Collateral Damage

by dreamsofspike

Summary

Kris is tired of being the "Pocket Idol". Feeling insecure about his size and "cuteness", Kris goes to extreme measures to bulk up -- having no idea what the consequences will be for himself, Adam, and their relationship.
Chapter 1

Adam was in a very good mood when he walked through the door of the house he and Kris shared. He hummed one of his new songs under his breath, smiling as he set his keys down on the counter and made his way into the living room. The recording sessions for his new album were going very well, and he was exhausted but satisfied by the day’s work.

As he entered their bedroom, Adam couldn’t help smiling at the sight of Kris sitting up on the bed, his back braced against the headboard, his computer open across his lap. The smile faltered slightly, however, when Kris didn’t seem to notice him come in – then fell away completely when he saw the troubled frown on his boyfriend’s face.

Adam crossed the room and flopped down on the bed beside Kris, deliberately drawing as much attention to himself as possible with the seemingly innocent gesture. He leaned in to peer over Kris’s shoulder at the laptop, keeping his tone casual and light as he spoke.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

Kris quickly closed the laptop, turning to face Adam with a too-bright smile before giving him a light peck on the lips. Adam did not respond, maintaining his dubious gaze until Kris looked away, uncomfortable with his scrutiny. Adam had gotten only a glimpse of the page Kris was looking at, but it was enough to give him some idea of why Kris might be upset.

“You know you really shouldn’t even look at that crap,” he reminded him gently. “There’s always going to be somebody saying something harsh or hateful or just plain ignorant – and if you let it, it can ruin your day.”

Kris shook his head, automatically objecting in a dismissive tone. “No, it’s not… it’s nothing. It’s no big deal.”

“What are they saying today?”

Adam persisted, reaching across Kris to open the laptop again, bracing himself for ugliness of the worst kind – more scandalous rumors about how Adam had broken up Kris’s marriage, or how
Kris was slowly embracing the dark side of the rock star life style via his “wild and dangerous” new lover, or how one or the other of them was cheating.

He could understand why the constant stream of trashy lies upset Kris. It never seemed to stop.

What he saw when he opened the laptop, however, made him frown, puzzled at Kris’s reaction.

“Adam Lambert Has a Type: It Was Only a Matter of Time” the headline read.

Adam’s eyes scanned the article, which wasn’t particularly careful in its details, but wasn’t all that offensive either. It was basically old news, most of it taken from other, more legitimate interviews with him, and pieced together for the purposes of whatever online gossip rag Kris’s browsing had led him to.

“I like ‘em smaller and younger,” Lambert says – and we can see why, read the caption beneath a picture of Adam and Kris together, laughing and holding hands as they exited a club in downtown LA. We just wonder if the Pocket Idol ever stood a chance of escape when it came to falling prey to Glambert’s charms.

“Um…” Adam raised a single brow as Kris got up from the bed, covering his face with one hand in embarrassment. “… I’m sorry, babe, but… I don’t get it. What’s so bad about this article?”

“I said it was nothing,” Kris repeated, a slight edge to his voice. “Okay? It’s really no big deal…”

“How long have I known you?” Adam reminded him with mild exasperation that shifted to wide eyed concern as Kris sat back down on the edge of the bed, his shoulders slumped in a heavy sigh. “Kristopher Allen! Tell me!”

“It’s just… maybe I’m just sick of the whole ‘Pocket Idol’ thing,” Kris finally admitted.

“What?” Adam’s expression lightened with surprised amusement. “I think it’s cute.”

“Yeah. That’s the problem,” Kris muttered. “‘Cute’. That’s how everybody sees me. You’re the big, manly heartthrob that girls… guys… everybody wants – and I’m the cute little piece of arm
Adam frowned, troubled by Kris’s tone. “Okay, first of all – what media have you been reading that’s referred to me as the *manly* one? Because… yeah, that’s great, but *I* sure as hell haven’t seen it! And second…”

Adam set the laptop aside, leaning forward and reaching out to grasp Kris’s hand in a silent plea for his attention. Kris grudgingly looked up to meet his eyes, his uncertainty and insecurity plain in his gaze. Adam gave him an adoring smile that was completely genuine, putting a hand at the back of Kris’s neck and pulling him in so that their lips were mere inches apart. His voice was hushed, wanting, as he glanced down at Kris’s mouth before finishing softly.

“… I think you’re *perfect*.”

Those sincere words drew a reluctant smile to Kris’s lips, and it was Kris that closed the distance between them, gently kissing Adam’s mouth, raising his own hand to cup his cheek affectionately as he drew away with a smile.

“Unh-uh, *Pocket Idol,*** Adam smirked, unexpectedly grabbing Kris and flipping him over onto his back on the bed, his larger weight settling comfortably over him. “You’re not getting away so easy.”

Kris laughed, startled but more than willing, as Adam unbuttoned his shirt and slid it to the side, his talented mouth working its way slowly over his skin. For a little while, Kris forgot about his worries, allowing himself to get lost in Adam’s expert attentions.

When Adam fell asleep, however, Kris did not.

He lay there for a little while before carefully extracting himself from Adam’s embrace and retrieving the laptop from the floor beside the bed where Adam had put it. He glanced at his lover’s sleeping form, not wanting to disturb him, before closing the laptop and carrying it out to the living room.

He browsed a little longer, his morose mood returning as he counted the nearly constant references comparing his size with Adam’s – or just with other guys in general. It was something Kris had noticed from the start – an embarrassing trend that the media seemed to enjoy exploiting – but he’d never mentioned it to Adam.
When he tried to put his insecurity and frustration over the issue into words, it always seemed to lose some of its importance in the translation; and he didn’t want to sound as petty or childish as the complaint always seemed to sound in his mind. Still, it bothered him to think of the way the public seemed to generally perceive him – and it always had.

Kris sighed, ready to put the laptop away and stop torturing himself – when he noticed an ad along the right side of the screen, with flashing red letters and an exorbitant claim that almost screamed “SCAM”.

Still, it caught his attention.

“Get RIPPED in TWO WEEKS!”

*Couldn’t hurt just to look,* he told himself as he clicked on the link. *It’s probably a scam… but you’re not committing to anything just by looking. And… what if it’s not?*

He read through the article on the next page, advertising a “vitamin supplement” that was still in the experimental phase for its effectiveness, but had shown dramatic results in those that had tested it so far. The article said that it was safe, because it was all natural, and that it came with a money back guarantee.

*Doesn’t matter,* Kris thought with a grin. *Money’s not something that’s an issue for you these days, anyway.*

*And the worst that could happen is that it won’t work.*

After only a moment’s hesitation and a slightly guilty glance toward the bedroom door, Kris took out his wallet and entered the information into the form on the website.
Chapter 2

When the package arrived in the mail a few days later, Kris was relieved that he happened to be at home alone to receive it. He didn't want to have to field any awkward questions about its contents from his perpetually curious boyfriend.

And... he wasn't really sure anymore why he'd ordered it.

Kris sat at the kitchen counter, staring at the tiny, innocuous box in front of him, caught in the midst of a mental debate. In the light of day, now that the sting of the tabloids' insinuations had had time to fade, he felt a little silly for answering the rather sketchy internet ad in the first place.

*It's probably fake, anyway. Won't do you any good. You've just wasted your money.*

*Or maybe it's not safe... untested. Don't see an FDA approval sticker anywhere on here, do you?*

With a heavy sigh, Kris took the little box upstairs to the bedroom, where he tucked it into the back of his underwear drawer, hoping that it would be safe from Adam's perusal.

*I won't take them. It was silly to even order them, so I'll just leave them there.*

*For now.*

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That evening, Kris and Adam had a charity event to attend. They always attracted a great deal of attention, so Kris was used to dealing with the overly entitled and often obnoxious press on the way in.

Still, he wasn't prepared for how pushy they were tonight.

As long as Adam was with him, everything was fine. Kris was often in awe of how easily Adam managed to handle the never-ending stream of reporters and photographers and others shoving microphones and cameras into his face. He managed to be gracious and polite, but also firm and in control when he had to be, making sure they knew when enough had become enough.
Kris usually just sort of followed in his wake, attached to his hand like a lifeline, smiling and answering questions when he was asked -- but usually, it was Adam they wanted.

"Adam, can we get a picture by the sign?"

A distinguished older gentleman that Kris recognized as one of the organizers of the event called out to Adam, and Adam nodded his acceptance, squeezing Kris's hand before letting go of it to step away from him and toward the large sign outside the children's center where the benefit was being held. There was a barricade surrounding the entrance, and the press couldn't get through to Adam once he had passed it.

Kris watched with a proud, affectionate smile as Adam posed with several officials of the charity, his smile brilliant and easy as ever -- utterly genuine and engaging.

_He really is the most photogenic human being on the planet._

"Kris! Kris Allen, do you have a minute?"

Kris turned, mildly surprised to see a young woman smiling brightly and holding out a microphone to him. He nodded, directing his full attention onto her and answering the rather mundane questions she posed. Soon, she was accompanied by several others, each calling out questions to him, trying to get what information they could from him while Adam was otherwise occupied.

"When is Adam's new album coming out?"

"How long have you two been together now?"

"Any plans for after the benefit?"

Kris tried to answer all their questions with the cautious poise and confidence he had seen Adam display, but the simple fact was that, while Kris had been left no choice but to be a quick study in these things and learn how to deal with them -- Adam was a natural. Kris did his best, but felt a little insecure, aware the entire time that Adam would have been handling the attention better.
"Kris!"

His uncertainties were realized when Adam called his name over the tumult of the crowd, and he looked over the heads of the reporters to see his boyfriend beckoning him toward the entrance.

"Okay, guys," Kris told them with a smile. "I've gotta go. See you after, if you have time..."

"Just one more question, Kris, what do you hope to achieve..."

"I haven't gotten a question yet! Kris, over here..."

"Kris! Kris, just one last question!"

Kris felt momentarily overwhelmed, trying to push past the press toward the entrance without being rude, but unable to do so with them deliberately blocking his way, insistent upon getting just one more piece of information for their respective projects.

"Guys," he objected, hating the slight tremor in his voice. "I really just need to go in now. I'm gonna have to..."

He felt an overwhelming sense of relief when the crowd parted, and Adam came to his side, firmly clasping his hand as he turned to speak to the press with a politely apologetic smile.

"You'll have to excuse us now, we have to go inside."

Kris allowed himself to be led along as Adam strode purposefully through the throng of reporters and photographers until they were past the barricade and at a safe distance. Kris let out a shaky sigh of relief as Adam put an affectionate -- and subtly protective -- arm around his shoulders and led him inside.

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The incident was really no big deal.

At least, that's what Kris thought until he had the misfortune of reading the tabloid headlines the following morning.

"I thought you were going to cancel your subscription to that trash," Adam remarked on his way to the refrigerator as he passed the place where Kris sat at the counter, the magazine open in front of him. "Why do you keep torturing yourself?"

Kris didn't respond, just stared down at the huge, two-page article that was the centerpiece of the gossip rag he was reading. He felt a little sick, his face breaking out in a cold sweat, flushed with embarrassment.

"Dramatic Rescue on the Red Carpet: Adam Lambert Comes to His Idol's Defense"

A piece followed detailing how Kris had appeared lost and faltering outside the benefit, until Adam -- "his hero" -- had appeared to usher him to safety. There were other comments, referring to Adam's strength and command of the situation, in comparison to Kris's relative weakness. The one that particularly stood out to Kris was a rather distasteful reference to him as the "damsel in distress".

"Kris... that's crap."

Adam spoke over his shoulder, and Kris quickly shut the magazine, not having even realized that Adam was looking until that moment. Adam's hand on his shoulder felt oppressively heavy, rather than comforting, as his jaw worked with repressed irritation.

"That had nothing to do with your size and everything to do with your deeply ingrained Southern hospitality," Adam continued with an affectionately teasing smirk. "They make it sound like they -- overpowered you, or something, and that's not what happened at all. Besides, you had it under control. All I did was help out a little."

"All you did was take over and make me look helpless. Again."

Adam went very still, frowning, his lips parted in surprise. "Kris, I... I wasn't trying to..."
"You don't have to try, Adam," Kris pointed out, rising from his seat and pointedly shrugging out from under Adam's hand. "It just sort of happens, doesn't it? Every time."

Adam shook his head in confusion, utterly at a loss. "Kris..."

But Kris didn't wait to hear his explanation. He picked up the magazine and tossed it forcefully into the trash basket on his way up the stairs, leaving Adam stunned, dumbfounded, and staring after him. In their bedroom, Kris slammed the door angrily as he stormed across the room to the dresser, opening his underwear drawer with far more force than was necessary.

He took the box from the back, tearing it open and staring for a moment at the shiny glass bottle inside. He hesitated a moment, drawing in a deep breath as he scanned the back of the container without really reading it. Finally, he let the breath he'd been holding out in a rush and twisted the bottle open, taking out two of the narrow red capsules it contained.

He went to the bathroom sink and took one of the small disposable cups from the counter, filling it with water to wash them down before glaring at himself in the mirror. After a moment's final indecision, he downed the pills and the water quickly, before he could change his mind.

*If it doesn't work, fine. But if it does -- they're gonna see a whole new side to Kris Allen. Won't be their 'Pocket Idol' anymore.*
Chapter 3

For the first couple of days after he started taking the pills, Kris didn't notice much of a difference. He didn't feel any different, and when he closed himself into the bathroom to get dressed in the mornings -- something he'd never bothered to do before -- he didn't look any different either, no matter how much he turned and flexed and tried to see some kind of muscle growth.

Stupid freakin' scam. That's all it was. Should call and complain on principle...

But he didn't.

He didn't stop taking the pills, either; and he didn't stop checking the mirror every morning.

Near the end of the first week, however, Kris began to notice an increase in his energy levels. He was wary of the excitement that rose up with that development, reminding himself that it was probably coincidental. He didn't want to get his hopes up only to find that his initial impressions were in fact accurate, and the pills were nothing more than a fraud.

With each day that he looked in the mirror and saw no change, however, Kris's frustrations grew -- and so did Adam's.

Kris had never felt the need to lock himself away from Adam before, not even when dressing and undressing -- and why should he? It wasn't as if he had anything that Adam hadn't seen before, countless times. There was no reason why Kris should want to shut himself into the bathroom -- to shut Adam out -- and yet he did, every morning.

Every morning… since the morning of their fight.

Kris still hadn't talked to Adam about it, despite Adam's attempts to get him to open up; and that alone was cause for concern in Adam's opinion. Adam knew he had to have done something, if not wrong, then at least somehow offensive to Kris -- but he had no idea what, and Kris wouldn't tell him.
They had barely touched each other in four days, their busy schedules keeping them apart. In the past, one or the other of them would make a point of making the time to be together, but Kris no longer seemed to mind the long hours of separation at all. When Adam came home first, he would wait up for Kris, only to have Kris mutter his excuses and drift off to sleep without so much as a kiss goodnight.

When Kris came home first – he was already asleep by the time Adam got there.

Adam felt a little sick when he thought about the precarious state of their relationship, desperate to do something to fix it, but not sure what he could do, if Kris was determined to pretend that there wasn't a problem.

*If he would just let us try to work this out, just talk to me... Why won't he talk to me?*

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Kris knew that he was upsetting Adam with his distance and secretive behavior, but he couldn't bring himself to explain what was bothering him. He felt his face flush with humiliation at the very thought of expressing his recent insecurities.

*Adam's never had to deal with this. There's no way he'd understand.* He felt a little sick as he imagined Adam's likely reaction of confused amusement. *He'd probably think it's no big deal... funny, even. No, there's no way he'd get it.*

He just kept taking the pills, and added a daily hour at a private, discreet gym to his schedule. If the pills weren't going to make a difference, then he would just have to try something else.

After taking the pills for two weeks, Kris looked in the mirror as he changed after his workout and thought he was beginning to see the barest traces of improvement. It was possibly just his imagination, he waringly reminded himself -- but his arms seemed a little more toned, and he could see a bit of faint definition that his abs had previously lacked.

He was in a good mood as he drove home from the gym, humming along to his own song on the radio and smiling to himself.

*Maybe those pills were worth the money after all. I've never seen visible results this early from just*
He walked into the house, his good mood fading slightly as he thought of Adam, who would probably be home, maybe catching a little rest before he had to head out to an event that evening. Feeling a little guilty as he thought back over the past couple of weeks, Kris took the stairs two at a time as he made his way to their bedroom.

Adam was lying on his stomach on the bed, his face turned toward Kris and his eyes closed, apparently in sleep. At the very sight of his lover lying there, so beautiful and subtly vulnerable, Kris found himself suddenly impossibly aroused.

God, how long has it been?

As Kris stood there just watching Adam sleep, his pulse accelerating and his desire rising, Adam suddenly began to stir, as if somehow sensing the fact that he was being watched.

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Adam wasn’t sleeping very deeply – hadn’t meant to be sleeping at all – and was suddenly aware that he was not alone in the room. He raised his head from the pillow, blinking sleepily as his eyes came into focus on where Kris stood in the doorway. All at once he sat up, abruptly alert as he rose to his feet and took a couple of halting, uncertain steps toward his boyfriend.

“Kris,” he began, a quiet, pleading urgency in his eyes, his voice softer than usual and strangely uncertain. “I was… I was waiting for you. Can we talk? Please?”

Kris didn’t reply, just standing there for a moment, his dark eyes intent as they slowly drifted downward from Adam’s face, raking over him with unmasked desire before finally meeting his gaze again. The swift feeling of hope that filled him at the look in Kris’s eyes almost hurt, and Adam quickly tried to force it back.

You’re just imagining it. He hasn’t wanted to touch you in weeks…

But Kris was purposefully crossing the room toward Adam, a lazy smile beginning on his lips as he reached him and slid his arms around his waist. “We can talk later,” he replied, his voice low and husky as his free hand rose to the back of Adam’s neck, tugging his head insistently downward
to capture his mouth in a thorough, demanding kiss. When he drew back at last, Adam was breathless and wide-eyed, and Kris’s voice was barely over a whisper as he confessed, “I want you so bad right now, Adam.”

Adam felt something within him shaking apart, an overwhelming sense of relief that he wouldn’t quite let himself accept – not yet – as he pulled Kris closer to him with trembling hands, biting his lower lip as he searched Kris’s strangely unfathomable eyes with a desperate, quiet urgency. He hated the sound of his own voice – small and insecure, pitifully hopeful.

“You do?”

Kris’s hand played affectionately through his hair, twisting the strands between his fingers, as his expression softened momentarily. “Of course I do,” he assured Adam tenderly, his grip on Adam’s hair tightening to draw him in for another kiss.

Adam willingly lost himself to the kiss, closing his eyes and drinking in the affection for which he’d been starving these past two weeks. He knew they needed to talk about what had happened, needed to work it out; but for now, this was what he needed – Kris’s hands roving over his body, working their way under his clothes; Kris’s mouth on his, drifting down to his neck, his shoulder, back up along his jaw as Kris backed him slowly toward the bed.

Adam was startled by the strength in the action as Kris abruptly pushed him onto his back on the mattress, falling down on top of him for a moment before rising up to straddle Adam’s hips as he began hurriedly unfastening his belt. Kris’s eyes were narrowed and dark with lust as he smiled down at Adam’s expression of mingled confusion and arousal.

“Come on, baby,” Kris whispered. “Let me… let me… just this once…”

Kris had never been quite as confident about asking for exactly what he wanted as Adam was, but there was no questioning what it was that he was asking for now. Adam felt a brief moment of uncertainty and apprehension, before surrendering to the electric fire in Kris’s smoldering eyes, realizing that – just this once – he wanted it as badly as Kris did.

He closed his eyes, his head falling back as he gave Kris a tiny, almost imperceptible nod. It was all the permission Kris needed as he tugged Adam’s jeans down around his knees and reached across him for the drawer in the nightstand with a shaking, impatient hand. He pressed the tiny foil packet into Adam’s hand and then unfastened his own jeans; and Adam obeyed his silent demand, expertly retrieving the condom and sliding it onto Kris’s fully erect, already weeping cock.
Kris made a token effort at preparing him, but by this point he was in a frenzy of need, and didn’t take enough time to thoroughly finish the task. Adam braced himself, well aware that as this was something he didn’t do often, it would have probably hurt some anyway, regardless of the care Kris took with him.

And at the moment, Kris wasn’t taking much care at all.

Under other conditions, Adam might have been bothered by that knowledge; at this point, he couldn’t have cared less. Kris wanted him, was touching him, claiming him, just when Adam was beginning to wonder if that would ever happen again. It was rough and violent and painful – but ultimately fulfilling for both of them, as Kris finally began to slow his pace and focus his efforts on meeting Adam’s need as well as his own.

When it was over, Adam felt light-headed and sleepy again, overwhelmed by what had just happened.

We still need to talk…

The words echoed in his mind, but he couldn’t bring himself to say them out loud – not right now – not when all he wanted to do was to hold onto Kris for as long as he’d let him. He rolled over on the bed, wrapping his arms around his smaller boyfriend and pulling him close; and Kris welcomed his embrace, wrapping one arm around him and raising the other hand to lightly stroke the backs of his fingers across Adam’s cheek.

As Adam’s vision cleared, his euphoria faded slightly at the troubled, searching look in Kris’s eyes.

“I love you,” Kris murmured, urgency in the quiet words. “You know that, right? I love you so much.”

“I know,” Adam whispered, nodding in reassurance, though fresh tears of relief sprung to his eyes. “I love you, too.”

He pulled Kris closer to him so that his head rested on Adam’s shoulder, holding him tight and whispering words of soothing affection, his heart aching with the sweet relief of thinking that things were finally going to be all right between them again – unaware of the troubled expression
that lingered in Kris’s eyes, still wide open and a little stunned as he gazed at the wall over Adam’s shoulder, trying to understand what had just happened.
“So… what do you think? How do I look?”

Adam smirked, letting out a soft little scoffing sound as Kris stepped out of their bedroom, dressed in a simple black t-shirt with shorter sleeves than he usually wore, paired with a pair of dark-washed jeans that fit him very well. Adam’s appreciative look belied his teasing words as he made his observation.

“You look like Simon Cowell.”

“Shut up.”

Kris’s eyes narrowed, but he was smiling as he sauntered nearer to his boyfriend, swiftly closing the distance between them and placing his hands on Adam’s shoulders. Adam just grinned down at him, his eyes dancing with amusement as he drew Kris in closer to him with an arm around his waist.

“Only, you know… cuter… and buffer…” He ran an appreciative hand slowly over the newly defined bulge exposed by Kris’s short sleeve before smirking and concluding, “… and, well… shorter…”

“Shut up,” Kris repeated, still teasing as he unexpectedly pushed Adam back against the wall, edging in closer until there was virtually no space between them, “before I find a way to shut you up.”

Adam’s eyes widened in surprise at Kris’s aggression, and the unexpected strength behind it – but he laughed softly, a little breathless as he retorted, “Is that a threat or a promise?”

Kris returned his laugh, answering by rising up on his toes to kiss Adam deeply. After a few moments, Adam reluctantly pushed him back a little, rolling his eyes with a sigh of resignation.

“We’d better go or we’ll miss the red carpet, and then we’d never get our publicists to shut up about it.”
The event was a charity dinner for a foundation that helped children with terminal diseases. Many celebrities had signed up for the $500-a-plate meal, and Kris and Adam had agreed to provide the evening’s entertainment for free, for the cause. It was fun in a low-key, relaxed kind of way.

Afterwards, however, Adam was in the mood for a much different kind of fun – and for once, Kris was, too.

He was starting to see visible results from his workouts and medication, as Adam’s appreciative words and looks earlier that night had confirmed. He had deliberately worn this shirt to show it off for whatever press would be present during their evening, wanting to finally take steps to shed his image as the cutest little American Idol ever.

After several hours spent fielding compliments on his new look from reporters and posing for obviously impressed photographers, Kris’s confidence was at an all-time high. He felt incredibly energetic, as if he’d just downed about four Starbucks double-shots. A few hours out at Adam’s favorite club sounded like just the thing to let out a little of that energy and excitement.

It sounded good, in theory.

In reality, Kris had only been at the club a little under an hour when his mood began to shift, and he began to find the crowds and incessant attention more irritating than welcome. Still, he kept a smile on his face, kept nodding graciously as he mingled with the crowd, accepting the compliments and questions of those in the club who knew them – and those who just wished they did.

It was not quite midnight when Kris was ready to leave.

He scanned the room for his absent lover, who seemed to be always stolen away from him for some reason or another. Adam was a hot commodity these days, and it seemed that everywhere they went, everyone wanted to talk to him.

And some people wanted to do more than talk.

Kris’s eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Adam leaning against the bar across the room. A tall, attractive young man was talking to him, and as Kris watched, Adam threw back his head and laughed at something he’d said. A frown creased Kris’s brow as he watched the intruder lean in close to whisper something into Adam’s ear. The smirk on Adam’s face as he drew back to meet
the other man’s eyes, a single brow raised, increased Kris’s apprehension; but when Adam placed a hand at the back of the other man’s neck and drew him in close to speak into his ear, it set Kris’s blood to boiling.

With a purposeful stride, heedless of the people calling out to him as he passed, Kris pressed through the throng to get to Adam’s side.

Adam half-hoped it was obvious that his laughter was fake as he forced a response to the lame pick-up line with which the stranger at the bar had greeted him. Surely the guy had to be joking. No one would actually think that would work.

 Apparently, this guy was utterly clueless.

He smiled, seeming encouraged by Adam’s laughter, and leaned in close to whisper a lewd suggestion into his ear. Adam drew back, giving the guy a look of dubious disbelief, a single brow raised. When the guy still just grinned at him blankly, Adam smirked and beckoned the guy nearer, leaning over to place a hand at the back of his neck and pull him in close enough to hear Adam’s words over the pulse of the music.

“You’re kidding me, right? I’m here with my boyfriend, okay? And I’d really like you to back off.”

He withdrew with a sweet smile, as if nothing had happened, and the guy nodded, seemingly embarrassed but grateful that Adam had spared him the humiliation of a much more public, stinging rejection. At that moment, Adam felt a strong, familiar hand on his elbow, and turned with a pleased smile to see Kris at his side. His smile faded, however, when he saw the dark look Kris was sending in the direction of the retreating man’s back.

“Kris? It’s okay, I got it…”

“I need to talk to you.” Kris cut him off sharply, maintaining his grip on Adam’s elbow and using it to steer him away from the bar and across the room.

“Kris? Hang on a minute…” Adam resisted a little, trying to break Kris’s grip, unwilling to make a scene, especially without knowing what was going on. “What’s the matter?”
“Shut up,” Kris snapped, and Adam blinked, startled—too stunned to remember that he was trying to pull away as Kris continued to lead him across the room and toward a deserted hallway that led to a couple of deserted rooms that were usually used for private parties.

Adam waited to speak until Kris had steered them into one of those rooms and closed the door behind them, not bothering to turn on the light—mostly because it took him that long to get past his shock and indignation enough to speak at all.

“Excuse me, what did you say to me?” Adam demanded, incredulous and warning. He could barely make out Kris’s face in the faint light that filtered through the small square window in the door. “Did you actually just tell me to…?”

“Shut up.”

Kris repeated his previous words, cutting Adam off, one hand rising to roughly fist in his hair, dragging Adam’s shock-parted lips down to crash against his own mouth in a fierce, possessive kiss. Adam resisted for just a moment before surrendering to the kiss, waiting until he was breathless to finally pull away, a slow, knowing smile forming on his lips as he ran his hands slowly up and down the taut muscles of Kris’s arms with an appreciative little hum.

“You are so freakin’ hot like this,” he admitted in a laughing whisper, meeting Kris’s eyes with his own dancing with desire—willing to forget Kris’s harsh words, if they had only been spoken in his haste to get Adam to a place where they could have a little privacy. “If you just wanted some alone time, you could have told me you were ready to go…”

“What was that back there, Adam?”

Adam blinked, confused, searching the shadows of Kris’s face for some explanation. Kris was smiling, too, but Adam slowly realized that it was not a pleasant smile. Kris’s eyes were narrowed and blazing with fury as his hands trailed down Adam’s arms to clutch his wrists in a grip that was almost painful, pinning them against the wall near his shoulders.

“What… what was what?” Adam stammered, shaking his head in bewilderment. “Kris… what…?”

“Damn it, Adam, don’t treat me like I’m stupid!” Kris snarled, raising his voice in anger. “I’m not stupid, Adam, and I saw that guy at the bar flirting with you…” He lowered his voice slightly, and
Adam felt a shiver of apprehension at the realization that the lower, slightly more controlled tone was all the more disturbing. “… and I saw you flirting back.”

Adam couldn’t suppress a hoarse, disbelieving laugh. It was all just so surreal. “Are you kidding? That wasn’t what happened at all! I just…”

“Are you laughing at me?” Adam’s words broke off as Kris abruptly jerked him away from the wall and slammed him back into it again, getting right up in his face to demand, “Are you fucking laughing at me, Adam?”

Adam let out a groan of pain, as his stomach lurched with sudden fear at the unbridled rage in Kris’s voice, the glittering madness in his eyes. He tried to remember whether or not he’d ever heard Kris use the word “fuck” before. He twisted his wrists within Kris’s grasp, trying to break his grip – alarmed and concerned when he realized that he couldn’t.

“Kris…” he began, his voice soft and breathless, wide eyes searching Kris’s face for some explanation. “… what is wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me, Adam, you’re the one who’s flirting with strangers right in front of me…”

“Have you been drinking?” Adam’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, and he leaned in to try to catch the scent of Kris’s breath – remembering a moment later that he had kissed Kris and hadn’t tasted alcohol. “Because you know that you can’t hold your…”

Kris shoved him hard into the wall again, and Adam’s breath left his lungs in a rush at the painful impact. Kris grabbed him and got in his face again, his grip on Adam’s arms bruising and punishing so that Adam winced with pain, biting down on the inside of his lip to keep from crying out with fear.

“I am not a child, and I am not an idiot, Adam.” Kris bit off the words with threatening rage in his trembling voice. “And I will not be treated like either.”

He released Adam abruptly, turning on his heel and storming out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Adam flinched at the sound, struggling to catch his breath as he stared in bewilderment at the place where he’d last seen his boyfriend. After a few moments, when he felt a little more composed, Adam straightened himself and ventured out of the room.
room for Kris, only a little surprised when he did not see him.

Within a few minutes, it became clear that Kris had left the club without him, leaving him to find his own way home.

*********************************

“Wake up!”

The sharp, nearly shouted words and the accompanying slam of the door pulled Kris rudely from sleep, and he blinked in confusion, raising his head from his pillow and struggling to sit up. His head felt thick and hazy, as if he’d been sleeping very hard for far too long. It took him a moment to realize that he had been lying on top of his own bed, still fully made – and that Adam was the one who’d yelled at him and slammed the door.

Bits of memory came filtering through to him as he tried to focus on Adam’s furious, tearful – tearful? Why’s he been crying? – face. He remembered the charity dinner, singing by himself and with Adam – he remembered going to the club after…

He didn’t remember coming home.

Kris started to speak, then paused to clear his throat when only a weak, croaking sound came out.

“What happened? How’d I get home?”

“You drove.” Adam’s smile was tight, cold, like the bitter words that spilled from his lips. “And the fact that you can’t remember it is oh so comforting!”

Kris frowned, shaking his head, utterly confused. “I… I don’t remember…”

“You must have… I don’t know, had too much to drink? Or… taken something?” Adam raised a questioning hand, shaking his head, and this time his trembling voice betrayed his anguished confusion. “I don’t know, Kris. But you definitely should not have been driving, whatever it was, and you… you shouldn’t have… been around people, God, Kris, I don’t know what happened to
Adam’s shoulders were shaking and he raised a hand to angrily cover his face, clearly frustrated with his own emotion.

Kris felt like the worst person on the face of the planet – only he had no idea why.

“You…you flipped out on me and… and shoved me and screamed at me and accused me of… of…” Adam’s voice trailed off, and he looked away for a moment, visibly struggling to bring himself back under control. “And… after you went off on me, you walked out on me and drove off and left me! Do you have any idea how humiliating that was? I didn’t even do anything, Kris!”

“Adam… baby…” Kris whispered, swallowing hard, anguished by the hurt he heard in Adam’s voice, and the fact that he had no idea how to fix it – or even what he’d done to put it there. “I… I didn’t take anything. I don’t take anything, you know? And… I don’t remember drinking… I’m sorry, I wish I could… but I don’t remember…”

Adam was quiet for a long moment, and when he finally spoke his voice was cold, distant, completely composed.

“Well, whatever it is, I think you’d better finish sleeping it off. I’ll be in the guest room tonight.”

Without another word, he turned and stalked out of the room, slamming the door with rattling force behind him, leaving a bewildered, dismayed Kris to try to figure out what had happened, and why he couldn’t remember any of it.
Chapter 5

Kris hesitated outside the guest room door, his hand poised to knock. He bit his lower lip, his brow creased with nervous apprehension. He hated feeling like this, with Adam – as if he couldn’t quite face him, didn’t deserve to face him – especially when he still had very little idea of what he’d actually done the night before.

Finally, he ventured a tentative knock, accompanying it with a soft, cautious word.

“Adam?”

There was a moment of silence before Adam responded, his voice quiet and composed.

“Come in.”

Kris felt a measure of relief as he opened the door – at least Adam hadn’t refused to let him in – but that relief froze and shattered as he stopped in the doorway, staring in horrified disbelief.

Adam was wearing only a pair of dark jeans, facing the mirror above the dresser with his back turned to Kris, one hand raised to slowly massage the back of his neck – and fully revealing the extent of the damage done the night before. There was a faint purple bruise in the middle of Adam’s back, and Kris could make out the livid imprint of fingerprint-shaped bruises on his arms as he slowly turned and met Kris’s eyes.

Adam’s dark gaze was guarded, filled with a wary uncertainty that broke Kris’s heart to see it.

Adam wasn’t supposed to have that look in his eyes – not when Adam was looking at him.

“Adam… what happened?” Kris’s voice was barely over a whisper, aghast, as he hesitantly moved further into the room, closing the distance between them. “What… what did I do?”

“This is what you did, Kristopher.” Adam’s tone was soft but clipped, sharp, as his hands crossed over his bare chest, each indicating the opposite arm. He was quiet a moment, his voice softer, betraying his hurt when he shook his head and added, “I… I never thought you’d ever… hurt
Kris felt a rising sense of panic at those words, and the reality of what he’d done, mingled with sheer frustration and fear, as he still couldn’t remember doing it. “Adam…” He took another halting step toward his lover, freezing when Adam took an involuntary step backward, away from him. “Adam, I… I don’t remember it at all. I’m so sorry, baby, I’m so sorry, but… please, please tell me!”

Adam was silent, pacing slowly toward the bed with his arms crossed over his chest, before sitting down on the end of it and letting out a heavy sigh. He buried his face in his hands for a moment before looking up to meet Kris’s eyes again, a troubled, uncertain look on his face.

