



A Love's Landscapes Story

OVERKILL

Elizabeth Daniels

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

OVERKILL

By Elizabeth Daniels

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

Two men in a pool, in an eyes closed blissful embrace. A man has his arms wrapped around the other from behind, pulling his back to his chest. His large hand gently tips the other man's head to the side and he licks the shell of his ear. The man in front is slack jawed in ecstasy.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two have been playing together for years (you choose the type of music & whether it's a hobby or profession), and finally the UST became unbearable and something had to give. Luckily for both, it was their resistance. I'd love to watch a bunch of that UST, and the moment when it all falls away.

Time/place/heat level is yours to decide just please no BDSM, GFY (bisexuality is cool though!), or shifters.

Thanks!

Sincerely,

Charley

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: musicians/rock stars, slow burn/ust, sweet/no sex, sexual tension, homophobia, deception

Word Count: 39,510

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To Charley – thank you for providing the prompt that allowed me to bring these boys to the page.

To the M/M Romance Group – I cannot express enough thanks for hosting an event that allows someone like me, a simple girl who loves to write... a chance to do so. This event pushed me to do what I have dreamed of doing for many years. Thank you.

To the UM – you not only cheered me on to claim the prompt, you held me up when I needed it. Special thanks to N, Lx, JL and S... your honesty with my boys made me *and* them better every time I read your comments.

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To my real life Lisa – only you could have been there for the boys in the story the way you are in your real and everyday life. Thanks for letting me vent throughout this process.

To my name doppelganger Elizabeth – though we don't read the same anymore you never once let that alter your encouragement with my writing. The simple statements you made were not so simple when they hit me in the heart and gave me strength to continue writing.

To Susan; who cheered me on and reminded me that no matter what, I have taste.

To my three sons – thank you for dealing with me as I got lost in my own world. I am sorry you had to ask me more than five times to get my answer. Yes, we will walk the three dogs in the evenings again like we used to.

To my husband – thank you for trying to understand what you don't but being there for me regardless. Your love for me creates the love I give to my characters. I don't want you to be like the boys in my books, I want the boys in my books to be like you.

OVERKILL
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Prologue

~September~

This would be the last night of the tour. The last night for Declan Morrison and the boys to play their hearts out to the home town crowds of Los Angeles. Six months on the road, traveling on a bus, sleeping in motels, eating at random hole-in-the-wall restaurants, and playing to massive crowds as the opening act for Balthazar, one of the biggest hard rock bands on the scene. The boys of Station Zero were paying their dues. Tonight, they would be playing at the famous Whisky a Go Go—this would be *their* show, one night of just the boys on stage. No opening for Balthazar; just Declan, Chuck, Keith, and Tate as Station Zero, playing to their fans. Their manager was in talks with an A&R representative from a new label. The meeting with the new label rep was riding on this gig—rock it and they'd get the meeting, but bomb and it was back to being nothing but an opening act. They'd worked too hard and had come too far to settle for second best.

Declan leaned his head against the cold window watching the early morning and landscape change as the bus headed south toward Los Angeles through Bakersfield. The drive through this part of California made him homesick. Declan hadn't grown up in the mountains surrounded by towering windmills, but every trip his family took to their cabin, the windmills always meant they were almost home.

The band played in Southern California the night before but added this show up north at the last minute. A few hours on the road was worth it to feed off the energy of the crowd from last night. They were having the time of their lives on this tour and thanked their lucky stars they were asked to come along on the last leg. They were especially lucky to have Tate on drums after Slater bailed on them suddenly. Tate Newman, *where the fuck did he come from?* Just as the thought passed, Tate strolled from the back of the bus and sat across the table from him, cradling a cup of coffee.

“Hey, you okay?” Tate asked.

Declan took in the sight before him. Tate was dressed in a pair of faded jeans—the ones he claimed were lucky, and not because of the label said they were—along with a charcoal-gray wool sweater with a V-neck and a white T-shirt underneath. Declan flushed as he focused on Tate's revealed collarbones. His fetish for collarbones began when he met Tate; the man brought out things

in him he never dreamed he would like or want. Tate was also wearing his signature Chuck Taylors; unless he was playing the drums barefoot, dressed for his day job, or out on a run, he never went anywhere without them on his feet. It made Declan smile knowing Tate's habits.

Tate's hair was still damp from his shower; his new close-cropped haircut was different, and it showed off his blue eyes. The blue appeared darkened by the rim of his glasses, it was rare to see him wearing them lately. The more they toured and did interviews, press junkets, and fan-based events, the less he wore them. Declan loved the way Tate looked in glasses—they transformed his face and made him seem vulnerable under the piercing blue gaze when he turned it full force on you. The man was a collection of contradictions, and Declan was only beginning to figure them out. Tate became someone whom Declan cared about, more than cared about, but he was told he couldn't have him.

"Hey, yeah. I'm good." Declan gave a fake, wide smile, using his forefingers to pull his mouth up at an unnatural angle to prove his point. "Just reflecting, you know? Thinking of where we were when this all started and where we might be headed."

Tate sipped his coffee, looking over the rim of his cup at Declan. "That's a lot of thought for so early in the morning." Tate's right eyebrow pulled up in a way he swore was a natural reaction, but it didn't matter if it was done on purpose or not, Declan found it sexy as hell.

"Early bird gets the worm, right?" Declan responded.

"Or the responsibility of a band's future?" Tate tilted his head in question.

Declan slunk into the bench seat, tonight's gig heavily weighing on his shoulders. The gig was a massive weight and so was his attraction to his drummer. Tate and Declan were dancing around this thing between them; their chemistry was like nothing he experienced before. There were too many close calls where Declan was so gone he longed for nothing more than to grab the taller man, bend him over the nearest surface, and sink into him. The thought alone made Declan's dick start to swell, and he couldn't help but shift in his seat. Tate caught the movement and winked.

"Screw you, Newman," Declan huffed.

Tate set his cup down and nodded. "Ah, we're screwing now and not fucking? Okay, Declan, but remember this is what we use as our dining table."

"This is your fault." Declan pouted. He sounded like he was twelve years old again. *What the hell was wrong with him?*

“You’re going to play it that way, are you? Fine, Dec. It’s my fault you can’t stop thinking about me. It’s my fault every time you’re in the room with me, your thoughts turn to the moments we’ve had together. The moments where if we gave an inch, if we gave in to this thing between us, we could find something we both want and need. It’s my fault there have been too many times...”

Declan stared at Tate, realizing his ramblings of fault weren’t about him, they were about himself. *Could he actually?* Could he?

“Your fault, what...Tate?” Declan prompted the man who he’d barely spoken to in months to spill his guts.

“It’s my fault too many times have passed without me taking what I want regardless of the consequence.” Tate took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. Declan sat up straight in his seat, as this was what he had been waiting for—a sign he still had a chance with Tate after all they’d been through. They could work out the details with the band and management later.

No! Fuck management. They couldn’t tell him who he could be with.

“What is it you want, Tate?” Declan breathed in deep and held his breath waiting for his answer.

Tate replaced his glasses and raised his eyes. The want and desperation in them stilled any movement Declan could have willingly provided.

“You, Declan. I want you.”

Chapter 1

~February, Seven months earlier~

“*You what?*” Declan stared at his now former drummer.

“I quit.” Slater MacAlister stared at the ground as he delivered the news, ripping the rug out from under the three remaining members of Station Zero.

“What the fuck, Slater?” Declan looked at Chuck, the band’s guitarist. With his fists clenched, he looked like he wanted to throw a punch or five, using Slater’s face as the target.

“Look, guys, I’m sorry. I have to.” Slater looked up and at each of the bandmates. “I have to.”

“Why *now?*” Keith, the band’s bassist, the stoic member of the band, whispered the question.

“I know my timing sucks...” Slater paused.

“You could say that ten times fast with my fist down your throat!” Chuck yelled.

“Chuck! Down, boy.” Declan knew Chuck was on the edge of losing his cool and needed to calm him down before things got physical.

“Fuck, Dec! What are we supposed to do without a drummer? Get one of those stupid machines from the eighties?” The sound of a vintage lighter being open and closed let Declan know Chuck was trying to cool down. Anytime Chuck got overwhelmed, he used the lighter to ground him.

“Okay, look. Let’s all calm down and let Slater tell us why he’s bailing on us when we leave on tour with Balthazar in three weeks.” Declan looked at Slater, raised his eyebrows and swept his hand as an invitation for Slater to start explaining. “And Chuck, no drum machines, I promise. You’re still safe from New Wave.”

Chuck blew out a breath and shook his head. “That shit ain’t right, man. It’s just not right.” Declan bit back a laugh and clapped Chuck on the shoulder.

“I know, man. I know.” Declan regarded Slater again who was fidgeting with his drumsticks. “Spill, Mac.”

Slater looked up and took a deep breath. His stool creaked as he sat and started to talk. “I’m sorry, guys. *I am*. You have no idea how sorry I am, but

Becky's pregnant." A smile crept over Slater's face and the joy he felt at being a father was palpable. "And I know you're going to say I don't have to quit because we're having a baby," his smile quickly faded, "but Becky's been having problems..."

"Why didn't you say something?" Keith asked.

"Becky didn't want me to before we were sure what was wrong. But she has gestational diabetes and I can't leave her, I can't leave either of them now."

Declan felt his heart drop to his feet and the blood pound in his ears. He took a few deep breaths in attempt to calm himself down.

"That's rough, man. I'm sorry. So what are you going to do?" Declan asked.

"The only thing I can do is suck up to my parents, move back home with Becky, and finish my Engineering degree."

Declan nodded, as he absorbed the new information. Slater was done with the band. They were minus a drummer and they were leaving on a six-month North American Tour with Balthazar in three weeks. What were they going to do? Declan caught the nervousness in Slater, which wasn't normal for the guy; his self-esteem was greater than the four of them combined and drunk on *Jägermeister*. What was up with him?

"Mac?" Declan asked.

"Yeah?" Slater responded.

"When are you going back to school?"

Slater looked at Declan with pleading eyes and shook his head.

"You're registered for the summer semester, *aren't you?*"

"Declan..." Slater hesitated.

"You knew for how long, Mac?" Declan was losing his patience.

"I knew last month but I didn't want..." Slater answered, his gaze firmly on the floor.

Chuck flew across the room and grabbed Slater by the front of his shirt, yanking him up and yelled in his face. "We are supposed to be brothers. To have each other's back, Mac! What fucking games are you playing? This is our lives!"

Slater clutched Chuck's hands as they wrestled.

“Let him go!” the quiet tension of Keith Raines exploded. Chuck released Slater.

“Thank you,” Slater said to Keith, straightening out his dishevelled shirt. But Keith lunged at Slater to unleash his own fury. Pretty soon it was a free for all.

Declan watched as his band slowly fell apart.

Declan stared at the back of Slater's truck pulling out of the parking lot of the warehouse they'd converted into their rehearsal space. Slater had made it pretty clear that Beck and the baby came first, and they should. The band left for a US tour with Balthazar in three weeks and they needed a drummer or they were screwed. There was no way he was going to call Max, the lead singer of Balthazar, and tell them they were going to cancel. They needed this tour.

Declan walked to Slater's drum set, and sat down on the stool. His urge to fidget took over, and he started to lightly press the drum pedal against the bass as he figured out what to do next.

Declan had been the band's unsung and unofficial leader from the first day they'd decided they were a band. There had never been a vote, it just was. So now this fell on his shoulders, but how the hell was he going to fix this mess? Declan rested both feet on the ground, and turned the stool from side to side in a rocking motion. *Think, Morrison!* He couldn't; his head was locked into his heart with this, and he didn't want the responsibility. There was no choice in the matter.

“What are we going to do, Dec?” Chuck sat on the couch diagonal from the drum set. “I gave notice at the shop already, I can't go back.”

“I gave my notice too, Declan,” Keith chimed in, slumped next to Chuck. The change in mood since the fight between bandmates was obvious.

Declan looked at them both, knowing the fate of Station Zero, and their careers, was in his hands. He stopped the motion of the stool and rested his elbows against his knees. Lacing his fingers together he found the pressure point between his thumb and first finger which would help ease the raging headache forming behind his eyes.

“No one has to go back to their day job. Just...” Declan released his hands and lowered his head. Running his hands through his hair, he tugged on the roots, hoping the pain would clear his mind. He looked at the last two

remaining members of his band and sighed. "Just give me a day all right? Give me a day to figure this shit out. I promise, I'll fix this."

"Okay, man. Okay." Chuck stood, flicking the top of the lighter again. "Just, let us know when you do."

No pressure there, Charles. Chuck was a kick-ass guitarist, but the guy wasn't the first one Declan would turn to in a crisis. There was a reason Declan was the one who made the big decisions in the band. It was always a group effort between the four of them, but when it came down to getting dirty and making the hard decisions, those always fell to Declan.

"Declan. If you need any help, you know I'll do whatever you need," Keith added. Yeah, Declan knew if he needed some form of OCD errand run, Keith would be who he turned to.

"Thanks, Keith. I'll let you know if I need you. Right now I think we all need to leave this place, forget what just happened, and come back to this mess tomorrow." Declan attempted to sound assertive with his suggestion. He hated ordering the band around like a drill sergeant, but it was the only way to deal with this. "Go home, do some last minute packing, spend time with your families or just stare at the wall. Whatever you do, don't think about this. I got it." Declan stood and put his fist out for the two men to give their signature "hand shake." Keith and Chuck stepped forward and they shook hands.

Declan turned and grabbed the drumsticks lying across the tom toms in the middle of the drum set and pointed them at the men. "Now go. I don't want to see either of you until tomorrow. And not early or I'll beat you with Slater's drumsticks." Declan slapped the sticks crossed his palm with a grin and cocked his eyebrows.

"You got it, boss," Chuck returned with a mock salute and his best Johnny Utah "surfer dude" voice. "See ya mañana, mi amigo."

Declan watched as the second band member walked away from him today. At least this one would return.

"I meant what I said, Declan." Keith stared at him. The man could stare down a wild cat trying to eat him alive. The way his eyes could focus on a person was scary. There was no wonder Keith was a top associate at the law firm under one of the most influential lawyers in town. Declan always wondered why he would give up something he was so good at to play bass in a band. Keith was not only the stoic member of the band, but the most private.

Declan respected that fact about him and never pushed for more information than Keith wanted to give.

“I did too, Keith. Trust me. Tomorrow. We will deal with this tomorrow. Now get the fuck out of here.” Declan flashed his toothy, fake grin at his bassist. “I need to go punch out this crap Slater has dumped on me at the gym and not on you.” Keith only nodded, turned and walked out of the small warehouse.

