# Mine

**by simplymoa**

## Summary

Once is an accident. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is a conspiracy. Who do you trust?
Chapter 1

They say that you can't miss something you've never had.

It's not true.

You start to miss it when you see how important it is in other people's lives. You miss it when you realize that you're the only one without it...and you've never really understood the reason why. You get jealous of friends who have it and wonder why you're different...why you can't be normal like they are.

When they ask about it...you lie. It's easy...because you don't know the truth.

And then when you finally learn the truth, it hurts. You get angry. You get consumed with resentment and helplessness and the worst part is that nobody - nobody - can possibly understand. Because you can't talk about it. They would only turn on you with the same disgust and pity.

There are secrets you don't tell.

But sooner or later, you do get even.

Sunday
Mid-April 2012
New York City

The fact that he hadn't done it on purpose didn't make Terrance feel any better.

He dropped down on all fours beside Gus, unmindful of the way he skinned his knees and his hands on the pavement. The next minute he was hauled back to his feet by Adam, who was in an absolute blind rage and looked like he was about to kill someone.

Isaac seized Adam by both arms and pulled him back. "Jesus, Adam...let him go! It was an accident!"

"I'm sorry," Terrance said, horrified. "I'm so sorry...I didn't see him..."

Adam yanked free from Isaac's grip and fell to his knees. It was hard to tell whose face was whiter, his or Gus', but in this case Gus' was due to pain and Adam's was due to sheer panic.

The risk had been there from the very beginning, hanging over both of them in everything they did, but Adam had learned to live with it the same way Gus had. He knew the instant it happened that reality had finally caught up with them. It only remained to be seen how bad it was and what the long-term implications would be.

It didn't seem fair. Everything had been going so well.
Two Days Earlier

For any artist, making music involves taking an extreme emotional risk. It didn't help when there was the added pressure of business relationships and the bottom line and the sheer financial risks involved. This wasn't a new challenge; there had been an awful lot riding on the release of For Your Entertainment, but its success only amplified the attention now being focused on its follow-up. No matter how pleased Adam had been with the results of his studio work and post-production, he harbored natural inner doubts about the quality of his own product and whether or not it would be good enough to do what everyone was expecting it to do...out-perform its predecessor.

Noting this apprehension, the management company had suggested a private concert. No heavy-duty production, no huge crowd...just something small and intimate that would allow Adam to test out his live vocal on the new material and reacquaint himself with the subtleties of a stage performance.

The decision was made to schedule a show for one month prior to the release date of the album. There would be only a select group of one thousand invitees in a small concert hall, with nothing more than a handful of musicians and absolutely no press allowed. Immediately following that, he would kick off a series of promotional appearances around the country, on television, on radio and in person, to raise his profile again and capitalize on the frenzy that was building around the release date.

They picked New York, mostly to take advantage of the fact that Adam had been invited to appear on a number of high-power morning news and late night variety shows in the same city. To minimize the amount of traveling, it was decided to try and accomplish as much as possible in each place, even if it meant a little bit of local over-saturation.

The plans for the tour itself were already well underway. This time, Adam had decided to run a parallel fundraising campaign to support his and his friends' charity and other projects, with events planned on each scheduled stop of the tour.

The responsibility of organizing that part of things had fallen on Gus. He had been only working for a few months as the director of Tommy's foundation and had been extremely reluctant to take on the mammoth task of trying to organize charitable events in a whole succession of different cities.

Tommy had managed to sweet-talk him into it, although he'd nearly backed out in a panic when he realized the sheer amount of legwork involved to visit all of the cities ahead of time so that events could be coordinated with the local chapters of the organization.

"Oh sure," he complained to Adam. "You are already turning green at the thought of how many stops there are on this tour, but you're quite happy to make me go through it all twice!"

He had his revenge. When discussions ensued about how to decide who would be invited to attend the private show, Gus pointed out that the fundraising campaign needed to be kicked off just as much as the tour did. When everyone nodded warily, he went on to add that he couldn't think of a better way to highlight the campaign that to auction off the seats for the show...all one thousand of them.

"No," said Monte immediately. "I don't want it to be a contest to see who has the most money. It has to be something that's fair to everyone."
"Fine," Gus said doggedly. "Then pull a series of tickets - hell, make them front row if you want - and let your charities award them to outstanding volunteers. Take another series of tickets and allocate them for people who wouldn't normally be able to afford them. The fact is, even if you auctioned only half of the seats for a show like this, you'd still raise a lot of money."

"You do have a point there," Adam admitted. "But..."

Gus put his hands on his hips. "Well, look at it this way. Just in case the new album really sucks, at least you'll be remembered for being a nice guy."

There was a momentary silence. Monte looked at Tommy reproachfully. "Who hired him again?"

Tommy shook his head and pointed at Adam. "He came with him."

Adam opened his mouth, then thought better of it when Gus cocked his head at him and raised his eyebrows.

Adam smiled weakly at him instead.

"Wise move," Gus nodded. "So...are we agreed, or what?"

In the six months since he had moved to California, Gus had worked hard to adjust to an entirely new way of life. First, there was the challenge of a new job in a new country, although the responsibilities of the Youth Task Force and Tommy's foundation were reassuringly similar. Secondly, there was the far more difficult challenge of trying to come to terms with the fact that he was in a relationship with one of the biggest pop singers of all time. Despite Adam's attempts to protect him from the worst of the publicity, Gus was still struggling to accept all the attention that was being focused on him, sometimes in a very negative way.

Most difficult had been the effort to overcome the severe emotional problems that still plagued him as a result of the car accident that had ended his law enforcement career. He had been so positive that he'd put that part of his life safely behind him. It was Adam's untimely appearance in his life that had made him vulnerable in ways he had never expected and he was only now just beginning to face up to many of the issues that he had pushed away for so long.

There were still days when grief and pain threatened to overwhelm him. Adam would still occasionally be woken at night by the sound of broken sobbing, but as time went on, the bouts of crying eased and the spells of depression came less frequently and passed away more quickly.

The one thing to which Gus simply could not reconcile himself was the long separations from Adam when he was on the road. It was primarily for that reason that he had allowed himself to be talked into taking on the job as fundraising coordinator for the upcoming tour. Even though it would mean several weeks of being apart from Adam while he did the prep work beforehand, at least he would be able to travel with Adam once the tour began without feeling like he was simply tagging along like some groupie.

He took two weeks and visited the majority of the cities scheduled on the tour and did as much of the groundwork as was possible with the organizers at each stop. It was some consolation that Adam was also away, tying up the last loose ends before the release of the new album and starting
work on the video to accompany the first single.

Gus had planned to meet him in New York a few days before the private concert but to his extreme frustration, he received a phone call before he left L.A. that scuttled those plans completely.

Gus missed Toronto so badly that he and Adam frequently flew up there for a few days whenever their schedules allowed. The move to California had also separated Gus from his best friend Michelle, and Gus took any opportunity to go and see her or to talk Michelle into coming down to California. This time however, Gus was more than a little annoyed at being summoned back to Canada.

"What do you mean, you have to appear in court?" Adam said in astonishment, when Gus told him he'd been subpoenaed. "You've been off the police force for over two years...how can you still have trials pending?"

"It's not the first trial. It's an appeal. And the stupid thing is we never should have gotten the conviction in the first place. The judge absolutely mangled the charge to the jury, because the evidence was so damn weak that there wasn't any way they should have found him guilty. So, now he's getting his appeal. I have to testify."

Noting the uneasy look on Adam's face, Gus said gently, "Relax. It's not going to be anything like the trial for my accident. I can guarantee you they won't need me for more than a couple of days, but it means I won't be able to meet you in New York until the day before the show. I'm sorry, Adam."

Adam sighed. "That's going to make it almost three weeks that I won't see you, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But you're going to be so busy, you won't even have time to notice that I'm gone."

"I'll notice," he said softly.

He woke up on the Friday morning in New York to the sound of his assistant knocking on the door to his suite and shouting at him to get up and get ready for rehearsals. He felt groggy and badly rested, but it was his own damn fault; it had been past midnight before they'd finished up the previous night and he'd spent nearly an hour and half on the phone with Gus before he finally went to sleep.

Gus had promised to meet him at the hotel in the early evening. "They don't actually need me in court anymore, but I suppose I should hang around for the verdict. It should all be over by noon. And by the way, I'm bringing a surprise."

"Oh yeah?"

"Michelle's coming with me. And Brian."

"Really?"

"Really. She says she needs a weekend away and by now I imagine New York has probably recovered from her last visit."

"Oh. What did she do, get arrested?"
"No. She's just a heavy-duty shopper. I told her she and Terrance can try and out-do each other. He'd probably like the challenge."

When evening rolled around and there was no sign of Gus, Adam began to worry. His calls to Gus' cell-phone went unanswered until eventually Gus called him on his, sounding distracted and annoyed.

"Something's come up. I'm sorry but I'm not going to make it down there tonight. Michelle and I will get a flight out in the morning."

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. We hit a snag here, but don't worry. Everything's wrapped up now and we'll be on the first plane tomorrow."

"What was the verdict?"

"Conviction overturned."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I was expecting it. It's just...oh, look. I'll tell you the whole story when I see you, okay?"

Adam frowned. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Adam, I'm fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

Knowing Gus had a profound capacity for understatement, Adam was more than a little uneasy until he arrived, showing up with Michelle and Brian at the concert hall at noon the next day and walking into the middle of final rehearsals.

He was halfway through a song. Gus and Michelle stood in the wings and waited so as not to interrupt but Brian had no such restraint. He caught sight of Adam at his microphone, pulled from his startled mother's grasp and ran out onto the stage.

Adam didn't notice him until he was seized around the legs in a fierce grip. Letting out a startled yelp, he knocked over the microphone stand, which resulted in a loud screech and abruptly ended the number.

Everyone else turned to stare at him. Brian, not particularly concerned about rehearsal schedules, pulled at Adam's hands until Adam picked him up and hugged him.

"You should play football," he told the little boy, suffering himself to be kissed and snuggled. "You have pretty a mean tackle."

"Hey you," said Tommy, coming across and poking Brian in the ribs, whereupon Brian delightedly launched himself out of Adam's arms and into Tommy's. "You're just about as much trouble as your mother."

"I heard that," said Michelle tartly, emerging from the sidelines. She got an ugly look from the stage crew who were all waiting impatiently and gave them just as ugly a look in return. "Sorry
guys. This is why they say you should never work with animals or children. Brian, come here."

Brian looked mutinous and Tommy took the opportunity to give Michelle a hug as he reluctantly handed her son over. "It's good to see you. Where's Gus?"

"I'm here," Gus said, waving from his perch in the wings. "Don't stop on our account. I'll see you all when you're done."

Adam stole offstage just long enough to put his arms around Gus and give him a lingering kiss. "It's about time you got here. How are you?"

"Fine."

"Did you get your snag worked out?"

"They're waiting for you," Gus said softly, ignoring Adam's question. "I'll fill you in later. Get back to work."

He and Michelle took Brian down to the audience and watched the rest of the rehearsals from the front row. Brian clapped enthusiastically after each number, much to his mother's embarrassment and the band's amusement.

It was three o'clock before the final lighting rehearsals and sound checks were done and they all felt they were about as prepared as they could possibly be.

Adam came offstage and hung his arms wearily around Gus's neck, leaning his forehead against Gus' and smiling at him.

"What now?" Gus asked.

"Back to the hotel for a few hours. We'll get ready there too...there's not a lot of dressing room space here."

The fact that the concert was by invitation only didn't seem to have affected the number of fans who had staked out both the auditorium and the hotel. Michelle stuck close to Gus and Adam as they made the usual harrowing dash through fans and media from the stage door to the car and then from the car into the hotel and was astonished at Gus' poise.

"You're getting good at this," she observed.

"Do I have a choice?" Gus replied. "You know what, Michelle? They take your picture whether you look happy or not. I've learned that if they're going to take your photo, you might as well just put your head up and smile."

"So exactly how much do they take your picture?"

Gus shrugged. "Not as much lately, thank God. Or rather, thank Terrance. He's the one who took the pressure off me."

"Ah. Got a new boyfriend, has he?"

"Got the old one back. Andy. He's here. You'll meet him."
Michelle looked startled. "But isn't he the one that hurt Terrance?"

"I wasn't around in those days, so I'm not the one to ask. And I suggest you don't ask anyone else either. It's a bit of a touchy subject from what I can tell."

For the rest of the afternoon Gus watched Adam circumspectly, noting that a combination of nerves and adrenaline was making him alternately pensive and edgy. Given his mood, Gus would have preferred not to get into the reason for their delayed arrival, but had no choice when Adam asked him straight out in front of Michelle and everybody else.

"So why did you get held up yesterday?"

Gus looked at Michelle, who shrugged. Reluctantly, he said, "We had to hang around the courthouse after the verdict that's all. It took longer than expected."

"Adam told me the guy got off," Isaac said. "He must have been pretty pissed to find out he'd done two years of jail time for nothing."

"Just a bit pissed," Gus agreed with a smile.

"Gus," Michelle said impatiently. "Why don't you just tell them?"

Gus glared. "This isn't exactly the time."

"It's not a big deal, is it?"

"Everybody won't necessarily see it that way," Gus muttered under his breath.

Adam was looking back and forth between them with an increasingly troubled expression. "Whoa, whoa...the two of you make me really nervous when you do that. Will somebody please tell me what you're talking about?"

Gus leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "He threatened me."

"Who threatened you?"

"The defendant. He walked out of the courtroom and went a bit ballistic when he met up with me in the hallway. He seemed to think that it was my original testimony that got him convicted in the first place. He should have re-read the transcripts. There were enough holes in my evidence to drive a truck through and his lawyer was too damn stupid to see them. And then the original judge fouled up on the charge to the jury...so how the hell he can blame me..."

"Never mind that," Adam said through gritted teeth. "What exactly did he say to you?"

"The usual. The 'I'm going to get you for this' speech. 'You'll be sorry...I'm going to make you pay...'; etc, etc. I've heard it before, don't worry."

"Don't worry?"

"Adam, I've been threatened by more defendants than I can count. It's all hot air and emotion."
"So...what? You just let it go?"

"Of course not. Even if I'd wanted to, he did it in front of about seven other people, a couple of them lawyers."

"So..." Isaac prompted. "They just hauled his ass right back into custody then?"

"No," Gus admitted. "He was gone before anybody could grab him."

Noting Adam's mouth drop open, he added defensively, "And there is already a bench warrant out for him for uttering threats, so stop looking at me that way. That's what took so long yesterday. By the time I had filed a report, we couldn't reschedule the flight."

"And really guys," Michelle remarked. "This is pretty standard stuff. Cops get threatened all the time. Besides, Gus isn't going to be back in Toronto for ages. Even if this guy really had the guts to follow through, Gus's not going to be around to give him the chance. And if he's just come off two years in jail, he's going to think twice about doing something that's going to get him right back in there again."

Adam didn't appear particularly reassured. "So...the cops are looking for this guy, right?"

Gus looked at the floor. "Not likely."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because there are a lot more dangerous people out there to be looked for, that's why. You know...murders, rapists, child molesters...And besides, the Attorney General's Office is already facing a wrongful conviction suit if this guy decides to file one, so they're quite happy to leave him loose on the street with a good reason to keep his head down. Frankly, he'd have to be jaywalking and be hit by a cruiser before the cops would bother trying to pick him up."

"Now," he added firmly. "Drop it. And there is no need to be worried. I'm not."

Normally before a show Adam liked to spend some time with a small, select group of fans. On this particular evening, with nerves too much an issue, Adam had gone straight to the concert hall and into warm-ups.

"If it had been any other show," Gus remarked to Michelle. "I could have used your help at the meet and greet."

"The what-and-what?" Michelle said, perplexed. "God, I hate this business. You need a damn dictionary to know what the hell is going on."

Gus rolled his eyes. "I would have thought that particular term was self-explanatory."

"What exactly would you have had me doing?"

"Well, there are two kinds of fans at those things. The fans that Adam and the band can't beat off with sticks, and the fans that are too petrified to go anywhere near them. Adam likes someone to
cruise and chat up the nervous people and then take them up to whoever it is that they want to meet."

"Ah. I probably could have handled that. Why'd they skip it tonight? Too wound up?"

Gus opened the dressing room door and winced at the sound of Isaac and Tommy snapping irritably at each other.

"What do you think?" he said with a sigh.

Adam was pacing in small circles, nervously clutching a bottle of water and trying to clear the lump out of his throat.

Fighting to hide his smile, Gus slid his arms around Adam's neck and kissed him.

"It's not like you haven't ever done this before," he said soothingly.

"Not for awhile," Adam said through teeth that were actually chattering. "And not with any of this material."

"Relax. I was at rehearsal. You're not that bad."

"Oh, thanks. Did you practice that pep-talk or was it just off the top of your head?"

"I'm joking. I'm trying to lighten you up. Since when do you have stage fright?" Gus picked imaginary fluff off the black coat Adam wore and smoothed his hands down over Adam's shoulders. "You look like a million bucks."

"Thanks," Adam said distractedly, then gave himself a shake and smiled at Gus. "I'm glad you're here. Keep your fingers crossed for me."

"You don't need my help," Gus said firmly. "You'll manage to blow them away all on your own."

Having said that, he still chewed anxiously at his fingernails from the time they sat down in their reserved seats out front to the time the house lights went down. There was the customary amount of screaming, followed by an anticipatory silence as the hall remained dark, followed by more screaming, applause and stomping when the spotlights finally went on illuminating Adam and the band on the stage.

"Oh my God, I'm so nervous," Gus said, digging his fingers into Michelle's arm on one side and Lisa's on the other.

His heart did a back-flip when Adam faltered on his first cue but once he'd actually opened his mouth and made it through the first verse, he visibly relaxed, even casting Gus a rueful half-smile as he got into his rhythm.

"I don't know what everyone was so uptight about," Michelle complained. "Everything sounds fine to me."

There was no doubt that the audience was highly prejudiced, but it was clear from their reactions that they were also extremely impressed with the new songs. About half way through the show, even Adam stopped worrying and fell into his old familiar routines of light-hearted banter.
Things went so well that he threw in an extra number at the end...the song that was meant to be the first single off the album and which he had decided ahead of time not to use in the show. But it was clear that he was so relieved and so grateful at such an enthusiastic response that he wanted to show his appreciation, and the crowd nearly screamed the roof off in acknowledgment.

It couldn't exactly have been called a standing ovation at the end, since the audience stood up about three quarters of the way through the show and just didn't sit down again. Gus was nearly in tears with emotion by the time it was over, to the vast amusement of the Lisa and Sophia who'd each been through it all before. When they went backstage afterwards, Gus hurled himself at Adam so hard he nearly knocked Adam over in his enthusiasm.

"You rock!" he cried delightedly.

"Yeah, I think so," Adam agreed with a weary smile, trying to maneuver with Gus' arms locked around his neck. "Damn, Gus...take it easy. You're going to strangle me."

Grinning, Gus released him and made his way around the band, hugging them all and offering congratulations.

"Oh my God, Gus...I need a drink," Isaac said, leaning on him weakly. "Screw Gatorade. I want Tequila."

It didn't seem to matter that there hadn't been a single dance routine during the show; they were all as exhausted as if they'd run a marathon. They abandoned the idea of waiting around the hall for the fans to clear and instead, all piled into limousines almost immediately and went back to the hotel.

In the car, Gus sat with Adam's arm around his shoulders, teasing Monte about the fact that they're had been at least eight stuffed guitars fired at him during the show.

"Blame Taco Bell," said Monte, shaking his head. He pointed accusingly at Adam's bodyguard Jeremy, who was squashed on the other side of Gus. "I thought you guys were supposed to have everybody searched on the way in."

"Oh yeah?" said Jeremy. He shouted up to the front of the car. "Hey, Kevin! It was cameras, recording devices and extra lingerie we were checking for...right? Anybody say anything to you about shaking the ladies down for little stuffed guitars?"

"I was actually selling them at the door," Kevin called back. "Ten bucks a piece."

It proved tricky getting back into the hotel. Gus and Adam got caught in the crowd as it surged around them and it took both Kevin and Jeremy to extricate them, prompting Gus to worry about Michelle who was in the limo behind them.

"Relax," Adam said, hesitating just long enough to sign an autograph. "Tommy's looking after her. Besides, I'd be more worried about the fans than about Michelle. She can take care of herself."

They had been so uptight about how the show would be received that they had deliberately not made any arrangements for a post-concert celebration.

"You're all way too superstitious," Gus had scolded them, but when they got back to the hotel and
Adam asked him if he minded the two of them hosting an impromptu party, Gus sighed indulgently.

"Go and have a shower," he said and waved off Adam's apologetic smile. "I'm sure I can whip something up."

By the time Adam had showered and changed, Gus had arranged for food and drinks to be delivered to their suite and the room was already half full of people.

Adam had thrown on a pair of jeans and a Bowie T-shirt and raised his eyebrows when he saw that Gus had also changed, from the flared pants and long jacket he'd worn for the concert into a tight black shirt and white pants.

"Wow," Adam said, holding his hand out for the drink Gus was offering him and nearly dropping it. "Nice outfit."

Caught off guard, Gus reddened self-consciously. After Adam had been so focused all day by rehearsals and the concert, Gus was startled to find he was suddenly the recipient of Adam's complete and undivided attention. It provoked a hot flush all through him that Adam didn't miss and Gus abruptly ducked his head to hide his embarrassment.

There was a welcome distraction in the form of three new arrivals. Gus noted curiously how everyone went straight to the newcomers to greet them, but waited patiently until Adam brought them over to meet him.

He eyed them all with interest. He knew little about Samuel Brice other than he was the CEO of Griffin Entertainment, which was the conglomerate that was sponsoring the upcoming tour. Samuel was extremely tall, extremely handsome and extremely wealthy, all of which translated into an unfortunate mix of arrogance and ego that might have been a positive characteristic in the entertainment business but which got on Gus's nerves the moment she met him.

With him was Doug Taylor, the tour manager. Gus had noticed him at the concert earlier that evening, eyeing the entire process with a critical eye that branded him as a professional. When Adam introduced him, Gus suddenly understood Doug's close observation; he was evaluating what he had to work with. Doug was friendly and far more laid back than his boss and seemed almost annoyed at Samuel's flashy behavior. Gus grinned at the expression on his face; when Doug looked up and caught him reaction he almost self-consciously grinned back.

Samuel seemed about as interested in meeting Gus as he was about introducing the third member of their group. Once he had shaken Gus's hand absently and muttered a few words, he took Adam's arm and steered him away, impatiently calling Doug after them and leaving the other man standing with his mouth open.

"Guess we just aren't important in the grand, cosmic scheme of things," Gus said, putting his hands on his hips in indignation. "Well, it's a pleasure to meet you anyway. All you have to do is tell me who the heck you are."

"Bill Wasley," he replied, nodding his head at Gus so his dreadlocks bounced. "I'll be the press agent for the tour."

"Oooh," said Gus with a smile. "Never mind. I won't hold that against you. But you're a little early. The tour hasn't even started yet."
"I know. Samuel wanted me here with Doug to see Adam perform. We haven't done more than just get together with them at a couple of planning meetings. Griffin's never sponsored a tour before and Samuel's a little on the hyper side about it."

"Never sponsored a..." Gus gaped in astonishment. "I didn't know that. But Griffin's so huge...I just assumed..."

"It is huge. Casinos, hotels, video production companies. And what they don't own, they manage. But they want to get into the music industry and Samuel figures sponsoring this tour is about the best way possible to make his mark in the business. He's not the kind of guy to pick somebody low profile to start off with. He wanted the biggest name he could get. So Griffin's here to pay the tab and provide all the staff to manage the tour."

"And you decide what to tell people about it," Gus said with a straight face.

Bill shrugged with a smile. "No, actually...Samuel decides what I tell people about it. I sure hope he'll loosen up once the tour starts because right now he's getting on my nerves...big time. Doug's already just about ready to kill him."

Samuel seemed to have that effect on everybody's nerves. Gus watched as he went around the room, schmoozing with those people he considered important and basically ignoring everybody else.

He shook his head. In the music business it wasn't what you knew, it was who you knew. And you didn't have to like them...you just had to hope to hell that they were on your side.

He got into a conversation with Sophia and didn't notice that Adam kept eyeing him from across the room. When his appetite kicked in, he wandered into the kitchenette and investigated the platters that had been sent up from the kitchen before taking up a plate and digging in.

Adam wandered over and came around the counter to stand beside him, idly taking a cracker from one of the trays and nibbling on it. Having filled his plate, Gus was just about ready to go back into the main part of the suite, when Adam leaned one elbow down on the counter, effectively blocking his path.

"What's up?" Gus said with a half-smile.

"Nothing," Adam said casually, speaking so low that Gus had to drop his head down beside Adam's to hear what he was saying. "I'm just wondering what you're wearing under those pants, that's all."

Gus nearly dropped the plate. As it was, two bread sticks tumbled off and when he reached out to grab them, Adam moved a little closer and the hand that was out of sight below the edge of the counter casually curved around one of Gus' legs and moved upward against the inside of his thigh.

At that point, Gus did drop the plate. There were a few curious glances in their direction as it clattered against the counter, but all the others saw was Adam leaning on the counter with his head propped nonchalantly on one hand and Gus, badly flustered, trying to pick up everything he had spilled.

"Because," Adam continued as if absolutely nothing had happened. "Those pants Are so nice and tight and looks so damn good on you that I don't think you've got any idea how much it's turning
"Will you stop?" Gus hissed. "This is not the place to be getting frisky."

"That's why this suite has a bedroom. Right over there."

Gus gaped at him. "Surely you aren't suggesting...?"

"I haven't seen you for three weeks."

"We can't just walk out in the middle of a party," Gus said, aghast. "Besides, it was your idea to invite everybody back here."

"Well, that was before I got a good look at you in those white pants. And they won't miss us if we just slip out for awhile."

"Won't miss us? You mean if we walk right through the middle of them into the bedroom? Would you like to be any more obvious?"

Adam's hand resumed sliding up and down Gus' leg. Despite himself, Gus couldn't pull away. It had been three weeks, after all.

"We can't just disappear for the rest of the evening," he said weakly.

Gus had no idea how Adam was managing to look so completely casual while touching him in such an incredibly provocative way. "I'm not suggesting we don't come back. I just want some time alone with you. I'm not kidding...you've got me so wound up I can't think about anything else."

Gus' heart was pounding. "Everyone will notice."

"No one will notice. I only want a few minutes."

"A few minutes?"

"Uh huh," Adam said, and turned his head in close against Gus'. "That's why they call it a quickie."

Gus' face had gone scarlet. "Adam," he said. "Be serious."

The hand moved again, making him gasp. "I am serious. Just a few minutes." Adam smiled at him wildly distracted expression and didn't miss the fact that Gus was unconsciously leaning in against him, making it easier for Adam to touch him. His voice went very low, nearly vibrating against Gus' ear. "What I have in mind will be very fast, and very hard and very good. Just enough to keep us going until later."

Gus caught his breath and closed his eyes and with a satisfied smile Adam straightened up, pausing only long enough for one last whisper.

"Meet me in five minutes. I dare you."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Once is an accident. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is a conspiracy. Who do you trust?

When he slipped inside the bedroom all the lights were off and Gus suddenly began to wonder if he’d been stood up. Then he felt Adam’s hands taking hold of his arms, pushing him backwards and holding him against the wall while Adam kissed him wildly and locked the door at the same time.

“You’re crazy,” he said breathlessly.

Adam had his face buried against Gus’ throat. “You’re right. I am going out of my mind wanting you right now. It was either this or throwing you down on the sofa in front of everybody. Come here...”

With their eyes unaccustomed to the half-dark, unfamiliar room, it took them a minute of staggering around in each other’s arms before they hit the edge of the bed and crawled up on it. By now, Gus had realized that Adam wasn’t kidding about how urgently he wanted him and Gus found himself completely and utterly caught up in Adam’s excitement. There was something incredibly erotic about having a brief, wild interlude with an entire roomful of people only a few yards away.

Adam was kneeling over him, braced on one hand while the other caught at the hem of Gus’ pants and slid it down to his knees. Adam gasped when he felt Gus’ fingers go to the waist of his jeans, and when Gus had pushed them down, Adam curved one hand under the small of Gus’ back, lifting Gus up against him so their bodies immediately connected.

“Oh my God,” Adam said, deeply shaken. “You’re ready for this too, aren’t you?”

Gus caught Adam’s head and pulled it down to his, kissing Adam so wantonly that it threw Adam’s estimate of a few minutes off by a considerable amount. In reality, it was all over in less than two, since they were both so turned on they were overcome by intense pleasure the moment Adam was inside Gus and from that point on each sensation just rushed into the next.

Gus had to clamp his hand over Adam’s mouth to stop him from crying out. He was shaking so hard himself that he was beyond making any sound, although his breathing was loud and uneven.

After a minute, Adam pushed himself up onto his knees and pulled Gus to a sitting position. Gus’ face was hot and unfocused, and his hair was a mess.

“I love you,” Adam said, still badly out of breath and kissed Gus hard one last time. Then he slid off the bed, straightened his clothes out as best he could and let himself quietly back out into the living room.
Michelle had been checking on Brian. When she returned to the suite and observed Gus sneaking back out of the bedroom, she followed her friend to the bar and poked him.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Gus said, pouring himself a cold drink with hands that hadn’t quite stopped trembling.

Puzzled, Michelle looked Gus up and down. After a moment she smiled and said dryly, “You should zip up your pants. It’s a dead giveaway.”

Mortified, Gus did as he was told. “It wasn’t my idea.”

“Oh, no...and I’m sure you were objecting every step of the way. Don’t mind me; I’m just jealous. I’ve completely forgotten what it’s like to get waylaid in the middle of a party. So to speak,” she added, as Gus’ eyebrows rose.

“Would you mind keeping your voice down? It’s bad enough that Adam is about a subtle as a Sherman tank...”

Michelle snorted rudely. “If you’re so worried about giving people the wrong impression, you should try and wipe that ‘whoo-hoo-I-just-got-rolled-in-the-hay’ look off your face.”

Noting Tommy bearing down on them from across the room, Gus gave Michelle a threatening stare. Tommy stopped and glanced between them for a moment while Michelle smiled pleasantly and Gus seized the opportunity to examine the pattern on the carpet.

“We’re all heading out to check out a few clubs,” he announced. “Are you two up to it?”

“Sorry,” Michelle said, with regret. “I only booked the sitter until midnight. And as much fun as Brian would probably be, I think it’s still a bit early in his life to take him bar-hopping.”

Tommy looked particularly disappointed at this until she added, “Although Gus probably wouldn’t mind staying here with him.”

Both Tommy and Gus turned to stare at her. Michelle shrugged. “I know you’re tired. And I’ve noticed you’re starting to look a little flushed. Maybe you’re coming down with something. You should probably just get to bed early.”

There was a moment’s silence while Gus floundered about desperately for something to say. Then he jumped when Tommy laid one palm against his cheek in concern and observed, “You do feel a little bit warm, you know.”

“See?” said Michelle. “Look, I’ll just bring Brian up from my room and he can sleep on your sofa bed. He won’t be any trouble...he’s so wiped out he wouldn’t wake up if a Sherman tank rolled through the room.”

Gus coughed and put one hand over his mouth.

“You are coming down with something,” said Tommy.

There was no graceful way out, so Gus threw up his hands in surrender. It was no consolation that Adam found it all extremely funny.
“I was set up,” Gus complained to him.

“So? Are you trying to say that you’d rather go out to a club than stay here with me?”

“No!”

“It’s much better than the excuse I was going to use.”

“Which was...?”

“I was going to tell them the truth.”

Adam smiled at him and Gus found himself blushing furiously. “All right. I admit...it’ll be nice to have the evening to ourselves.”

Adam squeezed his hand and bent his head close to Gus’ ear. “Now, I don’t suppose you’ve got any bright ideas of how to get everybody to hurry up and get the hell out of here...?“

In reality, once plans were made it didn’t take long for everybody to clear out. Michelle went with an extremely smug look on her face, giving Gus the urge to kick her in the shins as Michelle waved cheerfully on her way out the door.

While Adam made sure that Brian was tucked up comfortably on the sofa bed, Gus idly collected plates and glasses and stacked them in the tiny kitchen. When Adam straightened up, he found Gus was standing close beside him; wordlessly he turned and slid one arm around Gus’ shoulders, pulling Gus in against him as they walked around shutting off lights and bolting the doors.

Gus paused one last time to peer at Brian on the way by, looking up in amusement as he felt an insistent tug on his hands.

“Oh, here he goes again,” he teased, letting Adam draw him across the room.

“What?” Adam said softly.

“You’re very impatient.”

“Are you complaining?”

“Definitely not. The last time you pulled me into the bedroom was pretty amazing.”

Adam looked indignant, but his hands had already closed around Gus’ waist.

“I don’t remember pulling anybody. I just remember making a simple suggestion, and the next thing I know, I’m in bed with this very warm, very willing man who absolutely blew my mind with how incredibly sexy he was.”

Gus smiled. Hooking his hands around Adam’s neck, he began nuzzling Adam’s cheek as he whispered, “I blew your mind, did I?”

“Yeah, you did.”
“Well...brace yourself. I plan on doing it again. But this time...” He ran a finger down Adam’s cheek from his ear to the corner of his mouth and his eyes darkened. “I want to go real slow. And this time...I want all your clothes off because I’ve missed that beautiful body of yours an awful lot.”

Adam nudged the bedroom door closed behind them with one hip and they stood against the wall, kissing deeply and leisurely reacquainting themselves with each other.

When there was a little whimper from the next room, Gus groaned and very reluctantly turned his head towards the sound. “Uh oh. I think I’m being paged.”

“What are you so amused about?” he inquired, sliding into Adam’s arms and edging him backwards over the threshold.

"I just like watching you with him. You're so good with kids." He pulled Gus closer so their faces were nearly touching and added huskily, "You should have a few of your own."

Adam leaned forward to kiss him but Gus drew his head back to stare at him with warm, wide eyes.

"What's the matter?" he said, bemused.

The corners of Gus’ mouth lifted. "Is that a proposal or a proposition?"

Adam’s mouth opened and closed a couple of times and Gus grinned at him mischievously.

“Well?”

"Just an observation," he murmured, flushing.

"Well, you should be careful about making observations like that. Somebody might jump to the wrong conclusion."

Unexpectedly Adam went from being sheepish to horrified. Awkwardly, he stammered, "I’m sorry...I shouldn't have brought that up. I mean...I know that’s a touchy subject for you...."

Gus’ eyebrows arched. "It is? Why’s that?"

Now Adam looked completely uncomfortable. "You've just had a lot of physical problems...I just thought maybe it wouldn't be a good idea for you to...uh, go through that."

Gus’ jaw dropped. Adam stumbled on before he could speak.
"It's not a big deal. I mean, if you're worried about what I would think...”

Gus seemed so stunned that Adam was afraid he’d offended Gus. He made another half-hearted attempt at an explanation, but Gus cut him off.

“Adam,” he said. “Are you trying to tell me that we’ve been together all this time and you’ve never known for sure if I could have kids or not?”

Lamely, Adam said, “I knew it was possible...I mean, technically...but, I just figured it would be too risky for you ...after all that you’ve had to go through already...”

“Oh my God,” Gus said, absolutely astounded. “I don’t believe you.”

“Really,” Adam insisted. “I didn’t mean to bring it up.”

Gus was still shaking his head. “I can’t believe you didn’t just ask me...” He put one hand on either side of Adam’s face and made Adam look at him. “Don’t you think I would have told you? I know how important that is to you...”

“You are important to me,” Adam muttered. “The rest doesn’t matter...”

Inexplicably, Gus’ eyes filled with tears. “You sweet man,” he whispered shakily and hugged Adam. “Oh, you sweet man...”

A bit perplexed, Adam hugged him back and when Gus saw his worried expression, he said very gently, “Adam, from what I’ve been told, there is no reason why I can’t have kids when I’m ready.”

“But it would be so hard on you. Your back couldn’t take it...”

“I’d just have to take things real easy, that’s all.” Gus pressed a soft kiss against Adam’s mouth. “I think we can worry about that when the time comes. But since you mentioned it, you should know that it’s very important to me too. And that thinking about it is very exciting and wonderful and I think that while we’re waiting for the right time in our lives we should make sure that we get lots of practice.”

“You mean looking after Brian?” Adam said innocently.

“I’ve had lots of practice doing that already,” Gus said, glancing up at him from beneath lowered eyelids in a way that Adam found both irresistibly shy and suggestive. "I was thinking more about the earlier stages of the whole business.”

"Oh? I would have said that you were pretty experienced in that department..."

"Well, thank you. Doesn't mean I shouldn’t work on upgrading my skills, though."

"It's nice to see you're so dedicated."

Gus smiled. "I love my work."

"All right," Adam said, intrigued. "So...what would you like to practice first?"
Thoughtfully, Gus stepped backwards out of his embrace without answering. Taking note of Adam’s puzzlement as he moved beyond of his reach, Gus went unhurriedly to the bureau and stood in front of the large mirror, casually removing his watch and sliding off the silver bracelet that Adam had given him.

Adam didn’t move until Gus took up a brush and began pulling it through his dark hair. Gus tilted his head forward, moving the brush through his thick hair, and when he lifted his head and looked in the mirror, he found Adam had come to stand behind him. Without speaking, he took the brush and began stroking it through Gus’ hair for him.

Gus closed his eyes and stood silently, enjoying this personal attention until he heard Adam put the brush back down on the bureau.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

“You’re welcome,” Adam murmured back and slid his arms around Gus from behind. When Gus opened his eyes, he found Adam staring at him in the mirror, not taking his eyes off his face as Adam turned his head just slightly to kiss Gus on the temple.

They stood for a moment with their gazes just lingering on each other. When Gus felt Adam’s hands go to the buttons of his shirt, he leaned back against Adam and curved his hands around the arms that encircled him, pressing them gently closer.

He could feel Adam’s fingers brushing him the sensitive skin over his abdomen as Adam gently loosened his shirt and his breathing accelerated. With a half-groan, Gus closed his eyes and tried to turn towards Adam, but found Adam’s arms firmly holding him in place and Adam’s warm, soft voice tickling his ear.

“Hold still. Don’t move. Just look at me.”

Gus lifted his eyes back up to their reflections and felt an erotic jolt at the sight of the two of them watching themselves. It was impossible to take his eyes off Adam’s hands as they worked their way up the front of his shirt; when it was completely unbuttoned, Adam slowly slid his hands into the opening at the top and drew it down over Gus’ shoulders, leaving his torso in nothing but the tight wife-beater he wore underneath.

It seemed almost voyeurish to watch Adam’s hands moving over him from behind but they were both mesmerized and aroused by their own images as Adam caressed him. Feeling breathless and lightheaded, Gus had to rest his head back against Adam’s shoulder but his eyes never wavered and as the anticipation built, his hands unconsciously began moving over Adam’s, guiding them and inviting Adam to touch him more intimately.

He gasped when Adam caught his fingertips under the edge of the form-fitting wife-beater and deftly drew it off over his head. If the sight of all that bare skin threw Adam into a frenzy, he controlled himself amazingly well and just smiled into Gus’ desperately aroused eyes in the mirror.

“You look so incredible like that,” he whispered. “I love it when you’re so turned on...I love making you feel so good.”

“I’ve missed this so much,” Gus said softly, and groaned in frustration when Adam refused to let him turn around to face him. “Please...I want to touch you too.”
“Don’t you like this? Watching me touch you this way?”

“Yes...”

“I want you to see what I see when I make love to you. I want you do see how amazingly beautiful you are...the way your face changes every time something feels good...watch ...like this...is that good?”

“Mm,” Gus said faintly. One arm came up over his head and hooked behind Adam’s, ruffling his hair and betraying his impatience. “Yes, that’s good...but I need to love you too. I want you to feel the way I do...”

For a second, Adam’s control slipped and he had to bury his face against Gus’ throat, kissing his neck and shoulder while he tried to slow the rush of arousal. When he regained his composure a little he raised his eyes back to Gus’ but felt his body weakening all over again at the way Gus was looking at him. Sliding one hand in between them, he very slowly unbuttoned Gus’ pants. Gus sucked his breath in sharply as Adam opened the zipper and then just slid his hand around over his abdomen and then downwards, catching the loosened fabric of the pants and the waistband of the briefs underneath, pushing everything over Gus’ hips so that it just fell to the floor.

Gus’ chest was heaving with strong emotion and Adam could feel the way Gus’ heart was pounding beneath his hands. He backed up with Gus until he reached the bed and sat down, at which point Gus just turned very deliberately in his arms and slid onto his lap, straddling him and taking away his last ounce of control.

Gus wasn’t as gentle as Adam had been when it came to removing his clothes. Adam barely had time to identify the feeling of cooled air on one section of skin before he was aware it on another. When Gus pushed him back on the bed, that cool skin was abruptly met with very warm skin and Adam felt himself gasping as sensations began overtaking him that he couldn’t stop.

“Gus...Gus...” he said desperately. “I thought you wanted to take it slow...”

“I can’t wait,” Gus whispered against his mouth. “Just like you...before. You’ve got me too wild.”

Stubbornly, Adam tried to hold back the agonizingly good friction of Gus’ body against his. “This feels too good...please don’t rush. Make it last...”

“I can’t,” Gus said breathlessly. “I want it all...right now.” Gus was kissing him with deep, penetrating strokes that matched the steady rhythm of his long frame sliding over his and the hands he tried to use to slow Gus down crept past his lower back of their own volition, until they were urging him on, even as Adam still struggled to draw out the incredible sensations.

“It’s all right,” Gus sighed close to his ear. “Don’t fight it. You’re so close, baby...I can feel it. Just let go...let your body go. I promise you...it won’t be the last time I make you feel like this tonight.”

Adam’s eyes were closed but his vision was still going white around the edges. There was an incredible pressure inside him that kept building with every movement Gus made and he was still shockingly aware of a thousand other sensations, from Gus’ fingers stroking his forehead to the brush of Gus’ stubble against his skin. Adam felt Gus’ sudden, sharp intake of breath and then Gus stopped breathing altogether while his body tensed into one long spasm. Adam had no way to stop himself from surging up against Gus as everything started to move too fast and then his senses began going off-line one at a time as each one registered a powerful flood of pleasure and then
slowly settled back into satisfied relaxation.

“I’m sorry,” Gus whispered in the low, languid voice that always moved Adam so deeply after they’d made love. “I really didn’t mean to rush that...I wanted to show you how much I’ve missed you...”

“I think I got the general idea,” Adam said faintly, eyes closed.

“I promise, this time will be very, very slow...”

“This time? Do you mind if I have five minutes to catch my breath?”

Giggling, Gus snuggled against him.

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate the offer,” Adam said, opening one blue eye to make sure Gus got his point. “But physiologically speaking...”

“It’s all right. I don’t need a biology lesson. But don’t you fall asleep on me. I’m not finished with you yet.”

“We’ll be right back after a word from our sponsors,” Adam agreed, and the eye shut again.

It took just about every tactic Gus knew to keep Adam from dozing off. When he was finally teased back from the edge of sleep once too often, he growled at Gus, rolled over and pinned him down.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Gus said in satisfaction.

“You need to be taught a lesson, boy.”

Gus nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

“Would it have hurt to let me have a little nap?”

“You don’t know how to nap. Maybe you were nap-deprived as a child; I don’t know, but your idea of a nap is a full-night’s sleep and I have other plans for you, in case you didn’t get the hint.”

“Hint? You call that a hint? It was more like being hit with a two-by-four.”

“Oh, look who’s talking. The man who slid his hand up the inside of my thigh in the middle of a roomful of people. Like that was subtle.”

“Did it work? Huh? Did it?”

“It was effective...in its own underhanded way. Pardon the pun. And speaking of effective, are you awake now?”

Adam scowled at him. “Yes, dammit.”

Gus kissed him very sweetly and Adam grudgingly admitted later that it was well worth missing out on a few hours of sleep. Gus kept his promise to make Adam feel incredible more than once that night and when they finally did fall asleep in the very early hours of the morning, it was curled
together and thoroughly, hopelessly and unmistakably well reunited.

He found Gus the next morning by following the sounds of splashing. Gus was sitting on the bathroom floor next to the tub with his long legs showing beneath one of Adam’s shirts, obviously the loser in an ongoing bubble bath fight with Brian.

“Thank God...reinforcements,” he said with a grimace as another handful of bubbles flew.

Brian grinned up at Adam from under his halo of soapy hair.

“He’s awful cheery for so early in the morning,” Adam muttered.

“Well, I’d better feed him soon or he won’t be cheery much longer. I was just going to order some breakfast...what do you want?”

“A shower,” Adam said pointedly.

Gus tried to hide his smile. He rinsed Brian’s hair, making him squeal, and then shook out a towel and lifted the little boy out of the water.

“It’s all yours,” he said on the way by, stopping long enough to kiss Adam on the cheek. Brian stretched up and did the same, making Adam wince as at the feeling of a wet little face being pressed against his.

“Isn’t it time you went back to your mother, you little brat?” he sighed.

Gus made a face at Brian. “He’s grumpy when he wakes up, isn’t he?” he whispered and then had to beat a hasty retreat to avoid being hit in the backside by the bathroom door as it was slammed in his wake.

Somewhat bolstered by a length shower, Adam reappeared in time for breakfast and patiently helped Brian maneuver cutlery through a stack of mini-pancakes. When he’d had enough, Brian went to slide off his chair and was sternly told to get back up and finish his milk.

“No!” said Brian stoutly. “Done!”

“Yes!” said Adam. “Not done!”

They exchanged glares for a moment and then Brian reluctantly climbed back up onto his seat and picked up his glass. Satisfied, Adam smiled at him and then looked over at Gus who was on the phone and rolling his eyes.

“She’s ignoring me.”

“Who? Michelle?”

“Uh huh.”

“She’s probably not awake yet. Who knows what time they got back last night...I mean, this morning.”
“Well, I figured letting the phone ring fifty times might wake her up. See...she’s ignoring me.” Irritably, he slammed the receiver down. “Not that I’m trying to get rid of you, sweetheart,” he added, patting Brian on the head. “But I was hoping to have a little more privacy this morning.”

Adam abruptly put down his coffee and raised his eyebrows. Gus didn’t dare look at him, but the corners of his mouth twitched.

“That’s a good point,” he said. “Maybe you should just go bang on her door.”

“You go bang on her door. I’m going for a bath.” On his way past the table, Adam bent and brushed a kiss on Adam’s cheek and murmured, “And if you hurry up about it, you might get back in time to help me.”

Michelle’s room was one floor down, which was perfectly all right with Brian, who would ride elevators anywhere at anytime. Since he couldn’t read the numbers on the buttons, Adam had to show him which ones to push while at the same time trying to prevent him from pushing everyone within reach.

“We don’t want to be doing this all day,” Adam said with as much patience as he could muster after they’d ridden up and down for several minutes. “I have some place very important to be.”

When the door opened on the right level, Brian said, “More!” and took a swipe at the panel again. Adam scooped him up and half-threw the little boy over his shoulder.

“Sorry, buddy,” he said grimly. “Someday when you’re all grown up, you’ll understand.”

He stepped out of the elevator and paused for a second to look at the sign that indicated which rooms were in which direction. When he turned to the right, with Brian still slung over his shoulder, he stopped dead and stared.

Michelle was just in the process of letting herself into her room at the far end of the hall. Even from where he was standing, Adam could see that she was still wearing the same clothes he’d seen her in the night before and had her purse hooked over her shoulder.

He gave her a second to get her door opened, grateful that Brian couldn’t see his mother from where he was dangling upside down. Once Michelle was out of sight, Adam lowered Brian to the ground, where the little boy tugged on his hand and looked up inquiringly.

With a sigh, Adam walked him down to the end of the hall and knocked on the door. Michelle opened it immediately, looking at first startled and then thoroughly uncomfortable.

“Hi sweetheart,” she said, as Brian grabbed her in a fierce hug. “Did you have fun?”

“Did you?” Adam asked, trying to keep a straight face.

He wouldn’t have thought Michelle was capable of looking so completely embarrassed. Taking pity on her, he said simply, “I’m just dropping him off. We’ll see you later, I guess.”

On the way back to his room, Adam decided that it was probably better for him not to tell Gus what he’d seen. After all, Michelle was a grown woman and had every right to be out enjoying herself as much as possible. Adam doubted Gus would have had any problem with the idea of Michelle sneaking back into the hotel after being spending all night out clubbing with their friends.

He just wasn’t sure Gus would be quite so understanding if he knew that Michelle had apparently been doing a lot more than that.

Since there was only one private elevator to the top floors...and since Adam and Brian had tied that same elevator up for about ten minutes straight... and since he really doubted that Michelle was likely to have walked up fifteen flights of stairs from the lobby...there was only one way she could have possibly just been arriving back at her room without him encountering her on the way up.

And that was if she’d just come out of somebody else’s room on the same floor.

Dear Diary: I’m so tired but I had to tell you...what happened between us before wasn’t just a one-time thing. I didn’t know what to expect at the party but as soon as he saw me he took me aside and slipped me the number of a private room in the hotel. He went all out for me with flowers and champagne. He wanted to dance, but as soon as he touched me it started all over again, just like before. We spent hours in bed. I was afraid everyone else would notice he was gone, but he didn’t seem to care. He said I’m worth taking risks for. In the morning, he didn’t want me to leave, but he said I needed to get out before anyone from the hotel recognized me. He wants to see me again today.

A/N: Well, there was a brief mention of mpreg earlier in this chapter. How do you feel about that? Personally, if I ever get to write a story in that genre, I would like to treat as a normal, natural pregnancy. I’m just curious to know your feelings about this issue. Thanks! <333333
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Once is an accident. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is a conspiracy. Who do you trust?

There was a big red circle drawn on the calendar. Nobody thought it was odd. After all, the plans for that day were the topic of conversation everywhere.

The date couldn't have been more appropriate if it had been designed that way. As it was, it was just a fluke...a happenstance so completely perfect that it couldn't be ignored. Opportunities like this didn't come along every day.

Things had gone on long enough. It was time. Time to make a statement, to tell the world...literally.

The biggest gay rock star of all time. A live audience of millions. New Year's Eve, which was the true beginning of the new year.

How fitting.

Fortunately for Adam, Gus had other things on his mind when Adam got back and gave him far more interesting things to do than spend time wondering about who Michelle had spent the night with. They had booked three floors of the hotel and although Adam could have easily found out who was staying on what floor, he already had his suspicions and quite frankly, it wasn't any of his business anyway.

After a long and very demanding session in the bath, Adam was all for going back to bed - to sleep - and wasn't overly enthusiastic when Monte phoned to suggest a game of basketball in the private outdoor court behind the hotel.

"Go on," Gus said. "I'll come and cheer for you."

"I'm not good at sports," Adam grumbled.

Gus grinned and poked him in the ribs. "Well, you should work on getting yourself back in shape then, sweetheart...you've got a tour coming up."

"Back in shape?" Adam said, indignant. "Excuse me? You didn't seem to think I was having any problem keeping up with you during the bathtub-Olympics."

"Your gold medal is in the mail," Gus said soothingly.

Outside, it was brutally hot for the middle of October. Adam and his friends squared off against the security staff to play five on five while Gus relaxed with the other significant others and a few
of the staff in the shade on the sidelines.

"You're awake!" he said wryly to Michelle, who was half-reclined on a chaise lounge with Brian on her lap. "You must be getting too old for this all-night partying...what time did you get back in?"

Fortunately, Gus was half-watching the game and missed the look on Michelle's face as his friend stumbled for an answer.

"I wasn't watching the clock. It was late."

"So how hard did Adam have to pound on your door to wake you up? You sure weren't in any hurry to answer the phone."

Michelle floundered again. "Sorry about that. But, hey... thanks for watching Brian."

"He wasn't any problem," Gus smiled. He reached across and tweaked Brian's nose. "Were you, you little monster?"

Brian took this as an unspoken invitation to trade laps. His mother certainly was being any fun and even at the tender age of three, he knew his odds of getting attention were much better with Gus than with just about anybody.

He adored basketball and sat enraptured as the game went on. He apparently didn't feel a strong allegiance to any particular team; he applauded for every shot on either net, whether it went in or not.

"Play," he said to Gus several times, pulling at his arm.

"Hm?" he said distractedly, trying to focus on what Sophia was saying to him. "I don't think so, kid. Maybe when you're about three feet taller."

Brian didn't like that answer. He pouted for a moment then slyly edged off Gus' lap. Gus, assuming Brian was going to plead his case to his mother, didn't pay much attention to him until he caught Brian's sudden abrupt movement out of the corner of his eye and realized he had taken matters into his own hands and dodged out onto the court to join the game.

"Brian!" he said sharply and bolted after him.

The ball at center had just been intercepted. Terrance was running full tilt down the sidelines looking over his shoulder for a pass from Monte and didn't notice that Brian had barreled out in front of him.

Gus was right on Brian's heels. He got hold of Brian by one arm, swung him around and then shoved hard so that he was out of Terrance's way, just about the same time that Terrance looked around and saw that Gus was right in his path.

He was going too fast to stop, so he changed directions. So did Gus.

Unfortunately, they picked the same one.

Gus didn't even have a chance to brace himself. Terrance hit him straight on, knocking him clean
off his feet. Feeling himself falling forward, he tried to twist clear but only made it worse and ended up crashing down on top of Gus.

He scrambled to his feet. When he looked down to see if Gus was all right, he was aghast to see that Gus wasn't moving.

He dropped back down on all fours beside Gus, unmindful of the way he skinned his knees and his hands on the pavement. The next minute he was hauled back to his feet by Adam, who was in an absolute blind rage and looked like he was about to kill someone.

Isaac seized Adam by both arms and pulled him back. "Jesus, Adam...let him go! It was an accident!"

"I'm sorry," Terrance said, horrified. "I'm so sorry...I didn't see him..."

Adam yanked free from Isaac's grip and dropped to his knees. It was hard to tell whose face was whiter, his or Gus', but in his case Gus' was due to pain and his was due to sheer panic.

The risk had been there from the very beginning, hanging over both of them in everything they did, but Adam had learned to live with it the same way she had. He knew the instant it happened that reality had finally caught up with them. It only remained to be seen how bad it was and what the long-term implications would be.

It didn't seem fair. Everything had been going so well.

Gus lay flat on his back with his arms up across his face. His first instinct was to roll around in pain; his second was to try and lie absolutely still while he did a quick physical inventory to see what was working and what was not.

He tried to breathe normally but his lungs refused to inflate. Clenching his hands into fists, he forced himself to relax as much as possible and push away the natural panic that overtook a body starved of oxygen. He was aware of anxious faces hovering over him and worried questions being fired from all directions but had no strength to worry about offering anybody any reassurance.

Adam was trying to draw his arms down so he could see his face. Michelle ran across from the sidelines, knelt beside Adam and grabbed his wrists.

"Adam, he's had the wind knocked out of him. Give him a second to get his breath back."

"Did you see how hard he landed?" Adam said, horrified.

"I know. Calm down. Don't pull him around too much. Gus, hon...are you okay? Can you hear me?"

"He hit his head," Tommy said very sickly.

"No, I don't think so. Will you all back up a little so I can see, please?"

Adam was frantic. "Michelle, he might really be hurt."

"Adam...just wait a minute. He's not unconscious...see, he's starting to take in some air now...Gus, try and take slow breaths."
"He should see a doctor," Adam insisted. "He may have really done some damage..."

"Take it easy, Adam," Monte said, trying to calm him down. "Give him some time."

"He's got a spinal injury, Monte!" Adam snapped.

"I know that! And you shouldn't move somebody with a spinal injury, should you? If he's hurt, you should call an ambulance."

"Cut it out you two," Michelle said sharply. "Nobody's doing anything until Gus can tell us what's going on. He's had the breath knocked out of him...you wouldn't be moving much either. And Terrance, for God's sake, stop looking it's the end of the world. He ran right in front of you; there wasn't anything you could have done to avoid him."

"If he'd been playing his position," Adam said through clenched teeth. "He wouldn't have been anywhere near Gus."

"Jesus, Adam," Isaac said angrily. "Make him feel better, why don't you?"

They were all talking at once, still arguing over what to do when Adam felt himself seized by a handful of sopping wet shirt and pulled down until he was looking directly into a pair of very green, very exasperated eyes.

"Lambert," Gus said quite clearly. "You are dripping sweat all over me. And since I'm not quite ready to be buried yet, thanks...do you suppose you could all stop bickering long enough for somebody to help me up?"

He made light of it, but before they even made it back to the hotel, Gus knew something was seriously wrong. Normally, any stress on his spinal column resulted in numbness down his left arm and leg that was a familiar prelude to the pain that should have kicked in as the lack of sensation passed. But this time, there had been excruciating pain in his back the moment he'd fallen and the loss of sensation that followed lingered far longer than it should have. There was no hint of the pins and needles that usually marked the return of feeling as the nerves began transmitting again.

He made it up to their room under his own steam although he was limping badly and Adam had to steady him. He brushed off everyone's concern and insisted that they go ahead to lunch without him.

He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes, waiting for something...anything...to happen. Adam had a quick shower and when he went to check on him, Gus took Adam's hand and pulled him down to sit beside him on the bed.

He took one look at Gus' face and his heart went up into his throat.

"I don't want to scare you," he said as evenly as he could manage. "But I've lost most of the feeling on my left side."
Adam drew a sharp breath but to his credit, managed to keep his panic down. He gently massaged Gus' left hand, watching him anxiously for signs that his touch was registering and when he realized it wasn't, he pinched the inside of Gus' wrist hard.

Gus shook his head and his breathing accelerated. "No...I can't feel that. Something's wrong."

Adam put a hand against Gus' cheek to calm him. "Okay, just tell me what you need me to do."

"Get me my cell-phone. And go and get Michelle."

His specialist's number was on speed-dial. He wasn't in the office, but at Michelle's insistence, his nurse tracked him down at a local bistro.

He listened in silence to Gus' description of his fall and the lack of sensation that remained. When he finished, the shakiness in his voice betraying his fear, the doctor sighed and cleared his throat.

"All right. You need to get in here. But I don't want just anyone to move you. Tell me where you are and I'll arrange an ambulance for you."

Gus choked on a weak laugh. "I'm in New York."

The doctor uttered a rather unprofessional curse. "You don't make things easy do you? Are you downtown? Fine...I've got some colleagues there. Let me make a few calls and they can arrange to have a specialist look at you. But they don't do anything until they've consulted me...you got that?"

"Okay. But...my problem is...I mean, you know my rather unusual circumstances..."

"Yes, I know. My son's girlfriend apparently has pictures of the two of you all over her locker at school. Is that your way of saying you need to keep this quiet? Yes, I get your point. Let me see what I can do."

It was pure co-incidence that a local television news crew happened to be passing on their way back from the coverage of a rather boring civic event. Caught in the heavy congestion of fan traffic outside the hotel, they noted with interest the ambulance that drove into the underground, and decided to pull over and go inside to find out what was going on.

They hadn't been the only ones that noticed the paramedics, but they were the only ones who had any luck grilling a handful of hotel employees for information. They then went back to their station and reported that there had been some kind of medical emergency at the hotel where Adam Lambert was staying. Within an hour, suggestion was rampant all over radio and television that something had happened to someone in the band's entourage, and possibly even to Adam himself.

It got worse. Since Adam had been seen getting in the ambulance, and his band was quickly confirmed to have remained behind, it was only a matter of time before the press knew that Gus had been the one taken to the hospital. The legitimate media only theorized cautiously on the cause of his sudden illness but in the absence of any comments from Adam, speculation quickly grew among the fans that Gus had needed an ambulance for any one of a dozen nasty reasons, from a drug-overdose, to a domestic dispute.

Gus was blessedly oblivious to all of this. At the hospital, he tried to quell his growing sense of panic as he was subjected to a lengthy examination and an MRI. The local specialist then consulted with his own doctor by phone and both agreed that he needed to be moved back to
Toronto so he could be under the care of the physician who was most familiar with his case.

Michelle refused to let Gus be transported by ground. "I'll borrow a plane. Dad loans the jets out for mercy runs all the time. He can damn well do it for Gus."

Adam let Michelle make all the arrangements, too numb to be able to think straight. He did his best to keep calm around Gus but he was all too aware that they were both visualizing the same kinds of horrible scenarios.

Adam lost his cool only once, when Gus reminded him that he had two very important interviews booked the next day.

"Don't say it," Adam said furiously. "Don't even think about it..."

Michelle backed him up. "They'll have to get postponed. He goes with you and so do I."

It took hours for Michelle arrange for one of the jets to be sent to New York. All three were away, necessitating a wait until one could be diverted, with its corporate passengers left to make their own way home by commercial air.

"It will do them good," Michelle said to her father grimly. "Let them fly the friendly skies for once and see how the real world lives."

Jeremy stopped at the hotel on the way from the hospital to pick up Brian; Michelle was waiting on the edge of the ramp when the limo pulled up at the airport and to her astonishment, Tommy got out with them.

Brian ran to his mother, but he was more interested in another flight on Grandpa's plane than he was in anything else and went aboard with Jeremy without argument, leaving Tommy and Michelle standing beside the car.

"Thanks for bringing him out," Michelle muttered.

"No problem," he said gently. "Are you okay?"

She glanced over her shoulder as the jet switched over from auxiliary power and she could hear the pilot running up the engines. "I'll be better once we get home."

He would have taken her hand, but she had both her arms folded tightly at her waist and seemed determined not to look at him. "You scared me to death on the phone. Is there any way to tell how bad it is?"

She shook her head. "His own doctor wants to see him. But..." She bit her lip. "I don't think it's good. He'd been warned this might happen."

For a moment, her emotions got to her and she didn't object when Tommy put his arms around her and held her. After a minute, he walked her out to the plane and took her on board.

Gus had been sedated for the flight. He was too drowsy to speak to Tommy but he smiled and squeezed Tommy's hand when he bent down and whispered to him. He hugged Adam and assured him that he will be there if Adam needs him and that everything will be fine, but on his way out, at the top of the aircraft's steps, he turned back to Michelle and hesitated.
"Do you want me to come with you?" he asked suddenly.

Michelle blinked in astonishment. Her nerves were too on edge to be concerned about trying to interpret the real meaning behind his offer and she said without thinking, "Do you mean for me or for Gus?"

She saw the hurt look that crossed his face and kicked herself.

"I just thought maybe I could help," he said, very low. "It's okay. You can call me if you need me."

"I'm sorry," Michelle said hollowly. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. But this isn't the time. I can't deal with anything else now. I'm sorry...I know I'm not being fair..."

"Don't worry about it," he replied, staring over her shoulder out the door. "Just keep me posted, will you?"

He ran down the steps and walked back across the tarmac to the car. Michelle thumped the heel of her hand against her forehead and then stood aside to let the first officer retract the stairs.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

Out the window, she could see Tommy leaning against the door of the limo, waiting for them to take off.

"Fine," she said. "Just extraordinarily stupid, that's all."

Gus' choices were remarkably limited.

"I did tell you this was a possibility," Dr. Holt reminded him quietly.

Gus stared silently out the window. The room was very private and, by the usual Toronto General standards, roomy and cheerful.

He remembered little about the trip. His first clear thoughts had been when he'd awoken to find Adam holding his hand and trying to reassure him with a smile that couldn't quite disguise his fear and exhaustion.

Adam looked from the doctor to Gus and back again. "But I thought the odds for the surgery being successful weren't very good."

"Well..." He hesitated. "Actually the fact that you've waited this long has probably worked in your favor. There's been a lot of renewed interest in spinal cord research - thank Christopher Reeve - and there have been considerable advancements in the last few months. But this is a far cry from a sure thing. You're still taking the same risk. You may end up no better than you are now...or worse. With such delicate surgery, there is always the chance of permanent damage and that could, conceivably, mean complete left sided paralysis."

Gus lifted the affected hand and flexed it, with great difficulty, but flexed it nonetheless. "I've
already gotten some feeling back...why isn't it possible that I could get the full range of motion back without surgery?"

Dr. Holt folded his hands behind his back. "I'm not saying it's not possible. But it's not likely. And the next time you fall, or the next time somebody runs into you..."

His recommendation was surgery. Immediately. He didn't even wait for Gus to ask but wheeled in another specialist who evaluated his case and the second opinion was the same as the first.

"I need some time to think about it," Gus said in a choked voice.

When the doctors were gone, he lay back against his pillows and closed his eyes. Adam was sitting in a chair in the corner and Michelle was leaning against the windowsill. They exchanged brief, distressed glances, but neither of them spoke.

After a long pause, Gus opened his eyes and rolled his head on the pillow until he could see them both.

"So?" he said quietly. "What do you guys think?"

"It has to be your decision," Adam murmured.

"That's not what I asked!" he snapped, suddenly angry. "I need your opinion. For God's sake, Adam...I'm too scared to think straight...I need you to help me..."

His eyes filled with tears and Adam immediately went to sit beside him on the bed and put his arms around Gus. For the next two hours, both he and Michelle sat with Gus as he tried to come to grips with the shock and the fear and when he finally made his decision, it was based more on the choices he knew he didn't have than the choices that actually lay in front of him.

On top of everything, he was worried about Adam. It was bitterly ironic that at the exact time he was trying to refocus public attention on himself, he was caught in a completely different and unwelcome kind of spotlight. Fretful that rumors about his illness would adversely affect the promotion of the new album, Gus asked Adam specifically to have his publicist release a statement that outlined his condition.

"If you want this kept private, we'll keep it private," Adam argued.

Gus insisted. Personally, Michelle agreed and took Adam aside to tell him so.

"It's not worth letting people speculate. You've got enough people out there crossing their fingers and hoping you fall on your face with this album...don't give them any more ammo to start taking personal shots. That's only going to hurt Gus more in the long run."

Reluctantly, Adam did as he was asked. He also told his management company to cross him off any personal appearances for at least one full week and then deliberately turned off his cell-phone so he didn't have to listen to the furious backlash.

Gus knew Adam was going to take a great deal of flack for missing scheduled interviews at such a critical time and didn't tell him that it was one of the main reasons behind his decision to go ahead with the operation. If nothing else, Gus knew that Adam was at no point in his life to be in limbo while he sat around and waited to see what might happen.
He refused to see either Adam or Michelle immediately before the surgery claiming he was afraid that the sight of them would make it impossible for him to keep calm. And although Dr. Holt assured them that there was no need for them to actually be at the hospital while the operation was underway, the thought of the long, painful process of just sitting around at The Farm and waiting for his phone call was unthinkable to both of them. Instead, they stole into the hospital early in the morning around the time that surgery was scheduled to start and commenced the long, painful process of just sitting around in the waiting room.

Adam was a basket case, but Michelle was worse. She was not only fighting memories of the days that followed the accident, when she faced losing Gus as well as Nick, but memories of all the other surgeries that Gus had undergone in the months that followed.

Unable to sit still, but also unable to go wandering in the hallways without causing a riot, Adam wore a little path back and forth between the waiting room and the nurses' station, looking up hopefully every time one of the staff appeared from the surgical wing. Michelle paced with him until the distinct warning of a migraine began lurking at the base of her neck, forcing her to take a double dose of Tylenol and retreat to one of the waiting room sofas.

Unexpectedly, she fell into a heavy, exhausted sleep. She was startled awake a long time later by a touch on her arm and jerked upright, rubbing her eyes and trying to focus on Adam's face.

Her heart sank. He'd obviously been crying and the hands that reached out to grip hers were shaking badly.

Tears sprang to her own eyes. She pressed one hand to her mouth and lurched forward into his arms and with her head pressed against his shoulder and her chest heaving it was several long moments before his words penetrated her distress and began to register.

Stupidly, she began to cry even harder.

"He's all right. Dr. Holt says everything went smoothly and that they got all the fragments without any problem and that there's no permanent damage to the spine. He's very pleased with how well it went and he thinks that with a lot of rest and physio, he'll be absolutely fine."

Fortunately for Gus, he knew very little about the difficult days that followed. What had gone well for him during surgery was completely undone by the complications that plagued him afterwards. On the first night, the heavy sedation caused his blood pressure to drop drastically, setting off all the alarms on the equipment in his hospital room and scaring the hell out of Adam who had been dozing in a chair in the corner.

That was corrected easily enough, but by the end of the second day, a post-surgical infection had begun to set in. It wasn't unexpected but it did get a faster hold than Dr. Holt had anticipated and before they could boost the level of antibiotics in Gus' system, he was running a raging fever and they had great difficulty in getting his temperature down.

On the third day, he had a reaction to the powerful doses of erythromycin. By the time they had stabilized him again, Adam was a complete wreck and the nurses were half-teasing him that they were going to start hooking him up to heart monitors if he didn't calm down.
He spent most of his time in Gus' room, not only because he was reluctant to leave Gus but also because getting in and out of the hospital after the first day proved nearly impossible. Once word got out that he was there with Gus, the entire block around the building was staked out twenty-four hours a day and even the underground parking garage was peppered with lurking fans.

Fortunately, The General was only one of many hospitals in the downtown core, all of which were linked with a series of underground tunnels, primarily for transferring patients, but also to facilitate the easy movement of staff between buildings. Dr. Holt made sure Adam and Michelle were shown how to sneak in and out without being seen, allowing them both the freedom to go up to The Farm for a decent meal, a shower and a few hours of sleep.

Four days after the surgery, Michelle convinced Adam to stay in bed one morning and went into the hospital on her own. She found Gus awake, but still too groggy from painkillers to carry on anything but the simplest and shortest of conversations.

Michelle hung around until Dr. Holt passed through and reported that Gus was fighting the infection well and that there were no other signs of complications. Satisfied that things were going as well as possible, Michelle made a quick trip down the hall to phone The Farm and leave a message for Adam and was on her way back to Gus' room with a magazine and a cup of coffee when she turned a corner and ran smack into Tommy.

"Watch where you're going, for God's sake!" she said furiously after being forced to perform a short but lively jig in a circle to avoid scalding herself. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"What do you think I'm doing here?" he said blankly. "I'm tired of your five minute telephone updates...you keep saying everything is fine, but I decided to come and see you all for myself."

"You might have warned me," she muttered and scrambled to hide how pleased she was to see him.

"Why? So you could try and talk me out of it?"

She scowled. "I wouldn't have...oh, never mind."

"How are you? You look tired. Here, let me take that."

"Don't take it too far," she said with a sigh. "Right now, caffeine is the only thing that's keeping me going."

"I believe it. How's Gus?"

"Not bad. His doctor's pretty pleased, but he's got a long road ahead of him. So far, the best he can do is mumble. When he's worked his way up to complaining about the food, I figure he'll be out of the woods." She looked up at him from under her blonde fringe. "And where are you supposed to be that you're not?"

"L.A. Don't look at me that way. I'll head out tonight."

She took him into Gus' room and watched the way his face changed when he saw Gus. There was still enough medical equipment around his bed to make it look like an operating room and Gus was motionless and extremely pale. When he took Gus' hand, Gus blinked at him but it took several long seconds of squinting before he recognized Tommy and managed a dopey smile.
"You're not supposed to be here," he mumbled.

Tommy rolled his eyes at Michelle. "Oh yeah, I can see some things are working just fine."

Gus’ eyes closed and for a moment Tommy thought he had drifted back to sleep, then the dark lashes fluttered open a second time and the squinting resumed.

"You're not supposed to be here," he said again.

Tommy looked up at Michelle. She shrugged.

"Short term memory's still a bit off the mark. Don't worry. It's the painkillers."

She stood for a moment watching the way he was staring at Gus and then abruptly crossed the room to the window and began deadheading some of the blooms on the dozens of flower arrangements that had been delivered. When she turned around, Tommy was leaning against the wall at the end of the bed and looking at the floor.

His gaze flickered up to hers, startling her and making it impossible to look away.

"Mad at me?"

"No," she said quietly. "And this isn't the time to be talking about this."

"Can we pick a time?"

She brushed imaginary pollen off her fingers. "Sure. What's your schedule for oh...say, a week Thursday?"

His eyes narrowed.

"Sorry, I don't have my copy of your itinerary handy..."

He hunched his shoulders and let them fall. "I'm not trying to put more pressure on you. I just think a few things have to be said. Is there someplace we can go and talk? Now?"

"No," she said flatly. "I will not talk about this right now. In case you hadn't noticed, I've just spent six days in hell worrying about Gus, worrying about Adam...I'm exhausted and I'm not thinking straight."

"Would it be easier for you if I go?"

She pulled her bottom lip through her teeth. "Adam will want to see you. He'll be here in a couple of hours."

"Okay. I'll come back later."

He pushed himself away from the wall. Michelle closed her eyes, put one hand up and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Oh shit...I'm sorry," she said raggedly. "Don't go."
Gus hated painkillers and always had. Morphine made him nauseous; Demerol produced bizarre hallucinations. He normally stalled as much as possible between shots, but one of the unpleasant side effects of having all his nerves back in full working order was the fact that they were now quite capable of transmitting agonizing pain.

The passage of time still wasn't registering. He was pretty sure he was in Toronto and he was pretty sure he remembered somebody - Adam? - leaning over him and telling him that the surgery had gone very well. But everything else was fuzzy and completely out of context.

He kept hearing Michelle's voice but his eyelids were so heavy they simply refused to stay open. He turned his head towards the sound and tried to blink the heaviness away and then just for a second, his vision cleared.

Michelle was standing at the end of the bed with her fair head tucked down on someone's shoulder. Gus' focus blurred, then re-established itself. He saw the pink hair and that made sense...so he hadn't imagined Tommy talking to him...but he couldn't remember if Tommy had been there all along or if he had just arrived.

Michelle raised her head. Gus tried to coax his wayward tongue off the roof of his mouth long enough to say something but his mouth simply wouldn't co-operate and it was at roughly the same point in time that his eyes decided to start playing tricks on him as well.

He saw Michelle's arms go up around Tommy's neck and pull his head down to hers. It took Gus a moment to process that; he closed his eyes to clear them but when he forced them open again, they were still standing at the end of the bed, kissing gently and murmuring to each other.

Gus blinked once more and then gave up and just let his eyelids sag shut. Damn, he hated Demerol.

He kept imagining the strangest things.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Once is an accident. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is a conspiracy. Who do you trust?

Once he knew he was expected to make a full recovery, Gus became grimly intent on doing just that...at the fastest pace possible.

When they told him he could sit up, he got out of bed. When they told him he could walk for five minutes, he walked for ten. When the physiotherapist gave him twenty reps of an exercise to do, he did thirty. He drove the hospital staff berserk by constantly doing more than he should have.

When he was released from the hospital after twelve days, Dr. Holt gave him a stern warning...overdue it and risk a lengthy setback. Gus looked up at him guilelessly and nodded, but both Adam and Michelle were in the room at the time and knew better than to fall for his acquiescent demeanor.

He was determined to go straight back to L.A.

“Do you know how much work I have to do?” he complained to Adam when he flatly refused to let Gus do anything of the kind.

“Tough. I’m going to be away on promotion and if you think I’m leaving you unsupervised at home, you’ve got another thing coming. You’ve got two choices; stay at The Farm, or you go to my mom’s. Take your pick.”

“That’s not fair,” he said, outraged. “Your mother would be just as bad as Michelle...hell, your mother would be worse than Michelle. I can take care of myself.”

“Bullshit.”

Grumbling, Gus gave in and agreed; he would stay at The Farm under Michelle’s evil eye until Dr. Holt gave him the all-clear. This also mean he was able to continue work with his usual physiotherapist, a man who already knew his case well and who also already knew each and every trick in his repertoire.

Satisfied, Adam flew out and caught up with his band on his cross-country promotion. He frequently spent more time in interviews answering questions about Gus than about the album, but was gratified to see the support for Gus among the majority of fans. He spoke to Gus every night and was relieved that Gus seemed to be gaining strength daily, although Adam took each of Gus’ reports with a grain of salt until he’d had the full story from Michelle.

Once he started full-time rehab, Gus became all too aware of how weak his back muscles had become since the accident and found the sessions of physio extremely painful and difficult. But he stuck to it doggedly, determined to be back to full strength by the release date of the album so that
he could be with Adam and his band for the celebration.

“Are we going to be celebrating?” Adam asked wryly. “A lot of people don’t think so.”

“Well, I do.”

“You’re not leaving there until Dr. Holt says you’re okay to travel.”

“I have an MRI on Thursday. I see him for the results on Monday. I’m getting on a plane on Tuesday.”

“You are not. Look, I’ve got an interview in New York on Monday morning. I will come up and go to the doctor’s with you, okay?”

“Okay,” Gus said softly.

Adam tried his hardest, and Barbara Walters did her best to accommodate him but the studio schedule was running so far behind that he would have had to walk out half way through the taping itself in order to be in Toronto in time.

He managed to reach Gus who was secretly relieved to hear that Adam would not be with him at the appointment. He was petrified that the MRI would show swelling or bleeding or some kind of complication that would prevent him from joining Adam the following week. All he wanted to do was to be with Adam on the date of the album’s release and if there was the slightest hint of any problem, he would have Dr. Holt and Michelle and Adam all insisting that he stay put.

Circumstances all conspired against Adam that day. First he was stuck at the studio until nearly five o’clock. Then he missed the first available flight from O’Hare and the next flight was delayed because of mechanical problems. It was nearly midnight when he and Jeremy finally arrived at The Farm but the lights were still on and Michelle met them at the door.

"Good flight?" she asked as he hugged her.

"No. Don’t ask. We probably could have walked here faster. I’m sorry we've kept you up so late. Is everything okay?"

She nodded but Adam caught the fleeting change of expression that she was quick to neutralize.

"How's Gus? What did the doctor say?"

Michelle averted her eyes. "I think he wants to tell you himself."

His heart plummeted. "What happened? Was something wrong with the test results? He's been doing so well..."

"I'm sorry, Adam...he asked me not to say anything. It really is something the two of you need to talk about privately. Go up and see him. He said he was going to stay up until you got here."

He ran up the stairs three at a time and eased Gus' door open as quietly as possible. The lights were dimmed down to near-darkness; tiptoeing over to the bed he found that Gus was curled on his side with the duvet drawn up to his neck and his eyes closed.
Gingerly he eased himself down beside Gus and laid one hand gently on the dark head. Smoothing his fingers through Gus' hair, he was leaning down over to kiss Gus' cheek when Gus' eyelashes fluttered.

"Hi," he whispered.

"I was wondering if you were going to make it in tonight," Gus murmured.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to wake you...but Michelle's got me worried. What happened at the doctor today? Why didn't you call me if something's wrong?"

Gus closed his eyes and shifted his head slightly on the pillow. "I thought it was something I should tell you in person."

Adam swallowed convulsively. Gus had been through so much already; Adam had hoped that the worst of his problems were over...

Gus raised himself slowly, forcing Adam to straighten up to give him room. The duvet fell to his waist and Adam had a brief, puzzling glimpse of bare shoulders and an oversized t-shirt before Gus slid his arms around Adam's neck and began nuzzling him with warm, wet kisses.

Adam's mind and his body abruptly went in two different directions. He opened his mouth to protest and then realized that was a serious mistake since Gus' kiss only deepened and flamed, numbing what little self-control he was managing to muster.

"Stop...stop..." Adam said hoarsely. "What are you doing?"

"You wanted to know what the doctor said," Gus whispered.

"He said you should jump on me the minute you saw me?"

He felt the smile that curved Gus' mouth. "Not exactly."

Frustrated, Adam took hold of Gus' shoulders and held him away. "Then would you mind telling me what's going on?"

Their physical relationship had always been so intense and satisfying that it was very difficult for them both when they were unable to be together. Since the surgery Adam had spent a lot of time resigning himself to the fact that it would be weeks, if not months, before Gus would be well enough for any kind of serious intimacy. He missed it - badly - but his main concern was that Gus make a complete recovery without rushing into anything that might set him back. And at the moment, he seriously doubted that coming on to him was something that Gus should have been doing, but it had been so long, and Gus felt so warm and strong and willing that his libido was going into serious overdrive.

Gus ducked his head a little and his lashes lowered. "My MRI was fine. There's no sign of any residual swelling, and Dr. Holt is very pleased with the report on my rehab. He said that as long as I'm feeling fine and don't overdo things, he doesn't need to see me for six months, and there's no reason why I can't start going back to all my normal activities."

Lifting his head, he smiled at Adam. Even in the dimness, he could see the teasing light in Gus' eyes.
"So..." he whispered seductively. "Want to go skydiving?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Pulling Adam's head back down to his, Gus took up where he had left off, this time sliding his hands longingly over Adam's chest.

"Gus...Gus," Adam said breathlessly. "Baby, it's not that I'm not...I mean, I'm so glad for you...but..."

"Mmmm? But...what?"

"Stop it...don't do that..."

"What? This?"

"I don't think you know what you're doing."

Gus was trying to pull Adam's T-shirt loose in between kisses. "Yes, I do know. Come on...it hasn't been that long...you must remember how good this feels..."

Adam swore under his breath and grabbed Gus' hands. "Are you sure he said that this was okay? Specifically?"

"Believe me, I was very specific."

"And he told you this was fine?"

Gus sighed. "Adam, he told me I could go back to doing anything I felt up to. Just to be careful not to overdo it, that's all"

"Yeah, well...what does he mean by overdoing it?"

He was so genuinely concerned that Gus couldn't keep on teasing him about it. He lifted one of Adam's hands and pressed a soft kiss against the knuckles. "Will you just trust me? I feel fine, I feel strong ...I want this...."

He started taking off his own t-shirt. Involuntarily, Adam's gaze dropped to where the t-shirt now gaped away from Gus' body and gave him a tantalizing preview of what was underneath.

"I'm all yours," Gus whispered. "Would you like to see the rest of me?"

"Gus..." Adam said, and closed his eyes.

"I've missed you. I've been lying here waiting for you all night." He touched his fingertips to the corner of Adam's mouth. "Thinking about seeing you again. Thinking about good it was going to be that I can show you what I'm feeling after so long."

Adam squeezed his eyes shut more tightly. "I'm just so afraid of hurting you. You've been hurt so much..."

Sensing his growing weakness Gus kissed Adam again and felt an incredible rush as he groaned and reached up to tangle his hands in Gus' hair and tilt Gus' head so that he could draw the full
taste of his kiss into his mouth. Gus felt how Adam began to shake as he touched Adam's face, holding him back just slightly so that he was able to uncoil his legs and stand up at the side of the bed.

The boxers he was wearing clung to him and hid more than it revealed but it was incredibly provocative and sexy. When he put his hands on Adam's shoulders and began kissing his upturned face, Adam circled his arms around Gus' waist. He put tentative fingertips on Gus' skin and began smoothing them up and down. He felt all the familiar scars; the original wounds from the accident, the surgical scars from all the past operations and now, the new ridges of healing skin where the damage had finally been repaired.

Gus' breath caught and he winced, just slightly.

Adam let go in a hurry and stood up. “You see?” he said in frustration. “I’m hurting you.”

Gus groaned and looked up at the ceiling. “You are not hurting me.”

“Then why did you just flinch like that? You can’t tell me that those scars aren’t still painful.”

“Yes, I can,” he whispered. Taking advantage of the fact that Adam was now standing, he tried to pull Adam's shirt loose from his jeans, prompting him to back away.

He sighed. “Adam, they don’t hurt. They itch.”

“Excuse me?”

Gus threw up his hands. “They itch. Okay? The skin is healing, the stitches are dissolving...they itch. Like crazy. There. How sexy is that?”

He sank back down on the bed and crossed his arms dolefully, completely oblivious to the fact that it only emphasized his dishabille and made it even more impossible for Adam to concentrate.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and then began to laugh.

“It’s not funny. First of all, I can’t reach them properly to scratch them and secondly, even if I could scratch them, it would only make it worse.”

He dropped his head and Adam was suddenly angry with himself for spoiling his mood. After all, it was what he had been waiting weeks for; the thought of her in his bed again was beginning to numb his mind.

“Wait just a second,” he said softly. Gus was so consumed with disappointment that he didn’t notice that Adam vanished into the bathroom and then reappeared a minute later and sat down beside him on the bed.

He’d taken his shirt off. Gus raised his eyes, travelling up the long line of Adam's torso until he could see his face and the gentle, loving smile.

“Maybe I can help,” he said. “Turn around.”

Gus narrowed his eyes at him, but did as he was told. He practically yelped the next time Adam touched him; whatever it was...it was wet and cold.
“Sorry,” Adam said, but kept rubbing lightly. “Guess I should have warmed it up first.”

“I’m afraid to ask...”

“Baby oil. It will soften your skin up and take out any of the dryness. That should stop the itching.” He traced his finger along the edge of one scar and noticed how Gus leaned back against the pressure. “Is that okay?”

He nodded. He sat silently while Adam continued to gently work the oil into his skin, creating a warm, satiny finish under his hands. After a few minutes, Adam's touch worked its way up his backbone to his shoulders, smoothing oil into the base of his neck and along the smooth slope of his arms. And from that point on, for Adam at least, it went very rapidly from being an exercise in preventative skincare to being an exercise in self-control.

“When do I get my turn?” Gus said huskily. “To rub that all over you?”

“Maybe another time.”

“Please?” he whispered and tried to turn around. When Adam held him in place by the shoulders, Gus just slid backwards until his soft, slippery back was pressed against Adam's bare chest.

He gasped; he couldn’t help it. He dropped his head over Gus' shoulder and said, “Oh, my God.” His hands, still slick with oil, slid around Gus from behind and began touching him all over. Gus leaned his head back on Adam's shoulder and turned his face towards Adam's until they were exchanging hot, open kisses.

It was nearly impossible but Adam forced himself to go slow. And for all his protests to the contrary, even Gus was initially tentative and cautious in case sudden movement brought about a return of pain. But although there were an awful lot of sensations, none of them were the least little bit uncomfortable and eventually they lay down facing each other, legs tangled, kissing helplessly.

The struggle to keep it slow and gentle after such lengthy abstinence only made it more erotic and intense. As Gus gradually relaxed and realized that he wasn’t in any danger of hurting himself, he slid down hard against Adam with one fluid movement and all of his senses reeled.

“Oh wow,” he whispered. “That’s sooooo good.”

“He groaned desperately. “Please...you’re making me crazy. “

He breathed out, very hard. “Oh, yeah? Then you should do what you want to do and stop fighting it...”

Adam pressed his fingertips against the most sensitive areas on Gus' back, loving the way he arched against the subtle pressure. When he buried his face against Adam's throat and gasped his name, Adam hushed him softly and kissed his forehead. Gus twisted lightly in his arms, taking his breath away and exciting him even more.

In the months following his accident, Gus had suffered agonizing pain and had taught himself to shut out touch and sensation. Adam had been the one who had coaxed his body back into awareness and now he was reliving that incredible feeling a second time, overwhelmed by the
freedom of finally being healed and whole again after so long. The experience was just as powerful emotionally as it was physically and he found himself crying softly. Adam threaded his fingers into his hair and tilted his face up, murmuring against his lips then licking away tears and making him laugh.

“Where do we go next?” Gus whispered when they finally lay together in a sweaty, exhausted tangle.

“Back to New York,” Adam said sleepily. “But look, I don’t want you doing too much, understand? Until the launch party, I want you to take it easy...people have managed to fill in for you for the past month; there’s no reason why they can’t do it for another week.”

Gus rubbed his cheek against Adam's chest. “So what do I do to fill my time?”

“Just be with me. I’m going to be a nervous wreck until the release date. I’m going to need you to stay close and keep me from losing my marbles.” Gus chuckled and Adam hugged him and added ruefully, “I’m not kidding. I will go on stage and face seventy thousand people and it will hardly make me blink, but ask me to sit around one day and wait to see how many people go out and buy my album and I turn into the world’s biggest chicken.”

“I’ll see what I can do to keep you occupied that day,” Gus promised with a smile.

“Yeah, I was thinking about that.” Adam turned his head until his mouth was touching Gus’ ear and whispered, “As a matter of fact, I was just thinking about how inventive we’re going to be able to get now that you’re better.”

“Mmmm? You’ve got some ideas?”

“I have lots of ideas. Things I’ve wanted to do for months. Places I’ve fantasized about. Dreams I’ve had.”

Gus raised himself up on one elbow. “Are you going to give me any hints?”

“No,” Adam said firmly. “You’re not supposed to overdo things.”

“Well, no...” Gus wheedled. “But frustration would be very bad for me at this point.”

“Too bad. When I think you’re up to it, we’ll talk. Or rather, we’ll stop talking. Until then... you, my darling, are just going to have to be frustrated.”

Dear Diary:
I can’t believe how much he wants me. There doesn’t seem to be anything that will stop him from seeing me anytime, anywhere. He’s so incredible in bed – I can’t say no to him. Today he bought me the most beautiful necklace and says he never wants to see me without it on. There was one problem today...the boy’s around a lot more now and he has to be more careful. I can’t stand the sight of that boy. I saw them together today; I was there in the room with the rest of the entourage. The boy went up to him and gave him one of those lovey-dovey kisses and I wished I could tell the guy what he’d been doing with that mouth only a couple of hours before. I’d love to see the look on that beautiful face if he knew.

Bet he wouldn’t look quite so beautiful then.
Hype takes on a life of its own, no matter how much you try and control it. Not even the best spin-doctors in the world can control media frenzy when it hits the point of no return.

Gus had met Adam at the end of the Glam Nation tour and had only caught the briefest glimpse of the delirium that had surrounded it. Since then he had learned about fan adoration and obsession the hard way, but nothing had prepared him for the absolute hysteria that surrounded the release of the new album.

Adam spent two days with him in Toronto before he was convinced that Gus was strong enough to travel. They joined the rest of the gang in New York forty-eight hours before the official release and even Adam was shocked at the frenzy already at work in the city. The amount of attention being focused on him was both gratifying and terrifying; there was nothing more embarrassing than having the entire world watching if you just happened to fall on your face.

The night before the release, he threw a launch party at Studio 450. ("The banquet hall at Motel 6 was all booked up," Isaac pointed out to the reporter who was foolish enough to ask about the choice of venue). It marked the celebration of Adam's accomplishment and also marked the first public appearance that Gus had made with Adam since his surgery.

Hiding away at The Farm had given him a welcome break from the morbid fascination that fans always had for "the boyfriend" and the thought of plunging back into that spotlight was a daunting one. But he went along with all of the plans for that evening without comment or complaint, aware that Adam was too distracted by nervous anticipation to be able to understand his apprehension.

Gus went in the first limo with Adam, Tommy and Samuel Brice. Though he wondered why Samuel would be part of the entourage that night, he assumed that as sponsor for the upcoming tour, the band was as eager to promote their affiliation with Griffin as Griffin was to promote theirs with Adam. He just didn’t enjoy Samuel’s company and resented his pride of place at a moment that should have been entirely Adam's. For his sake, Gus carefully concealed any hint of dislike and endured Samuel's boorishness without comment.

At the last moment, Bill Wasley ducked into the car.

"You’re supposed to be there already," Samuel snapped at him.

Bill’s dark brown eyes flashed, but he held onto his temper. As he squeezed into the space next to Gus, he said simply, "I’ve been on the phone for the last four hours returning calls. You wanted a lot of media attention didn’t you, Samuel? Well, congratulations...you’ve got it. Doug just called me from the Studio and says it’s a zoo. They’ve had to close off part of 31st Street and bring in more police. Apparently you can’t move for photographers and fans."

"Well," said Gus brightly. "Good thing none of us is having a bad hair day, then."

Tommy and Adam glared at him.

"That’s a joke," he muttered.

"It’s not funny," said Adam.

He rolled his eyes and held his tongue from that point on, although he could have sworn he felt Bill
shaking with silent laughter beside him.

At the Studio, Jeremy came around and opened the back door, prompting earsplitting screams and a hail of flashbulbs.

Samuel pointed at Gus. "You wait here. Bill will bring you in."

Gus' eyes narrowed dangerously and he specifically looked at Adam for instructions. He had felt the way Adam's body tensed the moment the car had stopped and suddenly wished that he had come separately so as not to be a distraction to Adam at this particular moment. But although Adam seemed to not have heard Samuel at first, he then looked up and fixed the other man with a cold stare.

"You go first," he suggested coldly. "We'll be right behind you."

Samuel hesitated. Tommy gestured sharply and then followed the older man out, casting Gus an apologetic smile as he went.

Adam waited until Tommy had a good start, and then stepped out himself, holding his hand back into the car for Gus and pulling him lightly to his feet on the red carpet.

Gus paused for a second, smoothing out his pants. When he glanced up, he was completely blinded by lights.

"Holy shit," he said without thinking. Startled, Adam glanced around at him and then started to laugh when he saw the look on Gus' face.

"Sorry," he said, aghast.

"It’s all right," Adam murmured, leaning in and touching his mouth to Gus' ear. "It is your first time after all. Now shut up and smile, will you?"

Everything subsided into slow motion. He slid his arm around Gus' waist and walked him slowly towards the door, pausing strategically for pictures as requests were called from the crowd. Clutching one of Adam's hands with both of his, Gus found he was completely oblivious to all the noise and activity around them and couldn’t take his eyes off Adam's face as he smiled and waved at the fans who were packed up and down both sides of the sidewalks and across the street.

Inside the building they rode up to the beautiful loft with its panoramic views. The moment they arrived, Adam was taken aside for a few brief interviews, and Gus found that Adam’s grip on his hand only tightened when he tried to discreetly draw back out of camera range. Adam wandered around the room, shaking hands and welcoming the friends and family and other celebrities who had come to celebrate with him. Gus was just as capable of being star struck as anyone and frequently found himself speechless as he met dozens of people he’d long admired. He seemed excited and cheerful, and while Adam watched him anxiously for any signs that he was growing fatigued, it was obvious that Gus not only felt fully recovered, he had as much energy, if not more, than any of the rest of them.

He ran into Doug Taylor and greeted him with pleasure.

"Thank you again for the flowers," he said.
"I got your note. I’m glad they cheered you up. The hospital can be a pretty drab place, so I just wanted you to have something to brighten the room."

"So are you working tonight, or just here as a guest?"

"Bit of both. To be honest, Samuel spent a lot of time trying to convince Adam to hold this party in one of his hotels in Vegas."

"I heard."

"Frankly, I agree with him. New York’s a better place. Besides, it works out better for Griffin if he makes his first appearance at New Year’s."

"New Year’s?" Gus said blankly.

"Adam didn’t tell you? We only just finalized it, but I thought you would have heard."

"I’ve been a bit out of the loop," he said ruefully. "And to be honest, Adam’s doing his darndest to keep me there, so I don’t start doing too much."

"Well, tell him I’m sorry I let the cat out of the bag. But Griffin’s opening its newest hotel on New Years’ Eve. The Citadel. It will be one of the biggest entertainment complexes in the world. There’s a huge concert facility there, and we’ve managed to convince Adam to be the guest at the opening ceremony and then perform that night. VH1 has agreed to come in and do live a worldwide simulcast. There hasn’t been anything this big since Band-Aid."

"Whoa," said Gus. "No wonder Samuel’s so pleased with himself. That should fill his hotel pretty damn quick."

Doug grinned. "We haven’t exactly had trouble in that department. It’s not even open yet and it’s been pre-booked for months. But Samuel isn’t happy unless there’s excess on top of excess. He wants this to be the biggest launch of a Griffin property ever. " Dropping his voice, he added, "If he could have talked Adam into delaying the album release to coincide as well..."

"Don’t think RCA would have gone for that," Gus said, amused.

"No. But having him perform at such a high profile event will raise a lot of interest in the tour and hopefully pull in some early publicity."

Gus crossed his arms and looked suddenly speculative. Doug raised his eyebrows.

"Wheels are turning. I can tell. What’s on your mind?"

"Well, you know," Gus said slowly. "I’m in charge of promoting the charitable events in that are being held in conjunction with the tour..."

Doug wagged a finger at him. "That’s work. Careful. I’ll rat you out to Adam."

"Don’t bother. I’m just going to put a flea in your ear."

Gus didn’t lay a finger on Doug, but he could have sworn he felt his arm being twisted behind his back. By the time Gus finished with him, he had wrung a commitment out of him to talk to Samuel
and try to convince him that the Christmas season was an absolutely perfect time for a charity event and that not only would it also draw attention to Griffin and the upcoming grand opening of the Citadel, but it would also make Samuel Brice look like a blessed saint.

And there wasn’t any amount of money in the world that could buy that.

Every time Adam turned around there was somebody else demanding his attention. He kept scanning the crowd anxiously, looking for Gus and when their eyes would meet he would give him a lopsided, apologetic smile and Gus would smile sweetly in return. Even at dinner, Adam barely had time to murmur more than a few words to him in between interruptions. When the meal was over, Gus was invited to meet a few people on the other side of the room and it was almost an hour later before their paths crossed again.

Gus didn’t see him until he passed immediately behind Adam's chair where he sat talking with a handful of people as they enjoyed after-dinner liqueurs. Adam glanced up and snagged him by the arm as he passed by, pulling him down onto his lap and grinning at his flushed face when Adam kissed him despite the crowd of curious onlookers.

"Hi. Long time no see," he whispered to Gus, running his hands up and down his back. "By the way, you look absolutely beautiful."

Gus looked at his watch. "Oooh, buddy...that’s pretty bad. It’s been nearly three hours since you first saw me in this thing and that’s the first comment I’ve heard. You’re slacking."

"Sorry. I was a little wound up earlier."

Gus leaned over the table and squinted at the drink in Adam's glass. "You seem to be winding down quite nicely," he teased. "And how many of those have you had?"

"I’m not drunk. Well, not yet anyway. And I’ve been watching you. You’re the most gorgeous man here...do you know that? That suit looks incredible on you."

Gus grimaced. "Yeah, I’m sort of in trouble over the whole suit-thing. Somebody from People magazine asked me who the designer is."

"So?"

"So? I haven’t got a clue. Michelle bought it for me. Actually...here..." He wiggled around on Adam's lap until he was facing away from Adam. "Do me a favor and look at the tag on this thing, will you?"

"Oh my God," Adam said through gritted teeth. "Don’t do that. Do you have any idea what that does to me?"

"What?" Gus said puzzled, half glancing at Adam over his shoulder.

"Sliding around on me that way. We’re in a roomful of people in case you haven’t noticed."

Gus twisted around again, making Adam gasp, and widened his eyes at him. "I don’t believe you just said that." He leaned forward until they were nose to nose and said, "I seem to remember that you were the one filling me up right smack in the middle of a roomful of people...in this very city,
as a matter of fact."

"That was different."

"Different, my ass," he said lazily and wiggled again to make his point. "Now, if you’ll excuse me...? I was on my way to the bar."

He thoroughly enjoyed himself but before he knew it was after one a.m. and he had to admit he was exhausted. Knowing they would encounter more press and fans on the way back to the hotel, he escaped to the rest room to tidy up a little. On the way back out, he met up with Tommy, who had slipped out into the same hallway to make a phone call.

They smiled wearily at each other. There was still a hint of awkwardness between them from time to time, although Gus tried his hardest to make sure that Tommy understood what an important place he still had in his life.

"Are you heading back with us?" he asked, stopping to give Tommy a hug. Without waiting for an answer, he shook his head at him indulgently and added, "Never mind. I know that’s a stupid question. You look like you’ve still got a few hours of partying left in you."

"You don’t," Tommy said gently, touching his cheek. "You know, if you overdo things, Adam won’t be the only one hitting the roof. Don’t you know how worried we’ve all been about you?"

"Yes, I know. But I promise to be good. If Adam wants to stay with the rest of you, I can just get the limo to drop me back at the hotel. Personally, I’m going straight to bed."

Tommy raised his eyebrows. "And you think Adam’s going to leave you alone? I don’t think so." After a second, he added softly, "I wouldn’t...if I were him."

Caught off guard, Gus looked away and blushed furiously.

"But I know," he said tiredly. "I’m not him. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that."

Taking his hand, Gus towed him off into a little alcove. Tommy kept a tight hold on his fingers and leaned against the wall with his head down, staring at the silver bracelet on Gus' wrist.

"Please don’t start, Tommy," he murmured.

He looked up at Gus earnestly. "Believe me...I’m not trying to. You know, I thought I was good and over you. We’ve been working together and spending a lot of time together and I’ve been fine. I’ve just been happy seeing that you’re so happy."

He shrugged, still rubbing his fingers over Gus'. "Then you got hurt. I...I had a really hard time with that. Maybe it’s just me being overprotective...I just started having those feelings again. You had me worried half to death, even though Adam kept telling me you were getting better."

"I am better," he whispered.

"I’ve noticed," Tommy muttered. "Fuck, you look incredible. I’m sorry, baby boy. I’m not trying to start anything...I’m not trying to make things uncomfortable between us again. That’s the last thing I want. But it’s just really hard for me right now." He put one hand up and touched Gus' flushed, emotional face and said softly, "Sometimes I still wish you were mine."
Gus closed his eyes. Tommy gave himself a shake and squeezed his hand.

"All right, I’m shutting up now. It’s just nerves. And too much wine. Come on; let’s go find your date. He needs to take you home."

They walked out and back along the hallway completely oblivious to who they passed on the way by. The variety of tall potted plants had obscured the figure of the person who had stumbled upon them and stood by both watching and listening as they huddled together.

Mental notes were made. This was quite a revelation. There was no telling how useful that information might be later.

In the morning, Adam refused to get up. He was slightly hung-over and the limited sleep he’d actually managed to get had been restless and fraught with anxiety.

Gus sat cross-legged on the bed beside him and tried to coax him out. He just rolled over and put the pillow over his head.

"I don’t want to know," he said in a muffled voice.

Exasperated, Gus said, "Adam, it’s only eight thirty. Most people are still asleep."

"Some are not. Some have been awake all night, waiting for the album to show up on iTunes."

"So?" Gus leaned over him and gave him a poke. "That’s good then. That shows they’re quite excited about it."

"I still don’t want to know. If I don’t break the record for first day sales, everyone will be saying ‘we told you so’, and if I do break the record, everybody will just be saying that I bought up thousands of my own album to make the numbers look good..."

"Oh, you need to get up and have some coffee," Gus said, rolling his eyes. "You’re getting way ahead of yourself here. If everyone else is as paranoid as you, we’re in for a very long day."

Adam refused to budge. Finally, Gus gave up, got up and got dressed.

Adam peeked out from beneath the pillow just as Gus shrugged into a leather jacket and slid on a pair of sunglasses.

"Where are you going?"

"Shopping."

"Shopping?"

"Uh huh. I’m going out to buy me the album. A physical one."

That got Adam up in a big hurry.

"You can’t do that!" he said, aghast. "What if somebody sees you?"
"Yeah? So? They’ll think I’m a fan. Which I am. And they’ll know that I think it’s good enough to spend my own money on, even though I could get promotional copies by the truckload."

Adam's jaw opened and closed without any sound.

"You could come with me," Gus said mildly.

"What?"

Gus gestured impatiently. "Throw on some clothes, grab your shades, put on that stupid awful knitted hat that I hate, and come with me. We’ll cruise by some of the big record stores and see how things are going."

Adam blinked. "I can’t."

Gus shrugged. "So stay here. I’ll fill you in when I get back."

He was almost out the door before the pillow hit him in the head. When he looked back, Adam was sitting up in bed with his arms crossed, grinding his teeth and scowling.

"Fine. Wait for me. I’ll be ready in...thirty minutes."
Dear Diary:

A horrible, horrible night. It was all a mistake...as soon as he found out, he arranged for everything to be fixed. He even came to get me himself, in a big beautiful car, and as soon as we were inside with the doors closed, he pushed me down on him. Good thing the driver couldn’t see us or hear us. I had him screaming more than once, on the floor, on the seat, even standing up out the sunroof. And the big news is that he’s even taking me with him on trips now. Even with him there, he just brings me along with the rest of the entourage and nobody knows. The money keeps coming in, thank God. I need it and he never says no when I ask for more.

Records were made to be broken after all.

To the media who pestered him for comments about the phenomenal first day sales figures, he presented a matter-of-fact face, saying only that he hoped the album would be judged on its own merits and not merely by the dollar signs. In private, he was all giddy with excitement and overwhelming relief and felt, finally, that the heaviest pressure was off and he was able to focus on the upcoming tour without worrying about how well the album was doing.

It was the start of several incredible weeks. For Gus, it was doubly exciting; not only was he able to share Adam’s astonishing success both in private and in public, he was experiencing the remarkable feeling of being completely healthy for the first time in years and it was a struggle for Adam to keep him from overdoing things.

"Dr. Holt said I could do anything I wanted to," he pointed out peevishly.

Adam refused to budge. "Yes, I know he did. But I don’t think he meant for you to be doing them all at once. You’d be rock-climbing up one side of a mountain and skiing down the other if I wasn’t sitting on you half the time."

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "So...maybe you’d better sit on me a little more often...maybe I won’t get the urge to be so active in other areas."

Adam sighed and shook his head at Gus, but they were both feeling a hopeless addiction to each other now that Gus was finally healed and able to be as adventurous as he wanted in the bedroom...and anywhere else the mood struck. The weeks between the album launch and the Christmas season were the happiest weeks of their relationship, full of promise and excitement and a deepening love that they both found overwhelming and fulfilling.

Doug had executed Gus’ concept on extremely short notice. Samuel had been quite taken by the idea of a benefit concert the week before Christmas, with Adam performing in one of his smaller Las Vegas venues for a crowd of underprivileged kids. Gus had to do a bit of fast-talking to convince Adam and his band to give up some of the precious holiday time to perform, but when it came right down to it, there was enough incentive for them to keep Griffin happy that they came around willingly.

Because Samuel wanted to keep the unveiling of the “new” concert for the New Year’s Eve show that coincided with the opening of The Citadel, Adam took the opportunity to create a play list with
some unusual mixes of songs. Along with many of his best-known tunes, he worked in a series of new "covers", giving himself and his band the opportunity to have some fun with other people’s material.

They rehearsed in L.A. for a week before the show, arriving in Vegas on December 15th. Although the Citadel was not officially opening until New Years, the hotel was already half full of A-list guests and at Samuel’s insistence, it was there that the band went to stay.

When the bellhop let them into their room, Gus found a beautiful vase of tulips waiting for him on the bedside table. He looked over his shoulder at Adam as he followed Gus in and his mouth curved in a shy smile. The flowers Adam sent him were invariably tulips if they were available, in honor of his Dutch heritage. It had become a personal and intimate ritual between them whenever there was a special occasion.

"Did you do this?" Gus asked softly.

"Maybe you should read the note and find out."

Gus unpinned the little envelope from the bow and slid out the card, eyeing Adam covertly over the top of his sunglasses. The message made him smile and blush; when Adam came to stand beside him, Gus put one hand up against Adam's cheek and then touched his lips to the corner of Adam's mouth.

"Don’t run away, find me," he said teasingly and Gus narrowed his eyes at him.

"Yeah, thanks...I got that. I do recognize your lyrics, you know. And you’re pretty sneaky... calling florists behind my back."

"Actually, I just called Doug. He took care of it for me. There’s a florist right here in the hotel."

"They’re beautiful."

"So are you."

Adam kissed him between the brows, making him giggle, and then they both turned abruptly at the sound of the bellhop behind them discreetly clearing his throat.

"Your luggage is all here now, sir. Will you be wanting anything else?"

Irritably, Adam opened his mouth to reply that...yes, as a matter of fact... there was something he wanted and he’d be able to have it as soon as the damn bellhop made himself scarce. Gus caught the look in his eye and nudged him hard. He sighed.

"That’s all. Thank you."

Doug Taylor undertook all the arrangements for the benefit, displaying a capable and thorough approach to tour management that boded well for when the band hit the road in January. He worked hard with Gus to promote the charity aspect of the show and gave him full access to Bill Wasley for anything else he needed in the way of press material.

Gus was more than impressed by Bill. He was very young, but his talent was astounding.
"You should be writing more than just press releases," he said to Bill when he’d reviewed the material Bill had prepared. "Wow, you’re good."

He hunched his shoulders, clearly flattered. "I’m glad you like them. And yeah…one day I want to write for a major magazine. But it’s hard to get into the industry without connections. I’m hoping working for Griffin for a few years might open some doors for me."

Gus grinned. "Working for Adam Lambert might open a whole lot more. Samuel is a smart man. He knows that if he points any opportunities your way and you leave, he loses big-time." He leaned in a little closer and said conspiratorially, "Stick with me. I know some people who know some people who know some people…"

He took Bill to the run-through with him and was miffed when Adam ordered him out when it came to the one of the cover songs. No matter how he wheedled, Adam refused to tell Gus what he was planning for that particular cover song.

"It’s a surprise," he said loftily. "I’m not telling. Now get lost."

Gus went under protest. "You’d better not tick me off," he grumbled. "Christmas is coming. There’s still plenty of time for me to return your Lear Jet."

On Saturday, they took advantage of the fact that Adam didn’t need to be at the arena until six. While everyone else went out cruising the casinos, they were able to spend a rare, lazy day in bed, alternating between intense, passionate lovemaking and sleepy sessions of cuddling and conversation. They talked about Christmas, and their plans to go to L.A. with Monte and Lisa for four days over the holidays before they had to return to Vegas on the day after Boxing Day to begin dress rehearsals for the live show at the Citadel.

"Oh my God," Gus said suddenly, looking at the clock. "You were supposed to be out of here half an hour ago."

"Hm?" Adam said drowsily. "Half an hour ago I was…"

Gus swatted him. "Yes, I remember. Now get up and go stick your head in the shower before they send out a search party for you."

Adam rolled onto his back and caught Gus in his arms on the way over, pulling him down against him and kissing his throat. "They all know where I am. They know I can’t get enough of you these days."

"Oh, that’s good," Gus said, both amused and mortified by the thought. "But you still have to get up. Concert. Sing. Music. It’s what you do for a living, remember?"

"I remember," Adam breathed. He brushed his fingertips down Gus’ cheekbones and touched Gus’ mouth to his. "Do you know how much I love you?"

"I do," Gus said softly.

"You make me so happy. I’ve never felt this good before in my life."  

"And I never thought things could get any better," Gus whispered back. "But they do. They just
They lay together losing themselves again in slow, satisfying kisses until there was a discreet knock at the door.

"Search party’s here," Gus said ruefully, scooting out of his embrace. "He’ll be right there!" he shouted in the general direction of the knocking and then began rummaging in the closet for something to wear. "Get up. Get going. And don’t take too long about it. I’m dying to find out which song you are going to cover tonight and I think you’ve kept me in the dark just about long enough."

Dear Diary:

Things are not good. I don’t know who’s been trying to talk him out of seeing me, but he says we need to be apart for awhile. He’s afraid of people finding out about the other night. I told him I won’t go. I went to see him when I knew he was alone and he asked me to leave but it didn’t take much before we were on the sofa, screwing like rabbits. He’s worried about his career. I told him all famous men have a significant other on the side. The boy won’t find out. He’s so busy doing his do-gooder thing that he wouldn’t notice if we were fucking right in front of him. He needs me. He even said so. But he still wants me to keep away for awhile. I gave him some photos of me that he took one night and told him to think about it. He won’t go far. I saw his face when he looked at the pictures...he was already wanting me again.

By Griffin standards, the arena was fairly small. It was one of their oldest venues and only held slightly in excess of eight thousand, but it had been beautifully restored and was the perfect place for such an event. Gus went ahead of the others in order to give himself some time to walk around and meet with all the representatives from the local branches of the charities that were in attendance.

He talked Andy into going with him. He’d been prepared to dislike Terrance’s boyfriend based on what he’d heard, although the rest of the gang, Adam included, were careful not to criticize him too openly. Instead, he found Andy a little immature, but bright and reasonably friendly, if just a touch on the wary side at the attention he was getting from Gus.

They finished up early and stuck their heads in the dressing room to wish everyone good luck before they went down front to their appointed seats about half an hour before show time. As the crowd filed in, many of them zoned in on the "family and friends" section of the audience and spent a lot of time hanging around with questions and comments.

"This doesn’t bug you?" Andy asked Gus.

"It used to make me crazy. But now I look at it as part of my job...to be out here representing Adam. Anything I do reflects on him, so I try and be as friendly as possible with the fans. Believe me, it pays off."

Andy bristled slightly. "Yeah, well...you haven’t had the kind of bad reputation I have."

"Maybe not," Gus agreed steadily. "But I try not to give them any ammo. When they make stuff up, there’s nothing you can do but you sure as hell can have a say in what they see and hear when they’re around you."
Andy took this gentle rebuke as it was intended and made a real effort to be pleasant and friendly with the curious fans that crowded around them. Still, he was relieved when the house lights began to dim and the air was punctuated with the familiar sound of screaming.

"Sorry we’re late," Lisa said, sidling past both of them to her seat. Sophie was right on her heels and both of them looked flustered and cross.

"Problem?" Gus said curiously.

"Yeah," said Sophie. "It’s called I was on a streak. I was up five hundred bucks in blackjack and somebody dragged me away from the table."

"They were changing the dealer," Lisa snapped. "You were toast anyway."

Fighting a smile, Gus leaned over to Sophie and said, "Do you have any idea about that particular song Adam’s going to cover? He wouldn’t so much as give me a hint."

"Not a clue. Why, are you worried he’s going to do something to embarrass you?"

"Holy shit," Gus said, going pale. "That hadn’t even crossed my mind."

"Relax. I don’t think he’d do that to you."

"Oh, I don’t know," Gus muttered. "I seem to remember being pulled onstage in L.A...."

Sophie looked startled. "I’d forgotten about that. You may be right. Maybe he does have something up his sleeve."

The show started with a few songs from For Your Entertainment, just enough to get the crowd warmed up, and then the lights dimmed to a cozier, more intimate level and Adam slid into his selection of cover songs.

First he did a rendition of Celine Dion's song "It's All Coming Back to Me Now". Then he sang Bonnie Raitt’s "I Can’t Make You Love Me". Bryan Adams’ "Heaven" came next, nearly causing a riot among the girls in the audience and making Gus curse the fact that he’d forgotten to bring earplugs.

When he finally sat down on his stool, Adam deliberately flashed Gus an evil grin that made him extremely nervous. He needn’t have worried though. The moment the new melody filled the arena, Gus realized what final song Adam had chosen and broke into a relieved smile. It was old and most of the crowd didn’t recognize it, but they understood the meaning of the lyrics nonetheless.

Oceans apart day after day
And I slowly go insane
I hear your voice on the line
But it doesn't stop the pain

If I see you next to never
How can we say forever
Wherever you go
Whatever you do
I will be right here waiting for you
Whatever it takes
Or how my heart breaks
I will be right here waiting for you

I took for granted, all the times
That I thought would last somehow
I hear the laughter, I taste the tears
But I can't get near you now

Oh, can't you see it baby
You've got me goin' crazy

I wonder how we can survive
This romance
But in the end if I'm with you
I'll take the chance

Oh, can't you see it baby
You've got me goin' crazy

Wherever you go
Whatever you do
I will be right here waiting for you
Whatever it takes
Or how my heart breaks
I will be right here waiting for you

The crowd howled in appreciation of this and Gus had to slide down in his seat to hide his emotion. Sophie nudged him hard and grinned and even Andy seemed impressed.

"And you thought he was going to embarrass you with that song," he said reproachfully.

Gus had one hand over his face but he was saved from further commentary when Adam and his band reappeared from the wings and took up positions on the stage again. There was the usual amount of screaming and Adam waited patiently for the worst of it die down before he began the next number. He was opening his mouth to begin "Better Than I Know Myself" when there was another series of screams from behind Gus’ section, making everyone both ahead and behind swivel to see what the commotion was about.

The hair went up on the back of Gus’ neck when he heard it. It wasn’t a teenybopper scream and it wasn’t the familiar sound of a fan simply overheating into hysteria. It was strident and frightened and more than a little chilling.

Something was very wrong.

"What the hell is that all about?" said Andy in annoyance.

Gus stood up and when he couldn’t see what was happening simply by stretching up to his full height, stepped up on his chair, grabbing at Sophie’s hand for support. It was still impossible to
see clearly but one thing was obvious; there was a crowd of girls suddenly in a panic and somebody was on the floor.

"We’ve got a problem," he said to Sophie and before anyone could stop him, he leapt down off the chair and tripped over Andy out to the aisle.

He met Jeremy and two of the other security guards running up the aisle from the edge of the stage. Jeremy knew Gus well enough to let him go ahead without argument and sharply motioned the other two men to do the same. Behind him, he could hear Adam doggedly working his way through the song and knew he must have been curious to know what was happening, especially since he could only clearly see past the footlights to the third or fourth row.

He knew what was happening the moment he got close enough to see the teenager on the floor, thrashing and moaning and struggling against anyone who tried to hold her still. She was surrounded by a crowd of friends, all screaming hysterically and Gus was suddenly seized by a shocking sense of deja vu. This was all too familiar to him. There had been far too many occasions where similar things had happened during undercover assignments and it suddenly seemed twisted and completely out of context that it could possibly be happening here.

He forced his way through the crowd until he reached the fallen girl, cursing and swearing at the chairs in the floor section that had all been wired together and were therefore almost impossible to clear away. At the sight of the huge security guards at his back, most of the crowd drew away to give him room. Gus knelt and grabbed the flailing arms of the girl who was convulsing on the floor, took one look at the clenched jaw and the wildly dilated eyes and began shouting questions at the two petrified girls who were on their knees beside to their friend.

"What did she take?"

There was a moment’s blank, horrified silence.

"I can’t help her unless you tell me! What did she take?"

Clutching each other’s hands, the girls both burst into tears.

"Nothing! She wouldn’t do anything like that!"

Desperately Gus looked up at Jeremy who was firmly keeping the rest of the onlookers back. "There are paramedics here, aren’t there? Somebody better go find them. This girl’s taken an overdose of something..."

By now there were nearly a dozen of the security staff clustered around them. Jeremy sent one running for the medical personnel and he had just knelt back down to help Gus when another girl who had been hovering close by suddenly went down hard on her knees and then passed out, half-collapsing into Jeremy’s arms as she pitched forward.

Within the space of a few minutes it was pandemonium. To Gus’ horror, there were more than a dozen girls staggering wildly, unable to stand straight, and some who were just sinking down onto the floor in a state of complete delirium. When the second girl began convulsing and it became obvious that something had gone seriously wrong, Gus struggled to his feet, bolted past the paramedics who were making their way through the crowd and ran back down the aisle to the stage.
There’s a saying that "the show must go on" and although Adam and his band all knew that something very unsettling was taking place, they were still singing, struggling to keep their focus until somebody could tell them what was happening. Gus didn’t want to start a panic by vaulting up onto the stage, so he went straight to the sound engineer and snatched a headset off the board.

"Punch up Adam’s monitor for me," he said and when the engineer complied, he settled the headset over his ears and put one hand up to steady the mic.

Adam heard Gus’ voice in his ear just as the set ended and jerked around, trying to figure out where Gus was.

"There’s something really wrong here," Gus said as steadily as he could. "We need house-lights."

"What’s going on?" Adam mouthed at him. Gus could see Tommy beside Adam, also squinting into the pit to try and spot him.

"Please, Adam…just do it. Tell everybody you’re just taking a break and don’t make it sound too serious. There are some sick girls down here."

By now the entire audience was shifting nervously. Those who could see some of what was going on were growing more and more agitated by the minute and those who couldn’t see a thing were speculating wildly on the nature of the problem.

Neither Adam nor his band members could see what was happening. He stood up and walked downstage, ignoring the puzzled looks from his band mates, and addressed the crowd.

"All right everybody, we’re just going to take a bit of a break right now before we get into the second half of the show. You can probably see we’ve got somebody out there who needs some medical assistance, so I’m just going to ask you all to stay in your seats and take it easy for a few minutes while we put the house-lights up and let the paramedics do their thing. As soon as we can, we’ll be back out, okay?"

As it was, the show didn’t go on. It took nine ambulances to transport the girls who had fallen ill and another group of paramedics several hours to treat the girls in the crowd who had panicked or become hysterical. As soon as they realized the situation could not be controlled, Doug Taylor ordered the show cancelled and the rest of the arena cleared.

Gus stayed on the floor and helped out as best he could, trying to calm some of the girls whose friends had been affected while she desperately tried to figure out what was going on. The moment the police arrived on the scene they collared him and asked him for a complete rundown on what he knew. The stories he’d heard from the victims were all badly jumbled but it wasn’t long before he was certain of one thing…that what had happened wasn’t an accident.

He knew Adam had been rushed out of the building by a large contingent of Griffin and his security personnel who were insistent that Adam and his band be evacuated on the off chance that there was any risk to them from whatever was taking place. Gus got hold of Jeremy on his cell phone and asked him to tell Adam that he would be back to the hotel as soon as he had found out all he could, but the more time he spent with the police as they scoured the arena, the more he began to wonder how the hell he was going to explain it to Adam.