“You… got jealous because some jerk was hitting on me. You… you dragged me away from the party and… and slammed me into the wall and screamed at me and… then you drove off and left me there alone. Kris… you were really… off. I don’t know what was the matter with you. It was like you were… totally out of control. I don’t know what you were on, but… I can’t even imagine how it might have affected your driving, and…” He shook his head, looking away, utterly at a loss.

“Adam… I didn’t have anything to drink. I didn’t take anything,” Kris quietly insisted, eyes wide with stunned horror at his description. “That just… doesn’t sound like… like me. I love you, Adam; I would never hurt you!”

Adam’s mouth trembled and he blinked away tears, averting his gaze and swallowing hard, struggling for control. His voice was barely over a whisper when he replied, his lost, aching words of hurt and confusion tearing at Kris’s heart.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Adam, Adam, no,” Kris murmured pleadingly, crossing the room to sit down at Adam’s side. Adam tensed but did not pull away when Kris reached out to grasp his shaking hand. “I am so sorry, Adam. I don’t know what happened. Maybe… maybe someone slipped me something in my drink? I just… I just can’t understand what happened…”

Adam looked up at him, searching his eyes, and this time there was concern mingled with his confusion. “If someone gave you something… something strong enough that you couldn’t remember afterwards… maybe you should go to the doctor.” Adam shifted slightly nearer to Kris, and Kris felt an irrationally enormous amount of relief as Adam’s hand squeezed his slightly. “We need to make sure you’re okay.”
For some reason, that idea made Kris feel uneasy; but he couldn’t deny the sweetness of the suggestion. He shook his head slightly, raising an affectionate hand to brush against Adam’s cheek, his expression softening with sorrow and sympathy to think that after how he had hurt him, Adam’s chief concern was still *Kris’s* well-being.

“No, baby, I’m fine now,” he insisted softly. “I feel… totally normal. Whatever it was – I’m sure it’s worn off by now, but… God, Adam, I can’t believe I actually hurt you! I’m so sorry…” Kris leaned in, biting his lip with a hesitant frown before leaning the rest of the way and pressing a tender, tentative kiss to Adam’s lips. He drew back, meeting his eyes with pleading earnestness and repeating in a whisper, “I’m *so sorry*, Adam.”

Adam did not pull away from his kiss, but did not return it either, closing his eyes and waiting until Kris withdrew to open them again. There was indecision in his gaze for a few moments before his shoulders fell and he let out a soft breath, reaching his arms out to pull Kris close and resting his head against his shoulder. Kris could feel Adam’s body trembling against his as he breathed out his words in a shaky sigh.

“God, Kris, you scared the *shit* out of me…”

Kris raised a hand to gently cup the back of Adam’s head, stroking his hair comfortably as he kissed his temple and whispered again, “I’m so sorry, baby… so sorry.”

Kris was overwhelmed with relief that Adam was letting him touch him at all – that he seemed to be forgiven for the crimes he could not recall, but knew he was guilty of. The evidence spoke for itself, dark purple contrasting sharply against Adam’s pale skin. Kris had to close his eyes, couldn’t make himself look at what he’d done, despite the fact that Adam’s arms were around him now, and Adam seemed to be willing to move past what had happened.

After a little while, Adam had to get up and get ready for a photo shoot scheduled for that morning. Kris followed him back to their room, watching as he got ready and struggling to make ordinary small talk, though neither was in the mood for it. Despite their reconciliation, both of their minds were still focused on the troubling events of the night before – though in very different ways.

Kris waited until Adam left for his photo shoot before opening the top drawer of his dresser and reaching deep into the back corner for the box he had hidden there. He frowned as he took it out and studied the back of it, reading the list of ingredients again with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.
All of the ingredients listed seemed to be ordinary herbs, vitamins, and minerals – things that should have been purely healthy and natural. Kris couldn’t fathom the idea that any of the items listed could be dangerous.

*But something made me freak out on Adam like that. Something made me hurt him. I’d never have done that on my own… and why can’t I remember it?*

*Something must be wrong with these.*

An idea occurred to him, and Kris took the box downstairs to the kitchen counter, where a phone book lay beneath the telephone on the wall. He opened the book to the front section that held the public service numbers, and scanned the list until he found the number he was looking for.

1-800-ASK-A-NURSE

He dialed the number, trembling as he waited for someone to pick up.

“1-800-ASK A NURSE, this is Amy, how can I help you?”

“Yeah, um… hi, Amy. This is… Kris. I have a question about this, uh… herbal supplement I’ve been taking?”

“Yes? What kind of supplement is it?”

“It’s supposed to… well… let me just tell you what’s in it.” Kris turned the bottle around and listed the ingredients to the girl on the phone. “It says it’s all natural, and those ingredients sound like it, but… well… I was just wondering. Um… is there anything on that list that might cause a… a dangerous kind of reaction? Like, um… mood swings or… or violence?”

Amy was quiet for a long moment. “Have you been experiencing those kinds of symptoms?” she asked at last, her voice measured and polite.

Kris winced at the question, shaking his head as he realized how he’d just made himself sound, and was grateful that he hadn’t identified himself fully. “Um… well, I’ve just been a little moody, and I was… wondering… if… this supplement is safe or not.”
“The ingredients you’ve listed sound perfectly safe,” Amy cautiously replied. “But I have to ask: where did you get this supplement?”

Kris grimaced, already dreading the reaction he knew he’d get when he answered. “Online.”

“Well, then I think it’d be a good idea to have an actual physician check them out – maybe even run some tests to find out exactly what’s in this supplement, Kris. The problem is, though the ingredients you listed sound fine – if you purchased this from some random website, you have no way of knowing for sure whether or not that’s actually all that’s in those pills…”

“But the things I listed…” Kris tried to direct her back toward his original question. “They sound all right?”

“Yes, but…”

“Thank you, Amy. Have a nice day.”

Kris hung up the phone, still staring at the nearly full bottle in his hand. He frowned, considering Amy’s unwelcome cautions. He didn’t want to think that the pills that were helping him bulk up, and therefore feel more confident and happy with himself, could be dangerous. The ingredients were safe, according to the nurse on the hotline he’d just called.

But then… if there is something in them that’s not on the label...

The image of the marks he’d left on Adam filled his mind, and Kris’s jaw set with resolution.

No matter what… I won’t let myself hurt him again.

He placed the bottle back in the box, then hid the box in the back of his drawer again – without taking his daily dose.

I can do without them. It’s not worth it if it causes me to hurt the people I love.

Throughout the course of the day, however, Kris found that he felt tired and sluggish and just
generally – not right. He alternated between feeling that he lacked the energy to move, and feeling jittery and anxious. His thoughts never strayed far from the untouched pills in his room.

Gradually the pull of them became stronger and stronger, until Kris found himself taking the bottle out again, against his better judgment, in spite of his resolve. He took one of the pills and swallowed it before he could change his mind – almost immediately feeling better. He felt his nerves begin to settle, and a good mood begin to replace the nervous unease that had filled him only moments earlier.

*That nurse had to be wrong,* he decided, whistling as he grabbed his jacket and headed out into the cool night air. *All she was going on was a suspicion – and she said herself that the listed ingredients were fine. Besides – how could anything that makes me feel this good possibly be dangerous?*
Chapter 6

For about a week, things went very well between Kris and Adam.

Kris felt terribly guilty for what he’d put Adam through, despite the fact that he couldn’t remember it, and went out of his way to make Adam feel special and let him know how much he loved him. It only took a couple of days for Adam to fully forgive Kris and fall back into the familiar, comfortable pattern of their relationship. Kris continued to take the pills, and was relieved and reassured by the fact that there were no further incidents while he was on them.

*It must have been something I accidentally took at the party – something slipped into my drink, or something...*

The pills actually seemed to be *improving* the way Kris felt. He had more energy than he could remember having in his entire life, and felt stronger and more confident with every day that passed. Kris began to see a difference in the things that the media said about him as well, and he began to look forward to googling his name in the evenings to see what the latest articles said.

“Our favorite Pocket Idol is bulking up!” announced one website in a caption beneath two side-by-side pictures of Kris – one from before he’d started taking the supplement, and a more recent picture. “We don’t know what you’re doing, Kris Allen, but we like it!”

Adam happened to walk past the computer, and Kris beckoned him over.

“Hey, come check this out,” he crowed, impossibly pleased with himself. Adam read the article over his shoulder, and Kris automatically placed his arm around Adam’s back, grinning. “Apparently they approve of the new me.”

“Huh.” Adam’s tone was light, but slightly strained and a little wistful. Kris looked up at him with a surprised frown as he stood up straight, shrugging out from under Kris’s arm. Kris barely caught the rest of his words as he turned his back and started to walk away. “I liked the *old* you.”

“What?” Kris swiveled his chair in a circle, his head tilted sideways, a perplexed expression on his face. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”
Adam’s tone was flat and defeated as he left the room, leaving Kris to his computer. Kris stared after him for a moment, frowning, before reluctantly returning his attention to the webpage in front of him. His focus was no longer on the results of his self-google, however. After Adam’s unexpected reaction, every mention Kris found in favor of the changes he had made to himself only made Adam’s negativity stand out in more unflattering contrast.

Kris tried to put it out of his mind, tried to tell himself that Adam was just having trouble adjusting, that was all – but he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

And the more he thought about it – the angrier he got.

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Adam moved restlessly around the bedroom he and Kris shared, finding random things out of place to busy his hands, but nothing distracting enough to divert his troubled thoughts. Since the frightening incident between them a week earlier, Kris had seemed relatively normal. They had been getting along well, but something was still… just off. Adam couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

Except I did a minute ago, he realized, stilling his motion and letting out a heavy sigh. Kris is changing… and I liked him the way he was.

“Hey.”

Adam looked up, slightly startled, to see Kris leaning in the doorway. He looked away, unable to shake the morose, troubled mood that had fallen on him.

“Hey,” he echoed half-heartedly.

Kris stood up straight and slowly crossed the room toward him, waiting until he reached him to speak again. “Hey,” he repeated, reaching out a gentle hand to touch Adam’s shoulder and half-turn him to face him. “Adam… what’s up with you? What’s wrong?”

Adam hesitated, biting his lip, visibly struggling to find the right words. “Kris… I just… I don’t know,” he sighed, frustrated. “I just… I miss you.”

“You miss me?” Kris echoed in amused disbelief. “Adam… I’m right here.”
“Yeah, but… I still feel like I’m losing you,” Adam confessed, his voice filled with aching confusion. “I just… I feel like… I don’t know this new guy you’re turning into. I want… the old Kris back. I want my Kris back… you know?”

Adam searched Kris’s dark gaze, finding some hope in the fact that there was concern and sympathy there. Kris raised a gentle hand to brush the backs of his knuckles against Adam’s cheek, and Adam closed his eyes, leaning into the contact with heart-breaking, pleading need in the gesture.

“Adam…” Kris shook his head slowly, his voice soft and reassuring. “I’m still your Kris. Okay? So I’m… taking some steps to improve myself. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Adam admitted, lowering his gaze, shaking his head in defeat. “I just… I don’t know. You’re just…”

“Different. And you’re having trouble dealing with that.”

Adam couldn’t exactly argue with Kris’s conclusion. He gave a grudging half-nod, half-shrug. “Maybe,” he admitted, his tone guarded and not quite conceding the argument.

“I’m still the same guy, Adam. I’m still the guy that loves you and wants to be with you and would do absolutely anything for you.” Kris’s voice was warm and earnest, and Adam looked up to meet his eyes again. “People change, Adam. You know that. But that doesn’t have to be a bad thing. I like to think these changes are for the better.”

Adam didn’t respond, not wanting to say what he really thought about that. Kris sidled in closer to him, sliding his arms around him and raising a hand to tilt Adam’s chin back a little, gently.

“Hey,” he murmured in a soft, cajoling tone. “Come on, darlin’. Don’t be like this. So I’m making some changes.” His hand shifted, sliding around to rest at the back of Adam’s neck, gently massaging until Adam reluctantly looked up to meet his eyes again. Kris’s dark eyes were dancing with the teasing, infectious humor that Adam always found so adorable. There was a little-boy cuteness and vulnerability to his voice as he asked softly, “You still love me anyway, right?”

Adam couldn’t help but relent a little, nodding automatically. “Of course I do.”
Kris’s grip was stronger than Adam remembered as he tugged Adam’s head down, urging him into a slow, deep kiss. Adam automatically resisted a bit at first, not used to Kris taking the lead so firmly; but then found himself relaxing into the kiss, his arms moving to rest around Kris’s waist as Kris began slowly backing them toward the bed. Adam let out a startled laugh when Kris abruptly pushed him down onto his back on the bed, falling on top of him with an impish grin.

That grin faded as Kris’s dark eyes slowly roved downward over Adam’s body, his hands trailing up Adam’s arms to grasp his wrists and pin them on either side of his head. Adam instinctively flexed against Kris’s grip, eyes widening with uneasy surprise when he realized that he couldn’t break free. He met Kris’s eyes again, startled – and a little turned on – by the smoldering, predatory look he found there.

“Even if you can’t hold me down anymore?” Kris whispered, a low, seductive yet taunting sound to his voice.

Adam let out an uneasy laugh, his wrists twisting against Kris’s unyielding fingers. “Come on, Kris,” he breathlessly objected, rolling his eyes. “Let me up.”

“Why?” Kris demanded, his grip tightening as he shifted, his weight pressing Adam’s body down against the mattress. His eyes were narrowed in calculated speculation. “Does the fact that I’m stronger than you bother you, Adam? Not being in control? The fact that I can do this?” He shifted yet nearer, one of his legs sliding between Adam’s thighs and edging them apart as he leaned in to whisper against Adam’s ear, his warm breath sending apprehensive shivers down Adam’s spine. “Did you like me better when I was weak and little and submissive?”

A nasty note of mockery had crept into Kris’s voice, and Adam felt panic beginning to close in. He struggled uselessly to free himself, fear driving any semblance of control from his actions and making his efforts all the more ineffective. Kris brought his wrists together over his head, clasping them there with one hand – freeing the other hand to slide slowly down Adam’s side and around to his chest, where he began slowly working open the buttons of Adam’s shirt.

Kris’s dark eyes were strangely impenetrable as he met Adam’s wide, panicked gaze with a little smirk. There was a challenge there, as if he were daring Adam to try to stop him.

Except – Adam was trying.

And he couldn’t stop him.
“Don’t,” Adam gasped out, no longer at all turned on by the situation. His arousal had been replaced with terror. “Kris, what are you doing? Wait…”

Kris stopped unbuttoning Adam’s shirt, giving him a taunting leer as he grabbed his hair and shoved his mouth down upon Adam’s in a kiss that was too forceful, dominant, painful. Adam struggled to pull away, finally managing to twist his face away and gasp in a deep, shaky breath.

“Stop!” he pleaded breathlessly, resisting Kris’s efforts to renew the kiss. “Kris, please, stop!”

Kris stilled his motions over Adam, but did not release him. He met Adam’s eyes with a cold, angry smile, and Adam realized that this entire terrifying incident had been intended to make a point. Kris leaned in close, a note of bitter anger and defiance in his voice as he whispered in Adam’s ear.

“So you liked me better weak and easily controlled.” He rose up to meet Adam’s eyes, a triumphant smirk on his lips as he shrugged. “Too bad. I like me better now.”

Abruptly he released Adam, getting up from the bed and stalking out of the room. Adam just lay there for a moment in stunned confusion and disbelief, trying to make sense of what had just happened. A part of his mind believed that he had to have imagined the whole thing. There was no way that Kris would ever have even thought about doing what he’d almost done to Adam.

But... he didn’t. He didn’t even ‘almost’. He was never going to. He was just… making a point. So... he doesn’t like to be controlled. Okay. That’s fine.

But Adam knew that it was more than that. Kris’s actions had seemed to be less about proving that Adam could not control him than about proving that he could control Adam.

And that was simply not like Kris.

He’s never been this way. He’s not a controlling person. He’s not a violent person. The Kris I know would never do anything to… to hurt me, or… or even scare me. That’s just… not him.

Something was terribly wrong with Kris… and he didn’t seem to know it. Kris seemed to think that everything was fine – better than ever, even.
Far from it. I don’t know what’s going on with him, but... he’s in trouble.

Something is happening to him, and I don’t know what it is, but... I have to find a way to help him.
Chapter 7

“You don’t need to put up with that shit, baby.”

Adam couldn’t even look at Brad, knowing very well the shock and disapproval he would see on his face. He hadn’t really even meant to tell his friend about Kris’s strange behavior lately – as it was, he’d left out the worst bits – but Kris was across the crowded club, talking to a few of their other friends and acquaintances, and Adam was just feeling so confused and alone, and… well…

A couple of drinks and the familiar company of someone who knew him better than most had all the pain and fear and confusion of the past couple of weeks pouring out of Adam without reserve.

And Brad was not in the least pleased with what he was hearing.

There was a note of protective – or maybe possessive, a little – outrage in his voice as he advised Adam to stand up for himself, and Adam couldn’t face that, either. He knew Brad was right – knew that he shouldn’t put up with anything like Kris’s behavior lately, from anyone – but…

… it was Kris.

I love him… and he loves me. He’s not usually like this…

“He’s not usually like this.” Adam knew that the first part of his argument would be dismissed off hand by Brad anyway, so he didn’t bother to speak it aloud. “Something’s wrong with him. Something’s… making him act this way.”

“Poor Kristopher,” Brad drawled with insincere sympathy, rolling his eyes before meeting Adam’s gaze, his own piercing and unrelenting. “I hope he works that problem out.” His wide, innocent eyes narrowed, his tone sharpening almost imperceptibly as he went on, “But something’s wrong with you if you let him treat you like shit because – let me guess. You’ve never loved anyone like you love him. He’s ‘the one’.” Brad’s eyes narrowed when Adam looked away, caught. “Getting warm, am I?”

“Okay, I know it sounds like a cliché, but I’m a romantic. Get over it,” Adam sighed, rolling his eyes. “I do love him – and that means that whatever is going on with him, I need to try to figure it out and help him. I can’t just leave him to… to self-destruct, or whatever.”

“Fine. Figure it out. Help him.” Brad shrugged slightly, leaning against the bar and meeting Adam’s eyes with a piercing gaze that was a little too perceptive for Adam’s comfort. “Just do it from a distance.”

“You don’t understand…” Adam sighed, shaking his head.
“I mean it, babe,” Brad cut him off with a warning note in his voice, standing up straight and taking a sip of his drink. “The way you talk, it sounds like he’s losing it. Sounds like… he might be dangerous.”

Adam inwardly cursed his own transparency, or Brad’s perception, or whatever it was that had allowed his friend to pick up on what he thought he’d left out of his description of Kris’s recent behavior. He swallowed hard, not meeting Brad’s eyes as he waved a dismissive hand and shook his head.

“I’m sure it’s nothing that serious…”

“What’s not that serious?”

Adam spun around, startled at the unexpected sound of Kris’s voice behind him. He hoped he didn’t look as guilty as he felt at being caught talking about his boyfriend behind his back, but the expression of vague suspicion on Kris’s face told him that he probably did.

“Nothing, it’s…” Adam managed a weak smile. “… not that serious. Or important. It’s… nothing, really.”

“Okay…” Kris dragged the word out warily, glancing between Adam and Brad. “I still wanna know. What’s nothing?”

Adam hesitated, his usual sharp wit failing him in this moment as he tried to come up with a valid excuse. He hadn’t really talked to Kris about the incident in their bedroom the previous evening, making excuses to himself for why he was putting it off, when the real reason was simply that he was afraid that Kris would not know what he was talking about. But then, he was also afraid that Kris would know what he was talking about.

At this point, Adam wasn’t really sure which was worse.

He had decided to wait and see if anything else happened before confronting Kris about it – and the strangely wild gleam in Kris’s eyes warned him that something else was indeed about to happen.
“Kris… we’ll talk about it later, okay?”

Adam’s voice was low and private, but even as he tried to silently communicate to Kris that it was something better discussed alone, he knew that the unspoken message was not getting through. Kris’s jaw twitched, his eyes narrowed with anger, and he moved a slow, deliberate step closer to Adam, one hand slowly clenching into a fist at his side.

“No… I think we’ll talk about it now.”

Adam instinctively took a step backward, bringing his back into contact with the bar, then closed his eyes with a wince at the thought of how the gesture must have looked – not only to Brad, but to anyone in the room who happened to have a camera. Through the more immediate worry of whether or not Kris was about to lose it again, Adam was also aware enough to consider the possibility of some member of the press getting a picture that could prove devastating to Kris’s image.

“I’ve got to keep him calm… gotta make him wait ‘til we get home…

“Kris… just relax, okay?” Adam’s tone carried a slightly pleading note as he reached out a trembling hand to close around Kris’s tense bicep, gently pushing him back a little. “This is… something that’s personal. Just wait until we…”

“I don’t want to wait!” Kris snapped, his voice rising enough to draw the attention of the other people gathered at the bar. As he spoke, he jerked his arm free of Adam’s grip and pressed forward further into Adam’s space. “I want you to tell me what the hell you two have to talk about that you can’t tell me!” He cast a resentful glare in Brad’s direction before slamming his palm down on the bar with an audible slapping sound to emphasize his next furious words. “I’m your boyfriend, Adam! Me! Not…”

“Not for long, if you don’t back the fuck up.” Brad cut Kris off, moving forward and trying to maneuver his way between Kris and Adam, his dark eyes blazing with indignant fury on Adam’s behalf.

Kris’s eyebrows rose in surprise and he let out a little huff of derisive laughter. “You’re gonna make me,” he skeptically surmised.

Brad cast a dubious look in Adam’s direction before responding. “Well, if he’s not, someone’s gonna have to. I don’t know what you’re on, honey, but you’re gonna go home – alone – and sleep it off before you’re gonna touch my friend again…”
“Guys…” Adam’s voice was trembling, unusually uncertain as his glanced around at the dozens of curious eyes now aimed in their direction. He held up his hands in a halting gesture between the two other men, trying to regain some control of the situation. “Guys… can we not do this right now…?”

“Your friend,” Kris echoed, anger and resentment clear in his voice. “That’s what this is really about, isn’t it? You exercising some claim over Adam? You two sharing secrets that he can’t tell me, and you think that makes you… what? Special? Well you might as well forget it because he’s with me now, and…”

“And right about now, I bet he’s wondering why!” Brad interrupted, raising his voice. “I’ve tried to understand what he sees in you, but right now you’re acting like the backward hillbilly redneck from Arkansas I always thought you were!” Brad paused for breath, and the triumphant gleam in his eyes as he opened his mouth again told Adam that his next insult would be considerably more clever and colorful. “You’re just nothing but a…”

Unfortunately, Brad never got to finish the remark. Before he could, Kris drew back his ready fist and slammed it into the smaller man’s face, sending him careening backward into the bar and then collapsing to the floor. Dazed and startled by the unexpected attack, Brad tried to get up, but Kris was already standing over him, delivering a savage kick to his stomach that kept him down.

Horrified, Adam reached out to grasp Kris’s arm and pull him back. “Kris, what the fuck! What are you…?”

“Shut up, Adam, just shut up!”

Kris snarled, spinning on his heel, freeing his arm from Adam’s hand and gripping Adam’s arm in a painfully strong grasp, all in a single movement. Adam tensed, half-expecting a blow, despite the fact that Kris had yet to actually strike him, despite his frightening behavior of late. Striking out physically at Brad – or anyone, for that matter – was something Adam had never thought he’d see his boyfriend do.

At this point, he didn’t know what to expect from Kris anymore.

Kris cast a sullen look around at the dumbstruck crowd, momentarily seeming embarrassed by the scene, before jerking Adam toward the door by the grip he maintained on his arm. “Come on! We’re going.”
“Wait,” Adam protested, trying and failing to pull away. “Brad… you hurt him…”

“He shouldn’t have tried to get involved in something that’s between you and me,” Kris snapped.

“But…”

“Come on, Adam.”

There was a warning note to Kris’s voice, a dark sound that Adam had never heard there before, and it set an uneasy tremor in the pit of his stomach. He was painfully aware of the apprehensive, excited buzz of the crowd watching as they headed toward the exit, and knew that any minute now someone would take out a camera. Adam was leery of creating a scene in front of the paparazzi – a scene that could prove the undoing of Kris’s rather precarious career.

So, he went with Kris to the car, silent and unprotesting, waiting until the car doors closed and shut out the prying ears and eyes to speak, his voice low but sharp and severe.

“Kris… this is ridiculous.”

Kris ignored him, pulling the car out onto the road with a screech of burning rubber that made Adam wince at the sound.

“I mean it. Kris… what the hell? We should probably go back…”

“Adam… don’t.” Kris’s tone was warning.

Adam glanced anxiously out his window back toward the club, worried about his friend. “I hope Brad’s okay. You hit him really hard, Kris. Why the hell did you hit him in the first place? He didn’t do anything…”

“Adam, shut up…”
“Someone will probably call the cops, because the drama that’s already happened just isn’t enough. Oh, and because what you just did is assault!” Adam’s voice was dripping with sarcasm, trembling as he struggled to keep his own anger under control. “This could get really bad, Kris, you know that? You could end up with charges against you. You could end up in jail!”

“I said shut the fuck up!”

Kris fairly roared the words at Adam, lashing out to deliver an unexpected backhand blow that caught Adam across his face and knocked his head sideways into the window. The violent motion caused Kris to momentarily lose control of the car, swerving and screeching across the road before he managed to right the vehicle again.

Adam was dazed by the blow, and terrified by Kris’s erratic, dangerous behavior – not to mention his driving. He was furious, in shock – and devastated – that Kris had actually finally gone so far as to hit him; but he wisely opted not to press the issue at the moment – not while Kris was in such a clearly unstable state, and operating a moving vehicle.

The way he was operating said vehicle was already frightening enough.

At the locked gate outside their home, Kris got out of the car, slamming the door behind him, to enter the combination to open it. Adam hesitated, watching Kris’s angry stride, and the way he cursed and slammed his palm against the security device when he accidentally entered the wrong numbers the first time.

*Something is seriously wrong. He can barely think straight – obviously.*

Adam knew that there would be no reasoning with Kris – no helping him – while he was in this state. If anything, Adam would only succeed in getting himself hurt worse for trying.

No, he had to get away – and he had to do it now.

While Kris was struggling with the security device and his own lack of concentration, Adam slid across the front of the car and into the driver’s seat, sliding the gear shift back into reverse. Kris turned at the sound of the wheels on the concrete as Adam backed out of the driveway, staring in shocked indignation for a moment before chasing after the car.
“What are you doing?” he demanded. “Get back here! Get back here, damn it!”

He chased along beside the car as Adam backed into the street, pounding angrily against the driver’s side window, but Adam put on the gas and sped away before Kris could try to get into the car. He glanced into his rearview mirror, barely able to make out Kris’s form standing in the street behind him through the tears that blurred his vision.

He blinked them away, taking several deep breaths in an effort to control his emotions.

*If you break down now, then you’re no safer driving than he was.*

*God… what is wrong with him?*

After he’d been driving for a few minutes, Adam pulled out his cell phone. His hand shook slightly as he looked at the screen, but he ignored the seventeen missed calls from Kris and instead dialed Brad’s number. Someone else answered and informed Adam that Brad had accidentally left his phone at the bar when another friend had taken him to the emergency room.

“Is he okay?” Alarm filled Adam at the thought that Kris might have seriously injured his friend.

“He seems to be,” the stranger on the other line replied, not sounding particularly worried. “Just banged up a little. Try him again in a little while; I’m taking his phone up to him.”

Adam didn’t try to call Brad again. The more he thought about it, the more ashamed he was of the whole situation. He knew it wasn’t his fault, what Kris had done – but he wouldn’t blame Brad for blaming him.

*He warned me… and I knew he was dangerous… and I let it happen…*

Adam’s troubled thoughts circled around in his head as he drove through the darkness, going through a never-ending cycle of guilt and confusion and dread, the same questions echoing through his mind over and over.

*What’s happening to him?*

*Why would he hurt me like this?*
Where did my wonderful, sweet, loving boyfriend go?

He finally stopped the car after he’d been driving for just over two hours, in the driveway of a familiar home. The lights were all off, and it was obvious that the occupant of the house was in bed – but Adam had no doubt that he’d be welcomed regardless. Weary in both body and spirit, he got out of the car and made his way to the front door, where he rang the bell and waited for an answer.

After a few moments, he rang it again. Almost immediately, a light turned on in an upstairs window. A minute later, the front door opened, and a pair of warm, familiar eyes looked up at him with concern.

“Adam?”

An overwhelming sense of relief came over him at the gentle worry and affection he heard in her voice, and Adam felt his fragile control beginning to fragment already.

“Mom…”

Adam’s voice broke over the word as she stepped out onto the porch and put an arm around him to guide him into the house, turning on a light in the hallway as she closed the door behind her. Her eyes widened with dismay as she got a good look at him.

“What happened?” she gasped. “Adam, baby, you’re bleeding!”

Adam reached up with vague surprise to absently touch the sore spot on the left side of his mouth, feeling the dried crust of blood that was the evidence of his boyfriend’s betrayal.

“Not anymore,” he listlessly replied. “I’m okay.”

“Adam?”

His mother didn’t have to voice her questions. The sympathy and concern in her voice, the warm reassurance of her hands on his arms, tore the floodgates down in an instant. The careful resolve Adam had maintained in order to get him there safely crumbled, and his shoulders shook as he lowered his head, tears of confusion and fear and hurt flowing from his eyes.
“Mom,” he sobbed out quietly, his voice hoarse and despairing. “It’s Kris. I don’t know what it is, but… something’s wrong with Kris.”
Chapter 8

“Come inside, sweetie. Come here, let’s get you all cleaned up, and then you can tell me all about what happened, all right? Come on…”

Adam nodded wearily, his shoulders falling with relief as he let his mother take control of the situation and lead him past the foyer, deeper into the house. He was too confused, hurt, and exhausted, physically and emotionally, to keep it together any longer. The gentle warmth of his mother’s arm around him was a welcome sense of comfort and security as they made their way into the kitchen that had been familiar to him since childhood.

He leaned against the counter, head bowed, trembling all over, as Leila dampened a soft cloth under the faucet and wrung it out.

“Let me see,” she murmured, raising the cloth to gently dab at the dried blood at the corner of his mouth. She frowned with concern, drawing in her breath through her teeth in a sharp hiss as she got a closer look at his face in the brighter kitchen lights. “That’s gonna be a nasty bruise. What happened, sweetheart?”

Adam opened his mouth to respond, but found that he couldn’t bring himself to form the words. He couldn’t quite make himself believe that it was true – that Kris was the one who had done it to him, had hurt him like that. Somehow, speaking it aloud felt like a betrayal. He cringed at the thought of what his mother would think when she heard the truth, and the greater part of him really didn’t want his mother to think that of Kris.

He looked away, closing his mouth and shaking his head, at a loss.

“Adam… tell me,” Leila gently urged him, raising a hand to cup his uninjured cheek. “Come on. Who did this to you? Did they hurt Kris, too? You said… there was something wrong with him? Where is he, anyway?”

“Mom…” Adam swallowed hard, his eyes closed, afraid that he wouldn’t be able to get the words out at all if he was looking at her. “…it was… God, I can’t even believe this… this happened…” He drew in a sharp breath, raising a shaking hand to cover his eyes for a moment, wrestling for control of his emotions. He was quiet for a moment before blurring out the words, afraid he wouldn’t get them out at all if he didn’t get them out quickly. “Kris did it, Mom. Kris hit me.”
Leila’s eyes widened in utter shock, and she just stared at Adam in disbelief for a long moment. “Kris… Kris… what?”

“Something’s wrong with him.” Adam’s shoulders shook with the sobs that rose up in his chest, as the truth began to pour past the gate he’d just unlocked by confessing Kris’s crime. “It’s not his fault, it’s not like him, he’s never… never done anything like this before…” He hesitated, his breath catching in his throat as he amended tearfully, “Except… he did. Once. But… he didn’t even remember it after, and he didn’t really hit me, and I… I don’t think he’s… himself. Something’s wrong with him. Maybe… drugs? Or… or something. But Kris wouldn’t hurt me, Mom! He wouldn’t, I know he wouldn’t, but he… he did, and… and I don’t know what to do. I just don’t know what to do anymore…”

“Kris did this?” Leila still seemed stunned by the concept of the gentle, sweet-natured young man she knew striking out in violence against her son. “Adam…” She shook her head, bewildered. “… how long has this been going on?”

“He started… started acting weird just like… a few weeks ago. I don’t know what’s wrong with him. He just… he started… working out and stuff. He didn’t like the stuff the press has been saying about him. You know – ‘Pocket Idol’ and all that. He’s… a lot stronger now.” Adam knew he was rambling, but he couldn’t seem to stop, all the worries and confusion of the past few weeks pouring out of him in a torrent of emotion. “Which is really tragically ironic timing, because it’s just in time to knock me around any way he wants…”

Adam’s eyes widened with dawning realization, as the pieces began to come together in his mind. In the meantime, however, Leila was gradually getting past shock and into anger. There was a wary expression on her face as she cautiously interrupted.

“Adam… I know you don’t want to think this, but… we have to consider the possibility. Maybe… he’s been this way all along, underneath it all. Maybe… maybe he’s only just now acting this way because… because he only just now can. He wasn’t strong enough to hurt you before, but… but now…”

“No.” Adam objected, his voice distant and distracted. “No… he started acting this way around the same time he started working out… but… it’s only been three weeks. Nobody bulks up that fast…”

“What are you thinking, sweetie?” Leila asked, shaking her head in confusion. “What is it?”

“Maybe he’s taking something. Something that’s affecting his moods, judgment…” Adam looked up at his mother in alarm. “Mom, he’s in trouble! Whatever he’s taking, if it’s doing this to him, it
has to be really dangerous. I have to help him…”

“No, Adam, you have to protect yourself,” Leila objected, an edge of warning to her voice. “You need to worry about making sure that you are safe, do you hear me? It’s all well and good to want to help Kris, but you have to think about your own safety, all right?” Her tone shifted to something taut and angry as she added, “He’s damn lucky to have someone who cares enough to be thinking about how to help him at a time like this, instead of calling the cops and having him thrown in jail!”

Adam sighed, letting out a deep, shaky breath. “Mom… I love him. It’s not that simple…”

“It is to me.”

Adam’s gaze was drawn to hers again by the note of steel in her voice, and he was silenced by the protective fire he saw in her eyes.

“I know you love him, sweetie. And it’s all well and good to want to figure out what’s wrong and help him. But you can’t help him while you’re with him – not like this. You need to break it off with him for now and keep your distance. Maybe that’s what it will take to make him get help for… for whatever this is.”

Adam was quiet, considering her words. Although he desperately wanted to be there for Kris, he had to accept the logic of what she was saying. He knew that he couldn’t help Kris if he was in danger himself – but he couldn’t even begin to fathom the idea of leaving Kris.

Leila seemed to sense when it was time to ease up a little and give Adam time to think. She gave him a gentle hug, rising up on her toes to kiss his cheek before pulling back to meet his eyes again.

“Just… stay here tonight, Adam. You’ll be safe, and it’ll give you some space to think things out. We’ll talk about it more in the morning, and we can figure out a plan. But, for now – just get some sleep, sweetie, okay?”

