

Chasing
**Death
Metal**
Dreams

KAJE HARPER

CHASING DEATH METAL DREAMS

Carlos Medina has spent years of sweat, pain, effort, and money becoming the man he is. He writes original songs, plays lead guitar, and wears his death metal front-man persona like armor. With an excellent drummer and a talented bassist, his band, KnifeSwitch, has what it takes to succeed, if they can just catch a break. But it's been a long road already, and there's still a mountain left to climb. Carlos isn't looking for anything more in his personal life than an occasional hook-up with a hot guy, preferably outside the less-than-gay-friendly metal scene.

Nate Goldstein has no intention of dating a musician. His twin brother fronts a band, and he knows band guys are all busy, broke, and obsessed with their music. But Carlos catches his artist's eye. Nate is wary—he has a history of picking the wrong guys. Still, he might be willing to break some personal rules to find out what's behind Carlos's dark gaze and imaginative lyrics.

Getting together the first time is easy and fun. The second time is more complicated. And when music, ambition, and personalities clash, the guys will have to decide if they have a future worth fighting for.

Table of Contents

Blurb	2
Love is an Open Road.....	4
Chasing Death Metal Dreams – Information	7
Acknowledgements.....	8
Chasing Death Metal Dreams	9
Prologue	10
Chapter 1	13
Chapter 2.....	23
Chapter 3.....	34
Chapter 4.....	46
Chapter 5.....	68
Chapter 6.....	88
Chapter 7.....	98
Chapter 8.....	113
Chapter 9.....	134
Chapter 10.....	146
Chapter 11.....	159
Chapter 12.....	170
Chapter 13.....	183
Chapter 14.....	200
Chapter 15.....	215
Chapter 16.....	230
Chapter 17.....	250
Epilogue	258
Author Bio	265

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

CHASING DEATH METAL DREAMS

By Kaje Harper

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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CHASING DEATH METAL DREAMS

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Photo Description

A young bare-chested man stands staring boldly outward from below his raised arms, hands pressed together in his black hair, elbows winged out, colorful dagger tattoos on his forearms. Another tattoo near his neck forms swirl of dark curves with “Boy” over his left collarbone. His biceps are strong, his stomach and pecs flat, his nipples small, above a thin treasure trail leading downward. Below each nipple is the unmistakable, long-healed scar of top surgery.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I was sent to the US at the age of 10 by my father who could not accept me. You see I was misgendered at birth and I started fighting against my body at a young age. My father sent me to live with my cousin’s family along with enough money to pay my way for a few years. Little does he know he helped to fund the many surgeries and hormones to fulfill my dream of having my outside gender match the gender my brain has always known myself to be.

What do you think Author? Not many know of his secret. He is a gay man. Is he in a gang? Is he in a band? How will he find love? How will he be accepted?

Thank you!!

Sincerely,

Melissa

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: musicians/rock stars, visual arts, in the closet, F2M transgender, family, men with pets, tattoos

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CHASING DEATH METAL DREAMS

By Kaje Harper

Prologue

Dios mío. Everything was different.

Ten-year-old Carlos Medina stared though the doorway of the fifth grade classroom at his new school. Almost the same as the *primaria* he'd gone to back in Puebla, and yet a thousand little differences rose up to trap him there, standing in the hall, unable to take a breath or move his feet. His pulse pounded and he blinked hard. Ahead of him, the morning sun hit the star-spangled flag on its pole in the corner. The poster beside it on the wall said, "D.A.R.E. to resist drugs and violence" in bright, angry, English letters. The school even smelled different, and around him so many students were big and blond and loud and...

"Move it, stupid!" A push between his shoulder blades jolted him over the threshold and into the room.

He'd have turned and snapped an insult back, but he still had no breath, and he was humiliatingly grateful for the shove that had unstuck him from that doorway. He glanced around. Many of the desks were already taken, but he spotted one in the back row and dived for it. Tía Lisa had checked and found out there was no special seating and he could just pick one. The back was safest, where no one could get behind you. He slipped into the chair and set his bag with his notebooks and pencils down by his feet.

The room was filling up fast. He sneaked a look at the other boys in the back row, watching how they sat, what they did. Subtly, he slid his butt forward in the attached metal-and-wood chair and stretched out his legs, slouching, his knees casually apart. Two of the boys in the back row had their arms crossed across their chests, and he did that too.

The teacher at the front of the room rapped on her desk. "Two minutes, class. Please find a seat."

A pretty dark-haired girl asked, "Will we be stuck with these seats all year, Miss Boston?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out. Soon." The teacher's smile seemed real, and Carlos relaxed a bit. A teacher who had a sense of humor was a good thing, right? He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth like Tío Ramón had taught him the time he got stressed out at the mall. He could do this. He would. *Pa' lante.* Not like he had a choice.

The bright, busy conversations of the other students were a maddening chatter he couldn't begin to understand. Despite a summer spent frantically improving his English with Tía Lisa and Tío Ramón, he couldn't follow these fast, slangy, mixed-up words. He swallowed panic. For the first time in his life, there was no big brother, no Fernando, or Juan, or anyone, just down the hall to have his back. His youngest cousin was a senior in high school, blocks away. He was on his own.

Carlos tossed his head, lifting his chin. *So what?* He'd always been alone, in a way, a stranger in his own house, his own family. A pang of homesickness washed over him, and he shoved it down, pressing his lips together, folding his arms tighter. Mamá and Papá didn't want him, not the way he was. There was no going back.

He stared out the classroom window at the scrap of schoolyard he could see, a strip of flat green-brown playing fields with the pale-blue sky arching overhead, clear in the bright morning light. That same sun was shining back home, where Mamá might be braiding Silvia's hair and Leticia would be complaining about having to get up so early for school...

He only realized he'd missed the beginning of class and roll call when he was startled by the teacher's voice. "Beatriz Medina?"

He jerked his head up, heart thumping, snapping his gaze to where she stood with the class book, her pencil on the page, looking around the class. Her eyes landed on him. "Beatriz Medina?"

He could say, "*Here,*" as he'd practiced with Tía Lisa. He could even just nod or wave and she might let it pass. But he hadn't given up his home and family and everything he knew to be a coward now. He gathered himself, cleared his throat, and said the thing he'd practiced in secret a thousand times that summer. "I prefer the name Carlos."

The teacher's eyes were kind, but a bit perplexed. "As a nickname? It's not much like Beatriz. Isn't that a little confusing?"

He couldn't even begin to explain, with the other kids looking at him and the bright American flag in the corner and his fingernails cutting into his palms. He managed to say, "No."

The teacher hesitated. Carlos heard a mutter of something from one of the girls across the room, the words impossible to make out, but the disgusted tone clear. He couldn't spare his attention from the teacher to look over there.

Instead, he tried to use his eyes, to beg and plead with this pretty American woman to *hear* him, to understand him, as even Tía Lisa did not when she told him to take it slow, to give her and Tío Ramón time. *This is not a game. This is not a whim or a wish. See me.*

Her eyes skimmed over him. Did she notice the new haircut, shorter than Mamá had ever allowed, but still not the cropped boys' cut he'd really wanted? Did she see that his jeans were baggy, his shirt plain and loose? He slumped a little lower, fists tight under his crossed arms, his muscles clenched so hard that the pressure hurt his chest.

"I suppose you can choose any nickname you like," the teacher said slowly. "As long as you stick to it. Welcome to Northside School, then, Carla." She looked down at her book, made a quick note with a pencil, then said, "David Mendelssohn?"

As someone to his left said, "Here," Carlos closed his eyes.

Almost. He wasn't sure if she'd not heard him, or just decided that a Beatriz couldn't be a Carlos. He tried to tell himself it was a start. Anything was better than being Beatriz. To his right someone whispered loud enough for him to hear, "Hey, new kid, you some kind of dyke?"

He didn't know the word, but the tone made him guess it was something like *machorra*. Nothing he hadn't heard before. Nothing he wouldn't face down and get past, soon, later, once he gathered the energy to try again. Carlos Medina was a boy, no matter what they said, and someday everyone would know it. He listened to the teacher's voice calling on Lisa, Matthew, José, Mark, Zach, María, Nancy, Jason... familiar names and alien ones, names he should learn but couldn't bother right now.

He breathed, slowly, in and out, fingers of his hidden hands clenched in the boring, blue cotton of his shirt, feet in his new sneakers spread even further apart. Carlos Medina would write songs, one day. He would play guitar on a stage and everyone would cheer and say, "He's so good. Look at him." And they would see who he really was...

Chapter 1

¡Mierda! These people were crazy. Carlos threw his shoulder against a heavy speaker that threatened to fall on him, while managing not to break his rhythm on his guitar. There were probably a hundred people squeezed into the living room of the cramped house venue they were playing, all at least half-drunk, all singing and shoving and laughing, surfing the mosh pit, crashing into each other. *My kind of crazy.* Carlos ripped off a sharp arpeggio line that caught him a startled glance from Foster on bass, but Carlos didn't care. He'd written the damned song, he could play it the way he wanted to. Mia on drums went with him, her bare arms shiny with sweat, the sticks a blur as she matched his tempo.

Carlos leaned into the mike.

*You think that you can break me
With your cheating and your lies?
You think I missed the rot beneath
Your saccharine disguise?
Let me tell you
Fuckin' amateur
I saw you
Who you really were
You're not the first I've kissed with only greed behind your
eyes.*

The speaker wobbled again as a big guy in dreadlocks hit it with his hip. This time one of the venue guys grabbed it, then stationed himself between it and the moshers. Carlos gave the guy a nod, as he nailed the bridge back to the chorus, the notes fast and crisp under his calloused fingertips. He wasn't a star, wasn't where he'd sworn he'd be by twenty-five, but this? This was what still made it worth getting up every day—a crowd of people asking him to move them, shake them, blast their ears and their souls.

*Not going under
Not going down
Using the users
Owning this town*

*Been kicked in the teeth
Been stabbed in the back
But I'm not going under
I'm on the attack*

The music took him then, and all he knew was the guitar under his fingers, the voice that ripped out of him, rough and deep and painful, and the lyrics that had kept him alive through the tough times. Mia was on fire, Foster actually kept tempo, and the songs Carlos had written pulled the surging crowd around him into one sweaty, shouting, heaving, dancing creature, drunk on cheap beer and on his music and his words.

They finished with “Get Off”. What was the old saying? Leave ‘em laughing? He slammed the last chords and sucked in a harsh breath, knowing he’d done that. Taken this crowd of strangers and made them angry, made them ache, made them laugh. It was heady, heady power, and he shouted a laugh of his own. His throat was raw, the sweat soaked every inch of him, his head still throbbed with the beat, and it was a perfect moment.

So of course that was when someone slipped in the pit, flailed long arms and whacked Foster in the neck.

Foster, being the moron he was, took a return swing, missed the guy, and hit the girl next to him in the tits. She shrieked, her boyfriend whirled with a roar, and Carlos swore and grabbed for Foster. “Forget it. Come on!”

Foster whirled around, his guitar swinging dangerously on its strap, and shoved him back. Carlos staggered, catching his foot on the six-inch strip of wood that was all that marked the stage from the floor. He fell backward into the crowd in the mosh pit, hugging his black-and-white RGA custom desperately against himself. Luckily the room was so packed he fell in slow motion, buffeted from a meaty shoulder to a bony hip to a denim-covered thigh, before hitting the floor. People shouted and laughed, but over it Carlos could hear the sounds of a fight getting started.

¡Put a madre Foster! Carlos wriggled himself clear, wrapped protectively around his instrument. He made it back to the stage space by Mia’s drums, and stood.

“Mia! It’s me!” he yelled, just in time to avoid being brained by his angry drummer. She snarled at him, but put her shoulder to his, standing in front of her kit with sticks in hand like a mama bear defending her cubs. He set his guitar behind them too. It might be just as well he’d left his cello behind today.

A sudden ripple in the crowd marked the approach of Big Dave. The brawny six-foot-six bouncer grabbed Foster by twisting up his arm, snared the girl's boyfriend by the collar, and yanked them apart with a wordless snarl. Carlos relaxed slightly.

Some venues were nasty, with no one monitoring the crowd, ending up with a mass of drunken fans pissing in corners and shooting up in the bathrooms. One reason he came back to The Cave was because they ran a clean venue. Big Dave's ability to bounce troublemakers out the door was a large part of that. Unfortunately, half of the trouble getting bounced now was his bass guitarist.

Carlos hurried after them, as Dave frog-marched his captives toward the door. "Yo, Dave? Let me grab my guy?"

Dave paused, and shook Foster, drawing a whine of pain from him. "You sure you want him?"

Not really. Carlos was pretty sick of this. But he said, "Yeah. I'll deal."

"Okay. Keep him out of trouble or I will." Dave shoved Foster at Carlos, then kept going with the boyfriend despite the girl now yelling and slapping at his meaty arm.

Foster rubbed his shoulder, watching them push through the crowd to the door. "Dave is such an asshole! He fucked up my playing arm."

"Shut up!" Carlos gave Foster a shove of his own. "We've got ten minutes to tear down. Get the goddamned amp unhooked."

"I want a smoke first." Foster patted his pocket clumsily.

"Smoke after! Christ!" The tech crew for the venue were already at work coiling away cables. Mia, reassured that the crowd was drifting away from the stage, turned to her drum kit. Carlos bent to retrieve his case from the corner and put away his guitar. The Japanese custom Ibanez RGA had cost him two months of his day job salary and she was worth every penny. He patted her cutaway horn as he settled her into the case, then closed and locked it. A glance to his left showed that Foster had managed to find his own case, but not open it.

Carlos stepped over to give him a hand. "What the fuck are you on?" he asked under his breath, as he unhinged the lid.

"Just BC bud, man. The good stuff." Foster's eyes had a sharp glitter that belied his words. The bass player was jittery, not mellow on weed.

Well, they'd got through their set without any disasters. Carlos would have to settle for that. He stood up, hefting both guitars, and let Foster head out the

door behind the stage area without stopping him. Easier to do the work himself than babysit that guy.

The doorway behind them led through the house kitchen to the back door. There were people hanging about in the kitchen, but the roadies for the next band had cleared a path to get the gear through and outside. Carlos took a breath of damp cooler air out on the deck, and looked around for Mia's van. It was parked on the gravel behind the house. Completely parked in, of course. You could either park in close, and expect that, or hump your cabs and shit for blocks. The speaker cabinets were heavy, and bulky enough he wouldn't do that without an army of roadies. At least no one had blocked the back doors of their van shut this time.

It took about ten minutes to get their minimal gear out of the house. The next band was setting up as they were tearing down, stepping around each other in the confined space. The Cave ran a tight show, so it was at least organized chaos. The next act was a well-known local group who did have a bunch of guys willing to roadie. Carlos cast an envious glance at the Mesa/Boogie quad being wheeled past him. If they cranked those speakers up, the beat would be felt halfway to downtown.

The guy wheeling the quad was worth a second look too—the build of a runner, the straight, silky hair of a model, and the out-of-place goth look of a wannabe vampire. Carlos lifted a lip in mixed appreciation and scorn.

He got a long look back, one of the ones that jumped from his pecs to abs, to package, to ass, and then up to his eyes to linger a second too long. Vampire-boy had wide gray eyes behind the straight fall of his dark hair, and lush lips that curved just enough to signal “message-received”. Carlos wasn't surprised when the guy kept on going without a word, though. This was not the time and place.

Mia said at his elbow, “I would so tap that.”

“Mm.” The back view was nice too. “If I was some kinda girl, I would too.” They gave each other dramatic snarling looks. Mia knew exactly what he was, and a metal show wasn't the place for that either.

“This is the last of it.” Mia hefted a coiled instrument cable, tagged with her bright red stickers every three feet. Carlos followed her back to the van once more, even though his own hands were empty, and waited, leaning his shoulder against the side while she stowed the cable and checked that everything was in place and safely fastened down. There was a time, years ago, when he'd have

been impatient with her finicky perfectionism. Then he heard a guy talking about how his Washburn went flying through the windshield when his car got hit, and finicky started to look really fucking good.

Mia slid back out of the van, locked up, and looked at him, her head cocked. “Coming inside for Serpentine?”

“Nah.” He always had a hard time listening to someone else’s music coming down off his own set. Tonight he really wasn’t in the mood. “Gonna walk, I think. I’ll come back when we can get the van on the road. Can you flog the merch for now?” Bands lived and died on their merchandise sales, and it was kind of his job to be in there, selling the crap, pushing the band. Especially since Mia’s ex-girlfriend had dropped the band along with the relationship, and they were shorthanded. But tonight he suddenly needed air.

Mia gave him a closer look, then said, “Yeah, my friend’s been watching it, but I’ll go see if I can push a few shirts. Don’t get mugged or anything. You may suck, but I’d still hate to have to find a new lead guitar.”

He gave her another sneer, but his heart wasn’t in it. Her words made his gut hurt, because the band was painfully close to having to find a new bass. *Pinche Foster pendejo, with his fucking drugs and booze.* He turned away from the house, heading down a rubble-strewn path toward the local swamp. Foster was the third guy he and Mia had brought into their band. He was the best technical player they’d had, and four years ago, after dumping two guys who couldn’t play the music Carlos wrote, he’d seemed like the answer to a prayer. But what had started out as Foster just liking to party a lot was turning into a disaster, and it was screwing over the band.

The sound from the house ramped up, with the opening power chords of Serpentine’s set. Carlos suddenly wanted to be further away from the crowd and the noise and the band that was doing better than his while pounding out boring unoriginal shit. He strode on, into the scrubby abandoned area that backed up to The Cave.

The path got rougher and the ground boggier, but the sound died down. He stepped over a mud puddle, kicked an empty pizza box out of the way, and cursed as the concrete block hidden under it scuffed the side of his Docs. They were new boots, too, bought just for shows. A hundred and fifty bucks of tattoo print, and now there was a gouge in the side. “*Chingada madre,*” he growled, then louder, “Fuck my life!”

“Just your life?” an amused voice behind him asked.

Carlos whirled, his heart thumping. A few too many times, someone making a stupid joke behind him in a deserted place had not been good at all. But this time it was Vampire-boy, smiling slightly, but not in an I'm-gonna-have-fun-beating-your-ass way. Carlos noted that even if he was planning to be a jerk, he was barely an inch taller and probably had twenty pounds less muscle. Wiry, skinny dude. Not a real threat.

Carlos took a slower breath, relaxed his shoulders, and unclenched his fists. "What're you doing here? Shouldn't you be in there cheering for your Snakes?"

"Nah." The guy shrugged. "I roadie 'cause the lead guitar's my brother. I've heard their shit about a billion times already."

"So you figured you'd walk in the swamp?"

"So I followed you. I didn't know you were a mud-loving lunatic."

"I'm following a path." Carlos waved at the muddy strip of ground between the boggy patches of weeds.

Vampire-boy lifted one foot to look at the muck on the bottom of his black sneaker. "Just because other idiots went marching through a swamp in this direction doesn't mean you should too."

"I wanted somewhere *private to think*."

"Well, it's a good thing you didn't want somewhere private to fuck, because no one's gonna kneel down in this crud." The guy stepped up right beside Carlos, and scraped the bottom of his shoe off on the edge of the concrete block.

Carlos could smell the guy's aftershave, even over the unpleasant funk of the swamp. Their arms were so close that he could imagine the heat of pale skin against his own. Vampire-boy glanced at him from under that silky hair and Carlos suddenly wanted to shove his fingers into it, grab hold and pull the guy in. It had been way, way too long since he'd got laid. But he still had an ounce of caution left. "I don't see any girls here."

"Why would you want a girl when you've got me?"

"Jesus!" Carlos reached out, but somehow his hand landed on the guy's neck, not in his hair. The skin under his palm was shaved satin-smooth, unmarked, and cool, unlike Carlos's own. "How the fuck are you not more careful? This isn't exactly a rainbow folk show."

"Since my ears are still ringing from your set, I'd say that's pretty obvious." The guy didn't pull away.

Carlos slid his fingers a little higher, up to the guy's hairline at the back and into the dark soft strands. He tugged lightly. "Well, some of the metal crowd aren't exactly gay-friendly." He still wasn't quite certain this wasn't some kind of setup, to out him. A fizz of anxiety made him breathe faster. Or maybe it wasn't anxiety as much as anticipation, because the guy didn't pull back from Carlos's grip, but leaned into it, lips parting. Carlos muttered, "You could get bashed pretty bad, saying that to the wrong guy."

"Are you the wrong guy?"

Carlos hesitated a minute longer, closing his fist until the pull in the guy's hair made his pretty face tense up. Very few people around the scene knew he was gay. Mia of course, and a few guys here and there that he'd hooked up with over the years. But mostly he did his cruising well away from where he played, and even Foster seemed only half-aware of what Carlos was and did.

He watched as the dark attraction in Vampire-boy's eyes faded, to be replaced by tension. He shook the guy's head slightly using the handle of his hair. "What's your name?"

"Nate." The guy was stronger than he looked, as he clamped his hands around Carlos's arm. "And you need to let go *right now*."

Yeah, it could happen just like this. You could be on the ground with a turn of my wrist. As Nate's expression became stormy, Carlos realized he'd gone too far and too long. He opened his fingers and let go. "Sorry."

Nate let go too and stepped back. "Yeah. So what the hell was that?"

"Maybe I'm not gay."

"Maybe I'm a purple T-rex. But actually not."

Carlos glanced over his shoulder. The twilight was getting darker, and they were screened from the house and the surrounding warehouses by the scrubby bushes and trees of the swamp, but he still felt way too exposed to be comfortable. "Right here, right now, I *am* a purple T-rex."

Nate laughed, his expression softening. He crossed his arms over his chest, showing taut biceps beneath the sleeves of his black silk shirt, and licked his upper lip. "Is there anywhere you turn into a real boy?"

Real boy. Carlos made himself not react. Nate had no idea how much of a trigger that was. Instead, he focused on Nate's mouth, on the fullness of his lips, the pink of his tongue, on the sparkle returning to his eyes. "I sometimes stop at The Higher Bean for coffee to sober up for the drive back."

“Not the place I’d have picked for a little action.”

“You have a car?”

“Yeah.”

“That’ll work. After the last set. One a.m?”

Nate hesitated, eyeing him. “Are you gonna have me show up, then ditch me? Or bring other T-rexes?”

“Kinda late to be careful, isn’t it?” Carlos shook his head. “I’ll be there, alone.”

Nate nodded. “Okay then. Can’t wait to see what that ink on your chest says.”

Carlos touched his chest piece through his shirt. The scrollwork lines turned into the word “Boy” under his left collarbone. This shirt was one of his usual stage-wear, with a few strategic rips and holes, so it covered his chest enough but not too much, letting a few of the black lines show through. “I might show you.” *Or not.* He didn’t take his shirt off for random tricks, ever.

Behind them came a roar of applause and a momentary lull in the bass beat that was all that carried this far. Nate sighed. “Sounds like they like him tonight.”

“Serpentine is pretty big.”

“Relatively speaking.” Nate’s pretty mouth twisted ruefully. “For this circuit.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Someday it’d be cool if my brother could break out of the ‘*put a three-thousand-dollar guitar in a five-hundred-dollar car to drive a hundred miles and earn twenty bucks*’ category.”

“I wouldn’t mind breaking out of that myself.” It was too true. Mia’s van was held together with wire and duct tape, and some nights they were lucky to have their cut amount to twenty bucks apiece. “Remind me why I do this again?”

“Masochism?” Nate’s eyes sparkled, though. “I don’t know, not having the martyr gene myself. But I think it has to do with not being able to walk away from the music. Even if it means being broke and riding in a bus with no shocks and scary-bald tires. At least, that’s what Eli says.”

“And what do you do? Something that makes you rich?” Carlos didn’t like being reminded about money. He had Tío Ramón to do that, if he wanted to feel like a failure who’d spent too long at something that would never pan out.

Nate laughed. “Nope. I’m a barista. And kind of an artist in my spare time.”

“And you say you don’t have the martyr gene?”

“Well, I never expected to support myself with my art. So I’m not torturing myself over it.”

“Just over your brother’s art?”

“Well, family’s family.”

“Sometimes.” Carlos knew some bitterness had come through in his voice because Nate’s smile faded. Carlos hurried to add, “So are you the protective older brother? Obedient younger?”

“Blackmailed-into-it twin brother. Actually, I don’t mind too much. I like the music, and I get to hear a lot of decent bands for free. I just don’t need to hear Eli for the six-hundredth time. I live over the garage, which is where he practices.”

“Ouch.”

“He tries to mostly practice while I work. It’s not that bad of a deal.”

“So what deep dark secret does he have to blackmail you into slave labor with?”

Nate put a finger alongside his nose. “It’s a secret. I’d be pretty dumb to tell you.” But then he shrugged. “He keeps Mom happy by telling her all about his girlfriends and pretending he’s getting serious about this one or that one. She gets all her grandchild guilt-tripping out on him, and I kind of fly under the radar, reproduction-wise.”

“Mm.” He wanted to ask if Nate’s mom knew he was gay, but it wasn’t the kind of question you asked out loud.

Nate’s next words answered it anyway. “I mean, I’ve been out since I was sixteen—she knows I’m gay. But she doesn’t see why that should keep me from finding a nice Jewish surrogate and having many kids with my gay-married boyfriend.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” He wasn’t into poaching, or cheating.

“Nope.” Nathan’s eyes were amused. “She’d love to help me find one, though.”

“Oh, man.”

“She’s all right. My family’s pretty great.”

Carlos didn’t want to think about that. Sometimes you had to leave family behind and stand on your own feet. He glanced around. “Hey, it’s getting fuckin’ dark out here. We should head back before we fall into the bog.”

Nate lowered his voice to a deep sepulchral tone. “To be found, decades later, entombed in mud with broken bongos, pizza napkins, and twigs in our ears.”

“You’re weird, dude.”

“Sometimes. So, one o’clock still on?”

Carlos felt a tug of desire. “Sure. Hey, give me your number and I’ll text you if I’m gonna be late.”

Nate hesitated, but got out his phone and they exchanged texts.

“Well, I should head back.” Carlos turned for the house.

“Later, then.” Nate’s voice was low, and when Carlos glanced back, he saw Nate was following slowly, the space between them opening up. That was good. It wasn’t smart for him to appear out of the dark alongside a guy who’d been out since he was sixteen. Carlos increased his pace, until he was jogging, straining his eyes to avoid the worst of the mud and debris.

He should go inside and try to sell KnifeSwitch T-shirts and patches, and listen to Serpentine and the last band, which was supposed to be some kind of black metal. He’d never heard them, but he’d seen the lead singer in the house kitchen, wearing really unfortunate-looking corpse paint. Carlos hoped they played better than they looked, or the last hour would be penance, in order to pick up their twenty bucks each.

Chapter 2

Nate shifted restlessly in the seat of his car, parked in a dark corner of The Higher Bean's lot. This was a really dumb idea. A fact that didn't keep him from being completely hard, sitting here thinking about the lead singer of KnifeSwitch, with his tatted-up, strong arms and his caramel skin and dark, angry eyes. Not Nate's type at all, and yet...

After watching Carlos Medina do his thing on stage, with a beat that shook Nate's bones and lyrics that made him want to paint, he'd had to follow the singer outside. A moment of eye contact had made his whole body hum with possibilities. And when he saw Carlos head off down the path to the swamp, with his shoulders slumped like he was carrying the world, Nate was pulled after him like iron to a magnet. Something about all that confidence and snarling anger on stage, fading into pain and sadness when he thought he was alone, tugged at Nate.

He resented it a bit. He thought he'd learned how to be careful and controlled. He was done with picking up guys who looked like they needed him, very completely totally done with trying to be kind to someone who would probably kick him in the teeth. These days, he picked up guys who were clearly out, seemed cheerful, and who looked likely to let him top. Easy, fun, no hearts or pain involved.

But there was something about Carlos that rode over all his preferences and lit a fire inside him. He hadn't wanted a guy this bad in a long time. So he was going to do this, this stupid, one more time, one-hour stand with a sad-eyed hot-mouthed closeted metal musician, and get it out of his system.

Assuming Carlos actually showed. He pulled out his phone and checked the time. 1:26. The question was becoming, just how much longer was he willing to wait for a guy he probably shouldn't even touch? As he frowned down at the phone, it chimed for a text.

Hey, sorry. Van was parked in. Leaving now.

He texted back: *Did you get your \$20?*

Hey, best house venue around. We got 40

You can buy my coffee then

For a moment he regretted the quip, as sounding like maybe he was expecting more than quick car-sex, but the answer bounced back immediately.

Can do. I need one anyway. What do you drink?

He quickly added: *No I'm already here. I'll get it. What for you?*

Just strong black and big

Got it

Ten min

He put the phone away and got out of the car. The air was cooling, but still comfortable, and he smiled. He'd always been a night owl, and this was his favorite time of the day. About to get even more favorite, with luck. It could be that simple; of course it could. Get lucky, scratch an itch with a hot guy, and go home.

He was back sitting in his car, nursing a caramel latte, when a van with "KnifeSwitch" inexpertly painted on the side pulled in, up close to the coffee shop door. He watched as the three band members emerged. The drummer was a small woman, her blond hair dreadlocked, her curvy figure emphasized by leather and chains. The bass guitarist was tall, skinny and jumpy, with long dishwater-blond hair, and thin hands that seemed to move constantly as he talked to Carlos. Carlos waved them toward the door, then turned away, scanning the parking lot as they went inside.

Nate leaned over and swung the passenger door of his Civic open. Carlos looked his way, then strode over. Nate felt his body react to just watching this guy cross a parking lot. Carlos had a confident stalk now, no sadness, no hesitation, like a big cat approaching its prey. Nate was no one's prey, but that didn't mean he didn't like the look, the strong body and confident head tilt. It made things more about sex, less about anything else, and that was good.

Carlos swung into the other seat and pulled the door shut behind him. His dark eyes glittered in the neon from the coffee shop window, and under the torn T-shirt, his narrow, well-muscled chest rose and fell with fast breaths. Nate gripped his own knees, so he wouldn't be tempted to grab Carlos, and said, "Hey, your coffee's in the holder."

Carlos grinned, a flash of white teeth, and reached for it. Nate watched as he gulped the brew down in long swallows, his chin tucked down a bit too far to make the ripple of his throat foreplay. Ah well. Nate would see better things soon.

Carlos finished the cup, set the empty back in the holder, and turned sideways in the seat. "Small fucking car you have."

“It gets thirty-five miles to the gallon. I’m less broke that way.”

“Small for fucking, though.”

Nate admitted, “I don’t use it for that a lot. Um, the back seat has fewer knobs and lumps.” He was suddenly a little nervous. The predatory look on Carlos’s face was hot, but Nate wasn’t interested in taking this too far, especially in a parking lot. “Or we could go somewhere. I don’t want to get busted for public sex.”

“No worries, man. The cops all drink at the Starbucks down the block.” Carlos reached over and put a confident hand on Nate’s crotch. There was a tattoo on his forearm, a dagger wreathed in a ribbon that was unreadable in the dim light. His fingers clamped firmly around Nate through his black jeans. “I just want to taste this.”

“Really?” Nate had thought they’d have to negotiate, but if Carlos was offering to blow him, he was definitely not saying no.

“Oh, yeah.” Carlos slid down into the foot well and reached over with both hands, tugging at Nate’s belt.

Nate was suddenly, painfully eager to get that damned thing open too. “Let me.” The dagger-shaped buckle gave way to his practiced touch.

He pulled at the tab of his zipper, but Carlos smacked his hand away. “Mine.”

Usually Nate would have smacked back, but he was breathless at the touch of Carlos’s hands and the sight of his dark head bending lower, so he slid down in the seat and spread his legs. Carlos unzipped him and shoved at his jeans, exposing his naked dick, and grunted, “Commando, huh?”

“Always.” Nate’s voice hitched as Carlos blew on his already-damp cockhead. “Ngh.”

“Lift your sexy ass a bit.”

He did, and Carlos dragged the jeans down enough to bare him completely. Nate gripped the sides of the seat with both hands, aware that he was half-naked in a public place, and completely hard and exposed, and unable to care about anything but getting more. “Suck it.”

“Planning to. My way.” The rough sound of Carlos’s voice made Nate shiver. “Just sit there and take it.” A wet swipe of tongue ended with a brief lick at his slit and Nate couldn’t help grabbing onto Carlos’s curly, black hair,

pushing his head lower. Carlos laughed darkly and resisted, giving Nate no more than little licks and nips, one hand ringing the base of his dick to hold it steady.

Then without warning, Carlos stopped fighting and let the force of Nate's hands drive him down over that straining length, until Nate could feel the heat of Carlos's throat tight around his cockhead. Nate clenched his teeth against a shout and bucked his hips upward. Carlos held still, his throat rippling in fast swallows, then slid ever so slowly up, and up, until his lips just barely kissed Nate's slick-tipped cock. He pulled off completely, going back to tongue action, licking and probing.

Nate gave up trying to control things. His grip in Carlos's hair was more to keep himself from flying apart than to direct the action. He wished he could see better, but the dark close quarters meant that this was all about touch and sound, not sight. He tipped his head back, closed his eyes, and arched his back in offering. *Take anything you like.*

As if Carlos had heard that silent thought, he plunged deep again around Nate, then changed to slow, long bobs of his head. Nate let sensations take him over—the rise and fall of Carlos's head under his hands, the exquisite, hot press and slide of lips and tongue, the wet slurp, the hoarse panting and gasps that were half his own. In the private darkness of his car, just fifty yards from where people came and went, everything narrowed down to his rising need. The force of it clawed at him, building in his cock and balls, tightening, unrelenting, near-painful, *making* him arch and pump his hips up, driving into that sloppy, sucking, welcoming mouth.

Carlos picked up his rhythm, sliding his hand down between Nate's thighs to tug his ball sac and then press in behind it. Electric spasms shot through Nate, making him jerk and swear. His cock was rock hard, Carlos's touch pushing him so close to the edge it was desperate pleasure and pain. He managed to tug on Carlos's hair lightly. "Gonna come! Have to!"

Carlos pulled off and closed his hand around Nate's shaft but just held tight, not stroking or moving, his touch not quite there, not enough to do the job. Nate groaned, opened his eyes, and looked down, trying to work his hips up and down enough to get some friction. Carlos laughed again.

"Please! C'mon, do it!" Nate reached down, meaning to wrap his fingers around Carlos's hand and *make* something happen, but his fingers tangled in coarse hair as Carlos dropped his head low at the same moment and sucked Nate to the back of his throat, swallowing hard.

“*God!*” Nate arched like a thousand volts were sizzling through him and came. He shot deep in Carlos’s mouth, a rush of whiteout relief that made him groan and clutch at Carlos for balance. “Oh, man. Wow. Aahh. Ngh.” An aftershock thrummed across his nerves and he pulsed again, briefly, helplessly. “Shit.”

It took a moment to realize he was gripping Carlos’s hair too tightly. He opened his fingers, turned his clutching to a tentative caress. Carlos shook his touch away, and sat back into the passenger seat, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “You taste pretty good for an artist.”

Confusion and an unexpected twitch of desire, with the sudden awareness of where they were, made Nate’s tone a bit dry. “Oh? I should taste like what? Turpentine? I use watercolors and acrylics.”

Carlos chuckled. “You can’t take a compliment, huh?”

“Not weird ones.” But Nate’s moment of tension was easing back into blissed-out warmth. “Anyway, that was seriously awesome. Thanks.”

“It’s a gift.” Carlos smirked at him.

Nate glanced around the quiet parking lot, before asking, “Can I return the favor?”

Carlos reached down to refasten his own baggie jeans. “Took care of it myself. You’re pretty hot when you start moaning and begging.”

Nate dug behind his seat and found a box of tissues. “Here.”

“Thanks, man.” Carlos took one, wiped his chin and then his hand, and stuffed the tissue in his back pocket.

Nate suddenly wasn’t sure what to do, where to put his hands, where to look. He reached down to tug his jeans up and more or less in place, although there was no safe way to zip himself in yet. “So. Um.”

Carlos gave his shoulder a rough smack. “So. Nice meeting you, Nate the Artist. See you ’round maybe.” He pushed the car door open and was out and standing up before Nate’s still-fizzing brain could react, but then he leaned down to look in at him, a wicked grin firmly in place. “If your brother wants to play for a real band, or you want to roadie for one, you know where to find KnifeSwitch.” Then he slammed the door and strode away, his walk less seduction now and more power.

Nate watched him go, watched him pull open the café door and disappear inside. He realized he hadn’t done half the things he’d imagined. Hadn’t dug

his fingers into those arms or that ass, or traced the flat planes of Carlos's chest, hadn't seen the other half of that tattoo, hadn't even kissed the guy despite how much time he'd spent thinking about that mouth. Which had been otherwise busy, of course. *Mmm.*

He leaned back for a moment, letting the warm deep satisfaction wash through him. God, it had been far too long a dry spell, to leave him so wrecked now. He wasn't sure he could move enough to drive. Not yet. He took a few long breaths, then carefully tucked himself away and did up his zipper.

Such a strange night. It was like he'd been another person, hypnotized out of his normal caution by a wicked rough voice and some unfamiliar lyrics. Seduced, surprised, satisfied and then left in this new floating uncertainty.

The KnifeSwitch van was still parked by the door. Presumably Carlos had joined his bandmates having more caffeine for the road. Nate realized he didn't have any idea where that road ended—whether Carlos was a local or a long way from home. He had the impulse to get out and go in, to strike up a conversation, see if Carlos looked as good under fluorescent lights as he did in the dim neon glow.

But that had been a pretty clear good-bye. If Carlos wasn't out to his band, then Nate walking in there would be a really bad idea. He should just go home. Now. Any time now.

He was still sitting there, thinking, when the café door opened. Carlos came out, followed by the drummer and bassist. They were talking, bass guy still wired enough to almost smack the woman in the face with one of his gestures. That was a guy who hadn't needed more caffeine. As they opened the van, Carlos came around to the passenger side. For a moment, before getting in, he glanced over at Nate. His expression was completely flat, no anger, no interest. He swung up into the seat, the muscles of his arm flexing, and then shut the door. The old van pulled out of the lot, turned east on the road, and was gone.

Nate turned his key, slowly enough that there would deliberately be no chance of following them. The engine whined, caught, and he waited another minute before putting it in gear. By the time he hit the exit of the parking lot, the taillights of the van were out of sight. He turned west and headed for home.

Fifteen minutes later, he parked in front of his place, suddenly aware that he'd been on autopilot and couldn't recall one thing about the drive. Presumably he hadn't hit anything. He could vividly recall the ten minutes before leaving, though... He shook his head hard and got out of the car. His

brother's bus was there too, standing open, and Eli came out of the garage as Nate headed toward the door.

Eli grinned at him. "You're back fast. I thought you said you had a 'stop' to make." He made air quotes around "*stop*".

Nate frowned. "What are you? Twelve?"

"Just keeping your blushes from frying your face. But okay. Did you get laid or not?"

Nate felt his face heat, which was so unfair. "None of your business."

"Sure it is." Eli slung an arm over his shoulder. "You're my little brother."

Nate shoved him off. "By twenty-four minutes. And you smell like you haven't showered for a week."

Eli sniffed his pit. "Good honest sweat from working hard." His grin became more real. "That was an awesome show. The audience ate it up, and we made forty bucks apiece."

Nate managed not to say, *I know*. That would lead to undesirable questions. Instead he sneered. "Wow, might almost pay for gas."

"More than, plus we sold a shitload of merch. And the other bands were pretty good too. I had a bunch of fans come up after and rave about the whole lineup. The venue asked us to come back anytime."

Nate tried to let go of his sarcasm in the face of Eli's genuine pleasure. "That's cool. Will you?"

"Sometime, maybe, if we have a break and can't find anything bigger. Don't get me wrong—they run a tight show, but those house venues can't pack in more than a hundred people and another fifty or so on the lawn. Absolute max. I mean, it's a great crowd, but..." His enthusiasm faded. "Well, we need to hit it bigger."

"No rush though, right?"

"I'm twenty-six, Nate, and I'm the youngest guy in Serpentine. If we don't start making some actual money off this, we'll turn into a weekend band. A fucking hobby."

Nate hated to see his brother's smile disappear. He reached out to fake-ruffle his hair. "I know exactly how old you are. Old man. You have time. And I could hear them screaming for you from a block away."

Eli gave him a twisted smile. “A block away? Running out on us again? Sure, you *loooove* our music.”

“Well, I did, the first sixty-two times. Where are the guys, anyway?”

“Gone home. I told them I’d finish up.”

Nate grabbed the hem of Eli’s In Flames T-shirt and tugged. “Come on, then. I’ll give you a hand with the gear.”

There was only one cab left to move, and they wrestled it out of the bus, onto the handcart, and into the garage. Nate figured Eli would leave it and go, but he fiddled around, hooking everything up, setting the practice space to rights. Nate leaned by the door waiting.

Eli’s voice was low. “You really think it’s worth hanging on?”

“What? Of course.” Nate’s stomach hurt to hear that doubt in his brother’s voice. “You’re the best guitarist around. You can kind of sing, too.”

“We’re a hell of a cover band.”

Nate winced, because it was true that their original songs were the weak spot. “I really like ‘Dirty Corners’.”

“Tom wrote that two years ago.”

“Well, it’s still a good song. And, um, ‘Confession is Good for the Wallet.’”

“Meh. Sounds like a sixties protest song. We need something more. Something different.” Eli ran a hand through his hair. “Never mind, it was a good night. I’m just tired.”

“Maybe *you* need to get laid.”

That brightened Eli’s eyes. “So you *did* get laid. Dude! About time. Who was he?”

“A gentleman never tells.”

“Since when?”

“Since I don’t think he’s out.”

“Oh. Damn.” Eli sighed. “Well, I hope he was a good fuck, at least.”

“Awesome,” Nate said. “Best hookup ever.”

“Glad one of us got some.”

“See, there’s your problem. You wouldn’t be so gloomy if you had a new girlfriend. You just have to quit moping and let some guitar bunny pick you up.”

“Screw you. Your dry spell was a lot longer than mine.”

“But I didn’t let it make me whiny.”

Eli grabbed him and hooked a leg around his to make him trip, but at least the sad look was gone. They left the garage and parted with a fist bump. “See you tomorrow,” Nate said. “Get some sleep.”

“Sure. Tomorrow.”

Nate waited until Eli had driven off to turn away. Then he climbed the stairs along the west wall and opened the door to his apartment. The welcoming space was so familiar, the light switch a reflex reach to his left, the tray for his sneakers a quick kick and drop beside the mat. But as he looked around, it seemed different somehow.

Maybe it was Eli, talking about getting older. Maybe it was Carlos and the roller coaster highs and lows of pick-up sex. But here he was, twenty-six, living above his parents’ garage, working a minimum-wage job, no serious boyfriend for the last four years, just a few random hookups. Perhaps it was time he asked if this was all he would ever be, too.

He shut the door behind him. A low snarling sound from overhead reminded him that he wasn’t completely alone. He glanced up at the cat playground of hanging perches and walkways that ran the whole way around the room, a foot below the ceiling. He was rewarded by a flash of white fur. “Hey, Ghost, how was your evening?” He kept his voice to a gentle murmur, not that she would care.

The cat’s next noise at least had less growling in it.

“You need anything? Food? Water? Some sucker like me to cater to your every whim?” He checked the food dish and water bowl, and then the litter box. Everything looked fine, but he added a little fresh kibble to the bowl anyway. When he turned, the little cat was down on the floor barely two feet behind him, eyeing him. He managed not to jump. In the same soft soothing voice, he said, “Hey there. Getting bored yet?”

She didn’t run off when he looked at her, the way she would have a week ago. Instead she flicked her tail a few times, silently, her blue eyes dark and wide. Encouraged, he squatted down slowly, and held out his hand with a bite

of kibble on his flat fingertips. “Here, sweetie, you can get it on a silver platter.”

Her whiskers twitched, but she didn’t move. He waved the bit of kibble in the air, trying to waft the scent to her, wishing he had a better treat within reach. “Nice fresh fishy kibble. Come and get it.” Not that the little deaf cat could actually hear him, but it didn’t hurt to talk. He figured she’d see his tone in his body language.

He didn’t think he’d done anything scary, but the cat suddenly leaped straight in the air, landed inches closer to Nate, and darted forward. She swiped at his hand with a hiss, small claws connecting, and then swarmed up the carpet-covered pole leading to the safety of the overhead perches. Nate dropped the kibble, swore, and sucked on his scratched finger. “There’s gratitude for you,” he murmured.

You couldn’t blame a cat, though. She wasn’t the first feral foster kitten he’d dealt with and wouldn’t be the last, even if she was the first he’d brought home. He’d helped at the local animal shelter long enough to understand them. Raised up to be wild and wary, unused to human touch, a feral cat might come to eat from your hand, but she’d still turn on you suddenly if she felt threatened.

Ghost was better than she had been, and that was progress. Unlike with a human, there was no calculation and no malice in her scratching the hand that fed her. She couldn’t know better. Trust would be a long slow road.

“You hide up there, Your Highness,” he told her softly. “Feel safe. Tomorrow’s another day.” He turned out the overhead light. As he headed for the bedroom, he saw the glint of her eyes, following him now through the open overhead maze rather than hiding in one of the enclosed boxes. Progress indeed. He still closed the bedroom door behind him, giving them each a safe space for the night.

It was late, and past time to go to bed, but he was more wired than tired. He didn’t have to work till two in the afternoon anyway. He grabbed his sketchbook off the desk and flopped onto his bed, the pad in his lap. There were sharpened pencils ready in a cup on the nightstand, and he flipped to a clean page, grabbed a 2B and a graphite in 4B for that dark hair and the shadows, and began.

Carlos’s face developed under his fingers, with those challenging eyes and the faint haze of hair on his upper lip, the rounded face and arched eyebrows and lush mouth. He used the 4B with abandon to create the mass of curls on the

top of Carlos's head, then short choppy strokes to suggest the shorter crop on the sides. After a while he paused, grabbed the eraser to take out a finger smudge, and inspected the result.

It wasn't bad. There was something wrong about the neck and the way it led into those muscular shoulders. But he thought he'd caught the expression about right, the smoldering, challenging look Carlos had given him, right before lowering his mouth to Nate's dick. *Damn, that's one sexy guy.*

He tore the page out carefully and set it aside to spray later, put the pencils down and wiped his fingers. He had a variety of pens and chose his favorite Speedball. The lines went down fast and sure, a caricature—nose longer, hair wilder, that lower lip impossibly full, lean, strong arms marked by tattoos. He wished he'd had a chance to see them properly, but he put in the daggers on each forearm, substituting a scrawl for the words he hadn't managed to read on each, and drew an imagined tracery of scrolling lines across the chest. On a whim, he added himself standing alongside, a little taller, skinnier, his black hair wispy over his forehead, his chin an exaggerated point, his brows thick, straight and dark.

Do these two things go together? Even the lines he'd used were different, fat and heavy and curved for Carlos, thin and flyaway and light for himself. *Probably not.*

And that was okay. It had been a one-time thing. Hot as hell. Jerk-off fodder for the next few months, for sure. About time he had a new fantasy guy anyway.

He began to sketch again randomly, impressionistic fantasies built from scenes of the night. He drew a band onstage, dressed like zombies, their instruments flying out of their hands. Then a rubble-strewn path where rocks and chains and knives lurked under the litter. Eli onstage, burning in the fire of his music, flames wreathing his hands and rising from his hair. Hours later the bed was strewn with pages, his hand cramps could no longer be ignored, and his head was empty. He set the pad aside, dragged himself to the bathroom to wash up, stripped and fell back into bed. Sleep caught him before he had time to do more than tug the sheet up over himself.

Chapter 3

Carlos growled, “*Mondays*,” under his breath, eased his grip on the phone and kept his voice calm. “Yes, Mrs. Kingston. I know we were closed on the weekend. I understand you couldn’t get hold of us. But this is the third time you’ve canceled your appointment less than eight hours ahead. There’s a small charge...” He held the receiver farther from his ear. Her indignant squawking was plain even over a six-inch gap. “I’m sorry, ma’am... It’s not my policy... No ma’am, I don’t have the power to make an exception... I’ll have the office manager call you.”

At least, these days angry people couldn’t slam the phone down. There was just dead air as she clicked off. He grimaced and set his receiver back on the hook. Shannon, the hygienist, sighed. “I take it Mrs. Kingston isn’t coming. Again.”

“You take that right.”

“I’ll tell Dr. Donner.” Shannon tuned and headed back toward the exam rooms.

Carlos began gluing stamps on the waiting stack of appointment reminder cards, his busywork for slow moments. Today had sucked—late patients, no-show patients, complaining patients. Not that he envied Shannon or the dentist who had to actually work on them. But then, he didn’t make the money they did either. He stuck a stamp on crooked, hanging over the edge of the appointment card, and swore under his breath. Of course it wouldn’t come off without ripping in two. He hid the torn stamp-corpse in the trash, and put a fresh one on.

Dr. Donner came into the waiting room with Shannon behind him. The dentist rubbed at his graying hair and sighed. “Well, Kingston was the last client, so why don’t we take advantage of her blowing us off again and get out of here early? Carlos, close out the books and then you can go. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

“Great!” Shannon’s bubbly mood made a fast comeback. “I can save an hour of daycare. Thanks, Dr. D.” She hurried back toward the employee break room.

“Carlos.” Dr. Donner lowered his voice. “A word?”

“Yeah?”

The dentist pointed at Carlos's arm. "That shirt doesn't quite fit the dress code."

"Huh?" It was long-sleeved and high-collared. Carlos looked down and realized that steady washing had thinned the fabric until the tats on his arms showed through clearly. In this case, his left arm, where the scroll said, "*DEATH*." "Fuck. I mean, sorry, I see that. I'll get a new one."

"That's fine. I know it wasn't intentional. But small minds are everywhere." Dr. Donner gave him a tight smile. "As much as someone like Mrs. Kingston would benefit from a little mind expansion, my office will not be the place it happens."

"No, sir."

Carlos totaled up the co-pay receipts, made up the bank deposit for the safe, and closed out the register. By the time he got to the break room to strip off the offending shirt and pull on a sleeveless tank, Shannon and Dr. D had gone. He set the alarm and headed out to his car.

He needed a new shirt. Probably three new shirts, because truthfully he was down to that last one, washing it out by hand half the time. There were always better things to do with his money.

He thought about running to Target and just buying the first three shirts he saw. Who cared how dorky they might be? But it occurred to him that if he was going to wear the damned things daily for the next two years it might be worth actually paying a little attention to what he bought.

He considered calling Mia to shop with him, but he couldn't do it. Mia loved to look at clothes, but he'd made that mistake once, and he was not ever, never, till hell froze over, clothes shopping for mind-numbing hours with her again. The problem was, he didn't know anyone else who could dress for shit. Or did he...?

He took out his phone and tapped in a contact. He'd only pulled up that number once or twice since Friday night. Maybe four times. There was really no reason to keep it—they'd both agreed it was a simple hookup. No matter how hot Nate was, coming undone, sweat dampening that goth-vampire silk he was wearing, it wasn't smart to go for a repeat. But Nate was the one person Carlos could think of who didn't look like they dressed themselves from the local Goodwill, or out of their own merch box.

Not that Carlos wanted to look like a goth nightstalker.

Although the clingy shirt and tight jeans had been smokin' on Nate's lean body.

Not that he was fooling himself; he was looking for an excuse to call Nate.

Not that there was anything wrong with having a reason to call. Before he could second-guess himself again, he hit the number. It rang three times, long enough for him to think about hanging up, before Nate's light voice said, "Hey. I was just thinking about you."

"Me?" Carlos wished he could undo the squeak of surprise, but it was done. He coughed and plowed ahead. "Hey, Nate, what are you doing?"

"Right now?"

"No, next week. Yeah, right now."

"I'm working. Why?"

"Oh. Never mind."

"Wait! Don't hang up. Come on by."

"I don't wanna bother you while you're working."

"I'm a barista, not a brain surgeon. Come say hello. I'll buy you a coffee. Black. No froufrou."

Carlos felt the smile cross his lips. "It's too hot for coffee."

"I'll put ice in it."

"I don't even know where you work."

"Oh. Yeah. I'm at the Top Cup in Lacey. Do you know where that is?"

"I know where Lacey is," he said slowly. Half an hour south. Not next door, but not too far.

"Where are you coming from? I'll text you directions. Unless you're in, like, Portland or Bellingham, and it would take three hours."

"Lakewood. Just south of Tacoma," he said. "Not too bad."

"Sure, come down I-5." Nate's voice faltered. "Not that you have to. I mean, that's still kind of far to come for a free iced coffee."

"Hey, you said the magic word."

"Coffee?"

"Free."

Nate chuckled. “So... you didn’t call me just for free coffee, did you?”

“Uh. I have to buy stupid shirts.” He realized how pathetic that sounded even as he said it. “Never mind.”

“No. Go on. You have to buy shirts. Stupid ones. So... you want company? Advice? Someone to hold you back so you don’t buy out the store?”

“I hate shopping,” he grumped. “It’s for work.”

“Ah, that kind of stupid. Well, you’re in luck. I have a degree in shopology.”

“I have no money.”

“I’m not surprised. There’s a thrift store in the strip mall here. We’ll find something.”

“We?”

“I have a half-hour break at seven, I have the expert shopping gene, and you need shirts. Buying will happen.”

Carlos bit his lip, but a happy Nate was pretty irresistible. And maybe there’d be a few spare minutes in that half hour for something a lot more fun than shopping. “Okay. Send me the trail of breadcrumbs. I’ll see you a bit before seven.”

The coffee shop where Nate worked turned out to be at the end of an older mall, next to a dry cleaner and a hardware store. Carlos parked, strolled across the lot to the storefront, and pushed open the glass door. It was a small place, deeper than wide, with round tables for two or four, and a short counter at one side. A few middle-aged customers sat at the tables with their cups and electronic devices. The board up above the counter listed a wide array of hot drinks and cold, but the pastry case had pretty meager choices. The girl behind the register smiled as he approached. “What can I get for you?”

A couple of feet down the counter, Nate looked over from behind the espresso machine and grinned. “This one’s on me, Mandy. Hey, Carlos. What’ll you have? Hot or cold?”

“Hot. Coffee.” It occurred to him that Mandy no doubt knew Nate was gay, which meant she’d probably guess he was too. Shouldn’t be a problem unless she was a local metal fan, which judging from her Lolita goth look, was unlikely but not impossible. Well, it was too late now to do anything. He straightened his shoulders, slouched his hips, leaned an elbow on the tall part of the counter. “Hey, Nate.”

Nate's lips twitched, giving Carlos the uncomfortable feeling he'd spotted the straight-guy act, but he just said, "Pick a seat, any seat. I'll bring it over."

Carlos picked a table in the corner, looking out on the parking lot. The mall was pretty deserted. When Nate brought his cup, he said, "Seems quiet."

"It comes and goes. There's a theater a block down; we get customers between the shows. My break's scheduled now for a reason. Give me five minutes."

Carlos drank his coffee, which was pretty damned good, and waited as Nate conferred with the cashier, then took off his blue apron. Under it he was wearing—surprise—all black, in painted on jeans and a shirt with long cuffs and loose sleeves. When he came back over, Carlos reached out and twitched a fold of silky fabric. "Dress Like a Pirate Day?"

Nate smacked his fingers away, but not roughly. "Philistine."

"Ooh. I bet you went to college."

Nate looked a little surprised. "Didn't you?"

"Nope." Tío Ramón hadn't been happy with him, since his parents had been sending money to put in his college account for years, but it'd been needed for other, more urgent purposes.

"You still knew what it meant."

"Didn't say I was dumb, just uneducated." He was a songwriter, and he loved words. Anyone who thought he should talk like a laborer could get screwed.

"Sorry. Bad assumptions."

"S'okay." He reached out again to pat Nate's shirt. "So what do you call this? Flutter-goth?"

"I call it better than that rag you're wearing. Finish your fucking coffee and come on." Nate fixed him with a demanding look.

Carlos smiled into his mug and sipped the last bit slowly, but not too slowly because a half-hour break would be all too short. He set the cup aside and stood. "Okay, where're we going?"

"Four doors down." Nate led the way out of the coffee shop. "There." He gestured.

The store was a small consignment and thrift shop, at the other end of the mall. Nate was clearly known in the place, because the guy sitting at the

counter started to get up as they entered, then just gave them a wave. Nate turned to Carlos. “So what do you need? Besides a makeover?”

“Three shirts.” Carlos held a hand in front of Nate’s face with three fingers up and wiggled them. “One. Two. Three. Stuff that’ll work for my day job.”

“Which is?”

“Receptionist for a nice, suburban dentist who doesn’t want my tats showing.”

“Any of them?” Nate’s eyes dropped to his chest, where most of the black scroll was visible.

“Mainly these.” He held out his arms and turned them over.

Nate reached for him, running his fingers over Carlos’s forearms. It was odd and a bit ticklish, but something about his close attention made Carlos feel warm and reluctant to pull back.

“Nice daggers. Kind of boring lettering. The blood drops could use some three-D effects.”

“Everyone’s a critic.” Carlos stepped away.

“Sorry. Did you design those?”