Once alone, Declan flopped onto the couch and covered his eyes with his left arm. *What am I going to do?* He was in shock Slater could do this to them. Not in shock over Slater choosing the health, safety, and wellbeing of his future wife and unborn child, but that he would know about this and wait until the last minute to drop it on them. *He knew* and still came to practice, to rehearsal and played shows with them knowing he was betraying their trust the entire time. Declan didn't want to throw Becky into the same group as Yoko, but why was there always some chick who broke bands up? Declan grinned, knowing a girl would never come between him and the band. He didn't swing that way.

Declan had known from his teen years he was gay, but running in the circles he did, it was impossible to be out and be safe. So he played the part of the jock, the ladies' man and dated numerous girls, most of whom weren't from his hometown, which was done on purpose. He came out at his seventeenth birthday party to his cousin and his best friend Lisa, who said she always suspected he was gay. From that day on, his sexuality became their secret, and Lisa would wrangle her friends, who people at his school didn't know, and they would pretend to be his girlfriend. Declan kept up the charade with everyone, including his parents, until the night before he was leaving for college.

Declan sat with his parents in the family room the night before he left, Lisa on one side of him and his “girlfriend” Chloe on the other. He told his parents he and Chloe weren't together, that they couldn't ever be together. Declan struggled and choked on the words as he strained to get them out. In his head, he could hear the words coming from his mouth proud and strong, but he couldn't speak. His mouth went dry as he sat in front of his parents, knowing he was crushing their hopes and dreams of becoming grandparents, of his father having someone to carry on the family name, of his mother being able to wear pink on his wedding day as Emily Post dictated, to show she was gaining a daughter.

Declan watched as the confusion and worry played across their faces. He had an entire speech prepared to handle the news of his coming out, delicately, but instead he blurted, “Chloe and I aren't together because I like dick.”

His mother gasped and put her small hands over her mouth, the horror showing in her eyes.

“Ah, crap! Mom. I’m sorry. I’m gay, okay. I’m gay. Dad...” Declan remembered the look on his father’s face, the fury never before seen and there were plenty of times Declan deserved it, but not now. Declan knew without asking his father, this was not acceptable. He heard the phone conversations between his father and grandfather, which usually included the word “faggot” being used a handful of times. Like saying the word wasn’t a derogatory statement against another human being, but something they could use to show they weren’t manly enough. He never understood how neither man thought they were doing anything wrong.

“Mom, please say something. Please?” Declan pleaded with his mother. She was always the one who was empathetic to all those in need, but the look she gave her son was one of ice. She was cold, immovable, and there was no longer love in her eyes for her only child. “You aren’t serious? Mom? Come on. It’s still me. I’m still your son.”

Declan’s mother reached out and grabbed his father’s hand, a show of solidarity, and he knew this was the end. Words, not the ones he’d planned to say began falling from his lips. “I never wanted to hurt you—either of you but I didn’t expect you to hurt me either. I’m still your son. You raised me to be honest and I’m telling you my truth. I’m gay, this is who I am and who I have been for as long as I can remember. I’ve never liked girls, I faked dating them to fit in and not cause trouble. But I couldn’t lie anymore. It was tearing me apart from the inside out and my heart hurt every time I denied who I was. I hoped you could see past what you believe to be right and wrong and see me, your son. I guess I hoped for too much.”

His father stood and tugged his mother to her feet, staring down at Declan. He spoke the four words that gutted Declan, tore his heart out and turned him into the self-reliant man he was today. “We have no son.”

Declan could feel the pain in his heart, even today, seven years after that night. The feelings never let up.

Declan swung his legs off the couch and sat up straight. He wanted to escape the memory before he did what he always did when he remembered—called home. He couldn’t count how many times he’d called his mother’s cell phone just to hear her voice. She always knew when it was him; she’d whisper his name, *Declan Matthew*, once, and then break into sobs. She never hung up,

just cried as if her heart was breaking each time, and Declan would clutch the phone until he couldn't take anymore. He would *not* go there today. The memory was enough. He needed to deal with this shit storm Slater had dropped into his lap. He had to keep his band together and get them on this tour. The plane was scheduled to leave for New York in three weeks, where they would start off the tour with a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden. The whole tour was set: six months of opening for Balthazar and getting their music heard by a bigger audience was worth more than his mother's rejection over the phone.

Declan stood and looked at the drumsticks in his hands; he wanted to break them into pieces. This drama with Slater would blow over, but it would take time. The boys were more than bandmates or friends, they were brothers. Declan threw the sticks onto the couch with force and grabbed his keys off the table as he walked out of the warehouse. He pulled the large door shut and turned the lock. He needed to get these emotions out. He had two options: either find a hot and willing ass to fuck, or go to the gym and take his frustration out fighting in a cage. Sex would be his best solution, but Declan didn't have time for the complications of a blowjob in the bathroom at a bar.

Getting behind the wheel of his car, he made his way toward the gym, ready to blow off steam, clear his head and be done with this day. Tomorrow would come and he'd have to face it, but right now, all he wanted was to fight some poor dude into submission to make himself feel better.

Chapter 2

Declan grimaced, listening to what felt like the one hundredth drummer they'd auditioned today. He had come up with the idea while in the cage, fighting the newest wanna-be MMA fighter at the gym. While having his opponent in a rear naked choke hold, making it impossible for him to move, the simple idea of auditions came to mind. When his opponent tapped out like the loser he was, Declan had jumped up, shook his hand and ran out of the gym to get the flyers made to get the word out they required a new drummer.

Declan had avoided the texts from Max about the auditions. He knew he was being a coward but he didn't want to say anything to the front man until they were certain which way their asses would be headed. Declan, Chuck, and Keith had been to Los Angeles and Hollywood, posting flyers and handing them out at the local hard rock shows, even the punk ones. If they could find themselves a decent drummer who could handle their music and leave last minute to go on a six-month tour, they didn't care what kinds of shows the guy frequented.

The assault of sound coming from across the room came to an end. Declan stood and walked to the drum set, Slater's drum set—he'd talked the former drummer into letting them hold it hostage for the auditions. There was no argument on Slater's end, and Declan was relieved. The latest victim certainly dressed for the part—ripped jeans, sleeveless T-shirt and enough piercings that Declan was sure he would never pass through metal detectors without setting them off and requiring a full cavity search.

"James. Thanks for the audition man." He shook the man's hand and slapped him on the back a few times. James wasn't a bad drummer, but his song choice left much to be desired and the three band members made faces at each other during the audition. Station Zero had a particular sound to their music; their sound fell on the side of hard rock, though sometimes a softer side to it emerged. They even played a ballad Chuck had written drunk one night while longing for his college girlfriend who, to this day, wouldn't give him a second look. When Keith first found the lyric sheet, he'd sat and began a bass line to the words, but Chuck wouldn't let this one be turned into a jam. He'd asserted the song was about love and love must be done acoustically. It was the only way for the emotions to come across, just him and his beloved vintage Gibson. An heirloom passed down from his uncle who was rumored to once

have played with Neil Young. Declan couldn't, and wouldn't, begrudge his friend's wants for the song. Playing it acoustic worked and was the standard way Station Zero would close their show or play into the encore.

"We'll let you know, when we've made a decision." Declan walked James to the large door of the warehouse, hoping he wouldn't jump into a long list of questions. "So don't call us, you know, we'll call you and that rock-and-roll bullshit." Declan gave James a final handshake and watched as the man slung his bag over his shoulder and walked off.

"Declan, this sucks ass, dude." Chuck's voice bounced off the walls of the warehouse as Declan walked back inside, the echo was one reason they chose the rehearsal space. The bare-bones price was another, but not as important as the authentic sound, similar to a live show without the normal interference of feedback they usually would get while recording as independent artists. They not only rehearsed there, they also cut their first EP to sell at shows.

"How many did we see today?" Keith sat on the rug next to his microphone. The boys were worn out from the day. They began auditioning at 10:00 a.m. and they still didn't have anyone suitable to fill Slater's spot. There was the one girl with a YouTube channel, but she still wasn't a good fit for them. It was going to be hard to fill Slater's shoes on drums, as Station Zero had played together for three years and knew how to read one another without words.

"We've seen exactly..." Declan scanned the sheet full of names and numbers of each person who auditioned in the last eight hours. "Sixteen, no, seventeen drummers including the guy who puked thirty seconds into his 'originally composed song' and ran out before we could get his number."

Declan shrugged and tossed the clipboard containing the sheet on the couch, following it with a thump as he plopped down. "This is not going well, guys. I thought it would. Everything appeared to be so easy."

"What do we do if we can't find a drummer, Dec?" Chuck started to sound panicky, which was never a good sign.

"It's only been one day, Chuck. We still have the weekend before we have to make any major decisions. Most musicians won't see the flyers until this weekend anyway. Assuming they go to shows or check the boards." Declan was trying to convince himself, as well as Chuck, that this thing would work itself out. The idea seemed basic and simple—post flyers about needing a drummer, one comes, they're a perfect fit, the sound remains the same and they

get to go on tour and have their careers set. This day of auditions with not one possible prospect was not what Declan thought would happen.

“So we do this again tomorrow and then what?” Chuck would not let this go. Declan sighed, for he lacked a definitive answer to give him.

“We wait, Chuck. Patience have you must, young Padawan, hmm yes?”

Chuck made a face at Declan. “Anyone tell you that your Yoda is terrible, boss?”

Declan gave a mock show of shock to his guitarist. “They have, but never in bed.” Declan waggled his eyebrows at Chuck and blew him a kiss.

Chuck smacked the air as if the kiss were flying toward him. “Okay, cool the sexual harassment, Dec. Way too much information even for a guy who loves you like a brother, as much as I do.”

“Oh, Chuck. Ouch. You wound me.” Declan grabbed at his heart as if hurt and rolled off the couch to the floor only to come face to face with a pair of extremely shiny, and extremely expensive, black dress shoes. *Hello. Where did you come from?*

Declan inspected the shoes and let his gaze follow them up to a pair of dark blue slacks, fitted and tapered to fit the legs they encased. His gaze continued up along the inseam to a crotch which left a bit to the imagination but outlined enough to know the possibilities of what was underneath. Declan grinned at the thought and propped himself up on his elbow to get a better look at what was attached to this pair of sexy legs. The slacks were part of a three-piece suit. Declan found this out when a pair of strong, large hands swept the sides of the blazer back to rest on slim hips. The immaculate fit of the vest under the blazer drew his gaze up to a dark patterned tie in a full Windsor Knot, causing his mouth to water. Ties were among Declan's fetishes; they could be proper and formal, very useful in bed, or simply a way to drag a lover around to get them to do what you wanted. The tie led to an Adam's apple begging to be licked, sucked, and bitten. Declan brought his right leg up to hide his growing erection. Damn, this was one tall drink of water, and Declan wanted to flip over and wag his ass in the air, begging the man for attention.

Oh, but that face left Declan breathless. The myths of men who could be placed among the ruins of Greece, godlike men with chiselled features, long noses, and high cheekbones. This man had it all. Declan traced each line of the man's face with his eyes until they came to rest on his. *Damn!* The guy wore

dark-rimmed glasses, and glasses were more of a turn on than ties for Declan. When he looked up, the eyes behind the glasses were staring down into his. Declan fought the urge to rise to his knees, feel the material of those slacks beneath his hands and see what was hiding behind his zipper. He grinned instead, noticing the only response from this man was a raise of his right eyebrow, having more effect on his hard-on than a room full of naked men at a bath house. Thinking of a room full of naked men at a bath house was not where his mind should be going at that moment, but this man was sex on legs with bedroom eyes and a mop of curly blond hair just the perfect length to tug...

“Are the auditions over?” the suited man asked. *Oh fuck me, please?* Declan had never reacted to someone this strong or this fast before. The guy was more than likely straight and Declan was down on the floor wanting to be mounted. If he was close to coming from hearing the man's voice, what would he do if he touched him?

“Hey, man! No they aren't over. You just made it.” Declan heard Chuck's voice, made out the words he was saying, but he couldn't tear his eyes off the man above him. The man grinned and turned toward Chuck, breaking the spell and forcing Declan to remember where he was and what he was doing. He rolled to his back, pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes in an attempt to erase the erotic thoughts from his mind and to will his dick to calm down. This was neither the time nor the place for his dick to rule his brain; he needed to get his band a new drummer.

Declan used a move he learned in the cages and flipped to his feet. Straightening his button down shirt and wiping the floor off his ass, he watched the man walk, no, strut across the room to Chuck. There was no way this sex-god in a suit was going to play the drums. He must be waiting for someone, holding their place while they parked the car or something.

Declan walked over and stuck out his hand. “Hey. Hi. Declan Morrison, front man of Station Zero. I apologize for the odd meeting, we were messing around.” The man grinned, again, and the blood rushed to Declan's dick, again. This needed to stop or he would pass out from lack of blood-flow to the brain. The man put his hand in Declan's.

A shock passed through Declan with the simple touch. The man's hands were huge. His long fingers reached Declan's wrist where they lightly caressed their way down to his palm. The touch was subtle, yet Declan hoped it was deliberate.

“Tate, Tate Newman. I hope I’m not too late. I rushed straight over from work.”

Declan reluctantly released Tate’s hand, looking him up and down. “You play the drums?”

Tate removed a black canvas messenger bag from his shoulders, dropped the bag to the floor and straightened his glasses. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t. I saw the flyer at The Roxy last night. Shame you lost Slater, the man was talented.”

“So you’ve heard of us?” Declan was skeptical of the man. The slick suit and the way he spoke, with a deep timbre which vibrated off the walls and down to his groin, he was sure this guy was going to bust out with a song from AC/DC. Great band but the drumming was too easy for what they required.

“Heard of you, yes. Seen you live, more than once.” Tate grinned and did the eyebrow thing again. *Does he practice that look in the mirror?* “Even watched a show in a Greek Community fundraiser at USC. Not the type of music for Kappa Kappa Gamma, if I remember right?”

“Hot chicks in sororities like hard rock too!” Chuck became defensive when their past college shows were brought up. Tate raised his hand in defense and placated Chuck.

Declan was now impressed. The hot guy in the suit showed excellent taste in music. He just needed to be gay and he would fulfill all of Declan’s wet dreams. He would fill all his fantasies if he could actually play the drums.

“Hi, Tate.” Keith’s voice sounded from behind Declan. “Keith Raines, bass player.” Tate nodded and shook Keith’s hand.

“Um...hellooo. Remember me?” Chuck waved as he bounced up and down, his anxiety getting the best of him. They either played some good music fast or they needed to get the guy on a trampoline to get his energy depleted. “Chuck King, and before you ask—King is my real last name, but it does mean what it implies.” Tate shook Chuck’s hand, and Declan gave him an Italian mother’s love pat across the back of his head.