************************************************

The sunlight streaming through the windows, combined with the sound of voices from the television, gradually filtered through the sleep haze that surrounded Kris, drawing him slowly
toward consciousness. He blinked against the light, groaning and raising a hand to press against his throbbing head.

He sat up, disoriented and confused to find himself sleeping still fully clothed and sprawled across the couch. His eyes widened in alarm as he took in the state of his living room – chairs overturned… papers, pictures, various items strewn everywhere… broken glass scattered across the floor.

*What happened? Why did I sleep on the couch, and in my clothes? Did someone break in?* Kris sat up abruptly, momentarily forgetting his headache as his stomach dropped in alarm. *Adam! God, where’s Adam? If someone broke in…*

“Adam?” he called out, hearing the note of panic in his own voice. “Adam! Are you here?”

He rose and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time on his way to their bedroom. The bed had not been slept in, and he wasn’t sure whether to think that was a good sign or a bad one. He hurried back downstairs, searching the entire house, calling out for Adam – with no result. His hands shook as he took his cell phone from his pocket and hit the first number in his speed dial.

Adam’s phone rang and rang, but no one answered.

*Where did he go? When did I even go to sleep? Why can’t I remember?*

Suddenly, Kris felt sick, his stomach lurching as a horrifying thought filled his mind.

*The last time you blacked out like this and couldn’t remember what happened…*  
*God, what if I did something… what if I hurt him?*

Kris dialed Adam again, desperately hoping that Adam would answer. Before it could even ring, however, Kris’s attention was diverted by a new story appearing on the television, and he hung up the phone, his eyes suddenly riveted to the screen. There was an entertainment news show on – and he and Adam were on it.

“All right, folks, you’ve been waiting for the latest scoop on Kris Allen’s colorful personal life! Apparently, America’s Idol sweetheart Kris Allen has a jealous streak. This footage was taken by a fan last night at an exclusive club in downtown LA. Kris had a major freak out when boyfriend Adam Lambert spent too much time talking to an old friend who was also in attendance. There was a verbal altercation between the three which ended… like this…”

Kris stared in horror at the video footage as the scene played out before him – a scene of which he
could not remember a moment. He watched, shocked, as he got in Adam’s face, threatening and furious – his heart twisting at the obvious fear in Adam’s eyes.

No… I never wanted to make him look that way… no, please…

He almost couldn’t believe that it was real when he saw himself punch Brad in the face, knocking him to the floor – and then continue to attack the smaller man while he was down. He watched as Adam tried to stop him, flinching when Adam flinched as Kris grabbed his arm and jerked him toward the exit.

He looks so scared… God, he shouldn’t ever be scared of me…

He tried Adam’s number again, his heart pounding, his mind racing, as he struggled to remember something – anything – about what had happened after he and Adam left the club. He had looked like a stranger to his own eyes on the television screen – so angry and violent and utterly disrespectful to everyone around him, especially the one person who loved him more than anyone else, and was trying to help him in spite of his inexcusable behavior.

He’s always there for me, even when I don’t even come close to deserving it… but… where is he now?

Kris couldn’t get the fear in Adam’s eyes out of his mind – or the sinking certainty that of all the things he could not remember doing, the worst had not been caught on tape. He tapped his foot impatiently as the phone rang and rang, praying that the ringing would stop and he would hear Adam’s voice.

Please, Adam, please answer…

Please be okay…
“So… you’re sure you’re okay?” Adam’s voice was tentative and tinged with guilt, though what had happened wasn’t really technically his fault. “I mean… nothing’s broken, or…”

“No, I have no injuries good makeup can’t cover, thank you very much for asking – after you made sure I wasn’t going to press charges.”

Brad’s tone was flat and subtly mocking, but Adam knew him well enough to know he wasn’t really angry. Still, he couldn’t help feeling a little defensive given the circumstances. His face flushed with shame, and he was grateful that Brad was not there to see it as he quickly protested.

“I asked you if you were okay first thing!” he insisted. “I wouldn’t have even mentioned the charges unless I knew you weren’t really hurt.” He paused, his voice softening as he repeated for what felt like the fiftieth time, “I’m really, sorry, Brad. I swear, I’m so sorry…”

Adam heard the familiar beeping noise alerting him that another call was coming in and removed the phone from his ear long enough to read the name on the screen.

*Kris*

He grimaced, momentarily torn, but ultimately it was an easy decision. He knew better than to end this call with Brad for Kris – not after what had just happened. To do so would be to effectively end one of his longest standing friendships for the sake of a romantic relationship which, at this point, he wasn’t even sure was going to survive. He placed the phone back to his ear and dutifully focused on what Brad was saying.

“I know, babe.” Brad’s voice was gentler now, relenting. “It’s not your fault.” He paused, a hard edge creeping back into his voice as he added, “And so it’s perfectly clear, the only reason I’m not pressing charges is for you – not him, that’s for damn sure.”

“I know.” Adam barely recognized his own voice, small and subdued as it almost never was. “Thanks.”

The beeping started again, and Brad sounded a little impatient as he demanded, “Who keeps calling you? If you need to go, that’s fine…”
“Well, um… no, I don’t. It’s just… it’s…”

“God, it’s Kris, isn’t it?” Brad’s voice was tinged with disgust. “I take it back. Adam, I know I promised not to press charges, and I won’t, but that does not mean I don’t hate him with every fiber of my being right now – and not for what he did to me, for what he’s been doing to you.” He paused a moment before admitting, “Okay, also for what he did to me. But whatever. The point is – I swear if you hang up on me to talk to him, I no longer know you.”

Adam couldn’t repress a smile at Brad’s overdratic threats. He recognized that they were little more than a thin disguise for his concern and affection. His tone became teasing as he leaned back against his mother’s kitchen counter and smirked.

“Despite that tempting offer, I think I’ll stay on the phone with you a while longer anyway.”

“You are dead to me, Lambert.”

Brad’s retort came without hesitation – but he did not hang up. They talked a few minutes longer – until Kris beeped in again. Adam went silent, biting his lower lip, hoping it wasn’t obvious how badly he wanted to take Kris’s call.

It was.

“He beeps in, and you’re not even listening to me anymore, are you?” Brad sighed. “Fine. Call him back. But you’d better be calling him back to tell him to fuck off. Adam, you can not even think of going back to him, not until he’s got his shit straight, you hear me?”

Adam nodded, then remembered that Brad could not hear the gesture and managed a weak response.

“Right. Of course.”

Brad’s tone was warning, suspicious. “Adam…”
“I get it. I won’t. I’ll… call you later, okay?” Adam knew he sounded distracted, but he really couldn’t help it. “I’m sorry,” he offered again. “I’m really sorry, sweetie…”

“Don’t patronize me, bitch,” Brad warned before adding in a light, lilting tone that made it clear there were no actual hard feelings. “Call me.”

Adam disconnected the call, then stared at his phone for a long time, trying to work up the nerve to dial Kris’s number. He knew that Kris was the one who should be feeling nervous. Kris was the one who had possibly done irreparable damage to their relationship; Kris was the one who needed to get help for whatever was going on with him if there was any hope for that relationship to be salvaged. There was no real reason that *Adam* should feel awkward about calling.

And yet somehow, he couldn’t quite bring himself to make the call.

Fortunately, it was a matter of mere seconds before Kris called back again. Adam took a deep breath and answered the call, holding the phone to his ear and waiting without speaking a word.

“Adam? Are you okay? God, where are you?” Kris sounded breathless with relief. “Are you okay?” he asked again, anxious concern in his voice.

“Yeah.” Adam’s voice came out in a weak croak, and he cleared his throat and tried again, a little stronger. “Yeah, I am. Now.”

The emphasis on the final word momentarily silenced Kris, and Adam waited through the awkward silence, not really knowing what to say. He just wanted to know what Kris knew about what had happened, and what he thought needed to happen now – whether or not he had any idea of how serious the situation had become.

“Adam…” Kris sounded lost, desperately confused, and the sound of his voice tore at Adam’s heart. “Adam, what happened?” He hesitated before amending softly, “What did I do?”

“You… don’t remember?”

Adam knew it was probably irrational, as blackouts were certainly a very bad sign, but he felt a tremendous amount of relief with the knowledge that Kris did not remember what he’d done. It would have been infinitely worse to think that Kris had been even slightly in control when he’d
dragged him violently out of the club and slapped him in the face.

“No,” Kris confessed in a hushed, horrified voice. “Adam… I have no memory at all of last night after… after we got to the club, I think. That’s the last thing I remember.” There was an edge of panic in his voice as he persisted, “What did I do, Adam? Did I hurt you?” When Adam was silent, the panic increased, his voice trembling with alarm. “Oh, God, Adam, did I hurt you?”

The love and desperate concern he heard in Kris’s voice was enough to bring Adam to the verge of tears. He swallowed back the knot in the back of his throat, closing his burning eyes and trying to control the trembling of emotion that passed through him enough to respond.

“Yeah, Kris,” he whispered at last, his voice thick with emotion. “Yeah… you hurt me.”

There was utter silence on the other end of the line, broken at last by a choked sobbing sound from Kris that only served to further shatter Adam’s resolve. He fought to control his emotions, to keep his voice at least a little steady when he managed to speak again.

“You need help, Kris. Something is… is seriously wrong with you right now.”

“I know,” Kris sobbed softly. “I know, Adam. I just… I don’t know what it is.” There was a helpless sound to his voice as he pleaded, “Adam, I need you. I’m so sorry, I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but… I need you to help me. Please… can you please come home? Please?”

Adam felt an uneasy sensation of fear in the pit of his stomach at the suggestion – but the need to know what was happening to the man he loved was strong enough to make him consider it. He hesitated over his response, cringing at the uncertainty he knew was clear in his voice.

“I… I’m not sure that’s… a good idea right now, Kris…”

“Please,” Kris repeated, panic creeping into his voice. “Adam… I need to figure this out. I n-never want to hurt you…” He was crying again. “I didn’t mean to. I don’t know what… what’s happening to me…”

If it’s drugs, there’ll be some kind of evidence in the house, surely. Maybe I can get him to go to the doctor, or a therapist, or something… or at least we can try to figure out what the hell is going on… talk about it and maybe find the answer…
Adam’s thoughts worked in tandem with the pain he could hear in Kris’s voice, pushing him toward his decision. He was quiet for a moment before he responded at last, his voice terse and edged with warning.

“I’ll be there in two hours. And Kris…” He paused, drawing in a shaky breath, hoping he sounded more commanding than he felt. “… you had better be straight with me.”

“Adam, I will! I am!” Kris insisted. “I’m not trying to hide anything from you, I just… I don’t have a freakin’ clue what’s happening to me…”

“Okay, okay…”

Adam soothed him wearily, more out of an automatic response to the vulnerability in Kris’s voice than out of real sympathy. If his suspicions were accurate and it was indeed a drug addiction that was causing Kris’s frightening personality changes – then Kris was lying to him even as they spoke.

“I’ll see you soon. Bye, Kris.”

Adam was thankful that his mother had gone to work, because he knew there was no way she’d allow him to go, if it was in her power to stop him. He felt a little guilty, like a teenager sneaking out of the house, as he scrawled a brief note on a piece of scrap paper and left it on the kitchen counter.

He still had enough of a sense of self-preservation to know that he had to tell her the truth about where he was going – just in case.

_And isn’t that a horrible thing to have to think… about Kris…_

_Please, please let me be able to help him…_
Kris was quiet and subdued as he opened the door for Adam and stepped aside as he walked in. Adam silently walked into the living room and sat down on the couch, and Kris followed him obediently, sitting down beside him, but giving him a respectful distance, leaving several feet between them.

Adam couldn’t bear the look of pain and shame on Kris’s face as he took in Adam’s split lip and the dark bruise on his cheek for the first time. Kris’s lower lip trembled and he looked as if he was about to break down in tears. Despite the concern he felt for Kris, Adam couldn’t help the sense of righteous anger that surged up within him.

“No,” he snapped, surprising even himself as he spoke. “Don’t you dare fuckin’ cry about this, Kris. You’re the one who hurt me, so self-pity right now from you is really fuckin’ inappropriate.”

Kris flinched, nodding hurriedly as he looked away in shame. “You’re right,” he whispered. “I’m sorry… you’re right…”

Adam stared down at his own hands for a tense, awkward moment before looking up to search Kris’s fearful, questioning eyes, his own gaze piercing, unrelenting. He voiced the main question on his mind point blank, without hesitation, hoping that the element of surprise might prevent Kris from coming up with a convincing lie.

“Are you doing drugs, Kris?”

“No.” Kris shook his head, looking genuinely confused. “Nothing.”

“Not even, like… some kind of steroids or something, to help with the workouts?” Adam suggested, watching Kris intently for any sign of deception. “Because… all of this seemed to start around the time you started on this whole body-building kick.”

Kris abruptly looked away, swallowing hard. Adam tensed automatically, bracing himself for either a lie, or the painful truth – not really sure at this point which would be worse.

Depends on what the truth is…

“Wait here just a minute,” Kris softly requested, rising to his feet and heading toward the stairs. “I think… there’s something I need to show you.”
Chapter 10

Kris took the bottle from the back of the dresser drawer where it was hidden, his hands trembling as he made his way back down the stairs to the living room where Adam waited for him. He wasn’t sure that the supplement was responsible for his recent behavior, but it was the only thing he could think of to explain it. He almost turned around and went back upstairs before Adam could see the bottle, momentarily afraid of the idea of going without the pills that he was now taking three times daily – but he was more afraid of losing Adam.

And if he offered Adam no explanation for what had happened, Kris knew that he would lose him.

Adam looked up at him as he approached, and the solemn, guarded expression in his eyes hurt Kris’s heart, but not as much as the way Adam tensed, unintentionally drawing back as Kris neared him. Kris quickly sat down on the sofa beside Adam, deliberately leaving plenty of space between them and trying to make it clear to Adam that he was not a threat.

Kris held out the bottle, his eyes downcast as Adam gave him a curious look and took it from his hands. Adam turned the bottle in his hand to read the label, a troubled frown creasing his brow.

“It’s totally natural. Just… just herbs and stuff,” Kris explained with a slight shrug. “Shouldn’t be dangerous, but…” His voice trailed off as he glanced up and caught sight once more of the dark bruise on Adam’s cheek. He swallowed hard, flinching as he looked away in shame.

“If what’s on this label is really what’s in here,” Adam pointed out, his tone wary and distrustful. “Where did you get these, Kris?”

“At least it’s online,” Kris mumbled, feeling his face flush with embarrassment, because he knew how foolish it made him sound to admit it. “From this… this bodybuilding website that… popped up on my screen…”

“Oh, that was brilliant.”

“It says they’re all natural,” Kris protested weakly, unable to meet Adam’s eyes. “I thought maybe it was a scam – a waste of money, but… but I didn’t think they’d be dangerous. They can’t just sell dangerous crap online, can they?”

“It’s a random pop-up ad on the internet, Kris.” Adam gave him an incredulous look, his tone flat and disbelieving. “They kind of specialize in dangerous crap.”

1. “I – I’m sorry.”
2. “I know.”

Kris was quiet for a moment, looking away, his hands fidgeting anxiously in his lap as he waited for Adam to go on. Adam opened the bottle, tipping a few of the pills out into his palm and examining them closely. Kris didn’t want to look at them – didn’t want to acknowledge the fact that it had been a matter of hours since he’d last had one, or the overwhelming craving that was gradually building within him. He tore his gaze away from the pills in Adam’s hand, forcing himself to look up to meet Adam’s eyes.

Adam was staring at him, a wary look of suspicion in his eyes. Kris felt inexplicably guilty, caught,
as he quickly looked away, biting his lower lip as he focused his attention on a spot on the carpet, a stain that had not been there before his apparent rampage the night before – the rampage he could not remember.

“We need to take you – and these – to a doctor, Kris,” Adam quietly declared. “We need to have them do a full work up on you and make sure this crap hasn’t done you any permanent damage, and… and we need to get them to run some tests on these pills and find out what exactly they are. We need to know if… if this is what’s causing your…” Adam’s voice trailed off, and he shook his head slowly, at a loss for the right words.

His tone was severe and quietly commanding, but there was no mistaking the loving concern behind it. Kris nodded silently, swallowing hard, feeling a little bit like a child in trouble with his parents. He was scared and guilty and confused, and deeply relieved that Adam was still using the word “we” to describe them – still loved him enough to be talking about taking steps to make sure he was okay, instead of packing his things and walking out and leaving Kris to deal with his problems alone.

At least he still loves me. I don’t know why he does, after I hurt him like this, but... at least he still loves me.

That was the important thing, he reminded himself as Adam rose and went to the phone, calling Kris’s doctor and making an appointment. Kris tried not to look at the bottle on the end table, and the handful of pills Adam had carelessly laid down beside it – tried not to wonder whether or not Adam knew exactly how many he’d taken out, or would notice if Kris slipped one into his pocket... or into his mouth.

No. Those things might have made you hurt Adam. Just look at him. If these pills are what made you do that, then you don’t ever need to touch them again.

But... maybe it wasn’t the pills. Maybe it’s something else. There are other things. Hormone disorders, certain viruses, mental disorders...

God. You’re wishing for a mental disorder so that you can keep on taking your pills. If that’s not a sign that you have a problem, I don’t know what is.

Kris let out a deep breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, utterly relieved when Adam hung up the phone and returned to the sofa, and the opportunity slipped by without his having taken advantage of it. Kris felt strangely cold and shaky inside, emotionally vulnerable and on edge – a feeling which was only intensified when Adam reached out to hesitantly cover Kris’s trembling hand with his own. Kris looked up into his eyes, stunned and grateful for the contact, as well as for the guarded compassion he saw there.

“We just need to... to figure this out.” The faint tremor in Adam’s voice tore at Kris’s heart, intensifying his guilt. “I... you’re really scaring me lately, and... I just want for you... for us, both... to be okay... okay?” Kris nodded, and Adam was silent for a moment before going on, a hitch in his soft voice, the protective walls descending to reveal more vulnerability than he’d exposed yet in this difficult, awkward conversation.

“I... I love you, Kris. I want you to know that. No matter what. I love you.”

Kris’s eyes welled with tears, and he swallowed back a sob. Adam had been right to tell him not to cry. He didn’t deserve to cry, to feel sorry for himself – didn’t even deserve to offer back the words of devotion Adam had offered him, not with the evidence of his own brutal betrayal still glaringly visible on Adam’s sweet, concerned face. He couldn’t speak, anyway, so he just nodded, blinking
away his tears, as Adam rose from the couch, taking his car keys from his pocket as he silently led the way toward the door.

“You said you’ve been taking these pills… how long?”

Kris glanced at Adam in the chair beside the examination table before looking back toward the doctor, whose expectant gaze was locked onto Kris as she waited for his response. Her tone was mild and clinically professional, but her disapproval was clear in her eyes.

“Um… three weeks. No… a month, now, I think.”

The doctor’s frown deepened at his answer, and she shook her head in dismay. “Your last check up was two months ago, Kris, and the amount of muscle mass you’ve put on in that time, well – it shouldn’t be possible. Not on nothing more than an herbal supplement. And frankly, I don’t think it is possible, in any healthy sort of way. Whatever is causing you to bulk up like this, who knows what else it’s doing to your body in the process?”

Kris felt an unsettled sensation of fear in the pit of his stomach as he considered that possibility – one he hadn’t thought of since he’d started taking the pills. Adam sat forward in his seat, his expression troubled and fearful, though he was not surprised by the doctor’s warning. He had expressed the same concerns to Kris at home.

“How can we know that he’s all right?” he asked anxiously, reaching out to place a hand on Kris’s knee, though his attention was fully focused on the doctor, and Kris wasn’t sure he even realized he had done so. “What kind of tests do you need to do?”

“We’ll do a stress test now to find out if there is any apparent damage to his heart or lungs. In the mean time, we’ll begin some blood work, though that will take a day or two before I’ll have the results. The same with the toxicology report on these pills.” She briefly picked up the bottle from the tray beside the examination table before putting them down again in distaste. “In the mean time, the best thing you can do is to not take any more of them…”

“Keep them.” Adam’s voice was surprisingly hard as he interrupted her, surprising even himself. He swallowed hard, looking momentarily self-conscious, deliberately softening his tone as he looked between Kris and the doctor and explained, “We don’t want there to be any… any temptation…”

The doctor frowned critically, glancing between them with dawning suspicion in her eyes. “Temptation Kris… have you experienced any symptoms of addiction to these pills? How long has it been since you’ve taken one?”

“I-I don’t know,” Kris stammered, feeling suddenly trapped and self-conscious, unable to meet either Adam’s eyes or those of his doctor. “Maybe – sixteen hours? Something like that?”

The doctor’s gaze was piercing as she studied his expression and carriage. “Any signs of withdrawal? Cravings, headache, nausea?”

“No,” Kris answered automatically, shaking his head, feeling unreasonably defensive at her questions. “Nothing like that. I’m not… addicted, I just… maybe they’re not good for me, but I’m not an addict!”

He swallowed hard, certain that his face was giving the truth away, though he was unable to bring himself to look into the faces of his doctor and his lover to gauge their reactions. After a moment,
however, the doctor spoke again, a note of resignation to her voice.

“All right. But if you do start to experience any of those symptoms, Kris, or anything else unusual, please give me a call. Don’t take anything else until you hear from me, either – not until we know what’s in these and how other drugs might interact with them. It should take a couple of days for the test results to come back, and I’ll call you as soon as they do.”

As Kris and Adam made their way to the car, Kris couldn’t help but notice the swift, taut pace with which Adam moved – anger and frustration clear in his every step. Kris winced inwardly, remaining quiet and subdued as he got into the passenger seat of the car, sure that even if he had managed to convince his doctor – and he was doubtful even of that – Adam had certainly seen through his lies and knew that he was not telling the whole truth.

_It doesn’t matter, _Kris insisted silently, desperately. _I don’t have the pills anymore, so it doesn’t matter…_

“You lied.” Adam’s voice was like steel, slicing through the stony silence that filled the car. “You want those pills, Kris. How are you going to get help if you lie to your doctor about what’s going on?”

“Adam… I don’t…”

Adam slammed his hand angrily against the dashboard before turning in his seat to face Kris, his eyes blazing with furious challenge. “Really, Kris? Really? You’re gonna lie to _me_, too?”

“No!” Kris objected, matching Adam’s tone. He stopped, however, the breath sucked from his lungs when Adam flinched in reaction to the anger in Kris’s voice. Kris’s eyes went wide and he shook his head in horror, holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender and leaning back away from Adam. “Adam, no… I wasn’t… I wasn’t gonna…”

Adam shook his head, letting out a shaky sigh of frustration and running a hand through his hair. “No, I… I know,” he replied. “Kris… I just… how can you expect me to trust you again if you’re lying to me?”

“I’m _not_!” Kris insisted. “Adam – I’m not lying to you. I was just going to say that… I don’t need to tell the doctor whether or not I’m craving the pills. I don’t _have_ the pills. I’m not taking them anymore!”

Adam bit his lower lip, torn between the apparent reason of Kris’s words and what he knew to be best. He shook his head slowly, opening his mouth to speak; but before he could, Kris reached out a cautious hand to take his, waiting until Adam looked up at him to go on.

“Adam… I am _so sorry_ for what I did to you. I will try for the rest of our lives if you’ll let me and I still won’t ever be able to express how sorry I am. I _love_ you, and I – I want you home with me. I don’t _want_ the pills – not as much as I _want_ you.” Kris paused, his tone softening, yet filled with conviction as he explained, “That’s what matters – not what label I am or am not willing to get slapped onto me by the first employee in that office who happens to peek at my file and then sell the information to the nearest tabloid. Okay? Just because I don’t necessarily tell her _everything_ doesn’t mean that I would _ever_ lie to you. And I wouldn’t. Ever. I swear, Adam. I love you. Please, you have to believe me.”

Adam studied Kris’s face, uncertainty and love warring on his own. “Kris… I… I _want_ to…”

“Please, Adam,” Kris whispered, squeezing his hand. “Please. Give me a chance to prove it to
Adam hesitated a moment longer, but Kris could see the end of the battle in his eyes. “Okay,” he whispered at last, nodding slowly as he turned back toward the windshield and freed his hand to turn the key in the ignition. “Okay, Kris. Let’s go home.”
Chapter 11

By the time they reached home, Kris was jittery and on edge, fidgeting with anything within sight in an attempt to distract himself from his desire for the pills he’d left behind in the doctor’s office.

They’d been home less than an hour when he found that he was unable to think of anything else.

He knew the pills were dangerous – knew it even better with the realization of how desperately he still wanted them, against all logic and rationality – and yet he found himself wishing that his last dose had been at some point that day, instead of an hour before the party they’d attended the night before. An instant after the thought crossed his mind, he felt guilty for it, remembering what the pills had caused him to do to Adam.

But… if I’d just had one this morning… before I realized about last night… then maybe I wouldn’t want one so badly right now. Maybe it’d be easier to handle this...

And how screwed up is your logic right now?

God, you really need help.

Adam didn’t seem to have much to say to Kris at the moment. He moved around the house straightening up rooms that were already neat, closing doors with not quite enough force to call it “slamming” them, but with absolutely enough force to passive aggressively display his feelings about the situation. The unspoken message was clear.

Adam had agreed to come home with Kris and to help him – but that didn’t mean he wasn’t still mightily pissed off.

Even Kris’s desperate craving for the pills was not a sufficient distraction to keep him from noticing the awkward, moody tension in the room. He tried to think of something he could say that would make the situation better, but nothing came to mind. He had already said that he was sorry, though he knew the mere words were pitifully inadequate.

All he knew was that he couldn’t take another minute alone with nothing but the silence and Adam’s quiet anger.

“I don’t feel good,” he mumbled, rising to his feet, not quite daring to look at Adam as he made his way toward the stairs. “I’m gonna lie down.”

“ ‘Kay.” Adam’s tone was terse, falsely light, and he didn’t spare Kris so much as a look.

“ ‘Kay.” Adam’s tone was terse, falsely light, and he didn’t spare Kris so much as a look.

Thanks for caring.

Kris might have muttered the words in his head under his breath as he climbed the stairs – which seemed far more steep and numerous than usual – and made his way toward their bedroom. It didn’t matter, though. He knew that Adam wasn’t paying any attention to him at the moment anyway.

Kris lay down on the bed, not bothering to pull back the covers. He felt overheated and nauseated. He was exhausted and jittery at the same time, his head spinning and dizzy. Within minutes of lying down, the fevered sensation gave way to cold chills, and Kris pulled the blankets over him, trying to think about anything besides the drugs, and how badly he wanted them.
He soon realized that even being downstairs with Adam and his pissy mood would have been better than being up here alone, with nothing to distract him from his torturous thoughts.

When Adam unexpectedly entered the room a mere thirty minutes later, Kris was immensely relieved. Those thirty minutes had felt like an eternity. Although the tension and guilt intensified once more with Adam’s arrival, Kris couldn’t suppress a vague feeling of affectionate amusement in spite of the serious nature of the situation.

Apparently banging things around while cleaning already clean rooms without an audience is a little too much ‘passive’ and not enough ‘aggressive’ for Adam’s purposes.

Adam hummed under his breath as he picked up discarded clothes from beside the bed, not acknowledging Kris’s obvious state of distress. He disappeared into the bathroom for a few moments, the melodious tones of his voice amplified by the tile walls, before he turned and stopped for a moment in the bathroom doorway.

Kris didn’t move or look up, too preoccupied with his physical symptoms to pay much attention, when the soft humming abruptly died away. He was shivering with cold that he knew had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. He jumped, startled, as the mattress beside him dropped slightly under the pressure of Adam’s sitting down beside him.

Kris opened his eyes, venturing a glance up at his boyfriend as Adam placed a tentative hand on the middle of his back. There was resignation and defeat in Adam’s eyes and voice when at last he broke both the silence and the stand off, in a tone that suggested that the simple act of caring almost hurt.

And maybe it does. It did last night.

“Are you okay?” Adam’s voice was soft and tired.

“ ‘M fine,” Kris mumbled into the blankets he’d drawn up around his face, his eyes averted with shame. “Don’t bother.”

“I shouldn’t,” Adam retorted with indignation in his quiet words, clearly offended by the resentment in Kris’s voice.

He rose from the bed and started to move away, but Kris reached out a trembling hand to catch his wrist, sitting up just a little and looking up at Adam with pleading eyes. He knew that Adam had a right to his anger – that he didn’t deserve his concern and compassion, and it was too much to ask, when the livid purple bruise that evidenced his own transgressions was still clearly visible on Adam’s face.

He couldn’t help asking anyway.

“Wait,” he whispered, his voice hoarse and trembling. “Adam… can you just stay for a little while? Just… sit here and talk to me? I just… I can’t stop… thinking about… just thinking, and I… I don’t wanna be alone. Please?”

Adam hesitated just a moment before turning his hand to grasp Kris’s, squeezing for a moment before letting go and walking around to the other side of the bed. He ignored Kris’s suggestion of just sitting down with him, and instead carefully lay down on the mattress, climbing under the blankets and wrapping his arm gently around Kris’s smaller frame, drawing him back against the warm solidity of Adam’s chest. Almost instantly, Kris felt his shivering subside, and the tumult of guilt, craving, and confusion in his mind fell to a muted, background hum.
Kris could have cried from sheer relief.

Silence reigned for a few moments, and Kris could feel that Adam wanted to say something, but simply wasn’t sure how. When he figured it out, his voice was low and quaverling, as if he was fighting back tears himself.

“I… I never thought you’d hurt me like this. Not… not you. You’re… you’re supposed to be the nice guy. The good, wholesome Southern gentleman who always treats his partner with love and respect, and… and you’re not right now. You’re a miserable little shit for lying to me, and… and treating me like crap, and hitting me, and… and I kinda hate you right now for… for all of that.”

Kris flinched slightly at Adam’s quietly ruthless honesty, though he knew he deserved every word.

“But,” Adam continued, his voice softer and achingly vulnerable as he tucked his face down against Kris’s shoulder, letting out a soft, shuddering breath, “I still love you, Kris. Maybe too much, because… because I can’t walk away from you, in pain like this. I tried to ignore you, and I couldn’t make it for a single freakin’ hour. I just… I love you so much, Kris.” He paused, and the soft sob that caught in his throat tore at Kris’s heart. “Please don’t make me regret it. Please.”

Before he knew it, Kris’s shoulders were shaking again – but not with chills. “I’m so sorry, Adam,” he sobbed, reaching up a trembling hand to grasp Adam’s and pulling him closer. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Kris lay there in Adam’s arms, crying softly, as exhaustion gradually overtook them both. He knew that the last thing he deserved was the chance to fall apart in the warmth and security of Adam’s embrace – and yet, that was what Adam offered him, in exchange for nothing more than a flimsy promise that could easily yet be broken.

But I won’t break it. I won’t. He deserves so much better than that – so much better than me, right now. He doesn’t have to put his faith in me like this, to give me another chance – and I’m going to make sure that he doesn’t have to regret it.

*****************************************************************************

The ringing of his cell phone drew Adam from a heavy sleep he hadn’t even meant to fall into. He groaned, rolling over onto his own side of the bed and blinking sleepily at the clock on the night stand. An hour had passed since he’d lain down beside Kris. He fumbled at his pocket until he managed to retrieve his phone, then stared at the screen until the lighted letters came into focus.

Mom’s Cell.

Shit.

Adam’s stomach lurched at the memory of the note he’d left her in lieu of an actual explanation, and how badly she probably wanted to kill him right now – once she’d made sure he was still alive, of course, after foolishly going back to the arms of his abusive boyfriend.

Yeah. She’s gotta be so pissed…

But unless I want her to assume the worst and send the cops out here with the idea that Kris has probably already killed me, and that story splashed all over the internet tomorrow… I’d better take this call.

“Hey, Mom.” Adam kept his tone light and innocent as he rose from the bed and quickly moved toward the bedroom door, not wanting to disturb Kris now that he was finally asleep. “No, he’s
Despite Adam’s efforts to keep quiet, the motion of his getting out of bed and the soft sounds of the beginning of his phone conversation drew Kris unwillingly from sleep. He whimpered unhappily at the cold feeling at his back left by Adam’s absence, huddling further under the covers for a moment and trying to find the peaceful sleep that had slipped away from him.

After a couple of minutes, he gave up, as the cravings began to fill his mind again, with a vengeance. Kris sat up in the bed, his arms crossed over his chest in a vain attempt to stop the shivers that were beginning to return. He just knew that if he could take one more pill, he’d feel so much better, and then maybe he could focus on getting well, on getting to the point where he didn’t want or need them at all…

A wild idea struck him, and Kris sprang out of bed, rushing across the room to the dresser where he’d kept the pills hidden. He glanced guiltily toward the door, though the silence told him that Adam had taken his conversation downstairs so as not to disturb him. That only intensified his guilt, but not enough to keep Kris from feeling around at the back of the drawer, pulling it out as far as it would go to search for any accidentally spilled pills that might remain there.

His efforts came up completely empty.

Kris sighed, resting his elbows on the top of the dresser and shaking his head at his own pathetic behavior.

It’s a good thing they’re gone, he reminded himself. Look at yourself. ‘Not an addict’. Please.

Suddenly, Kris lurched away from the dresser and rushed into the bathroom, barely making it to his knees in front of the toilet before the nausea he’d been feeling for the past few hours reached its fruition. When his stomach had emptied itself, he was trembling, his face broken out in a cold sweat, wanting to vomit again simply from the vile taste in his mouth.

Yeah, Kris. Adam’s right. You’re supposed to be the wholesome, ‘good’ one, and look at you. On your knees on your bathroom floor in the middle of withdrawals. Yeah, that’s about as low as it gets, Kris – and you’re already there.

Fate seemed determined to prove him wrong.

Kris’s stomach dropped, and his eyes widened as something caught his eye on the bathroom floor a few feet away from him – just barely visible under the bottom edge of the cupboards. It was small and white and nearly blended in completely with the tile, but Kris immediately recognized it. It was one of his pills that he’d somehow dropped and forgotten.

He picked it up, holding it in his hand and staring at it, his heart racing with anticipation – and dread.

No. You can’t do this, Kris. You can’t do this to yourself – or to Adam.

It’s just one, though. It’s not like you can take more than one. There aren’t any more. And maybe… maybe it’d just take the edge off…

They’re dangerous. They made you hurt Adam. You can’t take this pill, Kris. You can’t.

But… how much could just one hurt?
“Adam Mitchel Lambert, what the hell are you thinking?”

Adam winced, closing his eyes for a moment and drawing in a deep breath as he tried to find the words to appease his mother. As most children learn from an early age, Adam knew very well that when his mother used his full name in that particular tone of voice, it meant that she was seriously pissed.

Not that she didn’t have a perfectly valid reason.

“Mom… just let me explain…”

“No, Adam, explaining is what you should have done this morning instead of leaving me a two-sentence note to tell me that you’d gone back to be with Kris after what he did to you last night!”