“Huh? No, just picked them.” *While high on pot, on the theory that getting wasted would be good for my needle anxiety.* It might have helped him stress out less, at the time, but it sure hadn’t done much for his judgment. He wasn’t going to disown his tats now, though. They’d served their purpose all right, making him look more butch. The *blood* and *death* parts might have been overkill, but his philosophy was *no regrets*. “I like them.”

“Well, I’ve seen a lot worse.” Nate colored. “Sorry, that’s the artist in me. I kind of have a thing for lettering. Now the chest piece looks good.”

Carlos tugged the left side of his shirt down a bit to show the word “*Boy*” in the scrollwork. He didn’t regret that one either. It had been his flag run up the mast, his flat-out statement to his tío and tía that there was no going back for him. He was a guy, not a girl, and nothing would ever change that. He’d written it in ink and pain on his skin, and thank you to the underground artist who worked on a fifteen-year-old. He wasn’t inclined to explain it either though.

Nate just nodded. “Yeah, nice lines. But you need shirts that will hide most of that?”

“Yup.”

“And that don’t make you look like a corporate drone. Okay. Follow me.” Nate headed for a rack of shirts and began flipping through them. “You have that great caramel skin tone, so you can wear almost any color, but I think blue is going to be best. Or maybe autumn colors. No green though.”

“I need something boring,” Carlos protested, as Nate pulled out a seventies yellow-and-peach stripe and held it up against him.

“That’s too big anyway. Here, hold this.” Nate shoved a pale blue print into his hands, then a cream with a black collar.

“Um.” He took them, rather than let the shirts fall.

“Maybe this one”—a gray-and-silver stripe—“or this.” The next one was pink. Very pink. Carlos shoved it back at Nate.

“No fucking way.”

Nate grinned. “Maybe not for work.”

“Maybe not for anything, ever. I’m not a pink person.” He’d worn enough of it, under protest, back home with Mamá and Papá. Pink skirts, pink dresses, bows in his hair, ripped out, torn, stained, hidden, in his fight for his life, his real life—

He jolted as Nate touched his arm. “Are you okay? You zoned out on me.”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“No pink. Got it.” Nate grabbed three more. “Changing room is over here.” He led the way to the back of the store.

Carlos followed him into a curtained cubicle. The space wasn’t too tight, but the fabric curtain stopped a foot above the ground, so any real fun would be too risky. *Que lástima*. Too bad. He hung the shirts he was holding on the peg. Nate handed him a blue-and-gray stripe and said, “Here, try that one first.” He leaned against one of the solid walls, arms crossed over his chest.

Carlos slid the shirt off its hanger and stopped dead.

It was odd, the way he would remember and forget at the same time. He was a guy, always had been a guy. The fact that he’d had surgery to get rid of his girl parts seemed like something from another life. Until suddenly it meant he had scars on his chest that wouldn’t be mistaken for anything else. Until it meant that pulling off his tank top would reveal him far more nakedly than he’d

intended. He hesitated, then slid the shirt on over the tank. The buttons were a bit tight and he fumbled them.

“It’ll fit better without doubling up,” Nate said. “Three more months of summer, and it gets hotter every year, seems like. You’ll roast if you wear layers. Or do they overuse the air-conditioning at your job?”

Carlos paused, two buttons fastened. He ducked his head, staring at his Vans, the plain black ones he wore for work. He’d bought them two years ago, and they were getting scuffed, the tops lined with gray creases, the rubber smudged. Two years ago, he’d bought Vans and Docs to celebrate finally paying off what he owed Tío Ramón, what the college fund hadn’t stretched to, for all the hormones and the doctor visits, and the lab work, and the surgery, and the silicone gel sheets for reducing the scars, and... everything, really. His life. His self. He’d vowed then, no shame.

Nate had pushed away from the wall and was looking at him, those thick eyebrows arched and his lips parted with some question he held back, unasked.

¡Pues ni modo! To hell with this. His other motto had been, “*¡Si no les gusta, que se chinguen! If they don’t like it, screw them!*” ever since he was ten. Ever since Mamá and Papá gave up on him and sent him north for Tío Ramón to try to make him see sense. He’d gotten out of his uncle’s car in front of the house in Crescent City, and he’d yanked the frilly shirt over his head, ripped one sleeve off, and crossed his arms over his bare chest. He’d said, “*Yo no soy una niña.* I am *not* a girl,” and never backed down again.

Being in the closet in the metal community was just common sense. For all that they claimed to hate the establishment, the metal crowd had its share of gay-hating, women-hating, trans-loathing jerks. If he wanted a real shot in music, he needed to be a straight guy. Outside of music, though, if Nate couldn’t take him as he was, then screw him. *¡Mierda!* Carlos yanked the striped shirt off without unbuttoning it, then grabbed the hem of his sleeveless tank and pulled it over his head.

Without looking at Nate, but without crossing his arms over his chest or turning away, he picked up the striped shirt, opened the two buttons, and then slid his arms back into the sleeves. He knew what Nate was seeing. He’d heard the little hitch in Nate’s breath, so small he’d have missed it if he hadn’t been expecting it.

Nate had asked to see his chest-piece tattoo, but below that, below his flat, dark nipples that grafting had shaped so well, were the narrow, ridged, brown

scars of his top surgery. No amount of creams and silicone and compression and wishing had smoothed those off his skin. He was resigned now, six years later, that nothing ever would. Of course, there was a chance Nate didn't know what he was looking at.

The shirt was a good fit, worn over bare skin. Carlos buttoned it easily enough. With two buttons open at the throat, some of his chest piece showed, but closing one more hid most of it. He held out his forearm under the brightest light to see if the tat would show through. There was a hint of shadow, but not enough to offend a little old lady. He turned to see himself better in the mirror. The fit in the back wasn't bad either.

Nate said, "Yeah, that's your color. Kind of a shame to hide arms like yours, but it does a good job."

Carlos let out a breath, louder than he'd meant to, and said, "I'll take this one."

Nate pulled the hanger out of the blue print. "Try this next."

It took ten minutes for him to pick two more shirts, from the most ordinary of Nate's choices. Nate pushed the print at him again. "This one was perfect. Really."

Carlos flicked the fabric without taking it. "It looks like I'm covered in peacock feathers."

"Does not!" Nate crossed his eyes and held up the shirt. "Well, maybe. Okay. Be boring."

"Receptionist. Remember?"

"Do you like it? The job, I mean?"

Carlos shrugged, pulling his own shirt back over his head. "It pays the bills. Better than most jobs a guy with a high school diploma's likely to find. I was lucky to know someone who knew someone." Lucky that Dr. Donner had seen something he liked in his interview and let him train up on the Dentrax software, and learn on the job. Because he sure as hell wasn't making a living with the music. He fought back a bitter twist of his lips and said with forced cheer, "I could be flipping burgers, or making cold calls."

"Yeah, I get that." Nate pulled open the curtain. "I have a degree, and I'm still serving mocha-soy-latte-frappito whatevers."

"What kind of degree?" Carlos took his choices to the register.

“Psychology, actually.” Nate shrugged, leaning against the counter as Carlos paid. “It’s cool, it’s interesting, but there’s no way to use it without *more* school, and yet *more* school. And when I was working my ass off in classes, I didn’t have time for art. So now I have a crap job, but when I’m off, I’m off. I can draw and paint.”

“Paint what?”

Nate hesitated, holding the door to the consignment shop half-open. A moment later, he pulled it all the way and led Carlos out into the evening dusk. “It’d be easier to show you. If you want, sometime?”

Carlos didn’t answer right away. He couldn’t quite tell what Nate’s nonchalance ever since that naked moment in the cubicle meant. He didn’t notice? Didn’t understand? Didn’t care? They’d walked halfway back to the Top Cup before he said, “Are you asking me to see your fucking etchings?”

“Maybe?”

Carlos grabbed Nate’s arm, because this was too important to just let slide, and the door was too close. “Wait. You do realize...?”

Nate turned to him, the setting sun glinting in his smoke-gray eyes. “That you look like you’re, um, trans?”

“Yeah.” It came out harsher than he meant it to. “That.”

“So...?”

“So now you can just walk away, and I’ll say thanks for the help with the shirts and that’s it.”

“I don’t want to, though.” Nate tilted his head. His pointed features and baby-fine hair made him look young and lightweight, but his gaze was steady. “Do you?”

“No. I don’t.” Carlos clenched his hands until his nails bit into his palms. A sudden sweat broke out on his back. “Um, your place?”

“Yeah. I get off at ten.”

“I’d have to kill three more hours.”

“Two and a half. You could watch a movie down the road.”

Part of Carlos, a big part, wanted to take the delay as an excuse to move on. Tell Nate, *maybe some other night*, and then just never follow through. He went for his *screw that* attitude instead. “Right. I could. What do you think’s showing?”

“X-Men—the whateverth sequel? It seems to be everywhere.”

“James MacAvoy’s not too hard to look at.”

“And I’m sure plenty of stuff blows up or catches on fire.”

“Is that your description of a good movie?”

“I thought it might appeal to you.”

Because you think I’m tough? Or because you think I’m overcompensating?
There went the second-guessing again. Carlos rubbed his eyes. “How about if I hang out and write lyrics, and my personal servant keeps me supplied with drinks?”

“Do you tip your personal servant well?”

“I’ve heard he’s willing to take blow jobs instead.”

Nate bit his lip, then smiled. “You have to pay for the coffee from now on, but I’ll let you work off the tips.”

“The service had better be great though.”

“I always aim to please.” Nate turned for the coffee shop door as if that was all that needed to be said. Carlos followed him bemusedly. *Was that it?* Well, until the moment when all the clothes might come off. He wasn’t sure if they would go that far, but he’d deal with that if and when.

For now, he found his corner table again, set the bag with his new shirts underneath, and pulled his little notebook out of his pocket. He took the book with him everywhere, ready for that flash of words that demanded to be written down, before the sharp awareness of perfection slid out of his mind and became muddled and lost. It was hard to concentrate, though. Lines floated to the surface and were gone, ungrasped.

The questions that you didn’t ask

The words you didn’t say

Might let me stay.

He drank coffee, and scribbled lines of futile wrongness, pedantic rhymes, fragments that went nowhere.

Knife edge of hope

Like wire strung neck-high

Cuts me down.

The place got busy twenty minutes later, with what was clearly the after-movie crowd. Gradually they drifted off again, leaving Nate clearing tables and wiping up spills. Carlos found his eyes turning again and again to Nate's back as he moved quietly around the room.

It wasn't like he'd never had a boyfriend. There had been a couple of guys in the last few years who'd liked his muscles and his ass and his talent and hung around for a while, but it'd never been a good fit. It'd never felt easy, and for all his efforts, eventually he'd done something they hated, or they'd pushed him too far. The pain from when he'd broken up with Pete and had to kick him out had gone deep.

"You're such a bitch... you're trying to be like a guy, acting all tough, but you're still a whiny little girl... ugly... no one could really want that. You're just another hole... dyke... loser... wannabe..." He bit his cheek hard, refusing to remember more. *Imbécil.* It had made him tougher, made him stronger. Pete had taught him to have his fun, cut his losses and get out fast. Not to settle for someone just because they were happy to fuck him and let him give them a free ride in his apartment.

He really should go. Except when he watched Nate, with his fey smiles, and his graceful gestures, and the way he laughed easily at things his customers said, hope rose up inside him. Nate cleaned a mess on a table without a frown or a glare at the departing slobs. Nate looked over at him and his eyes sparkled, even after seeing, and knowing. Maybe this time... Carlos stayed and scribbled lyrics that were either banal or cut too close to the bone. And waited for ten o'clock.

Chapter 4

As they turned in at the driveway, Nate vibrated with a mix of anticipation and anxiety. How long had it been since he'd brought anyone home? He wasn't sure, but it had to have been three years. At least. And Carlos was different from anyone he'd met before and not just in the obvious way.

Yeah, the fact that Carlos was trans added a little edge to the anxiety. Nate knew how sex with a guy went, but he wasn't on solid ground here, and he really, really didn't want to do anything that might hurt Carlos. The guy might seem like a rock, all solid muscle and full-speed-ahead personality, but he'd seen a flash of worry in Carlos's eyes as he'd turned, chest bare, pose casual like he didn't care as he revealed his truth. Nate didn't want to make it a big deal, but he also didn't want to assume it didn't matter.

He wished there was a manual he could've read up ahead of time. Then he felt guilty for assuming a trans guy was so different he'd need one, and by the time his brain untwisted from that, his arousal was fading. Then he saw that there was light coming from under the garage doors, and three cars were parked on the gravel by the drive.

“Shit! Sorry.” He braked harder than he'd meant to.

“What?”

Before he could answer, the main garage door rolled up and two guys came out—Eli laughing at something his drummer was saying. The light behind them showed the other band members of Serpentine set up for practice. Eli looked up, spotted Nate's car, and jogged over.

Nate froze. He couldn't get away from Eli without powering backward down the drive, and his reflexes were too slow. Eli tapped on his window, and he hesitated a moment more, then rolled it down. He carefully didn't look over at Carlos, although he could tell how stiff and tense he was in the passenger seat.

“Hey, Nate, sorry!” Eli's model-perfect smile lit up his face. “I didn't think we'd run this late.”

“You weren't supposed to be here at all,” Nate snapped, not hiding the irritation in his voice. Living over the practice space for a metal band only worked if he knew when they were going to be there. Serpentine at full howl

could make not just sleep but conversation, rational thought, and walking a straight line impossible. There was a reason he'd only fostered the one deaf kitten. "We have a fucking schedule."

"Yeah, but I knew you were at work. I figured we'd be gone before you got home, but we're stuck on the new song. The last verse sucks. If you can give us about ten minutes we'll get out of your way. Or maybe twenty. I want to run through a couple of things." Eli ran a hand over his head, tousling his long brown hair, and tilted his head appealingly, glancing further into the car toward the passenger seat. "Hey, it'll be like a free concert, right? You don't mind?"

Nate winced and didn't look, but somehow he wasn't surprised when Carlos rumbled, "And worth about what we'll pay for it."

"Hey!" Eli straightened, then looked more closely. "Wait. I know you."

Carlos swung the passenger door open and got out, leaning on the roof. Nate scrambled to do the same, swinging his door open hard enough to smack his damned brother on the hip. Eli bit off a yelp, stepped back, and eyed Carlos's tattooed forearms. "I do know you. KnifeSwitch, right?"

Carlos frowned, his dark brows coming together until he looked dangerous. "So?"

Eli looked back and forth from Nate to Carlos, clearly adding one and one and getting at least two, but for all his pretty face, Eli wasn't dumb, and he just said, "So, you were pretty good Friday night. Great lyrics."

Carlos's attitude eased off a notch. "You too."

Eli laughed easily. "Not talking about our lyrics, I bet."

Carlos's smile was grudging, but it was there. "Nope. Your bassist has a great touch, the arrangements are cool, your voice doesn't suck, but your lyrics do."

Eli sighed. "Yeah. None of us can write much better than some high school kid in his parents' basement." He gave a theatrical toss of his head. "It's a burden to look this good, play this well, and suck that bad. At least our covers are *awesome*." His teeth flashed in a white grin. Carlos smiled wider in response.

Nate had always envied Eli that—the way he could get people on his side. It was partly his looks, because being six-two, with great cheekbones and a swimmer's build never hurts in the popularity sweepstakes. But it was also

Eli's easygoing nature and the way he was willing to laugh at himself that made everyone like him.

Nate tried to be like that but he just wasn't. Carlos saying "Your work sucks," would have made him curl up like a pill bug in defense of his soft underbelly. Nate's only consolation was that Eli was arrow-straight and not interested in guys, so he didn't have to compete with his brother for dates. He knew very well who'd have lost.

Carlos said, "Do you always flirt with your brother's dates?"

Nate stared at him, stunned that he'd admitted the date part out loud. Carlos's chin jutted aggressively, his eyes were fixed on Eli, and Nate saw that his hands had clenched to fists, the muscles of his arms taut under those blood-dripping daggers. Whatever had made him put that into words, it wasn't a casual mistake.

Eli's voice was as smooth and easy as ever. "Only to make him crazy. Brother's duty. I'm straight."

Carlos raked his gaze up and down Eli. "Ever thought about changing that? You're pretty hot."

Eli's expression hardened. "No. And mostly my brother's dates don't flirt back in front of him."

Color rose under Carlos's caramel skin. "That was just... fuck if I know what that was. Self-defense? In advance?"

"You don't need defense from me, man," Eli said. "I've got a gay brother. I don't care and I don't tell."

From the garage, the drummer yelled, "Hey, Eli? Are we gonna wrap this up already?"

Carlos looked from Eli to Nate. "I don't mind going for a walk for twenty minutes."

Eli shook his head. "We can pack up and go."

"Nah." Carlos stepped away from the car, shut the door and stretched nonchalantly. "I've been sitting for hours. A walk'll be good."

Nate said, "Dude, still here." But when they both turned to him, he dropped his gaze. "I guess I could walk a bit. Except I've been on my feet all night, so Eli, you've got fifteen minutes to make that song work, and then get out."

Eli slapped his shoulder. “Got it.” He turned and jogged back to the open door. A moment later, the band drove hard into the opening chords of a song.

Nate turned to Carlos. “Let me park off the driveway, and then you can tell me where you want to walk to.” He waved a hand at the street, lined with mismatched houses and sprawling, unlandscaped front yards. There was no sidewalk, and no view. He slid into the car, leaving Carlos to look around, and drove another twenty feet to park off to the side of the drive.

When he walked back, Carlos was staring at the garage, his head cocked, listening. Nate said, “Free concert, my ass.”

“I like your ass better. Although they’re not bad.”

Nate had to smile. “Where should we go?”

Carlos shrugged. “I didn’t mean to keep you on your feet. Maybe we can go sit somewhere out of the way.” He waved at the huge old willow tree on the side lawn.

“Sure.” Nate headed over there. He’d actually spent a lot of time up this tree as a kid, feeling sheltered and hidden by the green tracery of its branches. This time he circled the trunk and sat on the far side with his back against the rough bark. Carlos came and sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched.

Nate sighed. “Sorry about all that. Usually Eli’s good about keeping the band out of my hair.”

“Maybe it’s a sign we should forget this,” Carlos muttered.

“No! Unless you want to.”

“I want to get fucked.” This time the low voice held a different kind of tension. “It’s been a while. I want your dick up my ass.”

“Oh!” Nate shifted to ease the stretch of his jeans. “Yeah. That’s, um, good.”

“You do top?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Or I could suck you off, like last time. I liked the taste of you.” Carlos reached over, his hand landing on Nate’s groin, gripping him through the denim. “Right here even. We have fifteen minutes.”

Nate grabbed his wrist, pulling up against that wiry strength. “Hands off. This is my parents’ front lawn. I don’t care how many hundred yards back the house is, I’m not getting sucked off here.”

Carlos’s chuckle was low and dirty, but he let go. He didn’t pull his hand back, though, rubbing slowly instead. “So you want to just pass the time for fifteen minutes.”

Nate elbowed him in the ribs and managed to disconnect that rubbing from his eager dick. “By talking, not by making me walk past my brother with a giant boner.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Not happening.”

Carlos eased his hand away. “Spoilsport. Okay, what *do* you want to do?” He turned toward the garage enough for Nate to see the faint glow of the floodlamp light his eyes and trace the line of his jaw. The haze of stubble across his cheek caught Nate’s attention. He’d never gone for the rough look before, but on Carlos it was damned sexy. Nate reached out to touch, then pulled his hand back.

“Sorry. We could talk, I guess.”

“Or I could write your brother better lyrics.” Carlos’s attention was fixed on the garage, listening. Eli’s voice moved from rough and hard to smooth and slow as molasses. “Seriously? He’s rhyming ‘fire’ and ‘higher’? Teen girls do better.”

Nate said defensively, “Tom, the drummer, writes the songs.”

“He should stick to drumming.” Carlos fumbled in a pocket and pulled out a small notebook and pencil stub.

“Like what? You can do better in ten minutes?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“Why?” Nate heard his voice thinning, as one more person paid closer attention to Eli than him. “Why bother?”

Carlos’s shrug rubbed their shoulders together. “Because I can. Because there are still ten minutes before I can make you come like a rocket.” He hesitated, then blew out a sigh. “Because if he owes me a song, I’ll trust him better not to spread gossip around the scene.”

“Oh.” Nate kept silent as Carlos turned the notebook to catch the faint light, scribbled, listened, scribbled again. Eventually Nate said, “Would it be that bad, to be out?”

“Wouldn’t be good,” Carlos grunted. He crossed something out, scribbled again. “You must know, with your brother and all. No one’s making money at music anymore. I mean, if Devin Townsend has to crowdfund his albums, the rest of us are fucked. But it’s hard not to try, so I try. I can’t afford anything going against me at all. Yeah, there’s gay guys in metal. You know there are. But almost none who are out, not rubbing noses in it, not waving flags, because there’s enough asscracks in the audience to make it a bad, bad idea right now. Especially when you’re trying to catch a break.”

“So what do you do? For sex, I mean. Pick up random guys and hope they don’t know who you are?”

“Pretty much. I use Grindr or go places where they like more EDM than metal. A mouth is a mouth, in a dark hallway. Get off and get gone. It works.”

“Sounds lonely.”

Carlos glanced his way, eyes glittering. “Well fuck you. How’s your way been working out?”

Nate almost snarled back, but for once, he managed to catch the words before they left his mouth. “Also lonely,” he admitted. “I’ve had a few hookups recently, but I don’t like them much. Dated a few guys who didn’t click. You’re an exception. It’s been a long time since I was with someone who was worth a second look.”

Carlos grunted. “I think there’s a compliment in there.”

“Yep.” Nate bumped his shoulder. “You’re third-look worthy.”

“We need your bro to shut up so we can get that second, um, *look* taken care of.”

“True.” Nate tipped his head against the tree, closing his eyes. It was calm under the tree, the sound of the band just muted enough not to vibrate through his bones. A light breeze brushed his cheek, and when the band stopped for a moment, he could hear the soft shush of Carlos’s pencil on the page. The band took up the song from the top again, Eli’s voice carrying them. Nate leaned sideways until Carlos’s shoulder was a support under his, and waited to be shrugged off, but Carlos chuckled and kept on writing.

“I sometimes wonder what I’ll be doing ten years down the road, or twenty.” Nate raised his knees as his erection subsided, and wrapped his arms across his shins. “Art’s a bit like music. Lots of us at the bottom, picking up crumbs, and only a few at the top who actually earn a living.”

“Are you any good?” Carlos said it like he was interested, judgment reserved.

“You’ll have to tell me. I’ll let you look.” Mostly he didn’t want to know what guys he dated thought of his art, but he suddenly wondered what Carlos’s blunt opinion would be.

“After we fuck,” Carlos said, in the same conversational tone. “Sex first, etchings later.”

Nate laughed. From the garage, the music stopped and the door opened again with a mechanical rumble. Carlos ripped a page out of his notebook and passed it to Nate. “Here. Give that to your brother. Tell him it’ll sound better if one of his band can do a second voice on the underlined bits, but either way it won’t suck as bad as what he has now.”

Nate took the paper. “Don’t you want to give it to him?”

“Nah. If he really hasn’t told his band about me, I’d like to keep it that way. He may be your brother, but they’re not.”

“All right.” Nate pushed to his feet. “Back soon.”

“You’d better be.”

Nate rounded the tree and headed for the garage. A glance back showed that Carlos was nearly invisible, a dark lump on the outline of the gnarled trunk that only resolved into a seated figure if you already knew what it was. Nate moved faster across the grass.

When he reached the circle of light from the garage, the guys were well into packing up. Eli looked his way. “Two minutes, bro.”

Nate jerked his head. “Can I see you a sec?”

“Sure.” Eli set his guitar down and came toward him. Nate backed out and around the corner enough to be out of view. Eli reached him and said barely above a whisper, “Sorry. I really didn’t mean to cock-block you. Is that guy still around?”

“Carlos. And yeah, he’s waiting for you all to get your asses out of here.”

“Sorry. We’ll make it fast.”

“Wait.” Nate grabbed Eli’s arm. “He did this for you.” He held out the bit of paper.

“He what?” Eli took it, looked at it, and frowned. “Is that what it looks like?”

“He said it was better lyrics than the crap you were singing.”

“Um.” Eli read through it once, then again with his lips moving almost silently. “Well. Yeah, that could work. Fuck, yeah. Although we’d have to change this one line here. Um.” He looked up at Nate. “Why? Is he, like, asking for money or...?”

“How do I know why?” Nate said irritably. “Maybe he wants to help. Maybe he’s showing off. Maybe he wants to make sure you owe him to keep your mouth shut.”

“I would anyway. He doesn’t have to bribe me. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t.”

“I guess. Listen, I won’t get in the way right now, but this is pretty cool. I’m gonna take it with me, try it with the guitar. If it’s good, tell your guy I might want to buy it from him.”

“He’s not my guy, and I think it was free.”

“I want to have the rights, clean and clear. I won’t pay much, but something.”

“I’ll tell him.”

Eli hesitated, looking at him. “He’s kind of a tough guy, from what I’ve heard. I wouldn’t have thought he was your type.”

“Me neither.” Nate shrugged.

“You’re sure this is a good idea then? He’s got to be deep in the closet.”

“You fuck your way, I’ll fuck mine.”

“Too true. All right, so, I should go.” The shadow in Eli’s eyes was an unwelcome reminder of how often Nate’s impulse to get close to a guy had gone wrong. “You know where to find me.”

“If he wants to sell the song.”

“Yeah. That.” Eli hovered another second before smacking his arm. “Be careful.”

Nate watched him head back into the lighted interior. “No chance,” he said, too softly to be heard. He was tired of safe, tired of holding back just because he’d dated too many bastards to trust a sexy voice and hot body. This once, he was going to pretend his past never happened, and start new.

It took more like ten minutes to get everyone out of the garage and into their assorted vehicles. Nate heaved a sigh of relief as the last held-together-with-string beater vanished down the street. He turned toward the lawn, to see Carlos already strolling toward him.

“So.” Carlos’s grin was a flash of white teeth. “You think we can fuck now?”

Just like that, Nate was hard and out of breath again. “Yeah. For sure. Come on.”

The stairs to his place went up the south side of the garage. He led the way, vividly aware of Carlos following close behind him. The lock on the door stuck, but he gave it a practiced jiggle and it opened for him. He led the way in, and fumbled over to the floor lamp rather than hit the bright ceiling fixture. He took a quick glance up, but Ghost was hiding somewhere, silent and out of sight.

When the light came on, Carlos took a step inside and shut the door behind them, flipping the bolt over. Nate’s breathing hitched in anticipation.

Carlos took another slow, controlled step forward, looking around. “Nice place. Weird overhead sculpture.”

Nate swallowed against the dryness in his mouth. “Thanks. And it’s cat furniture. Walkways, perches.”

“You have a cat?”

“Yeah.” He waved vaguely upward and hoped Ghost wasn’t lurking up there thinking about dropping down on Carlos’s head. She’d done it to Eli once.

Carlos glanced up and around but then shrugged. “Got a bed?”

“Um. Through there.” He gestured to the bedroom door, still trying to spot the half-grown cat in the shadows overhead.

Carlos raised a dark brow. “Second thoughts?”

“No.” Nate turned and led the way, already hard and eager, with Carlos close behind him. He shut the bedroom door behind Carlos, but didn’t turn on the light. Enough moonlight filtered through the blinds to see the outlines of the desk and bed. Carlos brushed past him and without asking, reached for the bedside lamp. It came on in a wash of warm light that picked up the fine dark hair of Carlos’s forearms, the colorful tattoos, and the lean smoothness of his hands. Nate shivered and sat on the edge of the bed.

“So.” Carlos reached out to touch Nate’s neck, resting a hot palm against the angle of his shoulder. “You can tell me what you like. Or I can tell you what I want.”

“You.” Nate couldn’t remember being this turned on, or this unsure, in a long time. “Tell me.”

Carlos’s grin held a touch of feral pleasure. “Oh, yeah. I want you naked first, then.”

“What about you?” Nate asked, even as he obediently tugged up the hem of his shirt.

“Maybe. Later.”

Nate pulled off his shirt, kicked away his sneakers, and reached for the button of his jeans. “I liked what I saw of you so far. I want more.”

“Mm. Okay.” Carlos mirrored his move, yanking his cotton tank off quickly. The long hair on top of his head came out mussed and disheveled, and the bedhead look matched the heat in his eyes.

Nate let his gaze trail up and down, from the edge of battered jeans up the toned stomach with a dark treasure trail, to Carlos’s flat brown nipples and the black elegance of the tattoo across his collarbones, looking at the scars, but not lingering there. “Love the ink. Can I see closer?”

Carlos crossed his arms. “Get naked first.”

“Such a romantic.” Nate lifted his ass off the bed to drag his jeans down. His dick sprang free, bouncing happily.

“If you want romance you’ve come to the wrong guy.” Carlos stared at Nate’s erection and licked his lips.

Nate kicked his jeans across the room, toed off his socks and leaned back. “I’m not looking for that. Come here.”

“I’m calling the shots, remember?”

Nate didn't remember exactly agreeing to that, but at this point, if it got some of Carlos's skin touching his, he didn't care. "Lube and condoms in the top drawer." He swung his feet up on the bed and leaned back on his elbows. He spread his legs enough to show his balls, and his dick bounced eagerly, leaving a smear of liquid on his stomach.

Carlos took a loud breath and swayed forward. "Looking good."

"Planning to do something about it?"

"Maybe." Carlos came over and got onto the bed, swinging a leg over to straddle Nate's thighs. He set both hands on Nate's chest and pushed him down flat.

Nate went with it, letting his shoulder blades hit the mattress. He raised his hands to trace the black lines across Carlos's skin, following the swirls with a fingertip, then the word at the end. "Boy?"

"I was young and dumb."

"No, it looks great. It suits you."

Carlos shrugged and leaned over to kiss him, hard and wet, with a clash of lips and teeth. Nate slid his fingers up to tangle in Carlos's coarse hair and focused on giving as good as he got. God, he'd missed this, naked in a bed with the weight and heat of a man over him, the sloppy, breathless tangle of tongues and mouths. He bucked up under Carlos, his dick brushing against rough denim. He moved his hands to Carlos's arms, digging his fingers into the lean muscles. Carlos sat down harder, pinning his thighs to the mattress.

Nate turned his head, freeing his mouth to say, "Gonna get undressed?"

"Later."

He reached to tug at Carlos's waistband. "Sooner."

Carlos grabbed his wrists and pinned them against the pillow beside his head. "Later." He nipped at Nate's jaw, then sucked on his throat. "Rules? Are marks okay?"

Nate couldn't hold back a moan. "Some. Yeah. I don't want to look chewed by weasels."

Carlos bit him, harder, right above his collarbone. "Bears, maybe."

"Ooh. Big talk. Ow!" He twisted as Carlos put a matching bite on the other side. "Bastard."

“Nope. My folks were very, very married.” Carlos bent and took Nate’s mouth again, and he quit squirming and focused on driving Carlos’s tongue back with his own, pushing between those soft full lips. Carlos hummed and let him do it, opening to be explored. Nate took the pouty lower lip between his teeth and pulled, then let go.

Carlos groaned and sat up, still pinning Nate’s wrists. His face and neck were flushed, and his chest rose and fell fast. A sheen of sweat glistened on his shoulders in the soft light. “Stay put. Okay? Right back.” He let go of Nate and climbed off the bed.

“Bathroom’s to the right,” Nate said. Carlos nodded and ducked out of the room.

Nate took a slow breath and reached down to palm himself, keeping a slow simmer going. He was going to do it. He rarely went for anal with a guy on a first time, or even a second time, despite liking to top. There was something more intimate, more committed, about being inside someone. He liked to keep that back for a while. But for Carlos, he was strangely willing to let another man call the shots. If Carlos wanted to fuck, Nate wasn’t going to say no. He heard the water running, and had to change his stroking to a firm grip around his base. *Not yet!* He was closer than he’d realized.

Carlos came back in the room, dressed only in his boxers. Nate couldn’t help a little curious dip of his eyes in that direction. Then he flushed, but it was natural, right? Wondering what the other guy was bringing to the table, or the bed. Not some kind of freaky curiosity because Carlos was trans.

Carlos bent over him and kissed him, harder than ever, his mouth tasting of mint. Then he turned away, yanked off his boxers and swung onto the bed, straddling Nate’s hips, facing away from him. It was a graceful, powerful move, that completely hid Carlos’s groin from view. Nate tried not to wonder, laying his palms in the divots above Carlos’s bubble butt.

Carlos bounced once or twice, pushing Nate’s dick down between his thighs. His hands clamped on Nate’s legs.

“Mmph. Yeah.” Nate slid his fingers lower to cup Carlos’s ass cheeks and push them apart. A faint dusting of hair lined his cleft. Nate wondered for a moment about the width of Carlos’s hips, the roundness of his ass, and then got angry at himself. Hell, he’d fucked a hockey player and no one had bigger asses than those guys. He slid his hands up the hard masculine planes of Carlos’s lower back, and along the hairy sides of his thighs. “Come on, Carlos!”

Carlos smacked Nate's thigh loudly. "When I say."

"Ow!" Nate froze for an instant. "Listen. One smack is okay. I'm not into spanking, and I'm not into pain."

"Good to know." Carlos rubbed the slapped spot firmly, his voice quieter. "Me neither."

Nate wiggled under him, rebuilding the heat. "I *am* into fucking, though. Are you going to sit there and count my toes?"

Carlos's chuckle was deep and lush. "Eleven."

"What the hell?"

"Toes. Must be a mutant. This one's bigger." Carlos reached down between his thighs and tweaked the head of Nate's dick.

"Quit that."

"Nope." Carlos used his ass to keep Nate pinned down, while he rubbed Nate's cockhead and fingered his slit. His hands might look smooth, but he had guitar calluses that caught Nate's sensitive skin with perfect roughness.

Nate groaned, his straining erection clamped down under Carlos's weight. "Jerk!"

"Me? Nah. Grab those supplies."

Nate reached sideways and grunted. "Can't."

"Shorty."

"I'm taller than you. Lift your fat ass."

Carlos flicked the head of Nate's dick lightly.

Nate yipped, even though it had barely stung. "Lift your perfect ass then, so I can get a fucking condom."

Carlos rose up, strong legs braced, still holding Nate's thighs lightly. Nate's cock sprang upward from under Carlos, as Nate twisted sideways, dragged open the drawer and retrieved the supplies. Carlos reached a hand back. "Give 'em here."

Nate did as he was ordered. Carlos scooted backward up the bed until he was straddling Nate's chest, and Nate felt both calloused hands going to his dick. Nate wanted to put a bite on that fat curve of ass in front of him but the angle was wrong. He dug his fingers in instead, and Carlos gasped. Nate slid a finger awkwardly to rub over his hole. "Gonna let me in?"

“That’s the fucking obvious plan.” Carlos dripped a little lube into the tip of the condom, then steadied Nate’s dick and rolled the sheath over him. Nate shivered, the touch almost enough to make him come.

He rubbed that waiting hole again. “Want prep?”

“Nope.” Carlos smoothed the condom down all the way, then rose up again, on his knees above Nate’s straining dick, and reached his own lube-slick fingers behind him. Nate watched, his lip caught between his teeth, as Carlos attacked his own ass like he seemed to do everything, hard, two fingers together, insistent, pushing, demanding entry. Carlos groaned as his own fingers sank in, and Nate echoed him.

“God, that’s hot.”

Carlos grunted, sliding his hand in and out in a punishingly fast rhythm until he sank deep, then pulled his fingers away. “Ready?”

“Fuck, yeah.”

Carlos reached down to grip Nate’s erection in his fist, and lowered himself into place. Nate pulled at the covers with both hands, as the head of his cock pressed against Carlos, and stopped there, touching. He arched his back without thinking, pushing upward.

“Hold still,” Carlos snapped. “Let me.”

“Get into fucking gear then.” Nate grabbed Carlos’s hips instead of the sheets, going for leverage, but he managed not to yank downward.

Carlos lowered himself, his hips making little circles, until Nate suddenly sank in one hot, tight inch. They both gasped, and Carlos sat down harder. His ass gripped Nate like a fist, tight and clenching and heated, slowly opening just enough for Nate to go deeper, and deeper, and deeper, until Carlos was seated on Nate’s hips, impaled and stretched and full. Carlos rocked back and forth, the motion snubbing gently on Nate’s cock.

“Gnh!” Nate tightened his fingers on Carlos’s hips. “Stop. Wait a sec. Gonna come if you do that.”

Carlos chuckled darkly, but sat still. Nate panted a breath, thinking about icebergs and math problems and cleaning litter boxes. He closed his eyes, but opened them again fast. He didn’t want to miss a moment of this, the sight of Carlos’s strong back and the flare of his ass and the way he was stretched around Nate’s dick. It had been way, way too long. This was perfect. Except... “Okay, move now. More.”

Carlos took up a rhythm again, small rocking moves that turned into a little lift and grind. Then when Nate grunted, “More,” Carlos shifted gears into long slow rises and hard fast drops. Nate let his hands rest on those lean hips but didn’t try to control things. He didn’t even thrust back, just lay still and let Carlos work him, work them both.

Carlos began to breathe with his motions, fucking himself on Nate like it was a race, faster, harder, pulling up fast, almost coming off, before dropping himself hard enough to shove them both into the bed. The mattress creaked and rocked under them. All Nate could feel was the blazing, steel-melting heat clamping around his cock and the rising tightness of his balls.

He needed to move. He bucked up to meet Carlos, matching his rhythm, thrusting up as Carlos came down. They slammed together, hard enough to draw gasps from both of them, not hard enough to stop. Carlos said, “Yeah. Like that.” Nate braced his heels and did it again and again. He wished he could see Carlos’s face. The back view was hot, that long, sweaty, strong back flexing and arching, driving that ass over him, but he wished he could see more.

Before he could ask, his body took over, his balls drawing up tight. “Gonna come,” he gritted out.

Carlos froze, damn him, up on his knees with Nate barely inside him. He looked back over his shoulder and grinned. That was the face of a fallen angel, dark and wicked and smiling. “Want to change position?”

Nate panted, tugging downward against the strength of Carlos’s thighs. “No. Fuck! Finish it. Do me.”

Carlos resisted a second longer, braced against the pull of Nate’s hands, then gave in and slid down. He altered the rhythm to something low and fast and urgent, little twisting motions that made Nate crazy. Carlos had one hand on Nate’s thigh, and the other slipped down between them, rubbing against Nate’s balls, pressing, moving urgently, bumping against his sac. Nate’s vision darkened around the edges and he tipped his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes, slamming up into Carlos with jumbled sounds of need. *More. Please. God, hot, yeah, more, fuck, yeah.* Half the words never made it through his open mouth, past his rasping breaths.

His climax hit in a rush of molten relief. He spilled over, spilled out, eyes closed, neck arched, mouth a rictus scream that echoed in his ears. Carlos kept going, riding him hard and fast, and just as Nate thought he was going to have to beg him to stop, Carlos shouted and stilled, seated deep over Nate’s hips, shaking enough for Nate to feel the tremors.

Nate unlocked his fingers and slid his hands up and down Carlos's back as far as he could reach. The skin under his palms was damp and smooth, the muscles still twitching and shuddering at his touch. Carlos grunted, "Hold the rubber," and as soon as Nate had his fingers in place, he lifted up and off. With his back still to Nate, he fumbled on the bed for his discarded shorts and pulled them on.

Nate patted the bed beside him with a flap of one hand. "C'mere."

Carlos didn't look at him. Instead he got out of bed and bent to pick up his jeans. "I should go."

"You should lie down here and hang out." Nate rolled up onto one hip and reached for tissues to deal with the condom. He wrapped it and dropped it into his bedside trash. "Come on. It's not that late."

"I guess." Carlos hesitated, his jeans already halfway on, then shrugged and pulled them up. But instead of buttoning them, he turned to the bed, walked around, and slid in behind Nate. "This okay?"

"Sure." Nate leaned back against Carlos's chest, then wriggled sideways so he could see his face. He tried a wry smile. "That was the best sex I've had in months."

Carlos grunted. "The only sex you've had in months?"

"Well, other than that time with you, yeah."

Carlos kicked his ankle lightly with bare toes, his eyes amused. "*Pendejo*."

Nate could guess well enough what that meant. He grinned back, but then had to ask, "You had fun too?"

"Sure."

"You ever top?" He wanted to take the question back the moment he saw Carlos's face go stone-still. "Sorry, I'm not trying to be nosy. Forget I asked."

After a moment Carlos said, "Yeah. I have. It's not, um, quite as simple though."

"Well, this was great," Nate said, eager to get back to an easier place. "I'm available to fuck you any time."

Carlos's lips curved up. "Such a sacrifice."

"Not even." Nate gave one denim-clad thigh a squeeze. "You're hot."

"Thanks."

When Nate had actually been with a boyfriend, at least early on before things went sour, he'd liked to snuggle. Those moments after sex, letting his body reboot while lying soft against his man, had been some of his favorites. It wasn't quite the same with someone he didn't know, though. He fidgeted, sliding his foot against Carlos's ankle, rubbing a hand over the "Death" dagger tattoo. "When did you get this?"

"When I was eighteen. Trying to look tough."

"They do that, I guess." Nate traced the wavy outline of the blade, then the flat-looking drops of blood that were scattered around it. On Carlos's wrist there was a row of black block gothic letters. Nate took his arm and turned it to see them better. Carlos resisted for a moment, then let him. The letters said, "DON'T".

"Don't what?" he asked, running his fingers over them too. The fine, straight ridge of a scar along the upstroke of the N made him freeze and pull his hand away.

Carlos shrugged with almost convincing nonchalance. "Don't *that*, obviously. And don't worry because I won't. That was *really* long ago."

Nate bit his lip and decided that Carlos could have stopped this conversation already, if he hadn't wanted Nate to know. "When?"

"Ah, hell, I was fourteen, I guess?"

"You *guess*?"

A tinge of red rose in Carlos's cheeks. "Yeah, fourteen. But you know, I'm nothing like the person I was then."

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-five. Almost. You?"

"A year older." He touched Carlos's arm, not where the scar was. "I remember when I was fourteen, though. God that sucked. I was dealing with being gay, trying to figure out how the hell I could be when my twin brother wasn't." *Fourteen, oh yeah.* Lying awake with Eli snoring the sleep of the righteous across the hall, and wondering what he'd ever done to pull all the losing cards. That was a long, *long* time ago. Thank God.

"You're not identical twins though, right?"

That startled a laugh out of Nate. "Um, you *have* seen us together, right? He's five inches taller, to start with."

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.”

“But still, it was weird, because we were kind of joined at the hip when we were little. Only he was the beauty and I was the brains.”

Carlos reached out to touch Nate’s jaw. “You’re just as good looking as he is, only in a different way.”

Nate snorted. “You don’t need to flatter me. I’m a sure thing, remember?”

“That wasn’t flattery. Sure, he’s got those angel-of-death cheekbones and eyes and all, but it’s almost too much. I like how you look.”

“Thanks.” Nate pushed the little warm flutter in his belly away, to think about later. “Anyway, he was really into girls by fourteen and I was all like, ‘Ooooh, yeah, she’s so hot. Oooh, bare boobs, yay.’” He kept his voice flat and was rewarded by Carlos’s laugh.

“When did you tell him?”

“Not for another year. Fourteen... sucked dead rats.”

“Mm.” Carlos leaned into him, just enough for their shoulders to press together. But after a moment he pulled back and sat up. “So, where are those etchings, huh? You lured me up here to see your art. So where is it?”

“I what *when*?” Nate sat up too, reluctantly glancing around for his jeans. *Oh, there, by the door.*

“Okay, maybe you lured me with sex. But I still want to see.”

He hesitated.

Carlos swung his feet over to sit on the side of the bed and smile winningly at him. “Come on. You heard me sing, I get to see your stuff.”

“Half the town heard you sing. You were loud.” But he got up reluctantly and picked up his jeans. “Okay. Give me a minute.”

“Gonna run to the can anyway,” Carlos said. “Back in a second.”

Nate was just as glad to have a moment to think it through. Despite his earlier resolve, when it came down to actually doing it, he felt reluctant to let Carlos see his art. He went out of the bedroom, and opened the door to his studio, flipping on the light.

A quick glance confirmed that there was a cover over the half-finished piece on the easel, and the nude portrait thing that hadn’t worked out was turned to

the wall. He glanced at the walls, second-guessing the drawings he'd chosen to display. Some of them were old, from four years ago, even five. He'd gotten better since then. He really should put newer stuff up. He realized he truly cared what Carlos would think.

Behind him, Carlos said, "This is a nice space."

"Yeah. It's the reason I'm still living over my parents' old garage." The lofted space had been split up, creating the living area at the front with the kitchenette, and two bedrooms at the back with the bathroom between them. Originally, his folks had meant it to be for Eli and him, as they started college, but Eli had gone up to U Dub and the dorms. Nate had leaped on the chance to finally have a room just to paint. With the angled ceiling, clean white walls, and the skylight his dad had helped him install, this second bedroom was perfect. There was no way he could have afforded anything half as good anywhere else.

"You're lucky." Carlos stepped in further and turned in a circle, surveying the artwork on the walls. "And good. Fuck. Why aren't you a full-time artist?"

"Why are you stuck playing music for beer money?" Nate returned with a hint of bitterness.

Carlos raised a dark eyebrow at him. "People don't know talent when it hits them in the face?"

"Yeah. That."

Carlos went over to look closer at a series of ink drawings on the far wall. They were studies of Eli in full cry, hair whipping, his back and hips moving, his guitar an extension of his hands. Nate had kept the face low on detail, going for the action feel. Carlos reached out as if to touch the last one, his finger hovering an inch off the glass. "Damn. Even with what—four lines for eyes and a squiggle for his mouth?—you can tell he's a good-looking bastard."

Nate felt a twinge of something odd, pride and jealousy mixed, maybe. "You think?"

"Hell, yeah." Carlos flashed him a grin. "And he has that voice. But you know what he doesn't have?"

"What?"

Carlos came back, stalking, smooth and powerful strides. He reached out and grabbed Nate's chin, and Nate let him. "This, you sexy bastard. The poor guy dates girls." He kissed Nate hard. "Plus, you know, no real creative talent. You do art. He does covers."

Nate pulled free, his emotions more mixed than ever. “He has a shot at making it big. He had a producer come by a couple months ago—the guy who’s going to be at Sparkfest in two weeks, watching for talent. He personally invited Eli.”

“Really?” Carlos’s voice was neutral, but something in the flatness of his eyes caught Nate’s attention.

“Are you, um, going to be there too?”

“Yup.” Carlos smiled but his eyes remained watchful and cool. “Not that he’s likely to look at us.”

“Why not? You have great songs!”

“Well, maybe. Whatever.” Carlos ran a hand over his hair, and managed a better smile, reaching out to touch Nate’s hip. “So, another round? Or another time? Interested?”

“Sure, although not now. I think you got all I have tonight.” Nate hadn’t come that hard in a long time.

“That was the plan.”

“You know,” he said slowly. “What I’d really like to do is draw you.”

“Me? Why?”

“Why not? You’re hot, you have that great mouth, eyes.” Carlos’s eyes looked like he had secrets, dark ones and smoldering ones, but Nate didn’t want to say so. Anyone with that scar on his wrist probably had secrets he didn’t want grubby hands to touch. Plus he was sure there were challenges about being trans that Carlos might never tell him about, but it all combined to give him a depth Nate itched to capture in ink.

Carlos shrugged. “A picture of me? Doing what?”

“It doesn’t have to be tonight. And nothing in particular. I mean, I would like to do a series of you like those ones of Eli. It’s interesting. You’re both musicians, you even cover some of the same songs, but you have a different energy on stage. I’d love to see if I can capture it.”

“You could check out a band practice if you want.”

“No. Well, I’d love to, but there’s a different feel to a practice. Not that I don’t like that too. Here, look.” He went to his shelves and found the right sketchbook. “This is practice.” He opened it, passed it over.

Carlos looked at the pages, turning them respectfully by the corners. This book was an ink sketch series of Eli and the band down in the old garage, on a day when things weren't going well. There was the drummer, flinging his stick across the room; Eli, his hair standing untidily on end from running his fingers through it, glaring at the music on his stand; the bass player shaking out his hand after the hundredth run at the same piece. At the end was a page of them together, Eli's arm draped over the bassist's shoulder, all of them sweaty and tired and in that place where you call it quits and try again the next day.

"Not a good practice," Carlos muttered. "A tight band, though."

"Yeah, they've been together a long time. Since high school."

"That's cool." Carlos closed the sketchbook and handed it back. "I don't know if I want you to draw me now, though."

"What? Why?"

"Those ones go deep, huh? You see things."

"I still see them even when I don't draw them."

"Mm. I guess." Carlos stared off into space for a while, eyes unfocused like he wasn't even seeing the artwork on the wall. His frozen features gave no clue to what he was thinking. Then he shook himself and turned back. "Hey, it's getting kind of late. Can I get a ride back to my car?"

"Sure." Nate wasn't sure why the distance had opened up between them, but he could feel the coolness of it against his skin. For sure, they were done tonight. "Let me finish dressing and I'll drive you."

The trip back to the coffee shop was silent, though not strained. Carlos stared out the windshield, slouched in his seat, tapping his fingers on his knee in intricate rhythms. As they pulled in next to the only car left, an ancient gray and rust Pinto, he straightened up.

Just for something to say, Nate muttered, "Aren't those the kind where the gas tanks explode?"

"Hasn't happened yet." Carlos's voice was warmer than Nate expected. "So, you think I could maybe come by again sometime?"

"You want to?"

"Yeah, for sure." Carlos looked down. "Don't you?"

"Anytime," Nate said strongly. "I mean, as long as my brother's band isn't jamming under our feet."

“Works for me.” Carlos stretched in the cramped front seat and then reached to hold Nate’s chin for a kiss. It was odd how that gesture, which Nate had never liked, felt right coming from this man. Nate opened his mouth for Carlos and grabbed a fistful of hair on the back of his head to hold him longer. They both came up breathless.

“Maybe we should’ve rethought that second round,” Nate murmured.

“It’s Monday. I have to work tomorrow.” Carlos’s breath was warm on his cheek. “But call me, and I will definitely get you off again another night.”

“Same here.” Nate let Carlos’s hair slide through his fingers and dropped his hand. “Sleep well.”

“Oh, that’s not gonna be a problem.” Carlos got out, unlocked his car and started it. Nate was surprised at the throaty rumble of the engine. Carlos grinned over at him, gave him a wave that was half a rude gesture, and pulled out of the lot with a squeal of rubber. Nate sat and watched him drive away. He hoped the cops were looking for speeders somewhere else tonight.

Chapter 5

Carlos held his phone in his hand, staring at Nate's number. He wasn't sure why he wasn't clicking on it. They'd texted and Snapchatted all week, mostly dumb stuff. It'd started with Nate sending him a picture of a cartoon he'd done, Carlos himself, wrapped pornographically around a guitar. It had been both silly and kind of hot, and he'd had to send back suggestions of what you could do with other instruments. Then Nate had drawn some of them, all with Carlos involved. Dude had serious talent and no shame.

So now, on Friday night after a long boring workweek, nothing sounded better than getting sweaty and naked with a hot guy. One particular hot guy. At the moment, Mia was helping him set up to practice for a couple of hours, but after that he'd be more than ready to trade metal in for some rock and roll in the sheets, if Nate was up for that. But he didn't tap the screen.

Mia came over to him, juggling drumsticks with the ease of long practice. "Hey, did Foster say he was going to be late?"

"No." He slid his finger up his contact list and hit Foster's instead. The phone rang and rang, then went to voice mail. "He's not answering. If we're lucky, he's on the way."

"And if we're not?" Mia tilted her head, looking him in the eyes. "Foster's headed for a cliff. You know it and I know it and when he's not fuckin' high or wasted, dude knows it too."

"Yeah." Carlos stuffed the phone away in his pocket. He had enough going on in his life without confusing repeat sex. However cool the guy was. "You think I can do anything about it?"

She frowned. "I wish I knew, right? Can you, I don't know, like, tell him if he doesn't get his shit together and at least come to shows less wasted, he's out of the band?"

"Yeah. I can. And then when he shows up flying on whatever shit he's on, and it's ten minutes to show time, do I fire him?"

"Maybe? Fuck. Yeah. Maybe you have to. Or at least not let him onstage. Make him think."

"I don't think he's using his brain at all. If he still has one."

"Fucking idiot." Mia began tossing her sticks again, her eyes fixed on them as they rose and fell. "But how long can we keep doing this?"

“We could audition someone new. We probably should. Maybe add someone who can play rhythm, and then if Foster crashes they can move to bass?”

“Yeah. Although what are the odds it’ll go better than last time?”

Carlos sighed. They’d tried a year ago to audition someone for rhythm, or even for lead and he’d drop back, because some of the songs he wrote would sound a lot better with three guitars. Not one of the many, many eager musicians who showed up had been a good fit. The ones who could really play didn’t want to be bossed around by Carlos, or they didn’t show up when they said they would, or they couldn’t stick to the same practice schedule, and the ones who were willing to bend to fit were weaker players, or too slow to pick up a new song. It had been weeks of frustration, and in the end, they’d let it drop. “Not great. But what choice is there?” He yanked out his phone and checked the time. Fifteen minutes late, dammit.

He sent a text.

If you don't show in the next ten minutes I'm giving your job to a trained monkey. At least they'll show up for enough bananas

Mia caught her sticks with one hand, tapped them even, and said, “It’s getting really old.”

“What is?” Carlos tamped down a flash of panic. “Foster screwing up? Yeah, for real.”

“Not just that. All the time we put in, the practice, trying to be good enough, and for what? We were lucky to make forty bucks apiece last week, and half of that went for gas.”

“It shouldn’t have been half,” Carlos said fast. “Didn’t Foster chip in his share? I’ll kick his ass and make sure he pays you.”

Mia shrugged. “Never mind. I’m just feeling bitchy tonight.”

The door of the practice space swung open and Foster strolled in, guitar case in hand. “Well, don’t take it out on me, Mama Mia.”

Mia strode over and whapped him on the head with her drumsticks, not gently. “Why not? You’re most of who I’m pissed at.”

He set his guitar down and raised his hands. “Not guilty. Car wouldn’t start.”

Mia snorted. “Right. So you weren’t in the bathroom doing blow.”

“That shit’s too rich for me.” Foster smirked and bent down to get out his guitar. “So, are we practicing, or what?”

Carlos sighed. “Yeah. We’re practicing. Get set up. We’ll start with ‘Common Cold’, warm up a bit.”

The practice was one long fight. Foster was high as a kite, and that gave him ideas. He wanted to argue everything, from arrangements to lyrics to which songs they’d do tomorrow night. Mia sniped at him constantly. Carlos swore sometimes she said the opposite just to make Foster shout and flail and lose his shit. By the time they were done, Carlos was wet with sweat and had a throbbing headache.

Foster practically ran out the door and was gone in a spray of gravel. Carlos packed his guitar and his cello carefully into his back seat and waited for Mia to finish loading up her drums in the van. It totally blew to have to takedown after each practice, but the guy who owned the space let more than one local band practice there, and they couldn’t leave anything or it would be gone.

Mia put the last piece in the van and shut the back, leaning her shoulder against the door. “So that went well. Not.”

“We played okay.” Carlos knew it was a weak comeback.

“I don’t live on beans and use all my spare time driving around and weight-lifting drums to play *okay*.”

“I know.”

She pushed away from the van and came over to him, reaching to touch his arm. “Carlos, you’re a good guy and you’re a fucking excellent musician, but I can’t keep pissing my life away on something that’s only headed downhill. We need to fix KnifeSwitch, or we have to admit we can’t.”

“And do what?” he asked bitterly. “Spend the rest of our lives as a dental receptionist and a salesperson, saying ‘Yes, ma’am’ and ‘No, that doesn’t make you look fat’?”

“Hey, I don’t mind my day job. I get to see pretty women in their underwear, and cute guys waiting in total boredom who want to chat.”

“Guys who are totally bored in a lingerie shop probably would rather chat with me,” Carlos sniped. Mia was pretty equal-opportunity when it came to dates, but he thought the girls had a bit of an edge. “Anyway, that might suit you, but it doesn’t work for me.”

Mia nodded. “I wouldn’t still be doing this shit with my thirtieth birthday staring me in the face if I didn’t want it too. But I’m also staring back at that fucking birthday and asking how many more I’m going to celebrate in a half-wasted crowd in some house venue with someone peeing in the swamp outside. You know?”

“We’ll do better,” Carlos promised recklessly. He couldn’t imagine being onstage without Mia. They’d clicked from the moment she’d shown up to audition with him six years ago, and he’d never have made it this far without her. “We’ll find another guitar, I swear. Fuck Foster. He’s not breaking us up. And we have Sparkfest and the battle of the bands coming up. I heard maybe more than one label rep will be there, looking for new talent.”

Mia’s eyes brightened. “Really? Cool. That would be so fucking cool.”

“Yeah. I’ll keep an eye on Foster, I swear. I’ll keep him with me all day tomorrow, and make sure he shows up ready to play. Don’t give up on us yet.”