“Enough, Chuck.” Declan eyed Chuck as he rubbed the back of his head and gave him a dirty look. Declan pursed his lips in a kiss for Chuck once again before he turned his attention back to Tate. “Sorry about him. Too much of anything makes him antsy.”

“It’s what makes his sound original. His energy flows through him to the guitar. It shows. It works.” Tate nodded toward Chuck as he delivered his affirmation of his skills.

“See, I told you!” Chuck pointed at Declan; his validation from a complete stranger obviously meant more than the constructive criticism given him over the years.

“Yeah, you did.” He raised his hand, made a duck face and nodded at Chuck. “So Tate, we have Slater’s set if it will work for your audition.”

Tate turned and eyed the drums sitting in the middle of the room. “They’re fine, but I’ll use my own sticks.”

Declan was impressed, again, the guy brought his own sticks. To him, that showed dedication. He watched as Tate removed his blazer and laid it over the back of the couch. He unbuttoned his vest, loosened his tie and the first two buttons of this shirt, and then did something that made Declan and “little Declan” take notice. Tate undid the buttons of his cuffs and started rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt. Every roll of the sleeve revealed tanned skin, light hair dusting his forearms and an insane view of vein porn that left Declan panting. *This guy can’t be real. I must have hit my head when I rolled off the couch.* Tate left his shirt tucked in and grabbed his sticks from the messenger bag on the floor. Declan leaned over to get a view of Tate’s ass when he bent over, watching the material of the slacks pull tight across a set of firm cheeks which deserved to be pulled apart and have fingers, tongues, and his dick slide between them. Tate looked behind him and winked at Declan before he stood up. *Shit. He was caught. Was he flirting?* Tate walked to the drums, adjusted the stool, grabbed the material of his pants, pulled them up, and sat.

Tate grinned at Declan. “How do you want to do this?”

Declan cleared his throat. This wasn’t a game. Well, he would play many games with Tate, but his band was not something he would play at.

Declan waved his hand in dismissal and feigned being uninterested. “So, what are *you* going to play for *us*?”

Tate turned his body toward the drums, placing his feet on the double bass pedals and tapped out a simple four beat rhythm. He twirled his sticks in each hand and looked at the members of Station Zero, his gaze lingering last and longest on Declan.

“Let’s play name that tune and see if you can guess right.” Tate struck the cymbal with this stick, reaching out to stop it and the sound produced. “And if

you do, let's see if you," Tate pointed the drum stick in his right hand at Declan, "can keep up."

Declan shook his head at Tate's audacity. The guy had a big set of balls, he would give him that.

Declan waited to see what Tate would come up with. He didn't wait long. Tate tapped the bass pedal one time before he began drumming full force on the set with a moderate but fierce tempo reaching out and silencing the cymbal for a span of four seconds, then Tate turned into a flurry of arm/hand wielding drum sticks as he played out one of Declan's favorite songs.

Holy shit. This guy can play!

Declan was too stunned to react, realizing Tate was playing System of a Down's "B.Y.O.B." He turned to judge the reaction of Keith and Chuck, but both men were on their way to retrieve their instruments off the stands, each wearing a huge grin on their face. Tate stopped drumming and counted back in with a *two, three, four*, count of hitting his sticks against each other. The count gave Chuck the final push; he joined in on guitar with Tate, nodding at the drummer, their sound blending well, but not as well as when Keith came in with the wicked bass line of the song and they sounded... like a band. Tate's style of drumming was similar to Slater's and yet had a flare of its own. His skill on the double pedals was faster than Slater's; songs they wanted to try with Slater but couldn't, they could now. *Now?* Was Declan already thinking of the future with this guy on drums before a four-minute audition was over?

The seamless sound of the music being played flowed through Declan, as his bandmates and this stranger jammed effortlessly together, like they'd been in a band for years and not for less than two minutes on a single song. Declan smiled and shook his head as he realized this man in the fuck-hot suit, tie, and glasses could be the perfect fit, the one they waited and hoped for. Declan wasn't one for yelling his lyrics, but the urge to join in was overwhelming. He picked up his microphone, turned on his amp and joined in with the last chorus, singing both lead parts.

Declan sang about having a good time, looking at his bandmates and knowing they were doing just that.

Declan watched Tate play, admiring the bounce to his body when he played the slower tempo, showing he felt the music and drumming wasn't just a series of motions to complete a song. The band played the song to its end. Declan watched Tate as he closed his eyes and played the last few beats, ending the song with two hard hits to the snare drum.

The warehouse stilled to silence and each of the four men simply stared at each other. Chuck was the first to break the silence, of course, breaking out in to the riff from his favorite eighties movie, pumping his fist in the air and yelling, "I'm Ted Theodore Logan and we're Station Zero!"

The band, yeah the band, erupted in laughter. Declan walked over to Tate and nodded at the drums. "Nice choice for a song. "B.Y.O.B." is one of my favorites."

Tate solemnly nodded. "Mine too."

"So, you can rock System of a Down and you claim to know our sound."

Again, Tate nodded. Declan made a motion to Chuck as he raised two fingers of his right hand in the air, spun them in a circle three times and pointed.

"Let's see if *you* can keep up with this." Declan turned and walked away from Tate before the adrenaline, the emotions he was feeling about this entire audition, caught up with him and he did something stupid.

Chuck started playing the opening riff to one of their newly released tracks, "Dark Forever". The riff ended, turned into picking on the strings and right on time, the bass pedals sounded, better than ever, coming from the drums and Tate. Declan gripped the microphone and sang the intro verse, Keith's bass flooding the room and the four men played the song. This started a game of who can play what and out-play whom. Ten songs and less than two hours later, the sun hidden behind the Hollywood Hills, Station Zero was back in business.

The boys finished packing up their instruments, and Declan pulled his cell phone from his pocket and checked the time, 10:00 p.m., early for a Thursday night in Los Angeles. The adrenaline high he was on demanded an outlet.

He wanted to have a quick band meeting to ask Chuck and Keith if they were feeling the same way about Tate as he was, that he *was* their new drummer. He motioned from them to come over, letting Tate gather his things and fix his clothes. Declan did not watch as he did, since he'd perved out on the guy enough in the last few hours. He had a bad case of lust for someone he knew nothing about. Declan refused to pine after someone who was straight, hoping they would see him and turn gay simply for him. That kind of thing only happened in the books his cousin Lisa read. He swore the girl read more gay sex and watched more gay porn than he did.

“So.” Declan looked to Keith and Chuck. “What do you think of the suit?”

“Dude!” Chuck gave a stage whisper. “He rocked. I say he’s in. He knows how to play and he knows our songs.”

“What if he can’t leave in three weeks?” Keith asked.

“Most jobs require two weeks’ notice to quit. I guess if we’re sure, we need to let him know now.”

Declan glanced at Tate. He had removed his tie, taken off his vest and left his sleeves rolled up. The man did have incredibly sexy forearms.

“Are you both sure about this?” Declan knew he was, but he wanted his bandmates input too.

“Fuck yeah!” Chuck bellowed with a fist pump.

Keith nodded. “Yeah, Declan. He’s good, really good. It’s like we have been playing with him forever.”

“I got that feeling too.” Declan looked over his shoulder to see Tate sitting on the couch, waiting. He walked over with Chuck and Keith beside him. “Tate?”

Tate looked up. “Yes?”

“We really enjoyed playing with you tonight,” Declan told Tate.

“I did too, with you. It was great.”

“We talked it over and we want to know...” Declan was hit with the full force of what he was about to say. It was surreal that Slater had bailed on them. That they had to go through auditions and scramble to find someone to fill his position. But they had and that was what he would focus on.

“We want to know if you’d like to join us, as the new drummer for Station Zero and go on a six month North American Tour?” Declan held his breath for all of ten seconds waiting for Tate’s answer.

“You bet your sweet ass I do!” Tate smiled, and Chuck let out a battle cry.

The new bandmates shook hands. “So you have to give notice to work right?” Keith asked.

“No.”

“No? Why is that?” Declan was worried they may have jumped the gun.

"I gave notice before I left today." Tate clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels, smiling wide.

"You're one cocky son of a bitch aren't you?" Declan stared at the man as he rocked back and forth.

"Nah, I just know I'm good." Tate smirked.

Declan was so in lust with the guy, he'd have to call Lisa and ask how they turn the straight boys gay in her books.

"Well, Tate Newman, welcome to Station Zero. I don't know about you guys, but I need to blow off some fucking steam. Who's up for a game of pool and drinks?" Declan looked to the three men in front of him.

"I'll fly if you buy?" Chuck offered.

"Chuck, you never fly or buy. You can't drive if you drink asshat," Declan teased his friend. "And I'm buying. First rounds on me." He turned to Tate. "How 'bout it Newman? You up for some fun since you don't have work in the morning?"

"Sure, sounds like..." A noise from Tate's bag interrupted him. "Excuse me." He walked over to the couch and pulled out his cell phone. He swiped at the screen and made a face that was not pleasant.

"Oh, the old ball and chain after you, dude?" Chuck loved the drama of relationships. It was too bad he couldn't stay in one himself.

"Not really. Just the ex who never leaves." Tate was typing out a reply on this phone. He finished and shoved the cell phone in his front pocket.

"Chicks be crazy man. Sorry you have a psycho ex-girlfriend," Chuck replied in a singsong voice.

"Boyfriend, more mental than psycho." Tate nodded.

"Did you just call me your boyfriend?" Chuck asked.

"No Chuck, I was correcting you. You said ex-girlfriend and I don't have one. I have an ex-boyfriend."

Declan's head snapped around to look at Tate. The smarmy bastard stood there without a care in the world announcing to three total strangers that he was gay. Declan's world began spinning. There was no way this guy—with a body like a Greek god and the hands that were blessed by rock angels on the drums—was gay. The odds of that happening would never be in Declan's favor.

“Seriously? So now we are a rock band with two gay dudes? You know I love ya, Dec, but isn’t that going to fuck with our image?”

“Two gay dudes?” Tate asked.

“Thanks for outing me, Chuck.” Declan leaned his head back and took a deep breath. He loved Chuck but the man was pushing his luck with this.

“Since when are you in the closet, boss?” Chuck shrugged.

“I’m not, but I usually like to be the one to express my sexuality to new people on my own terms,” Declan grumbled through clenched teeth and punched Chuck in the arm.

“Ow! Shit, sorry Dec. It just caught me off guard.”

“Don’t worry about it now. Fairies are all out of the closet now, aren’t they?” Declan stood on his tiptoes and fluttered his hands like wings. “So let’s go get those drinks and play some pool.”

Declan glanced at Tate. “Hey you want to walk with me?” he asked.

“I have my car here,” Tate stated.

“I know, the bar is just a few blocks away and”—Declan pointed to the floor above them—“I live in the loft above the warehouse. You can leave it here and we can come back for it later.”

“Is this your way to seduce me, Morrison? A walk with just us gay dudes to the bar?” Tate waggled his eyebrows and grinned. “Liquor me up and take me back to your place to ‘get my car’?”

“I’m not seducing you, Newman. You aren’t my type,” Declan lied.

“That’s not what your dick was saying when you were on the ground checking me out.” Tate tilted his head and gave Declan a challenging look.

Declan was screwed. Not only was he physically attracted to the guy, but Tate had a sharp wit on him that turned Declan on.

“Let’s go,” Declan grumbled, glaring at Tate as they walked side by side out of the warehouse. Declan closed and locked the door and nodded to Tate.

“Ready?” Declan asked.

“Where is the bar?” Tate inquired.

“Just up the street, three straight blocks,” Declan said.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“After you, Newbie.” Declan bowed, waving his arm for Tate to walk ahead.

“Are you making me walk in front so you can check out my ass again?” Tate teased and walked off as Declan did just that. Tate stopped, looked over his shoulder, and winked at Declan.

He was so screwed.

Chapter 3

~March~

The crowd was loud for Balthazar's encore at Madison Square Garden. Declan was busy setting up the merchandise table for the rush after the show. He looked across the foyer to see Chuck in a cluster of girls asking him to sign numerous body parts. He was amazed the guy could attract anyone with his attitude. Chuck was fun but the fun usually borderlined on over the top, at least 99 percent of the time.

Declan had a love/hate relationship with this part of being in the band. He knew they had to do a lot for themselves before they made it, and being your own grunt man sucked, but he loved the interaction with fans. He liked talking to the new fans who only discovered them through them being an opening act, and the fans who came just for them. Declan loved being a musician, being a singer and being a part of Station Zero. He just wished he had the chance to have fun while he was doing what he loved.

It wasn't that he never had fun, he just shouldered more responsibility, though self-imposed, when it came to the band. If Declan went off and had fun like Chuck did, there wouldn't be a band to love.

Declan straightened shirts and hoodies on the table and made sure the postcards with their webpage were front and center. The small amount of CDs were lined up at the front of the table for those who went old school with their music. The CDs sold, though not as well as the digital downloads off their site. Declan managed their website too, and now the hats he wore for the band were starting to get heavier than he'd planned.

A hand on his back made him jump; Declan spun around and relaxed when he saw it was Tate. The man stood there with a wide grin on his face, a grin that was sexier than Declan would have liked.

"A bit jumpy, Declan?"

"No, I was just getting some extra cardio in after our set. You know, build up the lung expansion and all." Declan blew out a breath and turned back to the table, eyeing their merchandise and deciding he and the table were ready for business.

"Funny guy, I see." Tate walked around the front of the table, fingering the shirts before stopping and giving Declan a nod. "Nice set up. I didn't know you did this."

"Someone has to." Declan shrugged.

"What about the others? Do Keith and Chuck help?" Tate looked over his shoulder in the direction of Chuck and his girl posse. "They don't help?"

"We all have our jobs." Declan waved his arm over the table and bowed.

"*We* being you?" Tate did his damn eyebrow raise with his question.

"It's always been like this." Declan didn't want to go into the off-balance dynamics of the band. He knew he did more than the others, but it felt too late to change now. He had his ways of doing things and delegation was never his strong suit. It was easier to do things himself and not have to watch over Chuck, making sure he charged the hot girl for her T-shirt before he signed her breast, or hoping Keith was talkative enough to engage the casual person into buying something, or at least taking a post card. It wasn't what Declan wanted to do after a show but it was what he'd always done.

"Speaking of jobs." Declan was determined to change the subject. "What is it you do, or did, again, Tate?"

"I'm, um... I was an actuary."

"A what?"

"An actuary."

"What the hell does an actuary do?"

"Funny you should ask, we're experts in risk management."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, don't start. I get the irony." Tate laughed.