“Mom, it’s totally okay,” Adam insisted, hating the way that the tone of her voice made him feel like a twelve-year-old again. “He called and said he was sorry and that he needed my help, and I just wanted to find out what happened…”

“I know what happened,” Leila snapped back, though it was clear that the terse anger in her voice was not directed at her son, but at the wayward lover he was defending. “I saw your face last night, Adam. I saw the bruises he left on you, how he… he hurt you.” Her voice softened as she went along, the faint tremor it took on making Adam feel terribly guilty – as was her intention, he was sure. “That’s all I need to know to know that you should not have gone back there – not without letting me know you were going. Thank goodness I came home for lunch today, or I wouldn’t have even known you were gone for another four hours…”

“And since he’s clearly planning to murder me in the next fifteen minutes, that’s such a relief.”

Leila went dead silent, and Adam closed his eyes, wincing at his own ill-advised sarcastic remark. He felt defensive and trapped by her accusations – born of love and concern though they were – and reacted without thinking about it, his emotions sharpening his tongue and causing him to lash out.

But she’s not the one who deserves to be lashed out at. No, he’s asleep upstairs in your bed. Apparently, according to your twisted new enabler mindset, concerned warnings get smart-ass comments in return, but a fist to the face gets… cuddles.

Smart, Adam. Really smart.

“Do you think that’s funny, Adam?” Leila’s voice was quiet and restrained, but Adam could clearly hear the hurt and anger there. “Really? Because I don’t…”

“I’m sorry, Mom…”

“You came here bleeding and bruised and crying and told me that he did it. You told me that he punched Brad in the face and then nearly wrecked the car driving the two of you home last night. You told me he scared you – that he seemed like a totally different person…”

“Mom, I’m…”

“I am not finished.”
Adam stopped talking immediately, biting his lower lip to hold back the rest of his apologies and protests, as his mother continued in a fierce tone full of quiet fire that he knew better than to dismiss.

“You give me all that information, and then just take off this morning to go back to him, and expect me to not panic the second I see that note? You wanna make jokes about him murdering you in some kind of drugged out psychotic episode? I’m glad you can joke about it, because that’s exactly what I was picturing when I read it! Adam, who knows what’s wrong with him? What he’s on, or… or whatever it is that’s wrong?”

“I do.”

“How can you just…” Leila’s trembling rant broke off abruptly as his quiet words registered with far greater impact than his attempted apologies. She was quiet for a moment before asking softly, “You do what?”

“I... I know what’s wrong with him. Now. He… he showed me what he’s been taking. Some kind of fake herbal supplement for body builders. It has to be fake, because they’re addictive, and mood-altering, and he got them from some shady website that popped up on his computer…”

“Oh, Kris.” Leila sighed, and Adam heard the rueful affection in the words that she would not have admitted to under the circumstances. She paused before adding wryly, “That boy really is from Podunk, Arkansas, isn’t he?”

“I know,” Adam agreed, grateful for the moment just to be off the topic of his own foolish errors in this situation. “It’s that small town mentality. He’s always been too trusting, because he’s used to being able to be. It’s like – it’s like it wouldn’t even occur to him that they might have been lying to him to take his money. But… he gave me the pills, Mom. And he let me take him to the doctor.”

Leila was quiet for a moment, and Adam held his breath, half-expecting her to divert the conversation back onto her previous lecture. However, the new development he’d shared with her seemed relevant enough to hold her interest.

“Well,” she admitted at last, reluctant acceptance in her voice. “That’s something. At least he’s admitting to the fact that he has a problem and getting help for it.”

Adam decided it was better not to mention the fact that Kris was unwilling to admit to his doctor that he had a problem. Kris seemed to feel that it was enough that Adam knew, and as long as Kris didn’t have any more of the pills to take, Adam was willing to go along with that – at least until they heard back from the doctor and knew just exactly what they were dealing with. At any rate, he knew his mother was unlikely to see it that way, and chose to keep silent.

“How has he been behaving since you got back?” Leila asked, a wary edge to her voice.


“As he should have been.” Adam could almost hear his mother’s approving nod over the phone.

“But… normal. Rational. You know – like Kris.” Adam swallowed hard, trying to control the tremor that had crept into his voice. “And… when I got here, he just… he just seemed like himself again. That’s when he told me about the pills and agreed to go with me to the doctor. That was… a couple hours ago.”

“And now?” Leila’s voice carried a severe note of warning, and Adam knew that her suspicions
were far from abated. “How does he seem now?”

“Fine, I guess.” Adam considered a moment, weighing his words and trying to decide how much to tell her. “He’s sleeping, now. He’s been… feeling sick all afternoon, from not having the pills. Withdrawals, I guess – though we can’t really be sure, since the doctor can’t tell us what’s in them for a couple of days probably. But… he seems okay. I think he’s going to be, anyway. I think – we’re going to be.”

Adam winced at the vulnerability he heard in his own uncertain words, well aware that not a single inflection would manage to slip past his mother’s well-attuned ear. He was not surprised when she spoke again with tenderness, her stern, reprimanding tone finally giving way to a gentler one.

“Do you need me to come over there, honey? I can be there in a couple of hours…”

“No, no,” Adam insisted, trying to make his tone light and steady. “We’re fine, Mom. Kris is resting, and…”

“I asked if you need me, Adam,” Leila clarified. She paused a moment before adding in a pointed tone of knowing concern. “I’m not worried about Kris. Number one – he hurt my baby, and he could probably get hit by a truck right now and I don’t think I’d shed a tear…”

“Mom…!”

“Number two,” Leila continued despite Adam’s indignant protest, “he has you to worry about him – to look after him right now – and he’s damn lucky he does. What I’m worried about – is who’s looking after you?”

“I’m okay, Mom, really.” Adam tried to swallow back the knot in his throat, blinking back the stinging moisture that rose to his eyes in instinctive response to the love he heard in his mother’s voice. “I promise. I can handle this. I – I’m sorry I took off like I did. That was – thoughtless. But – I’m really not being stupid about this. I’m not letting him out of my sight. He’s not getting anywhere near those pills, not while I’m having anything to do with him, I promise.”

“I know you say that, Adam, and I know you’re worried about him, but sweetie, I can’t help thinking that you ought to be thinking more of your own safety in this…”

“I’m safe,” Adam insisted. “I am. He’s too sick to do anything right now, anyway. I’ll just keep an eye on him until we hear back from the doctor, and I’ll keep you posted and let you know as soon as we know anything, okay?”

“You’ll do better than that.” There was unmistakable command in Leila’s voice, a warning note daring him to defy her words. “You’ll call me again before you go to bed tonight, and let me know how you’re both doing – and then you’ll call me again in the morning…”

“Mom…” Adam heard the whine in his own voice, but couldn’t bring himself to care at the moment.

“Don’t even start with me, Adam,” she cut him off sharply. “Not after the scare you just gave me. Not when we still have no idea what he’s been taking or exactly what the effects might be – not only of taking them, but of the withdrawals themselves! Is a couple of two minute phone calls too much to ask, to keep from giving me a heart attack?”

Adam closed his eyes, leaning back against the kitchen counter and letting out a slow breath in resignation. In at least one way, Leila was the stereotypical Jewish mother – she had the art of applying an irresistible guilt trip mastered to the point of perfection.
“No,” he relented quietly. “No, it’s not, Mom. I’m sorry.”

“You should be.” Her tone softened as she added with affection and relief, “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“I’m gonna go check on Kris, now.” Adam headed back toward the stairs, cradling the phone between his shoulder and his ear. “I love you, Mom. I’ll talk to you in a few hours.”

“I love you, too, sweetie. I’ll be waiting up.”

Adam disconnected the call, feeling both relieved and bereft at the sudden silence. It was vaguely irritating and frustrating to be treated like a child and made to feel like he didn’t know how to take care of his own problems; but then, he knew very well that if she ever stopped being such a – well, such a mom – he’d be devastated. Though he hated to admit it, there was a part of him that wished he’d taken her up on her offer to come, if only to have some company and support through the unknown ordeal that lay ahead of him.

*Be a grown-up, Adam,* he mentally chided himself as he climbed the stairs to the bedroom. *You can handle this.*

He froze in the doorway, surprised and a little alarmed to see that the bed was empty, the rumpled sheet and blankets tossed aside. He frowned, his steps unintentionally slow and careful as he entered the room, glancing warily around into the darkness.

“Kris?” His voice was hushed and cautious. “Where are you?”

The sound of the toilet flushing in the bathroom was a tremendous relief, and Adam made himself relax as the door opened and Kris stepped out into the bedroom, holding onto the door jamb with one hand, looking pale and a little unsteady. Adam hurriedly went to his side.

“Were you sick?” he asked with sympathetic concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Kris insisted, waving a dismissive hand at Adam’s worried expression. “Really, I’m okay. I just… got a little nauseous, that’s all.”

“Come on, I’ll help you back to bed,” Adam offered, taking Kris’s arm and steadying him as he started back across the room. “You need to lie down.”

“I’ve been lying down for hours,” Kris pointed out, gently but firmly extracting his arm from Adam’s grasp and standing up straight, giving Adam a reassuring, grateful smile. “Really, Adam, I’m fine now, I promise. I want to… I don’t know… just go downstairs and watch TV for a little while, or something? Just to get out of bed for a while.”

“Are you sure?” Adam frowned. “You don’t look so good.”

Kris rolled his eyes, shaking his head. “I’m fine.” He smiled, and this time it was a bit more convincing. In fact, he was looking more focused and steady by the moment. “I was feeling really sick, but really… I’m feeling a lot better now.”
“Really, Adam. I’m good. I’m feeling much better now.”

Adam frowned, giving Kris a slow, suspicious look-over as he tried to determine his level of honesty behind his words. When he’d left Kris less than thirty minutes earlier, he’d been sleeping soundly; but before that, Kris had been shaking and feverish – severely ill.

“She sure?” he asked cautiously, catching Kris’s gaze and studying his expression for any sign of deception. “You should probably rest…”

“Adam, I’ve been resting for hours now,” Kris sighed, understanding but impatient. “I’m ready to get up for a while.”

“I… I don’t know…”

“Adam.” Kris held his gaze, his tone flat and matter-of-fact. “I’m asking to go downstairs and watch some TV – not climb Mount Everest.”

Adam still hesitated, an anxious frown creasing his brow, but relented at last, letting out a soft sigh and nodding. “Okay. But… you let me know if you need to go back to bed. If you need anything – okay?”

Kris returned his nod with a grateful smile, warmth and gratitude in his dark eyes. “You’re too good to me,” he remarked with affectionate amusement at seeing Adam’s strong nurturing, protective nature surface.

Adam let out a soft huff, rolling his eyes as he put his arm around Kris’s shoulders and guided him toward the stairs. “You know I am.”

Kris wasn’t lying when he said he felt much better.

He didn’t think Adam would be happy to know the reason why, however.

It was just one pill – and it hasn’t done any harm. You’re acting normal. You feel normal. You haven’t broken into any psychotic rampages. Maybe – maybe it wasn’t even the pills at all. Maybe it was some kind of – of temporary, stress-induced breakdown, triggered by the jealousy of seeing Adam with Brad…

Except… you don’t even remember seeing Adam with Brad…

If it’s not the drugs – why can’t you remember?

Kris was drawn out of his troubled reverie by the feeling of Adam’s larger hand gently squeezing his. He looked up to see Adam’s worried gaze fastened onto him, studying him, as Kris had caught him doing so many times already tonight. This time, however, Adam did not look away when Kris caught him. He gently squeezed Kris’s hand again, his voice a low murmur of concern.

“You sure you’re okay?”

Kris was touched and amazed by how perfectly in tune with his moods Adam seemed to be at the moment. They’d been sitting together on the couch for hours, and were on their third DVD of the
night – barely speaking at all, simply enjoying the quiet and comfort of each other’s company – and yet somehow, Adam still seemed to notice the very moment when Kris’s thoughts darkened with worry.

Except… there’s probably nothing to worry about. I took that pill, and I feel fine. I haven’t blacked out – we’re both still just fine, just calmly enjoying this movie – so it must have been something else.

Kris willfully ignored the fact that he was beginning to crave another pill, refusing to acknowledge how that might be affecting his logic at the moment. He put his troubled thoughts out of his mind and focused on Adam, giving him a warm, reassuring smile and nodding slightly.

“I’m fine, darlin’, I promise,” he insisted. “I’m just… just thinking.”

The worry faded from Adam’s face, but his pensive gaze still studied Kris closely. “About what?”

Kris was quiet for a moment before responding, his voice soft and thoughtful. “About you. About – how lucky I am to have someone like you in my corner. I really am okay, Adam, but… but you have no idea how much it means to me just to know that you’re here for me, and… and looking out for me. Even after – what I did.”

Adam looked away, vainly attempting to conceal his emotions at the reminder of the frightening incident of the night before. He shook his head slightly, his lips parted to speak dismissive words that he couldn’t quite form – because it wasn’t something he could easily dismiss, no matter how badly he wanted to do so.

Kris’s hand slid out from under Adam’s and trailed gently up his arm until it reached his shoulder. Kris cautiously, tentatively tilted Adam’s head up a little and pressed a soft, chaste kiss against his lips. Neither of them closed their eyes, each still searching the other’s gaze for something they were not quite certain they would still find there. As the kiss intensified, however, Adam finally closed his eyes, relenting and raising his arms to draw Kris closer, returning both the embrace and the kiss until he at last drew back, breathless. His head rested against Kris’s as he gasped softly, his shoulders trembling with relief.

“I love you,” Kris whispered between tiny, tender kisses along the line of Adam’s jaw, his hands moving slowly up and down Adam’s sides and around to his back. “I love you so much, Adam.”

“I love you, too.” Adam’s voice was trembling with the depth of his emotions as he rested his head against Kris’s shoulder, holding him close. “I love you…”

“I’m so sorry,” Kris continued, one hand rising to gently press Adam’s head down against his shoulder, cradling him close and encouraging him to take comfort in the embrace and his soft promise. “I don’t know why I did it, and it doesn’t matter – because I swear it’s never going to happen again. I love you too much to ever lose you – to ever hurt you – and I won’t, not ever again…”

Kris’s heartfelt babbling words gradually drifted off as he became aware that Adam had gone very still in his arms. Kris moved his hand from Adam’s hair as Adam raised his head at last with an effort, troubled, questioning eyes finding Kris’s, confusion and uncertainty in their blue depths.

“But… we do know why you did it,” he warily reminded. “It was… the pills…”

“Maybe.” Kris nodded, easily accepting that explanation. “Maybe not. We won’t really know for sure until we hear back from the doctor. Anyway, it doesn’t really matter, because I’m not taking
them anymore. And… whatever it was… it’s not going to happen again.”

“But Kris,” Adam objected, a note of panic rising in his voice. “Kris, you’ve been going through withdrawals all afternoon…”

“I don’t think it has been withdrawals.” Kris shook his head, ignoring the twinge of guilt he felt as his lips casually formed the deceptive words. “I mean… withdrawals would last longer, right? They wouldn’t go away in like – a few hours. But I feel fine.”

“Now,” Adam conceded with a slow, thoughtful nod, though his voice trembled with anxious dismay. “But… you were shaking… feverish… throwing up…”

“Which can be symptoms of withdrawal,” Kris cut him off agreeably, nodding, “but can also be signs of a mild flu bug.”

“So you think you just randomly developed a flu bug… and it just happened to be within a couple of hours of taking your last pill?” Adam raised a single dubious brow. “It makes more sense than a three hour withdrawal period.” Kris shrugged. “Adam, I’m not saying it’s not the pills. I’m just saying – there are more possibilities than just that one, and some of the things about this situation don’t add up, you know? We’ve got the doctor running tests on the pills, so we’ll know soon enough. But in the mean time, I’m just saying… maybe we should consider the possibility that it might be something else. You know?”

Adam frowned, shaking his head slightly, his lips parted to speak – when his cell phone rang in his pocket. Momentarily distracted, he took it out and glanced at the screen.

“Shit,” he muttered. “It’s Mom. I forgot to call her.” He awkwardly extricated himself from Kris’s embrace with one hand while pressing the receive button with the other. “Hey, Mom, I’m sorry. We were just watching a movie and I forgot what time it is. Yeah, everything’s fine.” Adam glanced up to meet Kris’s eyes for just an instant before looking away. When he spoke again, his voice was slightly strained. “Yeah, he’s… he’s fine. Really, Mom, everything’s…”

“Tell her I said hi.”

Kris kept his voice low so that there was no chance of Leila’s hearing him on the other line, giving Adam a sly, mischievous look; but the dark, are-you-kidding-me? scowl Adam gave him in return told him that the small joke was very ill-advised. Kris looked away, clearing his throat, nervously rubbing his palms on his jeans.

“Or not,” he muttered under his breath, rising to his feet. He raised his voice a little, catching Adam’s attention before gesturing toward the stairs. “It’s after eleven. I’m gonna go to bed, okay?”

Adam nodded distractedly, returning his attention to his phone call. “Yeah, he’s going to bed. Just a second…”

Kris found himself grinding his teeth in frustration, his face flushing with embarrassment at the blatant, obvious comment. Adam wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that he was waiting for Kris to go upstairs so that he could talk about him freely to his mother. Kris knew that he probably deserved at least that much. In fact, he didn’t deserve for Adam to be here at all. He couldn’t complain if Adam chose to confide in his mother about their recent difficulties.

And I’m not freaking out, Kris reminded himself, trying to turn his thoughts back in an optimistic direction. It upsets me, but I’m not freaking out – and that pill is still in my system. Surely if it was the pills making me freak out and lose it like I did, I’d be losing it right now – right? So… it must
When Kris reached the bedroom, his gaze fell immediately on his laptop, resting on the night stand beside the bed. His heart began to beat faster as a tempting thought occurred to him. He glanced back toward the doorway, stepping back out into the hall and listening carefully for a moment. He could still hear the hushed sounds of Adam’s phone conversation coming from the living room. He frowned slightly, considering, torn between what his cravings were dictating, and what he knew Adam would think about it.

If it’s not the pills, though… then there’s no reason to go without them, when it’s so hard, is there? Adam doesn’t have to know you’re still taking them, until you’ve been taking them for a couple weeks with no ill effects. Then you can tell him, and you’ll have proven that it’s not the pills. That’s a good plan – a smart plan. The doctor’s report will come back and confirm that you’re right, and he can proceed with whatever tests he needs to do on you to find out what is causing your symptoms… and it’ll all be good.

Nothing to worry about.

Nothing at all.

Kris quickly opened his laptop and got online, going through his history until he found the site he was looking for. It was a simple matter of entering his sign on name and password to place a second order using the same billing information as the first. Kris considered for a moment before clicking the button that said “overnight special delivery”, and then placed his order.

The entire process took a matter of seconds.

And Adam has a photo shoot tomorrow, so he won’t be around when it arrives. He won’t ever have to know, until it’s been long enough that I can prove to him they’re safe.

It's perfect.

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Adam knew that Kris had been painfully aware that Adam didn’t want him listening to his conversation, and felt a little bad about it. He knew from experience how much it sucked to know that someone was talking about you, and not be able to do anything about it.

But he brought this on himself, he reminded himself with a sigh as he climbed the stairs. Mom can’t help it that she’s worried about me. It’s better that he went upstairs, though. I’d hate for him to overhear some of the stuff she said – and some of the stuff I said…

Kris’s vague arguments in favor of the mysterious pills had Adam more than a little worried. He hadn’t come right out and said that he thought they were okay, or that he should keep taking them…

But then, he wouldn’t, would he? He may be an addict, but he’s not stupid. He’d realize that that would make him sound like an addict.

Adam felt an apprehensive shiver run down his spine as he stopped outside the closed bedroom door, suddenly worrying about what he might find inside.

What if he stashed some of them somewhere? I have no idea how many he’d taken… how many he had left. What if he didn’t give me all of them before we went to the doctor?
Adam hated the distrust that he felt for Kris now, but knew that he had to face the possibility that in this case, his suspicions were just good common sense. He hesitated a moment, taking a deep breath, before quickly pushing the door open and looking inside, hoping that if Kris was doing something he shouldn’t be, he might catch him in the act.

The room remained silent and still, and it took Adam a moment to locate Kris – lying still and silent in the bed, his eyes closed, his breath slow and even with sleep. Adam relaxed slowly with a sigh of relief, moving quietly toward the bed and sitting down on the edge of it. He turned off the light, undressing quickly in the dark before climbing under the blankets beside Kris and shifting in close until he could put his arms around him.

Kris let out a contented little hum as he settled back against Adam’s chest, and Adam felt his throat constrict with warm, welcome emotion.

Everything’s going to be okay, he told himself. He wasn’t doing anything – just going to sleep, like he said.

“I love you,” he whispered into the darkness, though he knew that Kris didn’t hear him, pressing a tender kiss to Kris’s temple before closing his eyes and settling in to sleep.
Chapter 14

Kris woke up the next morning feeling like crap.

He was achy and overheated, his head pounding. He felt as if he hadn’t slept a minute, and all he could think about was how badly he wanted another pill. He stirred, letting out a muffled groan, as Adam leaned over him, his lips brushing against Kris’s temple in a brief, tender kiss before he raised up on one arm, his voice hushed and affectionate.

“How are you feeling, sweetie?”

Kris almost answered honestly – and then, through his sleep-induced haze, remembered the delivery he was expecting that morning. His eyes opened wide, his back still turned to Adam, and his mind raced with a single thought.

*I have to get him out of here before that delivery arrives.*

He forced a sleepy smile onto his lips, turning over and raising a hand to run through Adam’s hair and gently tug his head down for a slow, leisurely kiss. As they parted, Kris felt gratified – and just a little guilty – to see the warm, wide smile of elated relief that broke out across Adam’s face, his eyes lighting up at Kris’s affection.

“How great,” Kris lazily answered the question, closing his eyes again and turning his head away. “Looking forward to sleeping in for a change.”

“Lucky.” Adam gave him an affectionate push as he reluctantly rose from the bed. “I’ve got less than an hour to be at this photo shoot…”

“Mmm… better hurry,” Kris mumbled, pulling the blankets up over himself again and burying his face in the soft, downy pillow beneath his head. “Takes you longer than that to get ready to go to the grocery store.”

“Shut up, you,” Adam shot back cheerfully, his voice fading away as he disappeared into the bathroom.

Although he knew Adam would not be late to his photo shoot, and therefore he had forty-five minutes at the most before Adam would be gone for the day, it still seemed like far too long to Kris. He hid under the blankets, hoping that Adam would not notice the cold sweat that had broken out on his brow, or the fine shiver coursing through him. Just a little bit longer… he reminded himself. Just a little bit longer, and he’ll be gone for the day. And just a little bit longer than that, and I’ll have my pills… and everything will be okay…

Kris felt an uneasy, sick sensation with the thought that it was just possible that the delivery might arrive before Adam left – but that was highly unlikely. Adam would be gone before nine o’clock, and the chances of his delivery being so near to the beginning of the route were very slim. Still, Kris knew he’d feel a lot better once Adam was on his way, and he was alone, and free to get up and wait for the delivery to arrive.

Kris felt an overwhelming sense of relief when he heard Adam pick up his car keys from the dresser and move toward the bed. He drew in a couple of deep breaths, struggling to put his façade of calm composure back into place before Adam reached him.
Adam crouched beside the bed, drawing back the blankets to reveal Kris’s face, a warm smile on his lips. His smile faded with concern when he saw that Kris was pale and shivering a little. Kris forced a smile, shaking his head in dismissal at the expression on Adam’s face. Before he could even speak, however, Adam broke the silence, reaching out to gently brush Kris’s hair back.

“Maybe I should cancel the photo shoot. They won’t mind if I reschedule once. I think… I think you need me more, today.”

It was all Kris could do to keep from grinding his teeth in frustration.

_He has to go, he has to go now before…_

“I’m fine, Adam, really,” Kris insisted. “Just a little lingering symptoms from that bug yesterday, that’s all. I’m really feeling so much better. Really. Just go on, darlin’, I’ll be fine…”

Adam frowned, conflict visible in his eyes. “Kris… I don’t know…”

Kris sat up in the bed, meeting Adam’s eyes with a reassuring smile. “Go on, Adam. I’m just going to sleep for a while, anyway. Really boring stuff, I promise. Just go do your photo shoot.” He paused, shrugging as he offered with a grin, “You can come bring me something good for lunch if you want, when you get a break. But there’s really no need to cancel your plans.”

“Kris…”

“Adam. Go.”

Adam hesitated a moment longer, and Kris held his breath, momentarily afraid that Adam was not going to listen to him, and was going to stay home – and that would be a disaster in the making. Finally, he let out his breath slowly as Adam nodded, leaning in to kiss Kris’s cheek before rising to his feet again and heading toward the door.

“See you in a few hours, baby,” he said, blowing another kiss in Kris’s direction before heading down the stairs.

Kris listened for the sound of the front door closing, letting out a sigh of relief when at last he heard it and knew that Adam was on his way. He rose from the bed, holding onto the edge of it for balance as he made his way toward the door to go downstairs and wait for the delivery. He had just reached the bottom of the staircase when he froze at the sound of the door opening and closing a second time. Kris’s stomach lurched in instinctive anticipation at the sound of Adam’s slow, measured footsteps across the tile of the foyer, just before he came into view – holding a small square wrapped in brown paper in his hand.

He met Kris’s eyes in a pleading, fearful question, his voice soft and trembling with dread as he held out the packet.

“Kris… what is this?”

Kris just stared back at him for a long moment, his lips parted to speak, but unable to come up with a convincing lie fast enough to counteract the guilt he knew was clear in his eyes. After a moment, he tried anyway, his gaze darting away from Adam’s as he gave a careless shrug.

“Probably the new strings I ordered for my guitar. Looks to be about the right size and shape.”

His heart raced as he turned away casually, doing his best not to look at the package, not to give any sign as to how desperately important it was to him. He made his way into the kitchen, where
he set about taking out the ingredients to make a breakfast that he had no desire to eat – just to present some semblance of normalcy to Adam, to hopefully ease his suspicions.

Adam followed him silently, then stood in the kitchen doorway for a long moment, watching him, with the package still clutched in his hand.

Kris hoped that if he pretended not to care about the package for long enough, Adam would give up and go on his way. He knew Adam well enough to know that he would not violate Kris’s privacy by opening it himself – not without asking Kris if it was okay – so if Kris just showed no interest whatsoever in opening it, there would be nothing else that Adam could do – right?

“Kris.”

Kris looked up at his boyfriend in surprise, as if just realizing that he was still there. “You’re late, aren’t you? You’d better get going…”

“Kris.” Adam’s voice was low but sharp, unyielding. He waited until Kris turned to face him with an innocent, questioning look before holding out the package in his palm, extending it toward Kris. “Open this.”

Kris was silent and still, his gaze darting back and forth between Adam and the package in his hand. Finally, he looked away, reaching up into the cupboard over the stove to take down a pan as he answered with casual simplicity.

“No.”

“Kris. Now.”

“Adam. No.” Kris deliberately echoed Adam’s tone, rolling his eyes in irritation, still struggling to seem casual and unconcerned. “Later. I’m hungry.”

“A minute ago you were sick,” Adam observed.

“Don’t you trust me?” Kris demanded, making his tone wounded and disappointed. “I told you, I’m not…”

“Kris…” Adam’s voice wavered, breaking slightly, and Kris’s heart clenched at the painful sound. “… please. Don’t lie to me again. Please, just… just open this, so I can… so I know…”

Adam already knew – and they both knew it.

Kris lowered his head in defeat, setting down the pan in his hand and bracing his palm against the counter for a moment. He drew in a deep, shaky breath, struggling for control. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out Adam and his own guilt and the ever-present craving that was slowly overwhelming him, intensified by the knowledge that the pills were right there, within his reach, and he still couldn’t take them…

“Kris…?”

“I’m not opening it, Adam!” Kris snapped, spinning around to face Adam, his jaw set in defensive anger. “Okay? I’m not a child that you can just order around, and I’m not opening it! Open it yourself for all I care!”

And, unable to face Adam’s disappointment when he opened the package and saw what was inside it – unable to face the pulling, dragging allure of the box itself, and his intense desire to snatch it
from Adam’s hands and just take what he needed – Kris turned and strode out of the room toward the stairs, desperate to just escape.

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Adam stood there, his hands trembling as he stared down at the white plastic bottle that had been concealed by the torn brown paper that now littered the kitchen counter. His eyes burned with tears, his heart heavy with the pain of Kris’s betrayal and deception. He’d only had the package open for a few moments when Kris’s swift, determined footsteps returned, as if he’d changed his mind before he’d even managed to get to his destination.

Adam glared up at him through his tears, shaking all over with rage and shock as he held up the bottle for Kris to see. “How could you do this, Kris?” he demanded softly, unable to conceal the quiver in his voice. “How could you lie to my face…?”

“You know what?” Kris snapped, eyes narrowed and mouth set in a taut line of defensive frustration. “I’m not a child, Adam. I know what I’m doing, and that’s mine.” He took a step nearer to Adam, holding out his hand demandingly. “Give them to me.”

Adam let out a harsh, disbelieving laugh, shaking his head slowly, his grip on the bottle tightening instinctively. “I don’t think so,” he retorted with quiet determination. “Kris… this shit is poison. It makes you sick… it makes you violent… it makes you… not you. You promised me you wouldn’t…”

“Give them to me,” Kris repeated insistently, moving nearer to Adam, reaching out for the bottle.

Adam swiftly moved around to the other side of the counter, toward the kitchen door, shaking his head in refusal. “You need to give these up, Kris. Look at yourself. You say they’re not hurting you – you’re not in withdrawals – but just look at yourself! You’re so desperate for these that you’re…”

“I’m not desperate for them!” Kris insisted, following as Adam retreated. “I just want to… to prove to you that it’s not the pills, okay? I’m a little under the weather, not going through withdrawals. These pills are no big deal. I realized that last night when it was so easy to go all night without them…”

“Easy?” Adam echoed in disbelief, still backing away from Kris. “So easy that you went and ordered these? Overnight delivery, Kris? If you’d ordered them, like… a week ago… but…” He shook his head, his mouth trembling as his face crumpled into an expression of hurt. “…but you ordered these… after you told me… you promised me…”

“Adam, just give them to me!”

Kris cut him off in frustration, closing the distance between them and reaching for the pills. Adam jerked away, stumbling backward into the wall beside the kitchen doorway. Kris roughly grabbed his arm, trying to keep it in place long enough to get the pills. Adam struggled to escape his powerful grip, but Kris’s jaw locked with determination, and he shoved Adam forcefully back against the wall with his free hand, not letting go of Adam’s arm.

Adam let out a soft cry of pain at the unexpected impact, his grip on the bottle loosening automatically. Kris took the opportunity to snatch it from his hand, taking a step backward and staring down at the prize he’d won, gasping for breath.

Then, he began to realize what he’d just done – and looked up slowly, dreadfully, into the wounded eyes of the prize he’d lost.
Adam’s wide blue eyes were blinking rapidly in his effort not to let his tears fall – which failed miserably. He shook his head in disbelieving despair, his hands guiding his way along the wall until he reached the doorway.

“Adam… wait…”

Adam just closed his eyes and turned his head away, drawing in a deep, shaky breath that came out in a sob as he turned and headed toward the front door again, taking his keys from his pocket as he did. Panic seized Kris at the sight, and he ran after Adam, following him to the door.

“Adam, I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Adam, please, please don’t go… don’t…”

Adam shook Kris’s hand off when it touched his arm, the door open in his hand. He turned halfway toward Kris, not quite facing him, as he spoke in a quiet voice hoarse with tears.

“You’re addicted, Kris. Admit it.”

“I…” Kris swallowed hard, even in his desperation, reluctant to say the word. He shook his head slowly, torn.

Adam opened the door and stepped out onto the porch.

“I’m addicted!” Kris cried out, stepping out after him, stopping in the doorway as Adam’s steps halted a few yards ahead of him. “I am, okay? I’m addicted, but… but I need you more! Please, Adam, don’t leave me! Don’t go! I need you!”

Adam finally turned to face him, the tears still flowing from his eyes smearing the makeup he’d applied so carefully that morning. Kris’s tears were less obvious, but he hoped that Adam could see them in the bright glare of the morning sunlight – hoped that he knew how desperately Kris meant his words. Adam studied his face for a long moment without moving any closer, before his gaze drifted downward to the medicine bottle still tightly clutched in Kris’s hand. He nodded toward it once before meeting Kris’s eyes with a listless shrug. His voice was flat, barely over a whisper.

“It doesn’t look like it.”

Kris looked down at the pills before meeting Adam’s eyes again, hurrying down the walk to his side. “Adam, I can give these up! I want them, but I need you, okay? I swear I’ll give them up! I don’t need them…”

Adam looked down at Kris’s hand on his arm, raising it slightly to draw Kris’s attention to it, then reached out to grasp Kris’s wrist and raise the pill bottle to the same level, his gaze shifting pointedly between the two before meeting Kris’s confused, questioning eyes. Adam’s voice was soft but steady and controlled as he spoke, before freeing himself of Kris’s grasp and getting into the car.

“Call me when you’ve made up your mind."
Chapter 15

Adam was trembling all over, a numb, heavy sensation tightening his chest, making him feel as if he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, could barely focus on getting into the car and away from Kris; but he had to, because if he didn’t get away from him now, he knew he wouldn’t have the strength to for much longer.

It was more than he could stand as it was, driving away from Kris while he stood there sobbing, his dark eyes pleading and desperate.

He needs you. How can you just leave him like this when he needs you most?

But... you have to. He’s physically stronger and mentally weaker than he’s ever been before – and that makes him unbelievably dangerous. He’s already hit you once... hurt you twice. If you stay... who knows what he might do?

The vivid memory of Kris thoughtlessly slamming him into the wall in order to reclaim his pills set an ache in his heart, and Adam’s vision blurred with the fresh tears that sprang to his eyes. He blinked rapidly, raising a trembling hand to brush at his eyes when that failed to clear his vision. He glanced down at the speedometer, his eyes widening with alarm when he noticed how fast he’d been driving.

You’re going to have a wreck if you don’t calm down... take a minute to get it together, Adam...

You can’t help Kris if you’re dead.

Adam was trembling violently, his breath rapid and uneven as he vainly struggled to control his emotions. He withdrew his foot from the gas pedal, glancing into the rearview mirror before pulling over into the right lane, then off onto the shoulder of the road. He put the car in park, then rested his arm across the steering wheel, burying his face in it for a moment as deep sobs rose up within him.

After a few minutes, Adam managed to regain some semblance of control, though his face was still streaked with the tears that continued to fall. He took out his phone with a shaking hand, dialing the third number on his speed dial and waiting while it rang.

“Hello?”

“Mom?”

The calm tone with which she’d answered changed in an instant to one of concern at the hoarse, tearful sound of her son’s voice. “Adam, what is it? What’s wrong, sweetheart?” She paused a moment, considering, before she added in a dark, knowing tone, “What did he do?”

Adam broke down again at those words, taking a few moments to compose himself enough to respond. “He... he lied to me, Mom. He’s still... still taking those pills.” He was quiet then, unable to bring himself to tell her the rest of what had happened.

He didn’t have to.

“Adam...” Her voice was dangerously quiet. “Did he hurt you again?”