“Not giving up.” Mia punched his shoulder and headed for her van.

Carlos got into his car, but just sat watching as she pulled away. His heart was racing and his palms were wet, like he’d dodged a bullet. He *needed* Mia, needed the music and the band, to be himself. What was he worth without it? Any trained chimp could say, “*What’s your dental insurance?*” and “*Would Thursday work better?*” He’d given all of his life to getting this far, ever since he’d bought his first guitar. He had to go big, because going home just wasn’t an option.

He pulled out his phone. There were two texts from Nate, the chime clearly unheard over the music.

At 6:30: *Hey, want to come by on my break?*

And at 9:04: *Let me know if you want to get together this weekend. I’m off at 10 *hint*

He looked at the time. Not much after ten.

He sent back: *You still up?*

The reply chimed immediately.

Sure. Want to come over? I have lube and beer

Carlos could feel the smile stretch his face.

In that order?

In either order, if you get your ass over here

30 min. He realized he was pretty gross and sweaty and changed that to:
make it 45

I might not have beer by then

I'll bring more

Deal

He realized he was humming as he drove home. When he got there, he stripped fast, not looking in the mirror. A little touch with his fingers down low told him that the hard practice and sweat had loosened things up slightly. This was not the night he wanted his packer to suddenly fall off. He grabbed the solvent and cotton balls, cursing slightly, and went to work.

There was always a moment when he detached the thing that was disorienting, like a frame shift—guy; mutilated guy. He powered past it, not letting himself obsess. Tonight was about better things. A fast shower used up seven minutes, and he hesitated, then took the time to reshave before spraying the adhesive and reapplying the packer. The adhesive pulled on his freshly shaved skin, but he told himself it was erotic. He added a harness that wasn't all stretched out, and dragged his tighter pair of jeans on for the first time in a long time.

Ready. He looked in the mirror at last. There he was, naked flat chest, hard-muscled arms that he worked like a sum-bitch for, little mustache, flat belly, and jeans that clearly outlined the shaft and flared head of his dick. He tipped his chin up and lowered his eyebrows, twisting his lip into a little sneer. *Would you mess with this guy? Would you fuck this guy?*

He looked good. He felt good, and he was going out to get laid by a guy he actually liked. Whistling, he grabbed his last two cold bottles of Hop Czar, swiped from a friend's bachelor party and reserved at the back of the fridge for the right moment, and headed out.

The drive was shorter than he remembered, and in less than twenty minutes he turned in at Nate's place. This time the garage was dark and silent, but mellow light showed from the windows above. He parked, climbed the staircase and rapped on Nate's door, trying to pretend his heart wasn't beating fast. Well, only because he was horny, of course. When Nate opened up, Carlos grabbed him in a rough clinch with his free hand, pushing him inside while taking control of his mouth.

Nate didn't protest, just humped up against him, clearly as turned on as he was. Carlos kicked at the door blindly, and managed to swing it shut. Nate huffed against his lips, half laugh, half need. "Dammit. You're late."

He raised his other hand. "I brought beer."

Nate pulled away, reached over to lock the door, and then took the bottles. "Oh yeah, the good stuff. You're forgiven. Now or later?"

Carlos lowered his voice to a growl. "Later. Really later. Put it down."

Nate's lips twitched, but he obediently reached over and set the beer on an end table. "And now?"

"Bedroom."

"Got it." Nate turned away, tugging his shirt off as he did so. He had a great back, lean and long and pale, with those little butt-dimples right above the waistband of his jeans. He tossed his shirt over his shoulder and Carlos caught it, getting a whiff of clean male sweat. As they reached the bedroom, he flipped it into the corner, toed off his shoes, and kicked the door shut. Nate turned around by the bed. "And what about now?"

Carlos took two long strides, dropped to his knees, and popped the button on those jeans. Nate clamped his hands on Carlos's hair. That weight on his head, the sight of Nate's body and the sound of his fast breaths, made Carlos's fingers clumsy as he reached for the zipper tab. *God, he needed this.*

He slid the zipper slowly down, grinning at the way each inch revealed Nate's flushed straining dick. Then he paused, teasing a bit, leaving the last inch closed, trapping Nate just enough to not spring free. He pressed a kiss over the veined length of the revealed shaft, and Nate made a pained sound through his teeth. Carlos licked down him, breathing in the clean taste and heady scent of his warm skin.

He always liked this, blowing a guy, making him jolt and pant and swear with the power of mouth and hands. He'd heard other transmen complain about how it was easier to bottom than top, how they usually did the simple thing anyway, rather than fight it, whatever their preference. But he'd always known he wanted this, a man in his mouth or his body. He was no doormat, but you could still top a guy even as you let him fuck your face. He lowered the zipper that last inch, and let Nate's cock bounce up against his lips.

He caught the tip and sucked on it, tasting the slick salt of it. Nate's fingers clenched in his hair. Carlos hummed, and slid the length of Nate's cock into his mouth, over his tongue and against the vibrating back of his throat.

Nate gasped, and tugged at his hair. “Won’t last long.”

Carlos pulled off with slow deep suction, then nipped just under the curved head, making Nate whimper. Carlos laughed, hearing his own voice dark with satisfaction. *Hell to the yeah*. He could play Nate like a fucking instrument, emphasis on the fucking. He reached up and tugged the waistband of Nate’s jeans lower. Nate gave a helpful wiggle of his hips, the wet tip of his dick bumping against Carlos’s neck.

Carlos tugged the denim down Nate’s slim, pale thighs and over his arched feet. So much goodness in that lean body, and he was going to taste it all. “Get on the bed.” He stood and pushed Nate’s shoulders backward.

Nate didn’t argue, just let Carlos arrange him on his back, his dick pointing eagerly upward. Carlos crawled up on the bed to loom over him.

“Your clothes?” Nate said breathily.

“Later.” He loved this, himself fully dressed with Nate splayed out naked under him. He bent to suck on Nate’s chest, raising a red mark just over one flat nipple, watching the sensitive nub wrinkle tight. He sucked that tight bud, flicking his tongue against it, then moved to the other side. Nate’s hands landed on his head again, but Carlos resisted any tugging and pushing. He was in charge here.

“Lower,” Nate begged.

“Later.” He dipped his hips so the roughness of his jeans dragged over Nate’s cockhead, and arched up to kiss the gasp off his mouth. Kissing was special, something he’d so often gone without. He lowered his weight to pin Nate to the bed and just enjoyed kissing for a while, taking over Nate’s mouth, sucking and biting his lips, while running his fingernails up and down Nate’s arms and shoulder.

He found a ticklish spot on Nate’s ribs that made him writhe and swear. Lowering his head, he mouthed down the column of Nate’s throat, faint stubble abrading his lips, until he could press a kiss on that sensitive place, pinning Nate with his hands and his weight.

“Bastard,” Nate muttered. “Gah.” His hips arched up under Carlos. Carlos laughed against his skin, then nipped him there. Nate’s yelp was high-pitched, and he twisted sideways.

Before Nate had settled back down, Carlos slid lower, gripped Nate’s hips, and sucked his cock into his mouth, clamping tongue and palate tight on its

silky-skinned rigid length with as much pressure as he could get. Nate groaned roughly. "God, Carlos."

So good. This was pleasure. This was power. He bobbed his head in long slow motions, sucking upward until that rounded head was just trapped in his lips, then going down and deep until his mouth brushed dark curls. The sounds Nate made were heady encouragement.

When he felt the pulses of near-climax against his tongue he pulled off fast, and ringed the base of Nate's dick with a tight grip.

"Don't stop! Please?" Nate whined and panted short shallow breaths, head tipped back, his neck a strained arch.

Carlos grinned and held on until he felt Nate ease back from the brink. Then he slid off the bed and tugged Nate with him, bending Nate's legs over the edge and spreading them wide. Nate propped himself up on his elbows, staring at him, long hair damp across his forehead. Carlos knelt between his thighs, reaching up with one hand to tug on Nate's soft sac, and down with the other to unbutton his own jeans and reach inside. The touch of his own finger, pushed down low, made him take a fast breath. God, he was close himself, just from the power of winding Nate up. He rubbed himself in time to his gentle tugs on Nate, and they gasped together.

"Please, Carlos, please, mouth, now, please." Nate reached down to grab his own dick.

"Not if you're gonna try to drive," Carlos growled, bending in to nip Nate's inner thigh.

Nate raised his empty hand. "Okay. Not. Just... soon?"

"Now." Carlos rose a bit higher, opened his mouth and captured Nate's cockhead between his lips. This time, he went at it hard and fast, sucking, moaning, rubbing Nate's round balls under the thin sac, as his other hand down below the edge of the bed found his own best places, his own favorite rhythm. He was startlingly close himself, his thighs trembling with pleasure. He let the edge of his teeth just drag up the underside of Nate's cock, tracing a soft vein.

Nate whined painfully, desperately. "God. Now."

On Carlos's next deep plunge, Nate bucked against him and spilled into his mouth with a deep groan. Carlos kept it up, sucking, bobbing, rubbing both of them, drinking everything Nate gave him. *Yes. This. Suck him dry.*

He shuddered and held back a groan of his own as his own body convulsed against his fingers. *Wow. Fuck, wow.* Taste, smell, touch; the electric dark flashes of climax ripped through him, and he lost concentration. Nate's cock slipped from his mouth to slap wetly against Nate's pale stomach. Carlos lowered his head, bracing his forehead against the shaking firmness of Nate's thigh. He closed his eyes and slid his palms slowly down Nate's calves, sparse hair rippling against his fingers, ending up gripping one slender ankle in each hand. For a minute he knelt there, his breath catching. Then he lifted his head to look up.

Nate had dropped back to lie plastered flat on his back on the bed. His chest rose and fell with deep breaths. As Carlos eyed him, enjoying the view, he struggled back up onto his elbows.

Nate's grin was crooked and warm. "Wow. Serious skills."

"Thanks." Carlos let go of him and rocked back onto his heels.

Nate patted the bed. "Come on up and relax for a minute. Then we'll check out the beer."

"Not yet." Carlos stood and looked down at Nate, still spread out there, legs wide, cock damp and half-hard. "Not done with you." That made Nate twitch, and Carlos smiled slowly and deliberately.

"Yeah?"

In answer, Carlos began stripping off his shirt, arching his back, flexing, making a show of it. Then he put his hands on his hips and eased his jeans down and off. His dick swung free, heavy against his thigh. The jock's black straps framed him, and he turned, setting his clothes aside, letting Nate look at his ass, his back, then turned to reveal his chest, stomach, and everything.

Nate's eyes darkened, and he reached out a hand. "C'mere."

"I plan to." Carlos went to the bedside table, opened the drawer without asking, and got out the lube and a condom. He tossed them on the bed beside Nate. "I got you off in five minutes. Now we'll try the slow way."

"Seven minutes," Nate said. "At least."

"Complaining?"

"No. God, no." Nate scooted up against the pillows, swinging his legs back onto the mattress, and spread his arms and legs in obvious invitation.

“Better not.” He got on the bed, straddling Nate’s thighs, and bent to whisper against his throat, “You. Inside me. Deep and tight. That’s next.”

“Ngh.” Nate’s response wasn’t a word. “Yeah, okay, I might get it up again for that.”

Carlos laughed, and licked the salt taste off the soft skin under Nate’s jaw. Not much doubt about that. And Carlos wanted this; he was greedy for it. He wanted the fullness and pressure, the drag of a man’s dick against his rim. He might not have a prostate, but there was a place inside that echoed electrically to the thrust of a hard cock in him. He was going to tease, and kiss, and maybe bite. And when Nate was hard again, he was going to fuck him slowly and thoroughly, top him from the bottom until they both came apart.

He growled, deep in his throat, and caught a fold of that soft neck skin between his teeth, just hard enough to sting. Nate’s whimper was not pain, and Carlos felt the stir of Nate’s dick against his thigh. Hell, yeah, this was going to be good.

Half an hour later, Nate eased sideways on his back on the bed, his breath still rasping in his throat. Beside him, Carlos stretched his legs out, crossed his arms behind his head, and gave him a shit-eating grin. Nate elbowed him lightly in the ribs. “Proud of yourself?”

“You came twice. I call that a job well done.”

Nate did too, but he said, “Hell, I can do that on my own with one hand tied behind my back.”

“You into bondage?” Carlos’s voice was teasing too, but there was something about the now-rigid quality of his smile that made Nate sorry he’d said that. Carlos had these little triggers that could make his tone suddenly flatten, and Nate thought he might have hit one, even if he wasn’t quite sure where. He had a workable distraction though, if he was willing to go there.

“Nope, not one bit.” He hesitated a moment longer, but maybe a little oversharing would bring the easiness back between them. Carlos had already given Nate some of his secrets, unblinkingly and without apology, and that made it feel safe to say, “I had a boyfriend once, who wanted that, to tie me up and spank me. He didn’t listen when I said it wasn’t working for me and to let go, kept saying the burn would get good if I let him finish.”

“Shit!” Carlos’s face darkened, and he rolled up on his elbow to look at Nate. “What happened?”

“He finished, untied me, and I broke his nose.”

“Hell, yeah!” Carlos’s fierce expression almost made Nate laugh, until the look faded into uncertainty, maybe anxiety. “Was it a bad, um, thing?”

“For me? Nah.” He had the nonchalant tone down pat, covering the memory of how, for days afterward, for weeks even, he’d been hit by random shakes, realizing how awful it *could’ve* been. He never told anyone about that part. “I didn’t even mean to hit him that hard. I grabbed a math textbook off the bedside, went to clock him on the side of the head with it, and he turned.” The crunch of Garrett’s nose and the startled shock on his face as the blood poured out had been darkly satisfying though. “It burned that I’d trusted him. I should have guessed from the pizza.”

“Pizza?” At least Carlos simply looked puzzled now.

“He was my last college boyfriend. He wasn’t that bad of a guy but, um, he assumed if he liked something, everyone else should. Couldn’t see another point of view.” Nate had thought at first that Garrett was just socially awkward, that he didn’t know how to interact with people. He’d actually thought being together would help Garrett be more human. He’d put up with all the little selfish stuff, thinking he was making a difference for someone who needed him.

It turned out, Garrett had no real interest in anyone but himself. Nate forced a chuckle. “He kept sneaking pineapple onto our pizza, and telling me if I kept trying it I’d eventually see how awesome it was. I should’ve dumped him after the third pineapple pizza. It would’ve saved time.”

Carlos smiled, almost naturally. “No pineapple on pizza. Check. Although you know, also gross, so not a problem.”

“He had a few good ideas. The ice cube and hot coffee blow-jobs were excellent. But I’m not into bondage and I’m not into spanking. I *am* into your ass, which was actually much better than my own hand.” He let the joking in his voice get extra heavy. “Maybe even better than *both* my hands.”

“Fuck you.” But Carlos’s tone sounded properly amused now, not fake at all.

Nate breathed easier. “You could, if you want to. Um, can you?” This time, Carlos hadn’t hidden the real-looking dick that swung heavy from the jockstrap he was wearing, above a set of high-hanging balls. But he hadn’t gotten hard that Nate could see. Not that Nate had been coherent enough to really look. He looked now at the soft cut shape of it lying along Carlos’s hairy thigh.

Carlos sighed. “Yeah, I could. There’s a rod for it, that makes it hard, but I don’t do it much.”

“You don’t like it?”

“Sometimes.” Carlos shrugged.

“Is it, um, real? I mean, surgical.” Nate wasn’t sure what transmen usually did. It was kind of uncharted territory. He hadn’t meant to ask, but he’d had a bad lesson about assuming. Plus he had a cat’s curiosity, since forever. *If you don’t ask, you’ll never know.*

“It’s a packer, a prosthetic.” Carlos lay back down flat, arms crossed on his chest. “You can touch it.”

Nate wasn’t sure if that meant he should, or if Carlos was waiting to see if he was curious in the wrong way. He was going to change the subject, but then he thought, *What the hell. If I was with some guy after sex, I might touch him. Why not?* He reached down and lightly touched the shaft, then rubbed over the balls, half hidden in the jockstrap. “Feels pretty real.”

“Cost my fucking soul.” Carlos rolled over, baring his ass framed by the black bands of elastic, spreading his thighs apart.

Nate groaned. “You have a great ass but twice is my limit.”

Carlos turned his head to meet Nate’s eyes, his gaze dark and serious. “We could test that out.”

“Not now. You brought good beer. Want some?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Stay put.” Nate slid out onto the floor, hauled himself to his feet exaggeratedly, and then went out into the main room for the brews. Ghost jumped down off the cat maze as he reached for the bottles, landing on the carpet near his feet. He didn’t look her in the eye, but paused, fiddling with the corner of one label, waiting to see what she would do. She hesitated, then walked past him to her empty food bowl and meowed demandingly. One neat white paw flicked out and tapped the bowl three inches sideways. Then she actually looked over at him.

“You’re supposed to be moving into the hand-feeding stage,” he said softly, setting the bottles down to pull out the Tupperware canister of kibble. She backed off a couple of paces as he tipped a meal’s worth into the bowl. “Be grateful that I don’t want to be disturbed tonight. There’s your dinner, Your

Highness.” He stood by the dish for a moment, his eyes carefully averted, but she wasn’t ready to approach it until he stepped back two paces. “We’ll keep working on it,” he murmured. “*Bon appetit.*”

He picked up the beer. They’d screwed around long enough that the bottles weren’t ice cold anymore, but that wasn’t a bad thing since he planned to chug half of his. He brought them back to the bedroom, sat down beside Carlos on the bed, and nudged his arm with one bottle. “Here. Don’t spill it on my sheets.”

Carlos sat up, scooted back to lean on the headboard and took the beer. “Thanks.”

“Get the taste out of your mouth,” Nate suggested. He raised his bottle and poured the amber life-giving fluid down his throat. “Ahhhhhh.”

“I like your taste,” Carlos muttered, but after a sip he added, “Not as much as this, though.”

“Totally.” Nate swung his feet up and moved to sit shoulder to shoulder with Carlos. They drank in silence for a while. Nate slid over enough to press his thigh along Carlos’s, and Carlos didn’t look at him, but he didn’t move away either. When Nate’s bottle was empty, he lifted it to peer at his lamp through the base. “We need more beer.”

Carlos tipped his own up and chugged the last quarter. “Yeah.”

“Which means getting up.”

“Fuck.”

“Getting up, not getting *it* up.”

Carlos nudged him hard. “Jerk. You go.”

“I went last time.”

“I don’t want more beer enough to get up.”

Nate smiled behind his bottle. “Me neither.”

They sat there, doing nothing, just leaning on each other. It should have been awkward, but somehow it wasn’t. Nate set his bottle down, and began tracing the dagger tattoo on Carlos’s arm again, this time the one with no scar. Some of the lines weren’t inked as cleanly as they should have been.

“You keep doing that.” Carlos didn’t sound unhappy though.

“Sorry. Parts of it are cool, parts make me want to get out a pen and make corrections.”

“Maybe if I get more ink, you can design it for me.”

“Would you?” Nate looked up and down that lean brown body, imagining what he would design. “Get more, I mean?”

“Maybe. Probably not. I’m saving my money for important stuff.”

“Like?”

Carlos shrugged. “Food. Rent.”

“Come on. You work a real job. You can’t be that broke.”

“Gas. Guitar strings. Hormones.”

“Oh.”

“It’s no big. But I’m not getting more ink just to have ink. Or to give you practice designing it.” Carlos folded his arms behind his head again, emphasizing the muscles of his shoulders and upper arms. “Maybe if you come up with a perfect design then I’ll think about it.”

“Mm. A challenge.” Nate closed his eyes, then blinked them open again. “Oh, yeah, by the way. Eli asked me to let him know if you were coming over. He seriously wants to buy that song you wrote for him.”

“He does? Well, okay. Although y’know, if he’s going to pay me and put my name on it and all, I’d like to have a chance to polish it more. That was a pretty half-assed job.”

“Better than their drummer’s full-assed jobs.”

Carlos snickered. “Unfortunately, that wasn’t hard.”

“Unfortunately, neither am I.”

“Does everything go back to sex for you?”

“Only when I’m with a guy with a sexy back.” Nate winced at the crappy line. “Bleh.”

“Yeah, that was lame.” Carlos tackled him down to the bed, leaning over him, pinning his wrists. “And you’re impossible.”

“Actually, I’m pretty easy.”

Suddenly, as Carlos loomed over him, grinning, their eyes met, and something sucked the air out of the room. Nate couldn’t breathe, couldn’t

move, while Carlos's smile faded to stillness, while he leaned in and gave Nate a kiss that was different from anything they'd shared before. It was light, and soft, closed-mouthed and open-eyed and dry, and yet Nate shook when it was done. Carlos brushed his mouth over Nate's lips again. "You're a good kind of easy. I like that in a guy."

I like you too. Instead of answering, Nate hooked an arm around Carlos's neck and pulled him down. Carlos went with it, lying heavy and soft across Nate's chest. After a while, Carlos whispered in his ear, "How many guys with sexy backs have you been with?"

"A few." Nate nuzzled in against the damp skin of Carlos's neck. "You're working your way up to top ranking, though."

"Just working?" Carlos brushed a kiss over his temple, then tugged his hair lightly. "What would it take to hit first place?"

"Get up and bring me a beer?"

Carlos laughed. "I guess you *are* easy. Coming up." He eased out of Nate's grip, stood and headed jock-harness-naked for the door.

Nate's sweaty skin felt chilled without his living blanket. He tugged the covers free and pulled the sheet up over him. He listened as Carlos made a pit stop, then opened the fridge. There was a pause, and Carlos mumbled something Nate couldn't catch, before he came back into the room. As Carlos reached the bed, Nate flipped down the sheet in invitation. "Get in and pay toll."

Carlos did, passing him a can. "PBR is a pretty cheap toll."

"I'm a cheap guy."

"Who doesn't have any ink. You don't want to design for yourself? You have great skin." Carlos set his beer beside the bed and ran his chilled hand over Nate's chest.

"Hey, keep your ice fingers to yourself." Nate pushed his hand away. "Yeah, I don't have any tats because I know how much I change year to year. If you look at my sketchbooks, you'd think I was a different guy ten years ago. Imagine if I'd inked that shit on my body."

"You might have wavy daggers with fake blood?"

"Far, far worse." Nate leaned close to Carlos's ear and whispered, "Dragons."

“Hell, no.”

“Hell, yeah.” Nate laughed. “There, now you know. I was a dragon-loving goth boy once. Drew them on everything. Looovved them. My big dark secret. How about you? What were you ten years ago?”

“I was a girl.”

“Well, that’s no secret.”

He said it flippantly, without thinking, and was startled to see a happy smile cross Carlos’s face. “It isn’t, is it? Not to you.”

“No.” If that was a good thing, he’d go along with it. “So you owe me another secret. Something really awful like mine. Embarrassingly awful.”

“Like being in a mariachi band?”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. When I was fifteen Tía Lisa decided I should do something more useful than moping in my room playing lousy music on my guitar, and she volunteered me for a group one of my tío’s friends led.” Carlos’s voice sounded rueful but not unhappy. “It was a good reason to immediately get together with some other guys who were into metal, form our own band, and get out of the house more often.”

“I bet.”

Carlos sipped his beer. “How come Eli didn’t rope you into his band? Do you play anything?”

“Nah. And he tried.” Nate shrugged. “I messed around on keyboard for a while. It took time away from doing art. I pretended to be really awful, and eventually he gave up.”

“And then formed a better band without you.”

“Yeah. No loss.”

“And here we are.” Carlos raised his can in salute, then drained it. “He’s got a shot, and you and I are amateur hour.”

Nate bit his lip so he wouldn’t snap back at that. He might not be some famous artist, but he wasn’t a fucking amateur. He’d sold some canvases, and quite a few sketches. For cheap, but they’d been real sales. After a moment he said, “What makes you think we’re not going anywhere?”

“Sorry. I get all gloomy on beer.” Carlos added, “Hey!” as Nate took the can out of his hand.

“You don’t get to be gloomy in my bed.” He set the can beside his own. “Anyway, aren’t you playing the same Battle of the Bands venue he is next week? Which means you have a shot too?”

“My band’s shot depends on keeping my bass guitarist away from booze, pot and speed, for hours, until we get done with our set. Any odds?”

“Mm. Not great. Although better in a Seattle club than an Oly house.” Drugs were always around the edges of the music scene, but at some Olympia house venues, they were front and center.

“We’re doing an Oly house tomorrow. He needs to be sober for that too.”

“I’ve seen a lot of guys play pretty wasted,” Nate offered, hunting for comfort. He didn’t know Carlos’s bandmate, but he already hated him for the way Carlos’s tone went cold and bleak.

“Well, maybe he can be half sober. I’m not giving up, but I’m having a moment of Eli-envy.”

“Shit, man, I know how *that* is. I spent my teen years locked in permanent Eli-envy. I used to fantasize about putting superglue on his toothbrush or shaving his head while he was asleep. Except the creep had to be a really nice guy, too, so I could never stay mad long enough.”

Carlos snorted.

“So what about you?” Nate figured three dates together, well, three rounds of sex with extras, entitled him to a little more personal curiosity. “Any brothers or sisters?”

Carlos was silent long enough that Nate was going to withdraw the question, when he said, “Four older brothers. Two younger sisters.”

“That’s a houseful,” Nate said lightly, responding to Carlos’s tension. Carlos was one smart, sexy guy, but he wasn’t restful. “I guess I should be glad I’ve only got one.”

“Mm.” Carlos reached across Nate, their chests brushing as he snagged his beer back. Nate let him have it. Carlos took a long swallow. “I was born in Mexico. Papá’s from Colombia, but he moved to Puebla when he was a teenager, and then he met Mamá and married her. He works at the Tecnológico; she raised us kids.”

Carlos paused, but he didn't change the subject. Nate couldn't read his expression, so he went for something bland. "Seven kids. That's a full-time job."

"Yeah. When I was little, everyone figured I was just trying to be like all my older brothers. They thought it was cute, how I hated dresses and tried to cut my own hair short and wanted to be a baseball player. Then my sister Leticia was born, and suddenly I was supposed to be the big sister and quit messing around pretending to be a boy."

"Ouch." Nate laid his hand on Carlos's leg. The muscle and hair and strength were all male, and he tried and failed to picture this man as a girl.

"Yeah. Then Mamá had another girl, Silvia. I insisted I was one of the boys. My parents refused to consider such a thing. We fought a lot, but as a kid I didn't have much power. So I fought mean."

Nate rubbed lightly, tracing the line of Carlos's hip, managing not to come out with some platitude about not being mean. If Carlos wanted to talk, he was happy to listen. He could feel the tension in Carlos's body under his fingers.

"Like, when I was seven, we were going to church for the youngest of my brothers' first communion and five minutes before we headed out the door, I got a pair of scissors and cut up every dress I owned. I announced that I'd have to wear one of my brother's suits, because all my sisters' stuff was too small."

Nate winced. Even his own mom would *not* have been okay with that. "I bet it went over well."

"They made me wear one of my mother's dresses, pinned up. Then I rolled in the mud in it, behind the church after the mass."

Nate snorted, trying to keep it light, although he could picture a young Carlos, the desperation and determination that would take. "I can see you doing that. Stubborn."

"I couldn't stop. I just couldn't be a girl." Carlos's voice thinned. "By the time I was ten, my folks gave up on me, and sent me off to live with Tía Lisa and Tío Ramón in California. That's who really raised me."

"Permanently? Your parents *gave you away*?" It wasn't like Nate didn't know that stuff happened. He'd met a couple of guys who'd been kicked out of their homes for being gay. But Carlos had been *ten*.

"Well, kind of. It was the best thing all around, really. Tía Lisa's a California girl. It took her a while to wrap her head around who I was, but when she did, she didn't try to have me exorcised or make me wear a dress."

“Do you see your parents at all?”

Nate regretted the question when Carlos stared down at Nate’s hand, his lips pressed in a thin line. “No. Not for years now. They say they had a daughter, not a son. They don’t know me.”

“I’m sorry.” Nate leaned in harder. He wanted to offer a hug, but there was something so fragile about Carlos’s expression that he didn’t dare. “Now, *my* folks can’t get rid of me. I was supposed to live here over the garage for my four years of undergrad and then move out. But I’m still here. They’ll need explosives to move me out.”

Carlos lifted his head to glance around. “If my place was this nice, I’d never leave either.”

“It’s not a bad deal for them. I do pay rent, and I watch the house and babysit the dogs if my folks want to travel.”

Carlos nodded.

Nate was filled with a rush of affection for his parents, and a deep welling tenderness for Carlos. What would that be like, to be sent away when you were just a kid because your parents didn’t like who you really were? He leaned over and kissed Carlos’s neck, deliberately wet and hard. He sucked up a mark, then moved lower to his shoulder, licking, nibbling.

“Trying to start something?” Carlos’s tone was lighter.

“I wish. I think you broke my dick.”

“You were doing the shoving. If it’s broke, you did it. I was just kneeling there.”

Nate was hit with the vision of Carlos on his knees, thighs spread and braced, the cleft of his raised ass shiny with lube. His dick actually twitched before giving up again. “So you were. It was so—” *kiss*—“fucking—” *bite*—“hot!”

Carlos wrapped an arm around him and pulled him down, turning them into a loose spoon wrapped around Nate with Nate’s ass against his thighs. Nate had meant to hold him, but this worked too. “Do you have to go home soon?” Nate asked. “Or can you stay a while?” *That isn’t too much like begging, right?* It had been a long time since he’d been held like this. Of all people, he surely knew it didn’t mean anything, but it felt so damned *good*.

“I can hang out for a while.”

“Stay the night?”

There was a long silence. Nate had pretty much resigned himself to seeing Carlos leave, when he leaned up instead, reached over, and switched off the light. “I guess maybe. G’night dragon-boy.”

Nate wriggled back harder against him and gave Carlos’s arm that snuggled across his chest a pinch. “Shut up, Mariachi boy.”

Carlos’s low chuckle against the back of his neck in the dark felt new, and exciting, and yet somehow wholly familiar.

An hour later though, he was woken by Carlos moving around the room in the dark. He fumbled for the light switch and blinked at seeing Carlos half-dressed, pulling on his shirt. “Hey. Wazzup?” He rubbed his sticky eyes.

“I can’t sleep. I’m gonna head out.” Before Nate could get too pissed, Carlos came over and bent to kiss him apologetically. “I’ve never managed to share a bed with anyone. It’s not you. Will I see you at the show tomorrow?”

“Maybe, if I need to put Eli further in my debt. But you should call him about the song lyrics. I was going to ask him to come over here in the morning.”

“Don’t have his number,” Carlos said, already reaching for the door handle. “Tell him he can play it, and I’ll meet up with him after the show.”

“Why not before?”

“I’ll be busy trying to keep Foster away from his druggie friends.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Nate wanted to say something all memorable and deep and worth staying around for, but a yawn cracked his face wide, and Carlos clearly had one foot out the door anyway. “See you, then. Don’t let the cat out.”

“Mm.” For a moment Carlos hovered, as if he might add something more, but then he slipped out.

Nate heard the front door open, then shut firmly. The handle-latch would’ve caught, so it was safe enough, but he probably should get up and throw the deadbolt lock. Later. He turned out the light and splayed himself out from corner to corner across his empty bed. It was more comfortable that way, for sure. It was just fine.

Chapter 6

Carlos was pretty proud of himself, by the time KnifeSwitch made it onto the makeshift outdoor stage Saturday evening. The venue was located in the Washington countryside, near enough to Vancouver and Portland to draw a good crowd. The nice weather had prompted them to set up for open air music on the field behind the house—a larger space, which meant the mosh pit crowd was less likely to knock the speakers over, but which had made keeping track of Foster a nightmare. People came and went, inside the house and back out. The crowd was surprisingly big and enthusiastic, and there was plenty of alcohol and weed in evidence. So the fact he'd only turned around once to find Foster had vanished was an achievement. He'd found him again before he got more than half-baked, too, so Carlos was calling the operation a success.

He tuned his B string up a hair, squinting at the tuner display on his pedalboard, and hoped he'd stretched it out enough to hold the tuning. It sounded okay. He glanced at Mia, already head-bobbing in anticipation, and she raised a stick. Beside him, Foster gave him a hell-for-leather grin that made him abruptly see the Foster he'd first auditioned, all raw talent and wild enthusiasm. An answering grin stretched his face. He reached out to pull his stand mike closer. "Hey, you fuckers having a good time out there?"

A roar of mixed approval and catcalls came back at him.

"Ready to hear some *real* music?"

Mia said into her own mike, "Fuck yeah. But we have to listen to you."

Carlos gave her the finger, and snarled to the crowd, "We're KnifeSwitch. Hold onto your ears." He nodded to Mia, and they dove into the opening for "Cut the Noise."

They played like one person. For the first time in weeks, Carlos felt that exquisite high, as words, music, sounds, flew from all of them in one seamless mass, slamming through the crowd, lifting them. The mosh pit was a roiling mass of bodies, and the whole audience was moving, shoving, dancing, waving. When the song ended he didn't even stop for breath, just dove into "Cap Stop."

Today they had one voice, one soul. Foster anchored the harmonies, solid as a rock, Mia's beats were crisp and perfect, and his voice for once screamed and roared without cracking. The crowd got bigger and louder, and they topped them all. They took *his* songs, *his* words, and shoved them into everyone's

minds and guts and hearts. He even heard the crowd taking up the chorus of his brand new song, belting back the lyrics by the third time around.

*If it burns you when you touch it
Freezes fingers to the bone
If you'd give your life to own it
That's the thing that takes you down.*

He lost track of time and space, and anything except the music until he came out the other side of their planned set, voice gone, wringing wet, clinging to the mike stand for support. The crowd roared and pounded their approval. Foster was grinning like a loon, blond hair dark with sweat and plastered to his forehead, his hands still jittering on the strings, letting a little dissonant hum fill the empty space where the music had been.

They even got to play an encore, and he went old-school with early Exodus, "And Then There Were None." Playing the familiar cover let him down enough to yell an insult at the audience when they wrapped it, swing the strap of his guitar off his neck, and walk offstage.

He'd made the two steps down when he almost fell, as Mia leaped on his back, hugging him. He caught at her arms with his free hand, pulling them down from his throat, and rasped, "Don't choke me. I still need to sing next week."

She dropped to her feet, laughing. "That was awesome! God! Like it used to be." She turned to Foster, who'd followed them. "You were great, Fos. Fuck, we still have it, don't we?"

"Hell yeah." Foster grinned back. "Hey, gonna put my guitar into your van, all right?"

"Sure. Let me open it up." They all headed for the parked van. As Mia opened it, she said, "You guys want to go out somewhere when we're done?"

Carlos was about to agree when Foster said, "Nope. I got a, um, date." He grinned again, white teeth flashing beneath watchful eyes, set his guitar into the rack on the van wall, and headed off fast.

Mia and Carlos watched him go, five strides and disappearing into the crowd. "We can hope it's with a woman," Carlos said under his breath.

"At this point, a man would be fine too," Mia muttered. "Any bets?"

"Nope." Carlos turned to stow his own instrument, his ecstatic mood souring fast.

Mia nudged his arm. “Stay here and watch the gear? I’m going to go help the volunteers tear down.”

“Sure.” She liked to keep unskilled and drunk hands off her drums. He’d usually help, but leaving the van open with people wandering past wasn’t an option. They needed someone standing guard. “Fuckin’ Foster.”

“Well, if he can still play like that, I’ll cut him more slack.” Mia patted Carlos on the head. “Good sheep herding, boss.”

He knocked her hand away from his hair. “Moron herding. But yeah, if he plays like that at Sparkfest next weekend, we might have a shot.” He shouldn’t let himself hope. The chance to win was theoretically open to every group on the schedule, but KnifeSwitch was nowhere near the top. The prize money would be great, the possibility of a production contract was supposedly on the line and up for grabs, but he’d been determined not to even imagine winning. Till now, coming off the performance high. “We might have a shot,” he repeated.

“I’ll help you watch him at Spark. God, wouldn’t that be amazing?” Mia hurried back toward the stage, where the roadies were manhandling her double bass.

Carlos hitched himself up to sit inside the open back doors. They were far enough away that only the occasional person wandered, or staggered, in the spaces between the parked cars. A recording of Meshuggah came over the PA, above the hubbub of the crowd. The sky was getting darker, and the smell of pot and sweat hung in the air. Carlos breathed deep, letting it seep into his bones. This was where he belonged. All the work, all the effort, from years spent losing his accent to building his body to taking money from his maybe-surgery fund to pay for a new pick-up for his cello—it was all worth it. He leaned back on his elbows and closed his eyes.

“You were amazing.” Nate’s voice floated to him, like an extension of the dream. It took hearing Eli’s deeper tones saying, “Yeah. Great set,” to jolt him upright.

He blinked at them. Nate stood there, slender and ethereal in his usual black, a fine mesh shirt fluttering around his arms. Eli towered over him, dressed for the stage, his gray jeans tucked in buckle boots, a sleeveless blue and silver tank emphasizing the width of his chest and the size of his guns. Carlos cleared his throat. “Are you sure you’re twins?”

It was a feeble comeback, but Nate laughed. “I kept saying he was a changeling and they should take him back to the cabbage patch.”

Eli said, “Can we talk for a second?”

“Coming through!” Mia’s shout came close behind Eli. “Move or get the rack up your ass.”

Carlos hopped out of the van, and they all reached to help her and the locals get the amps and drums safely stowed and locked down. It was a tight fit, but everything had its place. If the van ever broke down... Carlos rapped with his knuckles on his skull to drive the thought out.

Mia locked up tight and glanced at him, her eyes skimming over Eli, and then Nate. “I’m going to go listen to Cthulhu’s Arms and keep an eye on the merch. You coming, Carlos?”

“In a minute. Thanks, really.” She’d been doing her share and more to keep the band going. He’d have to find a way to show he knew it.

“No problem.” She headed back toward the crowd, with only one look over her shoulder.

“Now she is *fine*,” Eli said.

“Poach my drummer and I’ll break your leg. Date her and I’ll break both of them.” Carlos grinned with a lot of teeth to show he meant it.

Eli laughed. “I bet she could do that on her own just fine. God, drummers get great arms.”

Nate said, “She was awesome onstage.”

Carlos nodded. “So what’s up?”

Eli pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it. “Here. I wrote up a contract to sell us that song that you did.”

Carlos took it. “Okay... I mean, I’ve helped other bands out, and never needed this.”

Eli ran a hand through his artfully tangled hair. “Well, I’m hoping my band will go places, and I really like the song. I’d hate to have a mess about the rights. I looked up a basic rights sale contract online. There’s two copies.”

Carlos glanced over it. It seemed simple. He gave up all rights, in exchange for... “The money part is blank.”

“Because you never said. How much do you want?”

Carlos glanced at Nate, who was watching them both. What was fair? Eli couldn’t have much money. “Fifty bucks?”

“I was ready to go a hundred,” Eli said, reaching for his wallet.

“Then go a hundred,” Nate said acidly. “Don’t be a cheap dickhead.”

Carlos frowned at him. “I said fifty.”

Eli took the contract and wrote in *\$100*. “I’m going to spend big and take it as an omen that this song will make us money. Okay?”

It was hard to argue with that. “As long as you let me polish it up for you. The bridge needs work, and I think the fifth line of the chorus is too long.”

Nate laughed. “Isn’t this backward? You’re supposed to be saying ‘*Pay me the big bucks, bitch,*’ and Eli is supposed to be saying, ‘*Not until you fix the crappy fifth line.*’”

“I like our version better.” Eli signed the contract, passed it back to Carlos, and then took a countersigned copy in exchange for five twenties. “Done. Thanks. So now, I want to ask, can you write us one more? Like, now? Yesterday?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I know you’re going to Sparkfest, and we’re kind of in competition, but maybe you have a song idea that’s never going to work for KnifeSwitch that we can use?”

Carlos considered it. “Well, if they’re looking for your kind of glam metal we’re not gonna win anyway.”

“Fuck you,” Eli said cheerfully. “We’re not glam just because we didn’t record our EP with a fucking toaster.”

They gave each other fake glares. Carlos said, “When are you up today?”

Eli checked his phone. “In about two hours.”

“I’ll listen when you play, see what I can come up with.”

“Thanks.” Eli gave him a nod, then smacked Nate between the shoulder blades hard enough to knock him forward a step. “You did good, brother. He’s useful.”

Nate grunted and twisted enough to stick out a foot and trip Eli as he turned away. Eli laughed and headed off into the crowd.

Carlos glanced around fast, his heart pounding. He wasn’t sure if it was getting paid for a song or that casual crack of Eli’s, having someone on the

scene know he was gay, that had his mouth dry and his vision blurring. He just knew he had to get away for a while. “Hey, Nate, you have a car here?”

“Yeah.”

“Parked where you can actually get to it?”

“Probably.”

“You want to get out of here until your brother’s up?”

“Sure. RoRo’s girlfriend is hawking the T-shirts. They don’t need me.” Nate gestured with his chin. “Come on. I’ll buy you a beer.”

They walked to Nate’s car in silence, and Nate managed to back-and-forth it gradually out from where it was parked in by a van and an old Plymouth. Carlos folded and unfolded the contract between his fingers, until he made himself put it in his pocket before it fell apart. “Sorry about last night.”

“Huh?”

“Ditching you. I don’t, um, snuggle. Never have.” Plus he didn’t like to sleep wearing his dick, but didn’t want to be in Nate’s bed without it. “It makes me twitchy.”

Nate shrugged easily, but he was turned toward the side mirror, changing lanes, and Carlos couldn’t see his face.

Carlos added, “I’m flush, right? I’ll pay for the beer.” He patted his pocket.

“Sure. After all, I got you the extra fifty. You owe me. And listen, you should charge him two hundred for the next one. He’ll go for it. The band was psyched about the first one.”

“Does Eli know you’re keeping him poor?”

“It’s my brotherly duty. Besides, you’re spending the money on me.”

“I’m not buying fifty bucks worth of beer.”

“It’s the principle.” Nate turned in at a little pub. “How much beer are you good for?”

“Depends on who’s driving.”

“I saw you the other night. You’re not touching my car.”

They parked, and Carlos followed Nate inside. They found a table near the window and ordered beer and nachos. Nate pulled out a little sketchbook and

began doodling. After watching him quizzically for five minutes, Carlos said, “Don’t mind me.”

Nate glanced up and colored. “Oh, sorry. Habit. I think of something and I want to draw it.”

“I’m like that with songs. Can I see?”

Nate hesitated, then handed the notebook over. The top page was a cartoon of KnifeSwitch at full blast. Carlos was drawn with four arms, playing guitar while also grabbing the mike, his fourth hand clenched in the top of his own hair. His head was arched back, his neck a bowed curve, his mouth open. Mia’s arms were a blur of muscles and sticks, her dreads flying. Foster had—Carlos peered closer—“Are those horns on Foster?”

Nate colored. “Yeah. He seems like a schmuck.”

“Sometimes. He played like a fucking god tonight, though.” Idly, Carlos flipped the page. The previous sketch was of himself, stretched out in bed on his side, the curve of his ass and the strong line of his thigh drawing the eye. He was shown sleeping, his facial scruff growing in, his hair a mess. “What’s this?”

Nate snatched the sketchbook back. “Shit. My imagination. Ignore that.”

“It wasn’t half bad.” In fact, Carlos felt warm. That drawing was fucking sexy. Nate had serious talent. “Hey, do you ever do album covers? If KnifeSwitch can stay together long enough, I want to do another demo, and that concert sketch you did would be great.”

“I’ve done all of Eli’s.” Nate leaned forward. “Yeah, I could do that.” He grinned. “It’ll cost you fifty bucks though.”

“Robbery.” Carlos took the notebook back and Nate let him. He carefully focused on only the top sketch. “I really like it, though. It’s weird enough, but it’s us. It’d need lettering.”

“And inking, and a better layout.” Nate touched one slender finger to the page. “Move Mia up a bit here, put the band name there, album name here. Or is it self-titled?”

“Nope. We did one like that already.” Two years ago and they’d outgrown both the songs and the crappy production values. He still sold it at shows, because it was all they had, but it was rank amateur hour. “We’d call this one *Not Going Under*.”

“Good title. Good song. One of my faves of yours. Okay.” Nate gave him a sideways look. “You want to keep the horns on Foster?”

“Not unless he screws up worse. You could keep the devil tail though.”

“Got it.”

They talked about the cover while the server brought the beer, debating adding some color, and backside art. That segued into recording, and somehow to art galleries and craft fairs and craft beers. Carlos wasn’t aware of time passing until Nate’s phone chimed and he pulled it out. “Fuck.”

“What?”

“Snapchat of Eli about to go on stage.”

“Shit.” He wanted to suggest that they stay put and skip it, but if he was writing a song for those guys he definitely needed to hear them play. “We should go. Hey, does your brother have an album for sale today?” He stood and tossed a twenty on the table.

“A couple.” Nate stood too, stretching in a way that made Carlos really want to skip the show. “But I have all of them at home. You can come back to my place and I’ll let you study Eli’s style before I show you mine.”

“I think I know yours.”

“Oh, young padawan, much of mine, seen you have not.”

“Was that meant to be Yoda? Because there’s nothing sexy about Yoda.”

Nate snorted happily. “True. Just for that, I’ll let you blow me again after the show.”

“You’ll let me, eh?”

“Pay you to?” Nate slid in behind the wheel.

“How drunk are you? Do I look like a hooker to you?”

“You could earn a free album cover.”

“That I might take you up on.”

They had to park even farther away when they got back, but it was a nice night. The edges of the crowd were drunk and distracted, but as they worked closer to the stage, the audience became more focused. Serpentine was onstage, making the ground shake. Carlos leaned closer to Nate and bellowed in his ear, “That song has got to go, too.”

“Tell Eli. Maybe you can cut a package deal for a full set’s worth.”

“After Sparkfest.”

Carlos had to admit, the band had the sound and the look. They moved into covers of “Hangar 18” and then “Enemy of God” that had the crowd moving hard. Then he recognized the opening chords of his own song and leaned forward, grabbing Nate’s arm. The audience was into it. Some guys surfed the mosh pit. He had to admit, there were decent moments, although if he’d written the tune and not just the lyrics, he’d have made a few more changes. Maybe a lot of changes. And ouch, that rhyme was too clean. He made mental notes.

When the song was over he let go of Nate, not looking at him. Nate leaned in close and shouted into his ear, “Well, it wasn’t ‘Hangar 18,’ but it wasn’t half bad.”

“High praise.”

“Damned straight.” Nate bumped his shoulder.

They stood together through the rest of the set. When it was over, they worked through the crowd to the back of the stage. Eli jumped down, his face flushed and wet. “Awesome! Fuck, I love this crowd!” He strode up to them and grabbed Carlos in a one-armed hug, his guitar bumping Carlos’s hip. “Your song fucking killed.”

“I can make it better.”

Eli’s grin got wider. He called over, “Hey, guys, meet our songwriter.”

The three other band members crowded around, teasing Nate and shaking Carlos’s hand. A minute later they were pressed into service with tear down. Carlos found himself carrying the snare, walking behind Nate’s tight ass as he wheeled a cab on a dolly. It was a sight worth following. With all the guys hanging about, he didn’t dare do more than look.

Serpentine had an old half-size school bus for a band bus, with the last four rows of seats taken out for gear. Loading was fast and simple with six people working. When they were done, Eli glanced at Nate, then looked at Carlos. “So, you think you can do us another song? Before next weekend?”

“Sure.” He’d been thinking about it, and there were a couple of songs in his notebook that had never been right for KnifeSwitch that might work. Plus music and words were bouncing around in his head in a promising way. “I’ll get together a couple possibilities and let you know in a day or two.”

“Cool.” Eli fist bumped him. “See you later. Don’t corrupt my brother.”

Carlos froze, glancing at the back of the drummer who was locking the cargo door. Nate said, “Just ’cause Carlos knows the good beer when he sees it.”

Eli blinked, then gave them each a sunny grin and turned away. Nate took a few steps back from the bus and said very quietly, “You want to see more etchings?”

Carlos hesitated, but yeah, there was a lot to be said for ending this night with good hot sex. “Sure. Let me text Mia.”

He pulled out his phone and sent:

Got a ride home. You okay with the merch? Take care of my guitar?

He figured she might not hear it, but she must have been on vibrate because a minute later he got back:

Gonna hold the RGA for ransom till you tell me about him

Might be too drunk to remember

Don’t drink and drive

Yes mom. Tell Foster that

There was a pause, then: *I wish*

Carlos stuck his phone in his pocket. To hell with Foster anyway. As long as the guy played half-sober, he could get as wasted as he wanted afterward. Carlos wasn’t going to let worrying about it ruin this night. “Mom says I can go over to your house to play.”

“Come on then. If you’re good, I’ll break out the fun toys.”

He grabbed Nate’s arm and growled, “I can be very, very good,” in his ear. When he let go, Nate’s fast breaths were visible even in the uneven street lighting.

“I know,” Nate said. “I’m counting on it.”

Hell yeah. It was a nearly perfect night.

Chapter 7

A couple of days later, Nate set a pan of refried beans on the back burner of his stove and turned off the heat. *God, this was a stupid idea.* Carlos was coming over again, and Nate had casually said, “I don’t work tonight. Why don’t you eat here? I’ve got tortillas and fixings.” And Carlos had said, “Sure.”

And everything had been fine, up until Nate realized he was opening a can of beans and laying out discount-store tortillas for a guy who was actually from Mexico. Sure, he’d left when he was ten, and his Aunt Lisa might be white-bread American, but he probably had other aunts and cousins and whomever there in California making tortillas from scratch and adding fancy spices and not deploying the trusty can opener.

He looked at the stuff on the counter, debating tossing it and telling Carlos his fridge had gone off. They could pick up Thai food or something. Before he could make a move, it was too late. There was a knock on his door. He sighed and hurried to open it. “Listen, I know I said I’d cook, but—” He stopped because that was his dad on the doorstep.

Dad raised an eyebrow. “Since when do you cook?”

“Hey! I’ve lived on my own for eight years. I cook.”

“You’re over at home eating your mom’s good dinners half the time.”

Nate flushed. “Yeah, well, otherwise she just brings me the leftovers anyway.” It was a perk he hadn’t mentioned to Carlos, although they’d shared the chicken salad for a midnight snack on Monday. “What’s up, Dad?”

“You have a second? I wanted you to look through this stuff. Mom’s trying to turn the spare room into a sewing room, and we need to toss a bunch of things out.” He hefted a couple of big tote bags. “These are yours.”

“Um, sure. Bring them in and set them by the couch.”

Dad stepped past him and headed for the living area. Nate shut the door, double-checked that the stove was off, and then went to join him. “You can leave that there. I’ll look at it later.”

“There’s some old photo albums.” Dad dug in one of the sacks, seeming oblivious to Nate’s impatient shifting from foot to foot. “This one. You remember Danny Pasternak? You had such a crush on him.” He pulled out a blue-covered binder.

Nate winced. “Dad, I was eight. I didn’t even know what a crush was.”

“You were cute. You followed him around.”

Dad was acting like he wanted to sit down with the book when Nate heard a car pull up on the gravel outside. He grabbed the binder and stuffed it back in the bag. “I’ll look through it, I promise.”

“It’s hard to get rid of things.” Dad hovered, looking down. “Your mother’s good at that, but I kind of cling to stuff, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” Nate figured that without Mom, his dad would be halfway to a hoarder. He was by far the more sentimental of the two.

“Maybe I should find space in a closet and put those away instead.”

“I don’t think there’s a closet you haven’t stuffed full.” He reached for Dad’s arm. “Thanks for bringing them over. I’m about to eat, though.”

“Oh, sorry, I’ll leave you to it then.”

He had Dad halfway to the door when there was a knock that had to be Carlos. Dad looked at him, that eyebrow raised again. “You’re expecting someone?”

“Yeah.” He knew his face was red.

“You’re cooking dinner. A date?”

“I guess.”

“Are you going to introduce me to him?”

Nate huffed a breath. “Well, I can hardly hide you in the closet.” He let go of his dad’s arm and went to open the door. “Hey, come on in.”

Carlos handed him a six-pack. “I brought beer.” Then he caught sight of Nate’s dad and took a step back.

Dad came on over, a welcoming smile on his face, hand outstretched. “Hi, I’m Nathaniel’s father. You can call me David.”

“Carlos.” He shook hands guardedly.

Dad didn’t seem to notice. “Well, you don’t need me here. I’ll head on back to your mother’s cooking and leave you to yours. Although Carlos?”

“Yeah?”

“If my boy burns whatever he’s making, you’re both welcome to take potluck with us.”

“Dad!” Nate glared at him.

He just smiled. “Nice meeting you, Carlos. Don’t let me have any of that stuff back, Nate.”

When the door closed behind him, Carlos said carefully, “Stuff?”

Nate waved toward the bags. “Old stuff. Mom clears it out, Dad tries to find a reason to keep it.”

“Hah. It was the other way round in my tío’s house. Tía Lisa loves crafts. She keeps saying, ‘You never know when you might need a plastic hose or a roll of netting.’ She has drawers full of stuff. My cousins always had great Halloween costumes, though.”

“She sounds cool.” Nate tried hard not to poke at the sore places in Carlos’s family background, but he always sounded happy when he mentioned his aunt.

“She is. She loves art. She’d be crazy about you.” For an instant they stared at each other, then Carlos added, “If you ever met, y’know.”

“Sure. She knows you’re gay?”

“Knows all about me and is cool with it. She’s great. Probably saved my life.”

Nate couldn’t help a glance at Carlos’s wrist, and although he snapped his eyes up fast, it wasn’t fast enough.

Carlos looked rueful. “Yeah, man, she was so mad at me about that.”

“*Mad* at you?”

“Well, scared first, ’cause it bled pretty good even though I mostly missed the vein. Then mad as hell. She asked me if I’d forgotten I could go to her for anything. She yelled. But she had my back, even when she was confused as hell about what I needed.”

“I’m glad.”

Carlos headed for the stove. “So what are you actually burning? And is there lots, ’cause I’m starving?”

Nate came and stood behind him as he poked a spoon in the pot. “It’s refried beans, American style. Which means from a can. And, um, stuff.” He waved at the peppers and salsa and fixings on the counter.

“Great.” Carlos gave the beige glop in the pot another stir.

“You did not just say great to that.”

“All it needs is a bit of spicing up. What do you have?”

“Pepper?” He pointed at his cupboard. “Garlic powder?”

“Okay, this may be harder than I thought.”

Carlos dug through his fridge and took out some bacon. As he laid the rashers in a pan, there was a rustling sound overhead. Carlos jumped and swore. “What was that?”

“The cat. Ghost.” Nate looked up over Carlos’s shoulder at the pointed little white face peeping over the catwalk. “Bacon. Even the most aloof creature can’t resist it.”

Carlos followed his gaze. “She’s cute. I almost thought you were making her up.”

“Wait. Just how crazy did you think I was?”

“Okay, maybe not making her up. But she’s been invisible.” Carlos flipped the bacon over, then looked up again. “Hey, little cat, smells good, eh?”

At his attention, Ghost hissed softly and backed away. The catwalk swayed, showing her route to her favorite enclosed perch.

Carlos raised an eyebrow. “She’s not super friendly, huh?”

“She was feral. That means, born wild. I’m fostering her for the animal shelter, getting her used to people. When she’s better, she’ll go up for adoption.”

“Seriously? You won’t keep her?”

“I like taming the wild ones. I do a bunch of that at the shelter.” The stray cat problem was unending, but Nate liked to think he was at least doing his own small part. “Although, she’s the first one in a while that I could bring home.”

“Why’s that?”

He pointed at the floor. “Metal band.” And then up. “Deaf cat.”

“Oh, fuck, yeah.” Carlos lifted the bacon out of the pan onto a plate and tipped the can of beans into the fry pan. “Don’t you want to keep her? Sounds perfect.”

Nate shrugged. Sure he did, sort of. But after losing Slinky to cancer less than a year after getting her, he wasn’t giving his heart to any new cat, just

because she wouldn't freak over Eli's band. There was safety in being certain that there was a time limit on it. In an odd way, planned heartache was easier than not knowing. "I'm helping her find a forever home. I'm good at it."

"Cool." Carlos sprinkled something on the beans and began crumbling the bacon. "Should I save her a bit of this?"

"Sure. Maybe I'll finally lure her close with bacon."

"It would work for me." Carlos popped a strip in his mouth, then tipped most of the crumbles into the beans. "Give me a minute, and we can eat this."

The bacon and whatever else he'd used gave the canned beans some zip. Combined with the salsa, fresh diced tomatoes, lettuce and onions in a tortilla, it wasn't half bad. They ate standing at the counter, leaning over plates to catch the drips. Nate mumbled through a mouthful, "This isn't close to authentic, though, right?"

"No way." Carlos's voice took on a hint of accent. "Abuela and Mamá spent half the day buying food and preparing food and cooking food. Of course, there were ten people in the house. Man, I miss their cooking."

"Not enough to spend half the day doing it, though," Nate suggested cheerfully. He'd bet it wasn't just the cooking Carlos missed.

"Nah. Not that much." Carlos shoved the rest of the tortilla in his mouth. "So, do we have time for me to blow you for dessert before—" The sound of cars pulling up out front answered that question.