They were all crowded into Monte and Lisa’s room when he returned to the Citadel and they all
turned to stare at Gus when he walked in.

It had been a long time since he'd had to break this kind of bad news; he'd forgotten how agonizing it was.

Adam slid one arm around his shoulder and kissed his forehead. His voice was very quiet, but he spoke for everyone.

"What did you find out?"

Gus hesitated. "What have you already heard?"

"Not much," said Monte grimly. "And nobody is in any hurry to tell us anything. So whatever you've heard, spit it out."

"It's not like we don't have a right to know," Tommy pointed out.

Gus hitched himself up on the bureau and chewed his lip for a second. "Yes, I agree with you. But this is only what I've managed to find out second-hand, okay? Nobody wants to tell me very much either."

When they all nodded, he took a deep breath. "All the girls that went down ingested some kind of drug. It will be a few more hours before the tox-screens are finished..."

"You were a fucking narcotics officer," Isaac said coldly. "Give us your best guess."

Gus raked his hands through his hair. "I thought at first they'd been roached by the way they were all staggering, but some of them were hallucinating so bad, it was more likely something like GHB..."

"Ecstasy?" said Monte wearily.

Gus shook his head. "Not quite. Ecstasy is methylenedioxy-methamphetamine. GHB is gamma-hydroxybutyrate."

"Can we skip the chemistry class?"

"All I’m saying is that they’re similar, but they aren’t the same."

He saw the impatient look on their faces and reluctantly continued. "There were nineteen girls taken to the hospital. Bill’s been in touch with the Emergency Department and they say that sixteen have pretty mild symptoms and they're only being kept for observation. Two are serious, but they aren't in any danger. They're damn lucky...with the amounts they apparently consumed it could have been much worse."

He hesitated, giving them all a moment to process this but Terrance had already caught his omission.

"That's only eighteen."

Gus dropped his head and rubbed the back of his neck where knots of tension were forming. "I know," he said gently.
Everybody's mouth dropped open in shock.

"Jesus Christ," said Isaac, horrified.

"I'm sorry," Gus murmured. "She was epileptic. She probably didn’t even ingest that much...but it triggered a seizure. Bill spoke to the paramedics. They said there wasn’t anything they could do for her."

In the heartsick silence that followed, Adam leaned down on his elbows on the bureau beside Gus and put his head in his hands. Everyone else either stood frozen, unable to move, or began pacing in distraught, angry circles.

"The police will be coming by here to speak to you all tonight," Gus said soberly.

Monte jerked around. "What the hell for? Do they think Adam is in the habit of encouraging drug use at his concerts?"

Gus’ eyes went wide. "My God," he said slowly, after a minute. "You really don’t have any idea what actually happened out there, do you?"

They all stared at him. He opened his mouth once and closed it again.

He couldn’t believe that nobody had told them.

"I’m sorry," he said in a shocked voice. "Guys, you’ve got to understand how serious this is..."

"Serious?" Monte said angrily. "You’ve just told us someone died at this concert, for God’s sake...how much more serious can it get?"

"Listen to me!" he snapped. "For God’s sake, Monte...this wasn’t an accident. This wasn’t some kid of teenage experimentation that went wrong. Those girls were drugged...deliberately...by someone who was specifically out to hurt them. None of them had any clue that they were being doped."

"Then how did it happen?" he shouted at Gus.

Gus struggled to control his temper. The truth was already going to hurt and letting his frustration get the better of him wasn’t going to accomplish anything.

"All the girls that were affected were in the same section of seats. They all reported that somebody was walking around before the show handing out "complimentary" bottles of Gatorade. There were empties all over the floor, but I also found one that was full. It still had the safety seal on it, but it was leaking."

"Jesus Christ," said Isaac again.

He nodded dully. "There was a pinhole near the lid. My guess is somebody used a hypodermic to inject each bottle with drugs. Liquid GHB is pretty much tasteless, and in the dark, in all the excitement, nobody would have noticed if any of the bottles were leaking. And with all the screaming they were doing, some of those girls probably drank the entire thing without even taking a breath."
"Fuck," said Tommy, sickly. "Who would do something twisted like that?"

Gus bit his lip. "I don’t know. But that’s why the police are going to want to speak to you all. The girls they’ve questioned so far don’t remember very much, but they do remember one thing...that the guy who was handing them out said they were compliments of Adam and the band and that he was wearing a shirt that said "Security" on it."

The rest of the night crept by in a series of jerky freeze frames with furious sessions of everyone talking at once interspersed with empty silences. When the police arrived, Gus was subjected to questioning all over again, as was everyone else in the band and entourage who’d been at the arena that night.

His professional hackles went up when he met Dean Holden, the Las Vegas police detective who had assumed charge of the case. Gus watched him talk to everyone and found his approach to investigation brusque and heavy-handed and by the time he got around to speaking to Gus, he had formed a pretty negative opinion of Holden.

The first words out of his mouth were, "So you were a cop, is that right?"

"That’s right," Gus nodded. "I’m Gus Harrison."

He extended one hand and then let it fall in disgust when all Holden did was scribble his name in his notebook.

"It’s double R," Gus pointed out to him. "Not double S."

He scribbled some more. "Off the force long?"

"A couple of years."

He raised accusing eyes. "Then I’d like to think you’d know better than to disturb evidence at a crime scene." At Gus’ blank expression, he added, "It was you that picked up that full bottle of Gatorade, wasn’t it?"

"Yes," Gus said coldly.

"Haven’t you ever heard of fingerprints?"

"Haven’t you ever head of rubber gloves?" Gus retorted. "I grabbed a pair off one of the paramedics."

His eyebrows went up. "Oh. Good boy."

It was on the tip of Gus’ tongue to tell him that he’d learned all about fingerprints in police school, around about the same time they taught him how to be condescending to witnesses. Instead, he bit back his sarcasm and concluded grimly that this doofus was obviously just another graduate of the Samuel Brice Charm School.

Holden waved his pen at him. "So…tell me again what happened."
By the time Gus had finished his story, he was ready to smack Holden. Holden interrupted him on a regular basis and he had the supremely annoying habit of finishing Gus’ sentences for him whenever he paused in thought.

"Did you see anything before the show started?"

"No. I was down front, talking to a group of fans."

"Ah. Schmoozing with your public, huh?"

"It was a fundraising concert," Gus said through clenched teeth. "I’m in charge of the charity events on this tour."

"Oh. Really? I thought you were just the boyfriend."

Gus clenched his fists as well. "I’m just Adam’s boyfriend. But I also work for him and Tommy."

Holden scribbled again. "So you’re an employee? That’s a bit of a switch, isn’t it? I mean, from police work to pushing concert tickets?"

Gus looked at the ceiling and began to count mentally. Fortunately by the time he got to ten, Holden had moved on to another subject.

"Well, you know the drill. If there’s anything else you remember, make sure you call it in." He handed him a card and Gus impatiently dropped it on the coffee table without looking at it.

"What do the tox-screens show?"

He looked surprised. "We haven’t had any results yet."

"Bullshit. The hospital will have done a set of bloods before they started any specific treatments on those girls. That will at least tell you what the Gatorade was spiked with."

He folded up his notebook and put it in his jacket pocket. Frustrated, Gus prodded, "So what was it?"

"Look, Mr. Harrison, I can assure you that our lab is working on it. I appreciate your interest, but if you don’t mind me saying so, it’s none of your business."

"It’s called professional courtesy," Gus snapped.

Holden raised his eyebrows at Gus. "If you were still a fellow officer, Mr. Harrison, I’d agree with you. As it is, you’re just a witness and quite frankly…until we determine otherwise…even a possible suspect. You know it’s not appropriate for me to be giving out that kind of information to you."

"Was it GHB?"

His mouth twitched as if he wanted to make a comment but thought better of it. "Good night, Mr. Harrison."
Dear Diary:

I didn’t want to scare him, but I had to make him understand that I’m serious. Maybe he’ll listen to me now.
Tragedy affects everyone in different ways. Samuel Brice nearly had a coronary when he found out what had happened and immediately put Doug and Bill in charge of damage control. He ordered Bill to release a statement on behalf of Griffin Entertainment, doing whatever he could to distance Griffin and Adam from any action that fans might have taken at the concert.

That idea made Gus uneasy.

"It’s a bit premature, isn’t it?" he said aside to Adam. "Nobody knows what the hell actually happened yet. You can’t let him make it sound like those girls knew they were taking drugs. Shouldn’t you just be extending your condolences and emphasizing that you’re supporting the police in their investigation?"

Adam looked at him with blank eyes and Gus backed off. They were all so badly shaken that he doubted much he said to Adam was actually getting through. He was also feeling the first disturbing pangs of helplessness, suddenly aware he had been plunged into a situation where he was going to be forced to remain on the sidelines when everything in him was screaming for him to take control.

They all sat in Monte’s room for hours after the police had gone and the rest of the entourage had said goodnight. Gus could see how they were naturally closing in to protect and console each other and swallowed the urge to try and talk Adam into going to bed. But he did protest when Monte got up and flipped on the television and turned it to CNN.

"Don’t," he said. "You don’t need to see that right now."

Monte silenced him with a look, but at the sight of the first news report on the incident, Adam got up abruptly, pulling Gus from his seat as he passed him and keeping a tight grip on his hand all the way back to their own room. He didn’t release Gus until they were alone inside, then he went and threw open the patio doors and stalked out onto the balcony.

Grimly Gus went to the mini-bar, poured the strongest shot he could find and went out after him. Adam was leaning on the railing with this head down between his shoulders and Gus' first gentle touch on his arm provoked no response.

"Drink this," he said quietly.

"No, thanks."

Gus waited a moment, then tried again. "Come on. You’ve had a bad shock."

"Gus, I don’t want it."

"Please? It’ll help you to calm down…"

"I said no!"

Adam turned on him so fast that Gus barely had time to jerk back before Adam snatched the tumbler from his hand. Swinging around furiously, he fired it out into the night air, ignoring the muffled sound of breaking glass from far below that was accentuated by the frightened shrieks of scattering tourists.
Gus leapt to the railing and leaned over it. "For God’s sake, Adam," he said, horrified. "There are people down there! Are you trying to kill somebody?"

It was the worst possible thing to say. Adam flinched like he’d been struck and although Gus immediately clapped one hand over his mouth he had no time to take his words back before Adam pushed past him and went back inside. He stood for a minute, clutching his head and kicking himself before he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down.

He found Adam slumped on the far edge of the bed with his back to him, forearms on his knees and his hands twisted together. Gus stood for a minute, unsure of how much to invade his space but then he very gingerly crept up on the bed behind Adam and edged across it until his knees were against Adam's back and he could lay his hands on Adam's shoulders.

Adam twitched a little but he didn’t pull away. When Gus very gently began flexing his fingers against the ridges of tension at the base of his neck, Adam straightened up and let his breath out between his teeth.

Gus slid forward and wrapped his arms around him. Adam leaned his head back against him wearily but he didn’t speak and Gus took the cue from him that he wasn’t ready for conversation. Instead, he just sat holding Adam with his face tucked into the curve of Adam's neck, trying to will away some of Adam's distress with his touch and his warmth.

After a very long silence he said bleakly, "I don’t believe this is happening."

Gus turned his head up just slightly and pressed a kiss under Adam's ear.

"I’m so sorry," he whispered. "I’m just so sorry."

"Who the hell would do something like this, Gus?"

He assumed that was a rhetorical question. The moment it had happened his brain had kicked into analytical mode and a thousand scenarios were already running through his mind. It didn’t seem necessary to point out to Adam that there were any number of possibilities; he knew perfectly well that the police were already probing into motives and that the next few days were going to be filled with hard questions and probably few answers.

Adam came in contact with thousands of people a week. More often than not, despite his best efforts, some of those people went away with a sense of frustration and annoyance…another autograph that couldn’t be signed, another demo politely refused, another dancer who wasn’t quite good enough to be in the new video or part of the tour. And that didn’t take into consideration the business deals gone bad, the professional jealousies and grievances. It could have been a boyfriend sick of his girlfriend’s obsession with Adam or a former employee who knew enough about the inside operation to hit it where it was weakest.

In short, it could have been pretty much anybody.

And Gus knew perfectly well that before he had bolted out of Monte’s room, Adam had seen enough of the CNN broadcast to know that word was already out about the "security" guard who had been walking around the arena before the show, distributing dangerously spiked drinks with the "compliments of Adam and the band".

Which in the eyes of much of the very jaded public was just about the same as if Adam had personally been handing out amphetamines at the door.

"This could be the end of me, you know," Adam said unexpectedly.
Gus tightened his grip and tried to be firm at the same time that he acknowledged Adam's fears. "You can't blame yourself for this. Just because someone does something in your name doesn’t make it your fault."

"But it is my name. My concert. My responsibility. Those girls were there because of me…"

"Adam…” Gus edged around until he was beside him on the edge of the bed; when Adam's shoulders slumped again, Gus gently brushed a lock of hair back off his forehead. "The only thing you are responsible for is what happens from this point on. It’s how you handle this that’s really going to count."

Adam's head came up. "And exactly how do you handle something like this?" he said, half-angry. "Is there an instruction manual? I’m not used to people dying at my concerts."

Biting his tongue, Gus let the subject drop and after a minute, Adam's frustration evaporated into contrition.

"I’m sorry,” he murmured.

Gus kissed his cheek. "Don’t be. I’ll be right here with you the whole time you’re going through this…just remember that. I’ll do whatever I can to help you."

Adam dropped his head on Gus' shoulder, squeezing his hand with appreciation. It seemed a simple enough offer and one that was honestly made. Gus was used to taking matters into his own hands.

Neither of them had any idea what a bone of contention it was going to become between them.

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Sun Dec 17, 2012

By 6 a.m. the next morning, the lawyers had descended on The Citadel. On top of the legal team from Griffin, there was a contingent of lawyers from both the record company and the management company that had flown in from L.A. overnight.

Gus dug his heels in when Doug Taylor knocked at the door of their room to let Adam know he was wanted for a meeting with the legal counsel.

"Doug, he just managed to get to sleep. Can’t you leave him for another hour? He’s not going to be in shape for anything if he doesn’t get a little rest."

Doug looked uneasy. "To be honest, Gus…I think he should be there. Decisions have to be made pretty quickly. That little press release Bill sent out last night isn’t going to stall the media for very long and the band really should be making some kind of statement. I’m sure Adam wants a say in what gets released to the public."

Gus closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the edge of the door.

"Did you sleep?" Doug asked sympathetically.

"No. My brain has been on overload. And you don’t look like you’ve slept either. Have you heard anything from the police this morning?"

"Not yet."

"I’d like to be in on it when you do, if you don’t mind."
Doug smiled. "I don’t mind at all. I’d be glad to have your help. But somehow I suspect that anal-retentive detective Holden is going to feel differently. He’s already told Samuel point-blank that he doesn’t give a damn who is involved here, the department will be treating it like any other case, high-profile or not."

"Is he on some kind of power trip, or what?"

"Beats me. More likely he’s just had to deal with his share of celebrity crimes in this town and wants to make it clear that nobody’s going to be pulling his chain."

"Like I said," Gus muttered. "Power trip. Have you checked with the hospital?"

"Most of the girls will be released today. The two that were most seriously hurt will have to be kept for a few more days."

"Adam should get over to see them."

Doug shook his head. "His management company wants him locked down until the police know what’s going on. While you’ve not-been-sleeping, raving paranoia has taken over. A lot of people are convinced that he could just have easily been the targets here."

"That thought’s crossed my mind too," Gus admitted, rubbing his temples tiredly. "Although there’s a awful big difference between getting to a handful of fans in a public place and actually getting to him. But for now, it’s probably better to be a bit on the paranoid side."

He hesitated. "Will you wake Adam?"

Gus nodded. "I guess I’d better. Tell them he’ll be up in a few minutes."

Doug shook his head. "His management company wants him locked down until the police know what’s going on. While you’ve not-been-sleeping, raving paranoia has taken over. A lot of people are convinced that he could just have easily been the targets here."

"That thought’s crossed my mind too," Gus admitted, rubbing his temples tiredly. "Although there’s a awful big difference between getting to a handful of fans in a public place and actually getting to him. But for now, it’s probably better to be a bit on the paranoid side."

He hesitated. "Will you wake Adam?"

Gus nodded. "I guess I’d better. Tell them he’ll be up in a few minutes."

Gus roused him as gently as he could, feeling a pang of guilt when Adam blinked up at him with a sleepy smile that rapidly faded as his memory kicked in.

He brushed his knuckles lightly against Adam's cheek. "I’m sorry, sweetheart, but you need to get up. They want you upstairs."

Adam's chest heaved in a sigh, then he put out one hand and tugged lightly at the sleeve of Gus' shirt.

"Didn’t you come to bed at all?"

"No, I only would have disturbed you. You were restless enough as it was."

He sat up slowly and leaned forward until his head was on Gus' shoulder. "Have you heard anything new?" he asked in a muffled voice.

Gus rubbed his back and shook his head. "Not really. But all your lawyers are here."

"Oh, God…this is already enough of a nightmare."

"But you need to go and listen to what they have to say. You’re going to need their advice."

Turning his face towards Adam and pressing a kiss against his head, Gus said, "Would you like me to go with you?"

"No. I think it’s probably something you should stay out of. I’ll fill you in later."

"Doug says everyone’s flipping out about security. Not that I blame them, but be prepared for
everyone to be keeping a real close eye on you for awhile."

"Like you, you mean?" he said ruefully.

Gus took a deep breath. "Yeah, I think I’m going to be watching your back until we know what’s going on."

Adam circled his arms around Gus back tightly and they sat together for several minutes without moving or speaking. It took him a long time to gather himself, but when he sighed and straightened up, Gus released him and lay back wearily on the bed, watching him in silence as he dressed, dropped a kiss on his forehead and then quietly let himself out of the room. Once he was gone, Gus rolled over and buried his head in the pillows, trying to capture a few minutes of rest.

The ringing phone made him jump and swear. Grabbing it irritably, he forced himself to be as polite as possible while reminding the front desk that they had specifically been asked to hold all incoming calls.

When he heard the clerk’s flustered explanation, he smacked himself on the forehead for forgetting that Toronto was several hours ahead of Vegas. He assured the clerk that it was all right to let the insistent caller through and then braced himself for the sound of Michelle’s shocked, impatient voice.

"What the hell is going on down there? Are you all right?"

"Me? I’m fine. I guess you’ve heard the news reports, huh?"

"Yeah, while I’m doing 120 kilometers on the highway on the way home from church…thank you very much. I nearly drove into a bridge. What on earth happened?"

Flopping back on the bed, stretching out aching muscles while he talked, Gus gave Michelle a detailed description of the events of the previous night.

Michelle whistled. "And you thought you’d gotten away from all that crap when you left the force. How is everybody?"

"Adam’s holding up. He's locked up with the lawyers. I haven’t seen anyone else yet this morning. You know perfectly well that everybody is going to get their asses sued over this. It’s the last thing they want to be thinking about right now…but it’s got to be faced." Toying with the phone cord, Gus added, "The one that I’m really worried about is Monte. I’ve never seen him the way he was last night."

"He’s taking it hard, huh?"

"Probably the hardest of us all. Although Andy was just about as bad. He shook like a leaf for hours. I don’t think he’s ever had this kind of a shock before in his life. He’s so young; he doesn’t have any clue how to handle it."

"I wish there was something I could do for you, kid."

"There is. Send me a police detective who doesn’t have an ego the size of Texas. The guy in charge down here is a real charmer."

"Don’t start butting heads with the locals," Michelle warned.

"I don’t plan to."
"Don’t give me that crap. I know the way your mind works. Are you trying to tell me you’re not already in there like a dirty shirt?"

"I’d have to get past Inspector Gadget. And he’s already made it very clear that he doesn’t want any help. Especially from me. I tried to tell him my Mountie uniform was at the cleaners…"

"See? You get sarcastic like that with them and you’re only going to piss them off."

"Yeah, well you just wait and see how pissed off I’m going to be if they screw Adam around on this. A lot of people are going to be saying some pretty nasty things. The cops here had better not be pointing any fingers where they don’t belong, or I’m going to be doing a lot more than just pissing them off."

Michelle had a lot more to say, but let it go. Gus was agitated enough.

"When are you supposed to go to San Diego?"

"Friday night. Sooner if we can manage it, but I somehow doubt that’s going to happen now." Gus ran his hand through his hair with a sigh, suddenly aware that the festive season wasn’t likely to be all that "festive" after this. "Speaking of Christmas, I was going to call you this weekend. Do you realize this is the first time in years that I won’t be at The Farm with you over the holidays?"

"Yeah, I know. Brian will miss you. So will my folks. We all will."

"Are your parents still planning to take all the grandkids away for a few days after Boxing Day?"

"Yep."

Gus chewed his lip. "Well, I've been thinking. If Brian is going away with your folks anyway, why don’t you fly down here for a few days and spend New Year’s with us?"

He mistook Michelle’s blank silence for indecision and added, "I’ll send you a ticket. It can be my Christmas present."

"You don’t have to do that."

"I want to! Come on…it will be a blast. I still feel bad that your trip to New York got all screwed up. You should see what’s being planned down here for New Year’s." He paused. "You can imagine how hard the next couple of weeks are going to be after all this…I’m really going to be in the mood to have some fun."

Michelle hesitated, grateful that Gus couldn’t see how furiously she was blushing. "Let me think about it, okay?"

"Don’t take too long."

"I won’t. Look, I know you’ve got a lot of stuff going on, so I won’t keep you. Just tell everybody I’m thinking about them and call me tomorrow and tell me how things are going. I’ll…I’ll let you know then."

When she hung up, Michelle sat back in her chair and stared moodily at her bedside table. She hadn’t finished reading the cover story on Adam Lambert in the latest copy of Rolling Stone; picking it up with a sigh, she slowly flipped it open and removed what she’d been using as a bookmark.
The flight details were printed on the ticket: Mrs. Michelle McGavison, Air Canada, Toronto to Las Vegas, Wednesday, December 26, 2012. 

Chicken. You should have just told him. Sooner or later, he’s going to have to be told.

Gus showered and dressed and waited and fidgeted and then more than an hour passed and Adam still hadn’t returned, his patience ran out. He knocked on Monte’s door and found Lisa was also waiting and fidgeting and showing serious signs of fatigue and distress.

"Have you seen Monte?"

Gus shook his head. "I was just going to ask you if you’d seen Adam. Any idea what’s happening?"

"No. And it’s driving me crazy." The cup of coffee in Lisa’s hands was doing some pretty severe shaking and with a sigh, Gus took it from her and set it on the table.

"Come on. I’m tired of not knowing. Let’s go and find out."

After grilling some of the security staff, they discovered what floor the meeting was being held on and from that point it was just a matter of following the raised voices. The door was closed but the sound of arguing could be heard clearly all the way down the hall.

Jeremy was lingering with one of the other bodyguards outside the door and Gus went straight to him, eyes wide.

"What’s going on?"

He made a face. "I’d like to say I don’t know, but for the last twenty minutes we’ve heard every word whether we want to or not. The lawyers want things done a certain way, Griffin wants things done a certain way, Adam wants to do things his way, the police don’t want him to do anything and everybody is seriously wound up. And this whole religion thing has just made it all worse."

Gus and Lisa looked at each other. Jeremy took note of their blank expressions and hurriedly explained.

"Sorry. I thought you would have heard. Bill’s been going through the newspaper reports this morning and discovered that the parents of the girl who died have made a statement to the media."

"About what?"

"Apparently they are devoutly religious and their beliefs go strongly against any kind of popular music, let alone a gay pop star. Think "Footloose"…only with more fire and brimstone. And they were hyper-protective of their daughter because of her epilepsy. They live a couple of hours outside town and they hardly ever let the girl out of their sight."

"Then what the hell was she doing at the concert?" Gus demanded in astonishment.

"She talked them into letting her sleep over at a friend’s house. She didn’t tell them the other girls parents were away. And the plan all along had been to come into Vegas and get some scalpers seats for the concert."

"Oh great," Gus groaned. "So not only did she not have permission to be there, she lies to her folks and goes to see a type of concert they already think is the work of the Devil and she drops dead from an epileptic fit triggered by a drug overdose." He put two fingers to the spot between his brows where a serious headache was brewing. "Oh yeah…the media’s going to have a field day with that."
He cast a sideways glance at Lisa and found she was white-faced and nearly in tears.

"Monte took that pretty hard," Jeremy said somberly.

As if on cue the voices from inside rose to new heights and then the door flew open and Monte stalked out, pushing between Gus and Lisa so violently that they were both forced to step back abruptly or be knocked over. Lisa went running after him while Gus turned back to stare in through the open door and met Adam’s bleak gaze.

Monte’s departure appeared to signal the end of the meeting. Samuel Brice came out with nearly as much velocity as Monte and a face like thunder. Doug Taylor was hard on his heels and as he passed Gus he threw him an apologetic look that clearly indicated he would have liked to stop and speak with him but didn’t dare. Gus watched him go in frustration and when he turned back to the doorway, he came face to face with Dean Holden.

"Inspector Ga…” he began without thinking, and then hurriedly bit off the remark.

Holden didn’t miss the reference but to his credit, managed to hold on to his manners. "Mr. Harrison," he nodded, stepped around him and kept right on going.

It was hard to tell who had the longest faces in the meeting room. The lawyers looked uniformly grim and the reps from the management company looked nearly paralytic. Gus slid past where they were huddled to the end of the long table where Adam sat with his remaining band-members.

He leaned one hip against the table, eyeing Adam's strained face with concern before he smiled gently around the rest of the group. "Are you guys doing okay?"

"We’ve been better," Tommy said giving him a faint smile in return.

He sobered. "I heard about the newspaper reports this morning. I’m sorry. I know how much worse that makes everything seem."

"It certainly doesn’t help," Adam muttered.

"Did you write up a press release?"

He handed Gus the draft without a word. Gus scanned it and just as silently handed it back.

"Says a lot of nothing, doesn’t it?" Adam said derisively.

Gus’s expression indicated agreement but he’d worked with lawyers long enough to be able to understand their position. From a legal standpoint, there was so much exposure for liability in a case like this that even the most sincere expression of sympathy could have been construed as an admission of responsibility. He knew it was necessary, but he also knew how much Adam hated the insincere and inadequate tone of the only public statement that he would be allowed to make.

"Is that what set Monte off?" he murmured.

"That," said Isaac. "And just about everything else. He’s taking this all pretty personally."

Looking around at the grim faces, Gus felt like pointing out that Monte wasn’t the only one. But having seen Monte’s expression when he stormed out of the meeting, it was obvious that he was having a harder time with this than any of the others, and that things were going to be very rough for all of them until they each found their own ways to cope.
No one had mentioned Dean Holden. Trying to keep the impatience out of his voice, Gus ventured as casually as possible, "I hear most of the girls will be released today, so that's good. I saw the police were here for the meeting...what have they found out so far?"

Adam’s gaze flickered up to his. He knew damn well what Gus was asking and he also knew that he wasn’t going to like the answer. "He wouldn’t say."

"Anything?" said Gus.

"Anything."

In irritated disbelief, Gus crossed his arms and ground his teeth. Lamely, Adam added, "Because if this is an inside job, he doesn’t want to give out any information that might make it easier to cover things up."

"If it’s an inside job," Gus said, half to himself. "Then you need the feedback of at least some of the people on the inside so at least your information stays in context. Why the hell won’t he talk to me?"

The rest of them looked at each other, but no one dared to say it.

"Never mind," he said sourly. "He’s already told me. I’m a possible suspect until he proves otherwise. Which is unmitigated bullshit. What he’s really saying is that he just doesn’t want my input."

"If it was you in charge of this case," Isaac said, trying to be reasonable. "Would you want some ex-cop sticking his nose in and messing with your investigation?"

Gus’ eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Maybe that was a poor choice of words," he said.

"Right now," Adam said, warningly Isaac with a glance. "They want me to pull together lists of anybody I can think of who might possibly have had something to do with what happened. Anyone I've fired, anyone we think I might have inadvertently pissed off, any fans any of us have had problems with...it's going to take awhile just to get all that information together...do you have any idea how long it's going to take them to check it all out?"

Gus didn't answer, but Adam caught the change in his expression and added, "Sorry. Of course you do."

"I hate to say it," he sighed. "But for your sake, I hope that they do come up with something from the info you give them."

"Why the hell would you say that?" Cam said, astonished.

"Because if it's someone who's got some kind of prior involvement with Adam or any of you, that means there's a trail somewhere. And as long as there's a trail, there's half a chance of finding the connection." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm sorry. I know that's hard for you to hear. But if this was random, the chances of ever finding out who did it are next to zero. Unless this person has done something similar somewhere else. Or plans on doing it again."

"Shit, why does everybody have to keep saying that?" Isaac muttered.

"Come on...you have to be realistic. Whoever planned this might have gotten the result he was
"Looking for, or he might not. If he didn't, he's going to try again...maybe not the same way, but he'll try again. Your New Year's concert..."

"Don't start," said Adam sharply. "I've already heard this from a dozen different people. Everybody's absolutely screaming about the increased risk."

"That's my point. There is a risk...as long as you don't know what's going on..."

Angrily, he smacked Gus on the arm with the back of his hand, making him jump. "Gus! Save it, would you? Please? I don't need to hear that right now!"

Gus fell silent but Adam's rebuke obviously troubled him. He nearly bit his tongue off trying not to object when Tommy informed him they were going ahead with the first of their rehearsals at the Citadel that afternoon. The police had recommended against it and the lawyers were only slightly less impressed with the idea, but Samuel Brice was grimly determined to proceed with business as usual and Gus couldn't help but understand that Adam and his band were in desperate need of something to do besides stare at the walls.

Still, he couldn't stop himself from tracking down Doug Taylor and begging him to postpone it for twenty-four hours in order to give the police some time to investigate leads.

"I tried," he said ruefully. "Samuel won't budge. You've got to understand how much is riding on this grand opening and this concert. There are millions of dollars to be made here. VH1 has already sunk a massive amount of investment into it and Griffin is mortgaged to the back-teeth over this new property. Samuel even had to sign a personal guarantee in order to get all the financing in place."

Gus was shocked. "So what happens if the concert is cancelled?"

Doug lifted his shoulders. "Samuel would be pretty much ruined financially. And professionally. You've seen the size of his ego. He wants to be the biggest entertainment guru in the world, and if this doesn't go through...well, he's not the kind of man to take that sort of humiliation well. It would certainly finish his career...in this country anyway."

"Isn't there cancellation insurance?"

"Sure. But that only covers costs. It doesn't compensate for lost revenue because you can't quantify it. There's no way to tell how much income something like this would generate, so you can't insure against loss."

"So in other words, Griffin won't cancel this no matter what!"

He was so outraged that Doug was taken aback. "Well, of course... if the police feel that there's some kind of tangible risk...they could technically pull the event permit..."

"They're not going to be able to prove that and you know it," he scoffed. "I just finished trying to convince Adam that whoever did this might be looking for more of a response than the one he got last night. And if he decides to try again, we're not likely to get much warning...if any. That's how terrorism works; if you don't get a big enough of a reaction, you escalate it. And the whole point is to make people paranoid about when and where and how...you don't go giving them a road map. It spoils the surprise."

"Terrorism?" Doug said, looking rather weak at the knees. "Do you have to put it that way?"

Gus waved a hand impatiently. "All terrorism means is intimidation-by-threat. You don't actually
ever have to hurt anyone to terrorize them…all you have to do is make them believe that you can. And will."

"I see your point," he muttered. "So on the one hand, whoever did this doesn’t necessarily need to do anything else…just sit back and let human nature take over."

"That’s right. Isn’t your imagination working overtime already?"

"Yeah," he said gruffly. "So what do we do?"

"That’s the problem," Gus sighed. "There isn’t really anything we can do. Not until the police get something to go on."

Doug scuffed one shoe against the carpet. "Well, that Detective Holden does seem to be pretty efficient…doesn’t he?"

"Efficient? Maybe. That depends on what he manages to come up with today. And no matter how efficient he is, he’s still got the bedside manner of a porcupine. He’s in your face too much. Can you imagine how that’s going to intimidate the girls he’s got to interview today? They’re probably already in some pretty serious shock. He’s just going to get them so flustered they’ll be lucky if they can describe themselves, let alone anyone they saw last night."

"Don’t suppose you’d like to volunteer your services?" Doug said with a rueful smile.

Gus couldn’t help but smile back. "Sorry. I’m apparently on the Most-Wanted list. Most-Wanted-Out-Of-The-Picture, I think."

They both sobered.

"I’ll arrange extra security for the rehearsal today," he said.

"Thanks."

"Will you be there?"

"Damn straight I will. And I’d like to think that Inspector Gadget might do something useful like assign some undercover officers to keep a discreet eye on Adam. Surely to God they must have taught him that perpetrators usually return to the scene of the crime to see how effective they’ve been."

"You’re making me nervous."

"Don’t be nervous," he said quietly. "Just keep your eyes open. And Doug? Please do me a favor. If you see anything that doesn’t look right, come and tell me first…okay? Before you call Inspector Gadget?"

He nodded. "You bet." On the way back to her room, Gus considered checking on Monte and then thought better of it. His relationship with Monte was guarded at the best of times, and he doubted very much that his sympathy at this point was going to be of any comfort to him. Instead, he stopped by to see Sophie and found that Andy was holed up in the same room, wrapped in a blanket and huddling on the sofa, looking bereft and overwhelmed with every hint of his natural defiance wiped out of him.

"Shit," said Gus to Sophie in an undertone. "He doesn’t look good."
"He’s not. He’s pretty scared." Lowering her voice, Sophie admitted, "If you want to know the truth, he’s afraid maybe he’s the reason behind all this."

Gus’s eyes went wide.

"Because of Terrance. And all the crap they went through when they broke up. About the fighting and all that. You know how some fans are fond and protective of Terrance. Somehow they have come to the conclusion that he is bad for Terrance and that Adam doesn't like him either."

"What…so he thinks some guy decided to dope a bunch of fans because he’s pissed that they got back together? That doesn’t make any sense."

"I know that. But apparently when that cop talked to him last night, he suggested that anyone Adam or one of the crew might have pissed off could be doing this to get back at any of them. When this all hit the fan originally, there were some people who put out a lot of negative stuff about Andy, saying that they were speaking for Terrance. I thought you knew all this."

"I’d forgotten about that," Gus muttered.

"Yeah, well…that cop isn’t exactly Mr. Personality. He kinda laid it on him pretty thick. Maybe he was deliberately trying to rattle Andy. I dunno. But next time I see him…"

"Get in line," said Gus. "Does Terrance know?"

"No. Why do you think Andy’s hiding in here? Terrance’s already having a hard time…Andy doesn’t want to freak him out." Sophie raised her eyebrows somewhat ruefully. "In a really weird way, I think somebody’s grown up in one hell of a hurry in the last twelve hours."

"Do you want me to talk to him? I mean, I haven’t known him very long, but…"

Sophie looked over her shoulder. "Maybe later. He talked a lot to me this morning; now I think he’s just trying to get himself together. But thanks. I may take you up on that."

Gus let himself back into his room and found that Adam was obviously working his way through some necessary phone calls. He was slumped on the bed with the phone to one ear and his arm laid over his eyes and he lifted it just enough to see Gus as he went to slide past him to the balcony. Although he didn’t want to disturb Adam, he motioned Gus over and then handed him the receiver.

"You talk to her. He’s about five minutes from getting on a plane and coming out here. Try and calm her down, will you?"

Gus tried his best, but Adam’s mother was in full mama-bear mode. Gently reassuring her that they would all be in San Diego later in the week, Gus managed to convince her that there was no need for her to come to Las Vegas.

"He’s fine. Really he is. There’s no reason to think there’s any danger right now. I promise, I won’t let him out of my sight."

There was a muttered imprecation from beneath the arm on the bed and Gus waved at him to be quiet, then started to stammer at the next, unexpected question.

"Monte? Uh…he’s…"

Adam sat up and waved frantically back at him. "Don’t tell her," he mouthed.
Gus grimaced at him. "He’s…he’s okay. It’s been pretty crazy here. He probably just hasn’t had the chance to call her. Tell her to relax…oh yeah, I can imagine she is. You mothers are all alike…too over-protective for your own good. Oh yes, you are. Now go and make yourself some tea and calm down. Don’t worry. Really. We’ll see you on Friday."

"Thanks a lot," he complained, handing Adam back the phone.

"You – she’ll listen to. Me – she thinks I just talk to hear myself speak."

"She’s just worried."

"I know." He rolled over with a groan and put his arms over his head. "Damn, I have got such a headache."

"You haven’t eaten," Gus pointed out quietly, tucking one leg beneath him and settling down on the bed beside Adam.

"I couldn’t. So please don’t bug me, okay?"

Taking note of his peevish tone, Gus dropped the subject and moved closer. Taking advantage of the fact that Adam wore a loose sweatshirt, Gus slid his hands under the bottom hem and pushed it up to bare his back.

He nearly fell backwards off the bed when Adam suddenly shoved himself up irritably and flipped over, fixing Gus with an angry look and yanking the shirt back down into place.

"For God’s sake, Gus…not now…"

He stared at Adam then he said gently, "I was just going to give you a back rub. You said you had a bad headache…I thought it might help."

"Oh." He dropped his gaze and rubbed at his eyes wearily. "I’m sorry."

"It’s okay. I know you’re tense."

Adam lay back down and put his arm back over his face. Gus knew he wasn’t deliberately trying to shut him out, but just trying to focus himself. He wanted very badly to curl up next to Adam and offer him whatever comfort he could, but Adam seemed so edgy that he doubted anything he did was likely to be taken the way it was intended. Instead, he just left Adam to rest and took a bottle of juice and a granola bar out onto the balcony to sit in the sunshine, where he tried desperately to organize his own thoughts and come up with some effective way of talking Adam and his band out of going out to rehearsals that afternoon.
Chapter 7

Nothing Gus said could convince Adam that the rehearsals for that day should be cancelled. He seemed desperate for something normal and familiar to do, even though it meant physically leaving the hotel later that afternoon and traveling the short distance to the stadium. The crowds of fans outside the hotel and the arena were quiet and respectful, but the some of the media were a little less restrained and while Monte had been just as determined as Adam to attend rehearsals, he was badly rattled by the phalanx of reporters and cameras they encountered on the way out to the limo.

The moment they arrived at the stadium, Gus disappeared. It was nearly an hour before he resurfaced, having made a detailed tour of the entire facility to observe the set-up and the security. On his way back from the dressing rooms, he met up with Bill Wasley and frowned at his gloomy expression.

Gus didn’t envy him. He had to walk a very tight line between the wishes of the band and the grim advice of the legal counsel and there was no doubt that he didn’t feel the middle ground adequately represented either side.

"You weren’t at the meeting this morning," Gus observed.

"Only at the beginning. Although I might as well have stayed, for all that I accomplished."

They walked back along the corridor together and Gus cast him a sideways glance. "Why?"

He had a zippered binder under one arm. Removing a folded piece of paper, he handed it to Gus.

"I was asked to deliver that to the family of the girl who died."

Puzzled, Gus flipped it open. It was in Adam’s handwriting, but it was signed by the band and the dancers. It was simple and straightforward but clearly from the heart, and Gus could only imagine what had been going through his mind when he composed it.

"This is the original," Gus said gently.

He nodded.

"You didn’t see them?"

"I saw them. They wouldn’t accept it. They wouldn’t even read it. They were very polite and very calm...but they said they weren’t interested in any expressions of sympathy from Adam." He took the paper back from Gus and carefully refolded it. "They told me to tell Adam that they would be praying for him. In the hopes that he might take this as a sign that his lifestyle and what he’s doing is wrong."

"Damn," said Gus under his breath.

"Do you think I should tell him?"

"I’d like to say no. But he should know the whole truth." He hesitated. "Did Samuel know they’d
asked you to do this?"

Bill’s mouth twisted. "Yeah. I’m not sure he thought it was the right thing to do, but Adam told
him he and his friends were going to do it anyway no matter what he or the lawyers said, so
Samuel figured that sending me was the closest he was going to get to keeping control."

They were silent until they reached the entrance to the stadium.

"Do me a favor," Gus said, looking down the endless steps down to the stage. "Stay out of sight
until rehearsals are done, okay? They might have half a chance of getting through some stuff if
you don’t talk to them until afterwards."

"You don’t have to ask me twice," Bill said gratefully, sinking into one of the seats. "It’s not
something I’m looking forward to."

Gus left him on the upper level and walked down to the floor, joining Sophie, Andy and Lisa a few
rows back from the front. Rehearsals were usually seen as a good excuse to go shopping, but today
all three had refused to remain behind at the hotel and were looking extremely uneasy despite the
fact that the entire level was absolutely crawling with security.

"You can all relax," Gus said, dropping into a seat in the row behind them. "The place is like Fort
Knox. No-one is getting in or out without Doug’s personal approval." He leaned forward to
address Sophie over the back of her seat. "How’s it going?"

"Not great. None of them can concentrate. I’m not even sure they should be trying this today…"

Almost on cue the sound of arguing was heard from the stage and they all looked up to find that
Adam had lost his temper over something and had thrown his headset off in a rage.

"It’s not working," he shouted at the stage manager. "Are you deaf? Does it sound right to you?"

"I’m not worried about the sound right now," the stage manager said soothingly. "I want you
blocking the moves for lights and pryo…that’s all."

"Then why the hell am I singing?"

"Adam," Isaac said sharply. "Will you just do it? Who cares if it sounds like shit?"

"I do!"

"My sound is fine," Cam said, sounding perplexed.

Angrily, Adam snatched his headset from where he’d fired it, yanked Cam’s right off her head and
shoved the other one at her. "Well, then you use this!"

"Fuck off, Adam! You know, you aren’t the only one who doesn’t feel like doing this today!"

Tommy marched past, grabbed Cam by the upper arm and kept right on marching, pulling the
heated Cam out of Adam’s range. Monte just sat down in the middle of the stage and put his
elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

It didn’t get any better. The next few hours were a mix of short spurts of work mixed with longer
spurts of frustration and bitching. Gus sat chewing his nails, watching Adam get more and more intense as the rehearsal went on. Even Isaac had grown sullen. Monte fluctuated wildly between anger and lethargy and Cam, bereft of the steadying influence she usually relied on from Isaac, grew snappish and whiny. Tommy went quiet and refused to be baited by anyone.

It made for an unpleasant afternoon.

"They’ll feel better tomorrow," a voice said behind Gus.

He looked over his shoulder. "Feeling that optimistic, are you, Doug? I’m not so sure, especially after Bill talks to them."

"Yeah, I know. He told me." Crossing his arms, Doug observed the work being done on the stage for a moment and then said ruefully, "You know, even when he's in such rough shape he looks damn good up there."

Gus leaned back in his seat and crossed his ankles on the back of the seat in front of him. "I guess that’s what comes from years of being on stage. A lot of this stuff he doesn't have to even think about anymore." He winced as Adam accidentally bumped into Terrance during one routine and then rolled his eyes as they began arguing about who had stepped on whose cue. "Or maybe not."

"I think it’s time to pull the plug on this," Doug sighed. "They’re not going to accomplish anything else today."

Nobody argued with the suggestion that the rehearsal had run its course. Monte left immediately with Lisa tagging anxiously at his heels and as a result, a frustrated Bill was forced to postpone his talk with them until they were all reassembled back at the hotel.

Gus sat with Adam in the car, holding his hand and surreptitiously taking note of his agitated pulse. He seemed withdrawn and touchy but as Gus stroked arm and leaned his warmth in against him, some of the tension began to drain away and Gus felt him relax a little. When Adam felt his eyes on him, he smiled apologetically and squeezed his fingers lightly.

"I’m sorry," he whispered. "I’m acting like an ass, aren’t I?"

"Could be the lack of sleep, the lack of food and all the stress you’re under," Gus murmured back. Even his gentle teasing put an edge back into Adam's voice. "Don’t start fussing over me please."

"I’m not…” he began, and then gave up.

They gathered in the lounge that had been set aside for their use. Doug had arranged for food to be sent up and Gus noted silently that despite the fact it was past dinnertime, there wasn’t the usual stampede for the buffet that generally followed a long rehearsal. Instead, they all seemed more interested in stiff drinks and in hearing what Bill had to say.

There was silence when Bill was finished. Gus exchanged sober glances with the girls and went and poured himself a drink.

It was going to be a long evening.

He took note of the fact that they were low on ice and gratefully took the excuse to slip out of the
room for a few minutes. But as he pulled open the door to the hallway, he came face to face with Doug, took one look at the expression on his face and nearly dropped the ice-bucket.

"What’s up?" he said uneasily.

Doug backed him up into the room and drew him off to one side. Leaning his head in against his ear, he said in a low, urgent voice, "You asked me to talk to you before I called the cops…"

Gus’ eyes widened. "Has something happened?"

"Yeah," he said grimly looking down at the large envelope in his hands. "I think so."

"What’s that?"

"Look, I don’t want to do this here. Can we go somewhere else?"

"Sure." Gus didn’t hesitate but left the ice-bucket on the nearest table was just about to slip back out with him when Adam caught up with them.

"Doug," he said. "I wanted to apologize for this afternoon. A lot of what was going on was my fault. Our rehearsals are usually a lot cleaner than that, I promise."

"No problem," Doug said as Gus shifted with impatience.

"Actually, on those rare occasions when I did have my head on straight today there were a few things I noticed that I think are going to need to be changed. They’re minor…but if you’ve got some time now while they’re still fresh in my mind…"

Doug looked at Gus helplessly.

"You go ahead," Gus said steadily and took the package from him. "I’ll take care of this."

"Oh no you don’t," Adam said just as steadily and pulled the envelope from Gus’ hands before he could stop him. "I don’t want you sneaking off to do work. Come and sit with me. I’ve been giving you a rough time today too and I’m sorry. I only want five minutes of Doug’s time, and then I’m all yours."

Both Gus and Doug opened their mouths and found there was no graceful way out.

"What?" said Adam, puzzled.

Doug sighed. "Gus, he’s going to find out anyway…I might as well show him while I’m showing you…"

"What?" Adam repeated, a little less patient.

"You’d better come and see."

They followed him to the counter in the kitchenette and as the rest of the group crowded around curiously, Doug up-ended the contents of the envelope onto the tabletop. Dozens of newspaper clippings slid out.
"What the hell are those?" said Terrance in bewilderment.

He reached over to pick one up and Gus grabbed his arm. Looking up at Doug, he said, "Did you touch any of these?"

"Yeah, I’m afraid I did. So did the clerk at the desk. We didn’t realize what they were at first… sorry…"

"Not that there’s much hope of getting prints off them anyway," he muttered, half to himself. "Newsprint smudges too much…"

"Jesus…” said Isaac, who could see some of the clippings from where he was standing.

Gus crossed the kitchen to where the snack trays had been laid out and scooped up one of the plastic-wrapped sets of tongs. Tearing off the cellophane, he used the utensil to separate out the clippings one at a time and lay them face up on the counter. Around him, everyone else pushed in for a closer look, banging heads and swearing at each other.

There were thirty clippings in total. Several were from Las Vegas dailies but most were from almost every other major newspaper in the United States. There were even clippings from Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro and Honolulu. Every single one of them was an article on the drugging at the concert and almost all included pictures, either of Adam at a recent appearance or taken from some of his promotional material.

"It was left at the concierge’s desk," Doug said grimly. "She didn’t notice who left it and the envelope’s not addressed to anyone. But as soon as she saw what was in it, she called me."

"Nothing else in the envelope?" Gus said, still sorting out clippings.

"Only these."

"Some of these are from thousands of miles away," Tommy said in amazement. "How could somebody get hold of all of these so fast?"

"This is Vegas," Gus muttered. "There are people visiting here from all over the world. I’d bet pretty much every hotel around here brings in these editions every day."

"They all do," Doug nodded. "And so do we. It’s part of catering to your international clientele."

"Shit," said Adam, looking over Gus’ shoulder at the front page of the Los Angeles Times. "Look at that."

The hometown paper had by far the most coverage of any of the clippings and they all stared at it numbly as Gus continued to separate the pieces. The sick feeling that had been in the pit of everyone’s stomach since the night before was only compounded by this hard proof that the story was being followed around the world. And worse, that someone was apparently attempting to rub their noses in it.

Gus had reached the bottom of the stack; when he flipped over the last clipping and saw what was on it, he gasped and all trace of color drained from his face.

"Oh, my God…” he blurted.
"What?" said Isaac, startled.

He dropped the clipping on the counter like he’d been burned with it. Reaching around him, Adam pushed the other papers away so he could see clearly and found himself staring at a picture and article from the front page of the Toronto Star.

It was no surprise that Gus’ local paper would have chosen to run a front page story on the incident, especially given Gus’ high profile in his home town. There was a picture of Adam and his band, with an inset picture of Gus from a fundraiser he’d organized the year before and the full-length story from Reuters. It was virtually the same information as had been contained in all the other clippings…with one exception.

At the top of the page, stapled firmly as if to eliminate any possibility of it being there by accident, was a large, shiny leaf.

"What the heck is that there for?" Terrance said. "Is that supposed to mean something?"

Gus’ heart was ricocheting around in his throat. "Yeah," he said, dry-mouthed. "I think so."

"What’s so important about a leaf?"

He heard Adam’s sharply indrawn breath beside him and realized that he’d made the same connection.

"That’s not just a leaf," he said dully. "It’s a maple leaf."

"You should have told me."

Gus looked up from brooding contemplation of her hands and fixed Dean Holden with a look that could have split stone.

"Why the hell would I have told you about something that happened three months ago… in a different country…when none of these people were even there? Are you running so low on leads that you have to start making them up?"

He had the Toronto Star clipping in a little plastic bag. Waving it at Gus, he inquired, "So how do you explain this?"

His mouth tightened. "I can’t."

Monte had been the one who’d spilled the beans. Gus wasn’t sure if he’d done it deliberately or not, but the fact remained that when Doug had notified the police about the envelope that had been delivered, Dean Holden, partner in tow, had arrived to investigate it and had zoned right in on the clipping that stood out from all the rest.

And from his point of view, with very good reason.

Holden tapped his finger against the leaf. "This is a reference to you, isn’t it?"
"Taken a look at the Canadian flag lately?" he retorted. "Yes, it sure looks that way. I can’t imagine why someone would have deliberately stuck a maple leaf on there for any other reason."

"And you’ve had threats made against you…is that correct?"

"Threat," he corrected. "One. Three months ago." He shot Monte a dirty look and he defensively crossed his arms and stared right back. "And I can understand that Monte might have thought that it was important to mention it, but I’m sure that you know perfectly well that police officers get threatened all the time. It doesn’t mean anything."

"You don’t know that. And it’s not up to you to be making those assessments. Any information that might be pertinent to this case should be given to me…up front."

"None of us thought about it at the time," Adam said quietly. "We haven’t all exactly been thinking straight, if you know what I mean."

"It’s not like Gus was trying to hide it from you," Tommy added with more than a little annoyance.

Gus flashed him a grateful smile, which was promptly wiped from his face when Holden continued abruptly, "What was he convicted of?"

"Who?" said Gus, just to be bloody-minded.

He caught the faintest hint of amusement cross the face of Holden’s partner Del Marco. Obviously, he didn’t find it any easier getting along with Holden that anyone else did, and enjoyed watching him having his chain yanked. In Gus’ case, his dander was already up over suddenly being the center of attention in this situation…he had no intention of making it any easier for Holden to yank his chain.

"The guy who threatened you," Holden snapped.

Gus ran his tongue over his teeth. "Trafficking."

"Trafficking what?"

He glared. "Liquid Ecstasy."

"And you don’t think that’s relevant?"

"I was a narcotics officer," he said, beginning to lose his temper. "I didn’t hand out a whole lot of parking tickets. Half the people I arrested went down for selling Liquid-X. But just in case it’s relevant, I’d like to mention that none of them…not one…ever got arrested for spiking Gatorade. Or anything else. They were in the business of selling the stuff…not giving it away for free."

"It still has to be checked out."

"You can’t be serious. There’s a bench warrant out for this guy, for God’s sake. Are you really suggesting that he managed to get through an identification check at the border and traveled all the way to Vegas just to get back at me?"

"You said yourself that the local authorities haven’t been able to locate him since he last saw you."
"I doubt very much they’ve even looked for him. Come on, you know how these things work. Do you have the manpower for those kinds of things? Does any department?"

"I have the manpower to check out any lead that’s viable. So I’m sure you won’t mind if I check this one out."

"Like hell I don’t mind," Gus snapped.

"Mr. Harrison," Del Marco put in, very mildly. "If you could just provide us with the name of a contact in your local department, I can make a few inquiries and probably clear this up with just a couple of phone calls. You’re probably right, but I’m sure you understand that we do need to eliminate the possibility."

Gus’ eyebrows rose and his mouth twitched. After a moment, he relented…slightly. "Fine. But I’ll make some phone calls and have a contact in my department get in touch with you. I’m sure you understand that you’ll get more information if I initiate the inquiries myself."

"That would be appreciated," Del Marco nodded. "Thank you. Now, Mr. Taylor, we’d like to speak to the concierge…"

He ignored Holden’s scowl and went out with Doug but Holden, on his way to the door, stopped behind Gus and said pointedly, "And Mr. Harrison, if there’s anything else that you might have forgotten to mention to me, I suggest you spend some time tonight refreshing your memory and call me in the morning."

"I’ll do that," Gus said sweetly. Without turning around, he added loudly, "Oh, and Detective Holden…you and Detective Del Marco really should work a little harder on your ‘good-cop/bad-cop routine’…because right now it really sucks."

There was the sound of muffled laughter from the hallway. Gus permitted himself a grim smile. He would have loved to be a fly on the wall in that cruiser on the way back to the station.

However, not everyone appeared to appreciate the humor.

"Do you always have to be that way?"

Startled, he looked up and found Monte scowling at him. It was disconcertingly aggressive; Monte had already indulged in several strong drinks before Doug had even produced the envelope and the additional alcohol he’d consumed while they waited for the police has aggravated his anxiety into belligerence.

Not that Gus was getting any more sympathy from the rest of the crowd. No one else spoke, but there just seemed to be a few too many reproachful faces all of a sudden.

"What way?"

"Difficult. Don’t you think things might go a little easier if you just give him some straight answers and stop playing mind games with him?"

Gus cocked his head to one side. "I didn’t think I was being difficult, Monte. The guy’s barking up the wrong tree."
"You don’t know that. You were threatened."

"We’re halfway across the freaking continent, Monte!"

"It’s still possible, isn’t it?"

"Pretty much anything is possible. It’s also possible that whoever did this is trying to generate suspicion in the wrong place. The first thing you need in an investigation is a motive. Creating a false motive is the oldest trick in the book."

"Yeah, then you should be happy to get them the information they want so they can eliminate it as a possibility."

"I will get it for them." Gus’ back was going up in a hurry, egged on by the fact that no one else in the room seemed the least bit inclined to jump to his defense. "But while they’re busy eliminating the most remote possibility on their list, what the hell do you think they’re doing with all the other leads? It’s what’s not getting checked out that bothers me. And it bugs the hell out of me that he’s not sharing any information with Adam."

"I explained that to you this morning," Adam muttered.

"Yeah, I know…they don’t want to tip anybody off in case it’s an inside job. I think I’ve used that story myself once or twice. It’s in the handbook of excuses they give you when you graduate from the police academy."

"See?" Monte snapped. "There you go again. I think we really could do without all the sarcasm right now."

Adam shot Monte a look and then said to Gus, "You of all people should understand that what Holden is doing is just procedure and not personal."

His eyebrows arched. "Yeah, well…I wasn’t lucky enough to have many cases where one of the chief witnesses at the crime scene was a cop."

"Ex-cop," said Monte pointedly.

Gus’ fuse burned a little shorter. "Right. Sorry, Monte…I forgot." Abruptly, he stood up. "Look, in the morning I’ll make some calls and do whatever I can to get this cleared up. If it’s making you uptight, I’m sorry. I do understand that when something like this happens you need to rationalize it. You need to get answers and in this kind of situation, you usually don’t get them very fast. And I know that you don’t like the idea of somebody doing this because of something that you’ve done…"

"Gus," said Adam. He spoke very quietly, but the admonition was clear.

"…and I don’t blame you. But that doesn’t mean you should just go looking for a reason that suits you better."

Without giving anyone an opportunity to respond to that, he just left. He was fuming impatiently in front of the elevator when he became aware of one of the security guards hovering at his shoulder.
"Something wrong?" Gus growled at him.

"Just following instructions," he replied, unruffled. "Adam's management wants someone with all of you at all times."

"I don’t need a babysitter."

"I won’t get in your way."

"You’re right. Because you’re not coming with me. I want to go for a walk. Alone."

"Sorry," he said quite calmly. As the door opened, Gus stalked inside and when he went to follow him he spun around and put one hand on his shoulder, digging his thumb hard into his collarbone so that he stumbled backwards.

"Look, Gus…"

"Take the rest of the night off," he said as the doors closed in his face.

He got as far as the lobby before he angrily admitted to himself that he couldn’t leave the hotel without risking a run-in with the press and fans that still lurked outside. He got a few too many appreciative stares in the sports bar and quickly decided that wasn’t the best place to hang out either. Finally he took refuge in the main floor restaurant where the maitre de agreeably let him take a secluded booth in a section that wasn’t currently being used.

He was stabbing his fork moodily into a slice of chocolate cheesecake and wondering why the hell it wasn’t making him feel any better when a figure slid into the booth beside him and nearly gave him heart failure.

"Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to play with your food?" Doug said gently.

"Holy shit, Doug…don’t you think my nerves are bad enough? How did you know I was in here? Did the manager snitch on me?"

"No. I hadn’t eaten. I just stopped by to raid the kitchen." As Gus mashed a little more cheesecake through the tines of the fork, he ventured, "Are you hiding?"

"Yep."

"I’m sorry. I should have checked out everything in that envelope before I brought it up to show you. I just didn’t think they would see it."

"Not your fault."

"They don’t really think this has anything to do with you, do they?"

Gus shrugged. "Power of suggestion," he said simply. "In the absence of fact, you make things up. When somebody plants an idea in your head, your imagination can’t help but run with it."

He frowned at his plate for a moment, then took up one of the spare utensils from the place setting and handed it to him.
"Here. Have some cheesecake. It’s certainly not doing me any good."

"If it makes you feel any better," he said, slicing off a forkful. "I suggested to Detective Holden that rather than being on your back about everything, maybe he needs to look at you as a really good source of inside information."

Gus snorted. "Personally, I think what he needs to look for is a really good source of fiber. Sorry…sorry…I’ve been told my sarcasm isn’t helping. But frankly, Doug? I’m not expecting to get a friendship bracelet from that man anytime soon." Licking the end of one finger, he absently picked up chocolate flakes from the rim of the plate.

After a minute, he asked, "Did he talk to the girls in the hospital today?"

"He apparently re-interviewed them all. I got that from Del Marco. Holden just keeps telling me that he’ll only give me information he absolutely thinks I need and the rest is police business." Doug took note of Gus’ frustrated face and put one hand over his. "I’m sorry about all this. I know I haven’t known you a long time, but you and Adam seem really happy and I know that this is kind of coming between you."

"I wouldn’t say that," Gus said a bit icily, withdrawing his hand.

He looked askance. "No? So why are you down here hiding behind a plate of cheesecake when he’s upstairs probably worried about where you are?"

Gus threw down his fork.

"You want to know why I’m hiding down here, Doug? I’ll tell you. I’m hiding down here because this is the first time since I had to leave the police force that I’m stuck in a situation where I have all the knowledge and all the skills and all the desire to get involved and do something to help and instead I’m expected to sit still and do nothing. I could handle that, if I thought that everything possible was being done without me. I just don’t happen to think that’s the case, that’s all."

"It’s only been twenty-four hours," Doug said gently.

"Yeah, I know."

"And we all are just trying to find a way to cope. No one means to be making you uncomfortable. I’m sure that when they have some time to think about it, they’ll realize that this is bringing up some difficult things for you too."

"Yeah." Gus began refolding his napkin methodically and then just balled it up in irritation and tossed it on the table.

"I should go back upstairs."

"I’ll take care of the rest of this," he said, indicating the cheesecake with a smile.

"Be my guest," Gus smiled back ruefully.

"Hey."

"What?"
"You’re an important member of this organization, you know."

Gus slid out to the edge of the seat and stood up.

"I want to be," he said bleakly. "I try to be. I try to do whatever I can to support Adam his career. I thought I was doing a pretty good job of it up until yesterday. But to tell you the truth, Doug…at the moment I just feel like the boyfriend who arranges the benefit concerts where people die."
Chapter 8

Adam was on the phone when Gus let himself back into the room and he look both relieved and annoyed to see him.

"Never mind, he just walked in. Thanks."

He replaced the receiver and waited while Gus walked silently past him and into the bathroom, eyeing Adam's reflection out of the corner of his eye as he began taking off his watch and bracelet.

He knew what was coming.

"You know, Gus…you spend a lot of time giving me hell for going places without security. Why did you blow off Tony when he tried to go with you?"

Gus deliberately made himself busy with his bracelet, delaying his answer while he tried to squash the resentment that bubbled back up. "Because," he said finally, tossing the bracelet on the counter. "Unlike you, I don’t put myself in situations where security is an issue. Besides…and I’m sorry; I hate to keep reminding everybody about this…but I was an undercover police officer and I could probably beat the crap out of pretty much anybody if I set my mind to it. Better that extra security hang around here and back you up as much as possible."

Adam leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed and his eyes on the floor. His voice was very controlled, but there was no mistaking how bothered he was by Gus' answer. "Still…I don’t want you going off by yourself until we know what’s going on. Please? Especially now."

"You mean now that you think this all has something to do with me?" Gus ran a brush through his hair for a few quick strokes and then dropped it as carelessly as the bracelet and turned to face him.

Adam's head came up. "I mean now that something else has happened. I mean that I’m just as worried about you as I am about the others and I need to ask you to please not take any chances until this gets sorted out."

Adam was very quiet and very serious and Gus suddenly felt a rush of remorse. He could see the emotions jostling for position on Adam's face – anxiety, confusion, dread – and berated himself for being so self-centered.

Adam looked up as Gus tucked his hands into his tightly folded arms and gently pulled them free so he could slide in against him.

"I’m sorry. You have so much more going on here than me…I should be doing everything I can to help you, not just thinking about myself."

He felt Adam's chest heave in response and his chin move into the curve of his shoulder.

"I’m not handling this well," he said, voice muffled. "I know I’m not."

"And I’m not helping. I’m sorry. You’re right about security. If it makes you feel better, I won’t go out alone."

He squeezed Gus gently in response and they stood silently for a moment while Gus traced his fingers gently through Adam's hair.
"I need to ask you something," Adam said, very low. "And I need you to tell me the truth."

Gus sighed. "That’s generally my policy when you ask me something."

Adam straightened up just far enough that he could look him in the eyes. "Gus…are you really sure that this doesn’t have anything to do with what happened in Toronto? Or…or are you just having a hard time with it because you’re afraid that maybe it does?"

Gus’ face flushed and his prolonged silence made Adam uneasy but in actuality Gus was just trying to find the right words.

"To be honest," he said with great difficulty. "If I thought that something that I had done, however long ago, was responsible for this happening to you, it would just about kill me. But no. I don’t think this is connected to me. And to be perfectly honest, what’s really bothering me isn’t what I think about all this, but what you think. You do think this could be linked back to me…"

"I don’t know what to think," Adam said wearily.

"I know you don’t. And I’m trying really hard not to be upset that you’ve got these suspicions. They’re natural. Somebody is trying to make you think that way."

He studied Adam's face earnestly for a moment and then he put his hands on Adam's shoulders and set him back with a rueful grimace.

"I think I’d better go and apologize to Monte."

Adam caught at his hands. "I don’t think that’s a good idea."

"Come on, Adam…I was pretty hard on him. Of all of you, he’s taking this the hardest and I shouldn’t have bitched at him that way."

"I know," he said, tightening his hold as Gus went to draw away. "And maybe when he sobers up he’ll appreciate the apology…"

Gus stopped. "Oh," he said uneasily.

"Yeah, he was pretty looped last time I saw him. And ragging on Lisa for trying to talk him into going to bed. And biting the head off anyone else who tried to settle him down."

"That’s my fault," muttered Gus.

Adam’s mouth tightened. "Well, not entirely. But you’re right…he’s taking this really hard."

He went unexpectedly silent, sinking into such deep thought that Gus furrowed his brow at him in puzzlement.

"You seem pretty worried about him."

"I am. In fact…” Adam brooded for a moment and then admitted, "I’ve been noticing…that Monte’s not really been happy for quite awhile. The summer was rough on him. He was away from Lisa and the kids for too long, he got really stressed out over his last gig…then there was the disagreement we had over Beg For Mercy and the whole incident with Twitter and the fans…I think it’s all affected him a lot more than anyone realizes."

"He has seemed a little more withdrawn lately," Gus said slowly. "But it’s not serious, is it?"
"I don’t know. I’ve tried to talk to him but he says everything’s fine. He goes really quiet backstage, he doesn’t joke around with us or the fans as much as he used to and he seems to go out of his way to avoid publicity more than he ever did."

Gus took a moment to digest that. He was shocked when Adam added unexpectedly, "Maybe he’s just had enough of being a part of my band."

He blinked. "Oh come on, Adam! He is just burned out being a part of Madonna's tour and now yours. It is going to pass, you know it will. You’ve got the new album out, you’ve got the tour to look forward to…"

"I don’t think Monte’s looking forward to it. And even though I’ve got way more control over things that I used to, the fact is, there is so much at risk financially with me that I still have to do things the record company’s way a lot of the time. Now Griffin is pulling my strings. That’s frustrating. But it takes so much money to back me that I don’t have much of a choice. I can't pay him enough to make him leave his other responsibilities and be a constant part of my band. He has a family to support."

"But you don’t honestly think that Monte…"

He shrugged. "Twenty four hours ago, I would have agreed with you. I would have said it was a phase and he’d work through it. But now…"

"You’ve all had a horrible shock," Gus said gently. "And you’re getting a lot of negative attention at the worst possible time, and you all feel a terrible responsibility for what happened. Everybody’s judgment is going to be off for awhile."

Gus kissed his mouth softly and touched his forehead to Adam's. "In a few days," he whispered. "We can all get away and have a break and be with your family and it will give everyone a chance to get things back in perspective."

Adam kissed him back, but his face remained troubled. "I’m not so sure that’s going to be enough for Monte."

"I do. He’s a level-headed guy. He just needs a little time, that’s all."

Gus wasn’t feeling quite so understanding a few hours later when he was roused from a restless sleep by a soft, persistent knocking.

He sat up, disoriented in the dark, and cocked his head to one side until he was certain of what he was hearing. According to the clock radio it was nearly three a.m. but someone was definitely knocking on the door.

He fumbled for the bedside lamp and switched it on, then glanced down at Adam and found he was still fast asleep with his arms up over his head. Careful not to disturb him, Gus slipped out of bed and blearily made his way to the door. He had to rub his eyes before they were awake enough to focus through the peephole; when he saw who was knocking, he immediately pulled the door open.

It took Tommy a second to regroup. He’d been expecting Adam to answer, not Gus, tousled and half-asleep and wearing only a t-shirt and pair of boxers. Oblivious to his state of undress, Gus could only stare back at him.
"What on earth is the matter? Do you know what time it is?"

"I’m sorry…I know," he whispered. He was looking at little disheveled himself. He had clearly dressed in a hurry and he had a bad case of bed hair. "You haven’t seen Monte, have you?"

Gus rubbed his eyes again. "Wha…? Monte? Not since…why? Are you looking for him?"

"We all are," he said with a grim smile. "Nobody can find him."

"Where’s Lisa?"

Tommy winced. "In their room. Having a fit. She and Monte apparently had a pretty bad fight. He stomped off somewhere and nobody’s seen him for about four hours. She waited, figuring he’s calm down and come back but he hasn’t been seen since." He gestured apologetically. "I thought maybe he’d come to talk to Adam."

"Where else have you looked?"

"Everywhere," Isaac said, appearing over Tommy’s shoulder. "I’ve woken everybody up on this floor. Kevin’s on the elevator and he swears nobody’s used it since about ten-thirty. He checked with the guys in the lobby and they say nobody’s come out down there either."

Swearing beneath his breath, Gus ran one hand through his hair. "Would he do something stupid like sneak out of the hotel?"

Isaac and Tommy looked at each other.

"Last time I saw him, he could barely walk straight," Isaac said flatly. "I don’t think he could have found his way out if his life had depended on it."

Gus sighed. "Okay, give me a minute to get dressed and I’ll come and help look for him."

He turned around and bumped straight into Adam. "Look for who?" he said in sleepy irritation.

"Monte. He’s gone AWOL."

After more than another hour, even Gus was starting to get frantic. The security staff had scattered, covering areas of the hotel no one else dared canvass, and came back to report that no one had seen any sign of Monte since he’d returned from rehearsals that afternoon. But it was also clear that he could conceivably have left the building by any one of a dozen fire exits, in which case he was wandering around Las Vegas severely intoxicated and without a bodyguard.

"Does this run in your circle of friends or something?" Gus snapped at Adam when they all congregated back in Monte’s room to make sure Lisa hadn’t heard from him. "Do you remember what happened to you when you pulled this little stunt? You nearly got yourself killed…and you were sober!"

He saw the look on Lisa’s face and kicked himself. "Sorry…sorry. That was a stupid thing to say."

There was a sharp knock at the door and Kevin answered it to admit Doug Taylor, who had obviously been summoned by one of the hotel staff and who was looking like he was in the middle of a waking nightmare.
He listened in silence to the story and then looking directly at Gus, he asked, "Should I be calling the police?"

"Oh hell yes," he said derisively. "Put out an all-points-bulletin. Be on the lookout for one drunken guitar player."

"If he left the hotel, he could get himself in some really rough spots. We could at least let them know that he might be out there."

"Maybe we should," Tommy said quietly.

"Jesus, Tommy..." Isaac protested. "Do you know what will happen if that gets out? The place is already crawling with press. There’s no way we can keep something like that quiet."

"And do you know what will happen if we don’t find him and somebody from the media does?"

It was a good point. Isaac threw up his hands and looked at Adam.

"It’s your band. It should be your decision."

"Thanks," said Adam sourly. He looked at Lisa who was white-faced and shaking and knew what her opinion was without asking. To Doug, he said, "I don’t want to. But you’re probably right. The longer we wait the worse this could get."

They argued back and forth with each other until the general consensus was to go ahead and notify the authorities.

Then Andy piped up hesitantly, "Is there any way that any of this has something to do with what happened at the concert last night?"

Gus had been twitching with frustration but managing to hold his tongue, feeling that it wasn’t his place to try and talk Adam out of something that he had already agreed was necessary. But he took one look at the horrified expressions triggered by Andy’s comment and said firmly, "No. The only way this has to anything do with last night is that Monte’s really upset and just isn’t thinking straight."

On that note, the room broke up into little pockets of agitated conversation. Adam took Lisa aside and sat with her to try and calm her down, and Doug went to the phone and started making calls. Gus was too restless to just wait around and after a few minutes, he sidled over to the door and spoke quietly to Kevin.

He didn’t look terribly happy about it but he didn’t stop Gus from slipping out of the room.

He was halfway down the hallway when Isaac caught up with him. "Where are you going?"

"I can’t just sit here," he said impatiently. "I’m going to go through the building one more time."

"I’ll go with you."

"No. And how did manage to get out past Kevin?"

"Told him I wanted to get my cell phone. Come on, Gus. We can cover more ground with the two of us."

"No offense, Isaac," he said through clenched teeth, "But you’re not exactly Mr. Inconspicuous. Just please go back and tell Adam that I’m just checking some things out and I’ll be back soon."
"Yeah, right."

Isaac refused to be dissuaded and eventually Gus gave in. Between the two of them, they worked their way through every room on each of the floors they had booked, waking members of the staff for the second time and making absolutely sure that none of them had seen Monte since he’d left with Lisa. On the last floor, they checked all the meeting rooms, the private workout room and the video arcade.

"There are supply rooms at the end of this hall," Isaac said pointing. "We should check those as well."

"Lounge first," Gus said, pushing open the next door and flicking on the lights. No one had been in yet to clean up after the room had been used earlier that evening; it was extremely untidy but without too much effort it was easy to tell that it was also extremely empty. Still, Gus went to the tiny kitchenette to make doubly sure and as he passed the exit to the balcony he was startled to feel a definite draft and to see that although the curtains had been pulled closed, they were being moved gently by the breeze.

"Isaac, did you check the balcony last time you were through here?" he said.

He looked blank. "What balcony?"

"This one," Gus said, pushing the curtains back to reveal patio doors.

"Shit. I didn’t know there was one there. I thought it was just a picture window."

Without hesitating, Gus slid open the door and stepped out and then stopped dead as something crunched underfoot.

"Careful," he said to Isaac over his shoulder. "Something's been smashed out here."

He paused and inspected the pane of the door for damage. "I don't see anything broken. Somebody dropped a glass, maybe?"

"No idea," Gus muttered, cursing the fact that the light from inside wasn’t bright enough to illuminate more than a couple of feet outside the patio door. He edged a little farther out into the darkness and passed the cover of the walls that framed the balcony. Immediately, he was caught by the strong breeze and had to turn to one side to stop the air from hitting his face.

With his eyes still unaccustomed to the darkness, he took another step forward, tripped and fell hard. He knew what he had fallen over even as he went down and instinctively tried to twist clear, landing hard on his side and recoiling immediately.

His yelp brought Isaac out in a hurry. He hit the glass at the edge of the doorway and faltered, also unable to see and uncertain whether or not he should venture any farther.

"Gus! What the fuck…?"

Gus scrambled to his knees. He was swearing unintelligibly, half scared out of his wits but trying desperately to stay in control.

He squinted fearfully at the motionless figure on the ground. The features were half hidden by the jacket that had bunched up around his face, but there was still no mistaking who it was.

"Oh Christ, Isaac…I found him."
Isaac searched wildly for the switch that controlled the patio lights, and by the time he had stumbled out onto the balcony Gus was on his feet, cursing a blue streak and clutching his head.

"Jesus!" he said at the sight of Monte face-down on the ground. "Is he…?"

"Dead?" Gus spat wrathfully. "No, he’s not dead! He’s just dead drunk!" To Isaac’s disbelief, he kicked Monte in the ribs as hard as he could and was rewarded with a dull groan. "You stupid asshole! You moron! You fucking idiot!"

There was another groan from Monte and Gus, absolutely enraged, wound up and booted him again.

"Gus! For God’s sake!" Isaac had to seize him around the arms and hold Gus still while he struggled furiously and hurled a consistently descriptive stream of abuse at the crumpled figure at his feet.

"Do you have any idea how much he just scared me? Holy shit, Isaac…he took twenty years off my life!"

After a minute, Gus sagged against him and Isaac became aware of how badly he was shaking. "I fell over him. I fell right over him…." Putting his hands to his face she said weakly, "…and God…for a second there…"

"Okay, okay…" Isaac held on to him until Gus had regained control of both his legs and his temper. "You’re not going to do him any good by beating the hell out of him…"

He didn’t release Gus until he had steadied and then they both knelt down and gently rolled Monte onto his back, carefully avoiding the shattered bits of glass that surrounded him.

"Jack Daniels?" Gus muttered as he was assailed by a particularly strong whiff of liquor.

"That’d be my guess. He must have dropped the bottle. Hey, M! You’d better wake up, buddy. Half of Las Vegas is looking for you."

There was no reply. Monte was sleeping peacefully.

"Now what do we do?" said Isaac wryly.

Gus was still waiting for his pounding heart to come back down out of his throat. "You mean since I can’t get away with shoving him over the railing into the pool?"

"We’re about twenty stories up. You’d kill him."

"Like hell. He’s so pissed he’d probably bounce." Gus scrubbed his hands over his face to try and clear his head and then sat down hard and leaned back against the wall of the balcony.

"First of all," he said. "You’d better phone down to Lisa’s room and get them to call of the bloodhounds. Then…hell, I don’t know…can you carry him?"

"I guess so," Isaac said looking doubtful. "But he’d better not throw up all over me."

He got hold of Terrance and hurriedly explained. "And for God’s sake, don’t tell Lisa about the shape he’s in. Just tell her that Gus knows where he is and that he’s not hurt, then get your ass up here and help me with him."
Between Terrance and Kevin they managed to get Monte down to Terrance’s room, where they stripped him and threw him in the shower. Gus stood outside the bathroom door, grimly enjoying the outraged cursing from within and finally opened the door far enough to shout, "Monte! Don’t you know any nice words?"

"You’re one to talk," Isaac said, halfway through his own glass of whiskey. "Your vocabulary was getting pretty colorful there for a few minutes when you found him."

"How much did he drink?" Tommy said in amazement when he arrived with Adam.

"Beats me," said Isaac, “He’d been helping himself to the bar in the lounge…he’s lucky he doesn’t have alcohol poisoning."

"He’s lucky he doesn’t have broken ribs," Gus said darkly. He slouched in a chair in the corner of the room with his knees drawn up against his chest.

Having wrestled him into a pair of Terrance’s sweatpants, Kevin and Terrance steered a wet and very subdued Monte out of the bathroom and pitched him on one of the double beds.

"You can go and get Lisa now," Terrance said resignedly to Kevin. "She’s not going to be happy until she sees him and he’s about as presentable as he’s going to get."

"Yeah, she might as well see him now," said Adam in disgust. "Because he’s going to be a whole different story when he wakes up." He crouched down beside Gus’ chair, looked up into his pale, set face and asked gently, "Are you okay? You look pretty shaky."

"Tripping over bodies in the dark can do that to you," Gus muttered.

"Come on then," Adam said, taking one hand and pulling him up out of his chair. "You need some rest. We might as well go back to bed for whatever’s left of the night."

"Not much," said Isaac looking at his watch. Reaching out, he hung one arm around Gus’ neck and kissed him on the cheek. "You’re a smart cookie, man. You saved the day. Go and get some sleep."

"Thanks for your help," Gus said and hugged him back. On the way to the door, he paused long enough at the end of the bed to smack a motionless Monte on the leg and promise, "And once you’ve sobered up, you jackass, you and I are going to have a conversation."

It was after 6 a.m. by the time he and Adam crawled back into bed, but Gus was too wound up to sleep. He waited until he was sure Adam had dozed off, then crept out and took his cell phone onto the balcony where he wouldn’t disturb Adam.

Knowing Michelle was most likely already at work, he phoned the Youth Task Force office in Toronto first. To his astonishment, Frankie answered the phone.

"Lose another receptionist, Frankie?" he asked cheekily. Frankie was notoriously hard on receptionists and had gained a reputation as a bit of a "Murphy Brown" when it came to retaining staff.

"She had a dentist appointment," Frankie retorted and they spent a moment laughing together.
Frankie had been Gus’ right hand during the time he had spent as Task Force coordinator and hearing her voice brought back sudden, intense memories of the good times that they’d had when they’d worked as a team.

"How are you?" she said seriously after a moment. "I heard what happened."

"I’m okay," he replied, although he doubted his blood-pressure readings would have supported the assertion. He didn’t ask what she knew and didn’t volunteer to provide any new information. Instead, he spent a few minutes catching up with her on how her life was going and was surprised to find how badly he was missing her sense of humor and her friendship. Pushing away regrets, he finally asked her if Michelle was in the office.

"I was just going to try and call you," Michelle said when she picked up the phone. "I just wasn’t sure you’d be up yet."

"Being up implies that I actually ever went to bed. Well, okay…I did get a few hours of sleep, I guess."

"Why…what’s happened now?"

Grateful to have an ear to bend, Gus told Michelle the whole story…about the statement from the family of the dead teenager, about the tense and heated rehearsals, about the delivery of the envelope full of clippings, about his confrontation with the police and finally, about Monte’s disappearance and the subsequent search and rescue effort.

There was silence.

"Crazy, huh?" said Gus, fishing for a response.

Michelle was flabbergasted. "Is that possible? Could this really have to do with those threats against you?"

Gus groaned. "Oh hell, Michelle…I thought that you of all people wouldn’t jump to that stupid conclusion…"

"Stupid? You got sent a newspaper clipping from Toronto with a bloody maple leaf stapled to it!"

"In an envelope with dozens of other clippings."

"So why was that one clipping singled out?"

"I don’t know!"

"It sure looks like somebody’s trying to point a finger at you."

"Yeah, and that could be for anyone of a dozen reasons. The most obvious reason is that whoever did this is just trying to divert attention…to throw off the police investigation… not that that would take very much…"

"And maybe whoever did this is doing it to get back at you," Michelle said very seriously. "You’re not letting your ego get in the way here, are you…?"

"Oh for God’s sake! There’s no reason to believe that whoever delivered the envelope is even the same person who drugged the girls at the concert! There’s been a lot of negative publicity…maybe somebody’s just trying to rub our noses in it."
"You didn’t answer my question."

"That wasn’t a question. It was a shot. This has nothing to do with my ego."

"Are you sure?"

In disbelief, Gus held the cell phone in front of his face and stared at it. After a moment, he put it back to his ear and said, "You’re as bad as everybody else. Look, I understand that everyone is desperate to find some answers here but that doesn’t mean you go grasping at the first possible explanation."

Reluctantly, Michelle swallowed the rest of her comments. "So what are you going to do?"

"That’s why I called you first. I need some phone numbers. There are a few people I need to speak to."

Michelle immediately tracked down the information Gus was looking for and even offered to make some calls herself if it would help. "I could get Max Wagner to check a few things out on the sly for you."

Gus’ eyebrows went up. Max Wagner was a police officer who had spent a lot of time in recent days volunteering his input to Task Force projects. Gus knew Max and had worked with him in the past and often wondered if his interest in working for the Task Force was strictly philanthropic, or if he had another interest in mind…namely Michelle.

Gus had only mentioned the possibility once and had his head bitten off for his efforts. Michelle’s position on dating police officers was very clear; she’d already married one and buried one, thank you very much and she certainly wasn’t about to put herself in that position again. Still, Gus had suspected for quite some time that somebody had attracted Michelle’s attention and it perked his curiosity no end to have Michelle suddenly bring Max’s name into the conversation.

"Will you be seeing him today?"

"Probably. The last batch of donated gifts is going out to the shelters this morning. He’s organizing some of the cruisers to drop off the ones for the street kids."

"Oh. Well, say hi to him for me, will you? But I don’t think you need to get him involved. I think I’ve got enough people at Headquarters who still owe me favors." Gus made a mental note to follow up on this train of thought in a future conversation and then said, "I should go and start making some calls. By the way, you promised me an answer today…will you come for New Year’s or not?"

Michelle stammered for a moment before she was able to answer. "Yeah…I thought about that. It sounds like fun, and I’d love to see you, but I’m not letting you send me a ticket."

"It’s my Christmas present."

"Too late. I’ve already booked a flight." The lie came easily, which wasn’t surprising considering that she’d practiced it all the way into the office. "And I’m arriving on Boxing Day. When are you back from California?"

"The 27th. Early. So you can do some damage at the casinos before we get back. But damn it Michelle, I wanted to do this for you. Now you’re going to make me go Christmas shopping."

"Life’s rough," Michelle said with a smile. "Look, I won’t keep you. But you call me later and tell
Gus wasn’t the only one in a hurry to make another phone call. The moment he hung up, Michelle looked up a phone number in her address book and dialed it. She wasn’t expecting an answer and she didn’t get one. Voice mail would have to do.

"Just so you know, I told him I’ve booked my flight. He still thinks that this is all his idea...I’m sorry...I know you want me to talk to him, but do you think now is really the time? I’ve heard what’s going on down there. And I know it seems like I'm stalling but you seem to think this is just going to slide right off him and I’m telling you...it’s not. It’s a lot more complicated than that and things sound complicated enough for all of you right now. I promise that when I have a chance to see him face to face, I will tell him the truth. For now please just go easy on him, okay? Don’t let people rag on him. This is all harder on him than any of you realize and he’s still not as strong emotionally as he might seem."

She doodled a little on the notepad in front of her and then, aware of dead air, said in a rush, "You must be going through hell. I wish I could be there for you. You know that I’m still trying to work all this out in my head. It’s not that I don’t...well, I won’t get into it now. If you have time, will you please call me? I want to be sure you’re all right."

As it turned out, Gus didn’t need to wheel out his little stack of favors when it came to calling old colleagues at police headquarters. After only two calls, he had half a dozen officers digging for information on his behalf, with promises to contact Detective Holden to advise him they were working on it while at the same time promising to call Gus first with any information they managed to find. Satisfied, he went back inside and was looking longingly at the empty space next to Adam when there was a knock at the door.

"Doesn’t anybody ever sleep in this town?" he said under his breath. He stalked to the door and threw it open without even bothering to look out first and found himself under the disapproving eye of Dean Holden.

"You’re up early, Detective," he said sweetly. It was a low blow; Gus knew perfectly well that he’d been rousted out of bed in the middle of the night when they’d reported Monte missing, only to drive all the way across town and arrive at the hotel to be told that it was a false alarm.

"I understand your missing person showed up?" he said bluntly, ignoring Gus’ comment. He also tried hard to ignore the fact that Gus was wearing boxers and apparently not much else. Gus noticed the way Holden's gaze flickered up and down his body as he tried to be nonchalant about it, and deliberately put one hand up over his head against the doorframe to give the detective a better view.

"Monte? Yes, we found him. We probably jumped the gun a little bit by calling it in. Sorry about that."

"Would you mind telling me where he was?"

Gus widened his eyes. "Why would you need to know that?"

"You filed a missing person’s report," he growled at Gus.

"Oh, we did not. I was standing right next to Doug Taylor when he phoned the station. All he said – all he said – was that we weren’t able to locate Monte in the hotel and we were worried that he’d
left the building without a bodyguard. All we did was ask your street patrols to keep an eye out for him. If you jumped to the wrong conclusion, I’m sorry."

"Given what’s happened in the last thirty six hours," he said angrily. "I’m sure you can understand that we’d take a disappearance rather seriously."

"Well, it wasn’t serious. But we appreciate you help."

"That’s not good enough. I’d appreciate the courtesy of an answer."

Unable to help himself, Gus grinned widely. "Oh, so now you want some information from me. That’s interesting. Maybe we can make a trade."

If Holden ever ventured into the casinos, Gus sincerely hoped he didn’t play poker. His frustration was clearly evident on his face as he retorted, "Mr. Harrison, I’m finding your lack of co-operation extremely annoying."

"I’m not trying to annoy you," Gus innocently. "All I’m saying is that I would be willing to fill you in on what happened with Monte if you’ll tell me what you found out when you re-interviewed the victims yesterday."

His face tightened even more. "I will not give you privileged information about a case."

"Fine." Gus tossed his head. "Then if you don’t mind, I’d like to go back to bed. And before you ask, I’ve already contacted the Toronto police about the man who threatened me. They’ll be in touch with you."

He let go of the heavy door and it began to swing shut. At the last minute, Holden put out one hand and caught the edge of the door just in time to stop it from closing. He didn’t bother to push it any wider but he leaned in close to the opening and said very curtly, "Mr. Harrison, if I find there’s any reason to believe you’ve been withholding information from me or doing anything to interfere with this investigation, I will arrest you for obstruction of justice. Do you hear me?"

Gus put his hands on his hips. "Detective Holden? Are you left-handed?"

"No…what does that have to do…"

"Then I strongly suggest you remove your hand from my door, because it’s about to close with a considerable amount of force and I’d hate to think you’d have to get poor Detective Del Marco to take your notes for you until all five of your broken fingers have healed…"

The fingers disappeared and with a grim smile Gus kicked the door the rest of the way shut.
Without access to any inside information on the status of the investigation, Gus went for the only other source readily available to him...the newspapers.

Going back to sleep seemed pretty much out of the question, so he simply dressed and stole downstairs to the gift shop in the lobby and picked up several of the local dailies. He didn't want Adam to see him reading them and ended up hiding out in the change room of the private workout area upstairs where he was relatively certain he wouldn't be disturbed at this early hour of the morning.

The story on the front page was slightly smaller that the day before and contained only file photos of Adam and the arena.

Investigation of concert death enters second day

Las Vegas police continue their probe into the death of a teenage girl at Adam Lambert's benefit concert Sunday night. A total of nineteen girls between the ages of twelve and twenty were injured when they accidentally ingested a narcotic substance provided to them by an unknown assailant in spiked bottles of Gatorade. Sonia Worden, age sixteen, of Henderson died as a result of complications of an epileptic fit that was triggered by the overdose. Two other victims still remain in hospital in good condition. All others were treated and released.

Police Detective Dean Holden confirmed that investigators are examining the possibility that the person responsible has a present or prior connection to Adam Lambert and/or the band. He also confirmed that extensive eyewitness interviews have resulted in a detailed description of the suspect.

Gus swore to himself. There was nothing more detailed in any of the other papers either and in frustration he crumpled them all up and fired them into the garbage. No wiser now than he’d been earlier, he rushed back to his room before anyone noticed he was gone.

Adam was half-awake when he returned but didn’t seem aware of his absence. When he sat down on the bed beside Adam, he rolled over and tucked his head into us' lap and almost immediately fell back to sleep. Deep in thought, Gus leaned back against the pillows and sat for a long time with one arm curved protectively over his boyfriend and his brain on overload.

You're not letting your ego get in the way here, are you?

Irritably, Gus pushed Michelle's voice out of his head. The only problem with his ego was that it wasn’t in great shape to begin with and this only served to chip away at his self-confidence. In his heart, he truly believed that there was no connection between what had happened at the concert and what had happened to him in Toronto months before. But he knew perfectly well that until a better explanation came along, he was going to be the focus of a whole lot of negative attention and that made him extremely uncomfortable.

As a "boyfriend", he was always in an awkward position. No matter how much Adam wanted him
to be front and center in his life, his record label, his management company and the majority of his fans preferred that he stay firmly in the background. He was expected not to influence Adam in any visible way yet still took the blame for anything he did that was unpopular with the public.

While there were many true fans who welcomed the fact that Adam was happy and who supported him in a wide variety of ways, the fact remained that most heartily resented his position in Adam's life and they would take a great amount of pleasure in knowing that he might somehow be linked to the incident at the concert.

It was inevitable that the whole entourage would harbor doubts about his role in the whole affair. In his current state of shock, Monte was desperate for a place to direct some of his anger and Gus knew perfectly well that he was going to be the focal point for Monte's outbursts until more information came to light. It might be days before any information came from the Toronto police and there was always the possibility that their investigation would turn up nothing at all. In that case, he was relying on the Las Vegas police to come up with another explanation.

And that wasn’t a fallback position he had a whole lot of confidence in.

It was also obvious that he was going to take the brunt of Adam’s distress as well. When Adam finally awoke, he was short-tempered and clearly still very tired and he only barked at Gus when he tried to wheedle Adam into some breakfast. As before, he calmed down and apologized quickly but Gus didn’t like the way Adam's moods were swinging and sincerely hoped he wasn’t going to end up having the same type of reaction to the stress as Monte.

Monte didn’t make an appearance until well after lunch and then only because of scheduled rehearsals. Gus took one look at him and knew perfectly well that there was no hope of getting anything out of Monte other than possibly what was left of last night’s dinner, but he still couldn’t stop himself from giving the older man a piece of his mind at the first possible opportunity.

Monte mumbled a thank you at him for what Gus had done to track him down. Gus let him finish, taking grim satisfaction in the fact that he seemed to be rather stiff and sore around the ribcage. But the moment he shut up Gus laid into him, not for the way Monte had frightened him or his band-mates but for what he had done to Lisa.

"You’re just lucky it was me that walked in and found you and not her. Could you imagine what it would have done to her to find you like that? And you don’t even seem to give a damn how you’re hurting her by acting this way."

Monte took the rebuke more quietly than he expected until he realized the older man was probably just afraid to open his mouth in case he threw up. In disgust, Gus gave in and left him alone. Judging by the look on his face, Monte was paying enough of a price already and he wasn’t completely unsympathetic to the feelings that had driven him to be so out of control in the first place.

Lisa looked like she’d had about fifteen minutes sleep…in total. But she was tearfully grateful when Gus gave her a gentle hug.

"I wish this week was over," she confessed. "I wish we could just go to L.A. now."

Silently, Gus agreed. But he also knew it was out of the question. There was less than two weeks before the New Year’s concert and there was far too much on the line both financially and professionally for there to be any talk of starting the Christmas break early.
He felt desperately sorry for Lisa. In reality, they had little in common and while they enjoyed each other’s company, they could hardly have been called close. Lisa was very conscious of the uneasy relationship between Gus and Monte and was careful not to give Monte any signs that she felt any particular loyalty to Gus that would have seemed disloyal to him. Gus was just as careful not to ever appear to be seeking Lisa’s support in anyway that Monte would resent, but his relationship with Adam’s friend and guitarist was becoming more uncomfortable by the day.

He’d always thought that Monte saw him as a threat to the future of Adam and the band. Now Gus knew for a fact that he also saw him as the reason behind the tragedy that they were all going through.

All in all, he didn’t think it was going to be a very merry Christmas.

Although Dean Holden’s refusal to give him any details about the status of the case really got up his nose, Gus was grateful for one thing…Holden was just as reticent with the press, which made it very unlikely that the story about the newspaper clippings would be made public. He was also confident that the detective would not mention anything about Monte’s disappearance although he was still bothered by the report in the morning paper that the police had a “detailed” description of the suspect.

The atmosphere around the hotel that day was very subdued and they were all glad when the time came to take the short ride to the arena for rehearsals. Lisa was too exhausted to go and both Andy and Sophie voted to stay back and keep her company. Gus brushed aside Adam’s gentle suggestion that he might want to do the same and refused to budge from his seat down front for the duration of the run-through.

Things got off to an extremely slow start. Monte was still moving with great difficulty and the accumulation of stress and fatigue was obviously taking a toll on the rest of them as well. They were too lackluster to even have the energy to snipe at each other and once again Gus wondered why the heck they were even bothering to rehearse.

When they took a break, he joined Adam where he was sitting on one of the risers with his band.

"You doing okay?" Gus whispered in his ear when he sat on the riser behind Adam and began massaging his neck.

"Yeah," he said with a groan. "Wow, that feels good."

"You are going to share that around, aren’t you?" Isaac piped up, with a trace of his usual humor.

"Count me out," said Terrance, laying flat on the stage. "Unless you want to put me to sleep, right here, right now…"

They were trying to rouse themselves back up to resume the run-through when Doug Taylor suddenly appeared from the wings and asked if he could have a few minutes of their time.

Bill was with him and it was hard to tell which of the two of them looked grimmer.

"Is there a problem?" Adam said uneasily.
Gus took one look at Doug’s face and went cold. Both he and Bill pulled up chairs in front of them and both seemed equally determined not to meet his gaze.

"What’s going on?" Adam prodded.

Doug sat forward, elbows on his knees and his voice quiet. "Apparently one of the local newscasts has run a report on the envelope that was delivered to the hotel last night…"

At their shocked expressions, he added quickly, "I don’t know where they got their information originally…but someone tipped off a TV reporter who nailed the concierge as she was coming in for work today and starting firing questions at her." He looked apologetic. "She didn’t mean to say anything…I guess they just really got in her face and rattled her. Something slipped out and she tried to take it back and that only made it worse…"

Gus had gone very still, staring at the floor and acutely aware that everyone was suddenly staring at him. "What did the report say, Doug?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "That there was apparently a connection between what happened at the concert and…I’m sorry, Gus. You know how it works; stuff gets taken out of context, they take a lot of liberties with the facts…"

He didn’t move and his expression didn’t change, but his eyes flicked up to Doug's and his voice was frigid. "What exactly did it say, Doug?"

He hesitated. "That you’d been threatened. That a specific reference was made to you in some documents that were delivered to the hotel. That you could be the reason for someone taking some kind of action against Adam. That there was too much security around you to get to you personally…so this might have been a way to get back at you indirectly…"

Gus half-turned away while Doug stumbled on, trying to offer reassurance. Adam reached back and took hold of his arm, aware of his suddenly shallow breathing and whitened face.

"It's all right, Gus…"

He jerked free. In the back of his mind he knew that he should have been angry; instead he just felt horribly self-conscious and suddenly the focus of the worst possible kind of attention. Before his accident, the press had been an ally, a medium to be worked with and used for mutual benefit. After the accident it had become something to avoid at all costs and that deep-seated fear had been his biggest obstacle in learning to handle life in the public eye again. He tolerated the press because he knew it was part of the package. He had even reached a comfort level where he knew how to play the game and make the best of it without compromising his privacy, but this was an intrusion that went too deep and struck at him where he was most vulnerable.

Adam braced himself for the explosion and when it didn’t come he felt a terrible sense of foreboding. Already Gus’ face indicated how quickly he was shutting down and turning in on himself, and the signs of insecurity that Adam hadn’t seen for months and had hoped never to see again all seemed to be rushing back to the surface.

"Excuse me," Gus said through numb lips, and fled.

Adam went to run after him and nearly knocked Doug down when the shorter man got in his way.
"Hang on, hang on…maybe you should just let him go and cool off."

"You don’t understand. He’s going to take this all too personally."

"He’s got a good reason, don’t you think?" Tommy said furiously. "It’s bad enough that he thinks we all blame him…now the whole damn world knows about it."

Doug doggedly kept hold of Adam’s arm. "And there isn’t anything we can do about that right now. Bill’s already gotten a ton of calls and it’s only going to get worse. He’s got to just get a grip."

"Yeah, well it’s not that easy for him." Adam forcibly removed Doug’s fingers from his arm. "Dealing with the media gets really hard for him sometimes. He’s already been through enough this year…"

Doug looked blank. "I’m sorry…I’m not with you…"

Without thinking, Tommy said, "It wasn’t all that long ago that he nearly had a nervous breakdown…and he’s only just gotten over some very serious surgery…"

Adam turned on him angrily. "Shut up, Tommy! That’s personal…somebody’s already leaking stories…do you want that getting out as well?"

"Sorry," Tommy said, kicking himself. "I didn’t mean…"

"Shut up! Just shut up!"

Adam was so infuriated that Isaac bounced to his feet and deliberately stood between them, grabbing Adam’s shoulders and weaving his head back and forth in front of him until he caught his friend’s eye. "Whoa, man…chill out a little a bit. Just go and talk to Gus. He’s bound to be a bit freaked out. Take some time and calm him down."

"If it will help," said Doug. "Bill can prepare a statement and try and distance him a bit…"

Adam turned on him, even more incensed. "No, dammit! I don’t want anybody talking to the media about Gus. Not anybody! Is that clear?"

"For God’s sake, Adam," Monte snapped unexpectedly. "You don’t have to shout."

Adam swung around again, completing a full, angry circle. "What’s the problem, Monte? Does it hurt your head? Maybe you should remember that the next time you decide to go off and drink yourself stupid. In case you’ve forgotten, Gus was the one who tracked your ass down last night when nobody could find you. Do you think that did his nerves any good?"

Fortunately for Adam, Monte’s head did hurt otherwise, the two of them would have ended up at each other’s throats. As it was, the confrontation had cost Adam valuable time; by the time he broke away and went looking for Gus he was nowhere to be found.

He had promised Adam he wouldn’t go anywhere without security, but Gus was halfway back to the hotel before he even realized he’d left the arena. He walked fast, head down, sliding silently
through gaps in the throngs of people that seemed to be everywhere in Las Vegas no matter what the time of day or night.

It was a long walk and he was breathless and hot by the time he reached the other side of the Citadel complex but the exertion didn’t take any of the edge off his distress. He went straight to his room and called Toronto but found that although his contacts there were apologetic, they had no new information for him.

"For God’s sake Gus, you know how this works. It’s going to take some time…"

He hung up and sank down on the bed feeling sick. This had gone too far…there was no way he could just sit still and wait for other people to come up with answers.

He reached Jeremy on his cell-phone and asked him to let Adam know that he was all right, that he was in the hotel and that he needed some time alone.

"He’s going nuts here looking for you, Gus. Just stay put. I’ll bring him over."

"No!" Gus rubbed two fingers between his brows and tried to hold on to his temper but Jeremy had been around Gus enough to know him very well; he could tell how badly agitated Gus had become. "I’m very serious. I want to be by myself. Tell him to finish up rehearsals and I’ll see him back here when they’re done."

He hung up before Jeremy could argue. Then he went straight to the closet and rummaged for the stack of promotional material they always kept handy, dropping several items into a bag.

The concierge who’d been waylaid by the news crew earlier that day was nowhere to be seen in the lobby and Gus could only assume that Doug had sent her home to avoid any further confrontations. The concierge who was on duty called Gus a taxi as requested and if he knew that the management didn’t want any of the entourage leaving the hotel without security, he didn’t make an issue of it.

Everything in Gus’ demeanor reflected tension and fierce determination and there was no way that he was going to take his life in his hands by trying to stop Gus from doing whatever he had planned.

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His nerves were already on edge. Being in a hospital only made him edgier, but he clenched his teeth and forced himself not to think about the past. Since visiting hours were already well underway, no one paid any particular attention to him as he inquired casually at the nurse’s station and then peeked cautiously into the room to which he was directed.

"Hi," he said.

The teenager in the bed looked up and went from being slightly pale to being absolutely green at the sight of Gus in her doorway.

"You’re Suzanne, aren’t you? Can I come in?"

There was only an openmouthed stare so Gus seized the initiative and ventured across the
threshold, offering a friendly smile and trying to put the stammering girl at ease.

"I hope I’m not bothering you. I’m…"

Galvanized into action, Suzanne sat bolt upright and pointed at Gus in disbelief. "I know who you are! Oh my God…oh my God!"

Envisioning a troop of nurses on a stampede towards the sound of adolescent shrieking, Gus quickly steered a chair over to the bedside and dropped into it.

"For heaven’s sake, hush! You’re going to get me kicked out of here if they think I’m getting you all wound up."

Suzanne’s mouth was still open and her eyes were darting around the room. "You…you didn’t bring anyone else with you…did you…?"

"No. Sorry." Gus flashed a quick smile. "Adam is really sorry he couldn’t come to see you in person. Everybody’s pretty flipped out about security right now. He or his band members is not allowed to go anywhere, really."

Suzanne slumped a little but her eyes remained bright. "That’s okay. They sent me flowers. They signed the card and everything."

"I know. But they all still feel pretty bad."

"Wow. It’s really cool that you stopped by."

"I just wanted to say hi and see how you were feeling."

"Not bad. Yesterday was kinda weird, ‘cause of all the tests they were doing, but today’s been all right. I’m just really tired, that’s all."

"When can you go home?"

"A couple more days. The doctor told me for sure that I’ll be out by Christmas."

"Good!" Gus flashed another smile and then dug in the bag that he’d brought with him. "Speaking of Christmas, I brought you a few things. I thought maybe they’d cheer you up."

They did more than that. The preliminary copy of the special edition tour program nearly threw Suzanne back into hysterics. She clutched the signed copy of the CD and the official t-shirt to her chest and kept repeating, "Oh my God. This is so cool. You didn’t have to do this. Will you say thanks for me? And tell Adam and Tommy I think they are just so awesome?"

"I’ll make sure I tell them," Gus promised gently. "You know, Adam really does feel awful about what happened. We all do."

"It wasn’t his fault!"

"Yeah, but it was his concert. And it was my idea. And you ended up in the hospital. And you’ve probably had the police bugging you. And reporters…"
Suzanne grimaced. "My parents told the reporters to clear off. But yeah, the police have been in a few times. All they do is keep asking me the same things over and over again."

"I hope they weren’t too hard on you," Gus said, trying to keep his voice casual.

"No. Not really. But the one guy was just kinda pushy…"

Gus didn’t need to ask who she was referring to. He was trying to find an innocent way to redirect the conversation when Suzanne looked down at her lap and began muttering shyly.

"I gotta say thanks for what you did. I was so scared. But I remember seeing you…I remember you helping me..."

"I’m glad I was there," Gus murmured. He patted the young girl’s hand and tried to reassure her. "I was pretty scared myself. Things got pretty freaky, didn’t they?"

"I didn’t know what was happening to me. One minute we’re all just joking with this guy and waiting for the show to start and the next minute we’re all feeling really weird and sick…"

Gus hesitated. His conscience was already bothering him…he knew he shouldn’t be doing this…

"Actually," he said slowly, after a long pause. "Speaking of that guy…would you mind very much if I just asked you a few questions…?"

Gus’ time with the Task Force had given him a lot of experience in dealing with teens. He’d become very adept at getting information out of them without them realizing they were being grilled and by the time he left Suzanne’s room, he had gently withdrawn from her every detail that the young woman could remember.

He got even luckier with his second visit. Not only had Melinda been less seriously affected and therefore had a much clearer memory of the whole event, but she was also in the process of being visited by four of her friends, all of whom had been at the concert and all of whom had been offered bottles of Gatorade at roughly the same time.

When Gus finally left, head spinning, he ran into Melinda’s parents on their way in to see their daughter. They shook Gus’ hand warmly and expressed appreciation for his time and effort and assured him that they didn’t hold him, Adam or the band in any way personally responsible for what happened.

After Gus had gone, Melinda’s parents spent a lot of time discussing his thoughtfulness and marveling that he would have the guts to pay such a visit only hours after being publicly linked to the motive behind the attack at the concert. The more they thought about it, the more it didn’t seem fair that Gus was facing all that negative publicity without at least being recognized for his kindness.

They had been pestered by journalists the night of the concert and had steadfastly refused to make a statement to any of them. But they still had the business cards of several of the reporters…the least they could do would be to speak up for Gus and make sure that the media knew how kind he had been.
Gus rushed back to The Citadel and was relieved to discover that Adam had been dragged into a production meeting after rehearsals and that he was able to beat his boyfriend back to their room. In fact, he had enough time to shower and change and then fell wearily onto the bed and actually dropped into a fitful sleep for half an hour before he felt Adam’s touch on his arm.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes and found Adam watching him worriedly.

"Are you okay?"

He nodded, pushing away the guilty realization that Adam assumed he’d been moping in their room for the last few hours. He was still processing information from his visit to the hospital but there was no way he was going to raise the subject with Adam until she’d had a chance to think it all through. He was already going to be angry enough.

Their eyes met briefly and then Gus’ gaze dropped away.

"You scared me when you ran off like that," Adam whispered to the top of his head.

"I’m sorry."

"I’m sorry…about what happened."

"It’s all right."

"It’s not. And you have every right to be upset. I’m not going to say that I know how you feel…I don’t. But I know this is really personal for you. I know you needed some time by yourself, but I was worried. I wish I could stop this…I wish there was something I could do…"

He was gentle and sympathetic but it was obvious that he was also over-tired and on edge. Knowing how easily his feelings of helplessness could be transmitted into aggression, Gus didn’t contradict his assumption that a few hours alone in the hotel room had eased some of his anxiety. Inside, a huge part of Gus was desperate for someone to confide his fears and frustrations to, but he knew the moment he told Adam what he’d done there would be an explosion and he didn’t feel up to facing Adam’s anger; his emotions were already too raw and his self-esteem too fragile.

They all met up in the lounge for dinner. Gus would have preferred to hide out in their room but Adam seemed to need him close and it seemed one way to make sure that he at least had something decent to eat. But the moment they walked in, an entire roomful of eyes turned to look at him and the atmosphere immediately became awkward and uncomfortable.

Gus knew he was the focus of sympathetic uneasiness, not reproof but he still felt like the fox in the henhouse, as if the rest of the group perceived some kind of threat from his presence. It was bad enough that he seemed to have drawn the violent attentions of someone with a grudge against him but now he had also drawn a whole lot of very unwelcome media attention…on top of the backlash they were already facing.

He didn’t stay long. The thought of food only turned his stomach and he couldn’t bear the stilted conversation. As soon as he could, he gave Adam the excuse that he was too tired and slipped away.

He felt a gentle hand on his arm as he reached the door.

"Do you need someone to talk to?" Tommy said very softly.
“No. I’m okay.”

“You don’t look like it.”

Gus averted his eyes. Tommy empathized with his moods almost better than Adam did. He’d been with him through some of the most painful moments of his life and Gus knew that he could have blurted out all his feelings to Tommy and he would have been compassionate and non-judgmental.

Adam would hit the roof when he found out what he had done that afternoon. Tommy would understand.

More than anything at that precise moment in time, Gus needed to be understood.

“What is it, baby boy?” he whispered.

“It’s just been a bad day,” Gus murmured, then had to press his lips together to stop them trembling.

Tommy didn’t miss the way Gus was trying to hide his emotion. "Shit," he said, half-angry. "Let me take you back to your room."

He already had one hand curved around Gus’ forearm. His other hand went to his opposite shoulder, rubbing gently. Gus shrank away.

After all this time, the signs were still there. Every now and then Tommy let his guard down and edged over the line. He felt Gus’ drawing back into himself and released him with a curse.

"At least let me get Adam to go with you."

"No…no. I’d just rather be alone. Really, I’m okay…"

“You’re not. I’ve seen that look before.

"…but thanks. You don’t have to worry about me."

Too late.

Tommy was between him and the exit. Gus gave him a wider berth than was necessary as he edged around Tommy, eyes on the floor. The other man didn’t make any attempt to stop him but stood staring into space after he had left and then nearly jumped a foot when he heard Doug Taylor’s voice over his shoulder.

"Is Gus all right?"

"No, I wouldn’t say that," Tommy replied irritably.

"He’s got to feel pretty uncomfortable. Especially if…look, I don’t mean to pry, but I couldn’t help but hear what you said earlier about him nearly having a breakdown. I can see how hard this is on him. Is he going to be okay, do you think?"

"He’ll be fine. But he doesn’t need anyone making a big deal of this, got it? I shouldn’t have said anything this afternoon and I’d better not hear that it’s gone any further."

"It won’t. I promise you.” Doug looked a little miffed that Tommy would even suggest he’d be indiscreet, but Tommy wasn’t in the mood for subtleties.
"I’m serious, Doug. Don’t mess with me on this."

"Will you relax? I don’t want Gus to be hurt anymore than he already is. I’m just glad he’s got you."

Tommy narrowed his eyes. "Got me?"

"Such a good friend. He needs that right now." Doug patted Tommy on the shoulder. "It’s got to make a big difference to him knowing how much you care about him."

When Adam returned to their room, Gus feigned sleep and he didn’t disturb his boyfriend.

Instead, he took a long shower and then crawled into bed with Gus, sliding his body up against his from behind and hugging his boyfriend close to him. Gus stayed perfectly still and Adam was so tired that it didn’t take him long to drop into heavy slumber. He lay awake for several hours, feeling the tickle of Adam's breathing against his neck and the rise and fall of Adam's chest at his back. It hurt not being able to talk to him…there were so many things he needed to get off his mind.

He spent a lot of that night thinking about Nick. With his death Gus had lost a friendship that had done more to balance him emotionally than he ever could have realized… until Nick was gone. Their relationship had been so close it had been nearly symbiotic and he had been hopelessly lost for months without Nick in her life to steady him. And rather than giving him closure, the trial of the man who had caused Nick’s death had thrown Gus into a horrible tailspin. He had lingered on the edge of a nervous breakdown for several weeks, until Adam had taken him back to California and found him a good therapist who helped him to deal with a lot of his pain. But his life since then had been so hectic and so full of change that the doctor warned him it would only be a matter of time before something set off the memories again.

It was a completely illogical notion, but if there had ever been a time he could have used Nick’s help…

He knew what was triggering these thoughts. In their years of undercover work, he and Nick had gotten themselves into and out of dozens of dangerous and complicated situations. Now he was stuck on the wrong side of a police investigation, thousands of miles from the contacts who could help him. He knew Nick would have understood his fears; that he would have accepted his concerns without question and done whatever was necessary to get the information he needed. Nick's trust in his instincts and his intuition had been unshakeable.

He had never doubted Gus.

Sometimes Tommy was so much like Nick that it hurt.
Wednesday December 19, 2012

Gus was up at dawn and made another phone call to Toronto. This time there was at least some information, although his contact at Headquarters was reluctant to go into detail.

"We haven’t confirmed this yet..."

His hand tightened on the receiver. "Will you jus tel me?"

"We’d heard some rumors that he’d left the province. Gone out West. Then we managed to track down his lawyer who confirms that he was talking about going out to Vancouver..."

"Shit," said Gus. Vancouver seemed a hell of a lot closer to Las Vegas than Toronto.

"...but we haven’t been able to find out for sure. If it’s any consolation, his lawyer’s looking for him as well. Seems like he didn't quite take care of his bill before he disappeared."

"Have you talked to Vancouver?"

"We've got calls in to them. But don’t forget the time difference...they’re a few hours behind, just like you. It will be later today before we get anything back, I’m sure."

He let Adam sleep and sat on the balcony until mid-morning, wrapped in his own thoughts. He wasn't looking forward to coming clean with Adam about his trip to the hospital but after long deliberation, he knew he had no choice.

And then, with or without his approval, he was going straight to Dean Holden to get some answers.

Before he could make his confession however, the situation got completely out of his control.

Breakfast was a subdued event. Adam and Gus were the last to arrive and while Gus murmured 'good morning’ to everyone present, he took his fruit salad and coffee and parked himself in an armchair outside the circle of conversation. He said nothing while everyone else discussed the day’s schedule and the plan for rehearsal, and promised himself that as soon as Adam was fully awake, fed and suitably caffeinated, he was going to take him aside to talk.

He noted Doug’s concerned appraisal when he first arrived and fully expected him to waylay him at the first possible opportunity. But one of the hotel staff poked his head in the door and spoke to Doug urgently; without saying anything to anyone else, he abruptly excused himself and left the room.

When he returned, Dean Holden was with him. Gus sat up so quickly he almost spilled the coffee that had gone nearly untouched in his cup and his eyebrows went up as Holden nodded grimly
around the room at the others and then fixed him with a cold stare.

"I told you," he said in a low furious voice. "That if I had any reason to suspect that you were interfering in this investigation, I would arrest you. Did you think I was joking?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Gus said blankly.

Holden pitched a folded newspaper at him. Baffled, Gus flipped it open and his stomach lurched.

"I...I..."

"And my first thought when I saw that," Holden went on. "Was to blast the hell out of Mr. Taylor here for letting you do something so stupid. Then, to my complete and utter amazement, I find out that he knew absolutely nothing about it."

"He didn't," Gus muttered. "It was entirely my idea."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

Adam didn’t know what was going on, but he didn’t like Holden’s aggressive tone or his body language. He took a few steps until he was by Gus’s side, moving Holden back out of his personal space with his own presence.

"Would you mind explaining what you’re raising such hell about?"

Gus had the paper in his lap. Holden reached down and snatched it from him, shoving it at Adam with the appropriate article turned face out.

"I assume that means that you also don’t know that your boyfriend paid a visit to the hospital yesterday?" He didn’t wait for Adam’s reaction, but turned angrily back to Gus. "Judging from the interview, you impressed the hell out of that girl’s parents. They just couldn’t believe that you’d gone out of your way like that, especially with all the stories that were leaking out about the envelope that was delivered here." His voice took on a sarcastic sweetness. "And it was just so kind of you to spend all that time talking to them about what happened. How did they put it...?"

He grabbed the paper back from Adam whose face was only just beginning to register understanding. "Ah yes..." he said, reading aloud. "It’s easy to tell why he was a good police officer. He’s got such a way with people and he treated our daughter with a lot of respect and kindness, at a time when she has been very frightened and intimidated by all the attention from the authorities and the media."

"Sorry," he added to Adam, handing the paper back. "You really should read it for yourself. It’s touching."

"Gus, what did you do?"

His gaze flicked up to Adam’s. Everyone else’s mouths were open in disbelief, but Adam already looked grimly certain about what he was about to hear.

"I went to the hospital yesterday..."

There was an immediate reaction. Questions and angry comments were flung at him from every
direction, including more sharp remarks from Holden whenever he managed to get a word in
edgewise. Gus went from self-consciously trying to defend himself to being downright angry as
his hackles continued to rise over this assault from all sides.

"Will you take it easy? So I went to the hospital. Yo weren’t allowed to go, Adam...I figured
somebody from the organization should at least make an appearance. Those girls nearly died, for
God’s sake!"

"And I’d almost be willing to buy that story," Holden snapped. "If I wasn’t pretty damn sure you
went there to question them about the concert."

"You should never have done something like that without checking it out with me first," Adam
said angrily and then he half-choked. "What do you mean...question them?"

"I mean he questioned them. Asked them what they remembered. Asked them for a description of
the guy that was passing out the bottles. Just like he was conducting his own private little
investigation."

Adam’s head swiveled back accusingly. "Aw, dammit Gus...what the hell did you think you were
doing?"

Gus shot to his feet and faced him so that his angry green stare was just about even with his angry
blue one. "Would you really like to know? I was trying to figure out how the police could have
possibly had a ‘good description’ of the suspect when everybody I’d been in contact with that night
couldn’t remember much about him at all. You’re not the only one who reads the papers," he
added sardonically to Holden over his shoulder.

Adam reached out and grabbed his arm. "Leave him out of this and talk to me!"

"He doesn’t have a good description, Adam! He can’t possibly!"

"You don’t know what you’re talking about," Holden said coldly.

"No? Then explain to me how I spoke to six girls...all of whom were at the concert and all of
whom saw the suspect...and I got six completely different descriptions? They couldn’t agree on
anything about him other than the fact he wore a security shirt. Two of them swore blind he wore
glasses, and two of the others said he had a mustache. He wore a baseball cap, he didn’t wear a
baseball cap, he was short, he was tall, he was thin, he was muscular...hell, I’m not even sure they
were all that certain he was male!"

"What do you expect from teenage girls?" he snarled.

"Given the fact that the house lights were down, given the fact that there were a hundred guys
there in Security shirts, given the fact that they were all so wound up they weren’t thinking about
anything except the show...that’s exactly what I would expect. But I certainly wouldn’t expect that
those kinds of discrepancies would translate into a news report that says you have a good
description. Not one of those girls was visited by a sketch artist. I can see why you wouldn’t
bother...there wasn’t enough from any of them to go on..."

"They weren’t the only witnesses, you know."

"I know that! Okay, so you got all your good information from other sources. So where’s your
composite? Shouldn’t you be showing it around to other people who were there that night? Like me? Like the rest of the staff?"

There was silence.

"He’s got a point there," Doug said quietly. "We haven’t seen anything like that from you."

Gus felt the shift in allegiance and decided to take it as far as he could. "So you’re doing one of two things. You’re either trying to spook the suspect into running by publicly stating that you have a solid lead on a description or...you’re just trying to protect your own ass by claimin that you do."

"Don’t get me wrong," he added, when Holden was silent. "I understand both approaches..."

"Don’t patronize me."

"Fine. Then tell me which it is and I’ll get off your back."

Holden went back on the offensive. "I told you that if I felt you were interfering in this investigation..."

Gus lost his temper. "So arrest me!"

"Don’t think I won’t!"

"Give it your best shot! I’d like to see you try and walk me out of this hotel in handcuffs!"

"Oh, you like handcuffs, do you, Mr. Harrison? I wouldn’t have thought that was your style!"

"That’s enough!" said Adam furiously. He took hold of Gus by the shoulders to restrain him since he was giving him the distinct impression that he was about to take the law into his own hands, specifically by putting them around Holden’s throat.

"Let go of me," he muttered, trying to twist out of Adam’s grasp.

His angry voice hissed in Gus’s ear. "For God’s sake, settle down, will you?" To Holden, he snapped, "I think you need to back off a little."

"And I think you should exercise a little more control over your...whatever he is..." Holden cocked his head at Gus. "What exactly do you do here again?"

Gus’s eyes narrowed warningly and only Adam’s fingers digging into his arms prevented him from giving into the urge to commit assault. Before things could get any more heated, Doug had stepped in and put an end to the confrontation in his usual efficient manner. Holden was firmly escorted out of the room and once he was gone, Gus shrugged free of Adam’s hands and had to satisfy himself with kicking an ottoman in frustration.

"Well, well..." said Monte, who’d picked up the newspaper. "You did a great job here, didn’t you? Not only do we have a nice article about the envelope that got delivered here making references to you but we have a wonderful little companion piece about what a swell person you are to go and visit those poor girls in the hospital."

"Look," said Gus, unable to conceal his impatience. "If I made things difficult for you, I’m sorry.
But I’m the one facing all the accusations here. I have a right to look out for my own interests."

"Not when you make it look like you’re doing it on my behalf, you don’t!" Monte shouted at him.