He didn’t answer her question, knew that she already knew the answer. When he’d managed to
regain some control of his emotions, he spoke again, his voice small and pleading.

“Mom… can you come…?”

“I’m already in L.A.” The tenderness in her voice, the relief at her words, despite his confusion as to how they could be true, shattered Adam’s fragile control, and he found himself in tears again. “I drove in last night and stayed in a hotel. I just… I didn’t want to be in the way, but… but I couldn’t not come, Adam. I just couldn’t.”

Of course she couldn’t.

“Thanks, Mom,” Adam whispered, sniffing back his tears. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby.” Her voice was soft with sympathy and affection. “Now listen to me for a minute. I’m staying at the Holiday Inn downtown, on Sycamore…”

Kris paced helplessly back and forth on the sidewalk outside the house for a few minutes, in shock and at an utter loss as to what to do next, before realizing that he was in plain view of their neighbors, as well as any bored paparazzi who might be hanging out outside their house waiting for something interesting to happen.

Well, if they are, you just gave it to them. Get inside, moron, before you make it worse…

Deep down, however, Kris knew that it couldn’t get any worse.

I’ve lost Adam. I had to have the stupid pills so bad, that now I’ve driven him away. God, Adam! I can’t lose him… I have to find him, have to talk to him, make him understand… but… but he doesn’t understand how much I need them… how sick I get when I don’t have them… if I could make him understand…

You hurt him again.

The realization struck Kris like a physical blow, guilt knocking the breath from his lungs and nearly driving him to his knees. He sank down on the living room sofa, his hands covering his face, gasping for breath as he tried to come to terms with the reality of what had happened – but it was difficult to focus through the nauseated haze that was sweeping back over him as his symptoms began to intensify once more.

He was shaking, broken out in a cold sweat, nausea overwhelming him, nearly drowning out the tumult of his muddled thoughts.

Have to think… have to focus… to find a way to get him back… can’t… can’t think… I need… I need…

Kris struggled to open the bottle he still clutched tightly in his hand, managing somehow to get the lid off and pour out a couple of pills into his hand. He swallowed them without bothering to get water to wash them down, then leaned back against the sofa, closing his eyes and resting his head while he waited for them to take effect.

Just… have to be able to focus, and I can’t focus if I feel like crap… have to be able to think of a way to get Adam back…

As his thoughts began to clear, Kris’s heart sank with despair as he remembered what he had done
in the kitchen, and the wounded, betrayed look on Adam’s face. A certainty of realization struck him, and his stomach lurched at the frightening thought.

*Adam will never come back to you as long as you’re still taking these.*

Kris swore softly under his breath, resting his head in his hands and shaking it slowly.

*If he’d just left it alone… if he’d just let me take them and show him that they’re not affecting me like he thinks they are… I freaked out because I didn’t have them, not because I did. He doesn’t get it, he just doesn’t understand what I need. If he’d just let me take them for a while and see how it goes, I know everything would be fine, but he won’t… he won’t give me a chance…*  

*There has to be a way…*

The telephone rang, momentarily distracting Kris from his thoughts, and he jumped up to answer it, irrationally hopeful that it might be Adam. His heart sank with disappointment when he recognized his doctor’s phone number on the caller ID – disappointment swiftly followed by dread. His heart raced, his mouth dry as he answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Kris?”

“Yes. Dr. Archer?”

“Yes. I have the results of your blood work, and the labs on that medication.” The doctor’s voice paused before adding, “It’s… not good news.”

Kris immediately wanted to end the phone call. He didn’t want to hear what the doctor had to say. He ran a shaking hand through his hair, closing his eyes as he cut him off tersely.

“Look, this is a… a really bad time. I don’t have time to talk. Can you just… just fax the report over to me or something? I’ll look at it in a little while…”

Dr. Archer hesitated a moment before reluctantly conceding, “I can do that, but I’d suggest you look at them now, Kris. This is very important information. Don’t wait.”

“Okay, thanks, Dr. Archer.” Kris’s pleasant tone was tinged with impatience. “I’ll just get off the line, then, so you can send the fax. Thanks for calling.”

Kris didn’t want to see the doctor’s report, and yet he found himself pacing in front of the fax machine in his office, waiting with restless anxiety as it slowly printed out. He snatched it up, his eyes scanning the words, his lower lip caught between his teeth, a troubled, fearful frown on his face.

...* laced with an experimental form of steroid…*

...* not FDA approved…*

...* potential side effects unknown…*

...* discontinue use immediately…*

Kris crumpled the paper up in frustrated anger, shaking his head.

*That can’t be right. I feel fine. In fact, I feel better when I take them than when I don’t. It has to be*
a mistake…

He tossed the crumpled sheet of paper into the trash can – then thought better of it and took it out again. It wouldn’t do for Adam to come home – perhaps for good, or perhaps just for his things – and find it there and see the doctor’s ludicrous report. Then, Kris would certainly never hear the end of it.

No, he had to make sure no one but him ever saw it.

Kris took the paper to the kitchen and set it in the sink, then took down the red and black grill lighter they kept in the cupboard above the sink, despite the fact that they did not own a grill. He held the paper in one hand and lit the corner, then dropped it into the dry basin and watched with grim satisfaction as it slowly burned to ash.

The flames had barely gone out when Kris heard the doorbell ring.

He hurriedly turned on the tap and washed the remnants down the drain, waving a hand to dispel the scent of smoke, then turning on the fan above the stove in the hopes that it would help to disguise the smell. He wiped his hands on his jeans and made his way quickly toward the front door, barely daring to hope.

His hopes proved surprisingly accurate – but one look at Adam’s distant, downcast expression, and the terse, warning look Leila Lambert gave him made it clear that this visit was not necessarily a good thing.

“We’re just getting a few of Adam’s things,” Leila informed him curtly. “He doesn’t want to speak to you right now, so it’s best if you just stay out of the way and let him do this.”

Icy anger slid through Kris’s veins, and his eyes narrowed as he glared at her defiantly. “Adam’s a grown up now,” he informed her coldly, stepping forward into her space. “I think he can speak for himself…”

In an instant, Adam was standing between Kris and his mother, his blue eyes blazing with a challenging fire. His voice was soft but intent, leaving no question as to his sincerity, as he stated quietly, “Don’t talk to her like that, Kris. She’s here because I want her here, and if you’re trying to win me over, being disrespectful and threatening to my mother is definitely the wrong way to go about it.” He paused, his voice trembling with quiet fury when he continued, “If you touched her – I don’t care how strong you think you are – I’d take you down or die trying.”

Shocked and horrified, Kris shook his head, holding up his hands in surrender and backing off. “Adam, no… that’s not what I…”

“Like she said,” Adam cut him off icily, turning away. “I’m not here to talk to you.”

Kris slunk away, retreating to the sofa to forlornly watch as Leila and Adam gathered some of Adam’s things and packed them into a couple of bags. Kris felt a cold, helpless ache building in the pit of his stomach, and at last, could no longer bring himself to watch. His averted gaze fell on the bottle of pills on the end table, and he reached out to pick it up, turning it over and over nervously in his hands. As Leila and Adam headed for the door without even speaking to him, Kris rose and followed them, the pill bottle in his hands.

“Wait…”

Both turned to face him, their eyes darting down toward the bottle with disgust and suspicion.
“Here.” Kris thrust the bottle into Leila’s hand, meeting her eyes with an earnest, pleading expression. “Take them. I don’t want them, I swear.” His eyes moved to meet Adam’s questioning, barely hopeful gaze. “I just want Adam to forgive me.”

Leila was quiet for a moment, considering, before she put the bottle into her purse and turned to face Kris more fully. Her voice was gentle but stern as she replied at last.

“It’s really easy for you to give me this bottle of pills, knowing you can go right upstairs and order another one, Kris. I want to believe that you mean this – but I’m afraid that your ‘mean it’ will only last until you start craving your next pill.”

Kris watched in dismay as Adam took in the clear logic of her words and broke his gaze, disappointment in his eyes. Kris shook his head emphatically, pleading.

“No, I swear. I won’t. I don’t want them anymore.” He turned his eyes back toward Leila. “Mrs. Lambert, I swear, I’d rather die than to ever hurt Adam again!”

Leila was quiet for a moment, taking in his expression, pensive and thoughtful. After a moment she spoke again, her voice low and soft and certain, without a trace of irony or humor to soften the sharpness of her words.

“Well, that works out nicely, then, Kris – because if you ever do hurt Adam again, I will kill you.”

Without another word, she turned, a gentle hand on Adam’s back nudging him toward the door. Kris watched helplessly as the door closed behind him and they disappeared, silently vowing to keep his promise to her and resist the cravings that had been tormenting him for the past few days. Nothing was worth losing Adam – nothing.

An hour later, Kris was on the website again, making another overnight delivery order.
“Yeah, hi. Okay. Okay, we’re on our way. We’ll meet you there.”

Adam closed his cell phone and put it in his pocket, straightening up from where he had been leaning against the bar. Brad gave a reluctant sigh as he did the same, glancing regretfully around the crowded club before following Adam toward the door.

Brad’s irritation was softened somewhat as Adam instinctively maneuvered himself between his ex-boyfriend and the swarming paparazzi waiting outside for them – ever protective, just as he had always been when they were dating.

*Of course… that’s just Adam. He’s like that with everyone he cares about – which is why this must be killing him – leaving Kris on his own like this.*

*Good thing he’s got me around to make sure he doesn’t do anything else.*

Their was a strange friendship, considering their history together, but Adam was still one of Brad’s closest friends. They often saw things very differently, bickering like siblings rather than lovers and coming near to driving each other insane – but each knew that the other would be there for them if he were ever needed.

*Like now.*

“Adam! *Adam!* Over here, Adam!”

The paparazzi’s voices blended together to become nothing more than a barely distinguishable tumult of noise. The flashing cameras were dizzying to Brad, but Adam seemed to be used to all of it by now. He kept himself between Brad and the greater part of the reporters and photographers, giving them a bright, courteous smile that was almost completely genuine.

Only those who knew Adam best – like Brad – could tell the difference.

“Adam, is it true you and Kris Allen have broken up?”

“Is it official? Are you back with your ex, Adam?”

“Adam! Why’d you and Kris break up? Adam…”

Brad wanted to scream in frustrated outrage at the obnoxious parasites seeking to gain from Adam’s personal tragedy – and he’d only been dealing with them for a matter of moments. He wasn’t quite sure how Adam managed to put up with this on a regular basis. Adam’s smile barely tightened, his tone becoming just slightly too sweet as he responded to their blatantly intrusive questions with polite, vague answers, and swiftly maneuvered himself and Brad through the throng toward the refuge of his car.

“What’s going on between me and Kris is between us. We’d both really appreciate it if you’d let us keep it that way, please.”

“So there *is* something going on,” one very persistent reporter concluded, shoving a microphone in Adam’s face. “Something to keep secret? Is that why you’re out tonight with your ex-boyfriend instead of with Kris?”
Adam withdrew slightly, the smile on his face plastic and unshifting as he restated firmly, “My romantic entanglements and other personal relationships are not your business, guys. Thanks for respecting our privacy. Have a good night.”

The cacophony of mingled voices and flashing lights were abruptly shut out as Adam shut the passenger side door of the car behind Brad and moved quickly around to the other side of the car to get in. He closed the door firmly without slamming it, the smile still on his face as he started the engine and pulled carefully away from the curb, watching for any wayward paparazzi that might venture to try to stop him from leaving.

As insane as that sounded – it wouldn’t have been the first time.

As soon as they were out of range of the intrusive cameras, Adam’s polite smile faded away, and he let out a weary sigh, raising a shaking hand to run through his hair before giving Brad a frazzled look and rolling his eyes. Brad responded by reaching out to place a supportive, comforting hand on Adam’s thigh.

“You’re a better person than I am, babe,” Brad remarked quietly. “I’d tell them all to go fuck themselves.”

“Yeah.” Adam let out a soft huff, shaking his head ruefully. “I do that, and the next day it’s on the cover of every tabloid and in the entertainment section of every reputable publication in the country – and I can kiss any media favor I’ve had so far goodbye.” He was quiet for a moment, the barest hint of a smirk forming in the corner of his mouth as he confessed at last, “I was thinking it, though. Loudly.”

Brad couldn’t suppress the amused grin those words evoked, and gave Adam’s leg an affectionate squeeze, glancing out the window before venturing a cautious, searching glance in his friend’s direction. He was disappointed and concerned to see that any trace of humor had fallen from Adam’s face, and his expression had become withdrawn and worried. Brad was quiet for a moment, trying to decide on the right words, before finally venturing to offer some form of comfort.

“You’re doing the right thing, you know.”

“I know,” Adam sighed, though there was a brief flash of uncertainty in his eyes in response to Brad’s words. “I just… I just wish the right thing didn’t hurt so much.”

“He hit you, Adam.” Brad’s voice was trembling despite his attempt to keep most of his anger out of his voice. “If this was anyone else and not yourself, you’d tell them to get the hell out while they still can.”

“It’s not that simple.” There was frustration in Adam’s voice, and Brad knew that, despite the protective fury he held toward Kris Allen at the moment, attacking him would not help his case in Adam’s eyes. “I love him, Brad. The last thing I want is to just… just leave him to this, when he needs help…”

“You can’t help him if he’s hurting you, Adam. As long as you let him get away with it, and stay with him, he’s got no reason to quit…”

“I know all this, okay?” Adam’s tone was terse, warning, as he let out a frustrated sigh. “I know I can’t stay with him right now, but… but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Yeah. And he’s not making it any easier, either,” Brad muttered, looking away.
It had been a week since Adam had retrieved his things from the house he shared with Kris and gone to stay with Brad for a while. He didn’t want to stay in a hotel for an indefinite amount of time, and going to stay with his mom would have been highly inconvenient for his career obligations – and getting his own place was simply more final than Adam was willing to commit to yet.

During that single week of separation, Kris had called Adam’s cell phone countless times, and Adam took his call every time – a fact which was endlessly infuriating to Brad. If it had been up to him, he would have turned the damn thing off, but Adam was afraid that in his present instable state, any of Kris’s calls might be a legitimate emergency.

“Who knows what he might do to himself while he’s out of his head on that shit?” he reasoned. “What if he’s hurt, but too out of it to think to call anyone but me? I might need to call help for him.”

Of course, Kris’s calls never actually were emergencies – and each call left Adam an emotional wreck. Most of the time, Brad was close enough to overhear Kris’s manic words, even when sitting several yards away from Adam. Kris’s mood swings were evidence of his continued use of the pills, despite his promises to Adam. In the course of a single call, he’d go from calm and rational, to sobbing and desperately pleading with Adam to come back, to furious ranting and threatening physical harm – sometimes to himself, and sometimes to Adam.

Adam tried to remain calm and reasonable during these calls, repeating over and over that he would talk to him only if he agreed to get help. Adam would inevitably end up in tears, sometimes before the end of the call, and sometimes after he’d hung up. It was simply devastating to him to hear and be reminded of how very sick Kris had become – how twisted and unhealthy his mindset was now, under the control of his addiction.

And as much as it broke Adam’s heart to hear how low Kris had fallen, it broke Brad’s heart to see Adam suffering.

“I just… I just wish he’d listen to reason. These pills… they’ve… they’ve changed him…”

Adam’s voice was trembling slightly, and the note of pain and defeat Brad heard there drew his attention back to the present conversation. His hand stroked slowly, reassuringly, up and down Adam’s leg as he repeated the truth, hoping that it would eventually sink in for Adam and help to assuage the misplaced guilt he felt.

“You really are doing the right thing, Adam. You are.”

Adam’s frustration had faded into sadness and resignation, and he nodded slowly, raising a hand to wipe away the moisture that had gathered in his eyes, but not quite fallen. “I know.” His voice was low and hoarse with unshed tears. “I know. I just… wish it felt right.”

Silence fell over them, and Brad withdrew his hand, staring out the window as they turned onto his street. He was quiet for a few moments before venturing to break the silence and attempt to lighten the mood a bit.

“You know what else doesn’t feel right?” There was irritation in his voice, but it was good-natured and joking. “Getting into the most exclusive club in town that I’ve been dying to get into for years and you’ve only just now gotten around to taking me – and then leaving before ten.”

Brad’s good-natured grumbling was at least partially effective in distracting Adam, who rolled his eyes and replied, “I’ll take you another time, I promise. It’s just that… well… our guests aren’t
exactly big on the night life. Unless we want them sleeping in their car on the street, I think we’d better be there to meet them.”

“Yeah,” Brad sighed. “These southern hillbillies with their backward ways… I swear, you used to hang out with a better class of people, Adam…”

“No, I used to hang out with you.”

Brad let out an exaggerated gasp of indignation. “Bitch!”

“Whore.”

Brad opened his mouth to make a particularly creative – and filthy – comeback, but Adam cut him off before he could speak, nodding toward a red SUV parked outside Brad’s building.

“They’re here. Let’s try to keep a civil tongue in that filthy mouth of yours, shall we?” Adam gave him a wink and a sweet smile as he parked the car and turned the engine off. “We don’t want to send them back to Arkansas in a panic.”

“Oh, well, that’s just not fair…”

“Shh,” Adam insisted as he opened the car door. “This woman’s like my second mom, okay? Be respectful.”

Brad got out of the car, keeping his distance a little and watching with amusement as Adam was enveloped in a warm hug by a heavyset woman with blond hair and a warm, inviting smile.

“Hey, sweetheart,” she greeted him, drawing back to look him in the eye. “How are you?” Her smile faded as she registered Adam’s red-rimmed eyes and the damp spots under them that he hadn’t quite wiped away. “Have you been crying?” she asked, her concerned dismay clear in her voice. “What’s wrong, Adam?”

“Um… pretty much everything, Mrs. Allen,” Adam confessed, lowering his head self-consciously in a way that Brad had only ever seen him do when being fussed over by his own mother. “It’s just… there’s a lot I need to talk to you about.”

“It must be pretty serious, if you couldn’t tell me over the phone,” she remarked, glancing around with open suspicion at the street around them as Brad began to lead the way toward the door. “And if we’re meeting here instead of at the house. And why didn’t you want me to talk to Kris yet? I’m putting a lot of trust in you, here, Adam…”

“I know,” Adam acknowledged with a solemn nod. “And it is serious.” They paused outside Brad’s door as he unlocked it. “I’ll explain everything. Let’s go in. I think you… you really need to sit down for this.”
Adam led Kris’s mother and father into Brad’s living room and sat down with them on the sofa, with Kris’s parents on either side of him. Ordinarily, he would have been totally comfortable with that arrangement. At the moment, however, it made him feel a little trapped and self-conscious.

He knew they were not going to be thrilled with what he had to say – if they even believed him at all.

He barely believed it himself.

“Can I get you guys something to drink?” Brad offered, more quiet and reserved than Adam had ever heard him before. “I’m… not sure I have anything non-alcoholic, but…”

“Water?” Mrs. Allen suggested, giving him a warm, appreciative smile. “Would be great, hon. Just plain ice water. We’ve been on the road a long time.”

Brad nodded and returned her smile, and Adam noted a trace of surprise in his expression that probably only he would have noticed, because he’d felt that same sense of surprise the first time he’d met Mr. and Mrs. Allen – and realized that Southern Christians were not the only group of people with pre-conceived, prejudicial ideas about groups of people different from themselves.

Somehow, observing how easily Mrs. Allen broke through Brad’s defenses made Adam feel reassured in doing what he had to do.

_They’re good people. They love you. They love Kris. They’re going to want to do what’s best for him. They’re going to listen to you…_

“Adam, honey?” Adam was distracted from his mental pep talk by the feeling of Mrs. Allen’s gentle hand on his knee, drawing him out of his thoughts and back to the present moment. “What is it you needed to talk to us about? Is Kris okay?”

Adam’s stomach dropped at the mention of his boyfriend’s name, and he lowered his eyes to focus on his own lap, his lips parted to speak a few moments before he was able to bring himself to utter a word.

“Um… no,” he admitted at last, shaking his head. “No, he’s not. He’s… he’s in trouble.”

“Adam, honey?” Adam was distracted from his mental pep talk by the feeling of Mrs. Allen’s gentle hand on his knee, drawing him out of his thoughts and back to the present moment. “What is it you needed to talk to us about? Is Kris okay?”

Adam’s stomach dropped at the mention of his boyfriend’s name, and he lowered his eyes to focus on his own lap, his lips parted to speak a few moments before he was able to bring himself to utter a word.

“Um… no,” he admitted at last, shaking his head. “No, he’s not. He’s… he’s in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Mr. Allen asked, a worried frown creasing his brow. “What’s happened?”

“He just… well… he got tired of all the tabloids talking about how… how small he is, and…”

Adam stammered over the explanation, his words tumbling over each other in a breathless rush as he struggled to make it all make sense, not only to the Allens but to himself as well. “… I guess he wanted to… to do something to change that, so… he ordered this… vitamin supplement online, only… only it wasn’t vitamins, it was… there was something else in them, and… and now he won’t stop taking them, and he’s… gained a lot of weight. Muscle. He’s… he’s been working out and he has these… these weird… like… blackouts, or…”

“Adam, slow down.” Mr. Allen’s tone was stern and sharp as he held up a halting hand. The disbelief in his incredulous voice made Adam cringe. “Are you telling me that my son… has a drug problem?”

“Um… I hate to… to even say it, but… but yeah…”
“What’s he taking, exactly?” Mr. Allen sounded understandably defensive on his son’s behalf. “If Kris is taking some kind of drugs… then what’s he taking?”

“I-I’m not sure,” Adam admitted miserably, unable to look Kris’s father in the eye as he answered. “I took him to the doctor. They were going to test them and get back to us…”

“What’d they find out?” Mrs. Allen’s voice was more hopeful than hostile.

“I don’t know.” The more Adam tried to explain, the more useless his explanation sounded, even to his own ears. “Kris… Kris says they called back and told him that it’s just an herbal supplement, just like it was advertised, but… but I know he’s lying…”

“How do you know?” Mr. Allen demanded.

His wife reached out a hand to touch his arm, giving him a warning look, before addressing Adam again. “What actual evidence is there that Kris has been taking drugs, Adam? I know you’re worried. I can tell this is a big deal for you, but… I don’t understand…”

Adam felt sick at the thought of explaining to Kris’s parents about the violent, unstable behavior he’d witnessed in his boyfriend in the past few weeks. He hesitated, stammering out a vague explanation. “I… well, he’s been having… mood swings, and… and not acting like himself, at all. He gets… angry. Like, really angry. He…”

“Well, I’m sure he’s under a lot of stress, with all these changes in the past year or so,” Mrs. Allen reasoned, her words slow and cautious. “What makes you think these… mood swings… are because of drugs? Maybe the pills really are an herbal supplement…”

“If you two are having problems,” Mr. Allen interrupted, agitation clear in his skeptical tone, “that doesn’t necessarily mean that Kris is on drugs, Adam. Just because he’s… making some changes in his life and the two of you are not getting along over it is no reason to start making baseless accusations against our son…”

“Look, Adam’s trying to help your son, okay?”

Brad spoke up at last, indignant – and Adam wasn’t sure whether to be alarmed or grateful. Brad had kept his silence as long as possible, Adam knew, knowing that this was a family matter; but Brad knew Adam well enough to know when he was losing control of the situation and feeling trapped and under attack, and cared enough to be unable to do anything but come to his defense.

“Though why he’d even bother after everything Kris has done to him these past few weeks is beyond me,” Brad continued, protective anger in his trembling voice as he glared at Kris’s parents in turn. “If you two had any idea what Kris has put him through…”

“Brad.” Adam’s wide eyes looked up at him in alarm, and he shook his head emphatically. “Don’t.”

Brad reluctantly fell silent, rolling his eyes and turning away, muttering under his breath as he retreated to the kitchen. “Fine. It’s not like it’s my business, anyway…”

Adam looked up at Mrs. Allen anxiously, trying to gauge her reaction – and felt his chest tighten at the wide-eyed look of horror in her eyes. Adam realized with dismay that her gaze was focused on the side of his face he’d turned in her direction when he’d silenced Brad – the side of his face that Kris had bruised a week earlier. He’d done his best to cover it with makeup – but then, he’d been crying, and had wiped his face with a tissue, and hadn’t looked in a mirror since, and…
“Adam…” Mrs. Allen’s voice was hushed, filled with a knowing sense of dread. “… what happened to your face, sweetie?”

Adam found his gaze arrested by her pleading, searching eyes. His eyes welled with tears as he lowered his head, staring down at the sofa between them. He shook his head helplessly, simply unable to say what he knew she needed to know.

He didn’t have to say it.

“What?” Mr. Allen seemed momentarily lost, looking between them with a bewildered question in his eyes. As the implications of the situation slowly d awned on him, however, he drew in a slow, sharp breath. “Adam… you’re not saying that Kris… Kris didn’t…”

It was as if a heavy weight had settled in Adam’s chest, and he couldn’t draw breath to speak – couldn’t so much as raise his head. When he heard Mrs. Allen begin to cry beside him, Adam could no longer hold back his own tears, allowing them to slip from his closed eyes and fall in warm drops onto his folded, trembling hands.

“God, no,” Mrs. Allen whispered. “Why would he…? No…”

“I’m sorry,” Adam whispered helplessly, feeling inexplicably ashamed and guilty for what he’d told them. “I shouldn’t… I mean… I’m so sorry…”

His words seemed to momentarily snap Kris’s mother out of her own emotions, for she suddenly shifted toward Adam on the sofa, unexpectedly embracing him and pulling him close. “Adam, no,” she reassured him with warmth and compassion in her voice. “No, you have nothing to be sorry for. Okay?”

She drew back, one hand at his cheek, silently urging him to look at her. When at last he reluctantly did so, she held his gaze, her eyes shining with tears as she spoke in a hoarse, uncertain voice.

“If Kris… did that to you, Adam, well… then I believe you. There has to be something going on. I don’t believe for a second that Kris would ever lay a hand on you otherwise. And… and whatever he needs… whatever it takes to help him… that’s what we’re here to do, okay?”

Adam nodded, taking comfort and relief in her words.

He turned to look at Kris’s father when he felt a firm hand on his shoulder, and was surprised to see that the man’s demeanor had changed. His expression was solemn and sorrowful, but no longer angry and defensive as it had been. He met Adam’s eyes and spoke quietly, his words slow and purposeful.

“Thank you, Adam… for having us come here. For letting us know. I… I shouldn’t have jumped on you over this, it’s just… you can imagine it’s… hard to hear.”

Adam nodded, swallowing hard, trying to find his voice again.

“Tell us everything, Adam,” Mrs. Allen urged him gently, leaning back on the sofa, but leaving one reassuring arm around him. “We need to know exactly how this happened… exactly what we’re dealing with, here… in order to help him. Why don’t you just… start at the beginning?”

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Kris’s workout routine had expanded from the twenty minutes he used to attempt no more than three times a week to a full two hours daily.

While Adam was across town talking to his parents, Kris was completing his workout – which barely even caused him to break a sweat anymore.

*What’s his problem, anyway?* Kris thought, defiantly triumphant. *The pills aren’t bad for me. I’ve never been in better shape… never felt better in my life… and it’s not as if I actually hurt him, not really. He’s just paranoid. He just likes being the one in control, and that can’t happen if I’m actually taking care of myself for a change…*

When Kris finished his workout, he still had energy to burn, so he jogged in place for a while in front of the television, hoping to find something to distract him from his ever-present thoughts of Adam – but that proved to be counter-productive, as several channels were carrying various clips and short stories about his wayward boyfriend.

Agitated, Kris turned off the television, then hurled the remote against the wall in furious frustration. It bounced off and landed amid a pile of other refuse that had accumulated over the past week. When Kris looked at his living room, he barely noticed the horrible mess he’d created of it over the course of the last few days. He didn’t remember the fits of rage he’d experienced – many of them while on the phone with Adam – or tossing various dishes and pieces of furniture and other items around in his anger.

But the results were clear to be seen – and utterly overwhelming to even think about cleaning up.

So, he didn’t think about it – until he heard the doorbell ring.

Kris glanced around the room in horror, biting his lip and frowning uncertainly at the door. It didn’t take long to decide not to bother answering it. Adam had made it very clear that he would not come by to see Kris unless Kris was willing to get help – and there was no one else that Kris cared to see at the moment. He headed for the stairs, deciding to ignore the doorbell and wait for whoever was outside to go away.

He was halfway up the stairs when his cell phone vibrated in his pocket, and Kris took it out, curious when he saw that he had a text message. His eyes widened with surprise and he stopped short on the stairs when he saw that it was from Adam. His heart raced, an irrational hope building in his chest as he quickly pressed the button to read the message.

*It’s me. Open the door.*

Kris could hardly believe it, reading the message over a few times to be sure his mind wasn’t playing tricks on him before turning and rushing back down the stairs and to the front door. He didn’t bother with the mess, knowing that it was just Adam, and after all Adam lived there, so it didn’t really matter if he saw the house like this…

That train of thought stopped short when Kris opened the door to find not only Adam, but Adam’s mother and Kris’s own parents there as well. Blind panic overwhelmed him, and Kris looked over his shoulder toward the living room, his face burning with shame at the thought of his mother seeing his house – or him – in their current state.

*God, what are they doing here? They can’t be here. Why didn’t he tell me they were here? I wouldn’t have let them in…* … oh. Right.
Kris’s mother did not wait for an invitation, but just stepped past him into the entryway, wrapping him in a warm hug. Kris stiffened at first, immediately defensive, well aware that this little visit from this particular group could only mean that they intended to stage some kind of intervention. However, after a moment, the warm embrace of his mother – her comfortingly familiar scent, the feel of her arms around him that his body had had memorized from the time he was a child – began to break through his defenses, and Kris found himself taking comfort from her presence in spite of himself.

She held him tight for a few moments before drawing back, and he had to look away when he saw the tears in her eyes. Her voice was soft and knowing when she spoke, and he knew before she’d even finished the question that denying her was not an option.

“Is it okay if we come in, son? We really need to talk to you.”
Chapter 18

Nervous and ill at ease, Kris reluctantly backed off enough to allow the little intervention party into the house. His face flushed with embarrassment as he glanced around his living room, really seeing the mess he’d made of it for the first time, and imagining what his mother must think.

“I’ve… I’ve been really busy,” he explained weakly, closing the door behind his unexpected guests and following them into the room. “I’ve… barely been home…”

“It looks more like you’ve barely left,” Kris’s father muttered, surveying the filthy room with disgust.

Despite their recent estrangement, this was still Adam’s home. Without a word, he set about straightening up the mess, gathering piles of dirty laundry and crumpled paper food wrappers off of the sofa and disappearing with them into another room, before returning to collect another armload and carry it off. Once he had cleared enough room for everyone to sit down, he didn’t stop – until Kim Allen stopped him with a gentle hand on his arm, meeting his gaze with solemn, understanding eyes.

“Adam,” she said softly. “We need you in here right now.”

Adam swallowed hard, realizing that he had been subconsciously avoiding the difficult conversation about to take place. He nodded once, accepting, before awkwardly taking a seat in the armchair across from the sofa, where Kris’s parents sat on either side of their son. Leila took her place quietly in a second chair near Adam’s, her arms crossed over her chest as she waited for someone else to take the lead.

She was really only there to support Adam.

“So, um… I guess I don’t really have to ask why you guys are here,” Kris spoke up at last, breaking the uncomfortable silence. He didn’t venture so much as a glance in Adam’s direction, instead choosing to address his parents. “What did Adam tell you? He’s all… all worked up on this crazy idea that I’m on something, but he’s wrong…”

“Are you sure about that, son?” Neil asked, casting a dubious, disapproving glance around the living room again, its state not much changed by Adam’s efforts. “Because this…” He waved a hand in a vague gesture to indicate the entire room. “… this isn’t like you, Kris.”

“Like I said, I’ve been really busy.” Kris’s voice trembled slightly, and he looked as if he was going to be sick.

Adam could sympathize with the feeling.

“Kris, honey,” Kim cut in, her voice gentle and understanding to match the light touch of her hand on Kris’s nervously bouncing knee. “I’m really not all that worried about your messy house. That’s not… not why we’re here…”

“Adam tells us you’ve been doing some body building,” Neil added, a cautious note to his voice as he inspected his son’s face closely for any sign of reaction to his words. “And… maybe you’ve been taking something to help with that?”

“It’s an herbal supplement,” Kris snapped, casting a swift, resentful glare in Adam’s direction. “I swear, he’s all freaked out about this, but it’s nothing! It’s just vitamins and minerals and herbs and
stuff. It’s not a drug. I went to the doctor and everything, just to make him feel better about it, and
the doctor told me it’s nothing to worry about…”

“Where’s the doctor’s report?” Adam spoke up at last, his voice soft and controlled. He could
barely bring himself to look at the stranger sitting across from him, wearing the face of the man he
loved. “He said he was gonna fax it over. Where is it?”

Kris’s eyes went wide and trapped for a moment before he covered his reaction with a cool mask of
indifference and a casual shrug – but no one in the room had missed the brief but incriminating
look on his face.

“I didn’t keep it,” he replied incredulously, as if that should have been obvious. “What would be
the point?”

“What, you expected me to just believe you, after…?”

“I expect you to trust me!” Kris snapped back, hurt and resentment in his trembling voice. “If you
love me…”

“I do love you, Kris, and I’m sorry, but trusting you is the last thing I should be doing right now!”

The words hurt Adam as much to speak as they hurt Kris to hear, and he found himself staring
down at his lap, blinking back tears. He looked up, his stomach tightening at the sight of Kris’s
trembling fist clenched at his side, his jaw working with repressed fury as he glared at Adam across
the room – and Adam was suddenly very glad that he’d chosen a seat with a little bit of distance
from his boyfriend.

“You’re gonna just hold that over my head for the rest of our lives, then?” Kris’s tone was scathing,
accusing. “Never gonna forgive me?”

“For what, Kris?”

His mother’s soft voice drew Kris’s attention away from Adam sharply, and
his eyes went wide
and guilty again. He closed his mouth, swallowing hard and looking away from her, his shoulders
falling as he suddenly tried to make himself seem inconspicuous and non-threatening.

“Nothing. I just… it’s between us.”

“Not anymore.” Adam’s voice was quiet, betraying just a hint of regret beneath the firm certainty
in his words. He waited until Kris looked up at him in alarmed understanding to confirm his
boyfriend’s suspicions. “I told them, Kris.”

Adam watched Kris’s face as shock slowly shifted to embarrassment and guilt – and then to fury,
as Kris rose to his feet, fists clenched at his sides. “You told them?”

Adam braced himself for the violence he’d come to expect from Kris in this particular frame of
mind, then let out a soft gasp of alarm when he saw Kris’s mother reach for his taut, trembling arm.

“Kris, honey… he only told us because he’s concerned about you… your behavior…”

Kris jerked away from his mother’s hand, casting a contemptuous glance in her direction before
glaring at Adam again. Kim sat back, startled and hurt by Kris’s reaction, as Kris came around the
coffee table toward Adam. Adam rose to his feet as well, moving to stand behind the chair in
which he’d sat, so that it formed a barrier between himself and his furious boyfriend. Adam’s
stomach dropped as, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his mother standing up and edging
toward him, as if to stand between him and Kris.