"Guess not." Nate tugged his jeans straighter. "Hold that thought."

He tucked the remaining bacon bits into the fridge, where Miss Antisocial couldn't just help herself. They headed outside, down the steps, and met Eli and his bandmates in front of the garage. Tom rolled up the door and the guys began setting up, while Eli pulled Carlos and Nate aside. "So, Carlos, what've you got?"

Carlos said, "In my car. Let me get it." He came back with a sheaf of paper. "There's two songs here. You should try this one first. "Tongues and Ashes." I originally wrote it for lead, bass, drums and cello, but I tabbed the cello part for the second guitar. I think it's a better song than "Dead on the Tracks" but I brought that one too."

Eli took the pages, scanning the first one. "Yeah, okay, good stuff. We'll give it a try. Pity we don't have a cello, really. It would be good to have

something to set us apart from the rest of the bands.” He glanced at Carlos. “Hey, RoRo used to play a little fiddle. Maybe we could bring that back.”

“Probably not on this song. But yeah, I can think about adding a fiddle part somewhere, if he wants to.”

Eli laughed. “It might take blackmail. He hated practicing it. What else is here?”

“I want to tweak “Past Gravity” a bit. There’s a new lyric sheet for that at the bottom. Here.”

“I liked the old one.”

Nate stepped back, watching his boyfriend and his brother with their heads together, poring over the papers. Really, it was a damned good thing Eli hadn’t turned out gay.

Carlos shrugged. “It’s not bad. Could be better.”

“Well, come on, then, hang out and tell us how it should go.” Eli hesitated. “Unless you want to, like, hand this over and split. It’s not your band.”

“It’s my song.”

From behind Nate, Dad said, “Hey, Eli, I’ve got something for you.”

They all turned. Dad held out a pair of bags to Eli. “I already gave Nate his. This is stuff your mother wants out of the house.”

Eli said, “Can’t you find somewhere to keep it?”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Nate said. “Mom will kill him.”

Eli reluctantly went and collected his bags, dumping them inside the garage near the wall. The guys looked over from setting up and came out to say hi to Dad. All of them had been playing together since high school, and some of them had probably spent more time around Nate’s folks than around their own. Dad greeted them and asked about parents and siblings. Eventually he said, “It’s nice to see you all. You’re in and out so fast these days, we barely hear how you’re doing. You should stop by the house and see Rebecca when you’re done. I know she misses you.”

“I bet she likes the peace and quiet,” Eli said.

“It ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. I’d bet she’d even let Tom use her good pans for drums again.” As the guys shoved Tom, reminding him about the time he got the band kicked out of the house, Dad glanced at Carlos, then asked Eli, “Do you guys all know Carlos? I just met him today.”

“Sure,” Eli said easily. “He wrote a couple songs for us.”

“Oh, how nice.” Dad got a twinkle in his eye as he turned to Nate. “And here I thought you swore you’d never date a musician. He must be special.”

Nate said fast, “He’s a friend.” But it was too much to hope that the whole lot of them hadn’t overheard, or that Carlos wouldn’t give the game away by turning to expressionless stone. Nate took a fast breath, his mind scrambling for damage control. Dad glanced between them, his brow wrinkling, amusement fading.

Eli butted in clumsily, “He’s just here to help us with practice. If we win this battle of the bands thing, it’ll be with his songs.”

But Tom said, “Hey, Nate, you really dating this guy?”

Nate choked on his answer, which left Carlos to say, slow and deep and rough, “Yeah. He is. That a problem for you?”

“Kind of.” Tom came closer. “He’s like our honorary little brother, right? You’re a local musician, so you’ve got to be as broke as the rest of us. You play metal, so you’re as crazy as the rest of us. I wouldn’t let Nate date Chris or RoRo.” He waved at the other two guys.

Chris snapped right back with, “And we wouldn’t let him date you. Hey, Nate, what’s this guy got that we don’t got?”

“Good taste?” Nate suggested, his voice shaking with relief. “And a real day job. And a black belt. And you douches don’t get to decide who I date.”

“Well, fuck. I guess I withdraw my objection then,” Tom said.

“I don’t have a black belt.” Carlos sounded less nervous.

“Sure you do,” Nate told him. “I think it’s under my couch.”

“TMI!” Eli put his hands over his ears. “Nate, when you’re done traumatizing my band, would you tell your boyfriend to come do that magic thing where he makes us sound like pros.”

“We *are* pros,” Tom objected. “But he makes us sound like better pros.”

RoRo said, “Well, you’re gonna sound like crap unless you get that rack straightened up.”

Tom snapped back, “By the time you get all six strings tuned in the same key, I’ll get the rack uncrooked.”

Dad shook his head. “Boys, boys. Do I have to put you in separate corners?”

“We’ll be good, Mr. G.” Tom ambled back toward his drum kit. “Come on, Chris. Help me with this mother.”

RoRo and Chris followed him, leaving Nate and Carlos standing with his dad and brother, listening as the sounds of tuning up resumed, perhaps a bit louder than before.

Dad looked at Nate. “Did I just do what I think I did?”

“Yeah.” Nate wanted to tell him it was no problem, but that wasn’t his call. He turned to Carlos.

Dad did the same, saying, “Carlos, man, I’m so sorry. Open mouth, insert foot. I just, well, Nate’s never dated anyone who wasn’t out. I assumed.”

Carlos shrugged. “We are dating. It’s true.”

“But it wasn’t my place to say so. What can I do?”

When Carlos shrugged again, Nate moved closer, near enough to touch. Carlos didn’t react, though. Nate said, “I don’t think it’s a problem. Not right now. I mean, these guys have known me for ten years, and I’ve been out for all that time. If they were going to have a problem with the gay, I’d know about it.”

Eli said, “He’s right. RoRo can be a bit of a dumbass, and Tom likes to talk, but they’ve met Nate’s boyfriends before. They were jerks once or twice when we were in school, but they’re big boys now. They won’t care.”

Carlos licked his lips. “I guess.”

Nate dared to put a hand on his back. He could feel the muscles under his palm twitching, like a racehorse held back in the gate. He rubbed in a circle, but after a second Carlos shook him off and stepped away. Nate told Eli, “Make sure they know not to spread it around, right? Tell Tom to keep his mouth shut.”

“Look, we don’t need to get carried away,” Eli said. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“Yeah?” Nate glared at him. “Name one big out gay metal artist who isn’t Rob Halford.”

Carlos frowned at him. “Not helping.”

That stung. Nate bit his lip.

Carlos turned to Eli. “Look, what’s done is done. Let’s make some music, right? That’s what we’re here for.”

“Exactly.” Eli brightened. “Come on.”

Carlos followed him into the garage without another look at Nate. Dad said softly, “How bad did I really screw things up?”

“I don’t know.” Nate glanced at him. His eyes stung, which was crazy because this wasn’t even his problem. Everyone knew *he* was gay. It was Carlos who’d get hurt if this came out. “I wasn’t kidding about the metal scene. Too many of the guys are anti-women and anti-gay bigoted assholes.”

“Maybe that should change.”

“Of course it should. But it’s not going to change for some guy in a no-name band who happens to be outed. Maybe if there’s enough top artists someday, but, I mean, if fucking *Judas Priest* can’t change people’s minds, it’s gonna be a long wait.”

“Or maybe the way the whole world is changing will carry metal fans with it.”

Nate nodded. It was a nice dream. “In the meantime, if this gets out, Carlos’s band could be more fucked than it already is.”

“I thought he was a songwriter.”

“And he has a band.”

Dad sighed. “Can you tell him I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure he knows.”

“What’s he like? Have you known him long? He seems pretty tough.”

“Yeah, he is.” Nate wasn’t sure what that would mean, how Carlos would react if he freaked about being outed. “But he’s also smart and funny, and he gets me. We have fun together.” It was only payback to add. “Out of bed and in it. He’s really fucking hot in bed.”

Dad sighed. “You get a pass on that. This time. What do you think? Should I stick around and grovel a bit?”

Nate thought briefly. “No. I’m sure he just wants to forget it.”

“All right. But tell him for me I’m glad you’re dating someone you like that much. Bring him by sometime when it’s less fraught. Your mother will want to meet him.”

If we’re still dating. “Sure. I’ll do that.”

Dad suddenly pulled him into a quick hug. “I wish I could change the world for you, kid. And for your Carlos.”

“I know.”

“Okay. Good night.”

Nate watched his father cross the drive toward the house. From the back like this, he suddenly looked older and more bent. Nate had an impulse to run after him, but instead he turned back to the garage. Carlos and the band were bent over a music stand, heads together. As Nate watched, Carlos pointed at something, then reached for Eli’s guitar. Nate held his breath, but Eli handed the instrument over. Carlos played something short, then another longer section, and passed it back. The musical huddle broke up, with the guys all taking their places. On Eli’s three, they launched into something unfamiliar, only to stop a moment later with an obvious discord. Carlos went to Chris, saying something Nate couldn’t catch. The band got ready and began again.

Nate watched for a while, then snuck up to his apartment. As he came in he spotted Ghost in the sink, licking at the frying pan. He managed to catch himself in time not to smack the counter at her. *That* could have set his taming efforts back weeks. Instead he approached obliquely, opened the fridge, and got out the plate of bacon. “Here, sneaky girl.” He tossed a tiny piece onto the counter beside her. “Try the real thing.”

She twitched her ears, but sniffed, nostrils visibly moving. Then she stretched her neck out and lipped the bit of treat daintily off the counter. She swallowed, paused, and her tiny pink tongue came out to sweep around her mouth. Nate tossed another bit, and was rewarded by seeing her snatch it up more enthusiastically. With careful placement of another six bits he was able to lure the cat out of the sink, up onto the counter, and within a foot of him. She eyed him sideways as she chewed the last bigger bit, and he decided not to push his luck.

“You see? Humans are friendly. Humans slay the dreaded giant boar to lay its cured flesh at your royal feet.”

She opened her mouth, but instead of a hiss, he heard a tiny breath of a mew.

“Are you asking nicely? All right then.” He tossed her the biggest piece and set the plate down. She flinched at the motion but snatched the bite of bacon before retreating up to a perch to eat it. When he walked over to look up at her she peered back down intently, instead of running into one of the closed boxes.

“So would you say I’m crazy?” Nate asked, just to hear the sound of his own voice. “Taking on a kitty with attitude and then returning her the moment she starts to like me?” The cat only blinked calmly, before turning her back on him to begin washing herself. “Oh yeah, lick your butt at me. Good answer.”

He tidied the kitchen, doing a half-assed job because his mind kept going back to Carlos. The music filtering up from below suggested practice was going on as usual. He trusted the guys in Serpentine not to give Carlos a hard time. But once they were gone, once he and Carlos were alone again... had that twitchiness been fear? Anger?

When Darryl was mad, he used to twist things around to make sure it all looked like Nate’s fault, and Nate had half believed it. He’d spent more than a year trying to make up to Darryl for supposed sins that he couldn’t even explain to himself. When Garrett was mad he’d sulked and acted hurt, and had to be coaxed out of his mood with favors. *What would Carlos do?*

Eventually Nate got too restless for cleaning. He grabbed a big sketchbook and went back down. None of the guys looked around as he eased inside the garage, planted himself against the wall beside the door, and began to draw album art. He managed to lay out a couple of cover concepts, but eventually found his pencil doodling a portrait of Carlos.

He gave in to temptation, drawing Carlos bare from the waist up, looking off to the left. He added the tattoos, nipples, paused at the scars below Carlos’s pecs, and had an idea. Nate couldn’t do anything about having outed Carlos, but he could maybe give him a gift. Maybe he could do *something* that would be a win for Carlos, and not just a risk. He’d never actually designed a real tattoo—not one someone might actually get—but he’d critiqued enough of them. He made seven fast sketches of Carlos in the same pose, thought about the options, and began designing.

He was aware from time to time of the rhythm of the practice. He listened to Carlos’s new songs long enough to decide he liked them, but the lure of his pad and pencil sucked him in. The vague awareness of someone walking past him finally pulled him out of his distraction, and he turned to see Carlos heading out the door and across the gravel toward his car. The band was still practicing, but clearly Carlos was leaving, without one single word. Nate grabbed his pad and scrambled to his feet to chase after him. “Hey, wait up.”

Carlos froze momentarily, then turned back. “I’m not in a mood to hang out.”

“Okay. I know.” Nate lowered his voice as he caught up, stopping a couple of feet away. Carlos’s expression made his heart sink, but he kept on going. “But we should talk, and I have something to show you.”

“Does it have to be now?” Carlos closed his eyes, his face drawn and dull.

“Well, no. But I think it might help. A little bit?” He clutched his sketch pad to his chest, suddenly unsure. Maybe this was a really bad idea.

“Okay.” Carlos took a step away from him though, not stopping till he reached the car, then turning to lean against it. “What?”

Nate had wanted to get Carlos up to his apartment, and do something about that defeated look, but he wasn’t sure that was what Carlos wanted. He hesitated, glancing at the sky. The sun had almost reached the horizon while they practiced, but there was still a perfect golden evening glow. Enough light to see by, for sure. No excuses.

“Okay. So it isn’t much, really. Just some, um, drawings.” He went up to Carlos and leaned beside him. The sun-warmed metal was almost too hot though the light fabric of his shirt, even though the car was in the shade now. “So I was thinking. I did these.” He flipped open the pad.

“That’s a good one of Tom,” Carlos said.

“Yeah. I figured I’d do small cartoons for the back cover, maybe. But that’s not what I wanted to show you.” He flipped the pages. “What about these?” He passed it over.

Carlos turned the first couple of pages quickly, then the next few more slowly. He stopped at the last one, staring down. His fingers on the edges of the pad were white-knuckled. “What’s this?”

“Well, tattoos, obviously. Designs.” Nate pointed to the chest of the standing portrait. “I tried to incorporate the shape of the little chest piece that you have now into them, in different ways. That one mirrors the curves in the trellis.” It had roses, growing through ironwork, piercing themselves on their own thorns. “Okay, that’s maybe too gloomy and trite? I was having fun with the lines. How about this?” He flipped back a couple. “This matches the daggers, kind of. The swords are different, but you could ink them with some of the same colors, for continuity.”

Carlos was shaking his head, his jaw set and thrust forward. Nate’s hands shook, but he kept his voice enthusiastic as he flipped another page. “Now this one goes with your song “Behind Bars”, right? I made it more asymmetrical,

wrapping around left with the bars getting more damaged the further they go.” Carlos suddenly shoved the pad back at him, and he grabbed it awkwardly, his heart pounding. “It was just a thought, you know? I thought you might like them.”

“Really? You thought you might make up for your dad outing me by coming up with six different ways to hide the fact that I’m trans?”

“What?”

“You think I didn’t see the one thing all those designs did? Every single one wrapped around my scars. Every one, designed to make those not show. Because being a fag in metal music is hard but being trans would be unthinkable?”

“Wait. That’s not what that was!”

“Yeah, right, *no mames!* Every single design.” Carlos’s lip curled up mockingly.

“So okay, I did think you might use a new tat for that.” Nate took a quick breath, steadying his voice. “Why is that so bad? You said you were bummed about how much the scars still show, six years later. So why are these wrong?”

“They suck, and if I have to explain, you already don’t get it.”

The flat disdain in Carlos’s tone hurt, but Nate tried to stay reasonable. “If you don’t like these, I can do something else.”

“Just forget it.”

“Well, you know what?” Nate gritted his teeth and tucked the pad under his arm. “I thought those were pretty damned good tats. If you have a real issue, tell me. If you’re being pissy because my dad was too friendly—”

“Friendly!” Carlos took a step closer, eyes locked on him. “You call that friendly, calling me out as your date in front of strangers? Who the hell is he to do that to me?”

“He’s my father! And they’re not strangers to him.”

“I am, and that was just ignorant. He had no right to get personal.”

“He’s interested in my life. He wants me with a nice guy who makes me happy.”

“Not some tattooed Mexican trans metalhead, right?”

“He never said that!”

“I could see it. He probably wanted me gone.”

“Well you’re fucking deluded.” Nate blinked hard. “You know what? My father has never, not *once*, told me not to date someone I was interested in. And I guarantee you he would never out someone deliberately to get back at them.”

“So you’re saying he’s just stupid?”

The sneer on Carlos’s face burned, because this was Dad, the guy who’d been at Nate’s back since the moment he’d come out, and never faltered. “Well, I’d rather he cared about my dates, and was okay with the gay, than a father who dumped me in another country and pretended I didn’t exist!”

He wished he could call back the words the instant he said them. Carlos rocked back a step, and his eyes went flat and hard. “Sweet. Maybe your perfect father can find you a perfect out guy to date.” He whirled and yanked open his car door.

“Wait! I’m sorry!” Nate reached for Carlos, but Carlos dodged the touch as he slid into the driver’s seat, and Nate had to jump back to avoid getting caught by the door as he slammed it. The Pinto’s engine revved to a harsh snarl, then Carlos slammed the car into gear. Nate jumped back again as gravel spat from under the wheels. A moment later, Carlos was gone down the drive, leaving Nate staring after him.

Nate stood there in the driveway, reeling off every swearword he could think of. The music from the garage snarled appropriately behind him. It didn’t help.

What now? Had they just broken up, from whatever *together* they’d had? He couldn’t imagine Carlos coming back and wasn’t sure what to say if he did. “*You take back what you said about my dad and I’ll do the same?*” Taking something back didn’t mean you could forget it.

He flipped open the sketchbook, looking at the designs. He’d spent the last two hours listening to the same fucking songs over and over, drawing these, trying to make Carlos happy. Well, screw that!

He ripped the pages out, one by one, and tore them into little shreds, opening his hand to let the pieces drift to the ground. A scrap fluttered and turned over, showing one dark eye under a heavy brow, looking at him warmly. *Not gonna happen.* He flipped the scrap over with his foot.

The song from the garage changed to a familiar cover. He glanced that way, thought about going up to his place and... doing something fun. But even with

the insulation they'd put in, Serpentine at full volume wasn't background music, and it wouldn't take much for him to want to kill his brother too. His head hurt, and he rubbed it fretfully.

The mellow summer light was still too bright for his eyes. He didn't want to drive anywhere. He wandered across the grass to the old willow, and ducked between the hanging fronds to reach the trunk. The big branch he'd barely been able to reach as a kid was at neck height now, and he boosted himself up onto it easily. From there, it was only three more branches up to his favorite seat. He eased onto it, straddling the thick curve of the tree limb, and leaned back against the trunk. The long leafy willow-wands around him swayed lightly in the breeze, screening him. It felt as secure as it always had, his safe harbor, hidden from prying eyes.

As a child, he'd sat here for hours surveying his kingdom. By force of habit, he looked over to the end of the driveway, and the patches of road visible between the pines. There was no flash of rusty Pinto, of course. Carlos was long gone. Nate closed his eyes, and tipped his head back against the rough bark.

From up here, the music in the garage filtered down to a lot of bass, deep driving wordless rhythms that matched the fast thumping of his heart. No words, no thoughts. He'd learned meditation in high school, trying to learn to not react to bullies and anger and hurt. He'd never meditated to a metal beat, but why the hell not. Maybe if he breathed once every two bars, it would work. Maybe once every three. He sucked air in, held it, blew it out. And again. Without meaning to, his eyes slitted open, but the road between the pines was empty. Then a truck went by. A horse trailer. An old pickup. Nothing. He closed his eyes again and breathed.

Chapter 8

Carlos wasn't sure where he was driving. In fact, he wasn't sure *how* he was driving, because a red veil kept hazing his vision, and his grip on the wheel hurt his hands. He cornered too fast, and heard the tires whine in protest.

Slow down, jackass. You can't live to show them all how it's done, if you die in a car crash. He imagined squishing his inner Jiminy Cricket with a rolled up newspaper, and took the next corner even faster. It helped to have to focus on his driving, to fight the sway and slide of the car and steer with a light touch, adjusting as the pavement roughened and then smoothed. He could focus on this and not give a moment's thought to the way Nate had reddened and blinked when he'd trash-talked the guy's father.

¡Mierda!" His distraction was shredded by a bright flash of lights behind him and the whoop of a police siren. *¡Me lleva la chingada!*"

He wasn't a complete fool, so he slowed and pulled to the side of the road. The cop behind him turned off the siren but left the lights flashing. Carlos sat still, keeping his hands in sight on the steering wheel, and waited. Back in the patrol car, the cop was doing whatever they did before getting out and coming to ticket you. Running the plates, or whatever.

Carlos tried to remember if he had any unpaid parking tickets. He didn't think so, but there were some of the venues where the legal parking wasn't close to enough, and he picked one up now and then. "Shit." His heart hammered, and he felt sweat break out on his forehead. *Great, I'll look guilty as fuck.*

Eventually the cop got out of his car, adjusted his belt, and strolled over to the passenger side of Carlos's car. Carlos rolled down the window, and the guy bent to look in, his hand on his gun butt. "License, insurance and registration?"

"My license is in my wallet in my back pocket, the papers are in the glove compartment." Carlos knew better than to reach for anything without permission.

"Get the license out. Slowly. Two fingers."

Carlos dug out his wallet and pulled out his license, handing it over with exaggerated care. The cop held it up and slowly comparing the picture to Carlos's face. Carlos gave the cop a big fake photo-studio grin, watching the

guy's face darken. *So stupid to mess with him.* He still wasn't listening to Jiminy Cricket, though.

"Where's your green card?"

"I don't have one."

The cop's attention sharpened. "Illegal, huh?"

Carlos gave an exaggerated sigh. "I'm an American citizen. Grew up in California." He didn't need to mention he'd only become a citizen at sixteen. "Washington resident for six years."

"Right. 'Cause you look so American." The cop gave him a grin that was all teeth. "Try again. Green card?"

Like you can't be American unless you're a dumb white cracker, huh? He had enough self-preservation not to say it. "I'm an American."

"Would you step out of the car, sir? Nice and slow. Leave the keys in the ignition."

He turned *Shit* into "Sure", opened his door and eased out of the seat, keeping his movements casual, and his hands well away from his body.

"Turn and face the car. Hands on the roof."

He carefully dropped his wallet onto the seat, inside the car, and did as he was told. The cop came around the hood and stepped close behind him. "I'm going to pat you down, sir. Just keep still."

Carlos wanted to say no, wanted to protest that he'd given the cop no reason to get personal with his body, but he knew better. He held still as the man ran rough hands all over him. Carlos flashed back on a bad day, when he'd been stopped just like this, eighteen and driving too fast. He'd been on hormones, but pre-op, still binding, and he'd been a C-cup, hard to hide. Worse yet, his mustache, and his still-female driver's license, had made that cop freak. He'd hauled Carlos in to the station, and it had taken Tío Ramón driving all the way over to convince them to spring him.

He bit his lip and didn't move as the cop explored his groin and down around his thighs. At least now he had it all together, even if that meant he was now a young man DWB. Driving While Brown was probably better than Driving While Black, but it still sucked. The cop said, "Put your hands behind your back, nice and easy."

“Why?” He couldn’t help asking, even as he followed orders. “What did I do?”

“You were twenty over the limit, and that car might be stolen.”

“Hell, yeah.” Carlos winced as the cuffs closed over his wrists. “‘Cause if I was gonna steal a car, I’d take a thirty-five-year-old rusted-out Pinto.” He *heard* his accent thicken and felt the way his body centered differently, his tough-guy mode and he couldn’t control it. Not tonight. “Don’t you check the plates or something? That’s my car. The registration’s in the glove compartment.”

“I’m going to put you in the cruiser and search your car, sir.”

Carlos said as clearly and accent-free as he could, “You do not have permission to search my car.”

“Don’t need permission.”

“You do on any routine traffic stop.”

“Don’t need permission when you threaten me.”

Carlos swallowed back his protest. He wondered if the cruiser behind him had a dash cam. Then he wondered what might happen to the recording, if the cop didn’t like what it would show. He spoke louder and clearer, words Tía Lisa had taught him, holding still as stone. “I have not threatened you. I am cooperating. You do not have permission to search my car. Any search will be invalid under Washington State law.”

The cop shook his head, grabbed his arm, and tugged him back to the cruiser, supporting Carlos when he stumbled. He opened the rear door and pushed Carlos in. “Mind your head, sir.” Carlos almost expected to be smacked into the door frame as he said it, but it didn’t happen. He sat on the hard plastic seat uncomfortably, hands behind him, as the cop shut the door.

There was nothing he could do but watch, fuming, as the cop pulled on plastic gloves, opened the Pinto’s doors, and began going through the stuff on the rear floor. He pulled the floor mats out, dumping them on the gravel at the side of the road. Carlos muttered under his breath, “I hope you put your hand in a rotten hot dog.” For once, he regretted that he wasn’t the type of guy to toss really gross stuff back there. He’d pay to have a mega-slob car right now.

He realized he’d given Foster a ride more than once in the last few months. If something had dropped out of Foster’s pockets, Carlos could be up shit creek. Fear began to creep in, past his anger, and he sucked air between his

teeth. His tongue glued to the roof of his mouth, dry as cotton. If he was arrested, went to jail, there was no Tío Ramón within a hundred miles to come charging to his rescue. He'd be locked in a cage, a freak among predators. If they strip searched him, would they put him in with the men, or the women?

Up ahead, the cop popped the trunk open. The hatch light came on, visible in the growing dusk. The cop bent, reaching around, head ducked down. Taking short panicked breaths, Carlos tried to remember what he had in there. He'd had camping gear stowed in the car once, with a buck knife in it, but he thought his pack was back home now. He was sure of it. Almost sure. Sweat slid down his neck and forehead, and he rubbed his cheek on his shoulder to stop the itchy trickle.

The cop shut the trunk and came back toward him. He opened the front door of the cruiser, reached in, and got something out. Straightening, he went back to stand in front of the cruiser. The strobe of red and blue flashed on his face, a sinister flicker over shaded eyes and wide jaw, as he wrote on the pad in his hand. Then he came back and opened the back door. "Come on out."

Carefully, silently, Carlos eased out of the cruiser and stood up, hiding the shaking of his knees, forcing himself to look up boldly.

"Turn around and hold still."

When he did so, he was surprised to feel the cop reach over and unlock his cuffs. As they came off Carlos tensed, tightening every muscle, not even letting himself rub at his irritated skin.

"Turn around."

He pivoted slowly, raising his hands to shoulder height. The cop eyed him with a flat, unreadable stare. "Directions for paying your ticket are printed on it. If you wish to contest your ticket, you may do so in court. There's a phone number and a link where you can find more information." He frowned. "You were clocked by radar doing sixty-two in a forty zone, so I don't advise contesting it."

Carlos gritted his teeth and waited for the punchline. *What did you find in the car? What did you plant?* Except if there was any illegal substance involved, he wouldn't be standing here with the cuffs off. He wondered if the cop was going to demand he take a breath test, or touch his nose or whatever, but the guy just separated off the ticket and held it out to him.

Carlos took one slow step, then another, reaching out. He waited for the gotcha, waited for the cop to lie for his camera, "*He's going for me! Gotta take*

him down.” But his fingers closed on the paper and the cop let it go. “You can get back in your car. Drive carefully now. Keep it under the limit. If I catch you going that fast again, I’ll run you in, and you can spend a night in the lockup.”

Carlos’s jaw ached with the effort of keeping his mouth shut. He made a wide circle around the cop, stepping down into the ditch rather than get too close. When he was well past, he folded the ticket into his pocket without looking at it. The contents of his back seat were strewn on the gravel, and he bent to scoop them back up unsorted. Among the jumbled debris was a crumpled scrub top with his name tag still pinned to it. “*Dr. Donner Dental; Carlos, receptionist.*”

Was that what made the cop back off? Who knew? Who cared? Well, he cared if Carlos the receptionist with his name next to a cartoon of a tooth was that much more human than Carlos the random brown guy in a beat up car. But he couldn’t think about it. Not now.

He used an Arby’s bag to sack up some of the more trashy bits. Even though the cop had done the littering, Carlos couldn’t leave the roadside looking like a dump. He straightened as the cop car rolled slowly past. The officer met his eyes through the windshield. Carlos couldn’t soften the glare he could feel tightening his face, but the cop just stared through him as he pulled away. Carlos blew out a long breath and slumped against his car.

“*¡Dios, qué día!*” This motherfucking day needed to just go fuck itself.

He leaned back on the metal, letting the air dry the sweat on his face. Slowly his heart returned to normal. He suddenly ached to go see Nate, to let Nate’s touch and voice and dick pound the sickness out of his body and the crazies out of his brain. He almost decided to, until he remembered he was mad at Nate. For a reason. A good reason. *Dammit.*

He shoved the last bits of grot into his car and slammed the back door. The keys and his license were sitting on the dashboard next to his wallet. He leafed through the wallet in a panic, but there was nothing incriminating in the stupid receipts he’d stuck in there, nothing missing from his twenty-six bucks of cash, nothing gay on view. And nothing trans. He remembered the incredible rush of getting his gender changed on his driver’s license. He’d pulled it out a hundred times that first week to confirm that it really said “*sex: M*”. He picked the current one up, tilted it in the light. A dark-haired guy with a little mustache and scruff stared out of the picture from under shaggy brows. “*sex: M*”. He’d bet some girl pulled over for speeding wouldn’t be cuffed and stuck in the back of the patrol car. He tried to make that thought help him feel better.

When he got back on the road, he held it down to a safe three miles over the limit. His stomach churned acidly, but he didn't feel the urge to tromp on the gas anymore. *Fucking ticket*. He wondered how much it would cost him and decided he didn't want to know. The burn in his chest was indigestion. Maybe hunger. He realized he was hungry despite Nate's having fed him. Not good food hungry, but empty carbs hungry.

He tried to be good with his diet. On the T implants, he'd built guy-type muscles, but it was still too easy to put on weight in his butt and thighs. He hadn't worked like a fool on his body to wreck it with donuts. Then again, sometimes only frosting would do.

He headed back to town, and swung by the little bakery a few blocks from home. At this hour, they'd boxed up all the day's leftovers for cheap and were about to close. He ducked in the door under the wire and came out with an assorted dozen, half of them Long Johns that were almost *churros*.

Sitting in his car, with the box on the passenger seat, he stared at them in the waning light. He could go home now, eat until he puked and then work out like a madman to work off the calories. Or... not. He could call Mia. If he told her he'd been outed to Serpentine she'd be wonderfully furious on his behalf. He could imagine her ranting about shitheaded old men who had no idea how to watch what they said. Or dumb boyfriends who told anyone and everyone Carlos's private business. She'd be as angry for him as he needed her to be. And probably eat half the donuts.

He didn't want that either.

He started the car and began driving, pretending he was wandering randomly, and knowing he wasn't. It was twenty-five minutes back to Lacey, to a small country road and a long gravel driveway. It took him an hour, but he got there eventually.

The garage was dark and silent, when he rolled the Pinto to a stop beside the drive. The only other car there was Nate's, but the apartment over the garage was dark too. Carlos glanced at his phone, wondering if he'd lost more time than he thought, but it was only a bit before ten. Through the trees ahead, he could see lights on inside Nate's parents' house. He wondered if Nate had gone there to hang out with his dad, and if he was there, whether he was talking about the problems with dating someone like Carlos. He hoped not, but at the same time he ached with envy that it might be possible.

He could imagine that conversation with his own father, talking about a gay boyfriend, or worse yet, a trans one. Papá would have gone ballistic. “¿*Qué te*

pasa? ¿Estás loco? ¡Vámonos con el Padre Alejo para que te haga entrar en razón!” In fact, crazy would have been the best thing he was called, and getting hauled off to see the Padre might’ve involved Papá’s thick fingers gripping his ear while Mamá wailed and begged him to see the light. Really, Papá had probably saved his life by sending him north to Tía Lisa’s care and Tío Ramón’s benign indifference. He’d have gnawed off his own arm to get out of that trap of religion and expectations.

He turned off the car and rolled down the window. The peace of the quiet evening gradually seeped into him. Traffic rumbled far off, rising and falling on some bigger road. A bird called sleepily from the trees and then was silent. Overhead, a sliver of a moon floated in the deep purple sky. The west was still slightly lighter than the east, a band of turquoise edging the star-studded dome.

He sat there, hearing the hot metal of the engine ping as it cooled. There was no sign of Nate, and Carlos couldn’t picture himself actually walking up to that distant house, looking Nate’s dad in the eyes, asking to come in. *No*. But maybe Nate had fallen asleep on his couch, or was watching YouTube and hadn’t noticed night had come.

Carlos made himself get out. The air was perfect summer-evening warm, as he walked around, and picked up the floppy bakery box off the passenger seat. He bumped the door shut with his hip, turned toward the garage apartment, and straightened his shoulders. No quitting. *Pa’ lante*. Onward.

Nate came out of some kind of fugue state at the sound of a car turning in the drive. He tensed and bit back a yelp of pain as every muscle told him he’d been sitting in one position far, far too long. He grabbed the branch he was straddling with a white-knuckled grip and whimpered. Below him, Carlos’s Pinto pulled over and stopped.

Nate sat breathing shallowly through his nose as the tingle of returning circulation burned through his thighs and ass. Carlos’s door opened and he got out, went around and pulled something big and white out of the passenger seat. Nate knew he should call down to him, but he just watched as Carlos carried the something over to the garage and headed out of sight up the stairs. The sound of his knock was clear in the still evening air.

Nate waited. He wasn’t sure for what—some sign, maybe, of what Carlos was thinking. The rap of the knock came again, then after a pause Carlos reappeared without the white thing, pausing at the foot of the stairs to glance

back up. Whatever it was, he'd left it at the door. Peace offering? Something Nate had somehow left behind in his car? Time bomb? From up in the tree, the look on Carlos's face was unreadable.

Nate worked his feet in small circles and massaged his thighs with his fists, as Carlos came slowly back down the driveway. Halfway to the car, he stopped and bent to the ground. Nate leaned forward, puzzled, until Carlos picked up a bit of paper, and then another and another. *Oh.*

He watched as Carlos carefully gathered the scraps, stuffing them in his pockets. Whether he was hiding the evidence or keeping the environment clean was debatable. Then Nate saw him raise his head and look around at the big house once more, his face drawn and defeated, before slumping and turning to go. It was still surprisingly hard to say, "Hey. Mariachi man."

Carlos jumped and whirled around. "Nate? Where?"

"In the tree." He stayed put as Carlos came over, walking hesitantly at first and then faster as he clearly spotted Nate on his branch against the dark trunk. Carlos ducked through the hanging wands and came to the base of the tree, looking up. Nate peered down at him. "Um."

"Half artist, half frickin' squirrel?"

"Panther. Lying in wait—ouch." He rolled his shoulder painfully.

Carlos stared up at him, his expression had to read in the dim light. Eventually he cleared his throat and said, "I'm sorry?"

It sounded more like a question than a statement. Nate wasn't sure who owed apologies either by now. He pushed down a roiling mix of his own anger, hurt and guilt and asked, "For what?"

Carlos reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple of shreds of paper, holding them up toward him.

Nate winced. "I was the one who tore them up."

"I ripped them with words first, I guess."

"That's... almost poetic."

"Well, duh. Songwriter."

Nate's heart was beating strangely fast, and he couldn't quite get his breath. *Fight or flight.* Which was odd, because neither of those seemed like a good plan. "You came back. I wasn't sure you would."

“Neither was I.” Carlos sighed audibly. “Could you come down? I’m getting a crick in my neck.”

“Maybe.”

“What? I need a magic word? *Pleeeeeease*?” There was sarcasm in his tone, but his eyes were fixed on Nate’s.

Nate snorted. “Not that I mind hearing you say that, but more like, I’m so stiff I’m not sure if I can *come* down, or I’m gonna *fall* down.”

Carlos moved right under him. “I’ll catch you.”

“I’ll squish you.”

“I’m stronger than I look.”

“Well, just remember you said that.” Nate swung carefully off his branch, setting his feet on the lower one, and eased down, fumbling for the next level. He slipped as he got six feet off the ground, the stumble half real, half intentional as he slid and grabbed. True to his word, Carlos caught him and steadied him until he could stand on his own. Nate closed his hands on Carlos’s arms for a moment, gripping the strong biceps with his fingers, then let go. “Thanks.”

“Mm.”

“So.” They stood there in the shelter of the tree, looking at each other. Nate figured Carlos couldn’t see much more than he could, just a shape, a male body, a hint of uncombed hair, a glint of eyes. It was hard to know where to begin. “Do you want to, um, talk?”

Carlos’s voice was low with only a hint of self-mockery. “I’d rather, um, fuck.”

“No doubt. Me too.” Nate was going to say something about it being a bad idea without talking first, but having Carlos that close was scrambling his brains, and he’d done too much thinking already. “Bed?”

“Better than out here on the fucking lawn, yeah.”

Nate led the way, intensely aware of Carlos following him. The white box was sitting beside his door at the top of the stairs, and he joked, “That won’t explode on me, will it?”

“Not unless they’re a lot older than I thought.”

He climbed the last step, bent and looked at it. “Donuts? Like, a shitload of them?”

“A dozen. Six for you, six for me.”

“Damn.” Nate picked them up. “I’ll have to run ten miles tomorrow.”

“Twenty for me.” Carlos stood close as Nate fumbled with the key. “Do you actually run?”

“Sometimes.” It’d been a while, but seeing his legs stretched out on a bed next to Carlos’s muscular ones the other night had made him feel sloth-like. “I should do it more often.”

“I run every day.” Carlos followed him in and shut the door.

Nate reached past him and latched it. *You’re staying.* His dick was getting hard, optimistic as ever, although he wasn’t sure how this would go. He emptied his pockets in the dish on his counter.

Carlos stood close enough that Nate could tell he was breathing faster, but without reaching to touch him. “I run and do cardio, lots of weights. I need it, not just for the muscle but it, um, centers me. I get really twitchy on a day I can’t run.”

“Maybe I can suggest alternate cardio.”

Carlos pushed up against him then, face in his hair and one hand already diving for Nate’s zipper. It was darker than ever with the door shut. Nate reached toward the light switch, but Carlos grabbed his wrist. “No. Wait.”

Nate shuddered as Carlos pressed him back against the kitchen counter, kissing and biting at his neck and jaw. Carlos’s teeth and tongue stung and cooled him in turns, and he moaned and tilted his head for more, unable to resist, certain there would be marks and not caring. Carlos reached down and tugged Nate’s jeans open, pushed them low with rough hands, then dropped to his knees. He pinned Nate’s hips, hard fingers biting in against skin and bone, while his lips fumbled in the dark and then sucked Nate deep.

Nate groaned and grabbed his head, tugging on the coarse hair, but Carlos resisted, swallowing him harder.

“Hang on.” Nate could hardly believe he’d managed to say that.

The deep grunt was surely a *no* because Carlos tongued him harder, plunging up and down Nate’s shaft, sucking, his throat rippling, with a drag of teeth under the head. The edge of the countertop dug into Nate’s spine and the handle of the cabinet poked his ass, and he was already on the edge of coming.

“Carlos!” He yanked Carlos’s head back.

“What?” Carlos’s voice was rough.

“I want...” His brain cells were fried with needing to come, and he couldn’t think.

“Would you fuck me?” There was a dark tone to the words that thrummed across Nate’s nerves, making him even harder.

“Um. Sure!”

“Right now, right here? I haven’t prepped. It might not be clean and pretty.”

“Do you want it? Can you take me?”

“Fuck, yeah.”

“Condom?”

“Got one.”

He pulled on Carlos’s hair again, and this time Carlos surged to his feet, leaning in, kissing Nate’s throat and then his mouth. Nate could taste his own precum and sweat. He bit at Carlos’s lips, and their noses clashed. Nate pressed his face in against the rough stubble of Carlos’s neck and moaned. “Gonna be a short fuck.”

“I don’t care.” Carlos fumbled with his own jeans, digging in his pocket, foil tore, then he reached down and grabbed Nate’s dick, rolling the condom onto it.

“Lube?” Nate tried to remember what was close to hand. “Lotion?”

“That shit stings. The condom’s lubed. Use spit.”

“I don’t want—”

“Don’t wimp out on me.” Nate could just make out the way Carlos spat onto his own fingers, then reached behind himself. The shape of his body as he worked himself open made Nate shudder and grab for him.

Carlos’s full weight leaned onto Nate, pinning him against the hard countertop. Nate was rubbed by the motions as Carlos pushed forward against him and then arched back onto his own fingers. Carlos pulled his fingers out, spat again, reached around and grunted. Nate could feel the muscles of his arm working. He bit Carlos’s throat roughly, any concern about marks forgotten, and Carlos moaned and humped him. Nate’s dick was hard and ready, sliding and catching against the bunched fabric of Carlos’s boxers. Nate worked a hand between them and pushed both their clothes lower, brushing against himself,

his touch nowhere near enough. There was a line of jockstrap under his fingers and he snapped it against Carlos's hip, making him jump.

Carlos broke away from him, shuffled a step sideways, and turned to brace on the cabinets, ass out, an arm on the counter, his clean hand sliding under himself in front. "Do it. Now!"

Nate stepped behind him, grabbing the hard round cheeks of that ass framed by those taut straps, and spread them. He slid his fingers down the fuzzy cleft, touching, orienting himself, worried for a moment that Carlos was still too dry.

"Fucking spit and go." Carlos bucked hard, slamming his ass against Nate's bobbing cock near-painfully.

Well, hell. Nate did as he was told, adding more spit on the condom and then pressing forward carefully. *So tight, so hot.* He gripped the base of his cock, breathed in through clenched teeth, and went slow.

"More!" Carlos's muscular back flexed and arched under him, trying to drive their motions.

Nate put a hand on Carlos's shoulders, pushing him further down. "Screw that. I won't hurt you."

"Hurts so good. Please." Carlos flexed, a fast pump of hips that opened him, pushing Nate in deep.

Nate gasped and put more weight on his hand, trying to hold Carlos still. "God, wait, gonna come."

"Not yet, not yet. Don't move then."

Nate stopped, impossibly deep inside Carlos. He could feel Carlos's arm flexing down low, moving, working himself. Carlos's breathing sped up, hoarse pants that shook them both. Carlos's ass was perfect heat and pressure around Nate, the tiny movements as he clenched and shivered squeezing Nate's dick until holding back became pain and darkness, unbearable pressure driving him to the edge. "Got to come!" he managed through gritted teeth.

"Wait, wait... Yeah! Now, now, now! Jesus!" Carlos suddenly jolted against him, hips pumping in fast short rhythm. "Fuck me!"

Nate grabbed his hips and did, letting loose, slamming harder than he ever had, or meant to, each thrust tearing a shout from his throat. Carlos didn't stop him, didn't protest, in fact met him back. They crashed together, fast and furious, too tight, too hard, sticky, sweaty, in the dark. Nate shouted as he

came, digging his fingers into Carlos's hips to keep from falling. His knees shook, his whole body trembled. White flashes arced across his vision and his blood roared in his ears.

"Oh, God." He had to fall forward, draped over Carlos's damp back, gasping. "Sorry. Oh, man."

Carlos reached back and wrapped an arm across Nate's back, holding him there. "Not sorry. Perfect."

For a few moments, they leaned that way, plastered together, both breathing raggedly and shaking, causing little tremors that set each other off again. Then Carlos eased his arm off Nate's back and said, "The counter's giving me a hernia."

Nate managed half a breathless laugh and reached down, easing out with care, the condom sticking and stubborn. He slipped out at last, and Carlos whined. Nate reached down to rub that abused asshole. "Sore?"

"A bit. It's good."

"You're okay?"

"I never came that hard. Not ever." Carlos eased sideways and turned.

Nate needed to see him. He fumbled under the counter and flicked on the light. They eyed each other. Carlos stood with his chin up, clothes around his knees, his hips turned just enough to make his groin a dark mystery behind one muscular thigh. He was flushed and rumped, the long hair on the top of his head a wild tangle. His eyes shone, there was a rising bruise on his neck, and his mouth was open, a glisten of saliva marking his lip and chin. Nate desperately wanted to paint him like that. Instead he took two steps to the sink, tossed the condom in the trash below, and soaked some paper towels. "Here." He handed a couple to Carlos.

They both wiped up, and then Carlos came over, jostling his shoulder, to wash his hands. Nate stuck his fingers beside Carlos's in the flow of warm water, pushing at him gently, watching the colors as pale fingers and toffee-colored ones brushed each other in the satin slide of the liquid. He looked back up to find Carlos's eyes fixed on him. "What?"

Carlos raised a wet hand, took hold of Nate's chin, and leaned in very slowly. Nate watched him come, closing his eyes at the last moment and parting his lips. Carlos kissed him, firmly and thoroughly but gently. Nate sighed and leaned against his shoulder, turning his face into the crick of Carlos's neck when he broke the kiss. "Bed?"

Carlos said, “Donuts?”

Nate’s laugh broke free, a stupid chortle that made Carlos push him off with a matching grin. “Sure. I have to sit though.”

“I might stand.”

Nate’s amusement ebbed. “Was it too rough?”

“You gave me exactly what I asked for. Don’t worry.” Carlos tugged his underwear and jeans up, leaving the zipper unfastened, then bent and picked up the box that had somehow ended up on the floor. “Well, squished donuts.”

“Not a problem for me,” Nate said. He suddenly craved a sugar-and-fats hit. “Share ’em out.”

Carlos went to the little table and set the box down, popping the tape and flicking the lid open. “Mm. Love that smell.” He reached in, pulled one out, and bit into it. After the second big bite he grinned at Nate, powdered sugar on his lips. “Come on, or I’ll leave you nothing but old-fashioned and maple-iced.”

“I kind of like maple-iced. And old-fashioned.” Nate went over and peered in the box to check out the jumbled selection.

“It’s like we’re made for each other,” Carlos rumbled in his ear.

Nate turned abruptly. They were inches apart. Carlos’s eyes were still blown wide and dark, but suddenly also uncertain. Nate ran a finger over Carlos’s full lower lip and licked it, defusing the moment. “Sugar. Mm.”

Carlos laughed and eased back. “Lots more where that came from.”

“And a good thing too.” Nate picked out a battered jelly donut and took a big bite.

Food like that needed coffee with it, so Nate made some, and they hung out, Nate in a chair, Carlos with one hip hitched on the table. Somehow, a dozen donuts disappeared in comfortable silence. There were things that needed to be said, but it was like neither of them wanted to break this feeling. Nate had sometimes resented someone pushing into his space, hanging around too close to him, but with Carlos, his personal bubble seemed to have vanished. He relished every random touch, every time their hands brushed grabbing for the same donut, every time Carlos’s swinging foot grazed against his thigh.

Eventually there was nothing but a mess of leaked jam and powdered sugar in the box. Carlos sighed. “I’m so full, I’m not even tempted to lick that.”

Nate wasn't either, really, but he did it to make Carlos laugh. Carlos reached over and flicked a finger on Nate's nose. "Raspberry jam."

Nate swiped at it, sucked his finger, then got up and carried the box to the trash. When he turned, Carlos was still leaning on the table, but his arms were braced like he needed support. He eyed Nate without speaking.

Okay then. "Want to go to bed?"

"Um. I guess."

"I forgot. You said it makes you twitchy."

"Well, sometimes. But yeah, I want to try."

"You can have the bathroom first."

Carlos nodded, slid off the table and headed for the john. Nate pattered, wiping the table, waiting. Carlos came out, still in boxers, clothes in hand, and went into the bedroom without speaking. Nate checked the cat's water dish, turned out the kitchen light, and then took his own turn to clean up. He caught sight of himself in the mirror, looking just as used as Carlos had, hair wild, bite marks on his neck and throat. He touched one, wincing and yet turned on by the sting. Maybe it should have bothered him, that he liked Carlos marking him up, but he was going to take it as a sign he was learning to trust again. He slapped some cold water on his face, wiped the jam off his lip, and called it good.

Carlos was on the bed when Nate went in, but sitting up, tilted onto one hip with the sheet over his legs and stomach. He looked up, and bit his lip. "It's kind of early to sleep. But I think I'm fucked out."

"Me too." Nate got in beside him carefully, not jostling the bed. "We should do something else. I have my tablet. We could watch a movie."

The look of relief on Carlos's face was almost comical. "Yeah. Great idea."

Nate hid a grin. He was pretty sure Carlos was expecting the dreaded "*We should talk*". Which they probably should, but... not now. He reached for the tablet. "What do you like?"

"At the moment? Can we watch shit blow up?"

"Sure." He logged on and browsed Netflix.

Carlos pointed. "*The Avengers*?"

Nate had seen it more than once, but hey, it was an instant classic for a reason. "Sure, what the hell."

He tugged the pillows up higher behind them and Carlos turned stiffly and settled in, his shoulder against Nate's. Nate queued up the movie.

Two and a half hours later, Carlos was draped over Nate's side, arm across his chest, as the credits rolled. "Hell, that doesn't get old."

Nate snickered and smacked his knee with his fist. "'*Puny god.*'"

Carlos eased more upright in the bed and rolled his shoulders out. "Now what?"

Nate said lightly, "Another movie?"

"You pick this time."

"*48 hours?*"

"Sure. Stick with the classics."

"I need the john first, and some beer. Want any?"

"Yeah, I could drink something."

Nate made a quick pit stop, passed through the kitchen for the beer, and went back into the bedroom. Coming in the room, he tripped over his chair, tipping Carlos's jumbled clothes onto the floor. He set the beers on the bed and bent to pick up the clothes. Scraps of paper and a folded square sheet fell out of the pockets as he draped the jeans on the seat. Silently, without comment, he picked the folded sheet up and set it on the top, then gathered the torn scraps and dropped them in the trash.

Carlos said, "Nate? I'm really sorry."

"How many times do I have to remind you that you didn't do that?" He didn't look up from his tidying. He might not be able to stop feeling hurt, but he didn't have to let Carlos see it.

"I liked them. A lot."

That did make him glance around.

Carlos rubbed a knuckle over his thin mustache, pulling his lip sideways, eyes shadowed. "I don't know why I freaked. After all, I spent a *bunch* of bucks on silicone sheets and ointments and all kinds of crap to make the scars less noticeable. I even paid for a round of laser treatment. So why you making me tattoos to do the same damned thing made me go Hulk, I really don't know."

"If that was your best Hulk, you need to choose a different superhero," Nate suggested. "I see you more as Iron Man."

“Or Loki,” Carlos suggested. “He’s the genderqueer antihero.”

“Loki’s cool.”

“So.” Carlos kept rubbing his face. “There was one, kind of a fence thing? Where it started high and new, and got old and bent and open on the other side.”

“Yeah.”

“Could you maybe, please, draw that again and, um, keep it for me. For a while?”

“Sure.” It had been a fast design. Nate thought he could even make it better, but he didn’t want to go to the trouble just because Carlos thought it was a nice gesture. “You think you might actually wear it someday?”

“Maybe? I don’t know.”

“Enough possibility to be worth me drawing it?”

“I don’t want you to waste your time, I guess.”

Nate realized Carlos’s thin tone was an echo of his own. The last thing he wanted now was to turn a peace offering into a new fight. He walked over and got into bed beside Carlos, picked up the beers and handed him one. After popping the top of his own and taking a long swallow, he said, “Not wasted if you liked it. And drawing pictures of your body is never a hardship.”

“Thanks.”

“So. Movie?”

Carlos nodded, and they settled in. Nate selected *48 Hours*, and watched the retro image of Nick Nolte and Eddie Murphy appear on the screen. As it started, Carlos said quietly, “I think I have this fantasy of standing up on stage one day, ripping off my shirt in front of a hundred thousand fans, and yelling ‘This is me. If you want the music, you get this too. I’m here and I’m queer.’”

“Mm. Do you ever think you would?”

“Well, the most unlikely part of that is me playing in front of a hundred thousand fans. I don’t know.” It wasn’t until about fifteen minutes into the movie that he added, “I don’t think so.” Nate had to struggle to remember the context.

“No reason you should.”

“Sometimes I just want to come roaring out of the box, you know, and make people see me. Sometimes I want something like those tattoos, where you’d have to look hard to notice anything. Where I could probably dance without a shirt in a dark club and no one could tell. Because mostly, I want people not to even know. But...” His voice trailed off.

“So you’ll wait.”

“Yeah.”

“I can do a design a week.” Nate grinned. “For practice. I might have to check your body regularly though, note any changes, maybe take pictures for reference.”

Carlos snickered. “A hardship.”

“Totally.”

Nate had to grab for the laptop as Carlos rolled out of bed. He watched as Carlos stretched, the boxers sagging low on his hips, outlining the V of lean muscles and the soft mound of his dick. Carlos stared him intently in the eyes as he ran his fingers up his chest, behind his neck, then pressed his hands together in his hair, elbows winged out, standing in front of the pale wall. His body was displayed, toned, arched, nothing hidden except for hints under the soft boxers. “Like this? Inspection?”

“Damn.” Nate looked him up and down, the movie forgotten. It was the dark eyes, he decided, that you would see first, the challenge and the heat. Then the tattooed forearms, strong shoulders and biceps, dark-haired pits, the treasure trail leading down between the arches of Carlos’s hips. And only after that, the line of darker, rougher scar below each nipple that said this man had made himself, through pain and determination. “Fuck. You do that onstage and you’ll have to fight off the girls. And probably some guys whose dicks are too inspired to be careful.”

“You think?” Carlos changed to a classic muscle-flex pose, then canted out his ass. “You’d tap this?”

“Whenever you let me.”

Carlos laughed, but some of the tension seemed to ease from him. “Well, not tonight. But I could suck you off tomorrow, if you want to pencil me in.” He reached for his clothes on the chair.

“Jerk.” Nate turned off the tablet and set it aside. “I’m working, but you can come by on my break.”

“Maybe. I have rehearsal. I’ll Snapchat you.”

Carlos pulled his jeans on over the boxers. The folded paper fluttered free again, and he picked it up with a grunt that seemed half snarl.

“What’s that? Hate mail?” Nate realized a second later that was probably not his business, but Carlos shrugged.

“Speeding ticket.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. I was actually speeding though, so it’s legit.”

“Well, of course.” Nate hesitated as one of those dark moments flashed across Carlos’s face. “Or not?”

“I’ve been stopped a time or two for looking suspicious. Once, um, never mind.”

Nate’s curiosity would kill him someday. “Once, what?”

Carlos shrugged, pulling his T-shirt over his head. Nate had figured he probably wasn’t getting an answer, when Carlos mumbled through the cotton, “Let’s just say that having a permanent tan, face scruff and a buzz cut, along with squished down boobs and an F for girl on your license, does not bring out the best in small town cops.” He slid the T-shirt into place, gave Nate a totally fake grin, and added, “Of course, revving my car sitting next to a cop at a spotlight was pretty dumb. So. Tomorrow?”

Nate wondered queasily what lay behind that grin, but he wasn’t willing to push. “Sure. I want to hear how your practice goes.”

“I’ll send pictures if Mia decides to kill Foster.”

“Is that likely?”

“Fifty-fifty. On his good days, he’s awesome. On his bad days he’s stoned out of his tiny mind and Mia wants to drown him like a rat.”

“And you?”

Carlos looked down. “I just want to make music.” He turned to go.

Nate slid out of bed. “I’ll lock up behind you.” He followed Carlos through the main room, shivering at the air on his naked body. A sudden thump made them both jump and turn. Ghost looked up at them from the base of the cat tree and opened her mouth in an imperious mew, before stalking two steps closer, her tail switching.

“How feral is she?” Carlos asked. “She looks like she wants to eat me.”

“She probably wants bacon.” Nate squatted, holding out his hand. “Hey now, Ghostlet, that was not in the least subtle, little girl.”

To his delight the cat came nearer, one step at a time, until she was close enough to sniff his outstretched fingers. She looked up and mewed again.

Carlos’s voice was a mere breath. “Should I make bacon?”

“She doesn’t need to be that spoiled. There are cat treats in that little blue jar on the counter.” Nate held his position, murmuring softly to the cat, while Carlos eased sideways, opened the container, and dropped a couple Squishy Fishies into Nate’s other hand. Nate eased the treats forward. Ghost jumped back one step, but her whiskers twitched, and she didn’t run. He held out the treat and held his breath as she eyed him a while, before taking the single step back to lip the food delicately out of his fingers.

Then with a leap back, she swarmed up the pole and disappeared overhead. Nate stood and rubbed his fingers on his bare thigh. “Well, that’s progress.”

“But you don’t plan to keep her.”

“I’ll help her find a forever home. It’s satisfying. Plus...”

When he stopped there, Carlos said, “Plus what?”

“I don’t know. I guess maybe there’s some comfort in knowing there will always be another kitten needing to be tamed. Nothing ends when this one inevitably goes away. It gives me less to lose, maybe.” He bit his lip, belatedly hearing how odd that sounded.

Carlos said, “You feel that way about guys too?”

“Huh? No.” Tension pulled his shoulders tight. *I don’t, do I?* He didn’t mean to anyway. He resolved not to let his doubts show. “Nope.”

“Mm.” Carlos glanced upward. “She’s kind of cute.”

“They all are. It feels good, helping to save them.”

“Well, I should head out and leave you with your reformed attack kitten.” Carlos set the treat jar back on the counter and turned for the door.

As Nate let him out, he thought about going for a hug, but Carlos had somehow retreated into himself again, leaving a distance between them. Or maybe it was Nate who’d retreated. So he just said, “See you.”