"I didn’t do anything of the kind!"

"No? Well, that’s not how it comes off in this article. Our lawyers are going to go berserk."

"Let them," Gus said spitefully. "They don’t seem to have done you a whole lot of good so far."

"Do you not realize Adam has a live, worldwide, simulcast concert coming up next week? Do you not realize he doesn’t need publicity like this right now? We’re trying to launch a tour for God’s sake...and we don’t need people thinking that one of our concerts is a dangerous place to be!"

"All the more reason why it would be nice if it looked like the police were getting somewhere in their investigation!"

He should have known better than to get into a pissing match with Monte. He had already been pretty close to the top of his shit list and this seemed to have elevated him all the way to number one.

The rest of the room had gone ominously quiet. Looking around at the sea of faces, most of whom were deliberately avoiding his gaze, Gus felt sick.

"Anybody else have anything they’d like to say?" he said stiffly, and when there were no takers, he muttered, "Didn’t think so..."

"I do," Adam said grimly. "I think we’d better go somewhere and talk."

He pointed at the door. Gus hesitated and then preceded him out, noting that Tommy tried to smile at him reassuringly as Gus passed him and suddenly wishing he could take Tommy along for moral support. All his carefully rehearsed explanations now seemed inadequate and foolish and there was nothing he could do but wait for Adam to finish hitting the roof.

Adam was remarkably controlled, considering. When they got back to their room, he was silent for several long minutes, visibly trying to calm himself down before he spoke to Gus.

"You shouldn’t have done it, Gus," he said finally.

"I didn’t mean for you to find out this way..."

His head came up. "Is this where you say that you wer goin to tell me?"

"I was!"

"You were taking your time about it. Could that have had anything to do with the fact that you knew what kind of a reaction you were going to get?"

Gus scowled. Ha stalled too long and he knew it.

"All right then. I'm going to ask you a question. And I'd appreciate if it you would tell me the truth."
A flush swept his face. "Why do you always have to put it like that? You make it sound as if all you can expect from me is a lie."

Adam wasn’t looking at him, but his jaw flexed in annoyance. "Then you're taking it the wrong way. All I mean is that I want you to be completely honest with me."

"Same difference," he retorted. "So ask me the damn question."

"Why did you go to the hospital when you knew that it would cause problems for me?"

"Because I didn't see why i woul cause problems..."

"Yes you did. Or you would have told me about it. So don't go getting all self-righteous about how much honesty I should expect from you. Now answer me."

The flush deepened.

"Because there was a report in the newspaper that said the police had a detailed description of the suspect. But in case you hadn't noticed, no one has come to me with this so-called description even though I was there at the time and I just so happen to be the one that everybody thinks is responsible for bringing this on. If I supposedly know this suspect, wouldn't you think the cops would be waving a sketch at me? Or asking me if the description meant anything to me? Does that make sense to you?"

"If you want to know then why don't you just ask them?"

"What the hell makes you think I haven't? The cops don't want to talk to me, Adam. Maybe they think I'm just some hick from the north who isn't good for anything these days besides following some rock star around the world like an overgrown groupie...I don't know. So I decided to try and find out for myself. All I did was ask those girls some questions and the bottom line is...I don't believe that there is a detailed description. I don't believe that jackass of a detective knows what he's doing. I'll right, I'll be fair...maybe he does...but I have no way to tell because nobody will give me any fucking information!"

"Do you at least understand the position this puts me in?"

"You mean as opposed to the positio I' in?" he said wildly.

"All right, I know that news report flipped you out yesterday. I understand how much it upsets you to be under that kind of scrutiny, but you’ve just gone and made it twice as bad. Now there’s not just one article on you in the paper...there’s two!"

Gus looked away at the reminder, struggling to clamp down on the emotions that were starting to get the better of him. "I had no way to know that it would get out like that."

Adam saw how his anger was starting to give way to agitation and suddenly felt the same uneasiness that Tommy had felt the night before. He swallowed the rest of his lecture. Gus was staring at the carpet looking more now like a child being scolded too harshly than the man who had been spitting fire at a police officer a few minutes before. He was withdrawing back into himself again and Adam thought rather dully that he preferred the stormy moods to the nervous, edgy frame of mind Gus seemed to be sliding into.
His voice was shaky and he didn’t seem able to control it. "I shouldn’t have done what I did. I’m sorry. Things are just..." His fists clenched. "I’m just feeling s useless.. like I’ve caused all this trouble and now I can’t seem to do anything to get you out of it. I can’t stand the thought that this is all because of me."

The admission startled Adam. Gus had been so certain that the drugging at the concert had absolutely nothing to do with him...this was the first hint of doubt in him that he’d seen. It didn’t seem as if anything he’d learned in his "investigation" would give him reason to believe otherwise; in other words, he was just starting to second-guess himself and his instincts. That was another dangerous sign and one that made Adam extremely uneasy.

Gus was still staring at the floor and his voice had dropped to a mumble. "I won’t go with you to rehearsals today. I’ll just stay here...just in case there are any reporters around the hotel or the arena...

All the fight had gone out of him. He felt listless and exhausted and he couldn’t bring himself to look at his lover.

"Gus," Adam said gently. "It’s okay. I don’t mean to be angry. I know what you were trying to do. But please...you have to talk to me before you do anything. From now on it’s not going to be like it is when it’s just the two of us at home. From now on, anything you do is the same as if I do it. It’s just the way it is on tour...okay? I know you don’t understand it, but I’ve been through it before.... I know how it works..."

Gus nodded submissively but Adam had the feeling that he wasn’t taking anything in. His eyes had gone dead but he only brushed aside Adam’s concern, apologizing a second time and promising that he would spend the day at the hotel, staying out of sight and out of trouble. Adam let it go at that, sensing that Gus needed time to regroup and think about what he’d done. He reached out very slowly, pulling his boyfriend against him and they stood together for a long time with Gus’s head drooped against his shoulder.

He had seemed so strong lately; Adam had to keep reminding himself that Gus was so newly healed, both physically and emotionally; that he was still always on the edge of a setback no matter how hard he protested to the contrary. Adam was feeling very torn between the need to support him in every way he could, and the need to keep him from doing anything that might reflect badly on his career. On top of that, he neede Gu to be strong for im...nothing in his life had prepared him for anything like this and he wasn’t sure how he was going to get through it without Gus there to support him.

Before Adam left for rehearsals, he stood for a few minutes watching Gus silently from the doorway of the balcony. He sat huddled on one of the chaise lounges staring blankly at a book he didn’t seem the least little bit interested in reading, with his lunch untouched beside him and his cell phone in his lap.

Adam regretted snapping at him but he was still shocked that Gus had gone behind his back in such a fashion. Worse than that was the niggling fear that he might have underestimated Gus’s ability to cope and what he was seeing were the first signs of his lover cracking under the strain. It didn’t help much that he did understand how Gus felt, but there was still no way he could let Gus become
a loose cannon in the band. If Gus thought the pressure was ba now there was no possible way he was going to be able to handle it when they went on the road.

He had suggested he call Michelle to vent a little. When he heard that Michelle was tied up for most of the day with the Task Force staff Christmas party, he gently pointed out that maybe talking to Lisa or Sophie might help instead.

"They understand what this kind of pressure is like. You know that. Maybe it would make you feel better."

"No, thank you," Gus said very low. "I’m fine."

He had seen the looks on the girls' faces that morning and somehow didn’t think he was going to get a whole lot of sympathy from them. And besides, he didn’t need any help beating himself up; he was doing a fine job of that all by his lonesome.

On his way out, Adam met Doug Taylor just about to knock at the door.

"Yes, I’ll be right there," Adam said irritably, and Doug held up both hands.

"I’m not here to rush you. I just wondered if I could talk to Gus before we leave for the arena."

"He’s not coming."

Doug’s eyebrows rose. "Oh. Is...he okay?"

"He’s just going to hang out here for the afternoon."

"By himself?"

Adam ground his teeth. "Yes. By himself. He doesn’t feel too social right now, Doug. Get it? He’s sensing a bit of tension from the rest of the world, in case you hadn’t noticed."

"I’d noticed," Doug said quietly. "Okay, so I’ll just say hi to him and then I’ll catch up with you."

Shrugging, Adam continued out. Doug peeked out onto the balcony and waited until Gus looked up from his mindless contemplation of his book before he stepped out to join him. Gus registered momentary surprise, then Doug observed how his face fell back into a smooth mask.

"I did some digging for you," he said.

The green gaze sharpened a little. "About what?"

He pulled the matching chaise closer and sat on the end, slowly rubbing his hands together before speaking. "I managed to convince Detective Holden that he needed to be more up front with me about the status of the investigation. Especially considering the potential risks involved if he had any information that might allo u to hel hi make some kind of connection to a suspect. Considering that if he didn’t...and that suspect remained within the organization and continued to have access to Adam..."

Gus’s mouth twitched. "You mean you threatened to sue his ass if something happened to Adam because he wasn’t up front with you."
"Pretty much."

"And he gave in?"

"Not exactly. But he did tell me this much. Out of the list of about forty-five names that he was given...names of everyone any of us could think of who should be checked... they’ve tracked down almost forty of them. Most of those they were able to just cross off the list because they were physically out of the country or had airtight alibis. Of the ones they haven’t located yet, there are only two that they consider to have strong motives for something like this."

"And let me guess. That’s as far as he would go."

"Yeah. But the good news is that they’ve also done a complete background check of the employee list we gave them...all the Griffin staff and all staff that are traveling with Adam...looking for past records, suspicious behavior...whatever. Aside from the odd unpaid parking ticket, everybody came up clean."

"That’s a lot of work," Gus admitted grudgingly.

"Damn straight it is. He’s obviously put a lot of manpower into this." Doug fell silent for a moment and Gus felt his unspoken rebuke.

"You think I’m being too hard on him?"

"I think you need answers he can’t give you. I can’t tell whether he doesn’t know, or whether he really thinks he has to keep them to himself."

"And what about this detailed description?"

Doug hesitated. Gus’s gaze had been focused on his hands; now it rose curiously at the prolonged silence.

"There isn’t one," he said flatly. "Is there?"

Doug hunched his shoulders and let them fall. "No. There isn’t. Just like you said...it was a ruse. Trouble is...nobody took the bait. Whoever’s responsible for this wasn’t the least little bit spooked, not enough for it to be noticeable anyway."

Gus let his breath out between his teeth and leaned his head back against the cushions.

"Gus...have you heard anythin from Toronto?"

He closed his eyes. "Nothing that means much."

"Oh. I’m sorry. I was hoping they’d be able to clear things up for you by now. You don’t need this hanging over your head."

Gus fell silent. Doug rubbed his hands together a little more and then made his excuses and stood up to leave.

"Thanks," he said suddenly, as Doug went to step back through the patio doors. "For finding out
"And you did."

"No problem," he said softly. "You take it easy, okay? I’ll see you at the party tonight."

Shit, he’d forgotten. It wasn’t surprising. He barely knew which day it was, let alone what was significant about the date. But Doug’s remark had jolted his memory, making him swear under his breath.

Poor Jeremy. He’d seen him that morning and hadn’t even wished him Happy Birthday.

Gus spent the rest of the day in exactly the same place, feeling alone, depressed and generally sorry for himself. Doug’s visit had been well intentioned but it hadn’t done anything to cheer him up. Instead, he knew that he was still on the top of the list of "most likely" candidates to be the cause of the drugging at the concert and even the knowledge that he’d been right about the description of the suspect wasn’t a great deal of consolation.

On top of that, he’d angered Adam and put him in an impossibly difficult situation and forgotten Jeremy’s birthday. Bodyguard or not, Jeremy had been a good friend to him since the day he had met Adam and he felt ashamed of himself for not having remembered his big day. He knew that Adam had asked Doug to arrange something a little special for that evening in the lounge...only problem was, most of the other guests probably would have been happier without his presence and he was badly intimidated by the thought of facing them all at a supposedly festive event.

Despite his troubled frame of mind, he grew drowsy in the late afternoon sun as it warmed the balcony and dropped into a restless sleep that lasted until he was jerked awake by the sound of someone knocking insistently at the door. Startled, he scrambled to his feet, sending his cell phone and novel flying, and rushed back inside.

"There you are," Bill said when he yanked open the door. His warm brown eyes were full of concern and his brow was furrowed. "I was getting a bit worried."

"I’m here," he mumbled blearily, then abruptly his mind cleared. "Is everything okay? What time is it? Is Adam back yet?"

"He’ll be a little late. I came on ahead to let you know what happened. Adam was afraid you might have been watching the six o’clock news."

Gus looked at his watch. It was nearly seven. How long had he slept? His throat had gone tight and he was already berating himself for falling asleep. "Why...what happened? What’s wrong?"

"Whoa...slow down. Everybody’s fine. It’s nothing serious. It’s just another one of those things we weren’t expecting."

"Bill..." Gus had his palms pressed to his forehead. "For God’s sake...what happened? Did something go wrong at rehearsals?"

"No. No, rehearsals were fine. But when Adam came out of rehearsals...he found that the arena
was being picketed."

"Picketed?" he echoed. "What do you mean, picketed? By who?"

He laid his briefcase on the sofa and flipped it opened. Handing Gus a flyer, he replied, "These were being distributed to the people walking by."

Gus’s brows drew together as he scanned the headings. He was still half asleep...this wasn’t making any sense. "Fundamental Families? Who are they?"

"Do you remember the Moral Majority?"

His mouth dropped open. "Of course I do...but didn’t they disband years ago?"

"Yeah. They did. And since then there hasn’t been a successful national campaign of that kind. What we see now are..." He pointed at the flyer. "Regional groups that focus on particular areas. This group’s been active around here for about ten years."

He hesitated then he added, "That happens to be the group that Sonia Worden’s parents belong to. It’s based out of their church."

More hesitation. "Sonia Worden was buried today..."

Gus stared at him. "I know. I saw the notice in yesterday’s paper..."

"...and there was a big turnout at the service. Not surprising, considering all the publicity. A lot of people came from out of town. And afterwards...they decided to all get on a few buses and come here..."

"Oh my God," said Gus. He sank down on the nearest chair and tried to focus on the pamphlet in his hands.

"Before you flip out, this group isn’t just targeting Adam. They’re on a rant against most popular music, especially the stuff that a lot of parents think is a nice, safe, clean alternative to acts like Eminem and Marilyn Manson. But after what happened...well, they’re just using Adam to promote their cause...that’s all..."

"That’s not all," Gus muttered. "I knew this was coming...Adam has practically been asking for it..."

"This group isn’t even pushing Griffin or VH1 to stop the concert. They’re very careful that way. They rely pretty heavily on the freedom of expression laws, so they can hardly be seen trying to stop concerts or intimidate promoters. All they’re trying to do is make parents aware that just because it’s not a hard rock, punked-out rave doesn’t mean that an Adam Lambert concert necessarily fits with what they want their kids exposed to."

"Oh my God," Gus said again. Halfway down the first page, he started to read out loud.

*The openly gay singer freely lives with his boyfriend and there have been persistent rumors of sexual dalliances with fans.*
Not only do the lyrics of some of his songs contain objectionable themes, his live shows involve a number of highly suggestive dance routines and extremely provocative movements like kissing his band member or deep-throating the microphone. A leading international entertainment magazine recently featured a cover story on him containing highly objectionable subject matter and semi-pornographic pictures.

He looked up at Bill. "Is this group affiliated with the Westboro Baptist Church?"

"Not exactly. But there are cross-references in their materials. Fred Phelps has done some guest speaker dates for them."

"He’s already mentioned Adam and Tommy a few times."

"I know," he replied grimly. "But keep reading. It gets better."

The majority of his band members, dancers and entourage are gay/lesbian, and at least one of them is a cross-dresser.

"Cross-dresser?" said Gus wildly.

"Sutan."

"Oh. Yeah, I get it. Bill...are you telling me Adam saw all this when he came out of the arena?"

"Well, yes and no. We already knew about the protest, so we just told Security to move him off the property by the parking garage. All they did was relocate across the street. So we stalled him for a while, hoping they’d clear off, but then the news crews showed up..."

Gus closed his eyes. "Great."

"So basically, Security was just waiting for things to calm down enough and then they’ll bring him back. But I wanted to warn you. Adam was afraid you might hear it from somewhere else."

"Thanks," he muttered. "God, what a mess."

He waited while Gus read the rest of the pamphlet.

...the incident at Saturday night’s concert only goes to emphasize that these kinds of events are prone to violence, drug use and sexual misconduct. We urge parents everywhere to educate themselves about what they may mistakenly believe is a pre-packaged "safe" substitute for more overtly immoral entertainment.

When he had finished, he looked up at Bill with a grim smile.

"They did a good job. It’s borderline inflammatory, but not actionable."

Bill’s eyebrows went up.

"I used to date a lawyer," he explained.

"Oh. Well, you’re right. There’s nothing there that any of our lawyers would touch. It would be
suicide anyway. You’ve just got to leave those kinds of things alone. No matter what you say, it will get twisted...you’re better off just to not comment at all.”

Gus nodded in agreement, forehead furrowed in a frown. "Did you talk to anybody else? How are they taking this?"

"Badly."

He winced. "Monte...?"

"Not good. Look, I’m sure I’ve got about a thousand calls coming about this..."

"On top of what I put you through this morning, right?" Gus said with a sick little smile.

"Gus, it’s okay. I understand why you did what you did. In fact, that article that ran about you might take some of the pressure off Adam over this. But even if we don’t actually react to the protest, we’ve got to be ready for damage control. I’m on my way over to the office, but Doug wanted me to ask you to make sure that everything is ready upstairs for Jeremy’s party. I don’t think too many people will be in the mood, but it will give everybody something to do, and we all need that right now..."

Gus sincerely doubted that cake and ice-cream was going to go very far towards calming everybody down, but he dutifully went up to the lounge to check out the preparations. He suspected that Bill and Doug were just trying to give him something to keep him occupied; the hotel staff had done their usual efficient job, and the lounge was already laid out with a large buffet, a beautiful birthday cake and, to Gus’s chagrin, a fully stocked bar.

_**Note to self: keep an eye on Monte...**_

The numbness from this most recent shock was already beginning to wear off. It didn't seem to matter what he did...this just kept getting worse and worse...

Restlessly, he stepped out onto the balcony to look at the view over the city. It was becoming more and more difficult to deal with his feelings of guilt and frustration, and the fact that Adam was starting to notice this only added to his sense of remorse for what he was putting him through.

He was starting to regret that he’d ever come with Adam to Las Vegas. And this was only the beginning...

Behind him, a door slammed.

Pasting a benign look on his face, he took a deep breath and then flinched at the sound of angry voices. It was obviously Andy and Terrance and they were obviously sniping at each other. Not wanting to be caught eavesdropping, Gus opened his mouth to let them know he was there when he heard his name being angrily bandied about, his words died in his throat.

"Do you have to be such a jerk in front of everybody else? How do you think it makes Adam feel when you talk about Gus that way?"

"All I want to know is why he’s still here! If anybody else did anything like that, he'd pack them off without thinking twice. He made you do it to me before. Why is he letting him get away with
all this? Even Monte wants him out of here!"

"It’s not my place to decide. Plus, Gus is only trying to help."

"Oh, right. I can see how he's helping. He's doing you all a whole lot of good. How come it doesn't seem to matter when he brings on all the negative publicity and the rumors, huh? Now on top of everything he’s got that church group winding everybody up about what you do..."

"That wasn't exactly Gus’s fault."

"No? The only reason they picked on you was because of what happened at the concert. And what happened at the concert was because of Gus."

"Jesus, Andy...we don't know that for sure! There are all kinds of people who could have been pissed off at any one of us enough to do something like that."

"Oh yeah? Like that guy Adam had to fire because of me during the previous tour? Don't you think that's crossed my mind, T? It scared the shit out of me but I didn't dare say anything because I knew he'd just send me home and you wouldn't do a thing about it. But Gus...he could bring the whole fucking roof down and he'd still keep him around."

"First of all, you cheated on me with that stage crew guy, remember? That is not acceptable behavior while on tour. Adam had to either fire me or that guy, or send you home. Second of all, you are getting way too strung out over something that is none of my business or yours."

"I just can't believe the way you're all defending him."

"Hey!" Terrance said sharply. "I defended you when you needed it! In case you have forgotten, everybody was against you when we decided to give this one more shot!"

"I wasn't getting people killed!"

Terrance turned away angrily and Andy flounced around to get back in his face. They both caught sight of Gus standing just inside the patio doors and both stopped dead.

"Jesus, Gus," Terrance said, horrified.

His face was white.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you," he whispered. Terrance reached out to stop him as he walked between them and got his arm grabbed by Andy instead.

"Leave him alone, for God’s sake!"

"Gus, hang on...please...Andy, just let go of me and fuck off, will you?"

Andy had a good grip and Gus wasn’t about to stay behind to hear any more. He was back in his room before Terrance even managed to detach himself from his enraged boyfriend. Having groped his way blindly into the bathroom, Gus spent several minutes splashing cold water on his burning face and trying hard to control himself. He was grateful for one thing at least; Adam still wasn’t back and he had a small window of opportunity to try and shake off the shame and tears.
He was so badly rattled that it took him several minutes to figure out where the beeping was coming from. When he realized it was his cell phone, abandoned on the balcony when Bill had banged on the door earlier, he nearly wept again with frustration. He had missed the call from Toronto, placed late in the evening from one of his contacts as she was coming off shift.

She did however leave him a detailed message and listening to it, Gus was suddenly driven into action. It wasn’t the news he had been hoping for but it was somethin at last and there was no way, after what he had just heard, that he was going to let anything stop him from following this through.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I’m so sorry for not updating sooner. Life has not been easy on me lately. Things might not get better any time soon, but I hope I can update more often. I have finished writing another chapter of "Shedding Masks", if you are reading that one by any chance. So, stay tuned. Second of all, I want to thank bigj52 for being the awesome friend that she is. She has not only reviewed this chapter for me, but also all the chapters I have written so far. So thank you for that and everything you have done for me, Judy. <333 I hope you’ve enjoyed this chapter.
Gus should have just gone through the concierge, who probably could have easily utilized Griffin contacts to make arrangements for him. But it seemed important that he leave quietly and the last thing he wanted was word of it spread all over the hotel. So he just ground his teeth and endured the runaround of phoning the airport directly.

"Yes, I know it’s the busiest time of the year. That’s why I said that I don’t care if it’s a direct flight. Connect me through anywhere; it doesn’t matter, as long as it gets me there tomorrow."

He was listening to the ticket agent grumble on through a list of excuses and wondering who the heck had ever said Christmas was a time of goodwill towards men, when the receiver was abruptly snatched from his hand and slammed back down in its cradle.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Gus was so taken aback that he stared stupidly at the phone for several long seconds until he was able to find his voice. "I was making a phone call."

"Yeah, I can see that!" Adam was struggling to hold on to his temper, but the shock of coming in and finding Gus booking a flight home had made it impossible to think straight. He was tired, he was frustrated, the PR nightmare was growing worse by the minute, he had been worried all day about Gus cooped up by himself and no doubt taking things too hard....

He couldn’t be thinking about going back to L.A....

Gus’s gaze flickered up to his briefly and then fell away. At the sight of his red eyes and pale face, Adam suddenly felt very cold. Gus was obviously hurting far worse than he’d imagined and leaving him alone for the day had probably been the worst thing he could have done. He put his hands on Gus’s shoulders and backed him away from the phone, dropping his voice to a reassuring whisper.

"Gus, baby...I’m sorry. It’s okay...I didn’t think it would upset you so much. I just wanted Bill to make sure you got the whole story before you heard it somewhere else..."

Gus felt a moment’s confusion until he realized Adam was assuming that it had been word of the protest at the arena that had set him off. He closed his eyes briefly. No matter how deeply he’d been wounded by it, there was no way he was going to tell Adam what he’d overheard between Terrance and Andy. On top of setting Adam off when he was already going through so much, Gus knew it would only cause more tension in the band, especially since Terrance had indicated that Adam had already had a taste of Andy’s opinion earlier that day.

Adam’s hands slid up until they were gently bracketing his jaw, tilting it up and making Gus look at him. Gus saw his worried, anxious face and lifted his own hands to gently grasp his wrists.

"Please tell me you’re not leaving," Adam whispered. He kissed Gus’s mouth softly, drawing his lover in close against him. "I know how awful this is for you. But please...we just have to stick it
out for a few more days and then we’ll get away for a while..."

He stumbled on desperately in a low, urgent voice and it took Gus several tries to penetrate his
distress. "Adam...Adam..."

"I need you here..."

Gus breathed in raggedly and felt horribly guilty for hurting him. "It’s not what you think."

He touched his forehead to Gus’s and kissed him again. "I know you feel like this is all driving you
away..."

He wasn’t listening and Gus had to touch his fingertips to Adam’s mouth to silence him. "It’s not
what you think," he said again, more gently. "I had a call from one of my friends in the Toronto
crime force tonight. The guy they’re looking for? They think they know where he is."

Adam straightened up and stared at him, uncomprehending. "So...so you’re going to Toronto?"

"No," he murmured, then admitted, "Actually, I’m going to Vancouver."

That confused him even more. "Vancouver...why? What’s in Vancouver?"

Gus sighed. "It looks like this guy left Toronto just after the trial. He’d been talking about going
out West and it looks like that’s exactly what he did. All his mail has been forwarded to a post
office box in Vancouver and a few of his friends have been questioned and they confirm that he did
head out there a few months ago."

"So why can’t the cops just pick him up?"

He bit his lip. "Adam, I don’t know anybody in Vancouver. My buddies in Toronto will pull
strings for me if they can, but the Vancouver force is chronically understaffed and they just don’t
have the manpower to be doing little favors for other departments."

Adam was beginning to feel sick. "So?"

"So, I’m going to go and check it out for myself."

He looked horrified. Hurriedly, Gus continued, "All I need Vancouver to do is to tell me what they
know. I can do all the legwork myself. I probably don’t need any more than a day or two on the
street and I can..."

"What do you mean...on the street?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean? I mean, knocking on doors, tracking down where he hangs
out..."

It seemed impossible, but Adam looked even more aghast than before. "Gus, the man threatened to
kill you!"

"He didn’t threaten to kill me. He threatened to ‘get’ me." Wincing, Gus saw the way Adam’s face
changed and conceded that he probably wasn’t making his best argument. "Look, Adam...I know
what I’m doing. And it’s not like I’m going to try and arrest him myself. As long as I can find him,
getting him arrested is no problem. There’s still a bench warrant out for him."

Adam was speechless. Groaning, Gus put his head back and searched for words to explain it to him.

After a minute Adam said in a numb whisper, "What about Christmas?"

Gus hesitated. "I’m not sure I can make it back here before it’s time to go to California. But..." he rushed on, seeing another wave of hurt in Adam’s eyes. "If I can’t, I’ll just fly straight there and meet you..."

He kept talking, aware that Adam still wasn’t taking anything in. They stood together while Gus stroked his face and struggled with his own conflicting feelings as he tried to find a way to make Adam understand.

"I don’t want you to go," Adam said finally, but it was so faint that Gus barely heard it.

"I need to," he whispered. "Please understand."

Between the two of them, it began to seem as if there wasn’t any middle ground for their ricocheting emotions. The week had been full of nothing but fear, anger, mistrust, and deeply personal pain and Gus knew that no matter how hard Adam tried to accept his reasons, deep down, part of him would still feel like Gus was abandoning him when he needed him the most. Conversely, Adam knew that no matter how much Gus needed to follow this through for himself, deep down, he still felt like everything and everyone was pushing him away and it would be a relief for him to get out of Las Vegas.

"I haven’t been there for you as much as I should have," he muttered. "I’m sorry, baby...it’s not fair what this is doing to you..."

Gus wound his arms around Adam’s neck and pressed his face against his, fighting the return of tears. "Please, please don’t say that. This isn’t because of you. You’re just as stuck in the middle as I am. Maybe it would be better for you if I just wasn’t here..."

Adam tensed, wondering what Gus might have heard and thanking heaven all over again that Gus had stayed away from rehearsals. Andy’s little tirade had infuriated him, but only half as much as Monte’s agreement that maybe it would be better if Gus went on ahead to California and removed himself from the equation. They had argued heatedly and Adam had threatened Monte within an inch of his life if he ever dared make such a suggestion directly to Gus.

The protest outside the arena had just been the last, bitter straw in their feeble attempts to keep themselves focused and united. He’d faced similar criticism before, but it had never gained so much momentum. He knew too well that the coverage of the picketing would be all over the media within hours and another round of blaming would begin.

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"I’ll go to the arena on the way back."

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Gus was mad. Didn’t the man have any manners?

"What’s the problem, Samuel?"

"The problem? Do you have to ask? This has all gone just a little bit too far and since I’m the one footing the bill for this production and this tour, I have a few words to say to everybody and I want you all in the lounge. Now!"

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"Doug?"

"No. Doug’s fearless leader. The Almighty Samuel." Snatching his bag off the bed, Gus hooked it over his shoulder. "Tell him I’m sorry I missed him, okay? I have a plane to catch."

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"Sounds like a massive ego just needing to reassert itself. I don’t need that crap this morning. Tell him to send me a memo or something. After Christmas."

<< Chapter Ten
Title: Mine - Chapter Eleven
Sequel to: Leap of Faith
Author: aidalma
Rating: R
Fandom: Adam Lambert
Genres: Romance, Angst
Pairing: Adam/OMC
Status: WIP
Summary: Once is an accident. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is a conspiracy. Who do you trust?
Disclaimer: I don't know any of the characters involved. No money is made.

Gus should have just gone through the concierge, who probably could have easily utilized Griffin contacts to make arrangements for him. But it seemed important that he leave quietly and the last thing he wanted was word of it spread all over the hotel. So he just ground his teeth and endured the runaround of phoning the airport directly.

"Yes, I know it's the busiest time of the year. That's why I said that I don't care if it's a direct flight. Connect me through anywhere; it doesn't matter, as long as it gets me there tomorrow." He was listening to the ticket agent grumble on through a list of excuses and wondering who the heck had ever said Christmas was a time of goodwill towards men, when the receiver was abruptly snatched from his hand and slammed back down in its cradle.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Gus was so taken aback that he stared stupidly at the phone for several long seconds until he was able to find his voice. "I was making a phone call."

"Yeah, I can see that!" Adam was struggling to hold on to his temper, but the shock of coming in and finding Gus booking a flight home had made it impossible to think straight. He was tired, he was frustrated, the PR nightmare was growing worse by the minute, he had been worried all day about Gus cooped up by himself and no doubt taking things too hard....

He couldn't be thinking about going back to L.A....

Gus's gaze flickered up to his briefly and then fell away. At the sight of his red eyes and pale face, Adam suddenly felt very cold. Gus was obviously hurting far worse than he imagined and leaving him alone for the day had probably been the worst thing he could have done. He put his hands on Gus's shoulders and backed him away from the phone, dropping his voice to a reassuring whisper.

"Gus, baby...I'm sorry. It's okay...I didn't think it would upset you so much. I just wanted Bill to make sure you got the whole story before you heard it somewhere else..."
Gus felt a moment's confusion until he realized Adam was assuming that it had been word of the protest at the arena that had set him off. He closed his eyes briefly. No matter how deeply he'd been wounded by it, there was no way he was going to tell Adam what he'd overheard between Terrance and Andy. On top of setting Adam off when he was already going through so much, Gus knew it would only cause more tension in the band, especially since Terrance had indicated that Adam had already had a taste of Andy's opinion earlier that day.

Adam's hands slid up until they were gently bracketing his jaw, tilting it up and making Gus look at him. Gus saw his worried, anxious face and lifted his own hands to gently grasp his wrists.

"Please tell me you're not leaving," Adam whispered. He kissed Gus's mouth softly, drawing his lover in close against him. "I know how awful this is for you. But please...we just have to stick it out for a few more days and then we'll get away for a while..."

He stumbled on desperately in a low, urgent voice and it took Gus several tries to penetrate his distress. "Adam...Adam..."

"I need you here..."

Gus breathed in raggedly and felt horribly guilty for hurting him. "It's not what you think."

He touched his forehead to Gus's and kissed him again. "I know you feel like this is all driving you away..."

He wasn't listening and Gus had to touch his fingertips to Adam's mouth to silence him. "It's not what you think, he said again, more gently. "I had a call from one of my friends in the Toronto police force tonight. The guy they're looking for? They think they know where he is."

Adam straightened up and stared at him, uncomprehending. "So...so you're going to Toronto?"

"No," he murmured, then admitted, "Actually, I'm going to Vancouver."

"So why can't the cops just pick him up?"

"Adam, I don't know anybody in Vancouver. My buddies in Toronto will pull strings for me if they can, but the Vancouver force is chronically understaffed and they just don't have the manpower to be doing little favors for other departments."

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He looked horrified. Hurriedly, Gus continued, "All I need Vancouver to do is to tell me what they know. I can do all the legwork myself. I probably don't need any more than a day or two on the street and I can..."

"What do you mean...on the street?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean? I mean, knocking on doors, tracking down where he hangs out..."

It seemed impossible, but Adam looked even more aghast than before. "Gus, the man threatened to kill you!"

"He didn't threaten to kill me. He threatened to 'get' me."

Wincing, Gus saw the way Adam's face changed and conceded that he probably wasn't making his best argument. "Look, Adam...I know what I'm doing. And it's not like I'm going to try and arrest him myself. As long as I can find him, getting him arrested is no problem. There's still a bench warrant out for him."

Adam was speechless. Groaning, Gus put his head back and searched for words to explain it to him.

After a minute Adam said in a numb whisper, "What about Christmas?"

Gus hesitated. "I'm not sure I can make it back here before it's time to go to California. But...he rushed on, seeing another wave of hurt in Adam's eyes. "If I can, I'll just fly straight there and meet you..."

He kept talking, aware that Adam still wasn't taking anything in. They stood together while Gus stroked his face and struggled with his own conflicting feelings as he tried to find a way to make Adam understand.

"I don't want you to go," Adam said finally, but it was so faint that Gus barely heard it.

"I need to," he whispered. "Please understand."

Between the two of them, it began to seem as if there wasn't any middle ground for their ricocheting emotions. The week had been full of nothing but fear, anger, mistrust, and deeply personal pain and Gus knew that no matter how hard Adam tried to accept his reasons, deep down, part of him would still feel like Gus was abandoning him when he needed him the most. Conversely, Adam knew that no matter how much Gus needed to follow this through for himself, deep down, he still felt like everything and everyone was pushing him away and it would be a relief for him to get out of Las Vegas.

"I haven't been there for you as much as I should have," he muttered. "I'm sorry, baby...it's not fair what this is doing to you..."

Gus wound his arms around Adam's neck and pressed his face against his, fighting the return of tears. "Please, say that. This isn't because of you. You're just as stuck in the middle as I am. Maybe it would be better for you if I just wasn't here..."

Adam tensed, wondering what Gus might have heard and thanking heaven all over again that Gus had stayed away from rehearsals. Andy's little tirade had infuriated him, but only half as much as Monte's agreement that maybe it would be better if Gus went on ahead to
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Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year, friends. The wonderful bigj52 again came to my rescue and beta-ed this for me. Thank you, dear. You are amazing!
He tried to detach Adam’s hand but he hung on and finally Gus said wildly, "Please Adam...don’t you think I know exactly what Samuel’s going to say? He’s going to rage on about all the bad publicity and then everyone’s going to start looking at me again, or worse...trying not to look at me..." He had to turn his head aside to conceal his sudden emotion and finished, "You can tell Samuel I’m gone. That should make him happy."

Adam let go and closed his eyes. Without another word he sat down on the edge of the bed and steepled his hands over his face.

Gus felt another stab of remorse. It didn’t seem to matter what he did. Staying. Going. Everything just hurt. The last thing he wanted to do was face another confrontation upstairs, but it was only for a few minutes...the least he could do was be there for Adam for just a little while longer...

After a moment, he sighed and put a gentle hand on Adam’s dark head. "I’ve got a little bit of time yet," he said softly, "Let’s go up and find out what’s going on. When we’re done there, maybe you can walk me down to the cab..."

Just outside the lounge, they ran into Terrance. To Gus’s great consternation it became immediately apparent that he’d had an attack of conscience over Andy’s outburst the evening before and had unwisely chosen this particular moment to ask forgiveness for it all.

Gus saw him scraping up courage for his confession and braced himself.

"Not now, Terrance...for God’s sake...not now!"

Terrance sincerely hated causing other people pain and his sense of right and wrong was honestly troubled over what had been said in front of Gus the night before. It had taken him half the night to screw up the courage to face Gus and apologize and the other half of the night to screw up the courage to do it in front of Adam. But once he’d made up his mind, he was doggedly determined to follow through and Gus’s frantic attempts to wave him off went unheeded.

"Look, Gus," he blurted. "About last night...you gotta know that I’m sorry about what he said. I should have apologized to you when I saw you later, but I just chickened out. But I am sorry...he had no right to say things like that about you and I feel awful that you had to hear him going on like that."

"It’s forgotten, Terrance," he muttered.

He was hoping Terrance would take the hint and drop the subject but it was too late. Adam, having caught Terrance’s flushed and embarrassed expression was immediately suspicious that there was something he needed to know.

"You’re sorry about who saying what about Gus?" he demanded.
Terrance was more than a match for Adam size-wise but his bravado abruptly waned and he shrank back nervously. "Honest, man.... I had no idea Gus was there. Andy was just blowing off steam, that’s all. And I’m serious, I put him straight...."

Adam’s gaze narrowed a little further and Gus held his breath. Adam was jumping to conclusions at a high rate of speed and Terrance was clearly preparing to dig himself in a little deeper by sticking his other foot in his mouth.

"What exactly did you have to put him straight on?"

Too late, Terrance realized that Gus hadn’t said anything to Adam, and that the reason Adam hadn’t torn strips off him about it before now wasn’t because of a sudden surge of self-control but simply because Gus hadn’t ratted Terrance out.

Terrance gave him a weak, grateful smile and Gus grimaced back lamely.

"Spit it out, Terrance. Now."

Gus laid a hand on Adam’s arm. "Adam, it’s nothing to get hyper about. Like Terrance said, Andy was just blowing off steam."

The muscles under his fingers flexed warningly. "What did he say, Terrance?"

Terrance squirmed. "That he thought it would be better if Gus went home."

Adam’s mouth dropped open. "Are you telling me that he threw that tantrum from the arena all over again...in front of Gus?"

"We didn’t know Gus was there! He just overheard us fighting. I would never have let Andy say that to Gus. You know that! And I never would have let him tell Gus anything about what Monte said..."

Gus dropped his head in despair and at that point, Terrance trailed off. His life was beginning to flash before his eyes.

Adam went ominously quiet. He shook Gus’s hand off his arm and there was a prolonged, dangerous silence while they waited for his reaction.

"Is that why you’re leaving?" he said aside to Gus, very low.

Terrance gaped. "You’re leaving?"

So much for keeping it quiet until he was on the plane.

"You know why I’m leaving," he said, just as low.

"You’re leaving?" Terrance repeated.

"It’s a long story," Gus said desperately. "Adam, this has nothing to do with Monte or Andy...you know why I have to go..."

"Why didn’t you tell me any of this?"
"It’s not important."

"It is to me!"

Terrance sidled away. "Maybe I’ll meet you guys inside," he muttered even as the door to the lounge was flung open and Samuel glared out into the hallway.

"Would you three mind getting in here? You can have your private little chat later. Right now I want to talk to all of you!"

Gus took the only way out and slipped past Samuel into the room, leaving Adam and Terrance no choice but to follow him. Adam didn’t hesitate. He had someone very particular he wanted to have words with.

"Look, I said I’m sorry!" Terrance repeated, hard on Adam’s heels as he stalked through the rest of the group. "I should have been up front with you last night. I had no idea that Gus would leave because of this..."

There were startled looks from everyone present at this pronouncement but Adam ignored them all and went straight for Andy, who was slumped at one end of the sofa with petulance written all over him. He saw Adam coming and straightened up abruptly and Terrance had to move fast to get in between the two of them before Adam got within range.

"Adam!" Gus called after him desperately. "Just leave it! That’s not going to help!"

It all went downhill rapidly from there. Adam verbally laid into Andy with a fury that reflected all of his accumulated frustration and distress and Andy unwisely rose to the challenge and began to scream back at him. Everyone else in the room scrambled up from their seats with the braver (or more foolish) wading into the fray to start restraining the participants while the rest stood open-mouthed on the sidelines.

It took Samuel several tries to make himself heard over the noise. Having said all he wanted to say to Andy in some extremely plain language, Adam twisted free of the hands that were trying to back him away from Andy and stormed back to the other side of the room. On the way by, he shot Monte a look that could have broken glass but took note of Gus’s miserable expression and decided to keep that particular conversation for later.

Gus had backed into the farthest corner, clutching the strap of his bag in a white-knuckled grip and refusing to look at anyone. Adam put his hands on Gus’s elbows and gently drew his lover in against him, glaring over Gus’s head at everyone else and still breathing heavily with adrenaline and rage.

"Everybody, sit," Samuel barked savagely. "This crap has gone on long enough. I’m only going to say this once, and I damn well expect that you’re all going to listen. I don’t want to hear a peep out of any of you until I’m good and finished."

There was mutinous silence. Having gained everyone’s attention, Samuel was warming to his subject like an evangelist on speed but just as he drew himself up to his full height and opened his mouth, a cell phone rang.

Surreptitiously, everyone dug into pockets. Then they began looking around. It took Gus a few
seconds to realize that the ringing phone was his, stashed and forgotten at the bottom of his pocket.

He fished it out. Aside from the rest of the people in the room with him, there were only a couple of people who had his cell number. More likely than not, it was Michelle, going berserk in Toronto after a day of being out of touch and desperate for an update on the situation. Gus had planned to spend the two hours of waiting time at the airport indulging himself in a long-distance bitch and moan session with his closest friend.

"Leave it!" Samuel snapped at him as Gus glanced at the display on the phone.

"Fuck off, Samuel," he said quite clearly, and pressed "talk".

After only a few seconds, he drew a sharp breath. Watching the color drain from his face, Adam reached a hand out to him but Gus simply lowered the phone, muttered, "Excuse me, I need to take this," and fled out into the hallway.

He was gone only a few minutes, during which Adam and Samuel exchanged terse words and succeeded in winding each other up to an even greater degree.

"He’s a big part of the problem," Samuel pointed out angrily. "So if he’s leaving, I’m glad to hear it."

Tommy was appalled. "Gus is leaving?"

"Serves him right," Andy spat, still smarting from Adam’s lecture.

"Shut up, you spiteful little jerk!" Adam shouted at him, then turned on Terrance, "If you could ever teach your boyfriend to keep his whiny little mouth shut..."

Andy extended his claws. "Look who’s talking! You can’t even control your own boyfriend!"

"Maybe you could try a little self-control," Isaac suggested, his own temper rising. "You’re not exactly making yourself look good here."

Unnoticed, Gus had slipped back into the room. He came up behind Adam and caught him by the arm, turning him away from the still-spitting Andy.

He looked a little shell-shocked and Adam’s temper evaporated into dread.

"What is it?" he said uneasily.

Gus’s expression was unreadable but he had his plane ticket in his hand. He motioned to Jeremy, who stood disapproving but silent by the door and when he hurried to Gus’s side, handed him the folder with the faintest of smiles.

"Jeremy, would you please call the airline and tell them I won’t be on the flight? I’m sure they have loads of people on standby..."

Adam felt a rush of relief that nearly made him lightheaded.

"What happened?" he whispered.
Gus still looked dazed, as if he was having trouble processing information. They were standing close enough that Adam could hear his ragged breathing and see how tightly he was twisting his hands together at his waist.

"Gus?" he said urgently. "What’s going on? Who called you?"

He frowned at the carpet for a moment, mulling things over in his mind. Finally, he raised both his head and his voice.

"You might all be interested to know," he said. "That I just had a call from the Toronto police. They’ve called off the search for the guy who threatened me."

"They found him?" Tommy gasped.

"Toronto didn’t. Vancouver did." Gus offered Adam a half-rueful look. "One of my buddies badgered a contact in Vancouver to stay up half the night and do some checking for me."

"Thank God," Adam said, and put his arms around Gus. "Anything for you not to have to go there. I couldn’t stand the thought of you wandering around the city looking for this guy."

"You were going to... what?" Tommy croaked.

Gus turned his head on Adam’s shoulder to give Tommy a reassuring smile. "I don’t have to do anything now. It’s all taken care of."

Adam moved his hands to Gus’s shoulders and gently set his back. "Is that where they found him...Vancouver?"

Gus nodded.

"So what happens now? Were they able to find out if he left Canada at all?"

"He didn’t."

"Are they sure?" Monte put in derisively. "Have they questioned him?"

Gus’s face took on an odd expression. "Questioned him? No."

Monte’s eyebrows went up, then down. "Why not?"

"I guess they didn’t feel they’d get much out of him."

Monte looked around at the circle of puzzled faces and snorted rudely. "So what exactly did they do then? I thought the whole idea was to make absolutely sure that this guy never left Canadian soil."

Gus’s expression grew even odder. "Oh, they are sure of that."

"How the hell can they be sure if they didn’t question him?"

His green eyes regarded Monte steadily. "If you’ll just shut up, Monte, I’ll tell you. The most likely reason they didn’t question him was because they would have had to dig him up first. He’s not just
on Canadian soil, he’s in Canadian soil."

At the raft of impatiently perplexed looks, he added, "He’s dead."

It took some explaining. Gus had only received the Reader’s Digest version of the story, but he repeated what he’d heard, still clearly in a state of shock over the news.

"He’s been dead about six weeks. Not long after the trial, he moved out to Vancouver and got a job as a manager in a nightclub. He was trying to break up a fight on the dance floor one night and got knifed. In front of about two hundred people. He’s dead. Very dead."

"Are they sure?" Monte insisted.

His band mates all gave him exasperated looks. For Gus’s sake as well as their own, they were relieved and pleased to hear that the threats made against him were no longer an issue.

Gus still regarded him unblinkingly. "A copy of the police report and the death certificate are being faxed down here this morning. Vancouver will also be notifying the Attorney General’s office in Ontario to lift the bench warrant."

"Would have been nice if they’d been a little bit more on the ball in the first place," Monte observed caustically.

He won himself another round of glares. Gus twitched a little. The shock was starting to wear off and was rapidly being replaced by resentment.

"The police spend a little bit more time worrying about the live criminals than the dead ones, Monte. Sooner or later the Vancouver police report would have made its way back to Toronto."

Samuel pushed his way into this exchange. "So you’re saying that there can’t be any connection between what happened at the concert and the threat that this guy made against you?"

Adam could sense Gus’s growing edginess and knew that it was being fueled by days of anxiety and self-consciousness. He still had his arms around him protectively and by shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he half turned Gus away from Samuel’s impatient questions and said curtly, "Being dead is a damn good alibi, Samuel."

"So what about the clippings that were delivered here then? The one with the leaf on it was a pretty direct shot at Gus. How do you explain that?"

Adam felt the way Gus stiffened in his arms and lowered his eyebrows threateningly at Samuel. For now it was enough that this particular suspicion had been lifted from Gus’s shoulders and that he would not be getting on that plane to Vancouver. The last thing Adam was going to let Samuel do was wind Gus up again with more veiled accusations.

He gave the older man a last warning stare and then turned his head to look at the rest of the group over Gus’s shoulder.

"I’ll see you guys at rehearsals."
"Excuse me!" Samuel barked. "I called you all here because I wanted to talk to you and I’m not finished!"

Adam released Gus slowly and took him by the hand. "I know you’re not, Samuel," he said simply. "But I have a pretty good idea about what you’re going to say." He turned back to Gus, bothered by his set face and the shadows around his eyes and without taking his eyes off him, he pulled gently, enclosing Gus in the circle of his arm and turning him towards the door. "And I don’t need that crap this morning. But if there’s something you really want me to know, maybe you could send me a memo or something. After Christmas."

If Adam was expecting this news to lighten Gus’s spirits, he was disappointed.

He was silent all the way back to their room and even when they were alone he simply went to the window and stared out.

"I hope they don’t all hurt themselves," he said unexpectedly.

Adam blinked. Gus seemed discouraged - even depressed - and for the life of him he couldn’t imagine why. "Who?" he said, puzzled.

Gus glanced back over one shoulder. "The people jumping off the bandwagon."

"Gus, come on. This is good news."

"I guess it is." He resumed his gloomy contemplation of the city and added, "And maybe I should feel more relieved than I do...but I know that this isn’t over."

Adam’s arms went around him from behind. "If you’re talking about Samuel..."

"I don’t give a damn about Samuel. I think he’s an asshole, but he’s also absolutely correct. Just because one scenario’s been eliminated doesn’t mean that people are going to stop looking at me like I’m the one who brought this whole thing on. There’s still no explanation for that clipping on me and there’s still nothing from the police that points to a suspect."

Adam’s embrace tightened but his voice took on a frustrated edge. "I hate the way you’re blaming yourself for this."

"There’s a difference between blame and responsibility. I was the one that went to the hospital. I was the one they wrote about in the papers."

"Okay, so maybe that wasn’t your brightest move. And if I came down on you too hard about it, I’m sorry. But you had your reasons and I understand that you felt you had to do what you did."

"And what about everybody else?"

He felt Adam’s indrawn breath. "I know some people have said some things they shouldn’t have."

"Why shouldn’t they say them?" he asked with a grim smile. "If that’s what they really think?"

Adam’s frustration grew. "Andy doesn’t have a clue what he thinks..."

"Maybe not. But I’m pretty sure Monte does."
Adam fell silent and Gus shifted impatiently.

"You should tell me what he said, Adam."

"It doesn’t matter. He was like Andy, just blowing off steam."

"By telling everyone that he thinks I should leave?" Gus had had enough of Adam’s reticence and caught him in the ribs with an angry elbow. "I have a right to know, dammit!"

Adam let him go and backed up, rubbing his side resentfully. "Fine! Do you really want to know? Yes! Monte thinks you should go on to California now. So what?"

Gus whirled around. "So maybe it would make things easier for you if I did!"

"No! I’ve already told Monte to go to hell. He’s working for me, not the other way around!"

"He’s not the only one with opinions around here. What about the label? And management? And Griffin?"

"Screw them!" Adam shouted. This was getting too close to home. "Will you please stop? I can’t stand this! It’s been sorted out, all right? So don’t go getting any stupid ideas about leaving early. You’re not going anywhere without me. Do you understand? Not anywhere! It would be over my dead body!"

Gus flinched and Adam leaned against the wall, lacing his hands behind his head and trying to control his anger. Lately, he didn’t seem to be able to talk to anyone without losing his temper. He didn’t blame his boyfriend for feeling insecure but Gus could at least try to understand that he was vehemently defending him against anyone who dared to criticize him or question his right to be with the entourage. It didn’t help that he was taking a lot of criticism of Gus from the label and management but there was no way he was going to confirm Gus’s suspicions. He’d already had a taste of Griffin’s stand on things, courtesy of Samuel.

He had been so relieved to find that Gus wasn’t going to Vancouver; now he was already talking about leaving again and the thought infuriated him.

"This isn’t good for you, Adam," he murmured. "I don’t want to be causing fights, especially not between you and Monte. Come on...you’re practically family...we are going to see them during the holidays. It’s going to be pretty miserable if the two of you aren’t on speaking terms..."

He dropped his hands. "Fuck, Gus! The next thing you’re going to be saying is that you shouldn’t come home with me for Christmas!"

Gus’s gaze flickered away guiltily and Adam absolutely lost it. He raged at Gus, not caring that half the hotel could probably hear him, and then was appalled at how devastated Gus looked. Adam had blasted him so hard that Gus had literally backed into a corner with his head bowed and his arms wrapped tightly around himself as if for protection. He tried desperately to apologize but Gus was too shocked to react and could only stare numbly at the floor, trying to disguise his bruised and battered feelings without success.

Adam sank down on the sofa and put his pounding head in his hands. It had been a long time since he’d lost control of himself so completely. He couldn’t even remember half of what he’d said but
the look on Gus’s face was a reflection of how hurtful he must have been. Gus, on the other hand, felt stabbed through the heart by every word and while the logical part of his brain was trying hard to keep things in context, his stomach was in knots and he was already blaming himself for bringing on this latest explosion. Something else to berate himself for...another load on his conscience...he should have known that any suggestion of him leaving would be taken the wrong way, that in his agitated state, Adam would twist it into feelings of rejection, that it would hurt him in a way Gus never intended.

The tension was momentarily broken when Jeremy knocked at the door to return the luggage that Gus had sent down to the lobby earlier. He thanked Jeremy very quietly but didn’t miss the way Jeremy was staring at his sad face.

"I cancelled your flight for you," he said.

"Thanks."

"Are you okay?"

Gus nodded but the white line along his jaw was evidence of how incredibly tense he was. Jeremy glanced over his bent head and fixed Adam with a look that held more than just a little accusation. He held his tongue, but this was twice in about twelve hours that he’d seen Gus devastated and he was starting to wonder what was really going on between them.

He was fiercely loyal to Adam but he had also become fiercely protective of Gus and hated to see him in such a state.

"Rehearsals," he said curtly. "The car leaves in fifteen minutes."

He didn’t wait for an answer but stomped out.

"Well," muttered Adam. "I hope nobody comes after me with a gun today. I get the feeling Jeremy would step out of the way to give them a better shot."

Without a word, Gus picked up his suitcase and stuck it in the closet. Adam noted bleakly that he made no move to unpack it.

"Will you come to rehearsal?" he ventured, trying to be very gentle.

"No thanks." With great difficulty, Gus had mastered his emotions and was now holding on for dear life. When Adam was gone, he could let it all out, but now...

Adam had wound himself up so much that his muscles actually hurt. "Please...I don’t want you to be here alone."

His voice was flat. "Don’t worry about me."

"I can’t just leave you like this."

Gus choked a little. "I’d rather be by myself," he said wildly. "Just go!"

A spasm crossed Adam’s face and Gus closed his eyes, feeling guilty all over again. "Adam, honestly...I’ll be fine. I want to talk to Michelle anyway."
He was trying hard to avoid Adam’s gaze and it startled him when Adam suddenly crossed to his side and grasped his hands.

"So bring your phone and talk to her as long as you need to. There’s no way I’m going and leaving you here like this. Not after I acted like such an idiot..."

Gus swallowed. He was trapped. Refusing would only seem like he was pushing Adam away again and he wasn’t up to trying to explain how much he didn’t want to face anybody else.

Adam was still coaxing. "You haven’t seen a full run-through yet. Come on...it’s getting pretty good..."

"I’m not sure anyone would want me there," he said, low.

He dropped his head, shielding his expression as effectively as the long lashes that came down over his eyes. Adam put one hand up and lifted his face so he could see Gus’s face. "I want you there," he whispered. "I need to know you’re close by. Please come...please. We need to stick together now, baby..."

It was that argument that finally got to Gus and he gave in. Separated, they were both vulnerable. Together they had half a chance against the people who were trying to come between them.
Chapter 13

Gus’s reluctant agreement to attend rehearsal didn’t extend to hanging out with the rest of the entourage at the arena. He would rather have had dental work without an anesthetic than sit with Andy, and Andy almost defiantly stuck with Sophie and Lisa as if daring Gus to approach him. So Gus took a seat about twenty rows back from the stage, just where the edges of the light blended into darkness, where he could see everything that was going on and still be alone.

There appeared to be a serious planning session going on on-stage; while it was quiet, he took the opportunity to phone Toronto and try to catch Michelle at the office.

"I’ve been worried sick about you," Michelle said, indignant. "I’ve been staring at the phone all morning. I wasn’t sure if I should call...I figured you’d call me when you needed to talk."

Gus laughed but there was no humor in it. "Well, I need it now...believe me."

"Yeah...it sounds that way..." There was a muffled voice in the background, urgently calling Michelle’s name and Michelle could be heard grinding her teeth in response and muttering under her breath. Gus suddenly sensed that he’d caught Michelle in the middle of something and began to feel like he’d intruded.

"Gus, I..."

"I’m sorry. I’ve caught you at a bad time..."

"It’s not that. It’s my fault for being gone all day yesterday, but the week before Christmas is just absolutely crazy here..."

"You don’t have to tell me that," Gus murmured. "You took my job...remember?"

Michelle kicked herself. "Shit, I’m sorry...what a stupid, stupid thing to say. Of course you know what it’s like...are you all right? You don’t sound good at all."

"It’s been a rough couple of days," Gus said in a strangled voice. "Never mind...why don’t you call me later?"

"No...no! Just hang on a second." Before Gus could protest, Michelle had clamped one hand over the receiver and there was the sound of a heated argument. Abruptly, the hand was withdrawn and Michelle said irritably, "Just stall him, Frankie...okay? Show him some of your nice pie charts and tell him I’ll be there in a few minutes."

"Look, Michelle...if you’ve got a meeting..."

"Shut up. It’s nothing important. It’s only the Mayor."

"Oh hell," Gus said, half-hysterical. "Don’t keep him waiting."

"He’s just making his holiday rounds. Frankie will give him some eggnog and a few Christmas cookies and drag him around to say hello to all the staff. You know how he likes to chat." Michelle stretched the phone cord around her desk as far as it would go and slammed her office door shut for
privacy. "What’s going on? I’m not kidding; you sound really shaky."

That was all the invitation Gus needed and he began blurting everything out. Appalled at the state her friend was in, Michelle listened in silence; although much of the story was so garbled she had to do some serious mental gymnastics to make all the right connections.

"That’s good," she said in relief when Gus told her about the discovery in Vancouver. "I hate to say it, but that really had me worried. So you’re off the hook!"

"Am I? That still doesn’t explain the maple leaf on that stupid newspaper clipping."

"Well...no."

"And I’ve kind of made things a lot worse..."

Gus explained about his impromptu investigation and Michelle, to her credit, didn’t rebuke Gus for his actions although she did put her head down on her desk in despair and silently pounded one fist against her temple.

"Go on," Gus muttered. "Say it."

"Who me? I’m not saying a word. You sound like you’ve got enough people ragging on you without me being an armchair quarterback." When Gus momentarily fell silent, Michelle prompted, "So there’s been some fallout, huh?"

"Just a bit."

"I knew I didn’t like that jerk," Michelle complained when Gus told her about Andy. "Come on, you’re not taking that too seriously, are you? You shouldn’t be worrying about what he thinks."

"No? Then what about Monte?"

"Sounds like he’s just over-reacting. The pressure’s got to be getting to all of you."

Privately, it seemed to Michelle that more than pressure was getting to Gus and she didn’t like the way Gus seemed to be heading. When Gus confessed, in a rush of emotion, about Adam’s ricocheting moodiness and how he’d raged at him earlier, Michelle went very quiet. She knew Adam had a tendency to get a little intense. She also knew that Gus had been the one person he never seemed to get out of hand with, and worried about this disturbing new trend.

It had always nagged at the back of Michelle’s mind that an international tour was absolutely the last place Gus was suited to be. But Gus’s devotion to Adam seemed so absolute that Michelle had kept her concerns to herself in the hopes that Gus could find some kind of balance between someone he loved and a lifestyle that he was certain to despise. Michelle, after all, had been one of the strongest advocates of the relationship in the early days when Gus himself had been most tentative about it. There was no doubt that Adam had been able to protect Gus from the worst effects of his superstardom during the months since he’d moved in with him. And the weeks since the album’s release had been somewhat of a honeymoon period, when everything was still fresh and exciting and Gus was feeling particularly strong in the wake of his recovery. But by now reality had to be setting in. They were facing a brutal schedule that would mean the end of most of their privacy and solitude and while Adam had never made any secret about his relationship with Gus, in public, he was expected not to throw it in people’s faces. Michelle had visions of Adam
pulling Gus by one arm, trying to keep him by his side and management pulling Gus by the other arm, trying to keep him as much in the background as possible. And regardless of how much Gus was kept under wraps he was bound to attract more than his share of attention, unwanted or otherwise, and Michelle just wasn’t sure that Gus’s abhorrence for the spotlight was likely to be something that could be overcome by love.

No matter how strong.

"Oh hell," Gus said at the sound of the band warming up. "It’s going to get really noisy here in a minute."

"So, can’t you find some place quiet? Don’t you dare hang up on me!"

"You’ve got a meeting. I’m messing enough people around in my life right now without messing you around as well. Just go...please? I’ll call you tonight."

For a second his voice wavered so badly that even thousands of miles away, Michelle went cold.

"Gus, you’re starting to scare me. You sound like you’re coming apart."

"I’m not coming apart," Gus said, muffled and low. "Really. I’m just getting a little frayed around the edges..."

He was grateful that the lights went all the way down when rehearsal started. He sat in the darkness, wrapped in his own thoughts and almost oblivious to what was going on down on the stage. But when he managed to shake off the worst of his nerves and pay attention, he was relieved to see that at least Adam and his band had managed to put their disagreements aside and seemed to be working smoothly together.

Adam had been right about one thing; Gus hadn’t seen a full run-through and in fact, hadn’t even heard the full set list live. For the special concert and live simulcast New Year’s Eve, only about half of the scheduled "tour" set was being performed so as not to reveal all the secrets to audiences before the tour began. The trick on this tour had been to balance the old with the new; it was one of the peculiar drawbacks of having so much popular material to draw from.

Adam spent a long time working the glitches out of one particularly energetic number, leaving his dancers all tired and dehydrated. It made Gus smile to see that they had a least loosened up enough to fall into familiar playfulness. It was a sign of their comfort level with each other on stage, even if the lightheartedness didn’t last very long.

When they took a short break so some of the lighting could be changed, Adam scooped up a towel to dry himself off and then pulled the soaked shirt off over his head to change it. Watching him, Gus felt his mouth go dry. He’d been so agitated emotionally over the past week that he was completely unprepared for the purely physical reaction he had to seeing Adam unexpectedly shirtless. For a few seconds he felt so hopelessly aroused that he was tempted to run down to the stage and drag his boyfriend off into a dressing room somewhere. It made no sense to suddenly want him so badly after Adam’s anger and bitterness towards him that morning, but none of his feelings seemed to make much sense at the moment and he could only assume that his libido was just as badly screwed up.

But the truth was, he just wanted to feel Adam next to him...not angry or frustrated but just Adam’s usual loving self, showing him all the passion and fierce tenderness that Gus knew he was capable
Full of conflicting emotion, he sat and watched without moving as Adam stood deep in discussion with the stage manager over some technical issue. Gus hadn’t even noticed that the rest of the gang appeared to have wandered off to take advantage of the interruption until a shadow fell over his seat and he looked up to find Tommy edging down the row towards him.

"Hi," Tommy said soberly. "I was wondering where you were hiding out."

"Hiding out" was a pretty good way of putting it, but Gus just averted his eyes and didn’t bother to contradict him. Tommy dropped into the seat beside him and contemplated him without speaking for several seconds before he nudged Gus gently with one elbow until Gus sighed and turned his head to meet Tommy’s gaze.

"Are you doing okay?"

Gus nodded. "Fine."

Tommy slouched down, propping his feet up on the seat in front. "You’re a lousy liar," he observed gently.

That prompted a rueful smile and Gus slid down in his own seat so that his position matched Tommy’s. "You just know me very well, that’s all."

"Uh huh." Tommy brooded for a moment, then added, "And I know you well enough to know that you’re having a really rough time right now. I wish there was something I could do to help you."

"You already are," Gus murmured. "I know you’re looking out for me. That means a lot."

"Doesn’t seem like much. You’re hurting pretty badly, Gus."

Gus dug his fingers into the arm of the seat, feeling the tight lid on his emotions being gently pried open again. He was useless at hiding things from Tommy...he shouldn’t be starting down this road with Tommy right now. "Not just me," he whispered. "This is rough for everybody."

"But you’re taking the brunt of it..." Tommy hesitated. There were things he wanted to know and he was pretty sure he was crossing the line, but...

"...and I know how Adam can get sometimes. I mean, we all get wound up before a tour. There’s some much going on and everyone gets pretty tired and tense, and he sometimes gets a little too serious about it all. He can be kind of hard on people."

Gus clamped his lips shut.

"Is he?" Tommy asked quietly.

"Is he what?"

"Being hard on you?"

Gus felt suddenly suffocated. "For God’s sake, Tommy, with all that’s going on, don’t you think it’s natural that he might get a little bit wired?"
His shoulders jerked spasmodically and Tommy realized he’d not only struck a nerve, he’d hit the mother lode. Gus’s body language and sudden defensiveness were more of a testimony to the situation than anything he was likely to come out and tell Tommy. Tommy wasn’t at all surprised, but confirmation of his suspicions still hurt.

Neither knew what to say for several minutes. Gus sat rubbing his hands up and down his thighs as if for warmth and finally, hating the awkwardness between them, said lamely, "The show is really coming together."

"It is," he agreed quietly.

"Your solo piece sounded great."

Tommy smiled a little shyly. "You liked it?"

Gus nodded and tried his best to smile back at him. "It’s very beautiful."

In the silence that followed, his head went down and a breath escaped him in a long sigh. He seemed so suddenly dispirited and sad that Tommy put his hand over Gus’s and spoke without thinking, conscious only of being desperate to offer him something completely private and personal that might help to comfort and reassure him a little.

"Well," Tommy murmured very softly. "I had somebody very beautiful in mind when I suggested that song to Adam."

Gus’s entire body tensed. Tommy withdrew his hand.

"You have got to stop saying things like that to me," Gus said in a furious undertone. "Don’t you think I’m screwed up enough as it is, without you making me feel worse?"

Tommy groaned deep in his throat and said brokenly, "I’m sorry...I don’t want to upset you...."

Gus’s voice grew fierce. "Then please...drop it..."

"...but for fuck’s sake, Gus...you can’t tell me that you didn’t know...."

Gus closed his eyes. He knew. It was impossible not to know. The first time he’d heard the song, he’d been shaken so badly that he’d had to think fast to cover his emotion, and although he had kept his feelings to himself, Gus had been deeply touched by Tommy’s musical declaration.

"It’s like it has been written for me," Tommy said, managing to steady himself with an effort.

"I know."

"It has nothing to do with where we are right now."

"No?" Gus murmured. "Except I’m going to have to hear it at every damn show...I have to listen to Adam singing the damn thing for God’s sake..."

Tommy looked away and flushed hard, as if a deeply personal gift had been somehow rejected.
"I’m sorry if it makes you uncomfortable."

Gus swore to himself. Couldn’t he manage to talk to anyone without hurting their feelings? Even his most innocent comments were coming out all wrong and he knew Tommy was only trying to find a way to reassure him that those around him were still on his side.

He tried to soothe Tommy. "It’s not that. I could never make you understand what something like that means to me."

Tommy was nodding too fast, already deep in the rut of a painful conclusion. "But you don’t want to talk about it."

Helplessly, Gus sat up and threw his arms around his friend. Tommy sucked his breath in sharply in surprise then gingerly circled Gus with his own arms, hugging him gently and noting that Gus seemed upset.

"I will talk about anything you want," he said, muffled against Tommy’s shoulder. "Anywhere. Anytime. I need my friends right now. I need to know you’re there for me."

"Of course I am," Tommy said, puzzled at this change in demeanor.

"Good." Gus gave him one last squeeze and sat back, face carefully controlled but eyes wet.

"This isn’t about the song, is it?" he said unexpectedly.

"Tommy...don’t."

"What on earth is going on? Is there something really wrong between you and Adam? Is he being an asshole to you? Is that it?"

Despite himself, Gus had to smile. "Put your sword away, Lancelot".

"I know what he can be like..."

"Tommy! It’s okay. I know that Adam’s just finding it hard to cope right now. I’m no freakin’ ray of sunshine either. We just need to ride it out until Saturday and then we can get away for a few days. We all need the break."

Tommy opened his mouth again and Gus shook his head at him.

"We need to change the subject." He hugged Tommy once more and determinedly pushed his long face aside. "Let’s talk about Christmas or something."

Giving in, Tommy squeezed him hard, pressing his face in against Gus’s hair and hesitating there for a moment. When he glanced up, he started in surprise.

Doug stood a few yards away, watching them.

"Sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt," he said. He seemed apologetic but Tommy still took exception.

"Well, you are," he snapped.
"We’re ready to start again. I just thought I’d come and get you."

"You’ve got loudspeakers, don’t you, Doug? Haven’t you ever heard of making an announcement?"

"Tommy," Gus reproached. He nudged his friend and inclined his head towards the stage. "Go on. I’ll see you later."

Tommy hesitated and Gus nudged him again. With obvious reluctance, he stood up and squeezed by Doug, giving the other man a baleful look as he passed.

"Sorry," said Doug again to Gus.

Gus resumed his half slouched position in his seat, knees drawn up. "Don’t worry about it," he said, but his voice was a little frosty. He didn’t like Doug sneaking up on him any more than Tommy did.

"I’m glad to hear that things in Toronto got straightened out for you. That’s got to be a big relief."

Gus made a noncommittal noise.

Doug turned his back on the stage and braced himself against the row ahead of them. After fiddling with his clipboard for a moment for a moment, he added, "And actually a few more possibilities have been crossed off the list."

At that, Gus’s feet hit the floor. "Like what?"

"I didn’t speak to him personally...I was already tied up here. He just left me a voice mail..."

"Who did?"

"What is it that you call him...Inspector Gadget?"

"In mixed company, yes," Gus said, stamping irritably. "What did he have to say?"

"That the last two people on their suspect list have been eliminated."

Silence. Gus leaned forward and folded his arms on the top of the seat in front of him.

"Great."

"I gather you don’t think that’s good news."

He looked askance. "Do I think it’s good news that they’re back to square one? Without any leads? No, I don’t as a matter of fact." He ruffled one hand through his hair and the fingers lingered at the back of his neck to knead the constricted muscles there. "So what’s their next move?"

"Holden said he’d keep me posted."

"Great," Gus said, with even less enthusiasm than before. To Doug’s great surprise, he appeared to have nothing more to say on the subject.
"Are you okay?"

Gus chose not to answer him. Instead, he remarked, "I was surprised that Samuel didn’t want you there for his little lecture this morning. Or did you show up after I left?"

Doug shook his head. "No, actually I was already here. So was Bill. The first wave of the VH1 crews arrived first thing to start working up the venue for the broadcast. They wanted a chance to check out the facility and take a look at all the possible camera and boom angles before Adam started rehearsals."

"Oh."

"I hear Samuel laid it on pretty thick."

"I wouldn’t know," Gus muttered. "I was gone before he had a chance to really get rolling." After a second, he mused, "Is that what got him all hyped up? Because VH1 was arriving today?"

"Partly."

"Just partly? Hah. I bet he’s paranoid that I’m going to start giving interviews to Perez."

"Don’t think Perez hasn’t asked."

Gus’s eyebrows shot up.

Doug grinned. "Don’t worry. He was just trying it on. VH1 happens to be just reveling in all this controversy. And naturally Samuel wants them to play it up just enough to build the viewership for the simulcast, but not enough that they put a bad spin on Griffin."

"Bill must be doing his nut."

"He is. Samuel made noises about Bill not taking any time off at Christmas so he could be here for damage control. That didn’t go over well. I told Samuel he should keep his nose out of people’s holiday plans. It’s only a couple of days, for God’s sake."

"Tell him I’ll be in LA," Gus said wryly. "That should calm him down. How much trouble can I cause from there?"

Doug chuckled. "Speaking of which, are you still leaving Friday?"

Gus nodded. "I was hoping we might get away earlier, but I guess that’s not likely."

"Nope. Sorry. The producer and director from VH1 just basically wanted to watch the rehearsal today and get a feel for the material. Tomorrow and Friday they want to start setting all the angles. That way, they can go straight to camera rehearsals on the first day back after Christmas."

Gus pondered that for a minute. "Then I guess everything goes into high gear, huh?"

"Yeah. It will be a crazy week." At Gus’s dubious expression, Doug patted him gently on the shoulder. "But hey, you have to get used to it. If you think putting on one show is a big deal, wait until we get into the tour. Three or four nights a week for months on end."
Gus slumped back in his seat. "Are you trying to depress me, Doug? Because you're doing a damn good job."

"Oh. I thought you were looking forward to the tour."

"I am...I guess. I mean, I'll be really busy with all the charity appearances." Gus frowned, half to himself. "When it comes right down to it, I don't suppose I'll even see Adam that much..."

Doug stared at Gus for a moment and then purposefully sat himself down in the seat next to him.

"Okay, I have to ask you...Is everything all right with you and Adam?"

Gus's eyes narrowed. "What makes you think it's not?"

"Everyone can tell things are tense. I just wondered if there was something I should know. That's all."

Gus was so appalled at the idea of Doug asking about his personal life that it took him a moment to regroup. Struggling to suppress his annoyance, he said, "Look, Doug, I appreciate your concern and don't take this the wrong way but I don't see that it's any of your business."

"I can appreciate that," Doug said steadily. "But you need to appreciate that I'm about to take Adam on a world tour. From this point on, as the tour manager, the responsibility for his happiness and well-being will be on my shoulders. It's my job to keep things stable and running smoothly and that won't happen if Adam's not happy in his personal life."

Gus gaped in astonishment. "Who told you he's not happy?"

Doug backed off. "I just notice that the two of you are going through a rough patch. If I can help..."

Gus shot to his feet. "You know what, Doug? You need to take your worry beads somewhere else. If Adam seems tense, that's because he is. We all are. Don't go jumping to conclusions about his personal life. I'm sure if he needs your help, he'll ask for it."

"I didn't mean..."

"I don't give a damn what you did or didn't mean. You can do your job without sticking your nose in our relationship." Now more than a little angry, he stomped past without caring that he booted Doug in the leg on the way by.

"Gus! I'm sorry! Where are you going?"

"None of your business! But if you really 'need' to know, Doug...there are thirty-five thousand seats in this fucking venue. Surely to God there's got to be a seat somewhere in the place where I can just be alone!"

Saturday, December 22, 2012

Not even when Gus was small had Christmas ever seemed to take such a long time to arrive.
Rehearsals ran late on Wednesday, which meant that the promos that Adam was supposed to shoot afterward for the VH1 special ran into the early hours, so Gus went back to the hotel until nearly nine, figuring there was no difference between him being alone at the arena and being alone at the hotel.

He woke when Adam finally returned to their room, but he was so tired and stressed out from the entire day’s worth of tension that he didn’t manage anything more than monosyllabic answers to Gus’s questions. He showered, and then sank on to the sofa and stared mindlessly at the television as he tried to unwind. Gus turned his head on his pillow and watched Adam silently and when he began to doze off, Gus crept out and tried to coax him gently into moving into bed.

Adam pushed him away in sleepy irritation and finally Gus gave up and just tucked a blanket over him and let him sleep in a huddle on the couch. In the morning, he had trouble waking Adam for rehearsal and even more trouble avoiding his snappiness before he left. Like the day before, Gus steered clear of everyone else and sat for hours by himself just watching the run-through, pouring his frustration out to Michelle by cell phone and wishing he and Adam could have some private time to spend together. But Friday night was a near repeat of Thursday, and by the time Adam got back to the hotel at nearly 1 a.m. Saturday morning, he was so raw with exhaustion and nerves that he and Gus avoided anything but the most necessary of conversations.

Adam knew he was snapping at Gus about nothing.

Gus knew Adam was just overtired and overstressed.

One more day...

Saturday morning, he let Adam sleep in. Tommy, Isaac and Terrance all caught early flights out and while the flight to L.A. was just after lunch, Gus refused to try and wake Adam until the last possible moment. Adam seemed a little brighter when he finally awoke. Either the extra hour or so had done him some good or he was just relieved that the long-awaited break to go home had finally arrived. Gus was trying hard to focus on the fact that he and Adam would finally have some time together and tried not to worry about the fact that Monte was still snippy towards him and that Lisa was feeling awkward and guilty about torn loyalties.

All in all, Gus still didn’t think it was going to be a loving family Christmas.

Dear Diary,

I stuck the note under his door this morning so he’ll see it before he leaves. I put it all in there...everything he needs to know that I’m not making this up. The lab results, the name of the doctor...all of it. I know what he’ll say...that I’m lying, that it can’t possibly be his, but deep down he knows. He used to get off on being such a man, he used to brag about not using protection so that I was completely his... His ego is so big that I just know he’s going to be turned on by the thought of having knocked me up. The big question is...what’s he going to do about it?
Chapter 14

The flight put them into L.A. in the late afternoon. It was not a happy trip. Traveling the day before Christmas Eve is hectic at the best of times and none of them had any patience for the short tempers and delays that always accompanied holiday journeys.

It was also the first time that Monte had truly been out in public since the tragedy at the benefit concert and he was abrupt and distant with the fans they encountered at the airport and on the flight. No one felt like being the center of attention and Gus felt the need to just keep his head down completely but Adam managed to deflect most of the attention away from everybody else, especially Monte in deference to his mood.

Gus couldn’t help but notice how frequently Monte snapped at Lisa and how deeply his sullenness seemed to hurt her. But Lisa was remarkably patient and gentle with him, aware of the anguish he was still feeling, and all Gus and Adam could do was hope that a change of scenery would ease some of the stress he was under and give him back some peace of mind.

The flight was quiet, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Gus had given Adam the window seat as was his preference and sat between him and Jeremy so that Jeremy could ward off anyone who tried to wander up into First Class out of curiosity. Gus disliked flying at the best of times, always nervous at the thought of staying with Adam’s family and had been on such an emotional rollercoaster over the last week that he seemed to have permanent vertigo. He ate little and said even less, apparently wanting to do nothing more than sit with his eyes closed even though Adam knew perfectly well he wasn’t able to sleep on airplanes.

It was obvious to Adam how tentative Gus was around him since he had lashed out at him so brutally at the hotel. He knew he’d hurt Gus deeply - but Gus quietly brushed aside any attempts Adam made to apologize again and balked at any attempts to discuss it. And now that they were away from all the conflict and media attention, Adam was beginning to feel more and more guilty about how hard he’d been on his lover over the past few days. In the struggle to keep his focus through the effects of the long rehearsals and all the negative publicity, he knew that he’d not been as sympathetic as he should have and shut Gus out when they should have been leaning on each other for support. The hours that they’d shared so lovingly the afternoon of the benefit concert seemed five lifetimes ago and he was tormented by the sense that some of their precious closeness had been lost.

He’d made the decision very early in their relationship that Gus was the man he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. And while he had never doubted the depth of Gus's feelings towards him, he’d been very aware that his boyfriend had suffered so much before they’d met; that he was still healing and finding himself again. This wouldn’t have been the easiest thing to do in the best of circumstances, let alone in a fishbowl. But when Gus had bounced back so strongly from his surgery, Adam had finally felt that the time was approaching when they could think about the next step.

They had never discussed marriage in anything more than the most cursory of ways. He suspected
that Gus was aware of the difficulties it would pose for Adam's career and felt it wasn’t his place to broach the subject. Adam appreciated his sensitivity on the subject ... it would give the record label and the management company massive coronaries... but he had already come to the decision that he didn’t want to wait any more.

Christmas seemed like the perfect time to ask him. Surrounded by family and friends, away from the pressures of who he was and what it would mean for him publicly...

There was only one problem. At the moment they were barely speaking to each other.

It was a relief to finally arrive in California. Adam hadn’t been off the plane five minutes before he felt some of the terrible tightness in his chest start to ease; he was home at last and he and Gus would have a chance to mend some of the awkwardness and tension between them.

Gus’s tension lingered. While confined on the plane, he’d managed to work himself into a state of extreme anxiety and let too many doubts start to get the better of him. It was bad enough that he had already been doubting himself lately; now he was troubled by the first ever sense that maybe he didn’t know Adam as well as he believed he did and that the pending return to Adam’s "normal" life as a rockstar was going to bring out more characteristics that he’d never considered might be part of Adam’s personality.

He tried hard to shake it off but even California's sunny Christmas didn’t cheer him much. Instead, it just reminded him that he had missed the coldness and snow in Canada and was going to miss Christmas there for the first time in his life. And as much as he enjoyed spending time with Adam’s family, trips home with Adam still intimidated him a little and this self-consciousness only added to his anxiety.

Jeremy rented a car at the airport long enough to drive Lisa and Monte to his parents’ house and then drive Gus and Adam to Adam’s mother’s. He unloaded their luggage for them and hugged them both before he left to return to the airport to catch a flight home to be with his own family for the holidays.

The holiday celebration was already in full swing. Adam had not given his mother an estimated time of arrival and he and Gus walked through the door just as Leila was starting to set the table for dinner.

"I should have known your sense of timing hadn’t changed," she said, shaking her head at her oldest son and then shooing them both out of the kitchen to go change and freshen up.

Pushed up the stairs by Adam, Gus tried to make a left on the landing and found himself propelled in the other direction.

"Not this time," Adam said. "You’ve been demoted. To Neil’s old room. He and his girlfriend are staying for the weekend and they need the bigger guestroom."

"Oh! That’s nice. I didn’t know they were staying over."
"Yes, you did. I told you."

Gus held his tongue, stifling the urge to tell Adam that he’d hardly said two civil words to him in the last few days and that conversation about room assignments at Christmas hadn’t been on their very short list of topics. Adam already seemed to be cheerier and the last thing Gus wanted to do was invite an argument.

Adam’s old room and Neil’s shared a bathroom. Gus knew there was an ensuite off his little room with its old-fashioned wrought iron single bed, but didn’t realize it was connected to Adam’s room on the other side. When Adam dropped Gus's luggage in Neil’s room and disappeared to get his own, Gus closed the door and hurriedly stripped off the clothes that were badly wrinkled from travelling so that he could make himself presentable for dinner.

He was frowning over a choice of outfits and shivering in the chill of the room when a voice piped up immediately behind him and he nearly died of shock.

"Well, I like it...but I’m not sure my mother will."

Gus spun around. Adam stood in the doorway to the bathroom, grinning like an idiot.

"We dress a little more...uh, completely... for meals around here."

"You sneak!" Gus gasped, hand over his heart. "How did you get in here?"

Adam crooked a finger at him and when Gus warily sidled nearer, Adam pointed out the connecting door from the bathroom into both Gus's room and his.

"I’m afraid we’ll have to share," he said very gravely.

Gus raised his eyebrows at him.

"The bathroom, I mean," Adam added.

Without waiting for a response, he put his hands on Gus's bare shoulders. Caught off guard, Gus wasn’t sure whether it was the warmth that affected him so strongly or the simple fact that they had hardly touched each other at all recently and it just felt wonderful to have Adam's hands on him again. Adam moved close and stood quietly against him, enjoying the feel of Gus's skin under his fingers as his touch moved over his boyfriend. Turning his eyes up to Adam's, lost in their first private, relaxed moment in days, Gus felt some of the coldness around his heart begin to melt. When Adam kissed him, that same heart lurched with intense pleasure, right before it rammed up into his throat as there was a knock on his door.
"Gus? I’ve got a couple of extra blankets for you."

Adam beat a hasty retreat back to his own room and Gus threw on a robe before he rushed to open the door. He took the blankets gratefully and stumbled out a thank you and if his flushed face made Adam’s mother wonder, Leila didn’t comment beyond a gentle reminder.

"Dinner’s almost ready, Gus."

________________________________________

Adam didn’t realize how deeply he’d been affected by everything that had gone on until he sat down for dinner with his family and felt the first reassuring waves of "home" surrounding him. The house was already full of noise and celebration and they sat around the kitchen table and talked long after the meal was cleared away. Adam was far more worn out than he’d realized and eventually both Gus and Leila lost their patience with his sleepy eyes and persistent yawns.

"Go to bed, for heaven's sake!" Gus said, poking him. "I'll wake you for breakfast."

As it was, Adam was so exhausted that Gus didn’t have the heart to disturb him and to Adam’s annoyance, he not only let Adam sleep through breakfast but let him sleep straight through until after lunch the following day.

"I didn’t come here to sleep," he scolded Gus. "I came here to spend time with my family. I don’t get to do that a lot, you know."

Gus just smiled at him, not the least little bit bothered by his grumbling. Adam looked a million times better than the day before and, for the first time in days felt rested and cheerful and had a raging appetite. When Adam looked at him now Gus felt the familiar rush of warmth that had been missing between them and as Adam gradually unwound, Gus found himself beginning to relax as well.

When Monte and his family joined them in the afternoon, Lisa immediately noticed the difference in Adam and observed to Gus that a trip home certainly seemed to have done him the world of good. She didn’t add that she wished the atmosphere had had the same effect on Monte, but Gus caught her downcast expression and hugged her sympathetically.

"Monte’s still pretty tense, huh?"

Lisa nodded and to Gus’s dismay, her eyes filled with tears.

"He’s not himself at all. I’m getting so worried about him. I hope that seeing the kids might settle him down but he’s been so short and touchy with them...with everybody that I’m afraid that he’s not going to get over this."
"It'll take time, Lisa. All you can do is let him have some space."

"I don't have much of a choice," Lisa said bitterly. "When he's with people he won't talk and whenever he can he just shuts himself up all alone."

Gus couldn't answer that; it was exactly what he'd been going through for the last few days and he understood the feeling all too well.

Lisa seemed to think the same thing. Somewhat hesitantly she ventured, "Would you talk to him?"

"Me?" Gus echoed, unable to hide his astonishment. "Why on earth would you think that would help?"

Lisa shrugged helplessly. "I don't know...you've just been through a lot of really tough times yourself and I know you understand a lot of what he's feeling..."

Gus squirmed. Clearly, Lisa hadn't heard the story of how Gus had used Monte for kickboxing practice on the night he'd disappeared. "Well...yeah. I do. But you know I'm not on his list of favorite people right now. He would have voted me off the island if Adam hadn't stopped him. I think he'd really take it the wrong way if I started trying to give him advice."

Such was the depth of Lisa's distress that Gus reluctantly agreed to give it a try. If nothing else, he felt he owed it to Adam to try and mend fences with his friend and band member and figured he was going to have to be the one to pick a starting point to try and initiate a dialogue. So before dinner, when everyone was scattered casually around the house and Monte had gone out on the porch alone, Gus went out after him and tried gently to draw him into conversation.

He got told.

Adam winced when he heard the story. "Yeah, it sounds like you got the same answer I did when I tried to apologize to him for giving him such a hard time lately. I'm sorry, baby...he shouldn't be barking at you like that but he's just really struggling with all of this and I don't think he wants sympathy from any of us right now."

"He's pretty angry, Adam."

"Well, I'm sure you remember what you felt like when your life got taken out of your control for a while," Adam replied a bit abruptly.

Gus took the hint and didn’t push the point any further. Instead he tried to be as much support as he could for Lisa, and just hoped that Monte would come around on his own with the simple passage of time.
There appeared to be some unspoken agreement that the recent events in Las Vegas would not be discussed in front of the family in general, although Gus noted that Adam spent a lot of time sitting privately with both his mother and his brother. He guessed that Adam had asked them not to pester Gus with questions since their comments to him about the situation were very low key. It was also obvious that Adam was anxious not to let the anxiety and pressure interfere with their time with his family and everyone deliberately steered clear of any topic that might have been the least bit contentious.

The dinner was lively and full of fun. Gus, quite used to the rambunctious nature of Caruso family gatherings, wasn’t the least bit fazed by the antics of Adam’s brother.

Throughout the night, Adam kept a tight hold of Gus’s hand and kept him close against his side and several times Gus glanced to find Adam’s face only inches away from his as they sat together on the couch in the living room, with everybody else. It didn’t escape Gus that from the way Adam was acting, he almost seemed to be seeking some kind of forgiveness from him. Gus knew that on some level they were both desperate for reassurance that things between them were still strong and he was touched and comforted by Adam’s gentleness. At times like this, it was easy to put aside thoughts of how moody and difficult Adam had been recently and begin to think that he’d taken it all a little too personally.

Gus smiled at him and Adam suddenly found himself being revisited by his thoughts from earlier in the day. Lost in a million little scenarios in his head, he unconsciously stared at Gus’s left hand as he held it, rubbing one fingertip lightly over the third finger and making him twitch.

"That tickles," Gus whispered, nudging him with his knee. "Cut it out!"

Adam let go but that didn’t stop his mind from wandering. He was by nature both very sentimental and romantic and there was no doubt that the combined atmosphere of the warm living room, the closeness of family and the whole essence of the holidays itself was beginning to get to him.

He forced himself to pay attention to Neil who was teasing Gus, wondering how nervous getting married would make him if he couldn’t even contemplate the idea of a proposal without getting completely rattled.
Adam was sitting at the corner of the sofa where he stayed put with Gus tucked under one arm as his family took up positions around the room and began digging into snacks and drinks.

Gus sat curled beside him with his head against Adam's shoulder. He was so relieved to see how relaxed and happy Adam was that he was content to just listen to the warm family chatter and occasionally throw in a remark of his own. But as the hour grew late he began to grow more and more aware of the warmth of Adam's body under his cheek and the way the fingers of Adam's free hand kept brushing lightly over his. It was getting more and more difficult to follow the thread of the conversation, especially when he casually shifted position beside Adam, brushing his hand lightly against Adam's leg and feeling the definite, immediate leap in his pulse.

The link between them was so strong that they frequently found themselves saying the same thing at the same time or thinking similar thoughts without realizing it. Such was their sexual connection as well; they were so highly attuned to one another physically that they could practically sense arousal in each other and rarely had to communicate it with anything more than a brief glance or touch. But the past week had been so difficult that their mutual awareness had been badly out of whack and they'd both been so deeply shaken that neither had been in any frame of mind for intimacy. But now, with all the immediate worry and strain suddenly lifted, there was a distinct change in mood.

Being in a houseful of family members wasn’t the best time to have an attack of lustfulness, but their bodies were already exchanging heated messages and restraint was hard to come by.

At the next natural break in the conversation, Adam stifled a completely fake yawn and announced that he was tired and needed some sleep. There wasn’t a person in the room who didn’t register amusement at this obvious excuse, but straight faces prevailed and everyone just exchanged goodnights as Adam stood up and gently pulled Gus along with him. They walked out of the room hand in hand but by the time they were starting up the stairs, Adam’s arm had tightened around Gus's waist and was holding his boyfriend close beside him as they walked.

"Sleepy?" Gus murmured.

"No," Adam said huskily against his ear. "Are you?"

"No."

Adam's old bedroom was dark, with only a faint reflection of moonlight on snow shining through from the outside. Adam pulled Gus in without a word and closed the door behind them. His hand went automatically to the familiar place on the wall for the light switch, but Gus ran his hand down his arm from his shoulder to his wrist and lightly pulled his hand away. Adam drew a deep breath as Gus's hand continued back up his arm to his neck and curved into his hair.

"Does this door lock?" Gus whispered and felt the negative shake of Adam's head.

"Bathroom does though..."

It was too dark to see Gus's expression but there was no mistaking his intent when he lightly licked at his lips and pushed him gently backwards across the room until they were in the ensuite. Gus
swung Adam's door shut lightly behind him and locked it and then continued to move Adam backwards with his mouth and his hands until Adam was up against the connecting door into Gus's room.

There was the sound of another lock being turned.

"Hold still," Gus whispered and Adam felt his hands at the opening of his shirt, slowly freeing buttons until it was open all the way down. Parting it just enough to bare a long strip of skin, Gus touched his hot mouth to the center of Adam's chest. It expanded reflexively under the warm wetness and Gus heard the gasp and the soft thud as Adam's head hit the door.

"I love you," Adam said weakly as his breath caught in his throat. There was no need for any other words; he knew what Gus intended to do and was overcome by such a rush of desire that it took all his self-control to stand still and not pull Gus wildly into his arms.

When the shirt was pulled free, Gus tugged it down over Adam's shoulders so his torso was exposed but deliberately left his arms in the sleeves so that his movements were restricted.

Adam shifted impatiently and Gus lifted his head away just long enough to murmur, "Don’t move, or I stop."

Adam willed himself into motionlessness but that didn’t stop his heart from trying to come out through his chest. The mouth dipped a little lower and Gus slid slowly to his knees, running his tongue hard around the lower edge of Adam's ribcage and then nuzzling his abdomen. He could feel the way the muscles were contracting involuntarily against his touch and how heavily Adam was exhaling.

Gus took such a long time unbuckling his belt that Adam tried to push his hands away to do it himself and frustration added an extra edge to his arousal when he realized how effectively Gus had trapped his arms within his shirt. He could have sworn he felt Gus's mouth curve into a smile as his hands clenched involuntarily, then with the tip of one fingernail, Gus lightly scratched him across the waist at the lowest edge of bare skin, making him shiver and swear hoarsely.

"Shhhh..." he breathed and Adam forced himself to bite back all the expressions of pleasure he so badly wanted to make, although he was still sure half the house could hear his ragged, desperate breathing.

Adam had no idea how long he stood there while Gus leisurely toyed with the button and zipper, loosening them just a little at a time and making him twitch helplessly. The room was chilly but he was rapidly being covered in a fine layer of perspiration so that he was feeling both hot and cold all over. When Gus put his hands to the outside seams of Adam's pants and slowly drew them down Adam almost groaned out loud just knowing that Gus was finally about to move him from one level of pleasure to the next.

He was alternately holding his breath and gasping. He wanted to do so many things...to pick Gus up, to lay him down, to twist his hands in Gus's hair and urge him closer and faster...everything had become hazy and over-exaggerated like he was high on something that had cranked the volume up on all of his senses as far as they could possibly go.

Gus was so focused that he was hardly even aware of his own physical needs. He had watched Adam go through such agony over the last few days that nothing mattered to him except taking all that pain away from his lover...although he had absolutely no qualms about the different kind of
agony he was inflicting on Adam now. He could hear Adam grinding his teeth and when his mouth
trailed down into the smooth slope just under Adam's appendectomy scar, all his breath left him in
a desperate rush.

"It’s almost midnight," he whispered, the words tickling Adam's skin.

Adam rolled his head from side to side edgily, wondering why the hell that mattered until he
realized that midnight signaled the start of a new day.

Gus's voice hushed a little more. It was languid and husky and full of innuendo and promise.

"So, baby...tell me...what would you like for Christmas?"

Adam gasped once at the suggestion and then widened his stance as far as the tangle of clothes
around his ankles would permit. He was aching and burning everywhere and he could feel the way
his body was jerking in tiny spasms as if it was trying to reach out for Gus. Gus was so close that
he could feel himself rubbing against his cheek as he gently savored the sweat from Adam's skin.

Adam’s eyes were closed; he was visualizing the scene in his mind and not knowing what was
more erotic...what Gus was doing to him or the images of it that were swirling in his head. Gus laid
his hands against Adam's hips on both sides and then gently drew them in until they met at the
juncture of his thighs and Gus smiled as he felt Adam tense in agonized anticipation of Gus's first
intimate taste of him.

Adam braced himself back against the door and his body began to move in a helpless rhythm...he
couldn’t stop...he wanted it so badly...

Gus's whisper vibrated against him.

"I think this is what you’d like..."

There. Hot breath...wet mouth...a swirling, stroking tongue and fingers that were alternately gentle
and rough, touching him inside and out...that’s what I want...keep going...keep going...oh, fuck,
baby...that’s so good...

Adam heard the clock begin to strike downstairs around about the same time that he felt the hot
rush start down in his toes. When it swept up his legs and flooded through his inner thighs he tilted
his head back and cried out soundlessly, feeling his whole body peak and throb and flood with
intense excitement. It was all he could do not to sob out Gus's name and Gus was the one who
began moaning softly and muttering passionate, inarticulate words against him, filled with the type
of pleasure you can only get by giving it to someone else.

Adam remembered very little after that. He was so weak that he couldn’t quite figure out how he
was even still standing and Gus had to gently propel him back into his room where he pulled off
the rest of Adam's clothes and tucked him into his bed. Adam lay breathing raggedly and watching
Gus through heavy eyes as he slipped back into his own room and returned minutes later in his
boxers.

He sat down on the edge of the narrow bed and touched Adam's face.

"You’re so incredible," Adam mumbled as Gus's fingers brushed damp hair back from his
forehead. "I can’t believe how hot you are sometimes."
"Sometimes I just need to love you like that," he whispered back. "Without you doing anything except just enjoying it."

He kissed Adam's temple and smiled as Adam blinked, fighting to stay awake. Gus knew what he was feeling...that familiar, heavy layer of pleasure that lingered after lovemaking and slowly pushed you down into slumber. It was just as seductive and irresistible as the desire itself and letting yourself gradually slide down into it was just another part of the whole sexual experience. But Gus also knew that Adam was feeling conscious of the fact that he hadn't so much as felt Adam's hands or his kiss during the whole process and Adam wasn't the type of man who felt comfortable taking all that pleasure and not giving some in return.

"You deserve to be loved that way too," he murmured fretfully.

Gus had no way to explain to him that it didn't matter...that he had just needed to prove his love in the simplest, most basic way possible, without accepting anything back.

He cupped one hand under Adam's jaw and gently rubbed his thumb against his cheek. "You'll get your chance," he promised. "Go to sleep, baby...I love you...go to sleep..."

December 25th had already arrived before Gus crawled into his own bed, but it was the first moments of wakefulness that brought the warm realization that it was Christmas. He knew it was morning...there were sleepy signs of dawn peeking in through the window...and even though he hadn't heard him sneak in, Adam was kissing his throat and tickling his ribs.

"Move over," he said huskily. "I'm cold."

Gus's eyes opened a little wider and he smiled. He held back the covers so Adam could slide in and then shivered at the feel of all Adam's cold bare skin pressed against him. Stretching lazily, he pulled Adam's head down to his and began feathering his mouth with soft, lingering kisses that gradually deepened until they were interrupted by the sound of feet pounding by outside the door.

"Somebody's awake early," Gus observed ruefully, and then realization dawned. "And hey... you're awake! What's the occasion?"

"Merry Christmas," Adam breathed, kissing him again. "And I want to go downstairs and eat mom's wonderful pancakes, but before that, I want you to check out what Santa left for you."

Rubbing his eyes, Gus sat up and Adam drew him into the curve of his arm against the headboard. "But you're not Christian."

"Hope Santa had his hands over his eyes," he remarked, as Gus leaned over to the bedside table and rummaged in the drawer. "Since I seem to remember last night we were working our way down the naughty list."

Holding one hand behind his back, Gus wriggled back over until he was leaning against Adam. "You go first."
"Sure," Adam said, proffering him a little wrapped box.

Gus took it suspiciously. Giving it a shake, he observed, "It’s too small to be that big screen TV I’ve wanted. And besides, I meant that I get to see you open mine first."


Eyeing him even more suspiciously, Gus removed the wrapping paper carefully, prolonging the moment and his breath caught when he saw the jeweler's name stamped on the lid of the gift box.

"What have you done?" he murmured.

When he lifted the lid and Adam saw the look on his face, he burst out laughing.

"What have you done?" Gus repeated.

"I’m tired of you stripping the gears out of my car."

He gasped. "I have never so much as missed a gear on your car!"

"Not according to my mechanic. Okay, so driving standard’s not your forte. Don’t worry. That’s automatic."

Gus was dangling the keys between thumb and forefinger and staring at them. "An automatic what? Lawn tractor?"

"Jeep. Like you said you always wanted." At Gus's shocked expression, Adam said hurriedly, "Don’t flip out on me. It’s not new. One of the sound engineers on the last tour bought it for his son to get back and forth to college and then his son joined the Air Force and was transferred overseas. So it’s been sitting for almost a year. It’s in great shape though. And it’s automatic."

"You bought me a car?" Gus said softly.

"Yeah, I thought it was about time you had your own wheels to get around in." When Adam saw his shy, flustered face, he added defensively, "I didn’t go overboard. If I’d bought you what I wanted to buy you..."

Gus shook his head, still blushing. "This is amazing...thank you."

He sat staring wordlessly at the keys for several long minutes, until Adam cleared his throat with a discreet cough.

"Excuse me. Have we forgotten something?"

"Hmm?"

"Hello? Hey! Haven’t you heard it’s better to give than to receive?"

"Oh!" Gus went scarlet and had to fish around behind him for the little box he’d stashed out of sight. "Sorry...I’m just so...wow, I mean..."

"I’ll take that as an expression of approval," Adam said dryly.

Gus extended his hand to offer him a box almost exactly the same size as the one Adam had handed to him and then suddenly withdrew it as if he had just remembered something.
"By the way, before you open this, you should know that this wasn’t my first choice of a gift for you. You messed up Plan A so I had to go to Plan B."

Adam's eyebrows rose. "I messed it up? How’d I do that?"

"Because my original plan was to get you tickets for New York Fashion Week."

Adam looked startled, then rueful. "Oh," he said.

"Yeah. Oh. So here I am calling in every favor I can possibly think of with every person I can possibly think of..." He sighed dramatically. "I had to sleep with an awful lot of models, you know..."

"Sorry about that," Adam said, biting his lip.

"...and the next thing I hear is that you’re already invited to Fashion Week...so my perfectly good idea went out the window."

"I said I’m sorry," Adam said, very contritely. "At least you still get to go with me."

"Thanks, but I wasn’t going to go anyway. Fashion is your thing, not mine."

"It's not?" he said.

"Nope. I'm a manly man!"

Adam opened his mouth to reply but before he could speak, Gus just shook his gift under his nose.

"Thanks," he muttered, cocking a doubtful eye at Gus.

Gus watched Adam's face very carefully as he removed the wrapping and lid and the layer of soft cotton that rested on top. It took a second for awareness to register; when it did, his face went through a thousand and one emotions in the space of about fifteen seconds.

"Where did you get this?" he croaked.

He tried to lift it from the box and found his fingers wouldn’t work. Moving his hand aside, Gus carefully lifted the watch from its resting place and set the box aside.

"Your mother gave it to me. When we were here last time, she loaned me her sewing box... when I tore the hem on my shirt, remember? - and this was in the bottom of it. I recognized it from the picture."

Gus had looked at the photo about a hundred times. It hung on the wall of Adam's studio where he could see it as he worked, a photo of Adam with his father, with Eber’s arm slung around his neck. The watch was distinctive because of the pale-blue face and the dark-blue hands. It had been a gift from Leila to her husband after the birth of their first son and was engraved on the back with a message from her to him and the date Adam had been born. Eber had worn it for years, through a dozen replacement straps, even when it became very out of fashion. Then it had simply stopped working one day, and rather than have it fixed, Eber had reluctantly upgraded to a more modern, digital display model. But Leila had kept the watch itself, tucked in her sewing box for lack of a better place to put it.

Gus had stumbled upon the watch the day he’d had to repair the hem on his shirt and knew
immediately who it had belonged to. When his plans for Fashion Week tickets had fallen through, he’d called Leila and then Eber and asked if he could have the watch for Adam. Leila had willingly shipped it to L.A. and Gus had found a reputable watchmaker who had repaired it, replaced the face with a new, scratch-free glass and added a beautiful new strap.

Retro was in. It couldn’t have been any trendier if he’d bought it new. But all that mattered to Gus was what Adam’s reaction would be to having something of his father’s, something he’d seen a million times in the photo of the two of them in his studio, that was personal and private, that he could wear every day if he wanted...

"I hope you don’t mind," he said softly. "I had something added to the back."

Adam’s chest was heaving and his fingers still wouldn’t function. Carefully Gus turned the watch over so Adam could see what he had engraved beneath the original inscription. They were the same words that Adam had had engraved on the silver bracelet he had given Gus in the early days of their relationship.

AL "True and deep stuff" GH

It took Gus several tries to get the band fastened around Adam's wrist. When he had tucked the end of the strap into the little loop, he let go and Adam sat for several minutes staring down at the watch, almost oblivious to Gus's presence as he relived a dozen private moments in his mind. When he looked up and smiled at Gus, Gus leaned forward into Adam's arms and pressed his face into the warmth of his neck.

There were no thank yous and none were necessary. Adam was moved beyond words and all that mattered to Gus was that he’d somehow been able to give back a little piece of Adam's childhood memories to him.

He leaned silently against Adam. Sentimentality was getting to Gus in a way he hadn’t expected. For some unknown reason he was suddenly aware that he was miles from his home, missing the people who had been his family for years and remembering the previous two Christmases when he had been in such physical and emotional pain. Stubbornly, he pushed the thoughts away; this was no time to be feeling sorry for himself when he had so much to be thankful for.

He felt Adam's long indrawn breath and then his fingers touched Gus's chin and lifted it so they could kiss. Adam closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of Gus's soft, warm mouth moving against his while Gus's hands brushed over his bare shoulders and went up around his neck. After a moment, Adam gently broke the kiss by leaning his forehead in against Gus's so that their noses were almost touching.

"The last few days have been some of the hardest of my life," he whispered. "You have no idea what it means to me that you were there for me...that you’re here now...our first Christmas together...I wanted it to be so special..."

"It is special," Gus whispered back. "We’re together, aren’t we?"

Adam hesitated. It was so tempting...

It had been hard for him to realize that Christmas simply wasn’t the right time. No matter what his plans had been originally, the events of the past week had taken a toll on all of them and he was afraid of putting Gus on the spot when they were both trying to recover from ragged nerves and
exhaustion. He didn’t want Gus to think it was some kind of knee-jerk reaction to the stress they’d been under...he didn’t want Gus to have any doubts about the timing or his intentions...he didn’t want Gus to think Adam was asking him for the wrong reason.

But so early on Christmas morning, when it was just the two of them snuggled together with their faces touching and their hands entwined and so much love and emotion between them...he wanted to ask Gus so badly that he had started to speak before he could stop himself.

"Gus..." he said softly.

There was a burst of laughter from downstairs and Gus drew back and cocked his head.

"I think we're going to miss all the fun if we don’t hurry up and get down there," Gus said with a smile. "Do you want breakfast or not?"

He missed Adam's sudden, crestfallen look. Sliding out of bed, he scrambled into jeans and a flannel shirt, turning around to find that Adam was still sitting up against the headboard with his arms folded and his eyes downcast.

"Are you okay?" he said, mystified at Adam's sudden lack of enthusiasm.

His head came up but his expression was unreadable.

Gus grabbed him by one hand. "Come on, pokey! Get dressed!" He pulled hard and Adam, unable to get his legs untangled fast enough, was hauled off the edge of the bed and landed with a thud on the floor.

"Ouch!" he said indignantly. It was bad enough to be interrupted on the brink of a marriage proposal; it didn’t do anything more for his pride to be sprawled naked on a cold hardwood floor. Before he could even get up, Gus had rushed into his room, rushed back and was pitching clothes at him.

"All right...all right" he protested, dragging a t-shirt over his head. "I’m getting dressed...see?"

"Well, move a little quicker." Gus grinned down at him. "You seem to be able to get out of your clothes pretty fast when the mood strikes you. I don’t see why it doesn’t go both ways."

Several times that morning Adam had glanced over at Gus looking wistful. He knew Gus was feeling the sense of wanting to be in two places at once and regretted that he hadn’t thought ahead of time to arrange for Michelle to call to surprise Gus.

As usual, Michelle came through anyway. While they were cleaning up from breakfast, the phone rang and Neil stuck his head in the kitchen to announce to Gus that Michelle was on the line.

"Oh sure," Adam teased. "The old ‘get a phone call just when it's time to do the dishes’ routine. Very clever."

Gus pinched him as he walked by, making Adam turn red. Adam left him alone for a few minutes and then wandered out into the hallway to remind Gus that he wanted to say a few words to Michelle before he hung up.

His heart nearly stopped when he saw his boyfriend. Gus’s head was bowed and he was leaning
heavily against the wall, looking incredibly sad. Adam felt a stab of trepidation and a dozen horrible thoughts flashed through his mind...please tell me she’s just calling to say Merry Christmas...please don’t tell me there’s been an accident, or that somebody’s sick...

He took Gus gently by the shoulders, eased him away from the wall and immediately slid his arms around his waist, pressing him close and ready to offer any comfort he could...and then he realized exactly what was causing his distress.

He was talking to Brian.

Or rather, he was listening to Brian. With his cheek against Gus's head, Adam could clearly hear Brian’s stream of animated chatter. Most of it was the disjointed rambling of a three year old, but his excitement was obvious and the sound of his delighted little voice seemed to have hit Gus like a freight train.

He shoved the phone blindly at Adam. Helplessly, he watched Gus stumble down the hallway and then decided it was best to let him go. Brian was just as delighted to speak to Adam as to Gus and once he’d finished gabbling in Adam’s ear, Michelle came back on the phone and asked him what was wrong.

"I’m not sure but I think I’d better go find out."

Michelle sounded more than a little concerned. "Is he okay? He’s seemed really shaky lately, Adam. He hasn’t sounded good at all."

"Yeah, well...a lot of that’s been my fault."

"I thought getting away from Vegas for a few days would settle him down."

Adam chewed his lip. "Me too. I’ll be glad when you get down to see him. I think he needs you. Look, let me go and talk to him. Say Merry Christmas to everyone for me, okay? We’ll call you back a little later."

Gus had fled out onto the porch and was huddled against the railing. He just stood there for several long minutes, unable to answer Adam's worried questions.

"I’m sorry. It’s Brian...I just miss him so much. This is the first Christmas he really knows what’s going on and he’s so excited...I wish I could see him. I don’t remember the last time I wasn’t at The Farm for Christmas. They’re the only real family I’ve had and I’m just still not used to not having them in my life like before..."

"Your family’s just getting a little bigger now, that’s all," Adam said gently.

"I know. It’s not that I’m not glad we’re here. But for the past week I’ve just felt so..." There was a rush of resentment and he half-turned away to try and hide his emotion.

"We all have," Adam whispered, stroking his back. "It’s okay."

Gus fumbled for words to make Adam understand and then just fell silent. He hadn’t been prepared for the overwhelming heartache he suddenly felt; it had been so long since his emotions had gotten so out of control. There was no way to adequately explain how he was feeling...how much he had begun to doubt himself again, how he was back to often feeling like he was unable to cope, how he
sometimes felt like an outsider, away from home and family and unable to fit in, no matter how warmly he was welcomed.

He knew he was over-reacting and felt stupid and childish.

"I feel safe with them," he mumbled. "They understand me. They know who I am."

Adam tightened his hold on him. "Gus, it’s okay. You don’t have to explain it. You don’t think I’d be feeling down if we were in Toronto and I was missing my family?"

"I don’t want you to think that I’m not happy to be with you..."

"I don’t. Will you please come inside now?"

Gus pulled away a little and made a visible effort to control himself. "I don’t want your mother to see me like this."

Adam took Gus back upstairs out of sight of the family and sat with him in his room until he had settled down. He didn’t move until he felt Gus relax against him.

"Better?" he whispered.

"I don’t know what’s wrong with me," Gus said tiredly.

Adam had a feeling he knew but wasn’t sure Gus would appreciate having it pointed out to him. But he was so troubled that he felt the need to say something, though he chose his words carefully and tried his best to be as gentle as possible. "Gus...baby, please...you need to give yourself a break. Remember everything you’ve had to go through over the past couple of years. You’ve been through hell. And it hasn’t been that long since...since you were pretty ill."

Gus's head drooped on his shoulder. He knew Adam wasn’t referring to his surgery, but to the nervous breakdown that had threatened him in the spring. "Yeah, I know."

"The doctor warned you that things would get really hard for you sometimes; that you’d have setbacks. You can’t always be strong; especially not after what we’ve gone through this week. Sometimes you just have to let go and let some of it out. And besides, everyone gets emotional at Christmas...why do you think I was bawling my eyes out this morning?"

"Because you’re a big baby?" Gus whispered.

"That too," Adam said, smiling against his hair.

"I’m sorry..."

"Don’t be."

Adam was trying not to beat himself up about it but the truth was that he now realized it had been a mistake to assume that Gus was past the danger point emotionally. He’d forgotten that Gus's recovery from surgery had been spent in the protective environment of The Farm and that he had only really had a month’s exposure to the very public spotlight. He’d been coping so well; it was a shock to see that he suddenly seemed so rattled and barely in control. The pressures of the past week had obviously taken more of a toll on Gus than Adam had realized and he grimly reminded
himself that he needed to be more considerate of Gus's sensitive state.

This was a nice break but once New Year’s was over, they needed to spend some serious downtime together or Gus wasn’t going to be in any fit shape to endure the stresses of a world tour.

"I was thinking," he murmured, "About us going away for a few days after the concert."

Gus's head moved up and down against his shoulder. They had planned to go to Vail, a place that was extremely personal to both of them, where Gus could try skiing again for the first time in years and where they would be able to have a short but very private vacation.

"Would you mind if we didn’t go to Vail?"

Gus leaned away and looked up at him in some surprise. "Not go...?"

"If your heart is set on it, we’ll do it." Adam ran his fingers through Gus's hair and added casually, "But if you didn’t mind, I thought maybe we’d go somewhere else for a few days."

At Gus's puzzled frown, he suggested, "How about Toronto?"

Gus's eyes went wide.

"I know that Michelle is meeting us in Vegas, but that’s not going to be the same as getting a chance to visit with her family. I thought that maybe we could fly back with her when things wrap up. You can spend some time with Brian and..."

Flustered, Gus stammered, "But you wanted to go snowboarding..."

Adam leaned his mouth against Gus's ear. "I’ve got it on good authority," he whispered. "That they have snow in Canada this time of year..."

"We do! It’s just...it’s not Vail. It’s not the same."

"Either way," The arm that was around Gus's waist shifted him a little closer, "Vail or Toronto. You pick. It’s completely up to you. And you don’t have to decide now if you’d rather..."

"Toronto," Gus said firmly.

"...think about it..."

"Toronto," he said more softly and his mouth curved at the way Adam began to laugh. Then Gus tilted his face up to Adam's and kissed the underside of his jaw. "And thank you, baby...thank you..."
"Don’t suppose you know where Lisa keeps the extra napkins?" Gus said hopefully as Adam towed him along. "She said they were in the hutch in the dining room...but do you think I can find them?"

"I’ll help you look," Adam said absently but instead his hands went to his boyfriend’s waist and Gus suddenly found himself pressed back against the wall.

"What are you doing?" he protested. "Adam! Have you lost your mind?"

"Hush. I just want you to myself for a minute, that’s all."

Without warning, his hands went underneath the lower edge of Gus's shirt and curved up his bare back. His mouth was on the other man's and the best Gus could manage was a squeak.

"Sorry," he whispered. "Are my hands cold?"

"Cut it out," Gus whispered back and tried to squirm away. "We’re in a houseful of people...what the heck are you thinking?"

Adam grinned at him, their faces barely an inch apart. "Do you really want to know?"

Gus narrowed his eyes. "No," he admitted, and abandoned his attempts to wiggle loose. The tactic had backfired rather significantly; Adam was holding him against the wall with his body and Gus's attempts to free himself only widened Adam's grin.

"You’re not helping yourself," he teased.

Despite himself, Gus laughed. Adam's light-heartedness was infectious. "Then let go of me, you big goof!"

"I want a kiss first."

"You just had one."

"Yeah, I know...but you can do a whole lot better than that."

Gus looked doubtful but it seemed the only way to pacify Adam and he tilted his head obligingly. To his embarrassment, he got a lot more than he bargained for and was immediately consumed by a blistering kiss that wiped every last concern over matching table linens right out of his mind.

"I owe you, you know," Adam murmured, so close that Gus felt the words more than heard them. "For last night."

"This isn’t the time," Gus breathed, but he couldn’t help nipping back at Adam playfully. "I told you that you’ll get your chance."

"When?"

"Well, obviously not now!"
Adam grinned at him again and for a moment Gus suspected he was going to try and prove that "now" was indeed quite a possibility. Instead, he just pressed a last soft kiss on Gus's lips.

"I'm only teasing. I just wanted to see you smile. And blush," he added at the hint of pink that crept into Gus's face.

"I guess that means you’re not going to help me find those napkins, doesn’t it?" Gus said dryly.

"I'll show you where they are."

They both jumped guiltily at the interruption. Monte stood only a few feet away.

"They’re not in the hutch. They’re in the old china cabinet. I’ll show you."

Adam’s mouth tightened a little and while he stepped away from Gus, he kept hold of his boyfriend's hands. He wasn’t at all pleased that Monte had obviously been watching their little mid-hallway tryst but was too wary of Monte’s mood to comment.

"You’re wanted in the kitchen," Monte said to him mildly. "My wife seems to think you’re handy with a carving knife."

Adam hesitated but he went nonetheless, warning his guitarist with a glance as he passed. Gus followed Monte into the dining room where the other man silently directed him to the stash of extra napkins. Taking half the pile, Monte began going around the table and laying them out at the place settings.

"I need to apologize about yesterday," he said suddenly, straightening knives and forks with a great deal more concentration than was necessary.

The flush had only just finished leaving Gus’s face and to his annoyance he felt the blood rushing right back into his cheeks.

"That’s not necessary, Monte," he murmured. "I didn’t have the right to say anything so I don’t blame you for getting upset."

"That didn’t give me the right to snap at you the way I did."

Gus opened his mouth and then forced himself to close it. His natural reaction was to brush off Monte's apology, to minimize the hurt of Monte's attacks on him in the past week and to change the subject as quickly as possible. But it had obviously cost Monte considerable effort to take this step given how depressed and angry he’d been since the drugging at the concert. He and Adam were old friends and it was stupid to even think about not accepting Monte's olive branch in full. They were going to be sharing each other’s company for several long months and for Adam’s sake, if nothing else, Gus needed to do what he could to smooth things over between them.

And dammit...it was Christmas Day...

"It hasn’t exactly been an easy week for you, Monte," he said softly. "And I know that some of the things I’ve done have made things more difficult. I’m sorry about that, and I promise that I will try to be more considerate from now on."
Monte's eyes abandoned their study of the flatware and lifted to Gus's. It wasn’t exactly a dubious look, but Gus sensed Monte's skepticism anyway. He felt a stab of defiance but managed to control it and added, "This is all still new to me. I’m trying to learn...really I am."

Unexpectedly, Monte began nodding. "Exactly! That's why I was so concerned about you and Adam starting something in the first place...although I tried to keep that to myself."

Gus looked so surprised that Monte rushed on, trying to soften his criticism. "I’m sorry, Gus...but you just don’t know anything about the entertainment business. You’ve never been in it...and a few months with Adam just isn’t enough to give you any frame of reference. It’s only natural that you’ll be walking into walls, but we just can’t afford that right now. Adam can't afford that right now. And he knows it. And I know that he’ll back you up and support you and that’s great...except sooner or later it’s going to cause a lot of resentment in the band and his management if he’s got divided loyalties."

Gus was hit from left field. On one hand Monte was trying to apologize and on the other hand he was revealing all the doubts he’d had about Gus from the very beginning.

"I think Adam does a pretty good job of fulfilling his professional obligations," Gus said in a choked voice. He had to push aside the memory of Adam cancelling more than week’s worth of appearances when he’d had his surgery.

"I’m not saying he doesn’t. But everybody can all see that he’s been torn sometimes. He doesn’t want to let anyone down...he doesn’t want to let you down..."

Gus clenched his hands into fists. "I would never ask him to put aside his career for me. I know how unreasonable that is, Monte! I’ve been there."

"Okay, fair enough. And what happens when the day comes that he has to make a decision between the best interests of his career and your best interests? Aren’t you going to resent that? A whole lot?"

"If it was a legitimate issue, I would understand," Gus muttered. "Why don’t you just say it, Monte? Why don’t you just say that you're afraid he would choose me over you...if it ever came to that..."

"Maybe he would. Maybe he wouldn’t...."

Gus's jaw dropped open and hung there.

"...and there’s something else you need to consider. If his career as a performer ended tomorrow, he will still be one of the famous people in the world and his career as a song writer or producer will keep right on going. This isn’t a short-term proposition for him. He’s committed...he’s in it for the long haul."

"Good! That’s what I want for him!"

Monte shrugged. He looked apologetic but he clearly needed to make his point. "But is it what you want for you?"

Gus exhaled sharply. It was tempting to point out to Monte that some people, including the fans felt he was the one who was suffering from divided loyalties and the lack of commitment. His
desire to smooth things over was rapidly changing into resentment and even if Monte had intended
his remarks to be constructive, he had completely missed the mark and stung Gus badly with his
attitude.

"I know I've given you a rough time lately, but it's only fair that I try and explain where I'm coming
from. I can't help the way I feel and you haven't been helping yourself with some of the things
you've done in the last week. I'm not trying to blame you, Gus. I just don't think you have the right
type of attitude for this business. Please don't take it personally."

Gus had his hands on the back of one of the dining room chairs and his knuckles were white with
the intensity of his grip.

*Personally? Hell, no, Monte...why would I take it personally?*

They were interrupted by the first wave of what was to be a long parade of food. Monte looked like
he had more to say, but Gus had heard enough. He grabbed the first platter of food from Lisa and
began setting dishes out on the table as they were handed to him. Then he quietly excused himself
to wash up before everyone sat down to eat and ran smack into Adam as he was hurrying out of the
room.