Declan made a zipping motion with his fingers across his lips and tossed the imaginary key over his shoulder. He smiled closed-mouthed at Tate and waggled his eyebrows.

"Funny *and* charming, I see. What else will I learn about you, Declan?" Tate came close and looked over Declan's shoulder. "You can't talk with locked lips." Tate grinned at him. "Where is that key?"

Declan mumbled his response. His hand was so close to Tate's shoulder—if he moved it a half inch it would rest on the spot where the skin shown above his shirt collar...

The roar of the crowd as the music stopped brought Declan out of his daydream. Max's voice came out loud and clear, "New York! We are

Balthazar! Thank you for spending the night with us..." The crowd's cheers grew louder. "Good night!"

"Duty calls. Time to feed the masses our merchandise." Declan grabbed the keys out of the front pocket of his jeans and pulled the cash box from under the table. He unlocked the box and readied himself for the next job of the night. He turned when he heard the scrape of a chair against the foyer floor. Tate was pulling a stool from behind and up to the table.

"Can I help you?" Declan wasn't sure what Tate's game plan was.

"No, but I can help you." Tate sat on the stool. "You shouldn't have to do everything, alone, Declan."

Declan knew he resembled a fish with Tate's response. He couldn't seem to form words, and his mouth was becoming dry the longer it hung open. Tate's finger crooked under Declan's jaw and lightly pushed his mouth closed.

"Easy, Declan. We don't want the wrong kind of business with your mouth as advertisement." Tate grinned and patted Declan's cheek.

Advertisement?

Declan stared at Tate as he talked shop with the first customer at the table. He was a natural at this. Declan was sure someone who spent their day job alone in an office would be awkward at small talk with strangers. He should have known better.

Declan was fast learning Tate was capable of almost anything.

Their bus drove into Pittsburgh, the next stop on the tour. Declan responded to a text from Rick, their manager, about a radio interview before the show. He was pleased they were making a name for themselves on the tour, and a local radio wanted them on the air. This would be their first interview like this, and Declan would be lying if he said he wasn't nervous.

Press was not something he looked forward to. The interviewers loved to focus on his sexuality. They found the idea that he liked to take a dick up the ass more worthy of their time than what direction the band was taking next. Declan was short lipped on his answers, but he refused to hide he was gay. He'd done it long enough as a teen, and besides, being a gay front man of a hard rock band wasn't unheard of. He wasn't in full leather like Rob Halford of Judas Priest, but he wasn't hiding it for years either.

Declan understood now why people in the public eye hid their sexuality. He never imagined admitting he was a gay man would become a focus for Station Zero. It was one of the reasons he worked so hard for the band and shouldered the base of all the responsibility. He didn't want them to be stereotyped in anyway because of who he chose to love.

Declan wanted to talk to Tate before this interview and let him know how things would go. Tate mentioned he was out to his friends and family but preferred he not be outed on the tour. Declan respected the man's wishes; he just wanted him to be prepared for the things he would hear when they were interviewed. Declan was fine with jokes, but there was the possibility the interviewer would cross the line into homophobia.

Pulling up the GPS on his phone, Declan saw they were less than thirty minutes away from the radio station. Declan needed to talk to Tate now and prepare his bandmate for whatever they might encounter.

Declan walked to the back of the bus and knocked on the door to the private suite. It opened moments later to present a shirtless Tate in a pair of low-hung gray sweats using a towel to dry his hair. Declan closed his eyes, and tried to find something he could think about so he would not get a hard on in front of Tate. Jacking off to thoughts of him in his suit playing drums was one thing, but he didn't need to offer Tate further ammunition to tease him. Their initial meeting was quite enough, and Tate still liked to poke fun.

"You need something, Declan?" Tate asked as he looped the towel around his neck and gripped the ends.

"What?" Declan looked up to find a grin on Tate's face. The man was slowly getting under his skin, and he didn't know what to make of it. Declan was used to the hook-ups; the one night stands that never held a promise of another night. He liked it that way. Relationships were messy and his life couldn't handle a mess right now.

"Oh yeah." Declan shook his head to get his brain out of his dick. "I wanted to give you a heads up about the radio interview."

"What about it? Will there be a pop quiz on historical Pittsburgh?" Tate asked.

"No, but DJ's can get out of hand during interviews." Declan said.

"How so?" Tate inquired.

"Some like to focus on me..."

“Which is understandable. You’re the front man,” Tate offered.

“No, Tate. They like to focus on who I’m fucking,” Declan stated.

Tate cleared his throat at Declan’s blunt admission. “I see, and you think this will be a problem?”

“I don’t know if it will or not. I wanted to let you know; we are a band of good-looking young guys...”

“You think I’m good looking, Declan?”

Declan groaned. “Not the point, Newman. They will pry into our personal lives. They go straight to our love lives. Chuck has his reputation and so does Keith and I’m known as the queer front man.”

Tate moved to lean against the door frame. The towel hanging around his neck swayed as he rocked back and forth. “Okay. I get it. You don’t want me to say I’m gay?”

“I thought you were keeping quiet?”

“I was. I mean, I am. I don’t know.” Tate faltered. “I guess I will just play it by ear when we get there.”

The look on Tate’s face made Declan want to gather him in his arms and hold him. This line of thinking was unusual for Declan; his firm rules on personal space outside of fucking included no hugging unless it was for dogs or kids he happened to like. This was odd.

“It’s up to you, Tate. I just want you to be prepared.” Declan forced a smile. “The jokes they think are funny can piss you off if you aren’t ready for them. Hell, they piss me off when I’m ready or not. Just be careful with what you say if you don’t want to be outed.”

Tate shoved off from the door frame and gave Declan a thumbs up. “You got it, boss.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Sorry, Declan. Should I call you sir instead?” Tate batted his eyelashes at Declan and pursed his lips.

Declan wanted to push the man inside the suite and jump him. He didn’t care who was on top, Declan was versatile and would take Tate in any way in every position. Those lips would look better with something shoved between them, like his dick. He would show Tate how many names he could call him

and how many times he would scream his name as he begged for it. *Cool it, Morrison.*

Declan took a step away from the door and pulled his phone out of his front pocket. "We are almost there." He gave Tate's bare skin and now slightly tented sweats a once over from head to toe. Declan bit the inside of his cheek to stifle a groan seeing Tate's aroused state. "Be ready."

Declan turned and walked back to the common area of the bus before Tate could do or say anything else. Having Tate Newman as his drummer was turning out to be the best and worst decision Declan made yet.

"Top of the mornin' to ya, Pittsburgh. It's the Jed and Jamie show in the morning and today we have some special guests. Station Zero is in the studio with us, stopping in while on tour with Balthazar. Welcome to Pittsburgh, boys."

Declan, Keith, Tate and Chuck all gave their hellos back. Declan's knee was bouncing with the anxiety flowing through his veins. This would be a short interview, shorter than planned as the radio station pushed them back for actual news which just broke. Declan was fine with that, because exposure was good, but he hated this part of the job.

"Morning, Jed and Jamie. Thanks for having us." Declan was the unofficial spokesperson of the band of course, so he made sure to speak up before the others had a chance.

"Declan Morrison, how *is* the tour going?" Jed asked.

"It's going great, thanks. We're playing to sold-out crowds and having a blast on the road with Balthazar," Declan answered.

"And how is your new drummer working out?" Jamie asked. She turned her body toward Tate and gave him a small wave with her question.

"Tate's been great. We were lucky to find someone so quick after Slater left," Declan answered as Jamie scooted her chair closer to Tate.

"Mmm hmm," Jamie purred. "You're lucky indeed." She rolled her chair right next to Tate, crossed her legs, rested her elbow on her knee and put her chin in her hands. Her ample cleavage was proudly displayed in this position. "How have the boys been treating you, Tate?" She placed her free hand on Tate's leg, drumming her fingers on his thigh.

Tate looked over at Declan with wide eyes at Jamie's bold gesture. Declan could only shrug and give him an "I told you so" look and hope Tate could handle this.

"They've been amazing, Jamie." Tate subtly slid his chair back to dislodge her hand. "Thanks for asking."

Declan grinned when Jamie realized quickly Tate wasn't interested in flirting with her. She was notorious for being aggressive when she wanted someone, and Declan was unsure how she was going to take the immediate rejection.

Declan nodded at Tate in approval, and he noticed a blush creep up Tate's neck; the man's poker face was worse than his. Declan glanced at Jamie and hoped she hadn't noticed the exchange between them.

The band answered a number of organized and traditional questions: how long was the tour, where are they most excited about playing, where they plan to go from here with their careers et cetera. It was almost time to end the interview when Jamie decided to play games with Declan.

"So, Declan. Enjoying Pittsburgh?" Jamie asked.

"Not yet. We just got in this morning," Declan returned.

"Oh. Planning on doing some sight-seeing?" Jamie probed.

"If we have time. We always like to check out local places as well as the tourist attractions." Declan did not like the tone of her voice—he didn't like where this could be going.

Jamie reached into a folder in front of her and pulled out a stack of stapled papers. "I took the liberty of printing out a few places you might want to check out." She handed the papers to Jed who glanced at them and then at Jamie with a scowl but handed them off to Declan.

"Maybe your drummer would like to tag along?" Jamie bent her wrist and wiggled it back and forth at Tate.

Shut up, Tate. Don't say a word.

Declan hoped Tate developed the power of telepathy and could hear him. When he glanced over, Tate was frozen in his chair, silent and staring straight at Jamie.

Declan looked at the papers and back at Jamie. *Figures.* "You know, Jamie. You really are amazing with your insight into my gay life." Declan looked at Jamie as the fake grin fell from her face.

“How did you know I wanted to see the *real* Liberty Avenue?” Declan spoke in a higher tone and exaggerated his words and waved his arms around. “Wow. *Queer as Folk* was my favorite show. It showed the world how my people really are.”

Declan actually couldn't stand the show but watched every episode of it with Lisa. She was convinced one day he would find his own Brian Kinney. She would get a kick out of this blast from Jamie before she went to her bosses at the firm, where she was a paralegal, and asked them to sue Jamie's ass and the radio station pro bono.

Jamie's face turned red, and she looked around the room for help and coming up empty. Jed wasn't going to bail her out of this one, not this time.

“I'm glad I could help, Declan.” Her words came out sounding choked. “Just let me know if I can help and oh...” She pulled a brochure out of the folder sliding it across the table to Declan. “Here is a hotel voucher for you and the boys. No need to sleep on the bus tonight.”

Declan noticed her hands were now shaking. Such bravado shot down so quickly. It was a shame she didn't put up more of a fight, the small exchange made Declan's nerves downshift.

He raised the brochure and vouchers to her in mock salute. “Oh, thank you so much, Jamie. How can we ever repay you?” He gave her a bright and wide smile. Declan made a noise he hoped resembled a squeal and placed his hand over his open mouth. “Would you like to come with me to Donny's Place? Don't they have a leather basement? What's it called...?” Declan tapped his fingers against his chin. “Ooh Leather Central and I hear it's amazing!”

Jamie gasped and covered her microphone. Her face flushed red, and she was obviously irritated. Good. She deserved it.

“Jed, I need a minute.” Jamie stood, knocking her chair over and stomped out of the room. Declan gave an apologetic shrug to Jed who shook his head and gave a tight smile back.

Jed cleared his throat. “About time. Nicely done, son. Nicely done.” Jed put his hand out and Declan grasped it in a firm handshake.

Declan glanced over at his bandmates; Chuck was busy playing with the knobs on the board in front of him, Keith was silent and simply nodded at Declan and then there was Tate. Tate who looked at Declan with what could only be admiration in his eyes and it made Declan's stomach do flips.

“So Jed, have you heard the story of what our band was almost named?” Declan steered the last of the interview back to the band where it belonged.

“It was just a suggestion, dude. I didn’t mean it!” Chuck was finally able to join in the interview.

“You mean you didn’t want to name us Citizen Dick?” Keith chimed in.

“Hey! Citizen Dick was a classic band made up of kick-ass grunge artists!” Chuck spun his chair around and played air guitar. “‘Touch me I’m Dick’ would have been a great song to record.”

Jed laughed at Chuck and his whining about the name. “Sure it would have been Chuck, but Declan here doesn’t resemble Matt Dillon so you might not have the same appeal.”

Declan couldn’t help but laugh. Chuck would be the only person to think naming a band after his favorite body part would be a good choice.

The interview carried on and ended on a good note. Declan thanked Jed and returned the vouchers for the hotel. He didn’t want anything from a station who employed someone like Jamie. The boys would pout and he would endure it for the night, but he stood up for himself. And now he stood up for Tate whether he was out or not.

Declan boarded the bus with his bandmates and went to the mini fridge to grab them all a bottle of water. It was too early for beer even if they were supposed rock stars who partied 24/7. If fans really knew what they did on tour, they would be bored.

Declan handed them each a bottle and raised his in a toast.

“To our first non-local radio interview!”

His bandmates raised their bottles and repeated his words back to him.

“To Declan, kicking ass with the succubus at the station who should be fired!” Chuck stood and pumped his fist in the air with his toast.

“Chuck, do you know what a succubus is?” Keith asked.

“Um, yeah. I watch Buffy you know.” Chuck answered and took a swig of his water.

“It was nothing, Chuck. Shit happens.” Declan shrugged and his neck twitched in pain. He’d been shrugging a lot lately.

“But it shouldn’t, Declan. Not like that,” Tate responded. His brow was wrinkled with worry lines. What Declan wouldn’t give to sit next to him and smooth them away?

What’s stopping you?

“It’s okay, Tate. What she did was mild, trust me.” Declan drank his water and tossed the empty bottle in the recycling bin.

“Let’s focus on tonight’s show and move on with the tour,” Declan proposed.

The members of Station Zero agreed, and Declan sat at the table and watched as the buildings passed him by. He didn’t lie to Tate, what happened with Jamie at the radio station *was* mild. He hoped he wouldn’t have to deal with anything more for the rest of the tour.

Chapter 4

~June~

Declan walked to the front of the stage and wrapped his arms around his bandmates' shoulders as the stage lights came up, blinding them as they took their final bow. The crowd cheered and the boys turned to each other and smiled. San Antonio was one hell of a show, but Declan was beat. He'd been working non-stop with Rick on different ideas and where they could take the band. He deserved a night off.

Declan waved to the crowd one last time, nodded to his bandmates and made his way offstage. He was congratulated for a good show with handshakes and pats of the back from the numerous people backstage. He felt great after their set, yet found it hard to genuinely smile at everyone. Walking into the green room, he met the band members of Balthazar as they were preparing to take the stage.