“Yeah. ’Night.” Carlos ducked through the half-open door and clattered down the wooden steps. Nate closed the door but stood there, listening, not locking it until the roar of Carlos’s car had faded down the drive.

Chapter 9

jPut a madre! Carlos glanced up at the ceiling of the practice space for strength, counted to a hundred by fours, and said, “Try it again?”

Foster stepped away from his mike. “Gotta run. Things to do.”

“What we gotta *do* is get this song down right.”

“It’s close enough. Lighten up.”

Mia snarled, “Don’t tell him to lighten up. We have three days to Sparkfest. Can you count them?” She scrambled out from behind her drum kit and stalked over to Foster, waving fingers in his face. “One. Two. Three! And how many mistakes did you make?” She waved both hands in front of his eyes. “This many.”

Foster batted her arms away irritably. “Lay off! We have three more practices. It’ll be fine. I’m done for tonight.” He swung the strap of his guitar off his neck and hurried for the door.

Mia yelled, “You’d fucking better stay longer tomorrow!” at his back, then slammed her hand on his mike. The thump and squeal echoed around the little space. “Fucking junkie!”

Carlos sighed and looked up at her. “Want to keep going?”

“Maybe we should.” She looked at him seriously. “Maybe we need to think about dumping that guy after Spark even if we don’t have a replacement. Maybe we can find someone who’ll at least practice, even if they don’t have magic hands.”

“Maybe. Probably.”

“Although if we win the contract we might be stuck with him.”

He stared at her. “Win?” The set order for the fest was typical, with the little-known bands first, popular bands last. They were set number three. Out of twelve.

“Hey, a girl has to dream.”

“It would be cool.” *Understatement of forever.* “Okay. Let’s try the new one again.”

Unfortunately, there wasn’t a whole lot they could do with just the two of them. Carlos had written the songs, so he knew them inside out, although more

practice never hurt. Mia was still learning the newest one, but she was an instinctive drummer and a few more run-throughs were all she needed to start improvising. They played a couple more songs for the fun of it, despite the hollow lack of bass notes, and then stopped.

Mia wiped an arm across her face. “Well, you and me are on top of it, and if Foster shows up for the next three days able to practice, there’s hope for us yet.”

Carlos rubbed his fingertips on his jeans and set his guitar down carefully. “I almost don’t want to hope, you know?”

“Yeah.” Mia stepped out from behind her kit and rotated her shoulders stiffly. “I’ve been up and down lately, till I’m seasick. When we’re on, it’s more fun than anything. When we’re not it’s starting to feel like work, and I’ve even thought about quitting. I figure, we give Sparkfest everything we’ve got and see what happens.”

“Isn’t that just putting things off? You know we don’t have a hope in hell.”

“God, you can’t be an optimist for one fucking second?”

Carlos bit his lip and shrugged.

“I don’t mean we have to win, but there’s going to be a big crowd, maybe some organizers from other venues. If we do good, if we impress some people and get a chance at bigger shows, I’ll call that a sign. If not...”

Carlos waited for the rest of it, but she just turned away and began takedown.

They got their stuff stowed, hers in the van, Carlos’s guitar in his car, and the practice space locked up. Carlos turned to say good-bye, but Mia reached out and tugged on the hem of his shirt. “So when are you going to tell me about him?”

“About who?”

“About the guy who has you feeling so mellow you didn’t wrap your mike stand around Foster’s neck.”

“Those stands cost good money,” Carlos stalled.

Mia made a rude sound. “Wrong answer. Come on, am I your fag hag or not?”

“Jesus, Mia!” Carlos glanced around automatically. Mia punched him in the stomach hard enough to make him wheeze slightly. “What was that for?”

“Being a secretive, paranoid pukeface.”

“Witchbitch.”

“Dickhole.” Mia frowned. “Wait, that’s probably not an insult to you, is it?”

“That would be TMI.”

She sighed. “Well, you don’t have to tell me. You don’t owe me anything. Just don’t pretend like I don’t know what I’m seeing.” Her shoulders slumped as she turned away.

“Wait! Okay.”

The brightness of her smile as she quickly turned back told him he’d been played a little, but he didn’t really mind. He realized he wanted to talk to someone about Nate. With Tía Lisa two states away, Mia was the only choice, and she was his best friend. “There *is* a guy.”

“Name?”

“Um, Nate.”

She came closer, pretending to glare at him. “Tell me he’s not another crazy musician.”

“Not.” Carlos couldn’t hold back a smile. “He’s a crazy artist.”

“What kind?”

“Drawings, paintings, stuff like that.”

“And you like him.”

“Yeah.” Carlos bent over, pretending to be interested in a fresh scrape in the van’s battered paint. “He’s cool.”

“And hot?”

“Well, duh. And smart.”

“So when can I meet him?”

Carlos straightened fast, staring at her. “You want to?”

“Well, *duh*,” she mimicked, then softened. “Only if you want. But you’ve been happier this last week or two. You actually wrote as close as I’ve heard you get to a real love song.”

“I never said anything about love.”

“In life or the song? Don’t panic. I like that you seem happy. And I figured as your best friend, it’s probably time for me to threaten to castrate him if he hurts you.”

“Ouch. I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. When I meet him.” She smiled brightly, her head tilted.

Carlos considered. By now, he totally trusted her, but she would be relentless in her hints when they were alone, until she got to meet Nate. He didn’t want to be distracted. He pulled out his phone and checked the time. “How about in half an hour?”

“Seriously?”

“He works as a barista in this coffee shop in Lacey. He has a break. Why not?”

Mia stared at him, then barked a laugh. “Wow, you are gone, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“The closest you’ve come to introducing me to one of your men was when you puked that guy’s cum on me in the truck.”

“Yuck. Don’t remind me.” He’d taken her to a gay club in Seattle, gotten very drunk and blown a guy. And then he rode home in her van with the crap shocks.

“I’m the one who gets to say ‘Yuck’.”

“I know. Sorry.”

“So tell me about this man of yours.” She slid her arm through his and bumped his hip. “I’ll drive, and you can spill.”

“I’ll drive.”

“I want to live. Plus I’m not leaving my kit parked here.”

“Damn.” He surrendered to what had been inevitable since he’d said Nate’s name. “All right. Let me get my guitar and stick it in back though.”

Mia didn’t actually bug him to talk on the drive. He found himself oddly hesitant. He’d wanted to share Nate with someone, but now that he could, he wasn’t sure what to say. He gave driving directions and otherwise stared out the window. He could talk about Nate’s taste in movies or his artistic talent or the

way he seemed so easy in his skin he made Carlos feel calmer and more real, just being with him. But he wasn't sure how to put any of that in the right words.

After fifteen minutes, Mia said, "We don't have to do this, you know."

"Huh?" He came out of his trance abruptly. "No, I want to. It's just, um, you might as well meet him, and then I won't have to explain."

"You could write a song about him."

He kind of had. She'd been right earlier—"Stumbling Down the Road" was about Nate, in a way. About finding someone who was a light in the fog.

Mia started singing, "*Nate and Carlos, Sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-ouch!*"

He rubbed her knee where he'd pinched her. "Well, you were flat. You know that bugs me."

"Right. Like that was the problem."

"This was a bad idea, wasn't it? You're going to embarrass the hell out of me."

She grinned wickedly. "Maybe. When Angie dumped me, you made a scene and threatened to push her in the swamp."

"She dumped you in the middle of a party. She deserved it. Anyway, Nate hasn't dumped me." He flushed, remembering that he'd almost done the dumping. Thank God Nate didn't hold much of a grudge. "He's the opposite of dumped."

"Opposite? Like, stuck on you?" Mia chortled. "Use more lube, big guy."

He pinched her again, but not hard. Without her, his closet would have been almost too much to take the last six years. "Behave."

"Me?" She batted her eyelashes at him.

"Ah, hell, no, bad idea. Just watch the road and don't embarrass the guy where he works."

"Deal."

When they walked into the coffee shop, Nate was at the counter and a girl a bit younger than him was working the drive-through window. Mia leaned toward Carlos, pointed her chin at Nate, and said, "Him?"

"Yeah."

“He’s cute. Looks familiar.”

“He has a brother in the music scene.”

Mia paused. “Really? Is it smart getting involved with him then?”

Nate looked up, saw them, and a slow smile lit his face. It warmed Carlos somewhere inside. “Too late for smart.”

Mia glanced between them. “I see that. Okay, come on, introduce me.”

Carlos steered them to a table. “Sit here. I’ll talk to him.”

Mia for once did as she was told, glancing up at the menu board. “Get me a caramel hazelnut iced latte. With whipped cream.”

“I live to serve, Your Highness.”

“Show respect or I’ll make you pay for it too.”

“It’s on me anyway.” He hurried over to the counter. The girl had finished with her customer and was frankly listening, so he just told Nate, “Hi.”

Nate asked, “What’ll it be?”

You. With whipped cream. He placed their order instead. “You could sit with us when you’re done.”

“You’re sure? That’s your drummer, right?”

“Yeah. Mia’s cool. She’s been my wingman for years.” He lowered his voice. “I told her about you.”

“Really?” Nate’s eyes glowed. “Cool. Awesome, yeah, I want to meet her. Ten minutes.”

Carlos collected the drinks and carried them to the table. He deliberately put his back to Nate, so he wouldn’t spend the time staring, and he and Mia spent the ten minutes arguing amiably about song order for their Sparkfest set. Mia wanted to skip any covers, and showcase the original stuff. Carlos thought a sprinkling of songs the audience could sing along to eased the way. “Doing only original stuff is tougher for the audience, like fucking without lube,” he said, just to make her choke.

“Bastard.” She rubbed whipped cream off her nose. “Okay. Two covers. Heaven forbid you fuck the audience up the ass dry.”

Behind Carlos, Nate said, “Um?”

Mia laughed, and Carlos turned, almost tipping his chair. “Hey, sit down, dude. Mia, Nate. Nate, Mia. Intros done.” He took a short breath and tried to seem cool.

Nate pulled over a chair and sat between them. “Hey, Mia. I’ve heard you guys play. You’re amazing.”

“Thanks.”

“And you have great arms.”

She snorted. “I thought you were gay.”

Nate’s mouth tilted up charmingly. “I heard my straight brother say so.”

“Well, I don’t date musicians, so he’ll have to like them from a distance.”

“Ah.” Nate flushed and sipped at the coffee he was holding.

“Okay,” Carlos said. “Awkward banter out of the way. Nate, are you coming to Spark?”

“Yeah, I got the day off. I owe Julia, like, about three nights in exchange, because no one wants to work an extra Saturday, but she agreed.” He leaned out to wave past Carlos and blow a kiss.

“Is she watching us?”

“Yeah. She says I’m acting goofy, and she’s been trying to figure out who the new guy is.”

Carlos turned to Mia. “What is it with you women? We start acting different, and you assume it’s a romantic thing.”

She smirked. “So, were we wrong?”

“Um.” He looked at Nate, who shrugged. He felt heat flush his face. “Well, no, not this time. But you could’ve been.”

Mia said, “Nate, do you want to invite her to come on over and hang with us? Is she a friend?”

“Friendly, but not like you two, I guess. Anyway, she has to man the register while I’m on break.” As if to punctuate that, the door chimed tinkled as a middle-aged couple walked in and headed for the counter.

Mia said, “So, Nate, what do you do when you’re not doubling up the whipped cream on your friends’ drinks?”

“Roadie for a bunch of guys who play this really loud, harsh, ear-blasting music?” Carlos kicked his ankle, and Nate winced and laughed. “And paint and draw. I’m taking up running, because *someone* has a sweet tooth.” He gave Carlos a mock glare.

“Running is good for you,” Carlos said blandly. He reached over and patted Nate’s flat stomach. “Take the flab right off you.”

“Harsh,” Mia said.

“I don’t have flab,” Nate grumped. “I have a smoothing layer. Keeps my stomach from being all bumpy like yours.”

“TMI,” Mia said. “I don’t need to know about your stomachs. I’m not really into guys’ stomachs.”

“Not even Captain America’s?” Nate teased. “I read where every woman in America is into his abs.”

“Gay-erasure strikes again,” Mia said.

“Ooh, have you been talking to my shrink?” Nate asked.

“You have a shrink?”

“No, but if I date Carlos much longer I’m gonna need one.”

“Hey!” Carlos said. “Sitting right here.” He knew it was just banter, but that got him in a tender spot. He *did* have a shrink, who’d said that someone dating Carlos was welcome to come in for a chat about their own questions on trans issues, if they wanted to. It’d been well-meant and still had made Carlos even less inclined to date. He wasn’t quite sure how Nate had snuck in past his guard.

Nate flashed him a grin. “Just kidding.”

He made a grumpy sound, but sat back, slouched in his chair, and watched Mia and Nate bond over action movies and women’s rights.

“My mom is a real equal rights activist,” Nate said eventually. “The quiet kind, but she speaks her mind clearly to everyone. She’d love to know a female heavy metal drummer.”

Mia said, “My mom wants me to quit playing *that awful metal stuff* and find a nice boy.”

“Doesn’t she know you’re queer?”

“Well, I’m bi, but I’m more into women lately. She’s hoping I’ll change my mind about that.”

“Ouch.”

“I’m wearing her down. She’s not really homophobic, just clinging to her vision of my lovely wedding with a big strong guy and seven sweet grandchildren.”

“All attending the wedding?”

Mia smacked Nate’s chest, just the way she did Carlos’s. “After, at regular intervals.”

“You could do that with another woman and a sperm bank. Do you want seven kids?”

Carlos coughed. “Mia says little children are the spawn of the devil.”

“Well, they are,” Mia insisted. “They make unholy noises, douse you with gross liquids, and demand your worship. What would you call them?”

Nate said, “Nieces and nephews, I hope.”

“Works for me too.” Mia shrugged. “I have a sister and a brother. They can do the spawn production.”

Nate nodded, then pushed back his chair. “Listen, I have to get back to work. I’m off in two hours. Carlos, want to hang out after? Or, um, Mia too, if you like.”

“Hell no,” Mia said. “I’m not standing around for two hours to watch you two drool over each other. I’m out of here.”

“My car’s up in Tacoma,” Carlos said. “I got a ride down with Mia.”

Nate glanced between them, then back at the counter where the girl was gesturing urgently. “I could give you a ride back up there later, if you wanted to stay.”

Carlos waved him away. “Go work. I’ll let you know in a minute.”

As Nate walked away, Mia said, “You should totally stay. I’ll hang on to your guitar till tomorrow.”

“You’re sure? This was a long drive for you to just spend ten minutes. We could go do something else now we’re down here.”

“I wanted to meet Nate. I met Nate. I’m good.”

He gritted his teeth not to say it but couldn't resist. "Do you like him?"

Mia kept her face expressionless, sitting silently, long enough to make Carlos sweat, before saying, "I guess he's okay..." Then she laughed. "I'm giving you a hard time. He's cool. He's even cute in a kind of elfish way. And he's not dumb."

"Wow, high praise."

"He's someone I wouldn't mind hanging out with some more, if it wasn't a weeknight and a two-hour wait."

"Ah. Yeah. Good." He hadn't realized how tied up in knots he'd been until his stomach unclenched. He really needed Mia and Nate to be okay with each other. When Mia had been dating Angie, who'd been a stuck-up bitch and totally not worth her time, it'd been really uncomfortable and awkward.

"So, you do want to stay here, right, C?"

It was a work night for him too, and the smart thing would be to head home. "Yeah, I do."

"So fine, I'll see you at practice tomorrow. We'll go through the whole set with Foster, get the order cast in stone. It's all good."

In a sudden rush of affection, he leaned over and hugged her. "You're the best, um, that anyone ever had."

She hugged him back. "Best friend? Best queen and ruler of the universe? Who are you and what have you done with Carlos?"

"Drowned him in mush," Carlos admitted.

"Mush is a good look on you." Mia let go and pushed her chair back. "You want anything from the van?"

"I have a bigger music notebook in my guitar case." He stood too. "I might as well use the time for something."

"Besides drooling over your boyfriend's nonexistent abs?"

"He has abs. They're just soft abs."

"I'm sure you can design a workout plan to fix that. Lots of pelvic work."

He stuck out a foot and tried to trip her. "I'll be right out." He detoured by the counter as she headed for the door. Nate looked up from the drink he was concocting, head cocked in silent query. Carlos wanted to push the loose strand

of hair off his high forehead. Instead he said, “Are you sure you can drive me home later? You don’t mind?”

“I’m not the one who has to be up early tomorrow. It’s fine.”

“Okay, I’m going to get something from the van, and then I’ll hang out and wait.”

“Great.” Nate bent to his measuring. A little smile hovered on his lips, as if he was thinking about something, well, something like what Carlos was thinking. *Hell, yeah.*

Mia was waiting for him outside the door. “All set?”

“Yeah, let me get my stuff.”

She turned for the van, saying more quietly, “Does Nate know, um, all about you?”

He knew what she meant, but quipped, “No one knows all about me; I’m a man of mystery.”

“Fucker. Does he know you’re trans?”

“We’ve had sex, for fuck’s sake. What do you think?”

“I’m pretty sure there are guys you’ve blown who have no clue.”

Carlos sure as hell hoped so. “We’ve had naked sex.”

“Okay, then I’ll quit worrying.”

“You worry?”

He’d meant it as a joke, but she turned, her hand on the door handle, suddenly serious. “Yeah, I do. You’re a tough guy, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be hurt. You’re my friend, and I don’t want to see that happen.”

“Oh. Um. Thanks. Although I *can* take care of myself.”

“Captain America.” She smacked his abs with the back of her hand.

“More like Iron Man.”

“Without the billions.”

“Unfortunately.”

“So, like, a smart-mouthed guy with lots of attitude and no super power, money, weapons or technology.”

“I write killer songs.”

“Speaking of, if you start writing sappy love ballads, I’m changing bands.”

He snorted. “No chance.”

“Uh huh. You go on in there and sit for two hours waiting for your guy to get off work and write about hate and death, okay.”

“Well, I will.”

She gave him another sudden hug. “I’m glad for you, all right? You deserve to be happy. As long as you keep the death metal coming.”

He went around, retrieved his pad, and shut the door with a thump to the panel. As she drove away, he turned back for the mellow-lighted space of the café, whistling lightly in the gathering gloom. The tune had that mix of hauntingly familiar and yet new that told him it was his own, and going to be a good one. He went back to his table, opened his notebook, and began transcribing. It was only an hour later that he realized he’d written another love song. *¡Diablos! ¡Ya me fregué!* He was in trouble, for sure.

Nate suddenly said at his elbow, “Hey, whatcha working on?”

Carlos jumped and flipped the book shut fast. “Um, nothing?”

Nate looked startled but then smiled. “You were pretty intent on nothing. Can I get you another coffee?”

“Nah. I’m good.”

He watched Nate head back to the counter, swinging his ass a bit, clearly aware Carlos was looking at him. The girl at the register wasn’t paying any attention. Nate turned and made some kind of gesture that was probably supposed to be a secret message, but looked like he had an itch and a seizure at the same time. Carlos smirked, looked back down and flipped the notebook open more gently, smoothing a new page, his pencil ready.

Your love makes me itch

Makes me twitch

Makes me sigh

Like a spell

by a witch

Or a twig

in my eye...

Maybe not. But he was grinning as he turned to another fresh sheet.

Chapter 10

Nate worked his shoulders out, stretched, and glanced down the crowded corridor at Sparkfest. Eli shoved the amp they'd been hauling into the marked-off corner for their equipment. It was only eleven a.m., but the air was already warm. A concert staffer in a "Sparkfest" red T-shirt said, "Okay. You'll get a bunch of warnings. Half an hour before your set-up, five minutes before, time to get your shit onstage, and five minutes till set. It's your job to keep things moving on time. We'll supply boots on the ground, hand trucks and such. But if you're not here to okay having your stuff moved, we won't touch it. If you're not ready to set up on schedule, you'll get five minutes of slack, and then we'll move on to the next band. We have twelve sets today. There's no time to fuck around if someone is late. Got it?"

"Yup," Eli agreed. He sounded cool and calm, but Nate knew he was pretty freaked out about the whole "*you might win*" thing. Carlos was too, although he kept saying KnifeSwitch didn't have a hope in hell. Nate was pretty torn about who to cheer for. Although with Twisted Stonemason at the top of the bill, it might not matter. Eli said they were already big, and getting bigger.

Nate watched as the organizer handed Eli a bunch of stick-on tags with the number ten on them and told him to mark all their gear. Eli handed stickers to his bandmates. Nate said, "Hey, if you don't need me, I'm gonna wander around."

"That's fine." Eli barely looked over. "Say hi to Carlos for me. Wish him luck."

"But not too much luck," Tom said.

"I'll tell him." Nate slipped away into the stream of people moving around.

He knew Carlos was third on the bill. When he reached the area labeled three, he spotted Mia, sitting on the floor beside their gear, playing with her phone. He scuffed his foot, and she glanced up and snapped, "What? Oh. Hi, Nate. Carlos is around somewhere."

"You look, um, hot." What she looked was pissed off, but he knew better than to say that to a woman.

"Hot like you think this new shirt is sick? Or hot like this motherfucking place has crappy AC and it's already eighty motherfucking degrees in here?"

“Um. Both?”

“Or hot like my head is going to explode if Foster doesn’t get his motherfucking ass here right the fuck now?”

“Ah.” He bit his lip.

“Right. Ah. Carlos is out looking for him. He was supposed to meet us here, an hour ago. Right here. Number three.” She smacked her hand on the painted number on the rough concrete. “You think he can’t count to three?”

“Um. Can I help?”

“I don’t see how. Other than keeping the top of *Carlos’s* head from exploding.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Not a clue.” She tapped her phone impatiently. “Shit. I died. Dumb game.” She stuck the phone away in her pocket. “Why don’t you keep me company instead. He’ll have to be back here. Eventually. Hopefully with Foster’s head on a pike.”

Nate sat down cross-legged. “Might make it hard for him to play bass that way.”

“Okay, dragging him by the hair. The pike can come later.”

“Carlos said rehearsals were going great.”

“They were. The last couple were like flying, like we were going somewhere. Except now Foster’s gonna crash the plane.”

Nate wasn’t sure what to say to that. He glanced around randomly. “Is that a cello?”

“It’s Carlos’s. Didn’t you know?”

“I’ve seen you guys in a couple of shows, but he never played that.”

“He doesn’t bring it to the house venues. The stages are too small, and he’s worried someone will wreck it. He has a couple of songs though, where it’s all voice over bass and cello. They sound a lot cooler that way than with guitar.”

“I really hope you guys have a great set.”

“Hell, me too.” She looked him in the eye but lowered her voice to a level only the two of them could hear. “If we don’t, if it comes apart and Foster is stoned and falls off the stage and gets his guitar stuck up his nose, will you stay

with Carlos? If we lose, big time, and he's all moody and wants to quit? Or does quit? Are you with the metal guitarist? Or the man?"

"Believe me." Nate leaned closer and lowered his voice too. "Don't tell anyone, but I actually like folk music. I love some of the Icelandic metal and stuff. But I'm not dating Carlos for his guitar."

Mia managed a snicker. "Is that what you call it?" Then she sobered suddenly. "Except, hell, sometimes I forget, you know. That he's, um, different."

"Well, that's the point, right? We should forget."

"I guess." She leaned close. "It really doesn't matter to you? That he's, you know?"

"Not that it doesn't *matter*. But if you date anyone, you get some baggage. He's totally hot in bed, so that's fine. What's hard is that he has emotional stuff in his past from being that, and I'm not sure I can understand it all. He hints around and jokes, but you can tell it still hurts. My family's so great I can't imagine what it's like if your family won't accept you."

"He talks to his aunt on Skype, I know. She's like a mom to him. But yeah, not the same thing."

"You said your mom's not okay with the gay?"

"She's more bark than bite. She would never send me away for not being straight. Especially not back when I was ten. God."

Nate's chest hurt. "So there's that. I want to help and not make it worse. And I know I'm gonna screw it up sometimes. I've been reading on the Net so I don't accidentally say the wrong thing, but different articles say they want different things and are insulted by different things. Pronouns, whatever. It's hard."

"Carlos is pretty thick-skinned. It's not that easy to upset him."

"I don't know." He still hadn't restarted the chest tattoo picture.

Mia raised an eyebrow. "If you've managed to get under his skin, then he really is falling for you."

"Or I'm crappy at dating. My last boyfriend would tell you that. I had totally no clue what he wanted."

"Well, frankly it amazes me how two guys ever have a relationship that isn't just sex. Talking to Carlos about anything emotional is like turning on his one-man jokes-and-punchlines routine. The man does not communicate."

“I don’t know,” Nate said slowly. “He does, kind of, around the edges.”

“See? That’s why you’re perfect for him, and I’m now dating girls.”

They both heard Carlos swearing before he appeared through the flow of musicians and gear. “I swear when I find that—” He spotted Nate. “Oh. Hey.”

“Hey. No luck?”

“I’m going to string my guitar with his guts.”

Mia drawled, “I’ll take that as a no.”

Carlos slumped. “No. But we still have two hours before our set. Lots of time. He’s blown us off and then shown up at the last minute plenty of times before.”

“True.” Mia patted the concrete beside her. “Come sit down.”

Carlos did as he was told, sitting between her and Nate. Nate didn’t dare really touch him here in this busy backstage, but he bumped his knee against Carlos’s. Carlos leaned on the wall and closed his eyes. “Wake me when Foster shows up.”

“Oh, that’s friendly of you,” Mia said.

He rolled his head toward her and cracked one eye open. “Huh?”

“Your, um, friend is here hanging out and you’re gonna sleep?”

“I can sleep, or I can go apeshit on everyone’s ass. Nate’s seen one but not the other. I’d like to keep it that way.”

Mia glanced at Nate. “How do you put up with this gorilla?”

“He gives good—” Nate managed to keep back the word ‘head’—“lyrics.”

“Right. How’s your brother’s band doing? They’re up late, right?”

“Yeah. Number ten.” He kept talking, just to say something. “They’re looking forward to it. They even brought this guy, Eric, to do lights for them. This is the biggest show they’ve done in months.”

“Our biggest ever,” Carlos said without opening his eyes. “KnifeSwitch’s big chance.”

Nate glanced around at all the people and gear and bustle. The air was humid and already thick with the smell of sweat and cigarettes and pot. “Lots of bands’ big chance, I guess. Should be a good show. Eli says a couple of local stations are going to broadcast it.”

“Really?” Mia grinned and cracked her knuckles. “Bring it on. I can handle being on camera.” She looked a little queasy behind the grin though.

“Do you get stage fright?”

“Me?” She laughed. “I eat stage fright for breakfast. I spit on stage fright.”

“You puke stage fright up in the toilet,” Carlos muttered. “Doesn’t matter, because by the time you get on stage you kill it.”

Mia sighed. “Don’t remind me.”

Carlos closed his eyes all the way again. “I won’t. Don’t trip over me on the way to the can.”

“Bastard.” She kicked at his foot, then stood up. “My sister’s got the merch table for us. Hey, Nathaniel... it is Nathaniel?”

“Only if you’re my mother.”

“So, Nathaniel, want to come buy a T-shirt?”

Carlos was about ready to puke himself, by the time they got their set-up warning. Nate and Mia had gone to check on their sales, and Nate had come back wearing a KnifeSwitch T-shirt. Black, of course. Carlos knew he should have been there too, chatting up the fans, but he didn’t want to leave their gear, or the forlorn hope that Foster might somehow show up after all.

Mia glanced up when the red-shirt hurried over and stopped in front of them. Carlos leaned back against the wall like he wasn’t keyed up, listening to the second band finish up their set with more energy than imagination. From backstage, the treble was muted, but the bass shook his bones. Decent speakers. The red-shirt said, “Five minutes. I’ll send a team to help with your set-up.”

Carlos opened his eyes, trying to look calm. “Got it.” Nate and Mia broke off their argument about some actor and stood up too.

Nate groaned. “I think my ass is asleep.”

“I’ll fix that.” He took the opportunity for a good swat, and a hidden rub. “Wake up, ass.” Then swung at Mia’s and deliberately missed.

Mia gave him a glare. “You’re not being subtle.”

He held his hands in the air. “Trying to help. My bad.” He stretched, feeling the tingle in his thighs as circulation returned. “Okay, time to gear up.” He

pulled out his phone and checked it. Still three bars. Still no calls and no texts. He could text Foster again, but there were a dozen already waiting for the guy. What good would it do? He took a couple of breaths, trying to center. He had a show to do, no matter what. Music to play. Lyrics to give voice.

Nate said, “Do you want me to help?”

Carlos was half-startled to realize Nate was still there. “No offense, but we know where it goes and the venue guys have the practice. Maybe just, um, go enjoy the show?”

“K.” Nate leaned over and hugged Mia, then held out a fist for a bump. “Break a leg, guys.”

“I’ll break both of Foster’s legs,” Mia muttered. “Thanks.”

Carlos didn’t have time to watch Nate walk away. The red-shirts came over with hand trucks and the next fifteen minutes were spent getting the amps and cabs set up, hooking into the soundboard, and testing everything. They set up Foster’s mike too, and Carlos did the sound check on it. His stomach was tying itself in knots, until he could taste the acid in the back of his throat. *Now would be a good fucking time to actually show up, motherfucker.*

The venue lighting guy came over. “Do you want me running lights?”

“Yeah.” There was no one else. Because they were pitifully small-time.

“Three spots? I have three names, but I see four mikes.”

“The cello is mine. There are only two songs with a cello part.”

“Which?”

“Second and fifth.”

“Got it. Any special requests?”

“My drummer has a solo in the third song. Make her look good?”

“You got it. Maybe some strobe? Right. Have fun, guys.” He walked away.

Carlos met Mia’s eyes where she sat behind her kit. The touch of panic he saw was probably an exact match for how he looked. He walked over there. “We got this.”

“We are not a duet, Carlos.”

“We’ll improvise.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Not if I get to him first.”

There was a sudden argument in the left wings. Carlos turned, suddenly hopeful. A security guy hurried to the edge of the stage, steering Foster with an arm up behind his back. “This guy says he’s with you.”

Relief made Carlos almost black out. “Yeah—” he started, then narrowed his eyes. Foster swayed on his feet, his face flushed, shirt pulled askew. There was no guitar in his hands. “Where’s your axe, Foster?”

Foster gave him a wide grin, his glittering eyes showing pinpoint pupils. “Carlos, buddy, I’m here.”

“No shit! I can see that. Your guitar isn’t.”

Foster waved behind him, tipping off balance with the gesture until the guard had to tighten his grip to keep Foster upright. “It’s back there. I’ll find it. We got time yet, right, have some time? Yeah.” His voice was slurred.

“Shit.” Mia jumped down from behind her drums and marched over to him. “You are fucking wasted!”

“Nope. Not. I can play. I just had some fun, a bit of fun. I’m all loosey ready to play.” He flapped his free hand in the air randomly.

The smack of her palm on his cheek echoed across the stage. Carlos lunged, trying to protect his own guitar with one hand, and grabbed her with the other. “Dammit, Mia. Not now.”

“He’s completely shitfaced.” She turned to Carlos, her face crumpled like a little kid’s. “Our chance, and he’s flushing it right down the toilet. Carlos!” The bright house lights beyond the stage silhouetted her, and he hoped no one past the footlights could really see their faces.

“I know.” He gave her a one armed hug.

Foster drawled, “Sorry, Mimi! I’m good. Give me a minute, a cup of coffee. I’m fine. I’m yeah, I can, I’ll play. No problem.” He rubbed at his face, still grinning manically.

Carlos looked at the security guy, who still had Foster’s arm in a tight grip, then at the nearest audience members who were eyeing them with curiosity, although they probably couldn’t hear anything over the roar of conversations. “You have a way of dealing with wasted fans?”

“Um. Yeah.”

Carlos eased his arm from around Mia and pointed at Foster. His hand was shaking, but his voice was rock steady. “Well, that guy’s not in our band, so I guess you should do whatever you do.”

Foster blinked hard, swaying. “What the hell? Carlos? I’m in the band. I’m the best fucking guitar in the band.”

“You used to be. Now you’re history.”

“Screw you!” His face got ugly. “You can’t fire me. Hell, no. You can’t. He can’t. I’m great, fine, I’ll play. No problem.”

“You can’t even fucking stand straight.”

Foster took a fast step forward and lurched against the guard’s grip. “I can. See? Standing.”

Carlos turned away, biting his lip. No more. *Ni una palabra más*. Another excuse, another fucking word, and he’d puke. “Get him out of here.”

He was caught by surprise when something slammed into his back. Foster snarled in his ear, “You can’t treat me like shit, dump me, not now, no way!” He staggered, slamming his elbow back, and connected with something. Foster yelped.

Then the guard was there, dragging Foster off him. “Sorry, sir. I got him.” He waved at the wings and a couple more guys came running to help. Between them, they dragged Foster offstage, still ranting and struggling. As they muscled him out of sight, he shouted, “You’ll be sorry. Fuck you! You’ll regret this, damn you, cunt...” His words became lost in the noise.

Carlos took a deep breath and met Mia’s eyes. She had her fist pressed to her mouth, and he stepped close again, pulling her in. “Are you gonna puke?” he whispered in her ear.

“No.” She turned in against his neck. “No way. Not crying. Not puking. Screw him. He doesn’t get that.”

Carlos felt numb. His voice sounded like it was coming from outside himself somewhere. “Atta girl. We’ve practiced without the sumbitch often enough. We can do this.”

“We can’t. It’s gonna suck!”

“Yeah. We can. You know what?” He set her away gently. “Blaze of glory. We’re going to do all original shit. No covers. No mercy. I’ll announce them.

We'll skip "Candyblades", and I'll do cello just on "Underhill". We'll do "Freakboy", and "Yesterday's News". Right?"

Mia rubbed her face and straightened her shirt. "We haven't practiced "Freakboy" very much."

"I have." It was Nate's song. Carlos had played it on his old acoustic so often this week, he could play it in his sleep. They hadn't had time for Foster to learn it, but now that didn't matter. "You're solid. No need for fancy. I want to play it."

"Right. You're the boss."

"The hell I am. *We're* both KnifeSwitch. Right?"

Mia raised a fist and bumped him.

An older man, red shirt stretched over his ample stomach, came hurrying over. "I heard there was a problem."

"My bass guitar just quit the band." Carlos was really proud of the even way he said it.

"Oh." The man glanced around. "Do you need to scratch?"

"No! We're going on. We just have to rearrange the set a bit." He dug deep for some lead-guitar attitude. "It might not sound as good as usual, but it'll be a whole lot better than those last guys."

The man actually smiled. "You're sure? Anything we can get for you?"

A new bassist who knows our stuff? All the extra synth parts I have recorded on my system at home? A million dollars? "Nope."

"Right. Five minutes, then. Show us what you've got."

"Plan to."

As the man walked off stage, Carlos dragged in a harsh breath. Then another slower one. He pulled his stage persona around him. Carlos Medina, lead guitar for KnifeSwitch, was a cocky son of a bitch who didn't let *anything* stand in his way. He stepped up to his mike, adjusted his guitar, touched the E-string for luck, just enough to make it hum, and turned a shit-eating grin on Mia. She settled behind her rack and raised a stick, looking at him. "'Not Going Down'," he told her. "On my mark."

The house lights went down, and the spots came up. The PA announced, "Let's hear it for another local band. This is KnifeSwitch, from Tacoma."

Usually, Carlos would have engaged the crowd for a moment and introduced the band. This time he waited one beat, then launched into the first song. It was thin, without Foster's base to fill in the low notes. Mia added more drums in the lower register, to help out. Carlos closed his eyes, put his mouth to the mike, and screamed, "*Not going under, Not going down...*"

It was the strangest concert of his life. Foster's absence was like this big aching hole in the songs, and he and Mia hit new heights trying to fill it. Her drum solo took the house down, everyone screaming and pounding approval. He pulled out all the stops, shredding on the strings until he figured he'd bleed tonight. His voice didn't have to hold out beyond this half hour, not anymore, not for anything, and he used it ruthlessly. When they eased down into "Freakboy", the audience stilled, swaying and listening like it was a rock concert and not metal. He sang the words, about how the right person could make a true man out of a cobbled-together boy. His throat hurt. His heart hurt. He let the last note hang for a second, then dove into "Coals Against the Skin" without stopping for breath, relieved to be able to scream and roar.

And then they were done. Mia hit the rim of her cymbal, a clean, sharp sound in the moment of silence that was everything he'd hoped to hear. And then the audience cheered and roared. For a while. And stopped. No screams for an encore, no wild approval. Just a decent response to a job well done.

Maybe it was just as well. He wasn't sure he had another song in him. He moved up to the mike, one last time. His voice rasped, as he said, "Thanks. I'm Carlos Medina, and over there, the wildwoman on drums is Mia Fontaine." He applauded in her direction and there was a decent echo of applause mixed with whistles from the crowd. "We're KnifeSwitch. Thanks for coming out; we'll see you all again!" The applause was loud but short, and as the house lights came up, the roar of conversations was already heavy. He was glad when they cut the stage lights, leaving them in near-darkness.

He swung the strap of his guitar over his neck and staggered. If one of the roadies hadn't already been hurrying onstage to get their gear, he'd have fallen. The guy grabbed his arm, shoved him upright, and said, "Great set," before letting go and bending to unplug his mike.

Carlos eased his guitar to the floor and turned toward the drums. Mia stood up stiffly and came over to him. He opened his arms and she walked into them. They held each other, rocking together, not needing words. But eventually she muttered, "We *owned* that fucking stage."

“Damned straight.”

She kissed his cheek, then pulled free. “Gotta see my babies get taken down right.”

“Yeah.” He wanted nothing more than to leave, to find some corner to hide in and have a breakdown. But those were expensive amps and the best mikes he could find, and he needed to take care of them. He turned to the nearest roadie and said, “I’ll take our mikes, if you get the rest.” *Professional. Be professional. Even when you want to kill someone and then cry.*

When they got back to their patch of naked concrete, Nate was waiting. Carlos just had time to set the mikes down and ease his guitar to the floor, before Nate jumped him. Carlos staggered, returning the hug, too achingly glad of the human contact to care what it looked like.

“You were amazing,” Nate said softly. “You were so, so awesome, and I’m going to kill Foster.”

Carlos chuckled damply. “You’ll have to stand in line.” He allowed himself one more moment with his arms around Nate, chest against chest, cheek against his hair, breathing in the smell of him. Then he shoved himself away. “Wait here. We have more shit to get, and I have to inventory. Wait, okay?”

“I’ll be here.”

As Carlos turned away, Mia set her snare down carefully and then rushed past him and grabbed Nate. “So, what did you think?” She hugged him hard. “Were we awesome or what?”

“You were fucking awesome.”

“And now I need a beer.” She stepped back and wiped her arm across her forehead. “Jesus, you think it would kill them to turn the air up? I just about melted out there.”

“Nate can buy us beer,” Carlos said. “He didn’t do any work.”

“Three beers coming up,” Nate said.

Mia shook her head. “Better make it six.”

“Done.” Nate hurried off, dodging red-shirts.

Mia muttered to Carlos as they headed back to the stage, “If you don’t keep that guy, I want him.”

“I thought you weren’t dating any more guys.” He didn’t have to work to whisper. His throat was on fire.

“I’d make an exception. He’s sweet.”

“Find your own sweet guy.”

“I don’t like sweet either, actually. Maybe I’ll go find my own wicked woman.”

“After the beer.”

“Well, yeah.”

They got their equipment cleared out, and stowed back in their square. Carlos went through it, making sure they had everything they came with. When he was done, he turned. Mia had her first beer almost empty, tipped up high as she drank, her second in her other hand. Nate bent to pick up a can from the floor by his feet and tossed it to Carlos. “Done?”

Carlos popped the top, took a long swallow, and coughed as the bitterness hit his throat. He took a second more careful sip and winced but didn’t stop. After half the can, he said, “Yeah. Other than moving stuff to the van.” His voice sounded like hell.

Nate’s lips twisted, but he didn’t comment, just said mildly, “So are you going to hang around?”

Carlos was going to ask what the fucking point would be, when Mia said, “Yeah. Why not? Just for laughs. We might sell some more shit. Who knows, we could even still win it.”

Carlos shook his head. “If all the rest of the bands come down with whooping cough, maybe.”

“It wasn’t that bad.” Nate handed him another beer. “You were better than the first two.”

Mia drawled, “My farts are better than the first two.”

Carlos stared at her. “How many beers have you had.”

“Two.” She held up her newly opened can. “And a bit.”

“She stole one of mine,” Nate said. “I figured she’d sweated it out.”

“He’s a gentleman.” She took another big swig.

“And you weigh all of a hundred pounds, and you’re a lightweight. You might want to switch to soda.”

“Not a lightweight.” She frowned at the can. “Anyway, I’m going to get wasted and listen to music and think of evil ways to kill Foster.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He raised his own beer to her. “Good thinking.”

“Do you need to load up your van first?” Nate asked.

“Nah. Don’t want to leave our equipment in the parking lot. This is fine.” Carlos found a space to sit against the wall. The sound of the next band warming up was a bit heavy on the distortion, but not too bad.

Mia said, “You know what though? I don’t want to kill my ass. I’ve got a blanket in the van. Be right back.” She handed her beer to Nate. “Hold that.”

He stared after her as she hurried down the aisle. “Will she be okay?”

“She can still pronounce ‘blanket’. She’s fine.”

Nate came over and sat beside Carlos, close enough that their shoulders touched. His voice was soft and low. “What about you? Are you fine?”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Be kind. Not right now.” He blinked hard and poured some more battery-acid-in-a-can down his raw throat.

“Can I get a head start on the ways to kill Foster?”

Carlos coughed. “I guess. Really, I just want to not think about it, you know.”

“Got it.”

They drank beer in silence. After a while, Mia came back with the blanket from the van and another six-pack. They folded the blanket up enough to make a pad for the three of them. They had to sit close together, but despite the heat, none of them complained. The beer was cold, anyway.

Chapter 11

The afternoon turned to evening. Bands came and went. Carlos thought that KnifeSwitch hadn't been the worst of them, or even close to worst, but he had no illusions. With four bands still to go, at least a couple others had already put out much better sets than his.

He'd managed to make a trip out to the merch tables, to chat with fans and thank Mia's sister for her help. But the fans who stopped all wanted to know what was up with Foster, and he didn't have any answers and his throat fucking hurt. Mia's sister had looked pretty sick of all the questions too, so he'd told her to pack it up and enjoy the rest of the show. He'd helped stow away the merch boxes and then hurried back to where Mia and Nate were hanging out. Nate greeted him with another beer. There was a lot to be said for having good friends.

Nate set his latest empty can down and said, "I should go wish Eli luck. They're up after this one."

"Yeah. Me too." His voice was still wrecked. He decided that was okay. Fitting.

"Bring back more beer," Mia told him.

"Sure." They'd all had a few, but a beer an hour wasn't going to put anyone out. He stood and held a hand down to Nate. Nate took it, letting Carlos haul him to his feet. They set off down the aisle, and around the corner to the double-digit band zone. Carlos hung back and let Nate go up to his brother, who was busy working on his pedalboard.

Eli looked up with a harried look. "Hey."

"Problem?" Nate asked.

"Defective pedal. No FX signal return. Just fucking glad I've got a spare and it didn't go out while we were onstage."

"Hell, yeah," Nate agreed. "Anyway, we just stopped by to say hey."

"We'll be pulling for you," Carlos offered. He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "You better play my songs right."

Eli managed a strained smile. "Thanks. Hey, what happened to you? I heard your set. They said your bassist was hauled off by the cops."

“Huh? Not that bad. Just too stoned to play.”

“Oh. Hell, that sucks.”

“Tell me about it. You got a spare bass player?”

“Keep your paws off Chris.”

“Like he’d leave your band for mine anyway.” Carlos only realized how bitter he sounded when Nate, standing beside him, touched his arm. “Never mind. Go break a fucking leg, right?”

“Thanks.” Eli nodded at them distractedly, turning to RoRo. “Listen, make sure you really scream when we do vocal levels. You were miked too high at the last show.” RoRo nodded.

Nate nudged Carlos. “Come on. Let’s go watch from somewhere good.”

They wandered a bit and found a place high up above the seats that gave a good view of the stage. A bunch of other band dudes were already there, but they made room. Carlos squeezed into the corner, and pulled Nate in close beside him, hiding a grip on the hem of Nate’s shirt in between their bodies. He felt oddly unsettled, floaty but not in a good way. Like there was nothing keeping him from drifting off, except that bit of cotton between his fingers. The number nine band below was at full teeth-rattling volume, and the mosh pit in the center floor heaved and writhed, but there was a little hum in Carlos’s ears that filtered it all down to a blur.

It was just tinnitus left over from being too close to his own speakers, he decided. He rubbed his eyes with his other hand and tried to focus on the music. Nate moved closer, their thighs touching, and that helped. He still couldn’t focus on the lyrics though, and the music didn’t do much for him. He sighed when the band wrapped it up to moderate applause.

Nate said, “Eli’s next.”

“Are you nervous?” He kept to a whisper, easier on his vocal chords, and safer, just between them.

“A bit. It would be such a big deal for him.”

“I’m betting it’s all a gimmick. The contest.” He’d told himself that as a reality check a hundred times in the last week. “I bet they already know what band the producer wants. This is just publicity, like chumming the waters.”

“Like *what*?”

“Throwing a bunch of wounded fish in to attract sharks.” He hesitated, running the analogy through in his mind. Or was it a simile? Damned if he knew. “Um, maybe I didn’t think that through.”

“You’re a strange guy. You’re lucky I like you.”

For once he didn’t even look around to see who might have heard, just admitted, “Yeah, I know.”

It took a while to get that band taken down and Serpentine set up. Carlos didn’t try to talk to Nate, just sat there next to him and watched through half-closed eyes, trying to make out details under the dimmed stage lights. It was pretty hard to see down there, with the house so bright. He could hope that Foster’s meltdown had only been noticed by the hundred or so fans down on the floor. For all the good that would do.

The lights began to fade, and under the cover of darkness Nate grabbed his hand, fingers crushing his. “God. I hope they kill it.”

The house went dark, the stage lights blossomed in a shower of gold and red. Eli’s friend had clearly brought some custom lighting, as the images of a multi-headed snake that was the band logo writhed across the backdrop.

“Hey, you.” Eli’s voice into the mike was a deep growl. “Shut up now and listen, ’cause we’re Serpentine.” Tom launched a fast rhythm on the bass drum, Chris came in hard and clean, and then Eli and RoRo screamed out the first notes in perfect unison.

Carlos sat up and listened, letting Nate squish his fingers bloodless. They were good. Better than good. He’d heard the band practice, even worked with them, but here in concert they’d cranked it up a whole bunch of notches. Eli’s voice rumbled, then soared, moving from a velvet purr to a primal scream with control Carlos had never had, even before his voice changed. Tom might not be better than Mia, but he sure as hell wasn’t worse, and Foster at his best wasn’t even fit to clean Chris’s shoes.

As they launched into one of Carlos’s own songs he sat tensely, torn between satisfaction and envy. *That*. That was how he’d heard it in his head. But it was beyond unfair that someone else was playing it, someone else was taking those words and those notes and setting them loose. He ached to be down there on that stage, and for a moment, he hated how good they were with a burning pain in his gut, and yet he also hated when the song ended.

They got an encore. In fact they got two. By the time the stage lights went down and stayed that way, Nate sounded hoarse from screaming and whistling.

He turned to Carlos in the brightening fluorescents. “Did you hear them? Holy shit!” He laughed breathlessly, eyes shining.

“Yeah. They were great.”

Carlos thought he managed to be enthusiastic, but Nate smacked his thigh lightly. “And your songs were the best.”

“Ya think?” he drawled.

“Jackass.” Nate bounced in place. “They have a shot. Seriously.”

“Don’t jinx it.”

The next band set up quickly, as if eager not to let the audience buzz too much about Serpentine. Their show was high-energy and high volume, with some semi-pro lighting effects, but their singer’s voice was more shrill and didn’t have the range Eli did.

“Really primal screaming,” Carlos noted when the lights came back up.

“Not as good though, you think? I didn’t think they were close to Eli’s band?”

“Nope.” Carlos tried to ramp down the excitement. “I hope I’m wrong about it being rigged. Although probably not.”

“You’re such a cynic.”

“I’m a realist.”

“Cynic.”

“Well, Mr. Cynic to you then.”

Nate laughed. “God, I’m so stoked. Eli must be going nuts. Do you think we should go down there?”

“I think he and his band are probably hanging out. You can if you want.” Carlos hated admitting he was jealous. He’d be like that little cloud over people’s heads, raining on their parade. Unless one of the organizers was a fanatic for original lyrics, he was fucked. KnifeSwitch was a decent little band, or had been pre-Foster—“Fuck. Motherfucker.”

“Who? Eli?” Nate’s forehead wrinkled.

“Shit, no. Foster.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Hidden between their bodies, Nate rubbed a knuckle on Carlos’s thigh. “That sucks. What will you do?”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t want to think about it. “Ask Mia, I guess, whether we start auditions.”

“Is there another option?”

His chest ached. “She could join half a dozen bands. A truly sick drummer is always in demand.”

“And what about you?”

He didn’t know. He didn’t want to think about it. He stood abruptly. “Wanna go down to the mosh pit?”

“You have a death wish? Anyway, we don’t have floor tickets.”

“We’re with a band. I bet we could get in.”

Nate tugged on his cuff. “Forget it. Sit. One band to go. I don’t want to die without knowing whether Eli won. Or you, of course.”

That should have felt supportive, but it got under Carlos’s skin and stung. “I’m going to head down to staging. I’ll check in with Mia, see if she wants to see Twisted Stonemason.”

“I’ll come with you.” Nate struggled to his feet, rolling his shoulders. “We can check on Eli too.”

Of course we can check on precious Eli. “You don’t have to. You can hang here.”

Nate frowned at him and led the way off the walk, down into the corridor behind the seats. “What’s with you?” he muttered as they got out of public sight.

Carlos gritted his teeth and glanced around. They were alone for a moment. “I’m fucking jealous. All right? Do I get to be petty and mean for once? Eli has every fucking thing I want, from a top band to a top voice to a great family to a face like Lucifer to a—” He cut off his bitter spew before he said ‘*dick*’. Not going there.

Nate grabbed his arm and tugged him around. “Yeah. Okay, he’s charmed. He’s my brother and sometimes I hate him. But you know what he doesn’t have?”

Carlos tugged his arm free roughly. “What?”

Nate grinned slowly and wickedly, looked Carlos up and down, ran his hands slowly down himself, then turned and walked off.

Carlos gave himself a moment to fume, then followed. “Ego, much?”

“Am I wrong?”

“You’re impossible.”

“That’s not like being wrong.”

Carlos bumped his shoulder, hard enough to throw Nate off balance a step. “It’s good you’re hot in bed.”

“It really is.” Nate laughed.

“Big ego, jerk.”

“Resorting to insults means you lost the argument.”

“I call it creative speech. Why were we arguing again?”

“I forget.” Nate moved closer. “Let’s find Mia. C’mon.” Carlos noticed that he didn’t mention Eli and felt a mix of gratitude and shame. Their arms brushed as they turned into a public corridor. He stepped away automatically. Time to be the public Carlos Medina again, for whatever that was worth. He raised his chin and straightened his shoulders.

Mia was sitting beside her drums, on her phone again, when they approached. The hallway was crowded, with a couple of bands clearly hoping to beat the takedown rush by moving their gear out now. She glanced up at them. “Hey, guys. Serpentine sounded fucking fan-damn-tastic from here.”

“They played good,” Carlos admitted. “Almost up to the quality of my songs.”

“Hah.”

“So, do you want to swap? Go up front for the last set?”

Mia shook her head, not getting up. “I’m okay here, even if the cell reception sucks donkey balls, and the WiFi isn’t much better. You guys can go back.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I’m beat, and I have the entire blanket to myself. My sister dropped off the merch when she headed out, and I’m sitting on, like, a dozen shirts with Foster’s face on them. I’m comfortable.”

Carlos wasn’t sure whether to laugh or wince. He rubbed a hand over his face.

Nate said, “Hey, Carlos, why don’t you hang with Mia while I go check on Eli?”

“I’ll come with you.” He could be a good guy about this, surely. “I have to give him a hard time about missing a note in that bridge.”

“I’m sure no one else noticed.”

“That’s why he needs me to harass him.” He thought Nate actually looked worried, so he added. “Just kidding. I want to tell him they were awesome.”

“All right.” Nate looked at Mia. “Can I get you anything?”

“Nah. I’m good.”

Carlos told her, “We’ll be back at the end to help load and all.”

“You’d better be, or your guitar will be on my front bumper.”

Nate said, “Thanks, Mia.”

“Take this guy away and keep him from getting ragey, and that’ll do for thanks.”

“Got it.”

Carlos realized as he followed Nate down the row, dodging big cabs on handcarts, that for once, he’d failed to manage *ragey*. He just felt tired and small and ready for the night to be over.

Eli and his guys were hanging out in their space, arguing over a football game, when they spotted him and Nate. Eli jumped up, ran over, grabbed Nate up in a bear hug and swung him around, narrowly missing connecting Nate’s foot with Carlos’s groin. “Did you see it? Was that the sickest, greatest thing ever? Man, we *killed* it. Right?”

“Put me down, stupid.” Nate bopped Eli on the head with his palm. “Yeah, you were okay.”

Eli dropped him back on his feet. “Okay?”

“Not bad?”

“Try ‘perfect’.”

“Adequate.”

Eli glanced at Carlos. “Help a fellow musician out here?”

Carlos shrugged, a little of the tension in his spine unwinding. “I don’t control Nate.”

“God, you are in trouble then.”

Nate kicked at Eli’s shin and missed. “I guess I could go as high as ‘good’.”

“You could go as high as the top of that dumpster outside.”

Carlos said, “You killed it, Eli. Of course, it was all due to my songs.”

“Fuck you.” But he was laughing. After a moment he sobered. “You do know those rocked, right? Seriously, we owe you, dude.”

“You paid me.”

“I guess.”

“Get the damned bridge right and I’ll call it even.”

“I changed it.”

“Screw you.”

“You’ll have to settle for my brother.”

Carlos winced and looked around fast, glad no one was paying attention. This, *this* was what happened when you started getting careless with the truth. Nate didn’t even notice, muttering, “Settle? Screw you twice, E.”

“Incest, bro.”

The lights flickered in warning. Nate said to Eli, “We’re going to watch Stonemason out front. Any of you want to come?”

The guys all shook their heads. Eli said, “If they’re great, I don’t want to see it, you know?”

Carlos said, “Sure. Fingers crossed they fall off the stage or something.”

Nate singsonged, “Cause that’s what it would ta-ake.”

Eli looked a little green, and his “Get fucked,” was a bit too real.

Carlos felt a rush of sympathy. “You guys totally deserve to win. Even over me, and I don’t say that lightly.”

Eli managed a hint of a smile. “Thanks.”

“See you later.” Carlos led Nate off toward the exit.

After a few steps, Nate muttered, “I screwed that up.”

“He’ll be fine. Especially when they win.”

“Your mouth to God’s ears.”

Carlos blinked. "I think God stopped listening to me when I was ten." *Or maybe before.*

Nate paused and touched his arm. "That's bullshit. But we won't get into it here. You can cross your fingers and toes and invoke Odin if you prefer."

Odd how Nate could make the old sore places feel better. "That I can do."

Their previous space was occupied, and the glares they got said no one was interested in squishing further, so they made their way further along and higher, past other groups of guys and girls in notches along the bracework, until they found an empty one. Carlos gave in to temptation and sat down with his legs straddled. He patted the concrete between his knees. "Sit here."

Nate didn't even glance around, just sat obediently with his back to Carlos.

"Fingers crossed," Carlos said against his hair.

Nate raised his hands, fingers braided and thumbs locked together. "Hell yeah."

The houselights went down.

Unfortunately, Twisted Stonemason didn't suck. Their singer didn't have Eli's range either, but he was a pro, and he knew how to use his voice. The band was slick, the effects a notch up from anyone so far, the songs original but well-known enough locally to have the audience screaming the choruses back at them. With each song, Carlos's heart dropped a notch. KnifeSwitch wasn't close to competing with that. Even Serpentine wasn't in the same league.

When they were done, he said succinctly, "Fuck."

"Yeah." Nate leaned back against his chest. "Maybe the organizer hates them. Maybe the lead singer screwed over his daughter or something."

Carlos barked a laugh and wrapped his arms around Nate.

A man wearing a red Sparkfest shirt under a charcoal suit came onstage and took the lead singer's mike. "So, it's been a great night, and we're all waiting to see who won this thing. Am I right?"

The audience roared back with drunken enthusiasm.

"Who will it be? Who walks out of here with five thousand dollars and a production contract." The man waved at the backdrop. A projection flickered through all of the band logos, and a bunch of onstage pictures clearly taken tonight. There was one of Mia, sticks flying so fast the ends blurred, her blond

dreads flipping around her head. Carlos wondered if he could get a copy. The video slowed down, and began posting the logos again. The man intoned, “Tombsgate? Lords of Meyhem? KnifeSwitch...”