Adam caught his arm as Gus attempted to slide past him without a word. "Hey sexy...where are
you going? It’s time to eat. Do you think I just spent twenty minutes wrestling that turkey for
nothing?"

"Just need to freshen up," Gus murmured with a small smile.

"Wait a minute...wait!" Adam tugged his around in a circle until the other man was facing him.
Gus was deliberately avoiding his gaze and Adam didn’t like the hot flush along Gus's cheeks.
"Are you okay? Monte wasn’t giving you a hard time, was he?"

Gus looked down at the floor. After a moment, he said very carefully and truthfully, "Monte
wanted to apologize to me about yesterday."

Adam looked relieved. "Oh. Good, I’m glad. I’m sure he’s realized that you’re only trying to help.
So you’ve cleared the air then, huh?"

"I’d say everything's pretty much out in the open now," Gus agreed quietly.

Adam kissed his temple and Gus said nothing further. This was Adam's off time and the last thing
Gus was going to do after what they had been through lately was throw gasoline on a fire. Better to
let Adam think that things had been settled amicably.

After all, there would be a lot more than just turkey being carved if he repeated any of Monte’s
remarks to Adam.

He said little during dinner but there was so much talk at the table that his silence went mostly
unnoticed. When the meal was over, he started helping around the kitchen, and once again busy-
ness compensated for conversation. He did notice that Adam had suddenly warmed towards Monte
and felt a moment’s guilt that he hadn’t told Adam the truth. Then he decided that it was better to
let Adam believe things had improved between them since it would remove some of the strain from
his relationship with his old friend–slash-guitarist, and that was a vital part of what would make the
upcoming tour more tolerable for everyone involved.

By the time they returned to Adam’s mother’s, Gus was exhausted. He helped Leila make up a few plates of snacks and laid them out in the living room where Adam and his brother were sitting. Gus was finishing up one last platter in the kitchen when Adam snuck up behind him and stuck his head over his shoulder.

"I’m working on it," Gus said without missing a beat. Swiping a peanut-butter covered cracker from the tray, he held it up in front of Adam's face without even looking and then popped it into his mouth when he obligingly opened it.

Adam made an appreciative noise and when he’d finished chewing, asked, "What about you? Did you make something for yourself?"

Gus packed up the cracker box and screwed the lid back on the peanut butter. "No, I’m fine, thanks." His shoulders dropped a little and somewhat hesitantly, he added, "To be honest, I’m really tired. I think I’ll just go up to bed."

"Oh."

Adam was immediately torn. The fact that they didn’t share a room didn’t change the fact that he would have liked to spend some time alone with his boyfriend before he went to sleep, preferably repaying him for his loving attentions of the previous night. Gus saw his gaze flicker back to the living room and knew where his conflict lay and quickly put an end to his indecision.

"You need to spend some time with your brother. So I’ll say goodnight now and I’ll see you in the morning."

Reluctant to let him go, Adam slid his arms around Gus and hugged him close. "Are you sure? Would you rather I came up with you?"

Gus fought a smile. "No, I think you were obvious enough last night."

"Obvious?" he echoed.

"Uh huh. I’m a little concerned about these plans you have to go into acting." Gus softened his teasing with a delicate kiss and they just stood together for a moment with their mouths gently touching.

"Thanks," he whispered. "For the incredible holiday."

"You’re thanking me?" Adam said huskily. "I think it should be the other way around."

Gus rubbed his knuckles along Adam's cheek and smiled. "No, I think I’ve got it right. I love you. Now, go on. Go talk brotherly stuff."

Gus didn’t mention the return to Vegas. The mere thought of it knotted his stomach, especially when he considered how relaxed and loving Adam had been while he was away from the stresses and pressures of the upcoming concert and the police investigation. Gus knew Adam probably dreaded leaving L.A. as much as he did, although after several interrupted attempts to continue their return to intimacy, Adam was grumbling that he would be glad to get back to the privacy of
sharing a hotel room.

Adam's frustration tickled him. He could never have admitted it, but his pride was hurt by the thought that their only physical encounter in more than a week had been completely one-sided and he hadn't yet been given the chance to reciprocate. He took every possible opportunity to tell Gus, in great detail, exactly what he had in mind to "even the score" but the fact was that there simply wasn't the time or the place or the privacy in his mother's house to follow up on his promise.

Their flight back was due to land in Vegas at 9:00 a.m. the following morning. Allowing roughly an hour or so to collect luggage and get back to the hotel, Gus had no doubt about what he was probably going to be doing about 10:15.

Sooner, if the traffic co-operated.

Before they left, Adam asked his mother if he could talk to her privately.

They went for a long walk and Leila was both amused and touched at his discomposed, stammering attempts to tell her what he wanted to say. She listened without interrupting, waiting for him to get it all out until he finally fell silent.

She tried hard to keep the amusement out of her voice. He was feeling awkward enough.

"So...are you asking for my permission or my approval?"

"Neither," he muttered. "I just wanted to tell somebody. I haven't talked to anyone else about this."

That surprised her. "Shouldn't you be working this out with...?I mean, you know this is going to create quite a fuss...shouldn't you be arranging....?"

He scowled at her. "I'm not doing any of that ahead of time. I don't want to get into it with RCA or management or anybody. They're only going to go insane and try and organize everything about it. Besides, the moment I start talking to people, there's always the chance that somebody's going to open their big mouth and leak it. The press is already all over me. Why do you think I haven't gone shopping? All I need is for somebody to see me in a jewelry store and it would be all over the internet in five minutes."

"I'd say the jewelry is pretty much a mandatory part of the process," his mother said mildly.

"I know that. That's sort of my problem. I have no idea what he likes or what he wants. If we'd been able to get here sooner I was going to ask you to come shopping with me but to be honest..."

He broke off, and Leila's eyebrows went up.

"What?"

"I've been thinking about this for months now but I really wanted to give him time to get used to all the changes...to move in with me, to really get accustomed to all the traveling and the attention. He was so nervous about it at first; I figured he really needed some space to get comfortable with it. Then he got sick and I wanted to give him time to get better. Then the album came out...do you see what I mean? It's been one thing after another and I don't want anything to overshadow this for him. I want it to be a big deal and I don't want all the other big deals to get in the way."
His mother considered that for a moment before she ventured, "Are you afraid he'll turn you down?"

"No. Well, not exactly. I'm afraid he won't think it's the right time. Now if you'd asked me last week, I would have said that I thought Christmas was a perfect time. Quiet. More private. But with everything that happened...we all got rattled and really uptight and he was put in the middle of everything...I think he’s hurting a lot right now and I was afraid he’d take it the wrong way." Adam shrugged. "And New Year's is going to be crazy, but then at least I've got some time before the tour and we can think about what we want to tell people and how we want to do it...

"I don't think he'll turn you down," Leila said, dryly. "He may knock you down when you ask him...or hug you to death..." She wrestled with a smile until it won and Adam couldn't help but grin back.

"You don't think New Year's is a bad idea?"

"I think you should do what you want to do and stop worrying about the timing. I understand what you mean about giving him space to be sure that he could handle this type of life, but you sound pretty sure to me and I've never doubted that the two of you are right for each other. If you want to do it at New Year's...do it."

He bounced a little, betraying impatience. "I want to do it now!"

She shook her head at him indulgently and hugged his arm. "Well, if you want my advice, I suggest that you handle that whole jewelry issue before you start asking questions."

"I was thinking about that. Michelle is coming down for a few days. She'll help me out. And the hotel can probably arrange for me to see somebody. Surely there must be jewelers who make house calls."

"In Vegas?" Leila said innocently. "I'm surprised they don't have vending machines."

Adam made a face. "They probably do. I think I'll do something a little more traditional."

"Good. So you're not thinking about any of those, uh...drive-through wedding chapels...are you?"

"I'm not. He might."

His mother broke up laughing and after a moment, Adam joined in.

"Somehow I don't think that's his style."
Chapter 17

Thursday, December 27, 2012

When Jeremy arrived to escort them back to Las Vegas, he was quick to notice the familiar closeness between Adam and Gus and said a quick prayer of thanks that things appeared to be back to normal. In fact, they were practically in each other’s pockets for the entire trip, oblivious to some of the amused glances that followed them at their very open displays of affection. It was also a relief that Monte seemed somewhat calmer but none of them appeared enthusiastic about returning to Vegas with all the tension and stress that was likely to resurface as a result.

They made it back to the hotel with a minimum of fuss, despite the usual group of diehard fans lurking near the entrance to the hotel. For once, Adam hardly gave them a second glance and seemed intent only on getting Gus up to the privacy of their room. Gus had sensed Adam's barely concealed impatience throughout the trip and felt his lover's focus on him begin to intensify even as they just walked into the lobby. Unfortunately for Adam, Doug Taylor was also passing through the lobby as they were on their way to the private elevator and Gus was immediately distracted.

He detoured to catch Doug. Adam saw where he was headed and sighed. "Go ahead," he said to Jeremy. "We’ll catch up."

Jeremy held the elevator door open for Monte but then let it close without stepping in. "No problem...I’ll wait." He too had noticed how Gus had veered off and also observed that Adam was grinding his teeth in irritation as he stared after Gus.

Doug’s face lit up when he heard Gus calling his name. As they shook hands warmly, he remarked that a few days away seemed to have done him a world of good.

"It was a nice break," Gus admitted. "I only wish it had been a little longer. Did you get home to your family?"

Doug smiled and rubbed the back of his neck ruefully. "No family to get home to, I’m afraid. I’m a bit of a solo artist. But I had a few nights out with some friends from Griffin, so I can’t complain."

Gus winced inwardly, sensing he’d stumbled onto a touchy subject. Doug seemed just as eager to pick a new topic as he did and shrewdly zoned in on exactly what Gus had been hoping to get at in the first place.

"I suppose you’d like to know if I’ve had any updates from the police?"

Gus widened his eyes hopefully, but Doug only shook his head. "I’m sorry. I checked with them this morning...in fact, I’ve been checking every morning...but there’s nothing new. I was starting to get the feeling I’m making a nuisance of myself but actually Holden’s partner offered to review the security plans for the hotel and the arena with me so they know what we’ll be doing for the opening ceremony and the concert. And before you ask," he added. "I was going to ask you to look them over first and give me your opinion."

Gus grinned gratefully. "I’d like that."

"Will you be at rehearsal?"
He nodded and Doug looked at his watch. "Well, I’m actually heading over there now. VH1 wants a couple of hours clear before rehearsals actually start. Tell you what...when you get to the arena, come and find me. We’ll pick a quiet corner and I’ll show you all the layouts." He glanced up and saw Adam bearing down on them and finished loudly, "...and it was great, thanks."

Gus looked startled but Doug just reached past him to shake Adam’s hand and steer the conversation onto more neutral ground.

"I hear you had a nice break, Adam. It’s good to have you back."

"Thanks. Are we still on for noon today?"

"Make it one o’clock. I think the VH1 crew’s going to need the extra time."

"Great. Thanks." Adam took a firm hold of Gus’s elbow and didn’t bother to disguise the fact that he wanted to scrap the chit-chat. He had a brutal schedule ahead of him for the next few days and he was determined to spend as much time alone with his boyfriend as possible before all hell broke loose. "Well if you don’t mind, I’m going to grab some rest while I can. I’ll see you at the arena."

Gus rolled his eyes at this feeble excuse. As he found himself being turned around, he fought the urge to remind Adam to call and book those acting lessons.

"Wait!" he said suddenly and looked back over his shoulder. "Doug, do you know if Michelle made it in okay yesterday?"

He was trying to master a smile. "Yeah, she did."

Immediately, Gus hesitated and glanced towards the concierge. Adam tugged half-heartedly in the direction of the elevator. When Gus balked, Adam pulled more firmly, causing him to plead, "Give me two seconds...I just want to find out what room she’s in..."

"Actually," Doug called after them. "I just saw her. She’s in the dining room."

Helplessly, Adam let go. It was no use. Gus stopped dead, looked across the lobby at the restaurant, looked at Adam apologetically and then grinned when Adam shook his head at him and spread his hands in surrender.

"If I drop dead from frustration," he muttered as he trailed behind Gus. "It will be all your fault."

Trying not to laugh, Jeremy followed them into the restaurant where Gus immediately craned his head to look for Michelle. Adam spotted her towards the back, sitting with Tommy at a table partially screened from the other diners. His eyebrows rose at the sight of them together; he wasn’t surprised, but he couldn’t help wondering if the day was ever going to come when Michelle would tell Gus that she and Tommy were spending more than just casual time together. Adam knew perfectly well that Gus would be furious at having been kept out of the loop, and considering that loops and nooses had a somewhat similar construction, Adam was determined he was going to keep his neck out of both if at all possible.

He nudged Gus. "Over there."

"Incoming," Michelle warned Tommy as she caught sight of Gus covering the distance between them with his long stride. "And for God’s sake, remember what we agreed...okay?"

"As long as you keep your promise and quit stalling," Tommy muttered back. He stood up as Gus reached the table and hugged him delightedly, then backed out of the way so he could hurl himself
at his best friend.

"Missed me much?" Michelle said with a gasp as most of the air was squeezed from her lungs. "Yeah, hi...it’s great to see you too. Go easy. I’m still not completely awake yet."

Gus dropped into the seat beside her. His pleasure was obvious; it was as if he’d suddenly found a counterbalance against the sense of being an outsider that had plagued him for the last week. "So you managed to survive a day here by yourself?"

Michelle didn’t dare look at Tommy. "No problem."

"Did you go casino-hopping? Is the family fortune still intact?"

"I hocked a tiara. How was your flight?"

Resignedly, Adam whacked Tommy on the back in greeting. Since it didn’t appear that he was going to get one appetite appeased in the near future, he figured he might as well satisfy another one. He slumped into the seat across from Michelle, poured himself a coffee, scooped a croissant from the pastry plate in the middle of the table and settled himself down to wait.

"How’s he been doing?" Tommy asked him in an undertone.

"Good days, bad days," Adam replied quietly, hiding his response behind his coffee cup. "Having Michelle here will cheer him up."

He didn’t have the heart to interrupt Gus’s reunion and even when Tommy excused himself and left the three of them alone, Adam just sat patiently and listened to Gus's animated chatter, amazed at how much brighter he seemed after only a few minutes. He kept casting Adam apologetic looks, aware that his romantic plans had been scuttled again but Adam just smiled at him indulgently and made no effort to try and hurry things along.

"Oh, look," Gus said suddenly, spotting a dreadlocked head across the room. "There’s Bill. Excuse me for one sec...I just want to go and say hi."

He bolted from his seat, leaving Michelle staring after him with raised eyebrows.

"Exactly how much caffeine has he had this morning?"

"He’s just excited to see you," Adam smiled. "He missed you a lot over the holidays."

"Yeah, I know. He told me you suggested flying back with me for a few days. I’d love it. And I’d say that’s just what he needs before you head out on tour. I don’t mind telling you that he’s had me pretty worried."

"Me too." Adam hesitated and looked over his shoulder. Gus stood with Bill beside the buffet, chatting and laughing and well out of earshot. With luck, he’d have a few more minutes before Gus returned....there was no way to tell when he’d have another chance...

"...and actually, Michelle...I was wondering if I could ask you a huge favor..."

He motioned her to lean closer. When she did and heard what he whispered conspiratorially in her ear, her fists hit the table with a bang.

"You son of a bitch," she gasped at full volume. "Are you serious?"

Adam kicked hard. Michelle yelped and rubbed her shin reproachfully, but she did lower her voice.
"I mean...Jesus, Adam...are you sure you know what you’re doing?"

He stared at her. "What the hell does that mean?" he hissed. "Of course I know what I’m doing!"

"But for God’s sake...why now?" "Why now? What do you mean why now? What’s wrong with now?"

Michelle floundered. In the back of her mind it occurred to her that Adam wasn’t going to take her comments in anything close to the context in which they were intended, but she couldn’t help but be honest with him.

"Come on Adam! You’ve seen how he’s been for the last couple of weeks. He’s up and down like a yo-yo. He’s feeling a lot of pressure and he’s not doing the best job of dealing with it. And you want to ask him to marry you?"

"Yes!"

"How can you do that to him right now? There’s no way you can keep something like that private, especially not when your management company is trying to hype the hell out of you right before the tour. When word gets out, a lot of your fans are going to go ballistic. Gus already gets enough flack about being your boyfriend...what kind of shit do you think he’s going to take when word gets out that you’re engaged?"

Adam slouched back in his chair and pitched his napkin onto the table, suddenly irritated in a way he couldn’t explain. "Michelle, I can’t help who I am. We’ll find a way to deal with it...okay? That’s why I pay big bucks for a public relations team. They’ll run interference for him as much as they can."

Michelle folded her arms. "No offence Adam, but you could have the whole fucking NFL running interference for him and it’s still going to be a nightmare. Do you really think he’s up to that? Do you want to risk it right now?"

"I don’t believe you’re saying this..."

"Do you want me to lie to you? I’m trying to be very honest...I’m afraid of what it will do to him..."

"Maybe," Adam said through gritted teeth. "It will make him happy!"

She scowled at him. "Don’t be an ass. Of course it will. And I’m happy for you as well...you know that...but that doesn’t stop me from worrying. It’s risky. If there’s a lot of backlash, it could all blow up in your face."

Adam was staring at the tabletop, baffled and hurt and no longer listening. Michelle was the last person he’d expected to try and discourage him but she valued her candor and her common sense too much not to take her concerns seriously. Michelle, aware she’d hit him at a very vulnerable moment, felt guilty for ruining his excitement and tried to find a way to lessen the sting of her response.

"Adam, I’m just worried about him. About both of you. He’s talked to me a lot about things lately. About how he’s having trouble coping." Michelle picked at the remnants of a bran muffin and added cautiously, "And...he’s told me...some things...that you’ve had a tough time dealing with what’s been happening this past week..."

His head came up sharply but Michelle’s gaze was neutral and not accusatory. After a moment his shoulders slumped a little and he nodded.
"I have been pretty hard on him," he muttered. "I've tried to apologize for some of the things I said. My temper’s just been really short..."

Michelle leaned forward. "He’s not blaming you. And neither am I. But it’s got him rattled. I’m just not sure he’s up to handling anything more right now. If it was just the two of you..."

"But it’s not," he agreed wearily. He braced his elbows on the table and rubbed his eyes. "So what do I do, Michelle? I want this so much. I hear what you’re saying, but there’s no way I can stop it from being public. If I tried to keep it a secret, it could end up being even worse than announcing it."

His disappointment was so evident that Michelle took pity on him. Until a few days ago, there had never been any question in her mind that this day was coming and she had never thought she would have been anything but completely supportive when the moment finally arrived. But Gus had said some very disturbing things during their conversations over the last few days...enough that Michelle was seriously concerned her friend was beginning to doubt his place in Adam’s life for the first time since they had been together. Michelle knew that it wasn’t fair to impose his doubts on Adam, especially when many of Gus’s remarks had been made under pressure and in the grip of intense emotion. But it didn’t stop Michelle from being troubled, even as she relented and patted Adam’s arm gently.

"I would love to help you pick out a ring. We’ll just have to keep it quiet, that’s all. He doesn't own that kind of stuff, but I've dragged him along to jewelry shopping many times, so I have a good idea what he likes. Let me talk to the concierge and find out which jewelers in town will come by the hotel. If we do it under my name, it won’t be as obvious. I’ll arrange it, and all you have to do is show up."

"I want this to be special," he whispered.

She sighed. "I know you do, you big suck. It will be. I’ll do whatever I can to help you...and it will be."

By the time Gus bounced back to the table, it was apparent that Adam and Michelle had had words. Michelle looked very uneasy and Adam was uncharacteristically quiet. A little warily, Gus eased back into his seat, glancing between the two of them and waiting for an explanation. "What’s up?"

They both stared at him. Michelle said quietly, "Talking about your trip home."

Gus’s eyes travelled back and forth again. "Is there a problem?"

"Of course not."

"Then why do you both look like you’ve had vinegar in your coffee?"

"It is pretty strong," Adam muttered, staring in his cup.

Gus could get no more out of either of them. Michelle announced she wanted to make a few phone calls and check in with her family and told Gus to come and bang on her door a little closer to rehearsal time.

"That is...if I’m invited..."
"Of course you are," Adam said with a trace of irritation.

Michelle pushed her chair back and stood up. Gus was regarding Adam with narrowed eyes and more than a little suspicion and it took Michelle a moment to catch his attention.

"Okay?"

"Okay," Gus said, still frowning.

Several more pointed inquiries to Adam went unanswered. By the time he and Gus got up to their room, Gus was seriously beginning to wonder if Adam and Michelle had argued over something. Specifically...over him.

There were messages for Adam from various people and while he went through his voice mails, Gus silently unpacked, noting bleakly that they hadn’t managed to be in the hotel for any more than two hours before tension and gloom had descended on them all over again. Mechanically, he began hanging stuff in the closet, making mental notes of what needed to be ironed and didn’t notice that Adam had finished on the phone and had come up behind until he was close enough to touch him."Sorry if I got a bit grumpy there," he murmured.

Gus sighed. "Is it just this place, Adam? This city? This hotel? I knew there was a reason I didn’t want to come back here. I thought maybe we might make it through a couple of hours before things got all wound up again but I suppose that was a bit too much to hope for..."

He offered Adam a half-hearted smile, but his boyfriend didn’t think the remark was any funnier than he did.

"I’m sorry," Adam said again.

His arms circled Gus's shoulders and pulled gently until Gus's back was against his chest. Gus leaned back and enjoyed his closeness for a moment before he tilted a little to one side and turned his head so he could see the other man's face.

"It doesn’t matter as long as we’re together," he said quietly, and kissed the corner of Adam's mouth. It was a simple gesture and not one that was meant to be inflammatory, but Adam’s reaction was immediate and his hands slid down over Gus's torso to his hips, turning him gently until they were face to face.

"I need to have you to myself for a little while," he whispered, nuzzling along the curve of Gus's jaw.

"You’ve got me," he whispered back. "What do you have in mind?"

Adam peeked over his lover's shoulder at his watch. "A lot more than I have time for," he groaned in frustration. "And I suppose I really should save some of my strength for rehearsals..."

Gus pretended to ponder that, rubbing his cheek against Adam's with a soft promise. "Well, I think I can help you out there. I’ve got a few scenarios in mind where you don’t need to do a thing..."
Adam lifted his head. "Oh no. I already owe you for the last time."

"You can run up a tab," Gus offered in husky tones. "It was good, wasn’t it?"

"It was incredible," Adam said just as huskily. "Except now it’s my turn."

"But you said you need to conserve your strength..." Gus widened his eyes in mock concern although his mouth hovered dangerously close to Adam's and the innuendo didn’t leave his voice. "So maybe we should just postpone this until later."

"I don’t think so," Adam said definitely.

"I don’t want you putting in a poor performance. On stage, I mean."

Adam smiled. "I don’t think you need to worry. The secret to a good performance is a good warm-up."

That perked Gus's interest. "Oh yeah?" he whispered huskily.

"Stop it!" Adam said as he sat down on the bed. Then he jumped as Gus hit the bed on his knees, tickling him until he was weak with mirth and unable to squirm away from his attack. Adam's one attempt to roll away only gave Gus the opportunity to pin him down so he could tease his lover with fleeting kisses. Adam abandoned his attempts to control the tickling fingers and managed to get his hands up on either side of Gus's head so that the kisses suddenly got very deep and hot and serious.

"I want you," he said helplessly. "Now. Please."

"Sorry. I can’t. It’s not my turn."

They wrestled a little more, both wildly aroused despite being fully clothed. It had the same kind of wicked overtones as two teenagers making out in the back seat of a car and any time Adam tried to work one hand between them to loosen Gus's shirt, Gus slapped his fingers playfully and stopped his protests with his open mouth. He still had Adam half pinned to the bed but when the other man managed to get one knee bent enough to be able to push himself up, he neatly flipped Gus onto his back. Gus’s breath left him with a gasp and more gasping followed at the sensation of Adam's hips rubbing against his. It didn’t seem to matter that there were several layers of fabric between them...neither could stop and the friction felt so good that both of them were on the brink of orgasm before they knew what was happening.

The knocking on the door threw them off their rhythm for only a second.

"Ignore it," Gus said in a low strained voice.

Adam didn’t answer. Instead he responded by sliding both his hands under Gus's hips and clutching him more tightly. The second series of knocks became more insistent.

"Adam! The car’s here. Let’s go!"

"Oh my God," Adam said into the side of Gus’s neck. "It’s Isaac."

Gus arched his back and swore silently. His whole body was about to turn into hot liquid and he’d never forgive Adam if he stopped now...

Adam had no intention of stopping even though he understood Isaac well enough to know that the
banging on the door was only likely to get louder and more demanding. But more demanding at the moment was the pressure that was building within him and he blocked out everything but the half-forgotten sensations of wanton adolescence that were taking over. He’d figured his days of sex with his clothes on were long over and for the life of him couldn’t remember why they hadn’t done this before.

*It felt so good...*

Right on cue, Isaac began pounding with both fists. "Adam! I know you’re in there. Will you hurry your ass up? The car is here, you know damn well that VH1 is waiting...are you coming or what?"

Adam had lifted his head to watch Gus’s face at about the same time that his eyes flew open and they both heard Isaac’s shout. Gus half-choked and had never felt so close to wanting to strangle somebody as he did when the full effect of the words hit him and he was suddenly overcome with the utter absurdity of the situation.

"Don’t say it!" he hissed at Adam whose expression indicated that he’d obviously had much the same thought. "Don’t you *dare*!"

Adam tried his best but between the outraged look on Gus’s face and the way his funny bone and his hormones were trying to beat one another to death he eventually had to take the only logical way out and dissolved into uncontrollable laughter.

Gus made several very uncomplimentary remarks and tried to push Adam off him. It was funny...but it wasn’t *that* funny. It was a lot like a roller coaster stalling just as it hit the edge of the first big drop, leaving all your senses standing on end in anticipation of something that obviously wasn’t going to happen.

"Well?" Isaac shouted peevishly.

"I’m sorry, I’m sorry!" Adam said, struggling for breath as Gus heaved upwards and shoved him until he rolled off. "It’s just...I can’t..."

"Yeah, I noticed!"

"No...wait!" He grabbed for Gus's arms as he sat up. Amusement was fading fast and being replaced by the realization that he was still incredibly turned on and that letting Gus walk away was unthinkable. His body was aching and if he could just make Isaac get lost for another few minutes...

Gus wriggled to the side of the bed and stood up. Fully aware of Adam’s voice protesting with every step, he marched to the door and threw it open just as Isaac was raising his fists for another assault.

Isaac’s eyebrows rose at the sight of Gus, disheveled and cross, scowling at him with such ferocity that he actually took a step backwards in self-defense.

"Hey, buddy! How’s it going? Did you have a good Christmas?"

"Peachy," Gus said through his teeth. "And you?"

"Great. Thanks." Warily, Isaac tried to look inside the room over Gus’s shoulder. "Is...uh...Adam ready?""Come in and ask him,” Gus snapped, standing to one side. Isaac sidled past, not at all sure he should be turning his back on Gus and found that Adam was lying face down on a badly crumpled bed with his arms clutched over his head.
"Adam?" Gus said sweetly. "Isaac wants to know if you’re ready. Are you ready?"

"Screw off, Isaac" Adam muttered into the duvet.

"He’s ready," Gus agreed and then added with some derision, "In fact, he’s so ready I’d bet he can even skip warm-ups today. He’s all yours, Isaac."

He stomped past them both. The sound of the bathroom door being slammed was closely followed by the sound of the shower running.

"Whoops," said Isaac, looking apologetic.

"Whoops' doesn’t even begin to cover it," Adam grumbled, pushing himself up and trying to ignore the fact that the proof of his statement was still physically obvious.

"Sorry, man, but the schedule for today is so tight..." Isaac’s eyes flickered up and down Adam with considerable sympathy. "Okay...so maybe ‘tight’ isn’t exactly the best word right now..."

Adam glared. With a good-natured shrug, Isaac turned for the door and Adam cast one last look over his shoulder as he reluctantly followed. If he thought he’d been physically wound up before, it was nothing compared to how wound up he was now. At least he’d have lots of pent-up energy for rehearsal and all he could hope for was that there weren’t any delays in getting started because he was feeling a desperate need to do something – soon - to help him work off some of his frustration.

Gus tried not to let annoyance get the better of him, but Isaac’s interruption was only another reminder of the demands of the upcoming tour that were inevitably going to get between him and Adam on a daily basis. If he’d felt stronger, it might not have bothered him so much but he was still plagued with feelings of insecurity and the short time they’d had together in California had not been enough to bolster his self-esteem back to normal levels. And lurking in the back of his mind were nagging concerns over the unresolved police investigation and what that might mean for them all as the days passed. It was a relief to know that Michelle was now physically in his corner. Needing a compassionate ear to bend more than ever before, Gus rushed through his shower and threw on more comfortable clothes but when he made his way up to Michelle’s room to take her to rehearsals, he got another shock, one from a direction he’d never expected.

Michelle stood clutching the edge of the door as she held it open. "Before we go, Gus, come in for a few minutes. I need to talk to you."

Gus edged into the room and perched on the end of the bed, sensing trouble. "Are you going to tell me what you and Adam were squabbling about?"

Eyes averted, Michelle fished around in the bottom of her suitcase. "We weren’t squabbling."

"Well, something's up with you two. Come on, Michelle. Tell me what’s going on. If you weren’t arguing over something, what were all the long faces about?"

When Michelle agreed to do something she rarely, if ever, let anyone down. In this case she’d made two promises, one of which was to Tommy. She looked forward to trying to explain their relationship to Gus about the same way she looked forward to her annual Pap smear...it was
necessary and would be better for everyone in the long run, but it wasn’t going to be pleasant.

Tommy had warned her not to keep stalling but Michelle reasoned that it was the other promise she needed to deal with first. She’d spent a lot of time thinking about it before she’d agreed to go ahead and might have rejected the request from the start if it hadn’t been for the unsettling signs of unhappiness she’d seen in Gus over the last couple of weeks. She’d kept the request to herself until she could speak to Gus in person and agonized over whether or not she was doing the right thing. But her conscience insisted that it wasn’t her place to be making decisions about what Gus should or should not be told; she’d only been asked to be the messenger and Gus would have to decide what to do with the information.

Adam’s revelation that morning only served to complicate matters even further. But then again, better that Gus had all his options laid out in front of him before he made any life-altering decisions.

Michelle straightened up from her suitcase with an envelope in her hands. "I was asked to deliver this to you," she said finally, simply.

It was clearly marked with the emblem of the Metro Toronto Police Force and as he accepted it, Gus’s face went blank.

"What’s this?"

"Read it and find out."

Now more than a little uneasy, Gus removed the papers and scanned them. The blankness disappeared but Michelle, watching carefully for the reaction, couldn’t decipher the change in expression.

"When did you know about this?" Gus whispered.

Michelle shifted. "They came to see me right before Christmas."

"They talked to you about it?"

"They asked my general opinion, yes. They wanted to do it formally, on paper. I just said I’d deliver it. I didn’t make any promises, and I’m certainly not going to twist your arm."

Gus’s eyes rose and Michelle shifted again. "I don’t know the details," she added defensively. "I told them I didn’t want to know."

"It’s a new Special Investigations Unit."

"Oh."

"Dr. Fox filed a report with the Department when they lifted my Long Term Disability coverage. They seem to think that I’d pass the physical without any problems and that I could re-qualify for Detective by just taking the test again."

Michelle studied the carpet. "That would probably be a good team."

"It is. They’ve included a list of the officers they’ve assigned so far." Gus was staring at the papers in his lap. "My God, Michelle...do you know what I’d do for a chance to work with some of these people?"
"You wouldn’t just be working with them," Michelle said without thinking. "They’d be working for you."

Gus’s mouth tightened. "I thought you didn’t know the details?"

Flushing, Michelle muttered, "I just know it’s a senior position. And I know what you’re going to say about you being too high profile. But that’s what they want. They want somebody recognizable."

Gus had gone absolutely still. He was staring at the letters with a faraway, distracted look on his face and Michelle knew without asking that he was struggling all over again with loss and disappointment.

"I thought it was over," he said finally.

"Only if you want it to be," Michelle murmured.

Gus’s head came up. "Are you actually suggesting I should think about this? You...of all people? Is there some reason why you always seem to be arranging new jobs for me? You were the one twisting my arm to move to California and work for Tommy..."

"To be fair," Michelle said archly. "I don’t think I had to do much twisting. Besides, you didn’t have this option then. And I’m probably about the only person on this earth who knows what that career meant to you. It got taken away from you in the most brutal way possible and you worked really hard to accept that you could never be a cop again. But the fact is...now...you can. If you want to be. Don’t blow it off. You need to think about that and make a decision, one way or the other. If you don’t, you’re always going to be second guessing yourself and wondering if what you’re doing right now is settling for the next best thing."

"I’d hardly call Adam the next best thing," Gus snapped.

"Neither would I."

"So why are you pushing this?"

"Because I know you; because you’re hurting. What have you been doing for the last week and a half, huh? Just about coming apart from the inside out because there’s a police investigation going on here that you aren’t allowed to be any part of. Doesn’t that tell you something?"

"That hardly means I want to chuck my life out the window and move back to Toronto."

"Well then," Michelle said quietly. She waved a hand at the letter. "That shouldn’t be too hard to deal with then, should it?"

Gus stared at the papers in his hand. The door that had been closed so firmly in his face had suddenly reopened. The identity that he had lost and the dreams that he had been forced to abandon had literally just been dropped back in his lap. He had grieved for that loss for so long...the unfairness of it all, the terrible void that it left behind, the way it made him question who he was and what he was doing with his life.... What he had mourned and raged over for months had just been neatly repackaged and offered to him all over again.

He very deliberately refolded the letter and put it back in the envelope. He held the package out to Michelle and then raised his eyebrows when his friend made no move to take them.

"I’m not interested," Gus said very firmly.
"Fine. Then you can at least have the courtesy to write and tell them that. Don’t look at me that way. I’m making a one-way delivery and that’s only because they didn’t have a definite way to reach you otherwise. From what they tell me they’re quite willing to give you as much time as you need to make a decision. The rest is up to you."

"Fine." Gus threw the envelope in the general direction of the dresser where it scattered makeup and room service receipts.

Michelle’s eyebrows also rose. "Don’t leave it too long."

Gus bristled. "You just finished telling me that it was an open-ended offer. So what’s the rush for the answer?"

"From their point of view? There isn’t one. From your point of view...that’s a stupid question. You know as well as I do that the only reason you would delay saying no is because you haven’t completely given up the possibility that you might want to say yes."

"You can’t possibly have any idea what I want," Gus said coldly.

"I know how hard this way of life is for you. I know that sometimes you feel like you want out...you’ve told me that in so many words...last week in fact...."

"Come on, Michelle! You know what I was going through!"

"And now you’re talking about several months on tour with your boyfriend. Are you really up for that? You hate flying, traveling by road still makes you very nervous, you can’t stand the media watching your every move and half the fans you come in contact with are going to want to make mincemeat out of you. You’re going to be miserable. Especially once everybody finds out..."

Michelle choked herself off in mid-sentence realizing she’d almost spilled the beans about Adam’s plans to propose on New Year’s. The furor that would cause would result in a lot of backlash for Gus once it became public, but there was no way that Michelle could warn him that things on the tour were likely to be a lot more intense than even Gus expected.

"About what?" Gus snapped.

Michelle waved her arms. "You’re just going to be very uncomfortable, that’s all. I just really wonder if you’re going to be able to cope when reality sets in."

"So I get frustrated with it all sometimes," Gus said, betraying more emotion than he intended. "So what?"

Michelle pointed at the envelope. "Just so you know...you’re not trapped. If you need it...if you want it...this is your way out."
Chapter 18

Having satisfied her conscience on one level by delivering the job offer to Gus as promised, Michelle was subsequently attacked by completely different feelings of guilt. Gus seemed so shocked that Michelle began to worry that perhaps she should have made the decision not to pass the message along and told the department to go to hell. Everything in Gus’s behavior gave Michelle the unexpected excuse for not fulfilling her promise to Tommy...not just yet anyway. Michelle knew that Gus’s real reaction would take some time to surface and there wasn’t any way Michelle was going to complicate the matter more with yet another touchy revelation.

So far, Gus’s only response to the letter had been to insist that Michelle not tell Adam anything about it. Privately Michelle agreed, even though she knew that Gus’s reticence was for the wrong reason. Michelle had no plans to share the information with anyone, even though she was starting to feel like she was walking a slippery slope. Keeping all the secrets was becoming a challenge...I need to tell Gus about me and Tommy, but make sure I don’t tell Gus about Adam planning to propose and make sure I don’t tell Adam that Gus has had offers to go back to the police force...Damn, I’m going to have to start writing these down...

By the time they got to the arena, Gus had stubbornly pushed the whole issue to the back of his mind. It was useless to even think about it...he was committed to Adam, he was committed to his current job; he had already dealt with the end of his law enforcement career and had moved on with his life. Just because it was now possible again didn’t mean that it was what he wanted.

"I don’t want a way out," he blurted.

"What did you say?" Michelle said gently.

Gus blinked. They were riding the elevator to the backstage level of the arena and he’d been so deep in thought that he hadn’t even realized he’d spoken.

So much for blocking things out.

"Nothing," he muttered and stepped out as the security guard held the door. The hallway was full of people but the moment they appeared, Tommy waved at them both from where he was standing with a handful of the stage crew.

"Go ahead," Gus said, glancing the other way. "I’ll be there in a second."

He had caught sight of Terrance’s broad shoulders heading in the other direction and ran after him. Despite the fact that his attempted reconciliation with Monte hadn’t gone all that well, Gus had still decided to put aside any bad feelings he’d experienced over the disagreements with Andy and was determined to show everyone that he was doing anything and everything he could to fit in. After all, Andy was very young...and Gus had managed to convince himself that he needed to give Andy the benefit of the doubt for that reason, if for no other.

"Hey, T!" he said, poking the other man from behind. "Slow down a minute."

Terrance spun around, looking both pleased and dismayed to see him. Gus hugged him tightly, pretending not to notice his awkwardness and Terrance gently hugged him back. He had hated being stuck in the middle when Andy had been so negatively outspoken about Gus, just as he hated the position he found himself stuck in now.

Clearly, Gus hadn’t heard...
"How was your holiday?" Gus asked affectionately. "How’s the family?"

"Good," he muttered. "My mom really liked the basket you guys sent."

"I’m glad. Look, I know there’s a lot going on today, but I just wanted to tell you something while I had the chance. I know I made everybody really tense before Christmas and I’m sorry. I screwed up and I promise it won’t happen again. I feel really bad that Andy got so pissed off and I know you were sticking up for me but I don’t want you taking my side and making things awkward between you. I’m going to apologize to him for what happened and I swear...we’ll get along. No more trouble, I promise."

"You don’t have to..."

Gus shook a finger at him and went on. "Look, we’ve got months on the road ahead of us. We’ve all got to get along and I’m the newbie here, so I’m the one that needs to just play ball. So I’m just going to shut up and be Little Mr. Social, okay? But I figured maybe I should talk to you first so you can let Andy know that I want to make it up with him." He grinned sheepishly. "You know...soften him up a bit for me..."

"I would," said Terrance honestly. "Except...he didn’t come back with me."

Gus’s eyes widened. "Oh. He stayed on with his family for a while? He’s catching up with you later?"

"No," said Terrance.

Gus began to feel uneasy. "No?"

"No." Self-consciously, Terrance looked at the floor. "We...uh...split."

Gus stared. "Split? Up?"

"Yeah."

Gus stared a little more and then faltered stupidly, "Was that your idea or his?"

The last thing Terrance wanted to do was to go into detail and with great reluctance, he admitted, "Mine. Things just weren’t going too good. You know how he gets. And you were really nice to him and I know you went out of your way to try and get to know him. It wasn’t fair how he flipped out on you over what happened and I guess that was kind of the last straw..."

Gus was horrified. "Oh God! Tell me the two of you didn’t break up because of what happened with me?"

"No! Of course not. Things had been kind of rough with us for a while. And it wasn’t the first time. I just really didn’t like how he handled it about you, that’s all. Like I said, it was the last straw."

Gus clutched his head. "Terrance, he was just letting off steam! He had a right to be pissed at me. Everybody was pissed at me!"

"That still didn’t make it right," he said stubbornly. "Look, do you mind if we don’t talk about this? I’m just kind of bummed out and I’m trying not to think about it right now."

"Terrance, I’m sorry," Gus whispered.

"Yeah, me too. But I don’t want you taking this the wrong way. None of this is your fault."
He squeezed Gus's arm on his way by. Gus leant back against the wall in a daze, staring into space while half a dozen people passed him by, all eyeing him with curiosity.

*Shit, can anything else possibly go wrong today?*

It was a stupid question. The day was barely half over.

Whether it was the break over Christmas that had lightened everyone’s spirits or the fact that they were all just conscious of the VH1 crew lurking around and ready to jump on any sign of discontent, both Adam and the entourage seemed to be light-hearted and ready to do some serious work. Gus was still trying to get over his shock at Terrance’s announcement and tried desperately to get Michelle’s attention, only to find that his friend was deep in discussion with Tommy and didn’t seem eager to be interrupted.

Adam appeared from nowhere. He mistook Gus's frown for annoyance and lowered his head to see his boyfriend's face.

"Still mad at me?" he said, as remorseful as possible.

"About what?" Gus said absently.

"Er...about leaving you...in the lurch. So to speak."

"Huh?"

"Okay, look. I’m sorry I laughed. I shouldn’t have. But you have to admit, the timing was pretty funny."

Gus’s face cleared and he glanced up at Adam. "Sorry...I missed that. What’s funny?"

Adam began to feel a bit irritated. "Never mind! I guess it’s not important."

"What’s not important?"

"I said never mind," he muttered.

"What are we talking about here?"

"Forget it! Your mind’s somewhere else. We’ll talk about it later."

Gus gave himself a shake. "I’m sorry. I just really want to talk to Michelle, if I can ever pry her away from Tommy."

Adam glanced down the hallway, snorted and put his mouth into gear without thinking. "You might have a long wait. They haven’t seen each other in a couple of months. I’m surprised we haven’t had to throw cold water over them with yet."

The words were out before he could stop them. He closed his eyes briefly, thought. *Lambert, you are such an idiot...*and then reopened them to find that Gus had gone absolutely puce.
"What did you say?"

It’s true that there’s no point in closing the barn door after the horses are out. With a sigh, Adam shrugged. Sooner or later Gus was going to find out anyway.

"You know...because they’ve missed each other."

"Missed each other?" There was a noticeable shift in color as blood began draining out of Gus’s face. He’d already had his share of shocks today and this one just simply wouldn’t register. "You mean...missed each other...as in...missed each other?"

Adam nodded. "I really thought you would have noticed by now."

All of sudden Gus had a flashback to a few days after his surgery. His mouth dropped open and for a moment words completely escaped him.

"My God," he said finally. "I thought I had imagined that."

When Adam looked puzzled, Gus told him about seeing the two of them together in his hospital room.

"I thought it was the drugs," he muttered. "What the hell is Tommy playing at?"

It was Adam’s turn to stare at him. "What do you mean...playing at?"

"Starting something with Michelle."

"Maybe she started it."

"She couldn’t have," Gus said blankly. "She...she would have told me. Besides, there’s just no way..."

"Why not?"

"She’s older than he is."

"So?"

"She’s a widow. With a three-year-old son...."

"So? He is good with kids."

"She’s...she’s..." Gus flailed about for a comeback and finally said in lame protest, "I just can’t imagine anyone who could be less likely to go out with a musician."

Adam raised his eyebrows. "Unless it’s a former undercover Vice Squad officer, of course," he agreed dryly.

Gus scowled. "That’s not funny."

"Do I look like I’m laughing? I’m just making a point. I don’t see what your problem is."

"She knows everything that I’ve been through. I’ve told her how hard it is. She doesn’t have the temperament to put up with all the crap." Gus was inexplicably angry. Only a short time before, Michelle had been the one pointing out to Gus the downsides of the life of a pop star’s significant other. "She should have talked to me about this. She doesn’t know what the hell she’s doing."
Adam shook his head at Gus in amazement. "What are you so upset about? The fact that they have something going...or the fact that you didn’t know about it?"

"It would have been nice to have been told firsthand," he snapped.

"Yeah, well...I might have said something I shouldn’t have. I just thought you’d noticed the same thing the rest of us have."

" Noticed...? Noticed what?"

"For God’s sake, Gus...why the hell do you think she’s here?"

"To see me!"

Adam began to laugh. "I hate to tell you this, darling, but I think you’re her second priority this time around."

Gus’s eyes flashed "hazard" and Adam sobered up in a hurry. He couldn’t exactly smell the gunpowder but from the way the fuse was burning, the explosion wasn’t far off. He began to wonder where he could dive for cover and was quite clearly relieved when the stage manager chose that particular moment to start calling everyone together to start rehearsals.

Adam risked leaning close enough to give Gus a quick kiss on the cheek and then he vanished. As the hallway cleared, Gus spun on one heel, determined to find Michelle and sit on her if necessary until all his questions were answered.

"Gus!"

Swearing, he glanced back over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of Bill Wasley chasing him down with an unfamiliar man at his back. Rocking back and forth on his heels, he muttered, "Hi, Bill...look, I’m just on my way somewhere. Can we talk later?"

Bill cleared his throat and followed it up with a meaningful twitch of the eyebrows. "I just wanted to introduce you to the publicist from VH1. I was telling him about the plans you’ve got for the charity promotion on the tour...he’d like to ask you a few questions."

He was trapped. Mustering a smile, Gus shook the hand that was offered to him and mumbled a pleasantracy. It would have been downright stupid to turn down an opportunity to promote the charitable campaign and he forced himself not to protest as he was taken aside and subjected to a lengthy discussion. He tried his best to focus and work the interview for the greatest possible benefit despite the fact that his brain was wheeling off in a thousand different directions.

"At least," he thought grimly, when he finally made his escape. "I’ve done something useful today."

Backstage was crawling with people but Gus noted with approval that despite the crush, everyone he saw wore the badges that they’d been issued at the entrance and that there was a heavy presence of Griffin security staff in all areas. He assumed that Michelle had probably gone down front to
watch the rehearsals but was once again interrupted in his search, this time by Doug Taylor with his arms full of drawings.

"Hey, Gus...I’ve got those plans to show you."

Gus hesitated. "Now?"

Doug looked apologetic. "I’ve only got about half an hour then the rest of the day looks crazy..."

Gus groaned inwardly. He knew that he was fortunate that Doug valued his opinion enough to be willing to share the security layouts with him. It was just that Adam’s comments about Michelle and Tommy were crowding the back of his mind and he wouldn’t be able to truly think straight until he found out exactly what was going on. "Sorry Doug, I’m not trying to be difficult. Today’s just been one thing after another, that’s all."

"Well, maybe this will at least make you feel better about security. I’ll make it quick, I promise. I just want your opinion before I take it to the police. Come on, we’ll use the dressing room while it’s quiet."

"Speaking of the police," Gus murmured as he held the door open. "I wanted to ask you this morning...Do they give you the impression that they’re treating the drugging at the concert as a random incident?"

Doug thought for a moment. "Yes and no. I’d say yes, if it hadn’t been for that envelope of clippings. I don’t think they quite know what to make of things, especially since they’ve come up so completely empty in their investigation. But I do know one thing...even though they’re asking to review our security setup, they are taking every chance they get to remind me that 90% of the opening and the concert is happening on private property and Griffin has to take total responsibility for the safety of Adam and any of the people who attend."

"They haven’t made any suggestions that maybe it should be cancelled?"

"Nope. But you’ve got to remember that this opening is a huge deal for this town. The City Council knows what kind of money Griffin draws and I’m pretty sure the chief of police is getting pressured to just keep the investigation low key and pretend it’s business as usual." He clapped Gus on the shoulder. "So! It’s my job to make sure that we’ve got all our bases covered and that no one has a chance to pull anything on New Year's Eve, which is exactly why I want your opinion."

The performers’ dressing room was actually a collection of roomy, private suites, all connected to a central lounge that gave each performer the option to prepare alone or hang out with the entourage. This lounge had been prepared for a post-rehearsal debriefing, complete with soft, relaxed lighting, an incredibly luxurious buffet, a fully stocked bar and strategically placed groups of comfortable chairs.

"Sucking up to VH1, Doug?" Gus observed with a smile, stealing a few grapes from the fruit platter.

He shrugged good-naturedly. "Okay, I admit...this might be a little bit fancier than we’ll get on a regular basis. But Samuel wants one of Griffin’s trademarks to be the way they treat their performers, which is why we put so much into this area. You see a lot of arenas with dressing rooms that look like they belong in hockey rinks...we want to be a cut above."

"I’d say you managed that," Gus agreed. From one end to the other the room was outfitted with phones, fax machines, laptops, televisions and video arcade terminals. There was even a door along
one wall marked Sauna/Massage. "At the rate you’re going, your artists will get so damn comfortable in here you’ll have trouble getting them out on stage."

They sat at one of the larger coffee tables close to the buffet. Doug spread the drawings out for Gus to see and handed him a collection of the memos and outlines of security procedures that had been worked out for the Grand Opening ceremony and the New Year’s concert.

"Did you hear about Terrance and Andy?" he asked as Doug fished out a second set of schematics.

He cast Gus a glance. "Yeah, I did. I don’t know whether the timing is good or bad. He’s going to find it hard to focus for this show." Taking a seat across from Gus, he added, "But on a lighter note, you and Adam both seem to be in better spirits than last week."

Gus frowned a little.

"Look, Gus, I’m not trying to get personal. Like I told you before, my job is to make sure my artists are as happy as they can be so I can get the best possible performance out of them. I’m just glad to see Adam has unwound a little, that’s all."

"Do you give Samuel daily psychology reports on us?" Gus asked lightly.

"Oh shit...don’t go giving him any more ideas. He’s got so much riding on this opening and this concert that I’m surprised he doesn’t have fortune tellers and psychics on staff reading his tarot cards and doing his horoscope."

"He really is screwed if this all doesn’t come together, isn’t he?" Gus muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. "I just can’t imagine taking such a huge chance professionally. I thought Samuel was a smarter businessman than that."

Doug shrugged. "Big business means big risk. It runs in his family. Samuel’s father built this company from the ground up, mostly by taking big risks and stepping on anyone and everyone to get what he wanted. Samuel’s prepared to prove he can be an even bigger bastard than his father was, if need be."

Gus cocked his head. "Doesn’t sound like you’re much of a fan."

"Are you?" Doug said bitterly.

Gus’s eyes widened a little at this somewhat disloyal display but he didn’t pursue it. He could see Doug was highly talented and perhaps his ambition drove him to take the highest profile position regardless of who the employer was, but it wasn’t the first time that Gus honestly wondered why on earth Doug would put up with working for a man he so clearly disliked.

Doug pointedly changed the subject and began taking Gus's through the security campaign for December 31st. His planning was meticulous, right down to color coded guards on each gate and undercover floor walkers disguised as concert goers. Gus knew the idea of metal detectors at the entrances wouldn’t go over well with Adam, but was grateful to see that it had been planned well enough to be as unnoticeable as possible and not overly slow down the flow of people into the arena.

"You’ve got the arena locked down pretty tight," he said with admiration.

"Thanks. But it’s the open air stuff that’s proving to be tricky. It’s only a short limo ride from the hotel to where we’re holding the opening ceremony, but I’m not real happy about the fact that it’s all outside. The crowd’s going to be enormous and Samuel is insisting that Adam be seen by as
many people as possible."

"Who else will be there?"

"The mayor, the governor, every big name Vegas entertainer that Samuel can possibly invite, and a lot of other celebrities who are just showing up to be seen. That’s what makes it tough...we’re trying to organize our security around their security..."

"And Samuel’s still insisting on all this red-carpet shit?"

"Yep. He wants everybody paraded around for maximum effect. It means parking the cars a lot farther from the podium..."

Gus scowled. "I don’t like that."

"Neither do I but it’s not my decision."

Gus frowned at one of the schedules. "Is this timetable final?"

"For the ceremony?"

"For the arrivals."

"Not yet. But I have to finish it off by tomorrow to give all the details to the police so they can finalize traffic control. If you’ve got ideas, I’d love to hear them. Maybe if you’ve got time later this afternoon, you can take a walk around and see the setup. It will give you a better idea of angles and exits."

"I’ll do that," he nodded. Eyeing the endless names on the long list of security personnel he suddenly grinned and remarked, "I’d hate to see what the payroll for this is going to be like."

"Can’t cost much more than today’s buffet," Doug said ruefully, pushing his chair back. "Speaking of which, I’m going to grab a drink. Like one?"

Gus nodded absently and began referring back to previous sets of drawings as Doug went to the huge double refrigerator on the opposite wall and stuck his head inside.

"You name it, we got it. Juice? Soda? Bottled water?"

"Diet Sprite, please."

He came back to the table with a soda for Gus and one for himself. Placing Gus's at the edge of the drawing he was leaning over intently, Doug flopped back into his chair and inquired, "What are you looking at now?"

"Map of the area. You know if the cops give you any flack about the impact on traffic, you might suggest that they turn some streets into temporary one-ways rather than closing them completely. We did that a few times in Toronto and it..."

"Gus..." he said, very oddly.

"...worked quite well..." He raised his head curiously and found Doug staring blankly at the bottle he held. "What’s up?" He reached out to grab the one that Doug had placed in front of him and added, "If it’s not diet, don’t worry about it. I can drink the hard stuff..."

"No, wait!"
Gus froze in mid-reach and his eyes went wide. Doug had one hand held out to him in warning but his gaze was still glued to the bottle clutched in the other.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

"What?"

Gus's insides rolled over uncomfortably as Doug sat motionless, continuing to stare. After a moment, Doug raised his eyes to Gus's slowly.

"I don’t know about the bottle you’ve got there, Gus..." With thumb and forefinger, he took hold of his gingerly by the lid and set it carefully down on the table in front of him with his face grim and his voice very controlled.

"...but this one’s leaking..."

Samuel arrived shortly before the police did and had the expected reaction.

"How the fuck did this happen?" he shouted at Doug. "Are you trying to tell me that somebody just walked in here and screwed with the catering? Where the hell is your security?"

Gus was still scanning the contents of the refrigerator. It was hard to tell without moving anything but from what he could see there were at least three other bottles with tiny pinholes near the lid, on top of the one that Doug had chosen for himself. There was no way to know what else might have been tampered with. The buffet? The water cooler? The ice buckets?

He was trying hard to keep his cool but inside he was going ballistic at the thought that within a very short period of time, Adam and most of the entourage would have been digging hungrily into food and drink.

Jeremy came to report that Adam and his band had been pulled from rehearsal and moved into one of the offices, since there was no real way to protect them on the massive, open stage.

"Adam wants to know what the hell’s going on," he said to Gus apologetically. Then, more to Doug, he added, "So does VH1, for that matter."

"I don’t want any of this information getting out," Samuel snapped.

"For God’s sake, Samuel," Doug muttered. "There’s no way to keep this completely quiet and you know it." He looked at Gus for suggestions and Gus threw up his hands. The last thing he was concerned about was VH1’s timetable, but he knew that it would be disastrous for Adam and for Griffin if word of this hit the street without going through some form of serious damage control first.

"You could tell him you’re running a drill to test your security precautions," he suggested finally.

"Oh, that sounds plausible," Samuel said sarcastically. "Exactly how do we explain why the police are here?"

"Quite frankly, Samuel," Gus retorted. "I don’t give a damn what you tell VH1. Your PR isn’t exactly my biggest concern at the moment, get it?" Without bothering to disguise his disgust, Gus brushed by him and went out with Jeremy, pausing only long enough to throw back over his shoulder, "Nobody touch anything, okay? I need to speak to Adam."
"I just don’t believe this," Adam said hopelessly, when Gus had explained the situation as gently as he could.

He let his eyes wander around the room, at the band and dancers, and didn’t like what he saw. In only a few minutes the newly optimistic atmosphere had been completely replaced with fear and anger and suspicion. Terrance was so confused that he stammered questions for five straight minutes while Gus patiently repeated himself. Tommy was drinking cup after cup of whisky. So far Monte hadn’t said a word and all Isaac had done was to ask a few quiet questions of his own.

As a precaution, Jeremy had rounded up Lisa, Sophie and Michelle as well and they and the rest of the immediate entourage were all spread around the room, worrying in anxious silence. The office was far too small to hold such a large amount of restless people even if it was the most secure place to keep them until the police and security managed to ensure there was no immediate risk to them from anyone who still might be in the building.

It was Adam’s reaction that disturbed Gus the most. He seemed disturbed beyond words, too agitated even to sit still and his immediate response seemed almost similar to Monte’s following the drugging at the concert. Gus had only recently come to truly understand how deep Adam's sense of helplessness went whenever he felt like circumstances were beyond his control and these danger signs worried Gus nearly as much as the breach of security itself.

All the security in the world wouldn’t make any difference if Adam started coming apart from the inside out.

From Gus’s point of view, this had all been allowed to go much too far. Everyone had returned from the Christmas break determined to put the earlier tragedy behind them, but in the face of this newer, more intimate threat he couldn’t believe that no one had yet voiced the most obvious course of action.

He stayed silent as long as he could stand it while stubbornly pushing aside nagging reminders of his promises to keep out of the professional aspect of things. This had gone beyond professional to being intensely personal and he knew that he only had a limited amount of time before a dozen other professional influences came back into play. At the moment, with only Adam and members of his inner circle, there was half a chance of being able to make his point. So when Adam finally stopped pacing and threw himself into a chair, Gus slid over as sneakily as he could to where Adam sat with his elbows on his knees and his head down over his hands. Crouching beside him, he touched his boyfriend's arm just lightly enough to draw his attention.

"Adam," he said very quietly. "Maybe it’s time to start thinking about pulling the plug on all of this."

Adam straightened and shot Gus such a look of disbelief that he involuntarily stood back up. Adam's first instinct was to scold his boyfriend for making such a stupid remark, but Gus's dark eyes were studying his with such profound concern that Adam knew it was not a comment Gus had made lightly.

He breathed in heavily and tried to keep his voice low. "Come on Gus, you know that’s not
possible."

"Why not?"

His patience slipped a little. His stomach was in knots and he was already feeling an ache in his shoulders from muscles that were clenched too tightly. "Why not? Do you have any idea what’s involved here?"

"What I know," Gus said, filtering as much frustration as possible from his voice. "Is that there is somebody in this organization with enough clearance to be able to get access to your dressing room. Take a look around, Adam! Security is already pretty damn tight. We’re not talking about somebody who just slipped in off the street. This has got to be somebody on the payroll. This is getting way too close."

"The cops cleared everyone on the staff," Adam muttered. "And all the Griffin staff. And anyone else we thought might have had a reason to come after me." His eyes flickered up to Gus’s. "And you...for that matter."

Gus flushed at the reminder. "All they did was run police checks on the staff. Just because someone doesn’t have a record doesn’t mean that they might not be psycho enough to do something like this."

Adam winced and Gus knew he’d hit a nerve. In Adam’s situation, the only way he could do his job was if he completely trusted the people around him and the realization that someone in his immediate entourage might be involved in an attack hurt him more deeply than he could ever admit. Gus sympathized with the sense of betrayal, but he also knew that Adam had forced himself to accept the nagging awareness of threats to his personal safety and hoped that being surrounded by bodyguards and protection hadn’t given him a false sense of security.

"So what do you expect us to do?" Adam snapped suddenly. "How is calling off this concert going to make a difference? If we’ve got a so-called psycho in our organization, they’re just going to wait for another opportunity. What’s next? Are you going to suggest I call off the tour as well?"

Gus put his hands out with palms down, trying to relax Adam a little with soothing gestures. "It would just give the police a little more time to pin this down..."

"They’ve had more than a week! Shit Gus, if I called shows off for every little thing, I’d never get back on stage!"

Gus stared at him. He knew Adam was in shock but he hadn’t figured his boyfriend was quite so deeply in denial.

"Little thing? A fan’s already dead because of this. Now someone is aiming directly at you and the people around you."

Adam looked away but not before he warned Gus with a glance. He obviously didn’t think this was the place or the time for Gus’s opinions and the last thing he wanted to have to do was to go back to defending Gus to the others for his outspokenness. The silent warning didn’t escape Gus but it had quite the opposite effect. He clenched his fists. Okay...so maybe this wasn’t the place for a personal conversation. So maybe he should just give up trying to do it quietly. "You have no idea when or where this might happen next. It’s too risky! Can’t you see that?"

The faces looking back at him in the room reflected a wide range of emotions but nobody spoke until Isaac exhaled deeply.
"I think what Adam is trying to say is that he gets your point. So do we. But he isn't the only one involved in this. There’s half a dozen other interests at stake here and the bottom line is that the decision may not be up to him…or us."

"Don’t give me that crap, Isaac! This is about personal safety! Of course it’s his decision! It's your decision as well, you know!"

Monte abruptly sat back in his chair with a snort that drew all eyes in his direction. He didn’t speak but his expression was unmistakable. *Here he goes again...*

Gus hadn’t missed the fact that neither Sophie nor Lisa had made their opinions known so far. He was also aware that their faces clearly indicated that they didn’t feel he should be making his known either, at least not at this particular time and in this particular fashion. Even Michelle was trying to head Gus off with a barely perceptible shake of her head.

Before he could say anything else, Tommy spoke up unexpectedly. "You just said we don’t have any idea when or where this might happen next, and you’re absolutely right. So there’s no reason to believe that the concert is any more of a risk than anything else we do, is there?"

"Which is the whole point," Tommy nodded, trying to be reasonable. "If we have a security issue we need to deal with it. We can’t just stop doing things. Who’s to say that this person wouldn’t just wait around until the next opportunity came up?"

"That’s exactly what I just told him," Adam muttered darkly.

"We could be jerked around like this for months," Isaac put in.

Gus was losing his patience. "I’m not suggesting you crawl in a hole and don’t ever come back out. All I’m suggesting is that you give the cops as much time as they need to find out what’s going on here."

"You’ve got a lot of faith in the local authorities all of a sudden," Monte observed coldly.

Gus swung around to glare at Monte but Adam’s temper had thinned to the breaking point. Standing up abruptly, he took hold of Gus by one arm.

"I think you’d better drop this, Gus."

Gus knew he was pushing it but frustration was moving faster than common sense. Angrily, he jerked free. "I can’t just drop it!"

"No, I’m serious! You need to back off!" Now just as infuriated, Adam stepped around him until he was blocking Gus’s view from the rest of the people in the room. His self-control had completely cracked and before he knew what he was doing he was screaming at Gus.

"Did you not hear what Isaac said? This isn’t just about me. This concert isn’t just an appearance that can be cancelled or rescheduled. It’s a live worldwide show on the most significant New Year’s Eve in my lifetime, which pretty much makes it the single biggest appearance of my career. There’s probably more money tied up in this one show than there is in the entire tour. Even if I didn’t have a contract, even if I wouldn’t get sued into the next decade, refusing to perform could ruin my reputation and make me look like a bad risk. I’ve got a promoter to consider, I’ve got investors to consider, I’ve got to handle the media so they don’t completely screw me over about
this.... For fuck’s sake, Gus, you should know how this works by now! The rumors alone could ruin me. Nothing gets decided until everybody’s been consulted. I know it’s risky; I know there’s a lot to be considered and I’ll consider it. So please just back off a little, okay? I don’t need you putting in your two cents worth before I’ve even had a chance for any of this to sink in."

Gus’s face had whitened. They both stood breathing deeply and staring wide-eyed at each other while Adam struggled to calm himself down.

"I’m sorry, Gus but you have to realize what’s involved here. This is a lot bigger than you think. I can’t let somebody else pull my strings and take control away from me." As Gus's gaze dropped away, Adam put his hands on his shoulders and ducked his head towards his boyfriend trying to re-establish eye contact. "It’s business. It’s complicated. I know it’s hard for you to understand..."

He didn’t mean for it to sound patronizing, but it did. Gus's eyes flew back up to his and resentment boiled over. "I just have one question for you, Adam," he said coldly. "If I happened to be a fan of beer, and if I had taken the bottle that had been tampered with instead of Doug, and if I hadn’t noticed the hole in the side and finished it off and overdosed on whatever the hell is in there...would you still feel the same way?"

It had the desired effect. Adam's hands tightened on Gus's shoulders and he squeezed his eyes shut at the thought. "Fuck, Gus..."

"Of course I’d be a lot quieter then, wouldn’t I? You wouldn’t have to worry about me pushing my opinion on everybody!"

He didn’t wait for Adam's response but shrugged away from his touch. Adam dropped his arms to his side and stood with his eyes closed while Gus deliberately turned his back on him and on everyone else in the room and went to stare blindly out the window. Things were uncomfortably quiet for a few moments until the door banged open and everyone looked around to find that Doug was standing on the threshold with a grim-faced Dean Holden looking over his shoulder.

"Oh, swell," Gus muttered. "The cavalry’s here."

Dealing with Inspector Gadget on this occasion wasn't going to be any easier or more enjoyable than on the last one. Gus was wound so tight that he found himself practically spitting answers at Holden but it was some relief that there were so many people to interview that he dealt with Gus’s questioning as quickly as he possibly could. Holden spent most of his time with Doug, since Doug was directly in charge of the majority of the security set-up at the arena. The longer the questioning went on, the more worked up Doug became. Gus could only sympathize with how rattled he must have been; not only had his ultra-cautious approach to security been seriously compromised, he himself had come so close to being the victim.

Gus said nothing more to Adam or to anybody else regarding cancellation of the concert. Numbness settled over him as shock, worry and dread rapidly wore out what was left of his nerves. He spent the next couple of hours simply watching in silence as the police efficiently searched the dressing room and removed all the evidence for testing. Griffin security, on Samuel’s instructions, went through the arena with a fine tooth comb. Nothing at all suspicious was located anywhere but in the dressing room itself, which may have been a relief to most but which was very little consolation to Gus.

VH1 didn’t fall for the "security precautions" story. As a result, when the formal meeting took place between Adam, Griffin, reps from management and the legal staff, VH1 was reluctantly included. And after an hour of discussion, argument, negotiation and general venting, they reluctantly agreed that all scheduled appearances for New Year’s Eve would take place as planned.
It took the waving of a very significant carrot to persuade VH1 not to run with a story on this new threat to Adam; only by promising him permission for exclusive coverage of the crisis as part of a companion special to the simulcast itself was Adam able to persuade the music channel to keep quiet for now.

Grimly, rehearsals resumed under rigid security. Gus remained silent but refused to let Adam out of his sight. He sat with Michelle, Lisa and Sophie during the rest of the afternoon and evening session but was uncommunicative and preoccupied and nothing Michelle could do seemed to be able to penetrate his silence. When it got late, Jeremy came down front and coaxed them into returning to the hotel, but Gus refused to move, bidding the others a quiet good night and slouching back in his seat as if daring Jeremy to try and budge him.

Jeremy knew better than to argue. He left Gus alone.

When the time finally came to return to the hotel, Adam was beyond exhausted, worn down by hours of rehearsals on an increasingly demanding schedule on top of all the emotions that kept rocking wildly and threatening to capsize. He saw Gus’s closed, withdrawn face and was angry with himself for having hurt and embarrassed his lover earlier in the day but couldn’t find a way to apologize that didn’t seem to invite another testy discussion.

Doug rode back to the hotel with them and quietly outlined his plans for the ongoing increase in security. It was being elevated to near Secret Service level but if Adam hoped that might reassure Gus, he was disappointed. Gus nodded and thanked Doug quietly for the update but beyond that had no comment. When they got to the hotel, Doug offered them both an uneasy goodnight and then went straight for the bar adjoining the lobby.

Jeremy walked them up to their room. Gus was so pensive that he failed to give Jeremy a genuine, grateful smile when he patted him on the back and Adam nodded at him wearily and said they’d see him in the morning. As their door closed behind them, Adam struggled to find a safe way to begin a conversation but to his disappointment, Gus seemed intent only on going straight to bed.

Frustrated, Adam retreated to the shower in an effort to soak away at least some of the tension. He half-expected Gus to be pretending to be asleep under the covers when he finally emerged but was surprised to find that his lover had changed into his usual boxers and was sitting on a chaise lounge out on the balcony, staring out at the myriad of lights across the skyline.

Slicking back his wet hair and tying on a bathrobe, he hesitated in the open doorway.

"Could we talk?" he said softly.

Gus rolled his head on his aching neck and rubbed one hand distractedly through his hair.

"I don’t want to fight, Adam," he said tiredly. "I’m trying really hard to just accept the fact that you’re going to do something I’m really uncomfortable with."

Adam balanced on the edge of the seat beside him. "I want to try and explain it to you."

Gus hunched his shoulders. "I think I got the message earlier, thanks."

Sighing, Adam laid one hand very lightly on Gus's back between his shoulder blades. When there was no sign of resistance, his hand travelled upwards until it was resting against the base of Gus's neck and he was able to massage the knotted muscles with strong fingers.

"I didn’t mean to blow up at you like that. It did freak me out to think that you might have been hurt. It could have been any of us, but..." His chin touched Gus's shoulder so that his face was
against his boyfriend's hair and his whisper dropped until it was almost impossible to hear. "...I
can’t stand the thought that something might have happened to you...."

Gus closed his eyes. He didn’t want to be having this conversation. Numbness came easily when
Adam was mad at him but this show of tenderness threatened to draw all of his emotions back to
the surface. He felt shaky and in danger of disgracing himself with another display of emotions.

"And how do you think I feel?" he said with difficulty.

"I know. I know that what I’m asking you to do is incredibly hard. Believe me, I understand."

"Do you?"

"Yeah. I do." He touched his mouth to Gus's temple. "Remember when you were planning on
going to Vancouver?"

Gus's lashes lowered and his nod was barely noticeable.

"I didn’t like that idea any more than you like the idea of me going ahead with this concert. I just
had to trust that you knew what you were doing."

"It’s not you that I don’t trust," Gus said desperately.

"Then who is it?"

He shifted a little. "I don’t know...that’s the problem. I’m starting to feel so paranoid...like anyone
who comes anywhere near you might not be who they say they are."

Adam's hand had moved around to Gus's cheek, fingertips gently stroking. "You’ll drive yourself
crazy, sweetheart. Things like this are going to happen from time to time. I know it’s hard for you,
but it’s something you’re going to have to get used to. Just remember that I have a lot of good
people watching my back. If somebody in the organization is doing this, they’ll find out who they
are. But in the meantime, I can’t just stop doing what I do for a living."

Gus lifted his head. The distress and the intensity of his gaze startled Adam enough that he almost
drew back involuntarily.

"You can stop, Adam. All you have to do is tell them 'no'..."

Their eyes locked for a moment and then Gus looked away in despair. He hadn’t really expected
anything more than the resigned silence he got but he had felt the need to say the words all the
same. Adam, desperate for a way to ease Gus's mind, encircled his lover's neck with both hands
and raised Gus's face, kissing him tenderly and trying to soothe him with the only tangible
reassurance he could offer.

Gus heard Adam murmuring to him in between soft kisses but his touch was working far more
effectively than anything he could have said and Gus tilted his head and opened his mouth against
Adam's to stop the words. It wasn’t the reaction Adam had been expecting and he was blindsided
by a sudden, intense craving.

Gus's voice was muffled and almost sad.

"Can it just be you and me for a little while...please?"

He didn’t pause long enough for an answer but Adam instinctively knew what Gus was asking.
Even more than the need for physical intimacy, he felt the same longing Adam did...just to have time together that was full of the closeness and emotional intensity they’d become so dependent on and that had become so elusive in the past several weeks.

Gus suddenly pulled back his face but before Adam could react, his mouth had moved down into the half-open neck of the bathrobe until he was licking at the sensitive skin along Adam's collarbone. He felt the vibration at the base of Adam's throat as he groaned.

"We should go inside..."

Gus's mouth became more insistent. "No...no...stay here...like this..."

He leaned backward until he was partially leant against the back of the chaise and curled his fingers into the bathrobe to pull Adam with him. One leg dropped down over the edge of the lounge so that his bare foot brushed the floor and the other leg drew up to his chest before the knee spread wide. Adam had to put one hand down to brace himself and drew a sharp breath when Gus took hold of his other hand and laid the palm against the warm, soft skin on the inside of his thigh. Gus didn’t have to guide it; the fingers slid upward of their own will and slipped under the fabric of Gus's boxers. The touch made him gasp and his hips rose upwards against the pressure.

Gus's edginess made Adam a little uneasy. He was already weak with the familiar, drug-like pleasure but all Gus’s anxiety was coming through in his arousal and Adam had to struggle to slow him down and relax him. Gus was twisting restlessly, needing the physical release but missing the connection that he was so desperate for.

"Easy, easy...it’s okay...it's just us now..."

It was several long minutes before Adam felt the shift in mood. As Gus's muscles began to loosen, his movements became slower and his eyes softened and lingered on his lover's face. Adam protested with a faint smile when Gus pulled at the tie of his robe but the warm hands that crept beneath it sent such a jolt through him that he couldn’t do anything more than close his eyes and try to recall the whole inhale/exhale process.

The chaise was narrower than the situation called for and a certain amount of creativity came into play. They fell back into their usual pattern of teasing and playfulness, so relieved to be finally connecting that neither of them could even begin to believe it when the sound of the phone ringing intruded from the other room.

Adam tensed but Gus grabbed hold of the ends of the belt on the open bathrobe and wound them around both hands until he had pulled Adam in tightly against him. With some effort, he managed to refocus Adam's attention and when the ringing finally stopped, Adam relaxed against him and the eroticism began to rebuild.

The second time the phone rang, they both closed their eyes and tried to block it out but Adam heard Gus’s low, frustrated moan and neither could ignore the distraction. The call hit voice mail again after six rings but in the silence that followed, both of them were anticipating the worst and both nearly hit the roof when the ringing almost immediately started again.

Adam shot to his feet, almost dumping Gus off the chaise in the process and by the time Gus had stumbled in off the balcony Adam had grabbed his phone angrily off the counter.

"Why the fuck can’t you just leave a message?"
damp hair and sank down heavily on the bed.

"You can’t possibly mean now," he said.

Gus’s shoulders slumped. Glancing up at him, Adam saw the disappointment building on his face and ground his teeth in frustration.

"Because it’s late and I’m tired and it’s not my fucking fault that you screwed up! All right, I’m sorry, I'm sorry..."

By the time Adam put the phone down, Gus had crept onto the bed and curled against the headboard with an afghan wrapped around his crouched form. Even from only half the conversation, it was obvious that there was a serious, business-related problem that required Adam’s immediate attention. It was promotional or financial or legal...Gus couldn’t tell which and didn’t care...but it was obvious that the massive rock star empire was still on its own schedule, oblivious to time zones and personal relationships and merrily rolling over everything in its path.

Adam tried to explain. It sounded reasonable enough but Gus was barely listening. He’d had just about all of business talk he could take for one day.

"Just go," he said dully.

Adam promised to be as quick as possible and true to his word he was back in less than forty minutes. But Gus, his emotions stretched from one extreme to the other from the moment he’d awakened that morning, had no more patience for conversation or even intimacy. This time, when Adam crept back into the room he *was* in bed, buried under the covers with his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep.
Chapter 19

Friday, December 28, 2012

Adam woke suddenly at some point in the early hours and realized he’d been dreaming. Stress and fatigue made falling asleep impossible, especially when Gus’s rigid posture and death grip on the pillow next to him obviously meant that he wasn’t sleeping either. Adam had been afraid to fall asleep, picturing nightmares about crazy concertgoers trying to assault him on stage, and so was dazed to be jolted awake hours later gasping at the way all his senses were heightened for reasons that had absolutely nothing to do with dreaming about security threats.

He lay breathing heavily, so completely turned on that it took a moment for him to separate reality from the intense fantasy. It had been a long time since he’d had such incredibly erotic dreams and he could only reason that his libido was so frustrated by all the sex he wasn’t having that his subconscious was trying to compensate as a result. Instinctively, he rolled towards Gus. In the dream Gus had been hard and desperate for him, laying back on the grass in the sunshine and pulling him down on top of him. Every movement, every sensation had seemed so incredibly real that Adam could almost still feel himself inside Gus. Waking up and finding that he wasn’t...

There was just enough light that he could tell Gus was curled on his side facing him. Feeling light-headed and feverish and unable to stop himself, Adam slid closer, seeking out his lover’s warmth beneath the covers. Maybe things had been a little strained between them when they’d gone to bed but Adam couldn't think of a better way to ease the tension than to gently seduce Gus out of sleep...

Then he realized what had woken him. Gus was shifting restlessly, kicking him in his sleep and whimpering. He wasn't the only one dreaming apparently, except Gus's dreams were clearly a lot less pleasant and Adam felt a sudden stab of dread. Horrible nightmares had disturbed Gus for months following his accident and then again after the trial of the man who had caused it, but it hadn't happened again since his surgery and Adam had finally dared to hope that it was over at last. Immediately he reached out to try and soothe Gus, brushing his hand against Gus's forehead and feeling the tears that were beginning to trickle from beneath his eyelashes.

His touch seemed to agitate Gus and his legs began bicycling again. As carefully as he could, Adam gathered Gus into his arms, smoothing his hands down Gus's back and kissing him softly in an attempt to calm him without waking him. But Adam was still feeling desperately aroused and it felt so good to hold Gus that his body began stirring against his boyfriend of its own will, trying gently to coax Gus out of his dream and into his own.

He focused on quiet, sensual reassurance until Gus went from pushing at his chest to snuggling as close as possible and muttering incoherently into one shoulder. Adam closed his eyes, wondering if this was the first drowsy indication Gus was beginning to stir. There had been a hundred occasions in the past when Gus had worked his charms on him to rouse him from slumber into desire. Adam was aching with anticipation but he forced himself to go slow; he wanted Gus sleepy and willing and almost unaware of his own response until all the distressing images had been erased from his mind.

Adam began indulging the both of them with his hands and his mouth. Gus moaned outright at this and his hands came up until they were grasping at Adam's wrists, causing a thrill to run through
him at this unexpected response until Adam realized that Gus was digging his fingernails into his skin and scratching at him in a panic.

He winced and grabbed at Gus's clawing hands.

"Gus! Gus...baby, stop it. Stop it!"

Gus sat bolt upright and sprang back like he’d been burned. Clutching the blankets around himself protectively, he stared at Adam wild-eyed as his lover struggled to sit up beside him.

"What’s wrong?" Gus demanded, chest heaving.

Adam held his hands out. "Take it easy, sweetheart...it’s OK. You were dreaming, that’s all..."

Gus blinked a few times, by turns dazed and frightened.

"No, I wasn’t..."

Adam flinched as he rubbed the spot where Gus's nails had scored his skin. "Yeah...you were."

"I was not!"

The suggestion seemed to really bother him. He may have seemed wide awake but he was badly disoriented by the darkness and the conflicting sensations that were overtaking his body and his mind. He put one hand to his face, feeling hot skin and tears and began to shake, unable to associate any memory with the disturbing feelings that lingered. His heart was pounding in his ears and he was aware of something...something...being terribly wrong but completely unable to identify it.

"You were there..." he mumbled in bewilderment.

Adam tensed. Was Gus remembering the seduction? Or had Gus's dream been triggered by some deep-seated fear for him after the revelations of the previous day?

Adam edged a little closer, reaching out with both his touch and his voice in an attempt to find a cadence that would quiet his lover. "You were just dreaming, baby...it’s OK...I’m here...nothing’s wrong..."

Gus edged away an equal distance and Adam forced himself to sit still, recognizing familiar coping mechanisms from months before. He knew that Gus needed to throw up walls to protect himself while he tried to sort out the images that had so deeply distressed him and that it would take time before he faced them and managed to put them aside.

Except...this time he couldn’t remember. Nothing made any sense. There was a horrible tightness in his chest...fear?... Of what?......but at the same time the rest of his body was warm with haunting pleasure. He’d never connected the two feelings before and found the association deeply distressing. His dreams were usually so intense and painful that to not be able to recall the details was almost more frightening than the memories themselves.

Adam waited uneasily, watching for some sign that Gus was ready to let him back in again. To his dismay, his boyfriend finally got up out of bed and paced anxiously by the balcony doors, arms crossed tightly at his waist and his breathing still accelerated. He remained agitated for the rest of
the night brushing off any of Adam’s attempts to convince him to return to bed. When he wasn’t moving restlessly around the room, he was curled in one corner of the sofa, cold and shivering and seemingly oblivious to the passage of time.

Adam wrapped him in a blanket, made him tea he barely tasted and then withdrew back to bed where he could keep an eye on Gus without seeming to hover. Sleep was out of the question. His body was still wound too tight after yet another abandoned attempt at lovemaking and he couldn’t block out the image of Gus’s shocked and bewildered face staring at him when he awoke from his dream.

Adam felt so powerless. Gus was showing all the danger signs of emotional imbalance again...even in the safe and relaxed atmosphere at his mother’s he’d clearly been struggling to control his feelings on several occasions. How on earth was he going to cope with all the pressure they were under now? Adam was increasingly afraid that all the ground Gus had gained in his psychological recovery might be completely wiped away by the sheer stress they were all under, and that even just another few days of tension might drive him straight into a serious depression.

Michelle had tried to warn him.

On top of everything else, he could sense his own control beginning to crack under the strain. He was flying off the handle at the least little provocation, finding it hard to concentrate during rehearsals and feeling the effects of the inevitable paranoia that was creeping over all of them. Physically, he was exhausted. Emotionally, he was overwrought. Sexually, he was frustrated beyond belief.

And there didn’t seem to be a damn thing he could do about any of it.

Adam had a nine o’clock rehearsal. Relieved to see that Gus had finally dropped back to sleep just before dawn, he tiptoed around the suite as quietly as possible as he dressed, trying not to disturb him.

Gus had shifted a little as he dozed and pushed the blanket off onto the floor. When Adam first got out of bed, the sight of Gus's long bare legs stretching out from shorts that had ridden up much too high sent another rush of desire through him. Adam knew it was being aggravated by the fact that now simply wasn’t the time...hell, no time seemed to be the time these days...but the more he tried not to think about it the worse the urges got. He was like a teenager in perpetual state of lust. Logically, he understood that he was just reacting to stress; sex was normally such a release for him that his body was channeling all of its adrenaline into the outlet that usually took all the edge off his frustration.

The irony of it didn’t escape him. If sex had been all he wanted, he could have had more than he could handle in less time than it would have taken him to order a pizza. For that matter, if an orgasm had been all that he’d wanted, he could have handled that all by himself. But what he wanted was Gus, sensual and uninhibited like he’d been in his dream, urging him on with his beautiful eyes and touching him and loving him until he lost control...
Almost unconsciously, Adam knelt down beside Gus and tried to smooth away the faint lines of tension between his brows. Even just the lightest touch of Gus's skin under his fingertips felt good and he was drawing back very reluctantly to let his lover sleep when he realized Gus’s eyes were open...heavy, but open...and focused on his face.

"I’m sorry...I didn’t want to wake you..."

Gus blinked a little. He still seemed disoriented and restless and not completely certain where he was. The events of the previous night were fuzzy but the distress associated with them still lingered and he was immediately on edge. As he pushed himself into a sitting position, his forehead furrowed and he winced.

"Headache?" Adam whispered.

Gus's eyes closed for a second then he nodded. To be more precise, his brain felt like it was about to come out through his eyelids.

"I'll get you some aspirin before I go."

Adam cupped a hand against his face and kissed Gus as he started to get up but Gus grabbed hold of his arm.

"Where...where are you going?"

Adam frowned at him. "Rehearsals. It’s okay...you stay and rest."

Gus rubbed his temples tiredly. "Right...right. Rehearsals." Sliding around Adam, he tried to swing his feet to the floor. "Just give me a couple of minutes..."

He felt pressure on his shoulders and realized Adam was holding him gently in his seat. Rubbing sleep off his eyes, he gave Adam an impatient look.

"You need to stay here and relax a little. You’ve hardly slept."

Gus pushed his hands away. "And you have? Don’t worry about me. I’m fine..."

Adam blocked his way again. "No, Gus. You are not." As Gus looked away, obviously irritated by his fussing, Adam turned his lover's face back until their eyes met and said softly, "You were dreaming last night."

Gus’s posture drooped a little and his gaze turned inwards, clearly disturbed by this statement. "Was I?"

"Yeah."

His mouth tightened. His eyes remained on Adam's face, but they were still unfocused and searching.

"I don’t remember," he mumbled.

And the truth was, he didn’t. But there was a peculiar, distressing feeling inside, knotting his
stomach and tormenting him with vague, troubling glimpses of...something. It was all very indistinct and elusive but the dread was very real. It may have just been nerves; it may have just been a natural reaction to the stress he was under, but...

The reason didn’t matter. There was no way he was going to let Adam out of his sight.

"I just need a couple of minutes," he said again.

But it was no use. His head was pounding so badly that even standing was a challenge. Adam took one look at the way Gus's face paled as he rose and tried to point out that a long and loud rehearsal was the last thing he was up for.

"I want to be there," Gus said, stubbornly. "And there’s Michelle. I hardly had a chance to speak to her after what happened yesterday...."

"Screw Michelle," Adam said as his patience began to ebb. "You can see her later."

Taking Gus's more firmly by the shoulders Adam piloted him back to bed. He disappeared briefly into the bathroom to get Gus some extra-strength Tylenol and a glass of water and half expected him to be back on his feet when he returned. Instead he found Gus sitting exactly where he’d put him, motionless against the pillows and staring blankly.

"What was I dreaming about, Adam?"

He waited until Gus had taken the pills, then he sat down, hands braced on either side of Gus. "I don’t know, baby...but it’s over now."

Gus's eyes travelled back up to his and trepidation was obvious in his voice.

"Is it?"

"Don’t start worrying about it. We’re under a lot of pressure. It could be nothing."

Gus swallowed. He didn’t believe that any more than Adam did.

Adam tucked him in and closed all the blinds so that the room was reduced to darkness. When he returned to the side of the bed and leaned over to kiss his boyfriend, Gus reached for his hand and squeezed it tightly.

"Promise me you’ll be careful."

"I will. You heard what Doug is planning for security. I’ll be fine."

"Don’t eat anything, don’t drink anything...not unless somebody checks it out first..."

"Gus, I promise. I’ll be careful." Lifting the hand he held in a death grip, Adam pressed a kiss against the palm. "But you’ve got to promise me something."

"What?" he whispered.

"I want you to sleep for a few more hours. If you feel better when you wake up and you want to come to the arena, you call me. I will get Jeremy to come and get you."
He saw the objection quivering on Gus's lips and shook his head. "I’m serious. You call me. I don’t want you leaving here by yourself. Understand?"

Gus argued a little more but the truth was that his head hurt so badly he couldn’t focus enough to even fight with Adam. He sat with Gus for as long as he could, stroking his hair and watching his face and when Jeremy knocked on the door, he kissed his lover on the forehead and quietly let himself out of the room.

Left alone, Gus curled on his side and pulled the covers up to his chin, trying to will himself into a more relaxed state. The uneasy feelings from the night before still churned at his insides. Reality was so much at odds with the fleeting, intangible visions in his head that nothing made sense; he knew only that he had a terrible sense of foreboding and was beginning to fear that he wouldn’t be able to cope...at a time when Adam would undeniably need him the most.

Jeremy saw Adam’s troubled face and wondered what had happened. He was dumbfounded to be told that Gus would not be accompanying them to rehearsal and quite frankly didn’t believe that a simple headache could possibly keep Gus from attending. From what he knew of Gus, Jeremy suspected he’d have to be nearly comatose before he’d allow Adam to go anywhere without him...especially now...and Jeremy couldn’t help but worry that something else had gone wrong between them.

Adam was moodily uncommunicative...another bad sign. After a couple of attempts at conversation, Jeremy shut up; he was already getting "the look" and there was no way he wanted to be responsible for winding Adam up before a long day of rehearsals.

The private elevator dropped them on the ground floor and as they crossed the lobby to the parking garage exit, a voice hailed them from behind.

"Excuse me, sir!"

Startled, Adam whirled around. Jeremy took note of the unusual jumpiness and sighed inwardly. On top of everything else, Adam was clearly feeling the effects of the paranoia that seemed to be creeping over everyone in general.

This was going to be an interesting day.

The junior concierge came panting up behind them. He had an envelope in his hand which he almost tentatively extended towards Adam and which Adam took almost as warily.

"I would have put it in your mailbox, sir...but I was asked to deliver it in person." He cleared his throat a little awkwardly and added, "By a young man."
Adam registered surprise but he tipped the concierge without a word and when they had stepped out into the parking garage, he paused and studied the blank envelope for a moment before he gave in with a shrug and tore open the end.

A folded letter fell out. Half a second later, a room key fell out on top of it.

Both Adam and Jeremy stood for a moment and stared. Then, feeling stupid, Adam stooped, snatched up the paper and the keycard and grimly unfolded the note. It was short, with a time and place clearly indicated. Jeremy watched in astonishment as Adam’s face flushed a deep red before he abruptly stuffed both the letter and the card in his inside pocket without speaking.

Jeremy had worked for a number of famous musicians and had been the reluctant courier for an awful lot of groupie invitations...room keys, car keys, house keys...often accompanied by a written proposition and sometimes even a piece of underwear or a sex toy. He had to admit that Adam got more than his share of what he jokingly referred to as "backstage passes" and tried not to be judgmental about the actions that he took as a result.

His job was to protect Adam, not to be his conscience.

Adam tended to attract serious groupies...the ones who had the time, the money and the libido to stick with him and his band like glue and make an appearance at nearly every Adam-related event. Many were so ubiquitous they were almost like old, faithful and devoted friends.

Since Adam had met Gus, every single backstage pass that Jeremy had dutifully delivered had been opened, chuckled over and handed back to be returned to the sender or just destroyed. For this, Jeremy was grateful. He was inordinately fond of Gus and both liked and admired Adam and the truth was he’d played more than a small role in getting them together. Now he stared at Adam, whose face hadn’t lost any of its discomfiture, and couldn’t believe that this particular invitation hadn’t been handed back in the usual manner.

Adam kept his eyes on the floor as they walked to the car. Of all people to see it...Jeremy was the very soul of discretion but his expression clearly indicated he was jumping to all kinds of very obvious conclusions.

They were silent until they reached the limo. As usual, Jeremy stepped ahead to open the door for Adam but then left his hand on the top of the door deliberately so that Adam’s access to the car was temporarily blocked.

"You’re not thinking about doing anything stupid...are you, boss?” he said bluntly.

Adam’s back went up. What the fuck did Jeremy know about any of this? Irritably he pushed Jeremy’s arm away and for a moment the two men’s eyes met and Adam’s blazed.

"You should be minding your own business,” he snapped. "Not mine." He pushed past the bodyguard with enough force to make Jeremy step back and then stuck his head back out momentarily once he was seated inside the car.

"And just remember who you work for...OK?"
Dear Diary:

He keeps asking me for more time; time to figure out how to handle this...to find a way for us to be together. I want a home with him. I want that easy life he taught me to love. He owes me. He owes me.

He's stalling. I've waited long enough. Now he's going to have to deal with me.
Given how his mind was racing, Gus did not expect to go back to sleep again but it was the sedative effects of the Tylenol that finally lulled him back to sleep. When he woke up a couple of hours later, he was trying to scream only to find out that he couldn't, flailing at sheets that had tangled all around him and extremely terrified. The darkness of the room only augmented his confusion and for several minutes he had no idea where he was and what was happening, until he twisted so wildly that he fell off the bed.

There was no doubt what he'd been dreaming about this time. The images were so deeply ingrained in him both emotionally and psychologically that even the familiarity of it had come to frighten him. He’d been taught to focus on that, to work through all the stages of the nightmare and deal with each emotion as it hit him. It had been bad enough in the early days when he had just been reliving the crash in his mind - Nick had died again a thousand times in his head after the accident...but in the days leading up to the trial, when he had been feeling the most vulnerable over his new love for Adam, his fragile psyche had somehow twisted the dream around until it was Adam trapped in the car.

Logically, he had been able to deal with dreaming about Nick. His death remained unchanged and no matter how many times he envisioned his struggle to get his partner out of the twisted wreckage, he knew on the most basic level that there could never be any difference in the outcome. But he had never been able to come to grips with the horrible fear that something was going to happen to Adam. He understood the psychology of it all, that his mind was literally refocusing his worst nightmare on the person that mattered to him most. Months of therapy had helped and gradually the dreams had lessened and then stopped altogether but this sudden recurrence struck at him in the most horrifying way, waving in front of his face like a giant red flag.

This is how scared you are for him, you idiot...

If Adam had been there...Gus might have been able to calm himself down. But Adam was gone and Gus was suddenly consumed by absolute horror that he had actually let his lover go to rehearsal without him.

Once he got his breath back, he stumbled across the room and snapped open the shades, blinding himself with sunlight that gradually warmed him and diluted the worst of the fear. He stood with his eyes closed, hands braced on the glass of the balcony door while he tried to relax, but it didn’t seem to matter how much he rationalized his fears. Raw emotion was making it impossible to think straight and eventually he just gave up and went to the dresser, throwing on clothes and combing his hair.

He realized there was nothing he could say or do to convince Adam or anybody else that it would be safest to just call off the concert and the appearance at the Grand Opening. If safety was an issue, showbiz was a bigger one and Adam knew as well as Gus did that there was no other reasonable plan of action than to continue with each scheduled event as if absolutely nothing was wrong.

Adam...I’m sorry...I just can’t let you do this...

He knew he was crossing that invisible line again. Hell, this time, he wasn’t just crossing it; he was practically stomping on it as he went by. But Gus was out of patience and nearly out of time and if Adam and Griffin wouldn’t face up to pulling the plug on the shows, Gus was determined to talk to the one person who had the power to take the choice entirely out of their hands.
"I want you to pull the event permit."

He had chased Dean Holden halfway around the precinct. No one seemed to know exactly where Holden was, but Gus had refused to wait for him by the front desk and stomped through every department until he tracked the detective down in the little coffee room and followed him all the way back to his desk.

Holden was tempted to just ignore him. Gus was clearly on some kind of mission and Holden didn’t much feel like trying to deal with his fractious temper. But he was so completely astonished by this blunt announcement that he put his coffee mug down on his desk with a bang and stared up at the other man.

"You want me to what?"

"Pull the event permit. The City Council requires Griffin to file for a permit for any publicly attended event, right? So there has to be one filed for both the Grand Opening ceremony and the concert itself. And you as the local law enforcement agency have the clout to rescind that permit if you feel there’s a threat to the public of any kind."

"Is there one?"

Gus’s brows drew together warningly. Did this jackass have to be so obtuse about everything?

"What do you mean... is there one? You have one person who dies at a concert as a result of doctored bottles of Gatorade and then less than two weeks later you have exactly the same scenario happening in another arena...are you an idiot? I can understand why Samuel Brice and VH1 and RCA don’t want to take the hit for cancelling this thing, but what’s your excuse? Afraid you’re going to get in trouble with your boss because the mayor and the governor would lose their photo ops?"

Holden's own forehead furrowed. "Maybe I’d just like to have a good reason."

"Jesus Christ! How much more of a reason do you need than four bottles of soda laced with GHB?"

"Who said it was GHB?"

Gus stopped short. Holden dropped his gaze dismissively and began sorting through papers on his desk.

"It wasn’t?" Inwardly Gus began cursing himself. *Never, never assume there’s a pattern... every incident has to be evaluated on its own evidence...don’t jump to conclusions.*

Shit. He’d been out of the loop too long. He was getting rusty.

"Look, you son of a bitch," he said angrily when Holden continued to ignore him. "This isn’t a game, so don’t bother giving me that crap about not revealing privileged information about a case.
Just tell me what the fuck was in those bottles if it wasn’t GHB!"

Almost too casually, Holden fished out a file folder and glanced inside it. When he lifted his eyes back to Gus’s, he could have sworn Holden was trying not to smile.

"On the contrary, Mr. Harrison...I’m more than happy to show you the lab results."

He held out the folder. Gus snatched it from him and began scanning the contents. Holden watched the way his face paled and the smile that had been hovering on his lips widened into obvious satisfaction.

Gus had to read it three times before he was sure what he was seeing. "This doesn’t make any sense..."

"It is rather peculiar," Holden agreed blandly. "Nothing?" Gus was flipping pages up and down, certain he must have missed something. "Nothing at all?"


"You checked all the bottles?"

"All of them. Whether they had holes or not. We checked all the food on the buffet. We checked every open soft-drink container we could find in the arena or backstage and even pulled the empties from the garbage to look for residue. And before you ask...yes, the results were double-checked. It took pretty much all day and all night, by the time the Lab was finished. I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Harrison. But nothing that we checked contained anything other than exactly what it should have contained.

"That doesn’t make any sense! Why would someone put a hole in a bottle if they weren’t injecting it with something?"

Holden shrugged. "Maybe it was just someone’s idea of a prank."

Gus was growing more agitated by the minute. "A prank? That’s not a prank! It sounds more like somebody trying to make a point. To show us that they could have doctored those bottles if they’d wanted to."

Holden looked skeptical. "And why would somebody do something like that?"

Gus threw the folder back at him. "How the hell should I know? You’re the detective! Maybe this is just a warning...maybe this is just to make us realize that somebody still has enough access to Adam to do something if they want to..."

"Or maybe somebody’s just got a lousy sense of humor. Maybe it’s one of those hard-assed roadies just looking to get a few laughs."

Gus’s anger hit new heights. "I can’t believe you’re not taking this seriously!"

Now Holden was equally as angry. "Seriously? I’ll tell you what I take seriously. I take it pretty
seriously when I have to pull dozens of officers off legitimate cases to chase their tails over a so-called incident that turns out to be a complete false alarm."

"There was nothing false about it! Those bottles were tampered with!"

"No, they weren’t! So somebody poked holes in a couple. So what? Maybe in Canada that’s against the law, but in the state of Nevada it’s not a crime!"

It wasn’t uncommon for voices to be raised in a squad room, but all eyes were turning towards the sound of this particular scene with growing interest. Those who didn’t necessarily know Gus by sight were still perfectly aware of who he was and by this point he and Holden were the focus of rapt attention.

Gus was struggling to keep his cool, without much success. "So you’re not going to do a damn thing about this, are you?"

"That’s where you’re wrong. What I’m going to do is have a pretty short conversation with Samuel Brice and Doug Taylor and tell them both that they need to get their internal security issues sorted out and stop wasting my department’s time. This city needs its police force working to ensure the safety of its citizens...not watching the backs of some flamboyant, overgrown wannabe rockstar who can’t even manage to take the right security precautions..."

"Wannabe rock star?" said Gus, outraged on an entirely new level.

"...and this is the second time that considerable resources have been focused on a situation that’s resulted from him being in this city, and the second time that absolutely nothing meaningful has come to light. So in answer to your first question, you’re absolutely correct; if I think there’s any kind of a threat to the public safety at any venue in this city, I can technically pull the event permit. But if you think that I’m going to pull it because somebody somewhere didn’t tamper with some bottles of soda, you’ve got another thing coming. Under the circumstances, that’s hardly an appropriate response, is it?"

"It’s a threat!"

"Of what?"

"Of...of..." Gus was floundering for words and his inability to express himself only made him angrier. "Of a potential threat!"

Holden couldn’t help it. He had to ask... "Let me get this straight. A threat of a threat?"

"Yes, you narcissistic bastard!"

All of a sudden, Holden had had enough. He reached for the back of his chair, yanked his jacket loose and began shrugging into it.

"Mr. Harrison, I don’t know who the hell you think you are but I don’t need you telling me how to do my job. And since you, your boyfriend and his entourage wasted an awful lot of my time yesterday, I’m sure you can understand that I just don’t have the time to have a meaningless discussion with you now. I’ll have the lab results faxed to Griffin’s office and maybe you can tell Mr. Taylor that I’ll be in touch with him later today. My partner will still be happy to go over the security layouts if he wants and on New Year’s Eve, we’ll still be taking care of anything to do
with crowd and traffic control on public property. Have a nice afternoon."

He brushed past Gus with more force than was necessary, barked, "Get back to work!" at the
gawking staff and slammed the door on his way out. Gus stood absolutely fuming until he realized
that everyone was still staring at him and then he stalked out as well, hardly even aware of how
furiously he was pushing his way through a hallway full of witnesses, victims, public defenders
and other police officers until he reached the elevator.

A young man with a notebook had been standing just inside the squad room door when he’d
cornered Dean Holden and although Gus hadn’t noticed him at the time, he’d lingered and
observed the entire confrontation with great interest. He hurried after Gus as he marched grim-
faced towards the elevator and when it arrived, slipped in with him to find that they were the only
two in the car.

"What floor?" Gus snapped at him, hitting the Lobby button with enough force to break a
fingernail.

"Uh...Lobby is good." He waited until the doors closed and then ventured, "I actually stopped by
to see that Detective you were talking to, but I get the feeling he’s kind of tied up with more
important things."

Gus turned his head to stare at him. His gaze flickered down to the "Visitor" badge that he wore
and he remarked derisively, "Well, if you were here to report a crime, I sure hope it was a mass
murder. Otherwise you’d be completely wasting your time."

The young man’s eyes widened. "Oh. You don’t sound like you think much of the guy."

"Think much of him? Would you like to know what I think of him? I think he’s so bloody full of
himself that he couldn’t see a crime if it was committed in front of his face. I think he’s careless
and egotistical and what’s worse than both of those is that I don’t happen to think he’s particularly
bright either. He’s so damn worried about covering his own ass that he doesn’t seem to give a
damn that people are likely to get hurt. So don’t be surprised in a few days if you see his name in
big letters in the paper, trying to explain why he didn’t take any action to prevent something when
he knew perfectly well that there was a huge risk."

The young man’s mouth formed an ‘Oh.’ When the elevator door opened, Gus practically fell out
into the lobby and disappeared almost immediately. His companion emerged more slowly, pausing
to sit down on a bench near the main doors to think for a moment about what he’d just heard.

The local media were fully aware that there had been some kind of incident the day before
although both the Griffin press office and Adam’s publicists had denied that it had been anything
serious. The young man rifled thoughtfully in his jacket pocket and removed his voice recorder.
All his editor had told him to do was to go to Police Headquarters and try to get a statement from
one of the senior detectives. He was expecting to get a "no comment" at best; instead, he’d not only
gotten a fairly detailed description of exactly what had taken place at the arena, he’d also gotten an
extremely blunt quote from the man who was Adam Lambert’s boyfriend.

He’d turned the miniature recorder on out of pure reflex. The tiny microphone didn’t pick up sound
well at a distance, especially through several layers of cloth. The audio from the squad room was
muffled and poor quality although the words could still be understood. The clip from Gus’s rant in
the elevator, on the other hand, had come through loud and clear.
There was no way he could release the recordings themselves without getting his ass sued. But there was also no way that what he’d overheard could in any way be construed as private...and a first-person account of a public conversation was completely fair game. The information he’d gained from being in the right place at the right time was probably going to be enough to get him a big fat by-line on the front page of tomorrow’s newspaper.

Gus barely remembered the taxi ride back to the arena. He was so numb that he barely even registered Jeremy’s furious lecture when he discovered Gus had traveled from the hotel alone. Adam was too involved with rehearsals to do more than shade his eyes to see him and wave from the stage, but Michelle took one look at Gus and knew something was terribly wrong.

"I don’t want to talk about it," Gus said in a dull voice.

Michelle twisted her hands together and bit her tongue. *Shit, I know Adam said he had a bad headache, but he looks more like he’s having a freaking aneurysm...*

There was no way Gus could divulge what he’d found out from the police without revealing that he’d gone to see them, and that would only raise countless questions and invite a backlash he wasn’t up to facing. But within a couple of hours, Doug arrived to make the announcement that nothing that had been tested showed any signs of having been tampered with. Gus held his breath, wondering if word of his visit to Holden had been reported back to Doug, but apparently Holden hadn’t passed on that particular piece of information. It was no doubt a temporary reprieve...the news was bound to come out sooner or later and he knew he was going to catch hell when it did. The worst part of it all was that he couldn’t even console himself with the knowledge that he’d managed to put a stop to the public appearances that were potentially the most dangerous for Adam.

And even more distressing was the reaction from everybody else. Regardless of the fact that there was no reasonable explanation for pinholes in four of the soda bottles that any one of them might have unwittingly consumed, they all heaved a collective sigh of relief as if they were reassured that the entire incident had been completely harmless. Once the information was out, Gus was at least able to talk to Michelle about the lab results and while Michelle shared Gus’s concerns, she was even more concerned by the absolutely shattered state that Gus seemed to be in over it all.

"You look like you need to go back to the hotel and take it easy," she suggested gently.

Gus shook his head. "I’m not leaving."

"Take a look around, Gus! There’s more security here than there is for the President! Nothing is going to happen here and you really don’t look good at all. Please, kid...humor me."

Gus steadfastly refused. When Adam was able to spend a bit of time with him during a break, he was just as alarmed at Gus's frame of mind and also tried his best to coax him to rest. By now, both he and Michelle were exchanging troubled glances and Gus struggled to get a grip and reassure them both that he was fine.

The day was abysmally long. The only consolation was that nothing had been scheduled for the evening and although rehearsals didn’t wrap up until nearly eight, they were all motivated by the tantalizing thought that they had the rest of the night to themselves for a change. But as the evening
progressed, Adam began to get edgy, looking at his watch repeatedly and trying to hurry things along. Gus noticed his restlessness and assumed that he was worried about keeping him out any longer than absolutely necessary and he seemed to have hit the nail on the head...when they returned to the hotel, Adam was determined that he should go straight to sleep.

Gus undressed tiredly and took the double dose of Tylenol Adam gave him without argument. He felt like all his nerve endings had been beaten with a cattle prod, but he half-hoped that Adam might come to bed as well. He wasn’t exactly feeling amorous, but he needed Adam’s closeness and his reassuring strength. He needed to know that Adam was all right.

To his disappointment, Adam waited until he had crawled under the covers before he casually mentioned that he thought he’d have a shower and then wander down to Sutan’s room for a few drinks.

"There’re a few things about my makeup that I’d like to discuss with him," he said apologetically.

Gus’s eyes were already closed but he snorted. "Bullshit. I know what you’re really planning."

Adam half-choked. "Am...am I planning something?"

"Uh huh." Gus wasn’t that far gone that he still didn’t have some of his wits about him. "Are you trying to make me believe that there isn’t a replay of some cheesy vampire shows somewhere on TV tonight?" He opened one eye, looked Adam up and down suspiciously and then closed it again.

"I know you’re missing your shows. You don’t need to make up stories. Go and have some fun."

Adam’s heart had gone into his throat and it took a few seconds for him to swallow it back into its original position and reassure himself. There was no possible way Gus could know...

"I’ll just hang around until you get to sleep," he murmured, and true to his word he sat and watched Gus until his face had slackened into a peaceful mask and he was certain his lover was sleeping soundly.

He showered and changed, spending an inordinate amount of time in front of the mirror and oddly worried about how he looked. He had no idea why he was nervous. Well, actually...he did. He was worried something would go wrong, worried that somebody would find out, and worried that he’d get caught... Sneaking around was not his forte but it was a bit too late to be worrying about that now. He’d started this and now he had to finish it, but resolution didn’t seem to take any of the edge off his nerves. The mere thought was still making his heart pound.

He must have looked at the clock a thousand times and every time he did, he then looked automatically to Gus, as if half expecting him to sit up accusingly and ask him what the hell he was up to. But he didn’t stir, so exhausted that it only added to the guilt Adam felt for leaving him. He fidgeted endlessly and when it finally came close to the appointed time, he steeled himself, took his leather jacket from the closet, checked the inside pocket to make sure the room key was still there and then eased as quietly as possible out of the suite.

Vegas never truly slept but at this time of the night the hallways of the hotel were primarily empty. Those who passed him were generally in such a state of inebriation or depression from stints in the casino that they barely glanced at him. He crossed from one Griffin tower to another, frowning at the signs to make sure he was going in the right direction. When he finally located the room he was looking for, he dug the keycard out of his pocket and stood clutching it for a moment in sweaty hands.

Then, gulping, he slid it into the lock and let himself in.
She was slouched in a large overstuffed chair with her legs hooked casually over one arm and a glass of champagne in her hand. When she heard the door, she looked up at Adam with an easy smile.

"Finally...a man who can be on time."

Adam let the door swing closed behind him, oddly irritated by the fact that she seemed so nonchalant about it all.

She looked askance. "Did you have any trouble slipping out?"

"No."

"Any trouble finding me?"

"No."

She swung her legs to the floor and stood up. "Still sure about this? No second thoughts?"

Adam scowled at her. "No."

She wandered closer, cocking her head to one side a bit dubiously. "You wouldn’t be the first guy who chickened out at this point, you know."

"I’m not chickening out," Adam snapped.

"Okay, okay," she said gently. "You’re just very tense, that’s all. Stop hovering by the door and come in. Have some champagne. You’re supposed to enjoy this." Taking note of the look on Adam’s face, she laid one hand on Adam’s arm and added even more gently, "You will enjoy it, you know...if you just relax and stop thinking about it so much."

He looked down at the floor.

"It’s a bit late for that," he whispered. "I haven’t been able to think about anything else all day."

When Gus jerked awake, he had no idea what had awakened him. He looked automatically at the clock radio; it was past midnight and he was groggy and thick-headed with sleep. Then the full effect of the sound intruded into the fog and he sat bolt upright with his stomach clenched with apprehension.

Oh, God...that’s the fire alarm...

He reached across in the darkness to smack Adam...the man could sleep through anything...and was shocked when his hand hit empty bedclothes. Where the...?

Right, right...he went to watch TV with Sutan...

He scrambled out of bed, fumbling for the bedside lamp and glancing blearily around the room to
make sure that Adam hadn’t come back and fallen asleep on the sofa. There must have been an alarm directly outside his room and the noise was absolutely piercing. He couldn’t smell smoke but there was no way to know what the hell was actually going on. A drill at this time of night? Not likely. A false alarm? Probably. A real fire? Given what had been happening lately, anything was possible and Gus could only think about one thing...finding Adam.

There was a commotion in the hallway as people began to spill out of their rooms. Throwing on a robe, Gus stuck his head out into the hallway and when he caught sight of Jeremy, stepped out to flag him down without thinking. The door closed behind him, locking him out and leaving him barefoot, half dressed and half asleep in a hall full of confused and anxious people.

Jeremy didn’t stop to answer Gus’s question but leaned past him and banged on her door.

"Let’s go, Adam! Now! We want to keep everyone together."

"He’s not there," Gus said, raising his voice to be heard over the din.

Jeremy looked startled. "He’s not? Where an earth is he?"

"In Sutan’s room."

"No, he’s not," Sutan said from behind him. Gus spun around and was shocked to find that Sutan also appeared to have been rousted out of bed...he looked sleepy and annoyed with his hair askew.

"Yes he is," Gus said, perplexed. "He went to watch TV with you..."

"What are you talking about? I was watching the inside of my eyelids. I haven’t seen Adam since rehearsals..."

Blankly, Gus looked at Jeremy. "Where else would he go? Maybe he’s with one of the other guys...?"

Jeremy stared back at him just as blankly and suddenly had a horrible thought. That envelope that he got this morning...some guy was looking to hook up with him...I was afraid he might do something stupid, but surely to God he hasn’t gone and done it right NOW!

"We’ll find him," he said flatly. "For now, we’re all getting out of here. Until we know otherwise, we’re treating this like it’s for real and we’ve got twelve flights of stairs to walk down. We’ll probably meet Adam in the stairwell. Let’s go."

Gus protested, but Jeremy forcibly escorted him into the fire escape and they began the long trek down to the ground floor. As they congregated in the circular driveway, with Adam's security trying their best to segregate the entourage from the rest of the hotel guests, Gus looked around wildly and began checking off heads as he was able to identify them...Monte and Lisa, Isaac and Sophie, Terrance, Tommy, Sutan, Michelle...everyone else in the entourage....

Everyone except Adam.
Chapter 21

He tried his best to slide into the throng without being noticed, but it was no use. He was too tall and too distinctive-looking to be inconspicuous in any group, let alone in a crowd of people all craning their heads to see what was going on.

Jeremy caught sight of him first. He gave Adam a look that could have split granite, but still moved efficiently through the mass of people to clear a safe path for Adam to join the rest of them.

Adam met Gus’s blazing eyes and his heart sank. His boyfriend looked both frightened and furious and when he got close enough, he could see that Gus was barefoot and barely clad in a robe. Isaac was hovering at his side, but everyone else seemed to be keeping a respectful distance. Adam didn’t blame them. He could well imagine the state Gus was in.

"Where the hell have you been?" Gus exploded.

Adam wasn’t thinking fast enough to come back with a believable reply but got an unexpected reprieve as Gus stormed on.

"You told me you were going down to Sutan’s room for a drink. Sutan didn’t know where you were. Nobody knew where you were. Jeremy didn’t know where you were. You scared the hell out of me, do you know that?"

It had already occurred to Isaac and now it dawned on Gus as well. Adam was the only one among them who didn’t look like he’d dressed in a hurry to get out of the hotel. The last time Gus had seen him, Adam had been in sweatpants and a t-shirt. Now he was quite carefully dressed in black designer jeans, a black sweater and a leather jacket. Hardly the type of outfit he’d choose to go down the hall and throw back a few with his make-up artist.

But he had been drinking. He was close enough that Gus could detect the faint fumes of liquor. He was by no means drunk, but he’d definitely been indulging in something... somewhere.

"Where the hell have you been?" he repeated, more blankly this time.

They were momentarily distracted by Doug, who pushed his way through the crowd to reach them and promised that the building would be cleared for re-entry in only a few minutes.

"Somebody pulled three of the alarms in three different areas of the building," he said grimly. "None of those areas are currently occupied...there’s no reason for anyone to have been there. I’m sorry about this, people. Bear with me for a bit longer and we’ll get you back inside."

"That would be nice," Gus muttered, shivering with a combination of nerves and the chilled desert air. Like the others, he was having disquieting thoughts that this occurrence was somehow related to the "prank" in the dressing room....not anything so obvious as to attract the attention of the police again, but just disturbing enough to make everybody wonder. And worry.

The concrete was cold on his bare feet, his thin robe was little protection against the stiff breeze and he was feeling over-exposed both physically and emotionally.

Isaac stood staring. "Hey...Adam! Gus is kinda cold."

Adam jerked his head up, startled. His mind was still full of what had taken place only an hour earlier. "What?"
Isaac gestured impatiently at Adam’s jacket and Adam froze. There was no way he could pass the jacket to Gus; if he found what was in the pocket...

"Never mind, you asshole," Isaac muttered. He was feeling pretty chilly himself but he still whipped off the Nike warm-up he’d grabbed on the way out of his room and zippered Gus into it. Gus smiled at Isaac faintly as he fussed over him but Gus seemed more concerned with Adam’s disappearance than he was about his lack of chivalry.

It was impossible to have any kind of a conversation with a crowd of people milling around them, many of whom had already noticed that they seemed to have a celebrity in their midst. Security was starting to seriously twitch about the level of exposure when Doug came back around to tell them that the fire department had reopened all the doors. Gus was silent all the way up in the elevator while Adam frantically worked on excuses in his head, very aware that once they were alone he was going to have to do some very fast talking. Everyone else was glaring at him reproachfully but although some had to really struggle to suppress the urge, no one dared to rebuke him openly. Even Michelle held her tongue, watching Adam without speaking and looking rather grim when their eyes met.

Goodnights were muttered. At the door to their room, Gus held one hand out to Adam impatiently.

"Give me the key."

"Key?" he repeated faintly.

_Guilty conscience? What guilty conscience?_

Gus was already more than angry and this was a game he had absolutely no interest in playing. "Yes, the key! In case you hadn’t noticed, I left the room in a bit of a rush and I locked myself out. So give me the key, or unlock the door...I don’t care which...just hurry up!"

Suddenly, Adam’s brain kicked in. Flustered, he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and barely had the key-card in the lock before Gus had yanked on the handle and pushed into the room.

"Where were you?" he demanded the minute the door had closed behind them.

He looked nearly ready to strangle someone and Adam realized he was trapped. Gus was expecting an answer - a complete answer - and there wasn’t going to be any time for him to choose his words carefully. The last thing he had ever wanted to do was cause his lover more stress and worry than he was already suffering. But clearly he already had...and now he knew Gus was desperate for some kind of reassuring explanation from him.

There was only one problem. He didn’t want to tell Gus the truth.

His companion that evening had been right about one thing. Once he’d stopped over-thinking things, he’d been able to relax a little. Like anything he ever wanted this badly, he was afraid of doing something to ruin it, second guessing himself before he even got started and feeling foolish at the way she gently teased him about his nervousness.

He had drained his glass and held it out for a refill. She had topped it up obligingly and then wagged a finger at him in warning.
"Okay, that’s it. You need to be relaxed, not catatonic. Any more than that and you’re not going to be much use to me and I’m certainly not doing this all by myself."

Taking another deep swallow, Adam nodded. Giving him a reassuring smile, she picked up her own glass, slipped one arm through Adam’s and they turned together to face the man who was waiting quietly and patiently on the other side of the room.

"I...I went to the casino."

Gus didn’t know what he’d been expecting to hear, but that definitely wasn’t it. "You went...where?"

"The casino. I needed to get out for a while."

His brows dipped. "You told me you were going to spend some time with Sutan."

"Yeah...but he was sleeping. And everyone else had turned in for the night...and I needed to get out. To blow off some steam, you know...after the kind of day we had.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and focused his gaze on a point just above Gus’s head, unaware that he was demonstrating all the classic signs of the kind of discomfort usually associated with whopping great lies.

"By yourself..." Gus said flatly.

"Yeah..."

"To the casino..."

"Yes!"

Gus crossed his arms. "You got dressed, walked out of this room, walked off this floor, walked out of this building, walked half-way across the complex and spent a couple of hours in a casino...by yourself..."

Nervousness triggered a defensive response. "Yeah...so? What’s the problem with that?"

He caught the glimpse of incredulity and braced himself for the explosion. Gus had every right to scream at him for being so stupid...it was stupid...or rather, it would have been if that had actually been what he’d done. But even though he hadn’t actually gone to the casino, the fact remained that he had left the complex alone, without his bodyguard and without letting anyone know he was going...all after they’d been through two weeks of major security issues and after he’d made a huge fuss that morning about insisting that Gus needed an escort from the hotel to the arena.

"You’re an idiot, that’s what! A complete idiot! An inconsiderate, reckless idiot! Do you have any idea what it was like for me to wake up and not be able to find you? For nobody to be able to find you?"
"I’m sorry if I worried you..."

Gus’s mouth fell open. "Worried me? I think the hotel might be on fire and I can’t find you and you think you worried me? I wasn’t just worried, you jackass! I was in a complete state of panic!"

Defensiveness was wearing off. "All right! I get your point! I said I’m sorry!"

Angrily, Adam turned his back on Gus. Gus’s words stung...badly. It was on the tip of Adam's tongue to tell his boyfriend exactly where he’d been, exactly who he’d been with and exactly what he’d been doing.

"What do you think?" Adam had asked for the hundredth time.

Michelle stifled the urge to tell him she thought exactly the same thing she’d thought the last time she’d answered the question. Instead she took another swig of champagne and tried to be tolerant.

The hotel had been remarkably accommodating, considering she hadn’t told them exactly what she required the room for. All she’d said was that she needed a private room and that she wanted something at the opposite end of the hotel to the guest rooms. A roomy and comfortable suite was provided and the elderly jeweler who’d been recommended and agreed to bring a selection of engagement rings had called ahead to ask the hotel to deliver a bottle of champagne as congratulations to the happy couple.

"Only one problem," Michelle said with a rueful smile. She pointed at Adam. "I’m not the one marrying him. I’m just his shopping consultant. But thanks for the thought. To be honest, he looks like he could use a drink."

She’d taken one look at Adam’s face when he’d arrived and resigned herself to a long, painful procedure. He looked so completely uptight that she honestly wondered how he’d managed to keep the plans quiet and sneak out to meet her without completely giving the game away. He’d even dressed up, for God’s sake, as if making a good impression on the jeweler was an important part of the process.

"You’re worrying too much," she chided. She’d taken her time, pouring a few glasses of champagne into him to try and get him to unwind a little. "This is not brain surgery. I know what he likes, so relax."

"You nearly screwed me up by sending me that note," he muttered.