"Great show tonight, boys!" Max shook his hand and moved onto the rest of the band. "Way to warm up the crowd for us, they're going to be hungry when we get out there."

Declan smiled and felt the honesty in Max's words. The man was a rarity in the land of the music business, at least the people Declan came in contact with. Max was old school—he paid it forward and gave back to those who were on the bottom of the musical totem pole. Max knew what it was like to be where Declan and Station Zero were right now and he did what he could to help.

"They love you no matter who opens for you, Max." Declan gave Max a brotherly smack on the back. "But thanks for letting it be us."

"No problem, Declan. Hey, you gonna stay and watch tonight's show? The pyro guy has some new tricks he's trying out."

"Actually, no. I thought about heading out and attempting normalcy for a night."

"Why would you want to do that, boss?" Chuck's mumble around whatever he had stuffed in his mouth came from over Declan's shoulder.

"It's what us grown-ups do, Charles." Declan patted Chuck's stuffed cheek. "You stay and have fun. But try to behave when there are cameras around, okay?"

Chuck swallowed and nodded. "Got it, boss. Only be the bad boy in private."

"And make sure she isn't a hooker..." Declan warned.

"That only happened once! Who knew she ran a site and hoarded a big black book like Gene Simmons."

"Be good, Chuck." Declan squeezed Chuck's bicep as he pouted and went back to the craft table.

"Max, have a good show." Declan shook the front man's hand once again. He nodded to each musician in the room, eyeing Keith as he huddled on the couch with the same girl from their show in New Orleans and noticed Tate was missing.

"Has anyone seen Tate?"

"I'm here." Declan turned at the sound of Tate's voice as he walked through the door. "There was an issue with my bass pedal and I wanted to speak to the tech about it. What's up?"

"Nothing, just letting you know I wasn't staying for Balthazar's show tonight."

Tate did the thing with his eyebrow that was fast becoming one of Declan's favorites about him in a long list of favorite things about him. Declan scanned the man's face as he slowly wiped a small towel over it and down his neck and chest.

"Oh, really? Want some company?" Declan's gaze met Tate's, and the man just grinned, as he waited for his answer.

"Not sure what I'm doing yet. I was looking for a night of normal to do..."

"I can do normal."

"Oh look, the boys are planning a date," Chuck teased and began to sing. "Declan and Tate, making a match, who's gonna pitch and who's gonna..."

"Shut up, Chuck!" Declan and Tate yelled simultaneously.

Chuck laughed. "Use protection boys, and Declan, *don't* do anything *I* wouldn't do!"

Tate balled up his towel and threw it at Chuck. He turned back to Declan.

"I understand if you don't want company."

“No. I don’t... I mean, company would be nice, actually.” Declan smiled at Tate’s surprised expression. “I’m going to hit the shower...”

“You take the bus, I’ll shower here,” Tate insisted.

“Deal,” Declan agreed. “Meet me at the bus in twenty?”

Tate nodded, walked toward Declan and whispered as he passed, “It’s a date.”

It’s a date.

Yeah, it’s what Declan wanted this to be all right. From the moment Tate Newman walked into their studio warehouse in Los Angeles and into his life, the man got under his skin. Declan wanted Tate’s skin, wanted to lick every inch of it, bury his nose in it and inhale his scent. Tate drove him to distraction. Maybe hanging out with only him for a night would exorcise Declan’s lust. Was it just lust? He liked being around Tate, the guy had a sense of humor and he was smart as hell. He knew Tate was an actuary and he didn’t exactly love his job—but Declan wanted to know more about him—and not just why he played the drums barefoot. It wasn’t so unusual for a drummer to play in such a way though, Declan wondered if there was more behind it.

Declan grabbed his faded red shirt out of the rumpled pile, which was his suitcase, and slipped it over his head. He buttoned up the fly on his vintage Levi’s and spun around looking for his shoes. Declan had the reputation of looking like he shopped out of vintage clothing stores, and he did, just not the trendy ones littering Melrose Avenue or anywhere close. Since he left home Declan made sure to spend his money frugally and thrift stores were as frugal as he could go. He also liked the hunt for the perfect piece of clothing and imagining the history of who wore it and why it ended up on the rack. Each piece has a story that took on a commonality of angst with a happily ever after, the once loved piece of clothing no longer unwanted and forgotten.

Finding his shoes and sliding them on, he checked himself in the mirror. Declan knew he was good looking, it was what got him into a lot of places, but he wasn’t vain. His hair could do with a cut and the dark circles under his eyes weren’t attractive, but he was tired and his body wasn’t good at hiding the effects.

Declan grabbed his wallet. Shoving it in the back pocket of his jeans, he walked toward the stairs when he caught sight of Tate leaning against one of

the smaller passenger vans. His blond hair caught the light of the sun as it began its descent for the night and cast a warm glow over the man. Declan raked his eyes over Tate's form; he wore a pair of tan pants and a black polo shirt, with the ever present Chuck Taylors on his feet. A simple outfit as the one Tate was wearing shouldn't be a turn-on, but Declan and his dick thought otherwise. The pants hugged Tate in all the right places, the material clung to his strong thighs and tapered off at the knee. The polo shirt was fitted enough to catch the outline of Tate's chest and the elastic around the sleeves strained against his biceps. Tate wasn't a huge man, but he was built from exercise and playing the drums. Declan eyed Tate's forearms and those delectable veins down to his watch with the leather band.

Declan broke off his eye-fuck of Tate, walked down the stairs and off the bus. Tate turned as the door made a sound as it closed. He smiled, nodded and made his way to Declan. They met in the middle of the parking lot, silently taking in the sight of one another—alone for the first time since they met and started this journey together. The music of Balthazar's set and the sounds from the crowds provided background noise; neither of them talked at first.

Declan cleared his throat. "So, you ready to go?"

Tate nodded, rocked back on his heels and fidgeted with his watch. "Have any ideas what you want to do?"

"Not one, I thought we'd play it by ear."

Tate ducked his head and looked up through his lashes. "I looked up a few places around town while you took your shower. San Antonio has some cool touristy places to check out if you're up to it?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"There is a place, San Antonio River Walk. From what I found online it looks pretty cool. Relaxing and all with decent places to eat or..." Tate trailed off.

"The River Walk sounds good. I've heard about it before. You want to grab something to eat first?"

Tate patted his stomach and nodded. "Yeah, I kinda looked up a place to eat too, if you're okay with eating at a bar."

"You're quite the planner aren't you, Tate?" Declan was impressed with Tate's forethought for their evening.

“Sorry, force of habit. I like organization. It calms me down to have things worked out. I’m not a fan of chaos,” Tate blustered.

“And yet you’re on a tour with crazy musicians?”

“Organized chaos is a gray area.” Tate shrugged at the omission.

“Where’s this bar?” Declan looked over his shoulder and across the parking lot to the line of waiting black town cars.

“It’s on the River Walk, called The Esquire Tavern. It has history and from what I read, killer beer and burgers.”

“Sounds good to me, let’s grab a ride and go.”

Tate smiled, and for all the flirting he did with Declan, this smile was innocent and sweet. Declan thought the flirting was going to kill him until he saw this smile.

For the umpteenth time since he met Tate Newman, Declan thought about how screwed he was and how much he was starting not to care.

Declan slid into the leather-backed booth of The Esquire Tavern and looked over the menu he’d grabbed on the way in. He watched as one of the female servers walked past their table and gave Tate a flirtatious look.

“She was checking you out,” Declan told him.

“Who?” Tate looked over his shoulder.

“The server that just walked by.” Declan chuckled. “You didn’t feel her eyes on you?”

Tate shook his head. “No, I guess I don’t pay attention as much as I should.”

Declan studied Tate as he glanced over the menu. Tate called this a date, and Declan wanted to pretend it was... didn’t he? He liked Tate, he wanted to try for more with Tate, but Declan was unsure how to navigate a romance or a relationship. *Romance?* Tate made him think crazy thoughts, and he was beginning to like it.

“You ready to order?” Tate asked, bringing Declan out of his thoughts.

“Sure? I’ll go place the order if you want?”

Tate nodded and gave Declan his order. Declan took their menus and walked to the counter. There were a few people in front of him, and while he

waited he let his mind wander again, straight to Tate. There was something brewing between them that had been there from their first meeting at Tate's audition. Declan believed in lust at first sight, but it wasn't straight lust with Tate. He *liked* being around him day in and day out as a bandmate, a friend and more. The thing he didn't like was being lost with how to deal with his feelings.

Declan looked over his shoulder to catch Tate watching him. He felt the heat rise from his neck to his face. *The man makes me blush*. Declan chuckled and winked at Tate before he returned to the counter and placed their order. He paid for their meals, grabbed their mugs of beer and walked back to the table.

"I was told these were the best local beers they had," Declan said, sitting across from Tate and sliding him a mug.

"Yeah?" Tate pursed his lips. "Let's see."

Tate tipped his mug and took a sip of his beer. He pulled the mug away from his mouth, and the foam had left a moustache on his top lip.

Declan pointed at Tate's face. "You, um have some..." He tapped his finger against his mouth.

"What?" Tate asked. "My lips?" Tate grinned, and Declan watched as he ran his tongue over his top lip, cleaning it of the foam.

"Jesus, Tate," Declan muttered. This was going to be a long night if Tate kept doing things like that with his mouth.

"Is there a problem Declan?" Tate raised his eyebrows and grinned. "I just like good head"—Tate winked—"on my beer, that is."

"Oh yeah..." Declan stopped as they were interrupted.

"Hi, boys." The server who was checking Tate out earlier arrived with their food. "Who had the Bison Burger?"

They sorted out their burgers, fries, and Tate's crazy assortment of condiments and were ready to eat.

"Dinner's served." Declan bowed his head and waved his arm over the table. He had no plans to continue the banter with Tate and his opinions on good head.

"Thanks, this looks good." Tate grabbed his burger, looked up and into Declan's eyes as he took a bite.

Declan cleared his throat, attempting not to stare at Tate's mouth as he ate. Declan lost his self-control, though, and couldn't help but watch the way Tate's

long fingers gripped the thin fries, his mouth wrapping around each one, his cheeks slightly hollowing as he sucked off the ketchup. Declan imagined it wrapped around other areas, preferably his dick, and his dick obviously agreed as it swelled.

Declan coughed and choked on his burger.

“You okay there, Declan?” Tate asked with concern.

“Yeah.” Declan swallowed and took a long drink of his beer.

“So, what do you have planned after this?” Declan wanted to steer the conversation toward something that would make his dick behave. Being on this non-date with Tate was making it hard to focus.

The San Antonio River Walk was beautiful, and the name implied exactly what it was: five miles of a river lined with shops, restaurants, and an outdoor venue for shows with plenty of available space for walking. Declan had heard of this place before Tate suggested it for their... *it's not a date Morrison*. He knew Tate called it one, but Declan needed to think of this as non-date to settle his emotions.

Declan walked alongside Tate, the silence comfortable between them. Anyone could hold a conversation with you, but it was a true gift to be silent with someone. He glanced at Tate, taking in the quiet strength that was radiating off him and drawing Declan closer. As much as Declan liked the silence, he wanted to talk before he got lost in his head and started to daydream of actual dates with Tate.

“So...” Declan asked as they walked next to the tables with brightly colored rainbow umbrellas eating their beer-flavored ice cream.

“So?” Tate asked.

“Tell me something about you?” Declan wanted to learn anything he could about Tate. They chatted here and there, while on the bus or in rehearsals, but they were more superficial than deeply informative. Declan would have tied Tate to a chair and gone over a checklist of questions if his brain would have stayed on the questions and not what he could do *to* Tate tied to a chair.

“What do you want to know?” Tate asked.

“Oh, I don't know.” Declan went with a safe question since dirty thoughts were plenty when he was with Tate. “Who were you in high school?”

"You're going to make me think that far back?" Tate laughed and bumped his shoulder with Declan's. "Making an old man work, are ya?"

"You're not old Tate," Declan promised.

"Older than you," Tate replied. "I was in the marching band in high school."

"You were?" Declan liked the idea of Tate being a band geek. "Playing drums?"

"Yup. Drums or the tuba were the fat kid's choice back then."

Declan choked on his ice cream. "You were fat?"

"A bit. You and I could've fit in my marching band uniform." Tate shrugged and licked his melting ice cream. Declan stifled a groan as he watched Tate's tongue delve into the soft serve and swipe along his bottom lip to catch the bit that dribbled. "What about you, Declan? Who were you in high school?"

"I was the jock." Declan waited for the obvious response he got when people learned he played sports.

"Football?" Tate asked.

"Baseball," Declan stated.

"Nice. Were you out then?" Tate's question took Declan back to his high school days, and though he wanted to talk to Tate, to get to know him, thinking about those times brought back conflicting memories.

"No, but I knew I was gay when I was twelve." Declan snuck a look at Tate from under his lashes. Tate was focused on Declan as they talked when not busy navigating the walk around other pedestrians.

"How was that, being a gay jock?"

"It wasn't anything. My cousin Lisa used to get girls from her school—she lived in a different town—to pose as my girlfriends." The memory made Declan smile. "It was easier to pretend."

"Did it work?"

"For a while, but it didn't feel right lying to everyone *and* me," Declan answered honestly.

"When did you come out?"

"When I was eighteen." Declan gripped his ice cream cone tight. "The night before I left for college."

"I didn't know you went to college?"

"I didn't actually," he admitted.

Tate grunted. "How did the coming out go?"

"Let's say not well. I haven't talked to my parents since then." Saying those words hurt worse than Declan thought it would. He hoped letting his skeletons out of the proverbial closet would prove to be cathartic.

"Wow, Declan. I'm sorry." Tate's sincerity was clear.

"So you've heard my short story, what's yours?" Declan was more than ready to change the subject, to move on and away from his past.

"Let me make a long, boring, drama-filled story short: I came out when I was twenty-one, when my best friend with benefits decided he'd turn my life upside down, which in turn created a lot of stress with my family."

"Sounds intense." Declan grimaced.

"It was. The guy wasn't the best decision I made in my life, but you learn from mistakes and move on, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. How did your parents take it?"

"My dad wasn't thrilled, being the stereotypical macho man he is. My mom—she went overboard with her involvement." Tate's gruff response hit a chord with Declan.

"Involvement?"

They stopped at the bridge and watched a boat full of tourists travel along the river. Declan shoved his hands into his back pockets and waited for Tate's answer.

"She joined every group she could to support her gay son. She sends me selfies from her PFLAG meetings with the other moms in the background. It's nice she wants to be a part of it, but it gets overwhelming most of the time."

"At least she tries, though." Declan would give his left nut to have his parents acknowledge his presence. Having a parent support you, even if it was over the top, was something he would never know.