There was applause for everyone, but the loudest screams were for Stonemason. No surprise. Carlos didn’t think he was giving in to the melodrama of the buildup until Nate winced and peeled Carlos’s clutching grip off his forearm. “Sorry,” Carlos muttered.

Another man walked onstage to join the first at the mike. He said, “I’m Donald Naylor. We’ve seen twelve excellent bands tonight. Let’s give them one more round of applause.”

That round was weaker and short, and he coughed. “Okay, without more waiting. The top band tonight was chosen through a combination of judging and your comments on the floor. Those of you who spoke to a guy in red about the bands? Your voices were heard. And the winner is... Twisted Stonemason.”

Carlos thought he was braced for that, but the rush of hurt made his eyes water and his breath hitch. He clung to Nate and tried to center and breathe slowly. *Stupid. Idiot! There never was a chance.*

“Buuuut don’t go yet,” the man shouted above the roar of the approving crowd. “Quiet? Everyone?” When they’d settled to a dull roar, he said, “Twisted Stonemason already has an album in production with another label. So they win the five thousand dollars, but the production contract goes to... Serpentine.”

“Oh my God!” Nate’s whistle almost took out Carlos’s eardrums. “Did you hear that? Oh, God. Eli is going to be so stoked!”

Carlos bit his cheek viciously to keep from saying all the nasty things that sprang to mind. *It’s just a tentative offer. Most albums don’t make money these days. They picked Eli because the girls will drool over his looks.* He managed to say calmly, “He deserves it.” It was only the truth.

On stage, the announcer had called the winning bands up. The guys were shaking hands and pounding backs. From this distance, they were little figures, faces a blur, dancing with joy. Carlos said, “You should go down there. Congratulate him.”

“Hell, yeah!” Nate jumped to his feet, then turned back when Carlos didn’t immediately do the same. “What about you?”

“Give me a minute. I’ll follow you in a bit.”

“Oh.” A little of the elation faded from Nate’s face. “I’m sorry you didn’t win.”

“I never had a chance.” It was a bitter truth, but he was proud of himself for saying it evenly.

Nate looked like he wanted to contradict that, but couldn’t find words. Instead, after a second he said, “Promise you won’t run off?”

Carlos shook his head. “I’m not up for a celebration, but I’ll see you before we go.”

“Okay. Promise?”

“Yeah.” Carlos flapped his hand. “Go. *Anda*. Tell Eli I said he was the world’s luckiest motherfucker and the next song will cost him two hundred.”

Nate laughed, turned and ran.

Carlos sat alone on the hard concrete, above where a couple thousand loud and rowdy fans were slowly clearing out of the arena. They were singing, bumping, shouting, gesturing. He wondered if any of them were saying, “KnifeSwitch totally got robbed. They had the best songs.”

It wasn’t likely.

In a minute he needed to get up and find Mia. In a minute he had to move on and do the next thing, be a man, clear out their gear and figure out if he even still had a band. But now, for just a minute, he gave himself permission to mourn a dream. He raised his knees, put his face down on them, and cried.

Chapter 12

Down in the backstage area, Nate shoved Eli off his neck roughly. “Let go! I need to go find Carlos.”

“Yeah. Find Carlos. Tell him he writes like a boss. Tell him we need more songs. Lots more songs.” Eli’s arm was still heavy on his shoulder, and Chris whooped in his ear. They’d clearly spent Stonemason’s set getting half-wasted.

Nate dropped out from under. “I’ll tell him. See you later.”

“We’re going out to celebrate! Gonna close the town down. Come on, bro!” Eli reached for him, but Nate dodged.

“You don’t need me for that.” There were enough girlfriends and roadies and best friends crowding into the space. Nate backed away. “I’ll see you when you get over the hangover.”

“Party-poophead,” Eli said, then laughed hysterically.

“What are we, three?” Nate turned away.

Eli yelled after him, “We’re twenty-six, and I’m going to get smashed!”

Nate yelled back, “Make sure someone sober drives, motherfucker!”

RoRo called after him. “I’m DD. No worries.”

Nate relaxed. He’d forgotten that RoRo was on meds he couldn’t drink with. And tonight that would be a damned good thing.

As he turned the corner into the confusion of the other hallway, he heard Mia’s voice, loud and shrill. “Well, screw you!”

Nate dodged through the crowd and ran up to where Mia stood, drumsticks in her hand, threatening to hit Foster.

Foster’s face was flushed and furious. “You owe me. You both owe me. Come on.”

“We don’t owe you a damned thing.” Mia wasn’t backing down, even though Foster was twice her size. The crowd around them looked entertained, but not likely to help out. Nate pushed through to stand next to her.

Foster glared at him. “Who’re you? This is none of your fucking business.”

Nate said, “Mia’s my friend. What do you want, Foster?”

Foster curled his lip at Nate and moved closer to Mia. “Come on. Don’t be a bitch. One of those mikes is mine and I chipped in on the amp. Fifty bucks. I’ll pay you back.”

“You can take your mike, then, and get lost.” Mia raised the sticks.

“I don’t want the mike. Look, I’ll pay you back Tuesday after practice.”

“There is no practice!” Carlos’s voice was harsh and loud, as he pushed through the crowd. “Because there is no fucking band!”

“Oh, come on, Carlos.” Foster turned to face him. “Look, I screwed up. I *know* that, right? I was nervous. I took something to calm down.”

“You couldn’t even stand up!”

“I took too much. I’m sorry, right? It won’t happen again.”

“Damned fucking right it won’t!” Carlos strode up to him and shoved him in the chest, rocking him back a step. “You’re gone, you bastard. You’re out. You and your drugs and your *sorry* and your fucking half-assed not bothering to show up. Out!”

“Hey! I was here!” Foster stuck out his jaw mulishly. “I drove the whole way here, and I was *on time*.”

Carlos’s voice nearly reached his stage scream. “It only counts if you’re *awake enough to play! Motherfucker!*” He shoved Foster again, harder. Foster staggered, bumping one of the cabs, and Mia jumped to steady it.

“Keep your hands off me,” Foster snarled, taking an ineffectual swing at Carlos. “You’re not my boss.”

“For this band, I am. And you’re *fired!*” The word ended in a squeak that made Carlos’s face redden. He raised a clenched fist.

Foster scrambled sideways. “Then pay me off. I put a bunch of money into our gear over the years. I want that money.”

“Screw you,” Mia said, glaring at him. “Between Carlos and me, we’ve loaned you more than you ever put in, and you never paid us back a cent.”

Foster folded his arms across his chest. “I’m not moving until you pay me. That mike had to be... at least a hundred dollars. And I put three hundred into the amp. No, four hundred.”

Carlos began, “We’re not paying you one—”

But Mia cut in, “Here.” She held out her hand, a couple of folded bills in it. “Forty bucks. You can take it now and be gone, or you can sue us for it all and lose big.” She waved the bills in front of him.

Foster got a cunning look in his eyes. “A hundred. And the rest later.”

“Do I look like I have a hundred bucks? You’re lucky I just went to the ATM for forty.”

Carlos rumbled, “Right. Enough. For God’s sake, Mia, don’t pay the fucker.”

“I want him gone.” She turned to Carlos, and Nate could see tears standing in her eyes. “I want him gone! Right now!”

“I can do that.” The muscles in Carlos’s biceps bunched, as he clenched his fists.

Nate stepped closer, deliberately blocking his line to Foster, and said to the bassist, “You’d better take what you can get and run, you creep. Or you may never play guitar again.”

Foster looked back and forth among the three of them, then around at the bystanders. Finally he reached out and snatched the money from Mia, knocking her hand hard enough that she yelped. “Fine. I’m gone.” He stared hard at Carlos. “I can work for anyone, lots of bands, fucking better than you! You’ll be sorry.” He whirled and shoved through the crowd, his passage marked by their curses and shouts.

After a moment, Nate moved aside. Carlos looked at him with an unfriendly glare. “What were you trying to do?”

“Keep you out of jail for assault.”

“You should’ve stood in front of me.” Mia shook out her hand, then rubbed at her eyes. “One more word and I was going for justified homicide. I was gonna stuff a drumstick up his nose till it came out his ear.”

Carlos sighed, and some of the color drained from his face, leaving him looking exhausted. “He used to be a decent guy and a hell of a bass player.” His voice was scratchy and rough.

“Come on.” Nate bent to shift a floor tom. “I’ll help you guys load up.”

It took a while, even though Mia had a hand truck in the van so they didn’t have to wait for a turn with the venue equipment. Leaving someone to watch on each end slowed them down further, even though they worked it like a relay,

heading back as soon as the next person arrived. They left the small stuff to the end, along with the merch boxes. Nate grunted as he tried to fit the last container into place. “You’re sure this all fits?”

“It all came in the van,” Mia said. “Hang on. Let me jump in and shift that cab a bit more.”

Eventually they had everything in place and bungeed and strapped down safely. Nate followed Carlos as he went round to the passenger side. “Hey. Can I bum a lift?”

“Don’t you have your car?”

He shook his head. “I rode up with Eli. Didn’t want the hassle of parking.”

“You’re not exactly on Mia’s way home.”

Nate tried a winning tilt of his head. “Maybe you could drive me the rest of the way home in the morning.”

Carlos looked startled, then thoughtful. “You mean, stay at my place?”

“Is that okay?”

“I guess.” Nate’s heart sank at how slowly Carlos said that. But then he added, “It’s kind of small. Nothing like yours.”

“I don’t take up that much space.”

“And I’m pretty tired, but—” Carlos pressed his lips together and met Nate’s eyes for a long time.

Eventually Mia said, “I want to get the hell out of here. Jump in the back, Nate.” She reached back and slid the door open.

Carlos said, “Hey!” But by then Nate had squeezed in past the gear and pulled the door shut. He got into a seat, holding the merch box he’d dislodged on his lap.

Mia said, “Strap in and hang on, Nate,” and pulled out of the parking spot.

“Don’t I get a say?” Carlos bitched, but not as if he meant it.

“You had your turn. You didn’t speak up.” Mia made the turn onto the main road. “Come on, big guy. You know you’ll have a better night with Nate than moping on your own. If I had a girlfriend right now, I’d be driving and phoning.”

“If you were phoning, I’d be driving,” Carlos said. “Okay. Sure, Nate, if you don’t expect too much that would be cool.”

“Great.” Nate pulled out his phone and texted Eli.

Got a ride with Carlos.

He didn’t expect Eli would hear the message come in, but if he stopped celebrating long enough to check for Nate, the text would be there. He put his phone away and took a long slow breath. “Man, my ears are ringing.”

Mia said, “Earplugs, baby. Only way to go.” She gave him an exhausted smile.

Ten minutes of dark roads rolled by before they climbed the entrance ramp for the freeway. Mia said, “I’ll be dropping you guys off at Carlos’s car.”

“Sounds good.” Nate eyed the back of Carlos’s neck, and the angle of his jaw, lit and then shadowed as they passed streetlights and headlights.

Ten minutes later, Mia said tentatively, “So, Carlos, you told Foster there’s no band.”

Carlos put a hand up, shading his eyes as if the flashes of headlights were too bright. “Well, there isn’t for him.”

“And for us?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I don’t think I know anything right now.”

“Yeah. I’m fried. We should probably sleep on it. But either way, you were awesome up there, boss.”

“You weren’t bad yourself.”

“Ooh, don’t inflate my ego or anything.” She veered down an exit ramp, rolled to a stoplight, and turned right.

“You know how good you are.” Carlos’s voice was thin. “You can always find a gig. Guaranteed.”

“Maybe.” Nate saw her reach over between the seats and pat Carlos’s thigh. “Just promise me you won’t blame yourself for that mess. That was all on Foster.”

“I should’ve auditioned another guitar. We should’ve been a four-man so when he fucked it up we’d have still had a band.”

“Should’ve. Could’ve. We did audition some guys, and none of them were worth the trouble. Let it go.”

“I should’ve insisted he drive up with us. I should have handcuffed him to the fucking van until showtime.”

“So then what? We could sign a contract and then have it ripped back the minute Foster violated it?”

Carlos rubbed his face. “I guess. Maybe.”

Mia shook her head. “Go home. Get some sleep. We can find another guy and rebuild. Or better yet, a girl. Or... not. Nate?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t let him get all broody and emo tonight, okay?”

“Screw you, I’m not emo.” Carlos’s scratchy voice was too flat to carry the joke.

“I’ll try,” Nate said. “He doesn’t take directions well.”

“Think of something. Distract him.” Mia turned into a paved driveway and hit a garage control. The door ahead of them rolled up, and she steered the van inside. There was a newish VW Bug in the next stall.

Nate said, “You live here?”

“My sister does. She lets me store the van here when we have gear in it, for safekeeping. I’m *not* unloading tonight.”

Carlos groaned. “Hell to the no. Thanks for driving, Mimi.”

She nudged him. “Don’t call me that.”

They all got out, and Nate followed Carlos through the open door to the driveway. There was a light breeze, and thin clouds flitted across a half-moon, low in the sky. The air felt like rain, but the ground was dry. Mia hit a control on the garage wall to close the door, then turned to Carlos and hugged him hard. They swayed together for a long time. A flicker of moonlight glistened off Carlos’s cheek.

Eventually they separated, and Mia came over to Nate. She hugged him too, fast and hard. “Take care of him,” she murmured in his ear, and he nodded.

She stepped back and tossed her keys in the air. “I’ll call you. Tomorrow. Late.”

Nate moved over beside Carlos, and they watched as she wheeled a battered Honda bike from around the side of the garage, took the helmet off the handlebars and jammed it over her tangled dreads. She swung a leg over, waved without looking back, and rumbled down the drive and into the street. They stood there, looking after her, listening as the whine of the bike rose and then faded.

Carlos said, "I'm parked on the street."

Nate followed him to his car, and they got in without a word. The drive to Carlos's place took about ten minutes, and Nate thought up and discarded a dozen opening lines, before deciding maybe he was best off just keeping his mouth shut. Eventually they turned in at a rutted parking lot. Carlos pulled into a space, turned off the car, and got out, still without a look or a word. Nate hesitated, then got out himself. He caught up with Carlos halfway down the walk. "Hey. What's with the silent treatment?"

"Huh?" Carlos turned to him, blinking, barely managing a shredded whisper. "Nothing. I'm just tired. I'm not sure I've ever been this tired."

Nate's eyes prickled. He put a hand out and pressed his fingers to Carlos's lips. "Don't talk then. Show me your bed."

"Not up for much," Carlos mumbled under his fingertips.

"Not for sex, you dumbass. To sleep."

"Oh. 'Kay." Carlos turned and climbed the front steps, in through a lobby where the second door stood propped open, and then up a flight of stairs. At the top he turned left, past a few doors, and opened number 214. "Here."

Nate looked around as Carlos closed and locked the door. It was a small studio apartment, cluttered and dim in the light from a streetlight outside the window. Carlos crossed the room and flicked on a bedside lamp. He turned to Nate and rasped, "You want the bathroom first?"

"Nah. You go."

Carlos tossed his keys and wallet on the counter, grabbed a piece of clothing off the floor, went through the only other door, and shut it firmly. The sound of water running and a few random thumps came through the thin veneer of the door. Nate turned in a circle, noticing the poster of Jimi Hendrix on one wall, and of early Carcass in concert on the other, the musicians silhouetted, all black T-shirts and whipping long hair and dark guitars. There was a bookcase full of paperbacks, a desk mounded high with papers, an acoustic guitar in a stand, and an old couch in front of a small TV. The bed was just a double. Good thing they were both short.

Carlos was taking his time in the john. Putting his game face back on, maybe, although Nate hoped he didn't feel the need when it was just them. He wandered over to the bookcase, glancing through the titles. It was an eclectic mix, Lee Child and John Steinbeck, China Miéville and Patricia Briggs,

Spanish-language titles by Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar. The books were mostly paperbacks and worn with use. A small frame was propped up with a calligraphied quote, done with ribbon loops and flowers. He bent closer to look at it.

From behind him, Carlos said hoarsely, “*Les diré que llegué de un mundo raro.*’ ‘I will tell them that I came from a strange world.’ It’s a line from a song I used to play sometimes. My cousin made that for me. She was into ribbon embroidery.”

“That’s cool.” Nate straightened and turned. “I wasn’t snooping.”

“I wouldn’t have said you could come in if I cared.” Carlos was dressed in a pair of gray sweatpants slung low on his hips, his face and hair damp. He waved behind him and whispered, “Blue towel’s pretty clean.”

“Save your voice.” Nate went to the kitchen, opened the fridge, and found a bottled water. He turned and tossed it to Carlos, who caught it automatically. “Drink that. I’ll just be a minute.”

In the bathroom, he peed and used a corner of the blue towel in some water to wipe up a bit. His reflection in the mirror was far from his best, but he didn’t look half as wrecked as Carlos. Which made sense. He stripped down, wishing he’d worn underwear for once, because he didn’t want to look like he was pushing. When he stepped out, Carlos was in bed, sitting up, chugging the water.

Nate set his clothes aside and gestured at himself. “This isn’t like some kind of hint. Do you want me to borrow a pair of shorts?”

Carlos shook his head and flipped the corner of the covers in invitation. Nate eased into the bed, trying not to make too much unwanted contact, but Carlos set the empty bottle aside, turned out the light, and rolled over, sliding his ass in against Nate’s thighs. Nate eased an arm around him, palm on his chest. He could feel Carlos’s heart beating, too fast for sleep. He murmured, “I’d sing you a lullaby, but there’s a reason I’m not in Eli’s band.”

Carlos snorted softly.

“Would you sleep better if I take the couch?”

Carlos’s grunt sounded negative, and he pressed a hand over Nate’s, pushing Nate’s palm tighter against the sparse hair above his nipple. Despite his resolve, Nate felt a stirring of interest, but he managed to hold still and not acknowledge it. That got tougher as Carlos squirmed around, rubbing up

against him. “Dude, you keep doing that and neither of us is gonna sleep,” Nate said. He tried to roll away, but Carlos reached behind him, and pressed against the small of his back, holding them together.

“I need—I want to get off. Maybe then I’ll sleep.” Carlos coughed. “But, like this? Can you get off just frothing like this?”

“Try me.” Nate slid his hand lower to tweak Carlos’s nipple, and raised a knee, putting his foot on the mattress for leverage. He was already nearly hard, and it didn’t take more than a few hip thrusts, sliding up along the warm skin of Carlos’s back, to be achingly ready.

Carlos moved his hand from Nate’s spine to his hip, still pulling them together. He pressed his ass back, mirroring Nate’s motions, speeding and intensifying the rub. Nate grunted and slid down the bed slightly, fitting into Carlos’s warm asscrack, soft fabric sliding around his shaft. “What do you need?”

“Um. Hand. I’m gonna rub myself. No problem.”

Nate couldn’t tell if the tightness of Carlos’s tone was hoarseness or arousal or anxiety. “Do you, um, want me to touch you?”

For a moment Carlos froze, then he murmured, “I don’t have much, down there.”

“Does it like to be touched?” Nate took up slow thrusts again, kneading the muscles of Carlos’s chest with his fingers.

“Yeah.” Carlos sounded breathless. “I’m sensitive. Just, you know, small.” He reached down, shoving his sweats lower. Nate’s cock jolted as the waistband dragged down against his shaft and the smooth skin of Carlos’s ass was bared under him.

“Tell me what feels good.” Nate slid his hand lower, keeping up an easy rocking between Carlos’s ass cheeks that was enough to stay hard. He rubbed his palm firmly over Carlos’s abs, and down the thin furry treasure trail. His fingers brushed curly pubes, then some soft skin. Carlos groaned, his wrecked voice sounding almost painful.

“Still okay?” Nate murmured against his neck.

“Please. God yeah.” Carlos writhed against him, dislodging Nate from his asscrack. He kicked his sweats and the covers down and away, giving them room.

Nate slid an arm underneath Carlos's waist, wrapping him in closer. It gave him one hand for down low, and one to stroke curly chest hair, pinch tight nipples and slide up along Carlos's throat to his jaw, then down again. He nudged Carlos's thigh up, and found his own groove again. Really, this was familiar. He'd done it a dozen times with his first boyfriend when Toby didn't want him inside. Way smaller, um, dick, sure, but he could adjust. He stroked and rubbed, fingers and thumb, tweaked nipples, gripped Carlos's pecs, kneading the hard muscles. His cock slid and snubbed along Carlos's sweaty crack, bumping and dragging in wonderful not-quite-enough ways, and he moaned. "Hell, yeah."

"Lube." Carlos stretched an arm out, grabbed something off the dresser, came back with a gloppy touch over Nate's lower hand, pushing the slick between his fingers.

"Okay."

"For you too." Carlos worked his hand around behind his back and slid lube-slickery fingers along Nate's cock and into his own crack.

Nate held still and shuddered as Carlos, arm crooked behind himself, smoothed lube onto Nate, slicking up his shaft, around the sensitive head, and down the space between them. "Mm. Good."

Carlos pulled his hand free, braced his palm in front of himself on the bed, and slid his ass up and down just right, stroking over Nate. "Move it!"

"Gnh." Nate didn't need to be told twice. He took up the rhythm and the speed, foot planted firmly on the bed, gripping Carlos around the chest, sliding up between the lush mounds of Carlos's ass, gliding, liquid, stroking, squeezing, muscle and skin and lube. He leaned in tighter, until his dick strained upward, slipping and bumping. Lube was good, hell yeah. He humped against Carlos, breathing the smell of his skin, rubbing Carlos's groin down below with the same urgency, taking his cues from Carlos's deep grunts and moans and shivers.

Carlos gasped, "Close. Like that. Oh Jesus, never thought."

It was hard to pay attention, with his own arousal thrumming in his ears, but he tried to use his fingers in the ways that made Carlos moan the loudest, stroking that firm small rise of flesh as he panted and thrust. *God!* He bit Carlos's shoulder lightly, right at the base of his neck, tasting skin and sweat, breathing in the smell of his man, and Carlos *screamed* and came.

Nate kept rubbing until Carlos shoved his hand away. Then Nate yanked his arm out from under, leaned back enough to see what he was doing, and jerked himself off in fast, desperate, hard pulls, his other hand tugging at his aching balls. In less than a minute, he came, blindingly, breathlessly, coating the dimly seen hollow of Carlos's spine with his spunk. He shuddered, his back arched for one more long nerve-blind moment, and then collapsed on the bed. Every muscle felt limp and shaky, and his sigh trembled. "Hell yeah."

Carlos laughed, an odd almost-soundless shaking of his shoulders, and pounded the bed a couple of times with his fist. Then he rolled over to face Nate, and pulled him in close, arms locked like iron around him. It was too hot, too sticky, and Nate's face was squished against Carlos's neck at an angle that made it hard to breathe, but he just wrapped his top arm over Carlos's shoulders and clung tight. After a long frozen moment, Carlos let go and pushed away from him. "We're a mess. Let me get a towel."

"I don't care," Nate said.

"You will when you're glued to me in the morning." Carlos slid out of bed and padded to the bathroom without turning on the light.

Nate rolled on his back, still breathing shakily, his body limp with satisfaction. Carlos was gone long enough for him to start to doze, before he felt a towel dropped on him. He cracked an eye open. Carlos stood beside the bed, a lean dark silhouette in the dim room. "Wipe up and then toss it back here."

Nate cleaned himself with the damp corner, getting the lube off his hands and dick and pubes. "Done."

Carlos took the towel, but just threw it in the direction of the bathroom door before getting in and rolling with his back to Nate. Nate hesitated, but Carlos's ass landing on his thighs again, bare this time, was a clear invitation to spoon. They lay quietly for a while, Nate's hand lightly draped over Carlos's hip, thighs touching. Nate thought there might be more to say, but damned if his brain could come up with it. Carlos was silent too, and after a while his slow, loud breathing suggested he'd fallen asleep. Nate brushed the faintest of kisses over Carlos's bare shoulder.

This was indefinably different from anything he'd ever known, lying here with the bulk of this man against his leg and under his hand. He thought it was a good different—surely it was—the way they fit together, the way he caught himself unconsciously trailing his fingers and lips over Carlos's skin. There

was a resonance when they touched like this that felt like a magnet locking onto its mate. But still he couldn't sleep. Vague unformed worries drifted through his mind.

The cat was fine, he was certain. He'd filled food, water and litter before leaving that morning. And Eli was no doubt having the night of his life, out there somewhere. Nate's absence would be no more than a moment's disappointment. They hadn't been joined at the hip since they were ten. This, with this man in this bed, was where he was supposed to be, here with the person who needed him most, the person he wanted to take care of tonight.

He slid back a little, easing his sticky warm skin away from Carlos's without waking him. Carlos murmured something undecipherable in Spanish but didn't stir. Around them, this unfamiliar room held little clues about who Carlos was, small pieces of Carlos that he didn't yet know. He had the sudden urge to get up and check the bookcase some more, to flip through the stack of CDs in the corner, looking for guidance to what Carlos liked and wanted. For proof that he really was as straightforward as he seemed. That for once Nate had something right.

How did you ever really know anyone? He'd had awesome sex with Carlos, laughed with him, talked, dreamed, even cried with him now. But he still had a nebulous fear that he was missing something that would come back one day to bite him.

Nate turned restlessly, trying to banish old worn-thin memories. Carlos wasn't a cheater; he wasn't selfish and oblivious, interested only in his own needs. Nate didn't think Carlos would ever just walk away with a laugh like their time together didn't matter. Those other guys who'd done that to him didn't matter now.

Nate resolutely ignored the little voice that suggested maybe Carlos was too good to be true. Carlos *was* a good guy. He was worth everything Nate wanted to share with him. Really, the question was if *Nate* was good enough.

Tonight, he was confident he'd done a good job. He'd managed to take Carlos from that bleak failure-landscape he'd been in, and make him come, and make him sleep. Could he keep doing that? Could he be enough for Carlos if KnifeSwitch failed, if things got messy? For three years he'd made sure he didn't have to live up to anything more than the needs of a skittish alley cat. He'd never yet been quite enough for another man to be content.

This time, he'd do it right. This man he would keep. He promised himself. Bitter little memories of how he'd been wrong before had no power over this new chance at something good. He swore it. Still, it was a long time before he drifted off.

Chapter 13

Carlos woke with the feeling that something was very strange, but when his eyes popped open, he was in his own bed in his own room. Sun was filtering through the curtains at an angle that clearly showed he'd slept late. Which was okay, because this was a weekend. Wasn't it? He stretched and yawned, feeling his throat dry and his arms and fingers achy the way they usually were after a really intense show.

Then Nate's voice said, "Boy, you sleep like the dead."

Carlos rolled over fast, pulling the bedclothes around him. Sure enough, Nate sat in the chair by the window, fully dressed, drinking a mug of something and looking at his phone.

Carlos cleared his throat, his tongue feeling gross and coated. "I think something died in my mouth."

Nate laughed. "You still sound better than you did last night. Here." He brought over a bottled water.

Carlos was hit with a flash of *déjà vu*. "You were here last night."

Nate smiled. "No kidding." His smile faded. "Don't you remember? You weren't drunk."

"No." Carlos rubbed his face. "Yeah, I remember." He wasn't sure what he'd been thinking, to just go to bed and sleep with Nate like that. But what he remembered made him flush with heat.

"It was a great end to a very, um, exciting day." Nate went back across the room and pulled the curtains open.

Carlos blinked, sat up and stared down at the bottle, paying attention to cracking the seal on the cap like it was a surgical operation. His brain raced through all the events of the day before, the big and the small, pleasure and pain. "I really fired Foster, didn't I?" he said eventually.

"I think that's pretty much for sure."

"I've tried before, and he's weaseled his way back in."

"Mia will kill you if you let him do that again, I bet."

"Mia would be right." He sipped the water slowly, trying to get his thoughts in some kind of order. He felt light, unreal, like a wind could come along and

blow him out of bed and right out the window into the bright air. Not to fly, but to drift and fall, buffeted by whatever force went by. He shivered.

KnifeSwitch might be dead.

If Mia wanted to keep going, he would. They could audition, find a new bandmate, maybe two for a fuller sound. Maybe someone who was an amazing lead, and then he could focus on the cello, and make their sound more distinctive. But he had a sinking feeling that her hug last night hadn't just been shared disappointment, but some kind of good-bye.

He jumped as Nate set a plate on the bed beside him and nudged his leg. "Eat something. I know you didn't get dinner."

There'd been fast-food vendors at the concert, and Nate had eaten a couple of greasy brats, but Carlos hadn't been able to stomach that crap. "Thanks."

"It's toast with that almond spread you had. You need to shop. I was going to get all fancy with jam and fruit and stuff, but you don't have any."

Usually he hated having people poking about in his things, but to his surprise he just felt a bit warmer. "Did you eat anything?"

"I might have tried the spread. In a spoon." Nate picked one up and licked it.

Carlos grinned. "Not as gross as it looks?"

"Okay. So it's like high-class peanut butter. You still need to shop." Nate trailed his tongue around the spoon again.

"Are you trying to give me ideas?"

"Is it working?" Nate laughed. "No, just playing. Actually, I'd appreciate a lift back if possible. I have to work at two."

"What time is it?"

Nate pulled out his phone. "Eleven-thirty."

"Damn. I really slept in."

"You were cute."

"I'm never cute," he muttered. The water was easing his throat, and he needed to get up. He set the plate aside, swung his legs out, and then froze realizing he was completely naked. Like, no shorts, no dick, no nothing. He took a shallow breath and stood. He vividly remembered the touch of Nate's

fingers, the press against his back and teeth in his shoulder and that rush of being handled and used and satisfied in a way that left both of them crashing into sleep. Nate knew everything now. And had made him breakfast.

“I need the john,” he said casually. “Back in a minute.”

He still took time in the bathroom to put his pack-and-play back on in a pair of shorts and then pulled yesterday’s sweats over the top. The weight and bulk of his dick felt like armor against whatever came next. He scratched at his beard stubble and decided to leave it. There was a flaky patch on his back where he’d missed some jizz last night. He washed his upper body thoroughly, toweled off, and went out to find a clean T-shirt.

Nate raised an eyebrow at the shirt. “The Rolling Stones? Seriously?”

“My tía gave it to me.” He grabbed the plate off the bed and carried it to the table with the rest of his water. From his usual chair he could look out the window at the trees opposite; in the other seat, he could see Nate better. It was no contest. He sat facing Nate.

When he’d choked down the toast, overloaded with almond butter, he said, “Any plans for today?”

“Besides asking, ‘Medium, large, or extra-large?’ for seven hours.”

“Well, yeah, before or after. Or, you know, during.”

Nate’s smile was sweet and bright. “I could be persuaded.”

“It’s Sunday. And no practice. I’m pretty free.” *Maybe too free.*

“Give me a ride back to my place, and we’ll discuss it.”

Getting out of the house and on the road kept them from having to say anything much for a while. The I-5 toward Lacey had its usual mess of crazy drivers, since it wasn’t three a.m. in a leap year. But eventually the Pinto was cruising at a steady forty-three miles an hour. With slowdowns.

Nate stretched his legs in the passenger seat. “I’ll be glad to get out of these clothes. I stink like a wolverine in heat.”

“Like a *what?*”

Nate quirked an eyebrow at him. “You’ve never been to a zoo and checked out the wolverine cage?”

“Um. No.”

“Well, take it from me, they reek.”

“You’re not that bad.” Carlos didn’t mind the smell of male sweat, especially on a guy he’d slept with.

“So.” Nate hesitated, clearly trying and discarding words before they could be heard. “Last night was okay for you too, right?”

“The part where my band blew up in my face, or the sex part?”

“Dork.” Nate elbowed him.

“Don’t hit the driver. Yeah, it was fine.” *It was amazing.*

“So we’re, like, gonna stay friends and sleep together and shit, right?”

“Don’t want to shit together. Gross, dude.”

Nate coughed. “Okay. Got it.”

Carlos let a few more miles roll by before saying, “We’re kind of far apart up the fucking I-5 but yeah, I don’t want to break up.” It was his turn to fumble for words, how to ask what he didn’t want to say, but did want to know. “Does it bother you that I don’t have, you know, a regular dick?”

“Not really. We might have to talk about the sex stuff more, sometime when I’m not about to jizz all over your spine. But everyone’s got something. You are still damned fucking hot. And damned hot, fucking.”

“Mm.” Carlos made a nonsense sound and squinted. The bright sun made his eyes sting and burn. Should have put on his shades.

Nate added slowly, “I might be a better boyfriend if you tell me more, like if you’re going to have more surgeries, or if there’s stuff I should be careful about. But you don’t have to. I think we’ve proved we can get each other off.” He gave Carlos a slutty leer. “That’s all we need, right? To keep each other happy?”

Carlos was going to just nod, but he found he really needed to ask, “So... you wanna be, like, exclusive boyfriends?”

“Aren’t we? I want to be.”

Carlos let go of the wheel, reached over, and for the first time in his life held a guy’s hand while driving him home. “Yeah. We are.” Nate nodded, tipped his head back and closed his eyes. His fingers clasped Carlos’s firmly, until their palms got sticky and Carlos let go.

They drove on in silence that felt comfortable and easy. Carlos thought how it would be, having someone to talk to about, well, everything. Someone who

didn't seem to want things from him that he couldn't give. Someone he could imagine staying with long-term, and letting into all of his life.

Maybe he wasn't quite there yet. Maybe he didn't want to share the kick-in-the-gut feeling of reading "*Doctors complete first successful penis transplant*" on Facebook, and closing it down without letting himself check out the details. Not yet. But with Nate, he could imagine someday getting close enough to even talk about shit like that. Or about how hollow he felt inside, wondering if the band was dead and he was now just a dental receptionist. Or how he wanted to call home and talk to Mamá and Papá, someday, maybe, if he could get up the nerve... He shoved the emo stuff back down, and took Nate's hand again. This was good—this, right here, on a mellow summer Sunday.

There were a bunch of cars in Nate's driveway when they pulled in. Nate groaned. "Just what I wanted, a metal show."

"Those are the band again?"

"Mostly."

The main door was open, and although there was no thumping back beat, there were plenty of people in the garage. Eli spotted them as they got out. "Hey! Nate, and Carlos! Just the guys I wanted to see. Come on over here."

They glanced at each other. Carlos shrugged and followed Nate inside. Eli led them up to a vaguely familiar older guy and said, "This is Donald Naylor, the music producer. Mr. Naylor, this is my brother Nate. I showed you his cover art. And this is Carlos Medina who wrote some of our original material."

"Gentlemen." Naylor shook hands with them. "Carlos, I do want to talk to you about your songs."

"Yes?"

"Ellis, do you have a signed contract for the ones you used yesterday?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you agree, Carlos, that you sold those rights to Ellis Gold?"

"Um. I think he signed as Eli Goldstein, but yeah."

Naylor waved a hand. "As long as it's legal. That's good. Carlos, would you be able to supply more original material on short notice. Ten songs, perhaps?"

"I, um, sure. For Serpentine?"

“Yes.” Naylor gave Eli a dry look. “They’re a good band. They have the sound, the look, the talent. I think they could be big. But the songs the audience liked best were the ones you wrote. Frankly, I could hire an established writer to do material for them, but you clearly know how to get the most out of them. And you work for cheap, right?” He laughed like it was a joke, but his eyes were watchful.

“Well, cheaper than some,” Carlos said cautiously. “I do have to eat.”

“You were on stage last night too? Early on, right? *Switchblade*? Something like that?”

“KnifeSwitch,” Nate said at his elbow.

“Right.” Naylor didn’t look at him. “Anyway, you had some good material, good lyrics. Crappy sound, way too thin, you should think about adding at least two, three guys. But your songs were decent.”

“Um, thank you.”

Naylor looked around the garage. Chris, RoRo and Tom eyed him back from where they were standing by the drums. “So, gentlemen, I’ll email a link to the contract tomorrow, after my lawyers check the details. Do have your lawyers check it as well.” He turned to Carlos. “You too. I’ll have a clause in there for new material at a set frequency and price. It’s part of the package deal. I want to get an album done, some video singles and a tour lined up. That means each of you—” he met their eyes in turn “—is responsible for making this work. Carlos, that cello you played onstage, you might write that into a song or two. I’ll add a clause for payment and rights for studio work, if we use you for that. It wouldn’t hurt to have a gimmick, something more uncommon for Serpentine’s sound.”

“Um.” Carlos glanced at Eli. Was he going to let Naylor effectively say, “*You might have to let this guy in your band sometimes*”? Eli gave him a bland look back, so apparently he was.

Naylor nodded briskly to Eli. “Talk to your boys, talk to your lawyers, e-sign the contracts. If you want changes, you can contact my lawyers and they’ll relay. Once all the signatures are on the line, you boys are going to *work*. Any questions?”

Carlos had a dozen, but Eli shook his head. Naylor stuck out his hand and shook Eli’s firmly. “I’m certain Serpentine and Ellis Gold will be one of my better productions. Congratulations.”

They all stood still, as if turned to stone, as Naylor walked out the big door, got into his BMW, and pulled away. They watched his car as it reached the road, and turned into the traffic. Then Tom whooped, grabbed Chris around the waist and whirled him around, and set him down with a loud smacking kiss on the top of his head. “Hands off! I don’t like you that much!” Chris protested.

Eli blew out a loud breath. “Well.”

Carlos said, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to walk into your parade like that.”

“Nah. He’d already asked if we knew where to find you. You were part of the package from the start.”

“You’re okay with that?”

“Hell, yeah. Write some more songs like the last ones, and I’ll kiss you myself.”

Carlos looked at Tom. “What about you? I’m stepping on your toes here.”

Tom shook his head. “You heard what he said. If not you, he’s gonna hire someone else. No problem, man, I’m way more of a drummer than a songwriter.” He grinned, showing teeth. “I’m just way more of a songwriter than the rest of these sorry bastards.”

Chris shoved him. “I can write songs.” He warbled, “*There once was a band guy named Tom, who wrote shit that always sounds wrong—eep!*” Tom grabbed his arm and tickled him to the floor.

Eli said, “I guess we’re all getting some changes. He wants me to lose ‘Goldstein’—too Jewish. Chris has to grow his hair, RoRo shaves his beard, and Tom quits writing songs, while you start.”

“Okay...” Carlos said slowly. “I can do that, I guess.”

“Well, don’t give up your day job,” Eli said. “Who knows how this will go? The contract sounds complicated, especially if you’re going to record with us too.” He sighed. “Run it by your lawyer. Do you even *have* a lawyer?”

“Nope.”

“Me neither.”

“Uncle Aaron,” Nate put in. “He’s a lawyer.”

“Divorce lawyer.”

“He’ll find someone.”

Eli gave Carlos a smile. “Family networking is good. You want him to check out your deal too?”

“Yeah. I can pay for his time. I think. If it’s not till after my next paycheck.”

A deeper voice behind him said, “I’ll pay for it.”

Carlos whirled, as Nate said, “Dad! Hey, hi.”

“Hi, boys.” Nate’s father raised his hands, a foil-topped bottle in each. “I brought bubbly.”

Eli said, “The producer just left. You should have been here.”

His dad said, “It’s your band, son. Your life. But I *will* pay for a top lawyer to look at the contract and make sure it’s fair all around. I want to see you get your break, more than anything, as long as it’s a real, fair break.”

“I can pay my share,” Carlos said stubbornly.

Nate’s dad shook his head. “I was careless and could have hurt you a while back. I’ve felt really bad about it. Let me make it up to you now.”

“Yeah, let him,” Nate said. “Lawyer time is freaky expensive, like, hundreds of dollars an hour. Let Dad feel better and save you the big bucks.”

Carlos thought about his bank account, swallowed, and said, “Okay, I guess. If you’re doing it for everyone else. Thank you.”

Nate’s father had his same smile, the one that could warm Antarctica, and he turned it on Carlos full blast. “Thank *you*. Now, let’s pour the bubbly. Eli, you have cups out here?”

A woman said, “Paper cups.” She came in, carrying wine glasses, the stems tucked between her fingers, and glanced around. “Perfect, I brought eight. Come and take them, boys, because I can’t set them down.”

The guys went to her, sliding their glasses from her hands. Carlos hung back and Nate went and took two, but she followed him back across the room to Carlos. “Hi, I’m Rebecca. You must be Carlos.”

“Um, yeah, hi.”

“It’s good to meet you. Nate’s been singing your praises for weeks now.”

“No, I haven’t,” Nate said. “Not until Dad, um, spilled the beans. Anyway, I can’t sing.”

“Silence, boy child,” his mother said. “You know what I mean.” She turned back to Carlos. “It’s nice to see him happy.”

“Yeah, um, me too.” He’d never met a guy’s parents before, and this was really awkward, but for Nate he’d try to do better. “It’s nice to meet you too, miss. Ma’am.”

She laughed. “Call me Rebecca. I hope we’ll get to talk sometime, but for right now we have something to celebrate.”

“That’s right.” Nate’s dad came over and tipped a splash of champagne into their glasses. “A toast.” He raised his glass high, and so did the rest, although the guys looked a bit sheepish. “To a great bunch of musicians who’ve been playing their hearts out for no reward for—how many years now, Eli?”

Eli glanced at Tom. “We started when, eighth grade? And Chris was ninth?”

“Summer before,” Tom said.

“Thirteen years then,” his dad continued. “Lucky thirteen. Congratulations on your success, and best wishes for the sky being the limit.”

Nate’s mom said, “Hear, hear!” and raised her own glass.

They all drank to that. Champagne wasn’t Carlos’s favorite booze, and the bubbles went up his nose, but the taste was sweet and sharp and clean. Nate leaned over and clinked their glasses together. “And to a guy who has a way with words, who’s going to write them the best fuc—”

“Nathaniel,” his mother cautioned.

He grinned at her. “Best freaking songs ever. Carlos!”

They raised their glasses again and toasted him, while he squirmed with embarrassment. When the glasses were empty, Nate said, “I hate to drink and run, but I have to work. C’mon, Carlos, let’s go upstairs.”

“What kind of work is that gonna be?” Chris said.

“Don’t you wish you knew.” Nate took Carlos’s glass from him and set it down on a shelf against the wall. “Seriously, I have a shift. I’ll see you all much later.”

“You could stick around, though,” Eli said to Carlos. “We should talk about songs and shi—” He glanced at his mother. “—stuff.”

She raised her glass to him. “Good save.”

Carlos said, “Yeah, okay. I guess.” He felt drunk, which was impossible on half a glass of champagne. His head spun, though, and he wasn’t sure whether he had stomach cramps or his breakfast was tap-dancing.

Nate took his hand, and he let him, willing to be tugged toward the door. “You can have him later,” Nate said. “After I leave. And no freaking music until I’m gone, right? My head’s still pounding from last night.”

Eli waved his glass at him. “We still have booze. Your head’s safe. Empty, but safe.”

“Lame, bro,” Nate called back. He towed Carlos around the corner and up the stairs. The door at the top opened with one jiggle of the key, and Carlos ducked past him into the warm, stuffy apartment.

“Damn, let me get the AC.” Nate locked the door and went to turn on the air. The rattle and hum eased the hollow sound in Carlos’s head. Nate came back and put gentle hands on his arms. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I guess. It’s been a strange day. A strange twenty-four hours.”

“I bet.” Nate leaned in and kissed the angle of his jaw, nipped at his earlobe, then stepped away and let go. “But some of it was good, right?”

“Some of it was awesome.”

“I hate that I have to leave, but I need to get changed. Work sucks. Wait, here.” He hurried to his kitchen counter and fished something out of a drawer. “Here.”

“What’s that?”

“Key. To my place,” Nate said, like it was no big thing, although something about his expression said that maybe it was. “You should hang out here for a while. It’s dumb to drive right back. You can talk to Eli about music, find yourself something to eat, maybe go for a run if those shoes are okay.”

Carlos looked down at his sneakers. “They’d do. But—”

Nate made the keys jingle. “What else would you do? Sit around your place and worry? Take them. Hang out here. If you get bored you can drive over to the Top Cup and harass me, or even go home if you want. Just don’t let the cat out and text me if you leave, so I know.”

Carlos took the keychain slowly. Nate tapped the silver key. “Front door. You have to jiggle it. That other one is for the back door to the garage. There’s a hatch in the ceiling there, leads into my closet. If this door ever really jams I can get in that way.”

“Oh.” Carlos closed his hand on the keys. “What do you want me to do with them if I do head home.”

“Keep them.” Nate curled his fingers around Carlos’s fist and pressed it shut. “Keep them.”

Carlos blinked hard, his voice lost somewhere in his aching throat.

Nate stepped back. “So I really need to have a shower and change and go. Will you be okay here? *Mi casa es tu casa*. Did I get that right?”

“Something like that. Yeah, this is great.”

“As long as you save me a beer, what I have is yours. Wait, save two beers.” He hurried into his bedroom, came out a moment later naked with clothes in hand, and ducked into the bathroom. The shower came on.

Carlos stood with his fist wrapped so tight around the keys he could feel them digging into his palm. *Shit, what a day*. He thought momentarily about refusing the keys, backing away from the whole *mi casa* thing, but the idea hurt so bad he stuffed the keychain deep in his pocket. *Not going under, not giving in*. Not to his parents when they made him go out in a dress to his ankles rather than letting him wear pants, not to the haters who called him names in school, not to the cop who sneered at the wetback weirdo, and not, *not*, to his own chickenshit fears of finally having what he wanted most.

He went over to the fridge, pulled out a soda, and sat at the kitchen table. The shower and the AC blurred in a soothing white noise. Overhead he heard a rustle that had to be the cat, but he couldn’t spot her. Still it was okay to have company.

He opened the can, took a sip. Lyrics swirled in the back of his mind, unformed, waiting. He knew he’d write a song today. Maybe more than one. Write and run and work out because yeah, he didn’t get to keep the muscles without putting in the time. Talk to Eli, one on one, and make sure he really was okay with hitching the band’s success to Carlos’s songs. Hang out here and think about Nate, and how being followed by a vampire-boy who turned out to be nothing of the sort had changed his life.

Maybe call Mia. That would be tough. Maybe set up a meeting. Some things needed to be talked about face-to-face. He was still imagining that conversation when the shower cut off. Nate came out toweling his hair, black jeans on but his T-shirt tucked in a pocket. Carlos looked at him and felt a rush of emotion so pure it made him dizzy.

He set his soda down, crossed the room and reached for Nate, skimming his hands over Nate’s shoulders, down his elegant neck and across his flat, smooth chest. Nate gave him a goofy smile. “What?”

“You are so fucking perfect.”

“Or perfect, fucking. Wait, I used that joke already.” He sobered, dropping the towel to touch fingertips to Carlos’s neck, then his lips. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Better than.” In that moment he willed it to be true.

“I wish I didn’t have to work. Hold that thought, okay? And if you want to just hang here and not talk to anyone, do that. You can touch base with Eli tomorrow.” Nate slid his hand lower to rub Carlos’s chest through his T-shirt. “There’s no rush. Maybe you should take it easy, sleep on it. You have to do what’s best for you, not just him.”

Carlos almost laughed at the concern in Nate’s eyes, not in amusement but in wonder. *How long since anyone looked at me like that, like I matter most?* Maybe forever. He’d never been the easy one to love. It was a blessing beyond hope that Nate seemed to like the challenge. “I’m fine. Do you want a lift to work?”

“Hell, no. No reason for you to go back and forth twice. I won’t say no to a cold pop, though.”

Carlos went and got him one, and Nate chugged it as the AC hummed and the room cooled slowly. When he was done he burped, grinned, and tossed the can into the sink. Untucking the shirt from his pocket, he pulled it over his head and flicked a comb through his hair. “I’ll grab food at work, but you should eat some lunch. See you later?”

Carlos took hold of him, pinning his arms with a strong grip, and kissed him hard. “I’ll be here.” He added another kiss, open-mouthed and deep.

When he let go, Nate staggered back. “Um, wow, I’ll look forward to that. Now I *really* wish I didn’t have to go to work.”

“I hope you get good tips.”

Nate turned and wiggled his ass, showcased in the tight jeans. “I always get good tips.”

Carlos smacked his rump. “Not that kind of good.”

Nate grabbed him, smooched him loudly, and hurried for the door. “Later. Text me. Or if you’re doing something, um, interesting, Snap me.”

“I’ll save the, um, interesting for when you get home.”

“Good thought.” Nate slipped out the door, clattered down the stairs and was gone.

Carlos wandered around the apartment for a bit, then decided he really should run. Clarity. Sometimes working out really hard could give him that. He could use it right now. Not to mention, he kind of owed the guy who was being so good to him not to get flabby the moment they hooked up. Running was good.

He took his phone out with him, and when he was walking back, cooling down, it chimed a text. He stopped under a shady tree, wiped his hands on his thighs, and pulled it out of his pocket.

From Mia: *So, we should talk, I guess, but I'm too chicken so I want to do it this way*

He started to text back, then said, "Fuck it." He hit her contact. It rang four times before she answered.

"Um. Yeah?"

"Hey. Mia. What the hell?"

"You're not supposed to turn around and call me when I'm being a wimp over texts."

"Too bad. What?"

There was a long silence on her end, then she said, "I think I'm done."

He leaned carefully against the thick trunk of the tree, holding the phone tighter. "Done? With?"

"Damn it."

"With the band? With me?"

"God, no, not with you." He heard her sniff loudly. "But with the band, with performing, yeah."

His heart beat faster. "Come on, Mia. You're a hell of a drummer."

"Yeah, I know. But I've been doing this a long time, you know? Spending every free minute practicing, or playing, or driving two hours somewhere to hang out for six hours and sell crap and play a one-hour set."

"It's worth it."

"Half the time we don't even make back our gas money."

"It's not just about the money. You know that!"

“I know. But it doesn’t help.” She sighed. “I was offered a promotion at work. Evening manager. But it means I’ll work weekends and a bunch of evenings. I won’t be able to take off to go play a gig.”

“Ooh, you can spend your evenings showing off little lacy things to fat ugly women.”

“Carlos! Fuck you.”

“I’m sorry.” He rubbed his face. “I didn’t mean that.”

“You’re a real pig sometimes.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I like my job. I want to take this promotion. In fact, I’m going to.”

“Mia!” He spoke faster. “Listen, I might have a gig with Serpentine, writing songs for them. I’ll have a bit of money coming in. If you need more, you could keep our whole cut from any shows—”

“Getting forty bucks instead of twenty, every third weekend, doesn’t make up for turning down a promotion.”

“I guess. Fucking Foster!”

“It’s not just about him. Yeah, that makes it easy to say now’s the time. But I’ve been thinking about quitting for a while. And I only have another three days to say yes or no to the job. So I’m going to say yes.”

“I can’t talk you out of it?”

“No.” Her voice dropped lower. “Carlos, you’re way better than me.”

“Bullshit.”

“Way more determined, then. You’re too stubborn to give up, and that’s good. In a few days I’ll want to hear about this gig with the Snake-boys.”

“It’s just writing a few songs.”

“For a band that’s moving up. You’ll be great.”

I don’t know if I can do this without you. They’d been together for a long time. “I’m kind of used to you,” he muttered.

“Aw, how sweet. I’m used to you too, snookums.” Mia’s laugh was unconvincing. “But you know I’m right. It’s time for me to let this stupid dream go.”

“It’s not *stupid!*”

“Hopeless, then. And I won’t mind getting away from rooms full of drunk guys whose only reason to like watching me play is ’cause it makes my boobs bounce.”

“You have actual fans. Real ones.”

“A few. They’ll live.”

And what about me? Will I live? “I guess I should say congrats on the promotion.”

“Don’t strain yourself.”

“I hope it works out.”

“Me too. And I still want to hang out sometimes. I want to see Nate again. You know, I don’t know if I could have done this if you didn’t have Nate. It helps knowing you’re not alone.”

“So if I ditch Nate, you’d stay in the band?”

She snapped back, “Would you ditch him? If the answer was yes?”

“Jesus, don’t ask me that.” Without trying, the sound of Nate’s voice in his ear, the driving heat of his body, the gentle press of his lips on skin, came to Carlos in a vivid flash. “No. Maybe not.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“So now what?”

“So now I’m going to hang up and get drunk, baby. You do whatever works for you. And in a couple of days when the hangover fades, we can talk about the equipment and the practice space rent and all.”

“Right.”

“It’s for the best. I know it.”

“I guess.”

“At least now you don’t have to audition a bunch of guitarists with egos bigger than their talents.”

He didn’t answer that.

After a moment she said, “Sorry. I’m trying for the bright side. I’m sorry I killed your band, Carlos.”

“Foster mortally wounded it. This is like a mercy killing.”

“God, don’t make me cry.”

“Why would that make you cry?” His own eyes were dry and aching.

She sniffed. “Hormones? Dammit, keep the name, okay? Maybe you’ll relaunch KnifeSwitch someday.”

His chest hurt too much to breathe. “Hang up, Mia.”

“I love you, Carlos. You’re still my BFF.”

“Bye.” He touched the phone, then slid it into his pocket.

The air was warm, and sweat dampened his shirt until it clung to his back. At least he was in the shade. The branches overhead barely moved in the still of the afternoon. He turned around to stare at the tree trunk. An ant made its way upward, navigating the ridges and grooves of the bark. To the ant, those little clefts were deep valleys, and the raised parts were mountain ranges, hiding the unknown future. “It’s all bark, little ant,” he said. “No gold in them thar hills.”

Nate’s mother said from behind him, “Carlos?”

He jumped and whirled around. “What the *fuck!*” Then he saw the bottled water she was holding out to him. He felt his face flush with heat. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“No, I shouldn’t have snuck up on you. I saw you coming back from your run, and I thought you might want some water.”

“That was nice of you.” He took it, opened the cap, and drank. “Yeah, real nice, thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I take it Nate’s at work?”

“Yeah.”

“He likes you a lot, you know.”

“Um, I hope so.” It felt so odd, having someone’s mother, his *boyfriend’s* mother, standing there smiling at him for being gay with her son. He kept wanting to look over his shoulder.

“He’s had a couple of other boyfriends through the years,” Rebecca said thoughtfully. “He got hurt pretty badly when they broke up. Especially the guy that cheated on him.”

“I can imagine.” Nate was nothing if not up front, and he’d have been really hurt to find a guy he cared about was a liar. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Good to hear.” She smiled at him. “You seem distracted, and I don’t want to intrude. But I’m looking forward to getting to know you better. Nate’s been so happy lately.”

“I’m, um, glad. Uh, me too, you know.”

“Well, maybe you have lots of friends and family around and don’t need more, but I want you to know that any boyfriend of Nate’s is a friend of ours. So if you need anything, remember you can ask us too. Okay?”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Carlos.” She turned and headed back toward the house, across the back lawn.

Carlos stared after her, then turned back to the tree. The ant was still climbing, backtracking, like it was looking for something. “Are you confused too, little ant?” Carlos sucked down the rest of the water, gulp by fast gulp. It was good, but it didn’t fix his whirling brain. “Hey, insect, you know where there’s anything fermenting out here? I think I need a drink.”

Chapter 14

The next Saturday, Nate was sketching some fresh ideas for a Serpentine album cover, and Carlos was lounging on the bed across the room, watching a video. Abruptly, footsteps thudded up the stairs outside, and there was a pounding on the door. Nate jumped, drew a crooked line, and cursed under his breath. At least it wasn't ink. He gritted his teeth and set his pencil down. Carlos looked up at him, eyebrows raised, and Nate met his glance with a shrug.

He stood up from his sketchboard and strode to the door. When he yanked it open, Eli stood on the landing, breathing hard, his face dark and stormy.

Nate snapped, "Hey! What the hell? You made me—"

Eli cut him off, pushing past him into the apartment. "Where is he? I know he's here. That piece of shit he drives is parked out there."

Carlos jumped up off the bed and stood, frowning. "Me?"

"Yeah. You." Eli strode forward into the bedroom and poked him in the chest. "Motherfucker! How could you do that?"

Carlos batted his hand away angrily. "Do what? Breathe? Fuck your brother?"

"Stop!" Nate hurried over and grabbed Eli's wrist. "What are you doing?"

"You know what he did?" Eli turned to him, and Nate was stunned to see actual tears welling in his eyes. "He fucked us all over for a stupid hundred bucks!"

"I what!" Carlos shoved him back, palm against his chest. "I never did anything for a hundred bucks. You couldn't pay me enough to fuck you, *pendejo*."

"Yeah." Eli turned back to him, his lip curled in disgust. "You're all about sex and money, huh? Just like Nate's other boyfriends. Losers, leeches. But you're the worst."

Nate yelled, "Eli! If you don't start explaining I'm gonna kill you myself."

"You want me to explain?" Eli stuffed a visibly shaking hand in his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. "Read that."

Nate took it and unfolded it, a printed email. He turned toward Carlos to let him read over his shoulder, but Carlos just stared at Eli with a cold, narrow-eyed gaze. *Okay, read it aloud, then. He should know.*

“Hey Serpentine, I heard you play at Sparkfest. Your best song ‘Tongues and Ashes’ was copied from my blog, date July 10 2011. See link. You stole that song. You are cheats and phonies. I’ll tell your label and your manager and everyone. Or I’ll put your a thief on YouTube and who will buy your shit then? Your going down.”

Nate swallowed. All that came to mind was, “Bad grammar. For a song writer.”

Carlos looked at him blankly, then glared at Eli. “You can’t *believe* that shit.”