"And how else was I supposed to get the information to you? I knew we had to do this tonight. I’m sorry if you think that Jeremy took things the wrong way, but Gus didn’t take his eyes off you yesterday and I just didn’t think I’d have a chance to get anywhere near you today without him being around. How was I to know he wouldn’t be at the arena until noon?"

Adam frowned, momentarily distracted. "I was hoping that it was just a headache this morning, but he didn’t seem well all day."

"No," Michelle sighed. "He didn’t, did he? He’s pretty freaked out about everything, Adam...but do
you blame him? Especially after yesterday? He’s worried sick about what might really be going on here."

Adam hunched his shoulders and then let them fall. "I know."

Suddenly he felt the need to tell Michelle that he suspected Gus was beginning to have nightmares again. But Michelle had already moved on, determined to get down to the matter at hand. "So we need to get this taken care of so that you can get back to him. Let’s get on with it, okay? Just watching you fidget is making me nervous."

He flashed her an ugly look and she grinned. She dragged him by the arm to the table where the jeweler had laid out a selection of rings and then sighed when Adam looked at the wide variety in dismay.

She took pity on him. "Okay, look. I can narrow it down for you right off the bat. Do you want something traditional?"

Adam looked blank. "Meaning?"

Michelle sighed. "A plain gold band?"

Blankness escalated. "Isn’t that what you’re supposed to get?"

"It’s traditional, but it’s not carved in stone. It can have a little diamond centerpiece, for example. It would be a little different, but not too off the wall."

Chewing her lip, Michelle ran her eyes over the selection of diamonds on gold bands and began waving away the most obviously unsuitable styles.

"Forget that. Too chunky. And those. Too flashy. Anything he’s ever liked has been pretty simple, but he does like styles that are a bit unusual. Don’t even look at the big ones... hey, that’s nice."

She selected one and thoughtfully slipped it on. Adam furrowed his brow.

"Gus would like that?"

"Hmmm? What?" Michelle looked momentarily embarrassed. "Er...no, actually... I was thinking about me."

Adam clenched his jaw. "Well, cut it out. You’re here to help me, not to shop for yourself. You can haul your ass down to the store and spend all day looking if you want. I have to get back before anyone notices I’m gone... so can we focus here please?"

Hiding a smile, Michelle reviewed the rest of the options and reduced the most likely candidates down to about one-quarter of the original selection. That still left far too many choices in Adam’s opinion, but at that point, Michelle took her champagne and retreated to a chair and bluntly told him the rest was up to him.

"Any of those would be fine," she assured him. "So now you just have to go with your gut."

He managed to get it down to three finalists. At that point his nerve failed him and he simply could not decide which of the three was the one he thought Gus would like the most.
"I’m sorry," he apologized to the patiently waiting jeweler. "The only jewelry I’ve ever bought him before is a silver bracelet."

The elderly man smiled. It was hardly the first late-night, undercover sales call he’d ever made. "It’s a big decision. Take your time. I’m in no hurry." But as his flustered client leaned over the table again and began looking from one ring to the other, the jeweler suddenly had a thought and added, "So he likes silver?"

Adam nodded. "That much I do know."

"And do you?"

"Me? Yeah. Why?"

"Good point," Michelle said, reappearing over Adam’s shoulder. "Did you bring any?"

The old man shook his head. "Not silver. But I do have some of these..."

There were only nine rings on the tray but Adam’s interest was immediately apparent.

"That’s not silver?"

"No. Platinum."

Adam looked at Michelle for approval. She leaned in beside him and glanced over the tray and nodded. "It’s okay. The band doesn’t have to be gold."

Adam looked back at the tray and screwed up his face in contemplation.

"Heaven help us both," Michelle said wryly to the jeweler. "We’re back up to nine choices."

"No...no..." Adam was already pointing. "I like that one."

Michelle waited a moment with eyebrows raised, anticipating the inevitable reassessment. Instead, Adam looked up from where he was staring intently at one particular ring and nodded at Michelle with resolution.

"That one," he said definitely.

Obligingly, she picked it up and slipped it on so Adam's finger so he could see the full effect. He stared a little more, then nodded again, then suddenly got hopelessly emotional on her.

"Don’t start, you big baby," she muttered, squeezing his arm. "You've done good. It’s beautiful."

It was a fourteen-carat white gold diamond band that featured a hammered finish with milgrain edging and was set with six brilliant round diamonds. It was distinctive enough that there would be absolute no doubt about what it represented. Anyone who saw this particular piece of jewelry on Gus’s hand was going to get the message loud and clear.

Adam was a thousand miles away. Michelle nudged him gently.
"Just remember, the wedding rings usually match the engagement ring. If you choose platinum, you need to stick with it for the bands as well."

He nodded absently. Hiding her smile, Michelle reached for her purse.

"Where are you going?"

"I think my work here is done," she said airily. "And in case you haven’t noticed, it’s the middle of the night. You can handle the rest, can’t you?"

With a smile Adam nodded, aware that Michelle was making a discreet exit before the issue of price or payment was discussed. Giving Adam a fierce hug, she thanked the jeweler for his efforts and was on the way to the door when suddenly she paused.

"I’d forgotten," she frowned. "You walked over here by yourself, didn’t you?"

"Yes. But I think I can find my own way home...thanks anyway, Mom."

"But you really shouldn’t go alone. Maybe I should wait for you outside...we’ll walk back together."

"Go," he said firmly. "I won’t be long and there’s hardly anyone around at this time of night. No one’s going to bother me."

Having made his decision, Adam was suddenly animated and full of energy despite the late hour and before he knew it, he’d spent another half an hour chatting with the elderly jeweler about Gus and how they’d met. It was a rare pleasure to be able to have a simple conversation with someone who had absolutely no interest in his career but when the older man tried without success to suppress a yawn, Adam started up guiltily and apologized.

"I can’t thank you enough for coming out so late. Sorry this was all a bit clandestine, but I just don’t want anyone to know about this yet."

"I’m quite used to it," the jeweler smiled gently.

Adam grinned. "Yeah, but I’m not. My nerves were absolutely shot by the time I was supposed to come out here. I don’t think I’d make a good secret agent. Michelle’s the one with the devious mind...that’s why she booked a room on this side of the complex...so we didn’t accidentally run into anyone we knew."

When he slipped out of the room, he stood for a moment in the hallway, fingering the little jewelry box in his pocket and smiling to himself. Then he retraced his steps back to the large glass-enclosed walkway that separated one hotel tower from another and stopped short in surprise when he reached for the door and found it locked.

"Excuse me, sir, but I’m afraid we’ve had to close the walkway temporarily."

Adam turned hesitantly. He was relieved to see that the lady from Housekeeping didn’t have a clue who he was but he couldn’t hide his dismay at the thought of having to find an alternate route.

"I just need to get back to the North Tower..."
She smiled apologetically. "I’m sorry, sir, but the fire doors automatically close and lock when the alarms go off. There’s no danger and there’s no need for you to leave this building, but of course all access to the north tower is closed off while they evacuate that building."

He’d gone pale. "Alarms?" he said faintly.

"Yes, sir. The alarms in the North Tower, sir. The fire alarms."

He rode down in the elevator with his heart in his throat but when he got to the lobby, he grimaced. It wasn’t as empty as he’d hoped and cursing under his breath, he ducked his head and walked straight through to the front entrance, praying that no one would recognize him. Luckily, most of the people were buzzing with nervous excitement over the evacuation of the adjoining building...there were still enough people in Las Vegas who remembered the deaths of eighty-four people in the MGM Grand tragedy of 1980 and who got very agitated at the mere suggestion of a hotel fire.

When he got outside, Adam had to stop to get his bearings but it was immediately apparent which direction he needed to go in. Even in the near daylight of reflected neon, he could still see the flashing lights of fire-trucks and police cars half-way down the block.

He began to run, thinking fleetingly of Michelle and wondering if she’d made it back to her room before the alarm went off. It was some consolation that he couldn’t see smoke and there didn’t seem to be any terrible urgency in the hordes of people who were spilling out of the North Tower, but that didn’t erase the realization that Gus would have been awakened by the alarms and found him gone. He’d be going nuts with worry.

Everybody would.

It took just about all the self-control Adam had to bite his tongue and stand still while Gus went up one side of him and down the other. He rarely backed down from criticism and his temper had already been tested so many times over the past few days that he was severely low on patience anyway. For God’s sake, he’d been out choosing an engagement ring for him and now he was tearing strips off him with a fury that only enraged him in return.

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket and clenched his fingers around the little box. All he had to do was pull it out and show Gus. That would have been the end of it but it probably would have gone down in history as the worst proposal of all time. He felt suddenly resentful that Gus was upbraiding him for what he’d done. He needed to make his boyfriend understand how much doing this right had meant to him...how he’d wanted to keep everything quiet so nobody would know, so that the whole process would be as private and personal as he could possibly make it. He’d worried all day about keeping the appointment with the jeweler secret, about being able to pick something that would be special to Gus...he’d thought about nothing else since he’d gotten Michelle’s note that morning and it had been important enough to him that he’d been willing to
sneak out in the middle of the night to get it done.

And Gus was hauling him over the coals for it like he’d been doing something that was frivolous or trivial.

_All I have to do is pull it out of my pocket and show him._ But instead he shoved the box a little farther back into his pocket, took a deep breath and tried to hang on to what was left of his temper.

Now wasn’t the time. Now wasn’t the place.

Throwing an engagement ring at somebody was definitely not the right way to ask them to marry you.

Michelle had only just arrived back in her room after her appointment with Adam when the fire alarm went off. Moments before, she had lingered for a moment outside Tommy’s door on her way by, tempted to knock to see if he was still awake. But since he’d already issued her a very enticing invitation earlier in the evening and she’d had to brush him off and give him the excuse that she was tired, she figured an unexpected reappearance at this point might look a bit fishy. Besides, he’d warned her that the next three nights were apparently one round after another of parties or appearances and it might be more prudent to take advantage of a good night’s sleep while she could.

She was literally pulling back the comforter to get into bed when the alarm rang. She had a sudden, horrifying thought ... _shit, I bet Adam’s not back yet..._ and then threw on pants and a t-shirt and ran out into the hallway to join the others.

Gus was predictably frantic, but Jeremy was insistent that he leave the hotel with the rest of them and there was nothing Michelle could do to alleviate her friend’s concern without giving the game away. She stood outside the hotel with Tommy, grimly noting the troubled look on Tommy’s face as he watched Gus worrying himself to near frenzy. When Michelle finally caught sight of Adam on his way through the crowd, she had to struggle to conceal her relief but could only shrug helplessly at him as he cast her a glance.

_You’re on your own, buddy..._

She didn’t envy his predicament. Gus had already seemed unwell and edgy throughout the day and it was pretty clear that he’d now managed to work himself into an even more severely agitated state. It didn’t help that there was already grumbling among the entourage that the series of strange occurrences was getting just a little bit too freaky; the look on Gus’s face clearly indicated that he’d reached _that_ conclusion a long time ago.

No one dared say a word to Adam as they all returned to their rooms. When they got off the elevator and everybody began to disperse, Michelle pulled at Tommy’s sleeve until he looked at her inquiringly.

"How’d you like to buy me a drink?" she muttered.

They went back to his room and Michelle flopped on the sofa before gratefully accepting the glass he filled for her.

Her mood mystified him. "Are you okay?"

"Who, me?" She stretched her legs out with a groan. "Yeah, I’m fine. I love being rousted out of
my room in the middle of the night by the threat of being burned alive."

His mouth curved but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. "I don’t blame you for that,” he murmured.
"But...actually...I was wondering if maybe you were ticked off at me for something tonight."

Michelle choked a little on her nightcap. "Ticked...? Why?"

He sat down on the edge of the coffee table beside her, elbows on his knees, sipping at his own drink and then slowly rolling the tumbler between his palms. "You just seemed a bit preoccupied earlier, that’s all. You said you were tired...but I thought maybe it was something else. You seemed to have something on your mind."

Michelle drew a careful breath, recognizing the need to proceed with caution. "I guess I do. There’s a lot going on right now."

"Are you still glad you flew down here?"

It wasn’t what she’d expected. It took her a second to register the full meaning of the question then she leaned forward, smacked him on the arm indignantly and retorted, "Of course I am, you goof! Why...am I making you feel like I’m not?"

He took another sip. "I just...I was getting the impression that maybe you were second guessing yourself."

He stared at the floor and Michelle, taking more time to consider his words, stared at the top of his head.

"You mean because I haven’t talked to Gus," she said finally.

His head didn’t move but his eyes flickered up to hers. "You’re still stalling and I don’t understand why."

"I’ve told you why. And I’m not stalling. I’m just trying to pick my moment. I don’t understand why you don’t understand that."

Annoyance crept into his voice. "Because I don’t want him to think that I was trying to hide this from him! I know the two of you have issues, but come on, Michelle...he’s going to think we’ve been deliberately sneaking around behind his back!"

Michelle drew her knees up to her chest and scowled, slouching further down against the cushions. Tommy straightened and for a moment they glared at each other until Michelle folded her arms mutinously.

"Gus has enough on his plate right now without me getting into this with him."

"Is that the real reason?"

"Shit, Tommy...he’s so flipped out about everything that’s going on that he isn’t going to be thinking straight. He’s not handling this well at all. He’s not just worried...he’s scared. He’s getting paranoid and that’s not like Gus. He feels like nobody will listen to him. All the little things are just piling up on top of one another...and now this...tonight...between the fire alarm and him worrying about Adam..."
She broke off, mentally kicking herself. *Damn, I shouldn’t have brought that up...*

"He’s not helping much lately," Tommy said darkly.

Michelle closed her eyes and bit back a sardonic remark. Tommy caught the look of irritation and added with bitterness, "Well, he’s not. I know him. He was like this the last time we were getting ready to go out on tour... the closer we get, the more wound up and difficult Adam gets. Don’t get me wrong...I know it’s just the way he is and onstage that intensity can be really good, but offstage sometimes he can be impossible to deal with. Gus hasn’t ever seen him like this. It’s not like he does it on purpose, but when you have to keep this big, happy face on in front of the public, your frustration ends up coming out when you’re in private. When it gets bad he can be a real bastard to people, especially the ones closest to him. And yeah...he’s freaked out about everything that’s going on just as much as the rest of us are but I know he’s really taking everything out on Gus."

Michelle didn’t dare ask him how he knew. Instead, she said grimly, "That’s my point. All the more reason why I shouldn’t be getting into it about you and me right now."

"Fair enough...if that’s the real reason."

There was a moment of silence. Michelle’s brows tapered in warning. "Excuse me?"

By now, Tommy should have been fully acquainted with the danger signs but he unwisely chose to push the point nonetheless. "Are you sure it’s not because you’re still not too sure about me?"

At that, Michelle sat up. Her glass went down on the coffee table with a bang and she said sharply, "I told you when I agreed to come down here that I was willing to try and work on it. I didn’t make any promises about what would happen, but I did promise you that I’d try. I’ve always been straight with you about that. I haven’t exactly been pushing you away, in case you haven’t noticed!"

He flushed. "I’ve noticed that you’re a lot different with me when we’re alone. I’m not saying that some people don’t suspect that we’re more than friends. They’re not idiots. What I’m saying is that I’m starting to think you’re trying to keep this quiet because once you admit it to people you can’t go back and pretend it never happened."

Her face sagged into incredulity. "I don’t believe you just said that! You pompous son of a bitch...since when are you so against being discreet?"

"There’s a difference between being discreet and keeping it quiet so you always have a nice safe way out."

She glowered at him. This was heading into very hazardous territory. "So...what exactly do you want me to do? Would you like me to issue a press release?"

"I just want you to show me that you’re serious about this! You could start by telling Gus. Now! You’ve left this way too long. Do you have any idea what he’s going to think of me when he finds out we’ve been seeing each other for months?"

"Aha," Michelle said as sarcasm broke through. "*There* it is. I suspected we’d get here sooner or later. You’re awfully worried about what Gus is going to think of you, do you realize that?"
"I don’t want to hurt his feelings!"

That did it. All restraint on Michelle’s temper snapped.

"Why don’t you stop worrying about Gus’s feelings and start worrying about mine?" she spat at him, then struggled to her feet and didn’t bother to lower her voice. "Maybe that’s part of the problem! Maybe I’d appear to be more certain about how I feel about all this if I was more certain about how you feel...about Gus!"

Tommy was on his feet as well, blocking her first one way and then the other as she attempted to go around him. "Don’t start twisting this into something that it’s not. We’ve been through this a thousand times. What do I have to do to get it through your head that I don’t have those kinds of feelings for him anymore?"

Fists went to hips. "You know, Tommy, there are times when you make it very easy for me to believe that. Then something happens. When he got hurt last fall I know that was tough for you. I tried to give you some space when that happened, but that was three months ago and sometimes I still see you looking at him like you’re still trying to figure out how you feel. You’re overprotective. You worry about him constantly. You watch him like a hawk. You don’t think you do...but you do..."

"Do you realize that you dig this up every time we try to talk about us?"

"Now who’s twisting it into something it’s not?"

"You’re using it as an excuse."

"An excuse for what?"

He drew back a little and folded his arms across his chest. His eyes fell to the floor.

"Maybe so you can convince yourself that this just isn’t going to happen."

She stared at him. Then, abruptly deflated, she sank back down on the sofa and Tommy’s heart sank roughly the same distance.

"Well, is it?" she said bleakly. "This is all getting a little too intense for me, Tommy. It’s not just about you and me. You know the position I’m in. I have my son to consider..."

He growled under his breath in exasperation. "Yep...saw that coming...Handy Excuse Number Two..."

Michelle squeezed her eyes shut and her voice broke. "Come on...you know that’s not what I mean..."

His accusation hurt, especially when she admitted to herself that she did still have concerns about the depth of his feelings for Gus. When they were alone, he never gave Michelle the impression he was thinking of anyone but her...but there were still occasions...like tonight...when disturbing little signs of his attachment to Gus were still evident enough to make Michelle nervous. But if she could find the guts to be honest about it to herself, it was her own feelings that disturbed her the most. She’d been adamant from the very beginning about keeping their relationship a strictly "no-strings" arrangement but the truth was that she’d woken up the first morning she’d arrived in Las
Vegas, taken one long look at him and realized that there were more than just a few strings involved here and that in all actuality she was trussed up like a Christmas turkey.

"I’m going to ask you again," he said with difficulty. "Are you still glad that you flew down here?"

She blinked at him slowly, eyes damp and her lips clamped together to stop them from trembling. She brushed self-consciously at the threatening tears while her head moved up and down in a jerky nod and she groped blindly for his hand.

"Yes, I am," she whispered. "But I start to panic sometimes...when things get so good...I’m afraid of it all going wrong...and I’d just gotten used to being alone again..."

She pulled hard so that he was tipped onto the sofa beside her. Her arms locked around him with enough force to squeeze all the breath out of him and then she seriously impaired his efforts to recover by kissing him so deeply that inhaling ceased to be an option.

"I am feeling seriously scared here," she said wildly. "Please hang on to me..."

"I can do that," he said, half-strangled.

They sat together for the longest time, saying little and simply resting against each other while Michelle continued to burn little bridges in her mind and found that she felt intensely relieved to have finally chosen a path.

"I will talk to Gus in the morning," she muttered into his chest, much later. "I promise. I’ll find a place where we can go and be alone and I will tell him everything...I promise."

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Saturday, December 29th, 2012

The day promised to be a killer. There was a full rehearsal scheduled until noon and then Adam was scheduled for a series of print and television interviews all to be held back at the hotel. This would allow the crews at the arena several uninterrupted hours for a full technical run-through to make the final adjustments on lights and special effects. That night, Samuel had planned a lavish dinner party at the hotel to which he’d invited dozens of his high-profile friends and business associates. Most of Sunday would be devoted to dress rehearsals and Sunday night was set aside for the VH1 party, where the channel would be looking for a lot of "behind-the-scenes" video footage for the companion special to the New Year’s Eve simulcast. All this, followed by the brutal schedule for Monday itself, was a daunting prospect to both Adam and the rest of the entourage...even more so to Gus, who barely had the strength to get out of bed Saturday morning.

It would have been incorrect to say that he had slept, although he had lain for hours with his eyes clenched shut, going over the previous evening in his head. The more he had lashed out at Adam for his disappearance, the more Adam had shut down until Gus finally fell silent as well, not for any lack of the need to express himself but because there simply weren’t any words in his vocabulary to convey the sensation that seeped through him as his chest began to slowly and painfully tighten. The hot flush that had swept his face now leached out and left it a waxen grey. There had never...ever...been an occasion when he had seriously doubted Adam’s word and now for the very first time in their relationship he was utterly shocked by the realization that he didn’t
believe what his lover was telling him.

"Where were you?" he whispered again. Adam’s gaze flickered away and Gus’s hands had curled into fists. He had no idea why he kept repeating the question, except perhaps to give Adam one last chance to re-think his answer...to change his story...

...to tell him the **truth**...

By morning, he had managed to convince himself that he had overreacted. The denial was purely a self-defense mechanism...his mind simply couldn’t cope with any of the alternatives. He tried to apologize to Adam for his outburst but found that his boyfriend wasn't exactly in the mood for acts of contrition.

"I went overboard," he said humbly.

"Uh huh."

"I'm sorry."

"Forget it."

"I don’t blame you for feeling like you needed to get out for a while. I just wish you'd be more careful. I'm worried about you."

"You don't have to worry. I'm a big boy. I think I can handle crossing the street by myself."

"That's not what I mean..." Tiredly, Gus slumped against the edge of the dresser and stared at the carpet. He was running on a minimal amount of sleep, his eyes were badly smudged with fatigue, the previous day's headache was making an encore appearance and nothing he wanted to say would come out in any kind of a coherent manner.

"You need to go back to bed," Adam said flatly.

Gus glanced up and found Adam applying his mascara with a bit more intensity than was required. He wasn’t any more rested than Gus was and still seemed to be inordinately resentful of his boyfriend’s anger during the night. It wasn’t like Adam to keep his opinions to himself when he got defensive and it amazed Gus that he’d ranted at Adam the way he had and there had been absolutely no comeback. But that didn’t mean Adam wasn’t still oozing petulance over it hours later. Every movement was jerky and cross and the signs of moodiness had become all too familiar to Gus.

"I'm fine," he murmured.

"You're not fine," Adam snapped. "You've hardly slept for two nights. You know, you might be in a better frame of mind to deal with all of this if you’d just look after yourself a little better."

Censured, Gus closed his eyes and Adam cursed under his breath. He knew it was wrong to blame Gus for the way his feelings had been wounded but the whole previous evening had been a highly emotional experience for him and he was inexplicably annoyed that Gus somehow hadn’t sensed that. Now he seemed over-emotional himself and doubt began to nag at Adam again.

*He's never going to last through the tour if he doesn't find some way to get a grip on things...*
Adam was irritable and sharp with Gus all the way to the arena. He was trying hard to concentrate himself on the matter at hand; they were on the final countdown to the biggest night of his career and he needed to shut out all the distractions and frustrations and try to focus on only those things that absolutely did require his attention and energy.

No one said a word to Adam about his whereabouts of the previous night and there also seemed to be an unspoken agreement that no one would mention the fire alarm, the prank in the dressing room or anything else of a controversial nature. The massive security was somewhat at odds with the concerted effort to pretend that everything was simply business as usual but that too went unmentioned and the rehearsal was very quickly up to speed.

Michelle made a point of finding an opportunity to speak to Adam, however briefly. She caught up with him as he warmed up by stalking around the empty arena concourse while Jeremy trailed him at a distance.

"I’m sorry I couldn’t cover for you last night. Did the two of you get into it much?"

"Gus got into it. I didn’t."

"Oh," Michelle said uneasily. He was covering distance so fast that she nearly had to run to keep up with him. "Was he really pissed?"

"You saw the look on his face. Was he pissed?"

"So what did you do?"

"Nothing. Stood there. Let him yell at me. What the hell was I supposed to do?"

"You could have just told him the truth."

"No," he said stubbornly. "I want it to be a surprise. I want it to be special and I’m not going to let anything spoil it. I’m going to do this right."

"Oh, so you’re just going to let him be pissed with you?"

"Michelle, I can’t help what he thinks. I made up some story about going out to the casino for a couple of hours and he didn’t buy it. And I’ve got a million things on my mind that I’m supposed to be concentrating on right now and I just can’t be worrying about whether or not he’s pissed at me."

"So in other words he wasn’t just pissed about you going missing...he was pissed because he thinks you lied to him."

"I did lie to him!" he snapped. "Nothing I told him about last night was true!"

"Oh, for God’s sake!" Michelle said in exasperation, two-stepping to match his pace as he abruptly changed direction. "You had a very good reason to lie to him. It’s not like you were sneaking out to meet another man or something."

He stopped dead and gave her a pointed glare.
Michelle decided against asking Gus about Adam and as they sat together and watched the run-through, she also had to work hard to drum up the courage to raise the "other" issue with him as well. Gus observed the goings-on dully, with little interest, and he seemed in such a state of profound exhaustion that Michelle seriously doubted that Gus should have made an appearance at the arena in the first place. Adam barely spoke to him, even after they returned to the hotel at one o’clock. But when he disappeared for his scheduled interviews, Michelle decided it was best to grab the bull by the horns and gently suggested that she and Gus go down to the main dining room and grab something to eat.

"Eat?" said Gus wearily. "What’s that?"

"Yeah, I notice you’re looking a bit faint around the edges. You need some food."

"I couldn’t, Michelle...honest."

Stubbornly, Michelle persisted. "Then come and just sit with me. I need to talk to you. Seriously."

Gus’s gaze sharpened a bit. "Something wrong?"

Michelle swallowed. "No. But we need to talk and it’s private."

"So let’s go up to your room..."

"No." Frankly, Michelle felt the surrounding hustle and bustle in the dining room would be some help in balancing out the frosty silences that were probably going to come about as a result of this little heart-to-heart. "I need some food. Let’s go downstairs."

Gus shrugged. They were stepping out of the elevator into the lobby when they suddenly became aware of some very angry voices raised in argument as somebody stormed in through the front doors of the hotel.

"Now what?" Gus sighed. The pompous arrogance of the voice identified its owner long before he came into view. Samuel Brice was on an absolute rampage and regardless of the fact that he was in full view of dozens of guests in the lobby of his own hotel, he was alternately stomping across the terrazzo floor and stopping to bark over his shoulder at both Doug Taylor and Bill Wasley who were in hot pursuit.

Michelle reached for Gus’s arm. "Maybe we don’t want to know..." she muttered, but Gus was already half-way to interception.

"Samuel!" Gus called after him. "What’s going on?"

Heads swiveled and Bill Wasley nearly turned himself inside out frantically trying to wave Gus off. Ignoring the warning, giving him a puzzled frown, Gus sidled around him and looked at Samuel, only half-aware of the grim, resigned expression on Doug’s face on the opposite side.
Samuel turned at the sound of Gus's voice and Michelle, only a few steps behind Gus, was actually convinced for a second that the man was going to throw a punch at Gus as he got within range. Gus half recoiled in shock; he looked like he wanted to kill somebody and the longer Gus met his blazing stare the more obvious it became that he was the exact victim Samuel had in mind.

"You stupid jerk," he said furiously.

Doug dared to take Samuel by the elbow. "Let's take this somewhere else, okay? There are too many eyes and ears down here."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Gus demanded.

Samuel jerked his arm free of Doug’s grasp, practically spitting his words at Gus. "Why can’t you just mind your own fucking business? You just can’t keep your nose out, can you? You’re not going to be happy until you’ve fucked up this entire event..."

Suddenly, Gus froze. Samuel could only be referring to one thing ... his visit to the police station ... and his mind began spinning with thoughts of how Samuel possibly could have heard about it.

_Holden, you bastard...you ratted me out..._

"I...I..."

"What happened?" Michelle said, looking around the group in an attempt to catch someone’s attention.

Samuel spread his hands in mock disbelief. "Don’t you know? I’ve just spent the past two hours trying to stop the story from going public. I’ve got the police breathing down my neck to keep it quiet and this dumbass reporter who is taking a whole lot of pleasure in telling me that the information came from somebody in my own backyard. I probably could have guessed without them getting specific, but he’s perfectly willing to get specific. In fact, he seems to really be enjoying it." He leaned in until he was only a fraction of an inch from Gus’s pale face and snapped, "Do you have anything you’d like to say, Mr. Harrison?"

"Look..." Gus said desperately.

Michelle didn’t have much information to go on but the look on Gus’s face was evidence of impending disaster. "Will you please tell me what he’s supposed to have done?"

Samuel straightened, arms crossed, with a face that indicated that he’d be more than happy to fill in the details if Gus didn’t start talking...fast.

Gus closed his eyes momentarily. When he opened them, Michelle was staring at him with a whole lot of apprehension and Gus could only mumble his reply.

"I went to the police and asked them to withdraw the event permits for the opening and the concert because of all the weird things that have been going on."

Michelle gasped and her jaw hit the floor. "Jesus H. Christ, Gus! Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"There!" Samuel said sarcastically. "It’s unanimous!"
"This is not the place to be doing this!" Doug said sharply. Both he and Bill looked seriously concerned about the amount of attention they were drawing, but Samuel seemed oblivious to everything but the source of his immediate problem.

"I wouldn’t worry about it, Doug. Since Mr. Harrison has already made his opinions known to the media, I don’t see the need to worry about protecting him from the fallout."

"Media?" Michelle echoed in horror.

Every trace of color was gone from Gus’s face. "What media?"

"You spoke to a reporter, you idiot!"

"I did not!" he said, aghast.

"Are you that stupid that you didn’t realize it?"

"I didn’t talk to anyone except Dean Holden! There wasn’t even anybody else anywhere near me when I was there...nobody...except for some guy in the..."

The realization nearly knocked him over. Everything inside clenched into a huge knot and breathing suddenly became impossible. He faltered a little more until his voice simply gave out for lack of oxygen.

"...elevator..."

Everything ground to a halt. He put both shaking hands over his mouth.

No...no...I couldn’t have been that stupid...

"Oh my God," he said sickly. "Adam is going to kill me..."
Gus was lucky that the reporter who had witnessed his little outburst at the police station had a serious ego problem. Envisioning himself as the next big thing in the entertainment world, he decided that the best platform for launching his career with a juicy Adam Lambert story was not the local daily newspaper but something a little more high-profile. And knowing that VH1 was planning to draw millions of viewers with the New Year's Eve simulcast, he figured that the channel would jump at the opportunity to bump their ratings even further with any story that contained a hint of scandal, controversy or danger.

He went to Bill Wasley first. While the inquiry was inoffensive enough - "I'd like to do a little piece on VH1's coverage of the concert...can you hook me up with the publicist who's handling things here in town?" - he made the serious mistake of trying to convince Bill that he had the proper credentials by hinting that he had been one of the reporters who had covered the incident at the fundraiser. Bill, having thoroughly read every piece of coverage there was on that incident, knew perfectly well that he was being lied to and stalled as long as he could while he notified both Doug Taylor and Samuel Brice. It was very fortunate that Griffin’s legal team was more powerful than the young reporter’s bravado, especially when Doug called Dean Holden and informed him that information about a police investigation was about to be leaked to the public. After being threatened within an inch of his career with both legal action and criminal charges, the young journalist backed off, although he refused to hand over the recordings he’d made and seemed glum enough about the whole thing to still be tempted to do something stupid like release the information anyway.

Samuel was in a terrible mood because of this loose end when they returned to the hotel. Running into Gus in the lobby threw him into a revived rage and for once, both Doug and Bill seemed reluctant to defend Gus. In fact, Doug’s feelings were almost impossible to read and Bill offered nothing but the occasional glance in Gus’s direction.

When the long series of scheduled interviews was over, Doug asked to meet with Adam and his inner circle privately in the lounge. Puzzled, they complied but when everybody arrived and saw that Gus, Michelle, Samuel and Bill were all waiting in tense silence, everyone started to speculate about the reason behind the meeting. It was now nearly four-thirty. Gus had been huddled in one corner of a sofa feeling like a lamb in the slaughterhouse for nearly three hours, with his misery clearly written on his face. In a rush of emotion he had confessed everything to Michelle, but it had been little comfort; Michelle was more than shocked at the lengths Gus had gone to and seriously doubted that anyone else who would even bother to listen to his explanation could possibly be able to understand his reasons.

Michelle was perfectly aware that Gus was feeling paranoid. He was so anxious that Michelle could practically see the way it was breaking through into irrationality. But going behind Adam’s back and trying to interfere with the concert...that had been extremely foolish. There was no way to tell what Adam’s reaction would be, except that the explosion was probably going to make an atomic bomb look like a firecracker.

There was another nagging thought at the back of Michelle’s mind. So much for my promise to Tommy...
Gus since he had closed his eyes and his hands were gripped tightly in his lap. He listened to Doug’s explanation, only barely aware of the rumblings that began very early on in the conversation and which grew louder as he continued.

"So the bottom line," Doug concluded finally, “is that we think we’ve been lucky and managed to control the situation before it got out of hand. But I don’t need to tell you that something like this could still be a disaster, both financially and from a public relations point of view. We’re just going to have to hope that this guy takes our threats seriously enough that he decides to play ball. As long as he does, there’s no reason to expect that VH1 or anyone else will get hold of this information. If not...well, Bill and I are working on some plans for damage control just in case..."

He stopped talking and glanced at Gus as if offering him the opportunity to speak up for himself but Gus was too numb for words. His eyes remained shut and there was no change in his rigid, hunched posture.

Doug cleared his throat. "From a professional standpoint, that’s all I have to say. I’ll keep you posted, of course. And as far as the rest of this goes...well, I think the rest is personal and I’ll get out of here so that you can have some privacy."

"I sure as hell have something to say," Samuel snapped suddenly. He had been standing against the wall, arms crossed and silent but clearly pissed beyond belief. It was a miracle that he’d managed to keep his temper under control long enough to let Doug speak. Now he stalked into the center of the lounge, determined to make his own opinion perfectly clear.

"In two hours, I’m throwing a dinner party in the ballroom of this hotel for some of the most influential and important business associates Griffin has. Some of these people are investors, some are potential investors, some are industry contacts that Griffin can’t do without and a whole lot of them are my personal friends. They’re expecting to party with Adam Lambert and that’s damn well what they’re going to get. You will be there...don’t throw any temperamental rockstar shit at me tonight...and none of you will mention any of this to anybody who might ask. Play dumb, do you hear me?" He narrowed his eyes at Gus. "For some of you, that’s not going to be so hard."

"Samuel..." Doug warned through clenched teeth.

"And I swear to God that if you dare to make me look bad tonight, Adam, I’m going to seriously reconsider whether or not Griffin will sponsor the second leg of this tour. So far you seem to be more fucking trouble than you’re worth, and there are a lot of artists out there who would just about drop dead for the chance to have Griffin back their promotions."

"Samuel!" Doug said again.

Samuel waved his arms. "So find some way to stop bringing disaster down on me. You might start with finding a way to control the people in your own organization, and if you can’t manage that...well, maybe you should be asking them to get the hell off this tour."

At that, Gus’s shoulders twitched, but otherwise he didn’t move.

"But you better damn well be here at six thirty, looking your best and impressing the hell out of my guests. At least until the first leg of this tour is over, you are mine...bought and paid for ...and I damn well expect to get my money’s worth out of you."

It was time for Gus to face the jury. Michelle shifted uneasily, not sure if she should go or stay and
finally decided that Gus needed somebody on his side...even if it was just to try and shield him from the worst of the blast. She hitched one hip up on the arm of the sofa beside Gus and looked over her friend’s head at Tommy, trying unsuccessfully to catch his eye and guess his reaction.

It took Gus a long time to get up the courage to open his eyes. The dangerous silence didn’t help and as he sat waiting for Adam to lose his patience and go on the attack, he was haunted by a vague memory of what he’d said to Andy on the night of the fundraiser when Andy had complained that Gus knew nothing about negative publicity.

*I try not to give the press any ammo. When they make stuff up there’s nothing you can do but you sure as hell can have a say in what they see and hear when they’re around you.*

God, he was such an idiot.

The faces that watched Gus as he sat and waited for the inevitable outburst were mixed with resentment, anger and a sort of sympathy but he continued to block them out until he finally couldn’t bear the waiting any longer.

He opened his eyes and lifted his head. Adam was slouched in a hard-backed chair, long legs stretched out and crossed in front of him and his arms folded across his chest. He was staring at the floor and seemed, for the moment, to be very calm...although there was a muscle twitching in one cheek.

"I," Gus said, struggling to keep his voice steady. "I’m sorry."

"That’s not good enough."

Startled to hear Adam speak, Gus head snapped up and his eyes went wide. Adam hadn’t moved an inch from his original position and his eyes were still fixed on the floor. His expression was carefully guarded but Gus could still feel his rage.

"This is twice in two weeks that you’ve gone behind my back and broken my trust by poking your nose into professional issues and getting yourself in trouble with the media."

Gus was completely and utterly embarrassed. The scolding would have stung enough in private; it hurt even more so with the accusing audience.

"I’m sorry..."

That snapped Adam from his paralysis. "Stop saying that!" He was on his feet, nearly tripping over Isaac as he crossed from his chair to Gus's. "I don’t want your apologies! What you did was unforgivable. It’s not the first time, damn it, but it had fucking well better be the last. You don’t represent me, and have no right to be talking to the police, the media or anyone else about what goes on with me. I’m getting sick of having to apologize for the things you do. You piss people off and I go to bat for you. You cause a public relations nightmare and I go to bat for you. You need to learn to just keep your mouth shut. This doesn’t have anything to do with you!"

It was entirely the wrong thing to say. Gus was quite prepared to take the blame for his actions but there was no way he was going to sit still and let Adam cast doubt on his motives.

"Nothing to do with me?" he flared. "How the hell can you say that? Where the hell do you think I was when those girls were drugged at the concert? Where the hell was I when Doug found the
bottles that had been punctured in the dressing room? Where the hell was I when everyone was pointing fingers about how this all got started? You all were pretty damn quick to jump on the bandwagon when it first looked like someone might have been trying to get back at me. I have the right to look out for my own interests and in case you hadn’t noticed, I happen to be trying to look out for yours as well!"

"You have a damn funny way of doing that," Samuel remarked sourly from the other side of the room.

Unexpectedly, Bill intervened. "Gus, I know that you're worried about safety. It's not that nobody appreciates your concern and I know that you're just trying to help, but it doesn't look good if one of us is running around making it look like Adam's trying to influence the authorities."

"He’s not one of ‘us’, Bill," Samuel snapped. "He's not a part of this tour. That’s my whole point."

Bill turned a very level gaze on Samuel. "Gus took a lot of crap over that envelope of clippings that got delivered here. That got him involved whether we wanted it that way or not. The cops were all over him..."

"Yeah, for two days. And I agree...those clippings made him look like he had something to do with this but that doesn’t give him the right to be going to the cops now and trying to interfere like that! Unless of course he’s suddenly decided that maybe he is to blame for whatever the hell is going on here and he’s got a guilty conscience."

Gus had been flashing Bill a brief, grateful smile; now his head jerked around in Samuel’s direction. "You just won't let go of that, will you? You still don't believe that this isn’t linked to me somehow. If you’re still looking for someone to blame...fine. Personally, I think you're all in a major state of denial about what still might happen here. So don’t stand there on one hand and tell me that you blame me for this and then give me crap because I try and do something about it."

He glared back. "The point is you don't represent Adam and you don't represent this tour! I warned you that you just don’t have the head for this shit. It was only a matter of time before you really got yourself into serious trouble and you just refuse to get it into your thick skull that any crap you get into just drags Adam in at the same time. And a lot of people are getting seriously pissed that you just won’t keep your nose out of it."

Gus stiffened and couldn’t stop himself from going on the defensive. "Can I help it if I still think that there is something going on that the cops are missing? Am I just supposed to sit on this? I’m sorry, but I still think there’s a huge risk here that you’re all ignoring..."

"Nobody is ignoring it!" Samuel shouted at him. "There are half a million things being done to make sure security is tight." Furious, he looked accusingly at Adam. "Shit, Adam...can’t you do something about him?"

"I’m not a dog," Gus responded angrily. "He doesn't have me on a leash."

"Don’t go there, Samuel," Adam snapped.

"Well, he either controls himself or you control him. I don’t care which. But I’m going to start having a major problem with you if this ever happens again. Keep him out of everything. Completely." He turned on Gus again. "You hear me? Don't do anything, don't say anything, don't start anything. Just keep out. If you're still so damn interested in being a cop, maybe you should
just go and get your old job back."

Tommy had stayed silent as long as he could possibly stand it but there was no way he could let that remark go. "Come on, Sam!" he said angrily. "That's a cheap shot. You know why he had to leave the police force."

"Yeah...so? He's had his surgery." Samuel's frustration was getting the better of him. "What's to stop him from going back to it now?"

Michelle flinched hard. Even Terrance shifted in anger at that one but managed to hold his tongue. There was a moment’s uncomfortable silence while they all glared at each other and Gus's face reddened. Samuel had no way to know what a sensitive subject that was for Gus but it struck him in an impossibly personal way and he just lost his temper.

"Nothing’s stopping me," he choked out. "And it's not exactly like I haven't had the offer."

"Oh yeah?" Samuel said with mockery. "Why’s that? Are they running short of loose cannons?"

At that Gus walked out, despite Adam's attempts to stop him. Even through the heat of his own anger, Adam knew that the remark had been unnecessarily insulting and cruel. He had a few choice words to say to Samuel and then he ran after Gus, catching up just as he was getting in the elevator down the hall.

Gus was leaning against the wall with his head down and made no move to prevent the doors from closing. Adam got his hands in the opening and shoved them apart and then braced his shoulder against one side to hold them open.

"Look," he said. "What Samuel said was out of line."

"He's got a good point, though, doesn't he?" Gus said flatly.

"Will you please try and understand the position you’ve just put me in?"

Gus's head came up. "Maybe you could try and understand my position! You're asking me just to ignore things that I think are potentially dangerous. Can I let them go? Will I sit by and watch you, scared to death that you’re going to be hurt? No. Don't ever ask me to do that!"

He put one hand on Adam's shoulder, shoved him backwards and then slammed his hand on the button to close the doors. As they slid shut, he fired one last bitter shot.

"Now since you’re expected to show up for this damn party tonight like you’re a performing monkey, maybe you should go and get ready. If it’s going to be a problem for me to be there, just let me know. Maybe there are too many juicy stories going around about me by now. But of course, if I’m not there...people will just start spreading rumors about that as well, so I’ll get ready just in case, while you try and decide whether or not you want me to be there."

Adam stood there, absolutely numb, as he listened to the sound of the elevator moving up. Then he hit the mirrored doors with his fist, hard enough to make him immediately regret it.
"You and I need to have a talk."

Michelle was facing him when he spun around and Adam immediately threw his hands up in front of him.

"Michelle, I don’t need a lecture from you right now. If you feel like telling somebody off...try Gus. He’s the one who needs that talk."

"I’d say he pretty much just got that," Michelle answered. "And I’m not planning to lecture you. But there are a few things you need to know and I doubt you’re going to hear it from Gus."

She refused to give up until Adam agreed to go back to her room with her, where he sat sullenly, practically bursting with so many emotions. Michelle sat down opposite him and eyed him with more than a little sympathy. She knew that there was nothing that could ever hurt Adam more deeply than a breach of his trust. There were so many things in his life for which he had to rely on others and he had always had great difficulty adjusting his controlling nature with the need to leave much of his affairs in the hands of people around him. The nagging awareness that he could be taken advantage of at any time was frequently troubling him and as a result he was very obsessive about the trust he insisted on from his closest friends and associates.

Breaking that trust was an unforgivable sin. He had cut more than a few people out of his life for doing it and Michelle was aware how badly this might have damaged his faith in Gus.

"First of all," Michelle said evenly. "I’m not defending him. What he did was totally crazy."

"You’re damn right it was. Fuck! I still can’t believe he’d go behind my back like that."

"Do you have any idea why?"

He glared. "What kind of a stupid question is that?"

"It’s a perfectly reasonable question and if you’ll just calm yourself down for five minutes maybe you could try and look at this from Gus’s point of view. If you remember, I tried to warn you the first day that you were back here that I was worried about how shaky he seemed. That he seemed to be having a lot of trouble trying to cope with the pressure. That I was worried that any more stress might push him over the edge again and we’d be right back to where we were after the trial."

Frustrated, he clenched the arm of the chair. "I know how hard this has been on him! I’ve never pretended that it wasn’t!"

"Well, I just spent the whole afternoon with him waiting for all of this to hit the fan. He talked to me...a lot. And I’ve seen Gus through a lot of bad times, but I’ve never seen him like this. Did you know that he’s dreaming about you again?"

That caught him off guard. His face paled a little and Michelle cursed under her breath.

"Damn you, Adam...why didn’t you tell me?"

"I wasn’t sure," he muttered. "It’s only just started...and he kept telling me he couldn’t remember..."
"It always starts out that way, Adam! You know that! And then it just gets worse and worse. So on top of all the fear he’s got about who’s messing with your security, now he’s dreaming about the accident again. About you in the accident. I’m not just guessing...he told me that. He woke up from dreaming about not being able to save you when you needed him - you’ve seen how that terrifies him - and then all he could think about was doing whatever he could to try and stop you from performing because he’s still convinced that something is very wrong here. I know it’s not rational...I know that...but doesn’t that show you how completely scared he is?"

She saw the painful spasm that crossed his face and then he leaned forward and put his clasped hands against his forehead.

"What do you expect me to do?" he muttered in frustration. "I can’t just sit around and let him do these crazy things. He’s making it impossible for me. Do you honestly expect me to just forget it?"

She let out a long breath. "No. This is something the two of you are going to have to work out and I know that now just isn’t the time. But I’m telling you that if you shut him out, it will be the end of him."

"I’m not going to shut him out," he growled.

"No? Then you’re going to have to control that temper, buddy, because it sure looks that way. And before you start," she warned, as his head came up with a snap. "I’m not giving you a hard time. You’re under way too much pressure right now, and he’s not helping. You have every right to be pissed and you have every right to let him know how much you’re pissed. But he’s not strong enough to take much more at this point. All I want you to do right now is give him a chance to explain. Just listen to him. He needs to know that you believe he did what he did out of concern for you and not for any other reason."

Adam closed his eyes, exhausted on so many levels that he had completely lost the ability to think straight. He had an appearance to make in less than two hours and he seriously doubted he was going to manage to put on much of a public face. He recognized the danger signs all too well; everything inside him was twisted so tight that he knew he was close to losing it. If even one more person got in his face about something tonight he was going to end up in a brawl....

"I’m not sure now is the time, Michelle..." he managed finally. "If you want to know the absolute truth, it just hurts too much at the moment."

"I’m sure it does, Adam," she murmured in reply. "I’m sure it hurts like hell..." She waited, soberly, while he struggled for a moment with a raft of contradictory emotions and when his eyes finally came back up to hers, her mouth twitched in a sympathetic half-smile and she pushed just a little more, as gently as she could.

"...so imagine how Gus feels."
Gus stormed back to his room and went straight into the shower, turning the water temperature down as far as he could stand it, hoping that it would cool off his temper as well as the rest of him.

Just as he was furiously scrubbing a towel through his hair, there was a knock on the door. For a moment he debated whether or not to answer it, and then he threw the towel onto the counter, slid into a thin bathrobe and went to look into the hallway through the peephole.

"Stop looking at me through there and just open the door," Tommy said gently.

Gus let him in reluctantly. Aware of the frown on Gus's face, Tommy ventured, "I just thought I'd check to see how you were doing."

Gus arched one eyebrow at Tommy but his stern expression didn't change. "You mean aside from being thoroughly pissed off and pretty sick of all of you?"

Tommy winced. "Come on. You're not being fair. And I know you don’t mean that. Everybody's saying things they don't mean right now."

Gus crossed his arms. "Well, gee...Samuel gets pretty damn articulate when he's saying things he doesn't mean. Look, I know he's never been my biggest fan..."

"That's not true."

"Bullshit! He tolerates me. That's about it."

Patiently, Tommy tried again. "This isn't about Samuel."

"All right, no. It isn't. It's about me. The loose cannon. It's about where I fit in into this whole little crazy world you've got going on here." Unexpectedly, his shoulders slumped. "Maybe you can explain it to me, because I sure as hell don't know anymore."

Turning his back on Tommy, he walked over to the little sofa and dropped into one corner, pulling his knees up against his chest and resting his chin on his arms.

Tommy hesitated. There were too many conflicting issues here to be sorted out with one simple conversation, but he couldn't bear to see Gus so upset. He was just as aware as Michelle that Gus was so close to losing control of his emotions and although he was mad at Gus for what he had done, he felt he needed to do whatever he could to draw Gus back from the edge.

When he sat down beside the other man, Gus didn't move but after a few seconds of silence he said softly, "I have had an offer, you know."

"Offer?"

Gus turned his head toward his friend. "To go back to the police force."

Tommy's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"
Gus nodded. He knew it was spiteful but he took a lot of satisfaction at the shocked look on Tommy's face. Sarcastically he added, "There are some people who happen to think that my investigative skills are pretty valuable."

Stammering, Tommy said, "You're not actually considering anything like that, are you?"

Gus turned his face away from him and couldn't hide his bitterness. "Would you blame me? This groupie thing just doesn't seem to be working out for me at the moment."

Tommy was stunned into silence. Gus ground his teeth and twisted the belt on his bathrobe around his fingers.

"I don't think I belong here," he said suddenly. "I don't think I have a place in all of this..."

"I do," Tommy blurted. "We all do. Adam..."

"Adam?" he echoed. "Were you not just in the same room as me? Where he stood there in front of everybody and basically told me to mind my own business? How do you think that made me feel? And how do you think I'm going to feel if I mind my own business and he gets hurt because of something I didn't do? I don't want to be here to see that happen...to him, or to any of you. I'd rather be somewhere where I can make a difference in what happens to people."

He angrily pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. Alarmed, Tommy slid closer until he was able to put his arm around Gus and when the other man refused to look at him, he laid his cheek on Gus's hair and said softly, "Please stop talking that way. You're going to make me crazy."

"It's how I feel right now," Gus said dully.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I know you're caught in the middle of all this...I know how much you hate it...."

Gus closed his eyes and turned his head into the hollow of Tommy's shoulder. Tommy felt so warm and comforting and his closeness never failed to steady Gus, so for a few minutes they just sat together while Tommy slowly stroked Gus's back and Gus leaned against him.

Neither of them heard the keycard in the door. Adam and Michelle were both in the room before Gus or Tommy realized it; looking up, they jerked apart in surprise.

Michelle had just spent the previous half an hour trying to make Adam understand that Gus’s fears were rooted in his insecurity and emotional fragility and that Adam needed to try to be a little more understanding. It had been nearly impossible to calm Adam down but she had managed to do that and drag Adam back to his room to apologize. But now that she had walked in to find Gus in nothing but a robe, snuggled on the sofa with Tommy and apparently in serious need of his attention, she suddenly felt extremely angry.

Tommy saw the look on Michelle’s face and knew what was coming but everyone else was completely unprepared.

"For God’s sake, will you make up your mind?" she shouted at him. "I'm getting sick of this!"

At Michelle’s outburst, Tommy’s expression betrayed his guilt, but Gus looked completely surprised. He scrambled to his feet, unintentionally displaying far too much of long bare legs as the
robe loosened and parted. Yanking the edges closed, he snapped, "Michelle! What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Me? There’s nothing wrong with me. You two are the ones with the problem." She ignored the way both Gus and Tommy went pale and turned furiously on Adam. "You know that big long speech I just gave you? Forget it. You’ve got bigger issues: like getting Gus to be honest with you, for starters."

Adam stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Michelle," Gus said, suddenly horrified. "Calm down. You’re jumping to conclusions."

Adam swung around to face Gus. "Will you please tell me what’s going on?"

Tommy stepped around Gus and took Michelle by the arm. "Stop it. Now is not the time. You’re only going to make things worse..."

She jerked free. "You’re the one who’s been bugging me to tell him about us, even before you invited me down here!"

Gus looked at Tommy, surprised. "You invited her?" His eyes went back to Michelle. "I invited you!"

"Yeah, you did," she muttered. "But Tommy had already asked me. I was coming anyway."

"You didn’t tell me that!" Shocked, Gus pointed at Adam. "So he was right all along! The two of you really do have something going on and nobody bothered to tell me!"

"Can I help it if you’ve got a big fat blind spot where Tommy is concerned?" Michelle snapped. "And you were pretty desperate to keep all of this from Adam when it all got started!"

Adam’s face was unreadable but it was clear he was starting to draw some unpleasant conclusions. Holding up his hands, Gus struggled to control his temper and said, "Look, maybe we’d better all settle down before somebody says something they’ll regret."

"Like the truth?" Michelle said grimly. "Just because the truth hurts doesn’t make it any less true. I’m sick of covering for you and I’m sick of you not being honest with me." She threw a hurt look at Tommy and added, "And that goes for you too."

"You might have been honest with me," Gus said angrily.

Michelle laughed without amusement. "Do you mean like the last time?"

That remark clearly didn’t mean anything to Adam, but Tommy’s face registered alarm.

"This probably isn’t the time to be getting into that, Michelle," he said.

Gus’s face reddened. "He’s right. This isn’t anything like that!"

"No? Do you think I’m an idiot? Don’t you think I learned my lesson? All I’ve tried to do is be considerate of your feelings. I never wanted to hide anything about this from you."
"Oh yeah?" Adam said suddenly. "So you didn’t happen to mention to him that I caught you sneaking out of Tommy’s room the morning after the show in New York?"

Gus’s mouth dropped open.

"Wait a minute..." protested Tommy.

Michelle went white, then red and refused to look Adam in the eye. "You don’t know anything about that."

"I don’t seem to know anything about anything!" he shouted at her, losing his temper at last. "But you seem to keep suggesting that there’s something I need to know. I don’t have a clue what the fuck you three are talking about, so somebody...anybody...better start telling me what the hell is going on here."

He swung around and pointed at Gus. "Let’s start with you."

Gus sucked in his breath sharply, but Tommy stepped forward and put his hand on Gus's arm.

"Gus..." he said quietly, "Let me."

Michelle had ducked her head; when it came back up, she didn’t bother to try and hide the hurt in her eyes or the trembling of her mouth.

"Much as I’d like to stay and hear your explanation," she choked out, "I don’t think I should be part of this. If you three ever work out your little ménage a trois, you can let me know."

She walked past Adam angrily and nearly pulled the door off its hinges on the way out. Gus put one hand over his face.

"Please tell me what’s going on," Adam said through clenched teeth.

Gus closed his eyes briefly and then looked over at Tommy. Helplessly, he gestured to the other man to continue and collapsed back down on the sofa.

Tommy crossed his arms, but he looked at Adam very directly. "This is my fault. Not Gus’s. Not Michelle’s."

"Why don’t you let me decide that?"

"Because I’m not going to let you blame Gus for something he didn’t start. He isn’t responsible for any of what happened."

Suddenly, Adam seemed to have trouble swallowing. "Any of what?" he muttered.

Gus leant his head back and closed his eyes. Tommy cast him a brief troubled glance and then squared his shoulders.

"Adam, look...you know how well Gus and I have gotten along from the night we met. He’s been a great friend to me and I value that more than anything in the world. And I’ve always thought that the two of you were great together. But...that hasn’t stopped me from...really caring about him... a lot more than I should."
Adam’s face had gone blank.

"I never would have even said anything to him about it. I didn’t want to make him uncomfortable and I didn’t want you to think I was trying to come between you. Gus probably never would have known...except we happened to go out together one night, months ago...when you couldn’t get back from Neil’s, remember?...and I’d been drinking and we’d been dancing and I wasn’t thinking straight..."

"And...what?" Adam whispered.

"And I went a little bit over the line. A little bit," he added hurriedly as Adam’s eyes darkened. "And believe me, he put me back in my place pretty damn fast."

"He kissed me, Adam," Gus said gently. "That’s all."

"Well, no," Tommy muttered. "That’s not all. I was drunk and upset and feeling pretty out of control and I was this close to doing something stupid. I knew I’d hurt him and embarrassed him and he would have had every right to throw me out and let me drive home drunk and probably kill myself."

Adam’s eyes flickered back and forth between them. Quietly, he asked, "So what did you do, Gus?"

"I threw his car keys in the pool, that’s what," he snapped.

Adam’s eyes widened and Tommy quickly continued. "He sat me down and we talked about it and it must have been incredibly hard for him but he let me say all the things that I had wanted to say to him all along. He didn’t have to listen to me...but he did. And things were really awkward between us for a long time. And I always thought you were a bit jealous of how close we were...I didn’t want to do anything to make it worse."

"So what is this all about...?"

"When Michelle came to L.A. after the trial, she and I spent a lot of time together. We got along really well, and thought that something might happen for us. But she knew what had happened between me and Gus and she’s always been suspicious that I’m not over it."

"Are you?"

Tommy sighed. "I thought so...Adam, I really did. But it was really hard for me when Gus got hurt. I started thinking about things again and I told that to Gus at the time..."

Adam looked back at Gus accusingly.

"...and he pretty much told me to wise up and get past it, which I have. I invited Michelle down here because I wanted to spend some time with her. I had no idea we would go through all this crap or I never would have brought her into the middle of it. But Michelle wanted to tell Gus in person, on her own terms. She has her reasons and it’s not my place to tell you what they are. But now she’s pissed off because I’m upset that Gus is upset and talking about doing something stupid like going back to the police force..."

Adam temporarily forgot his anger. "What?"
Gus groaned. "Would you like to make this any more complicated, Tommy?"

Tommy fixed his friend with a grim stare. "Well, Michelle’s right about one thing. You need to start being more honest with the people in your life."

Gus shot back to his feet. So far that day he’d been scolded by just about everybody around him. His nerves were raw and the last thing he was going to take was criticism from Tommy.

"You weren’t exactly honest with me, were you?"

"Michelle wanted to be the one to tell you. She promised me she would and I’ve been on her case for weeks about the way she’s been stalling..."

"So why didn’t you just talk to me yourself?"

"She asked me not to! And you know why!"

"Oh for God’s sake," Gus said in disgust, sinking back into his seat. "I can’t believe she fed you that bullshit."

"Is it bullshit?"

"It was years ago!"

"What was years ago?" Adam shouted at them. "Will you two stop talking like I’m not here?"

Tommy looked at Gus. He wasn’t exactly asking for permission, but he would have felt a lot better if he’d had it. Gus just held his arms out in surrender and said, "So go ahead and tell him. Hey, be my guest! I’m really interested to hear what version of the story you got."

"Don’t be like that," he muttered. Then with a sigh, he turned back to Adam.

"Michelle told me that when she first started dating Nick, it created a lot of problems between her and Gus. Gus was really against it because Nick was his partner and he didn’t want to be caught between them if things didn’t work out." He hesitated for a second. "Except Michelle thought there was more to it. She seemed to think that there was some jealousy going on and that Gus hated it because he and Nick had been so close and now Michelle was getting really close as well. And it didn’t help that Gus and Nick were spending a lot of time together because of their undercover work and Michelle started to resent that because Gus saw a lot more of Nick than she did." His gaze traveled over to Gus briefly. "And I guess things got really tense between them and they didn’t talk much for a couple of months, which made it really hard for Nick because he couldn’t talk to either one about the other. But I guess by this time things were pretty serious between him and Michelle and eventually he told Gus that if Gus didn’t make peace with her, Nick was going to request reassignment."

"And...what?" Adam said to Gus impatiently. "So you got pissed because Nick picked Michelle over you?"

Gus’s face was unreadable. "It wasn’t like that."

"Anyway," Tommy went on. "Michelle was just worried that history was going to repeat itself and
she just wanted to keep it really private until she and I knew where this was going. So she asked me not to say anything to Gus."

"Do you suppose it had anything to do with the fact that she knew you’d been kissing him?" Adam was starting to have a hard time keeping his breathing under control. "Boy, this has been quite the day for revelations, hasn’t it? I think I need to get my eyes checked because I really can’t figure out how I missed all this shit. Oh...right. My eyes aren’t in the back of my head, are they?"

"I’m sorry," Gus said in a low voice. "But it’s not the way it looks. This has just gotten blown all out of proportion."

"Oh. Yeah. Here we go with the apologies again. Do you know that starts to lose its effectiveness after a while? Could we just maybe stick to the truth and then you won’t have to apologize for things every five minutes?" Adam was pacing impatiently and the anger began to surface. "And do you know what the worst part of this is? Now I’m going to be going back over absolutely everything from the last few weeks...just wondering what else there was that you didn’t tell me the truth about."

A wave of resentment rose again and before Gus knew what he was doing, he threw the pillow he had been clutching the whole time at Adam. Adam caught it and threw it right back more forcefully.

"Oh, you want to start a comparison, do you?" Gus choked. "Well, since you’re getting so holier than thou...why don’t you try telling me the truth about where you were last night?"

It stopped Adam dead, but it was also the one button that Gus never should have pushed.

"Casino..." he mocked bitterly."Yeah...right..."

Adam breathed in heavily and then looked away while he waved one hand at his boyfriend. "I can’t talk to you when you’re like this. I can’t get my head around all this crap right now. When you stop acting like a child, let me know."

He went to the closet and began yanking stuff out. For a second, both Gus and Tommy were horrified by the thought that Adam might be packing but as he threw a suit onto the bed, not caring how it crumpled as it landed, and tossed shoes and a tie on top of it, they realized Adam was taking out clothes for the party.

"Since I have already pissed Griffin off, it would be nice if I could manage to get to dinner on time."

Tommy got the hint loud and clear but he was also very cautious of Adam’s fickle mood and wasn’t at all happy about the idea of leaving Gus alone with him.

"Will you be all right?" he asked Gus quietly.

He wasn’t quiet enough.

"You can stop worrying about him," Adam said coldly. "I think I can take it from here. I’d like to say that I appreciate your help, but quite frankly...I don’t."

"It’s okay, Tommy," Gus murmured.
Tommy didn’t look convinced until Adam strode over and deliberately blocked his view of Gus. Adam’s hands were on his hips and his eyes were dangerously dark and at that point Tommy reluctantly decided that it was better to leave the two alone.

He tried to give Gus a reassuring smile. "I’ll see you at the party."

Gus nodded back at him. But when he was gone and Adam still stood with his back to Gus, he looked up at the rigid set of Adam’s shoulders and asked bluntly, "Will I?"

"Will you what?" Adam muttered without moving.

"See anybody at this party?" He let the question hang for a moment and when Adam didn’t answer, his voice sharpened. "Do you want me to be there or not?"

Adam gathered his clothes off the bed without a word. He was halfway to the door before Gus realized he was leaving.

"Where are you going?"

"To change in Sutan’s room."

His heart contracted painfully. "Can’t stand the company?" Gus said bitterly.

Adam stopped at the door. He made no effort to turn around to face his boyfriend and simply spoke back over his shoulder.

"Not at the moment."

"You didn’t answer my question!" Gus shouted at him. "Do you want me at this damn party or not?"

Adam put one hand on the doorknob and hesitated. Then he turned the handle and pulled and Gus just barely managed to catch all of his reply before the door swung closed behind him.

"Do whatever the hell you want. It doesn’t matter to me."

Adam knew that this evening was an appearance he could not afford to fuck up. He showed up on time, and if Samuel noticed that Adam was alone, he didn’t comment. The room was already full and Adam immediately started to make his way around the room through endless introductions and small talk and dodged any casual questions about the absence of his date by simply saying that he didn’t feel well.

None of the guests felt his frustration, anger and anxiety and no one seemed to notice the fact that he was making an effort not to run into his band-mates in his travels around the room.

Isaac eventually walked up to Adam. At the sight of Adam’s face, he winced. Adam's eyes were too bright and his expression was too fixed, which only meant he was barely controlling his temper.
Adam was very dangerous in these moods and the fact that he always had a drink in his hand wasn’t a very reassuring sign either. He was still very mad at Gus, which was probably why his boyfriend hadn’t made an appearance. Isaac also noticed that Adam had been looking daggers at Tommy ever since they’d arrived. Something else was going on. Overall, it was not a peaceful evening.

"Gus okay?" Isaac asked casually, deciding to jump in with both feet.

"I wouldn’t know." Adam muttered into his glass. "Why don’t you ask Tommy? I bet he could give you an update."

Isaac blinked. "Tommy?"

"Yeah. Tommy. And if he doesn’t know either, I bet he’d just kill for a chance to go and find out."

Isaac blinked again and wondered what Tommy had done to create such resentment. He was usually the last person Adam ever got mad at.

"Oh," he said, a bit more cautiously. "Gus is probably feeling pretty bad about what he did. Come on, Adam...you know he wouldn’t have done it if he wasn’t really worried about you. You know he had to have his reasons."

Instead of a reply, Adam took another swallow. Isaac began to squirm. Adam was consuming far too much alcohol far too quickly. It wasn't even dinner time yet...

"I hope he didn’t stay away tonight because he’s afraid of people still being mad at him."

"I have no idea what his reasons were," Adam muttered. "In fact, I told him it didn’t make any damn difference to me whether he came or not."

"For God’s sake, Adam...he’s already feeling like shit. So you two had a big fight and then you just left him by himself? Is Michelle with him at least?"

Adam choked back a laugh. "I doubt it. If she is, we’ll probably be seeing World War III soon. No, I can pretty much guarantee you that Michelle isn’t with him. Honestly? I’d be surprised if Michelle isn’t on the next flight home."

Isaac was speechless. "What the hell for? Are they fighting now, too? Because of what Gus did?"

Another swallow, then Adam said slowly, "Isaac, you have no idea what can be going on behind your back without you knowing it."

He refused to say any more about it, leaving Isaac confused and quite worried. Isaac wanted to sneak out and check on Gus himself, but decided that it might be wiser to stay and keep an eye on Adam instead.

He was trying to convince Adam that it was time to get mingling again when he caught sight of a new arrival on the other side of the room. It was impossible not to notice him; not only was he taller than most of the people present, but...

"Jesus Christ, look at that!" said Isaac, openmouthed.
"Not now, Isaac. I’m not in the mood."

Isaac tried to get a better view. "Well, you may change your mind when you see it."

Grumbling, Adam turned around and nearly dropped his drink. He hadn’t expected Gus to show up at all, let alone looking like that...

Gus felt very insecure and self-conscious. After Adam had walked out of their room, he’d ordered himself a bottle of vodka from room service and consumed a good deal of it on an empty stomach in an attempt to simply drown his misery. It hadn't worked. The misery remained but his common sense had completely gone. Since the whole situation had gotten so completely out of control, why the hell did he need to worry about his self-control? Feeling cocky, he’d gone to his closet, fished out that one outfit he figured he’d never have the guts to wear in public and wrestled himself into it. He hadn’t bothered to brush his hair after toweling it out earlier and it had dried all wild and sticking out in every direction. Eyeing himself in the mirror, he decided the "just got fucked" look complemented the ensemble and let it be.

Makeup proved to be tricky. He wasn't used to wearing makeup, but he used Adam's stuff and outlined his eyes to match his slightly over dilated pupils and found a shiny lip gloss. He gave himself one last look in the mirror, and then stalked a bit unsteadily out of the room and down to the party.

He’d show Adam; and Tommy; and anybody else who cared to watch.
Chapter 24

The security on the door to the ballroom was tight, and as a result, Gus’s appearance caused a lot of activity that drew everyone’s attention. He smiled at the couple of staff who recognized him and waved him in, then stood just inside the door where he could let his eyes slowly travel around the room. He was dying to see the look on Adam’s face when he saw him but his boyfriend was nowhere in sight and Gus had to be satisfied with the expressions on the dozen or so men and women who were mingling closer to where he was standing.

He didn’t see Adam, but Adam sure as hell saw him. He was so shocked that Isaac had to shake him to remind him to breathe and it still took several seconds before he actually gasped. He absolutely could not believe what he was seeing. Every single one of his reactions - emotional, physical and psychological - was entirely different and highly at odds with the other.

Many days with no intimacy intensified the rush he felt through his body, and before he knew it, he was tingling in all the wrong places for the public eye.

He understood exactly what Gus was doing.

His lover was trying to piss him off.

He knew from experience that a sexual Gus generated enough heat to melt down metal but he had never ever done anything like that in public before. Gus's sexiness was more subtle. It came so naturally to him that people were even more intrigued by the fact that he wasn’t trying to be sexy. Except now he was trying. He appeared to have taken the whole concept of "natural" and cranked it up...a lot.

Isaac was still rambling. "God damn, you’re one lucky son of a bitch...and I'm not even gay! Talk about hot!"

"Shut up!"

When he’d first spotted Gus, there had been a least a couple of seconds where Adam had really, truly believed that Gus had shown up for the party half naked. Once he looked better, he realized the his boyfriend was actually covered from the throat to the waist by a very tight, flesh-tone Lycra shirt that looked like it had been painted on and then shrank a few more sizes as it dried. The outfit left nothing to the imagination in the front or back. But most attention-getting was the fact that the leather pants were slit up on both sides and the sides of the pants were...uh...non-existent.

Well, to be fair, there were flesh-tone laces. Tightly crisscrossed, the strings held the front and the back of the pants together, but not by much. There had to be four or five inches of skin visible down each side in a long bare strip. It wasn’t a lot in terms of actual exposure, even when you calculated it in the flash of long legs with each step, but it served its purpose...to make you wonder what the rest of it looked like.

Gus tried to spot Adam for a moment, shaking a few hands and nodding to Samuel who could hardly complain about his presence, especially with some of the guests rumbling approval. Samuel nodded back, and with a smile, Gus excused himself and smoothly walked through the crowd until he was face to face with Adam.
He couldn’t read the look on his lover's face but he’d certainly never seen it before. Gus held Adam's gaze steadily without speaking until he grew oddly uncomfortable by the realization that he’d never seen Adam's eyes that color. Gus wasn’t quite sure who was staring back at him but he was definitely starting to get the impression that it was somebody he didn’t know.

Isaac intervened. He knew he was likely to get murdered for saying it, but he couldn’t resist it. "Dude...there is no possible way you can have anything on under those pants."

Gus glanced down at himself. "Of course not. It would ruin the look."

"Raided a go-go boy’s closet, did you?" Adam said in a strangled voice.

Gus lifted his eyes back to Adam's very slowly and smiled.

"No. I bought this for you."

Isaac slapped Adam on the shoulders. "Damn, I need a drink. I’m going to the bar. Can I get you something, Gus?"

Gus opened his mouth but Adam was faster.

"I don’t think so," he said tightly. "It looks like someone’s already had their share of booze tonight."

"And you haven’t?" Gus challenged, looking pointedly at the glass in Adam's hand. His face was a little flushed, but to be honest, Gus had no way to tell if it was the alcohol or the effect of his outfit or a combination of both. "I'll have a glass of whiskey, Isaac," he said in an overly bright tone. "Thank you."

Gus reached out a hand to squeeze Isaac's shoulder and accidentally knocked his glass from his hand.

"Oops, sorry," he said and before Isaac could stop him, he had half-turned and bent over from the waist to retrieve them. The pants stretched even more tightly over the curve of his backside. Many jaws hit the floor at that sight.

Adam was getting too many contradictory feelings all at once to even think about doing anything. The fact that many of the guests were having very specific urges, all because of his boyfriend, and that Gus was not only discouraging it, he was practically advertising it, made him even angrier.

Gus straightened up and as he handed the glass back to Isaac, his vision blurred a little and Isaac had to reach out to grab him as he stumbled. Growing somewhat alarmed at Gus's recklessness, Isaac gripped his arms to steady him, leaned in close to Gus's ear and murmured, "You’d better slow down a little, buddy. You’re playing with fire."

"How about that drink, Isaac?" Gus said, and shook him off.

Isaac went, reluctantly. Adam reached to take Gus by the elbow and then changed his mind. Touching him probably wasn’t a good idea. One single touch and it would either encourage him to strangle Gus or encourage him to put his hands all over Gus.

"What do you think you’re doing?" he said in a low, tight voice.
Gus shrugged. "I represent Tommy’s charity…at least I think I still do. There are a lot of rich people here…" His mouth twitched. "I thought maybe I could advertise the cause."

He watched Adam’s knuckles whiten around his glass.

The tension was temporarily broken when Samuel announced that dinner was ready. Gus took his whiskey from Isaac as he reappeared, turned his back on Adam very deliberately and casually walked over to the dinner tables. He took his time picking a place to sit and finally chose a table that seemed most promising for interesting conversation. He had absolutely no intention of sitting anywhere near Adam or anyone else from the entourage, but as he slipped around a group of guests to make his way to the desired spot, he accidentally came face to face with Tommy.

He saw the way Tommy’s gaze traveled downward involuntarily. His gaze was sardonic and Gus suddenly felt the need to lash out at Tommy.

"Look all you want," he said cruelly. "Just don’t touch."

It wasn’t the most relaxed evening. Samuel was really trying to show off his star attraction to his friends and business associates and his star attraction could not be any less interested in that.

Gus felt the same. He politely chatted with a couple of Samuel’s friends and business associates, who seemed more interested in staring at his body than listening to what he had to say.

After dinner, some of his new female friends pulled him toward a corner and introduced him around and he spent a considerable amount of time smiling at their flattery and returning each bold comment with one of his own. Gus wasn’t a flirt by nature, especially when it came to ladies, but that certainly didn’t mean he didn’t know how and if his skills were rusty, nobody seemed to notice.

Adam was struggling to focus. The room was full of people representing different Griffin Entertainment divisions, which could mean future contacts for him when he decided to produce music or try his hand in movies or even TV. Normally he would have been in his element, but every time he turned around, he heard Gus’s laugh or saw his smile as he charmed his way around the room. Adam knew perfectly well Gus was faking it, but his audience, no doubt softened up (or hardened up) by his provocative attitude were falling for it.

Fueled by alcohol, Adam was beginning to feel more and more possessive. If just one more person touched Gus…

Michelle chose that exact moment to make a post-dinner appearance, looking drop-dead gorgeous in a sleeveless cocktail dress that matched her eyes. She ignored everyone else and attached herself to Samuel with an arrogance that she rarely showed but which was backed up by her family’s fortune.

"Nice dress," Gus said very sweetly when Samuel and Michelle walked past him. "Cost much?"

"This old thing?" Michelle said innocently, although the dress could have paid for that dinner
party. She picked an imaginary piece of fluff from her dress and then looked Gus up and down with a superior smile. "You look nice. Old habits die hard, I see."

Most of the people in the room overheard that comment, including Isaac, who raised his eyebrows.

Michelle shot him an angry look as she went by but it was nothing compared to the look she gave Tommy. She ruthlessly chose Samuel to be her co-conspirator. Samuel was aware of the charms of a beautiful, rich woman, and seemed to enjoy Michelle’s attentions. What he didn't notice was the way she was yanking him around like a yo-yo.

Her plan worked perfectly: she aggravated Tommy and infuriated Gus.

"He’s as bad as his father was," a cold voice said in Gus’s ear, making him jump.

He turned around and found Doug staring past him, staring at his employer with disgust.

"Yeah, well he’s being played and he doesn't even know it," Gus muttered. "So don’t blame him too much. That’s a display for my benefit, in case you’re wondering."

Doug raised his eyebrows at him. "Does that have anything to do with the really weird vibe in the room?"

"You could say that," Gus replied with a fragile smile. "I think I caused a shift in the entire polar ice cap tonight. I’m persona non grata...are you surprised?"

"I guess not."

"I caused a lot of problems for you. I’m sorry."

Doug shrugged. "I don’t blame you for what you did. I know you’re still worried about security."

"I’m worried about a lot of things. I don’t think this is over, Doug. Something else is going to happen and I don’t know what it is and I have no idea how to prevent it." He took a sip of his own drink. "Especially since I’ve been asked...sorry, I’ve been told...to shut up and keep my opinions to myself."

"I would think he’d take your concerns pretty seriously, considering your background."

Gus shrugged. "And do what? Cancel this concert? Cancel all his concerts until the cops find out who drugged those girls? Adam does have a point...it may not make any difference. Opportunity will just keep knocking all the way through the tour. Besides, if someone is out just to pull strings, cancelling shows would only give them what they’re looking for." He sighed deeply. "Problem is...if they’re looking for more than that, going ahead with the show will only give them more to work with. How do you protect tens of thousands of people? It’s impossible."

His eyes traveled across the room until they found Adam in a corner, deep in conversation with one of the producers. He must have felt Gus's gaze on him; he glanced up absently and when their eyes met, his eyes clouded over and his face went cold. Gus looked away.

"Whoa," said Doug gently. "Things are pretty touchy, aren’t they?"

"Oooh yeah," Gus said, slamming back the rest of his drink and looking around like he needed
Doug hesitated. "I wanted to ask your opinion on something, but maybe now isn’t the time..."

Gus waved his empty glass at him. "Ask away! You’re the only one interested in what I have to say at the moment, so I’m all yours."

"I didn’t want to take it to the police..."

Gus straightened up abruptly. "Take what to the police?"

Doug pulled him aside where they could have some privacy. "Normally I don’t take these things too seriously, but..."

"Doug, what are you talking about?"

"One of the stage managers came to see me today after rehearsal. A few weird things have been happening in the arena and he thought I should know."

Gus frowned. "Weird...like what?"

"For one thing, some pyro has gone missing."

Gus gasped. "How much pyro?"

"Well, that’s the weird part. Small amounts, like fuses, and some mortars... None of the equipment has even been touched though. It doesn’t make any sense."

"Has the stage manager asked around?"

"Sure. And it’s not that odd for a few things to disappear here and there. Somebody takes a few things home for a party...that kind of thing. Normally, no one would have even mentioned it, but the crews are all really sensitive about any little thing that’s not exactly right."

"And what else is going on?"

Doug frowned. "The catering truck didn’t show up this afternoon. We called the company and they told us that somebody from Griffin had cancelled the order. Then after rehearsals, two catering trucks from two other companies showed up out of the blue. We checked and they say the same thing...that someone from Griffin called it in."

Gus was busy processing that information when he continued, "And..."

"And?"

"And somebody keeps calling my cell phone and hanging up."

Gus blinked. "You mean like prank calls?"

He looked embarrassed. "I can’t tell. The phone number is blocked and there’s just nobody there when I answer. Maybe somebody’s speed dial has just gone crazy and I’m on the list...I don’t know. But I got over thirty calls yesterday and today was just as bad. I finally turned the damn
thing off."

Gus narrowed his eyes. Doug waited patiently while he thought things over, and when he looked back up at Doug, he said, "What do you think? Should I report this stuff?"

Gus threw up his hands. "To be honest, Doug...I don’t know. You’re right. It’s all weird, but under normal circumstances, is it stuff you’d be telling cops about? Would they listen? They might write it down...but would they do a damn thing about it? Not likely. Your cell phone calls probably can’t be traced if they’re hang-ups; catering companies get stuff screwed up all the time, and you’re probably right about the pyro...somebody’s just planning to jazz up their New Year’s party."

His voice trailed off. Doug folded his arms.

"Do you believe that?"

Gus looked away. "No."

"So what do we do?"

Gus ran his fingers through his hair and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he jumped; Adam was behind Doug and was glaring at him over the other man’s shoulder.

*Shit, what have I done now?*

Doug hadn’t noticed the sudden change in his expression. "Come on, Gus...I need your help here. I won’t say a word to Adam if that’s what you’re worried about."

"I’d say that’s exactly what he’s worried about," Adam said angrily. "Keeping stuff from me is a big hobby of his at the moment."

There was nothing Doug could do to get himself out of that one. Adam’s emotions were already on the verge of meltdown. He’d had far too much to drink and was feeling suspicious and angry and finding Gus deep in yet another conversation that was obviously not meant for his ears just made things even worse.

"Let’s go," he said curtly.

Ten minutes before, Gus would have jumped at any excuse to leave the party. Unlike Adam, he had sobered up considerably and now knew how everything about that evening felt completely and utterly wrong. He was ashamed of the way he had reacted toward Adam, Tommy and Michelle and began to wonder what kind of a heartless jackass he was turning into. But no matter how hard he was kicking himself, he still didn’t like Adam’s attitude and he also didn’t like being told instead of asked. When Adam put one hand on his arm, Gus resisted and Doug glanced nervously between them.

"I’ll see you both tomorrow," he muttered and walked away. Frustrated, Gus ground his teeth and pulled his arm out of Adam’s grasp, only to have it taken back in an even firmer grip.

"Are you coming with me or not?" he growled.

Gus looked down at the way Adam's fingers were digging into his arm and then raised his eyes back up to Adam's. "Looks that way, doesn’t it?"
He didn’t miss the way Adam’s face darkened and when he turned around and dragged Gus with him through the crowd, Gus tried his best not to fight him. But by the time they reached the door, more than a few people had noticed Adam’s aggressiveness and Adam found his path suddenly blocked by Tommy.

Gus stumbled to a stop, his arm still held in a tight grip. He looked up and gave Tommy a pleading look.

*Please...don’t start anything now...you’ll only make it worse....*

Tommy didn’t want to start anything, but he also couldn’t watch Gus being manhandled out the door. He deliberately stood in Adam’s way and didn’t budge, even when Adam drew himself up to his full height and glared down at him.

"I don’t think you have to pull his arm off at the shoulder," Tommy said quietly.

"And I don’t think it’s any of your business," Adam replied back. "So fuck off."

An uneasy silence felt the room. Gus looked around and found himself the center of attention. Samuel looked seriously annoyed. Michelle looked both disapproving and troubled. Monte looked resigned at yet another upheaval and both Isaac and Terrance looked like they wanted to start banging heads together. With a sigh, Gus gently but firmly pulled his arm out of Adam’s grip.

"It’s okay. We’re just heading out a little early, that’s all. Goodnight everyone."

He didn’t wait for any reaction but flashed an apologetic smile and walked straight between Tommy and Adam and out the door. He felt a moment’s panic that they might start taking swings at each other the moment he was gone but within seconds, Adam had followed him out and caught up with him as he walked to the elevator. Nothing was said during the ride back up to their floor and Adam unlocked the door to the suite and let Gus in without a word.

The moment the door was closed behind them however, Adam found his voice with a fury.

"So what the hell is going on with you and Doug? Have you been talking to him about security again?" When Gus looked up at him and then immediately down at his shoes, Adam said angrily, "Did you not understand anything of what I said to you this afternoon? You have got to keep out of it, Gus. You are making things very difficult for me."

"Doug came to me," he answered angrily. "So before you start accusing me of going behind your back, you can think again."

"Don’t get self-righteous. You should be the first one to admit that there have apparently been more than just a few things going on behind my back."

Gus turned his back on Adam and folded his arms, biting back an angry retort.

"For starters...would you mind explaining to me what Tommy meant by that remark earlier about you going back to the police department?"

Gus’s shoulders tensed. "I’ve had an offer."
"When?"

"Michelle brought the letter down when she came. The department had been speaking to my specialist; they know I could pass the physical again."

"Oh yeah?" Adam said caustically. "And what about the psychological tests? Have they been talking to your shrink as well?"

He meant it to hurt and it did. Gus's behavior that evening had wound Adam up so tightly that he was almost desperate to get his lover back for the feelings he'd provoked in him. Gus's head dropped a little at Adam's bitterness but rather than back him off, his reaction only stirred Adam up even more.

"You didn't tell me."

"Nothing to tell. I wasn't interested."

"Wasn't interested? What about now?"

Gus looked back over his shoulder. "What about now?" he said sarcastically. "I don't know, Adam... I'm not really wanted around here, am I?"

Sarcasm met sarcasm. "Oh, I don't know, Gus... judging by some of the looks you got tonight, I'd say many wanted you... real bad..."

Gus snorted. "Yeah, that's typical. You want me gorgeous and hot... you want everyone in this world to think that I'm gorgeous and hot... you want everyone in the world to envy you because they think I'm gorgeous and hot... but the moment somebody makes one move... one move!... in my direction, you're out for blood."

"So is that what the outfit was all about? To teach me a lesson? Or was Tommy the one you were trying to send the message to?"

Gus dropped his head again in frustration. "And you wonder why I didn't tell you about him? Can't you just understand that it was an extremely uncomfortable situation and I was trying to spare Tommy's feelings and yours? Can't you just believe that I handled it the way I felt it should be handled and it's over now?"

"Michelle doesn't seem to think it's over," Adam said flatly.

Gus spun around. "Well, Michelle has known about Tommy for months." Aware of the way Adam's face changed, he added defensively, "I needed someone to talk to about it. Michelle hadn't even met you or Tommy at that point. How was I to know that the two of them would be interested in each other? She knew it was going to cause problems or she would have told me about it the moment it started."

"You don't like it."

"No, I don't!" he cried, and then scolded himself for the outburst. "And you can believe that shit about Nick if you want, but what happens to me if things don't work out? They are my two best friends in the world and if there ends up being bad feelings between them, I'm going to be caught in the middle. I don't want to have to pick sides. And besides, Michelle doesn't know what she's
getting into. She couldn’t handle this crazy life any better than I can. And Brian...what about him? Do you think it’s fair to him that he gets put in this situation? He’s already growing up without his father...what would it be like for him having a father who’s on the road six months of the year?"

He had both hands on his hips and he was practically screaming. Adam stared, astonished by Gus’s frustration and then said unexpectedly, "There’s one excuse you’ve missed."

"What’s that?" he said grimly.

"That you don’t like it because you want him for yourself."

Gus went white. It took him three tries to make sound come out but by the time he got his mouth back in gear, the words were spat out ferociously.

"Don’t you ever...ever...accuse me of that...."

"I’m not accusing. Not the way you think."

Gus backed up a few feet as if he suddenly felt the need to put more distance between them and said emotionally. "I don’t know how can you stand there and say that to me..."

"Face it. You enjoy being number one in Tommy’s life. It must be flattering to know that he’s so attracted to you. Even if you don’t have those kinds of feelings towards him, you don’t like the idea of someone else being his favorite...do you?"

Adam’s voice had calmed considerably. He looked suddenly relieved, as if he’d suddenly found pieces of a puzzle he’d never really understood and discovered he was no longer threatened by it. Gus stared at him with a mixture of distaste and confusion, clearly not liking his supposition but unable to disagree with it.

"Well, if that’s your take on things," he muttered. "Why did you get so mad about it?"

Adam raised his eyebrows at him. "How about because you weren’t honest with me about it?" He saw the retort that was quivering on Gus’s lips and added, "And how about because I don’t like the thought of a very good friend of mine thinking about you that way?" A distasteful look crossed his face. "Or kissing you, for that matter. Do you think I like the idea of him having his hands all over you?"

Gus choked back a laugh.

"What’s so funny?"

"How can you...how the hell can you say that? You stand there and tell me that you don’t like the idea of Tommy coming on to me without any consideration for the way I feel when he does it with you? When your fans do it to you?"

Adam had to look away and Gus became angrier. On top of all the stress and worry, on top of all the other issues of mistrust surrounding them in everything they did, this was that one thing Gus could not bear. "No, that’s different...isn’t it? You expect me to just take that, because it’s ‘part of what you do’, but you’ve never...ever...once...acknowledged that it might be difficult for me."

‘It doesn’t mean anything,” Adam said furiously.
"No? Is that supposed to make it any easier? Jesus, Adam...sometimes it nearly makes me sick. Yeah, I know what you and Tommy do on stage is just an act, that it's part of the show, and I know that ninety five percent of the fans that rush up to you just want a hug or a picture or to tell you how much they love your music. Those aren’t the ones that bother me. The ones that bother me are the other five percent...those delusional women and those twinks that hang around the hotel until they can catch you going down a hallway and then jump all over you. I’ve seen it happen. For God’s sake, they do it right in front of me...I can only imagine what they do when I’m not around."

Adam was silent. There was no way to dispute what he was saying.

Gus got madder. This had nothing to do with the real issue at hand and deep down inside he didn’t know if it was more because he had kept his resentment to himself for so long or because he was angry with himself for finally going and doing what he swore to himself he’d never do...complain about Adam's job and the fans. But the fact was, since the release of the first single off the new album, he had watched Adam go from personal appearance to personal appearance, being mobbed and groped and showered with a hell of a lot more than just personal attention...and he hadn’t said a word about it, no matter how much it bothered him.

"Come on, Adam, this is where you're supposed to tell me that Tommy is straight, that I should know how lucky I am...that you've got men and women throwing themselves at you twenty-four hours a day, so what do you need me for, huh? You've got a healthy ego...you know what a sex symbol you are. Are you trying to tell me that you don't get off on some of that attention? That it doesn’t make you hard? That you don't do things to encourage it? That those dance moves aren't deliberate attempts to try and whip up thousands of sets of hormones? You expect me to put up with that for a full world tour. And you're going to stand there and accuse me of being flattered because the very same friend that you pretty much molest on the stage is attracted to me?"

Adam had no answer to that either.

"Sometimes," Gus said bitterly. "When I see you again after a long time, all I want to do is run up and hold you, but somehow I always feel like you’re not mine...that before I touch you I need to wipe off all the fingerprints and the drool and God knows what else..."

Adam's head snapped up. "Now who’s accusing who? That’s not fair and you know it."

"No!" Gus shouted, and the rest of his control gave way. "It’s not! It’s not fair that I’m just supposed to stand around and smile while all these people just attack you and throw underwear and sex toys at you and rub themselves all over you."

Unexpectedly, he stalked over until they were face to face and taunted Adam, "I’ve seen it. I’ve been there. So it’s okay...is that what you’re saying? That they come up to you and put their hands on you and try to unbutton your shirt or your pants and kiss you like they were some long-lost lover..."

He laid his hands on Adam's chest. His eyes were almost black with anger and there was a dangerous flush along his cheekbones. He stormed on, and with the heat practically rising from his body, he looked incredibly beautiful and sexy and he was using it against Adam before he even had a chance to brace himself.

"So what exactly do they murmur in your ear, Adam? I bet it’s more than a request for autographs. You get some pretty tempting offers, don’t you? What’s it like being propositioned late at night
after a long day in the studio when you’ve stopped at a club for a few drinks on the way back to the hotel and now some twink is hanging around your neck with his tongue in your mouth and his hands touching you everywhere? What kind of promises do they make, huh? What kind of offers do you get?” Gus deliberately ran his hands up and down Adam, watching his eyes darken, first with anger and then with an emotion he couldn’t identify and couldn’t fight.

He leaned in against Adam until their mouths were touching. Adam stood frozen, unable to move. Gus was stroking him too intimately, deliberately trying to bait him and when Adam tried to turn his head away Gus put his mouth against his ear and lowered his voice to a breathy moan.

"Oh Adam...you’re so hot. I love you so much. Just take me back to your room for a while...let me show you how much I love you. Just give me a few minutes... I’ll do anything... anything...I promise, I’ll make all your fantasies come true..."

Adam's eyes closed. He shouldn’t have had so much to drink; his head was beginning to spin. "Cut it out," he whispered. "You’re not like them."

One hand went up around his neck, caressing his head and the other remained much lower, making it impossible to think straight or even pretend that he wasn’t incredibly aroused by Gus's behavior.

"I can be like them," he murmured. "I can do whatever they do. When I’m not there...do you miss me? Do you miss this? Is this what you want? Is this what they do for you when I’m not around?"

"Stop," he said.

"Come on, Adam...I bet I know what you need. Aren’t you just a little bit lonely? Wouldn’t you like to feel good...no one will know...I’ll never tell..."

"Please stop!" Adam clutched Gus's arms trying to force his hands away. His heart was pounding and he was incredibly angry...and incredibly turned on and suddenly desperate to teach Gus a lesson for turning the tables on him this way.

He opened his eyes and found Gus's sleepy, seductive gaze only inches away. Gus flicked his tongue out against the corners of his mouth and let his breath out in a throaty growl when Adam took a harder grip on his wrists.

"Is that how you like it, baby?" he whispered. "A little rough? I’m all yours...I can do things anyway you want it..."

Adam swore at him and all of a sudden Gus realized he had gone too far. Adam's eyes were confused and angry and without warning he let go of one of Gus's arms and twisted his hand up into his lover's hair instead, tilting Gus's head to one side so he could kiss him in a shockingly lustful way. Gus tried to back out of his grasp and discovered it was too late, that he’d pushed Adam farther than he should have and unintentionally given him an outlet for all the frustration and suspicion that had been building around them for weeks.

Passion is a very strange thing. He sensed the hold it had on Adam but before he could stop it he was consumed just as strongly himself...anger combined with uncontrollable desire and a dark, moody lust.

Adam broke the zipper of Gus's pants. The feel of bare skin seemed to turn him on even more and with his mouth against Gus's throat, he pushed Gus down on the bed and began muttering fierce,
"...you're all I think about...you're all I want..."

Gus didn’t remember anything that had felt so good. In the back of his mind, he wanted to pull away; Adam was too angry and demanding, but everything in his body was betraying him until he was helplessly pleading with Adam not to stop. It made no sense, that he could feel such an incredible need for Adam in the face of all the anger between them and he couldn’t have explained the guilty satisfaction he felt at finally having provoked such an intense sexual reaction from him. Adam was just as tormented by emotions he didn’t understand and he had no words to explain the desperate need that was overtaking him...the need to prove his love for Gus...the need to punish Gus for doubting him....

It had never been so rough or forceful between them before. It was dark and dangerous and only added to the wild excitement until they began to push the boundaries of their physical relationship in a way they’d never dared before. Gus hit the limit first: as pain began to set in, he realized that the situation was getting out of control in a very frightening way. He fought once to try and break away but only succeeding in maddening Adam until he was bruising his wrists to hold him still. The thought of Adam hurting him was incomprehensible but even as he struggled against his boyfriend, pain began to merge with the promise of incredible pleasure and he found himself just lingering on the border, hating himself for his weakness and hating Adam even more for using it against him. Adam was so familiar with every inch of Gus's body that he’d always known exactly how far to push him and how to keep him there, but he’d never used that knowledge to do anything more than gently tease his lover. This sudden sadistic torture was so foreign that it frightened Gus; he’d never considered that Adam was capable of deliberately trying to make him feel such agony.

Trapped in an aching, sexual void, he held his breath for so long in anticipation that when Adam finally gave him the release he was so desperate for, he crashed hard and almost passed out from the intensity.

There was a rush of vulnerability that completely shocked him. As soon as he could find the strength, he rolled over onto his side and curved his arms up over his head as if for protection, devastated and trembling and feeling like something had been taken from him, something he hadn’t been prepared to give.

The most terrifying part was how his body had responded to it. He had wanted it...practically begged him for it. Even now, everything inside was pulsing with pleasure; he could still feel tiny little explosions rippling through him. He’d never had a physical reaction so intense and so shattering that he felt threatened emotionally, as if his body and mind had been pulled so far out of sync that they’d lost their connection. Trying desperately to center himself again, he lay clutched in a little ball and flinched hard when Adam tentatively laid one hand on his hip and slid it up to his waist. Adam seemed almost afraid to touch him and when his mouth brushed Gus's ear, his voice was ragged and hoarse and pleading for reassurance.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No," Gus said, almost inaudibly.

"But I scared you," Adam said dully. "I scared myself, too. Gus, I’m sorry...Fuck, please don’t turn away from me. Please...I need to hold you..."

Gus couldn’t bring himself to face Adam but he didn’t protest when his lover slid the length of his
body against his back and gathered him into his arms. His skin was clammy with sweat and there
was none of the natural warmth that there should have been.

"That was wrong...so wrong. I’m so sorry. It should never, ever be about anger. I hate what this is
doing to me. To us. I can’t trust myself anymore. I’m taking things out on you without realizing it."
Adam pressed a kiss against his shoulder and felt a stab of pain as Gus shrank away involuntarily.
Gus's eyes were closed tight and a deep furrow ran between his brows.

Oh, fuck...what the hell have I done to him?

"I started it," Gus said, but his voice was empty. "I made you feel that way."

Adam buried his face in the curve of Gus's neck, murmuring desperate apologies. "No...No...It
wasn’t you. It’s my fault...I got so angry...I never wanted to hurt you...I never wanted to be that
way with you..." He was close to tears and Gus could feel his body starting to shake with shock.
"You should have stopped me...Fuck, Gus...why didn’t you just ask me to stop?"

The thought choked Gus. Adam knew the answer as well as he did and it terrified them both. They
had been only moments away from destroying everything between them. If Gus had asked...if Gus
had told him to stop...

I couldn’t say it, Adam. I couldn’t ask you to stop because I was afraid that you wouldn’t...

Staying silent was the only way to keep the fragile illusion that what had just happened was a
completely consensual act. He had been too afraid that Adam was too far out of control. He had
been too afraid to draw the line because he was too afraid that Adam would cross it.

Gripped by regret, Gus had to face the horrible realization that he had brought this on himself. He
had deliberately set out to provoke the most dramatic reaction possible, knowing how close Adam
already was to being out of control...Adam was the one who had asked him to stop...to stop
tormenting him and making it impossible for him to think straight...to not make him feel like he
had betrayed Gus when he hadn’t. Adam had asked him to stop...and Gus had kept right on going,
pushing every button he knew Adam had without any consideration for the horrible way it was
hurting him.

Worst of all was the fact that Gus didn’t even understand his own reasons. He no longer had any
faith in himself or his emotions. He felt broken and ill and it was almost impossible to control his
body and stop shaking.

Adam's mouth touched his cheek. "Hush...it’s all right...I love you...you’re everything to me..."

"I love you too," Gus whispered brokenly. "But I just want this to be over...I just want to go home."

Adam closed his eyes and his heart began to break into tiny pieces. He didn’t need to ask the
question. He knew Gus didn’t mean L.A.

He wanted to go home to Toronto.
Sunday, December 30, 2012

It was an unbearable, silent night for both of them. After lying stiffly in Adam's arms for as long as he could bear it, Gus turned over onto his stomach, breaking the contact between them and leaving Adam feeling wretched and alone. They both lay awake for hours, filled with shame and doubt and a sudden fear that they'd damaged their relationship in a way that couldn't be repaired.

In the morning, Gus waited until Adam had finally fallen asleep before he slid out of bed. The tired face that looked back at him from the bathroom mirror didn’t come as a surprise, but what did shake him badly were the bruises on both forearms. He rubbed at them fretfully. How many times had he responded to domestic dispute calls and listened to people mumbling excuses for the marks on their bodies? It seemed surreal, as if somebody had taken his reality and twisted it in the strangest way possible. Maybe it was his past coming back to haunt him. Maybe it was a taste of his own medicine after years of being so self-righteous about how he would never allow himself to defend someone who got rough with him?

The room suddenly seemed to be getting cloudy and dark. At first he thought he’d accidentally bumped the dimmer switch on the wall and then he realized it had become almost impossible to breathe. He managed to put his hands out and catch the edge of the vanity before his legs gave out and he sank weakly to his knees. He hung onto the counter and managed to stop himself from collapsing completely but his chest had tightened so badly that he couldn’t take in air and his body was spasming with terror.

He had no breath to call for help, so he just sat there, leaning against the vanity. It had been so long since he’d had a panic attack he hadn’t recognized any of the warning signs. But it was as intense as any attack he’d ever had, with the familiar sense of dread and the feeling of being near death.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Months of therapy had put a lot of distance between Gus and his demons, but his doctor had warned him very clearly that regression was very common after traumas such as his. His mind was issuing a warning...that he had reached his limit and simply could no longer cope.

After years of not using his coping mechanisms, Gus had half-forgotten about them and there was nothing he could do but hang on and wait for it to pass. When his body began to relax and he could breathe again, he found himself still clutching the edge of the counter for support, disoriented and quite weak. He struggled to stand up and grabbed for a facecloth, soaking it in cold water and laving it against his face and neck while he forced himself to inhale and exhale as strongly and evenly as possible.

Once he had managed to compose himself, he tiptoed out of the bathroom and began dressing silently. Unfortunately, there was nothing in his own wardrobe with sleeves long enough to hide the marks on his arms so he was forced to borrow one of Adam’s sweatshirts.

He glanced at Adam briefly to ensure he was still asleep and found that even that hurt more than he could bear. All he wanted to do was to get out of the suite and find a place where he could be alone with his tortured thoughts. He decided to leave Adam a note, but even that simple task seemed harder than he thought. He just stood there, staring at the blank piece of paper for ages, with his mind in knots and no words to write down.

What the hell was there to say?
When the phone rang, he jumped wildly and was able to pick it up midway through the first ring. Wincing, he looked over his shoulder but Adam hadn’t moved.

"I didn’t wake you, did I?" said Doug.

"No," he muttered. "I’m already up."

"Can you talk? Are you okay? I’m sorry, but what happened last night has really been bothering me." Without waiting for a reply, he added, "I’m sorry if I complicated things for you. I didn’t mean to make any trouble between you and Adam but I feel like I’ve made things a lot worse."

Gus squeezed his eyes shut. "You didn’t. Not the way you think."

"Good. Because if you feel up to it, I’d like to finish our conversation."

Gus’s head came up. "Why?"

"It’s okay...it’s not like anything new has happened, but I’m worried that something will. I need to talk to you. Can you meet me?"

Gus looked over his shoulder again and hesitated. He could imagine the fallout if Adam discovered he’d gone behind his back again but he had to face the bitter, unpleasant realization that things had already gotten as worse as they could get.

"Yeah, I need to talk to you too," he said quietly. "Where? When?"

"I’ve got a meeting at the Griffin offices first thing, then I’m going to rehearsal. Will you be there?"

Gus groaned inwardly. The last thing he wanted to do was to go to rehearsal. If only he could have crawled under the bed and hidden there for the rest of the day…. The thought of facing anyone else, including Michelle, was enough to make him want to grab the nearest cab for the airport.

"Can’t we make it somewhere else? I don’t want anyone to see us."

Doug’s voice became apologetic. "I’ve got so much to do..."

"Fine...fine. I’ll meet you there. What time?"

"How about one o’clock?"

"Okay. I’ll see you then."

He hung up, cursing at himself. It was a hell of a long time until one o’clock and there was absolutely no way he was hanging around the hotel until then. Without stopping to think about it anymore, he left Adam a brief note "Gone shopping. Will see you at rehearsals" and didn’t sign it. They usually ended their notes to each other with hugs and kisses or hearts and smiley faces...but none of that seemed appropriate this morning.

He threw his workout gear into a shoulder bag and let himself out without a sound, musing bitterly to himself that for once in his life he was relieved that Adam was such a sound sleeper. But the moment the door closed behind him, Adam opened his eyes, sat up and stared at the walls, feeling like he’d been kicked in the stomach...and worse...like he’d deserved it. He’d spent the entire night, shocked and disgusted by his own behavior and wanted nothing more than to wake up with Gus after they had both calmed down and find a way to talk through what was happening between
them.

Instead, he woke up to find that Gus was right back to hiding things from him like before and his feeling of self-loathing was rapidly being overcome by a return of anger and resentment.

Overhearing the phone call had stung him badly, but reading the note only deepened the hurt. Anyone who knew anything about Gus knew how much he hated shopping. It was hard enough to accept that he was sneaking out to meet somebody again; it only made it worse to know that he hadn't even bothered to come up with a more believable excuse.

The rest of Tommy’s evening hadn’t been much better. He was already worried about Gus after Adam had dragged him out of the party, and Michelle trying her best to get on his nerves finally got to him and he finally lost his patience. Marching up to Samuel, he excused himself and pulled Michelle away to a corner by one arm.

"Do you mind?" she snapped. "I’m in the middle of a conversation."

"Yeah, I can see that. So tell me...why the interest in Samuel all of a sudden?"

"Does it bother you?"

"I’d say that’s pretty much exactly what you’re after, isn’t it? Look, if you’ve got something you want to say to me, just say it. You don’t have to act it out like some kind of a spoiled child."

"Oh yeah? And why are you just picking on me? I didn’t notice you giving Gus any shit for his little performance. Not that he isn’t going to pay for it anyway. I think Adam had an awful lot he planned to say to him."

Tommy’s eyes had hardened. "Don’t joke about that."

"Do I seem like I’m joking? Believe me, I don’t think it’s funny. Just leave me alone. This is way too pathetic and weird for me and I’m sorry I ever got involved with any of you."

Then she turned her back on him.

"So why are you still here?" he shouted at her as she walked away. Feeling uneasy glances, Tommy moved to a corner where he spent the rest of the evening speaking to as few people as possible while watching Michelle with a sick feeling in his stomach. Towards midnight Samuel invited those interested to go to the casinos. Michelle didn’t even look at Tommy as she passed him on the way out with Samuel and Tommy made no move to stop her.

What was the point in trying to talk to someone who wasn’t interested in hearing what you had to say?

But by morning, he had run out of patience. He knew Michelle was in her room, but no matter how he banged on her door and shouted, she refused to even acknowledge that he was there. He tried banging on the door to Adam and Gus’s room next, ignoring the startled look from the security guard who had followed him off the elevator.

"They’re not there."

Tommy turned and glared. "Where did they go?"

"Adam? I don’t know. Jeremy went with him."
"Not Gus?"

The guard shifted a little. "No. He’d already left."

Tommy’s heart stopped. "Where did he go? He didn’t leave here by himself, did he?"

"No....He went upstairs. I think he went to the gym."

Tommy stood silently and just watched. Gus was on the treadmill with the settings cranked as high as they possibly could go, running blindly, pushing himself past fatigue, pain, and awareness. It was obvious to him that Gus was trying to reach a certain level of physical exhaustion to numb his mind and emotions.

The first sight of Gus had been a shock. His back was to Tommy and the tank top and shorts he wore revealed the horrible scars that marked his back from the shoulder blades down. Tommy had never seen those before and felt sick by the reminder of how much pain Gus had gone through after his accident. It only doubled his worry over how much Gus was clearly suffering now, and made him more determined to poke his nose in where it didn’t belong to make sure that Gus was all right.

The second shock was so much worse. He walked slowly into Gus's line of vision, trying not to startle him and then realized that Gus's eyes were closed and his face was flushed with fatigue and running with sweat. As Tommy hesitated, unsure of how to get Gus's attention, Gus reached blindly for the towel on the handrail in front of him and wiped his face. That was when Tommy caught a glimpse of the bruises on his forearm and the words burst out before he could stop them.

"What the hell happened to you?"

Gus’s eyes flew open and he stopped dead. He failed to grab the handhold fast enough, and would have fallen off the rapidly moving treadmill if Tommy hadn't jumped forward to catch him.

"Let go!" Gus said as he started struggling to free himself. He didn’t want anyone to see him like that. Once he pulled away, he wildly grabbed the sweatshirt he’d tossed on a chair, cursing himself for having taken it off in the first place. He had not expected that exposure and it shook him up beyond all reason.

The extent of Tommy's shock was so clearly written on his face. Unable to meet Tommy's gaze, Gus dropped his head and yanked the sleeves of the sweatshirt down over his hands. His obvious humiliation brought his emotions back to the surface.

"Gus..." Tommy whispered sickly.

He wished Tommy was angry. Anger he could handle; it was the gentleness he couldn’t bear...He could hear the confusion and discomfort in Tommy's voice, and he knew full well that Tommy understood exactly what had happened but couldn’t find a way to say it.

"It’s not what you think," Gus mumbled.
Tommy's breathing was short and painful. In only a few seconds, he visualized all kinds of horrible scenarios, each one worse than the last. He walked into Gus's personal space and tried to make Gus look at him without having to touch him. "No? Please, Gus...you’re scaring me. Please tell me the truth. Do you think I’m blind? I saw the way things were going last night..."

"It’s not what you think," Gus repeated, more fiercely.

"It is what I think," Tommy said in agony. "What did he do, Gus? Fuck, I’m so sorry...I should have stopped him...I shouldn’t have let him drag you out like that.... I could have stopped him from hurting you..."

Memories of the night before rushed into Gus's head, and his control began to crack. He put his hands over his face. "He didn’t hurt me..."

Tommy clenched his fists. "He did! Look at you!"

"No! No, he didn’t! He didn’t hurt me! It wasn’t his fault...it was mine...I made him so angry...we just got...we both...got...so...angry..."

"Come here."

Tommy's warm arms and the promise of understanding and compassion once again reminded Gus of Adam and what he had been missing for the last couple of days. He felt too much guilt and despair and felt unworthy of any sympathy or comfort.

"Let go of me!"

He pushed Tommy away, causing the other man to stumble back in alarm and hold his hands out towards Gus soothingly in an effort to calm him down.

"It’s all right, baby. Take it easy...I promise you...it will be all right..."

"No! No, it won’t! How can you say that...after what happened...after what I did...Adam blames me...for everything...I know he does....I never, ever should have tried to make him feel that way..."

"I’ll talk to him..."

"NO!" Gus shouted, and Tommy froze. "Can’t you see? We were already so messed up...if it hadn’t been for you telling him what had happened between us, he never would have lost control in the first place. You made him jealous and angry and then he got drunk and I should have never said those things to him...I hurt him...and he wanted to hurt me back..."

Tommy could not bear Gus's blame. Stammering, he said, "I’ll explain to him..."

"You’ll only make it worse! Is that what you want? Do you want to ruin everything for me? Stay out of it! I don’t want your help or your sympathy...you’ve done too much already..."

Tommy's stomach clenched again. "Please don’t say that..."

"It’s true! You lied to me about Michelle...you let Adam think I lied to him about you, about going back to the police force...don’t you understand what you’ve done? And now you’re sorry and go around offering apologies and explanations...I don’t want that from you! I don’t want anything from you! Stay out of my life! All of you! Just leave me alone...do you hear me? Get out! Get out and leave me alone!"
Gus sank down to his knees and put his arms up over his head. He was so irrational that Tommy was almost immobilized with shock. He felt sick and frightened...*Shit! Gus’s going to have a nervous breakdown...and even though he knew his presence was causing too much distress, Tommy couldn't force himself to walk away.*

"Please get out..." Gus whispered.

He refused to speak to Tommy again or let the other man anywhere near him. The harder Tommy tried to approach him somehow, the more agitated Gus became. Tommy was petrified to leave Gus in that situation.

He thought about calling Adam and then decided against it. Firstly, the sight of Adam could push Gus right over the edge, and secondly, Tommy was not sure he would be able to stop himself from beating the hell out of Adam the moment he saw the other man.

Eventually, not knowing what else to do, he quietly left the room. Gus needed help and there was only one person he could think of who might possibly be able to get through to him.

That is...if he could ever get Michelle to open the damn door.

Tommy took the stairs because it was faster. As he arrived onto Michelle’s floor, he noticed one of the hotel porters in the process of getting off the elevator with one of the large, fancy luggage carts in tow. He nodded cheerfully at Tommy, who was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that it was several seconds before he realized that he and the bellboy appeared to be heading in the same direction.

"Hey!"

Startled, the young man stopped dead.

"Yes, sir?"

"Where are you going?"

The bellboy looked a bit amused by the question but readily replied, "Mrs. McGavison is checking out."

"Oh no, she's not!"

The bellboy looked even more amused when Tommy crossed the distance between them in several long strides and took hold of one end of the luggage cart. Confused but aware of his duties, the bellboy took a better grip on his own end, and tugged back.

"Yes, sir! She just called down and asked for someone to come up and collect her bags for her."

"Well, that's not necessary."

"Sir?"

Thinking fast, Tommy said, "Her flight's been delayed."

The bellboy looked skeptical. "Oh."

"So I'll tell you what. You just leave that here and when she's ready to check out, we'll just bring it down ourselves, okay?"
"But I'm not supposed to...."

Frustrated, Tommy dug in his pocket, pulled out several folded bills and handed them over without even looking at them. The bellboy promptly released his hold on the cart.

"Now, just do me a favor, will you? Go down and knock on Mrs. McGavison's door for me? And when she opens it...you can go back to your job."

The porter parked the cart outside Michelle's room and knocked. Tommy knew perfectly well that Michelle would never let him in, but when she saw the luggage cart through the peephole, she wouldn’t hesitate to open the door.

"Thanks," Tommy said, sliding between the bellboy and the door so that he was in the room before Michelle even had time to protest.

"Get out!" she said when she finally found her tongue.

"I need your help."

Michelle’s face was flushed. "I don’t give a damn what you need. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m just leaving."

"No...you’re not."

"No?" she said wildly.

"Not until we talk. Then if you still want to leave, I won’t stop you."

"What makes you think I have anything to say to you?"

"I’m not here to talk about you and me. This is about Gus."

Michelle dramatically rolled her eyes. "Oh and why doesn’t that surprise me?"

"Look, will you please just listen to me for one minute? You need to go and talk to him."

Now Michelle really was stunned. "You've got to be kidding me! What makes you think I want to talk to him? I don't want him anywhere near me. I just want to go home and forget that any of this ever happened."

The remark hurt, but Tommy did his best to ignore it. "I’m not joking. You need to talk to him. He’s in bad shape."

Michelle smiled grimly. "Yeah well, maybe he’s starting to realize that he’s got to stop messing with other people’s lives. He brought most of this on himself, you know."

She swung her back towards him.

"Will you please listen to me? Something is really wrong."

She was determined not to look at him, but something in Tommy's voice sent a warning to her mind and abruptly she lifted her head to stare him in the face.

"What do you expect? After what he did the day before yesterday on top of everything else that's happened? Of course something’s wrong!"
Tommy shook his head and Michelle suddenly noticed how truly troubled he seemed. "No, no...something happened last night. After he and Adam left the party."

"I bet it did!" she exclaimed. "He looked like he wanted to strangle Gus. And after what Gus had done and the way he was acting, can you blame Adam?"

Tommy expression was grim. "I blame him," he said quietly.

He tried to explain everything the best he could. Michelle was stunned into silence and her face went through a whole array of changes until it finally settled on something between shock and disbelief.

"Holy shit, Tommy...do you realize what you're saying?"

"Of course I do," he spat back. "And I tried to get Gus to tell me what actually happened. He flipped out on me...screamed at me...pushed me..."

At that, Michelle’s mouth fell open. "He pushed you?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "And he kept saying that it was all his fault, not Adam's..."

Michelle stared hard then she gave herself a shake and she held up her hands in protest. "No, I'm sorry...there has to be some other explanation."

"Like what? What other explanation could there possibly be?"

"First of all, I can’t believe that Adam would ever deliberately do anything to hurt Gus..."

"Maybe it wasn’t deliberate. He was quite drunk..."

"...and secondly, Gus was a cop for fuck’s sake. He knows how to defend himself. Adam could not have laid a finger on him unless he wanted it that way."

Tommy was losing patience. "If that was the case, then why wouldn’t he talk to me? I’m telling you, Michelle...something is seriously wrong." He glanced at the suitcases at the end of the bed and then his eyes dropped to the floor. "Please...I'm not asking you to do this for me. I know you’re not really mad at Gus. I’m the one you’re mad at and I know that’s why you’re leaving but please don’t take it out on him. I think he needs you right now."

His obvious emotions were making things difficult for her. "You know what, Tommy? I’m getting sick and tired of picking up all the pieces of his life. He’s going to have to do it himself from now. Besides, do you honestly believe that Adam would ever actually treat him that way?"

"I don’t know what to believe. All I know is that Adam was angry and drunk and Gus had been trying to provoke him all night... everyone could see that..." Tommy’s voice trailed off. "You are the only one Gus might talk to. Please. Please go and see him. He scared the hell out of me, Michelle. I’ve never seen him like this before."

Michelle felt an uneasy pain. Tommy was hypersensitive to Gus’s moods but he’d also been there at some of the darkest moments of Gus's life and Michelle was sure he wouldn’t deliberately try to make it seem any worse than it actually was. She watched the way his gaze went back to her luggage before it lifted again so he was looking her directly in the eye. She swallowed and, despite herself, her heart skipped a beat. He looked hurt and distressed and she knew in her heart that it wasn’t only as a result of his concern for Gus.
"All I’m asking is that you talk to him."

He held her gaze, steady and earnest, until Michelle closed her eyes for a moment and sighed.

"Okay. Yes. I’ll talk to him. I’ll try and find out what’s going on." At his suddenly hopeful expression, she added warningly, "But...as for...everything else...I think it’s just better if we agree that things aren't working out between us."

Tommy didn’t move but his mouth tightened a little. "That’s not what I want," he murmured after a moment. "And if you need to hear me say it, then I'm saying it. That's not what I want." He watched as the flush deepened across her cheeks and then asked very seriously, "Is that what you want?"

She couldn't look away. Her mouth opened and then closed again...it was hard; the words were stuck in her throat and refused to come out.

"I think it’s for the best," she managed finally.

They stared at each other a little more but Tommy didn’t push any further. They both knew perfectly well that by avoiding the question she’d given him an answer more definite than anything else she could possibly have said.

By the time Michelle and Tommy returned to the gym, it was empty. Gus had obviously remained only long enough to change; his sweat-soaked workout clothes were in a heap next to his gym bag and the treadmill was still running.

He wasn’t in his room either and none of the security staff had seen him since earlier that morning.

Jeremy came to pick up Tommy to go to rehearsals and when Tommy refused to leave the hotel, Michelle quietly suggested that perhaps Gus had already gone to the arena.

"I doubt it," Tommy said in a hollow voice. "He could be anywhere by now."

Michelle was beginning to get nervous herself. Even though she was resentful and angry at Gus, the fact remained that they had been through so much together that there was no way one of them could abandon the other. It also wasn’t like Gus to disappear without a word to anyone. And given his state of mind in recent days and Tommy’s description of his outburst that morning, Michelle was beginning to wonder if whatever it was that had happened between Gus and Adam had finally pushed Gus into a depression he couldn’t fight.

"I’ll come with you to the arena," she said when Tommy continued to hesitate. "And if Gus is there, I’ll talk to him; and if he’s not...then I think it’s time for me to talk to Adam."
Gus found a temporary refuge in the garden of the hotel. He chose the shadow of a huge oak tree out of sight of the walkways and lay flat on his back for several hours in the relative peace and quiet, staring between the branches at the sky and trying to make some sense of the events of the past twenty-four hours.

He felt completely drained. Most of the pressure had been released when he had exploded in front of Tommy. Even though he knew he had hurt and frightened Tommy with his outburst, Gus knew Tommy would never hold any of it against him. Tommy had always completely understood him. Gus could share things with him that he could never share with Adam...Adam always ended up blaming himself when Gus’s doubts got the better of him, as if he was somehow responsible for not being supportive enough.

Gus had to be careful when it came to dealing with thoughts of Adam. He still wasn't sure about his own emotional state and did not know what he expected to find when he finally allowed himself to begin to work through those feelings. In less than two weeks the nature of their entire relationship had changed; it shocked him that two people with so much love and commitment between them could have their bond tortured and twisted so badly in such a short time.

It hurt to admit it, but he knew he had caused Adam so much pain since they’d arrived in Vegas. No matter who was behind all this, Gus had been the one who’d involved himself in many inappropriate ways and complicated the situation even more for Adam at every turn. He’d lied to Adam, gone behind his back, interfered with his professional life, gotten him in trouble with the media and, ultimately thrown his entire career back in his face in the most unforgivable way and at the worst possible moment. He’d deliberately tried to provoke Adam in front of other people during a public appearance and, probably worst of all, openly suggested that Adam wasn’t able to resist any temptation thrown in his way, then practically accused his lover of being unfaithful to him.

Gus couldn’t rationalize why. All he knew was that at some point he had failed to face his own fear and helplessness; that Adam had seemed so preoccupied with the preparation for the concert that he had often seemed unreachable when Gus had needed him the most: that he had finally let his own insecurities get to him and had deeply hurt Adam by his behavior: that when Adam decided to shut him out the night before, he had responded by dressing and acting provocatively, because apparently negative attention from Adam, had somehow seemed better than no attention at all.

And that wasn't fair either. Whenever he felt insecure, Gus would start building up walls to prevent those closest to him from seeing how severely shaken he was. He was afraid that once his loved ones learnt about the depth of his emotional instability, they would just leave. But Adam had always been there for him. Despite all the criticism Adam had received because of his actions, and despite all the limitations his fame and lifestyle had created, Adam had been always patient and gentle with Gus throughout their relationship. He freely admitted that Adam had gone through hell with him since they’d met. From the earliest days when Gus had resisted the idea of a relationship with him, to the painful events of the trial, right through to his surgery and even during his emotional breakdown, Adam had always been there by his side. Even though if any of the details of Gus’s emotional problems had ever made to the tabloids, things would have become incredibly difficult for Adam, both professionally and personally, he had always refused Gus's attempts to distance himself and was both proud of and affectionate with him in public. Adam had stuck with him through impossibly difficult times, defended him against considerable criticism from his management and record company and worked extremely hard to overcome his natural impatience with any situation that frustrated him.
Gus took a long time thinking about Adam and their relationship before he eventually allowed himself to think about what had happened the previous evening. He could barely handle the grief, the guilt or the terrible feelings of having done something that had put their whole relationship in jeopardy.