_No, Mom, stay out of this… if he hurts you…_

“*My behavior?*” Kris seethed. “*Yeah, because Mr. ‘Tripping on Acid Helped Me Find Myself’ is exactly the right person to talk to *me* about drug use! Who are you to criticize *anyone* else’s behavior?*

Adam flinched, his face flushing with embarrassment, and he couldn’t bring himself to look at Kris’s parents, for fear of what he might see in their faces. His various interviews on the subject of how he’d come to the decision to go on American Idol were by no means secret. He knew that they knew he’d done his fair share of partying in his time, and also that they accepted him and loved him for who he was, and approved of his relationship with Kris.

Still, having his past sins cast up in his face in front of them was humiliating, and left him feeling uncertain and unsupported.

“Kristopher Neil Allen.”

The sharp tone of his mother’s voice turned Kris around to face her, though his jaw remained set in anger and defiance, his arms crossed defensively over his chest. Adam ventured a glance up to see that Kim Allen was on her feet as well, eyes blazing with indignation.

“This isn’t _about_ Adam,” she declared. “This is about _you_ – and if this is the kind of behavior he’s been telling us about, then I _absolutely_ understand why he’s worried about you – and why he doesn’t want to stay with you right now.” She was quiet for a moment, her expression softening with disappointment and sorrow before she nodded slowly and added, “I think I’d like to see that doctor’s report, too, Kris. I’d like to see for myself just exactly what they found in those pills.”

“I _told_ you…” Kris ground out the words, his voice shaking with the extreme effort to hold back his anger. “I _don’t_… _have_ it.”

“It shouldn’t be hard to get another copy,” Neil Allen pointed out, eyes narrowed in new suspicion at his son’s very uncharacteristic behavior. “And that’s what I expect you to do, Kristopher. Tomorrow morning, call the doctor and order another copy.”

“You can’t make me do that!” Kris snapped, incredulous. “It’s none of your business!”

“If you’re telling the truth, then why would you care?” Adam pointed out. “And if you’re _not_ telling the truth, then…” Adam tried to find the right words as Kris slowly turned toward him again, a challenge in his dark eyes, daring Adam to complete the half-formed accusation. Adam held his gaze unflinchingly, his words slow and certain. “… then you already know that we’re right – and you _do_ need help, Kris.”

“It’s none of your business,” Kris repeated, though his voice sounded smaller now, and he dropped his gaze from Adam’s knowing, intent gaze. “Guys… I’m fine, okay? I don’t need anything. But… if you don’t trust me, then… then I don’t want you here anyway.”

“That’s why you’ve been calling me non-stop, right?” Adam’s voice was quiet, matter-of-fact, his eyes sad and searching. “Kris… I know you don’t want to live this way…”

“You obviously don’t know anything about me.” He was quiet, looking around the room, first at Leila and then at his own parents. “None of you do.”

“Because you’re pushing everyone away, son,” Kim pointed out softly, venturing closer to Kris,
close enough to place a sympathetic hand on his arm again. “Kris… just talk to us. Just… tell us the truth.”

Adam watched as behind Kim and Kris, Neil half-rose in his seat, warily watching the exchange. The sight tore at his emotions, making him feel a confusing mixture of relief that his concerns were finally being taken seriously, and heartbreak at the thought of Kris’s parents having to see him like this – the idea that Neil Allen was actually afraid for his wife’s safety at the hands of her own son.

Kris must have recognized something in Adam’s expression, because his eyes narrowed in suspicion before he followed Adam’s gaze to his father behind him, noting the tense, wary stance his father had taken. Kris’s eyes widened in horror as he looked between his father and his boyfriend, finally settling his gaze on Adam and shaking his head slowly.

“You actually think I’d hurt my own mother?”

“I think…” Adam weighed his words carefully, holding Kris’s gaze. “…I think that right now… your behavior is very unpredictable, and… and you don’t even know what you might… might be capable of.”

“So your answer to my question is… yes,” Kris concluded, his voice dangerously soft as he shrugged out from under his mother’s hand on his arm and took a slow, warning step toward Adam. “You actually think I might hurt the one person I love most in the entire world.”

“Why not?” Adam whispered, swallowing back the soft sob that rose in his throat, shaking his head slowly as he instinctively stepped back away from Kris’s advance. “You said you loved me, too, you know – and we both know how that turned out.”

Kris froze in his tracks, flinching slightly as if he’d been physically struck. His eyes were wide and stricken, and whatever words he’d been about to speak remained unformed on his parted lips. No one spoke or moved for a long moment, everyone waiting to see how Kris would respond to the painful point Adam had just made. At last, Kris’s shoulders fell, and his gaze dropped to the floor. “Could you… could you guys just leave?”

“Kris…” Kim’s voice was pleading, anguished. “Sweetie, please…”

“Just go,” Kris whispered, shaking his head. “Just… just get out. Please.”

Kris’s mother started to object again, but her husband stood then and took her arm, speaking softly into her ear. She met his eyes, clearly torn, reluctant to leave her son like this – then finally sighed in resignation.

“If it’s… what you want, Kris. But… but you need help, Sweetie…”

“I know your doctor won’t give the report to anyone but you,” Neil quietly stated. “But we still need to see that report, Kris. We’re not leaving town right away. We’ll be back tomorrow afternoon, and expect to see a copy.”

Kris did not respond, just kept his back rigid and turned against them, everything about his stance making it perfectly clear how eager he was for them to be gone. Adam and his mother slowly followed Kim and Neil toward the door. Adam’s pace slowed as they neared the foyer, and he turned, his vision blurred with tears, his words halting and hesitant. “Kris… I…”
Kris turned his head slightly toward Adam, waiting for him to go on, but not turning to face him.

“… I still love you. I always will. But… I can’t help you if you won’t let me.”

Adam waited for a response, and might have waited all night, if his mother hadn’t gently touched his arm, tugging him slightly toward the door. His chest ached with the hurt and disappointment of the failure of their attempt – but for the moment, there was nothing left to be done. Sadly, Adam turned and followed the others out the door.
Chapter 19

The next day, Kris had an excuse for why he had not obtained the doctor’s report – and the day after that, and the day after that.

A week after the failed intervention, Kris’s parents were still staying in a hotel in LA, unwilling to leave without having managed to get through to their son – but they couldn’t stay much longer. Heartsick with worry, but having no other choice, they scheduled their flight home. The day before they were supposed to leave, Kim came by Kris’s house to try one last time to get through to him.

“Mom, I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Kim flinched at the cold, distant tone of her son’s voice, and the way he refused to even look at her as he continued his workout – swiftly walking on a treadmill that she was pretty sure he hadn’t owned a few weeks earlier, while simultaneously lifting a set of hand weights. She opened her mouth to try again, but then decided against it. Kris’s attention was already completely focused away from her once more.

She turned and walked out of the room, her heart heavy with disappointment.

In the living room, she set about straightening up some of the mess that Kris seemed to have no interest in cleaning up. She blinked back tears, trying to think of some way to get through to her son before it was too late. She lingered, using the excuse of cleaning Kris’s house to put off the inevitability of walking out of his house, and going back to Conway, leaving her boy on his own. Finally, however, she could put it off no longer.

“Mom?”

She was halfway to the front door when she heard Kris’s tentative voice behind her, and froze in her tracks, her stomach clenching with a painful sort of hope. She turned to face him, one hand rising to brush away the tears that streaked her face as she pasted on a falsely bright smile.

“Yes?”

Kris bit his lower lip, an uncertain frown on his face. He hesitated a moment before continuing. “Um… you’ve been talking to Adam these last few days, right?”

“Yes?”

Kim’s voice held a questioning note as she waited for Kris to go on, her hopes sinking as she realized that whatever Kris wanted to say to her, it probably didn’t have anything to do with his desire to recover from his addiction. Kris walked slowly closer to her, his eyes downcast for a moment before meeting hers again – and Kim hated the unsettled feeling of fear that settled in the pit of her stomach at her son’s advance.

*I shouldn’t have to be afraid of Kris… but… he’s very much not himself right now. Who knows what he might do?*

“Do you… do you know where he’s staying?”

Kim closed her eyes for a moment, letting out a heavy sigh. She knew that after the intervention
attempt, Adam had stopped taking Kris’s calls, and that nevertheless, her son had not stopped calling him. If anything, the phone calls had increased in frequency, and the messages Kris left, in desperation. Her tone was stern, unyielding, as she answered with tired resignation.

“I do, Kris, but I’m not going to tell you that. He doesn’t want you to know, and if he did, he’d tell you himself.”

“Mom, come on,” Kris whined, a pleading look on his face. As he spoke, he continued moving nearer to her, and Kim was acutely conscious of the decreasing space between them. “I really need to talk to him and he won’t take my calls. Please just tell me. I’m not going to do anything; I just want to talk to him!”

“Kris, no,” Kim stated emphatically, holding his gaze. “We both know he loves you, son… but if he doesn’t want to talk to you right now, I’m pretty sure you know why – and exactly what it’s going to take to change his mind.”

Kris stopped in his tracks, as his pleading expression slowly shifted into something dark and ugly with anger and frustration. Without another word, he spun on his heel and stalked off into the other room. Kim watched him go with fresh tears in her eyes, swallowing back a despairing sob as she forced herself to reach for the handle of the door.

*****************************************

Cut off from any contact with Adam, abandoned by his lover and his family, Kris took solace in the only things that he had left – his pills, and the strenuous daily workouts they made possible. Days passed, one rolling into the next in an unending haze. Kris moved his exercise equipment out into the living room, so that he could watch television while he was working out – and he kept the channel constantly tuned to the entertainment network, watching obsessively for any small piece of news about Adam.

He had tried calling every one of Adam’s friends whom he had a number for, but none of them would answer their phones. With every failed attempt, Kris’s frustration grew stronger. His pace quickened with a surge of angry adrenaline as he stared mindlessly at the screen in front of him, his thoughts focused on Adam and how cruelly he’d abandoned him.

It isn’t fair. He couldn’t even give me a chance to prove myself! If he’d just talk to me – just give me some time to show him that it’s not how he thinks it is, that the pills aren’t hurting me, then… then he’d understand.

But I can’t talk to him if I don’t even know where he is.

Kris’s heart leapt in his chest as abruptly the images on the screen changed to show the familiar, smiling face of his boyfriend, waving at the flashing cameras as he walked out of a club downtown. Kris’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, a cold jealousy creeping through his veins as he saw who was walking just behind Adam, and yet far too close for Kris’s liking.

Brad. What’s Adam doing spending so much time with his ex-boyfriend, anyway? Every time I see him on any of these gossip shows, it seems like he’s always with Brad…

Kris slowed to a stop, eyes widening with sudden clarity.

That’s it. Maybe that’s where Adam is staying. And even if it’s not, as much time as they’ve been spending together – if anyone knows where Adam is right now, it’s Brad.

Kris got off the treadmill and began searching his trashed living room for his car keys, his jaw set
with determination as a loosely formed plan began to take shape in his mind.

*I might not be able to find Adam – but I can find Brad. And he’ll tell me where Adam is – whether he wants to or not.*

**********************************************

“Aren’t you late for that… thing? Whatever it is?”

Adam cast a sly smile in Brad’s direction, not taking his focus from the bathroom mirror as he finished applying the last touches to his makeup.

“Always. But only fashionably so.”

“Of course.” Brad returned Adam’s smile, rolling his eyes as he advanced into the tiny bedroom of his apartment and flopped down onto the bed. “Still… you’ll miss the red carpet if you don’t get going. The paparazzi will have all gone by the time you get there.”

“Wouldn’t *that* be nice,” Adam muttered, twisting the cap onto his eyeliner and putting it into the drawer.

“Please.” Brad smirked. “Don’t even pretend you wouldn’t be disappointed.”

Brad got up off the bed and followed Adam when he headed out the bedroom door, walking him to the door of his apartment and watching as he quickly made his way out to his car. Once Adam was in with the car doors securely locked behind him, Brad closed the door, humming a little to himself. He loved Adam, he really did, and they were still very close friends even after everything that had happened between them – but he was still looking forward to the prospect of a night with his tiny apartment to himself for a change.

As he passed the small table near the door, Brad sighed as he noticed the spare house key he’d given Adam, still lying there where Adam had left it when he’d last come in.

*Which means he’ll have to wake me up when he gets back at whatever hour of the morning…*

The sound of the doorbell ringing drew a knowing smile to Brad’s lips, and he picked up the keys, turning back toward the door to open it, already speaking even before he saw who was there.

“Forget something?”

The words died on his lips, his stomach lurching at the sight of a wild-eyed Kris Allen outside his door. He immediately started to close the door again, but Kris caught it, pushing it back open with alarming strength and shoving past Brad into the apartment. Brad glanced uneasily at the door as Kris swiftly slammed it shut, bracing a hand against it to keep it so.

“Where’s Adam?” he demanded without preamble.

Brad held Kris’s gaze, doing his best to remain calm and in control, though he was acutely aware of the unsettling fact that if Kris did decide to try to hurt him, he was certainly no match for him in his current physical state.

“If Adam wanted you to know where he was,” Brad replied, keeping his voice quiet and even, “then I’m pretty sure he’d have told you…”

Brad’s words broke off in a startled yelp as Kris suddenly grabbed two fistfuls of his t-shirt in his
hands and slammed him against the wall with breathtaking force. A cruel smile twisted his mouth into an expression Brad had never expected to see on Kris’s face, as Kris shifted his body intimidatingly close to Brad’s, his voice lowering to a warning murmur.

“That doesn’t matter, because you’re going to tell me. Where’s he staying right now, Brad? Here, with you?”

“Kris… you need to leave.” Brad swallowed hard, his words breaking slightly, his breath ragged and uneven. “I’m not telling you anything Adam doesn’t want you to know, so… so you really just need to leave, before you do something you’ll regret…”

“Oh, trust me,” Kris sneered. “Anything you’re thinking I might do to you – I don’t think I’d regret it.” He shrugged slightly, a malicious light of amusement in his eyes as he added, “Most likely whatever you’re thinking, I’ve wanted to do it since we met anyway – and just didn’t because Adam wouldn’t have liked it.”

Brad’s mind went to the cell phone tucked into his pocket, but he didn’t have time to get to it, even if he could have somehow managed to take it out without Kris noticing. Without warning, Kris drew back his fist and slammed it into Brad’s stomach, driving the breath from his body and making him double over in pain. Kris easily yanked him up and slammed him into the wall again, smiling into Brad’s wide, pain-shocked eyes.

“Like that, for example.” Kris smirked. “Of course, Adam doesn’t seem to care what I want anymore, so… why should I hold back for his sake?”

The second blow fell across Brad’s face, so that through the greying of his vision and ringing in his ears as he sank to his knees on the floor, he was only vaguely aware of the front door opening for a second time, followed by loud, outraged voices. As his vision cleared and the ringing receded, however, Brad’s heart sank with the realization of what was going on.

Adam had come back for his keys, after all.

“Kris, what the hell are you doing? Get away from him!”

“Why? Why do you care so much, Adam?” Kris demanded, his voice trembling with rage. “Because I’m the ex, now, is that it? You two back together again?”

“He’s bleeding, Kris. What did you do?”

Adam gave Kris a look of disgust as he crouched down in front of Brad, reaching out a gentle hand to touch the spot just below his split and bleeding lip – and though Brad appreciated the gesture, he shook his head weakly in silent warning. Everything in his hazy mind was screaming at Adam to get up, don’t turn your back on him, look out! But his head was reeling from the blow he’d taken, his thoughts muddled with pain, and Brad couldn’t seem to make the words actually come out of his mouth.

Abruptly, Adam was jerked backward away from him as Kris grabbed his arm and yanked him up, shoving him against the door. Indignant and alarmed, Adam struggled to free himself from Kris’s grasp.

“Let go of me! Kris, you need to get out!”

Adam’s protest was cut off by a vicious slap across his face that knocked his head into the door, hard. He let out a weak groan of pain as Kris took hold of his arms in a bruising grip and shook him
hard so that his head hit the door again.

“I’ll get out when I’m damn good and ready!” Kris snarled. “You are going to listen to me, Adam, whether you like it or not!”

“Stop!” Adam gasped, struggling to push the smaller but stronger man away. “Kris, you have to stop!”

When Kris refused to let go, Adam kicked out at his shin, waiting until Kris let go of him with a cry of surprised pain, doubling over with one hand pressed against the injured limb, to try to push past Kris and put some distance between them. Kris quickly recovered, however, spinning around with vindictive fury in his dark eyes. He grabbed Adam’s arm and tried to pull him back, and Adam jerked away from him with desperate force – enough force to send him stumbling and crashing to the floor – the side of his head impacting hard with the sharp corner of the table where his keys had been.

Get up, Adam. Come on, get up!

Brad stared at his friend in stricken horror for a moment that seemed to stretch on for an eternity – a moment in which Kris’s rant died away, and he didn’t make a sound, staring down at Adam’s fallen form – and Adam didn’t move.

Blood was swiftly seeping from a large gash in Adam’s forehead, soaking into the cheap carpet beneath him at an alarming rate. Kris dropped to his knees beside Adam, pulling at his shoulders and trying to get him up, his voice trembling with fear as he put one hand behind Adam’s head, heedless of the blood that poured down onto it, and shook him slightly.

“Adam? Adam, wake up! Adam!”

“Don’t touch him!” Brad snapped, catching Kris in a moment in which he was off guard, and therefore managing to push him back away from his friend. Brad gently lowered Adam back down to the floor, stripping off his t-shirt and pressing it against the bleeding wound on Adam’s head. “You shouldn’t move him, you don’t know what damage you might do…” Under his breath as he tried to staunch the bleeding, Brad added a muttered, “Idiot.”

Kris’s fury had faded instantly under the weight of what he had done, and he obediently rose to his feet, backing away, wringing his hands as he stared down in horror at Adam’s still, silent form. “Wh-what… what can I do?” he whispered. “Please…”

Brad reached into his pocket with one hand and took out his phone, tossing it to Kris with a contemptuous look. “You can call 911 and tell them what you did,” he replied with disgust. “Hurry, he needs help, fast.”

Kris just stared for a moment longer before shaking his head rapidly and focusing his attention on the phone. His eyes went wide, and Brad knew that he was thinking about what he would have to say to whoever answered on the other line. How was he going to explain this one away?

Brad really didn’t care.

“Kris!” he snapped, his voice trembling with fear for his injured friend, sparing no pity for the man who was the cause of that injury. “Now!”

His sharp words seemed to spur Kris into action, and he dialed the three numbers with trembling fingers, holding the phone up to his ear and waiting a moment until someone picked up.
“Y-yes, um… my… my boyfriend… he fell, and… and he’s bleeding, and… Please send someone. Please hurry, he’s… he’s not conscious…”
Chapter 20

Brad followed close behind the paramedics as they rushed Adam on a stretcher toward the waiting ambulance. He waved away one of them who offered to check him for injuries as well.

“I’m fine. Just help him, please!”

As he reached the ambulance, Brad saw Kris standing uncertainly beside the doors, glancing hopefully toward the inside of the vehicle. Though he made no move to get in, his desire was clear – and absolutely infuriating to Brad. Any fear he’d felt when Kris had pushed his way into Brad’s house vanished, swallowed up by fury, as he swiftly closed the distance between them, surprising Kris by getting right up in his face.

“Don’t even think about it!” Brad snapped, biting off the words in a threatening hiss. “Don’t you dare come near him – not unless you want all these paramedics and the cops and TMZ and the whole damn world to know exactly how Adam got hurt!”

Kris’s eyes widened in alarm and he glanced around at the paramedics to see if any of them had heard. His explanation that Adam had “fallen” and hurt himself had kept any police from being sent to the scene – but Kris was not too stupid to realize that all it would take was a few words from Brad to change that very quickly.

“The only reason I haven’t said anything yet is because I think that’s Adam’s call,” Brad explained, resentment and frustration in his voice. “For some reason, he still cares what happens to you, no matter how many times you do shit like this to him – and I’m not losing my friendship with Adam over you.” He gave Kris a slow, disgusted look-over before meeting his eyes again. “Just stay away from him.”

Brad left Kris standing there staring helplessly as he climbed into the ambulance beside Adam. He reached out to take Adam’s limp, lifeless hand in his, but the paramedic beside him caught his hand and abruptly pushed it back.

“Please just give us room to work,” she ordered in a voice that was firm but not without compassion.

“Right.” Brad nodded hurriedly, unable to take his eyes from Adam’s face, and the bloody white bandage wrapped around his brow. “Right… whatever you need. Just… just please help Adam…”

The paramedic froze for just an instant, and Brad glanced at her with concern – but by the time he looked at her, she was already in action again. After a moment, however, she offered a murmured explanation for her reaction.

“So that’s why he looks so familiar. The guy from American Idol, right?”

“Right.” Brad’s eyes widened with alarm as the implications of the situation began to fully dawn on him. “Please, don’t say anything to anyone. I mean… the last thing he needs is the hospital crawling with paparazzi trying to get the story first while he’s trying to recover. Please, if you could just… not mention to anyone that it’s Adam Lambert. Please.”

“Of course,” the girl agreed with a nod and a taut but reassuring smile. “I won’t say a word.”

Brad took out his cell phone, his hands trembling, his vision blurred with tears, as he tried to find Leila Lambert’s number in his list. When he finally located it and hit send, a heavy weight seemed
to settle in his chest with the dread of telling her what had happened. His mouth went dry when he heard the faint click indicating that she’d picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Leila… something’s happened.”

There was a moment of horrible silence before she spoke again, her voice breathless and barely over a whisper. “Adam… is he… tell me he’s okay.”

“He… he will be,” Brad stammered uncertainly. “I think…”

“Brad!”

“No, he… he’s not conscious, but… but…”

“Vitals are strong,” the paramedic helpfully supplied under her breath, glancing up at Brad before returning her focus to Adam.

“… his vitals are strong,” Brad echoed, adding in a dejected whisper, “Whatever that means.”

“Okay. I’m walking out the door. What hospital are they taking him to?”

Leila’s voice was remarkably calm, and Brad found himself taking courage from it as he answered her questions. It helped to focus on something concrete and certain and not the overwhelming uncertainty of how badly Adam was injured, and whether or not he was going to be okay. He hung up the phone as the ambulance pulled into the hospital parking lot, following the paramedics through the emergency entrance as they rushed Adam inside.

Brad noticed several staff members doing double takes in Adam’s direction as they passed, and his heart sank as he realized that it was going to be next to impossible to keep this out of the tabloids. By the time Leila arrived twenty minutes later, the waiting room was already beginning to fill up with people who did not seem to have any injuries of their own. Several of those people approached him, asking him if he was Adam’s friend, and what had happened, and if he knew whether or not Adam was all right. Brad wasted no time in telling them exactly where they could go.

When a couple of the nurses began to notice the gathering crowd, a supervisor came out and asked the people who were obviously paparazzi to leave, but there were a few that Brad was pretty sure they missed; and as for those that were kicked out, Brad could see them hovering on the sidewalk outside, peering through the windows and flashing pictures of him, and of Leila as she approached him.

Brad rose to his feet as she reached him, immediately wrapping him in a warm hug before drawing back to fearfully search his face.

“Where is he? What happened?”

“He’s… unconscious.” Brad swallowed hard. “He… he hit his head when he fell, and… and it was bleeding. They said they don’t think it’s too serious, but… they took him right back, and they said they’d let me know as soon as they know anything…”

“Brad…” Leila interrupted, shaking her head in confusion as she guided him back toward his seat and sat down beside him. “… how did this happen? Was he… attacked, or…”
“It was Kris.”

Brad blurted out the words before he could think – and then immediately cringed, bracing himself for Leila’s reaction. For the past few years, Kris had been like family to her, and she had often said that she loved him like her own son. Of course, during the past few weeks, it had become obvious that such motherly affections vanished in the face of the abuse Kris had been inflicting upon Adam. Brad wasn’t sure exactly how Leila would react to hearing the news – but he knew that whatever her reaction was, it was likely to be explosive in nature.

“Kris…”

Leila’s voice was low and disbelieving as she attempted to process this information. Brad felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up at the barely restrained rage he heard in her voice when she continued with careful control.

“What did he do to my son, Brad?”

Brad hesitated for a moment, feeling strangely intimidated by the protective fire in Leila’s eyes – but when he finally made himself start talking, he couldn’t stop. The words kept pouring out in a trembling, tumult, as he tried to make sense of what had happened.

“He… he came to the apartment, looking for Adam, but… Adam had left, so… he was really… out of control, like… yelling and screaming in my face and… and shoving me around. And then… Adam came back, and… and tried to stop him, and… make him leave, but Kris wouldn’t go. I… I didn’t see it all, but… next thing I knew, Adam was on the floor, and… and bleeding… and Kris was panicked, like… like he couldn’t even believe what he’d done…” He paused, staring into the distance through shell-shocked eyes as the vivid image of Adam lying on his floor, blood gushing from the ugly wound on his head, filled his vision until he could see nothing else. “I… I tried to stop the bleeding, and… and Kris called for help…”

“Where is Kris now? Did… did the police…”

“No, there… there were no police.” Brad shook his head, his stomach lurching with a sudden fear, and he gave Leila an apologetic look, afraid of what her reaction might be to his answer. “Kris… he told the 9-1-1 operator that… that Adam fell, so… no police came to my place.”

Leila’s brow creased in an incredulous frown. “And you didn’t tell them…?”

“I thought… I thought it would be better to wait, and… and ask Adam what he wants to do. You know, when he wakes up…”

“I don’t really give a damn what Adam wants when it comes to this,” Leila declared, taking out her cell phone. “We need to know that he’s safe, and at the moment, Kris Allen is out of his mind.” She held out her phone to Brad, eyebrows raised in a pointed, challenging look. “Call the police. Have him picked up. Adam isn’t safe as long as he’s free to try to get to him again.”

Brad blinked, startled by the idea he had not yet considered, that Kris might try to get to Adam even in the hospital. “I… I don’t think he’d…”

“Kris isn’t in control of his actions right now, honey.” Leila’s voice softened slightly, though the steely determination in her eyes did not fade. “Right now he might be in shock over what happened, but there’s no guarantee that’s going to last for the next hour. Adam deserves to be safe – and Kris deserves to pay for this.” Her eyes softened with compassion as Brad slowly, tentatively took the phone from her hand. “And besides… it’s probably the best thing for Kris, anyway. He needs help.
Maybe this will force him to see that.”

Brad called information to get the number for the police, then waited while the call was connected, tapping his fingers nervously against his thigh, biting his lower lip in anxious anticipation. When a dispatcher finally answered, he drew in a deep, shaky breath before speaking into the phone.

“Yeah, um… my name is Brad Bell, and… I need to report a crime…”

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Leila waited, one hand resting on Brad’s arm in silent support, listening as he told the officer the same story that he had just told her. She found herself trembling with fury, wanting nothing more than to track down Kris herself and let him know – with words and more – just exactly what she thought of what he’d done to her son, who loved him too much to abandon him, no matter what he’d put him through.

*I wouldn’t be surprised if Adam forgave Kris, even for this – and I can’t let Kris get away with this. He’ll only do it again. He hurt Adam before, and that wasn’t enough to make him want to stop. Well, if he won’t stop on his own, then someone has to make him stop…*

She listened, distracted, as Brad gave the police officer on the other end of the line Kris’s name and address, and then waited while the officer spoke to him.

“Oh. Really? Oh. Um… okay…”

The surprise and uncertainty in Brad’s voice drew Leila’s attention, and she looked up at Brad with a curious frown. “*What?*” she mouthed when he gave her a wide-eyed, shocked look, but he just looked away again, shaking his head as he listened to the officer.

“All right. I understand. Thank you for the information.”

Brad disconnected the call, turning toward her, his jaw slack with stunned disbelief.

“Brad, what? What did he say? Are they going to arrest him?” she demanded, impatient to know what had put that expression on his face.

*Surely they’re not going to let him slide on this, because of who he is. Surely an assault of this level is enough to get even the American Idol arrested – right?*

“No,” Brad replied in a whisper, shaking his head slowly. “No, they’re not…”

Leila’s heart sank, and she raised a hand to cover her eyes in frustration, letting out a shaky sigh. Brad put a hand on her arm, pulling her hand down, and she looked up at him again in confusion to see a cautious, bewildered smile on his lips as he explained.

“They’re not… because… he’s already turned himself in.”
Chapter 21

As it turned out, Adam was not seriously injured.

The cut on his forehead did not require stitches, and was, thankfully, above his hairline, so he wouldn’t have to worry about a visible, permanent scar. Because he did have a mild concussion, the doctors wanted him to stay in the hospital overnight for observation, just to make sure that everything was all right – but overall, Leila and Brad were both just relieved to know that he was going to be okay.

Leila and Brad argued briefly over which of them was going to spend the night in Adam’s room with him, while the other went home to sleep in their own comfortable bed.

Of course, Leila won.

The nurses had just wheeled a cot for her to sleep on into Adam’s room when two police officers showed up to question him about what had happened.

“Can’t this wait?” Leila was more than a little perturbed, her protective instincts on overdrive. “He’ll be leaving the hospital in the morning. You can’t wait to ask your questions until then?”

“Mom… it’s okay.” Adam insisted, his voice weary but strong and clear as he reached out a hand to take hers, squeezing it gently. “I’d rather just… just get this over with.”

Once they were sure that he was going to be all right, Leila and Brad had filled Adam in on what had happened after he’d been knocked out. Adam was as stunned as they were to hear that Kris had turned himself in. He found himself feeling cautiously hopeful at the news – because certainly Kris wouldn’t have done that if he wasn’t truly sorry. Maybe he’d finally realized that he’d gone too far, allowed the pills to control too much of his life, and needed to make a change, once and for all.

And here I am, at that exact moment – about to turn on him completely.

But there was nothing Adam could do but tell the officers the truth. If Kris had turned himself in and was under arrest, then that meant that he had already told the police what he’d done. Attempting to cover for Kris now would not do any good, and would only serve to complicate the matter – and maybe to earn him a second concussion at the hands of Brad or his mother.

Adam’s exhaustion helped him to stay calm and controlled as he recounted the story to the police officers, feeling more and more guilty with every word. When at last they left, he let out a heavy sigh, resting his head on the pillow behind him and closing his eyes. He raised a hand to shade his eyes from the bright ceiling lights – then winced, withdrawing it with a muttered, resentful, “Ow.”

“What is it, sweetie?” Leila asked, placing her hand over his. “Are you okay?”

“I feel like crap,” Adam admitted, raising his head to meet her eyes. “I just… I know he messed up – bad – but… he didn’t really mean for this to happen…”

He couldn’t look at Brad, well aware that Brad had more of a reason than anyone besides Adam himself to want Kris put away. After all, it was Brad’s home that Kris had invaded, and Brad that had been attacked by Kris in the first place, before Adam had shown up to distract Kris’s attention. That’s why he was surprised when it was Brad that spoke up, his tone far more gentle and reassuring than Adam was used to hearing from him.
“Adam, you did the right thing – you did what you had to do.”

“That’s right,” Leila agreed. “Adam, honey, if you keep taking up for him, making excuses for him – if he knows that he’s not ever really going to lose you, no matter what he does – then, he has no reason to change.”

Adam was quiet, pensive, for a long moment, as he considered their words, in light of the events of the past few hours, and Kris’s unexpected actions following the incident. He swallowed hard, his thoughts spilling from his lips without his really meaning for them to.

“He turned himself in. That means… he wants to change. He’s sorry…”

“Maybe that’s what it means,” Leila cautiously conceded. “I will say, it is promising. But that’s just all the more reason that you had to tell the truth about it, Adam. You wouldn’t have been helping him at all by covering for him. Kris needs help, and… well… maybe this is the only way he’s going to get it. It seems like… maybe he knows he isn’t capable of making the choice for himself right now, so… in a moment of clarity, he deliberately took that choice and put it in someone else’s hands.”

Adam nodded slowly, thoughtfully, as he processed her words. Then, his mouth twisted into an unhappy grimace as a new, troubling thought occurred to him.

“The press is gonna have a field day with this.”

Brad was looking down at his Iphone, pressing buttons and frowning as he read something on the screen. “Already are,” he corrected flatly.

Adam let out a groan, shaking his head slowly and closing his eyes, trying not to think about the kind of questions the paparazzi would be asking him for the next few weeks, or even months – trying not to think about the impact this would have on his career – and much worse, on Kris’s career.

“Maybe we should turn the TV on,” he suggested weakly, already dreading the prospect.

With a knowing, sympathetic smile, Leila gently took the remote control from his hand as he raised it, shaking her head in response to his questioning look. “No… I think maybe we’d better leave it off for now.” When Adam hesitated, looking uncertainly toward the remote, she added, “The whole point of your staying here tonight is so you can get some rest and make sure you’re better before going home to face all this crap in the morning, so… let’s not face it until then, okay? Try not to think about it, and just get some rest.”

Adam had to admit that she was right.

It wouldn’t do him or Kris any good to torture himself with what was probably already being said on the entertainment news channel – and the reports would be far worse by the morning, he knew. There was nothing he could do about it now, so Adam decided to simply try to put it out of his mind for the moment.

“Well, at least there’s one good thing out of all of this,” Adam observed after a moment’s reflection, a sad smile half-formed on his lips. “Kris won’t be able to get to his pills if he’s in jail. He’ll have to detox, whether he wants to or not.”

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Kris had never been so scared in his entire life.
He sat on the floor, huddled in the corner of a dimly lit cell, his head hidden in his arms in a vain attempt to shut out the harsh, threatening sounds that echoed off the cold stone walls that surrounded him. Thankfully, due to the added risks that came along with his level of celebrity, Kris had been placed in a separate holding cell while his arrest was processed, prior to being placed in a cell of his own for the night – but his holding cell was only separated from the one next to it by iron bars, and that cell was filled with nearly a dozen arrested men, waiting either for someone to put up their bond, or to be moved to another room for the night.

Unfortunately, several of those men had recognized Kris the moment he’d been brought in, and the ones who hadn’t had quickly been informed.

“Come on, Idol, sing for us,” one of the men taunted. “I’m sure you’ve got a pretty voice. Everything else sure is pretty…”

“What’d they get you for? Turning tricks?” The question was followed by hysterical laughter. Clearly the speaker thought himself to be quite the comedian.

“Nah, he doesn’t have to. He’s the American Idol,” another inmate pointed out.

“Maybe he just wants to!”

Raucous laughter followed that suggestion, and Kris found himself huddling in on himself, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. If he could have disappeared completely, he would have. Sickening fear overwhelmed him as a dozen horrific stories from prison movies and true crime books he’d read came rushing to the forefront of his mind.

If Kris had been thinking rationally, he would have realized that these men were not, for the most part, hardened criminals, driven to animalistic lust by years of isolation behind prison walls. These were just your average drunk drivers and hookers and peace disturbers, and not at all a threat to him. He might have realized that their lewd suggestions and taunting comments were simply a response to his obvious terror at being here in the first place. It was clear to them what sort of nightmares he imagined to go along with this place, and they were deliberately playing into those fears, for nothing more than a good laugh.