“I didn’t. But then I checked out the link, and there it was. Sure enough. ‘Tongues and Ashes’ lyrics, almost word for word. Alongside what this bastard was having for lunch in 2011 and poems about flying.”

“Impossible.” Carlos’s face darkened. “Who is he? Show me!”

“Damned right, I’ll show you.”

Carlos strode to the bed, picked up the tablet, and shoved it at Eli. “Now.”

Eli jerked it out of his hands, set it on the table and clicked through some pages. “I need the link from my email.”

Nate waited, his pulse fast and furious, stealing his breath. *Impossible. I know Carlos. I’ve seen him writing, hour after hour.* But a harsh little voice reminded him that he thought he knew Garrett too, until suddenly he found himself tied up and helpless. He thought he knew Darryl, until he found out about the other guys, and the lies. Deke, until finals were over and he didn’t need Nate anymore. He remembered asking to see Carlos’s work, more than once, and having the notebook snapped shut in his face. *Please, not again. God, please, no.* He didn’t think he could handle being made a fool of again.

Eli tapped the screen one more time, yanked it back when Carlos made a grab for it and held it out to Nate. “There.”

Nate took the tablet. The blog name was *Better With Grass* and the logo was a pot leaf outlined in gold. No actual blogger name, which maybe wasn’t a surprise. The entry was dated 2011, and among a description of getting high and a list of all the food eaten while high was, *“I also wrote this poem. I like*

this one. Maybe might publish it someday.” The lyrics were almost word for word the ones he’d heard the band practice a hundred times in the last two weeks.

Nate clicked back a screen, scrolled up, then down. There was no doubt this entry was written among several others for 2011, talking about the legalization drive, back before the 2012 elections. There was no indication saying “*edited...*” and when he clicked to the most recent post it was clear the blog was now inactive, and had been for a while. He flipped through, reading bits and pieces of the weird poetry that clogged it, along with praise of weed and odd libertarian philosophy. He found another post, a month earlier, with a short poem that sounded very familiar. Then a third bit of poetry he recognized as one of Carlos’s choruses. There they sat in black and white, what had seemed like original lyrics, now apparently pirated from the stream of posts for summer 2011. He got out of the page, searched the blog name on Google and went back in that way instead of the emailed link, retrieved 2011. July. There it was. “Tongues and Ashes” lyrics. He held the tablet out to Carlos. He felt sick, and empty, and angry. “Explain that.”

Carlos looked him in the face for a long moment, before slowly taking the tablet from his hand. Then he set it on the counter behind them, and turned away, poring over the screen. For a while, he tapped around on it, his back hunched more and more with each minute that passed. Nate watched, trying not to care how Carlos pulled in on himself, how his breathing stumbled, and resumed fast and ragged.

Too good to be true. Apparently what he’d taken for his own stupid paranoia, what he’d refused to believe, had been his subconscious knowing better. No one was ever what they seemed. Carlos swallowed audibly, and Nate clenched his fists to not reach for him. *Yeah, caught, you cheating bastard. Explain that! Please...* Nate bit his cheek hard, tasting the salt-tang of blood.

When Carlos straightened and turned, his eyes were bleak. “It has to be a cheat, a fake. I wrote that song myself, two years ago. For us. KnifeSwitch. But it needed more guitars to sound right. We recorded it once for fun, but we couldn’t play it in concert, and I never released the recording. That’s why I gave it to you. Eli, I swear!”

Nate said, “Can you prove you wrote it from scratch? Do you have the rough drafts? Anything?”

“I wrote it mostly on napkins, at this sucky party we were at. I didn’t keep them.”

“Yeah, right,” Eli drawled.

Carlos didn’t even look at Eli. “Nate, you have to believe me. It’s my own work. You know how I write. You’ve seen me.” He hurried into the bedroom and brought back the bigger of his music notebooks. “In here, there’s a bunch of songs. Lyrics, notes, scratched out, fixed. My own work. Really!”

“You’ve never shown me any of it,” Nate said, rubbing it in like salt in the wound of his naive trust. “And you don’t have that one in there?”

“Well, no.”

Eli suddenly snatched the book out of Carlos’s fingers. “Maybe you’re just faking it, huh? Scribble in the book for a while, then *‘find’* the lyrics?” He made finger quotes around “find”.

“Give me that.” Carlos’s voice was low and dangerous. “That’s personal. You don’t get to read it.”

Eli backed up three steps, flipping it open, and glanced down. “Ooh, yeah, wonderful lyrics. *‘Your love makes me itch, Makes me twitch—’*”

Carlos tackled him, yanking the book away. Eli shoved him back hard enough to knock him against the counter. They both breathed hard, faces flushed, fists clenched.

Nate said, “Wait, stop!”

Neither one bothered to listen. Carlos came off the counter with a roar, swinging a fist into Eli’s gut. Eli slammed a hand against his shoulder, using his height and weight to drive Carlos to the floor. Nate dove in, getting between them, yelling wordlessly. Someone landed a smack to his ear that made him yelp, and then they all scrambled apart.

Nate rubbed his cheek, trying not to tear up. *Fuck. Fuck!* “Carlos. Can you do anything to *prove* you’re not lying? *Anything?*”

Carlos stood slowly, notebook still clutched in one hand. His dark eyes were flat and still, his jaw tight. “No. No proof.”

Come on, something.

Eli said bitterly, “Do you know what you’ve done? You’ve broken that shiny new contract we just signed. Remember the plagiarism clause? One fucking *week* and we’re all screwed.”

Nate said uncertainly, “Maybe you could buy those lyric rights from the blog?”

Eli turned on him. “I don’t care about one damned song! I care that this fucking boyfriend of yours is a liar and a thief and we tied our whole success to him and now we’re fucked up the ass. And so are you!”

“Fuck you both,” Carlos said, low and fast. “Mostly you, Nate. You claim to be my boyfriend, but you don’t trust me?”

“I’ve done trust,” Nate said bitterly. “It ended up with me—” He stopped there, because he’d never told Eli the rest, the bad stuff he’d, yeah, *trusted* Carlos enough to talk about. He narrowed his stinging eyes in a glare. *Prove to me that you’re different.*

“I’m walking out that door, right now.” Carlos stared at Nate, still with that closed expression.

If he’d pleaded, seemed sorry, or tried to somehow explain why he did it, Nate might’ve tried to meet him halfway. If he’d been that desperate, if he’d admit to stealing to keep his band going, well, Nate wasn’t heartless. He knew Carlos had lived for his band. But he hated when a liar kept on lying after he was caught. “*I didn’t. Really!*” Just like Darryl, confronted with at least two guys he’d been sleeping with, still saying, “*Don’t worry, baby. They’re just friends. Really!*” Like Deke, back in school. “*I only want you to do my homework problems so we’ll have more time to fuck. Really!*” Really, hah! Did they *all* think Nate was that stupid?

“How can we believe you?” Nate asked quietly. “It’s right there. July 2011. Even if you wrote the song two years ago, that’s still long after that blog post. It’s not just somewhat similar, it’s almost word for word. I don’t believe in coincidences that big.”

Carlos nodded, slowly and jerkily, like a puppet pulled by a clumsy puppeteer. “Okay. Then I’m gone. Hey, Eli?”

“What!”

He swallowed audibly. “I swear, this blog guy is lying, somehow. I’ll find out how.”

Eli just pointed to the door. “I knew this whole chance was too fucking good to be true.” His voice broke. “I knew it.”

Carlos opened his mouth as if to say something else, then shut it again, his lips pressed in a thin line. Without another look at Nate, he walked to the door, went out, shut it behind him. Nate and Eli stood still, as his footsteps pounded in a rush down the stairs and were gone.

Nate turned to Eli. “Well, I sure can pick ’em, can’t I?” His laugh had a dangerous wobble.

“I don’t get it!” Eli rubbed his eyes. “I mean, he must have actually done some songs himself, right? He had to have written the music. If he could do that, why steal words...?”

“I don’t know,” Nate said miserably. The beginnings of doubt had hit him the moment the door slammed shut. What if Carlos *was* telling the truth? Had Nate just proved what a totally awful judge of character he was, one more time but in reverse? “Maybe it’s a hoax, like he said.”

“For what? They sound pissed in the email, but they didn’t ask for money. They didn’t ask for anything. And that blog has a ton of poetry on it. I’ve been scared to look further.”

“Um.” Nate was pretty sure he’d seen others of Carlos’s lyrics on that *darned* blog, but he wasn’t going to say so now.

“What if it’s not just that song? We played three of his at Sparkfest and that show was recorded and broadcast. What if we’re going to get sued for those? Or maybe sued by two *more* people? What if we’re known as the fakest band in metal history?”

“Eli—”

“Fuck!” Eli’s eyes filled with tears, overflowing down his face. “I wanted this so bad, for so long. And I thought now, finally, we were on our way. And he just burned us to the ground! God. I have to tell the guys. Our manager. Oh hell, Nate...”

Nate reached out and pulled his brother into a hug. His cheek was pressed against Eli’s broad shoulder, which was a good thing because he could hide his own face. “So sorry. I’m sorry. Maybe it’ll work out. You can drop that song, or buy it. Maybe it’ll be okay. You’re still a great band.”

“And you.” Eli’s voice against his hair sounded hard with anger. “He screwed you over worse than me. I know you liked him.”

Nate wanted to curl up in a little ball and hide under the covers, to sob and rage and not come out for days, but he said, “It’s only been a few weeks. I’ll get over him. It doesn’t matter, if we can save the band.”

Eli hugged him until it was hard to breathe. “We’ll be okay, right? One step back. We’ll figure it out.”

“Damned straight.”

After a moment they eased apart. Eli dragged the back of his hand across his face. “I could out the son of a bitch to every rabid metalhead bigot in town.”

“Don’t you dare!” Nate poked Eli’s chest roughly, even though he kind of wanted to see Carlos hurting as bad as he was now. But not that way. “Just leave him alone, you hear me? Don’t make things worse.”

“I guess. So, what do you think I should do?”

“Maybe talk to the lawyer? And see what this guy wants. Did you post on the blog at all? Send back an email?”

“The blog has no contacts listed and comments are turned off. I emailed that I wanted to talk. No answer yet.”

“Hm. Well, lawyer first then? Maybe he’s seen stuff like this before.”

“I guess.” Eli looked down, rubbing at his eyes. “I really am sorry, Nate-O. I wish I could find you a decent guy who wouldn’t screw you over.”

Nate was glad of an excuse to glare at him. “Find yourself a girl like that first, huh?”

“Right.”

“Now go away. Talk to Dad or call the lawyer, okay? Keep me in the loop.”

“If you want—”

“I want you to *go!*” He wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep it together.

“Okay.” Eli reached out as if to touch his arm but dropped his hand listlessly and turned to the door. “You should lock up behind me and be careful. In case he comes back.”

He has a key. Nate didn’t want to get into that now. He’d given Carlos that key on purpose, pushed himself to trust again, only to get it wrong one more time. *God, I’m stupid.* “I’ll be fine. He’s a thief, not violent.”

“That you know of.”

“I’m pretty sure. Anyway I’m an inch taller, and I’m used to fighting with someone your size. I’ll be fine.” He felt a little ashamed even talking about fighting Carlos. Carlos hadn’t hit Foster even when he had every reason to. He wasn’t that kind of guy.

Eli nodded and went out the door. Nate shut it without a sound, slid the lock over, and slumped with his back against it. *Damn. Shit.* His eyes ached and his head ached and his chest felt like it might split open. He still wasn't sure what to think. Everything he thought he knew about Carlos still made him doubt the evidence.

If Carlos was telling the truth, though... If it was a fraud, a scheme... Nate pulled in a ragged breath. He'd burned his bridges for damned sure, with the things he'd said. Guilty or innocent, Carlos would never speak to him again.

He should lie down. Or take a shower. Instead he roamed the apartment aimlessly, finding little hints of Carlos everywhere. Sketches of him on the desk, a book that Carlos had laughed at left out on the bookcase, the rumpled covers on the bed where he'd been sitting. Nate leaned down and touched them, imagining he could feel the heat still lingering.

He'd done this before, breaking up with someone. He should be good at it by now. He knew the shouting and anger and burning hurt would fade to dumb bewilderment, and then slowly heal. He should be able to get there faster this time. It shouldn't hurt as much. But he still ended up curled tight under those covers, each breath a painful victory, the warmth of another man's body fading from memory against the rumpled sheets.

Carlos wasn't sure how he drove home. Except maybe because he was used to this. Maybe all those times in the past helped him now. He'd kept his head high, never giving in when his father called him unnatural, when his classmates called him *machorra* and *dyke*, when a cop called him *wetback*—maybe those times had made him strong enough to hear Eli Goldstein call him a thief, and watch Nate nod in agreement.

He parked in his spot and went inside. His apartment was stifling, closed up tight. He'd expected to stay at Nate's. He should throw open a window and let some air in, but somehow he didn't want to let the world into his space. He slid into bed with all his clothes on, even his shoes. Tía Lisa would have had his head for wearing shoes in bed.

He managed a damp chuckle. Tía Lisa would've smacked his butt and made him put the shoes where they belonged, and then she'd have brought him some of Tío Ramón's *dulces de nuez* candy and said, "*Okay, hon, what's wrong.*" She would sit quietly and listen... he suddenly *ached* to hear her voice.

He pulled out his phone and dialed.

“Hey, hon, nice to hear from you.” Tía Lisa sounded cheerful. “What’s up? Still seeing that artist guy you told me about?”

He wanted to say something simple, keep it light, but his voice betrayed him. He couldn’t force a word past the lump in his throat.

After a moment she said, “Carlos?”

He managed to croak, “Yeah.”

“Something wrong, hon?” When he didn’t answer, she said more urgently, “Are you sick? Hurt?”

“No, I...” He swallowed hard, tried again. “*Dios mío*, Tía Lisa, it’s so screwed up and I don’t know *why-y!*”

“Hey, easy, hon.” Just her voice over the phone steadied him. “It’ll be okay. I promise. Tell me what happened.”

He meant to, but it was too hard to explain. He slid the phone between his cheek and the pillow and closed his eyes. “It’s complicated. But I broke up with Nate and the band is crashing and... Could you, I dunno, could you tell me about my cousins and the dogs and all. I miss you so much.”

“Sure, baby. I can do that, for a while. But I want to know what’s going on with you. All right?”

“Maybe. Later.”

“I love you, hon. Remember that. Well, Sal and María, you remember that dog they have, the Great Dane? Well the other day...”

He listened to the news, pushing her to tell him about everyone from his great uncle to his family in Mexico. Apparently his brother Juan and his wife were expecting another baby. That was nice. Mamá and Papá were no doubt thrilled. With luck big brother Fernando would tag him with the news on Facebook. Mamá and Papá might have closed the door on him for good, especially after he used his college fund to transition, but Fernando and Leticia had friended him once they were all grown up. He wasn’t really alone in the world, at all.

Tía Lisa paused now and then for a gentle question, but he just nudged her back to the good family stuff. New jobs were excellent, broken legs not so much, babies were wonderful, yeah. He kept his eyes closed and managed not to shed one tear, hearing about everyone’s lives going along, with the highs and the lows. When her voice ran down he dodged her concerns and said good-bye.

It was only midafternoon. He couldn't settle, so he got up and cleaned the apartment thoroughly, until he thought the heat might make him pass out. Then he changed into shorts and a sleeveless shirt and went outside and ran until he puked. That was definitely one of his finer moments, bent over the gutter, heaving. He made himself jog home anyway, and once he got there, he was too tired and achy to do more than just collapse into bed. He pulled his phone out of the pocket of his shorts and checked it one more time. No texts. No calls.

He turned the phone all the way off, set it on the stand by his bed and closed his eyes. Night was coming, and then eventually it would be morning. *Not going down.*

He tossed and turned. After a while, he gave in to temptation, went online and read the fucking blog, start to finish. It was long, stupid, boring, but it didn't sound a bad kind of crazy. Some of the other poetry sucked, the stuff that wasn't his, but most of it wasn't awful. It didn't sound like anyone he knew—not Foster, not Nate, not anyone he might have insulted somehow, or any of the Sparkfest bands who might have wanted the fucking contract instead of Serpentine. It was all this mellow imagery shit. Most of it would have made better folk lyrics than metal. It made *no sense!*

At some point in the long, hot, stifling, miserable darkness he must have fallen asleep, because he woke sticky and headachy, to a loud knocking on his door. For a moment his heart leaped, and his phone crashed off his pillow to the floor as he rolled out of bed. But when he hurried to open the door, instead of Nate, the person standing on his doorstep was Tía Lisa.

“Whaaat?” He stared at her.

“Gonna let me in, hon?”

“Huh? Sure.” He pulled the door open. “What are you doing here?”

“Bringing you hugs and *dulces de nuez*. Although I think you need to shower before the hugs.”

“Oh. Um, yeah.” He rubbed his face hard. “Sorry, I stink.”

“Aw, Carlos, I'm joking.” He was abruptly swept into Tía Lisa's arms. She held him tight, rocking them from side to side. “You look like crap. You're sure you're not sick?”

“I'm sure.”

“Okay.” She set him aside and bent to pick up a backpack by her feet. “You'll feel better with a shower, and I'm going to make you some breakfast.”

“How did you even get here?”

“I drove. Ten hours straight. So you’d better be nice to me.”

“Wow. Um, you shouldn’t have done that. It’s um, Monday, isn’t it? Shit, I have to get to work.”

“Call in sick,” she told him firmly.

“I’m not.”

“You’re going to scare away the clients, the way you look. And tell me you’re not going to make a hundred mistakes. What time are you supposed to go in?”

“I. Um.” He couldn’t remember. “The same as usual, I guess. Um, eight-thirty.”

“It’s almost eight. Call them.”

“They’ll be shorthanded.”

“How many sick days have you taken this year?”

He tried to remember. “One, I think. When I had the flu.” It was a small office. They tried to cover for each other, but asking a hygienist to come in and man the reception desk for him was something he saved for emergencies.

“So you’re taking another. I drove all the way here to figure out what the hell is going on, and I don’t want to sit around your apartment for eight hours and twiddle my thumbs.”

He had a sudden thought. “Hey, you’re good with computers. Maybe you could spend the day checking something out for me instead. While I work and don’t leave my boss in the lurch.”

She tilted her head, looking at him. “Something important?”

“Yeah. Let me show you.” He hurried over to his laptop, turned it on. He didn’t have the link on this computer, and searching for “Better With Grass” got thousands of hits, but adding a few more keywords let him find the blog. He scrolled down the sidebar to 2011, and located the post. It was still a sucker-punch of pain to see his words there. He’d almost wondered if he’d imagined it. It was so impossible, but no, there was his song beneath a picture of a plate of nachos. “This.”

Tía Lisa sat down and pulled the laptop a little closer. “What about it?”

“These are lyrics to one of my songs. Except this guy claims they were his first, in this post from 2011. But I swear, Tía Lisa, I *swear* I wrote this from scratch at a party, two years after this post went up.”

“Mm.” She scrolled around a bit. “Is this guy asking for money?”

“No. He’s just mad at Eli or the band or me. Or crazy. I don’t get it.”

“Well, if you wrote a song, and then it shows up in his blog post, it’s because he stole it and put it there.” She looked over at him, her eyes stormy. “So either he’s trying to hurt you, or he’s planning to ask for money.”

Her casual certainty brought an odd mix of pleasure and pain. *That’s what unconditional love and trust looks like.* It burned like acid to realize he’d expected that from Nate, that he’d trusted Nate so much he’d just assumed they were good, when Nate still had him on probation. And then flunked him on someone else’s word. “It looks like it was written in 2011. There’s nothing there about edits.”

“Sure. But you can go back and alter old blog posts anytime and most hosts won’t show evidence of the changes up front. It’s not like Facebook or something, where edits show. People go back and clean up old blogs a lot. If you can find a cached version, you might be able to see the changes.”

Carlos dropped limply in the other chair. “You mean, he could fake it with nothing showing? Just like that? And you might prove it?”

She looked at him calmly. “Yeah. In fact, I doubt he could make any legal case at all with just a blog post. It wouldn’t hold up in court, because they’re so easy to edit.”

“So what...?” He shook his head to clear it. “What do I do? How can I prove it?”

“Do you need to? Can’t you just tell him it’s a known scam and to eff-off?”

“Eli believed him. The band leader.” *Nate did too.* He had no words for that feeling.

“There are several ways you *might* get definite proof. Some host sites will keep a record of edits, at least for a while. If you go to court, a judge could order the host site to release that information.”

Carlos sighed. “I don’t know. That would take a while, wouldn’t it? He’s threatening to go to the label and the manager and wreck the band’s contract with this.”

“I bet your lawyer could tell them it was no problem. Their lawyer would probably say the same. Even if it went to court, which I can’t imagine, a judge would throw the case out.”

“Yeah, but we have—” he realized there was no “we” anymore “—*they* have to produce an album pretty fast. If they’re tied up in court over the rights to the songs, the album might just get dropped. It’s such a competitive business, I can’t imagine the label would cut a new band much slack. Even just a fake story coming out, whispers on YouTube...” He could think of a dozen rumors that had become so big they were believed, long after the evidence proved they were wrong. “They’d drop Serpentine for a different act, I’m sure.”

“So you want me to help you do something faster?”

“God, yeah. You think you could?”

“I can try.” Tía Lisa patted his hand. “Go, shower, get ready for work. I’ll get us some breakfast and then see what I can do. At least I might be able to figure out who it is and check them out. Maybe they’ve done this to other bands.”

“Okay.” He wanted to beg her to start now, but a ten-hour drive deserved breakfast. He stood and scribbled on a scrap of paper. “That’s my password, in case.”

“I’ll keep it safe. Go, get clean.”

He went and showered, with a little flicker of hope in his darkness. Tía Lisa had been his salvation in the past—the person who eventually told his parents she was going to help him transition, not stop him; the one who marched into school and told them either Vinnie Brock got suspended or she would press charges; the one who helped him buy an electric guitar; the one who argued with Tío Ramón that if Carlos chose to use his college money for top surgery, well, he was nineteen, an adult, and it was his right to choose. Tía Lisa wanted him to be the best that he could be, but in his own way, not hers, and she was the smartest person he knew. If she said they could fix this, she was the one person he might believe.

When he came out, damp and dressed and shaky from not eating last night, she set a plate of eggs and salsa in front of him. She put a slice of dry toast on the side. “You had jam, but it wasn’t open so I wasn’t sure if you were eating sugar again, or not.”

“Not so much. It was for—” He’d bought it a few days ago, in case Nate ever had breakfast here again. “Maybe you can take it back with you.”

She patted his arm. “Eat up. Go to work and don’t worry.”

Hah. But he shoveled the food in, almost feeling his body sigh at the rise in his blood sugar. He felt a little better with each mouthful. “I hate to eat and run,” he mumbled around the toast, “but I’m gonna be late.”

“Go. No worries. Call me at your lunch break.”

“Okay. If, um, anyone comes by here—” He couldn’t imagine they would, not Nate, surely not Eli, and if it got to the label’s attention they were all fucked. But there was a little part of him that liked to picture Nate standing on the doorstep. *Yeah, right before I slam it shut in his face.*

Tía Lisa said, “I’ll tell them to come back tonight. But you might text that Eli guy not to do anything rash, right? Tell him it’s under control.”

“Maybe.” He’d think about it. Later.

Work started out busy enough to keep him distracted, which was a very good thing. Two patients had insurance changes that involved multiple phone calls. He spent some time convincing a paper-pusher that yes, sometimes a capped tooth could be a medical necessity, not just a Hollywood thing. Honestly, he wondered what kind of bozos they were hiring. He elected to work through his break and then let Shannon convince him to walk down to the Dairy Queen for lunch. She claimed that the exercise would counterbalance the calories from fried food, then gave him a hard time for buying a grilled chicken salad. It was good to have friends.

He called Tía Lisa, who made sure he was eating and not moping and told him she was “*working on it.*” He tried to take that as hopeful. He didn’t contact Eli. Or... anyone.

The afternoon dragged. He found himself checking his phone obsessively, pretending he was checking the time even when his eyes went to that text-message icon over and over. Finally he made himself turn it all the way off. If he wanted to know the time he could look at the damned analog clock on the wall, the way he’d learned when he was four years old. *See? Hands. Big hand on the three, little hand on the eight. More than an hour left to go. Fuck.*

When he finally clocked out, he was as tired as if he’d spent the day at the gym, which made no sense. Every muscle ached like he’d been working out. He felt cold, despite the heat of the late afternoon sun. Maybe he was coming down with something. He scratched his thigh where the pellet was. Wouldn’t it be the icing on the shit cake if his T was getting low ahead of schedule? It’d happened

a couple of times, back when his hormone doc had been getting him leveled out—PMS with all its fucking joyride. He forced his hand away. He'd been stable a long time now. He was fine. He needed to think about more helpful things, like Tía Lisa.

God, it was good to know that when he got to his place, she'd be there. It was so good. Sure, he could call Mia, or Gabe down at the music store, or one of his other friends. Mia would back him up, without a doubt, but her support still wouldn't be proof, and not even Mia would be as completely on his side as Tía Lisa. He didn't want Mia sucked into this mess. He drove home with careful concentration and bounded up his stairs two at a time.

When he reached the apartment, Tía Lisa was sitting in front of his laptop at the table. Her blond hair was mussed, the way it used to be when she ran her hands through it working on a problem, back home. The sight warmed Carlos's chilled bones. She looked up and smiled at him. "Hey. Knock out anyone's teeth today?"

"I'm a *receptionist*, Tía. They don't let me do that."

"Pity. It might be therapeutic." She stood, came over and hugged him. "I'm going to duck into the bathroom for a minute, then I'll show you what I have so far."

"Okay." He pulled off his scrubs and put on a pair of jeans, while she ran water in the john. He'd just grabbed a beer out of the fridge when there was a knock on the door.

Chapter 15

Carlos froze, the sound of the knock on his front door echoing in his head. It could be anyone. He had friends, he had neighbors, even the UPS guy. But somehow it was a hurt, but not a surprise, to open the door and find Nate in the hallway.

Carlos managed to say, “What do you want?” in a steady voice.

“To say I’m sorry?” Nate’s tone was shakier than his. “I really am sorry.”

He frowned. “For what?” *Spell it out.*

“You need a list?” The little tentative curve of Nate’s mouth was so familiar, the pain of having lost it slid into Carlos’s chest like a knife.

“Maybe I do.” He made his tone cool, bored, uncaring.

He saw Nate’s chin tremble, but his voice steadied. “For not believing you, then. For assuming that, because every other guy I got serious about lied to me, you probably would too. For not giving you the benefit of the doubt?”

That stung. “So that’s what you’re doing? Giving me the benefit of whatever little doubt you have?”

“I—” Nate bit his lip. “Crap. No. That’s not what I meant. I spent the whole night bitching to myself about how you weren’t who I’d thought you were, how I had one-midafternoon. in men, how you were no better than Darryl or Garrett or the rest. But around morning I realized how stupid that was. I *know* you better than that.”

It’s evening now. Carlos managed kind of grunt of encouragement.

“I don’t have any doubts. I was letting some lying bastard call you names, when I *know* they can’t be true. You’re not a thief. You’re not a cheat.”

“It’s only been a few weeks,” Carlos said perversely. “Maybe you *don’t* know me.”

Nate put his hand out tentatively and brushed Carlos’s bare chest, right above one scar. “You’ve *bled* to be exactly who you are.”

Carlos stepped back. “Don’t make it about that. There are transmen who would cut your throat. It doesn’t make me anything special.”

“Okay. But the guy I’ve spent the last month with wouldn’t ever have stolen lyrics. You respect, um, art, and you love the music; you don’t just use it to get

somewhere. Besides.” Nate looked up with a shaky smile. “You don’t have to steal anything.”

Carlos beat down a small thread of hope and said, “That’s not what Eli thinks.”

“I’m not Eli. Despite *‘Your love makes me itch’*, I know how well you can write. I’ve seen you doing it. I read that fucking blog end to end, and it’s mostly crap, except for your stuff. You couldn’t ever steal anything half as good as your own lyrics.”

Carlos’s chest felt tight, like he couldn’t catch his breath. His skin burned where Nate’s fingers still brushed against him. He took another step back.

Nate’s face fell. “Carlos? Did I screw up too bad for apologies? Can I say I’m sorry a few more times? Grovel a bit? Hit my knees?”

“I might let you grovel.” His voice broke in the middle. He rubbed his knuckles across his mouth.

“Out here? It would be more comfortable to grovel in there, and while I was kneeling, we might find a use for me.”

Carlos pulled the door wider. Nate said softly, “Thanks. Listen, Eli hasn’t reached the lawyer yet. I told him to wait, till I could talk to you. There has to be a way to prove this is a hoax, right? There has to be a law about it.”

Behind Carlos, Tía Lisa said, “There is. Fraud, plagiarism and maybe extortion.”

Nate froze, then looked around Carlos’s shoulder. “Um. Hi?”

Tía Lisa nodded to him, her expression forbidding. Carlos put a hand on Nate’s elbow, to tug him further inside and shut the door. “Tía Lisa, this is Nate.”

“I gathered.” Her glare didn’t soften.

Nate said in a stage whisper to Carlos, “Who should I grovel to first? She looks tougher than you.”

“She is,” Carlos said, fighting down the bubble of amusement in his chest.

“Right.” Nate took a step forward and dropped dramatically to his knees, raising his eyes to hers. “Ouch. Hard floor. Um. Carlos’s Aunt Lisa, I throw myself on your gentle mercy. My only excuse for doubting your nephew was that I’ve been screwed over enough that I thought no man could possibly be as

good as he seemed.” He hesitated, then straightened his shoulders. “Um. That was supposed to be funny. But I do mean it.”

Tía Lisa’s dubious expression relaxed slightly. She glanced at Carlos. “Your call.”

Carlos liked it better when he was on the side watching, but he said, “Nate. You want to do that without the Shakespeare?”

Nate stood and turned to him. “Um, yeah. Okay. I should never have let some stranger make me think you were a liar. I’m crappy at trusting people, but you’re you.” Carlos heard him take a short breath. “I should’ve believed you from the start. I was wrong and I’m sorry.”

“Wow.” Carlos crossed his arms, trying to find words. “That’s—”

When he didn’t go on, Tía Lisa said, “That’s impressive, is what it is. I have a husband I love dearly who still apologizes with, ‘*I don’t think I was really that wrong, but anyway I’d rather apologize than fight about it.*’ Actually saying you’re sorry takes guts, but saying you were wrong takes more.”

Nate shrugged. His gaze was still fixed on Carlos. “My mother trained me. Plus, I, um, spent a lot of time wishing I could get a real apology from other people, dreaming about it, even. I wanted to make mine count.”

Carlos said, “Thanks. Yeah. It did.”

Nate turned to Tía Lisa. “I don’t know what he told you, but someone’s messing with him. I *know* it’s a fraud, but I don’t know how to prove it.”

“Luckily, I have some ideas about that.”

“Oh. Great!” Nate glanced at Carlos. “You called in reinforcements. I like that.”

“She just came. I didn’t send for her.”

Tía Lisa said, “Hon, that phone call was like sending up the bat signal. I don’t ever want to hear you that miserable again.”

Nate took a step toward Carlos. “Sorry,” he murmured. “I’ll keep saying that. If it helps, I was miserable too.”

“It helps,” Carlos admitted softly.

“I think I was just waiting for you to screw up somehow,” Nate mused, low enough to be for Carlos’s ears only. “My first really serious boyfriend said, ‘*Oh no, I’m not sleeping around*’ while he was fucking at least two other guys. The

next one said, *'If you don't like it, I'll untie you right away.'* My high school boyfriend decided he wasn't really gay after all, as soon as our senior calculus class was done with and he didn't need my homework. It turned out he'd been dating a girl at the same time and girls were easier than being with me. A bunch of guys have said, *'I want more than just a hookup too,'* and never called again. I think I expected to be lied to."

"I don't lie," Carlos said through the ache in his throat.

"I know. I believe that." Nate stepped closer. "I really do."

If he'd excused himself some more, if he'd tried to weasel out of it, if he'd acted like it was Carlos's fault, it would have been easy to hold onto the pain and anger. But Nate just said softly, "Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry."

Until finally Carlos kissed the word off his lips. "Stop."

Nate leaned into him, arms locked around his back. "I don't want to lose you. Last night was like the suckiest night of my life."

Carlos deepened the hug, the warmth of Nate's hands on his bare back soothing the ragged edges inside him. "You haven't lost me."

"Yet," Tía Lisa put in. "You're on probation, Nathaniel. It is Nathaniel?"

"Yes."

"Okay. You hurt Carlos so badly—"

"Tía Lisa!" Carlos squirmed in embarrassment. He straightened but kept an arm around Nate.

"Let me finish. I drove ten hours nonstop to get here, because I don't *ever* want to hear that tone in your voice again. Now your man has apologized nicely. We'll see if he can put his money where his mouth is."

Nate said, "You want me to stuff some bills in Carlos's jockstrap?"

Tía Lisa stared at him for a moment, then actually laughed. "TMI, Nathaniel."

"Well, you said money where my mouth goes."

"I know what I said. The two of you, come on over to the table, and let's take a look at the problem. Carlos, put a shirt on or your boyfriend is going to keep on being distracted."

Nate laughed and stopped stroking Carlos's shoulder. Carlos dug in a drawer for a clean T-shirt and then seated himself between Tía Lisa and Nate.

Nate's hand landed on his thigh under the cover of the table. He covered that hand with his own. Tía Lisa sighed but just turned the computer a bit, so they could both see.

"Now, I did a bunch of checking around this blog and its links," she said. "Trying to find out who owns it, and whether there was any easy way to prove the content had changed recently."

"Is there?" Nate asked.

"Not off the bat. Some sites have a content management system that records edits, keeping track of the diff and the IP address of the editor. Like Wikipedia, you can follow the changes back. I don't know enough about this blog host to know if it does that. You might be able to petition the SysAdmin to tell you whether there's been a recent change." She smiled evilly. "Sometimes you can spoof the blog owner back, contact the site and tell them, '*I think my blog was hacked, man. I think someone stuck this dumb poetry right in the middle of my old posts. Can you verify that for me?*' If they're careful, the SysAdmin should ask you to verify your password first, but some of them are careless."

"So we might get them to say, '*Yes, it was changed two days ago?*'" Nate asked.

"Maybe. If they have that kind of record and can be tricked into telling you. A lawyer might also send a strongly worded letter to the owner, alleging criminal use of the blog, and they might even boot it off their service. Sometimes they just don't want to risk the bad publicity."

"Cool." Nate bumped his shoulder against Carlos's. "See. You come from a smart family."

"I *know* that." Carlos bumped him back, feeling better than he had all day.

"You could also check the Wayback Machine."

"Check what?" Nate asked.

"It's an archive site." Tía Lisa clicked on a window. "Here. They have a huge database of snapshots of Web content, back as far as '96. I haven't done a search for this blog yet, but you might find it. Not everything is there, of course. But if they have a snapshot of that post sometime in the past without the lyrics, that would be proof of editing."

"You didn't look?"

"Not yet." Tía Lisa turned to Carlos. "I thought it was more important to figure out who this guy is. The blog alone won't stand up in any court anyway."

But someone who'd try one kind of extortion might try another. If we can figure out who it is, and tell him we know, that should stop the problem. Assuming you haven't robbed a bank or anything blackmail-worthy."

"Not this week," Carlos said.

"So you told me he emailed this Eli guy. Emails can potentially be traced. In the meantime, I tried the social engineering route. I looked at the blog. His poetry is different from yours, and I didn't see lyrics like yours anywhere other than a few posts that one summer, which makes the whole thing even more fishy-looking."

"That's good, right?"

"Yeah. Now, the blog was aimed at getting marijuana legalized, and since it was started back in 1999, praising the wonder of the weed when it was illegal, there are no real names on it."

"I guess that makes sense." Watching Tía Lisa in problem-solving mode felt warmly familiar. He let his knee brush up against Nate's and gave her a tentative smile. "You found other ways to get there?"

"Maybe. There are links to other blogs, and even Facebook. From those, and comments, I was able to find the pages of some of the people who've been active there. A couple of these might be the owner, but most are people who hung out and commented a lot. The blog was abandoned about a year ago."

"Now that weed is legal and all," Nate said.

"Yeah, probably." Tía Lisa pushed the computer closer to them. "Up there along the top are tabs for the Facebook pages of the people I could identify. That last one is a list of the usernames of a few I couldn't get more of a handle on, in case you know someone who goes by '*Smokey the Dragon*' or whatever."

"Okay. What should we do?" Carlos turned the screen toward Nate.

"Well, you might ask Eli to come help out," Tía Lisa suggested. "He's the one whose band was targeted, so it might be someone he knows. Someone with a grudge or a band who lost out to his."

Carlos looked at Nate, who shrugged but looked uncertain. Nate didn't leap to say Eli also wanted to grovel for forgiveness, and Carlos wasn't sure he could talk calmly to Eli. "Not now," he decided. "Let's us just look first, okay?"

“Okay. If you see someone you recognize, we’ll go from there.” Tía Lisa stood and stretched. “Man, my back is stiff. I’m going to make myself coffee. Either of you want some?”

They both shook their heads. Carlos clicked on the first tab, while Nate leaned over closer to him. The tabs opened to eight different Facebook pages and several websites. Carlos did a quick click through them, hoping it would be easy. Maybe someone would have an arrow with “*blackmailer*” pointing at their chest. None of the names were familiar to him, though, and Nate shook his head too.

Tía Lisa sat down on the couch and leaned back, inhaling the steam from her coffee. Carlos could smell the hint of fresh-brewed cinnamon water in the aroma and the mix was so sweetly familiar he actually felt it relax his taut muscles. He kind of wished he’d asked for a cup, done his tío’s family way. Tía Lisa said, “Search through their photos, and the music they like, the bands, groups they’re in. Maybe you’ll see something useful.”

Only they didn’t. An hour later, Carlos pushed his chair back. “This is dumb. I really should ask Eli to come look.”

“I could talk to him,” Nate offered. “Tell him what Aunt Lisa said.”

“I just—fuck, I want to march up to Eli and say, ‘*Here, look. This is the lying liar who sent you that email.*’ Shove it back in his face. I want to smack him with absolute proof. Stupid, huh?” Carlos blew out a breath.

“We can look a bit longer.”

“I guess.” He stood and stretched. “Want a beer?”

“I wouldn’t say no.”

As he brought one over and passed it to Nate, a thought struck him. “Hey, aren’t you supposed to be working tonight?”

“I called in sick.” Nate dropped his gaze to the bottle in his hands, messing around with the cap. “I had to see you. I *was* sick, thinking about what I’d said. I actually sat outside your building for, like, two hours, waiting for you to get home from work so I could follow you in and apologize. And hope you might take me back.”

“It worked.”

Nate gave him a sideways smile that was still a bit wan. “Yeah. Although I’m on probation with your aunt.”

“Right here,” Tía Lisa said, waving her coffee cup at him. “You’re gradually earning points though.”

“Let’s try going through the Facebook crap again,” Carlos said. “Just a bit longer.”

They were browsing through six hundred party pictures one woman had on her Facebook when Nate clicked back to the previous one, his head tilted, squinting at it. “You know, could that be...?” He pointed at a face in the crowd.

Carlos looked, and his stomach dropped. “Maybe. Check the others from that party.”

Nate clicked through them, and then Carlos grabbed his wrist, lifting his hand from the touchpad. “Fuck. Foster.”

Tía Lisa looked up fast. “Foster from your band? Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Carlos checked the date. “A year ago, but yeah, that’s him. *Motherfucker!*”

“It might not be his fault,” Nate said in a rush. “Maybe he just knows the blog guy. Maybe he said the wrong thing and someone else took advantage.”

“Or maybe not. He said I’d be sorry.” Carlos felt sick. “At the concert.”

“Why not blackmail *you* then,” Nate suggested. “Why go to Eli? And why not ask for money?”

Carlos laughed bitterly. “He knows Serpentine got the contract, but he probably doesn’t know I’m part of it. He knows I’m flat broke. Maybe he wants to hurt us both, or maybe he’s going to come back and ask for money later.” He pushed his chair back, unable to sit still. “I wondered, you know?” He paced to the window and back. “Serpentine only played that song once in public, at Sparkfest. Yeah, there’s video, but still, the lyrics aren’t online or anything. I wondered how the bastard got the words almost right like that. But Foster knew them.”

Tía Lisa said, “Suspicion isn’t proof. Even strong suspicion.”

“What now?” Nate asked.

“I want to kill him.” Carlos pounded his fist in his palm. It stung, and it felt good. “I want to pound his lying, druggie face into the pavement.”

“I don’t know,” Nate said. “You’re tougher, but he’s bigger. I might have to help, and then I’d get hurt, and I hate getting hurt.”

“I don’t need help.”

“You could take your Aunt Lisa along. She’s the toughest of us all.”

Tía Lisa said dryly, “You can stop buttering me up. I’ve decided he can keep you.”

Carlos actually laughed. It caught him by surprise, bubbling up out of his chest, making him snort until his eyes watered, and then he wasn’t laughing at all. Nate knocked his chair over, jumping up to pull him into a hug.

“I’m fine,” Carlos said, despite the sobs that shook him, jolting out of his chest harder than the laughter had. “I’m o-okay.”

Nate just held him tight. “Maybe I’m not. You ever think of that?” His arms locked around Carlos, easing his tremors by their unshakable grip. “I want to pull Foster’s nails out at the roots. I want to shove the entire score of a bad opera down his throat till he chokes. I want to fill his best guitar with wet concrete.”

“Don’t hurt the guitar,” Carlos murmured.

“Okay. His jock strap then. God, I want him to get hives. And herpes. And whooping cough.”

Carlos pushed his nose in against Nate’s cheek, feeling the rasp of stubble, smelling the familiar scent he would never be able to name but recognized in his bones. “Love you,” he breathed.

They both froze. Nate eased back and laid his palm against Carlos’s jaw. “Me too. I plan to make sure you know that.” He kissed Carlos, hard, thoroughly, with tongue and teeth and powerful intentions. Carlos kissed him back just as fiercely.

Tía Lisa coughed. “Should I go for a walk?”

Carlos broke away, feeling his cheeks heat. “No. We’re done.”

Nate said, “We’re not close to done. But we can wait. So, Aunt Lisa, you’re the expert. What do you suggest?”

“Besides not getting arrested for assault or transmission of harmful diseases? I’d say call Eli and your lawyer or some other impartial witness, then have them find Foster and ask him.”

“Isn’t there a way you could, like, hack into his email and see if he sent the note?” Nate suggested.

She raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know what Carlos has told you about me, but I’m not Superwoman. Or Superhacker. Of course, you might also talk to the woman with pictures on that Facebook page. I’m ninety-nine percent sure the owner of the blog is a man, but she might know him and be willing to tell you who he is. Especially now that weed’s legal.”

“How would we find her?”

“Easy, peasy.” Tía Lisa stood, came over and reclaimed the keyboard. “This one? Patricia? Okay, she has her full name on there. We look her up...” Tía Lisa clicked through a few screens. “And there she is. Sea-Tac address and all. Even a listed phone number.”

“Wow. You look like Superhacker to me,” Carlos said.

Tía Lisa shook her head. “You’d be amazed what’s sitting out there online. I had someone find my cell number once, because it was listed in someone else’s reference list on their posted resume. It’s hard to be anonymous these days.”

Nate turned to Carlos. “Now what? It’s your call.”

Carlos still felt shaky, but he tried to pull his thoughts together. “Eli’s the one being blackmailed. Or extorted or whatever.”

“It’s your song. Your band guy.”

“*Ex-band* guy.” Foster’d once been the guy he spent hour after hour with, writing songs, polishing, practicing, sharing a beer and hopes and dreams. “*¡Chingado!*”

Tía Lisa said, “I recommend leaving it to your lawyer.”

Carlos shook his head. “I can’t. That’ll be days or weeks. I need to know now. I need Eli to know.”

“We can probably convince Eli,” she suggested.

“*¡Dios mío!* No!” His face warmed at the shrillness of his tone, but he still meant it. “No,” he repeated more quietly. “I want to go talk to this woman and to Foster and settle this myself. Tonight.” He didn’t want to wait. This lie, this theft of the thing that mattered most to him, hurt more than he’d imagined it could.

“Well, you’re not going alone,” Nate said.

Tía Lisa grabbed a pencil and a piece of paper. “Let me make a few notes, and we can see if there’s a logical approach. Then we should eat something, if you two are really going to go out tonight.”

“Can’t you come too?” Carlos felt a bit dumb, asking for his tía to come hold his hand. But she had all the good ideas. He could imagine him and Nate ending up on this woman’s doorstep without a clue what to do next.

“I want to.” She rubbed her eyes. “But my back is killing me. I need a few hours flat out on a heating pad, before I turn around and drive back home. Big meeting at work tomorrow.”

“But...” Carlos looked blankly at her. “You just got here. You can’t drive all that way back, especially if you’re sore.”

She reached over to pat his shoulder. “I’ll be fine. If I didn’t believe you were going to be okay, I’d stay. But this meeting at work is really important, and you don’t need me now.”

“I always need you,” he muttered.

“Thanks, boychik.”

Nate said, “You’ll give us some hints, though, won’t you Aunt Lisa? About how to deal with this Patricia party person?”

“Sure. First hint? Stay calm and remember she may not be involved directly. I don’t want to sic two angry young men on a woman who may have done nothing more than write ungrammatical posts in favor of legal marijuana.”

“We wouldn’t hurt her,” Carlos protested.

“I didn’t say you would. But you might scare her. This is going to take finesse not force.”

“I can be finessical,” Nate quipped.

“I hope so.” Tía Lisa scribbled some notes on the paper, messed with the computer for a minute, then shut it off. “Okay, got her address and some stuff that might help. Now dinner.”

“You want me to eat?” Carlos’s stomach was too tight to even think about food.

“Yeah.” Tía Lisa stood and touched his arm. “I threw together some soup at lunch. I’ll heat some up. You’ll think better if you eat.”

He’d have sworn it was impossible to choke down a bite, but when she set a bowl in front of each of them, he managed half of it before running out of resolve. Tía Lisa sighed and pitched the remains. “Better than nothing. I nipped out and bought some ice cream for when we’re done. It’s in the freezer.”

Nate finished off his own bowl and set it in the sink. “I want to see you make Carlos eat pure sugar and fat.”

“I’m a mom. I can force my kids to eat ice cream if I have to.”

Carlos had to smile. “She’s evil that way sometimes. And y’know, I’m not a fanatic.” Hearing her say *my kids* like that felt really good right now. He’d happily eat ice cream to be part of her family that way, without questions, without distinctions.

Tía Lisa went over to the couch and stretched out her legs, wiggling her feet. “Come on, Nathaniel, sit here. Strategy meeting.” She patted the sofa beside her.

“Me?” Nate glanced back and forth between them. “Shouldn’t you and Carlos decide?”

Tía Lisa smiled crookedly. “I think we might have to trick this woman, to find out what she knows. One of you might have to lie to her. Who’s it going to be?”

Carlos was going to say, “*Me*”, but Nate beat him to it.

“Me, because Carlos really is the Boy Scout in the room.”

“I was never a Boy Scout,” Carlos muttered. He remembered desperately wanting to be, and covered with, “The uniforms are ugly.”

Nate smiled at him, and there was a softness in it that had Carlos’s objection dying on his lips. “I spent an awful night coming to the conclusion you’re the last honest man. If anyone’s going to tell believable lies, it’ll be me.”

“Not to mention, if she knows Foster she might recognize you, Carlos,” Tía Lisa said. “You’d better wear a shirt that covers those tats and kind of stand behind Nate.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“Now. Planning meeting.”

Nate glanced at Carlos, then went and sat on the couch beside Tía Lisa. “So, what do you recommend?”

“I can think of a couple of options. Maybe you’ll come up with more.” Tía Lisa shot a considering look at Carlos, but when he stood there like he was glued to the floor, her gaze softened. She and Nate bent over her notes, heads together, talking quietly enough that Carlos only caught half the words. He

should have joined them, but his head felt too full to add anything more, more words, more thoughts. He just stood in the kitchen, watching Tía Lisa talk with her hands, waving and gesturing, watching Nate nod and point to something. She dug more paper out of her bag and wrote a paragraph, tapping pen on paper. Nate nodded again slowly.

The two of them sitting on his couch working together, working for *him*, made Carlos stupidly happy, even under these crappy circumstances. When Tía Lisa ruffled Nate's hair, just like she used to do with Carlos's, he had to retreat to the bathroom to put on a work shirt. There was no reason at all that should bring tears to his eyes, but it took him a few minutes to quit smiling and blinking at the dumb pinstripes.

When he came back out, Nate was on his feet stuffing the papers into his pocket. "Hey, you drive, okay? I need to study up. I love the nerdy shirt."

"You should." He tugged the cuffs lower. "You picked it."

"Got one I could borrow?"

He waved at his closet. "My shirts are yours."

As Nate grabbed one and went into the bathroom, Tía Lisa smiled. "Not bad, Carlos. Button the neck too, and how about a pair of glasses?" She reached into her bag and found a case. "Here, put these on. You'll look different, less threatening."

"I thought I was supposed to be able to drive," Carlos said, reaching for the case anyway.

"Dumbass. Put them on when you get there." Tía Lisa looked at Nate as he came back out wearing the plain blue shirt. "You will take care of him, right? And explain the brilliant plan we came up with that he couldn't be bothered to listen to?"

"It wasn't that I couldn't bother," Carlos objected.

"I know." She stood and hugged him, and her embrace was too wonderful to step away. "Tough day, boychik," she murmured. "Let Nate work off some guilt by helping look after you, okay?"

"Hey, I'm tougher than he is."

"I'll protect him," Nate said to Tía Lisa, flexing a muscle and completely ignoring Carlos's snort.

“I’m sure you will. Text me if you need anything.” Tía Lisa rubbed her shoulder and eased back down on the couch. “Carlos, do you have a heating pad by any chance?”

“Um, sure.” Carlos dug it out of the bathroom closet and plugged it in for her. “Don’t you want the bed?”

“This is fine.” She tucked it under her back with a sigh and lay flatter, stuffing a cushion under her head. “I’m getting old. I once drove across the country in four days, pretty much nonstop.”

“You’ll never get old.” Just the idea made Carlos worry. There were little lines around her eyes that hadn’t been there last time he looked, and the skin of her hands was less smooth, and it was unfair that anything could slow Tía Lisa down.

“Well, I’m not turning myself out to pasture yet. But I’ll have a nice rest while you young men go solve your own problems.”

“We could wait, I guess. Maybe we should stick around here.”

She chuckled. “I’ve got you switching from worrying about yourself to worrying about me. My job is done. But no, if you want evidence to give to Eli before he speaks to the lawyer or the label, you should get going.”

“Right.” He’d almost forgotten for a moment. His burning anger had dulled but thinking of Eli brought it back. “I do. Want that.”

“Nate had some good ideas. Go talk to Patricia. I have my phone. Keep in touch.”

Nate said, “Feel better, Aunt Lisa. And thanks for the brilliant help.”

“You’re not stupid yourself. I like that in a guy. Drive carefully.”

They took the Pinto, so Nate could study his notes while Carlos drove. Carlos followed the GPS directions through the city streets, in the mellow gold light of the early evening. Traffic was still heavy, and the trip was slow, but they sat in a silence that was comfortable and oddly calm. Here they were, driving out to confront someone who might be a blackmailer, and it felt like a trip to the supermarket.

Carlos glanced over at Nate. He looked pretty nerdy, with his hair slicked down flat with some of Carlos’s product, and the too-big button down. “So what’s the plan?”

“I’m going to tell her we’re doing a magazine story on the successful fight to legalize weed. Flatter her about how her opinion is important. Aunt Lisa suggested I could pretend to be one of the other bloggers, one she couldn’t track down.”

“You think you can pull it off?”

“Maybe? Hopefully?”

Patricia’s building was a run-down apartment block built of ugly beige concrete. Carlos pulled in along the curb a block down, and turned off the engine. He rubbed his suddenly damp palms on his thighs. “We’re just going to talk to her. How hard can it be?”

“Put on your nerd glasses.” Nate dragged a comb back through his hair again, leaving tooth-marked strands on the top of his head. “How do I look?”

“Awful”

“Perfect.” Nate stuffed the papers in his pocket, took a deep breath, and opened the door. “Come on.”

Chapter 16

Nate led Carlos toward the building, trying to look like he wasn't nervous. He had a strategy, thanks to Carlos's formidable Aunt Lisa. She was nothing like he'd imagined her to be. He'd heard enough from Carlos over the past weeks to know that she'd been his champion ever since he was little, the one who simultaneously encouraged him and made sure he flew straight. Somehow, he'd expected a large, commanding woman, not a little, blond, blue-eyed woman who looked like a schoolteacher.

The sun slanted down on the cracked front steps. Was it really only a couple of hours since he sat outside Carlos's place hoping with every breath that he'd get the chance to explain? Less than a day since that email had exploded in their faces? It felt like so much had happened in so little time.

"You do the recording," he suggested as he opened the outer door of Patricia's building. He realized his hands were shaking and closed his fists to hide it. This mattered desperately to Carlos; he really didn't want to screw it up.

Carlos pulled out his phone. "Video as well?"

"Yeah, if you can keep her from seeing you do it."

"Is that legal?"

Another niggle of worry. "I don't know. It could be useful, though." He assumed Aunt Lisa wouldn't have suggested it if they'd get arrested for doing it.

"Right."

The inner lobby door was shut, but when he pulled on the handle, it also opened easily. He led the way into the hallway and up two flights of stairs. The building was a pit, with debris in the corners of the stairwell and an odor of garbage and pot and stale cooking hanging like a cloud in the hot air. He felt a little nauseated and out of breath for just climbing two flights. At the landing he paused, looking at Carlos, and bit his lip. "We could wait..."

Carlos bumped his shoulder. "Come on." He turned down the third-floor hallway.

Nate pushed ahead of him at the door to number 311. Standing so he screened Carlos from full view, he straightened his shoulders and ran through

his opening lines again in his head. His lips were dry, and he licked them nervously.

It was just some woman's apartment. Odds were she had nothing to with anything, except posting a lot on the blog. Odds were this was a totally wasted trip.

Or she might be a stupid person who maybe held a grudge against Eli or Carlos, or wanted money or trouble. Or it could be her boyfriend planning blackmail, or maybe Foster was her boyfriend, or maybe Eli slept with her once and dumped her or, or, or something. If she knew about it at all.

His thoughts whirled. Maybe they should have gone after Foster instead. Coming here felt a lot dumber now he was standing at the door. What were the chances their plan would work? What if she freaked out?

"Go on," Carlos whispered near his ear. "Or do you want me to do it?"

"No. I got this." He buttoned the top button on his borrowed shirt, closing the collar geeky-tight, and scrubbed damp palms on his jeans. "Start the video."

Carlos set the video running and tucked the phone into his front jeans pocket with the camera just exposed, and then angled it forward. *Sure, it doesn't look odd to aim his hip at the doorway, right?* Carlos looked stupidly hot with glasses, but that was awkward. Nate whispered, "You look like a cross between a librarian and a runway model."

Carlos looked over the glasses at him and when Nate raised an eyebrow, he shrugged and lined the phone up differently in his pocket. Nate gave him a minute to find a more natural way to stand, then knocked on the door.

It took a couple of tries, but eventually the door opened partway to reveal a tall, thin woman in her mid-thirties, dressed in a rumpled tank top and shorts. "Yeah?"

Nate said, as warmly as he could without sounding like a Mormon missionary, "Are you Patricia Durand? I've been looking forward to meeting you. I'm Daniel Johnson. You don't really know me, but you kind of do, from online. I'm HighFlyer."

"Um." Patricia looked doubtful, but she didn't slam the door.

"You remember? I guess it's been a while. From *Better With Grass* and *The Legal Potter* blogs. The legalization movement. You were PatTheBoss, right?"

"Oh, my God." Patricia put a hand to her mouth. "I haven't used that name in a couple of years. Yeah, I think I remember you. You're HighFlyer?"

Nate's tight stomach muscles eased a bit, and he sailed on, keeping momentum, following his memorized script. "We had an argument once about Canadian growers. But mostly we were on the same side. And hey. Initiative 502. We won!" Nate grinned, pretty sure he'd got the number of the legislation right.

"Oh! Yeah. We did. Hey, cool to meet you." Patricia opened her door wider, showing a cluttered tiny apartment. "What's up?"

"I have this assignment. I'm a writer, and I'm doing a piece on the successful grassroots movement to legalize grass."

Patricia snickered. "Good title."

"Thanks. Anyway, I'm going to quote some of the important blogs, and some of the smaller underground ones." He'd been supposed to name a couple more blogs here—Aunt Lisa said HighFlyer, who'd been anonymous enough to risk stealing their ID, and PatTheBoss, had interacted several other places—but the titles had slipped out of his brain. He forged on, "I figured out who some of the smarter writers and commenters were, and I want to get their permission to quote their published stuff, plus maybe line up some new quotes about where they stand now, post-legislation. That's where you come in."

"I don't know," Patricia said slowly.