"Yeah, she does. She already lost one child and she vowed she would do whatever was in her power not to lose another."

"You have siblings?"

“Had,” Tate sighed. “I had a sister. She died when I was thirteen.” Tate’s voice turned melancholy as he related this new bit of information.

“How... if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I don’t. It’s fine. She was born with Type 1 Diabetes and lost her sight when she was eight. She adapted better than anyone thought to being blind.” Tate turned to Declan and the smile spread across his face showed his love for his late sister. “You know how I play barefoot?”

“Yeah,” Declan responded.

“I do it in honor of her, because of Louise. She used to say the greatest thing in the world was touch because without it she couldn’t see...”

Declan’s next question was swallowed by a tap on his shoulder. Declan spun around as Tate delivered a surprisingly unmanly scream, and he found himself face to face with a mime.

Turning back, he managed to catch Tate as he teetered on the edge of the bridge. Laughter erupted from him at Tate’s freak-out when he saw the mime.

Declan pulled Tate back onto the bridge, shaking his head as Tate’s eyes widened as he looked over his shoulder.

“Tate, buddy, you okay?” Declan righted Tate and made sure he was solid on his feet.

“Mime.” Tate pointed over his shoulder. “There’s a mime behind you, Declan.”

Declan searched Tate’s face and the fear plainly written across it. He reached out and patted Tate’s stomach as he turned toward the mime standing behind them, wearing black pants, a white loose fitting V-necked T-shirt and black suspenders under a black cardigan. His face was painted white with black markings and the tip of his nose painted red. His smile was mischievous, and he waved slowly at him and Tate. Declan waved back.

“Hi.” Declan’s simple two lettered greeting made the mime grin wider and pull a balloon out from behind his back. He held it next to his face and twirled it around so the words written on it were visible, *My name is Mikael*, he pointed to the balloon and pointed to his chest with a nod.

“Nice to meet you, Mikael.” Declan chuckled at the mime but when he turned to look at Tate he laughed outright at the look on his face.

“Tate, *are* you okay?” Declan lost his balance as Tate stepped forward and grasped at his shirt and latching on with a fierce grip. Declan placed his hand over Tate's, leaned in close and whispered, “Hey, it's okay, I'm here.” Tate's reaction was comical, but it sparked a protective vibe in Declan he noticed surfaced whenever Tate was near.

Tate nodded, his head turned so his nose rubbed against Declan's temple as he took a deep inhale and exhale.

Mikael prodded Declan's shoulder; he was making a motion with his hands like he was holding a camera, and pushing the shutter button to take their picture. Declan waved his hand in dismissal. “No thanks, we're good.”

Mikael pouted.

“Dude, mimes are not cool.” Declan felt Tate's whisper against his neck as he released his hold on Declan's shirt and moved to hold his bicep. “They're worse than clowns.”

“Mental note,” Declan whispered back to Tate. “Don't watch the movie *IT* with Tate.”

“Do it and you'll never get in my pants, Morrison...”

Declan's felt the statement down to his dick. “Is that where you want me, Tate?”

“Get rid of the mime and I'll answer the question.” Tate was gripping Declan's arm and tugging him in the opposite direction of Mikael.

Right... your mission, Agent Morrison, should you choose to accept it: ditch the mime and get into Tate's pants.

Declan tugged Tate back to his side and attempted to give him a stern look which he failed to execute as he grinned at the man's obvious discomfort. How could someone like Tate be afraid of a mime?

“Sorry, Mikael. My friend here doesn't want our picture taken.” Declan pointed to the crowd starting to gather to watch Mikael do whatever it was mimes actually did. “Maybe one of them would like you to take theirs?”

Mikael crossed his arms over his chest and tapped his foot on the ground. He walked toward them and touched Tate's arm; Tate flinched at the touch.

“Easy boy,” Declan chided Mikael with his directive and attempted to calm Tate.

Mikael's face softened under his white makeup as he looked at Tate; the mime's expression was amplified by the black smearing of fake tears which ran from his eyes down his cheeks. He stepped away from Tate, and turned to touch Declan's shoulder lightly. The smile he gave Declan reached his eyes, and he patted Declan's cheek. Mikael walked a few feet away and proceeded to "mime" himself into a box. Mikael boxed himself in with movements of his hands and crouched down then pulled the imaginary box closed. He stayed in position for a few seconds before he jumped to his feet and out of the box. Tate's hold on Declan's arm loosened as Mikael walked back to the "box" opened it and jumped back as if something popped up, Jack-in-the-box style. He pulled what Declan thought was a rope out of his pockets, made a loop and tossed it around what came out of the box. Mikael started to pull on the rope with determined yanks.

Declan looked up at Tate to judge his reaction; his hand has fallen from Declan's arm and he stared slack jawed at Mikael. It was the most relaxed he'd been since they were approached by the mime. Declan found it amazing and disturbing Mikael read their situation, or lack of one, in less than five minutes of meeting them in a public place. The realization hit Declan full force and made him sway on his feet.

Yeah, Declan was stuck inside a box of responsibility with Tate trying to pull him out, even if he wasn't conscious of doing so.

Thank you, Mikael, for pointing that out.

Declan clapped for the mime, hoping it would signal he was finished with his performance. Mikael looked over at Declan and turned his mouth into a frown. Declan was done with being judged by a street performer who didn't know him from Adam. He elbowed Tate to get his attention.

"You ready?" Declan asked.

Tate tore his gaze away from the mime and nodded to Declan. "Damn straight! Let's go."

Declan put his hand on the small of Tate's back and led them away. He looked over his shoulder to see Mikael holding a cluster of black and red balloons, with a burning cigarette hanging from his mouth. Declan decided he would agree with Tate and his opinions of mimes.

The warm night air floated around Declan and Tate as they walked across the parking lot of the amphitheater to the tour bus. Their non-date was nothing

like Declan expected. After the odd performance of Mikael the mime, he and Tate found a quiet table to have a drink and talk. Declan couldn't remember a time when he'd talked as freely as he did with Tate.

He'd learned a lot about Tate tonight. Declan knew the man was more than a pretty face, he didn't have to be with him more than five minutes to realize that, but the things Tate shared with Declan tonight, they brought on a deeper meaning that made him feel closer to his drummer.

Declan knew if he ever came face-to-face with Tate's ex-boyfriend, he would probably go to jail for letting his fist talk some sense into the man. The way he treated Tate and his family was unbelievable. Tate was more of a man than Declan was. He wouldn't give the two-timing, lying son of a bitch the time of day if he was hanging off a cliff by a nail, let alone talk to him more than once a week. Jealousy and rage like Declan had never known sprung up inside him as Tate told his story about his ex.

Tate told him about his sister, and it had torn Declan's heart out. The thought that someone so young, beautiful, and full of life could end up in a coma on life support just because, like a million teenagers, she'd gone to a party. Tate told him how Louise snuck out of the house with her boyfriend and played beer pong with her classmates. Louise wasn't like others though and a few drinks too many left her in a coma. The knowledge Tate was there when they pulled the plug was humbling. Losing Louise and knowing her loss of sight and life was why Tate played barefoot made Declan look at his drummer in a new light. Sure, Tate was snarky and flirty, but he was emotionally connected to those he cared about.

Declan shared as much as he could with Tate—he told him about Lisa, his parents, and his lack of relationships... ever. Tate gave him a shocked look at his admission. It almost matched the look Declan gave Tate when he learned it had been just under two years since Tate had sex. *Two years?* Declan hadn't gone longer than a few months without sex. Come to think of it, this tour was the longest he'd been without a hook-up.

These numerous thoughts running through his mind were giving him a migraine.

He glanced at Tate and admired the confident way he walked head up, back straight, his gait even and full of purpose. Declan could sometimes fool himself better than a magician on Las Vegas Boulevard, but he was into Tate, and he wanted him. *Not* simply for a hook-up. The thought terrified him.

"You coming, Declan?" He looked up to find Tate several paces ahead of him. *When did he stop walking?*

"Yeah, sorry. Got lost in my head." He walked faster to catch up with Tate.

"I notice you do that a lot," Tate volunteered.

"Do what?" Declan asked.

"Get lost in your thoughts."

"Bad habit of being an only child with absent parents." Declan shrugged. "There was no one around to talk to so I kept to myself."

"It would have been nice for you, if Lisa had lived closer?"

"Yeah, it would, but she's always been a phone call away."

Declan stopped walking when they reached the tour bus. The night and their non-date was coming to an end. A feeling of grief washed over him at the realization. It wasn't as if he wouldn't see Tate every day for the remainder of the tour, but this day, this day that could be the best of his life was coming to an end.

"Tate, I..." Declan felt Tate behind him. He took a deep breath and turned around, meeting the intense stare of Tate Newman head on.

"You what... Declan?" Tate moved forward, and the slight movement caused his hand to brush against Declan's. "God, I love saying your name."

Declan moaned with Tate's words, imagining how many ways he could make Tate say his name.

"Say it again." Declan's voice quivered with his request. Tate moved his hand against Declan's, his fingers sliding along his palm, against his wrist and up to his forearm where it vacated to settle on his hip.

Declan's body leaned into Tate's touch, as he shifted his hip, making Tate tighten his grip and move closer. Declan gazed into Tate's eyes, watching the color darken to a deep blue like the sky before a storm. Tate's free hand found its way to Declan's neck, and Tate was rubbing his thumb firmly along Declan's throat.

Declan tore his eyes away from Tate's to settle on his mouth. Tate's tongue darted out and touched his top lip before he spoke. "Declan." The slow way he drawled out his name made Declan's cock throb against the button fly of his jeans. His back arched at the same time Tate's grip on his hip and neck pulled him closer.

“You want an answer to that question, Declan?”

Declan couldn't remember what question he wanted the answer to, but if it kept Tate this close and his hands on him he would take whatever Tate offered.

He nodded his response.

Tate ran his thumb over Declan's bottom lip and he opened his mouth. Tate took the opening as opportunity and slid his finger inside—instinct took over as Declan licked the pad of his thumb before closing his lips around the finger and sucked.

“Fuck,” Tate groaned. “That's sexy.”

Declan hummed around Tate's finger and swirled his tongue, lavishing attention to his finger to mimic what he wanted to do to Tate's dick.

Tate began thrusting his thumb in and out of Declan's mouth, and Declan was lost in the sexual haze that engulfed them. He clutched at Tate, grabbing the front of his shirt and bringing them chest to chest and groin to groin. He gasped at the contact, and Tate's thumb fell from his wet mouth. Tate's rock-hard erection was pressed against his, and he could think of nothing but wrapping his leg around Tate's waist and riding him right there in the parking lot.

“Tate...” His name fell from Declan's lips in a mixture of question and desperation.

Tate gripped Declan's face in his hands. “Say it, Declan. Say it and I'm yours.”

Say what?

Declan wracked his brain for the words Tate wanted when the door to the bus slammed open and Chuck's boisterous voice bounced off the pavement.

“Whoa! Dudes what the fuck?” Chuck obviously spotted them.

“Leave it, Chuck.” Declan stared at Tate, neither of them taking their eyes off each other though the presence of Chuck dampened the sexual tension building between them.

“You said no sex on the bus, boss,” Chuck whined.

“We aren't on the bus and we aren't having sex,” Declan pointed out.

Tate grinned. “Yet.”

Declan's dick responded to Tate's answer before his mouth could. *Yet*. What was he doing? He laid down rules for the band and he was going to break every one of them for what? To get into Tate's pants? Yeah, he remembered the fucking question now.

Declan reached up to grab Tate's hands on his face, he held Tate's gaze as he pulled them away and lowered them to his sides. He shook his head at Tate and felt the freedom and hope from their day slip away. He didn't try to catch it.

"Tate, we can't."

The confusion on Tate's face turned to anger and then hurt as he swept his arms wide on either side of him.

"Have it *your* way, Declan." Tate walked away from Declan, taking his warmth and want with him and met Chuck on the stairs to the bus.

"What's up, Chuck?" Tate pushed at Chuck to turn him around and walk up the stairs. Chuck's low mumble response was inaudible.

Declan closed his eyes and heard the door close. He banged his head against the side of the bus and turned to lay his hot cheek against the cold metal, slapping his hand against it in frustration. This business with Tate was getting complicated and he screwed up tonight something good.

He was going to fix this, but he couldn't do it now. Tomorrow—the best thing about tomorrow—he got a fresh start, a do over, and Declan sure could use one.

Chapter 5

The bus swayed as it rolled down the highway. The highways all started to look the same and, after three months on the road, the romanticism of traveling was wearing off. The shows were the best part, the part that kept Declan going. The miles put on the bus, the band, and his conscience were going to need a long vacation when they were done with this tour. If he could take a vacation after this.

Declan sat at the table staring at his laptop. He'd finally found the time to reply to emails sent from Rick, their manager, informing them of a new start-up label that might be interested in Station Zero. Declan began research on the label the minute he finished Rick's email. He learned the CEO was a former vice president of a major label who was tired of the auto-tuned teenagers they were cranking out like chocolates running wild on Lucille Ball. That one fact alone gave Declan a good feeling about them. He was glad Rick sent the label articles of the band on tour with Balthazar and a few of the videos from the press conferences and interviews. Media they could use to visualize how they wanted to package the band.

Two words were currently freaking Declan the fuck out: package and media. There was another email from Rick marked "urgent" and came with the subject line of READ ME!!! Declan attempted to calm his nerves before he opened it, thinking the big bold letters and the three exclamation points could be Rick doing internet jazz hands. Declan sighed, bit the bullet and clicked on the email. Inside, four attachments showed two photos, a scan of an article and a screen shot of a Station Zero fan site. Declan could see in the thumbnails of the photos they were of him and Tate on the River Walk with the mime. The body of the text was simple and to the point, "Not good Declan. You know better. Call me when you get this."

They hadn't done anything wrong. They hadn't done anything at all. Not that he didn't want to. The night was amazing, romantic even, and Declan was not the romantic kind of guy, but the night was... perfect. He rarely held a conversation with another man longer than a few minutes without having to fake interest, but there was no faking with Tate. They could talk about anything and everything and Tate got him. He laughed when Declan made a joke, and it wasn't the type of fake laugh to get laid, it was genuine. After years of hook-ups, Declan could spot the difference. Tate laughed with him, and at him when his ego needed to be brought down a few notches.