He’d wanted to hurt Adam and he had. He’d provoked Adam’s anger and jealousy on purpose and then turned the sexual tension between them into a twisted competition. He’d challenged Adam's masculinity and his pride and taken satisfaction in the reaction that his lover clearly could not control. Only a few days before, they had been wrapped in a warm and loving cocoon in California that had seemed a million miles away from anything even remotely related to the music industry and superstardom. Gus remembered the look on Adam’s face when he’d given him his father’s watch and could barely hold back his tears. Somehow it no longer mattered that he’d spent half the time since they’d returned to Las Vegas tormented with fear for Adam’s safety and the other half haunted by feelings of emotional instability. Nightmares and panic attacks and the anxiety he’d suffered all seemed unimportant when he thought about how, in less than four days, everything good between them had been ruined and torn apart.

He had let Adam down in so many ways.

He sat for a long time rubbing absently at the bruises that continued to darken on his wrists. Despite himself, the memories of their hard, passionate lovemaking gripped him with a strange fascination. He remembered provoking Adam, utterly turned on by his boyfriend's intense blue gaze while he toyed with his emotions. Even when he was flirting with disaster, he could recall how incredibly erotic it was that Adam wouldn’t let him go. Gus had never felt so powerful and powerless at the same time. He knew all about the psychology... about the fine lines between pleasure and pain, fear and trust, love and hate...What he didn’t know was how to find redemption, how to seek salvation. 

Don’t start something you can’t finish...

Gus had no idea where to begin to ask for forgiveness. He had no idea where to begin to even try and find the words.

Perhaps there were none.

In a little over twenty-four hours, it would be the beginning of the New Year. It was a reason to look ahead...to focus on the future and not the past. He began to realize that leaving the hotel room that morning had been a mistake, and that the hours he’d taken to sort out his own thoughts had been hours that he'd left Adam alone with his. God only knew what had been running through his mind since he’d woken that morning and found him gone. Gus had only had the briefest glimpse of the torment Adam had been feeling. How much had that torment deepened? How much pain was Adam feeling now? He would be blaming himself...just as Gus was wracked by his own feelings of guilt and confusion...right when he had to prepare for the most important appearance of his career. There would be no simple solution for what had happened between them, but the least Gus could do was be there to support Adam during that, to make sure that his lover understood that everything could wait until the concert was over and they could have some private time.

For now, more than anything, Gus needed to be practical and realistic and do whatever was necessary to get them both through the next day and a half. Maybe that time could give them each some breathing room and allow them to understand what they were dealing with better...before it was time to face each other for answers and apologies.
"I’m sorry," Adam said tiredly. "Can I do that again please?"

The director was staring at him. The entire room was staring at him. The VH1 crew was trying to record a simple interview. Adam looked pale and distracted and he had screwed up more than half a dozen attempts to answer a simple question about the choice of songs in the set list for the concert. It was very unlike him to be anything less than completely professional and in the zone during an interview and the state he was in now was nothing compared to the state he’d been in when he’d first arrived at the arena.

Adam was staring blankly at his hands and barely seemed to register anything that was going on around him.

"What the hell is going on?" Isaac hissed at Jeremy.

The bodyguard shrugged. "I don’t know. Adam called me first thing and insisted that he wanted to come over here...hell, even half the set-up crew hadn’t shown up yet."

"Oh yeah? What about Gus?"

Jeremy’s face darkened. "He’d already left. I used the phone in Adam’s room to call for the car and Gus was nowhere in sight. I have no idea where he went, but judging by the shape that Adam’s in, I’d bet Gus is probably twice as bad. He won’t talk to me. But somebody had better do something to calm him down or he’s not going to make it through this concert..."

Tommy arrived shortly after, with Michelle on his heels. She determinedly pushed him ahead when Isaac approached them and filled them in about the situation.

"Let me see what I can do." Michelle squared her shoulders and went looking for Adam.

Jeremy saw Michelle coming and hurriedly walked away. Adam didn’t move from his spot on the couch in his dressing room. It had been one of the few places he figured he could be alone, but as usual he’d underestimated both Michelle’s determination and her skills as a detective.

"Where’s Gus?" she said.

Adam carefully unscrewed the lid from the bottle of water he was holding. Taking a swig, he just as carefully replaced the cap. "I figured you’d be on a plane by now."

"Don’t think that didn’t cross my mind. Answer my question, Adam. Where is he?"

He leaned back against the cushions and closed his eyes. "I have no idea. He was gone when I got up. He left me a note to say he’d gone shopping."

There was silence and he opened one eye long enough to take note of her disbelieving expression
and then he closed it again. "Yeah...that’s pretty much what I thought when I read it."

"You do realize that nobody knows where he is?"

"I think that’s the way he wants it right now."

"Are you going to tell me what happened last night? After you left the party?"

"It’s none of your business."

"Fuck you, Adam! Tommy’s been climbing the walls since he saw Gus this morning because of the state he was in..."

Adam sat up abruptly. "What state? When?"

"A few hours ago. He followed Gus to the gym and Gus went crazy on him when Tommy tried to talk to him about what had happened. And I should probably warn you that Tommy’s just about ready to kill you when he gets his hands on you. He already thinks the worst, and frankly...the way things are going I’m starting to get the same impression. So you’d better start talking...fast...and start telling me that this has all been some big misunderstanding."

Adam’s jaw tightened. "So...that’s who he was going to see." Hearing Michelle’s short, exasperated breath, he snapped, "I heard him on the phone...arranging to meet someone."

"Maybe you did, but it couldn’t have been Tommy. Gus was already gone from your room by the time Tommy went looking for him. You both were."

"Yeah...well..." His voice faded out. "I don’t think Gus wanted to be around me this morning."

Michelle narrowed her gaze on his face and watched closely for his reaction. "Could that have had anything to do with the bruises you gave him?"

It took only a half second for the full response and Michelle sighed in relief and some of her doubts disappeared. Adam was so completely horrified that she knew instinctively that he hadn’t been conscious of any such thing. If something physical had taken place between them, if in fact he’d hurt Gus in any way, he’d done so unintentionally and even now was still completely unaware of it.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"What happened last night, Adam?"

"Tell me what the fuck you’re talking about!" He jumped to his feet, eyes wide with shock. "What bruises?"

She folded her arms and told him; coldly and brutally and without bothering to prepare him first. He went white, then red and then ... even whiter than before.

"Oh, shit..." he whispered. His legs seemed to have lost the ability to hold him up. He sat down hard and his head dropped forward into his hands.

When he felt her hand brush gently over his hair and heard her quiet questions, he began blurring everything out. Michelle sat beside him and clutched his hands and listened as compassionately as she could while her heart bled for him and for Gus. Adam cursed at himself over and over, rejecting any of Michelle’s attempts to soothe him and finally fell silent.

He couldn’t admit to Michelle that Gus’s last words to him had been about wanting to go home.
But that was exactly what he feared the most...that Gus had decided he couldn’t take it anymore; that his actions the previous night had driven Gus away: that his lover had found it impossible to face him after what had happened between them...

...that Gus was gone.
Organized confusion is still confusion. The first thing that struck Gus when he entered the arena was the sheer number of people swarming around and the sheer noise level. Rehearsals had already begun and he slipped quickly through the security check, noting the startled look on the faces of some of the staffers as he produced his identification. Clearly, they were all on the lookout for him.

The closer he got to Adam, the more his nerves intensified. His speech had been repeatedly rehearsed on the walk to the arena. It was simple and straightforward and gut-wrenchingly honest but he honestly admitted that the mere sight of Adam would probably wipe all his carefully planned words completely out of his head. It was going to be extremely difficult to grab a few private moments with Adam in the midst of all the chaos - oh, God ...what if he won’t talk to me? But there were not likely to be any more naturally opportune moments during the day. Dress rehearsals would run most of the afternoon and then VH1 was throwing a massive pre-New Year’s party as part of the build-up to the simulcast. As appearances went, it would be a Command Performance and even if Gus was made welcome at the festivities, it would hardly be the time or place for such a difficult conversation.

He skirted the main concourse and made his way down to the backstage level. Several people greeted him as he made his way through the clusters of staff and crew but he just bobbed his head perfunctorily and passed by without a word. When he caught sight of one of the VH1 crews heading in his general direction, he panicked and dove behind a crowd of people into the main dressing room. Not only did he not want to be corned by video cameras, he was also suddenly aware of how awful he must look and felt an impulse to try and tidy his appearance.

Relieved to find himself alone, he ducked into one of the little powder rooms, emptied the contents of his bag onto the counter and then scrubbed his face clean of all hints of the earlier workout and the tears that had fallen since. He then combed his hair with his fingers. He grimaced at little at his reflection; all the effects of accumulated stress still showed clearly in his eyes, but at least he was presentable.

He was refilling his bag when he suddenly froze. Someone had obviously come in from the corridors, accompanied by the distinctive sounds of an argument. Not wanting to see anyone that he absolutely didn’t have to, Gus lingered at the door and then cracked it open just far enough so he could peek out and see what was going on.

"I understand what you’re saying. And I’m telling you that I’m dealing with it, and I don’t need you spreading word of this around."

There was another voice that Gus didn’t recognize. "Technically speaking, this should be reported to the authorities. You know that as well as I do. When that much stuff goes missing, it’s pretty serious. Do you want us to lose our license?"

"I’m not saying it won’t get reported," Doug said impatiently. His voice grew more muffled as he moved towards the back of the room and Gus had to strain his ears to hear the rest of his words. "Just not now. We don’t need any more crap going on than we’re already dealing with."

"It could be damn dangerous if somebody has hold of those charges and doesn’t know how the hell to handle them. And we can’t run this short...I’m going to have to try and scrounge some
replacements. That’s not going to be easy. Most of the suppliers are already low on even the basic stuff."

"Well, that’s why you get paid the big bucks," Doug retorted. "You’ve got contacts in the business...use them. But I’m telling you, not one word of this gets out on the street...do you understand? You just tell people we’ve done some extra rehearsals and used up more pyro than we expected." His voice sharpened; it didn’t sound as if the other party to the conversation was being co-operative. "We keep this between us until after the show. Then I’ll deal with the authorities on it."

Gus furrowed his brow. Either the problems with the missing pyro had worsened or Doug hadn’t told him the truth about the exact nature of what was being pilfered. He’d specifically mentioned that none of the large charges were involved and Gus wondered fleetingly if Doug had not known at the time or if he was just trying to minimize the seriousness. Either way, his crew chief didn’t seem to agree with the orders he was being given not to take the issue any farther. He argued a little more before Doug bluntly reminded him that there were a lot of other very qualified stage managers in Vegas and that the ones with bad attitudes didn’t last very long. Shortly thereafter, there was a blur as someone stormed past Gus’s hiding spot and a door slammed loudly to punctuate the departure.

Gus's mind had already spun into analysis when he realized what he was doing and gave himself a kick.

This is exactly what got you into all this trouble in the first place, you ass. You’re going to have to learn to start keeping out of things and you might as well start now. Adam’s the only thing you should be thinking about from now on...

In fact, it made sense to go one step further. Doug had stated that he wanted to continue their conversation from the previous evening and that probably would have been the worst thing Gus could have done under the circumstances. Better to let Doug know that he had resolved not to get involved any further in any security issues whatsoever and perhaps that would demonstrate to Adam and others that he was serious about making an effort to keep his thoughts and opinions to himself.

Cracking the door open a little more, he peered out and found that Doug was in the kitchen at the rear of the dressing room with his back to him, refilling the coffee maker. He waited a couple of minutes then slipped out of the powder room, crossed silently into the middle of the room and approached him from behind as if he’d just entered from the hallway.

"Sorry," Gus said when Doug spotted him and nearly dropped the carafe. "I didn’t mean to sneak up on you."

Doug frowned at him and for a moment, his ultra-controlled persona slipped a little. From his expression, Gus guessed that his day wasn’t going all that well either.

"Didn’t hear you come in," he muttered, and then his face changed and his eyebrows rose. "Do you realize that everyone is looking for you?"

Gus flushed a little. "Yeah..."

"Tommy phoned me this morning to ask me if I’d seen you. He was pretty upset. I didn’t let on that I’d already spoken to you, just that I’d let him know if I did. And then when I got here, the staff on the gates told me that they’ve all been told to watch out for you. I was a bit worried...are you okay?"
Gus chewed his lip a little and nodded.

"Are you sure?" he prodded.

Gus permitted himself a brief smile. "I have a few things I need to take care of, Doug... and then I’ll be fine."

His dubious expression lingered. "Well, I haven’t been out front yet, but I’ve heard that Adam doesn’t seem to be looking that good today either. I know that things between the two of you are really difficult right now. And you can say what you want...but I know that I made things a lot rougher for you last night. I really am sorry about that."

Gus shook his head. "Don’t be. I’m the only one that’s made things rougher than they have to be. And actually that’s what I want to talk to you about. I know I said I’d meet you and I really appreciate the fact that you called me, but I only dropped in for a second. I need to see Adam but I just wanted a word with you first."

He looked a little puzzled, but motioned for Gus to sit down. "Okay. I’m listening. Can I get you a coffee?"

Gus’s mouth watered a little. He probably could have done without the caffeine, but the thought of a warm drink was undeniably tempting.

Doug took another mug down from the shelf and promised wryly, "It’s okay...I made it myself, so I know it’s not poisoned..."

They sat at the one of the meeting tables and Gus warmed his hands around the steaming drink while Doug sat across from him and observed him with some apprehension.

"Are you really sure things are okay?"

Gus’s lashes lowered over his eyes and one finger rimmed the cup’s edge while he thought about his answer. "To be honest, Doug...I’m just really upset about how I’ve screwed things up. For everybody, but especially for Adam. And you’re right - things are very tense between us right now, but that’s my fault...not his. With everything that’s happened and everything that I’ve done, I’ve really put him in a terrible position. If I can get a few minutes alone with him today I need to apologize for a lot of things, but first I want you to understand that I need to go back to just being in the background for anything that has to do with his career. You’ve been great in trying to keep me up on all the security stuff and I appreciate it...but all that’s done is get me in an awful lot of trouble. I’ll be getting back into the charity promotions after New Year’s, but other than that, I’d prefer if you just leave me out of things completely. And I don’t just mean now. I mean when we go on tour as well."

He listened without comment until the last sentence and then his mouth quirked.

"So...you are still coming on tour with us?"

Gus’s gaze remained fixed on his coffee and the color was still very high in his face. "Well, I have a few fences to mend first" he murmured. "But yeah, I hope so."

Doug patted his hand. "Good. And for what it’s worth, I know you’ve been through a very rough time, but you can’t really be blaming yourself for all of this. There have been an awful lot of things completely out of your control."

"And an awful lot of things that I should have done differently. Look, Doug...I don’t really want to
start picking this apart again. I just need you to know that this is the way I want things to be from now on. Okay?"

"Sure," he said quietly. "Although I think you underestimate how much I value your input on security. You’ve got a pretty unique point of view on all of this. You can see both sides and that’s been very useful. But all right...I hear you," he added, as Gus narrowed his eyes at him. "And I promise. I won’t get you involved anymore. I can see how much this is affecting you and with your history, I know you’ve got to try and keep stress to a minimum."

Gus went very still. The comment had been casual enough but that one particular reference cut through him like a knife.

"My history?" he repeated numbly.

He wasn’t really looking for confirmation. He would have been absolutely certain of what Doug had meant, even if he hadn’t launched into desperate apologies. "Gus...I’m sorry. I had no right to say that. It’s personal and I know I’m not supposed to know. Believe me, Tommy didn’t mean to say anything and he’d kill me if he knew that I’d let something slip..."

Gus composed his face into something resembling a normal expression and managed not to display any of the absolute horror that gripped him.

"Tommy...?" he whispered.

"It was an accident, Gus. Honest. You know that he wouldn’t deliberately break your confidence. And neither would I. I shouldn’t have even brought it up but I just know that when someone’s had emotional problems in the past, stress can be very hard to handle. I’m just trying to say that I completely understand why you need to back away from all of this..."

He floundered on a little more but Gus had stopped listening. The mere thought that there had been any discussion about his personal situation - even the most well-intentioned discussion - was enough to make him extremely ill at ease. He wondered wildly when this had all taken place and if Adam had been aware that private details of his life had been leaked and then realized that it didn’t matter. There was no way to take the information back once it had gotten out and all he could do was hope that neither Doug nor Tommy had accidentally let it slip to anyone else. His emotional problems were a painful reality in his life that he guarded fiercely, not only for his sake but for Adam’s, and the last thing he needed right now was to have to deal with the possibility that the information might have gotten out to somebody who would not respect his privacy.

He had a sudden flashback to that morning and the panic attack that had hit him without warning and had to struggle to keep his composure. Who the hell was he trying to kid? It wasn’t just the past he had to worry about...it was the present. Trying to keep his history private was going to be something of a moot point if he didn’t stop himself from coming apart at the seams in the here and now.

He didn’t remember exactly what he said to Doug but he blurted some kind of excuse and tried to stand up too quickly. The chair refused to slide; flustered, he shoved at the edge of the table, jostling the cup of coffee he had barely touched and then making it worse by reaching out to steady it and knocking it over completely. He sprang back out of the way but not before the hot liquid had splashed all over one arm and down the front of his sweatshirt.

He yelped and plucked wildly at one sleeve where coffee was soaking through and burning his skin and then stared in dismay at the widening stain on the floor.
"Oh, God, Doug...I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! All over your beautiful new carpet..."

"Screw the carpet!” he exclaimed in alarm and rushed around to his side. "Are you okay? Did you scald yourself?"

"No," Gus muttered but he was white around the mouth. "No...it’s just hot..."

As he held the oversized sleeve away from his arm, Doug eyed him up and down and said grimly, "You’d better take that off."

"I can’t." He felt clumsy and stupid and suddenly Gus was close to tears all over again.

Don’t cry over spilled coffee...

"...I don’t exactly have much on underneath..."

Even though his brain was only functioning half-way, Gus was still acutely aware of one thing - there was absolutely no way he could risk letting Doug see any of the marks on his arms.

"Okay, here..." Before Gus could stop him, Doug had pulled off the nylon jacket he was wearing and was trying to hand it to Gus. "Put this on. There’s a washer and dryer in the back. I can just throw that in for you and you’ll have it back in an hour..."

"You don’t have to do that," Gus muttered but the truth was that he could hardly walk around the arena half soaked with coffee. He was feeling so distracted and embarrassed that Doug didn’t have much trouble coaxing him to change and almost mechanically he waited until Doug had turned his back and pulled the stained shirt off over his head.

"I’m sorry," he said again, zipping the jacket on and noting gratefully that at least the cuffs hugged his wrists.

"Stop apologizing. Are you sure you’re okay? Why don’t you just sit back down for a few minutes? Do you realize how rattled you are...?"

"Yes! I know how rattled I am, thank you!" he cried. "Can you blame me, Doug?" He pushed agitated hands through his hair and closed his eyes, exhaling heavily. "God, every time I turn around something else goes wrong..."

There was a tentative knock on the door. Gus jerked around and looked extremely distressed at the thought of interruption and Doug was quick to hold up his hands.

"Stay put. Don’t worry...whoever it is, I’ll get rid of them."

A head appeared around the edge of the door and one of the security staff raised hesitant eyebrows at Doug. "Excuse me, but..."

"Later, Jason...okay? Whatever it is, it’ll wait."

The head remained but the eyes flickered over to Gus. "Actually...I’m looking for Mr. Harrison."

"Everybody is," Doug agreed in annoyance. "Just tell them he’s with me and that he’ll be out in a little while, okay?"

"Sure, Doug ...no problem. But that’s not why I’m here. I’ve got something for him."

Exasperated, Doug crossed to the door and pulled it all the way open, revealing the burly guard on
the threshold, looking extremely uncomfortable and clutching a cellophane wrapped package in his hands.

"These arrived at the gate. We wouldn’t let the delivery driver in...I told him I’d have to bring them up myself..."

"Aha..." said Doug slowly, as understanding dawned. Standing to one side so Gus could see, he glanced back at Gus with a half-smile and then waved the other man into the room. "Actually, now that you mention it...your timing is probably perfect. You’d better come in."

The package was carefully placed on the table in front of Gus. He was wide-eyed and speechless and had to shake himself to murmur a thank you as the security guard beat a hasty retreat, grumbling something about floral delivery not being part of his job description.

Doug stood beside him, looking from Gus to the bouquet and then back again.

"Aren’t you going to open it?" he prodded after a minute.

Gus’s heart wedged briefly in his throat and then continued upwards until it was pounding in his ears. Condensation had built up inside the clear plastic package, fogging the view of exactly what it contained but his hands still shook as he tried to untie the ribbon. When he couldn’t seem to manage it, Doug reached over and worked at the stubborn knot himself and once it was loosened, he pulled back the cellophane and the frosted tissue paper that lined it and revealed a beautiful bouquet underneath.

There was a choked sob from Gus and when Doug raised his eyes to his face, he found the other man flushed and staring and breathing like a long-distance runner.

"Is this good?" he said gently.

Gus was blinking. *Tulips. He sent me tulips...*

Doug tilted his head to see Gus's face more clearly. "Gus?"

The envelope was tucked into the tissue. Swallowing hard, Gus pulled it out and fumbled to get it open. The enclosure itself was computer generated in dark green ink on a pale green card in a stylish, flowing script. It wasn’t signed, but the lyrics were unmistakable.

Gus had to sit down. Doug began to look nervous.

"Are you okay?"

He put his hands over his face. It was a gesture he had never expected. It went straight to his heart —*Better Than I Know Myself*— and flooded him with emotion. He’d been consumed with worry over the thought of facing Adam...of trying to find the right words to even start the conversation that he knew they needed to have. He had been so afraid that he wouldn’t be able to verbalize what he was feeling, that all the anxiety and distress would just jam up between them and make it impossible to communicate...he should have known...he should have trusted...that Adam would be able to find a way to say it first...to open the door so that he could simply fall through it and let out everything that was bottled up inside him.

A shy little smile appeared and he could only nod wordlessly at Doug as he continued to prompt for some reassurance that Gus was all right. As he sat, clutching the card in one hand and touching the delicate petals of the flowers with the other, Doug tried to give him a little space, busying himself by taking away the discarded cellophane wrapping and clucking with disapproval at the
"This shop is half-way across the city. The idiot...why didn’t he just call me like he did last time? We have our own florist, for God’s sake..."

Gus was in another world. After a few minutes, Doug leaned against the edge of the table beside him and nudged him gently with one knee.

"Maybe you should go and say thanks," he suggested softly.

Michelle spent a long time with Adam, listening as he poured his heart out, trying to comfort him as best she could and generally mopping him up. Of all the people in the entourage, Michelle probably had the least tolerance for the rockstar phenomenon, but even she realized that the show the next night was vital to Adam’s career. So she did what she could to steady Adam for rehearsals and if he was wooden and emotionless when he went back out to the stage, she reasoned it was at least better that the half-hysterical state he’d been in when she’d told him about Gus.

Michelle no longer doubted that what had happened between Adam and Gus had come about as a result of nothing more than sheer pressure. It was ugly, it was painful and it was going to take a lot of healing but they’d both broken down under tremendous strain and both had to face up to the reality of what they’d allowed to happen as a result. She knew that Adam felt the blame belonged squarely on his own shoulders and guessed that Gus felt much the same about himself. It wasn’t Michelle’s place to judge where the responsibility actually did lie and frankly, she didn’t give a damn. The only thing that mattered was finding a way to help them come together long enough to talk, which was proving to be extremely difficult, considering that one of them was nowhere to be found.

The longer Gus was missing the more Michelle’s disquiet grew. She reassured Tommy as best she could while at the same time steadfastly refusing to divulge anything that Adam had confided in her.

"It’ll be all right, Tommy. I’m sure of that now. He’s just taking some time to calm down. He’ll be okay. They’ll both be okay."

"Oh yeah? Then where the hell is he, Michelle? You didn’t see the way he was this morning...how can you say that you know he’ll be okay?"

She didn’t have an answer for that. She made him promise only one thing: that he would not confront Adam about anything that had happened and that he would just work through rehearsals as best he could. Tommy gave in ... very reluctantly - not because he trusted Adam all that much at that particular point in time but because he’d come to trust Michelle absolutely when it came to her judgment of Gus. It nearly drove him crazy but he too felt the huge responsibility of the upcoming show hanging over his head and grimly managed to focus on the task at hand. If Adam ever suspected how close he came to getting his clock cleaned, his distracted, perfunctory demeanor didn’t reflect any particular concern over it. Given the general mood, rehearsals could have been a disaster but once again the only thing that saved them was the intrinsic connection they shared after working together for the last couple of years. The first couple of hours of rehearsal were mechanical and completely uninspiring to say the least, but they passed without incident and that was all any of them could have hoped for at the moment.

They ran the show in full, once, without any heavy-duty vocals so as to save the best of Adam's voice for the next day. The plan was to stop briefly for lunch, then resume with a run-through of those sets that needed work, to be followed at the end by another full dress and camera rehearsal. It was a demanding schedule and Michelle wondered privately if any of them would have the energy
to even stand at the end of the day, let alone attend the VH1 party.

As they shut rehearsals down for the lunch break, Adam came off stage and went straight to Michelle, who had to shake her head regretfully and admit that not only had she not heard anything from Gus but that Jeremy had also had no luck trying to track him down. She watched the way the hopeful look was wiped off his face and felt a twinge of worry. He looked awful and only turned away when she suggested he go to get something to eat.

"You’re going to fall flat on your face if you don’t have some food," she chided.

"Do you really think that I give a shit right now?" he said angrily. He took a tight hold of the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger and closed his eyes. "Michelle, I just need to know that he’s all right. I’m going to lose my mind if I don’t hear from him soon."

With no other reassurance to offer him, Michelle just shut up. She trailed along behind him as everyone moved backstage and noted the curt, monosyllabic answers he gave to any inquiries that came his way. As they had done all morning, his band eyed him warily and muttered among themselves, full of both professional and personal concern. Tommy kept most of his thoughts to himself but Isaac, who had jumped to an awful lot of the right conclusions, knew enough to steer everyone away from any attempts at trying to confront Adam about what was going on.

All in all, there was enough tension backstage to fill a tour bus and if that wasn’t bad enough, every single person was also well aware of the insidious presence of the VH1 crews who were still circling like vultures. Journalistic antennae swiveled in all directions. They didn’t know what the hell was going on, but they were pretty sure that if they hung around long enough, sooner or later they were going to get a chance to find out.

Adam had withdrawn to a corner out of sight of most of the others. He’d spent such a long time praying that Gus would just suddenly appear out of the blue that it took a few seconds for him to realize Gus was actually standing in front of him. He looked his boyfriend up and down in shocked disbelief; his face was pale and blotched with patches of color, his chest was heaving, his mouth was trembling desperately and his lashes were glistening with the dampness he was trying to blink
Adam stood frozen, unable to move and - at first - too damn scared to speak. Their gazes locked and neither could look away although Gus was having enough trouble dealing with his own feelings without being bombarded by the naked emotion in Adam’s eyes.

"Are you okay?"

Adam's voice was hoarse. Gus wondered fleetingly if Adam had strained it in rehearsal and then realized his lover was just having trouble getting the words out.

His own didn’t come any easier. "I’m...okay. Are you okay?"

Adam nodded, then sucked in an enormous breath and said, "Gus..."

"I wanted to thank you," Gus blurted. Adam looked first bemused, then shaken and involuntarily his eyes dropped to Gus's hands. Gus was clenching them tightly together and it was hard to tell...but as Adam stared, he realized he could in fact tell that there were faint purplish marks along the bones below Gus's wrists.

His stomach twisted and he felt another wave of shame and remorse sweep over him.

"Thank me...?" he faltered.

Gus was stammering badly. "I...I’m sorry I took off this morning...I just couldn’t think straight. I needed time by myself...but the longer I was alone, the more I was worried that I was just making everything worse...I needed to say so many things...but I wasn’t sure I could get up the nerve to make the first move..."

Adam’s mouth went dry. He wanted to brush aside Gus's contrition and smother him with apologies of his own but he was petrified of anything that might upset this sudden and tenuous new line of communication between them. He tried to smile, eyes shadowed and apprehensive. "You're here now, aren’t you?" he whispered.

"Because of you," Gus whispered back and then began choking on broken, tearful words. "How did you know? How did you know that I just needed something to show me it could be all right? The flowers were so beautiful...I can’t tell you how it made me feel...to know that you were still thinking of me that way...after everything I’ve done..."

He had to pause to gather himself again. Eyes squeezed shut, he missed the parade of expressions that passed over Adam's face...first anxiety and distress, then vulnerability and tenderness...then confusion...

Mystified, Adam said, "Flowers?"

"...there’s nothing else...nothing...that you could have done that would have meant more than sending me that bouquet to say that you were sorry..."

Confusion deepened. "But...I didn’t."

Adam's voice stopped Gus cold. His eyes flew open and there was a deathly hush while he stared uncomprehending and Adam stared back. Then an icy knot began to form in Gus's chest and his fists clenched. "So...so you’re not sorry? Is that what you’re trying to say? What were the tulips for then? Some pathetic attempt to suck up to me without an apology?"
"Whoa, whoa..." Adam protested. "I didn’t mean that I wasn’t sorry. I meant that I didn’t send you flowers..."

Gus's mouth sagged. "Yes, you did!"

"No! I didn’t!" Adam's temper flared again. He had no idea what Gus was talking about but the brief connection between them had already been already severed; obviously they were still on very different wavelengths. The anxiety he’d been harboring all morning suddenly burst out of him. "Can you explain how I could have possibly sent you flowers when I had no idea where the fuck you were?"

Gus stared at him and his mind spun. This made no sense and all his attempts at logic came up empty. On top of that, his emotions were still tumbling ahead of his brain and hard on the heels of the bewilderment came a defensiveness he wasn’t able to hide. "I left you a note! I told you I’d be at rehearsal!"

Adam looked away and his jaw flexed in irritation. "You’ve told me a lot of things in the last twenty-four hours," he said under his breath.

Gus's own mouth jerked. "I told you I’d be here," he repeated. "I told you I’d be here and I’m here! And I was in the dressing room.... and one of the security guys brought me in a bouquet...beautiful flowers...tulips..." His brow furrowed and without warning, he was overcome with distress. Almost desperately, he said again, "You sent me flowers..."

Adam lifted his eyes back to Gus's and felt a jolt of remorse when he saw the expression on his lover's face. Somehow he was hurting Gus all over again, simply by virtue of not having a blessed clue what he was talking about. Adam shook his head. "No, Gus. I didn’t." As brilliant color rushed into Gus's cheeks, Adam murmured lamely, "I wish I had. I saw the look on your face just now. Obviously they made you pretty happy."

"They did..." he whispered. "Because I thought they were from you."

He dug into his bag and came up with the little enclosure card. Adam took it and read it, then handed it back without speaking.

"You didn’t write that?" Gus choked.

Adam shook his head again and stared at the floor. "Technically speaking, I guess I did. My lyrics. But not my card... and not my flowers. I’m sorry."

Gus stood twisting the card between his hands, feeling suddenly foolish and hurt in a way he couldn’t explain. Adam hadn't been apologizing at all. Nothing between them had changed.

"Maybe it was Tommy," Adam murmured.

It was the worst thing he could possibly have said. Gus’s head snapped up and his eyes blazed. "He would never...ever..." he said heatedly, "send me a card with your lyrics on it..."

Adam hadn’t missed the way Gus's head had drooped in disappointment and said in agony, "I know...Gus, I am sorry. About yesterday. About last night. About everything I’ve done... Those flowers should have been from me. I want to do whatever I can to make things right..."

Gus turned his face away and when Adam leaned down to re-establish eye contact, he just jerked away with a dismissive shrug. "Somebody’s just playing a pretty cruel joke on me, I guess. It doesn’t matter."
"It does matter. It wasn’t funny and when I find out who did it...” He moved closer and, reaching out to grasp Gus's arms, saw the flicker of uncertainty in his lover's eyes and realized with a pang that any attempt to touch Gus might be a reminder of his over-aggressiveness the night before.

His hand dropped away. Gus saw his hesitation and his eyes filled with tears. His feelings were so bruised in so many different ways that he had no words to make Adam understand.

"I’m so sorry," Adam whispered again. "For everything."

Gus made a visible effort to compose himself. Adam stared at him with haunted eyes, aware that there was nothing he could do to comfort Gus that wouldn’t just complicate the situation. And as he stared, hovering so close that he could literally feel his boyfriend's warmth, his mind suddenly tripped over into another completely disjointed train of thought.

Gus was wearing a nylon warm-up jacket...one that Adam had never seen before. It was much too big on him and even though it was it was zipped three quarters of the way up, it was clear that Gus wasn’t wearing a t-shirt on beneath it. He could see the top edge of Gus's top peeking out where the zipper began to close and even before that realization had fully registered, he was aware of another, more disturbing one, this time in the form of the faint hint of cologne that lingered on the jacket.

He frowned and another feeling was thrown on the pile of heightened emotions. Maybe he had no right to be suspicious...but he still didn’t know where Gus had been that morning and he couldn’t dismiss the memory of overhearing Gus's plans to meet somebody. Now his lover was standing in front of him, apparently wearing very little underneath something that obviously belonged to another man and trying to thank him for flowers he hadn’t sent. What the hell was going on?

Gus had completely withdrawn back into himself. His face was very still but his hands were trembling.

"I think I’ll just go back to the hotel," he murmured.

"No!" Adam said sharply. "You stay here. We’re going to get to the bottom of this..."

This time he did put his hand out to take Gus by the arm. The arm tensed, then very carefully, Gus drew it out his grasp.

"I’ll see you later," he said in a flat voice.

He was gone before Adam could even think of stopping him. Adam looked down at his hand almost as if it didn’t belong to him and felt a return of stomach-knotting misery.

He’d touched Gus and Gus had pulled away.

Gus hadn’t even reached the concourse level before he had to stop, blinded by huge, raw tears. There was no way to explain how badly it hurt. He’d been lifted from the depth of despair to giddy relief and then plunged back down into desolation...all by something that Adam hadn’t done. He didn’t know what cut the deepest; knowing that Adam had not taken the first step towards reconciliation or knowing that somebody in the entourage now hated him enough to torment him with such a horrible prank. He didn’t even stop to consider that it might have been a well-meaning, albeit misguided attempt at bringing him and Adam back together. No-one in their right mind
would have been so completely stupid as to try to duplicate such a personal gesture.

At street level, he ducked into one of the men's rooms and came back out with fistfuls of tissues, using some to wipe away the most obvious signs of emotion and then ramming the rest into the pockets of the jacket for the walk back to the hotel. He was too embarrassed to be angry and too wounded to even think about spending the rest of the day in the company of whoever it was who had been so vindictive. He forced himself to put one foot in front of the other until he reached the street and then aimed directly for the safety of his hotel room, desperate to put as much distance as possible between him and the arena until he could make some sense of all this...if such a thing was even possible.

Who could have been so completely malicious? He’d angered a lot of people. Some professionally. Some personally. Some disliked him. Many resented him. While Adam’s little tradition of sending him tulips was hardly a secret, it also wasn’t widely known outside the immediate entourage. Therefore it had to be somebody close, and that meant it might also have been somebody he trusted...

Already, Gus could feel the tightness in his chest that was a prelude to a possible panic attack and with it came the perceptual distortions that made it impossible to rationalize. As his agitation grew, he began envisioning all kinds of horrible possibilities ...that Tommy had been so hurt by the way he had blamed him that morning....that Michelle had been so resentful of Tommy’s feelings for Gus...that Monte had finally lost his patience with him meddling...on one hand he could never believe that any of them would have been so spiteful as to take the situation between him and Adam and deliberate try to exacerbate it...but he was so sick with disappointment and despair that reality didn’t seem to matter much.

When he got to his room, he ran a hot bath and crawled in hoping to ward off some of the horrible chills. A shower was out of the question; he was so lightheaded and short of breath that he feared passing out. He lay in the tub and tried to work through some of the methods he’d been taught to use when he felt panic beginning to threaten him, an exercise that was not helped by the fact that he could hear the bedside phone and his cell phone both ringing repeatedly. But when he got his breathing and his heart rate back under control, he forced himself into analytical mode and began trying to deal with the facts.

There had to be a reason behind all this. There had to be a way to figure it out.

It was a natural assumption that he would be at the arena for rehearsals at some point during the day, no matter how strained things were between him and Adam. So the fact that the flowers had been delivered there instead of to the hotel was no great surprise. And it was obvious why they didn’t use the florist in the hotel; not only might they have been recognized, but the order itself could have been easily traced...

*Shit!* Gus sat up abruptly, sloshing water everywhere. He needed to have his head examined. The most obvious place to look for the person behind this was to go straight to the source...the florist who had delivered the order.

As he dressed, tying one of Adam’s long-sleeved dress shirts on over a tank top, he methodically listened to and then deleted the handful of voicemail messages that had been left on the phone since that morning. There were pleas from everyone for him to check in with them...Tommy, Michelle, Jeremy, Isaac and later, even Doug. Adam was clearly the most distraught of all of them...the tone of his messages ran the full gamut from anger to worry to complete alarm.

"Gus, baby...please call me. I need to know you’re okay. I don’t understand what’s going on here but please talk to me. Michelle told me about this morning...that you almost lost it with
Doug had been right. It was halfway across town. Fortunately, Gus had kept the little enclosure card with the florist’s name and address imprinted on the back and it was only a matter of hailing a taxi.

"Peppermint Patty’s?" the cabbie inquired as Gus slid into the back seat. "Yeah, I know it. There are flower shops a lot closer though..."

"Thanks. But that’s the one I’m interested in."

Any hope he had of making his visit a quick, low-key affair was dashed when he arrived and found the shop was in pandemonium. He slid his sunglasses down his nose and looked around in dismay at the crowd of customers and staff who seemed to be rushing in every direction.

"New Year’s parties," one of the clerks explained when Gus finally managed to sidle up to the cash desk. "A lot of them. And then New Year’s Day we have about eighteen weddings....I’m sorry for the wait." She motioned towards a large, fancy candy dish that was the centerpiece of the counter and full to the brim of brightly wrapped candies bearing the logo of the store. "Would you like a peppermint?"

"No. Thanks."

"Were you interested in ordering something? Can I help you pick something out?"

"Actually..." Gus fished out the enclosure card and leaned his elbows on the counter feeling rather embarrassed. "It’s about an order I received from here earlier this afternoon."

"Oh. Was there a problem?"

"No! They were beautiful. But I was just a little confused, that’s all. I’m not sure who they were from."

The clerk raised her eyebrows. "The card wasn’t signed?"

Gus shook his head.

"Ahh...secret admirer, huh?"

Gus smiled briefly. "Something like that. Or maybe the signature got left off the card by
"mistake...?"

Obligingly, the clerk took Gus’s name and entered it into the computer to call up the order. "No, it’s right. It specifically says ‘no signature’ on the special instructions."

"Then can you tell me who placed the order?"

Unfortunately, one of the managers was passing behind the counter at the time and she both frowned and interrupted when she overheard the request. "I’m sorry, sir. We can’t do that. We have a policy of not giving out any information on our customers."

"But he doesn’t know who the flowers were from," the clerk piped up.

"If there was no signature on the card, sir, it was that way for a reason. We get that request a lot, believe me. And we have to respect the wishes of our clients. I’m sure you can understand."

"I do understand," Gus said a little impatiently. "But in this case, I’m asking because it’s created some rather nasty problems for me. The person I thought they were from didn’t order them...and he doesn’t quite understand why some other guy is sending me flowers."

The manager hesitated. She was being paged from across the store, but she paused long enough to give Gus a polite smile and her employee a warning frown. "I’m sorry about that, sir...I never understand why some people take a nice gesture and try and turn it into something mean. But I’m afraid it does happen from time to time in this business and I’m sure that you can appreciate I can’t have my staff getting into the middle of those types of situations. Jen will be happy to help you with anything else you might require, but I’m afraid I can’t allow her to give out personal details on a customer. Please help yourself to a peppermint."

She gave the clerk one last admonishing look and then continued on her way.

Jen looked apologetic. "Sorry about that."

Cursing under his breath, Gus tried again and laid it on a little thicker. "Look, I can promise you that I’m not going to tell anyone about this. You’ve got to understand that people’s feelings are being hurt here. Do you think it’s right that something like this might break up a relationship? Because that’s what’s going to happen if I can’t find out who’s pulling my chain here."

It may or may not have been true. Gus didn’t want to speculate on exactly how much this was going to hurt his situation with Adam, but if it was good for dramatic effect, he’d use it. Hell, if necessary, he’d play the Adam Lambert card...but only if he was damn sure that it was absolutely his last resort.

"I can’t," Jen said, even more apologetically. "I’ve only been here a few weeks. I’ll get my ass kicked out the door..."

"Great," Gus snapped. "Then could you do something else for me instead? Call up my boyfriend and explain why you won’t help me? At least then he’d know I tried to find out what the hell was going on!"

He closed his eyes briefly and bit back any further displays of temper. The last thing he wanted to do was get the kid fired. Resignedly, he straightened up and shoved the enclosure card back into the pocket of his jeans.

"Peppermint?" Jen said hopefully.
Gus opened his eyes and glared. "What is it with you people? How many times do I have to say, no thank you? I don’t want a peppermint. I don’t like peppermints. All I feel like doing at the moment is throwing peppermints...so you probably shouldn’t go offering me any ammunition."

Jen rolled her eyes meaningfully. "Well, if you’d prefer...the chocolate covered ones are just over here..."

"No! Forget it! I don’t care if they’re gold plated!" Gus was seriously starting to wonder if this girl was deliberately trying to get on his nerves, when he suddenly realized that Jen was angling her head to the left and pointing surreptitiously down the length of the counter towards another huge dish of candies.

Then it dawned on him. By moving down to the far end of the cash desk, Gus could have an unobstructed view of the computer screen that Jen had casually angled in that direction. Maybe she wasn’t allowed to actually give Gus the information...but if Gus accidentally happened to see it...

"Thank you," Gus muttered and sidestepped as casually as possible until he could see the display.

He ran his eyes over the screen. The delivery address, item, card message and delivery date were all clearly marked. In the "customer" section, there was actually very little information. Aside from the phrase "cash sale", there was only one name ... Lambert ... and a telephone number.

Jen nonchalantly slipped a pad and a pen across the counter towards Gus. "That’s not a local phone number," she said low. "But you can write it down if you want it. Maybe it’s a cell phone..."

Gus’s shoulders had already slumped. With a sigh he straightened up and offered Jen a grateful smile. "It’s okay. I appreciate it, but that actually doesn’t tell me anything I don’t already know. Whoever did this was pretty smart...there’s no way to trace the person back from that information."

"What about the phone number?"

"Doesn’t help me, I’m afraid," Gus said hollowly. "You’re right ... it is a cell phone number. As a matter of fact, it just happens to be mine."

He was forced to leave empty-handed. Jen had even gone so far as to quietly canvass the other staff members to find out if they remembered anything about the man who’d actually come in and placed the order. But given that the store had already served over one hundred customers that day, it was impossible for her to be able to pin anything down without raising suspicions. Gus thanked her for her efforts and grimly made his way back to the hotel.

Now that shock and embarrassment were beginning to wear off, anger was setting in. It was bad enough that his life had been turned upside down by circumstance ever since he’d arrived in this town; now someone was deliberately trying to play games with him, messing with his mind and hurting Adam in the bargain.

He remembered his assertion to Doug that he was backing away from any involvement in anything to do with Adam’s career. He’d promised to keep out... to mind his own business...not to get involved. There was barely twenty-four hours left before one of the largest television and music productions in history and the last thing he should have been doing was contemplating anything that could have possibly caused more dissention.
Screw that. This was personal. He had every right to know who was trying to push his buttons and this was just about him; it had nothing to do with Adam's career or Griffin or security or anything else to do with Adam.

Unless of course...it did. Gus’s insides went cold at the thought but the possibility hadn’t escaped him. The delivery of flowers may just have been somebody’s idea of a very bad joke...or it may very well have been another tactic in the long line of situations that Gus still believed had been carefully crafted by someone who was out to get back at Adam.

Dear Diary:

I fixed the boy today. I sent him flowers, pretending they were from him. I don’t care if I screw him up. Whatever it takes to get my man, back, I’ll do it. He doesn’t know what my man wants...what he needs. They have big plans for the holidays. Everybody knows about them. Big New Year's celebration.

Won’t ever happen.
Chapter 27

Gus realized too late that he should have asked the taxi driver to drop him off at the back of the hotel. The moment he stepped out of the cab, he was surrounded by a group of lurking fans, who were all over him with questions and requests to pass on messages to Adam or Tommy. He was as patient with them as he could possibly be while inside he cast about desperately for a graceful way out and then found rescue from a most unlikely source.

"Excuse me...Mr. Harrison?"

Gus looked around and found Bill Wasley waving at him from the doorway of the hotel.

"I'm here for our meeting," he continued without blinking an eye. "And I don't want to interrupt you, but I'm afraid I'm a bit pushed for time."

Gratefully, Gus accepted the opening and was able to extract himself from the situation without seeming ungracious. As Bill escorted him into the lobby, he leaned over and muttered, "You're a lifesaver. I owe you one."

Bill eyed him sideways and noted how inordinately stressed Gus looked. "No problem. You looked like a man in need of a good excuse. Nice bear."

"Thanks," Gus said dolefully, sticking the stuffed animal under his arm. "It's for Adam. You weren't really looking for me, were you?"

"That's not why I'm here, no. But to be honest, I'd like a chance to talk to you if you don't mind."

The last thing Gus wanted to do was discuss anything with anyone but he knew Bill’s job had been severely complicated as a result of some of his escapades and thus felt an obligation to do this one small thing for him. Reluctantly, he invited Bill up to his room.

"I'm sorry about what happened this morning," he ventured as they rode up in the elevator. "About the flowers."

Gus hunched his shoulders. "Oh. Great. I guess that means everybody's heard about it by now then, huh?"

"Well...Adam was asking around to see if anyone knew anything about it."

Gus winced. He could just imagine Adam "asking".

"He seemed pretty upset at the idea that somebody had played that kind of a joke on you." Bill took note of the furrow that creased Gus's forehead at this and added, "I don't imagine he was the only one."

When they got to his room, Gus ignored the madly flashing light on the telephone and just flopped down tiredly on the sofa. Now that they were alone, Bill seemed to be second-guessing himself about launching into a conversation. Gus looked askance but held his tongue; half fearing that Bill had been sent to give him a lecture about controlling his behavior during the next thirty-six hours.

"You weren’t at the dinner-party last night," he said finally, unable to stand the silence.

"No. There was no real professional reason for me to be there...and I’m not the type of person
Samuel chooses to associate with if he doesn’t absolutely have to."

"I guess not," Gus murmured with a small smile. "You’re not nearly snobbish enough."

Bill grinned back. "I’ll take that as a compliment."

"You should." Gus put one hand to the back of his neck and flexed it wearily. "Besides, it wasn’t a very festive occasion. You didn’t miss much. I wish I had."

Bill was silent for a moment as he pulled the chair across from the desk so that he could sit down facing him. Gus wondered again at Bill's apparent hesitation to speak but decided not to push and let him find his own starting point instead.

"I need your advice," he admitted finally.

His astonishment was obvious. "My advice? Good God, Bill...haven’t you been paying attention lately? My judgment isn’t exactly what it should be. I’m the last person you should be asking for advice."

"Maybe so," he said with a stubborn set to his jaw. "But I’m going to ask anyway. This is a bit of a touchy situation and I need a professional opinion."

Gus was tempted to ask him to be more specific about exactly which profession he was referring to but he swallowed the remark instead and nodded at him warily.

"If you insist. Go ahead - shoot. Just don’t say you weren’t warned."

He rubbed his palms on his knees and seemed to be re-thinking his options one last time before he eventually leaned forward and fixed Gus with a serious stare.

"I’ve heard something from one of the staff at the arena and it’s got me a little worried."

"Like what?" Gus said, startled.

"You’ve got to understand that I usually don’t get involved in anything that has to do with production. But because I’m responsible for public relations and this guy is afraid that word of this might eventually get out, he figured I should know. He also wants someone else in Griffin management to know what’s going on so that he doesn’t get all the blame when this all hits the fan."

Gus’s mind was so full of other things that he was astonished at how quickly he made the right connection. But almost before he’d finished forming the thought he blurted out, "The missing pyro..."

Bill bolted upright.

"How did you know...?"

"Doug told me."

"Doug did?"

"Yeah. Last night. Well, actually...what he told me was that a few odd things had been happening at the arena...and that one of the problems was that some of the low end pyro had gone missing. He said - and I agreed with him - that it was probably somebody just scooping some stuff for a New Year’s party. But he told me that it was only the small stuff, nothing big, nothing hazardous..."
Bill was shaking his head even as Gus continued.

"...but then this morning, I overheard one of the stage managers talking to him about it. About the fact that there were actually some of the big charges missing. Enough to be pretty dangerous in the wrong hands."

The dreadlocks abruptly changed direction as Bill’s head went from back and forth to up and down. "Yes! Exactly."

Gus chewed his lip. "And Doug blew him off."

"That’s why he came to me. Griffin has to have licenses for pyro in any of its venues...not just to use it, but to transport it, store it..."

"And you’re required by law to report any stolen explosives over a certain size."

"And we’re going to get fined in to the middle of next year if any of the agencies find out that Griffin knew pyro was missing and didn’t notify the authorities. Not to mention the lawsuits if somebody gets hurt over it. At the very least, our permits to use pyro in any of the venues could get yanked permanently."

"So...this guy came to you to cover his ass? Why didn’t he just go straight to Samuel?"

"Because Doug promised him that all the proper reports will be filed once the New Year’s Eve concert is over. But that’s still going to mean doctoring the dates and times, and this guy’s just not up for that. He doesn’t want to play ball but if he doesn’t, he’s going to get canned...and the guy’s got a family and a disabled kid...he can’t afford to lose his job."

"So...why is he telling you all this?"

"Because he wants it on the record that he was threatened with being fired if he said anything to anyone." Bill shrugged. "I handle publicity. If anything went public about this or if it ever went to court, I’d be the one making statements to the press. And he realizes that his chances of getting anywhere near Samuel in the next day or two are nil anyway...and if I know Samuel, he’d probably been even more in favor of a cover-up than Doug."

Gus was looking more uneasy by the minute. "I’d have to agree with that. So does this guy have any idea who’s been ripping off the supplies?"

"No. Aside from the fact that he knows it’s someone on the staff."

Gus’s face whitened. "Holy shit, Bill!" he said, appalled. "Is he absolutely sure about that?"

"It has to be. The security at the arena is just about impenetrable right now. Anyone who had access to the stage, or the equipment or the pyro ... especially off hours ... has to be one of the senior people."

Gus’s spine stiffened. All kinds of little alarm bells were going off in his head...exactly the same little alarms bells that had been ringing ever since the drugging at the benefit and exactly the same little alarm bells that he’d promised he was going to ignore...

Bill regarded him with some trepidation. "So I need your opinion. Do you think I should be going over Doug’s head about this to somebody? Should I be going to Samuel myself?"

"Oh, right!" Gus exclaimed. "So you get fired instead? And then it still gets covered up? I don’t
"I think that’s a good career move."

"Yeah. That thought did cross my mind. You got any other suggestions?"

Gus exhaled loudly. On its own, the incident didn’t seem worthy of creating another furious backlash. But in conjunction with all the other weird things that had been going on...

"What I don’t get," Bill mused. "Is why Doug is willing to look the other way over this. I can see him doing it when the odd little thing goes missing, but from the way it was explained to me, this is pretty dangerous stuff. Given his background, you’d think he’d be a lot more careful."

"His background?"

"Yeah. He did a tour in the army for a couple of years. He was in munitions. You know...explosives, artillery, bomb disposal... He apparently really knew his stuff and I just would have thought he’d be real militant about safety. He always seemed to be, but I guess he’s just feeling so much pressure over this concert and everything that’s happened..."

"All the more reason why he should be going by the book," Gus scoffed. "You’re right; it’s not the type of behavior I would expect from him. And he’s got to know that this would reflect just as badly on him if word ever got out."

His words trailed off and Bill watched without interrupting as he continued to process information. Gus was struggling; both with an inherent lack of confidence in his own ability to rationalize anything at the moment and with the realization that he was contemplating the same kind of interference that had gotten him in all the trouble in the first place. He should have let it go...but he had no luck squashing his concern or silencing the ongoing carillon in his head.

"Let me talk to Doug," he said after a long silence.

Bill looked taken aback. "No...I didn’t mean for you to get involved. I just need some advice on how to handle this..."

"And I’m giving it to you," Gus said shortly. "You can hardly do anything without risking your job, can you? Realistically, I can’t possibly get in any more shit than I’m already in and I might get a lot farther with it than you could anyway."

"What will you tell him?"

He spread his hands. "The truth! That I overheard the stage manager complaining about the stolen charges and I want to know what Doug’s going to do about it. He can hardly blame me for having big ears. Maybe if he knows that I’ve heard about it, he’ll decide to do things a little differently. At the very least, if Doug knows that I heard the stage manager trying to do the right thing, he can hardly go ahead and fire the guy over it."

Bill didn’t seem overly confident about that assertion but he nodded anyway. "Are you sure about this? Really Gus...with everything that’s happened, I don’t want you to get into something that’s going to create problems for you."

Gus rolled his eyes. "I’m more worried about all the problems that I’ve caused for you. Look Bill, you’re absolutely right that this is important and you can’t let it drop. Besides, I do owe you a favor. I’ll talk to Doug at the party tonight and see what I can do. Will you be there?"

Bill grimaced. "Yeah. Everybody will be. And Samuel’s already circulated a staff email threatening us all with dire consequences if anyone says or does anything that ends up looking bad on VH1."
"Well then," Gus muttered with a sigh. "I’m surprised I didn’t get a copy of that memo shoved under my door...personally autographed by Adam."

He looked so miserable for a moment that Bill couldn’t help himself from reaching out and squeezing his shoulder. He looked startled, then smiled at Bill gratefully.

"Thanks," he said.

Bill stood up, shoving his hands into his pockets with a trace of embarrassment. "No, thank you. Look, I have to drop back in the office before I go home to put on my party duds, so I’d better go."

"Wait a second then," Gus said, and hopped to his feet. "If you’re heading back there anyway, could I get you to do me a favor?"

He scooped Doug’s nylon jacket off the bed where he had pitched it earlier that afternoon. "Would you mind dropping this off? I sort of had a disagreement with a cup of coffee today and Doug loaned this to me so I didn’t have to walk around looking completely stupid. I can hardly give it to him tonight and the way my mind is these days, I’m likely to forget otherwise."

Agreeably, Bill held out one hand. Gus paused, reddened a bit awkwardly and then began cleaning out the pockets.

"Sorry, just let me trash all this stuff. I’m sure the last thing Doug wants is all my used Kleenex..."

He emptied one pocket and dropped the contents in the wastebasket. Then, as he rummaged in the other, pulling out more tissue, he became aware of something round and hard among the balled-up Kleenex and sorted through it more carefully, wondering if he’d stuffed something else in the jacket without realizing it.

Then he stopped dead. The jacket hit the floor and Bill, stooping to retrieve it, was more than a little concerned by the utterly shocked look on Gus's face when he straightened back up.

"What?" he said in alarm.

Gus’s frozen and bloodless expression didn’t change.

"Shit," he faltered. "Oh, shit..."

"What? What is it?"

He clenched his fist shut, momentarily hiding the contents and then almost unwillingly unfolded his fingers again. The second glimpse was no less disquieting than the first and with it came a rush of sick realization.

Bill stared, without a clue what he was looking at or why it possibly could have mattered.

"What’s the big deal?" he said.

Gus half turned towards him with his palm still up. In the center of his hand sat two peppermints... wrapped in shiny paper and trimmed with the distinctive and all-too-familiar logo of the florist he’d visited only an hour before.
It took a lot of explaining and it was no wonder he was confused.

"You’re not listening, Bill!" Gus said angrily. "I wasn’t wearing the jacket when I went to the florist. That’s my point!"

Gus was pacing around him in distraught circles, oblivious to the way Bill had to keep pivoting to try and face him. He’d told the story as best he could, but his account had been flustered and disjointed and riddled with the alarm that had only now begun to fully register.

"And if I wasn’t wearing it at the time, then the only way these could have gotten into the pocket of this jacket is if Doug had been at the florist himself before he loaned the jacket to me."

Bill was trying hard to keep up but it was obvious that he was still totally baffled. "So...Doug sent you the flowers?"

"Who else would have been at the same florist? All the way across the city? There’s a florist right here in the hotel if he was looking to send anything legitimately." Gus had his hands pressed against his head almost as if to try and stop the rush of insight that was threatening to leak out all over. "Crap, I am so stupid. Doug had already arranged to meet me... of course he knew where to send them and when. And he already knew exactly what to send because he was the one who took care of the order for the tulips that really were from Adam the day we arrived here. Doug even made a big deal this afternoon about pointing out that the flowers hadn’t come from the florist in the hotel and then he made an even bigger deal of pushing me to go and find Adam to thank him...knowing that I was going to get one hell of a shock."

"You are going way too fast for me," Bill protested. "Exactly why would Doug want to cause trouble between you and Adam?"

"I don’t know. But when I start to think back I can think of all kinds of occasions when he was asking some pretty personal questions and being far too interested in our relationship."

Bill fumbled over the beginning of a few different sentences and then gave up. "I’m sorry, Gus...that just doesn’t make any sense. It’s hardly in Doug’s best interests to have Adam all freaked out..."

"No," Gus agreed grimly. "It’s not... is it?"

He ended up against the edge of the dresser, bracing his hands on it and dropping his head down between his shoulders while he groped about for some perspective. But his gut was sending signals that his brain just wasn’t ready to acknowledge and he was having great difficulty reconciling the
"He’s been there...every single time..." he muttered half to himself.

"What do you mean...every time?"

Gus looked over his shoulder. "Doug. He was there when the girls were drugged at the concert..."

"It was a Griffin concert! Of course he was there!"

"...he was the one who brought me the envelope of newspaper clippings. He was there when we found the bottles in the dressing room...hell, he found them! He was there when the fire alarm went off..."

"He’s always there," Bill said, trying to be reasonable. "It’s his job to be there."

"...and today he was there when I got flowers that weren’t from Adam, but that had come from a flower shop almost twenty minutes from here and now I find candies from that self-same shop in the pocket of the jacket that Doug was wearing this morning when there is no other way for them to have gotten there unless Doug picked them up and put them there himself."

"You still haven’t answered my question. Why would Doug do something like that?"

Gus turned around. His expression was bleak.

"You tell me, Bill," he said quietly. "Why is Doug trying to cover up missing pyro all of a sudden?"

They stared at each other until Bill’s shoulders drooped and his mouth fell open.

"Gus," he stammered. "Have you got any idea what you’re saying?"

"So go ahead!" he cried. "This is where you tell me that maybe all the stress is getting to me. That I’m not thinking straight. That I’m letting my imagination get the better of me."

"That’s not what I’m saying at all. All I’m saying is that I’ve been with Doug an awful lot over the past couple of weeks. Yeah, he’s a bit wired and this thing with the pyro is really bothering me, but you’re trying to pin some pretty major stuff on him..."

Gus pushed himself away from the dresser. "Okay then! Answer this for me. You said you’ve been with him an awful lot. Yesterday? The day before? Were you around him a lot on those days?"

"Yeah. Of course I was. That’s why I just can’t see..."

"And was he getting a lot of calls on his cell phone?"

Bill’s face blanked momentarily. "On his cell phone? Well...yeah. I guess so. He’s not in the office much these days, so that’s how people reach him."

"A lot of hang-up calls?"

"What do you mean, hang-up calls?"

Gus ground his teeth in frustration. "Hang-up calls. Phone rings - nobody’s there. Was he getting a lot?"
"No. Not that I noticed. What the hell does that have to do...?"

Gus held up his hands to silence him. "Bill," he said, very carefully. "Doug told me last night that he had about thirty crank calls on his cell phone, both yesterday and the day before. Like someone was playing games with him. Enough that he finally just turned the phone off." Gus saw the way Bill’s face was changing and already knew the answer but he persisted with the question anyway. "You were with him on and off for a good part of those two days. Did he get that many hang-up calls? Did he get any?"

Bill’s eyebrows dipped sharply. He thought long and hard and Gus raised his own brows at him when Bill didn’t answer. Finally, his eyes closed and he let out a long resigned breath and had to say the words.

"No. I didn’t seem him get any of those types of calls and he also didn’t mention anything like that to me. Shit, Gus...why the hell would he make that up?"

"Because he’s pulling people’s chains," Gus muttered. "And Bill, I’m starting to get a really bad feeling about all of this..."

Bill’s expression indicated that he was starting to have similar thoughts. And misery may love company but it wasn’t a great deal of consolation to Gus that someone was finally sharing his disquiet. Instead, all he felt was fear clutching at insides that were already raw after days of upset and anger. This was all going far too fast and he was horribly conscious of being able to do anything concrete to stop it, at least not with the tenuous supposition and flimsy circumstantial evidence they had at the moment.

"You do realize that nobody’s going to believe any of this," Bill said a bit desperately.

Gus sat down on the edge of the bed. "Yeah. I know. Especially not from me and especially not based on the whacked out conclusions we’ve both just jumped to."

Bill sat down beside him.

"Tell me what you need me to do," he said steadily.

Gus glanced sideways at him. "I can’t ask you for help, Bill."

The steady gaze didn’t waver. "You’re not asking. I’m offering. What do you need me to do?"

There was so much he needed to know and so little time to find out. Gus was also very aware that if any of his suppositions were correct there was absolutely no way he could possibly let Adam or anybody else out of his sight, which meant that he most definitely needed to be at Adam’s side for the VH1 party that evening. There was also way that Bill could afford to be absent for the evening and with less than a couple of hours to go before the doors opened, they were strapped for both time and options.

"First of all," he said finally. "Talk fast. And tell me absolutely everything you know about Doug Taylor."
Michelle spent the rest of the afternoon doing damage control. First she had to struggle to calm 
Adam down when it finally struck him exactly how cruel somebody had been to try and make Gus 
believe that he’d sent the flowers in an attempt at reconciliation. Adam didn’t know what was 
worse; the fact that someone had deliberately tried to hurt Gus or the fact that his boyfriend had 
been so desperately wounded and disappointed to find out that the flowers weren’t actually from 
him. It didn’t help that Tommy insisted on knowing what was going on. Shocked and furious to 
hear how Gus had been tricked, he then began berating Adam for Gus’s state of mind in the first 
place, blasting him with such venom that everyone within earshot stopped what they were doing 
gaped in amazement. Michelle was forced to intervene but by that time all the angry words had 
been said and it no longer mattered. Adam had simply stopped listening and when his angry 
questioning of everyone in the entourage turned up nothing but astonished denials, he became 
deeply depressed. He tried several times to reach Gus by phone, growing more upset with each 
unanswered call and unable to stop thinking about how much Gus must be hurting at this latest 
blow to his ego.

Adam was so distraught that he seriously considered leaving rehearsals to go after Gus. Tommy 
probably would have seconded that motion had Michelle given either of them the chance; instead 
she managed to convince them both that they had a responsibility that could not be set aside and 
that she and Jeremy would continue to do whatever they could to track Gus down themselves.

Jeremy called the concierge’s desk at the hotel to ask them if Gus had returned there and then 
cursed himself for not having called them earlier.

"Well, he was here, sir. He came in about forty-five minutes ago, but he actually just left again. He 
asked me to call a cab for him, sir...but he didn’t say where he was going..."

Michelle broke that news to Adam as gently as she could. Adam went very white and all he could 
say was, "Did he have any luggage with him?"

"No. Listen, Adam, you have to stop jumping to conclusions. If he was going to the airport, he 
would have taken the hotel shuttle, not a cab. And I honestly can’t believe he’s really thinking 
about leaving. I’ll keep calling him...try not to worry...he probably just needs some time to 
himself."

Adam didn’t remember much of the remainder of the afternoon and he couldn’t have explained to 
anyone how on earth he managed to function throughout rehearsals. Michelle, not knowing what 
else to do, hovered nearby and marveled at the concentration he summoned from deep inside. She 
knew he could be fiercely disciplined but even so, she was amazed at his ability to focus under 
such pressure. Just as it had been that morning, his performance was centered and without fault but 
at the same time it was so completely detached and empty that Michelle could only speculate that 
he’d somehow blocked out all of his emotions and was working purely by rote. No one dared to 
comment on his lack of edge; it was only rehearsal after all and in general everybody was just 
relieved to see that Adam was functioning at all, given how listless he was with anyone who spoke 
to him.

It was a more difficult struggle for Tommy. His heart was aching on many different levels;
Michelle had ended their relationship, he was desperately afraid for Gus and no matter how angry he was with Adam, it still hurt him to see how deeply Adam was suffering. Michelle was quietly commiserative, but she kept her distance from him and seemed determined to make him understand that she was there only because her friends needed her, and not because she was interested in attempting to repair things between them.

Terrance and Sasha were a godsend. They continued to divert the attention of the VH1 crews anytime they seemed to be venturing too close to Adam. Michelle tried to take them aside to thank them but they simply shrugged and brushed off her appreciation.

"You know how I feel about him. And I’d do anything for that bone-headed boss of mine...but whatever the hell is going on, I sure hope somebody does something about it fast. Even we can only be outrageous for so long, and don’t think VH1 isn’t aware that something’s up with Adam. They’re not going to keep their noses out forever," Terrance said.

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Bill filled Gus in on everything he knew about Doug...and that didn’t take very long. Doug was notoriously close-mouthed about his personal life and the things that Bill did know had come mostly from secondhand information.

"He’s worked here a lot longer than me. He started out on the ground floor, doing production work for one of our smallest venues. But he’s so good at what he does that he just worked his way up incredibly fast. I’m pretty sure he came here straight out of the Army, when he was about twenty-one. So it’s not like he’s new around here. He’s worked for Samuel for about ten years now.”

"That’s amazing in itself,” Gus muttered. "I couldn’t work for Samuel for more than five minutes."

"I’m not saying they get along real well. In fact, I’d have to say that they barely tolerate each other. But Doug’s so good at what he does that Samuel knows Griffin can’t afford to lose him and Samuel’s so powerful that Doug knows he’s got the best of all possible worlds here. He couldn’t possibly get this many opportunities at another entertainment company."

"What about his personal life?"

"That’s sketchy. He’s pretty career-oriented. I don’t think he has any family."

"Yeah, he mentioned that to me once," Gus recalled, frowning to himself.

"...and anytime he’s dated someone it seemed to be pretty casual. He used to keep an apartment across town but with this kind of job he was hardly ever there. Samuel promised him a suite in the hotel so he’s actually lived here for the last couple of months. It was a pretty selfish move on Samuel’s part, actually...he just wants Doug on call twenty-four hours a day."

"Was he born in Vegas?"
"I’m pretty sure he was. I couldn’t tell you exactly how old he is. A bit younger than Samuel...maybe thirty-one...thirty-two?"

"That’d be my guess. And there hasn’t ever been any problem with him that you know of?"

"No. Nothing. He’s made himself pretty indispensable to both Samuel and Griffin. And I’ve worked with the guy for over two years without noticing anything weird. That’s why I’m starting to think we must be jumping to the wrong conclusion here."

At that point, Gus became so desperate for a way to get information that he even toyed with the idea of calling Dean Holden and asking him to do a background check.

"The police checked everyone on the Griffin staff when this all started," Bill protested.

"Maybe they checked Doug; maybe they didn’t. Or maybe they just missed something. I know it’s a long shot, Bill, but the only other thing I can think of is to get into the public records and start researching it from there. And not only do we not have the time for that but those offices aren’t going to be open again until after New Year’s..."

He caught the suddenly speculative look on Bill’s face and frowned.

"What are you thinking?"

"Just that...I know somebody in public records."

Gus stared at him. "Shit, Bill...are you serious?"

He nodded. "I should have thought of it sooner. It’s not someone I know real well, but she and I have taken a few journalism courses together. She called me before Christmas, actually...looking for a way to get tickets to the New Year’s show."

"Can you get hold of her?"

"I’d have to find my class list from the last course I took, but yeah...I think I can." He looked at his watch. "Shit, if I don’t get out of here I’m not going to make it back in time for the party. Samuel will have my head." He didn’t miss Gus’s determined, impatient expression and sighed. "When I get home, I’ll find that number. If I can reach her, I’ll try and talk her into going into the office for us...but I’m not making any promises. She may not be real happy about checking out somebody behind their back, even if she is willing to do me a favor. And even if she is, I’ll bet this is going to cost me big-time."

"Fine. Whatever she wants, she gets. Don’t you think I know what we’re asking her to do? If nothing else, I’m sure she’s got better things to do on New Year’s long weekend than do favors for you. But if she’s a fan and if that’s what it takes to convince her to help us, then I’ll pull out all the stops. She can have front row tickets, backstage passes, I’ll personally introduce her Adam...hell, she can come back to L.A. with me and Adam if she wants..."

"I think she’s more of a Tommy fan," Bill admitted and at Gus’s exasperated expression, added hurriedly, "Okay, okay. I’ll call her. She has been pestering me for weeks to get her in to the concert, just like every other ‘friend’ of mine that comes out of the woodwork when there’s a big event going on."

"Backstage passes," Gus reminded him. "And I’m not kidding. Tell her if she pulls this off for me she’ll get more up front and personal with Adam than she can possibly imagine."
Predictably, rehearsals ran late. There were problems with one of the camera cranes and as the delay grew, patience continued to thin. Doug did his best to smooth things over between the TV crews who were insistent that certain shots had to be set up before they wrapped and Adam, who was tired and irritable and wanted nothing more than for the whole day to be over.

Doug took Adam aside during the downtime and spoke to him privately.

"I heard about what happened to Gus. I’m sorry. Is he okay?"

Adam didn’t appreciate the question and immediately went on the defensive. "No, Doug. He’s not. Would you be if somebody did that to you?"

Doug looked apologetic. "Sorry...that was a stupid thing to say. I’m just very worried about him, that’s all. I know he was having hard time already and the two of you didn’t need anything else going wrong between you."

Adam’s eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

The other man shrugged. "Look, I understand that it’s pretty personal. I guess he just needed someone to talk to and he and I have always gotten along pretty well. Maybe it helped that he was able to vent a bit and get some things off his chest. And believe me, I know enough not to take everything he said at face value. When you get that emotional, you tend to exaggerate. I’m just glad that he trusts me enough to be able to talk to me."

There was a dangerous silence while Adam’s blood pressure began to rise all over again. The suggestion that Gus had been talking about their personal life infuriated him.

"Would you mind telling me what the hell you’re talking about?"

Doug was quick to back off. "Hey, Adam...it’s no big deal. I kind of hoped that I’d helped him out, but I’m sure that getting those flowers just upset him all over again. But he knows he’s got good friends...and I can see how much that means to him. He’s got Michelle... and Tommy...and I think it’s great that you’re cool with him having such a close friendship with Tommy. Some men wouldn’t put up with that, especially if there was that kind of history between them."

Diastolic readings crept up a little farther at this insinuation. Ignoring Adam’s sudden physical agitation, Doug reached out and rested his hand briefly on the other man’s arm where muscles
clenched involuntarily.

"Look, I hope I’ll see him at the party tonight. Don’t tell him I said anything, okay? He probably feels pretty embarrassed about some of the things he told me."

With that he walked away, satisfied that he’d succeeded in twisting the knife in a little deeper. Adam stood absolutely stunned, staring at Doug’s retreating figure and almost unable to make sense of what he’d just heard. Then almost absently, his nose twitched and he gasped as he was hit by another brutally sick realization...

*That cologne.* The *same* cologne. And Doug had been in strangely casual attire today...just a t-shirt and nylon tearaways...the kind that usually come with a matching jacket...

Adam closed his eyes and groaned to himself. Now he knew whose jacket Gus had been wearing that afternoon.

"You’re overreacting," Michelle insisted as they rode back to the hotel.

"Am I?" he said dully and to be honest, overreacting was the last thing he was doing. Instead, he seemed beaten down, resigned...almost completely helpless.

"Just ask Gus about it. I can’t imagine him telling Doug anything that personal."

"Would he tell me the truth if he did?" he said in despair. "And don’t think I didn’t get Doug’s little jibe about you either," he added to Tommy spitefully.

Tommy looked grim but refused to be baited. "Gus doesn’t talk to other people about those things. I’m with Michelle...you just need to ask him about it."

Adam put his head back on the seat and squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted sleep ... preferably deep, dreamless, alcohol-induced sleep - but as usual he had to put his personal wishes aside and accept the fact that sleep was out of the question. "Yeah, Tommy...I’ll do that. *If* I ever see him again."

Michelle booted him in the shin. "Don’t be an ass," she snapped.

She could have handled his anger but he’d become so completely despondent that she was
seriously beginning to worry about him. When they reached the Citadel, she doggedly followed him up to his room and insisted, "You get ready for this party and I'll go with you. Come on, Adam...you've got to do this. You know you do. Gus will be back sooner or later...I promise he will...and when he is, you can talk to him."

"What the hell is there to say?" he said wearily. Unlocking the hotel room door, he held it open for Michelle to precede him and then walked into her as she stepped across the threshold and stopped dead.

"God, I'm good," she remarked.

Gus stood up from his seat with his heart in his throat. Michelle looked both relieved and grimly satisfied that she’d been proven correct while Adam stared over her head and didn’t even bother to try to move her out of his path.

Nobody spoke. Then swallowing convulsively, Gus murmured, "You guys really ran late. You’re really going to have to move it if you want to be at this party on time."

Adam still stood against Michelle’s back and his heart was pounding so hard that Michelle could actually feel it. She looked Gus up and down once and then, satisfied that her friend wasn’t in any immediate danger of a meltdown, glanced back at Adam as she sidled around him.

"I’ll see you at the party, Adam. Don’t be late."

The moment the door closed, Gus spoke up again. "Tell me what you want to wear and I’ll get it all out for you while you grab a shower. Do you want something to eat? I’ll call down for a tray if you’re hungry..."

Adam was still staring. He hadn’t known what to expect when he saw Gus again. On one hand he’d imagined angry defiance and cold shoulders; on the other hand, he’d been afraid that Gus would be so distressed that he wouldn’t even be able to face him. But this was nothing like the angry, willful firebrand of the night before or the emotionally fragile man he’d faced that afternoon. Instead Gus seemed to have made yet another transformation. He appeared calm, clear-eyed and completely in control.

Unable to hold Adam's gaze, Gus looked down at himself and smoothed his hands over his hips a bit self-consciously. "Is this okay? It’s not going to be too fancy there tonight, is it?"

"No," he said and then blurted involuntarily, "God, you look amazing."

Gus was wearing the sweater Adam had bought him for Christmas over flared leather pants and boots. It was very simple and understated and a far cry from his outfit of the night before but the effect was just as startling. Gus looked like a million dollars.

He had put on the sweater deliberately, hoping Adam would understand the significance...and he did. But it was another mixed message in a long line of mixed messages and it threw him for yet another loop, given that he’d spent the last hour agonizing over the thought that Gus had confided their most personal problems in someone he considered a virtual stranger. No matter how much he’d tried to concentrate on the preparations for the concert, the truth was that thoughts of Gus had occupied him for the entire day...worry, anger, fear, jealousy, suspicion and every other possible kind of heartache. The last thing he ever expected was that he would walk into their room and find his boyfriend waiting for him in such an obviously calm state with concern about his party attire first and foremost on his mind.
"I wasn’t sure you’d be here," Adam said. He tried to keep his voice level but he was breathing so heavily that it cracked all the same.

Gus raised his head again. "I should have called you this afternoon," he murmured. "I’m sorry about that. I was upset...it took me awhile to think things through."

"I don’t blame you. Those flowers were pretty cruel. I am going to find out who did it, I swear..."

"It doesn’t matter," Gus interrupted and as Adam opened his mouth to argue, he raised a hand to stop the other man. "Please, Adam. Don’t you think I know how important the next thirty-six hours are for you? That’s all you should be thinking about right now. I don’t want anything else to be getting in the way of you doing what you need to for your career. And the first thing you need to do is get ready for this party..."

Adam looked away in frustration before his gaze returned to Gus's, even more intense than before.

"Screw the party! We need to talk...I need to talk..."

"It can wait. It has to wait." Gus was quietly insistent and when Adam seemed determined to contradict him, he said bluntly. "There are too many things to be said, Adam. I don’t want to be trying to fit that conversation into little gaps in your schedule. I want...I need...your complete attention and it’s not fair for me to ask you for that until after tomorrow night. So I’m telling you now - and I’m asking you to respect my feelings - that I’m willing to put aside our discussion until we can be alone and private and uninterrupted. Right now we’re both tired, we’re both stressed and you need all your energy and your focus to put towards the show tomorrow. Take care of business first and then we can deal with the rest of it."

"That’s not fair to you, either," he said, half-angrily.

"If I didn’t think it was fair, then I wouldn’t be offering." Neither had moved from their original position; now Gus edged forward until he was in his personal space, watching Adam's face change as he got closer and feeling the physical tension build between them. "This is the only way we’re going to make it through this, Adam. Surely you can see that."

When they were barely a foot apart, he stopped. Adam's eyes were troubled and Gus could sense his indecision but Adam held his gaze earnestly and without hesitation.

"I’d like you to be there with me tonight," he whispered. "It would mean a lot to me."

Gus nodded. Barring actually being handcuffed to a chair, there wasn’t anything that was going to stop him from being there. From this moment on until the concert was over, there was no possible way he was letting Adam out of his sight.

More than anything he wanted to confide his terrible suspicions to Adam. But something prompted him to keep quiet; he feared for Adam's safety more and more, yet knew that making him paranoid about his own security would be a terrible distraction. Besides, the chances of him believing anything Gus had to say at the moment were slim at best and until Bill managed to find something else to back up his suspicions there was no point in alarming Adam or angering him with the news that he’d been doing his own detective work again.

Things between them were bad enough already.

"Go and have your shower," he murmured.

Gus stood aside to let him pass. Adam hesitated.
"Wait a minute."

Without warning, he stepped close, reached for Gus's hand and lifted it very gently.

Gus inhaled sharply. "Adam..." he said.

His first instinct was to pull away, not because he didn’t want Adam to touch him but because he had already made the decision that this was not the time to open this particular door. He had managed to put aside his tortured feelings of confusion and heartbreak only because his protective instincts were on overload. He could not afford to let Adam weaken him now but at the same time he could not bear to give Adam the impression that he was drawing away. So he steeled himself and stood without moving as Adam pulled the sleeve of the sweater up only an inch or so, just far enough that he could clearly see the marks of his fingers on his skin. He swallowed hard and let go, almost regretfully touching the silver bangle on the same wrist as he released Gus.

"We’re not going to talk about this now," Gus reminded him softly.

"Yes, we are," Adam said emotionally. "Do you think I can let this go? It can’t wait, Gus. This has already gone too far. I see what it’s doing to you. You and I are both coming apart and I don’t understand what’s happening to us..."

They stood motionless, heads together and almost touching until Adam turned his face away and Gus had to press his lips together to stop the sudden rush of tears. With great difficulty, he whispered, "Just because you’re not saying the words doesn’t mean I don’t understand what’s in your heart. Will you please just trust me? I’m not going anywhere, Adam ... I promise - and all the things we need to say will still be there the day after tomorrow." He waited silently until Adam's face turned back to his; at the sight of his vulnerable green eyes, his heart lurched.

Then he nodded.

Immediately, Gus turned away and went to the closet, disguising the fact that his hands were shaking by rattling hangers along the bar. "What do you want? Jeans? Those leather pants?"

When Adam was finally in the shower, Gus sat down hard on the edge of the bed and willed himself not to cry. Knowing that what he was doing was right damn well didn’t make it any easier. He was desperate for Adam's touch and his understanding and to know that Adam still believed in him, and standing so close to Adam, feeling his eyes on him and being lightheaded with nearness had been almost impossible to bear without breaking down. But there were still too many obligations that had to be met first. Still too much to do. Still too much to focus on.

And if any of Gus's horrible suspicions were correct...still too much to lose.

__________________________________________________________________

Michelle stopped at Tommy’s room on the way to her own to let him know that Gus had returned safely to the hotel and seemed, for the most part, to be calm and in control. Tommy was in the
process of stripping down to take a shower...he let her in without a word and defiantly refused to make any attempts to cover up.

"He seems okay. At least for now. It looks to me like he’s planning on being at the party, so you can see for yourself."

"And what about you?" he asked snidely. "Will you be gracing us with your presence?"

She let the remark go. "I’ll drop by. At least long enough to be sure that they don’t need somebody to run interference for them. The last thing they need is anyone getting in their face about what happened today, or either one of them is liable to lose it."

Ignoring his sarcasm was one thing. She had a lot more trouble ignoring the rest of him as he deliberately reached around her to grab the bathrobe off the hook on the back of the door. A little rattled at his proximity and even more rattled at his state of undress, she snapped, "Why are you asking? Will it bother you if I’m there?"

"Suit yourself," he replied with a dismissive shrug. "You don’t need my permission. I’ll bet Samuel will be very pleased to see you there. He seemed pretty taken with you last night."

*That* remark touched a nerve and without thinking Michelle muttered, "He was pretty taken with my financial status, you mean. Do you know that the man actually had the balls to ask me what my personal holdings are in Caruso-White?"

Tommy didn’t miss a beat. "Yeah, I did notice that he was checking out your assets."

Color rushed into her cheeks. Almost absently, Tommy picked up his watch off the dresser and glanced at the time.

"It’s getting late. If you don’t mind, I’ve got to shower." With one hand he pulled open the door and, placing the other in the middle of Michelle’s back, neatly steered her out of the room. He cocked an eyebrow at her look of outrage as the door slowly swung shut in her face and offered her a bland smile.

"I’ll see you later, I guess."
Chapter 28

The word "party" usually implies something light-hearted and fun but despite everyone’s best intentions, the party that night was hardly what you would call "festive". All eyes sharpened with great interest when Gus arrived with Adam but those who were anticipating a repeat of the previous night’s performance were disappointed. Gus was quiet and reserved for the entire evening, rarely leaving Adam’s side and seemingly content to just be on the sideline of any conversation. But it also didn’t go unnoticed among those who knew them well that although they were physically together they never touched and barely even spoke to each other.

The last thing Gus wanted to discuss with anyone was the incident with the flowers that afternoon, yet he was oddly touched by the number of people who approached him with murmured sympathies. Lisa made a point of taking him aside and speaking kindly to him and several people from the entourage expressed their indignation that he’d been the victim of such a malicious prank. Terrance was openly outraged and scuffed his feet with muttered promises that he’d make mincemeat of the person responsible if he were given the opportunity. Even Monte astonished him by expressing regret that his feelings had been hurt in such a way, but in all honesty it was Isaac’s reaction that nearly did him in. Breezing into the party with Sophie on his heels, he walked straight up to Gus and gave him a bone-cracking hug. Gus hugged him back, unable to stem a fresh rush of tears and then laughed as Isaac pulled a face at him and muttered, "No crying on TV, buddy. I’ll be blamed and God knows I’m already on the hook for enough for one day."

“You’re one in a million, Carpenter," Gus sniffled and kissed him on the cheek.

He caught Tommy watching him on a number of occasions but he quickly looked away any time their eyes met and he seemed to be deliberately going out of his way to avoid speaking to him. That hurt, but Gus could hardly blame him given the cruel accusations he’d hurled at him that morning. More apologies were in order there, but it was another painful discussion that was going to have to wait until the pressures of the upcoming concert were off them all.

Doug’s arrival drew a lot of attention. He immediately began making his way around the room, greeting guests and shaking hands and indulging in a few moments of small talk with each group of people. Adam noticed how Gus stiffened noticeably as Doug drew closer and wondered numbly if it had anything to do with the fact that he had supposedly unburdened himself to him earlier that day. Adam had promised himself that he would not bring up the nature of Gus’s relationship with Doug until they sat down to have their "conversation" but the sight of the other man approaching them still made him shift a bit possessively in Gus’s direction. Gus saw Doug closing in and had much the same reaction; he unconsciously slid a little closer to Adam until they were so close that their arms were touching and they were both on the defensive...both for very different reasons.

"I’m sorry about what happened today, Gus," Doug said quietly. "That was a rotten trick. You don’t deserve to be treated like that."

The words went straight through Gus and it was all he could do not to haul off and belt him one. You two-faced son of a bitch...what the hell are you up to? Struggling to keep his temper, he mumbled what he hoped would pass for a suitable reply and abruptly excused himself. He stood at the buffet table for several minutes with his back to the room, filling a plate with snacks he really didn’t want but which gave him something to do with his hands besides clench them in frustration.

What frustrated him most was that there was still no sign of Bill. Samuel was growing restive since it was Bill’s responsibility to monitor any of the spontaneous interviews that took place that night but fortunately, having already captured a few of the early moments, the VH1 crew had decided to
take a break and indulge in some food and drink before they got down to any more serious business. They had every right to jump in and enjoy themselves since VH1 was hosting the party, but the rather blatant delay tactic didn’t go unnoticed by anyone...the longer the crew waited to get started again, the more likely partygoers were to be good and pissed, thus making for much more interesting video.

Gus noted with relief that Adam was drinking only Perrier and steadily refused any of the cocktails that were offered him by circling waiters. He too stuck to non-alcoholic beverages, not because he couldn’t have used something to take the edge off his nerves, but because he was determined to be completely alert and on the lookout for anything that looked the least little bit untoward. He kept a wary eye on Doug for the entire evening but found that, although he seemed psyched and full of nervous energy, he also wasn’t acting in any way out of the ordinary. A little bit of doubt began to twitch at the back of Gus's mind...he was absolutely positive that Doug had been behind the delivery of flowers and he also knew that there was no legitimate reason why he would be covering up the issue of the missing pyro, but frankly, there was nothing else odd about Doug's behavior to suggest that he was in any way responsible for the other incidents that had occurred since their arrival in Vegas. Half of Gus desperately wanted to confront him and just have it out; the other half knew that he was only likely to make himself look more foolish if he accused anybody of anything without a considerable amount of substantial proof. His judgment was already suspect as far as the majority of the entourage was concerned and they were hardly likely to give credence to any of his suspicions without backup.

Gus almost tripped over himself crossing the room when he spied Bill. He had to wait impatiently while Bill spoke to some of the media who were present and then he collared the other man and dragged him off to one side.

"Relax," Bill said in an undertone. "I got lucky. I did get hold of Catharine on her cellphone and she’s agreed she’ll run Doug’s name through the public records and archives to see what she comes up with."

"When?" Gus said anxiously.

"Well, that’s the bad news. She’s about two hours outside of Vegas visiting a friend. It took some convincing, believe me, but she’s on her way back and she’s promised me that she’ll go straight to the office and she’ll be in touch with me as soon as she gets the results back out of the system. It’s going to take some time though, Gus...she can search for hits on his name, but anything she finds is likely going to be stored on microfiche and that’s going to slow her down."

"We don’t have a lot of time, Bill..."

"I know. I told her that. And it’s pretty much going to take every single one of those bribes you mentioned to get her to do it, but she promised me that she’ll keep working on it, even if it takes her all night."

The evening dragged interminably. Gus shadowed Adam as much as possible with his eyes and ears open and his sensors on high. Nothing unusual caught his attention, a fact he found both comforting and frustrating. But he was entirely focused on the task at hand and all of the distress and confusion of the past several days were firmly set aside. It was an oddly familiar scenario...working an undercover situation with only minimal evidence and partial leads, waiting for the situation to play itself out while giving the suspect as much rope as possible in the hopes that Doug would finally hang himself. Except in this case, Gus was horribly aware of the fact that Adam may have been dangling by that same rope. Gus had no luck in suppressing the fear that lingered inside but even as agitated as he was, it was a still great source of comfort to him that he’d
been in similar situations hundreds of times before. A certain amount of trust in his own instincts began to resurface and with it, an even greater awareness of the responsibility he was undertaking.

*God help me if I’m wrong...*

Michelle made an appearance as promised, but kept it brief and remained only long enough to ensure that Adam and Gus were all right before she quietly made her excuses. Gus watched the emotion reflected in Tommy’s face as Michelle passed him without a word and felt a stab of guilt over this tacit confirmation that they were no longer on speaking terms. He’d hardly had a chance to get used to the idea of them being together and already they seemed to have drifted apart.

He couldn’t stop himself from slipping through the crowd and touching Tommy’s shoulder. "That’s my fault, isn’t it?" he said softly.

Tommy jerked around in surprise.

"And you’re avoiding me too," he added, even more softly. "I’m sorry if you’re uncomfortable that I’m here." His gaze dropped guiltily and he murmured, "There are a lot of things I need to say to you. For starters, I need to spend about an hour apologizing for some of the horrible things I’ve done. I know that now is not the time...but I just need you to know that I do realize that I’ve made things very difficult for you. With Michelle. With Adam. I’m so sorry..."

Raising his eyes to Tommy’s became an impossibility. Tommy’s heart turned over as he stared at the top of Gus’s bowed head and he had to stop himself from pulling Gus into his arms to comfort him. But he was already having enough trouble reconciling his own feelings over the day’s events; for now, it would have to be enough that Gus seemed to be all right and that he and Adam were making some kind of effort to be together.

He touched Gus’s arm, just briefly. "It’s all right," he said, low. "We’ll talk. When this is all over, we’ll talk."

Gus’s mouth twisted sadly. "Well, I hope you can book me in for a long session. If there was ever a time that I needed your shoulder to cry on..."

The remark caught Tommy the wrong way. He didn’t mean to snap at Gus, but a retort was out before he could stop it.

"I thought you were crying on Doug’s shoulder these days."

The head lifted abruptly and there was a flash of green as the eyes widened.

Tommy mistook the flush that swept Gus’s face for embarrassment. "Did you *have* to talk to him about me? Wasn’t it bad enough that Adam had to find out the way he did without you letting Doug in on it as well? Now he’s making sly little remarks to Adam and I don’t appreciate anybody talking about him *or you* or me that way."

Gus was dumbfounded. "What the hell are you talking about? You think that I told Doug about what happened between you and me? Are you crazy?"

"I thought I was...at first. I never thought that you would tell that kind of personal stuff to anyone. But I’ve been thinking a lot about it and now I’m not so sure. Aside from you and me, only Michelle and Adam know anything about it and they’re trying real hard to forget it ever happened. So if *you* didn’t say something to Doug...how does he know?"

Gus’s hackles rose. "You tell me," he shot back. "How does he know that I’ve been a few bricks
short of a full load a couple of times?"

It was Tommy’s turn to flush a deep red. "I’m so sorry about that...it was an accident. I did let something slip, but I wasn’t thinking...come on, Gus...you know I’d never spread that around deliberately."

Gus squared his shoulders. "Yeah, well...it was one hell of a shock to have it brought up in conversation, let me tell you. And I’ll tell you something else for free...I didn’t say anything to Doug about you and me. So if he knows, he found out from somebody else."

Tommy shook his head slowly. "That’s not what he told Adam. He pretty much insinuated to Adam that you told him. That you told him a lot of things, in fact." He closed his eyes for a second, missing Gus's completely shocked expression and then half-turned away. "Look Gus...I don’t want to get into it, okay? Maybe you did just let something out by accident ... the same way I did ... and maybe you did just need someone to talk to. But the fact is, Doug knows that something happened between you and me and he let it slip to Adam. And now Adam is taking it out on me because he can’t stand the thought of those kinds of personal details getting around. And I can’t blame him. It’s just got me really bothered, that’s all. Let’s just drop it for now, all right? I’ve got too many other things I need to be concentrating on."

He slid off into the crowd before Gus had even managed to fully register everything he’d said. But reality began kicking in quickly and his insides began to churn. Any doubts about a possible error in judgment when it came to Doug rapidly disintegrated.

How the hell did he find out about me and Tommy?

He could only imagine what Doug had actually told Adam. Or what he might have said to Michelle or Tommy or anyone else in the entourage. How far had he spread the word about Gus's emotional problems? It was no wonder that there was so much suspicion and distrust between them all.

What else has he been telling people?

One fact was frighteningly obvious. Doug was deliberately planting little bits of information here, spreading half-truths and God only knew how many lies and conducting a vicious game of "he said/she said" while trying to give the impression that he was concerned about everyone’s best interests. For some unknown reason the bastard was playing both sides against the middle and creating one hell of a lot of fallout in the process.

Gus smiled and muttered pleasantries through the remainder of the evening and even managed to make a few appropriate on-camera remarks when called upon to do so. The only other unpleasant moment in the evening came when he and Tommy were asked to stand together and answer a few questions about their work for the charity. They both managed to mask the strain between them as they talked and the incident could have been called a success if it hadn’t been for the fact that the interviewer then turned to Adam and asked jokingly why Gus was working for Tommy’s charity foundation and not Adam’s.

"Because Tommy got to him first," Adam said darkly and the subject was abruptly dropped.

Not long after midnight, mindful of the challenging schedule ahead, the partygoers began to drift away and Adam took the opportunity to bid everyone goodnight and head for the door. Gus was on his heels, hesitating only long enough to scribble his cell phone number on a piece of paper and shove a note at Bill as he passed.

"Call me," he hissed. "As soon as you hear anything...call me."
It had been uncomfortable enough being at a social event in each other’s company but at least the chatter and activity had been a distraction. Back in their room together, Gus and Adam found that the silence between them was deafening but neither had the guts to try and start even the most casual of conversations.

Adam pulled his shirt off over his head and pitched it into a corner. Even just the motion of lifting his arms up aggravated the tense, strained muscles and he stood for a few minutes flexing his shoulders wearily and looking for some relief from the accumulated stress. He caught Gus staring at him and knew he was thinking the same thing; on any other occasion, Gus would have already been behind him, kneading away some of the tension and using his strong hands to work out some of the knots and ridges of pressure in his back. Inevitably, those kinds of sessions evolved into something a little more intimate. Whenever Gus finished such a massage, he would press a soft kiss between his shoulder blades and slide his hands around the curve of Adam's ribs until he was holding him. From that point on it could have become anything from a gentle cuddling session to something extremely passionate.

The reminder stung both of them. Gus’s gaze dropped away and his face burned. Adam brushed past him with a curse and went into the bathroom.

Fighting back a sense of longing, Gus changed into his usual sleepwear and folded up his sweater, letting his hands linger for a moment on the soft wool. The longing intensified and irritably he snatched his hairbrush off the dresser. When Adam looked out through the half-open bathroom door a few minutes later, he almost choked on his dental floss at the sight of Gus brushing the hell out of his hair, regardless of how it hurt and Adam suddenly had a hot flashback to the day Gus had joined him in New York after they had been apart for three weeks. He remembered taking the brush from Gus that night and gently stroking it through his hair for several long minutes before he’d undressed Gus in front of the mirror while they both watched.

It was no wonder that they prowled around each other so awkwardly. It got worse when Gus got into bed; with his arms now bare it was impossible for Adam to ignore the purplish marks at his wrists and Adam suddenly realized that Gus might not be all that comfortable with the idea of him climbing into bed as well. He felt another twinge of remorse and stood wordlessly staring at Gus as he tucked blankets around himself. When his gaze flickered nervously up, Adam swallowed and reached for the remote on the coffee table.

"I think I’ll watch TV for a while."

Gus’s eyes opened a little wider. As Adam sat down on the sofa, he murmured, "You really should try and get some sleep..." and then suddenly realized that perhaps Adam was just looking for a way to avoid getting into bed with him.

He bit his lip. Then he shut up, lay back and stared at the ceiling. Adam shut up, slouched farther down on the sofa and stared at the television.
Neither of them spoke again.

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*Monday, December 31, 2012 ... New Year’s Eve*

His cellphone was set to "vibrate". Half afraid he’d fall asleep and miss the call and equally afraid that it would wake Adam when it eventually did go off, Gus literally clutched the phone beneath his pillow for most of the night. When it finally rang at about 6:45 a.m., he jerked out of a half-doze, slipped out of bed and lurched out onto the balcony where Adam couldn’t hear him.

"Thank God, Bill," he muttered, shading his eyes from the glare of the early morning sunlight. "I was really starting to worry that I wasn’t going to hear from you."

"Catharine only just called me."

"And?"

"And she wants to see you."

"And I told you, Bill! I’ll make sure she meets gets introduced to whoever the hell she wants...later! Right now I just want to know what she found out."

"That’s my point. She won’t tell me ... not over the phone, anyway. She wants to get together with you and me ... in person. Now."

"What the hell for?" Gus exclaimed. "Come on, Bill! She either found something out or she didn’t. We don’t have time for some kind of half-assed meet-and-greet this morning. We’ve only got a few hours before Adam has to leave here to go to the opening ceremony and I want to know as much as I possibly can before he sets one foot outside this room."

"I hear you. But Catharine won’t budge. I don’t think she’s playing games, Gus. I think she’s just getting real nervous about her name getting mixed up in all of this."

Gus clenched the phone a little tighter. "All of what?"

"She won’t say much. But she was pretty freaked when she called. Maybe she didn’t think we were serious about this ...I don’t think she was really expecting to find anything on Doug..."

At that point, Gus’s stomach began a slow crawl up into his throat. "But she did?" he croaked.

"I think so. Enough to make her really, really nervous. And she absolutely will not give me any details over the phone...all she told me was that if you and I were looking for a previous connection
between Doug Taylor and Samuel Brice...she’s pretty sure she’s found one..."

Gus loathed waking him ... Adam seemed so utterly exhausted and he would need every ounce of energy today ... and Gus could only imagine Adam’s reaction to his announcement that he felt the need to vanish unexpectedly yet again.

He left a note instead. It was meant to be short and to the point. There was no time for anything other than facts...but when he sat down at the desk and realized exactly what he was doing, he was seized by feelings of fear and desolation and suddenly all his emotion came spilling out onto the page.

Adam:

*I didn’t want to disturb you. I know how tired you are. There is something I need to do this morning, but I promise I’ll catch up with you before the ceremony.*

*Please don’t worry about me. I’m okay.*

*I know how important this day is to you. I know it will be absolutely unforgettable and I’m so proud that you’re letting me be a part of it. But when it’s over, I need to be alone with you again. It doesn’t matter where or how, as long as it’s just you and me. There are so many things that I need to talk about...I need to explain, to apologize...I need you to just hold me and listen to me cry it all out because I’m so confused inside that I’m afraid that my words are going to be meaningless.*
I can’t stop thinking about the other night. I’ve hurt you so badly and it breaks my heart to see the pain I’ve caused you. I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you if that’s what it takes, but please, please don’t give up on me. I’m so afraid of losing you. You are my life ... the only thing that matters ... and I feel so empty without you right now.

I’ll be there before the ceremony starts. I promise. I love you.

Gus

If it hadn’t been so freaking serious, Gus would have found the idea of an early morning rendezvous at a cross-town coffee shop extremely funny. His days of clandestine meetings with informants should have been long over but here he was again...sliding into a booth with a stranger he was bribing for information and who was eying him just as warily as Gus was eying her in return.

Bill introduced Catharine but he didn’t know her companion. The presence of another person was already making Gus nervous; she nearly hit the roof when Catharine bluntly introduced him.

"This is Matt. He’s a buddy from college. He works for the police department."

Gus stiffened. "You called the cops? What the hell for?"

"I’m not a cop," Matt said mildly. "I just work in Records. Part-time."

That wasn’t much comfort. "Yeah? So?"
"So," Catharine interrupted evenly. "Matt checked out a few things for me. You know, I had no idea you were expecting to find out some serious shit on this guy when you asked me to do this. I thought you were just scoping him out for a practical joke or something."

"Cath," Bill said, trying to be as reasonable as possible. "We don’t have a lot of time. If you’ve got something you need to start spitting it out."

"Only if you promise to keep my name out of it."

Gus looked at Bill in exasperation. "Out of what?" he gritted.

"Out of whatever you’re going to use this information for. I could get in some pretty serious trouble for this."

"Public records are public records," Gus observed. "There’s no reason information from public records should get you into any trouble. So aside from you maybe getting in shit for going into the office after hours...what’s the problem?"

Catharine toyed with a spoon. "Information from public records isn’t a problem. Information from police records...that’s a different story."

A waitress approached with coffee and Gus had to bite back his questions until the woman had moved on to another booth. "Doug has a police record?"

"Shit," Bill muttered. "You were right. The cops did miss something."

Gus waved at him to be quiet. Catharine was already shaking her head.

"No. He doesn’t. But there were some articles in the archives that made reference to police cases. I didn’t have access to any of that information, which is why I called Matt. He did some checking for me."

"And my ass is grass if you tell anyone where this came from," Matt pointed out.

Gus ran his tongue over his teeth while the silence grew and everyone stared at him and waited for reassurance.

"Not a word to anyone," he said finally. "I promise. Now talk."
"First of all, I assume you want the basics...?"

Gus nodded but at the same time he was looking at his watch in dismay. It was already nearly eight o’clock and the schedule for the grand opening of the Citadel called for Adam to leave the hotel at 11:00 a.m.

Catharine laid a file folder on the table and flipped it open. "Okay...he was born here in Vegas and near as I can tell he’s lived here all his life. At least he has since he registered to vote...his voting district has never changed. His mother’s deceased and there was no father listed on his birth certificate. There was a grandmother who seems to have raised him ... she’s deceased now too - but no brothers or sisters. He was in the army for only three years, from age eighteen to about twenty-one. I had no luck on pulling up much detail on his military record. It was a regular discharge at the end of his tour and the list of his duties was pretty general, except..." Here Catharine glanced at Bill. "You were asking about munitions? Yeah, that was listed on his record, but nothing specific."

"According to the phone company records, his residential phone number was the same for about four years. Then he moved, but took the phone number with him and he was listed at that address until a couple of months ago. Then it gets kind of weird....he drops out of the phone book completely."

"Not that weird," said Bill. "That would have been when he moved into the hotel. He wouldn’t have a residential listing anymore."

"Oh. Right. Well, his driver’s license is clean. So are his credit card bills. He runs a lot through them, but according to his credit rating he’s always up to date on his payments. He has a small car loan, a small line of credit and...get this... he must pull in one hell of a salary because he would qualify for a $350,000 mortgage."

"I’m happy for him," Gus said sarcastically. "What else?"

It was all pretty boring stuff. A few parking tickets, one civil court case over a municipal by-law infraction (settled in Doug’s favor) and handfuls of newspaper articles on Griffin over the years in which Doug was mentioned.

"I scanned them all," Catharine said. "Quotes mostly. The odd corporate profile or two. Nothing strange."

Gus was starting to get desperate. "So what the hell is the big deal? He’s starting to sound like Mr. Model Citizen..."

Catharine’s mouth twitched. "Yeah, well...I was starting to think the same thing. But whenever I run a name through the database of newspaper archives, I do it by just the last name first. Otherwise it could take forever for the computer to parse out the information. I might end up with thousands of hits, but once I’ve got a list to start with, I start narrowing it down...usually by initials first, then Christian name, then middle initial... I came across two names, both with the same initial."
Gus sat up a little straighter. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that on top of the articles on Doug, there were also two articles that contained the name of a different D. Taylor. A Diana Taylor. Who, according to the birth certificate I found, is Doug’s mother." Catharine eyed Gus over the tops of the glasses as she rifled through sheets of paper. "This is where it started to get a little freaky."

"You said his mother was dead," Bill interrupted.

"Yeah. And has been...for a long time. I’ll get to that." She fished out several printouts and raised her brows once more at Gus. "Do you want to read it yourself?"

"Give me the Readers’ Digest version," Gus said, looking at his watch again.

"Okay. Well, I told you there was no father’s name listed on Doug’s birth certificate. That’s not all that weird for the sixties, I guess, but the bottom line is that his mother was raising him alone. Now it was around about that time that the first Brice hotel went up in Vegas. It was called The Brice, actually, mostly because Mathew Brice was a raving egomaniac."

"That was Samuel’s father," Bill muttered aside to Gus.

"I’m not surprised," Gus muttered back. "I imagine egomania runs in the family."

Catharine ignored them both and continued, "Mathew came on the scene a little late in the game. There were a lot of really big hotels here at the time and he was the new kid on the block. So he really went after his clientele hard and tried to give his guests access to things that they couldn’t possibly expect in any of the other hotels. Like drugs. Like women. Pretty much anything you could think of."

"He couldn’t have been the first one to try that," Gus observed.

"No. But Mathew kind of made a name for himself doing it. The high-class, ‘respectable’ way. Only the best-looking women. Only the best drugs. And the better he got at it, the more he started to get more than his share of attention from the authorities. But he was good...so good that that cops had a really hard time pinning anything on him."

She paused and took a sip of coffee. "One of the things he was known for was keeping a group of women on his payroll... as dancers ostensibly... who were basically in-house escorts... with all that implies. They’d attend parties, cruise the casino and just be available anytime one of the big name guests decided they wanted some 'companionship'."

Gus’s mouth had gone slack. "Are we talking about Doug’s mother here?"

"Yes."

"How the hell can you tell that? You can’t possibly have access to personnel records, especially not ones from that many years ago."

"I don’t. But remember I said that The Brice was taking a lot of heat from the cops? Well, they eventually raided one of the big parties and nailed a lot of very prominent people for a lot of very dirty little indiscretions. It made some pretty major headlines, and on top of listing the names of those very prominent people, the papers also listed the names of the people who were arrested. There were twenty two people booked that night, all listed as Brice employees...and one of them was Diana Taylor."
Bill’s eyes were like saucers. "Doug’s mother was some kind of in-house hooker?"

"I can’t say for certain. But she was there at the party that got raided and according to the papers, she was arrested on charges of prostitution. The same article mentioned that the cops were planning a follow-up investigation of Mathew Brice for pandering, so I went looking for subsequent articles as well. And guess what I found?"

Gus’s brows lowered over eyes that were starting to reflect a significant impatience and Catharine hurriedly continued.

"The next day there was another story in the same paper...not much new information really...but what was interesting was that it mentioned the number of arrests again...and the number of people who were booked for prostitution had dropped from twenty-two to twenty-one."

She pushed the papers at Gus. "There were no names though. That’s when I called Matt."

Gus barely even glanced at the articles. His gaze went straight to Matt who squirmed a little under such intense scrutiny.

"Do you have access to police reports that old?" he asked very softly.

He nodded. "Yeah. It can be a bit hit and miss but most of the high profile cases were cross-referenced into the computer. Then it was a matter of getting to the hard copies..."

"And?"

"And...Catharine’s right. Between the first newspaper report and the second, the charges against Diana Taylor were dropped."

"So maybe she wasn’t a hooker," Bill reasoned. "Maybe she was just a guest at the party...." Matt snorted. "Well, if she was, she had some pretty powerful friends. According to the police report, the charges against her were withdrawn early the next morning, after the specific intervention of a man by the name of Charles Bernetto.... does he ring a bell?"

It obviously did.

"Holy crap," said Bill.

"What?" said Gus impatiently. "Who’s he?"

Catharine and Matt looked at each other. It was Bill who answered.

"Charles Bernetto was a really high-profile lawyer here in town in the sixties and seventies. And he also just happened to be Mathew Brice’s personal attorney."

Gus stared. "He worked for the hotel?"

"No. ‘Personal’ attorney. He worked for Mathew. On private matters only. Then he worked for Samuel for a number of years after Mathew died."

"Exactly," said Catharine. "Now you tell me...why would Mathew Brice send his personal lawyer to pull strings on behalf of one employee and not the others? In fact, why would he get personally involved at all? The cops were already looking for a way to get to him for some of his business affairs. Wouldn’t you think that Mathew would have done everything he could have to distance himself from those women?"
"Holy crap," said Bill again.

Gus had gone very still. "Unless he had personal reasons, you mean?"

"Yeah. The most personal kind, if you get my drift."

"He was married," Bill protested and then when he received three incredulous glares, added, "Yeah, okay...all I’m saying is that he’d hardly do anything that obvious and risk setting himself up for a divorce. If he and Doug’s mother did have something going on, you’d think he’d want to keep it as quiet as possible."

"Depends on how serious it was," Catharine said grimly. "If they were really hot and heavy, he might have gotten desperate enough to be risk being indiscreet. And I don’t think he was that worried about Mrs. Brice. There were more articles on her in the papers than Mathew. She was a major social mover and shaker and I’ve never seen anyone who better fit the description of a trophy wife. I don’t think she would have pulled her head out of the latest fundraiser long enough to give a damn what her husband was up to. She already had his money. They already had a kid...Samuel must have been almost six or seven by then. She may not have known a thing about it...or she may not have cared."

Gus pressed his fingertips against his temples for a moment and thought hard. The ticking of the clock in his head was making it impossible to think fast enough to compensate for the passage of time.

"Or maybe there was another woman in his life that he was hiding from Diana? Okay, assuming that we’ve made some of the right connections here...what else do you know? You said there were two articles on Diana in the paper. Both about the arrest?"

Catharine began to look a bit edgy. "No. The second one was about a different police investigation."

Gus’s head swiveled back to Matt. "There’s another police report on her?"

He nodded. "Yeah. A couple of months later. And this is the part that really makes me nervous. There was another complete case file on her, but this time it wasn’t for an arrest."

"Meaning?" Gus said. His mouth had gone dry and his guts were beginning to twist.

"This time she was the victim."

Bill looked horrified. "Something happened to her?"

Gus nudged him with one knee and warned him with a glance to lower his voice. He lowered his own and closed her eyes briefly. "Oh, please tell me that we’re not talking about some kind of mysterious, accidental death here..."

"No. It was a suicide. She killed herself."

He passed Gus photocopies of the newspaper article and the police report. Gus ran his eyes over it in dread while Matt continued uncomfortably.

"She did it in one of the rooms of The Brice. The room and the windows were bolted from the inside; there was no suspicion of foul play or anything. Cause of death was acute barbiturate poisoning. The newspaper clipping was pretty small but it referred to her as a "former" employee of the hotel. There wasn’t an awful lot more in the police report. If she left any kind of a note the
contents were never disclosed and the investigation just concluded she died by her own hand. That’s hardly news here. After all...this is Vegas. Suicides occur about every five minutes in this town."

"Go on, Matt," Catharine prodded him urgently. "Tell him the rest. Tell him the freakiest part..."

Gus had already figured that out. The words had jumped up from the police report and smacked him in the face so hard that he gasped and came halfway out of his seat in a rush of absolute, light-headed terror, oblivious to the way that everyone else in the coffee shop promptly twisted around to stare at him.

Bill grabbed for his arms to pull his back down. "Gus! What the hell...?"

Gus shoved the papers at him.

"The date..." he said half-hysterically. "The date she killed herself...oh my God, Bill...look at the date..."

Bill’s eyes dropped to the report and puzzlement was immediately erased by shock. His mouth opened but no sound emerged and Gus, slumped back into his seat with his hands over his face, could be heard muttering desperately to himself through clenched teeth.

"December 31, 1970. Forty-Two years ago. Forty-two years ago today..."

December 31, 2012 - 10:00 a.m.

"I can’t take any more of this," Adam said despairingly.

"All right," Michelle said, trying to be patient. "Tell me again...."

"What’s to tell?" He flung the notepad at her. "I woke up ... he was gone. End of story. I don’t know where. I don’t know why. What I do know is that the concierge says that somebody pulled up in a car in front of the hotel and Gus got in and it drove away. When is he going to stop this,
Michelle? One minute he’s here, promising that he won’t leave me and the next minute he’s gone. One minute he seems to be okay and the next minute he’s screaming. He disappears and I don’t know where he goes. He won’t talk to me, he won’t talk to you...but he’ll tell Doug Taylor God-knows-what about us and then I have to listen to Doug tell me how great he thinks I am because I can accept Gus and Tommy being such good friends even though they have "history"... I can’t do this anymore, Michelle. I just can’t.

He was trying to button a leather vest on over his shirt. The leather was new and still stiff and the buttons wouldn’t go through the little holes...

"Fuck!" he said furiously. There was a glass of orange juice on the dresser beside him; before Michelle could intervene, he’d snatched it up and hurled it across the room where it smashed against the far wall.

She flinched. The doors of all the other rooms were open as they prepared for the personal appearance and anyone could have glanced in and caught a glimpse of Adam in his extreme frustration. Stylists scurried every which way, room service came and went and VH1 was prowling around through the pandemonium looking for "pre-ceremony" footage. This was definitely not the time to be throwing a tantrum, no matter how warranted.

Jeremy appeared on the threshold, drawn by the sound of breaking glass.

"You need to settle down before someone sees you," he barked at Adam. "I know you’re pissed...okay? But you’ve got to get a grip. We don’t have time for this kind of shit this morning."

It was rare for Jeremy to lose his temper and even more unusual for him to snap at his boss. But Jeremy was rattled too; he was just as worried about Gus as he was about Adam and his eyes silently pleaded with Michelle to try and do whatever she could to calm Adam down.

Michelle marched to Adam’s side, brushed away his agitated hands away and buttoned the vest herself. "Adam, I read the note. He sounds like he’s okay. I can’t explain what the hell he’s doing either, but he says he’ll be back for the ceremony and I bet you he will. Just try and focus on what you have to do today, all right? By midnight this will all be over."

She fastened the last button and glanced up at him, letting her hands rest momentarily on his chest. Her heart twisted at the look in his suddenly bewildered eyes; she knew he was more frightened and hurt than angry, that he felt lost and utterly helpless and that feeling helpless was the one thing he simply could not handle.

"Midnight," he said dully. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and his face suddenly crumpled along with his voice. "Midnight...oh God, Michelle...I was going to ask him to marry me tonight..."

She slid her arms around his neck and hung on. He leaned hard against her, desperate for any kind of reassurance or comfort while Michelle murmured inanely and hated herself for being unable to soothe him in any kind of tangible way.

Jeremy’s voice interrupted them. "Adam..."

Adam’s head was down on Michelle’s shoulder, his breathing hard and uneven. Conscious of how completely vulnerable he was at the moment, Michelle waved a hand behind her back to make Jeremy go away.

"No, Michelle...I need him out here...now."

Adam made an effort to control himself and set Michelle back gently with his hands on her arms.
"It’s okay. I’m all right..." Then more irritably, he looked over Michelle’s head and said, "What is it, Jeremy?"

The noise level in the hallway was rising. Jeremy motioned Adam out; with Michelle on his heels, he followed the bodyguard down the corridor to the open area in front of the elevators where a crowd from the entourage had gathered.

"Is everybody here?"

Doug Taylor stood in the center, already fully dressed in a very expensive suit and tie with his hands on his hips and his expression grim. His eyes went briefly to Adam’s and he nodded, then his gaze resumed a tour around the rows of curious faces.

"Wait a minute...where’s Gus?"

"He stepped out," Adam said curtly. "What’s going on?"

That seemed to throw Doug for a moment. He looked at his watch, swore beneath his breath and then forged ahead anyway. "I’m sorry to do this to you but I need to make a change to this morning’s schedule. I know you’re not supposed to leave here for another hour, but the fact is we’re going to have to move you now."

"Excuse me?" Jeremy said with a frown. "What type of a change are we talking about here? This morning’s been pretty carefully laid out. We don’t just go switching everything around."

"It’s not a switch. Not really." Doug seemed to hesitate for a moment while the frowns multiplied around him. "To be honest, we’ve got a situation here in the hotel and to be on the safe side, I’d just like to get Adam out of here early."

At that, the entire protection staff began rumbling uneasily. Doug held up his hands.

"My chief of security just came to me and reported that we’ve got reports from all over the hotel of weird little things going on. Elevators being jammed. Surveillance cameras being vandalized. Doors to fire exits being blocked. All in the last forty-five minutes or so. There’s no way to tell what the hell is going on, but it sounds like we’ve got somebody in the hotel who doesn’t belong here and I don’t want to take any chances after some of the incidents we’ve already had."

"Have you called the cops?"

Doug raised quizzical eyebrows. "Do you really want me to? Again? After last time? I’m not trying to freak anyone out. This may be nothing but I’d rather move Adam to the arena and he can finish getting ready for the opening ceremony there."

"That’s not the way we work," Jeremy said sharply. "If there’s a problem, we don’t move him anywhere. We can lock down a couple of floors until you get this sorted out. Moving him just exposes him."

Doug betrayed a moment’s impatience. "And keeping him here may create a greater risk for the rest of the guests in this hotel. If somebody is determined to cause trouble for him, there are way too many innocent bystanders around here. We move him and the band to the arena. Not only can we provide better coverage there, but we also don’t involve any more people than absolutely necessary."

Everyone began talking at once. The sense of nervous anticipation that always existed prior to a personal appearance was abruptly escalated into fully fledged tension.
"I’m with Doug," Isaac said. He glanced around at others. "You guys?"

They all nodded, but Jeremy held his ground. "Sorry...no. I can’t go for this..."

"Crap, Jeremy," Adam said angrily. "Does it matter whether I get my hair done here or at the arena? I don’t give a shit where I get ready. If staying here is going to create a problem, let’s just get the hell out."

Michelle pulled at his arm. "I think Jeremy’s right, Adam," she said low. "Stay here until we know what’s going on."

His security was adamant but eventually, it was the risk of another public incident that swung the vote in Doug’s favor. Conscious of the negative publicity that had dogged Adam since they arrived in Vegas, the last thing he could afford to risk was another episode that might have involved members of the public.

"Gus wouldn’t like this," Michelle said again to Adam.

His face clouded over and Michelle kicked herself. That probably hadn’t been the best choice of words.

"He’s not exactly here to discuss it at the moment, is he?" he growled.

The limo that was scheduled to take them to the opening ceremony was already waiting in the parking garage. Grabbing their personal belongings, Adam and his band were escorted downstairs by the service elevator where the limo driver popped the trunk and began loading backpacks and bags into the back of the car.

Doug stood beside the limo with his suit jacket over his arm and a large duffel bag at his feet. He was issuing directions to hotel staff and as Adam and his band piled into the car, he turned to Jeremy and pointed out two large vans that had drawn up beside them.

"You can follow us over," he said.

Jeremy’s response was immediate and blunt. "I don’t think so. I ride with them. Everyone else can follow us over."

Doug shrugged. "Okay. Sure." Momentarily distracted, he glanced around and found that the limo driver, trying to be helpful, was reaching for Doug’s bag to load it in the trunk of the car with the others.

"No...leave that!"

The limo driver straightened with wide eyes. Doug cleared his throat and managed a smile. "It’s okay. That one rides with me. Thanks anyway."

He turned back to Jeremy. The bodyguard narrowed his eyes a little at this exchange but Doug simply flashed another smile, slid his arms into the jacket of his suit and rubbed his hands together.

"Let’s go," he said brightly. "Time to get this show on the road."
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

After thinking long and hard about this, I have decided to post the rest of this story. A new chapter will be posted every day until this work is finished. Thank you for reading it, for all the comments and encouragement. It is much appreciated.

December 31, 2012 – 8:38 a.m.

“Where are we going?” Bill demanded as Gus towed him bodily out to the car.

“Back to the hotel.”

“Aren’t we calling the cops?”

“With what?” Gus said wildly. “With information we're not supposed to have about something that happened thirty years ago that we can't prove has anything to do with what's going on right now? I still have no idea what Doug is planning here, Bill. Do you think they'd pay the least little bit of attention to me? After everything I've done? On top of all the ways that I've already gotten up their noses about what's been going on, you know damn well that Doug's been making himself out to be the soul of co-operation. Right down to asking the police to review his security plans, for God's sake. If I called the cops with any of this stuff, the only action they're liable to take is to send a rubber truck for me.”

“Wait...will you just hang on for a second? I thought you were convinced that Doug is behind all of the crazy things that have been happening.”

“Oh, I’m convinced,” Gus said grimly. “But being convinced and having a way to prove it are two very different things. It doesn’t help that my credibility with the cops is absolutely zero at the moment.”

“Gus!” Bill was still struggling to slow him down. “So how the hell are you going to handle this? Are you just planning on walking up to Doug and saying ‘Hey, I know your mother knew Samuel’s father and that today’s the anniversary of the date she killed herself and oh, by the way...I think that you’re the one behind all the strange things that have been going on?’ You’re accusing him of killing a girl at the concert, for God’s sake!”

“I’m not saying a damn thing to Doug until I have proof.”

“And where exactly do you plan to get it?

“I don’t know,” he said through clenched teeth. “But we’ll start with his hotel room.”

At that, Bill dug in his heels and came to a complete halt. “What do you mean...start with his hotel room?”