"I won't put your real name on anything," Nate said quickly. "Nothing about who you are. But you made some good points as PatTheBoss, and I want to include them in the article."

She eyed him with renewed suspicion. "How did you find me anyway?"

He laughed casually. "You linked your Facebook once, don't you remember? And these days if you have a name you can find an address. No privacy anymore, you know? I'm sorry if you're mad about that."

"Not mad, but it's, um, a bit creepy. Like, I haven't been PatTheBoss for ages, and then here you are."

"Yeah, but the things you said mattered. You helped us win." He did a fist pump, then felt his face heat, wondering if it was too much. Well, he was supposed to be some dorky harmless guy. He smiled sheepishly. "I'm a writer. It's kind of my job to track people down and talk to them."

He must have succeeded in looking harmless, because she said, "I guess. You want to be careful, though. Some of the guys got pretty heated up about that stuff, and they're not all, like, the sanest pencils in the box."

He nodded. "But it's just grass, not like I'm interviewing coke dealers."

"You hope." She glanced at Carlos, paused for a second, then shrugged. "Okay. As long as my name isn't in it. What do you want to know?"

Nate ran through a few questions about her memories of the legalization campaign, and the attitude of her friends afterward. If he'd been a real writer, her boring answers would have bugged him, but as it was he wrote stuff down in the notebook he'd borrowed from Carlos like it was important. After a few minutes he said, "That's good. I think I have what I need there."

Patricia looked disappointed. "We could talk some more, if you want."

"No, this is perfect. I have a couple more stops." He slid the notebook in his pocket.

"Do you need me to sign something?"

"Not right now. If I do quote you, I'll send you a copy of the article to sign off on."

"Sure, okay. I'd like to see it."

He said, "Cool! I'm so glad I got to meet you after all this time. I like to think that together we made a difference."

"Yeah. Me too. I think so."

"Oh, one more thing," he added, like it was an afterthought, like it wasn't the whole point. "I've found the owners and writers of some of the blogs and info sites, but one I can't seem to pin down that you might know is *Better With Grass*. It was kind of a fun site, the lighter side of the movement. I'd like to include it. You don't happen to know who wrote that one, do you?"

"Sure," Patricia said easily.

Nate held his breath and felt Carlos behind him in lean closer.

"He was a friend of mine. That's why I commented on that site a lot. His name's Shawn. Shawn Franklin. We went to school together, and he was dating my roommate, back then. He was over at our place a lot."

He was surprised to hear his voice come out totally steady, unexcited. "You don't know where I could find Shawn, do you?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't seen him in a couple of years, since they broke up. He used to live with his mom, actually, in Tacoma. Her name's, um, Janelle. Janelle Franklin. She was pretty cool too."

“You don’t happen have a number or email for him?”

“Um, maybe. Hang on.” Patricia went back inside and reappeared with her phone. “I don’t know if this is current, but try this one.” She read off a local number.

Nate carefully put it in his own phone. “Got it. Well, I hope I can find him. What’s he like? A tough guy?”

Patricia laughed. “Nah, he’s so mellow he’d make a marshmallow seem dangerous. Loves his weed, you know. That’s why my roomie broke up with him. All he wanted to do was lie around all day and toké.”

“So he’s not like some major drug dealer or something? I’m a bit nervous about going to talk to strangers, some parts of the city.”

“Yeah, I bet. There’s some real creeps out there, but Shawn’s okay. He’s harmless.”

“Well, you’ve been a big help and it’s cool to put a face to your name.”

“Yeah. You too.” Patricia looked sad. “You know what’s funny? Now that it’s legal, I don’t smoke half as much as I used to.”

“Um.” He fumbled for an answer. “Me neither. But when I do, I can do it with pride.”

It was pretty lame, but she smiled. “You’re sure you don’t want to come in?”

“No thanks. Hey, do you know? The *Better With Grass* blog looks like it’s locked down. No comments allowed.”

“Really?” Patricia didn’t look too interested. “I guess, after we won there wasn’t as much point, huh?”

“I guess. Well, thanks for your help.” Nate gestured behind her back for Carlos to move away, gave Patricia a kind of wave, and followed him.

As they headed down the hallway, Patricia called after them, “Good to meet you, HighFlyer.”

Nate glanced over her shoulder. “You too, PatTheBoss.”

When they got outside, Nate took a long shaky breath. “I feel kind of guilty about that.”

Carlos pulled out his phone and turned off the recording. “You were amazing. But she didn’t act like she knew me. She didn’t even act interested in the blog anymore.”

“Nope. I’d bet she isn’t involved, other than knowing this Shawn guy and Foster.”

“I think so too. So now what?”

“We talk to one or the other of them. I’m leaning toward the marshmallow.”

“I still want to bust Foster’s nose.” Carlos’s voice vibrated with anger.

Nate took a chance, touching his arm even though they were standing out on the sidewalk. “Your call, you know that. But what would it hurt to go talk to Shawn first?”

“I guess.” Carlos headed for the car. “Come on.”

As they got in, Nate suggested, “We should see what Shawn says. If he’s the guilty one, we don’t have to ever tell Foster that you thought he was, like, a blackmailer. If not, we can confront Foster with all the facts.”

“I guess. That makes sense.” Carlos turned on the engine. “So you think you can find this Shawn guy? Or should we call Tía Lisa?”

“Let me try.” He was already online with his phone, tapping through screens on the reverse lookup site Aunt Lisa had shown him. He double-checked the list of Janelle Franklins, but there was only one good candidate. “Well, I found his mother in Tacoma anyway. At least, I bet that’s her. If he’s not still there, maybe she’ll know where he is.”

“Or bust our heads for asking.”

“Optimism,” Nate said, switching his phone to GPS. “Love it.”

It was less than ten minutes to reach the address he’d discovered. They parked a couple of houses down, and got out. Carlos put on the glasses again, but ran his fingers through his hair until it stood up and left the top button of his shirt undone. His eyes were dark and narrowed. Nate thought he looked dangerous, although maybe not quite like himself with the glasses, and the tats still mostly hidden. Hopefully Shawn wouldn’t recognize him.

Shawn’s mother was in, and it turned out he still lived in her basement apartment. They walked around to the side, as directed, and knocked on the door. Nate took the front, even though Carlos glared at him.

“Be careful,” Carlos muttered.

“No worries.” Nate tried to project his nerd charm again. It’d worked on Patricia. He was actually kind of high, thinking about how that had worked out. Maybe he had a second career as a detective, or an actor.

The man who opened the door looked older than Patricia, and much heavier. He was dressed about the same, although on him the tank top sagged over his round belly, and the shorts strained around his thighs. He hadn't shaved in a few days, and the apartment behind him smelled of unwashed body and cooking grease. "Yeah? I'm an atheist," he said.

Nate laughed. "Do we look like preachers?"

"Lots of church folk come around."

"Oh. Well, I'm kind of the opposite. I'm a friend of Patricia Durand's, you remember, PatTheBoss from the good old days?"

"Oh, sure, haven't seen her in years. How is Patty?"

"Doing okay. Living less than ten minutes away."

"Cool." Shawn nodded several times, blearily, and scratched his stomach.

He looked bored and half-wasted, but Nate plunged on. "Anyway, I'm doing this article on the legalization movement, and I want to include your blog, *Better With Grass*, in the article." Nate paused, trying to spot any sign of guilt or worry. If Shawn was a blackmailer you'd think he'd be nervous.

Shawn just smiled. "Seriously? That's sick. Sure."

Nate saw Carlos make sure his phone was aimed as well as he could at Shawn. "So there's just one thing," he said. "I'm willing to pay you a hundred bucks for letting me use posts from *Better With Grass*. But I need to know that everything on that blog is your own work, and that nothing's been changed or edited that would affect the historical value of the posts."

Shawn frowned slowly. "A hundred?"

"If it's all the original authentic stuff, yeah." Nate held up a small wad of twenties, then pulled out a rough contract he'd come up with in the car. It was probably useless, legally, but Shawn didn't look like a lawyer. "Just sign this saying it's all original, pre-legalization."

Shawn took the page from him, squinting down at it. "What, like, would be the problem if I'd edited a post or two? I mean, that wouldn't be a big deal, right?"

"That depends." Nate put on a stern face. "If you changed a lot of things, then it's hardly authentic anymore. I want a truthful retrospective." *Okay, that didn't sound pompous or anything.* But Shawn was looking worried. "I like your blog, but I don't want to use it if I can't trust it." He paused. "On the other

hand, if it was something minor, and you can tell me exactly what it was you changed, that might be okay.”

“Sure. I get it.”

Carlos held out a pen. Nate watched Shawn, but there was no sign he recognized Carlos. He took the ballpoint and scribbled his name on the contract. “Look, I did add something to a couple of posts, for a friend. It was no big deal. He had some poems he wanted me to stick into old posts, and I did it. But it has nothing to do with pot or legalization. It was just some weird shit he wanted online, and I stuck it way back in 2011.”

“I see.” Nate held his breath until his vision sparkled. He could feel Carlos moving restlessly and wondered if he’d manage to keep quiet.

“That’s no big deal, right?” Shawn said. “I could still get the hundred bucks?”

“Do you remember which posts, and who asked you?”

Shawn hesitated.

Nate began unfolding the twenty dollar bills slowly, one at a time. When he got to five, he folded them together again and raised one eyebrow coolly at Shawn. *Spock for the win?*

“Ah, sure. Yeah. I mean, I don’t remember which posts, but it was summer of ’11. I could find it if you like. And it was Foster who asked me. This guy, Foster, um, Simpson. He’s a buddy of mine.”

Nate held out the bills but didn’t let go of them. “Did he pay you for it?”

“No! I mean, he brought some good weed and we smoked. He said there might be a little money in it later, but he didn’t pay me nothing. Why?”

Carlos growled, “Stupid motherfucker. Did you even ask why he wanted it?”

“Nah. It’s an old blog. I don’t bother no more. Weed is all legal now, and shit, so why would I care? I just never bothered to take it down.” Shawn snatched the money out of Nate’s hand.

Carlos was huffing like he wanted to go off on the guy, so Nate said quickly, “If we paid you another hundred, would you take the poetry out again?”

“Sure, I guess. Although Foster’s kind of a scary mofo when he gets mad.” Shawn stuffed the money in his shorts pocket and peered blearily at them. “What’s going on?”

Carlos said, “He’s trying to get you mixed up in blackmail, is what. You’d better take it down for free, if you don’t want to end up arrested.”

“Hey! Weed is legal now! Cops can’t arrest me.”

“Blackmail isn’t.” Carlos moved around Nate to crowd the guy on the doorstep. “You get that shit down, before we sue your ass for every penny you’ve got.”

Shawn gave an odd laugh and waved the bills in his hand. “That’d be a hundred bucks, right now. All right, all right, don’t get your panties in a twist. I’ll take those bits out again.”

“Today!”

“Okay! Jeeze, you’re tense. Hey, dude.” He looked over at Nate. “Are you really writing an article?”

“Um, I might,” he said quickly, then in the face of Shawn’s resigned slump added, “I don’t have a publisher for it.”

“Can I keep the hundred?”

He said, “Sure,” over Carlos’s negative grunt. “Keep it, but if the posts are still there tomorrow we’ll be back.”

“Should’ve known,” Shawn grumbled, as if to himself. “When idiots get off smokin’ the good weed and onto the other hard stuff, you can’t trust ’em anymore. Fuckin’ Foster.”

He backed up and shut the door in Carlos’s face. Carlos thumped it loudly with his fist, then turned away. Nate reached over to Carlos’s pocket, pulled out his phone and turned it off.

Carlos brushed past him and, without looking at him, stomped off to the car. Nate sighed to himself. “Getting messy.” *Getting painful.* He remembered Aunt Lisa saying softly, when Carlos was off getting changed, “*I’m glad he has you. If you’re going to stick with him.*”

And he’d said, “*That’s my plan. First I need to help him with this mess.*” And he’d done that. He was torn between feeling thrilled at how well this mashed-together scheme had worked, and feeling bad for Carlos.

When he reached the car, Carlos was already sitting in the driver’s seat, drumming his fingers on the wheel. Nate slid in beside him, trying to be calm, and supportive—the guy who was going to stick. “Now what? It’s your friend, your call.”

“Fucking Foster,” Carlos muttered.

“Yeah.” Nate sighed. “At least it’s not some shady gangster blackmailer.”

“Just a friend screwing me over.” Carlos sighed. “You know, he also knows I’m gay and trans. He can threaten to shout that all over if he wants something from me.”

Nate said, “That *would* be blackmail. He didn’t say anything about that in the email. Maybe we shouldn’t borrow trouble?”

Carlos started the car. “I think I want to go home. I think maybe we should talk to Eli first, and I should get some sleep so I don’t strangle Foster with his own guitar strings.”

“Sleep sounds good,” Nate said. “Last night sucked.” He wondered if he should apologize again, more, better, but once Carlos pulled out of the parking space, he silently rested his hand on Nate’s knee, not like sex, but like it was a comfort. So Nate just traced the back of that hand, running a soft touch over the knuckles and tendons, and said nothing.

The drive back to Carlos’s place felt anticlimactic. They had an answer, one even Eli would probably believe. But Carlos’s misery was thick enough to be felt, and Nate didn’t have any idea how to make that better. He knew very well that blank, painful, hollow feeling of knowing someone you’d trusted had screwed you over. Carlos and Foster had a lot of history, and all Nate could do was stand with him and hope they’d get through it without Foster wrecking Carlos’s career out of spite.

When they reached the apartment, Aunt Lisa was snoring on the couch, but she woke before they could back out again. “Hey, boys.” She rubbed her face. “So, tell me how it went.”

Nate held back, leaning on the counter and let Carlos sit on the coffee table beside his aunt and tell her the story. He only put in a couple of his own corrections when Carlos got carried away with what a good actor Nate was. “Only next to you, TatBoy. And I love you for it.”

“Dork.”

When they were done, Aunt Lisa kept her gaze on Carlos. “What’ll you do?”

“Talk to Eli tonight. Talk to Foster when I won’t just kill him.”

“Talk to the lawyer instead and let him handle it?”

“I can’t.” Carlos bounced to his feet, pacing around the room. “Yeah, it would be smart. I know that! But Foster’s my friend, and I need to know what the *fuck* he thought he was doing.”

Nate said quietly, “You did kick him off the band.”

“I know! But this? It’s so fucking elaborate. If he wanted to hurt me, all he had to do was tell his buddies about the dyke trans bitch he used to play for.” Carlos waved away Aunt Lisa’s sound of protest. “Two seconds, and I’d be screwed. This took work. When does Foster ever work? I need to know what the fuck he was thinking.”

Aunt Lisa asked softly, “Is he smart enough to know this lie about your music would hurt you a hell of a lot more than the truth?”

“Maybe.” Carlos stopped, face flushed, chest rising and falling. “Maybe he is. Maybe he hates me that much.”

Nate took a step in his direction, watching his body language. Sure enough, Carlos glanced at Aunt Lisa and straightened, arms crossed like he didn’t want to be touched.

Aunt Lisa glanced back and forth between them, then stood and wrapped her arms around Carlos despite his rigid posture. “It’s not a weakness to accept a hug, hon. Be grateful you’ve got a boyfriend offering.”

Carlos flushed and dropped his eyes. “Sorry.”

She kissed his cheek. “Now I’m going to get about another three hours of stretching out here on your couch and then head out. With luck, I’ll make my meeting.”

“Don’t go.” Carlos flashed an alarmed look at his aunt. “I mean, I wish you’d stay a bit longer.”

She patted his arm. “I know, hon, and I’d like to. But I took unpaid sick time today and I need to get back. Anyway, you’re doing well. You don’t need me. You have Nate, and all will be well.”

“I miss you,” Carlos said quietly.

“Aw, miss you too, hon.” Aunt Lisa glanced back at Nate. “You’ll have to come down and visit us soon. Bring your boyfriend. Ramón would love to meet him.”

Carlos made a choking sound. “I don’t think so.”

“Of course he would. He asks me sometimes if you have a steady boy yet.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. You know he loves you.”

“I know, but...”

“Yeah, he was a bit ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ when you were a teenager. He was reporting back to your mother and father, after all. But he’s better now, and he wants you to be happy.”

“I am.” Carlos hesitated, then repeated that, sounding surprised. “I am. Even with all the shit of the last couple days, I really am.”

“It’s because I’m awesome,” Nate put in, trying to make him smile.

Aunt Lisa turned back to Nate. “You’ll love meeting Ramón. It’s a rite of passage when you date anyone in our family, getting approval from the papa bear at the gate.”

Nate swallowed, covering a real worried moment with melodrama. “Oh dear! Do you think he’ll rip me to shreds?”

She laughed. “I think he’ll growl a lot, and then take you in and push me out of the kitchen so he can cook tamales for you.”

Carlos said, “That’s how we welcome people in the family. Tío Ramón’s tamales are amazing. *¡Para chuparse los dedos!* Almost as good as... Mamá’s.”

Apparently Nate wasn’t the only one who heard that little hesitation in Carlos’s voice. Aunt Lisa turned to him. “I wish your mother could meet Nate too, but you know she won’t. You’ll have to settle for Ramón and me.”

“That’s not *settling*.” Carlos sighed. “Have I said how glad I am that I have you? That you’re the kind of aunt who’d hear me sounding sad on the phone, and drive nine hours to cheer me up.”

“Ten hours. You’re worth it, hon. Every bit of it. Your mother’s the one losing out, while I get another wonderful son.”

Nate said past a thickness in his throat, “My own mom would love to meet you, Aunt Lisa.”

“I’d like that. Sometime soon, absolutely. But this time I really should get going. I just dropped everything yesterday and drove.”

“You didn’t need to do it like that,” Carlos said.

“Yeah, I did.” Aunt Lisa reached over and grabbed his chin, looking him in the eyes. “Carlos Pedro Medina Díaz, I didn’t pay enough attention when you were hurting once. I won’t ever do that again.”

Nate said quietly, “I’ll try to make sure he never feels that bad again.”

“¡Dios mío! Guys! I’m fine,” Carlos said grumpily, pulling free of his aunt.

Aunt Lisa said very softly to Nate, “You damned well do that from now on, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Nate realized somewhere along the line he’d added that to his lifetime resolutions.

Carlos sat at Nate’s kitchen table, in the apartment above the garage. Tía Lisa was still resting back at his place in Tacoma. He’d thought about waiting until she’d left to see Eli, but he needed to finish this. It was making him crazy. He might as well let her get some sleep and then head back in time to say good-bye.

Damn, he was going to miss her worse than ever. Life was just a bit easier when his tía was around to tell him how dumb he was, and help him fix it. A bump of Nate’s knee against his reminded him that someone else was on his side. And no doubt willing to call him dumb, when he needed it. He gave Nate a tiny smile, then looked up at Eli as he came inside.

Eli closed the door and came toward them slowly, glancing from him to Nate. “I hope you have a good fucking answer. Because I got another email and the douchebag now wants ten thousand dollars not to send that link to our label.”

Nate glanced at Carlos. “Well, that answers one question.”

Carlos took a breath against the churning in his gut and nodded to him. “Yeah, why so elaborate? Blackmail after all. *Imbécil.*”

Eli looked at Nate. “You said you had good news?”

Nate pointed to the other kitchen chair. “Sit down, shut up, and watch this.” He passed over Carlos’s phone.

Eli took the phone slowly, a mix of expressions crossing his face as he started the first video. The first mostly puzzled him. After the second one he looked up slowly. “So, it was all Foster? Screwing with us?”

“Mainly with you, Mr. Soon-to-be-rich boy,” Carlos said, twisting the knife. Nate kicked his ankle under the table, so he added, “But yeah, with me too. Only you’re a better target.”

“Shit!” Eli jumped up and paced around the room, cursing with each step. He wasn’t very inventive, Carlos decided, but he was loud and sincere. Good vocal control. Carlos leaned back in his chair, tipping it onto the back two legs, and waited.

Eli finally wound down. He raised a fist, turning to the wall, and Nate snapped out, “Don’t hit my apartment! And cool down. You’re scaring the cat.”

Eli and Carlos both turned to look up at the cat-maze, but there was no sign of the skittish feline that Carlos could see. Given that the cat was deaf to all the yelling, Carlos figured Nate was just jerking Eli’s chain.

“Damn.” Eli huffed out a breath and dropped back into his chair. “So. Now what? I mean, murder’s a possible plan, but I’d rather not get arrested.”

“We have to talk to Foster,” Nate said.

Carlos frowned. “I have to talk to Foster.” It still hurt, every time he realized how Foster had tried to use and destroy him, a queasy ache deep inside. “My old bandmate. My problem.”

“If you think you’re going alone, think again,” Nate said.

“I don’t want you anywhere near him, Nate.” Just the thought of Foster going apeshit around Nate made Carlos’s blood boil. “Not a chance.”

“We should all go,” Eli said. “We’re all in this. And I’m the only one bigger than he is.”

“Now?” It was Carlos’s turn to be unable to sit still. He strode to the window, looking out at the twilit lawn. He realized he was drumming his fingers on the sill and snatched his hand away. “I know where he lives.” How many times had he been over there to jam, to catch a bite, to crash after some party? They’d never been close like him and Mia, but he’d been a *friend*, dammit!

“Tomorrow,” Eli said firmly. “I have an appointment with the lawyer at lunch tomorrow. Obviously, now things are different, but I want to catch him up and make sure we have all the evidence we need.”

“You know he’s going to say, ‘Don’t talk to Foster’, right? He’s going to be all lawyerly and tell us to leave the guy alone,” Nate pointed out.

“Screw that!” Carlos thumped the wall with a fist. “Not happening.”

“Don’t you hit my apartment either,” Nate said. “No, I know, we have to talk to him.”

“After the lawyer. After we file copies of the recordings and the links with him, so we’re covered,” Eli said. “You’ll give me copies, right?”

“I want to go over to Foster’s now,” Carlos muttered, acid churning in his gut. “I want to grab his skinny neck and, and—”

“Whooping cough,” Nate said. “And herpes.”

Carlos whirled to glare at him. “That was barely funny once.”

Nate raised his empty hands, looking apologetic. “Okay, sorry, trying to ease the tension.”

“Well, fail.”

Nate got up and came over. Carlos didn’t want a hug. He felt like he was about to jump out of his skin. Nate seemed to understand that, because he just leaned on the wall next to Carlos, and turned to stare hard at his brother.

Eli said irritably, “What? I agree.”

“So stop being a dickhead,” Nate said.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Bullshit.” Nate continued his laser glare treatment.

Eli flushed and looked down, running a hand through his long rock-star hair.

“Chickenshit dickhead,” Nate repeated.

“Dammit!” Eli looked up finally, to meet Carlos’s eyes. “I was wrong, okay? I jumped to conclusions.”

“You were kind of pushed to conclusions,” Carlos said, bending backwards to be fair, because he really wanted to yell and pout and hit Eli. A few times.

“Well, I should’ve known better, right? I mean, I know you write great songs. No way you could have stolen all of them.”

“Thanks. I think.”

“Fuck,” Nate said to his brother. “That’s the crappiest apology I’ve ever heard.”

“It came out wrong.” Eli sighed. “Can I just stick with, ‘I’m a stupid dickhead’, and be done?”

Nate singsonged, “You gotta say *sowwy!*”

“You’re a dickhead too.” Eli flushed. “Carlos, I’m sorry. I kind of sucked. Can we still be friends?”

He wanted to say no. He wanted to take his justified anger and hurt and shove that half-assed apology back in Eli’s face. It would be so damned satisfying to yell and rage and stomp out. But then this moving-up music dream they were about to actually taste would be gone too, and one wasn’t worth the other. “I guess,” he muttered.

Nate said, “You can always write really embarrassing lyrics for him to sing, right?”

Eli snarled at him, then turned back to Carlos. “You don’t think Foster’s actually dangerous, right? Like guns or knives or whatever?”

Carlos was about to say no, but the Foster he’d been friends with had been fading away for a long time. If he was honest, he didn’t know anymore who Foster was. “I don’t think so. But if he’s hanging around real drug dealers, I can’t be sure. He’s been pretty strung out lately. You can’t trust a junkie.”

There was a glum moment of silence as they all contemplated the truth of that. If you hung out in the music scene long enough, it pretty much guaranteed you’d know someone who’d burned out or ODeD or given up making music to chase the chemical high. He’d just hoped that wouldn’t end up being Foster.

Nate moved closer, their arms barely brushing. It was one of Carlos’s favorite things, the way Nate would kind of touch base, giving him a little contact without being all over him. Although all over him wasn’t always bad. “Are we done?” Nate asked.

Eli said, “I get off work at six tomorrow. We could go find him after that.” He stood. “I’ll text you if the lawyer says anything useful.”

“I’m off at five,” Carlos said.

Nate made a face. “I’m supposed to work three to eleven. But this flu I have might still be too bad for me to go in.”

“There’s a nasty bug going around,” Eli agreed. “Six thirty tomorrow night then. Meet here?”

“Meet at my place,” Carlos said. “Seven. There’s no point in me driving down here and then back up.”

Eli nodded. “It’s not going to be fun, regardless.”

Carlos thought that was a pathetic understatement.

Nate said, “It’s going to suck hairy donkey balls.”

Carlos jerked a thumb at him. “What he said.”

Eli looked back and forth between them. “You two deserve each other.” He hesitated. “And I actually mean that in a good way too. I’ll see you tomorrow. Carlos? Um. Sorry? Really?”

Nate followed him to the door to lock it behind him, then leaned his back on it and looked at Carlos across the room. “And now?”

“Now I should go home. I don’t want to miss seeing Tía Lisa before she leaves.”

“You have a hour. She’s still sleeping.”

“I guess.”

“A dutiful child wouldn’t wake her up before she needs to actually get up.”

He raised one eyebrow. It did make Nate smile. “I seem dutiful to you?”

“A horny guy wouldn’t wake her up before he needs to.”

Carlos laughed. He wasn’t really horny either, though. Nate looked good in the T-shirt and shorts he’d changed into, but Carlos’s whole body jangled with nerves and tension. “I don’t know.”

“Come here.” Nate opened his arms. Carlos walked into them before he even thought about it. Nate didn’t take it further, just hugged him. “What a hell of a day, huh?”

“I second the motion.”

“Want to just lie down for a bit? I slept like crap last night, and I’d like to hang out with you for a while, but I’m dead on my feet.”

Carlos suddenly was too, fatigue settling over him like a leaden blanket. “Yeah. But I still don’t want to miss Tía Lisa.”

“We’ll set an alarm. You can nap for half an hour and still get back in time.”

“Okay.” He couldn’t resist that. Didn’t want to.

Nate led him to the bedroom, not letting go of him, and tipped them both toward the bed. Carlos lay down on his side, pulling Nate in against him. “Alarm?”

Nate pulled out his phone and fiddled with it. “Done.”

Carlos tugged him in tighter and breathed against his hair.

Nate said, “I’m glad I met Aunt Lisa. I’m really glad you have her. I mean, it still sucks about your parents. I can’t imagine that.”

“You’re lucky.” Carlos bit his lip against a momentary pain, pushing back memories he didn’t have to imagine. *Mamá sitting at the table, tears on her face, asking God what they had done to deserve this ungrateful child; Papá frustrated, confused, shaking his head angrily, demanding why Beatriz couldn’t just this once be a good girl and not make her mother cry; Papá pleading, even—as he’d never done before or since—begging to know why they had to lose their child this way, to her stubborn willfulness and sin; and himself, silent, frozen, battling the sick, shaky, desperate certainty that if he gave in, even just this once, if he tried to be the girl they could love, he’d never have the courage to be himself, ever again...* They’d never understood him, but they hadn’t been deliberately cruel. They’d tried to force him to be a good Catholic girl so he would go to Heaven. They’d wanted to save him. “They were good parents, really. At least, they meant to be. They loved all of us kids, took care of the family. Papá worked really hard to provide a decent life for us. But it’s like they have a blind spot. If I’m Carlos, not Beatriz, then the child they gave birth to is gone.”

“I used to think the worst thing they did was to send you away so young. But now I’m thinking maybe not. Maybe if they knew they couldn’t treat you right, they sent you to someone they trusted who would.”

“I like to think that.” All the nights he’d cried himself to sleep, in the dark of his room at Tío Ramón’s where no one could see, he’d told himself that his parents had wanted the best for him. Not just to get him out of their house, away from his sisters, but to find him a place he could really belong. Of course, the fact they refused to even let him visit afterward was the bitter reality. He pushed the memories away. He wasn’t that boy anymore. “Tía Lisa is the best. And you’d like Tío Ramón, once you get used to him. He growls on the outside, but he has a heart of mush underneath.”

“I look forward to it. No, I’m lying. I’m shaking in my boots.”

“Hah. You’re not afraid of anything.”

Nate was silent for a moment. Then he quietly said, “Everyone’s afraid of something. I’m afraid of being lied to.”

Carlos hugged his arm tighter across Nate’s chest. “I didn’t.”

“I know. Now. I’m scared of being used and dumped when something better comes along. Being told how great I am, right up until I’m suddenly not good enough, and I should have known it wasn’t for real.”

Carlos murmured, “Not happening. Not ever again.” He could hear the tension in Nate’s voice and wanted to smash the guys who’d made Nate feel that way. “You’re exactly right for me. It’s funny. I figured I’d never meet someone I could really be myself with. But here you are.”

“I like yourself,” Nate said. His tone lightened. “Some bits are especially excellent.”

Carlos nipped the top of his ear. “I’m being serious. I never thought I’d be a relationship guy, but I want that. With you. Like, exclusive and long-term and everything.”

“Well, since that was my sneaky plan from the moment I saw you, just call me the smart one in this relationship.”

“Was it?” He was curious. “Did you really think that?”

“Not really.” Nate lifted Carlos’s hand off his chest and brought it up to his lips, nibbling at the backs of his fingers. “I was looking at your excellent bits,” he said indistinctly. “It was totally due to your sex appeal.”

Carlos turned his hand to tweak Nate’s lip lightly. “Right.”

“Well, partly. I hadn’t gone out with anyone in a long time, and then I saw you and you totally flipped my switches. I wasn’t completely sure you were gay at first, even though my gaydar is pretty stellar, but I thought why not take a chance? I was bored, and lonely, and tired of being alone, and I thought, *‘If he just wants me to blow him and disappear, at least it’s sex. And if he pounds me into the swamp for asking, at least I won’t be bored.’*”

Carlos shuddered and hugged him. “I’m glad you didn’t get pounded into any swamps.”

“Oh, me too. And then you turned out to be more interesting and more hot than I even realized. And the rest, as they say, is history.”

Carlos raised his leg to brush his calf along Nate's. "I hope it's a long history."

Nate kissed his hand, then pressed it in over his heart. "I'd like that too."

Chapter 17

Nate stood behind Carlos as he paused on the landing of Foster's building. Nate was trying to be supportive and invisible, when he actually wanted to have a blowtorch in his hand. Eli shifted restlessly from foot to foot beside him. "Come on. Let's do this."

Carlos looked at them blankly, then nodded and led the way down the hall. At the last door, he stopped and knocked. There was only silence in the apartment.

"It's gonna suck if we came all this way and he's out," Eli muttered.

"His car's parked on the street." Carlos knocked again firmly. And again. This time there was a muffled thump from inside, followed by an indistinct voice. A few minutes passed and then the door opened a few inches.

Carlos slammed his palm on the door, whacking it open with a loud thump. Foster stumbled back from the doorway with a curse, and Carlos pushed his way inside. Nate scrambled to stay close behind, with Eli bringing up the rear.

Foster let go of the door and backed up. "What the fuck're you doing?"

"You look like shit," Carlos said roughly.

"Well, thanks." Foster curled his lip, glancing between the three of them. "Some of us don't have good jobs and organic food and stylists."

"What happened to your job?"

"Which one? The one I lost for skipping out to Portland to play at the Grey Wolf? *With you?* The one I lost for showing up hung over after PunkFest? The one that fucking fired me for refusing to cut my hair?"

Carlos winced visibly. Nate wanted to remind him that he and Mia had made those same trips and played the same shows and kept their jobs, but he'd sworn he'd stay out of this and let Carlos deal with his friend. Nate was there for backup only.

Carlos said, "Are you working at all?"

"Well, I had this band gig but, oh, yeah, they fuckin' fired me too."

"You showed up too wasted to play," Carlos said thinly.

"I could have played. I play better wasted."

“Bullshit.”

“You didn’t let me try, did you? Biggest concert of my life, and you took one look at me and said, ‘*You’re gone*’. You had them throw me out. They didn’t even let me pick up the fucking guitar till next day.”

“You’d have fallen over and smashed it.”

“Well, we’ll never know now. You know, we could totally have won that thing. If you’d stuck to the plan and not tried to compete like some lame-ass duet, we could have gotten the contract for KnifeSwitch instead of Serpentine.” He seemed to recognize Eli for the first time. “Great. You even brought him here. He’s the real enemy, Carly-girl. He’s gonna use your songs and screw you over.”

“Don’t call me that,” Carlos said between gritted teeth. Nate could see the muscles in his jaw clenching.

Eli said, “You want to know why we’re here? News flash. Do not pass Go. Do not collect ten thousand dollars.”

“Huh?” Foster stared at Eli, starting to look worried. He blustered, “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Ten thousand dollars? The amount you were trying to get from me by blackmail?”

“You’re nuts. I never.”

Carlos said, “Did you think I wouldn’t notice? That the words to “Tongues and Ashes” were the old ones, exactly the same as when we first practiced it two years ago?”

“Well, maybe you stole it that way.” Foster blinked. “Whatever it is you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, right. You blew it. You know how? You didn’t cover your tracks. And you’re busted.”

“Get out,” Foster said, pointing to the door. “Right the fuck now.”

“You screwed up.” Carlos took a step nearer, and even though he was inches shorter, Foster took a quick step backward. “I had someone who knows computers look into it. They found proof that you put the lyrics into that blog just a few days ago.”

“Did not!”

“They found proof that you’re the one who emailed the extortion demand.”

“There’s nothing to find. I don’t know what you’re even talking about.”

“They have the evidence. Everything I need to sue you for plagiarism and fraud and extortion.” Carlos’s face darkened with his anger, and he breathed faster.

Foster’s expression changed, a hint of fear crossing his face. “Come on, Carlos. All I want is a bit of cash. We were friends. I kept *all* your real secrets, made up a fake one for this. Now you’re going to make millions and I’m dumped here in the dirt. You *owe* me.”

Eli said, “He doesn’t owe you anything, you dirtbag!”

Foster snarled, “You stay out of it. You have no idea.”

“You’re blackmailing *me*. The hell I’m staying out of it.”

Foster turned back to Carlos. “Yeah, see, I didn’t hit you up for money, right? I went to him. He can pay me, and it’s nothing to do with you.”

Nate could almost feel the shudder that went through Carlos. “You said I stole my *song*! How is that nothing to do with me? You son of a *bitch*! I’m gonna fucking kill you!”

Foster’s eyes glittered. “Oh yeah? Well if you don’t pay up, if *he* doesn’t pay and pay me good, I’ll fuck you over with all your fans.” He moved toward Carlos and reached out to poke him in the chest. “You think one song’s a problem? Wait until they see that all your lyrics are stolen from that blog. Wait till they find out what a fake you are. You’ll be sorry you messed with me.”

“You’re pathetic.” Carlos shoved his hand away. “I have proof of what you did.”

“Liar.”

“*Better With Grass*? I can prove Shawn Whats-his-face changed those posts a few days ago. Enough proof to take to the cops.”

“You wouldn’t go to the cops. Come on. It’s just a bit of cash. Five hundred. I’d even take five hundred.”

“You *douchebag*!”

“Did Shawn say something? He’s a total pothead. You can’t trust anything a guy like that says.”

“And that email with the threatening note? Emails can be traced, you know. Even so-called throwaway ones. If you don’t back off and stay gone, we will *naïl* you! We’ll rip you apart!”

Nate didn’t dare touch Carlos. His quivering rage looked like it could be set off by a feather. Instead he moved forward, easing his shoulder in front of Carlos’s. “Look, how about we all drop the shit, okay? Foster, you lose. You set up a scam and you’re caught. Give it up, back off and get lost. And we won’t report you to the cops.”

Carlos grated out, “I want to bust him.”

Eli said, “Me too!” Nate wasn’t sure if Eli was playacting to scare Foster, but he was certain Carlos was serious.

He glanced back at Carlos. “Yeah. I know. But it’ll be messy and waste time you could use writing more songs for world domination.” He turned to glare at Foster. “Are we clear? Are we done? The web pages are coming down, and if you breathe a word of those lies anywhere, you’ll go to jail.”

“How about something that’s not lies?” Foster narrowed his eyes cunningly at Carlos. “What would you pay me not to tell your pretty boyfriend all about you, *girl*?”

Nate could hear Carlos’s teeth grate, and before he could speak, Nate jumped in fast and loud. “You think there’s *anything* I don’t know? For God’s sake, we’ve been fucking for weeks. I know him, he knows me, and we’re fine. Get over yourself.”

“I could tell the fans,” Foster muttered.

Nate was startled by Eli lunging past them to grab the front of Foster’s T-shirt. “Listen good. If any rumors start up, about the song or Carlos or anything, I’m going to assume you started them. Don’t care who it really was, I’m going to give the cops all the evidence we have. After I bust your face.”

“Let go of me!” Foster shoved ineffectually at Eli’s arm.

“You hear me?” Eli shook him like a dog toy. “Not one word about anything! If a rumor comes to you, you’d better do everything you can to squash it. Or you’ll be in jail with the real criminals taking turns at your ass.”

Foster wiggled free and backed up, panting. “Okay! Chill! All right, you win. Fuck, all I wanted was some money.” He looked at Carlos and there were actually tears in his eyes. “We were friends, once.”

Carlos glanced around the room. Nate followed his gaze, over the dirty, cluttered, pathetic squalor. There wasn't one thing in that room worth more than five bucks. Nate wondered where Foster's guitar was, and whether he'd sold it.

Carlos said unevenly, "Yeah, we were. But if I see you again, I'm gonna mess you up. Got it?" Nate turned to look at him. Carlos tugged his wallet out of his pocket, pulled out every bill in it, and dropped them on the floor. "There. All I have. No more."

Foster blinked at him silently.

Carlos added, "You're messed up, man. You were great once. You need to get straight. Ask your folks, find a program, something. Or you're gonna end up dead."

Foster said, "I'm fine. All I need is some cash to hold me till I get a gig. I'm doing fine."

It was Eli who reached out slowly and put a hand on Carlos's back, easing him toward the door. He said over his shoulder to Foster, "You heard us. We're done. If you stay gone, I don't care what the hell you do. Mess with any of us, and you'll be inside a cell before you can turn around. Got it?"

Foster just stared after them, but as they went out he shouted at their backs. "All right! Okay! But I'm gonna be bigger than any of you, one day. You'll be buying tickets to *my* fucking shows, you douchebags!"

Nate, bringing up the rear, slammed the door shut on his ranting.

They were silent all the way down the stairs, out of the building, and into the car. Carlos got in the back seat. Nate wanted to get in with him, but he also knew Carlos would probably rather be boiled in oil than admit he wanted his boyfriend to hold him, so he got in the passenger side instead.

Eli slid behind the wheel, but didn't start the car. Instead he looked up in the rearview mirror. Nate figured he was meeting Carlos's wild-eyed gaze. "Are you worried he'll do what he said? Tell everyone you're gay?"

"A bit. But I doubt people are going to pay much attention to him now. God!"

Nate nodded. "He looked like crap."

Eli said, "Just so you know, we still want you. The band. Out as gay or not. I talked to the guys, and we all agreed. In fact, we want you to write more stuff with the cello in it, and maybe play them onstage with us."

“You what?” Carlos’s eyes got wider.

“Yeah. It’s cool. We like the sound and it makes us stand out. You know, you look up on the stage and it’s, like, ‘*Oh, there’s a band. Guitar, guitar, guitar, drums,*’ or ‘*Guitar, guitar, keyboard, drums.*’ We think it would be cool if people look up at Serpentine and they’re, like, ‘*Guitar, guitar, guitar... fuckin’ cello?*’ The song you took the cello part out of sounds better with it in. We want the stage performance to be as good as the studio, right?”

“You’d seriously want me to tour with you?”

“Yeah. Write, record, tour.”

“This is because you feel guilty, right? Trying to make it up?”

“Hell, no. I wouldn’t change up my band out of guilt.” Eli gave him a charming smile. “It’s because you’re miles better than RoRo pulling out his fiddle.”

“Um.” Carlos bit his lip, his fingers clenched white on the back of Nate’s seat. Nate gave in to the temptation to reach over his shoulder and press those taut fingers with his own, trying to convey support. Carlos said in a very low voice, “You know, when Foster was calling me ‘*girl*’, he wasn’t implying some kind of femme fag thing. He was threatening to out me as trans. Transgender.”

Nate whipped his head around to stare at Eli, trying to bore holes into him with laser vision. If Eli screwed this up, he’d kill him.

Eli blinked a few times, then said evenly, “Wow. No one would ever guess. Well, if my dumb brother doesn’t care, I can’t imagine why it’s anyone else’s business. We’ll need your work hours to schedule practices for now, until we’re making real money and can quit the day jobs.”

Nate’s eyes filled, and he wanted to hug Eli. The dumb bastard could be okay, sometimes. He sat still, though, not even moving his hand on Carlos’s, just waiting. Slowly he felt the tense fingers under his relax. Carlos said, “I have a regular schedule. I’ll email it to you. But... seriously, we could be touring for like, three months, and then this—who I am—could suddenly come out.”

Eli shrugged. “Then we’ll deal. If anyone cares. We wouldn’t have any kind of shot without your songs. It’d be pretty evil to take your music and not you, for some dumb thing like that.”

Nate wasn’t sure that was quite the right phrase, but it worked, because Carlos sat back with a sigh, turning his hand to give Nate’s a squeeze before

pulling away. “Well, maybe we can record some songs with cello parts? See how it works out?”

Eli started the car. “Yeah. But you’d better write some fuckin’ awesome songs, or we’ll dump you like a rotten potato.”

“Got it.”

Nate leaned sideways, watching Carlos without being too obvious about it. Carlos turned to look out the back window as they pulled away. When he spoke again, his tone was sad. “He really was awesome, once. I remember when we auditioned him, me and Mia. We’d tried out, like, a dozen others and they either played like a chimpanzee in boxing gloves, or they wanted to take over the band and sing lead. And then there he was, playing bass like he was born to it, and willing to hang back, take rhythm from Mia and follow my lead. I thought, *‘This is it. This is my brother and sister in music, and we’re going to the top together.’* God, I had dreams. *We had.*”

Eli said, “I guess sometimes you lose the old family, and find a new one.”

Nate winced, thinking how that would hit home for Carlos. But Carlos just turned to face forward, looking pensive, and then met his eyes. “Sometimes the new family is even better. You know, sometimes they’re the place you can grow and be yourself.”

Nate said softly, “Losing the old one hurts, though.”

“Yeah. I hope he gets help. I really do. But we’re through now.”

Eli said, “So, where to, Carlos? Your place?”

Carlos looked at Nate, and his eyes brightened. “Hey, if I came to yours and put in some hot, sweaty work on those new family bonds, could you drive me back in time for work?”

Eli put a hand over one ear. “Not hearing the TMI about my brother. La-la-la.”

Nate curled his lip wickedly and said, “A ride that far doesn’t come cheap. What are you offering?”

Eli said louder, “La-la-la-la.”

Carlos laughed, and the last shadows cleared from his eyes. “How about a month of Sundays. And Saturdays.”

“Throw in the occasional Tuesday night, and it’s a deal,” Nate said.

“Done.” Carlos stretched his arm forward between the seats, and instead of shaking it, Nate turned further, raised it to his lips, and nipped at a fingertip.

“La-la-la get a room,” Eli warbled.

“The faster we get home, the sooner we’re out of your hair,” Carlos offered.

“Ah, crap.” Eli stepped on the gas dramatically for a moment. “Another bossy brother. What the hell have we done?”

“Started a new family,” Nate said, hanging onto Carlos’s warm fingers despite the awkward angle. “Onward and upward, right?”

Eli and Carlos echoed, “Onward and upward,” together.

Eli snapped out, “Jinx!”

As they swung down the entrance ramp onto the highway, Nate finally let go of Carlos and turned properly in his seat. He leaned his head on the headrest, closed his eyes, and listened to his boyfriend and his brother arguing about just what kind of penalty a jinx involved. As long as it didn’t start going down the sexual favors route, he’d stay out of the discussion. For a while. He smiled and tapped his fingers on his knee to the tune on the radio. Twenty more minutes to home, and Carlos, and the future.

Epilogue

Two years later

Carlos clasped his cell phone in his sweaty hand and eased past an arguing knot of people down the corridor of the stadium. This was the biggest venue Serpentine had played in the two years since they'd signed the contract, and he was tense. Not nervous. Well, okay, a bit nervous, but mostly keyed up.

He hadn't really believed he'd end up touring with the band, back when it all started. He'd figured Eli would get over feeling bad about the way he treated him and keep him in the background. But they'd started out recording the album, and all the guys had loved the added dimension of a cello part in their songs. When it was time to tour, they'd wanted that sound on stage as well. So here he was, two years later, living the life.

Onstage, the opening act was coming near the end of their set. In the hallways, the roadies were gathering, getting ready to swap out the gear. The headliner band was off somewhere chilling, and Carlos could have been in the Serpentine dressing room doing the same, but he needed something different.

He wandered far enough to find a corner where the music didn't pound as loudly in his head. In the past, he'd sometimes escaped out a back door for private time, but with this tour, they'd become recognizable enough that it wasn't smart to stand outside a venue in full view. He eased into a corner, and slid down to sit on the floor.

He found a couple of pics he'd taken of the audience before the house lights went down and sent them to Mia.

Wish you were here.

A text immediately chimed: *Wish you had baby puke in your hair.*

He texted back: *Aw. Thanks.*

Your goddaughter is a little witch when she misses her nap.

But you love the Mommy thing

Mia had met a woman who'd come into her store looking for lingerie to show off a pregnant belly in her selfies, to prove to an ex what he'd tossed away. Apparently sparks had flown, and they'd moved in together a month later. Her girlfriend Anne was everything Mia wasn't—tall, calm, brunette, and

unmusical—but they both were apparently crazy because they'd agreed on Carlos as the godfather. He'd tried to point out how unsuitable he was for the job. Anne had said, "You'll teach her determination. Show her how to be too stubborn to ever quit on what she wants in life."

Mia had nodded. "Yeah. That. Come on, Carlos."

Which was how for the first time in ten years, he'd found himself inside a church. Not like church back home though, as the smiling pastor helped two lesbians, a straight sister, and a gay man agree to watch over a baby.

Mia sent him a Snap of the little girl, baby food all over her face.

Yeah, it's great. Now go out there and be great too. Break a leg. You deserve this.

Thanks

And don't forget you're coming to dinner Monday. You and Nate. It's your Godfatherly duty

If I'd known how much mileage you'd get out of that, I might not have agreed

Bullshit. You love it too

He smiled, even though she couldn't see him.

Yeah. See you Monday.

He hesitated for a while, thinking about texting Nate. They'd Snapchatted earlier in the day, and he had some great pics on his phone, but instead he dialed.

Nate picked up right away. "Hey. What's up?"

"Nothing." Then, because sharing what he felt with Nate was something he was working on, he added, "A bit nervous. Missing you."

"You'll be great." Nate's voice softened. "I miss you too. One more night, TatBoy, and you'll be home."

"I know." He clutched the phone tighter. "Can't wait."

"I did a new chest piece for you. This time I'll convince you."

Carlos laughed. It was a running joke between them. "What's on it?"

"Steampunk gargoyles. Very metal."

“I can’t wait to see it. Can’t wait to see you.”

“See? How about touch? Kiss? Fuck?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Shut up. I don’t want to go onstage all distracted.”

Nate chuckled. “Nope. Stay focused or our brother will kill me.”

“How’s the commission going? And the book?” Nate had been getting more art sales lately. The most recent were an album cover and better yet, a graphic novel collaboration.

“The cover’s done. I did three versions, they’re coming to discuss and choose tomorrow.”

“Not late in the day, I hope.”

“We’ll be done before you get here. I promise.”

“And the book?”

Nate’s voice held a rush of excitement. “It’s cool. Wait till you see it!”

Carlos let his eyes droop shut and listened to Nate’s voice, more than his words, as he described the project.

When his enthusiasm eventually ran down, Carlos said, “I love that you’re so into it. Still wish you were here.”

“Maybe next tour.”

“Maybe.” Serpentine was moving up. They were second bill to a big act on this tour, and there were fans out there in the audience with multi-headed snakes on their T-shirts, screaming just for them. It was extra cool that the artwork was Nate’s. But they weren’t making enough money yet for Nate to feel safe giving up his day job. “Anyway, I can’t wait to see you.”

“I’d tell you all the things I want to do, but then you’d really be distracted onstage.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Use your imagination. We’ll sleep in too. Mom said she and Dad wanted us there for brunch, but I told her to make it lunch. Late lunch.”

“Good plan.” Nate’s parents were great, but sometimes a guy had to draw the line, especially when they still lived just down the driveway.

There was an odd squawking noise from Nate’s end of the line. Carlos asked, “What’s that?”

“New kitten. Ghost’s already on the job.”

Carlos had to smile. Since the band quit practicing in the garage, Nate had been able to take in more feral kittens to tame them, and then pass them on to find forever homes. But somehow Ghost had stayed, slowly going from spooked and jumpy to fat, mellow and content. Now she mothered all the new kittens.

Nate had sworn he wasn’t keeping Ghost. She’d go off to a good home as soon as she was really settled down. But then he’d brought home a new kitten, and Ghost had done half the job of taming it. She stayed with them, while that kitten went off to new owners, and then she took care of the one after it. Five ferals so far, and the new one made six. Ghost mothered them one and all, and they got calmer faster.

She mothered Nate too. Carlos had watched her waiting for Nate to come home, eyeing the door from one of the perches, intent on the world outside, some kind of psychic awareness or pressure sense taking the place of her hearing. She would jump down out of the cat tree with an uncatlike thud to hurry to the door almost before the old Civic’s tires hit the driveway. Then she’d wind around Nate’s legs or jump on the counter to pat at him with one white paw. After a year Nate had finally stopped talking about “*when we find her a home.*” She was staying forever.

So was Carlos. Touring was great, and he didn’t regret a minute of it, but that little garage apartment was where his heart was now. He was grateful to a fat white cat for helping keep it safe. Who’d have thought?

Nate rustled around and said, “Here, Ghost, want to say meow to Papa Carlos?”

“I am not that cat’s father,” Carlos protested, while listening to see if he could hear Ghost at all over the phone. “Anyway she can’t hear me so why bother?”

“Don’t listen to him; Papa doesn’t mean that.” Nate hesitated, then said, “She’s off to groom the kitten again. He’s a wild little thing.”

“How wild? Should I wear armor when I walk in the door tomorrow night?”

“More like a raincoat. The kitten will hide, but Ghost’s saving up drool for when you get back.”

“And fur, I bet.” By now, he’d gotten used to having cat hair on his stuff. He’d never admit it, but just a couple of days ago, weeks into the tour, he’d felt

almost sentimental about finding a tuft of white hairs at the bottom of his suitcase. “You’re sure we can’t dip her in Nair?”

“Cruel! You’re a cruel papa.”

“I’m a cat-hair-in-my-mouth papá.”

“See? You admit it. You’re her daddy.”

“I think being alone with the cats has warped your brain.”

“You’ll just have to come home and un-warp and un-alone me.”

Carlos pressed the phone closer to his ear. “Can’t happen soon enough for me.”

“Me either,” Nate said quietly. Something rustled again.

Carlos pictured him sitting on the couch, his hair mussed and ink on his fingers, a sketchpad in his lap. *Dios*, he missed being there. He wouldn’t have given up touring for anything, but he was glad they were almost done.

Nate said in a more practical voice, “By the way, your Aunt Lisa called again to make sure I was coming with you to Crescent City next week.”

“Are you?”

“Hell, yeah. For your uncle’s cooking, I’ll even let him glare at me some more and interrogate me about my savings account.”

“He doesn’t.”

“Sure he does. It’s cool. They love you.” Carlos could hear the smile in Nate’s voice. “I love you too, you dumb bastard. Now go out there and be great.”

“Love you too,” he said. “Sleep well, *Dragoncillo*. Dream of me.”

“You do know those two things don’t go together. I dream of you and I wake up pretty fast, all hot and sticky.”

“Save the hot and sticky for tomorrow, until I’m there to collect.”

“Always more where that came from for you, TatBoy. Good night.”

“G’night.” A picture came across on his phone, a drawing of a serious young man, better looking than Carlos had ever been in real life, his dark hair tousled, eyes hooded, with a big tattoo of gargoyles inked across his chest.

He sat there, looking at it, tipping the phone to keep it on, until he realized he’d spent ten minutes smiling down fondly at the latest entry in the tattoo wars. He shut the phone off, stood, and stretched.

As he was heading back toward the stage, the set ahead of them ended, to a roar of applause. That was a good sign that the audience was primed and ready. He sped up. Eli met him outside the dressing room with a smack to his arm. “There you are. Were you off making kissy noises at my brother again?”

“You don’t want to know.” Carlos smirked. “Setting up now?”

“Yep.”

Getting their gear out on stage was a choreographed dance by now. This crew was far better than on the first tour, when half the time they’d ended up juggling cords and amps themselves. Carlos went out onto the dark stage to check his instrument. The cello was set up in her stand, the wood gleaming softly in the low light. He tapped a string and heard the mellow hum of her voice. Behind him, RoRo said, “Hey, man, need anything from the dressing room? Otherwise they’re going to lock it.”

“Nope. I’m ready.”

Around him the band took their places. He glanced at them all, his brothers in music now. Wisps of melodies flitted through his mind, sounds, phrases, new songs waiting to be born. He pushed them away. There would be time for that. Tonight was for performance.

He settled behind the cello, checking the pick-up, adjusted the mike for his backing vocals. A mark on his left wrist caught his attention, and he smiled. He might be holding out on the chest piece, partly as a game with Nate, partly after two years still not sure what he wanted to do. But he had let his boyfriend design one tattoo for him. On his other wrist, a contrast to the stark block letters of “DON’T”, was a curvy, intricate design that matched the one at his throat.

Nate had said, “They don’t *all* have to clash,” and designed this one in plain flowing black lines, curling sinuously around his wrist. Wrapped in the lines, almost camouflaged, was the word, “*Love*”. When he set his wrists together they said, “*Love don’t.*” Love don’t care. Love don’t quit. Love don’t end. Lousy grammar, and mushy sentiment, and perfectly how he felt about Nate. Love don’t tie you down, it sets you free. Tomorrow he’d be home and say thank you again, properly.

The houselights faded. Then abruptly the spotlights came on, and the backdrop lit with their trademark knot of writhing cobras, heads weaving, tongues flickering. The energy hummed across the stage.

Eli lifted his chin and shouted out across the footlights, “Hey, fuckers, I’m Ellis.”

The others chimed in. “Chris.”

“RoRo.”

“Tom.”

He growled into his own mike, “Carlos.”

Eli said, “Hang onto your guts. Gonna get ripped.”

Around Carlos, they all tensed, poised, watching for the three count from Eli. Then Carlos’s hands landed on the cello strings, and he opened his mouth, aware of guitars coming up and drumsticks rising, as he and his band of brothers snarled the first of his words together, and launched into their music.

The End

Author Bio

Kaje Harper grew up in Montreal, and spent her teen years writing, filling binders with stories. But as life got busy, the stories began to just live in her head. The characters grew up, met, endured, and loved, in any quiet moment she had, but the stories rarely made it to paper. Her time was taken up by work in psychology, teaching, and a biomedical career, and the fun of raising children.

*Eventually the kids became more independent and her husband gave her a computer she didn't have to share. She started putting words down in print again, just for fun. Hours of fun. Lots of hours of fun. The stories began piling up, and her husband suggested if she was going to spend that much time on the keyboard she ought to try to publish one. MLR Press accepted her first submission, *Life Lessons*, which was released in May 2011. Kaje now has many novels and short stories published, including Amazon bestseller *The Rebuilding Year*, and a selection of free short stories and novels available on Smashwords and elsewhere. She currently lives in Minnesota with a creative teenager, a crazy omnivorous little white dog, and a remarkably patient spouse.*

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Other Books by Kaje Harper:

The “Life Lessons” mystery series (novels from MLR Press): *Life Lessons, And To All a Good Night, Getting It Right, Breaking Cover, Home Work, Compensations, Learning Curve*

The “Hidden Wolves” paranormal series (novels from MLR Press): *Unacceptable Risk, Unsettled Interlude, Unexpected Demands, Unwanted Appeal, Unjustified Claims*

Contemporary novels from Samhain Publishing: *The Rebuilding Year, Sole Support, Life, Some Assembly Required (Rebuilding Year 2)*

Free books on Smashwords and other retailers: *Into Deep Waters, Like the Taste of Summer, Nor Iron Bars a Cage, Lies and Consequences, Show Me Yours, Laser Visions, The Family We're Born With*

Self-published novels: *The Family We Make, Second Act*

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