Declan clicked on the pictures in the email and watched as they opened. He sat back against the seat and just stared at the screen. He couldn't lie to himself, he and Tate looked like a couple. The first showed them ordering the beer ice cream from a small shop they'd stumbled across. They were swapping cones because the young girl at the window was flustered by Tate, and got their order mixed up. The smile on Tate's face was beautiful, it was tender and looked like one a man would give to his lover. Declan couldn't tear his gaze away from Tate's face on the screen. The second picture was one Declan wanted framed and put on multiple surfaces that could hold a snap shot. This must have been taken from the bridge when they met Mikael the mime; he made Tate jump and Declan quickly grabbed him before he fell into the river. Declan's arms were around Tate, pulling him into his body and away from the water, and Tate's left hand was on Declan's bicep and his right on his neck holding on. The laughter and ease on their faces, this picture captured a moment neither of them were prepared for and it showed so much. They used to say a camera would steal your soul if your picture was taken, and Declan would sell his soul to have moments like this every day.

He tore his eyes away from the picture and clicked on the article next. It was a piece in a small San Antonio newspaper in the music section. It was a review of their show, a positive one that glossed over the boys' talent. Declan scanned over the typical jargon of a live show review and took a deep breath when he got to the last paragraph.

The bandmates of Station Zero have made plenty of room for their new member, Tate Newman. The unheard of drummer not only filled the shoes of Slater MacAlister, but he removed them and tossed those bad boys offstage. The six four, blond barefooted man has made himself at home with the likes of Keith Raines, Chuck King, and after last night, it looks like he might be playing house with front man, Declan Morrison. Spotted around the tourist attraction of The San Antonio River Walk, the men spent the night wrapped in each other in a romantic stroll along the river and playing the clowns, or with a clown on their walk. Are these two more than bandmates? We know which team Declan bats for, but is Tate Newman on deck?

This was some sort of gossip rag posing as a respectable piece. *Music review my ass!* After reading the article, Declan was sure he didn't want to see what was on the fan site. He loved the fans, their support was why they played

and he knew they wouldn't be anywhere without them, but some of these sites didn't know what boundaries were. Declan knew being a public figure came with social responsibility, but what was the big deal seeing him buying toilet paper at the local Walgreens? It never made sense to him.

Declan heard sounds coming from the back of the bus, so he hurried and clicked on the link to the fan site to get this over with before the band was up and about. *Oh! For fuck's sake!* This was sure to be the worst site out there, it ranked up there with the boy band sites who shipped bandmates hoping to see any sign of attraction or something passing off as more than friendship. These type of bloggers were rabid, and once they latched on they were not letting go. There were not only the pictures posted along with the gossip article, but some grainy video taken off someone's cell phone of them with the mime. Just fucking great.

Declan knew he was going to have to do damage control with Rick and smooth this all over. He wasn't looking forward to explaining what was going on, and he was not going to out Tate to anyone—that was Tate's decision. The band knew he was gay, but his reasons were his own for keeping part of his life private and Declan would not betray the man's trust. He would explain about the pictures; what happened before they were taken with the mime and what they *weren't* revealing, fast. Rick wasn't exactly a sleazy type of manager, but this was his business and there was never a false pretense—managing Station Zero was first and foremost about the money.

Declan scrolled through the posts and comments on the fan site/blog, the girls were already asking for fan fiction on the pictures. Talk about the dark side of fame, even the small amount they claimed could turn into this. Declan didn't want Tate to see the emails. This could go bad fast and he couldn't lose Tate now. The band couldn't lose him. What Declan wanted wasn't figured into the business plan, the plan was to get Station Zero signed with a label and record their first full-length album.

Keith came out and sat down at the table with Declan. His calm attitude could usually bleed into Declan and change his mood, but this time it wasn't working.

“You okay, boss?” Keith gave him a questioning look.

“Yeah. Just working on a few business things. You know, boring stuff.” Declan felt his blood pressure rise. He never knew what the feeling was before he hooked up with a surgical intern. The nights they shared together in the fall

taught him many things about himself. Feeling his heart beat in his ears was not a song begging for home, it was his blood pressure rising, and right now it was rising fast.

Declan closed the laptop and got up from the table. Keith was still giving him an odd look, but he needed to put out the latest fire for the band. Too bad he was in the middle of it.

“Hey, I have to do some stuff. Private stuff, so I’m going to use the back room. You all clear in there?” It was Keith’s week of luxury using the full bed in the private suite of the bus. They’d decided each of them would get a week to stretch out in a normal bed when not in hotels and not have to be cramped in the bunks. The bunks weren’t all bad, a guy could release a bit of tension in there with the right twist of his body and utilizing more wrist movement than the full arm. Declan knew how to use a small space to get full results.

“Sure Declan. I’ll just grab something to eat. Take your time.” Keith eyed him again. Declan knew he was stalling as he fidgeted with the edge of the laptop. He began composing the email back to Rick in his head, and hoped he could get out of a phone conversation with him. Stretching the truth was easier with the written word, the one you were lying to couldn’t hear the tremor in your voice as you did it.

“Thanks, Keith. I won’t be long.” Declan walked down the narrow hallway toward the door to the suite. He almost made it inside without incident when the bathroom door opened with a ghost of steam revealing Tate. *Jesus!* Did the man have to smell so good? Tate didn’t wear cologne, but used some organic body wash made of oranges and sandalwood. Mixed with his natural scent, it was like an aphrodisiac to Declan. The urge to lean toward Tate and bury his nose in his neck and just inhale was overwhelming. Declan needed to get himself under control.

“Oh, hey,” Tate said as he took a step back. The smile on his face was tight, and his eyes were shining. “Hi, Dec.”

Oh God. Did he have to use a nickname now? Three months of calling him Morrison or Declan and today, this morning when he has to sever the feelings and time spent with Tate, he pulls a nickname on him?

Declan examined the laptop in his hands. Look anywhere but at Tate. DO NOT look at Tate.

“Hey, Tate. What’s up? Sleep well?” Declan sounded like an ass or some sort of assistant at a bed and breakfast. Just where his thoughts needed to go: bed, breakfast, and Tate. Breakfast in bed ON Tate. Ah help!

Tate reached out and laid his large hand on Declan's, which was busy messing with the USB port for the wireless mouse.

"Dec?" Tate whispered his name. "Declan, are you okay?"

"Would everyone stop asking me that?" He was getting frustrated standing in the small, crowded space of the hallway. Tate took up too much room, too much space physically and emotionally. Declan needed to get away.

"Hey, it's okay. I was just asking. Um, I wanted to tell you..." Declan looked up at Tate, noticing a blush creeping up his neck to his face which was supporting a good amount of scruff. Declan's thoughts were heading to the south side of dirty, thinking of the places he would love to feel Tate's scuff against his naked skin. Tate's head was tilted to the side, his curly hair hanging over his left eye as he rubbed at his neck with the same hand that had just touched Declan.

Tate was in a pair of his running shorts that showed off his long, muscular legs. Tate's thighs were a thing of beauty. There wasn't a part of the man that wasn't gorgeous, though, from the sun-kissed locks on his head down to those bare feet that made magic on the bass pedals. Declan found it sexy when Tate played drums barefoot; he knew a good amount of drummers did, but he found it extremely sexy to watch Tate's feet as they moved. *Feet? Sexy?* Declan was slowly losing it over this guy.

"Tell me what, Tate? I'm busy. I don't have time. Someone needs to lead this band and get our careers going!" Declan didn't want to sound harsh, but his sexual frustration was taking over and making him insane. His mind kept drifting back to last night and what almost happened.

"Sorry, Dec. I just wanted to say I had a nice time last night." Tate shrugged. "Even how the night ended." Tate smiled. The smile reached his eyes and made the corners crinkle. "I don't think I have had a night like that in... well ever. So, um thanks." Tate's admission was almost Declan's undoing. What he wouldn't give to say the words back to Tate—to tell him yesterday on the river was one of the best days of his life—and he would kill to drag Tate into the suite, toss him on the bed and show him how perfect he could make the morning.

"Yeah, Tate. It was fun." Declan was trying to get away. But getting away from Tate was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Hey." Tate reached out and gripped Declan's bicep. It wasn't a hard grip, but Tate's hand was hot on his arm and it stung. It felt like the burn of heat on

frozen skin. Declan was trying to be cold, to shut Tate out, but his warmth was melting him.

Declan looked up into a pair of dark blue, searching eyes. Tate was asking wordless questions Declan didn't have answers to. Last night may not have been a date but whatever it was shifted who they were, and tilted their relationship to its "off limits" axis and forcing it on a new course.

"Hey. It's just me." When did Tate get this close? "Dec, it's just me." Declan would feel Tate's breathe against his cheek as he exhaled. It would take less than a foot to lean forward and press his lips against Tate's. It was what he wanted to do. Hell, it's what he wanted to do four months ago when he was at the man's feet and didn't know his name.

Declan took a step back, as much as he could in the hallway, and away from Tate. "Tate, I have shit to do. I told you, I don't have time." Declan turned and walked into the suite. He slammed the laptop on the bed with a muffled string of curse words. He went to shut the door and was met with the view of Tate, the questions written on his face and in his body language. Declan shook his head, and kicked the door shut with his foot.

He threw himself onto the bed, willing his emotions to calm down. There was no way this was going to end the way he wanted. Declan knew choices would have to be made, he'd been making them for the band the last four years. He just never knew that one day, the biggest decision would come with his sacrifice.

Declan read the email for the sixth and final time before hitting send. He did what he had to do and whatever Rick said after this would have to wait. The suite was becoming claustrophobic and he needed to get air, fast. He opened the door and heard the laughter and voices of his bandmates. They were having a great time out there, without him. How many times would that be the case? Keith, Chuck, and Slater were the ones to go out after the shows, never concerned with the merchandise booth or anything other than the meet and greets with fans. It was always Declan left to count the T-shirts, CDs, stickers, and the other paraphernalia they sold at shows. Lately, Tate helped after shows, but it still felt like it was his second job to take care of the little things.

Declan walked quietly down the hall, not wanting to disturb his bandmates as they bonded on the bus. Times like this were crucial, times to get to know one another on a deeper level. The stage was the place they conformed to

solidarity and functionality, but a band was like a marriage, they had to get along behind the scenes or the production would fall apart. Squabbling only worked with the brothers in Oasis.

Declan hung back and listened while they discussed music.

“Hey, I know more music than just rock!” Chuck protested when the teasing began.

“Prove it Princess Charles,” Tate tossed at him.

“The name is Chuck, Tater Nuts,” Chuck returned.

Tate smirked. “Keep calling me Tater Nuts, Princess Charles. I can last longer than you can.”

Chuck glared at Tate in response.

“That’s what she said!” Keith offered as he sat on the couch next to Chuck and high fived Tate across the small space in the common area of the bus.

“Fine, what other music do you know?” Tate started to fiddle with the harmonica on the table.

“I know the blues, I *am* the blues,” Chuck declared and Tate coughed to cover his laugh.

“Nobody leaves without singing the blues.” Tate grinned. “Play me something Princess Charles.”

Chuck grumbled and grabbed his Gibson. He settled the guitar on his lap, and his hands began picking on the strings to a Bee Gees song.

Tate laughed and bent over on the table, slapping his hand on top three times. He sat up and tore a sheet of paper out of his journal, wadded it and threw it Chuck, hitting him in the head. “You don’t know the blues. You know Jive... Turkey!”

Keith gave Tate another high five, then grabbed Chuck in a headlock, playfully rubbing his head.

“Get the fuck off, will ya?” Chuck struggled against Keith until he was free.

“He’s got you there, Chuck,” Declan spoke and avoided Tate as he turned in his seat toward him.

“Hey boss! Didn’t hear you come out. Playing ninja today?” Chuck fiddled with the tuning pegs on the head of his guitar.

“Nope, just enjoying the show. It’s not often I get to watch and not be the ring leader.” Declan winked at Chuck.

“You have a kinky side to you don’t ya boss?” Chuck was in his normal mood of playing the fool. “You know, ring leader? Whips? The circus?” Chuck raised his hand and shook his head. “No one gets my jokes.”

“That’s because your jokes aren’t funny, Princess.” Declan looked at Tate then, and their eyes met. Tate slid over on the bench seat behind the table and patted the empty space next to him. “Have a seat and join us, Declan.” Tate smiled. “Take off your shoes and stay awhile. We were just discussing Chuck’s lack of musical knowledge.”

Declan was surprised Tate was being so cordial after he slammed the door in his face. They couldn’t discuss what happened in front of Keith and Chuck, but there was no choice but to sit at the table, next to Tate.

“I told you, I know music.” Chuck was on the defensive. This would go one of two ways, bad with Chuck getting his feelings hurt, or a great way to learn about each other. Declan hoped it was the latter because an emo Chuck was not fun to be around.

“Princess. You just called The Bee Gees the blues, they are disco, darling.” Tate’s new way of talking to Chuck was comical. It was obviously done with good-natured intentions, and the way Chuck took to the teasing, Declan was sure he was playing along. For now.

“Then why did you call me a ‘Jive Turkey’?” Chuck’s brow wrinkled in confusion.

“I was teasing you, Princess, and you were playing the riff to their song ‘Jive Talkin’”.

“Huh? I thought I played ‘Tragedy’?” Chuck was beyond confused.

“Stop while you’re ahead, Chuck.” Declan laughed at his guitarist. “So how did this conversation start?” He looked at Keith when he asked the question, still trying to avoid Tate.

“Chuck asked Tate what he listened to on his mp3 player. He was shocked when it wasn’t hard rock or speed metal.” Keith shrugged and got up to get a bottle of water from the mini fridge. He turned and raised one in Declan’s direction. Declan nodded and put his hand up to catch the cold bottle when Keith tossed it at him. He opened the bottle and took a long drink, needing the moisture—sitting this close to Tate was making his mouth dry.

“Yeah, and what is on his mp3 player?” Declan again asked Keith and not Tate.

Tate cleared his throat. “Why don’t you ask *him* what is on it, Declan.”

Declan gave in and turned to look at Tate. Big mistake. The emotion in Tate’s eyes was palpable and, Declan couldn’t look away. The corner of Tate’s mouth twitched into a small smile, and Declan did what he wanted, at least for now, and smiled back.

“So, what’s on it then, Newman?” Declan tipped his bottle of water toward Tate in salute.

“What isn’t on it would be the better question. I’m a bit of a music nerd.” Tate shrugged as he flipped through his mp3 player. Declan wanted to know every song on it to dissect the man. Shakespeare was right when he compared music to the food of love. He could tell more about a person through the music they held close and listened to, than anything else.

“Okay. So what are you listening to now?” Declan was more than curious at the answer.

Tate showed the screen of his mp3 player to Declan. “Iron and Wine? Really? I wouldn’t have pegged you for a Sam Beam kind of guy.”

Tate met Declan’s eyes again and smiled. “Why am I not surprised you know who they are?” He shook his head and smiled wider.