“What do you think I mean? I’m going to search his room for something that I can use to prove a link between Doug and any of the things that have happened. Something tangible. Something I can show to the cops. Something they can’t dispute. It’s called evidence.”
“It’s called break and enter!” he exclaimed.

“Do you think I care, Bill?” They had reached his car and Bill, looking more doubtful by the minute, had to hold his keys out of Gus’s reach as he made a grab for them.

“Wait a minute!”

“I don’t have minutes,” Gus yelled in desperation. “If this date has a special significance for Doug and it just happens to be the day that millions of people are going to be watching something that he’s personally organized, don’t you think I’ve got a good reason to be scared to death that he’s going to use it to make some kind of statement?”

They stood and stared at each other. Gus tried to calm himself down, to speak sensibly and with persuasion while his heart was pounding so violently that it threatened to come out through his chest.

“Bill…please,” he said. “God only knows what could happen at that concert tonight. Please. This is all scaring the hell out of me. If there’s anything I can do to try and pin this down before tonight, I need to do it.”

Bill lowered his car keys.

“I think you’d be making a mistake,” he said.

“It’s my ass. I’m not asking for your help. All I want is a ride back to the hotel and if you won’t drive me, I’ll take a cab.”

“No…that’s not what I mean.” He was suddenly speculative, apparently thinking hard to himself and Gus stopped and bit back the rest of his arguments while he let Bill reach his own conclusions without further interference. Gus knew that Bill was having great difficulty coming to grips with the theory that this entire sequence of bizarre incidents all had a single, even more bizarre connection. He didn’t blame him one bit…but there was no more time to work on trying to convince him.

“What do you mean?” Gus prodded when he could no longer bear the silence.

Bill cocked an eyebrow at him. “I mean…” he said slowly. “That you’re not likely to find anything in his hotel room…”

Gus drew a sharp breath and held it.

“…I bet you’d be more likely to find something in his office…”

It was a great relief to Gus to finally have an ally in his corner, albeit a still highly nervous and reluctant one. It would have been inaccurate to say that Bill was convinced Gus was right…but he
was painfully aware that something very strange was going on and that Gus's conclusions, however bizarre, were starting to make some kind of warped and frightening sense. He knew what he was risking; in the back of his mind, he could actually visualize himself kissing his career goodbye, yet he swallowed his reservations and within a couple of minutes he was throwing the car into park outside the double doors of Griffin's head office.

"Why here?" was all Gus had asked him.

He shrugged. "Because Doug is hardly ever at the hotel except to sleep but he’s in his office evenings and weekends until all hours. And Housekeeping would be through his hotel suite every day...do you think he’d risk leaving anything there that he didn’t want anyone to stumble over?"

"You don’t have cleaners here?"

"We have our own maintenance staff. The common areas are cleaned every night but the executive offices are done only on request. That’s not that unusual...there’s so much sensitive material around here that access to offices is pretty much restricted."

He ran his security card through the reader at the main entrance and let Gus into the deserted lobby. The building seemed empty; the majority of office staff would be enjoying the New Year’s long weekend, and anyone who had anything to do with the grand opening or the concert would already be at the venue.

Bill was already showing signs of doubting his decision. "I’m still not sure how we’re going to do this. His office is on the same floor as mine, so I have the elevator pass code to get you to that floor, but how do you plan on getting in? Even if I had keys to his office I don’t have his security code."

Gus didn’t hesitate. "Then we’re back to break and enter, aren’t we?"

"You'll set off the alarm."

His jaw clenched. "What's the response time for the security company?"

"They're on site. It would take them less than five minutes to get up there from the basement. And if they don't get called off by authorized personnel during that time they also dispatch the police."

Gus snorted. "Oh, that doesn't worry me. From what I've seen of the Las Vegas police department, I don't think they could even find the address."

"That's not funny," he said, running to keep up with Gus's longer stride. "You do realize that if we're wrong about all this and we get caught, I’ll be fired."

Gus looked over his shoulder at him. "So? How do you think I feel? If we're wrong about all this and we get caught, I won't just be fired...I'll be arrested, I’ll be deported, I’ll be very single, and I’ll probably be the lead story on Entertainment Tonight."

They were silent on the ride up in the elevator. Gus was getting desperate enough to consider just breaking open the door and taking his chances with whatever he could accomplish in five minutes when suddenly he had a brainwave.

"You said each door has its own code. Does that mean they all have separate security zones?"

"For every door in this building? Are you nuts? No. One zone per floor."
"So if I trip the alarm on his door, the alarm company gets notified that there's been a breach in that particular zone, right?"

"Right. Otherwise they'd be running all over the building trying to find out where the breach is."

Gus snapped his fingers. "Bingo."

"Bingo? How does that help us break into his office?"

"Because we're not going to break into his office. We're going to break into yours."

He gestured at Bill impatiently when the elevator doors opened. He went out ahead of Gus, protesting all the way.

"Why are we breaking into my office?"

"So that we set the alarm off."

"I don't get it."

He hesitated outside Doug's door, but Gus shook his head insistently. "No, where's yours?"

"Right at the end. Will you please tell me what we're doing?"

"Five minutes is not enough time for me to get in and out of his office. So you're going to trip the alarm on your office door. The security company is going to get notified that there's been a breach on this floor. When they come up, you're going to put on your most foolish-looking face and tell them you stopped by to catch up on some work and that you accidentally set off the alarm. You show them your identification and your security pass and they'll go away. In the meantime, I'm also going to trip the alarm on Doug's door...same zone, right?"

Bill's face lit up. "So by the time they get back downstairs and re-set the zone control for this floor, we'll already be in."

"Uh huh. And even if it takes all day and I have to tear his whole damn office apart, we're not leaving until I can find something I can use to put a stop of all this."

The security guard recognized Bill immediately. Bill apologized profusely for the error and waited until the guard, grumbling about being taken away from the game on EPSN, had gotten back on the elevator to return to the basement.

When the coast was clear, he reopened his door and Gus crept out. They bolted down the corridor to Doug’s office and he stood with his mouth open as Gus silently and effectively jimmed the lock.

"You’re awfully good at that,” he remarked.

Gus smiled grimly. “That’s why cops make the best criminals.”
“Do you have any idea what you’re looking for?”

“Not a clue. Doug’s been damn careful. I just hope that he’s made a mistake somewhere and left something that I can use against him.”

“Would be helpful if we knew what it was,” Bill muttered with derision. “Then we could search alphabetically. Doug’s an organizational freak. He’s got everything catalogued and sorted and labeled…shit, Gus…I just realized…he’s probably got all his filing cabinets locked and anything really important he’s probably got stashed away in his safe…”

Gus looked up at him in dismay at the same time that the tumblers gave and he was able to twist the knob and push open the door. Filing cabinets and drawers he could force but a safe would be nearly impossible to crack on short notice. As it turned out, he didn’t need to worry …as soon as the door swung wide he realized that access to the contents of the room wasn’t going to be a problem.

“Oh crap,” he said dully.

There was nothing neat or organized about the office now. Bill was startled but Gus merely felt a familiar twinge of uneasiness, the kind he used to get when a case “went bad”. It wasn’t exactly what he had expected but somehow it was no big surprise either.

“Jeez,” Bill muttered, eyeing the mess with dismay. “Hardly looks like the office of an organizational freak does it?”

“No,” Gus said, tight-throated. “It looks like the office of someone who isn’t planning on coming back to it.”

Ignoring Bill’s shocked expression, he brushed past and went to the desk. There was no problem with access to anything…the laptop was on, the desk drawers were all unlocked and, most surprising of all, the door to the small safe was wide open. He simply began rifling through everything within reach while Bill took the unspoken suggestion and went to the safe, pulling out the contents, tossing aside the obviously business related items and digging for anything that looked the least little bit suspicious or alarming.

Gus located Doug’s address book on the computer and began scrolling through entries, feeling his insides turning to ice as he did. Among all the usual professional entries were the listings that should not have been there, including the names of contacts at the Fundamental Families organization and the name and phone number of the reporter who had supposedly been tipped off about the possible connection between Gus and the incident at the concert. The listings themselves weren’t that damning, unless you considered that they had been entered the day after the concert…well before Doug would have had any reason to have recorded the information.

Gus wasn’t so deep in thought that he didn’t hear Bill’s sharp exclamation and he immediately shot around the end of the desk to where Bill was on his knees in front of the safe. Without looking up, he simply handed Gus what he had found – a small vinyl toiletries case with the contents blatantly visible even through the partially opened zipper.

“Is that enough evidence for you?” Bill said, shaken and sick. “That is…that is what I think it is…isn’t it?”

Gus set the case down gently on the desk and prodded and poked gingerly with the end of a pencil. “I think so,” he said quietly. “Unless Doug’s a diabetic…”
“He’s not and you know it,” Bill choked.

There were four capped syringes and two smaller vials of clear liquid in the case. Another, larger vial was nearly empty, nestled against a tiny plastic ziplock bag that still contained several tablespoons worth of white powder.

Bill didn’t speak and Gus knew that he was struggling with the shock of irrefutable fact. But as Gus reached past him and began yanking the rest of the contents of the safe out onto the floor, Bill jerked out of his reverie.

“What are you doing? Good God, Gus…aren’t those needles and vials all the proof you need?”

“This isn’t just about proof, Bill,” he muttered. “I still don’t know what the hell Doug is planning.”

“Does it matter?” he cried. “You already have enough to go to the police…”

Gus ignored him. His hands were full of documents and file folders. He was sorting through them frantically, pitching them to one side as he scanned and eliminated them. There were stacks of cancelled checks, a passport, a significant amount of cash, legal documents and finally, at the very back, a small stack of worn, hardcover notebooks bound together with a large elastic.

“Look through these,” he said, shoving them at Bill while he frowned over the passport. “He didn’t take this, so he can’t be planning on leaving the country…”

“Gus…”

“…and there must be a thousand dollars here…ouch, Bill, that’s my arm!”

His fingers dug even harder. “Oh my God…”

The first volume was full of tiny, spidery writing – obviously feminine, but also obviously cramped to fit on the narrow pages. All the entries were dated and even at first glance it was easy to tell what the little book contained.

It was a diary.

Bill shoved the journal at Gus, open to the flyleaf where a name – D. Taylor – was penned in larger, more ornate script.

“Shit,” Gus breathed.

There were five of the little books in all. They covered a period of nearly two years starting in early 1969 and once Gus realized what he was looking at he began skimming madly through the pages in search of the last batch of entries. The first reference to Mathew Brice appeared halfway through the last book; glancing grimly at Bill, Gus began to summarize aloud as he scanned.

“October 1969 is when she started working for The Brice. She knew right off the bat what she was getting into…she even talks about Mathew sending her out on two “trials” with some clients to see how she’d do. She must have done pretty well for herself because only a couple of weeks later she’s talking about a party where she meets up with Mathew again and he makes a point of telling her how pleased he was with reports he was getting on her…Maybe he decided to try her out for himself…this was when their affair began, by the sounds of it. She mentions Doug – by name – sounds like he was about three at the time…”
“She calls it an affair? Specifically?”

Gus cast him another glance. “There are other words for it, I guess. But she certainly doesn’t have a problem with being descriptive about things. Hotel rooms, back seats of cars, boardroom table, stairwells…all right under his wife’s nose apparently. By the second week of November, he was taking Diana on trips with him…new secretary, my ass…but crap, he took her to Atlantic City, New York, London…shopping sprees, he bought jewelry for her, gave her fistfuls of cash…that must have been a pretty big high for a woman who was working as a waitress in a rundown bar about forty pages ago…oh wow!”

"What?"

"Seems like Diana had competition…aside from Mathew's wife."

"Who? Another 'secretary'?" Bill asked sarcastically.

"A guy. Apparently Mathew had a boyfriend as well."

"You gotta be kidding me!"

Gus shook his head as he read faster, "According to her diary, the boyfriend was a rich man..."

Despite himself, Bill was fascinated. “And then what happened?"

Gus read faster. “Sounds like Mathew was seeing them both…although, I get the feeling from Diana's words that Mathew really cared about this boy, she sounds jealous…wait, wait…here it is…the night of the party. When everyone was arrested. We were right…it was Mathew’s lawyer who got her off…Mathew even went to pick her up himself…and surprise! More sex in the car. Damn, talk about addicted to each other.”

And then it began to go wrong. Gus read snippets out loud while Bill sat in dumbfounded silence.

Dear Diary,

Things are not good. I don’t know who’s been trying to talk him out of seeing me, but he says we need to be apart for awhile. He’s afraid of people finding out about the other night. I told him I won’t go. I went to see him when I knew he was alone and he asked me to leave but it didn’t take much before we were on the sofa, screwing like rabbits. He’s worried about his career. I told him all famous men have a significant other on the side. The boy won’t find out. He’s so busy doing his do-gooder thing that he wouldn’t notice if we were fucking right in front of him. He needs me. He even said so. But he still wants me to keep away for awhile. I gave him some photos of me that he took one night and told him to think about it. He won’t go far. I saw his face when he looked at the pictures...he was already wanting me again.

It went on for pages and pages. Diana’s obsession with Mathew - with his lifestyle and his money - was growing exponentially at the same time that he was trying to discreetly push her out of his life. Her entries became more and more desperate, full of rants and threats that she swore she would carry out…to tell his wife, to tell his boyfriend, to tell everyone if necessary.

Then, in the late November entries, a shocker.

“Holy shit, she was pregnant!”

Bill’s eyes flew up to Gus’s and their open mouths mirrored each other for several seconds.

“Oh, God,” he said faintly. “I don’t imagine that went over well.”
Gus furrowed his brow back over the diary. “No. No it didn’t. She went to him with it. She even took him proof apparently. Lab results. Name of the doctor. But he wouldn’t budge by the sounds of it. Even claimed one of her other tricks must have knocked her up…” He winced. “No wonder this got ugly.”

The writing had widened as the pages filled, a reflection of the growing anger and resentment in each new entry. In some cases, Gus could hardly distinguish the words, they’d been penned with such ferocity but there was one entry that jumped out at him from all the others.

Dear Diary:

I fixed the boy today. I sent him flowers, pretending they were from him. I don’t care if I screw him up. Whatever it takes to get my man, back, I’ll do it. He doesn’t know what my man wants...what he needs. They have big plans for the holidays. Everybody knows about them. Big New Year’s celebration.

Won’t ever happen.

For a moment Gus stopped reading and his hands clenched involuntarily around the binding. Bill eyed him sympathetically, then reached out gently to take the book from him.

“I’ll finish it.”

“No. It’s okay.” It took visible effort, but Gus managed to compose himself. This was all getting a little too close to home, but at the same time it was becoming apparent that he absolutely needed to follow this through to the end. He blinked hard at the words that were blurring before his eyes, and then continued quoting from the entries as he scanned them.

Dear Diary:

That faggot! He sent his lawyers after me today; those slimy men who do his dirty work for him. He’s got a boxful of pictures of me. They showed me some. They’re all from before, with other men...they say they do this with all the girls, in case they ever get out of line. The lawyers say if I go public he’ll use them right back on me, to get me charged with prostitution, to get my baby taken away from me. And Doug. He says they’ll take Doug too, those bastards from Social Services. I don’t know what to do. All day I’ve been sick and everything hurts.

Then, two days before Christmas 1970...

Dear Diary:

He knows he won, the bastard. He and his boy toy laugh at me now. He says I’ve lost my bargaining chip...how dare he say that about me, about the baby? He says it could have been
anybody’s, like I was sleeping around like a slut when it was only him, nobody else. It was his baby, and he doesn’t even care that I lost it. He had me thrown out of the hotel today. Security got told that I was “fired” for inappropriate behavior. They were told to keep me out. My momma won’t have anything to do with me, but at least she took Doug. Now I can’t even see my boy over the holidays. A friend says I can stay with her. How did this get so twisted? I’m back in a two-room hole full of rats and roaches and I can’t even find enough money to feed myself. I tried to sell the necklace he gave me...turns out that was fake too. Like everything else. All fake.

Gus dropped the book.

“That’s it,” he said with finality. “Last entry.”

“And then she killed herself,” Bill whispered.

“Yeah. And then she killed herself. On New Year’s Eve in a Brice hotel. And it’s no great mystery why. If I was guessing, I’d say that was Diana’s way of getting back at Mathew…by trying to bring a scandal down on the hotel. The police report didn’t say anything about a suicide note, but you tell me, Bill…if Brice employees found the body and a note and the note fingered Mathew Brice for a whole lot of nasty things, would the staff be more likely to turn it over to the police or trash it? My guess is they covered it up. And somewhere down the line the line the staff must have inherited these journals and found out everything that went on between his mother and Samuel’s father, right down to the baby brother or sister he would have had.”

“And wanted to get even?” Bill murmured. “I bet he would. And Mathew was dead by the time Doug was old enough to have understood all this...so what does that make Samuel?”

“The next best thing,” Gus said hollowly. “Doug once commented to me that Samuel was ‘as bad as his father’...if they are so much alike, it wouldn’t be much of a stretch to transfer your anger from one S.O.B. to another.”

Bill went on almost desperately. “All right. So he wants to get back at Samuel. Why drug the girls at the concert? Why point fingers at you? Why try to get between you and Adam?”

At the mention of Adam’s name, Gus shivered. It was now nearly 10:00 a.m. and there was less than an hour before he was scheduled to leave the hotel. There was no way to know what Doug was planning and he still had no idea what the best way was to try and stop him.

“I don’t know. We know ‘who’ and we know ‘why’. I still need to know ‘how’, Bill…we must still be missing something here.”

They resumed their frantic search of the office. It was Bill’s idea to review the recently saved documents on Doug’s laptop. There was nothing unusual at first, just business correspondence and reports; the longer they looked the more desperate Gus grew and the harder it became for him to control his rising panic.

“One of these documents was on a flash drive,” Bill said half under his breath. “But there isn’t one attached to the laptop…”

There was no sign of a flash drive in the drawers or anywhere on the desk. But Gus dug into the trash basket, through empty fast food containers and crumpled napkins and found what they were looking for...a flash drive that contained not only the document they were seeking but almost all of the answers they were so desperate for.

Bill watched the color drain from Gus’s face as he read it on the screen. He didn’t bother to ask,
just printed it quickly and gathered the flash drive together with shaking hands.

He didn’t think he’d ever been more scared in his life.

Gus stood at the end of the desk with a face like white marble.

“Take me back to the hotel,” he said. “Now. Please.”

Traffic around The Citadel complex was already being diverted due to the Grand Opening. Vehicles were forced to change lanes, to merge unexpectedly and to just completely detour at times. It should have been a five-minute limo ride at the most to transport Adam and the band from the hotel underground to the underground of the stadium. It was, quite literally, no more than a trip around the block…except that the block had been cordoned off, divided up and otherwise reorganized by the police. So it wasn’t all that unexpected that the trip took much longer than usual, or that the limo and the two security vans that were travelling with it got separated in the gridlock. What was unexpected was that the two vans, despite the detours, arrived at the stadium within less than a minute of each other…and the limo didn’t.

That the limo…in fact…and didn’t arrive at all.
Chapter 30

Samuel,

I always missed not having a mother. They say that you can’t miss something you’ve never had. It’s not true.

You start to miss it when you see how important it is in other people’s lives. You miss it when you’re the only one without it...and you’ve never really understood the reason why. You get jealous of friends who have it and wonder why you’re different...why you can’t be normal like they are. When they ask about it...you lie. It’s easy...because you don’t know the truth.

And then when you finally learn the truth, it hurts. You get angry. You get consumed with resentment and helplessness and the worst part is that nobody – nobody – can possibly understand. Because you can’t talk about it. They would only turn on you with the same disgust and pity.

There are secrets you don’t tell. But sooner or later, you do get even.

I could never tell anybody what happened to my mother. I didn’t actually know the truth until I was nearly fourteen. Grandma told me she’d died in an accident. In fact, Grandma told me a lot of things...but none of them were true. Don’t get me wrong...I never blamed her. It couldn’t have been easy for her to live with the fact that her daughter had been a hooker...that she’d killed herself after an affair with a very wealthy, very prominent, very married man. Grandma kept the truth from me for fourteen years, until she was so ill that she realized she might never get another chance to tell me.

I know you don’t have a clue what I’m talking about, but you will...eventually. I wrote it all out, in nauseating detail and mailed a copy to the local police. For a couple of days, nobody is going to have the faintest idea what could have prompted this terrible act of violence but by Tuesday, all the speculation and rumor is going to turn into the biggest scandal of your life.

So why this? You forget; I’m an expert at promotion and spectacle. That’s why you hired me, wasn’t it? To make you look good? And I did a damn good job of it too...it’s a shame that you didn’t realize that I would be just as capable of making you look bad...or more precisely, of making you out to be exactly who you really are.

I don’t suppose my mother was the first person your father screwed around with. Or the last. He was pretty good at using people... that’s where you inherited the talent from, isn’t it, Samuel? But he must have cared about her at some point because she wrote about him like he was the most amazing man in the world. To be honest, I think that’s what truly killed her. That somebody could have lifted her out of her dirt-poor hopeless existence and showered her with such amazing attention and then just dumped her...and for what? For a man! He didn’t give a damn about what he did to her or to her baby. Did you ever know about that, Samuel? About my mother, or the baby she lost? You and I would have had a half-brother or sister. This could have all been so different. Instead, you got your life handed to you on a silver platter and I had to struggle up from the bottom. Alone.

This was all originally just supposed to happen today. I wanted you to know today. Fourty-Two years of silence is too long. But I guess I got impatient. You’d think after waiting and planning to get even with you all these years I would have learned to bide my time. But the closer it got, the harder it got. And when you were so full of plans for the Christmas season and you were so damned smug and arrogant at the thought of your big accomplishment – well, I got pissed. Even
so, I might not have done anything other than what I was originally planning if it hadn’t been for Gus coming up with the idea for the benefit concert. You were just playing up all that benevolent shit just a little too much. Anyone who knows you knows that you don’t have a compassionate bone in your body and all the pats on the back you were just getting to be more than I could take.

I didn’t mean to kill that girl. I actually spent a lot of time researching the doses to use, but I had no way to know she was an epileptic. It was just supposed to be something to shake you up a little and maybe wipe that self-righteous smile off your face. But things got a lot hotter than I intended, which is why I had to do something else to divert the attention.

It’s funny how you plant suspicions and they just grow. Having Gus around made me damn nervous at first but he actually turned out to be my biggest asset. A deliberate drugging at a concert – an ex-narc in the entourage… I didn’t think it would take much for people to start thinking there was some kind of a connection to him. And he did exactly what I needed him to do… get a little too involved, piss off the cops, piss off Adam, piss you off…

I jerked him around a lot. He’s a smart cookie but I knew I could get to him and keep him off-centre so no one would take anything he said too seriously. I already knew something had gone on between him and Tommy…I overhead them talking about it when he came back after his operation. It was easy to use that against him, especially when I realized that Adam had never known anything about it at all. And once I found out he had emotional problems, it was all downhill from there. To be honest, I felt kind of bad about messing with his mind the way I did. He was always decent to me but the more freaked out he was the less chance there was of him getting it together long enough to figure any of this out. I’d always been afraid that he was going to get too close to the truth but he was easy to manipulate, especially when the others started turning against him. I needed everybody to think he was a little on the unbalanced side. The more he did to bring down negative attention and the more flipped out you got over it, the more of a high it was for me. I enjoyed every little rant and tantrum you threw and the best part was that you were relying on me to find a way to make it all better.

This was never about Adam. He is a nice guy. Unfortunately for you (and him), he’s also the most famous gay man at the moment. When he shows up, people pay attention. and that is what I needed…after all, it was because of a gay man that your dad dumped my mom. Plus this day…this anniversary…was just too important to pass up. Several million people are going to be watching today when Adam just suddenly drops off the face of the earth. You should feel honored…you’ll be the first to know what happens to him.

So, exactly how are you going to tell the world, Samuel?

If you’re wondering why I picked this particular spot, don’t strain yourself. You’ve been the golden-boy, the businessman who seemed like he could never do anything wrong. So when you stop and think about it, it was a perfect setting…the site of your one and only failure. You hated that, didn’t you? I can remember you trying to play it down, to make it less of an embarrassment but the truth is, it just got under your skin like you couldn’t believe. It pissed you off for months. I can remember how good it felt to watch you squirm over it. So it seemed like a natural choice for this. All right…I admit; I’m rubbing your nose in it a little. It was one last shot, and I couldn’t bear not to take it.

It doesn’t matter that I’m not going to be around to enjoy this. I get all my satisfaction from knowing that there will never be another word said or written about you in your career that doesn’t contain a reference to what happens today. Everybody’s going to know what a bastard you are and what a bastard your father was and that he built your fucking empire by walking all over the people who worked for him. He used my mother and then tried to trash her like a piece of garbage…God
only knows how many other people he destroyed. You were heading down the same path, Samuel and there was no way I was going to stick around and watch that happen. There are no spin-doctors good enough to get the stink of this one off you so don’t waste too much of your precious fortune trying. The fact remains that, no matter what you try to do about it, the rest of your life is mine… you will never get away from this.

It only seems fair, after what the Brice family took from me.

My only regret is that I’m not going to get to see your face when you read this. But I am going to get to see your face when you have to stand up at the grand opening and explain that you don’t know where your guest of honor is. It’s only going to be the start, but it will have to be enough for me. I won’t be sticking around to see how the rest works out.

I just hope that VH1 zooms in on a nice fat close-up.

Happy New Year.

Doug

Getting back in the elevator was a mistake. No sooner had the doors closed than Gus lost the ability to breathe; he grabbed wildly for the handrail and hung on while the little room got dark and blood began pounding in his ears. He could hear Bill’s frantic questions and felt his arms around his shoulders to hold him up but he couldn’t do anything other than clutch at Bill desperately during the mercifully short ride to the lobby.

Bill half dragged him out to a bench, where he collapsed.

“Christ, Gus…are you all right? What’s wrong? Are you claustrophobic or something?”

Gus shook his head, still gasping for air. Not now…not now…this was no time for a panic attack and no time to be weak and helpless.

“I’m okay. Please just get me into the car and take me back to the hotel. Please Bill…it’s almost 10:30. I have to see Adam before he leaves for the opening.”

“Call the police,” Bill begged him as the car squealed out of the parking lot.

Gus was still nearly doubled over, dizzy and trying frantically to dispel the feelings of utter terror that were now compounded with shock and trepidation. “Not yet. Not until I see Adam. I don’t have time to try and convince the police and the only way to stop this fast enough is from the inside out.”

After a couple of blocks, he’d pulled himself together enough to fumble for his phone. There was no answer in his room, nor in Tommy’s and calls to both his cell and Adam’s went to voice mail as well. It was no great surprise; they were obviously in the middle of getting ready for the grand opening and may not have even been in the same room as their phones but when Jeremy didn’t pick up his cell either, Gus began to hyperventilate all over again.

He redialed him repeatedly. There were emergency codes between Adam and his bodyguards – Gus even had one of his own – but neither his nor Adam’s managed to generate a response. He
looked at his watch again. He knew the schedule for that morning like the back of his hand. The earliest Adam would ever leave the hotel would be 11:00 a.m. The ceremony wasn’t until noon, it only took five minutes to drive to the red carpet arrival area and there was already lots of time set aside for Adam and the other guests to mingle, greet the public and glad-hand before he took his seat.

There was absolutely no reason for Adam not to still be at the hotel…

Traffic around the Citadel was jammed. To Gus’s horror, he realized that there was absolutely no way that Bill could get the car anywhere near the hotel itself without a long delay. As if in unspoken acknowledgement, Bill hit the brakes and skidded into an alley where he just backed the car up against the wall and threw it into park.

Gus’s face was very pale and he was still breathing so heavily that Bill feared he wouldn’t even be able to stand, let alone walk.

“Can you make it?” he said anxiously. “If not, I’ll go myself…”

Gus shook his head. He had no idea how he managed it, but somehow he opened the car door, straightened his legs, put weight on them, put one foot in front of the other… Bill put one arm around his shoulders for support as they made their way out onto the sidewalk and when Gus looked up and caught a glimpse of the hotel tower and the mass of fans who were crowding the street around it, he suddenly forced himself to get a grip.

Nothing else was going to matter if he didn’t find a way to do this now.

Grabbing Bill’s arm, he lurched into a stagger and with a combination of Bill’s strength towing him along and sheer momentum, Gus managed to keep up with Bill as they ran awkwardly towards the main entrance.

There was another obstacle in the form of the hysterical fans who recognized him the moment he got close and who made pushing through the crowd nearly impossible. Gus didn’t know how many girls he pushed to clear a path and didn’t much care. When he got to the barriers around the portico, he didn’t hesitate but swung awkwardly over and bumped against a uniformed police officer.

“Wait just a second there, sir…”

Gus looked at the officer and said a prayer of thanks. The cop was one of the officers who’d been at the stadium on the day the punctured soda bottles were found in the dressing room; not only did he recognize Gus, but he seemed to have his own reasons for rushing both him and Bill inside without any questions.

“They’ve been looking for you,” was all he would say as he escorted them both to the elevator. “You’d better go upstairs.”

Naturally, Gus blamed himself. For underestimating Doug yet again, for not being there to prevent him from making sudden changes in the schedule, for leaving Adam when he knew that something was so seriously wrong...

There had been no security “issues” at the hotel. The hotel’s head of security knew nothing about any of the problems that Doug had described and adamantly insisted that Doug hadn’t spoken to him at all that morning.
When the two vanloads of Adam’s security staff and entourage pulled into the stadium and found that the limo had not arrived, one of the trucks backtracked as best it could through the traffic, fearing that the limo had stalled or otherwise broken down enroute. Calls were placed to Jeremy without success and Doug wasn’t answering his cell either. It was in attempting to determine if the limo had returned to the hotel that it was discovered that there had been no reason to change the schedule in the first place.

Michelle, Lisa, Sophie and a handful of the remaining staff had been just about to leave for the opening as originally planned when an apprehensive security officer appeared to inquire if any of them had heard from Adam, Tommy, Monte, Isaac or Jeremy, since the limo had departed. Confusion and concern spiraled quickly and speculation was driven into frenzy when Gus and Bill stumbled into the midst of the uproar and learned that Adam and the band had apparently vanished somewhere between the hotel and the stadium.

They dragged Michelle into the nearest empty room and bombarded her with questions.

“It’s only a block away!” Gus protested desperately. “Surely somebody must have noticed the limo slipping off down a side street or something!”

“Not in this crazy traffic,” Bill muttered. “And this is Vegas. Limos are everywhere. No one would think twice about seeing one on the street.” He exchanged an agonized look with Gus and said in despair, “We took too long…didn’t we?”

Michelle took one look at Gus’s tormented face and felt her stomach plummet. Grabbing her friend by the hands as Gus sank weakly into a chair, she knelt in front of him and said urgently, “Gus, you need to tell me what’s going on. You’ve been gone all morning. Why weren’t you here? I tried to tell Adam that you wouldn’t like the schedule being changed around…”

Gus closed his eyes. “I need to talk to Samuel.”

“What the hell for? He’ll already be going ballistic over this. He’s not going to talk to you.”

“The police, Gus,” Bill said gently. “Come on…we don’t have any choice now.”

He straightened abruptly. His eyes blinked open and seemed to take a moment to refocus and then he visibly shook himself and took a deep breath.

“No. Samuel first. Whether he knows it or not, he’s the one that started all of this. He’s going to be the only one who can stop it.”

Samuel was in the hotel’s main office just off the lobby. He was, as predicted, alternately raging and threatening, screaming at people on the phone one minute and then screaming at members of his staff the next.

Bill and Gus forced their way into the office with a protesting Michelle in tow, despite attempts from hotel security on the door to stop them. Samuel’s rage hit new heights when he laid eyes on Bill and immediately began blasting his Head of Promotion for not being where he should have been that morning.

“He was with me, Samuel,” Gus said sharply. “Shut the hell up.” His head jerked in the direction of the door and to the rest of those present, he barked, “Everybody out!”
“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Do you want me to tell you what’s happening here, Samuel?” He snatched the envelope of papers that he and Bill had spent the morning collecting and waved it furiously in front of Samuel’s face. “Then I really suggest that you tell everybody to clear out before I open this or things are going to get very unpleasant.”

“Wait outside,” he insisted again to the rest of the room in general. They looked uncertain but almost immediately began backing away into the outer office and when the room had cleared, Gus slammed the door and locked it.

Without hesitating he marched back over to Samuel and shoved hard, planting him without warning on the sofa. He spluttered with outrage and Gus, losing control of himself for a moment, backhanded him across the face as hard as he could and effectively shocked him into silence.

Michelle grabbed him by the arms. “For Christ’s sake, Gus…will you stop? You’re acting like a lunatic!”

Gus twisted free. “Not as crazy as some people have been making me out to be.” He dumped the contents of the envelope onto the coffee table and began shoving various pieces of paper towards Samuel.

“Your tour manager has been the one who’s been behind all this. From the very beginning. The drugging at the concert. The newspaper clippings. That religious organization that picketed the stadium. The little bits of information that got leaked to the media. The fire alarms. The bottles in the dressing room that were made to look like they’d been tampered with. The flowers that were supposed to have been from Adam…”

His voice broke a little at that. As he paused to compose himself, Samuel gaped up at him from his seat.

“What the fuck are you ranting about?”

“Read this, Samuel! Doug’s been after you for years. His mother used to work for your father. They had an affair; he ended it - pretty cruelly – but she was already pregnant and obsessed with getting him back. He turned his lawyers on her and threatened her with God knows what…then she lost the baby and pretty much everything as well.”

Michelle had snatched up a few of the loose pages and was flipping through them, feeling her chest tighten as she did so. “God Almighty…is this her? In this report? The woman who killed herself?”

“That’s her. Diana Taylor. Take a look at the date, Michelle. Significant, do you think?”

Michelle had already seen it. “Oh my God…”

“That’s what this is all about,” Bill murmured. “He’s taken Adam because he wants to get back at Samuel for what his father did. And he wants to do it today…and he wants to make sure there are millions of people watching when it happens.”

“We broke into his office, “ Gus added. “And found some of the drugs and syringes he used for tampering with the Gatorade. We found the diaries his mother left when she died. Doug was just a baby and for years he didn’t know…when he found out, something must have snapped and he’s been looking for a way to get even ever since.” He gestured helplessly. “We also found a note from Doug…”

“Note?” Michelle said, wide-eyed. “What do you mean, a note? A ransom note?”
“No.” Gus was starting to shake a little. Warning signs of panic were starting to edge up on him again and it took all of his concentration not to let the terror wash back over him.

“Worse. A suicide note.”

December 31, 2012  11:10 a.m.

Samuel Brice was not a stupid man. There was no disputing the evidence that Gus was literally shoving in his face, although they wasted precious time while he argued and protested and refused to accept it and while Gus grew more desperate with each passing moment.

“Why the hell haven’t you taken any of this to the police?” Samuel shouted at him at last.

Gus was dumbstruck. “Why? What the hell do you think I was doing all those times I tried to get them to take this whole thing seriously? Why do you think I asked them to pull the event permit? You were the one who kept telling me to keep out, you bastard!”

“Gus…Gus!” Michelle had him by the arms again, recognizing danger signs in Gus’s wild agitation. “Samuel’s right. Get the police in here now.”

“And do what, Michelle? We still don’t know what Doug’s planning. I was convinced it would be based around the simulcast tonight…and I sure wasn’t expecting that he’d just be able to walk out of here with Adam and vanish this morning!”

“Gus!” Michelle’s hands were gripping Gus’s shoulders; she half shook her friend until Gus raised despairing eyes. “I know you feel responsible for this, but this is way too big for you to handle. You’re not in any shape to take care of things now. You just need to take all of this to the cops and let them figure out where to go from here.”

Gus’s mouth was trembling. He clutched blindly at Michelle’s forearms and some of his panic began to break through. “I shouldn’t have left him, Michelle…I should have stayed with him…I might have been able to stop this…”

Michelle swallowed. She’d seen Gus at some of the most frightened moments of his life, but that was nothing compared to how terrified he seemed now. Pushing away her own paralyzing fear, Michelle said coaxingly, “Settle down a little. Don’t forget. Jeremy is with them. They’re not alone. But you need to go to the police, Gus. Please. You know that’s what you have to do.”

“This is all nuts,” Samuel muttered. “I still can’t believe any of this. I’m supposed to be opening a fucking entertainment complex in forty-five minutes. We don’t have time to argue about it. Get the cops in here now.”

Gus began protesting again. Samuel shouted back and stood up and his body language strongly implied that he was planning to either go around Gus or straight through him, whichever was
necessary. Taking advantage of the fact that someone was pounding insistently on the door and that Michelle was doing her best to prevent Gus from stopping him, Samuel unlocked the door, threw it open and came up short, having unexpectedly encountered the very law enforcement officers he was looking for.

“Mr. Brice, do you know this gentleman? He just tried to come through the barriers at the front. He says he’s one of your employees but he has no identification on him and he insists that he will speak only to you.”

Samuel stared at the man who was half-restrained and half-supported between the two burly cops. His suit was badly mussed, his complexion was waxy and the look in his eyes was nothing short of petrified.

“I don’t have a clue,” Samuel snapped irritably. “Do you think I can keep track of the thousands of people who work for me? No, I’ve never seen him before. Just throw him out, will you? And then get your supervisor in here. I need police assistance…now.”

Exchanging a glance, the two officers turned to escort the other man away, which prompted a flurry of protests and resistance.

“Come on buddy. Like the man said, he doesn’t know you. It was a good try, but you’ll just have to take your problem somewhere else…”

“Wait a minute!”

This time it was Michelle, pushing past both Gus and Bill and seizing one of the cops by a uniformed elbow to slow him down.

The officer patiently extracted his arm. “It’s all right, m’am. We’ll take care of it…no need for you to get involved. Mr. Brice says he doesn’t know this man…”

“Maybe not,” Michelle said desperately. “But I do.”

Everyone turned to stare at her. Even the stranger in question stopped struggling long enough to eye her with renewed hope.

Michelle furrowed her brow at him once as she made doubly certain, then she turned and spoke directly to Gus.

“I walked Tommy down to the parking garage when they were being loaded up to move to the stadium. I watched them pack the car…I watched this guy pack the car…”

Gus sucked in his breath sharply. “God, Michelle…are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” Michelle turned back and reassessed the other man one more time, then she nodded with complete conviction. “Absolutely positive. He’s the limo driver.”

Doug had miscalculated on two fronts. Not only did he not anticipate that Gus and Bill would get to the truth prior to the grand opening, he had no way to know that the limo driver, dumped unceremoniously from the car in a run down and dangerous part of the city without money or ID,
would have been able to make it back to The Citadel in such a short period of time.

The man had an envelope for Samuel Brice and instructions not to speak to anyone but Samuel himself. Any temptation he might have felt to go directly to the authorities had been coolly crushed by what was essentially an empty threat…Doug had no intention of releasing his captives anyway but for purposes of effect, he warned the limo driver than any intervention from the police would bring the entire incident to an abrupt conclusion.

It should have taken him much longer to get back into the city. But to his extreme relief he was able to flag down an empty cab whose operator he knew personally from his own days as a hack. Whereas Doug had estimated that the limo driver would not have been able to reach Samuel until the entire grand opening ceremony had been forced to proceed without the guest of honor he did, in fact, make it back with time to spare.

Gus, Bill and Michelle held their collective breath as Samuel hesitated for only a moment, then thanked the police officers for their efforts and quietly dismissed them.

“All right,” he snapped when the door closed behind him. “You’ve got five minutes before I call those cops back in here. Tell me what the hell is going on.”
Chapter 31

Steered towards the sofa against the wall, the limo driver half collapsed as his legs gave out, then gulped gratefully at the glass of water Michelle pushed into his hand. Gus crouched down in front of him so they were more or less at eye level and tried to gather himself enough to speak past the lump in his throat.

“Did he hurt you at all?” he said quietly.

The man shook his head, busying himself with another mouthful of water and refusing to meet his eyes.

Gus tried again, voice carefully controlled.

“Has he hurt anyone else?”

Another shake of the head but this time the eyes flickered meaningfully to Samuel and there was a muttered reply.

“No…but he warned me that people would get hurt if I spoke to anyone except Mr. Brice.”

Taking this as his cue to intervene, Samuel stepped forward into Gus’s peripheral vision, only to waved off by a sharp movement of his hand. The limo driver’s gaze dropped back to Gus’s somewhat apprehensively.

He continued in the same even tone. “What’s your name?”

“Willaker. Robert Willaker.”

Gus shifted a little for balance and drew a deep breath. “Okay, Robert…do you know who I am?”

Robert nodded.

“Then you probably also know that I’m a former police officer.”

More nodding.

“Well, Robert…I’ve just been filling Mr. Brice in on information that I’ve uncovered on Doug Taylor and why he should have reason to believe that Doug had something to do with whatever has happened to the limo. We know that it didn’t arrive at the stadium and we know that things are going to get very serious if we can’t find a way to locate it in a very short period of time…”

That prompted a protest. “But I don’t know where it is…”

“You were driving it, for Christ’s sake,” Samuel interrupted and Gus silenced him with another cutting glare.

“Robert, we have an awful lot of the pieces of this puzzle, but there are things we still don’t understand. You can talk to Mr. Brice privately if you want, but that’s going to take a lot more time and if you want to help us out here we need to know everything that you know and we need to know it right now.”

Robert was still breathing heavily and his color was so bad that Gus half-feared he was going to keel over from a heart attack before he managed to get any information out of him. He looked
from Samuel to Gus and back again, then he reached into the inside pocket of his dusty, stained suit jacket.

“I was asked to give this to you. Other than that, I don’t know much…I swear.”

Samuel took the sealed envelope and opened it while Gus clenched his fists and fought the urge to snatch it from his hands. But he didn’t have long to wait; Samuel read no more than the first couple of lines before he slumped heavily against the edge of one of the desks and let the paper fall to the floor.

“It’s the same letter…” he said unsteadily. “That you found in his office. The same. Exactly the same. Jesus…”

There was no mistaking the change in his expression. Whatever doubts he’d had previously…however improbable the entire scenario had seemed…he now had a piece of paper in his hand that directly corroborated Gus and Bill’s story and made it impossible to dispute.

The color drained from his face at roughly the same speed as sick comprehension began filling him from the pit of the stomach up. He looked desperately at Gus and Gus felt a rush of relief when he met his eyes; there was no longer any hesitation and Gus knew he would no longer stand in the way of anything he felt needed to be done.

Samuel looked directly at Robert and nodded his head in Gus’s direction.

“Tell him whatever he wants to know.”

It did everything to escalate the sense of foreboding while giving them very little new information to go on. Shortly after the limo had left the underground parking garage, Doug had coolly redirected the driver onto an alternate route. After a block or two of confusing turns, Robert had protested loudly enough that Jeremy lowered the privacy partition between the front seat and the rear and stuck his head through to ask what the hell was going on.

He nearly died of shock.

Within ten minutes, the limo had pulled to a stop on a side street in one of the seedier sections of town. The driver had been handed the envelope with instructions to deliver it directly into Samuel’s hands, no questions asked and without a word to anyone else.

The last time he’d seen the limo, it had been heading east.

“Going…?” Gus prompted.

“I don’t know. But he couldn’t have gone far.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He would have had to stop for gas. Normally, right before we take the cars out, we wash them and fill the tanks. I wasn’t expecting to get called out so early this morning. The car was washed, but I didn’t have time to fill it up. It’s nearly empty.” Throwing a defensive look at Samuel, Robert
added, “I didn’t think it would matter. I was only supposed to take them about two blocks.”

“Well, that’s good,” Michelle said hopefully.

“Maybe,” Gus muttered. “Maybe not. Are you certain he didn’t give you any clues about where they were headed?”

“He didn’t say a word. When he made me get out, he forced Monte to drive but I didn’t see anybody else. Nobody was really saying anything…I think they were all just scared shitless…”

Samuel had been shocked into frozen silence and both Bill and Michelle were pacing, wide-eyed and progressively more frantic. Gus knew damn well that if you pushed a witness too hard you weren’t likely to get anywhere fast and no one dared to rush the process, although anyone of them would have liked to have picked Robert up and simply shaken the information out of him.

Gus strove again for patience and somehow managed to maintain his even tone. “Forced him… how?”

Robert had paled a little at that. “He’s sick…” he whispered. “He really is…”

Control slipped a notch and Gus clenched his hands together. “You need to just tell me, Robert…”

“He’s rigged himself with explosives.”

Gus stood up abruptly. Samuel shoved himself away from the table, looking nearly apoplectic and choked, “What the hell do you mean…explosives?”

Groaning, Gus locked his hands around the back of his neck and his head fell forward despairingly.

“Oh God…that explains the missing pyro…”

He pried the rest of the information out of Robert with as much patience as he could muster, trying to ignore Michelle’s appalled, frightened expression and the way that Samuel was mumbling about the police, and the bomb squad and the SWAT team.

“It looked like he’d rigged a vest of some sort…like the heavy, utility kind you wear when you go fishing…with all the pockets. I have no idea how powerful the charges are, but he’s got them all over the front and there’s another strip that runs around the back on some kind of belt or harness. He carried it in a duffle bag in the front seat of the car…”

Gus swallowed hard. “Is it on some kind of timer?”

“No. At least I don’t think so. It looks like he constructed some kind of trigger, attached to the front left side of the vest around about waist level. He kept putting his right hand on it…”

Gus’s face was a mask of concentration and the focused look in his eyes was a reflection of the way thoughts were ricocheting through his head. “Okay, Robert…I need you to think carefully. What kind of a trigger is it? A switch? A button?”

“Not a switch. Not really a button either. It sticks up a little bit, I think…it looks like the kind of thing you’d have to press pretty deliberately to get it to work…”

“Like a plunger, you mean?”

Robert nodded.
“Has he rigged explosives anywhere else? On the car?”

“Not that I could see. He dumped the duffle bag out of the car when he made me get out, so I don’t think he’s got anything more with him than what he’s actually wearing himself.”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Michelle protested. “Why would he only rig himself up with a bomb?”

“Easy,” Gus said grimly. “Because that means that no one can possibly get to him. And all he has to do to maintain his control is just stay within blasting distance of any one of his hostages. He means to kill himself, Michelle…remember?”

“So why the hell are we just sitting here?” Samuel said furiously. “Why aren’t we notifying the police? They have teams they can send in to deal with these kinds of situations…”

Gus turned on him. Despite his best efforts, his composure was beginning to fray badly around the edges. “Send them where, Samuel? At the moment, we don’t even know where the hell they are!”

“Hang on a minute,” Bill said unexpectedly. All heads swiveled in his direction and found that he had retrieved Doug’s letter from its resting place on the floor and was re-reading it intently. After a moment’s study, he looked up and zoned in on Samuel with a piercing glare. “I think maybe I do. And I think you do as well…if you’d just listen to what Doug’s trying to tell you here.”

“Meaning?” Gus said.

Bill held the letter back out to Samuel. “Read what he says about “if you’re wondering why I picked this spot”… He’s talking about Luna Mesa, isn’t he?”

Samuel blinked for a moment before he took back the letter and stared at it again.

“What’s Luna Mesa?” Gus said, desperately aware of passing time.

Bill folded his arms. “Early last year Samuel tried to get into residential real estate development for the first time. He owns a large section of property on the east edge of the city and it’s expected to be the next big area of growth for new housing. Samuel’s idea was to get to it first, turn it into a prime site and then watch the property values go through the roof. The property itself is already worth a fortune, but Samuel didn’t have the financial backing for the actual construction, so he brought in some business partners…”

Gus looked to Samuel for explanation but it was Bill who continued.

“…partners who just happened to have made their millions in social media companies. And when the bottom fell out of that market last year, you can imagine where all the financing went.”

“Flush?” said Gus wearily.

“Yeah. Flush. Big time.” Here Bill cast a sideways glance at his employer and continued a bit derisively, “But like anything that Samuel does, he’d promoted the hell out of it as the next freakin’ Shangri La and when it fell through – literally as the ground was being broken – it made headlines in all the major business publications. It was a fiasco. There was a lot of sniggering and a lot of suggestions that Samuel should just stick to what he knows. I’m sure you can imagine there are a few people in this town and in this industry who got a lot of satisfaction out of Samuel suffering such a public embarrassment.”

Gus closed his eyes for a moment, remembering the letter. The paragraph hadn’t made sense until
now…now, when it might have been too late. “And Doug did too,” he muttered, half to himself.

You’ve been the golden-boy, the businessman who seemed like he could never do anything wrong. So when you stop and think about it, it was a perfect setting…the site of your one and only failure. You hated that, didn’t you? I can remember you trying to play it down, to make it less of an embarrassment but the truth is, it just got under your skin like you couldn’t believe. It pissed you off for months. I can remember how good it felt to watch you squirm over it. So it seemed like a natural choice for this. All right…I admit; I’m rubbing your nose in it a little. It was one last shot, and I couldn’t bear not to take it.

He looked at his watch. It was already 11:45.

“How long would it take me to get there from here?”

There was no immediate answer, basically because all three of them simply stood and stared at him with their mouths open.

“No, Gus!” Michelle said aghast. “No! You don’t have any idea what the hell is going on here! There is no possible way you can think of trying to handle this on your own…”

“It’s time we just handed all of this over to the cops,” Bill said, equally horrified. “Surely to God you don’t think you can put a stop to this all by yourself!”

“I’m not going by myself.” Gus was already moving, gathering up all the papers from the table and shoving them back into the envelope. His shoulders were set and there was grim resolve written all over him – familiar signs of absolute determination that Michelle had seen too many times before to misunderstand the implication now.

“Samuel’s coming with me.”

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It was beyond surreal, like trying to watch an episode of the Twilight Zone while under the influence of LSD. There simply could not have been anything more completely bizarre than sitting in the company of a man who appeared to be - at the very least - a schizophrenic, homicidal pyromaniac while he chatted on quite calmly, dispensed refreshments from the bar and casually glanced at his watch as if he was waiting for something no more important than the arrival of a subway train.

Adam demanded an explanation and he got one. Doug was perfectly willing to outline both his plans and his reasons and he obligingly answered every question fired at him. The initial sense of furious outrage gave way first to horrified fascination and then bone-numbing fear. There was no doubt that he meant every single word he said and that there would be no possible way to reason with him.

Not that Jeremy didn’t try. He had a considerable amount of training with respect to both abduction and hostage situations although he had never been called upon to put any of that training into action. But the profiles of potential abductors was drilled into his heads on a regular basis as part of his training and he realized very early on that they were dealing with the most dangerous kind of kidnapper imaginable.

The suicidal kind.
“You are stark raving fucking nuts,” Samuel said to Gus.

Gus threw his suit jacket at him. “Yeah…so I’ve been told. Where’s your car?”

“You actually expect me to drive out there and try and talk to Doug? After what we know he’s planning on doing? Are you trying to get me killed?”

“He doesn’t want to kill you, Samuel!” Gus shouted, losing his temper at last. “When will you get that through your thick skull? You’re no good to him dead! If he wanted you dead, you would have been dead a long time before now. What he wants is your complete and utter humiliation…in public. And once he’s accomplished that, he wants you to live a long and miserable life with this scandal chasing you around until you’re old and gray – get it?”

“So if that’s what he wants what possible difference will it make for me to try and talk to him? There are professionals who are trained to do these kinds of things…”

Gus waved a hand angrily. “And if one of them sets foot near Doug or the rest of the guys I guarantee you that it will be all over.”

“You have no way to know that he hasn’t already done what he planned to do!”

Michelle half-choked at this and Gus grasped her arm reassuringly.

“Yes. I do. It’s all in the letter, Samuel…remember?”

*My only regret is that I’m not going to get to see your face when you read this. But I am going to get to see your face when you have to stand up at the grand opening and explain that you don’t know where your guests of honor are.*

Michelle blanched. “You don’t think he’s planning on showing up at the ceremony, do you?”

Gus shook his head. “No. He doesn’t need to. Not based on what he wrote at the very end…”

*I just hope that VH1 zooms in on a nice fat close-up.*

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I’m guessing…” Gus said grimly. “But based on what I know about Doug…he may very well intend to kill himself and take everyone else in that car with him, but I’d be willing to bet you one thing – that he won’t do it until he knows for certain that he’s getting the kind of response he’s looking for. Like some kind of announcement on national television.” Here he looked over at the limo driver, still sitting motionless and shocked on the sofa on the other side of the room. “And I’ll bet you something else as well…and I’m sure Robert can confirm it…dollars to donuts, I’ll bet you anything that Doug made absolutely sure that there’s a TV in that limo.”
The big car felt eerily empty without Jeremy. There was also a heightened sense of vulnerability – not that anything Jeremy could have done was likely to have made the least little bit of difference in the long run – but it was still a shock to realize that the personal protection they always relied on was now completely gone.

It had been Monte’s idea and to everyone’s astonishment, Doug had readily agreed. Directing Monte into an empty loading dock behind a deserted shopping center, Doug instructed him to stop the limo and unlock the doors and then looked back over his shoulder at the other occupants of the car.

“You’ve got two minutes. If you want him out, do it now.”

Wide-eyed, everyone looked at Monte.

“Get Jeremy out,” he said quietly. “We leave him here.”

“The hell you are,” Jeremy objected angrily. “You’ve got another thing coming if you think I’m getting out of this fucking car.”

Doug had simply shrugged and spread his hands. “You have nothing to do with this. Monte’s got a point. There’s no need for you to get hurt.” He glanced at his watch meaningfully. “Like I said, two minutes.”

Jeremy refused to budge and there was a short but very intense argument between him and Adam. Then, in probably the most ironic episode in protection officer history, he had to be forcibly removed from the car by his employer while Adam begged Jeremy in an undertone not to argue. Jeremy was just as adamant. “Adam, I’m no good to you if I’m not with you. You may think this is a chance for me to get to the cops and get help…but take a good look at Doug, Adam…does he look worried about this to you? There’s only one reason he’d let me walk away…because he knows it won’t matter. I have no way to know where he’s taking you…”

“He’s got a point,” Doug said laconically, overhearing every word. He relaxed in the front seat, window down and his right elbow braced casually on the doorframe while his right hand lingered near the detonator on his vest. “But like I said, it’s your choice. Quite frankly, they are all just baggage. If it makes you feel better to leave them all behind, be my guest. But decide… right now. Your two minutes are up.”

Adam looked over his shoulder at Doug. His intentions were very clear; he wanted Adam for the strength of his celebrity profile and nothing else and anyone in his entourage was of absolutely no use to him.

Isaac took Adam’s arm. “We will stay with you, Adam, but let Jeremy go. Come on, it's done. Get back in the car.”

Adam hesitated. In grim, unspoken agreement, Tommy took Adam by the other arm and he and Isaac pushed Adam back into the limo where he slumped on the bench next to a petrified Terrance and put his head in his hands.

The passenger side window was halfway up when it suddenly reversed direction and Doug’s head unexpectedly reappeared.

“Catch,” he said.
Jeremy lunged and caught the cell phone before it hit the ground.

“Thought you might want that back,” Doug said. “Thought you might want to reach out and touch
someone…”

The tinted window closed again and the limo pulled away.

Jeremy activated the phone and punched 911.

Almost as dangerous as the human bomb in the front seat of the limo was the even more explosive
combination of adrenaline and testosterone building up in the back. With every passing minute,
Terrance grew more agitated, despite Adam and Isaac flanking him on the bench seat and gripping
his arms every time they felt him shift in rising rage and fear. They were all consumed with the
need to do more than simply sit and wait for what was apparently going to be an enormous and
violent publicity stunt at their expense, but a simple glance at Monte’s badly frightened face in the
rearview mirror was enough to prevent any of them from contemplating anything stupid.

When they reached their destination, Doug took the car keys from Monte and ordered him into the
back of the limo with the rest of the guys. Settling himself in along with them, Doug flipped open
the mini bar and poured them all drinks.

Adam and his band members had also had their share of training with regards to what to do in any
kind of threatening situation and the recommendation was always the same…just co-operate.
Cocktail hour, however, seemed a bit excessive under the circumstances.

“You must be joking,” Isaac said coldly as he was offered a tumbler.

Doug shrugged. “Suit yourself. I thought it might calm you down a little. We’ve got a long wait.”

“What the hell for?”

Quite patiently, Doug went over it all again. He even produced a copy of the letter he’d sent to
Samuel and read it aloud, lowering his brows in warning as Adam’s level of belligerence suddenly
rose at the references to Gus.

“Don’t bother being pissed at me. You were the one that wouldn’t listen to him. If you hadn’t
blown him off about this from the beginning, things might have been a lot different.”

Adam tensed and this time Terrance was forced to grab his arm to stop him from shooting out of
his seat.

Doug tapped one finger indolently against the trigger device on his vest and Adam willed himself
to sit still.

“Relax, Adam. He’s not here, so he can’t get hurt. And you should be grateful that he wasn’t
around this morning. I know I am. I wasn’t looking forward to having to deal with him.”

The mere thought shocked Adam into silence. He could well imagine what Gus’s reaction would
have been if he’d been with him that morning. He would have strenuously objected to the sudden
change in plans and if he’d had no luck in preventing the security scramble, would at least have
flatly refused to let him go anywhere without him. That would have resulted in one of two
scenarios – either they would have had a screaming argument over it and Gus would have ended up
trailing the limo in one of the security vans or he would have given in and allowed Gus to ride with
him…

And that didn’t even bear thinking about. His insides had already congealed into a block of ice.

Images and memories rushed into his head and he began to shake. *Loved ones… family… friends…
fans…*

His gaze dropped involuntarily to the watch on his wrist. *Christmas… home. An engagement ring…
the proposal he’d rehearsed so carefully…*

*I waited too long…*

That was the worst part…that Gus had *known* - somehow – that something was very wrong and
had tried to warn him, tried to protect him, had risked their relationship to try and put a stop to
whatever it was that was threatening him. Worse than any fear he might have felt for his own life
at this particular place and time was the horrible realization that he was never going to get a chance
to tell Gus that he finally understood what he had been struggling to do… that he had been
wrong…that he was sorry…that he loved him…

*I hurt him so much…*

He clenched one hand over the watch as if to protect it. It was unbelievably precious to him, not
only as cherished personal gift but because of what it had meant to his father, to his mother, to Gus
and ultimately to him…a symbol of the most important and private things in his life finally coming
together and promising him a genuine peace and happiness that he’d never dared to believe in for
himself.

He couldn’t believe it was over.

In the terrified eyes of his friends he could see a reflection of all of the same kinds of epiphanies,
all bracketed with fear, rage, anguish and regret.

He rubbed his palm over the face of the watch and thought fleetingly of the inscription on the
reverse.

*AL - True and deep stuff - GH.*

When it came to Samuel Brice, Gus’s method of persuasion was very straightforward. He simply
took Samuel by the balls – figuratively, of course – and brutally squeezed until he came around to
his way of thinking.

“You’ve got two choices,” Gus said bluntly. “So think carefully. The fact is that you will be
appearing on the front page of every newspaper in this country tomorrow. And the articles will be
saying one of two things…either that you were the man who was the target of revenge in all of this because you and your father were such unspeakable assholes, or that you were the man who was the target of revenge in all of this and at least had the guts to try and do something about it. Which is it going to be?”

“I will co-operate completely with the police…”

Gus’s eyes flashed and he was quite tempted to abandon “figuratively” in favor of a live demonstration. “No! No police! It’s you and me. That’s all! There’s no time for anything else.”

He left no room for argument despite Michelle’s attempts to reason with him.

“Let go of me, Michelle.”

Michelle both held her ground and tightened her grip. “Please Gus…you haven’t done anything like this in a long time. I know what you’re thinking but this is too personal…you’re not the right person to be trying to handle this alone.”

Gus had switched to automatic pilot, cold and detached inside and completely focused on what he now knew needed to be done. He broke Michelle’s hold on his arm with a simple pressure on the wrist and paused for half a second to squeeze his friend’s hand before he released it.

For a second, Michelle’s eyes glistened then she squared her shoulders in one last, determined stand. Her voice broke. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry, but I’m not letting you do this. I’ll call the cops myself.”

Gus looked at Samuel. “Make up your mind. Are you going to take me there or not?”

“You have completely flipped out, do you know that?”

He jerked his head defiantly. “Yes, Samuel. I have. And do you want to see just how flipped out I can be? How would you like to see me on the morning talk show circuit, filling America in on how you refused to help me when I felt we might be able to stop this?”

“You don’t know what you’re doing…”

“No? Who was the one who knew about this before you did? Before anyone else did? Who was the one who was trying to put a stop to it while the rest of you were all complaining that I was just trying to interfere?” Gus was physically pushing him, backing him up towards the door even as he resisted. “Make up your mind…now! In few hours, your career is going to be over and your name is going to be ruined…unless you help me. Doug wasn’t kidding about that and neither am I. You help me or I swear to God I’ll finish whatever he starts and bring your little empire down around your ears.”

It might have been guilt. It might have been a sudden attack of humanity or it might have been simple machismo and ego reasserting itself. Gus knew his only chance was to appeal to Samuel’s sense of power; after all, he was a man completely convinced of his own authority and influence…quite literally a legend in his own mind. Of course, it might also have been the sheer result of being blackmailed but Gus would never know and didn’t much care. All that mattered was that he’d hit a nerve…after standing eyeball to eyeball with him for several painfully long moments, Samuel suddenly shoved him away with a curse.

“All right, for Christ’s sake. What the hell do you want me to do?”
Gus left instructions for Michelle and instructions for Bill. Michelle, tears threatening and struggling to stay in control, begged and pleaded to the very last. And it was all nearly over before it began when Gus threw open the door to the office and headed out with Samuel and caught a glimpse of the infamous Detective Dean Holden making his way through the line of security that blocked the front doors from casual intrusion.

Gus swore viciously and reversed direction. Oh sure…now Inspector Gadget decides he’s going to make himself useful…

“Remember what I said,” he hissed at Michelle as backtracked past, half-dragging Samuel in his wake. “I need a thirty minute head start. If Holden’s already on the warpath, I need you to stall him…”

Michelle nodded, twisting her hands together and biting her lip. Bill looked over her shoulder as Gus and Samuel made their escape and then grasped Michelle’s arm sympathetically for a moment as he slipped past.

“I’d better hurry. I don’t have much time to try and pull this off…”

Samuel’s car was in the private wing of the underground parking garage. Gus had to give him credit; once he’d made up his mind, he led the way without question as they bolted off the elevator. When he drew up short, Samuel looked back over his shoulder in frustration.

“Now what? I thought you said…”

“Is that where Griffin keeps its limos?” Gus interrupted. He could see a small squadron of luxury cars in another gated area along the back wall.

“Yeah.”

“Is that where Doug would have ordered the limo from this morning?”

“Where else? Do you think he rented his own for God’s sake? What the hell does it matter?”

Gus brooded for a moment.

“It matters,” he said finally. “I need to talk to the dispatcher.”

Trust Samuel to drive something that represented several years worth of income for most of his employees. Gus wasn’t much of a car enthusiast himself but you didn’t hang out with a wealthy young man for very long without learning a thing or two about sports cars. Gus knew enough to recognize a Porsche when he saw one and also knew enough about the price tag to figure that the one he was looking at probably topped out at more than one hundred thousand dollars.

“What the hell are you waiting for?” Samuel asked when Gus narrowed his eyes and ran his gaze over the black car in speculation.

“Thinking,” he said, wrenching open the passenger door. “The top goes down on this thing, doesn’t it?”
“Yeah. But if you think I’m putting it down, you’ve got another thing coming. I don’t need anyone recognizing me on the way out of here.”

“You’re driving a fucking billboard, Samuel! How many Porsche Boxsters are there this town, do you think? You bought it precisely because it does get you noticed, you arrogant son of a bitch and it’s a bit too late to start worrying about it now. And I don’t want the top down just yet… but I will.”

They left the parking garage through the employee exit, which fortunately spilled them out onto the street behind the hotel and away from the worst of the traffic and crowds. As Samuel drove, losing more and more of both his temper and his nerve with each passing mile, Gus ran his mind back over everything he knew, including the last precious bits of information he’d managed to coax out of the limo driver before they’d left.

“About Doug. I need you to tell me how he’s acting…”

“That’s the freakiest part. He’s completely calm. Completely rational. He’s threatening to kill people and he sounds like he could be having a conversation over dinner…”

It was some consolation to hear that the other occupants of the car had also remained, for the most part, calm and relatively in control. An outburst at any time could prove deadly if it forced Doug into a premature execution of his plan. Gus could well imagine that Jeremy was doing his best both to keep everybody composed and to try and reason Doug into another course of action. He doubted very much that Jeremy would be successful but as long as he was trying, Gus knew that Adam would have been smart enough to just follow any lead set by his bodyguard.

He tried hard to avoid thoughts of Adam. This was no time to allow his personal grief and fear to get the better of him although he still found himself clutching his fingers around the silver bracelet on his wrist as they drove.

_Is he thinking about me? Is he afraid? Is he angry? Has he realized that this isn’t some kind of sick joke…?_

“There’s a gun in the glove compartment,” Samuel said unexpectedly.

Gus’s train of thought splintered and he jerked his head up. “What?”

“In the glove compartment. A gun.”

Gus stared at him. “Why, for God’s sake? Did you and Puffy go to school together or something?”

Samuel was gripping the steering wheel too hard, betraying his level of tension. “Haven’t you ever heard of a car-jacking? I just have it to protect myself.”

Gus stared a little more, then flipped down the door of the glove box and withdrew a small black leather holster. His nose wrinkled a little. It was what police officers tended to refer to as a “vanity gun” and it wouldn’t have been his weapon of choice. “Do you know how to use it?”

“What kind of a stupid question is that? Why would I carry it if I didn’t know how to use it?”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” Gus replied derisively. “And this is great, Samuel – thanks – but it’s probably not going to do us any good.”

He looked astonished. “Why the hell not?”
“Because you can’t shoot somebody who’s rigged with explosives, you idiot.”

“Give me one good reason!”

Gus ran a hand over his hair impatiently. “I’ll give you several. First of all, there’s the chance you’ll miss. Or just wing him. In that case he’s just going to push the button on that detonator and judging by the way that device was described to me he’s going to take out everything within several hundred yards. Doug’s going to be too smart to let Adam get outside the range of that bomb and he knows that as long as he keeps Adam close enough, no one will dare to touch him.”

“So? You’re the police officer. You should be good with a gun. Shoot him between the eyes or something. He can’t set off a bomb if he’s dead.”

“Oh, yes he can,” Gus said grimly. “When a body gets hit by a bullet, it convulses. If he has his hand on that trigger, he could set it off without even meaning to. Or worse, he could just fall down dead and that impact could trigger the explosion.”

He risked a sidelong glance towards the driver’s seat. “Besides…the second Doug lays eyes on me, this is all going to be over. You’re the one that’s going to have to face him, not me.”

Samuel paled but his gaze never wavered from the road and to his credit, he kept his voice perfectly under control.

“You’re going to have to tell me what the hell you want me to do. I still don’t see how there is any way I can talk him out of this. The man’s a lunatic, for God’s sake. What makes you think he would possibly listen to anything I have to say? And how do we know that we already aren’t too late?”

Gus looked at his watch. “How far out are we?”

“Two, maybe three minutes…”

He closed his eyes briefly and his fingertips went back to the smooth, burnished surface of the silver bangle.

“Well, it’s nearly twelve-thirty, Samuel. And if Bill has managed to do what I told him to do…he may just have bought us a little bit of extra time.”

____________________________________

December 31, 2012  12:00 p.m.

They watched in horrified fascination as Doug selected the correct channel on the limo’s tiny television and solemnly invited them to sit back and enjoy.

Taking advantage of the fact that Doug was momentarily distracted, Terrance leaned hard into Isaac and hissed, “It’s five against one, for Christ’s sake. Why the fuck are we all just sitting here?”

“Take a look at those charges, T.,” Isaac said, low. He gripped the other man’s knee. “You know what a few of those things will do on stage…what the hell do you think they’ll do to all of us if they go off in here?”

Terrance blew his breath out between his teeth in frustration and slumped back in his seat. Isaac
glanced at Monte across the car as they both released the breaths they themselves had been holding. The only sensible approach now was to try and stay together and stay calm; absolutely the last thing they needed was any one of them to go off half-cocked and eliminate all of their options.

This semblance of control weakened a little though as the live broadcast of the grand opening ceremony kicked off on VH1. The prepackaged opening sequence ran exactly on time, prompting a chuckle of approval from Doug, but it was immediately followed by far too many commercials and a series of out-of-context overhead shots from the roofs of surrounding buildings that showed nothing more than the mass of people surrounding The Citadel. There were a series of prerecorded clips of “red-carpet” interviews with celebrities and dignitaries as they arrived, then the show cut inexplicably back to commercial in a manner that only seemed to emphasize the fact that the focal “red-carpet” interview was missing.

You can fake live television for only so long. Within fifteen minutes, it had been announced that due to an unknown set of circumstances, Adam Lambert had not yet arrived for the ceremony. Joking about typical pop-star tardiness, VH1 ran one video and then another but by then the VJs were beginning to look a little green around the gills. It is notoriously hard to improvise without coming off like complete idiots and the thoroughly rattled on-air personalities soon exhausted their repertoire of patter. At that point, the desperate director had no choice but to resort to moronic pans of the crowd from street level.

“Come on Samuel,” Doug said impatiently. “Stop stalling. Get your ass up there and address the multitudes. I’m dying to hear how you try and get yourself out of this one.”

The VH1 producer gaped at Bill in disbelief.

“Jesus…are you serious?”

“I’m serious. I need you to stall until 12:15 and then I need you to go back live so I can make an announcement.”

The other man’s jaw remained hinged in the open position. Bill looked at his watch and shifted impatiently.

“The police are being briefed now. Naturally, Mr. Brice’s not available so he’s asked me to break the news. Under the circumstances the ceremony will have to be called off, but nothing – nothing – gets said until I make a formal announcement. Got it?”

The producer began bobbing his head, mouth still wide. “Sure…of course. Whatever. Whatever you need. But, Jesus…I mean…he’s not…I mean, you’re not trying to tell me he's actually…?”

“I’m not trying to tell you anything,” Bill said, grim. “Please. Just make arrangements to go back live at 12:15. I’m on my way back out to the grandstand now.”
The limo was unbearably hot. Between the mid-day desert sun beating down on the car and the overactive pores of the occupants, they were all growing more uncomfortable by the minute. Even with the windows down, there was barely enough breeze for relief but Doug steadfastly refused to activate the air conditioning.

“And leave the car running?” he snapped irritably, eyes still glued to the television. “I don’t think so. Damn…what is taking him so long?”

As if on cue, VH1 cut from an archived interview back to the scene of the grand opening. A number of seats were still conspicuously empty and the crowd was beginning to chant impatiently but everyone immediately fell silent as they became aware of a single individual making his way to the podium.

Several times on the long walk out to the mike, Bill had to swallow hard to clear the lump from his throat. He was aware of several thousand eyes trained on him intently from the crowd, not to mention a more profound awareness of the several million people watching the live broadcast…five of whom were counting on him without even knowing it.

He kept it short, as Gus had instructed him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Bill Wasley and I am the public relations officer for Griffin Entertainment. I’m here on behalf of Samuel Brice, Griffin’s Chief Executive Officer, to apologize to all of you for the delay in today’s ceremony. As some of you have become aware, there was an incident this morning involving Adam Lambert as he was being transported from his hotel to the stadium in preparation for this appearance. Details are still very sketchy at the moment however I can tell you that the situation appears to be an extremely serious one and that the local authorities have launched an investigation. I’m afraid that we have no alternative but to postpone the grand opening ceremony at this time.”

He had to wait for a moment while the noise first rose to deafening levels and then subsided to a shocked hush.

“I’m asking VH1 to continue their coverage for now as we are preparing a press conference that will begin in approximately fifteen minutes. At that time, Griffin Entertainment will be issuing an official statement to give you all the information available at the present time. Unfortunately, Mr. Brice will not be available to speak personally at that time but in his absence, I have arranged for the press conference to be conducted by Mr. Gus Harrison, who as many of you know is a close personal friend Adam, a former police officer and head of the umbrella organization that represents the charities supported by Adam and his friends.”

With that, he left the podium without another word, hoping he’d been obscure enough that he’d bought Gus a little extra time. He tried to not think about the pandemonium that erupted behind him as he left the stage. From a public relations standpoint, everything he’d just done had been completely and utterly against the rules. Griffin’s lawyers would flip, VH1 would flip and God help him when Adam's record label got hold of him. He’s also have a hell of a lot of explaining to do when word reached Dean Holden and even more to explain in fifteen minutes when it became obvious that Gus actually wouldn’t be making any kind of statement. He could only hope that Gus had been right and that somehow - wherever he was - Doug was watching the broadcast and would
hold off on execution of his plan out of sheer curiosity over whatever it was that Gus was planning to say.

In the limo, Doug began to laugh.

“You chicken shit, Samuel,” he said, wiping his eyes. “I should have known you wouldn’t even have the balls to make the announcement yourself. ‘Not available’ my ass. You just can’t stand to admit that you don’t have a fucking clue what’s going on. Poor Bill. He’s always got to do your dirty work for you. You really don’t pay him enough for all the crap you put him through…”

“What the hell does Gus thinks he’s doing?” Adam muttered. None of them dared to say the words but they were all more than a little surprised to hear that Gus would be making an official announcement on Adam's behalf. Not that it really mattered much from their rather precarious standpoint but they were all aware how unusual it was under the circumstances that anybody would have been saying anything to the media at this point in time.

“That’s a very good question,” said Doug, interest clearly peaked. “But remember, Jeremy should have been in touch with him by now. Perhaps he’s going to make some wonderful, emotional plea for your safe return. Well, well, I can hardly wait for that…it will be a nice touch, don’t you think, Adam? A chance for you to see Gus one more time?” As Adam’s face blackened and he looked away, Doug said reproachfully, “I would have thought you’d be pleased. I’m sure it means a lot to you. And to Tommy, too…of course.”

The mood shifted again – dangerously. Every muscle in Adam’s body stiffened and he had to struggle to control himself.

Tommy’s voice was brittle. “Stop it.”

Isaac, Terrance and Monte exchanged puzzled looks. Observing the frowns, Doug added too casually, “Actually, Adam…I’m still trying to figure that one out. Is it true that you really didn’t have any idea what was going on between Tommy and Gus?” As his eyes made another tour around the car, taking note of shocked faces and dropped jaws, he added, “That none of you did?”

Once again Adam struggled and barely managed to keep a lid on his temper. Tommy had less restraint.

“Leave Gus out of this, you son of a bitch,” he snarled. “There never was a ‘me and Gus’, do you understand? The whole situation was completely my fault. It was just a crush – Gus never had those kinds of feelings for anyone but Adam and what’s more, I still can’t believe that he told you anything that personal.”

Isaac was gaping at Tommy. “You had something going on with Gus? When the hell was that?”

“No! I didn’t!” Leaning forward, trying to catch Adam’s attention even as his friend leaned his head back on the seat and turned his face away, Tommy said desperately, “Adam, everything that Gus and I told you about that was the absolute truth. No one but Michelle knew anything about it…”

Adam’s head snapped around. This was not the time to be having this conversation, not when adrenaline and emotion were already running far too high and his heart was already breaking.

“Doug did,” he spat.
Unexpectedly, Doug intervened. “But Tommy’s quite right, Adam. I didn’t get the information from Gus. Not directly, anyway.”

“Then how?” Adam said, choking.

Doug lifted his shoulders. “I saw them together.”

Tommy looked horrified. Adam’s gaze returned to his in bewilderment, too shocked to be accusatory, too hurt to be angry and too dazed with too many contradictory emotions to even be able to process this new piece of information.

“It’s true,” Doug nodded. “It was the night of the release party.”

“We were all there, you lying son of a bitch,” Monte said furiously. “That’s not possible. Are you just trying to be a bastard? Isn’t the rest of this enough for your twisted little mind?”

“Adam,” Tommy said unsteadily. “I swear to God he’s making that up.”

Doug shook his head. “I’m not making anything up. The two of you stood out in the hallway at the launch party and talked. It was very late and neither of you knew I was there. You told Gus that you were still having trouble with your feelings about him, especially after he’d been so ill…” He watched what was left of the color in Tommy’s face drain out and prompted, “Remember? Remember what you said about wishing that he was yours, not Adam’s…?”

There was a stunned silence. Nobody needed to ask Tommy for confirmation or denial. He simply groaned and leaned forward, linking his fingers over the back of his head so that his voice was muffled between his arms.

“Stop it, you bastard,” he said in agony. “What does it matter now? You have no idea what I was trying to say to Gus…”

It was too much. Blindly, Adam grabbed for the door handle. I can’t take anymore… I need to get out...

He was vaguely aware of Terrance’s grip on his arm trying to force him to sit still and the frantic voices of the others, begging him to calm down even as he kicked viciously at the locked door. Everything inside Adam had erupted into blank rage, without perspective and far beyond the natural boundaries imposed by fear or rational thought. Staying in control no longer seemed to be important; regardless of what he did or how he did it, the end was still going to be the same and there was no possible way he could sit still and endure this torture in the meantime.

The situation deteriorated rapidly. It might have been all over there and then had Monte not happened to glance out his window and notice the black convertible making its way onto the building site in a gently billowing cloud of dust.

“Wait a minute!” he shouted at the rest of them. “Look! Look!”

Adam abandoned his struggle and let himself be shoved back into his seat. Breathing heavily, still unable to see much of anything beyond his own overwhelming emotions, he had to squint to follow Monte’s gesture as he pointed out the window and dropped his voice to an awed whisper.

“I think we’ve got company.”
December 31, 2012 12:15 p.m.

“Mrs. McGavison, I’m going to ask you one more time. What do you know about all of this?”

Michelle swallowed hard and raised her chin. She may have been badly shaken but she’d dealt with a few hard-nosed cops in her time and there was no way she was going to let this moron intimidate her. She didn’t know what he knew or exactly how he knew it but it was clear that he’d discovered at least a good part of the truth. Part of Michelle wanted to just blurt out the whole story and turn the situation over to trusted authorities. There was only one problem…Gus didn’t trust this man as far as she could have thrown him and nothing Michelle had seen so far inspired any greater level of confidence. Besides, she had made a promise to Gus and no matter how completely petrified she was, she wasn’t going to back out on it now. Gus was counting on her.

Her gaze flicked to the clock over the door of the office. Just another fifteen minutes….

Holden’s face was growing darker by the second. “Come on! We know that he threw the driver and the bodyguard out of the car…and I know for a fact that two officers escorted a man in here to see Samuel Brice. They overheard you tell Samuel that that man was the limo driver. Unfortunately, at that point, the officers weren’t even aware that the limo was actually missing because nobody from Griffin had the brains to report it to the police the moment it didn’t show up at the stadium. If you’ve got that man here, I want to see him. Now! Where is he?”

Michelle’s throat constricted. “I don’t know,” she lied. Robert was, in fact, stashed away in the supply room next door, more than willing to stay quiet and out of sight after the threats Doug had issued in the car. But Michelle barely gave him a second thought; her mind was already tripping ahead over Holden’s choice of words.

“Bodyguard…?” she faltered.

“Yes. The one who was in the limo with Adam and the band. Doug released him because he said the bodyguard was of no use to him and the moment he could, he called 911. It’s going to take awhile to get him escorted back here, but he has told us everything he knows…”

She gasped.

“…and since both Mr. Brice and Mr. Harrison appear to have pulled their own disappearing act, and since you were with both of them and the limo driver, I suspect that you have more information than you’re coughing up. Where are they? Is the driver with them? Do you not realize that he might be the only person who can help us track that car down?”

“He doesn’t know where it is,” Michelle muttered without thinking. Oh, God…if Jeremy isn’t there, they have no one to help them…

Holden stood over her and lowered his head until his voice was right in her ear.

“But I think you do. So tell me what you know. Now.”

She stumbled and stalled a little more. The hands on the clock crept by with agonizing slowness…12:18…12:20…Holden was running out of patience and Michelle was running out of tactics.

The cat and mouse game ended abruptly when Holden’s partner, Del Marco stuck his head in the office door and interrupted them.
“I figured you’d want to know. That press officer - Wasley? He just went live on VH1 and made some kind of announcement.”

Michelle winced. Holden cursed.

“What the hell did he say?”

Del Marco inclined his head. “I think you’d better come and find out.”

Muttering beneath his breath, Holden stepped around Michelle and nearly knocked her over on his way by. Desperately, Michelle grabbed him by the arm.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve wasted enough time trying to talk to you.”

“Wait a second! Please!”

Holden shook off her hand and then pivoted abruptly so that they were once again face-to-face. Michelle took an unconscious step backwards, practically impaled by his glare. “For what? Are you going to stop yanking my chain? Are you going to tell me what the fuck this is all about? I swear to God I’ll arrest you if I find out you’ve been withholding information…”

Michelle licked dry lips and her eyes flickered up over Holden’s shoulder until she could see the clock. It was only 12:25…not the full half hour that Gus had requested and with Michelle’s luck, the last five minutes was likely to be the most vital part of the head start that Gus had been so desperate for. But Michelle felt she was out of options; if she let Holden go now, heaven only knew how hard it would be for her to get him to take her seriously when she needed it.

_I’m sorry, Gus…this is the best I can do…_

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and let her shoulders fall.

“All right. Yes. I know where they are.”

The building site at Luna Mesa covered nearly twenty acres on the edge of the desert. All that remained of the failed housing project was the shell of the sales pavilion, the parking lot and the series of dirt access roads that crisscrossed the site from one end to the other and marked the approximate location of the streets that would have made up the little community had it ever been completed. Chain link fencing surrounded the property on three sides but a high stone wall separated the frontage from the main road so that nothing of the site itself could be seen from any of the vehicles that might have ever ventured by. Most of the adjoining properties also remained undeveloped and those few businesses that did exist in the immediate vicinity were closed up for the holiday so that the surrounding area was just as deserted as the building site itself. There was no one around to notice that the chain across the front entranceway had been removed or to observe the limo inexplicably parked at the far edge of the parking lot where it glinted in the sun.

Taking advantage of the high wall that safely obscured their approach on the road, Gus instructed Samuel to pull up as close as he could to the perimeter of the property. There was only one spot where they were able to boost themselves high enough to see over the stone wall; at the first glimpse of the missing car parked so unassumingly inside the fence, Gus’s heart first rushed into his throat and then sank. The fact that the limo was still in one piece was a good sign, but there was no possible way he could get anywhere near it without being seen; it was too far out in the open.
And while Samuel had a good chance of being able to approach Doug and even to be able to draw him into conversation, he was going to be of absolutely no use to Gus as a diversion if Gus wasn’t able to get any closer as a result.

He could detect some movement inside the car. The windows were down but with the sun’s reflection, there was no way to tell who was sitting where and Gus was simply too far away to be able to make out anything clearly.

Disheartened, he dropped down from his perch and paced anxiously back and forth beside the Porsche, wracking his brains for inspiration while Samuel stared at him in disbelief.

“This is not the time for you to be running out of ideas.”

Ignoring him, Gus suddenly stopped and found himself frowning at the car. It practically oozed high-tech toys. There wasn’t a single feature that this baby didn’t have…

“Put the top down,” he said to Samuel. “And listen to me very carefully…”

At the sight of Samuel’s black Porsche slowly approaching across the width of the huge parking lot, Doug began to laugh out loud all over again. Frozen, the rest of the occupants of the limo just stared at him and at each other, aware that the situation had just taken another perverse twist.

“Stay put - all of you,” Doug said quite calmly and fished out the car keys. Hitting the lock release on the remote control, he pushed open the rear right hand door, the same one that Adam had so recently been kicking, and casually stepped out so that he kept the bulk of the huge car between him and the oncoming convertible.

The car’s top was down. Samuel could be clearly seen, alone, in the driver’s seat and as he got closer, he grimly swung the Porsche around so that it came up immediately alongside the driver’s side of the limo as it drew to a halt.

“Happy New Year, Samuel,” Doug said with a broad smile. “Where’s the cavalry?”

“There isn’t one.”

“We’ve been watching the festivities. I can’t believe you weren’t there commanding your troops. How’d you find me?”

Samuel eased himself very carefully out of his seat and nudged the Porsche’s door closed with his hip. In the rush of fear and adrenaline that was pounding in his head, and despite the limited reassurance of the handgun tucked into the back of his belt under cover of his jacket, he was finding it very difficult to remember any of Gus’s instructions.

Don’t show him you’re rattled. He’ll be all over you. But don’t get too aggressive either. You can’t push him too far, but remember…he’s looking for a reaction from you. You’ve got to give him enough to chew on without stepping over the line.

Samuel tried hard and managed to inject just the right amount of contempt into his voice. “You screwed up, Doug. As usual. Didn’t cover all your bases. Robert managed to get a ride back to The Citadel and I guess I got your letter a little earlier than you planned.”

Deliberately, he walked around the back end of the Porsche until he stood between the two
vehicles. Leaning down, he glanced in one of the open windows of the limo and ran his eyes carefully over the shell-shocked faces of the occupants.

Then he straightened abruptly. “Where the hell is Jeremy?”

Doug regarded him across the expanse of the roof and shrugged. “I let him go.”

That caught Samuel off-guard. He hesitated for a minute, then leaned back down and eyed the inside of the limo again.

“You guys okay?”

“So far,” Monte said, low.

“Yeah, well…hang in there for me, all right?”

Doug’s eyebrows rose. His right arm rested lightly on the top of the limo so that his hand was easily within range of the detonator on his vest and the fingers of his left hand tapped thoughtfully on the roof. He didn’t seem the least little bit alarmed – far from it. This was a development he certainly hadn’t anticipated but despite himself, he was intrigued.

“I’m amazed you’re here, Samuel. I could have sworn you would have been up to your eyeballs in damage control.”

“Nothing to control,” Samuel said evenly. “At the moment, the only people who know the whole story about this are you and me and the limo driver and you’ve got him too shit-scared to talk to anyone. So I don’t see any reason why we can’t just put a stop to this now before it goes any farther.”

Doug chuckled. “Nice try. But since I handed Jeremy back his cell phone more than half an hour ago, I can guarantee you that a whole lot of other people do know about this. Do you honestly expect me to believe that the cops aren’t going berserk trying to track us down?”

Samuel met his gaze steadily. “Probably. I really wouldn’t know. I haven’t talked to them. I just took a guess that your letter was referring to this place and headed on out here. And unless you told Jeremy where you were headed, nobody else has a clue. Like I said, I don’t see any reason why you and I can’t work this out without getting the whole fucking world involved.”

A flicker of surprise crossed Doug’s face. He knew Samuel Brice inside and out and understood his poker faces better than anyone. It seemed outrageous, but Doug was absolutely certain that Samuel wasn’t lying.

He hadn’t told the cops.

Well, well. This was getting more interesting by the minute.

“And what about Gus? I hear he’s conducting a press conference on your behalf.”

Samuel didn’t even have to fake astonishment at that one. As his mouth dropped open, his obvious disbelief unwittingly reinforced his own cover story and left no doubt in Doug’s mind that Samuel was telling the complete and utter truth. The idiot had actually dropped everything and driven out here...alone... and without a word to anyone.

“Bullshit,” Samuel managed finally. "He doesn't have the right to be doing anything of the kind. Who the hell told you that?”
“Bill did. On national television.” Doug was beginning to enjoy himself. “You should have stuck around, Samuel. From what I can tell, you don’t have to worry about rumors. Your own staff is taking care of putting out the word and I don’t think it’s going to be pretty.”

It took Samuel a moment to regroup. The thought of what was taking place at The Citadel without him gnawed at his ego a little but this was no time to be worrying about anything other than the job Gus had given him to do. And if he thought any more about that, he was liable to simply lose his nerve altogether.

Time to get on with the show.

Without further hesitation, he simply walked up to the driver’s side door and yanked it open. On the opposite side of the limo, Doug’s face went blank for a moment and then solidified into annoyance.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?”

Samuel struggled to find the appropriate level of condescension again. Just enough…not too much…

“I’m going to drive this thing back into the city. Here…”

He tossed the keys for the Porsche over the roof of the limo. Caught by surprise, Doug snagged them one-handed.

“You can take my car. I’ll give you three hours. If I were you I’d get my ass out onto the nearest highway and get the hell over the state line before then. So hand over the keys to the limo and make yourself scarce…and consider yourself lucky that I didn’t decide to just turn this entire thing over to the authorities.”

He held out his hand expectantly. Inside the limo, five sets of eyes exchanged incredulous looks at this invisible conversation but it was nothing compared to the incredulous expression on Doug’s face.

“God dammit, Samuel…I knew you were an arrogant son of a bitch, but even I didn’t think you could be so completely obtuse. What part of this don’t you get? Do you think I’m playing some kind of half-assed game here?”

“Ask me if I give a shit, Doug,” Samuel replied, keeping his tone as flat as possible. “Frankly, I’ve got better things to do than try and psychoanalyze you. Take my advice and just cut your losses. You’re in way over your head with this one. Let it go.”

He held his breath, waiting for the reaction. Gus had warned him this was only Plan A. See if you can talk him into trading cars with you. There’s a tiny chance that his nerve might be letting him down by now and he might jump at a way out. If he goes for it, just get in the limo and drive it the hell out of there.

Samuel was understandably skeptical and Gus hadn’t been a whole lot more optimistic himself. Samuel had agreed to give it a shot, helplessly aware that the entire thing was a crapshoot at best anyway but couldn’t help but admit to himself now that he had wagered rather a bit too much on this particular tactic. Doug’s eyes had gone flat and hard and the belligerent approach had clearly resulted in the exact opposite of the desired effect…if possible, he was now colder and even more focused than before.

His mouth twisted into a rather unpleasant version of a smile.
“I’ve got a better idea, Samuel. How about I make you a deal instead?”

It was pitch dark and stifling hot. The last time Gus had pulled this stunt, he’d sworn to himself that it would be the last time. The last time he’d nearly frozen to death during a winter stakeout gone wrong…this time he hadn’t counted on the dry, oppressive desert heat.

Worst of all was the unexpected terror that began to grip him even as the car began to move. The motion itself had been enough to make him nauseous and now it was compounded by the breathlessness that was a sure sign of an oncoming panic attack. Suddenly claustrophobic and dizzy with exhaust fumes, he realized the last thing he should have ever done was lock himself in the tiny trunk of a moving vehicle even for the short drive off the main road up to where the limo was parked. He was assaulted on two fronts; his chest was so tight that he could barely draw breath and the air that he did manage to take in was so hot and polluted that not breathing almost seemed to be the better option.

He clenched his fists and felt control slipping away. God, I’m not going to be able to do this…I’m going to get us all killed…

When the car stopped, he managed to get a tenuous grip on his emotions. Forcing himself to lie still, he strained his ears to catch the ongoing conversation. The news that Jeremy was no longer in the limo knocked him for a loop; he had been counting on Jeremy to be the one to back Samuel up in his attempts to get Doug to abandon his hostages and to be the one he could rely on not to panic completely if things went wrong. Now it seemed that he had to rely solely on Samuel to give him the opening he needed and his faith in him was dubious at best. Samuel’d been grimly co-operative enough when he’d outlined his plans but there was no way to tell how he would respond under pressure and if he lost it somewhere along the way, they were all going be in one hell of a lot more trouble.

He was grateful to hear Monte’s low assertion that everyone was all right and even more grateful that it hadn’t been Adam answering the question. The sound of his voice would have proven to be too much of a distraction and he could not afford to lose any of his focus now. He waited and held his breath as Samuel and Doug bickered back and forth and then felt his stomach twist at Doug’s frigid reaction to the offer of a way out.

It had been worth a try, but Doug clearly wasn’t interested in easy answers.

There was no choice now. They were going to have to do this the hard way.

No one inside the car dared to move. The only one who could see Samuel was Isaac, facing front
on the left side of the car and the only one who could see Doug was Adam, facing front on the right. As the conversation continued over the roof of the limo, its occupants sat frozen and helpless and all five of them nearly jumped out of their collective skins as there was a loud thunk from outside, accompanied by a sudden yelp and an expletive from Samuel.

Doug’s voice had taken on a dangerous edge. “Here’s my deal, Samuel.” The keys to the Porsche nearly took off Samuel’s head as Doug fired them back at their owner; striking the hood of the sports car, they skidded across it, badly marring the beautiful finish before sliding off the other side.

Samuel stumbled backwards several steps and had to put one hand up to ensure that his left ear was still attached to his head. It was, but his bravado slipped a notch nevertheless. Doug was breathing heavily, visibly agitated for the first time since Samuel had arrived. From his viewpoint inside the car, Adam too noticed the physical change and unconsciously began digging the fingers of his left hand into Terrance’s thigh.

“My deal is that you just get back in that fucking little toy of yours and go back to The Citadel. And it’s a limited time offer so take it or leave it…right now. I’m not making it again.”

Every nerve in Samuel’s body twitched reflexively in the direction of his car. For a few moments there he’d actually managed to convince himself that he was going to be able to pull this off, that simply exerting his authority a little would have been enough to put an end to this whole situation. But everything about Doug’s demeanor had now changed and his hand was flexing against the front of his vest, far too close to the trigger on the explosive charges for comfort. There was a distinct Jekyll and Hyde transformation taking place, like watching a schizophrenic slide into a manic episode right before your eyes.

Samuel’s mouth had gone dry and it took several swallows to clear the thickness that had lodged in his throat. What the hell am I doing? I’m playing mind games with a God-damned lunatic!

Then his mind drifted back to the discussion at the hotel and he felt a spurt of encouragement in the realization that Gus had been absolutely right; there were rules to this mind game and he’d already been perceptive enough to pinpoint the most obvious one.

“You’re no good to him dead, Samuel! If he wanted you dead, you would have been dead a long time before now. What he wants is your complete and utter humiliation…in public. And once he’s accomplished that, he wants you to live a long and miserable life with this scandal chasing you around until you’re old and gray – get it?”

“Did you hear me, Samuel?”

“I heard you,” Samuel said, stalling for time. The assumption that Doug would do whatever he could to avoid killing Samuel was just that – an assumption. But there was no denying that Doug clearly did not want to deal with Samuel at all, and Samuel suddenly began to suspect that he did in fact have a lot more leeway here than was immediately apparent. Bolstered by this reassurance and egged on by his own competitive nature, he ignored Doug’s offer of an escape route as definitively as Doug had ignored his and reverted back to a more offensive approach.

“I’m just trying to give you a way out. I mean, hey…you worked for me for a long time, right? Obviously you’ve got some personal problems. I don’t pretend that I understand what this is all about but I don’t see the need to make it any worse for you. I’m willing to let you walk away. I can’t be any fairer than that, can I?”

“That’s so magnanimous of you,” Doug said, oozing sarcasm. “Why don’t you admit the real
reason?”

Samuel began edging around the door of the limo, leaving it open as he moved as casually as possible towards the front of the car.

“Which would be?”

“That you just don’t want to be responsible for any of this.”

Samuel drew a deep breath and tried to remember Gus’s coaching. Gus had tried to make him understand that there was a boundary here and one he dared not cross, but it was an indistinct line at best, and Samuel - being Samuel – decided to go with his own judgment when it came to an estimate of just how much harder he should be pushing.

“Don’t see how I would be,” he replied with a dismissive shrug. Having worked his way around the front of the limo, he took up a somewhat belligerent stance, facing Doug with his shoulders back, his arms crossed and his feet braced apart. “I actually don’t see what any of this has got to do with me. Maybe you should explain it all to me again. Your letter rambled on a bit, you know?”

He didn’t quite achieve his goal. Doug quite naturally rotated in position, watching Samuel carefully as the other man moved around into his space, but Doug made no move to step away from the car. In fact, he leaned back, crossing his legs at the ankles and bracing his torso against the frame.

Inwardly, Samuel winced. He’d been instructed to try and coax Doug as far as possible away from the limo but clearly Doug wasn’t planning on putting any significant amount distance between himself and his prize. From where he stood, leaning negligently, he could keep an eye on the occupants of the car simply by glancing down to his left, and still keep Samuel in his peripheral vision at the same time.

“I thought my letter was pretty clear, actually,” he countered warily. “So what exactly do you need explained?”

Playing dumb was not Samuel’s forte, but there was no reason for Doug to believe that Samuel knew anything more about the circumstances than had been revealed in the contents of the letter. Feigning a little ignorance might go a long way, but the danger – and Gus had been absolutely clear about it – was that everybody in such a state of profound psychological stress had their triggers, no matter how outwardly calm and rational they might have seemed, and if you accidentally happened to push one of the wrong buttons you were likely to radically change the tone of the entire situation. It needed a light touch and more than a little sensitivity.

Samuel took a deep breath. Sensitivity wasn’t exactly his forte either.

“Well, for starters…what’s all this shit about your mother?”

Inside the trunk of the Porsche, Gus heard this entire conversation and could have just about throttled Samuel had he been within strangling distance. The one thing that he had had repeatedly warned him about was to keep the conversation as general as possible and not to put Doug in an overly defensive position. He should have known better than to entrust the man who had invented boorishness with the job of handling someone on the verge of a homicidal rampage.
His ability to endure the hot, confined space had run out. The original plan had been to stay hidden until Samuel had managed to lure Doug’s attention away from the limo. There were a few strategic phrases that he and Samuel had agreed upon to let him know that he’d managed to turn Doug’s attention away from the cars but he hadn’t overheard any of the signals so far and it was becoming impossible to keep his composure when he couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe and was already so wound up that he was literally one gigantic knot of anxiety.

He heard the voices fade a bit and hoped they were moving away. But the entire scene was unfolding too slowly for his level of physical discomfort and soon he could no longer manage to focus on any of the conversation.

Another wave of nausea hit him. It was no good…he was too disoriented…he had to get out…

He groped blindly and found the emergency trunk release, thanking Dodge once again for having enough foresight to have included this safety particular feature on this particular vehicle. One hand released the latch while the other held the lid down…the last thing he needed was the trunk popping open unexpectedly and giving away his hiding spot.

He eased it up a few inches at a time, aware that there was just as much risk in moving too quickly as there was in hesitation. As soon as there was enough clearance, he raised himself on one knee just far enough to be able to hook the other knee out through the opening, then shifted his weight onto the dangling leg and felt about cautiously for the ground. It took a bit of an awkward lunge get himself over the frame of the trunk; in his dizziness he overcompensated for distance and landed awkwardly on his hip so that he ended up half sitting/half lying against the rear bumper, blinking in the blinding sunlight and desperately clutching the cover of the trunk to hold it down.

Closing it with a soft click, Gus curled into a ball and huddled as close to the Porsche as possible, gratefully filling his lungs with fresh air and trying to get his bearings. Judging by the lack of reaction, at least so far, no one had taken note of his somewhat undignified arrival on the scene. He took a few seconds to compose himself, still trying to shake off the lingering feelings of uneasiness and dread then, leaning as far to the right as he could, with his head low and his upper body braced on his hands, he peeked around the rear of the Porsche and tried to get an overview of the scene.

It was more of an underview actually, given that his sightline was limited to about a foot and a half off the ground. The two cars sat side by side, both facing forward and probably no more than three yards apart. Samuel had obviously managed to draw Doug around to the passenger side of the limo; the aisle between the cars was empty and the limo’s driver’s side door stood open. Breathing a prayer of thanks, Gus dropped a little lower, trying to see underneath the limo in an attempt to gauge exactly where Doug and Samuel were. To his dismay, the rear wheels on the limo blocked his view and he was forced to edge beyond the cover of the Porsche’s back bumper and into the space between the two vehicles.

It was there that he encountered his first serious problem. The rear window on the limo was down, but so far the heated conversation on the opposite side of the car had held everyone’s attention. Unfortunately, as Gus eased himself around the back of the Porsche and into the opening between the cars, there was just enough movement to catch the eye of the person who sat facing backwards beside the rear door. It was hard to tell who had the more violent reaction, Gus or Tommy, when he happened to glance up and found himself staring directly into Tommy's shocked face.

Luckily for Tommy, words failed him but he still gasped and jerked spasmodically in his seat.

From the opposite seat, Isaac stared at him in astonishment.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”
Tommy sat motionless and open-mouthed while Gus made furious shushing motions and scooted back around the rear of the Porsche until he was once again out of sight.

Following Tommy’s gaze, Isaac leaned ahead in his seat far enough to glance out the window himself.

“What’s going on?” he asked again.

“Nothing,” Tommy muttered and, as Isaac craned his neck for a better look, kicked his friend in the shin to recover his attention.

“Nothing,” he repeated more insistently. Puzzled, Isaac turned back to face him and Tommy shook his head in admonition and did everything he could to inject sufficient warning into his expression.

“Just ignore it.”

Isaac’s eyebrows shot up. If it was nothing then exactly why did he need to ignore it? Whatever it was, Tommy was shaken badly but he refused to say anything more and his eyes lingered on Isaac’s in a mute plea not to pursue it.

Isaac sat back slowly. No one else in the car had noticed their little exchange but there was now no doubt in his mind that there was something else going on behind the scenes. His chest tightened a little with renewed helplessness and the pounding of his heart took on a whole new urgency.

Tommy’s gaze went back to the window and after a minute, Gus’s head reappeared. He half-scowled at him in warning when their eyes met and although he blinked back at Gus in apparent understanding, it was impossible to tell from the look on his face whether he was imploring Gus to help them or imploring him not to put himself at risk.

Pushing their personal connection out of his mind, Gus eased himself back between the cars. He stretched himself facedown along the underside of the limo, further agitating Tommy by dropping out of his sight, and then inched himself up until he was clear of the rear wheels and had an unobstructed view beneath the car.

It was a relief to see two sets of legs as expected, although he was momentarily flustered by the realization that both were clad in dark grey suits and black shoes and it took him a few panicked seconds before he was certain who was who. But it wasn’t that hard to match voices to body language, even from the ankles down, and he felt another twinge of worry as he became aware that the tone of the bickering hadn’t cooled off to any degree.

Samuel’s voice had taken on just a shade too much disdain. “So you’ve got some huge chip on your shoulder about me over something that I had nothing to do with?”

“You are your father’s son,” Doug said, bitter and cold. “Every inch as much of a bastard as he was. What goes around comes around...”

“Okay, so Dad was a bit of a whore. He was a product of the fifties and sixties for God’s sake. A guy has an affair years ago and you think that’s worth killing people over?”

Gus clenched his eyes shut. Samuel, you idiot...you’re pushing too hard. You’re just supposed to stall him – not piss him off!

“It wasn’t just an affair! It was what he did to her! He broke her heart, abandoned her, left her alone and pregnant...for another man!”
Doug’s voice began to show new signs of strain. He seemed to alternate between utter control and moments where his composure cracked, and the more Samuel stalled to give Gus time, the more the cracks widened. It was no wonder…Samuel’s inflated ego was getting the better of him and what had started out as a simple ploy to draw attention away from Gus had now wandered into dangerous territory. Resentment and indignation had overridden Samuel’s original sense of fear and he was starting to show signs of throwing one of his patented power-tantrums.

No-one ever treated him like this and got away with it.

Gus pushed himself up on his hands and knees. Near as he could tell, Doug had his back to the limo, even if Samuel hadn’t managed to draw him any distance away from the car. That would have to do…given the indication that Samuel was winding up for even more dangerously injudicious remarks, immediate action seemed to be the most prudent approach.

On top of everything else, he could hear muttering going on in the back of the limo as well. The words were indistinct but judging by the overall tone, it was beginning to look like patience had run out among the occupants of the car as well and the last thing she needed was for one of them to try something reckless because they thought Doug’s attention had been diverted. He needed to get on with this now, before a wrong move on somebody’s part set off a disastrous chain reaction.

He crawled up between the cars as quickly and silently as he could and when he got even with the open door of the limo, he lay flat again and eased his head up just far enough that he could peek over the bottom frame of the door. The passenger side window was down like the others, but there was no sign of the two men standing on the other side of the vehicle. A quick glance underneath the limo confirmed it; Doug was still positioned halfway down the length of the car with his back to him as he leaned against the side. Samuel’s feet moved as he shuffled them impatiently, either in an attempt to keep Doug’s attention or simply as a result of frustration.

Gus next shifted his gaze to the underside of the steering column. Since his expectations weren’t very high, it wasn’t much of a disappointment to find that there were no keys in the ignition. He smiled grimly to himself. His sole objective in all of this had been simple – to separate Doug from Adam and the band in whatever way possible. All the way along his assumption had been that Doug would keep the group confined to the car in order to better control them. He’d also assumed, even if Samuel would have managed to coax Doug out of the car, that Doug would have kept the keys to the limo with him at all times. It was for that reason, on their earlier rush through the parking garage at The Citadel, that Gus had taken precious minutes to pay a quick visit to the dispatcher of the hotel’s fleet of limos.

He rolled to his side for a moment and dug a hand into the front pocket of his jeans, thanking God once again that somebody somewhere had the foresight to keep spare keys for all of the Griffin vehicles back at the complex. Samuel had stared at him as if he’d gone crazy when he asked for them but it wasn’t until they’d been peeking over the wall at the front entrance to the building site that he’d realized the full implication of Gus’s strategy.

Plan A had been one thing. Plan B was a whole other story.

“You want me to what?”

Gus’d explained it all again even as he popped open the trunk on the Porsche, eyed it up for space and began pitching all of its contents out onto the ground.

“Get Doug out of the limo. See if he’ll take you up on the offer to just drive away. If he’s willing to take your car, that’s great.”
Samuel’s mouth had tightened briefly as his very expensive golf clubs hit the pavement.

“With you in it?”

“He’s not going to know that, is he? Don’t worry about me…just do as I tell you. Now if he won’t go for it, I want you to just get him as far away from the limo as you can and I’m going to try and put as much distance as I can between him and that car before he tries to blow us all to hell.”

Samuel went maroon. “Is that what you wanted the spare keys for? You’re planning on just hopping in that car and pulling out of there? And leaving me behind? With him? Do you think I’m crazy?”

He had a point. Gus thought a moment, then went to the glove compartment and retrieved Samuel’s gun in its fancy leather case.

“So take this.”

“You just finished telling me you can’t shoot somebody who’s rigged with explosives!”

“That’s why I don’t want you to shoot him, Samuel. I just want you to shoot at him.”

Samuel was rapidly losing his temper. “You need to be a bit more specific!”

“Simple.” Gus slipped behind him, pulled the gun out of its case and ensured the safety was on and then yanked up the back of Samuel’s suit jacket and tucked the weapon into his belt against his back. “If he’s really rigged himself up with that much pyro, he’s not going to be very light on his feet. If you can get him away from the car and I get half a chance to get into driver’s seat, you’re damn right I’m going to pull it out of there. And when I do, you’re going to have four or five seconds at most where you’re going to have to move like a rabbit and run.”

He pulled the jacket back down into place and spun Samuel around, ignoring his completely outraged expression. “The moment that car begins to move, you move. Get as far away from him as you can. He’s not exactly going to be able to chase you down very easily. You aim a few bullets in his direction and that should slow him down a bit as well.”

“That’s a pretty big assumption!”

“No, Samuel…it’s not. It’s human nature. No matter whether you plan to live or die, it’s a completely involuntary impulse to try and avoid being shot. Ask me how I know.”

Without waiting for further comeback, Gus hitched one leg and then the other into the trunk of the Porsche. He had to pretzel-ize himself a little due to sheer lack of legroom but as he settled himself into place he glanced up at Samuel and narrowed his eyes at him meaningfully.

“Remember what I told you,” he said. “Now let’s go.”

It took Samuel a few seconds to find his voice again. Then he stepped forward with a curse and slammed the trunk of the car closed with a lot more force than was required.

“Crazy,” he said under his breath. “Absolutely fucking crazy…”
The problem now was simple timing. Gus had no wish to put Samuel in any more danger than was absolutely necessary, but he clearly wasn’t going to be able to entice Doug to move any farther away from the car. And leaning against it as he was, Doug was likely to notice any movement in the limo itself – like someone easing themselves into the driver’s seat – and that would completely wipe out the element of surprise.

Worst of all was the fact that Samuel had almost become a bigger variable than Doug. Gus knew he’d been taking a huge chance in trusting Samuel to be able to maintain a balance between confidence and over-aggression and he also knew that now that Samuel was on the offensive there was no hope of there being any further delicacy in his approach.

But the next remark was way, way over the line.

“Yeah, okay…so she was pregnant. She was a hooker, for Christ’s sake. How the hell could she even be sure who the father was?”

Gus’s heart nearly stopped in an echo of the silence that followed. That idiot is going to get us all killed…

“She was sure,” Doug said. Samuel didn’t notice the change, but Gus did…Doug’s voice had lost all its tone. It had become impassive and flat and was one of the sure signs of crisis in a standoff situation. A suspect in an agitated state was one thing – a suspect in an emotionless state was another thing altogether. You had half a chance of outwitting someone who wasn’t thinking clearly…

“Oh yeah? Just because she wrote it down in some stupid diary doesn’t mean that it’s true, Doug. How do you know she wasn’t just making it all up?”

At that, Gus’s heart did stop. So did Samuel’s…the moment the words were out of his mouth.

Oh, shit…the diary…I’m not supposed to know about that…

It was time to go. In one swift move, Gus rolled onto his knees and then bent his left leg beneath him. He raised himself just enough that he could edge his right hip onto the side of the driver’s set and then slid gently sideways and down until he was slouched in the seat as low as his long legs would permit. It hadn’t been until he’d started to ease himself into position that he’d realized that the privacy glass had been lowered between the front and back section of the car, and it was around about that time that he encountered his second serious problem; Doug had been so focused on Samuel and his lecture that he hadn’t noticed the subtle dip in the car as Gus settled his weight into the seat…but Adam had…and as Gus happened to glance up in the rear-view mirror he was appalled to find a pair of equally appalled blue eyes staring back at him from the rear seat.

Like Samuel, Adam’s words were out before he could stop them.

“Fuck!”

Everyone in the vehicle jumped. Doug jumped as well, abruptly shoved himself away from the side of the car and spun around to stare in the back window.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Adam?”

Adam froze. “Nothing…nothing…”

Fumbling wildly, Gus sat up and shoved the key into the ignition.
“Holy fuck!” Terrance gasped, also catching sight of him in the front seat. Adam elbowed him sharply and then kicked Monte as hard as he could as his guitarist twisted around to try and see what had caught Terrance’s attention.

“Shut up!” he hissed at them both. “Shut up!”

Doug barked out a harsh warning. “Sit still! All of you! Do you hear me?”

Samuel began backing away from the car. As he passed the open window on the passenger side, he glanced in and gestured furiously at Gus. Gus didn’t need to be told; his foot was already over the accelerator and hand was already on the ignition. The moment he heard Doug’s sharp admonition he knew that he had run out of time. He turned the key, feeling his heart contract as the engine turned over and caught, then he threw the car into gear at the same time as he stomped his foot down on the gas as far as it could go.

The limo lurched forward about eight feet.

And stalled.
It all moved in slow motion and every single detail of the next few moments stayed with Gus for the remainder of his life. Aside from utter horror as the engine failed, there was the agonizing sense that he’d completely blown his cover and that whatever action needed to be taken next needed to be taken pretty damn fast…before anyone had a chance to do anything about the fact that he had dropped himself into the middle of their chaos.

Pandemonium erupted in the back of the limo. Gus wasn’t sure if they were all shouting at him or at each other and didn’t have the luxury of enough time to try and make the distinction. He threw the vehicle back into park, grabbed for the ignition again and turned the key, trying not to focus too much on the limo driver’s earlier assertion that the damn thing had been nearly out of gas to start with.

He heard his name once, just as the limo’s engine turned over and caught for the second time. Almost reluctantly, Gus turned his head in the direction of the sound at the same time as his foot twitched on the brake and his right hand took a firm grip on the gearshift on the steering column.

Doug had flung the passenger door wide. It wasn’t exactly unexpected but Gus still flinched at the sight of him lunging in through the opening with his face a mask of utter rage and his hands clawing at him. Instinctively he leaned to the left, nearly falling out through the still-open driver’s door in the process and was only saved from an unscheduled exit as Doug managed to catch a handful of his shirt at his shoulder and began yanking him towards himself.

"Out!" he screamed.

He spat obscenities while Gus struggled, not only to prevent him from dragging him bodily from the car but to stop himself from giving in to total panic at the realization that his face was only inches away from a significant quantity of explosives and a man fully prepared to use them. Doug tore Gus’s right arm away from the shift as he frantically tried to throw the limo back into gear and in response, Gus hooked one foot beneath the brake pedal, anchored himself enough to risk abandoning his death grip on the steering wheel with his other hand and then cold-cocked Doug in the face with his left fist. As punches go it was awkward and off-centre, barely backing Doug off and inflicting minimal pain. But it did accomplish one thing, distracting him just long enough that Gus was able to jerk his right arm free from his grip, shove himself back into a sitting position and somehow manage to shift the limo into drive.

Gus’s blow to the face hadn’t moved Doug much, but he had recoiled a little from where he had been kneeling on the passenger seat. As the limo lurched ahead again, he was abruptly sandwiched between the frame of the car and the passenger door as it swung closed with the forward momentum. Gus’s hope was that Doug would simply react out of self-preservation, push himself away from the moving vehicle and let it go. Instead, Doug stubbornly launched himself at the car a second time and as Gus turned the steering wheel and hit the accelerator, he risked a glance in Doug’s direction and was horrified to find that he had somehow managed to hitch himself along for the ride.

On the inside roof of the limo, positioned just over the passenger door, there was a handhold - a small curved vinyl grip designed to give the passenger something to hang onto in the case of tight turns. Doug had managed to brace both his feet on the lower doorframe and to hook his right hand through the grip on the inner frame so that he actually balanced on the ledge of the door with his
body held close to the profile of the car. Gus could only see Doug from the middle of his chest down, providing him with another less-than-reassuring view of the explosive charges rigged on the vest Doug wore. The trigger on the device was in plain sight, hooked to the left side of the vest and luckily hard to reach as long as Doug’s right hand was occupied with holding on. But the last thing you ever wanted to do with an explosive device was jostle it in any way, and Gus was now in the position of having to drive like crazy, hoping to shake Doug from his precarious position before he managed to wiggle his left hand close enough to press the plunger and before the sheer vibration set the explosion off all by itself.

The first frightening jolt came when the car hit the edge of the paved parking lot. It bounced hard as Gus kept accelerating and aimed for the only clear path, the beaten dirt road that ringed the site and which would have been the main boulevard for the development had it ever been completed. The surface was dusty and full of potholes but it gave Gus the opportunity to bring the huge car up to speed and take a few precious seconds to shout over his shoulder at the five occupants who were rattling around like loose change in the back.

He only had the breath to tell them to sit down and hang on, but there was an immediate response – a quartet of voices all raging back at him. This uproar subsided into a series of yelps instead as Gus began swerving the car hard from one side of the road to the other, not only to avoid some of the debris scattered in his path but also in a desperate attempt to dislodge Doug from his perch.

He had no idea how Doug managed to hold on, especially considering that the waving passenger door slammed into him with each sharp turn. Gus couldn’t see his face to judge his expression but in those few moments when he dared take his eyes off the road, he was dismayed to see that Doug's right hand was still firmly glued to the grip on the inside of the door. He showed no signs of being ejected and worse still was the fact that his left hand had shifted a lot closer to the detonator on his vest.

Gus's choices were very limited. Stopping the car was out of the question. Driving out onto the main road and risking an encounter with other traffic was also out of the question. Driving around in circles on the ring-road wasn’t a long term solution either, especially with the fuel gauge on empty and with Doug only a few inches away from pushing the button that would resolve the impasse permanently.

As Gus approached the point where the long oval of the road met up again with the main parking lot, Samuel came back into view. He hovered anxiously beside the Porsche, shading his eyes with one hand to watch as the limo, still weaving wildly, followed the curve of the road back towards the deserted sales pavilion. He could see what was Gus was trying to do, but all attempts to shake Doug loose were having precisely the opposite effect; each time Doug was slammed against the side of the car, he was shifted in position until his left arm suddenly popped loose from where his body had been pinning it. When Gus next dared to look to the side he found that not only was Doug still firmly attached by his right hand, his other hand was now free…and clutching desperately at the trigger to the explosives on the left hand side of the vest.

Horrified, Gus panicked. He wrenched the steering wheel hard - as far to the left as it could possibly go - and stomped the accelerator all the way to the floor. The limo abruptly left the dirt roadway and burst onto the open field, skidding violently as the back wheels lost traction and began sliding in the sand. It was around about that time, as the vehicle completed a wild 360 degree turn, that the cumulative effect of opposing G-forces finally got the better of Doug and he completely lost his grip on the car.

It was also about that time, give or take a millisecond or so, that Gus felt the atmosphere around
him start to decompress. He closed his eyes and let go of the steering wheel…he knew what was going to happen next and there no longer seemed to be any reason to hang on.

It got very quiet as sound was sucked away with the air.

But the noise that followed was deafening.

Gus would never know for sure whether Doug actually got his hand on the detonator and set off the explosion himself or whether it was the impact of being thrown to the ground under the back wheels that triggered the blast. It didn't make much difference either way; the explosion caught the huge car under the back right fender and threw it up and forward like some kind of vehicular bucking bronc. Already too far into a tight left turn for Gus to regain control, the limo tipped up onto one side where it wobbled for a fraction of a second at high speed and then rolled over, bouncing once on the edge of its roof before it landed right side up in an enormous cloud of dust only a few yards from Samuel’s Porsche.

It was a miracle none of them were ejected from the car. Gus found himself lying on the floor, draped with deflating airbags and with the steering column jammed against his knees. Groggily, he kicked and squirmed until he got his legs free and then dragged himself up onto the seat, blinded and choked by the still swirling dust.

And smoke.

None of the windows remained. Conscious of bits of glass cutting him everywhere, Gus managed to get a grip on the passenger door handle and forced it open far enough that he was able to fall out onto the ground.

He was immediately blasted by searing heat and didn't need to see the back end of the car to know that it was burning. Staggering to his feet, he groped his way around the front of the car to the driver's side where he fell headlong over Isaac as he was crawling out through the back door. Tommy was already face down in the dirt, coughing and gasping for air, and Terrance lay motionless on the ground beside him with his face covered in so much blood that for one horrible moment, Gus was certain he'd been killed.

He felt hands underneath his arms and realized it was Samuel, trying to drag him to safety.

“I’m okay! I’m okay!”

“Fire,” he said succinctly. Gus struggled against him in a panic, knocking Samuel's hands away and shaking his head wildly both in an attempt to deter him and to try and clear the thick fog from his brain.

It was hard to see…and even harder to count…

*Samuel, Tommy, Isaac, Terrance…*
Still two missing.

He pushed at Samuel again. “I know! But I’m all right. Please…just get everybody as far back as
you can…”

“Gus…”

“Go on!” he shouted, and shoved as hard as he could. Samuel lost his balance and stumbled back
but fortunately had the brains to recognize that the subject was no longer up for discussion. He
didn’t hesitate as Gus turned away but went straight to Terrance and grabbed him by the wrists,
relieved to note that he twitched and moaned in pain as he was forcibly dragged clear of the car.

The rear door of the limo stood open. Gus ducked his head and lunged inside, finding it nearly
impossible to see and frantically waving his hands in front of her face while shouting for Monte
and Adam.

Adam had been sitting in the corner seat. When the car had rolled over, he'd obviously thrown his
right arm up over his head to protect himself, and now his arm from the elbow to the wrist was
pinned between the frame of the back window and the half-crushed roof of the car. Monte was
trying to free him by pulling frantically on his other arm, making Adam cry out in pain until they
were both screaming at each other.

"Monte, stop!" Gus shouted at him and scrambled over the debris on the floor until he was close
enough to Adam that he could see the petrified look in his eyes.

"You need to get out of here," Adam said weakly.

"Yes," he agreed grimly. "We do. So let's go."

He ran one hand along Adam's bicep until he met where the metal was biting into the flesh of his
arm. He had to twist to try and see where it was caught, and was horrified to find that the amount
of pressure against the bone meant there was absolutely no way to pull him out without leaving
most of his forearm arm behind.

By now, adrenaline had gone into fierce competition with complete and utter panic. No matter how
many years of training he’d undergone to learn to keep his cool in a crisis, there was no way to
fight off the horrible memories that swept through him. A car accident had cost him his best friend,
his career and nearly his life and it was unthinkable that it was all happening again.

He could smell gas and knew Adam could too.

It’s a popularly held belief that when you are about to die, your entire life flashes before you. Gus
had been to the edge once before and knew perfectly well it was true (aside from the fact that you
didn’t actually get the whole story…just the highlights) and having been there once before, he also
had absolutely no intention of going there again and certainly wasn’t going to let it happen to
Adam if he could possibly prevent it.