Kris realized none of that, too caught up in his own personal nightmare come true.

He was already beginning to regret his decision, as the pill he’d taken began to wear off. His memories felt muddled and uncertain, but he clung to them with desperate intensity, his mind repeating accusations over and over in an attempt to keep them at the surface. Every other time he’d lost himself so completely to his pills, Kris had not remembered later what he had done.

This time, though – this was different.

This time, he couldn’t afford to forget.

*You hurt Adam. You could have killed him. He was bleeding and unconscious on the floor, and you put him there.*

Kris shivered, hot tears of shame and regret slipping from his eyes as he shook his head in useless denial of the truth. He couldn’t believe what he had done – how low he’d fallen, and how much damage he’d inflicted on the people who loved him and had been there for him, even when he didn’t deserve it. As much as he’d tried to deny it, there was no question now as to the danger of the pills he’d been taking.

*I never would have laid a hand on Adam before. It has to be the pills. I want them – need them so*
bad right now, but... but if they’re going to make me hurt the people I love, then I have to find a way to quit.

I’d rather die than ever hurt Adam again.

Even as those thoughts coursed through his mind, Kris was struck with the intense desire for another of his pills, and felt a sense of impending panic at the knowledge that he would not be able to get another one – not tonight, and maybe not for a long time.

And at the same time, that knowledge filled him with a powerful sense of relief.

He focused his thoughts on Adam, shutting out the cacophony of obnoxious noise from the cell next to him, and the desperate screaming of his body and mind for its next fix. He forced himself to focus on the image burned into his mind of his boyfriend’s battered, bloodied form on Brad’s floor.

Oh, God, please let Adam be okay! Please don’t let him die because of me – don’t let it be too late to fix this mess I’ve made.

Please... please, even if he doesn’t want to, even if he never does... just give me the chance to ask him to forgive me.
Chapter 22

Adam, Brad, and Leila kept up a united front against the onslaught of paparazzi that virtually attached themselves to them following Kris’s arrest, refusing to give any comment. Still, somehow, a dozen different variations on the truth showed up all over the headlines in the days following Adam’s hospitalization.

“All-American Idol a Secret Drug Addict?”

“Idol Sits in Jail while Boyfriend Recovers in Hospital – Accident or Domestic Violence?”

And Adam’s personal favorite:

“Adam Lambert – No Longer Idol’s Resident Bad Boy”

Adam and his family and friends tried to lay low as much as possible in the days between Kris’s arrest and his arraignment the following Monday. He spent the time cleaning up the wreckage that Kris had left of their home in the weeks since Adam had left him. Leila stayed there with him, both for moral support, as well as to help him with the cleaning. After all, it was a rather monumental task – and Adam didn’t think he could have taken being alone right then.

Leila didn’t try to talk Adam out of going to Kris’s court date, though it was obvious to him that she didn’t think it was a very good idea.

“You know, you don’t have to do this,” she reminded him for the fifth time as the courthouse doors closed behind them, shutting out the babbling throng of reporters and photographers that had surrounded them on the courthouse steps. “No one would blame you…”

“I know. I just… I need to,” Adam softly explained, giving her a grateful smile and a quick hug. “But… thank you, for being here. I just… have to know what happens, and… and I want him to know that I’m… still here for him.”

Leila’s mouth twitched, and her eyes flashed with repressed anger and frustration, but to her credit, she didn’t say a word. She just nodded in silence, pasting on a reassuring smile and reaching for the door of the courtroom.

Adam was shocked at how awful Kris looked, when he finally located him near the front of the room, seated next to his attorney. He was dressed in an expensive suit and tie, his hair neatly styled – but he still looked terrible. His eyes were hollow and sunken, shadowed by circles so dark that it almost looked as if he’d been punched in the face. As Adam settled into a seat near the back of the room, he noticed with concern that Kris was anxious and fidgeting, drumming his fingers on the table in front of him and bouncing his leg with manic speed.

Withdrawals. He’s gone all these days without his pills, and it shows. And if they give him jail time, he’ll have to go even longer.

It might be the best thing that could happen to him.

Adam struggled to focus his thoughts as the judge called the court to order, and Kris and his attorney rose to their feet. The charges being brought against Kris were one count of home invasion, and two counts of assault and battery.

“Do you understand the charges against you?” The judge’s voice was stern, his expression
disapproving, as he fixed his severe gaze on Kris over his glasses.

“Y-yes, Your Honor.”

Adam couldn’t see Kris’s face, but he could clearly visualize the expression that went along with the nervous, trembling voice that barely sounded like Kris at all.

“And how do you wish to plead?”

“Guilty, Your Honor.”

Kris’s voice was barely audible, but there was no hesitation in his words. Adam blinked, startled by how easily Kris spoke them – by the fact that he was taking full responsibility for what he’d done at all. Kris had turned himself in, but Adam had expected that after a few days without his drugs, Kris would certainly be so desperate to get back home to his computer and whatever stash Adam hadn’t managed to discover while cleaning that he would have changed his tune.

Apparently, Kris was a little more serious about making a change than Adam had thought.

“Very well.” The judge nodded, the disapproval on his face easing some with Kris’s plea. “I have the paperwork from the prosecutor’s office right here, with their recommendation, so there’s no reason to waste any more time on this. The prosecutor has pointed out that your behavior was allegedly due to a drug addiction, is that correct?”

Kris hesitated then, and Adam held his breath, his heart sinking in expectation of the same resistance Kris had put up all along toward the idea that he was an addict. Adam’s stomach lurched when Kris gave the last answer he’d expected to hear.

“Yes, that’s true, Your Honor.”

“In light of that information, and your guilty plea, the prosecutor recommends that I suspend any jail time on these charges and instead order you to complete an in-patient drug rehabilitation program. Considering your cooperation and your willingness to accept responsibility for your own actions, I’m inclined to grant their request. I’m sentencing you to six months in jail, suspended as long as you complete the ninety day in-patient rehab program at Mercy Hospital. If you leave the program before you’ve been officially released from it, you’ll be immediately arrested, and you’ll have to serve the full six months in jail. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Kris sounded relieved and grateful, and Adam felt a pang of sympathy as he watched Kris’s shoulders fall slightly, trembling, and realized how terrifying all of this must have been for him. Although the prosecutor’s office could make their recommendations, the judge was not required to accept those recommendations. The idea of going to jail must have been overwhelmingly frightening, especially for a sheltered Southern boy like Kris.

“A court officer will escort you to the hospital immediately following these proceedings, where you’ll check in for the duration of the program,” the judge continued. “I don’t want to see you here again, Mr. Allen. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir.” Kris’s voice was barely over a whisper. “Thank you, Sir. I-I’m sorry…”

The judge cut him off with a curt nod and a tap of his gavel. “This concludes these proceedings. Court is adjourned.”
Adam rose to his feet, hesitating a moment, torn, as Kris spoke with his attorney for a few moments, and then was approached by two uniformed officers. Adam bit his lower lip, frowning in uncertainty, before making a quick decision and sliding out from between the rows of seats to make his way up the aisle to where Kris stood.

“Wait!” he called out when he saw one of the guards take Kris’s arm to lead him away. “Wait just a minute, please!”

The guard stopped, letting go of Kris’s arm and backing up a pace or two as Adam reached them. Kris stared at him in disbelief, eyes wide and questioning – vulnerable – as Adam stopped to stand directly in front of him, swallowing hard – suddenly speechless. As they stood there in terse, awkward silence, Kris’s mouth began to tremble, and he visibly struggled to maintain his composure, abruptly looking away from Adam’s gaze and staring down at the floor.

“Adam,” he whispered, shaking his head in despair. “I… I’m so sorry…” His shoulders began to shake as he spoke, and his voice broke over his pleading words. “I’m so, so sorry, Adam…!”

“I know.” With an extreme effort, Adam managed to keep his own voice steady and controlled. “Kris… look at me.” He waited until Kris reluctantly complied, his dark eyes brimming with tears, to continue, his voice quiet and carefully even. “I… I love you, Kris. No matter what’s happened, I still do. And… it means a lot that you… turned yourself in, and… and you’re trying to take responsibility for what happened. I… I hope this rehab thing works, and you can… can get the help you need there.”

Kris blinked, startled by Adam’s words, and Adam braced himself as he saw a slow spark of hope begin to light up Kris’s eyes. “So… does this mean that there’s… there’s a chance…?”

Adam held up a trembling hand to halt Kris’s eager questions, suddenly finding that he was the one unable to make eye contact. He struggled to steady himself, forcing himself to meet Kris’s gaze again and keep himself steady and firm. He swallowed hard before finally speaking again.

“It doesn’t mean anything except… exactly what I said. I want you to get better. No matter what happens, I still care about you, Kris. And… I just want you to get better. Once that happens… then, maybe we can talk.”

Kris was quiet, disappointment clear on his face, but after a moment he nodded his acceptance. “Of course,” he replied softly. “I want a chance to make it all up to you, Adam, but… I don’t deserve one. So… whatever you want. I’ll do it…”

“You should do it because… it’s what’s best for you. Because if you don’t, you’re going to end up destroying yourself and anyone close enough to you.” Adam’s voice was sharp, warning, as he cut Kris off quietly. “Not because it’s what you think I want.”

“I know,” Kris said softly. “I… I know.”

They didn’t touch, didn’t speak any other words, as they stood there for another long, awkward moment, each trying to figure out what to say – how to say goodbye, when they didn’t know how long it was going to be for, or if it was going to be for good. The guards moved forward to take Kris away, taking the decision from their hands, and Adam nodded in parting as Kris cast one last longing, sorrowful look in his direction.

Adam watched as Kris’s back was turned to him and he was led away, unable to bring himself to look away until they had passed through the door at the side of the courtroom and completely out of his sight. He still stood there then, staring at the place where Kris had disappeared, and trying to
make sense of what he was feeling, thinking – what he should do next. He knew that it was best, knew that Kris needed to get help – and yet, in spite of everything that had happened, the thought of his being gone for so long left Adam feeling cold and empty inside.

He jumped a little when he felt a warm, soft arm slide around his waist. He looked down to see his mother standing beside him, and his shoulders fell with relief. After a moment, he let out a soft sigh and turned to move toward the door, but Leila gently caught his arm, halting his progress. He gave her a puzzled look, but then understood when he saw the sympathy in her eyes. She put her arms around him and held him tight, and Adam tensed for a moment, unwilling to let down the mask of calm control he’d been wearing since they’d left the hospital.

After a few moments, however, his shoulders began to shake, and he allowed his head to fall onto her shoulder, as the tears he’d been holding back finally slipped down to soak into the silk fabric of her blouse.

“I love him, Mom,” he whispered at last, raising glistening, red-rimmed eyes to meet hers, despair in his gaze. “I know I shouldn’t, but…”

“I know, sweetie,” she murmured, rubbing his back gently and nodding in reassurance. “I know.”
The days following Kris’s arraignment and sentencing were very emotional for Adam.

He couldn’t stop thinking about Kris – missing him and wondering whether or not he was doing all right. Kris had seemed to be serious about making a change… but then, he’d fooled Adam into thinking that before. Every time Adam closed his eyes, he pictured Kris’s face – his sad brown eyes and pleading expression just before the guards took him away. It made Adam feel sad and wistful and uncertain… and guilty.

Guilty… because a part of him was relieved that Kris was gone.

Although Adam wanted to know that Kris was going to be okay, wanted the man he loved to return to the same kind, compassionate person he’d fallen in love with – Adam wasn’t sure if he wanted to be with him anymore, not after all that had happened between them. Of course, he wasn’t sure that he didn’t want that, either – but he was fairly certain that it would be easier to figure all of that out on his own.

Having Kris out of the picture for a while just sort of… took the pressure off.

Of course, Adam’s mother seemed to be doing her best to put a little of it back on.

She commuted back and forth between her own home and Adam’s house, staying with him for a few days at a time, helping him make order of the wreckage Kris had left of their home. Adam appreciated her help, and the emotional support she provided in the moments when he felt the most like he was about to fall apart completely; but she couldn’t seem to resist throwing in side comments here and there, hinting at the idea that whether or not he recovered, Kris didn’t deserve to be taken back by Adam – not right away, anyway.

Adam’s feelings went back and forth on the idea, alternating between a desperate need for the lover he was grieving – for Kris had indeed been lost to him – and furious resentment for all that Kris had put him through, both physically and emotionally. Usually, Adam managed to keep a rein on his emotions and not allow his hurt and anger to show.

Usually.

Leila walked into the house one afternoon, shortly after they’d finished putting things back together, stunned to find her son in the middle of a complete meltdown. Adam was standing in the kitchen, cursing and yelling, taking dishes indiscriminately from the cupboard and hurling them against the wall across the room. As she drew nearer, she could see the dark-tinged tears that streaked his face, and was actually touched with more relief than worry at his behavior.

It’s about time…

His unnatural level of control had been more cause for concern.

As she watched, however, her eyes widened with alarm when she recognized the large platter Adam had just taken from the cupboard, and she moved forward to stop him, a halting hand upraised.

“Adam, wait…!”

But it was already too late.
Her son had hurled the thing with all his strength against the wall, and it had shattered into an irreparable number of tiny shards on the floor. As soon as it was done, Adam froze, staring down at the mess. After a moment he started toward it, shaking his head in horror. Leila hurried to meet him as he reached the mess and started to kneel down in front of it, heedless of the broken glass that littered the floor.

Leila caught his arms and stopped him before he could, shaking her head as he looked up at her in dazed dismay. “Adam… no.”

“That was… his mother’s.” He hoarsely whispered what she’d already known. “She… gave it to us when we got this place…”

“It’s all right,” Leila insisted gently, raising a hand to brush his unintentionally disheveled hair back from his face. “It doesn’t matter…”

“It does matter!” Adam tearfully insisted. “I shouldn’t have… I…”

“Adam.” Leila’s voice was firm as she held his gaze, tinged with righteous anger in her son’s defense. “If that’s the only thing Kris loses out of all of this, then he’s damn lucky.”

Adam was quiet for a moment, letting out a heavy sigh as he straightened up and ran a trembling hand through his hair. He shook his head finally, letting out his words on a breath, barely audible.

“It won’t be.”

Leila frowned, puzzled by his words. If he meant by them what she thought he did, she wasn’t sure whether to feel relief or sorrow.

She was pretty sure she was feeling both.

“What are you talking about, sweetie?”

Leila gently pressed him, nodding toward the table before going to it and sitting down, then gesturing toward the chair beside her. Adam reluctantly followed and sat down beside her, staring down at the table as he tried to collect his scattered thoughts.

“It’s just… well… he’s already lost his reputation. He almost lost his recording contract – not that it matters because he’s not going to be selling anything after this for a while…” There was sympathy and regret in Adam’s voice, and Leila reached out a supportive hand to rest over his, keeping silent and waiting for him to go on. “And… and I’m not sure, but… I don’t think I can be with him again any time soon. I… I love him, but…” He hesitated, looking up to meet her eyes, his own stricken and haunted. “I have… nightmares, most nights… about… Kris…” He drew in a shuddering breath, scrunching his eyes shut and shaking his head slightly as if to clear it of the images there. “… and we’re together, and… in bed, and he… he turns into this… this monster that just… tears me to pieces, and…”

His voice broke off, his shoulders trembling slightly, and Leila stroked his arm slowly in a soothing gesture. “It’s a dream, Adam,” she reminded him softly. “It didn’t happen…”

“But it could have.”

Adam opened his eyes, and the dark certainty she saw there sent a shiver of unwilling knowledge through Leila, as her mind went unbidden to all the possible outcomes of what had happened between Kris and Adam – all the ways their story could have ended – and she knew that he was right.
Just because it *hadn’t* ended in grief and tragedy didn’t mean that it *couldn’t* have.

“You’re right,” Leila softly agreed, nodding slowly. “Which is why… whatever you want to do, Adam… whichever way you decide to handle this… I’ll support your decision. Just… be careful.”

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“So… how are you?”

The awkward question broke the even more awkward silence. Kris let out a shaky breath in relief before venturing a response. He still seemed to be a little stunned and awed that Adam was there in the first place. It was as if he’d expected to be completely forgotten and abandoned while he was locked away in rehab.

*And… he would have deserved it, but…*

*I couldn’t. I just… couldn’t.*

Adam had waited nearly a month into Kris’s court-ordered rehab before going to visit him. He knew that it was best for Kris, to have the time to adjust to his new surroundings and focus completely on doing what he needed to do in order to kick his addiction – but that was not Adam’s only reason for staying away. He’d needed time to come to terms with everything that had happened between them, and to reach some kind of a decision as to where things could and might go between them from where they were now.

“Better,” Kris answered at last, drawing Adam’s thoughts back to the present moment. “I’m… doing a lot better. Learning a lot. About… how I got here. What made me…” Kris’s voice trailed off, and he shook his head slightly as he amended his words. “Why I *chose* to take the pills. Why I *kept* taking them, even… after…”

Kris’s dark eyes darted away for a moment, and Adam found himself looking away as well, not quite ready to deal with the unspoken apology in Kris’s voice. After a moment, when it became apparent that Kris was not going to go on, Adam broke the silence again, his tone cautious and non-committal.

“That’s… that’s great, Kris. I’m glad you’re… getting better. That’s all that…”

“Adam, I’m *so sorry.*”

Adam closed his eyes to shut out the anguish in Kris’s trembling words, swallowing back the sob that rose in his own throat. He couldn’t say “that’s okay” – couldn’t even say “I forgive you”, not yet – so Adam simply nodded, his eyes downcast when he opened them at last, staring at the glass coffee table between them as he answered in a hoarse whisper.

“I know.”

“I… I miss you,” Kris confessed, and the vulnerability in his voice tore at Adam’s heart, asking for things he was not ready to give, no matter how badly he wanted to be. “I wish I could… could just go back in time and… and fix it all. Make it so it never happened, but… but I know it’s… not that easy. I know I can’t… I have to… to prove myself to you before I can ever ask you to trust me again…”

“You *can’t* ever ask me to trust you again.”

Adam winced the moment the words left his lips; Kris blinked, startled and obviously hurt by
them. His tone softened slightly as he clarified, “I mean… I hope that I can. I hope that… that one
day, you can… earn that back, but… but you hurt me, Kris.” Adam couldn’t hold back the tears
that filled his eyes, heedless as they slipped down his face. “You hurt me, and… I trusted you…
more than I’ve ever trusted anyone. I never thought you would ever…”

Adam’s voice broke off abruptly, momentarily overcome by anguish, and Kris was silent for a
moment before finally venturing to respond. “I know. I know, and… it kills me to think of… of
what I’ve ruined between us. We had something that doesn’t come along every day – the kind of
relationship that other people only dream of having, and… and I threw it away, for some… some
worthless pills. I have to live with that every day, Adam – and I deserve to have to live with it. And
yeah, I… I want to earn your trust back, but…”

Adam sniffled, drawing the back of his hand across his eyes as he finally managed to regain his
composure enough to continue, finishing Kris’s sentence in a soft, matter-of-fact voice, “… but it’s
not something you have the right to ask for, anymore. When… if… the time comes that I can trust
you again…” He hesitated, nodding once as he concluded softly, “…. I’ll let you know.”

Kris nodded slowly in response. “That’s all I can hope for,” he acknowledged with a cautious,
sympathetic smile. “I know I… I let you down, Adam. Worse than I ever would have thought
possible. I hurt you in ways that make me sick to think about it, now. I didn’t think I was even
capable of…” He shook his head, horrified at his own memories.

“Neither did I,” Adam whispered, blinking back fresh tears.

“I just… I can’t believe that you’ve… been there for me through all of it.” There was unmistakable
gratitude in Kris’s hushed, trembling voice, and Adam looked up to meet his eyes, touched by the
familiar warmth that was still there, even after all they’d been through. “You didn’t have to be, not
after what I did. But still… you’ve been right here for me, the whole time.”

Adam shrugged slightly as he rose to his feet, glancing uneasily toward the clock, both reluctant
and relieved that it was time for him to go. He gave Kris a brief hug that felt awkward and ill-timed
compared to their usual easy, perfect embraces before drawing back to give him a tentative smile
and a shrug, confessing softly,

“I… don’t think I know how to do anything else.”

“I know.” As Adam turned toward the door, Kris raised his voice slightly to be sure Adam heard
his earnest promise. “I know you don’t believe me yet, but… I’m not going to let you down again.
I’m going to prove myself to you, Adam.”

Adam stopped, not turning around, unsure how to respond to Kris’s words. After a moment,
however, he turned his head to meet Kris’s eyes one last time with a guarded but reassuring smile.

“See you next week.”
“So… Kris is getting out of rehab today.”

The tiny woman sitting across from Adam was nearly swallowed up by the large, puffy armchair in which she sat. Her arms were crossed loosely in her lap, a pen held in one graceful, slender hand and tapping idly against her crossed knees, the top one of which was slowly rocking back and forth. Her smile was warm and knowing, and her tone the perfect stereotypical model of the understanding therapist.

“How do you feel about that?”

Adam sighed, suppressing a twinge of irritation, despite the fact that he was used to her by now. He’d been seeing Gina for the last two months – ever since about a month into Kris’s court-ordered rehab – and she had proven to be very competent and supportive. No, his frustration was more with himself than with her – and with the fact that in two months’ time, he was no closer to knowing what he should do when Kris got out than he had been when these meetings had started.

“I don’t know,” he replied, rolling his eyes. “How am I supposed to feel?”

“We’ve been over this, Adam,” Gina reminded him gently. “There’s no right way to feel about any of this. However you feel – that’s how you’re supposed to feel.”

Adam gave her a self-deprecating smirk. “They can’t all be the right way.”

Gina raised an eyebrow in question. “You’re saying you feel all of the ways there are to feel about this?”

Adam threw his hands up a little, letting out a little huff of frustration. “I’m scared to death, I’m hopeful that maybe he’s changed, I’m excited to see him again, I’m dreading seeing him again… I have no clue what I want from him anymore or if I even want anything at all…” He sighed, giving her a rueful smile. “Let me know if I’ve left anything out.”

“No, I’d say you’ve got it about covered.” Gina returned his smile, sympathy in her warm, dark eyes. “And that’s okay, Adam. That’s normal. The situation that Kris’s choices have put you in – that’s what’s not normal, and it’s only natural that your feelings on the matter would be a little… everywhere, you know?”

Adam nodded slowly, feeling a little better in spite of himself at her reassurance.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Gina reminded him. “To support you through this, and help you to stay grounded, when your emotions are telling you to go in every possible direction at once – to help you make sense of what you’re feeling and thinking and wanting, and know what’s the best, most healthy thing for you to do – for you, Adam. Kris has to take care of Kris. You have to take care of Adam. And… that’s what’s hardest for you to do sometimes. Isn’t it?”

Adam felt unbidden tears welling in his eyes, and looked away, blinking them back. “I feel like I should be… there for him. When he gets out. I should… pick him up.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

Adam hesitated a moment, closing his eyes. Finally he let out a shaky breath and shook his head. “No. I… I’m not sure I’m ready to see him yet. I mean… outside of a… controlled
environment, you know? I still love him. You know that, but… but I’m just not sure if that’s enough anymore.”

Gina nodded thoughtfully, taking in Adam’s heartfelt words. “You should see Kris… when you know that you want to see Kris,” she advised him quietly. “And not before. Not because you think it’s what you should do. Not because you think he needs you to be there. Because you know you are ready, and you want to see him. That’s the only reason right now for you to go down there today.”

Adam was silent, torn between what he felt he should do, and what his heart was telling him was right, for him.

“Kris has his family, Adam. He’s not going to be alone, either way. In fact, it might be best for him to go home for a while… readjust to a quieter lifestyle for a while before jumping back into the same world where he developed his addiction.”

Adam nodded thoughtfully. “That’s what he’s planning on doing. His parents are coming to pick him up.”

“There, you see? So he won’t be alone. So… why do you need to go there?”

“So he… knows I’m there?” Adam’s voice was hesitant, uncertain. “To… support him?”

Gina nodded, considering that for a moment before meeting Adam’s eyes and asking in a soft, direct voice, “Is Kris able to support you back right now?”

Adam’s voice was barely over a whisper, and he glanced away for a moment before meeting her eyes again. “No.”

“Then… you need to think about your own recovery right now, Adam. We’ve talked about how you were as much affected by Kris’s addiction as he was, and you need to heal just as much as he does. If the two of you get together again before you’re both ready, you risk falling back into the same destructive patterns. You need to be with people who can support you right now, Adam.” She paused, giving him an encouraging smile. “When the time is right… you’ll know.”

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When Kris walked through the gates of the rehab facility and toward his waiting family, he was deeply disappointed to see that Adam was not with them.

He told himself that he shouldn’t have been surprised. Adam had been through enough because of him that Kris wouldn’t have blamed him if he’d never wanted to see him again. He didn’t ask his parents why Adam wasn’t there – didn’t feel that he had the right to ask – but as they got into the car and headed toward the highway, Kris’s mom turned around in her seat, giving him a knowingly sympathetic smile. “He’ll come around, sweetie,” she offered reassuringly. “Just give him a little time.”

Kris nodded, looking away to hide his tears, staring out the window as the LA skyline gradually gave way to a rural view. His things were already packed and in the back of the SUV. He was going to stay with his parents for a few weeks at least – until he felt that he was ready to get back to LA, and back to work. His therapists, his parents, and Kris had all agreed that the slower pace and quieter setting would be more conducive to the kind of reflection he would need to be doing in order to come to terms with all that had happened… all that he had done.
Staying clean in rehab was one thing.

Staying clean – and resisting the old ways of thinking about himself and about the way others viewed him that had led to his addiction in the first place – would not be so easy once he was back out on his own, unsupervised and in control of his own decisions.

Kris decided to stay away from the family computer entirely, unwilling to risk the temptation to look at the various websites promising “supplements” like the one to which he’d become addicted. He’d learned that even the pictures alone that accompanied those types of ads could be triggering to him – reminding him of his own perceived weaknesses and inadequacies, and making him feel the need to use unnatural means to “correct” those weaknesses.

He had to remind himself on a daily basis – sometimes many times in the course of a single day – that what the world defined as ideal did not matter to him. He had to be what was normal and healthy and safe for him – not to measure up to some airbrushed, distorted image of what a man should be.

It helped Kris to be around his family.

He found himself reconnectiong with a life he’d all but forgotten since moving to LA. It was a relief not to worry about what the entire country thought of him, and whether or not he was living up to their expectations. Oh, sure, the occasional reporter or photographer found their way to the Allens’ home, only to be politely but firmly turned away by Kris’s parents – but in general, Kris was able to forget about the pressures of living a life that was constantly in the public eye and just remember what it was like to just be who he was – and to be happy with that.

His family and friends loved him just as he was. His small size was simply a part of him, and gradually, Kris came to remember that it was not necessarily a bad part.

A few weeks passed into months, and Kris found himself uneasy, aware that he needed to go back to his life in LA, back to work setting up a tour that would now be far more difficult to find dates for, now that everyone knew about his stint in rehab and the abusive behavior that had led to it. He found himself torn – wanting to prove to himself that he could handle it… and yet terrified that he couldn’t.

His parents reassured him that no matter what, they would always be there for him, and anytime he felt he needed to come back home, their doors would be open to him. It was comforting to know that no matter what, there was always someone who would accept him just as he was. It gave Kris strength to know that even across the distance, they would be supporting him and backing him up.

You can do this, he told himself firmly. It might not be easy, but you’re not doing it alone. You can do this, Kris Allen.

On the evening before he was to leave to fly back to LA, Kris enjoyed a home-cooked meal of his favorite foods. His mother loved to spoil him, and insisted that as she rarely got the chance, and wouldn’t again for a long while, she wanted to go all out for his last meal at home. Many of his closest friends had come over to share the meal with them, and Kris found himself struggling to commit every moment to memory – filing away every kind word, every warm moment, for future reference in the difficult days he knew lay ahead.

He didn’t have very many good friends in LA – and the best friend he had there, the one on whom he’d always leaned for support and strength, probably would have nothing to do with him when he got there. Adam hadn’t called, hadn’t communicated with Kris in any way since he’d gotten out of rehab, and while Kris couldn’t say that he blamed him – he couldn’t say that it didn’t hurt, either.
How am I going to do this without him? he wondered, a cold ache building in his chest. How am I going to do anything without him?

They were almost finished with dinner when the doorbell rang, and Kris’s mother rose to answer it, sighing wearily. Not all of Kris’s friends could make it for dinner, but those who couldn’t still wanted to see him off, and the house had been a buzz of activity, with people coming and going, all evening. As she got up and walked away from the table, Kris’s father caught his attention.

“What time do you need to wake up in the morning, Kris?”

“I’m all packed, and my flight leaves at eight, so… seven thirty?” Kris suggested hopefully.

Neil Allen let out a soft snort. “Try six thirty. What if you have a hold up at the airport? Or there’s a problem with security? Or…”

“Or you could just… cancel the flight.”

Kris’s heart lurched in his chest, and he froze, not quite believing what he was hearing. He turned slowly in his chair, eyes wide and hopeful, his breath catching in his throat when he saw Adam standing in the kitchen doorway. His hands were tucked self-consciously into his pockets, and he looked at Kris uncertainly through lowered lashes, his head bowed slightly and the edge of his lower lip caught between his teeth.

“You could always just… ride back with me,” Adam suggested softly. “Long drive. I’d hate to make it alone… twice in two days.”

Kris just stared at him dumbly, not quite able to process the fact that after so many months apart, Adam was actually standing there right in front of him. After a moment, Adam cleared his throat self-consciously and stood up straight, glancing toward the empty living room beyond him and then back at Kris. His voice was soft and uncertain, saying a wealth more than his simple, quiet words.

“Kris… can we talk?”
An awkward silence filled the room for a long moment, as Kris tried to simply process the stunning fact that Adam was actually there.

Around him, his family and friends simply stared, as much in shock as he was. Even the least informed of them knew that Adam had broken up with Kris due to his addiction – and those who were closer to him knew the worst of what Kris had done. At any rate, they were all stunned to see Adam, and admittedly curious as to what was about to happen between them.

Adam shifted uncomfortably in the doorway, his hands shoved into his pockets and his head tucked self-consciously downward. “So, um… is there somewhere…?”

“Yeah, uh… of course.”

Adam’s uncertain words drove Kris into action, and he pushed back his chair so fast that he nearly knocked it over, stumbling to his feet and glancing back at his family with a mumbled “excuse me” before leading the way toward the stairs and up to his own bedroom. He cringed slightly at the implications of choosing that particular room, but knew that the living room was too close to the kitchen – and therefore too close to the curious ears of his loved ones.

He left the door open, leaving it up to Adam whether to shut it or not.

Adam left it open as well.

Kris sat down on the edge of his bed, swallowing back the nervous knot that had formed in his throat as Adam slowly sat in the chair across from the bed. It was painfully quiet, and Kris could physically feel the wall of awkwardness that had arisen between them. He remembered how close they’d once been – so close that they didn’t even have to speak to communicate to each other what they were feeling or thinking – and it hurt to be reminded of how much damage he’d done to what they’d once had.

“So…” Adam broke the silence at last, not quite meeting Kris’s eyes. “How are you?”

It was an honest question, more than a simple formality, and Kris gave him an honest answer.

“Good… all things considered. Better, anyway.”

“Good. I… I’m glad.” The unseen curtain of awkwardness began to descend again in the silence that followed, and Adam spoke up quickly, as if desperate to prevent it. “I’m sorry I stayed away so long. I should have come sooner, but…”

“No,” Kris objected, feeling a pang of guilt and dismay at Adam’s words. “No, Adam, you were right to stay away. I didn’t expect you to come at all…”

“Well, you needed… support, and…”

“And I had it.” Adam blinked in surprise, and Kris nodded slowly, giving him a reassuring smile. “Really, Adam – you did the right thing. I needed to… to learn how to stand on my own two feet. And I’m… not exactly sure that’s what I’ve done here these past few months. I mean… I’ve been staying with my parents, and they’ve given me a lot of support, but… but that’s not the same as…”

His voice trailed off, and he looked away. “I just… I needed to get used to the idea of… of going it alone. Since I… might be doing that for a while…” Kris’s voice trailed off, and a small, selfish
part of him that he knew would be denied desperately hoped that Adam might speak up to contradict him, to tell him that he wouldn’t be alone, that Adam would be by his side when he went back to LA, that everything would eventually be as it once had been.

Adam was silent, not offering any such reassurances. After a moment, however, he spoke, his voice soft and achingly heartfelt.

“I miss you.”

Kris felt tears of gratitude and relief spring to his eyes, and he barely managed to choke out a response. “I… I miss you, too…”

“If it was possible… and I’m not saying it is, but… if it was…” Adam hesitated, his gaze focused somewhere around Kris’s knees rather than meeting his eyes. “… would you still… still want to be together?”

Kris blinked, stunned by the question. When he spoke, there was something resembling awe in his voice at the very suggestion. “Of course I would. Adam – you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and every day I wonder how I ever let myself screw it up. I just… just can’t imagine that you would… I mean… do you?” There was disbelief in his whispered words. “Still… still want me?”

“I… I’m not sure,” Adam admitted softly, and the words were like a dagger in Kris’s heart, slowly tearing through him with a pain that was almost physical in its intensity. “I… really don’t know right now, Kris. I still care about you, I know that, but… I’m not sure I’m ready to trust you enough to… to be together again, you know? I just… I want to be sure we don’t fall into the same patterns as before.”

“Right… of course,” Kris readily agreed, though his voice trembled with the pain and insecurity he felt at Adam’s words. “I totally understand…”

“So… what can we do to… to make sure that doesn’t happen?”

Kris was slightly caught off guard by the calm, practical tone of Adam’s voice – but he didn’t have to think about his answer. It was something he’d already given a lot of thought.

“There’s a lot of things I’m doing already to prevent that,” he replied. “I don’t read the tabloids anymore. I actually… don’t read any press about myself, at all.”

“Nothing?”

Adam’s eyes widened in surprise, and Kris had to suppress a grin. He knew that such a concept was probably all but unfathomable to Adam.

“Nothing,” he affirmed, shaking his head slowly. “It’s… it’s not worth it. I’ve had to accept that… nothing they have to say about me matters… not really. Why do I need to know what some reporter thinks of whatever I was wearing, or my looks or body shape, or even how my performance sounded? Why do I really need to read any of that? I really don’t. What I need to be focusing on every day is how I am inside, and whether or not I’ve got my addiction under control and am living a healthy life. And when I think about it that way, reading stuff people write about me can only hurt, not help.”

Adam nodded slowly, considering that and gradually accepting it.

“And… I don’t go online anymore unless someone else is in the room with me. Not ever. Just to…
avoid the temptation.”

“That’s impressive.” A small, tentative smile formed on Adam’s lips as he nodded again, approving.

Encouraged, Kris hurried to offer him more reassurance as to the progress he’d been making. “I haven’t taken any pills since I left rehab – not even vitamin supplements. And I won’t, not anymore. Nothing that’s not prescribed by my personal doctor.”

