to say to that.* He couldn’t see her asking for anything horrible. Maybe she needed a ride to the show? That wasn’t opportunistic though. “Tell me what you need. I won’t hate you.”

“Mostly just to be seen. That’s why I’m here.” She dropped her gaze, as though she was ashamed to admit that. “My image is all wrong.”

“Come again?”

Shaking her head, she bit her bottom lip. “I was a cute little girl playing a secondary character the last time I did anything really impressive to add to my portfolio. My agent wants me to get some edge. She put out some calls to journalists she knows, hinting that a photographer might snap a few ‘interesting’ shots of me at this show. From what she told me, several took the bait. Now it’s up to me to be seen with someone unexpected.”

Was it crazy that her agent’s idea made sense to him? Maybe he’d been in the business too long. Their manager had set Brave up with a few models to give the band some publicity. Things working both ways wasn’t so far fetched.

But Danica could do so much better than him. “Sweetie, you’ve got your pick of some pretty heavy hitters. Why me?”

“Did I forget to mention how freakin’ dirty it makes me feel that I agreed to this? I like you. If I’d come here just to see the show, I’d have wanted to hang out with you, no strings attached.” She hunched her shoulders when a camera flash suddenly hit them. “When I did your nails, I couldn’t help but wish I didn’t have a job to do. But I’m trying to build a career and that always comes first. The agency paid for me to come here because they think I’ll get some good offers if I get my face in some damn tabloids. Once people start tweeting and talking shit about me online.”

She sounded so disgusted with the very idea he couldn’t help but turn his hand to give hers a little squeeze and grin at her. He doubted he was who her agent had in mind, but

maybe they could make this work for them both. Cole was always nagging at him, and the rest of the band, to be seen with chicks to kill the rumors that they were all gay. Neither Alder nor Danica had the freedom to explore their first, uncomplicated encounter, but if it could work in their favor?

He wasn't seeing a downside.

"My manager would love to see me with a woman like you." He stroked his thumb lightly over the pulse at her wrist, his smile widening at her sharp inhale. "So how about I let you use me, while I use you?"

She stared at the table, nodding slowly. "Yeah. That works."

"Hey." He reached up and placed his hand on her cheek. "I get it. This all started as a way to gain exposure. But there's more. I like you too."

"How could you? I'm asking you to let the media make more of me being with you than—"

"Than what? If there were no cameras, and I asked you to leave with me, would you say no?"

"I don't know."

Damn, she didn't pull any punches. But he liked her honesty. He ran his fingers lightly down the length of her throat. "Forget your agent. Forget my manager. Finish your drink and then look at me. See the loser who sat on the hood of your car and tell me what you want to do with him."

Her throat worked as she tipped her beer to her lips, polishing it off in just a few gulps. She slammed it down on the table and focused on his hand, which still held hers. Pressing her eyes shut, she nodded slowly.

"I'm not as sweet as you think I am, but for a minute, I wasn't the actress or the model everyone sees me as. I want to be the woman you saw." She groaned and pulled away from him. "I want to be her, but I *need* to be the one asking you to smile for the cameras and pretend I'm a glorified groupie."

He chuckled and caught her hand again, bringing it to his lips. "Groupies get a bad rep, but they're an important part of our history. They've inspired some of the greats."

"That makes me feel *so* much better."

"You're making a big deal out of this for nothing, Danica. I'm giving you what you need." He stood and pulled her to her feet. He was pretty sure she'd relax once they got past

all those pictures she needed. And he wanted to give her a chance to be the woman she really was. The one she didn't seem to believe she could be anymore. "Then, maybe I can give you what you want."

She grinned, moving close to him and speaking low. "I don't even know what that is anymore."

"I do." He lowered his head, brushing his lips against her cheek. The perfect photo opp for all those cameras. But his words weren't for show. They were all for her. "You want to be real. And you have been. Trust me to know the difference."

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