Monte was trying futilely to force the jagged edges of metal out of the way with his bare hands,
cutting himself badly and causing Adam to yelp in pain as the motion caused the edges to bite
deeper into his arm.

“That’s not going to work,” Adam said through clenched teeth. “For Fuck’s sake, will you two
please just get the hell out of here?"

It has been hot enough in the car before; now the heat from the flames engulfing the entire rear of the vehicle was making their eyes burn and water. Panic and exertion were filling their lungs with scorched air. Monte was starting to cough uncontrollably and Gus was finding it nearly impossible to take a breath.

He was dimly aware of someone shouting at him; when he felt something hit him on the back, he jerked around and found Samuel leaning in the door of the car and trying to get his attention. He was waving something at him and when he managed to focus his burning eyes on it for a second, he realized what it was. He remembered Samuel unlocking it from the steering wheel when they got in the Porsche, then throwing it behind his seat.

When Samuel bought something, he bought the best. He hadn’t gone for one of the less expensive imitations, or even one of the standard brand name models. He’d bought the finest they had. The shaft was solid steel, as were the two hooks designed to clamp inside the steering wheel.

Gus grabbed it from him. He accidentally smacked Adam in the face with it as he scrambled over him; when he managed to jam one end against the edge of metal that was pinning Adam, he leaned as far as he could out of the way, suddenly aware of what Gus was trying to do.

The metal had already been weakened. Once Gus had the end of the bar jammed in as far as it would go he used all his weight to pull down on the shaft so that the steel hook at the end caught against the edge of the metal. He sincerely doubted its makers intended it to be used as a crowbar, but it was remarkably effective and within seconds he had pried enough of the metal back that he could clearly see the piece that was jammed against Adam’s arm.

Shifting positions, he tried to force the end back under the inner edge and realized to his horror that it was too large to fit under the lip of the metal. Coughing and cursing, he dropped the bar and put one hand back up against Adam's arm, trying to feel for any openings that would indicate the pressure had been relieved.

Adam had his head back on the seat with his eyes closed. Gus wondered wildly if he’d lost consciousness; shaking him with his free hand, he shouted his name until Adam coughed and blinked dully at him.

“Pull,” he ordered and saw Adam's face spasm as he tried to do as he was told. Gus felt his arm move fractionally but only a few inches before the edge of the metal bit back into the skin.

Adam shook his head weakly and closed his eyes again. He couldn’t breathe and he had no strength left to fight it.

Gus pushed up against the edge with his fingers. It was tight, but not as tight as before. It was sharp, but seemed relatively short, with only a couple of inches actually pushing against Adam's skin. Gus knew he had no choice but still took him a couple of seconds to brace himself for what he had to do, then he put both hands around Adam’s arm at the elbow, tightened his grip and yanked as hard as he could.

Adam screamed as his arm came loose. Gus didn’t stop to see what damage he’d done but grabbed Adam by the shoulders and pulled him forward until he was able to turn him towards the door. Then he put his hands against Adam's back and shoveled him hard, not caring that he propelled him headfirst out onto the ground.
He was sick and disoriented from holding his breath. He tried to fight the urge to breathe but his chest expanded convulsively, filling his lungs with bad air. Choking, he slumped over onto his side then recoiled instinctively when he landed on something soft. He realized he’d forgotten about Monte, who was now motionless on the floor of the car and who only coughed feebly when Gus twisted his hands in the front of his shirt and shook him.

Unable to see, he just began crawling backwards, struggling to pull Monte with him. He half-tumbled through the car door himself, dragged Monte out on top of him and then somehow staggered to his feet and just kept on dragging, only half conscious and completely unaware of direction or distance. He didn’t recognize the voice that was shouting at him, nor the hands that reached out to catch him when he finally did let Monte go and pass out, but a few minutes later he came to, sprawled in the dust at a safe distance from the car, gulping in huge lungful of fresh air and trying desperately to see through badly tearing eyes.

He rolled over on his side, coughing out smoke and dust and then realized Samuel was on his knees beside him anxiously searching his face for any other signs that he was hurt. Shoving himself up on his hands, Gus looked around wildly. His eyes were watering too much to be able to tell who was who, but once he’d accounted for five other figures, all of whom at least seemed to be moving slightly, he slumped back down in relief and concentrated on trying to figure out if he was still all in one piece. It proved to be a painful inventory; his hands were bleeding and he’d obviously banged his head on something as he struggled inside the car. He could feel little bits of glass embedded in his shoulders and arms, and one knee seemed particularly badly bruised.

There were ominous rumblings from the burning car as the heat and flame finally ignited the leaking fuel. The explosion was minimal; there had been so little gas left in the limo that there wasn’t much to ignite. The gas tank on the Porsche, however, had been filled that morning. When the flames spread from one vehicle to the other, it didn’t take long for the heat to reach the point of ignition and once it did, Samuel’s prized possession was blown sky-high.

When Michelle arrived at the hospital, she took one look at Gus and burst into hysterical tears.

Gus lifted his oxygen mask off long enough to roll his eyes and wheeze, "All present and accounted for…well, all the ones that count anyway. Stop sniveling."

They were scattered around the Emergency Department, which had been turned into a mini-fortress, crawling with police and security all doing their best to keep out the rabid media and the hysterical fans.

"Are you all right?" Michelle said tearfully.

"Pretty much…ouch! Aside from the million little pieces of glass sticking in me everywhere." Gus glared at the intern who was blithely picking shards out of his arm and began to cough again. Without missing a beat, the young woman reached up and firmly put his oxygen mask back in place, eliciting another glare.

Michelle wiped her eyes. "God, you scared me half to death. I hate it when you’re right… I hate that…"

"I wasn’t right," Gus muttered. "I was wrong…from the very beginning. Doug pushed my buttons
from day one and I was too stupid to see it."

"You still figured it out."

"Not by much. I was convinced something was going to happen at the concert when it was being broadcast all around the world…" Gus was overcome by a fit of coughing and had to struggle to breathe deeply into the mask, making Michelle cry all over again. She had barely gotten her emotions back under control before she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned around to find Tommy standing behind her. He was still liberally caked with soot and dust but he smiled at her wearily and Michelle burst into tears a third time and launched herself at him.

Gus couldn’t hide his smile. Nothing like a good old fashioned brush with death to make two people forget their differences. But his throat tightened as he watched the two of them together and knew that Michelle was remembering another car accident, just over two years earlier, when she’d lost another important person in her life. The irony of it hadn’t escaped Gus and he doubted very much it had escaped Michelle either.

"Looks like you’re forgiven, Tommy," he said, voice muffled by the mask.

"I am fine…I am fine!" Tommy was wincing, trying to loosen Michelle’s death grip on his neck. "But they think I’ve bruised a couple of ribs so slam dancing me is not the best thing to do right now, okay? Just relax. Breathing doesn’t feel real good at the moment, but otherwise I’m all right. I got off easy."

Having uttered this reassurance, he began to look a little on the unsteady side and Michelle had to ease him gently into a chair. Kneeling in front of him, she clutched his hands anxiously and fretted, "What about everyone else?"

Gus’s eyes went to Tommy’s over the edge of his mask and felt his heart lurch when he looked away. He hadn’t been told much but it was impossible not to overhear the medical personnel talking among themselves.

Tommy shifted gingerly in the chair and said slowly, "It could have been a lot worse. Nobody’s in any danger. I heard from one of the EMT’s that he figured the sheer size of the car protected us from most of the explosion. Terrance actually looked a lot worse than he is. He got a big piece of glass in the temple…another inch or so and it would have taken out his eye. He also got a concussion, but he’ll be okay in a couple of days. Terrance’s got a pretty hard head; it won’t keep him down very long."

He shifted again, obviously uncomfortable. "Isaac is fine. A little scuffed up and he’ll be pretty sore for a few days, but nothing serious." Tommy’s gaze flickered back up to Gus and he added apologetically, "They’re still looking at Adam’s arm. They wanted a specialist to see him."

Michelle’s head swiveled back and forth. "Why? What happened?"

Tommy hesitated. "His arm was caught between the doorframe and the roof when the car rolled over. Gus pulled him out, but he’s pretty badly cut. They’re trying to determine how badly the tendons and nerves are damaged."

He didn’t miss the way Gus’s face clouded over and his heart bled for him. He knew Gus’s imagination was on overload and that he was devastated at the thought that something he had done might have hurt Adam badly. It was on the tip of his tongue to point out to Gus that he hadn’t had
much choice, and then decided against it. Gus was too level-headed not to be fully aware of the choices he’d had…but that didn’t necessarily make facing the consequences any easier.

"What about Monte?" Michelle persisted.

This time Tommy avoided looking at either of them. He studied the floor for a minute then said steadily, "It’s going to be awhile before they know for sure. At the very least, he’s got a bad case of smoke inhalation. But…they also think he might have inhaled something that’s burned his larynx."

"Jesus," Michelle whispered in horror. "Is he intubated?"

"No, but they’re watching his airway pretty closely and he’s on a high flow of oxygen to try and take some of the strain off his lungs. Right now they’re stitching his hands…they were pretty badly sliced up, but they’ll be okay. From what I’ve heard they’re more concerned about the carbon monoxide levels in his system than they are about anything else, but they say once they get his oxygen saturation back to where it should be, they’ll start worrying about the rest of him."

Even beneath the dirty smudges, Gus’s face blanched noticeably but at that point the conversation was ended by the Head of Triage, who came storming after Tommy and gave him holy hell for wandering around before anyone had given him permission to even get up.

"And you," she barked, pointing at Gus. "Stop talking and keep that mask on. Your CO level is no screaming hell at the moment either. You need to stay put until all that glass has been picked out of you…and then you’re going down to Radiology to have that knee x-rayed."

It wasn’t until very late that night, and only with the help of Marion, a young nurse with more regard for matters of the heart than for hospital policy, that Gus was finally able to see Adam. "I don’t want to get you into any trouble," he said, sucking in his breath sharply as he tried to swing his bad leg to the floor. The sudden intake of air may have been involuntary, but it was also painful…his raw throat burned and his lungs protested and the subsequent fit of coughing nearly put an end to his escapade right then and there.

"Keep it down and you won’t," Marion said, catching Gus underneath the arm and easing him into a wheelchair. "It’s almost midnight…most of the night shift has gone down to the lounge to suck back a little rum and eggnog. It’s at the other end of the hallway, and if we’re lucky, I can get you back here before anyone notices you’re gone." She did a quick double take as Gus’s face bleached with pain and added, "Are you sure you’re up for this?"

Gus nodded. Only now was the full physical and emotional impact of the day’s events beginning to hit him. As if all the medical poking and prodding hadn’t been enough, there had been the endless questions to answer and a parade of apprehensive faces all anxious to see he was in one piece, and full of emotion and gratitude – Michelle, Bill, Jeremy, Sophie, Lisa, even Samuel. Giving his statement to the police had been the most arduous experience but he knew it was important that it be done as quickly as possible. At least he’d been spared the ordeal of having to deal with Dean Holden; with such a high profile investigation, only the most senior detectives had been dispatched to interview the victims and word had it that Holden had been relegated to collecting evidence at
the crime scene.

Gus had given his account of the events as best he could, struggling through considerable discomfort and emotion to recall all the important details and making much of Samuel’s part in the matter. Regardless of his personal opinion of the man, the fact remained that Samuel had voluntarily risked life and limb to help him and the guys and Gus was determined that he should be recognized for his efforts.

Adam’s security, with considerable police backup, had locked down one full floor of the hospital once doctors recommended Adam, his band and Gus remain there at least overnight. Surprisingly neither Tommy nor Isaac offered up objections, even through their injuries were minor enough to warrant release. They were grateful for the excuse to remain in close quarters; it was almost a protective reflex even though the immediate danger had passed. Gus would have expected nothing less. It was a totally natural reaction to the fact that their bond had been threatened both emotionally and physically and he completely understood their need to stick close together while they tried to deal with the earliest effects of shock and grief.

Gus took another deep breath and resisted the urge to cough. Marion’s expression remained skeptical.

"He is okay, you know. You don’t have to do this."

Gus nodded again, trying to get a grip. Lying down had been one thing. Sitting up was a whole new ballgame. But no matter how many reassuring reports he’d had on Adam throughout the day, he was eaten with worry and nothing was going to satisfy him until he’d seen Adam with his own two eyes.

"Let’s go," he said.

There were two security guards in the hallway but both merely smiled at Gus as he and his co-conspirator made an appearance. Marion had been correct that most of the staff had taken a few minutes to ring in the New Year together and no one else observed their trip down the hall. Gus’s heart went into his throat as he was wheeled into Adam’s room; it was quiet and dark and only faint illumination came from the light recessed in the wall above the bed.

"Just a couple of minutes," Marion warned. "That’s all I can give you. Then I’ll be back. Don’t put too much weight on that knee."

Left alone, Gus clutched the rail on the side of the bed for support and eased himself to his feet, clutching the bar all the harder at his first sight of Adam, ashen and still but clearly in one piece and sleeping soundly. It took him a moment to deal with the tide of emotion – relief, heartbreak, remorse – they had come so close to losing everything and Gus knew from experience that it wasn’t the tragedy itself that would take the hardest toll on them all, but the struggle to travel the long road back to normalcy again.

Adam’s right arm was heavily bandaged from the elbow to the wrist. It had taken almost two hours of surgery to repair the ugly gash where the metal had torn into his flesh. Gus had been assured that none of the damage was permanent…recovery would be slow and painful but rest and some physiotherapy would restore the full range of movement and a little plastic surgery down the road would take care of most of the seven inch scar that marked the inside of the arm. Like Gus, Adam had suffered mild smoke inhalation and there was a deep discoloration along one cheekbone where Gus had accidentally struck him in the face as he struggled to free Adam from the car. He was
scraped and bruised in a dozen places but he was also very much alive, yet Gus couldn’t stop himself from groping for Adam’s good hand and reassuring himself with fingertips on his pulse and the warmth that seeped into his skin from Adam's own.

He had to blink away moisture from his eyes but when they cleared, he found Adam was blinking back at him, heavy-eyed and groggy with medication but just awake enough to recognize him and give him a faint smile. Moisture flooded back and spilled over, which seemed to distress Adam no end and Gus had to spend the next minute or so trying desperately to shush him while Adam mumbled incoherent questions at him.

"It’s okay," Gus soothed tremulously, smoothing tousled hair back from Adam's forehead. "Hush. Hush. You’re going to get me busted. I’m not supposed to be here."

Under his touch Adam quieted and within a few seconds his eyes drifted closed again. Gus would have stood there until morning, just touching his face while he slept but now that he had seen Adam for himself the last of his own reserves of strength were beginning to slip away. He ached in every muscle, his throat and chest were burning, his knee was throbbing horribly in its stiff brace and he needed to lie down.

Real soon.

Gripping the bedside rail again, he lowered himself back into the wheelchair and exhaled with difficulty. From down the hall, he could hear muted voices counting down to midnight and with a bittersweet little smile, he groped back along the edge of the bed until he felt Adam’s hand and gently twined his fingers with his.

"Happy New Year, sweetheart," he whispered.

He closed his eyes and waited, exhausted and silent.

The response was faint but unmistakable, just the slightest pressure on his hand as Adam's fingers tightened on his. Adam's words were so low they were nearly impossible to hear but Gus heard them nonetheless…murmured and drowsy and heart wrenching in the stillness of the room.

"Love you, Gus."

The police and the hospital security may have been prepared for the crush of fans and media, but nothing had prepared them for the onslaught of family that descended on the hospital the next morning.

Tommy’s sister flew in with their mom. Terrance's mom also showed up, and by midmorning, there were also arrivals from LA. Gus and Lisa had insisted to both Monte’s mother and Adam’s that enduring the fan and media frenzy in Vegas would have been a difficult and upsetting experience for both of them. It had taken some convincing but in the end, Monte’s father made the trip instead and when they arrived at the hospital Gus was pleased and relieved to see that Ebert had flown in with him.
Despite the best attempts of the nursing staff, the floor was hardly a restful place. Police came and went as they continued to collect statements, lurking reporters were methodically hunted down and ejected and there was a parade of anxious reps from the record company trying to co-ordinate public statements and deal with the inevitable tide of gossip and speculation. The hospital itself was surrounded by hundreds of fans standing vigil and between the television reports, the newspaper coverage and the hysterical postings to every social media on the planet, the rumors about the injuries Adam and his band had suffered ranged from everything from simple cuts and bruises to actual death and dismemberment.

Gus turned on the television in his room once. Michelle turned it right back off again.

"Is it that bad?"

"Oooh yeah. Really, Gus…you don't need to be worrying about any of that crap. Let the PR people handle it. You've got enough to deal with."

Gus slept a great deal during the first day, absolutely worn out with the sheer stress of it all. He made one slow trip around the floor, checking on everyone else and reassuring himself that Monte continued to improve but movement became progressively more painful as his muscles stiffened up and his knee, badly sprained but not actually dislocated, objected to even the slightest motion. His visits with Adam were brief. Adam too slept more than he was awake and his waking moments were filled with the most urgent business related issues and emotional reunions with his family and band members. For Gus, it had to be enough to see him sitting up and talking even if his face was still disturbingly pale and it was obvious that he was also in a considerable amount of pain. There was a great deal more to be dealt with, but the rest would have to wait.

Isaac and Tommy were both discharged later that afternoon, Gus and Terrance the following morning, all with instructions to rest for a day or two before making an attempt to travel. Gus had no intention of traveling anywhere without Adam and for the first time in his life actually balked at the idea of being released from the hospital. He simply lacked the mobility to be able to travel back and forth to visit Adam and as a result did nothing but fidget and fret back at the hotel when he was supposed to be taking it easy.

"You don’t have to stay here," he protested to Michelle, when his friend announced she was spending the night with Gus in his room. "I’m fine on my own. Don’t you…er… have another place you’d rather be?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Michelle replied tartly. "I’ve spent enough of my life babysitting you when you’ve been recovering from one thing or another, thanks very much…but Dia is staying with Tommy and it’s only fair that they get to spend some time together."

"Oh," said Gus. "Still...you don’t have to…"

"Save your breath. I’m staying. If nothing else, I can make sure you’re taking your medication and staying off that leg the way you’re supposed to."

It was a reasonable enough excuse, but Michelle also had another motive for wanting to stick close by. She remembered Gus’s confession earlier in the week that he’d been troubled by nightmares for the first time in months and Michelle naturally feared that this second accident would trigger a whole new series of night-terrors. To her surprise, Gus seemed steadier than expected and while his sleep was clearly disturbed by discomfort and restlessness, there were none of the warning signs of an oncoming attack. But he was still quiet and troubled during his waking hours and
Michelle’s gentle attempts to draw him into conversation yielded no response. It wasn’t until the next day, when Ebert dropped by to see how Gus was doing that some of his pain finally began to surface.

He seemed almost overcome to see Ebert at first and to both Michelle and Ebert’s dismay, the moment they all sat down together, Gus began to shake and then broke into uncontrollable sobs. Alarmed, Ebert caught him by both hands and moved closer to him on the sofa, looking over his head at Michelle for some guidance. Michelle wasn’t sure what had brought on this rush of tears… but she certainly had her suspicions… and raising her eyebrows at Ebert and patting Gus on the shoulder, she said gently, "Maybe I’ll just leave the two of you alone for a little while."

"I’m sorry," Gus mumbled, wiping at streaming eyes. "It’s just…I can’t stop thinking…please tell me what to do…." It was a long and agonizing process to get it all out but once he began it was only a few minutes before his faltering attempts to speak turned into a rushed, broken confession of fear and remorse and anguish. He knew that Ebert already knew most of the facts - the details of the drugging at the concert, the chain reaction of suspicion and tension that had followed it and the attempts at conducting his own personal investigation which had resulted in such enormous strain between him and Adam and others. It was describing his own emotions that proved almost impossible and he struggled to find the words to adequately explain how self-doubt had begun to consume him as the situation unraveled and how he had felt his emotional strength slipping away. Talking about the effect on his relationship with Adam was almost more distressing than Gus could bear but he forced himself to be brutally honest. He left nothing out, describing exactly how and why things had deteriorated between them, from Adam learning the truth about him and Tommy, to his behavior at the Griffin party when he deliberately challenged Adam’s animosity with his own, to the aggressive confrontation that had ended up in their bed and had completely shaken his faith in himself and in their bond for the first time since they’d been together.

He broke down again at that point and Ebert was taken aback at the intensity of his guilt. Ebert was very gentle with him, talking him through a lot of his emotion, and by the time they were finished Gus was dry-eyed and calmer.

"Are you afraid it’s over?" Ebert asked soberly.

Gus bit a lip already reddened with nervous chewing. "No…I’m just afraid it’s…broken, I guess. That things aren’t ever going to be right between us again."

"There’s a difference between not being the same and not being right. I’d agree with you that things won’t be the same…how could they be after what you’ve both been through? But that doesn’t mean it can’t be right. After all, something that’s ‘broken’ can be fixed. A broken bone is twice as strong once it’s healed."

"As someone who’s suffered a number of broken bones," Gus replied with a touch of his usual spirit. "I’d also like to point out that they can still ache like crazy for years afterwards…especially when it rains."

"Okay," he agreed with a smile. "But you do get my point."

There was a deep sigh. "I do. I just have no idea where to start to try and put everything back together. If there wasn’t enough pressure on Adam before this…” Gus gestured wearily. "This isn’t
just a fishbowl. It’s a shark tank. The media will be all over us for weeks, if not months."

"Maybe you should try and get away together."

Gus's face flushed. "We were…we’d made plans…after New Year’s…Adam promised we’d go to Toronto for a few days…"

Ebert squeezed his hand. "You’ll get your chance. Once he’s out of hospital he’ll have the perfect excuse to take some private time."

Gus nodded but his eyes were unfocused; exhaustion was creeping over him and he was finding it harder and harder to follow the conversation.

"You need to get some rest," Ebert said softly.

He brushed aside Gus's gratitude with affection, warning him to take it easy and threatening him with dire consequences if he heard otherwise.

"Is he okay?" Michelle said anxiously as she rode down in the elevator with him.

"Better, I think. He talked…a lot."

Michelle seemed relieved. "Thank God! I was just afraid he’d starting bottling things up…he was so close to a nervous breakdown before any of this happened and I was afraid that…well, you know. I had tried to get him to talk to me a little today but he didn’t seem to be up to it. Your timing was perfect. You must have been exactly the person he needed to see…somebody impartial, with a more balanced perspective on things…"

"Yeah, well…I was all warmed up," Ebert admitted and, at Michelle’s puzzled expression, elaborated, "Because I had almost exactly the same kind of visit with my son this morning."

"Did you?"

Ebert nodded. "The conversations were pretty much verbatim. And Adam blames himself just about as much as Gus does…for the whole situation. Even more so now, I’d say…since he knows now that everything Gus was trying to do to protect him wasn’t as far off the wall as it might have seemed at the time. And he could have died trying to save him, too…that’s tearing him up something fierce."

"It got pretty bad between them," Michelle said quietly. "I don’t know how much either of them told you…"

"I know. I heard it from both of them. Fear and anger and frustration can do that to people, no matter how close they are. They stopped trusting themselves and worse, they stopped trusting each other, but only because they were being manipulated and because one was being played off against the other. Once they realize that was completely beyond their control and stop beating themselves up about it, they’ll be able to start working things out. But make no mistake - what happened between them is going to be a big hurdle for them to overcome, on top of a hundred other hurdles."

"But you think they’ll be okay?"

"I think they need a lot of time to heal. Themselves. Each other. It will be hard but neither of them
gives up very easily. You know that they both want this."

Michelle walked him out to his cab and hugged him, betraying a little of her own vulnerability for a moment as tears threatened. Ebert squeezed her shoulders and set her back and looked down into her face with a reassuring smile.

"Nothing happens without a reason," he said gently, and then quoted, "Take these sunken eyes and learn to see that all your life you were only waiting for this moment to be free."

"My Bible study is a little rusty," Michelle said ruefully, wiping her eyes. "Matthew, Mark, Luke or John?"

Ebert grinned.

"Well…actually…" he said. "The other Fab Four. John, Paul, George and Ringo."

Late that night, Michelle was awakened by the sound of Gus struggling to get out of bed.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine."

Michelle scrambled up from the sofa bed anyway and turned on the bedside lamp. "Are you sure?"

Gus squinted in the sudden light. "I said fine."

"Can’t sleep?"

"Michelle! I’m okay! I just want some water…my throat’s acting up a bit, that’s all."

Michelle’s concerned expression didn’t change.

Gus sighed.

"I’m not dreaming, Michelle," he said gently. "It’s okay. Really, I’m not."

"But you’re not sleeping. You need your rest." As Gus sighed again and rubbed one hand wearily over the back of his neck, Michelle fussed a little more and then ventured, "Are you afraid to sleep, Gus? Is that it?"

The hand dropped abruptly. Gus stared. "Afraid?"

"Afraid to sleep…in case…"

"No, I’m not. Honestly I’m not. What do I have to be afraid of?"

"The accident," Michelle muttered, feeling awkward. "And Adam… come on, Gus…think of what
you’ve been through. Again. You know that sooner or later you’re going to start having those nightmares again."

Gus shook his head. "I don’t think so," he said softly. "Not anymore."

He held out one hand to his friend and Michelle nearly fell over herself crossing from one bed to the other. They sat side by side with their hands clutched together while Gus’s eyes filled with memories and pain and he took several long minutes trying to find a way to put the feelings into words.

"Don’t you see, Michelle? The nightmares about the accident…about Adam…I used to dream that he was trapped, that I couldn’t get him out, that he died because I couldn’t help him." His voice cracked briefly. "But I did get him out, Michelle…I was there when he needed me. I was able to save him…so those dreams don’t mean anything to me anymore." His mouth curved in a tentative, reassuring smile as Michelle blinked rapidly, then had to drop his head down and close his eyes, completely overcome with his own emotion and the memories of all that they had been through together.

"Thank God for that," Michelle said shakily. "I never thought I’d heard you say those words. Never. I never thought it would be over for you…"

Gus swallowed. Then he squeezed his friend’s fingers tightly as he spoke again and although his voice was very quiet, there was a new, underlying glimmer of relief and self-assurance.

"Well, it is. I’m sure of that now. They can’t hurt me…not anymore. It’s over, Michelle. Really. It’s finally over."
The next day proved to be yet another emotional roller coaster.

First, came good news. After consultations with a number of specialists in a number of fields, it was determined that Monte did not have any permanent damage to his larynx but did have some severely aggravated tissue along his throat and esophagus. A significant amount of rest was really the only treatment prescribed other than the oxygen support doctors continued to wean him from as his lungs improved.

It was pointed out to Gus by a tearfully grateful Lisa, that the doctors all agreed Gus’s fast action in getting Monte out of the car had been the only thing between him and a permanent injury. "I was top of my class in ‘car rescues’ at school," Gus said with an embarrassed smile and sought to change the subject. "So…have any decisions been made about the tour?"

Lisa shook her head. "No. Everything is still up in the air. The doctors told Monte absolutely no performing for at least three weeks. They want to be really cautious with him. Depending on how he’s doing at that point, he might be able to do a little rehearsal. But realistically, it’s going to be six to eight weeks before he’d be up to any kind of performance level. And then he’d have to physically be up for the traveling as well…I can’t see them taking on any dates until at least March."

"They all need the chance to really rest and get over this," Gus pointed out quietly. "Although I’m sure they’d all really rather just get back into action."

Lisa’s face clouded over and her eyes welled. "I’m not so sure about that."

Gus blinked in surprise but Lisa made no effort to elaborate. She just waved Gus off emotionally and muttered an excuse before she fled and Gus, too hampered by his wrenched knee had no option but to let her go.

He got a bit more information from Tommy and Isaac when they stuck their heads in to check on him in the early afternoon. They exchanged glances when Gus raised the issue with them, then both shrugged; neither of them would even think of not being completely up front with him.

"Yeah, we may have a problem," Tommy admitted. "We’re trying not to get too wound up about it, but we’ve all known how Monte’s been for the last few months. His heart just hasn’t been in performing with us…not after last summer. He wasn’t one hundred percent happy about the number of tour dates, he was complaining about the schedule and some of his performances were so flat that people couldn’t help but notice. And you saw how he was over Christmas…"

"Hell, Gus... you took most of the shit from him," Isaac put in broodingly. "…and we’re just afraid that this might have been the last straw for him."

Gus shook his head stubbornly, pushing aside the thoughts of the conversation he’d had with Adam the night Monte had gone on his drunken binge.

"It’s way too early to be thinking like that," he protested. "He’s had a hell of a shock – you all have. It takes time to get over. Maybe the fact that he’s got to take a month or two off will give him some time to get some perspective back."

"Maybe," Isaac agreed. "Or maybe he’s just going to keep right on drawing into himself and we’re never going to be able to get him back out. Face it, Gus…the main reason he’s stuck with all of this
lately is because of the responsibility he feels towards Adam and this tour. If he could, I think he would have pulled the plug on things a long while back."

"He loves performing," Gus said quietly.

"Sure he does. It’s all the rest of the shit that I think he’s had enough of. Some of us thrive on it. Monte never really has. And be realistic, Gus. What’s it going to be like from now on in? Nearly being dead is one heck of a boost to popularity, you know. We are all going to have the fans all over us on Twitter for months...looking for cracks."

There was no denial there. Gus had been through the exact same thing himself and he knew perfectly well that the focus was going to do nothing but intensify at a time when maintaining a public face was going to be more difficult than ever.

Isaac fell silent and Gus felt another, unexpected twinge of worry. Isaac was outwardly the toughest cookie in the box, bouncing back like Tiger from any little setback or roadblock. But watching him closely, Gus was startled to see some of the very cracks he’d just spoken about…more of a crazing over the surface than actual signs of fractures …but still uneasy hints of trouble brewing beneath the hard shell.

"Is he okay, do you think?" he said to Tommy when Isaac had gone.

Tommy shrugged. "I’m not sure. He’s not talking much. Not to me. He bites Sophie’s head off any time she tries, so we’ve all just decided to give him some space. We talk in generalities. He hasn’t said a whole lot about how he feels."

Gus touched his hand. "And what about you?"

"Me? I don’t think I’m going to be going for any limo rides in the near future, but…I’m hanging in there. Right now I’m just too worried about everyone else. It’s probably not going to really hit me for awhile."

Gus rubbed at his knee absently and frowned. "Will you promise me that you’ll talk to me when you’re ready?"

"Un huh." Tommy contemplated the floor for a moment and then he raised his head and gave him a meaningful look. "Look, Gus…I do know that some of us might have trouble dealing with this long-term. I watched you still going through hell two years after you nearly lost your life."

He flushed. Tommy sighed.

"I’ve got good family and friends around me. I’ll be okay. The big thing right now is that we have to come up with some way of approaching this with the fans. So far we’ve agreed that none of us were going to say anything to anyone until Adam says otherwise… But he needs to do something. Officially. To be honest, I'm not really sure what the best approach is here."

Gus shifted in his seat a little and chewed his lip. Tommy eyed him for a minute, wondering at his contemplative expression, then leaned over and nudged him with one elbow.

"I see wheels turning, buddy. What’s on your mind?"

Gus’s mouth curved. "Well," he said with a rueful smile. "Maybe I’m sticking my nose in where it doesn’t belong again, but...to be perfectly honest, I did sort of have an idea about that..."
"You’re worse than any physiotherapist I’ve ever had, do you know that?"

Michelle didn’t even blink. "Yeah, well I’ve had lots of practice with you and I know all your tricks. Besides, your doctor gave me some pretty specific instructions. So keep going. You’re not finished yet."

"That’s enough," Gus said, face pinched with pain.

"No it’s not. If you can’t handle having it flexed out, then the brace goes back on. If you can manage some range of movement, you can switch to the tensor bandage. It will be a lot more comfortable for you, but I’m not letting you do it if you can’t show me that you can handle it."

Gus ground his teeth and tried to relax on the bed. By the time they were finished, he was exhausted and soaked in sweat but the tensor bandage was a huge improvement from the huge, stiff knee brace.

"You have every color of the rainbow there," Michelle observed, admiring the bruise. "But the swelling’s down quite a lot. That’s a good sign."

"I’m just happy I’ll be able to get around a little bit."

Michelle paused, the last clasp for the bandage held in the air. "Okay, let’s get something straight before we go any farther. You stay off this leg…got it? I know you hate crutches, but at the very least you have to use that cane if you’re moving around at all…You don’t put any weight on it…are you listening to me?"

"Yes Mom," Gus said, but he was craning his head backwards towards the bedside table as the phone rang.

It was Adam, and Michelle noted with surprise the conflicting emotions that flickered across Gus’s face as they spoke.

"Are you absolutely sure? No, that’s great…of course it is…I just didn’t think it would be so soon, that’s all."

Michelle raised her eyebrows. Well, well. It sounded like Adam was coming home.

He was quietly insistent that the doctor had agreed he could be discharged but Gus, too wary of his stubbornness, refused to accept it as fact until he had tracked down the doctor and spoken to him himself. He confirmed Adam’s story…to a point.

"He no longer needs hospitalization, but he’s still pretty weak. There’s no question of him traveling at this point in time. I want to see him again in another four or five days, and then maybe… maybe…he’ll be well enough to be flown home if he wants it."

He put down the receiver and was gripped by a moment’s fear. The hospital had been neutral ground; as long as Adam was there, their relationship had been straightforward and one-dimensional, across phone lines that acted as a safe barrier between them and their personal situation. There was no need for discussion of how deeply they had hurt each other; the focus had been solely on Adam’s recovery. On one hand, Gus was overjoyed to know Adam was well enough to be released but on the other hand he was equally petrified by the realization that once they were alone together, they would have to look each other in the face and begin a very painful
journey back in search of themselves.

Michelle went down the hall to give the others the news while Gus began pulling together a set of clothes to take to Adam. Mindful of the way his arm would be bound, Gus was searching for as loose a t-shirt as he could find so that it would easily fit over the bandage and protective brace. He rummaged through the bureau in frustration and finally came upon a few larger shirts crammed into the top drawer. Trying to balance on the walking cane for support, he had to pull awkwardly to wrestle them out and ended up yanking out the entire pile.

And a little velvet box flew out with them.

It dropped in front of him and lay on the carpet. Gus stared at it stupidly and the more he stared at it, the more his heart crept up into his throat until it was nearly choking him. "Oh, God…" he said in agony.

When Michelle returned, she found Gus slumped on the edge of the bed with a pile of t-shirts littering the floor. The ring box was open and clutched in shaking hands and Gus was sobbing helplessly, unashamed. Michelle sighed, feeling her own heart contract painfully at the sight.

She stood silently at the side of the bed for a moment before she laid a sympathetic hand on her friend’s head and said softly, "That’s where he was the other night, Gus. The night the fire alarms went off. He’d asked me to help him pick it out."

Gus began to cry even harder, consumed with guilt at the memories of how he had berated Adam when he’d gone missing.

"I gave him such a hard time. He’s such a lousy, lousy liar. Why didn't he just tell me? I didn’t believe him and I just wouldn’t let it go…God, Michelle…I even started to think that maybe he’d…"

"I know. It’s okay. He knew that it looked really bad but he was just so determined it needed to be a surprise. He wanted it for New Year’s. I was trying to convince him that maybe he needed to wait a little, but there was no way I could get him to change his mind. He was going to ask you after the concert."

"It’s beautiful," Gus choked.

"Should be," Michelle said tartly. "After all I had to go through to get him to decide on one. Now…" She pointed at the open drawer and the pile of shirts. "You’d better put that back so that he can find it when he wants it."

Gus put his hands over his face. "What makes you think he still does?"

Michelle reached down and snatched the ring box away, closing it with a snap. "Stop it."

"After what I did to him…"

"Stop it!" Angry now, Michelle crouched in front of Gus and yanked her friend’s hands away from his face. "Do you hear me? Don’t you dare start doubting him now! He’s been through hell…you both have…and he needs your support and your love, not your doubts. The doubts are only a tiny part of what’s between the two of you. Stop hanging on to them so damn tightly and give everything else half a chance to come through."

Gus stared back at her, swallowing hard.
Michelle pointed again. "Now put all that back exactly the way you found it. And give me whatever clothes he needs and I'll go and get him."

"I'm coming with you..."

"You will not. Ebert and I will go. I've already talked to him."

"I want to be there, Michelle!"

"Too bad. You're not up to any walking yet and besides, Jeremy called and said it's still nuts over there. The last thing you need is to be running a gauntlet of fans right now. You will stay put, right here...and I'm not arguing about it."

Reluctantly, Gus gathered enough things together for Adam and packed them in a small case.

"Take this too," he said to Michelle, holding out Adam’s watch.

Michelle accepted it without a word. She understood the significance. Gus had been beside himself when Adam’s few personal belongings – including a necklace and his wallet – had been returned to him and he’d found that the watch face was badly cracked and it was no longer keeping time. Michelle had stepped in without being asked, contacted the jeweler who’d provided the selection of rings for Adam and was referred to a specialist in watch repair. By the end of the day, it had been returned to Gus, working perfectly again and with the only remaining sign of its ordeal a few small scratches on the back near the engraving.

"He didn’t seem to think you’d want that part replaced," Michelle had remarked and Gus could only nod mistily with emotion.

Ebert and Michelle were gone far longer than Gus thought they should have been and he was nearly beside himself by the time they actually returned to the hotel. Despite himself, he’d gone back twice to where he’d re-hidden the engagement ring and spent a great deal of time staring at it. He didn’t try it on - somehow he didn’t feel he had the right to - but simply sat and clutched the box with his heart pounding. Then he gave himself a stern shake, put it carefully back in its place and put the thought of it just as firmly out of his mind.

There were too many other things to be dealt with first before he could even contemplate that particular idea.

When he heard Adam’s voice in the hallway, he scrambled to his feet and hopped to the door with his heart in his throat. He knew the first few moments between them were likely to be tongue-tied and uncomfortable and all possible opening lines were completely wiped out of his head the moment he saw Adam’s face. He looked very drawn and tired and but his eyes lit up when their gazes met and he gave Gus a timid smile.

"Hi, honey...I'm home."

Michelle’s voice cut into the reunion. "Hey, you! What part of 'stay off that leg' didn't you get? You were given that cane to use for a reason, you know. So where is it?"

Gus ground his teeth. "Michelle, I don't need it right at the moment."

"No, I do. I want to hit you with it."

Fighting a smile, Adam caught his left hand under Gus's elbow to support him. "Don't take it personally. She's been scolding me non-stop for the last hour. Are you okay?"
Gus leaned his head in close to kiss Adam, trying to both keep his balance and avoid jostling the sling that cradled Adam's arm. As a result, it ended up as more of a bumping of noses than anything else and they both flushed awkwardly.

"I'm fine. But I was getting worried about you...what took so long?"

"Nothing that you needed to worry about. Look, I think we should both sit down before we fall down."

"Come along, Hoppy," Michelle said grimly, detaching Gus’s arm and steering him over to the bed. She plunked Gus down none too gently and stacked a couple of pillows beneath his knee. As she did so, she glanced over at Ebert who was helping Adam off with his jacket and inquired, "Do you want to tell him, or shall I?"

"I'm not going there," Ebert protested, shaking his head.

"Tell me what?" Gus said, immediately wary.

"Why we took so long."

"Before you both start winding him up," Adam said, wincing as he settled onto the sofa. "All I did was stop and sign a few autographs…that’s it."

Gus went wide-eyed. "I thought they were keeping the fans out of the parking garage?"

"We weren’t in the parking garage," Michelle explained sweetly. "We came out through the front entrance." As Gus’s jaw dropped, Michelle added just as sweetly, "And to be fair, he probably didn’t sign more than twenty or thirty…"

"Try more like fifty," Ebert muttered. "If you’re going to snitch, at least be accurate."

"Whatever," Adam said tiredly. "Come on, guys…some of those fans have been outside the hospital since right after the accident. I was just trying to put some of the rumors to rest, that’s all. Everyone was very polite and careful around me; nobody was pushy, nobody was grabbing at me…it was just something I felt I needed to do, all right? End of discussion."

Gus looked a little dismayed at this but to everyone’s astonishment no rebuke followed. In fact, after studying his hands for a moment, he simply nodded his head and said quietly, "I’m sure it really meant a lot to them that you took the time to do that."

And nothing more was said about it.

Gus privately thought Adam should be going straight to bed but although he seemed extremely tired, he insisted that Ebert order up dinner for them all so they could spend some time together before he left.

Gus’s eyes went to Ebert’s in consternation. "You’re leaving?"

He nodded. "Yeah. First thing in the morning. My flight leaves about 7 a.m."

Gus swallowed his objections. He’d hoped that Ebert would have stayed on for a few more days. Somehow he sensed that he and Adam were going to need some kind of buffer between them and it was already clear that Michelle would not volunteer herself for that duty any longer. Ebert didn’t miss Gus’s disquiet and when Adam had finally reached the point of exhaustion, they said their goodbyes and Ebert spoke to Gus privately as Gus walked him back to his room.
Gus would never disclose the details of their conversation to anyone but he was deeply touched and reassured by Ebert's straightforward counsel and he hugged him long and hard before they finally parted company. Then, taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders and hobbled back to his own room.

When he let himself back in, he was taken aback to find that Adam had managed somehow to get undressed and was sitting on the edge of the bed in boxers looking a bit green around the gills and struggling, one-handed, to get the top off one of his prescription bottles.

He limped over to help him.

"Let me," he said, trying to take the bottle from his hand. "Adam, I've got it. These things aren't just kid-proof, they're patient-proof...even with both hands."

He glanced at the labels and tapped out one of the antibiotics and two of the painkillers into Adam's open palm.

"I'm okay with one."

"It says you can take two."

"I know. But I'm okay with one."

Dubiously, Gus returned one pill to its bottle, recapped both and set them on the bedside table. Watching Adam drink the doses down, he said quietly, "You look a little shaky. You might have overdone it a bit today."

He nodded. "I think maybe I did."

"Well, tomorrow nobody's coming in through that door unless absolutely necessary. They'll have to get past me first."

Adam glanced up, amusement creasing the corners of his eyes. "Oh yeah?"

Gus's own lips curved. "Yeah. I have a cane and I'm prepared to use it."

Adam sighed heavily and then gestured up and down. "Well, how about you either use it for its intended purpose or get off that leg? If you overdo it as well, you're not going to be much use in being my watchdog, are you?"

Gus pulled back the bedcovers so Adam could lie down, running his eyes over him surreptitiously as he did so and noting the nasty scrapes and bruises along Adam's shoulder and down his right side. He looked stiff and sore and terribly tired and his eyes clenched shut against the pain in his arm as he tried to get comfortable.

Gus hovered without touching him until Adam suddenly let his breath out hard between his teeth and opened his eyes.

"I'm okay," he said when he saw the look on his face.

Gus chewed his lip a little, not at all certain that Adam was but unwilling to push the point. Now that they were alone, he felt the awkwardness resurfacing between them and knew that Adam did as well. There didn't seem to be anything to say that didn't invite a conversation that neither of them was in any condition to start.
"Would you be okay if I went for a bath?" he asked hesitantly.

"Sure."

He turned the lights down and left the bathroom door ajar so he could hear Adam if he happened to get up. It was a bit of a struggle getting in and out of the tub, but he emerged a half an hour later feeling that the long, hot soak had done him some good. Adam’s eyes were closed; Gus could only hope that he was sleeping. While brushing his hair, he eyed the bed and wondered uneasily if he should perhaps spend the night on the sofa. Then he tossed the brush down with a soft curse. Screw that. Those were just doubts again. He needed to be close to Adam and it was bad enough that they’d been apart this long.

Still, he hesitated for a moment at the edge of the bed and then crept in very carefully, as concerned about jostling Adam’s arm as he was about waking him. Adam didn’t move and Gus, struggling to stretch out his bad leg and get comfortable, finally settled down on his side where he could see Adam’s face in the faint dusting of light that filtered in from the street through the window blinds. He might have fooled Gus if he hadn't known him so well; after a few minutes he became absolutely certain that Adam wasn’t sleeping, no matter how hard he might have been trying to convince him otherwise.

He spoke very softly so as not to startle Adam.

"Is your arm bothering you?"

Silence. Then he heaved a sigh. His eyes blinked open and stared upwards, unseeingly.

"No."

"Are you sure? Because you can take another one of those pain pills if you need to."

His voice was very low. "No. I’m fine."

Gus let the silence grow for another few seconds.

"Something’s bothering you," he said gently. "Are you hurting somewhere else?"

In the shifting shadows, Gus could see that his eyes closed briefly and then reopened. His voice was just as quiet, but full of bitter irony.

"Yeah. I am."

Carefully, Gus shifted a little closer and raised himself on one elbow so that he could see Adam's face more clearly. Adam's eyes remained fixed on the ceiling and his expression was very controlled but he seemed troubled in more ways than one.

"What hurts?" Gus whispered.

It seemed a struggle to find the right words. When they finally began to come out, they were awkward and flustered and ragged with too much suppressed emotion.

"Everything. Everything. Right now I want more than anything to just be able to hold you and feel you next to me…I haven’t been able to hug you for so long or be close to you…I was so afraid of losing you…and I almost did…and I just can’t get those thoughts out of my head. It could have all been over, Gus."
"It’s not," Gus teased him softly. "And you’ve got the bruises to prove it."

Adam’s head turned suddenly on the pillow and Gus was startled by the abject misery on his face.

"Those aren’t the bruises I’m talking about," he said with difficulty.

Gus's throat tightened and Adam didn't miss his stricken expression. "Adam, we don’t have to deal with any of that right now. That can wait until you’re stronger."

"It can’t wait. I can’t wait. I can’t stand having this between us."

Again Gus tried to gently dissuade him. "You’re not up to this right now. We’ll have lots of time to talk when you’ve rested a little."

Frustration crept into his voice and Adam shifted edgily. "How am I supposed to rest? I can’t stop thinking about it. There are things I need to say. Now. Until we talk about it, I can’t…"

His voice broke off abruptly and he clamped his mouth shut. Gus saw his agitation building and struggled to find some words that would soothe him but before he could speak the rest of Adam's words began spilling out in anguish.

"I want to touch you…so badly…but I’m afraid that you…"

"What?"

Adam shrugged helplessly. "That you don’t want me to. That you’ll pull away. That it will make you feel uncomfortable. That you won’t like it…not after what I did…"

Gus hushed him gently. He was on the edge of tears himself but knew that his own emotion would only be Adam’s complete undoing. Both Michelle and Ebert had been absolutely right…this was not the time for doubts or second-guesses; he needed to take charge of the situation now…to comfort Adam, to strengthen him, to reassure him in the most obvious way that he didn’t doubt him or the love they shared. He remembered the endless times when Adam had held him and reassured him during the most painful periods of his life and knew that this was not a moment that could be recaptured at another time. He needed to reach out now — right here and now — and make the connection between them again.

Not only for Adam's sake, but for his as well.

He thought long and hard and when he finally spoke, he spoke with great care and gentleness.

"First of all," he said quietly. "I don’t look at it as something ‘you’ did. I look at it as something that happened between us…when we were both under a huge amount of pressure and when we were going through an incredibly difficult time. I look at it as something that we both have to take responsibility for, something we both allowed to start and didn’t stop and something that hurt us both…badly. It did hurt me, Adam…I’m not going to pretend that it didn’t. It hurt me and frightened me but the main reason it frightened me was because of the way that I tried to hurt you. The things I said to you. The way I made you feel. It was cruel and deliberate and I was so angry…I wanted to hurt you…and I can’t stop blaming myself for that. So what happened after that…it wasn’t just you. We brought it on ourselves."

"And now what?" Adam said in a choked voice. "Where do we go from here?"

Gus shifted a little closer. "You said you wanted to touch me," he whispered.
Adam stared at him, frozen. A muscle flexed along the line of his jaw. "Gus…"

"It’s all right. I need you to know that it’s all right. I need you to know that I want the same things as you do." Eyes warm, he reached across and took Adam's left hand, taking great care not to jostle his bandaged arm as he tilted him gently towards himself so that they were only inches apart.

His voice softened a little more. "Where do you want to touch me, Adam?"

Adam sucked his breath in sharply in surprise as Gus simply laid his hand over his and then placed it gently against the base of his throat where the pulse immediately leapt and began to pound.

"Here?" he whispered.

Adam didn’t move, but goose bumps ran all through him.

"Do you feel that?" he said very softly. "You do that to me. Always have. Every time. I could never stop wanting you to touch me…"

Adam lay still, breathing heavily, eyes on Gus's face.

"Where else?" he murmured. "Where else do you want to touch me?"

Adam couldn’t form an answer and Gus didn’t wait for one; he simply slid Adam's hand downward to his chest. His breath caught and so did Adam's and a dozen new emotions washed over Adam's face as heat penetrated into his skin. Gus let their hands linger there a moment, just long enough for them both to be certain of the messages they were exchanging.

"Where else?" he whispered.

Adam's breath quickened again. Gus drew his hand downwards a little further, across his abdomen and then, more slowly, down to his hips. Adam's fingers tightened convulsively on his as Gus continued to study his face and when he saw the involuntary swallow that ran down the side of his throat, he pressed Adam's palm against himself very gently…not asking…not offering…just in a simple, compassionate gesture of trust and understanding.

Adam was watching Gus's face too, searching it for any signs of wariness or uncertainty and found only a steady reflection of his own emotions. He was trembling now, lost for words and almost afraid to move in case he broke the spell. But almost of their own volition, his fingers lightly curved into the juncture of Gus's thighs, just barely enough to register pressure against the skin there. Then he smoothed the hand away over Gus's hip, but not before he’d felt the jolt of electricity that rushed through Gus and he found the indefinable reassurance he was so desperate for. Gus’s eyelashes lowered unconsciously and his lips parted on an unexpected breath and beneath Adam's hand there was the faintest arch of his hips, responding to Adam's touch without thought or expectation…just a pure physical reflex to the pleasure of being touched by him again.

"Fuck, Gus," he said emotionally.

He took hold of Gus's hand tightly and kissed it, feeling his heart swell with relief and tenderness. It had been so hard and yet so simple but he knew the boundary had been quietly crossed and that there was no longer any doubt in his mind or Gus’s that the physical and spiritual connection between them was still strong.

Gus brushed his knuckles against Adam's bruised cheek, marveling at how he could almost feel the tension easing out of him. They lay with their heads close together, not touching but still sharing and oblivious to the rest of the world around them. To Gus, Adam suddenly seemed fragile and
wounded and all of her protective instincts kicked into overdrive.

"Sleep now," he coaxed gently. "Everything’s all right. I’m right here if you need me."

Adam nodded almost imperceptibly as his eyes closed. He was exhausted - in body, in mind and in spirit – yet Gus could see that he was already resting more easily and felt a momentary pang of distress that he had been so tormented by reservations and fear. With his head beside Adam's on the pillow, Gus watched his face while he slowly surrendered to sleep and kept murmuring to him in soft, tremulous whispers.

"I love you. I won’t ever leave you. I promise. I could never let you go..."

The one who amazed Gus the most was Terrance.

He not only brushed aside the effects of his concussion, he just as quickly brushed aside any attempts by his mom to fuss over him. He didn’t even seem particularly concerned over the scar that was likely to result from the puncture wound on his temple near the hairline. The moment he was mobile again he spent the majority of his time making the rounds between Monte at the hospital and everyone else back at the hotel, grimly ensuring that everyone was taken care of.

He was only one of a handful of people Gus let into the hotel room the next day and he stoutly backed Gus up when he insisted on keeping the rest of the visitors to an absolute minimum. Exertion and emotional stress had taken their toll on Adam and he had awakened in a fever, lightheaded, nauseous and aching from head to foot. The sight of Adam looking so ill rattled Terrance badly but Gus barely turned a hair. He’d been through enough recoveries himself not to know that there were always "crash and burn" days after surgery where the body basically passed beyond its ability to cope and began to rebel. He simply coaxed enough fluids into Adam to keep his medication down and keep him hydrated, bathed him with a cool cloth when the fever spiked and did everything else he could to ensure that Adam was as comfortable as he could possibly make him. It was an odd reversal of roles for him; Gus was the one accustomed to being under someone else’s care for long periods of time. Now he was the one doing the watching and the worrying and while it was a perspective he certainly could have done without, he couldn’t help but value the time that it gave them together…an intimate, private time when Adam relied on him and when any awkwardness was set aside in the face of sheer physical necessity.

Their talk before had gone a long way towards breaking down the barrier between them. The rest of the obstacles were being worn away by simple togetherness, even though Adam would have been hard pressed to remember much of anything for those next twenty-four hours. He did remember Gus carefully removing the brace from his arm to change the bandage, wincing himself with every twinge of pain he caused Adam, however involuntary. Adam did remember Gus soothing his skin with cool water when he felt unbearably hot and then bundling him beneath the comforter when his fever broke and he began shivering. He did remember Gus talking inconsequential nonsense to him to take his mind of the nausea when he felt sick and that it felt wonderful to feel his fingertips gently massaging his temples when his head throbbed. When he dozed, Gus dozed himself, sitting up against the headboard of the bed with Adam's head tucked into his lap and his arm curled over Adam.
Michelle, letting herself in to check on both her patients, simply smiled and quietly let herself back out again.

The next day was better. Adam’s first demand when he woke up was for immediate access to a bath and a toothbrush. Once he was back in bed, a little shaky but feeling more himself than he had in days, the second demand was for breakfast.

It progressed from there. Much of their time together was companionably silent, watching movies or taking the long naps that their sore and tired bodies seemed to crave so badly. They didn’t talk about the accident or any of the horrible events that had led up to it. Gus knew that Adam had a lot of questions… about Doug, about what had taken place at Griffin after the limo had disappeared… but he instinctively knew that Adam wasn’t ready for the answers, that he hadn’t come to grips with it enough in his own mind to be able to talk about it. But Gus also knew that Adam was reassured by the knowledge that Gus had been through it all before, that he understood many of the contradictory emotions and that he would be ready whenever Adam was to begin to deal with it. Right now, the focus needed to be on his physical recovery, their relationship and the future of his career.

Gus did not involve himself in any of the discussions about when or where the tour should resume. He knew management and Griffin were doing back flips trying to accommodate the changes but felt strangely detached from it all. However, he did have something to say about Adam’s approach to dealing with the significant amount of rumor and speculation that still surrounded the events at the Citadel. In fact, he had a very specific concept in mind and his earlier discussion with Tommy had resulted in him raising the issue with Adam, who thought the idea was worth following up.

Bill arrived at the hospital on Friday with absolutely no idea why he’d been asked to meet Gus there. From Gus’s point of view, the choice of venue had been a matter of simple logistics; Adam had follow-up appointment scheduled, and Gus was due to have a physiotherapy session.

Gus met Bill when he got off the elevator, hugging him as hard as his bumps and bruises would permit.

"You look at lot better than the last time I saw you," Bill said when he’d recovered his breath.

"Thanks. Consider yourself lucky you’re seeing me before the physiotherapist gets hold of me. Later today I’ll probably be swinging this cane at anyone who tries to come near me."

Bill had to shorten his stride to accommodate Gus’s halting steps. "I stopped by a couple of times to say hi…"

"…and I was sleeping, I know. I got your notes. I’m sorry I missed you." He shrugged, a little embarrassed. "It seems like all I want to do is sleep these days."

"Yeah, well…I’d say you’ve earned it. How is Adam?"

Gus waved a hand to indicate the end of the hall. "Hanging in there. You’ll see him; he’s here. But never mind that now…how are you? You’ve been on the front lines all week."

"It’s been a challenge," Bill admitted, rolling his eyes. "On one hand, Samuel’s trying his best to play down the dirty little family secrets that started all this shit… but on the other hand he just
can’t manage to withstand the urge to shine his own halo, so to speak."

"Not the most humble of heroes…is this what you’re saying?"

"Not particularly. I’ve just about had it up to here with trying to fence with his ego, especially since he doesn’t seem to be all that generous about giving you the credit you deserve."

"I don’t give a damn about credit, Bill. You know that."

"Doesn’t mean I feel right about it. So I end up saying a lot about absolutely nothing instead. As usual."

"You’re wasted on that stuff, you know," Gus reminded him casually.

Bill hunched his shoulders. "Yeah. Maybe. But it wouldn’t be a real good career move to walk away from being the promoter’s press officer on Adam Lambert’s tour, now would it?"

Gus grinned. "I wouldn’t necessarily say that."

He took Bill into the room at the end of the hall where his obvious puzzlement deepened. As pleased as he was to see Adam and as gratified as he was to note his pleasure in seeing him, he was still completely at a loss as to why he’d been summoned, especially when neither Adam nor Gus made any effort to introduce the stranger in the room.

He kept shooting inquiring looks at Gus who eventually put him out of his misery as he eased down onto the sofa beside Adam and stretched out his bad leg with a grimace. "All right, Bill. I know you’re confused as hell why I asked you here."

"I’m a bit curious," he admitted with a smile.

"Couple of reasons, actually," Adam said. "First, I haven’t really had the chance to sit down with you and really thank you for everything you’ve done for me. Gus told me how far you stuck your neck out to help him. He seems to think that if it hadn’t been for you he wouldn’t have been able to figure out what was going on in time to stop it."

Bill began to look a little self-conscious, his warm brown completion taking on a distinct flush.

"I doubt that," he muttered. "He was doing fine all by himself. But if I helped things along a little, I’m glad. No need to thank me."

"Don’t mind me if I look at it a little differently," Adam replied lightly. "But to be honest, the main reason I’ve asked you here is to see if you’ll do me another colossal favor."

Bill’s eyes traveled from Adam to Gus and then back to Adam as he took up the conversation in between bites of a chocolate bar.

"My PR people and my management are busting a gut because I’ve refused to let them say very much about what happened other than just releasing some pretty basic details…"

"…like everybody’s alive," Gus interrupted.

Adam balled the wrapper up and fired it at him. "…but I know I’ve got to do something official. You can imagine that I’ve had every major network and every major publication chasing me for an exclusive interview."

"No shit!" Bill exclaimed. "Probably the same people Samuel’s been turning down. Ellen, Jimmy
Bottom line is, I know I’ve got to do it. I am not thrilled with the idea, but there’s just too much secondhand information out there. If I don’t put something heavy duty out on the street in a pretty big way, the rumor mill is just going to keep doing it for me. So I’ve been kicking around a few ideas.

"TV is out," Gus said. "I don’t think Adam would be up to that. Which leaves print."

Bill nodded. "And I would think you’ve pretty much got your pick of publications too. Have you decided?"

"Un huh." Leaning forward in his chair, Adam casually indicated the stranger who was still leaning silently against the wall to Bills’ left. "Bill, this is Ralph Wenner. He’s the Music Editor for Rolling Stone. I’ve agreed to let him run the story."

Bill half-choked. He hadn’t recognized the face, but he sure as hell knew the name.

"Wow," he said, rising to shake the other man’s hand. "Pleasure to meet you. This is one hell of a story you’ve got on your hands here."

Wenner returned the nod with an affable grin. "Yeah, I know. And the timing is pretty tight. We’re planning on pulling the next cover for it."

Bill was fascinated. "So what do you need from me? Are you looking for a tie-in from the Griffin press office? I mean, anything I do has to be run through Samuel first, but if there’s anything I can do to help I’d be happy to work with you. Shit, I’d kill for a chance to do anything for Rolling Stone."

Wenner looked askance at the others. Gus let his eyes make one last trip to Adam for final confirmation and when he nodded, Gus leaned forward until Bill’s puzzled gaze met his and he offered him a gentle smile.

"Actually Bill…Adam's looking for a little more than that."

He was mystified. "Sure. I’ll do anything. You know I will. Just name it."

Gus’s smile widened a little more.

"He’d like you to write it."

Not only did Bill not swing at the pitch there was considerable doubt over whether or not he even saw the ball. His expression didn’t change and he continued to stare at Gus in bemusement while Adam stared back at him just as expectantly, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Write what?" he prompted.

All eyebrows rose.

"The article," Gus said with a little more emphasis.

More silence followed while Bill’s expression slowly began to morph. It took awhile before his face finally settled on one reaction and it would have been an understatement to say that none of them got anywhere near the response they were expecting. It wasn’t confusion. It wasn’t astonishment. It wasn’t even disbelief.
Instead, he looked completely and utterly horrified.

"Are you stark raving nuts? Whose brain-dead idea is that?"

"Mine," Gus said a bit wryly. "This is my story too, you know."

"But we both agreed…" Adam interjected.

"I’m not a writer!"

Gus sighed. "Bill, you are a writer. A damn good one. And you told me yourself that your dream was to write for a major publication…they don’t get any bigger than Rolling Stone."

"This is a touchy issue for me," Adam added, exchanging a glance with Gus. "I need somebody I can trust to really respect that this isn’t going to be easy for me to talk about. The truth here is pretty damn ugly."

"But I write press releases, for God’s sake," Bill protested. "That’s my point! I don’t have any experience writing about the truth!"

When their laughter had died down, he tried again.

"You can’t possibly be serious."

"You already know all the background," Adam said, ignoring Bill’s growing dismay. "Any other writer would have to go through weeks of research and that would be absolute hell for me. Not only do I not have the time, I'm just not up for it. Talking about this to you would be one thing… talking about it to a complete stranger…"

His eyes flickered briefly to Gus.

"You were there firsthand. Come on, Bill…you were one of the ones who made a difference in how things worked out! Who could possibly be better to act as my voice in all of this?"

"It needs a delicate touch, Bill," Gus pointed out quietly. "We both agree that the story needs to be told, but we need someone we can rely on to be sensitive about it. You can imagine how hard it’s going to be for us."

Bill was looking more distressed by the minute. "Gus, I’ve never done anything like this before. I mean not really. Not outside of school. You know that. I’m just not qualified…it would be a disaster."

"I don’t believe that. We happen to think you’ve got the perfect perspective for the job and we happen to think you’ve got the talent. Ralph’s already agreed that the editorial staff will back you up with anything you need. And so will we. But it will be your feature. Cover story. Guest interviewer with a first-person viewpoint."

At that Bill began to wheeze a little, making them smile.

"I can see why you wanted to do this here," Wenner said to Gus. "He’s starting to look like he needs a doctor."
It took convincing. Bill was by turns openly grateful, stubbornly opposed and scared shitless.

"Samuel will never allow me to do this," he insisted.

"Samuel’s been handled already," Gus said, sweetly innocent. "And he was remarkably co-operative. But then again, he and I have a certain…understanding…"

"Oh," said Bill. Gus didn’t elaborate and Bill didn’t push for details. He’d already been witness to the effectiveness of Gus’s methods when it came to dealing with Samuel.

In the end it was difficult to tell which was harder to believe…that he’d been offered this incredible opportunity in the first place or that he’d actually allowed himself to be talked into it. He was still stumbling over thank-yous half an hour later when Ralph Wenner invited him to lunch to work out some of the remaining details.

"I honestly just don’t know what to say about all this …"

"Oh cool," said Adam, looking heavenward. "He’s got writer’s block…and he hasn’t even started yet."

Bill shook hands with him, full of emotion and anticipation but when he got to Gus, he simply hugged him without a word and a long look of affection passed between them. It gave Gus tremendous satisfaction to know that Bill would be recognized both for his talent and for the effort that he had put forth on their behalf. He had risked his entire career to help him and Gus knew it was not a chance that he had taken lightly. There was no need for words between them; Bill’s honest pleasure and obvious appreciation were worth far more than anything he possibly could have said.

As for the rest of the necessary words…he was certain that those were in good hands too.

The weekend was a long one. Despite the trust they all had in Bill, interviews for the article still proved to be a painful and difficult experience. But by Sunday night, he had collected all the information he needed and there was a sense of relief among that the worst was finally over.

Monday morning found Gus and Michelle sharing a few private moments together at breakfast in the hotel. Michelle quietly announced her intention to fly home that evening and Gus couldn’t manage to hide his disappointment. Realistically he knew that Michelle had already stayed far longer than originally planned but there was still a sense of impending loss and every hint of regret showed clearly on his face.

"I know you need to get back. And I think pretty well everybody will be pulling out today and tomorrow."

Michelle took a sip of coffee. "Oh yeah?"

Gus nodded again. "As long as Monte gets out of hospital as expected today, Isaac and Sophie are leaving for LA tonight. Terrance’s off in the morning. I’m not sure what Tommy’s planning. I was surprised he didn’t leave with Dia yesterday."

Michelle sipped again. "He’s leaving tonight too."
"Oh? He’s flying back with Isaac?"

"No. He’s flying back with me."

There was a startled silence. Then Gus said, "Oh."

Michelle set her coffee cup down and carefully wiped a smudge of lipstick from the rim before she looked up, directly into her friend’s face.

"Does that bother you?"

"No," Gus said gently. "It doesn’t."

"We just want to spend some time together…"

"You don’t have to explain."

"That interview with Bill was hard on him, no matter what he says. He can hide out at The Farm for awhile…where nobody’s going to bug him…"

"Sounds like exactly what he needs."

"It’s going to take some time, you know…to really put all this behind him…"

Gus waved a hand in Michelle’s face. "Hello? Did you hear me? I said…"

"And if you’re uncomfortable with that, I’m sorry, but this is between him and me and you and I are just going to have to hash the whole business out some other time."

At that, Michelle sat back and crossed her arms defiantly.

"Can I talk now?" Gus asked in a very mild voice.

"Just don’t get in my face about it."

"I’m not…oh for God’s sake!" Rolling his eyes, Gus set both elbows on the table. "Will you listen to me? I’m glad Tommy’s going with you. Okay? Really I am. He needs the break. He needs to be with you. And as far as hashing everything out, I don’t think we have anything to hash. I was just pissed because you hadn’t told me what was going on. You had your reasons and I don’t blame you for it. Because it came out when it did, with all kinds of other shit going on, I think we just both over-reacted. As long as he’s happy and you’re happy, I don’t have any problem with the two of you."

In the silence that followed Michelle eyed him, still wary.

"You sure about that?"

"Do you want it in writing?"

"I just want to make sure it’s not going to be uncomfortable for you and Adam when you come to stay with me."
Slouching back in his chair, Gus picked half-heartedly at his bowl of fruit. "Actually…to be honest…I’m not sure we’re going to be doing that anytime soon."

Michelle’s expression grew even more suspicious. "Why not, for heaven's sake? You were looking forward to it!"

"Yeah. I was." Abandoning the remainder of his breakfast, Gus carefully folded his napkin and dropped it back on the table. "But Adam was doing that for me and I just don’t think that’s where he needs to be right now. He’s really worrying about Monte and Monte seems to be doing a very good job of pushing everyone away. He’s already sent Lisa and the kids home but it’s going to be a few more days at least before he’s able to fly anywhere. I just feel that Adam would really like to stick close so Monte has someone around him. After all, Adam has the perfect excuse…he’s not really up to traveling yet himself."

"So where will you go?" Michelle asked quietly.

Gus lifted his shoulders. "I don’t know. I want to leave that up to Adam. I know he would like to see his Mom."

Michelle toyed with the edge of the tablecloth. "You and Adam deserve some time alone too, you know. You have your own issues to work out."

"I know that. We will."

Michelle didn’t look convinced. "Well, from everything he’s said to me, Adam really expects to be in Toronto in a few more days. When exactly do you plan to spring this on him?"

Gus ran his tongue over his teeth with a grimace and looked at his watch.

"As soon as he wakes up."
Certain that Adam would still be sleeping, Gus let himself back into their room as quietly as possible and was therefore startled to find that not only was Adam fully awake, he was up and about and half-dressed to boot.

He was barefoot and in jeans that he hadn’t yet bothered to button, standing by the bureau with his back to him. The moment he heard the door, there was a sharp movement followed by a sharper bang as the drawer he was rifling through was abruptly slammed shut.

He whirled around to face him. Gus stared.

"Are you all right?" he said blankly. "I didn’t expect you to be up so soon. Are you feeling okay?"

He’d been right about one thing. Adam was a lousy liar. His attempt at nonchalance was as certain a sign of guilt as the telltale shade of crimson that worked its way along his cheekbones.

"Sure," he said, nodding too empathically. "Fine. You just startled me, that’s all. I was…ah…just getting myself a t-shirt."

He gestured lamely at the dresser. Gus’s gaze went from his bare chest to the bureau and back again.

"Having trouble picking a color?"

Adam realized he was empty-handed. "No. I just changed my mind. I think I’ll wear that denim shirt with the loose sleeves instead."

Gus’s eyes widened. "Okay," he said slowly. As Adam passed him on the way to the closet, he had to drop his head to hide his own blush and sudden smile.

He knew perfectly well what Adam’d been doing. He’d been looking at the engagement ring.

Gus had tried hard to put the thoughts of a proposal out of his mind. Michelle had taken great pains to assure him, and Gus no longer doubted it himself, that Adam’s intentions on the matter remained unchanged but that it was likely to be some time before he felt it was appropriate to broach the subject. Las Vegas had become a bad memory for both of them and it was therefore hardly the place that Adam was likely to choose to ask Gus to marry him. There were too many other places where the moment would be more meaningful and private and despite himself, Gus could not stop wondering exactly where and when that moment might occur. He half-wished that he hadn’t become aware of the ring’s existence at all; now he was going to be in a state of perpetual expectation until Adam did decide to pop the question and the anticipation was already making him crazy.

Adam took a long time getting his shirt out of the closet while he spent considerable effort kicking himself for having come so close to giving the game away. He was still deeply troubled by the fact that his carefully planned proposal had never taken place and now couldn’t seem to stop himself from formulating all kinds of backup plans. He kept feeling the need to take the ring out and look
at it but he knew that Vegas was no longer the place that either of them would want to associate with their engagement. On top of that, he still harbored a nagging doubt that perhaps their relationship needed time to fully heal before they took the next step. There was nothing more important to him now that asking Gus to marry him, but he was determined that the place and the time and the feelings between them be absolutely perfect.

Maybe in Toronto…when they’d had a week or so alone…had time to relax and unwind where Gus was the most comfortable…

"I was thinking that maybe we should postpone the trip to Toronto," Gus said unexpectedly, breaking into Adam’s thoughts so abruptly that he dropped both the shirt and the hanger as he turned to gape at him.

"Postpone it?" Adam said numbly. He stooped to pick up the shirt, trying to shake off the eerie realization that they’d both been thinking about the same thing…apparently both for very different reasons. He was perplexed and oddly hurt by the suggestion that they should change their plans. "But I promised you we’d go. And now we’ve got the extra time…we can stay two or three weeks if you’d like. You wanted to see Brian and spend more time with Michelle…why have you suddenly changed your mind?"

Gus had limped past him into the bathroom, missing Adam's bewildered expression and now he limped back out and went to the sofa, setting out an assortment of medical supplies on the coffee table. As he motioned Adam over, indicating he wanted to change his dressing before he put his shirt on, he said simply, "I haven’t changed it. I still want to go. Just not now, that’s all."

Adam settled down on his left, brows still drawn together in a frown.

Gus removed the brace and unclipped the tensor bandage. As he gently unwound it, he explained, "First of all, Tommy is flying back with Michelle…"

"Oh."

"…and they need some time alone. Second of all, there’s Monte."

Adam stared at the top of his head as he worked. "Monte?"

"Un huh. I know you’re really worried about him. So why don’t we stay on here until Monte’s well enough to leave and then we can fly out with him?"

"I don’t think Monte’s looking for company."

"Maybe not. But we can still make the suggestion, can’t we?"

"And what if he won’t go for it?"

Gus had removed the bandage holding the dressing in place and now carefully lifted the gauze from Adam’s arm. Predictably, Adam turned his head and made a point of looking elsewhere.
"Looks better today," Gus murmured, ignoring Adam's earlier question. "That spot that was infected has pretty much cleared up."

"Good."

Adam seemed quite content to take his word for it and Gus sighed inwardly. Adam had assiduously avoided all glimpses of the wound on his arm and so far Gus had made nothing more than gentle attempts to encourage him to look at it. As scars went, he knew from experience that it was going to be a significant one but Adam had already received assurances from a plastic surgeon that it could be greatly minimized once it had reached a certain point in the healing process. Still the thought of it clearly bothered him and he averted his eyes anytime Gus changed the dressing. Today, as he squeezed some antibiotic cream onto a gauze pad Gus suddenly felt the impulse to force Adam to deal with it and without stopping to think, he placed the pad on the suture much harder than was necessary and ran it down the length of the scar with a considerable amount of pressure.

Adam yelped. To Gus’s satisfaction, he also smacked his hand away indignantly and lifted his arm to examine it for damage.

"What on earth are you doing? That hurt!"

"Did it?" he said contritely.

"Yeah, it did! Give me that stuff. I’ll do it."

Grumbling, he lowered his head and smoothed the cream into the wound himself.

"Looks like hell," he muttered as he worked and Gus didn’t miss the way he had swallowed convulsively at the first sight of the torn flesh. "And you said this is an improvement?"

"Uh huh," Gus said simply, handing him another pad. "Here. Use some more. It will stop the dressing from sticking."

He was silent for a moment as he gingerly swabbed the wound from one end to the other. When he was finished, he set the pad aside and extended the arm back out to Gus to finish the job. When he saw the way Gus's lips were twitching in an attempt to hide his smile, he scowled at him.

"Don’t think I don’t know what just happened there."

"You’re a smart cookie," Gus said quite calmly. "There’s no reason why you wouldn’t know."

"Can I help it if I’m squeamish?"

"No reason to be squeamish anymore," he said just as calmly. "You’ve seen it now. It won’t get any worse than that."
He covered the wound with a clean dressing and began to rewrap it.

"As for Monte…"

"Yeah?"

"Maybe you’re right. Maybe he doesn’t want the company. But I’m sure if I spoke to Lisa, she could convince him to let us fly home with him. Just to keep an eye on him until we get home."

Adam considered that for a moment then said gently, "He hasn’t exactly been kind to you these last few weeks, Gus. I don’t want your feelings to be hurt if he takes any more of this out on you."

"You don’t need to worry about that," he replied with a patient smile. "Post traumatic tantrums used to be my specialty." Fastening the last clip, he folded the protective brace around Adam's forearm and secured it, then scooped up his shirt and eased the right sleeve up over his arm.

"Okay," he said after a moment. "So we go home with Monte." He glanced down at Gus's hands as he began buttoning the shirt from the bottom up and spoke almost hesitantly to the top of his head. "And then what?"

The tentativeness in his voice was unmistakable. Gus knew Adam was asking, all over again, for reassurance that he had no qualms about thoughts of their future together.

"Then," he said softly. "After spending some time with your mom, I’d like to go home."

Adam's breath caught a little and Gus, fastening the last button, let his hands linger against Adam's chest for a moment before he touched one finger to the curve of his jaw and gently lifted his face so that their eyes met.

"To our own house. Our own bed. Our own yard. Our own kitchen. And I want to lock the damn door on the way through and stay locked up with you for about a month. I need to be with you. Alone. Just you and me. Just us." The finger traced upwards a little until it was touching the corner of Adam's mouth where Gus felt the faintest tremble and he smiled, half-trembling himself.
"Please?"

When Adam nodded in answer Gus's hand cupped his face gently and drew it closer. It was the first time they had kissed – really kissed – in more than a week and the reaction was unmistakable. Eyes closed and bodies shifted closer together and a hot shudder went through them both.

It lasted only a few seconds. Then they drew apart, flustered and warm and feeling a thousand different emotions…all entirely the right ones. It was all the reassurance that either of them needed.

It was more than enough.

____________________________________________________________________________________

Adam had never allowed neither his personal situations nor his band members' to be completely dictated by management, no matter what the risk to his reputation. It wasn’t quite as easy in practice as it was in theory but he had managed, with a few notable exceptions, to keep more of a balance between what was personal and what he felt the fans had a right to know.

In this case, it was more the opposite. As Tommy had pointed out to Gus, management had been encouraging Adam to be as open and as forthright as possible, and even to exploit the sympathy factor a little as well. It had been Adam’s decision to confine the official "story" to Rolling Stone, but at the same time, he had not made any attempts to have the hospital or management pull any punches when it came to releasing basic information on their medical situations.

Monte was the only holdout. He insisted that he be discharged from the hospital as quietly as possible. Although doctors had declared him "ready to go home", he insisted on being discharged early evening.

Everyone began to go their separate ways that day. It was hard to say whether having Adam around for the next few days made any real difference to Monte but if nothing else, Adam was able to monitor the situation and report back to others that Monte seemed to be improving… at least from a physical perspective. While Adam worried about Monte’s ongoing level of anxiety and sullen withdrawal, he was hardly surprised by it. What did surprise Adam was the difficulty he was having himself in dealing with the ongoing emotional effects of what he’d been through.

It was an up and down week. Within a few days the soreness in Adam’s throat had cleared up and his arm had improved to the point where he was able to gently flex his fingers without too much pain. While this was a great relief to him, he could not seem to get past the physical fatigue and he found himself plagued with brief but intense periods of unexpected depression.
Several times Gus found him alone on the balcony, hunched on a chaise lounge and staring blankly. He would be shaky and tearful and bewildered by a rush of conflicting emotion and Gus, feeling his heart break, would simply crawl up on the chair with him and snuggle wordlessly. When Adam did want to talk Gus listened without interruption, answering his questions as gently and truthfully as he could and trying to understand that his boyfriend needed to express some of his anger and hurt. When Adam lost his temper, he apologized humbly but the little explosions seemed to come and go in a natural cycle and Gus was inwardly relieved that the other man was starting to deal with some of his grief.

There were still moments of awkwardness between them. When they tried to talk about their personal situation, words sometimes came more haltingly than expected and there were frequent, tongue-tied silences. It was an honest struggle and if the conversations were self-conscious and painful they were also by necessity quite frank. They both made the effort to ensure that any uncomfortable moments were balanced out with warm hugs or extended periods of hand-holding but that was as far as it went. Even kissing became a frustration and both would break away in flustered embarrassment, each worried that they might be sending the wrong signal to the other before the other was ready.

They argued only once and, predictably, it was over Tommy. It was the one topic they had deliberately skirted until Gus finally decided that the time had come to take the bull by the horns. "As soon as we get back to L.A.," he said casually one afternoon. "I'm going to ask Tommy to start looking for someone to replace me as director of his charity."

Adam was shocked. Gus kept his face carefully averted and Adam could not read his expression.

"What on earth for?"

Gus chose a magazine from the coffee table and began thumbing through it without really looking at any of the pages.

"I just think it would be easier if I wasn’t working for him anymore."

"Because of me?"

"Because I don’t ever want you to be uncomfortable with the fact that he and I would be spending a lot of time together, working together, traveling together... I just don’t want it to ever be an issue for you. It’s not worth it... not if it’s going to make things difficult between us."

"So in other words... because of me." When Gus shrugged impatiently, a clear warning not to pursue that particular line of questioning, Adam continued just as impatiently, "You don't have to do that for me, Gus. It's not what I want."

"I've already decided. It will just be less complicated this way."

"No."

Gus cocked one eye at him in disbelief. "No?"

"No. I won’t let you do that. It's wrong."

Gus's hackles went up. "I'm not asking your permission!"
"No, you're doing something even worse. You're doing something without even discussing it with me."

Gus's voice flattened and went hard. "Okay, so it's just been discussed. I've told you my plan and I've told you my reasons. End of discussion."

He didn't want to argue with Adam. Even the mere thought of a quarrel brought back distressing memories of their last argument and its disastrous results. And quite frankly, Adam's reaction baffled him; he'd expected Adam to be relieved... or at the very least appreciative of the fact that he understood the reasons why his job might have become a source of discomfort for his lover.

But he didn't seem to be taking it that way.

There was a troubled silence while Gus resumed flipping blindly through his magazine. He was so deep in his own thoughts that he nearly jumped out of his skin when Adam unexpectedly sat down close beside him on the sofa. The magazine was pulled from his hands and tossed back on the table and when he looked up at the other man somewhat defensively, he found that Adam's face was very close to his and his expression was very gentle and serious.

"Can I please say something?"

Gus's lashes lowered, hiding his sudden apprehension. "I don't want to fight about this, Adam."

"No fighting, I promise. There's just something that I need you to understand."

When he nodded uneasily, Adam touched one finger to his cheek to make Gus look at him.

"What you do for Tommy’s foundation is very important to you. You enjoy it. You're wonderful at it. It's been amazing for me to see the things you've accomplished."

Gus flushed a little. Adam went on more carefully.

"You enjoy working for Tommy. He's important to you. Very important. Obviously the two of you managed to get past being uncomfortable over what happened – why don’t you believe that I'll be able to do the same thing?"

"The situation is a little different with you and me," he murmured.

Adam's hand moved to Gus's temple, combing his hair with his fingers. "Please don’t quit. If nothing else, now is not the time to be making those kinds of decisions. If it didn’t make you happy, it would be different. But you are happy there. And I need to know that you're doing something fulfilling and worthwhile...something that gives you your own independence. Something that's separate from who I am and what I do. I know sometimes that part of my life gets so big that it seems to push you out of the way." He hesitated. "Otherwise, how long will it be before you start looking for something else to make you happy?"

"You make me happy," Gus said, gruff with emotion.

"And I want to do anything I can to keep you that way," Adam said, trying to tease gently. Then unexpectedly he sobered. "Anything that’s going to keep you from wishing you’d moved back to Toronto and taken the police department up on their job offer."
Gus's eyes widened.

Adam's next words came only with great difficulty. "Unless that’s what you want, Gus. You’ve never really told me how you feel about it."

Gus shook his head. "I don’t want that job, Adam."

"Are you sure?"

"I won’t lie to you. Three years ago it would have been my dream. But that’s not where I am in my life anymore. Too much water under the bridge…"

He paused and then his chest rose and fell in a heavy sigh. "I like what I do, Adam…"

"Then keep doing it." When he opened his mouth to protest again, Adam wagged his head back at him and said, "Please just leave things the way they are for now. You can always change your mind later. But don’t give up because of me. I’m okay with it, Gus. Really I am."

He held Adam's gaze for few seconds, searching for any signs of doubt or hesitation. When he saw none, he relented and leaned forward to touch Adam's mouth with a soft, warm kiss that startled him and made him smile.

"Okay," he agreed.

________________________________________

It was a relief to finally leave Las Vegas.

The news that Adam and Gus were travelling back to California with Monte and Lisa hadn’t gone over particularly well. Monte complained about being fussed over, about needing time to himself and most of all about not being consulted on the idea in the first place. He vented at Lisa in private and was surly when the four of them got together to try and make travel arrangements.

"I’m sorry. This is going to be a problem for you, isn’t it?" Adam said to Lisa apologetically.

"It’s not going to be a problem for me," she said grimly. "I’ve just about had enough of him being so sulky. Everybody understands what he’s been through. Everybody knows he’s hurting. But everybody else is also getting on with it… or at least they’re trying to. I know it’s not going to be easy for him to get over this, but sitting around and feeling sorry for himself isn’t going to get him anywhere. I’m starting to think he needs a good slap upside the head."

Gus, who was privy to this conversation, had to pick his jaw up off the floor.

"I’ve never seen her like that," he said to Adam later. "I know Lisa’s pretty headstrong, but usually she’s so sympathetic to Monte that it’s nauseating."
That may have very well been true but everyone could see that Lisa’s sympathy appeared to be running out. She had several heated exchanges with Monte that even had Adam wincing but nothing she did could convince Monte to start to open up a little to the people around him. He hid out in his room, refused to see anyone he didn’t absolutely have to and even avoided speaking to family or friends on the phone.

Under the circumstances, a regularly scheduled airline was out of the question. After some discussion, the management agreed to charter a private jet for the flight, but even the trip to the airport became an issue when Monte insisted on another covert operation to ensure absolute privacy.

"Any minute now we’ll be handing out the secret code names," Gus grumbled at breakfast the morning they were due to leave.

That thought apparently appealed to Adam; he swallowed a mouthful of bagel in a hurry and inquired softly, "Oh yeah? And do you have anything in particular in mind that you plan to start calling me?" Gus choked on his own mouthful and the blush that started on his cheekbones went both ways until he was red from the hairline to the neckline. The warmth wasn’t restricted to his face either; he was suddenly hot all over and as he looked away with a suddenly self-conscious smile, Adam began to laugh and reached over to squeeze his hand.

The last step of their emotional reconciliation had been taken earlier that morning, spontaneously and without any expectations from either of them.

Around dawn, they both had somehow shifted in their sleep and found themselves curled together. Neither truly woke but what occurred at that point was the start of a sleepy ballet, where their bodies took up the natural and completely unconscious routine that was so familiar to them. Adam’s bandaged arm was curved over his head on the pillow and out of the way, allowing Gus to snuggle quite naturally into his usual place beside his lover, with his head on Adam's chest and his arm thrown across him. It wasn’t long before one of his long bare legs was tucked between Adam's and they began stirring together drowsily, barely aware of each other in the conscious sense but moved by a physical connection that did not require wakefulness.

It was dark, it was quiet and they were making love before either of them realized what was happening.

Adam turned his head against Gus’s, sighing sleepily as Gus's hair tickled his face. He tilted towards Gus on one hip at the same time that Gus bent his knee and curved it up the length of Adam's leg until it hooked itself naturally into the curve of his waist. An intimate haze settled over them, weaving its way into the drowsiness, followed by soft murmurs and stroking hands, until there was a seductive mix of dream and reality consuming them both.

It was tentative and gentle, each anxious not to hurt the other but moved by a growing sense of urgency and need. Gus was suddenly wide-awake and aware of being filled with heat and hardness and circled by a strong arm that shifted him even closer. Adam too, was awake…but completely lost in sensation, rocking Gus gently against him and moaning Gus's name into his skin. The movements were languid and slow and even the pleasure was unhurried, flooding them both in undulating waves and washing away any of the doubts that might have lingered between them.

"I love it when you love me like that," Gus said softly, watching Adam's profile in the early morning light.
"That’s a good thing," Adam murmured, so relaxed that he could barely turn his head to kiss his boyfriend. "Because I could do that all morning... every morning..."

"Yeah?" Gus whispered, nuzzling Adam's throat and making him arch his neck. "You think so?"

Adam tilted his head back even farther and groaned. "Definitely."

Gus went from nuzzling his throat to nuzzling his ear. Adam, devoured by the warm, tickling mouth, was caught in a weak moment and didn’t see the shot coming.

"That’ll make a nice change then..." Gus crooned huskily.

"Hm?" Adam's breathing quickened; now Gus's fingers were tracing patterns down into the hollow of his hips....

Then he pinched Adam, just once, in a vulnerable spot.

"... because usually you’re grumpy as hell first thing in the morning."

More than anything, it just felt good to laugh again.

"Did I tweak your pride?" Gus said innocently, when he’d recovered from his fit of the giggles.

"That wasn’t my pride," Adam grumbled, still doing his best to feign indignation. It was no use; the look on Gus's face was worth being pinched anywhere and he’d almost forgotten the simple joys of playfulness and teasing. He took great pleasure in the full body blush he caused his lover at breakfast and as they packed up and prepared to make the trip to the airport, the mischievousness and banter continued unabated, almost as if they were trying to make up for the long dry spell where there had been nothing but difficulty and grief.

The next round came when Gus was waiting patiently for Adam to finish with the bathroom so he could do his own routine.

"How long does it take one person to put makeup on?" he said in exasperation when he poked his head in for the third time and found that progress still did not seem to be progressing. Adam made a face at him in the mirror. "The more appropriate question," he muttered gloomily, "is how long does it take a one-armed person to put makeup on?"

"You’re left handed, dear."

"Yes, I know that, dear. Doesn’t make it any easier. In case you haven't noticed, applying eyeliner is a two-handed process."

"Oh. I see." Gus leaned on the doorjamb, eying him speculatively. "Want some help?"

"No," Adan said very firmly.

Gus edged a little closer and hinted, "You know it would be a whole lot easier if you just let your face rest for a while, no makeup..."
Adam half turned and pointed the eyeliner at him warningly. "Go away. I am not leaving this room without makeup."

"Come on," Gus wheedled. "Just for a change. I’d just like to see your natural look."

"No!" As Gus edged even closer, Adam wagged the eyeliner to make his point and added, "So just back off and nobody gets hurt."

Gus spread his hands with a sanctimonious sigh. "Fine! Do it your way. But I think it’s only fair to point out that you are hogging the mirror an awful lot more these days, if that's even possible."

Adam was leaning back towards his reflection to resume his task; now he put the eyeliner down and narrowed his eyes at Gus. "I am not! It’s all the distractions that are slowing this whole process down here and I’ll give you three guesses who’s causing all distractions!" When Gus stuck his nose in the air in mock offence, Adam goaded, "There is a mirror in the other room you know. A big one."

"Is that your way of saying you’re going to be a while?" Gus goaded back. "Okay, no problem…I’ll get Jeremy to call the airport and have them hold the flight for a couple of hours."

Adam pointed at the door. "Out!"

"I’m going," Gus said with great dignity. But stepping closer instead, he swept one arm out and firmly prodded Adam out of the way just as he was about to lean back over the sink. "But if you don’t mind, I do need my razor and shaving cream."

"Be my guest," Adam said, sticking his tongue out at Gus as he reached in front of him. Too busy with his own self-righteous indignation, he failed to notice that Gus surreptitiously picked up the can of shaving cream on his way by and before Adam could react, he had squirted a handful of foam into one hand and neatly tagged Adam on the end of the nose with it.

When he saw the look on Adam's face he said, "Oooh, yeah… I’m dead now," and made a break for it.

Given that Adam was pretty much one-handed and Gus was pretty much one-legged, it pretty much evened out the odds. Hysterical with laughter, Gus hadn’t gotten two steps back out into the main room before Adam had caught him around the waist with his good arm.

"Think that’s funny, do you?" Adam said. It was actually; he looked a bit like an outraged cake decoration as he struggled to hold Gus in place with one arm while attempting to wrestle the can of shaving cream from his desperate grip.

"I’m sorry! I’m sorry!" Gus wailed, trying to wiggle free. "Uncle! Uncle!"

"Too late. Don’t start what you can’t finish. Now give me that!"

"Forget it!" Gus was hanging on for dear life but his grip on the can was awkward at best and, to his dismay, he found that his own hand was pushing down on the nozzle while Adam’s fingers clawed at his. The harder Adam grabbed, the more stubbornly Gus clung to his prize and before it was over there was a distinct, creamy trail across the carpet and two rather foamy combatants eying each other warily across an empty dispenser.
"Do you surrender?" Gus said, panting.

"I never surrender," Adam said, lying flat on his back. "You are going to have nightmares about me with cans of shaving cream for the next six months."

"Can I make a suggestion then?" Gus said, screwing up his face in disgust. "This stuff tastes awful. If you’re going to get back at me for this, can you at least do it with whipped cream instead?"

Adam raised himself on his good elbow. His intrigued expression was somewhat spoiled by the shaving cream in his eyebrows, but his fascination with the idea came through nonetheless.

"I'll take that into consideration," he agreed.

As a general rule, flying was on Gus’s list of favorite activities right up there with visits to the physiotherapist. Small planes were even more of an issue than big planes but in this case however, he was so relieved to get out of Las Vegas he would have flown to California strapped to the wing if necessary.

The ride to the airport was inevitably tense. Given the heightened level of media interest, a full half-dozen of the security team had stayed on to watch over Adam and also to run interference for Gus…who, much to his dismay, had been elevated to near god-like status when word of his involvement in the rescue at Luna Mesa had hit the news.

It bothered Adam that they left the hotel without any acknowledgement of the fans who still lurked around the entranceway, but there was no way he was going to make any suggestions about an appearance and risk winding Monte up before they had to be on a plane together for hours. Monte said little on the way to the airport, but Lisa was clearly on edge and the unspoken consensus among the rest of them was that she and Monte had likely argued over something prior to departure. Consequently, everyone tiptoed around them… and everybody heaved an enormous sigh of relief when the little jet finally lifted off.

"You okay?" Adam said to Gus, once they were in the air.

Gus made a face at him gamely. Leaning across, Adam pressed a quick kiss on his cheek and then left Gus alone to his iPod as was his habit to distract him from the whole flying experience. Gus leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, focusing on the music and trying to relax. He was actually getting quite comfortable only twenty or thirty minutes into the flight when he became aware of voices intruding over the sound of the music and opened his eyes on the off chance that somebody was trying to get his attention. Instead, he found Monte and Lisa glaring at each other and spitting short and not-so-sweet sentences back and forth.

Gus rolled his eyes and then closed them. Damn, they were squabbling again.

Seated where he was, Gus couldn’t help but feel like he was intruding on the argument. He kept
his eyes firmly shut and turned up the volume on the iPod, but even that didn’t manage to block out all of the bickering.

There was a sudden breeze and Gus peered cautiously between lowered lids to find that Monte was now alone with him in the forward set of eight facing seats. The rush of air had apparently been caused by Lisa stomping aft and Monte caught Gus’s tentative peek in his direction and scowled at him before slouching down in his seat and closing his eyes.

With a sigh, Gus looked back around behind him at the sofa and diagonally placed seats. Adam was sitting with Jeremy and he caught his eye, wincing at Gus in sympathy. He and Jeremy were doing their best to concentrate on a game of cards and pay no attention to the quarrel taking place forward of the wings.

Lisa did not return and after an extended period of time, Gus was concerned enough about her to risk unbuckling his seatbelt and limp cautiously back along the aisle to the kitchen area.
"Are you all right?" he said gently.

Lisa was red-eyed, leaning against the bulkhead that separated the kitchen from the cabin and taking angry sips from a bottle of soda. She looked more distraught than Gus had ever seen her, absolutely beside herself with sheer worry and frustration, and for just a moment Gus began to regret that he’d even asked the question.

"This is going to drive me crazy," Lisa said, gesturing with the bottle in desperation. "I might as well not even be around for all the good I’m doing him. No matter what I say or what I try and do, he just blows me off. I just can’t seem to get through to him about anything."

Gus took up a position on the opposite wall where he could lean back and take some weight off his sore knee. "I know it’s hard, Lisa. I’ve seen how rough it’s been on Adam and Adam is managing to face things a little. But trying to block everything out is as natural as it gets. Believe me, I know. And it doesn’t help when everything around you just reminds you of what happened. Vegas was a zoo. Maybe when he gets home he’ll loosen up a little bit. He might try, but he can’t go on blocking everything out forever."

"And how long did you go on blocking everything out after what happened to you?" Lisa asked bluntly.

Gus shifted in discomfort. "It was about six months, I guess, before…"

That was definitely the wrong thing to say. Lisa was aghast.

"Six months!"

"Lisa! I’d been in a coma, for God’s sake! I had one operation after another, I was in a wheelchair for about nine weeks… it wasn’t quite the same thing! And my career was over, and I’d lost my partner and my best friend. But yeah… it was about six months before I started seeing people again. Before I even left my apartment. I didn’t want to have anything to do with anybody. I know it hurts you and I know you’re scared for him. I’m worried about Monte too, but there isn’t a whole lot you can do about it except try and be patient with him."

"All I suggested," Lisa said, with a half-sob, "was that there were a few gigs coming up that he could go to… just as a guest… it would be low-key and give him a chance to get out in public a little bit again… but he won’t even consider that!"
Gus hesitated. "Well… his body might not be up to it for a while."

"It has nothing to do with his body! It has to do with suddenly not wanting to be who he is anymore. If he’d admit that to me it would be one thing… but he won’t even be honest with me about any of this. The truth is that he just associates what happened to you all with being in the entertainment business. So he’s decided he doesn’t want to be a performer anymore. That’s what’s behind all of this. He’s just taking this all too personally."

"Bit hard not to do that," Gus murmured, trying to be fair.

"So what are you saying? That I should just let him throw everything away? Between you and me, Gus… I doubt very much he’s going to be able to pull himself out of this … not unless something major changes. He doesn’t seem to care about any of it anymore. He’s pushing everything away… me, the children, family, friends… He won’t talk. He won’t listen. Even music doesn’t seem to comfort him." Lisa rubbed her eyes. "I hate the way he’s given up. I honestly thought that it would be the music that would help to pull him out of this. He used to say that no matter how difficult something might be, he could do it because of the music and the fans… because the fans believed in him. Now he avoids it all like the plague."

"I guess he just feels like he’s lost the connection to the performing right now… but I think you’re right. And I agree with you. I think music, gigs and the fans might be exactly what he needs to pry him out of his shell a little. Just… don't go too far. Better to let him come around in his own time."

Lisa’s hands went to her hips. "Did you come around in your own time?"

Gus flushed. "Well, no. Michelle pretty much had to beat me over the head and drag me out into public again… but like I said… that was a little different…"

"Different, my ass." Lisa muttered. "He needs to deal with a little bit of reality - right now - and the best way to get him to do that is to just throw him back out into public and make him face it and get it over with."

"It’s not something you can force, Lisa."

"Wanna bet?"

Gus stared. The conversation was starting to make him nervous.

"And how do you plan to accomplish that?"

Lisa downed the rest of her soda like she was throwing back a shot of whiskey for courage. Then she tossed the bottle in the garbage, wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and took something out of her pocket.

"Easy. With a little app called Twitter."
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Wow. At long last, the final chapter of Mine - the final chapter of the Saga - is now posted. *sniff* I look back at these two stories and think "did I really write all that?". It seems almost like another person in another lifetime. I want to thank all of you. Thanks for sticking by me, for sending countless messages of encouragement and praise. Thank you for all your questions about my characters and my plotlines and your creative criticism and complaints when the story wasn't going the way you wanted it to! Thank you for kicking my butt when I was feeling down about things and prodding me to keep going. I have appreciated it all. It's been a wonderful experience. Of course, you just don't stop writing and expect your characters to go away. Just last night, as I finished reading the whole thing one more time, I got this totally random scene going in my head and I still can't shake it. That's why creativity can be both a delight and a curse. Thanks again! Enjoy the Epilogue! Cheers!

The airport was made up of a number of terminal concourses, but it was to one of the private terminals on the far end of the complex that their jet was directed as it came into land.

Adam pried himself out of the game just before final approach and had returned to his seat to find Gus twisting his hands together nervously, Monte in an arm-crossed, eyes-closed, jaw-clenched silence and Lisa by comparison, grimly calm.

Adam sighed. "Crap, I'm starting to wish we'd gone straight to mom's place. I don't feel like hanging around them waiting for the shit to really hit the fan."

"You're not going to have to wait very long," Gus said beneath his breath, then just waved Adam off when he looked at him inquiringly.

After touchdown, the little jet swung onto the taxiway that paralleled the runway and began its trip towards the terminal. As the terminal lay directly ahead, no one in the cabin could see anything out either side other than buildings and other aircraft, but the pilots had a bird’s eye view of what lay ahead and after a moment the first officer’s voice could be heard a bit uneasily over the intercom.

"Uh… one of you security guys might want to come up here and take a look at this…"

Everyone exchanged looks. Jeremy threw off his seatbelt and went forward, sticking his head into the cockpit and peering out between the pilots through the front windshield.

At that point the jet pivoted to the right and rolled off the taxiway onto the ramp of the private terminal. At that point, the view out the port side suddenly became a whole lot more interesting and Adam, wondering what all the fuss was about, nearly had a fit when he saw what was there to greet them.

"Holy shit!" he exclaimed.
Jeremy reappeared from the cockpit. Leaning across Adam and Gus, he took another good look out the window to be sure and then spoke over his shoulders to the rest of the security team.

"Heads up, guys," he said. "I think we’ve got a major problem here…"

Somehow, somewhere, the police division had managed to pull together some barricades. The ramp was fenced, but the parking lot wasn’t and the hordes of people had simply stomped across the lawn, squeezed through the gate and taken up anxious positions outside the entrance from the ramp into the terminal, where security was at least able to confine them somewhat. It was about as orderly as the police could make it on such short notice and the crowd was relatively compliant and calm… at least until the aircraft turned onto the ramp and the screaming started in earnest.

All Gus could see was faces and heads and there was no way to judge the numbers. And all he could think of was Lisa’s earlier assertion of what it was going to take to snap Monte out of his self-imposed solitude.

"What the hell happened?" Adam said, open-mouthed.

Gus squirmed. Better to put a bright face on it…

"Gee… I’m guessing," he said lightly. "But it looks to me like a little birdie spilled the beans about us coming in this afternoon."

Everyone continued to gape out the windows until Gus’s comment sank in and gradually all heads turned until everyone was staring at him with disbelief and more than a little accusation.

"You didn’t!" Adam said wildly.

"Me? No! Not me!" Gus looked around at the critical faces and felt somewhat miffed. It figures. Just because I got a bit careless with the media a couple of times…

He crossed his arms defensively. "Not me. I didn’t have anything to do with it."

Monte didn’t appear to believe him. "You interfering stupid asshole," he said furiously.

Gus jerked his head around to glare at him. "Read my lips, Monte! I said I didn’t do it! I said I didn’t have anything to do with it!"

"Then who did?"

Lisa’s voice piped up quite calmly from where she remained in her seat on the starboard side.

"I did."

Heads swiveled. Jaws dropped. They may have been on the ground but Gus still felt the urge to tighten his seatbelt.

"Excuse me?" said Adam darkly.

Lisa tossed her head. "I might have posted something on Twitter a couple of hours ago. And no doubt fans picked it up."

"Have you lost your mind?" Adam said, staring at her in horror.
"What’s the big deal? It’s a 'welcome home', in case you hadn’t noticed their signs …"

Monte had gone the color of chalk. "I don’t believe you did this." She looked around impatiently. "Like I said… what’s the big deal? It’s just a chance for a few people to see that you guys are all in one piece and that you’re home safe…"

"A few people?" Adam echoed. "Fuck, Lisa… there’s more than a few there, in case you hadn’t noticed."

That seemed to be the signal for everyone to start talking at once. Everyone except Monte, that is, who lapsed into a shocked silence and simply stared at Lisa as if she’d personally thrown him to the wolves.

"I told the pilot not to get too close to the terminal," Jeremy said evenly. "The limo’s here… he’ll just have to drive straight out to the plane."

"Why don’t we just walk out to the limo when we’re done?" Lisa said impatiently.

"No," he barked back. "You just go straight to the car. The airport doesn’t have a whole lot of their security here and there aren’t enough of us to back you up."

"Bullshit," Lisa said rudely. She fished her sunglasses out of her purse, raked her hands through her hair and, as the aircraft rolled to a halt, stood up from her seat and smoothed her skirt down with one hand. "You can go straight to the car if you want. I’m going to go and see a few of those people whether the rest of you are or not."

She pushed by Jeremy, no mean feat in the narrow aisle, and was stomping down the steps off the aircraft the moment the stairs extended. Jeremy blew his breath out between his teeth in frustration and turned back to point at Adam.

"Don’t get any funny ideas," he said, then, as he became aware of Gus struggling to stand and grabbing his walking cane for support, he barked, "And just where do you think you’re going?"

"With Lisa," he said calmly. When Jeremy didn’t budge, he simply poked the end of his cane in the middle of his chest and added, "Excuse me."

"Gus!" Adam said sharply.

Gus glanced back over his shoulder. "I’ll give everyone your regards, don’t worry."

"No, that’s not what I mean," he said, scrambling to his feet and having to perform a similar two-step routine with his bodyguard to try and get past him. "I mean, wait up!"

"Shit, Adam!" Jeremy protested. "This is nuts! After everything that’s happened, you’re just going to walk out into a mass of people?"

Adam thought about that for a moment. "After everything that’s happened," he said finally. "You’re damn right I am. So let’s go. I’m just going to go up to the barricade and shake a few hands."

He hesitated at the top of the steps and glanced back. Jeremy had his eyes closed, the palm of one
"Look at it this way, Jeremy," Adam said calmly. "My ex-police-officer boyfriend is already down there, armed with a cane and a bad attitude. I saw him in action up close the last time I was in trouble. Do you really think anyone’s going to get a chance to so much as lay a finger on me?"

Then he glanced at his guitarist.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

There was no answer from Monte, nor did he move. Adam raised his eyebrows at Jeremy next and Jeremy looked from Adam to Monte and then back again.

"I should have stayed in the Army," he said resignedly. "All right, Adam. If you insist, then lead the way. I’m right behind you."

At the bottom of the steps, Gus looked back for Adam and then flashed him a brilliant smile as he ran down to join him. His appearance prompted a new level of screaming and Gus looked up into Adam's face for confirmation before he made a move in the crowd’s direction.

"Are you okay with this?" he asked.

Adam nodded, taking Gus's free hand in his good one. He matched his pace with Gus's as they walked across the tarmac past the limo that had drawn up to the door of the aircraft, and up to the barricades where the hordes of fans were grinning delightedly with waves and screams.

Lisa was calmly answering questions about Monte’s condition. Gus was drawn into the fray just as quickly as Adam, walking along and shaking hands and posing for pictures and when he glanced up, Gus could see that Jeremy and his cohorts had formed a protective perimeter around him, and were watching carefully from a safe distance. As it became apparent that the crowd was not going to be unruly, everyone relaxed a little, and Gus was gratified to see that Adam actually seemed to be enjoying himself. The high spirits of the fans was infectious and even the media who were there kept the profile low-key and informal.

After several minutes, the focus shifted and there were renewed screams. Adam looked back over his shoulder hopefully as Monte appeared in the doorway of the jet. Lisa and Gus also paused and held their breath, but after a moment’s hesitation on the top of the stairs, Monte made his way down to the tarmac with his head lowered, and didn’t so much as glance back up again at the crowd. Then he went straight to the limo and got in.

Gus’s eyes went to Adam’s and they shared a brief, regretful grimace before they both shook it off and returned to their conversations. Still it was evident that some of the fans there had come with specific hopes of seeing Monte and they made no effort to hide their disappointment. Gus found himself face-to-face with a woman in her late forties who seemed particularly distressed at the thought that Monte would not be making an appearance.

"I’m sorry," Gus said apologetically. "It’s been a long flight for him. He hasn’t been out of hospital that long and he’s still pretty shaky…"

The woman shook her head. "It wasn’t for me." She lowered her voice and inclined her head to the left where a tall red-headed girl stood quietly at her side. "My friend was hoping to meet him, actually."

Gus glanced over and offered a smile, a smile that he had to struggle to maintain when the other woman nodded shyly back in response. At first glance Gus had assumed the close-cropped, spiky
hair was just a fashion statement but after a closer look he realized that it was short by default, not by design.

"Hi," he said, extending a hand. He’d been in enough hospitals to recognize a cancer patient when he saw one and, as always, the realization was all the more distressing when it was someone young. There was another jolt of surprise as the girl had to shift awkwardly to return the handshake; when Gus glanced down, he could see that the woman was using a cane similar to his own.

"We have matching accessories," he said lightly and then nudged Adam with one elbow. Narrowing his eyes at him meaningfully, Gus pointed the woman out to him and left him to chat and sign her autograph book. Edging sideways to where the other woman was standing, Gus gave her a rueful smile.

"I’m really sorry," he said softly. "I know she must be really disappointed. Monte’s just not up to seeing anybody today."

The woman laughed a bit shakily. "That’s okay. Kate hasn’t been up to seeing anyone for weeks. If anyone will understand, she will."

"Oh?" Gus said in dismay.

There were a thousand stories like it. Gus himself had read many of the letters from grateful fans or from families of fans, expressing appreciation for the inspiration they’d found either in the music or in following Adam’s career and those close to him. He knew that from Adam’s point of view, and his band’s, it was one of the most gratifying things about the power of being a celebrity. But in many ways it was also a double-edged sword; the higher the profile, the more they were held up as role models, and, in this case, a woman’s admiration for Monte had backfired badly and resulted in bitter disappointment.

Adam caught Gus’s cue and took a considerable amount of time with this particular fan, making her flush and mumble in embarrassment as he chatted with her. But there were too many people present for him to linger in one place and as he shook her hand one last time and moved on, Kate caught at her friend’s arm and seemed suddenly impatient to be somewhere else.

"Let’s go," she muttered.

"Look," Gus said kindly. "I’m so sorry that Monte missed you. Will you leave me your email address and I’ll make sure that you get a personal message?"

Kate shrugged, eyes on the ground. "Thanks, but it’s okay."

"No," Gus insisted. "Really…"

Without another word Kate swung away, leaning heavily on her cane as she tried to maneuver through the heavy throng. Kate’s friend gave Gus a last, grateful smile and turned to follow the other woman and Gus was left on the other side of the barrier, feeling frustrated and helpless and more than a little guilty.

This was one fan that Monte most definitely needed to see…

Without thinking, Gus reached out and snatched the autograph book and pen from the woman’s hand before she was out of range.
"Here," he said urgently, handing over his own cane. "Hold this for me. And just wait here, okay? I’ll only be a minute."

Adam looked up a moment later from posing for a photograph to find that Gus had disappeared. When he jerked around, he was astonished to see that his boyfriend was limping in a determined beeline for the limo on what was apparently some kind of urgent personal mission.

One of the security team scuttled after him. Impatiently, Gus waved him off. He had no idea if he was doing the right thing and he certainly had no illusions about the reception he was going to get. It only remained to be seen whether resentment and anger would be communicated in a frigid silence or in an angry exchange of words.

Maybe he was the last person to be doing this. He knew how personal and painful a struggle Monte was going through… Who the hell was he to be making pronouncements about how he was dealing with the situation? Monte had a right to his privacy, he had a right to grief and solitude if he wanted it and Gus had no right to be pushing his own opinions about anything on him at a time when he obviously wasn’t ready to deal with it.

But Gus had also looked in the eyes of that fan and it had triggered a flood of memories of his own struggle… and with it a tide of impulse and compassion.

Maybe Lisa was right. Maybe it was time somebody got in Monte's face.

The limo driver saw Gus coming and hurried to open the door for him. Gus thanked him with a smile, climbed in with a grimace as his knee protested at all the extra effort, sat down opposite Monte and then slammed the car door shut behind him.

"There are some folks out there who’d like to see you," he said without preamble.

Monte was slouched back in his seat, eyes fixed out the opposite window. "For once in your life I’d really appreciate it if you’d learn to mind your own fucking business."

"Look, Monte, there aren’t a whole lot of people in this world who can look you in the eye… if you’d ever look me in the eye, that is… and tell you that they honestly know what you’re going through. But some of them just happen to be your friends and band mates, one of them also happens to be your boss, and one just happens to be me. I know that bugs the absolute hell out of you but it’s the truth and if the truth hurts, get over it. Life’s like that."

"What the hell do you want from me? Why does it matter to you?"

"It matters to me because I just ran into a woman in that crowd who, coincidentally, also just went through a major trauma in her life. According to her friend, it’s the first time since the beginning of November that she’s even left her house. She had cancer in the leg and the treatments didn’t work and they had to take the leg from the thigh down. She has a prosthesis and she seems perfectly mobile but she’s been so depressed over the cancer, losing her leg, losing her hair, losing her job as a dancer and losing most of her friends who don’t know how to deal with the situation so they just don’t deal with it at all… that she hasn’t been able to face up to going out in public for two full months. Her friend has tried everything to get her interested in something again but so far she just won’t bite. Until guess what, Monte? She happens to see the little clip online this afternoon announcing that Adam and his crew were arriving here today and out of the blue she turns to her friend and says, ‘It would be so cool to go to that.’"

His face was taking on a defensive flush but it wasn’t anything compared to the head of steam that Gus was working up in response.
"And guess what else, Monte? She seems to think that it’s really neat to see Adam but he’s not the one she came here hoping to meet!"

"I’m sorry about that!" Monte said angrily. "But I can’t do this right now, okay? Why can’t you just back off?"

Gus sat back and mirrored his posture, arms crossed, mouth fixed in a flat line. Monte modulated his voice with considerable effort.

"Look, Gus. Let me make something perfectly clear. It’s not that I don’t understand that we – that I – made life hell for you over Christmas. It’s not that I don’t appreciate what you did for us. It’s not that I don’t know that I owe you my life. There is no way in this lifetime that I would be able to repay you for what you did for me…"

"You don’t think?" Gus interrupted.

His brows drew together a little. "There are some things that you can’t ever make up for…"

Gus’s brows drew together as well, then they rose sharply as his eyes widened.

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"What the heck does that mean?"

Gus looked speculative, sowing the seeds of a new approach over and over in his mind until it germinated into a full-fledged plan of attack and he suddenly sat up, sat forward and began jabbing a finger in Monte’s direction.

"You’ve just admitted that I saved your life and that you owe me more than you can possibly ever repay. Well, here’s a big surprise for you, Monte. I’m calling in the marker."

His mouth dropped open. "Excuse me?"

"You heard it right the first time. Paybacks. Now."

"What kind of a stupid…?" "Call it paying it back, call it paying it forward, call it a settling of accounts… I don’t care what the hell you call it. But I’m demanding that you repay me – right now - for

risking my life and saving your sorry ass. And the way you’re going to do it is by getting that sorry ass out of this car, walking up to that crowd and signing one autograph for one woman. That’s it. The end. No strings attached. Then, if you choose to, you can walk your ass back to this car, get in, drive away and drop off the edge of the earth for all I care."

Monte’s mouth was still open but there were no words. He looked shocked, outraged, completely taken aback at this blatant attempt at emotional blackmail and Gus took the opportunity to dig the blade in a little deeper.

"Do unto others, Monte…” he taunted.

That provoked an immediate reaction.

"Is this the way you would want to be treated?” Monte shouted at him.
Gus drew a sharp breath at the hostility but refused to back down. He knew he was pushing buttons with no consideration of the consequences, but he was the only one in the inner circle who didn’t really have anything to lose. If someone needed to throw down the gauntlet, better that it came from him… and not from Lisa, or Adam or anyone else who might do irreparable damage to relationships that Monte was going to need to rely on in the days to come… whether he would ever admit it or not.

"That’s exactly how I was treated, thank God," he said flatly. Leaning forward again, he began firing words at Monte in a low, carefully controlled voice.

"After my accident, I refused to see anyone. For months. Not my friends. Not my co-workers. Not well-wishers. Not anyone. And Michelle was really patient with me for a long time, until one day her patience ran out, and she took me by the scruff of the neck, and shook some sense into me by pointing out to me I had worked damn hard for two years on the campaign to show troubled teens that bad luck or hardship was not a crutch and not a reason to think of yourself as a victim. That working out of a bad situation was possible, with effort and belief in yourself, and by accepting the hand of someone who was willing to help you as long as you were helping yourself. It took a long time to get the message through… but Nick and I did… and it made a difference with a lot of those kids, and it stuck with them. They began to follow the examples that we had set and then started setting good examples for their own peers."

Monte’s mutinous expression hadn’t changed but his gaze also hadn’t wavered from his.

"When I got hurt, I stopped trying. I had good reasons. Just like every kid I’d ever worked with who’d been abused or who had a learning disability or who’d come from extreme poverty. They had good reasons too. But when reasons start to turn into excuses, you have a problem. I used my accident as an excuse and the moment I started to do that, I turned into a professional victim. I didn’t need my old career back; I had a brand-new one. And the worst part is that I could have lived into miserable old age and nobody ever would have felt that I was anything but justified to act the way I did after what I’d been through."

"This is quite the sermon," Monte said bitterly. "Are we having absolution later?"

"You can ask for it," Gus shot back. "But frankly, Monte… at the moment, I don’t think you’d qualify."

His jaw clenched and Gus’s frustration mushroomed.

"You can go there if you want to, Monte. Being who you are you could throw the biggest pity party of all time. But after all the years you’ve spent struggling to be a good example for your kids, and for people who appreciate your music, you’re about start setting a whole different kind of example, unless you make some kind of effort to show that you’re trying to deal with your problems. Whether you want it to or not, you set examples. You send messages."

He threw the autograph book at Monte, pen and all.

"Be very careful of the messages you’re sending here, Monte."

He sat back in his seat, breathing heavily. Monte’s color was still very high but the majority of anger and defensiveness had begun to drain from his face. Gus remained silent through his transformation; it was less a matter of holding his tongue than of simply having said all that there possibly was to say. Monte too, seemed to slump back after a moment and while Gus couldn’t read the expression that remained when all the others had gone, he had the distinct impression that he had found a chink in the amour.
Albeit a small one.

Monte flexed his hands almost unconsciously, feeling the stitches in his hands pull and pinch. He sounded resigned and weary and all the fight was gone from his voice.

"You don’t understand what you’re asking me to do."

Gus regarded him with more sympathy than he dared show. "Don’t I? Give me some credit, Monte. I’ve been pulled from the wreck of a car too, remember? I understand that it hurts. I understand that it’s hard. I understand that you’re absolutely shit-scared about dealing with it. And I understand that I’m the last person on this earth that you would ever want to be right about this."

There was prolonged dead air. Sighing deeply, Gus tried again.

"It will only get harder if you don’t do it right now, Monte. And I’m serious about the obligation you owe me. I know you’re not the type of man who likes to be indebted to anyone and God knows being indebted to me must stick in your craw like a rock. So I’m willing to make you a deal and this is all that I want in return. One handshake. One autograph. Five minutes of your time and then you and I will be even. Clean slate. Paid in full. Pure and simple."

"Nothing is ever simple with you," Monte retorted. He fell silent, contemplating the autograph book in his lap for a long moment before asking somewhat ironically, "So… are you letting Adam off this easy?"

Gus looked startled. "Hell, no!" he said, after a moment’s blankness. "With him, I’m milking this for all I can get."

There was silence. Monte looked out the window towards the crowds still milling to get a chance to meet Adam, and his throat tightened visibly.

"Shit," he said, and exhaled hard.

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Adam was so acclimatized to screaming that it took him a moment to realize that the squeals had taken on a whole new pitch.

He turned around. A few feet away, Lisa completed a similar about-face and the two of them stared across the tarmac. At the first sight of Gus’s tall figure emerging from the limo they both caught their breath in expectation, which rapidly faded to resignation when no one appeared to be likely to follow in his wake.

Gus’s leg was killing him after the lengthy flight and prolonged standing. As he stepped out of the back seat and straightened up, he leaned back against the side of the car for a moment, flexed the knee to loosen it and said to empty air, "Quit stalling. I’ve dragged you out of one limo already in this lifetime. Don’t make me do it again."

Mumbling was heard from the interior. It didn’t sound complimentary, but sure enough, when Gus leaned forward far enough to peer in threateningly, he was met by a pale face and a dark head on the way out.
"Oh…my…God…" Lisa said, gasping. "How on earth did he manage that?"

"I have no idea," Adam said, giddy with relief and pride. "But damn it if I don’t want to marry that boy someday."

"One handshake… one autograph…" Monte was muttering to himself as he stared at the crowd. "Yeah, right."

"Monte, you’ve got two dozen stitches in your hands," Gus said calmly. "Everyone understands that. Believe me… I know I’m getting you into this and I’ll get you out just as quickly. I promise you, in ten minutes this will all be over."

Wincing, he pushed himself away from the side of the car, cursing at himself for having left his cane behind. As he put weight gingerly on his sore leg and took a deep breath, he looked up to find Monte standing beside him and holding one arm out to him for assistance.

"I can manage, thanks," he said, with a half-smile.

Monte scowled at him. "What about all that shit you just gave me about accepting help from someone who was willing to help you as long as you were helping yourself?"

Gus eyed him back. "Did I say that?"

"Yeah. Along with a whole lot of other shit. Just take my damn arm."

Gus looked him up and down warily. "You’re not going to trip me or anything, are you?" he countered.

"Don’t think I won’t be tempted." Monte glanced sideways at the crowd where the waves and screams continued to escalate and said in a half-desperate voice, "Gus, if I’m doing this, I need to do it soon before I completely lose my nerve."

Gus looked down at the arm still held out to him and caught his breath in surprise. The realization startled him, although it really shouldn’t have. The gesture was so obvious… Monte was doing more than offering him support… he was asking for it. It was his way of trying to make him understand that he didn’t feel that he could face this alone. His eyes were carefully averted, determined to hold on to what was left of his dignity and without any further hesitation, Gus simply hooked his elbow beneath his so it was impossible to tell from any distance which of the two of them was holding the other up.

"Thanks," Gus said.

"You’re welcome," Monte said.

Slowly, they began to cross the tarmac together. "You do realize," Gus remarked as they walked, "that you and I just had a civilized conversation?"

Monte looked askance. "You said ‘thanks’. I said ‘you’re welcome’. In your books that counts as a civilized conversation?"

Struggling to keep a straight face, Gus kept looking ahead. He could see Adam’s smile quite clearly even from this distance and felt the warmth of it even more strongly, full of pride and love and tenderness. He grinned back in response, answering all Adam's silent affirmations with his own and suddenly finding himself full of new hopes and dreams again, of rings and promises and new beginnings and the future that lay ahead of them."
Well, it’s a start," he said.

The End

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