“That’s… great, Kris.” Adam’s voice was cautious but sincere. “I’m so happy that things are getting so much better for you. I just… I need to… to take this slow, if we’re gonna take it at all, you know? I want for us to… to talk and stuff, and… get to know each other again… when we go back, but… but I think… we need to live in separate places…”

“That’s… great, Kris.” Adam’s voice was cautious but sincere. “I’m so happy that things are getting so much better for you. I just… I need to… to take this slow, if we’re gonna take it at all, you know? I want for us to… to talk and stuff, and… get to know each other again… when we go back, but… but I think… we need to live in separate places…”

“Yeah, of course,” Kris agreed. It was no less than he had expected, but still the memory of waking up every morning to Adam’s face beside him smote his heart with a dull ache of loss. “I get that.”

“And… I don’t know if we’ll ever get to where we were, again. I don’t know if that’s possible, but… but what I do know…” Adam’s voice wavered slightly over his words, and Kris could see tears shining in his eyes. “… I know that… I miss you being in my life, Kris. I… I want to try to at least see if there could… could be something there again. I want to… try to trust you again, but… I can’t make any promises…”

“I understand that,” Kris assured him softly, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, desperately longing to be closer to Adam, but not wanting to push too hard. “Adam, I’ve given you no reason to trust me, and… and I can’t ask for that. But… anything that I can do to help you to be able to… I will. Anything you want me to do.”

Adam nodded in acceptance before hesitantly looking up to meet Kris’s eyes. “And… anything I can do to… support you… to help you deal with this… I wanna do that. But… only as long as you’re helping yourself.”

“I am.”

Adam studied Kris’s face for a long moment, silent and pensive, before slowly nodding, his voice soft and certain.

“I know.”

Those words filled Kris’s heart with a hope he’d gone without for the past few months – the hope that Adam might still believe in him, might still see some potential for good in him, despite the despicable behavior he’d displayed when they’d last been together. Kris felt his heart swelling up with pride and love and relief, and for a moment couldn’t speak for the lump that formed in his throat, and the hot prickling behind his eyes. Finally, however, he managed to regain his composure enough to break the silence that had fallen between them once more – though not nearly so awkward and uncomfortable this time.

“So… you’re calling the shots here, Adam,” Kris stated softly, holding Adam’s gaze intently. “Where we go from here… it’s all up to you. I want you to know that I… I love you, and of course I want to be with you, but… but if that happens or not is all within your control. I won’t… push for anything more than exactly what you are willing to give, and… and I’ll do whatever it takes to prove to you that you can trust me again.”

Adam ventured a cautious, uncertain smile. “I hope so,” he whispered.
“So… for now… friends, then?” Kris concluded. “We can just… talk, and hang out… reconnect… and kind of… see where it goes from there?”

“Exactly.” Adam nodded, his eyes sparkling with amusement as he pointed out, “And we’re gonna get a pretty big head start. We’ve got a long road trip ahead of us tomorrow.”

Kris returned his smile, relishing the simple pleasure of sharing a moment of warmth and humor with Adam again. His hands itched to touch, his arms longed to be wrapped around Adam as they would have been a few months earlier – but he knew that it was far too soon. Those things would happen only if and when Adam was ready for them to happen, and Kris would just have to be patient and wait.

All things considered, he knew it was a small price to pay.

“So… you can sleep here tonight if you want,” Kris offered softly – then immediately blushed, feeling self-conscious as he realized how that sounded. “I mean… not here, here, but… we have a… guest room, and… and that’s what I… meant…”

Adam smiled, mercifully cutting him off. “No, I’d better not. I have a hotel room in town already paid for, and I should probably use it.”

The reminder of the distance still remaining between them cut at Kris’s emotions, and he tried to keep his disappointment from showing on his face as he nodded in acceptance.

“I’ll just… pick you up in the morning, okay?” Adam offered with a soft, warm smile that lifted a bit of the weight from Kris’s mood. “We’ll hit the road about nine, and… see where it goes from there. How does that sound?”

“That sounds… amazing,” Kris whispered, eyes wide and wondering as once again, the weight of what Adam was offering to him struck him with a sense of awe and gratitude.

He knew he didn’t deserve Adam’s forgiveness, or the second chance he was being offered -- but he would accept it, and do everything in his power not to waste it or make Adam regret giving it to him. Kris could barely sleep that night – but it was not for the reasons that had stolen his rest over the past few months. It was not despair that kept him awake, but excitement and anticipation – and the hope that he had not completely lost all that he had held dear.

I could have, though, he reminded himself, sobered by his memories. I could have not just lost him, but destroyed him myself... and I’m so thankful that didn’t happen... so grateful to have a second chance...

... and I promise, I’m not going to waste it.

If it takes the rest of my life, I’m going to prove myself to him... and I’m going to win him back.
“Call us if you need anything, sweetheart.”

Kris nodded, giving his mother a reassuring smile as she released him from a warm hug, holding him at arm’s length for a moment and staring at him through worried, tearful eyes.

“I’ll be fine, Mom. I love you.”

She hugged him again before allowing his father to move forward to say goodbye. Kim Allen walked over to the car where Adam waited, leaning a little awkwardly against the passenger side door. He felt a little out of place, as if he was intruding, as Kris said his emotional goodbyes to his family. As Mrs. Allen approached him, Adam put a bright smile on his face, standing up straight and opening his mouth to speak – completely caught off guard when she swept him into a warm, grateful hug.

“Thank you.” She rose up on her tiptoes to whisper in his ear, drawing back to meet his eyes with a solemn expression.

Adam swallowed hard, feeling a vague sense of guilt that he couldn’t quite identify. “Don’t,” he replied softly. “Not yet. I… I’m not making any promises…”

“I know, I know…” She waved a hand, shaking her head in dismissal of the words she’d already known to be true. “But what you are doing, Adam – you have no idea how much it means to me – just that you’re giving him a chance.”

The tears in her eyes, the earnest gratitude on her face, drew tears to Adam’s eyes as well, and he nodded, looking away. Kris’s mother moved in closer, reaching out to grasp Adam’s forearms gently, wordlessly urging him to look at her again – and he could do nothing else but to obey.

She was a mom, after all.

“If you need anything… you call. Anytime. You hear me?”

Adam’s eyes widened, his lips parting slightly in surprise. Touched by the unexpected gesture, he nodded dumbly, biting his lower lip and blinking back tears.

“We love you, Adam. We always have,” she reminded him softly, rising up on her toes again to kiss his cheek before turning and walking back toward her husband.

She passed Kris on his way to the car, and gave him another hug and a kiss as well before allowing him to get in. As Adam pulled the car away from the curb, Kris waved and smiled at his parents until they faded out of sight. With a heavy sigh, he finally turned to face the windshield, casting one last glance over his shoulder before speaking in a soft, wistful voice.

“I am so freakin’ lucky.”

“You bet you are.”

Adam muttered the words under his breath without thinking – then immediately cringed, regretting having let his thoughts flow so freely from his mouth. He gave Kris an apologetic grimace.

“Sorry. No filter.”
“I’m used to it.” Kris was smiling, but the sorrow in his liquid brown eyes gave away his hurt.

An awkward silence descended between them, and Kris nervously reached to turn on the radio – freezing when Adam caught his wrist, stopping him. Kris gave him a questioning look, but Adam merely shook his head slightly, without offering a word of explanation.

No explanation was necessary.

Kris already knew why Adam wouldn’t let him turn on the radio, and as uncomfortable as it was – he knew that he was right. It would be far too easy to allow the latest pop tunes to drown out the silence, to fill the space between them with a false sense of comfort and ease – and there were too many things they still needed to work out, to allow that to happen. Kris’s jaw set with resolve, and he sat back in his seat, accepting Adam’s decision.

They would either talk to each other, or listen to the silence, but there would be no easy way out – not today.

Kris opened the conversation by talking about his family, and the ways in which he had spent his time with them over the past few months. It was mindless and unimportant, and probably nothing in which Adam was interested, but gradually, the stilted tone of the conversation began to ease, and Kris felt the tension in the car ease a little as Adam began to ask questions, taking part in the conversation with him, and adding his own anecdotes about what he and his friends and family had been up to in L.A.

They were halfway through their lunch at a tiny diner in some nameless town two hours past the Arkansas state line, when they finally exhausted their store of small talk topics.

Kris was the one to break the silence, his eyes darting up to meet Adam’s as he sipped his glass of tea, before he uttered a soft, unexpected question.

“Have you ever been addicted? To… anything?”

Adam blinked, a little surprised by the question, but then stared thoughtfully out the window, considering it. At last he shook his head slowly, turning to meet Kris’s eyes again.

“No. I… I’ve tried a lot of things, but… nothing ever stuck enough for me to develop a habit, I guess. It was all… experimental, you know? For the sake of the experience… and…” Adam grimaced, realization slowly dawning on his face as he considered the implications of Kris’s question. “… and I’m never going to be able to so much as smoke a joint again, am I?”

Kris gave him a sad, wry smile. “Not around me, anyway.”

“I mean… not that that’s a problem,” Adam earnestly amended. “If that’s what it takes to help you deal with this, I can handle it, no problem…”

“Yeah,” Kris observed with a pensive smile, staring out at the occasional car that passed down the lonely road outside the diner. “When you’ve got an addiction to one drug, you kinda have to stay away from them all. Because – you never know what might trigger you to go back to the one that’s the source of your problem. I can’t even drink…”

“Yeah.” Adam rolled his eyes, letting out a soft huff of amusement. “Because you were such a big drinker before.”

“No, I just… don’t ever want to do anything to… to take a chance on… wrecking my entire life like I did before,” Kris explained, his voice quiet, his gaze solemn. “It was… too dangerous. I… I
almost lost everything, over a few stupid pills. I’m not willing to go there again – not for something as stupid as a drink.”

Adam nodded slowly, a slight smile crossing his lips. “Good for you. I’m proud of you, Kris.”

Kris’s eyes lit up at those words, and he returned Adam’s smile warmly. “I’ve working on my twelve steps, and I’ve made a lot of progress,” he informed Adam, clearly eager for more of his approval. “There are a few things I couldn’t do while I was living at home – like – some of the making amends…”

Kris’s voice trailed off, and he looked guiltily down at the table for a moment before giving Adam a nervous, questioning look.

“Speaking of… of making amends…” He swallowed hard, letting out a shaky breath before going on. “H-how… how’s Brad?”

“Pissed.” Adam gave Kris a sympathetic smile. “At me, for coming here at all. At you, for… well, for obvious reasons. For existing, right now.” Adam paused, his expression growing more solemn as he held Kris’s gaze and assured him, “And… okay. He’s doing okay.”

“I… am not looking forward to talking to him, but I need to tell him I’m sorry…” Kris picked at his napkin, the miserable expression on his face making it clear just how unsettling he found that prospect.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea,” Adam sighed. “I know it won’t be easy, but… he’s one of my closest friends, and… if he’s ever gonna even begin to trust you again, well… you’ll have to let him know that you’re working on being trustworthy.”

They finished their meal and headed on down the highway. As the hours wore on, they took turns driving. Sometimes they would talk, the conversation far more comfortable now than it had been when they started; sometimes, the one who was not driving would sleep so as to be ready for his next turn behind the wheel. Neither of them wanted to extend their trip by having to spend the night in a hotel, so they simply drove through the night and the following morning, finally nearing L.A. around noon the following day.

“You can crash at the house,” Adam informed Kris, his voice hoarse and weak with exhaustion, as he pulled onto the street where Brad lived. “I’m gonna drop off my stuff at Brad’s, and then I can just go right to sleep after I take you home. But… tomorrow…”

“I know,” Kris softly cut him off, trying not to let the reminder sting too badly. “I need to find a place.”

“Yeah.” Adam’s tone was one of relief and gratitude. “Thanks.”

As Adam parked the car outside Brad’s apartment, Kris cleared his throat uneasily before breaking the silence that, this time, was merely a result of their road weary exhaustion.

“Um… do you think it’d be okay if I… came in for a minute? I’d like to… to talk to Brad…”

“Uh… yeah. That’s… probably fine. Let me just ask him first, okay?”

Adam seemed as reluctant as Kris, just at the thought of broaching the subject with his friend – and Kris was more than happy to wait in the car while Adam went in and assessed the danger. After what felt like a very long time – in which Kris imagined all the horrible things Brad was probably saying about him, and became almost certain that Brad was going to refuse to talk to him – Adam
finally came back to stand in the doorway, waving his hand to gesture Kris inside.

Brad stood just inside the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. There was a very cold, plastic smile on his lips, but his eyes blazed with fury and defiance, as if daring Kris to try to come up with words that might somehow make up for what he’d done.

“Hi. Um… thanks for… for letting me come in. I just… I had to tell you… I should have told you, before, but… there was so much… um… I’m sorry,” Kris finally blurted out, stumbling over his words, unable to raise his eyes above the level of Brad’s knees. “I came into your home, and… and threatened you, and… I had no right. I was out of my head, but… that’s no excuse, and… and I want you to know that I’m… sorry, and… and I’m doing my best to change my life so that… nothing like that ever happens again. I… I understand if you don’t wanna forgive me, but… but I wanted to ask, and… and let you know… how sorry I am.”

Brad was silent for a long, tense moment, and Kris finally ventured to look up to meet his eyes, bracing himself for the worst.

And what he received was pretty close.

Brad stepped forward, arms crossed, a single eyebrow raised over a sarcastic smile. “That means so much to me. Fuck you very much, Kris Allen…”

Kris blinked, startled, taking a moment to register the fact that Brad had not said “thank you very much” as he’d expected. Brad took another step into Kris’s personal space, and Kris found himself stepping backward. Despite his slightly superior size, in that moment, Kris had no doubt of the damage that Brad could do to him if he wanted to – and it seemed fairly likely that he wanted to.

“If you ever touch Adam again in any way that displays anything less than the utmost respect,” Brad continued, his voice dangerously soft and calm, his smile deadly, “I swear I will gouge your eyes out of your head before shooting you in the face. And yes, I own a gun, Kris. Because, you know… my home was invaded a few months ago, and that tends to be a little traumatic, so I’m a gun-owner now. I hope that makes you happy, you inbred, redneck, abusive hillbilly junkie!”

And with those words, and a dramatically dismissive hand raised in Kris’s direction, Brad spun on his heel and stalked out of the room, head held high.

Adam winced, watching him go.

“Ever the gracious host, that one.”

“I deserve it,” Kris pointed out quietly, following Adam’s gaze to the spot where Brad had last been.

Adam turned to look at him, waiting until Kris met his eyes to nod slowly, a rueful grimace on his lips. His voice was soft, blunt but not without compassion.

“Yeah. You kinda do.”

“Thank you.” Kris’s words trembled with grateful emotion, and his eyes welled with tears as he looked down at the floor again. “For… for giving me a chance. I understand that he probably won’t – not for a while, anyway, but… but I still had to make amends, you know?”

“I know.” Adam nodded. “And for the record, he doesn’t have a gun. He just… threatened to shoot you, and then had to back it up with something.” They shared a quiet laugh that eased some of the tension and guilt Kris felt, before Adam’s smile faded into something more solemn, his tone
earnest and reassuring. “You did the right thing, Kris… even if he’s not ready yet.” He was quiet for a moment, before reaching out to place a tentatively supportive hand on Kris’s shoulder. “Come on. I’ll take you home.”

Kris felt a bittersweet twist of longing in his stomach at those words – because he had never longed more for the home he and Adam had shared… and because he knew that it wouldn’t be “home” to him for a very long time.
“Great, guys! It’s really starting to come together.” Adam’s voice was breathless as the sounds of the instruments faded into silence, and his back-up dancers dropped out of their ending positions and began to relax. The concert was scheduled for a couple of hours later, and they were ready – just in time. “Tonight’s gonna be awesome! Okay, let’s take a break. Twenty minutes, and then we’ll run through it one last time.”

Adam drained more than half a bottle of water in a single draught as he wearily pushed open the door to his dressing room and collapsed on the sofa inside. When barely a moment later there was a soft knock on the door, Adam stifled a sigh. One of the inevitable side effects of fame seemed to be the inability to get even five minutes to himself.

“Come in,” he called, making his voice pleasant and cheerful despite his exhaustion.

He sat up a little as the door opened and Lane walked in – carrying a bouquet of flowers that was ridiculously enormous, but very beautiful, accented with the blood-red-and-black striped roses that were Adam’s favorite. Suddenly, Adam felt tremendously better. His expression immediately brightened, and he rose to his feet, meeting her halfway across the room and taking the flowers, wide-eyed and curious as he reached for the card.

It read simply, “You’re going to be amazing tonight. With all my love – Kris.”

Adam felt his face flush with self-conscious pleasure at the sweet and unexpected gesture, as he tucked the card into the pocket of his jeans and leaned in to breathe in the delicate fragrance of the flowers. A delighted warmth flowed through him, and he realized that he couldn’t remember the last time anyone had given him flowers – well, anyone he actually knew, anyway.

“Well?” Lane’s tone was teasingly impatient. “Aren’t you going to tell me who they’re from?”

“No.” Adam smirked, giving her a wink to soften his blunt response. “Aren’t I allowed to have a secret admirer?”

Lane let out a little snort of amusement at that, rolling her eyes. “I’d say you have a couple thousand.” Her eyes narrowed skeptically as she took in his reaction, glancing at the flowers again. “But… none of their presents ever manage to put that look on your face.”

Adam’s blush deepened at her words, and he looked away, hoping he wasn’t being too obvious. He hadn’t let on to anyone about the feelings he still had for Kris, not since he and Kris had broken up nearly a year earlier. Publically, Adam and Kris had not had anything to do with each other since Kris had been sentenced to rehab ten months earlier. Neither of them wanted to face the rumors and judgments that would surface in the press if they were seen together at all, even in the context of friendship.

Adam knew that it was a very delicate matter, as the reason for his hospitalization had leaked out into the media almost immediately after the incident at Brad’s apartment. Although he made a point often of stating that he did not wish to be a role model, he knew that, like it or not, he was – and one message he definitely did not want to send to his impressionable young fans was the idea that it was okay to let an abusive ex talk you into going back into an abusive relationship after you’d ended it.

Of course, he knew that his and Kris’s situation wasn’t that simple – but any eventual
reconciliation they might have would still have to be handled with extreme care, in order to avoid giving the wrong impression to his young fans.

For now, each refused to discuss the other at all in interviews, making it clear beforehand that they would not answer any questions about each other – but in secret, they were slowly, cautiously rebuilding a friendship.

Well… more than a friendship, but… less than a relationship.

It was… complicated, to say the least.

They got together whenever they could manage it without being seen – which wasn’t often. Mostly, they communicated by way of phone conversations – many, many late night phone conversations in which they talked about all the things they’d been through over the past year, and where they were now, and how they were going to get past it. Sometimes, Kris just needed to talk about the temptations and guilt with which he was struggling.

A dozen or so times, Adam’s voice over the phone was not enough, and Adam ended up driving out to Kris’s unknown, unlisted little apartment about an hour out of L.A., so that they could talk in person.

One of those times… their conversation turned into more than conversation.

It started with an impulsive kiss, that led to tentative making out, and ended with Kris and Adam quietly cuddling on the couch – swearing to each other that it had been a mistake born of emotional vulnerability, and they would never let it happen again. Adam stated firmly that he was not ready to be back in a relationship with Kris yet, no matter how badly both of them wanted it. Kris had quietly nodded, agreeing that of course, Adam was right, and he was willing to wait as long as Adam needed.

That one time just so happened to have been the night before the concert for which Adam was preparing.

Adam let his mind wander back over the events of the night before, carefully analyzing all the little details he hadn’t been able to focus on in the moment. He was the one who had kissed Kris first, and Kris had been so careful and gentle, as if Adam was some rare, fragile treasure that he didn’t want to risk damaging… dark eyes constantly searching Adam’s, as if watching for some subtle signal to stop – but Adam had given him no such signal.

Because I didn’t want him to stop…

Kris really had made so many changes in the past few months, and Adam was beginning to remember how good things had once been between them, and how much he was starting to miss having Kris around, as a part of his daily life. When he thought about the prospect of renewing their relationship, there was still some level of apprehension there – but there was more longing and hope than apprehension.

Maybe… it’s been long enough. Maybe… we’re finally ready to try… to try dating again…

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“Are you sure you know what you’re doing, Adam?”

Adam had expected no less than the wary disapproval he heard in Brad’s voice when he told him what he’d decided. He sighed, shaking his head and admitting, “No. Not at all. I’m just sure that…
that I miss him, and I love him, and... and he’s not the same guy he was this time last year.”

“If a guy’s got it in him to be an abuser, Adam, that’s not going to change,” Brad insisted, his voice quiet and troubled. “When it comes to two things – violence, and cheating – forgiveness is permission…”

Adam had heard this particular speech before, many times, over the course of the past few months, but he knew that Brad was wrong – at least in this instance.

“But that’s not the way it is with Kris,” he reminded Brad patiently. “Kris wasn’t abusive before the drugs – and he won’t be now that he’s off them. It wasn’t him, really, that was doing all those things. Yes, he made the choice to take those pills, but he didn’t know what they’d do to him until he was addicted, and by then he couldn’t stop – not without help. But... he got help, and now he’s choosing not to take them, so…”

“So what if he relapses?” Brad raised a single questioning brow in Adam’s direction, his gaze piercing and demanding.

Adam’s answer was simple, automatic. “He won’t.”

“Adam.” Brad’s tone was flat but emphatic, with a warning edge that let Adam know he wouldn’t be allowed to slide past this question so easily. “What. If he. Relapses.”

Adam drew in a deep, shaky breath, forcing himself to actually consider the question. If he looked at the situation objectively, he knew that Brad was right to wonder. Kris himself had told him that he’d learned in his therapy that most addicts experienced at least one relapse at some point in their recovery. It was something that he had to think about, no matter how much he wanted to avoid it.

“Then... then I leave him,” he sighed at last, struggling over the unpleasant words. “I... try to help him get back into rehab, and all of that – try to support him as his friend, but... but we break it off, and... and maybe don’t ever get back together. It’s taken me nearly a year to even begin to trust him again. If it... if it happened again, I don’t know if... if I ever could.”

Brad’s eyes narrowed slightly as he studied Adam’s expression for a moment... and seemed to find what he was looking for. He nodded once, slowly, in acceptance of Adam’s answer.

“I... I’m hoping that... knowing that will keep him from relapsing,” Adam confessed softly, his voice trembling slightly with uncertainty. “Knowing that... if he goes back to the drugs, it would be... killing us for real. You know?”

“I know,” Brad replied pointedly. “Do you know, Adam? Really? You say this, but are you gonna be able to go through with it if it comes down to it?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know,” Adam sighed in frustration, lowering his head into his hand for a moment and running his fingers through his hair before raising his eyes to meet Brad’s in irritation. “Why are you so determined to think the worst, anyway? Kris has been doing really well. Why do you have to still be so against him?”

“I’m not against him,” Brad argued, shaking his head. “I’m for you, Adam. I just don’t wanna see you get hurt again, that’s all.”

“I know.” Adam’s voice softened with affection, appreciation taking the place of resentment. “And... that’s why I need you around to support me, Brad. You’re the only one who not only knows me well enough to see it the instant I start being a moron again, but also has the balls to tell me to my face when I do.”
Brad smirked, clearly pleased with himself.

“But… I really want to try to make this work with Kris,” Adam continued, his expression fading into something solemn and vaguely pleading. “And… that won’t happen if my friends are constantly expecting him to screw up. If you could just… give him a chance…” Adam paused, shaking his head with a little grimace as he remembered. “When he first came back and tried to apologize to you, you were so hard on him…”

“He deserved it,” Brad pointed out, indignant. “Don’t expect me to apologize to the little…”

“I don’t,” Adam quietly cut him off, turning his head to meet his eyes. “But… I do expect you to accept his apology. It’s been almost a year, Brad. You can’t just keep hating on him every time you see him…”

“Wanna bet?”

Brad’s smirk faded when his remark was met without the slightest trace of amusement. He sighed wearily, rolling his eyes and allowing his head to fall back against the back of the sofa behind him.

“Fine,” he relented in a put-upon tone of voice. “I’ll try… for you.” He looked up at Adam again, his dark eyes warm with affection. “He’s just lucky I love you so much. And if he ever even thinks of laying a hand on you again, all bets are off. I will take his hot little Arkansas ass down so fast he won’t have time to figure out why he’s the one on the floor in agony instead of you…”

“He won’t. Good.” Adam sat up, taking his cell phone from his pocket. “I’ll call him. We need to figure out a game plan – how exactly to handle this with the media, and how much we want to say and to who, all of that. We haven’t been seen together in public in almost a year – and I think it’s about time we change that.”
Chapter 28

Kris’s heart leapt up into his throat at the sound of the doorbell ringing.

He knew who was standing on the other side of that door… and for the first time since he’d known him, Kris wasn’t looking forward to seeing him.

When Adam had called him a few hours earlier and asked him if they could “talk” – and then refused to explain exactly what he wanted to talk about – Kris immediately assumed the worst. He hadn’t heard from Adam since the night of their little “mistake”, when they’d agreed not to let anything like that happen again. Adam had made it clear that he wasn’t ready yet, and Kris had readily agreed.

And then, you send him flowers with a gushy card… like a freakin’ moron. He said he wasn’t ready – and you nod your head yes and go along with it to his face, then immediately make a move the very next day.

He had a feeling that was why Adam wanted to talk to him. He probably wanted to tell Kris that he’d crossed the line with his premature romantic gesture, and that they needed to take a few steps back in order to be on the safe side, and that he didn’t even want to talk to Kris for a while until he could be sure Kris wasn’t going to cross the line again…

What were you thinking?

Months of work in rebuilding his trust, and you’ve just wrecked it with one stupid move.

The doorbell rang a second time, and Kris reluctantly rose to answer it, his mouth dry and his palms damp with nervous dread. Adam’s solemn expression when he opened the door did little to alleviate Kris’s fears, but he forced a smile, in the hopes that maybe he’d misread the entire situation, and maybe everything was going to be fine.

No sense making things awkward when they’re not already awkward, is there? No, no sense in that…

“Hey.” Kris stepped back and allowed Adam to enter, his forced, ridiculous smile firmly pasted in place. “What’s up?”

Adam returned his smile, but it seemed taut and anxious, nothing like the easy genuineness of Adam’s real smile. “Hey,” he replied softly. “We need to talk. Let’s… sit down.”

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Now that he was actually there and ready to take this enormous step, Adam was suddenly nervous.

I’ve been so worried about whether or not I’m ready, but… what if he’s not ready? Sure, he thinks he is, but what if we’re rushing this? What if he needs more time to get established on his own? I know it’s been nearly a year, but… but what if…

… what if I’m not what he needs… and after all this time, and all his effort… I’m the one who causes him to blow it?

Adam’s thoughts consumed him, and he didn’t realize how long the awkward silence had gone on until Kris abruptly spoke up, clearly feeling the need to fill the silence.
“I’m sorry for sending the flowers,” he blurted out, his dark eyes anxious and searching on Adam’s face. “It was stupid, and… and too soon, and I wasn’t thinking, and I just shouldn’t have…”

“They’re beautiful.” Adam’s voice was soft, grateful, as he gently cut off Kris’s babbling attempt at apology. “It wasn’t stupid. I… I love them. Thank you.”

“Oh,” Kris blinked. “You’re welcome.” He glanced down for a moment before looking at Adam again, his brow creased in confusion. “Then… what…?”

“I’ve just been… thinking, a lot. About… us. And… and what happened the other night…”

“I’m sorry…”

“Wait.” Adam held up a halting hand that trembled slightly with his own nerves, as he struggled to find the right words. “Just… let me get this out, okay? Don’t… don’t say anything until you’ve heard what I have to say. Please?”

Kris nodded, and the dejection on his face made Adam hurry to clear up his obvious misunderstanding. “I just… I’ve been thinking about… everything you’ve been doing to… to make up for… before, and… and how hard you’ve been working, and how much it’s meant to me, and… and it really has meant so much to me, Kris. I mean… I know you’re dealing with a lot. I know an addiction’s not an easy thing to beat, and… and I know you’re trying really hard to beat it… for me. Because you love me, and…”

“No, I’m not.”

Adam froze, his stomach dropping at those words, and he fought off the impending panic they created, struggling to keep his voice calm as he echoed, “Y-you’re not?”

“I’m not doing it… for you, Adam,” Kris clarified softly. “I mean… I was, maybe. In the beginning, but… but I’ve learned that it doesn’t work that way. If I was doing this just for you, eventually… I’d fail. To succeed at this, I have to do it not for you or my mom or anybody else, but… for me. Because I don’t want to be… sick, anymore. Because I want to be healthy. Because I don’t want to hurt the people I love anymore.” A soft, sad sort of smile passed Kris’s lips, and he reached out a hesitant hand to rest over Adam’s on the sofa between them. “That’s where you come in.”

Adam was so overwhelmed with relief that he couldn’t speak for a moment. His eyes welled with tears, and he turned his hand under Kris’s to gently clasp it, blinking back his tears before meeting Kris’s eyes with a trembling smile, his voice barely over a hoarse whisper.

“That’s… pretty much exactly what I needed to hear,” he softly confessed. “I needed to know that you… you aren’t just doing this because you want us to get back together, and that… that I’m not what’s keeping you straight right now, you know? Because…” Adam swallowed back the hard knot that had risen in his throat, as his tears slipped silently down to streak his face. “…because I’m not always gonna be… strong, you know? If you’re counting on me to hold you up, well… then we’re both fucked.”

Kris let out a soft laugh, edging in closer to Adam and placing a gentle hand against his cheek, his thumb wiping away the dark-tinged tears. “I need you, Adam. I need your support, but… you’re not all I’ve got anymore. Okay? I have my support group, my sponsor… I have my family; they’ll come here at a moment’s notice if I need them. You don’t have to worry that if we get together, I’ll lose my motivation and relapse.” His smile faded to a more solemn, sympathetic expression as he added softly, “And you don’t have to worry that that might happen if you don’t get back with me,
Adam nodded, leaning forward so that his head rested against Kris’s, his eyes closed for a moment as he tried to catch his breath, to maintain his composure. “Good. That’s… that’s perfect,” he whispered. He opened his eyes, sitting straight again and searching Kris’s face for the reassurance he needed as he continued, “And… I feel like you’ve really been communicating with me lately – really telling me when you’re struggling, and when you need help, and… and I think that will help…”

“I know that will help,” Kris agreed, a grim smile on his lips as he added, “If I ever stop talking… that’s when you should worry. Call my sponsor and tell her something’s up.”

Adam nodded, filing that information away for future use. He was quiet, pensive, for a moment, before meeting Kris’s eyes again and informing him softly, “My friends… my parents… they’re… not thrilled about the idea of me and you getting back together. They’re… they’re afraid if you relapse, you might… I might get hurt again…”

“I know,” Kris whispered, his dark eyes welling with tears of regret. “I… don’t blame them. Frankly, I don’t deserve to get you back, Adam. And they’re right to be worried. God, if we were still just friends and this was some other jackass we were talking about? I’d be telling you to run as far and as fast as you can.”

Adam sighed, nodding. “But… you’re the jackass.”

“Yeah.” Kris couldn’t quite suppress a bittersweet smile. “I’m the jackass.” His smile faded as he quietly added, “But I’ll never hurt you again, Adam. I am so sorry… every single day… for the things I did to you. I still can’t quite believe that I did those things, to someone that I love… so much… more than I’ve ever loved anyone…” His words were halting as he wrestled to get them out past the emotions that choked him. “But… I did. And… they have every right to worry. But… I will never hurt you again. I promise, Adam. That’s how I know I’ll stay clean, because… every time I even think about the drugs… I think about… the way you looked that night… in Brad’s apartment, and… and thinking I might… might have lost you… might have… killed you…” Kris’s words broke off abruptly, and his shoulders shook with silent sobs as he fought to hold them back. After a long moment, he regained his composure, looking up at Adam to add a soft but certain promise. “I will never hurt you again. I swear it, Adam.”

“I know you won’t,” Adam confirmed quietly with a single, slow nod, his expression solemn. “But… if you did… it’d be the end, Kris. It’d be the absolute end. You’re right. You could have killed me the first time, and… and if it happened again… I’d be a fool to take you back, and… and I’m not. So… you have to know that. If it ever happened again… if you ever touched the pills again… it’d be over. Full stop.”

Kris just stared at him, wide-eyed, swallowing hard. His voice was hushed, cautious, when at last he broke the silence. “Are you… are you saying…?”

“I’m saying I love you, Kris,” Adam cut him off quietly, his eyes downcast. “I always have. Even when you… told me things I knew couldn’t be true… lied to my face, and… slapped me in the face… I still knew… I loved who I knew you were, underneath the person the drugs turned you into.”

As he spoke, he drifted closer to Kris again, and Kris followed his lead, edging in nearer until their thighs were flush against each other, their faces mere inches apart. Adam stared into Kris’s eyes as if mesmerized as he continued, his voice barely over a whisper.
“I can make myself stay away if I have to, but… I can’t help loving you, Kris… no matter what you do,” he confessed, his chest aching with the open vulnerability of admitting those words aloud. “Please,” he whispered. “Don’t… don’t make me a fool for loving you.”

Kris stared back at him, his lips parted slightly as he slid his arms gently around Adam’s waist. “That… almost sounds like a song,” he observed softly, a near-reverence in his voice.

Adam couldn’t suppress a slight smile that rose to his lips as he gave a little shrug. “It might be.”

“If it’s not,” Kris replied, “then it’s going to be.”

“Kris…”

Adam’s voice broke over the word and he lowered his head, his eyes closed against the uncertainty and vulnerability he still felt so deeply; Kris quickly focused, all amusement fading from his eyes as he reached down to gently tilt Adam’s head up to face him again.

“I won’t,” he promised softly. “I won’t, Adam. I won’t ever again make you regret loving me.”

Those were the words Adam had been waiting to hear.

He caught Kris off guard, arms slipping around him to hold him close as he pushed him back onto the sofa beneath him, his lips seeking Kris’s in a needy, desperate kiss – claiming, owning what he’d forced himself to put aside for so long. Kris eagerly returned the kiss, yielding to Adam’s firm hands as they trailed down Kris’s arms to his wrists, then drew them up over his head and pinned them there, holding him in place as he deepened the kiss until they both were breathless.

After a moment, Adam withdrew, urgency in his eyes as he reiterated, “Seriously, though: if you ever hurt me…”

“Let me guess,” Kris offered with a little smirk. “Brad will kill me?”

Adam let out a derisive little snort, rolling his eyes. “He’d have to wait in line behind my mother.”

Kris laughed softly, his lip quirking up on one side in a teasing smile. “She’d have to wait in line behind mine.”

Adam’s laugh was as much release as amusement as, still breathless, he lowered his face to rest against Kris’s shoulder, gasping softly. Kris managed to free one of his still-pinned wrists to rest at the back of Adam’s head, stroking slowly through the soft, shorter hair there, relishing the peace he felt as Adam relaxed a little more against him.

“But it’s not going to happen,” he whispered, brushing a light kiss across Adam’s brow. “I love you more than anything else in this world, Adam. And no matter what happens… I’m never going to forget that again.”

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