“Dude, Dec lived for that Rock and Roll Jeopardy show. He knows way too much about music, even for a guy who is in the music business. He could beat the long-haired dude from Megadeth, or the guy with the band who did a decent cover of “Stand & Deliver”, though the rest of their songs sucked ass.”

“Dave Mustaine and Mark McGrath of Sugar Ray.” Tate answered before Declan could. The goofy grin was impossible to stop as it spread across his face and something incredible happened inside his chest. He looked at Tate, and he was smiling too. Declan felt a light touch on the outside of this thigh. When he looked down and Tate’s knuckle was pressed against his leg, lightly stroking it. Declan felt the blood flow to his dick, making it swell.

“Oh, great. What is this? The meeting of the gay music nerd association?” Chuck put his guitar down, crossed his arms over his chest and pouted like a little boy.

Tate responded without looking at Chuck. “You’re just jealous, Princess.”

Declan watched Chuck dig the lighter out of his pocket at Tate's last jab. It was time to intervene.

"Okay, boys. I'm calling a time out." Tate's eyes flicked to Declan's and over to Chuck. He nodded to Declan with understanding.

"Let's play a round of 'get to know you' instead? How 'bout that?" Declan offered.

"Sounds good to me." Keith opened the "game" with the first question. "Favorite female singer?"

"Tori Amos," Tate answered and Declan looked at him with wide eyes. Tate shrugged and the feeling of his knuckle still stroking his leg disappeared. Declan relished the feeling more than he should have considering the circumstances and the news he would deliver to Tate. News he wished he could forget.

"Sheryl Crow," Declan answered. He was still staring at Tate, his eyes traveling to the set of full lips, watching them move as he replied.

"Nice. Singer songwriters are always a favorite of mine," Tate said.

Declan cleared his throat to break the pull Tate was having over every part of his body. His pants were painfully tight, he couldn't shift in his seat to adjust himself incognito anymore and if he grabbed his crotch to physically adjust, he would come in his pants. How did Tate get under his skin so quickly? The grin would not leave Tate's face.

Declan took a drink of water and nearly choked; Tate's hand came back to say hello, it slid over and down his thigh and squeezed right above his knee. Declan groaned at the touch. He was sure he was going to embarrass himself if this went any further.

It was vital Declan tell Tate the news, he would use the same words he wrote to Rick: they would stay away from each other, no more outings with just the two of them, no sitting, standing, flying, or any other adjective within ten feet of each other. They would be more than hands off, they would be nothing more than bandmates to each other for the next three months of the tour.

Declan could do this. He would do it for the band. There was a record deal at stake.

Declan stood quickly from the table, dislodging Tate's hand and banging his knee in the process. Three pairs of eyes looked at him as if he lost his mind.
Fuck!

“Tate?”

“Yeah, Dec?”

“I need to talk to you.” Tate gave Declan the sexiest grin suggesting they would do more than talk, as if Declan was speaking in code.

This was not going to be easy.

Chapter 6

~September~

Declan paid for his coffee and walked along the empty morning streets of Pomona. He'd never been much of a sleeper, there was too much on his mind to get the rest he required. Over the years he learned to function on less and less sleep. He liked the quiet of the early mornings, as they gave him a chance to see things, places and situations in a new light. The city was just waking, coming alive and gearing up for the day ahead. There was something peaceful about watching the world this way. It gave him perspective, gave him control over time, or at least the illusion.

Declan's thoughts centered on one thing this morning. Three months had passed since Declan had the "talk" with Tate. Three months of being on the side of cold he never imagined being on. Tate had gone from flirty and touchy to absolutely nothing in a matter of minutes. The talk had been brutal. Declan played it over and over again in his head at least four times a day.

Declan walked back to the private suite. He didn't need to look behind him to see if Tate was following, he could feel him. Declan entered the suite, and after Tate crossed the doorway, closed the door and had Declan pinned against it.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Tate's hands were pressed against the door, his biceps blocking each side of Declan's head as he leaned in putting his face close to Declan's.

Declan's brain went blank. He couldn't think with Tate this close. Tate was in his personal space, so close that Declan wanted to climb the man and crawl inside him. No one had been this close to Declan before, he never let them in emotionally, and as much as he wanted to, as much as he wanted to stay pressed against the door and let Tate "talk" to him, he couldn't.

"Yeah, Tate." Declan searched Tate's eyes; they were so close he could see the true color he never noticed before. Declan always thought they were blue, but up close and with the morning light streaming through the skylight, they were a blue-green. Declan could count each freckle on Tate's face. They were few and far between, but they were there. They gave Tate a charm of the boy next door, but the stubble gracing his chin gave Tate the rugged look of a man. A man Declan was supposed to be telling they had to stay away from one

another, because having two gay men in a relationship or even seen in a pseudo-relationship, in a hard rock band, was bad for business. But did people really care who Declan was with? It was no secret he was gay. He was never in the closet. His sexuality cost him enough as it was. He refused to deny himself, so why would it matter if it appeared he was interested in Tate?

The longing in Tate's eyes, the patience as he stood there with his body inches away from being pushed fully against Declan, was more than Declan could take. He wanted so much. He wanted Tate more than he'd ever wanted a man. His life of one night stands or fuck buddies that lasted a week was wearing on his conscience and his heart. Declan shoved all the things he wanted in his life on the back burner when he took on the role no one wanted, the role of leader of Station Zero. He never minded the role as much as he did now. Now, he resented it and he wanted to be done. Why couldn't he be the one who was free to have... a life?

"Declan?" Tate's deep voice brought Declan out of his maudlin thoughts. He reached up and grabbed Tate's hands on the door. Tate flipped his wrists and laced his fingers through Declan's. He whimpered, he fucking whimpered at the touch.

"Tate, we have to talk." Declan tried to get a hold of himself, to get his emotions under control, but here he was, holding hands with Tate Newman, the man he would have to stay away from. The man who, if he was honest with himself, he was falling for, and the man who held his hands in his and was stroking his wrists in soothing circles. The man who, with a simple touch and a look, made Declan's dick hard and held his balls in a vise. His balls and his heart. Declan was lost. He needed to be away from this.

Declan shook his hands free of Tate's, pressed them against his chest, and pushed Tate away. The confusion on his face was immediate, and he raised his eyebrows in question at Declan.

"Tate, when I said talk, I meant talk as in I have to tell you something."

"If it's about last night, Dec. I know." Tate tilted his head and gave Declan the most devastating, sexy smile. "I felt it too."

Declan groaned and felt his legs go weak with Tate's admission. He slid down the door to the floor, brought his knees up, rested his elbows on them, and put his head in his hands.

"Tate, I..." Declan threaded his fingers through his hair, tugging on the strands, hoping the pain would give him clarity.

Tate dropped to a crouch in front of Declan. He took Declan's hands out of his hair and held them between his. "Talk then, Declan. Talk to me."

Declan looked at the man in front of him. He was open, he was real, and Declan could not do this. He couldn't get Tate to agree to...

"Tate, I didn't. I mean, I had a nice time last night, but we are bandmates. I enjoy your company and I like getting to know you, but whatever you think..."

"Bullshit, Declan. Bullshit. Don't you dare try to pull that on me. What's going on?" Tate was gripping Declan's hands tighter. "Talk to me."

"Tate, that is what's going on. Things get lonely on the road. We had a nice time, I'm sorry if you misread anything between us and thought it meant more than two guys just hanging out." Declan could feel his heart shatter inside his chest as the lies fell from his mouth. Why was he lying? Why couldn't he tell Tate the truth? Knowing Tate for only a short amount of time, Declan knew if he did, Tate would take his business skills and fight management on this. Rick would be pissed and they could lose the chance at a record deal. Declan's obligation was to put the band first. He would go through with this and then he would deal with his love life. If the chance for him to have a love life ever came his way again.

"I'm not buying it, Declan. What aren't you telling me?" Declan could hear the frustration in Tate's voice and see it set in his jaw. He put this lie in motion, and he would follow through with it. Declan yanked his hands out of Tate's for the second time that morning. It was the second time he had physically put distance between himself and Tate, or he would crumble and let this man pick him up and put him together again.

Declan stood and looked at Tate who was still crouched on the floor.

"You don't have to buy anything, Tate. Just open your ears and listen to what I'm saying. We are friends. Nothing more. I had a good time. I'm sorry if you misread any of my actions last night as me wanting anything romantic with you. You're a great guy, but I'm not interested."

Declan turned away from Tate, opening the door before looking back at his bandmate who was now sitting on the floor in a dejected state. His shoulders were slumped and his head hung forward as he played with the frayed hem of his light jeans. Declan fought the urge to go to him, to push him to the floor, press himself along each inch of the man and kiss him senseless. To lay all his worries about the band and their future at Tate's feet. Ask for his advice, for his input, and for his guidance. Declan was tired, tired of it all, but he felt there

was no choice. Declan knew if another man was making this decision, he would tell him to stop being an asshole and man up. Finding someone who fit you the way Tate fit him was rare. You didn't find this connection and walk away from it. This was a once in a lifetime chance. It was what the poets wrote about when they spoke of love of soul mates and forever. Declan wasn't telling someone else what to do, he was doing what he had to do for survival and the career of these men, Tate included, and their future.

Declan took one last look at Tate, whose pleading eyes met his just before he walked out of the room.

Declan tried more times than his pride wanted to admit to get Tate to talk to him. The man was cold and would talk to Declan only when necessary for the sake of the band or the tour. Tate didn't have a huge reaction to Declan's news about the possible record deal. He nodded and asked if they would still need him on drums if and when they got the contract for recording. The thought of Tate leaving, not just the band, but leaving Declan, hit him in the gut and made bile rise in his throat. Declan knew he fucked this whole thing with Tate up, but it was too late to fix it now. There were only a few days before this secret show Rick arranged.

The big wigs of the label wanted to see Station Zero on their own so they booked them a show to play the day after the tour with Balthazar ended. The boys were scheduled to play the Whisky a Go Go, the famous West Hollywood club, which hosted legends in every music genre. Declan had seen many shows there, and though they played other venues in Hollywood and on Sunset Boulevard, they never played the Whisky. As if he wanted more pressure put on him, now they were playing a famous venue.

Rick contacted local radio stations to spread the word about the secret show. Flyers were handed out at shows they played locally. Tonight they would play The Glass House in Pomona with Balthazar. It was one of the smaller venues they played. Declan loved the feel of the arena shows and playing to thousands of fans, new and old, but there was an intimacy to the smaller shows which fueled his love for performing.

Declan sipped his now lukewarm coffee as he walked farther than he meant to and ended up in a corner of a small park. He took a seat on a bench off the path, taking in the surroundings and breathing them in. Chaos would rise and turn his day and self-confidence upside down soon enough. He needed these moments of solitude to form a plan. He never meant to lie to Tate that day. He wanted to tell him the truth, to let Tate help him out of the mess they were in

and find a way to make it okay. The lies came out and tore everything apart. Declan was never good with lies, and he struggled with this one every day. There were so many times he wanted to let it all go, tell Tate the truth and see if there was anything left between them.

It was torture for Declan the nights they slept on the bus, having Tate sleeping in the bunk below him. Declan thought of moving bunks more than once, yet he never did. He didn't want to give up the only time he would be close to Tate even if it was in a cramped space. The man put miles between them in so many ways. Declan wouldn't relinquish this chance to be close for the world. Declan often wondered why Tate didn't move either. Maybe he still harbored feelings for Declan? He could only hope and hold onto that hope for the right time. Would there ever be a right time for them?

Declan rose from the bench, threw his coffee in the trash, and made his way back to the hotel. Last night was a rarity, and they got to stay in a hotel, not the bus. Their schedule was lighter the last week of the tour, and they all needed the break.

Declan walked through the door of the Hilton and went straight to the elevators. There was more activity in the lobby of the hotel as guests were starting their day. He entered the elevator and pressed the number for his floor. The band always stayed on the same floor, more for superstitious reasons than anything common sense related. Luckily for him, Tate's room was right next door. Karma was messing with him, as their rooms had an adjoining door. Declan could open his side and see the only thing separating them was Tate's side of the door, which Declan was now standing in front of willing it to open.

He took off his jacket, hung it in the closet, and checked his phone for messages. There was a text from Lisa letting him know she would be in boring meetings all morning, so she was free for random texts from him about how he was getting his love life in order. Lisa was and would always be Declan's best friend and the only one to ever tell him the truth, even when it hurt. She flew into a rage when he told her he lied to Tate. She thought it was the most moronic thing he'd done and she'd seen him through some stupid shit over the years. Lisa knew how lonely the road got for him, how he longed for a connection with someone. Lisa was married with two kids now and lived in the same town as his parents. She saw them at least once a week and talked about Declan each and every time. His father would scowl at her and walk away, but his mother would stand silently with unshed tears as Lisa told her the latest news with the band and how much of it was due to the dedication Declan gave.

She told his mother he used everything she taught him: the ingrained dutiful and sacrificial way of conducting his personal life. Declan never turned his back on a challenge.

Declan loved and hated Lisa for what she did. He knew it hurt his mother to hear about him, but it would kill her not to. Declan didn't want his mother to hurt any more than she already did, even if it meant the hurt fell onto him. She was trapped in a loveless marriage, and that was punishment enough. Declan wished he possessed the will to hate his parents. He knew they would not have the type of relationship they'd nurtured before he came out. He just wanted understanding and acceptance. He could deal with not seeing them much, but he wished they wouldn't think of him as something they failed at or as something that was wrong. Declan wanted to be someone to them, not a something.

Declan sent a quick text message to Lisa letting her know he was up for a round of texts and to let him know when she was ready. He pulled out a chair from the table, sat, and unlaced his shoes. He toed each shoe off and heard movement from the room next door. Declan stilled and listened to the noise of Tate going about his morning routine. Tate was the only other bandmate who woke up early, usually going for a run first thing. Declan waited for the sound of his door opening and closing to signal he was heading out. Declan laid his head back, closed his eyes, and just listened. He knew if he handled things differently months ago, he would either be in Tate's room with him, or the adjoining door would be open and their space would be one.

The sound of a guitar made Declan open his eyes. From the sound he knew it was Chuck's Gibson but it was coming from Tate's room. Declan stood and dragged the chair closer to the adjoining door. He strained to hear the sound again and held his breath waiting for it. It came again, fumbled notes across the neck and the strumming was stuttered. A few minutes of preparation passed with the guitar, music flowed through the walls and into Declan's pores. Declan's hands shook as he heard the notes from the guitar and Tate's accompanied voice. Tate was playing Men at Work's "Overkill", but it wasn't the single version, he was playing it acoustically and it was breaking Declan's heart.

Declan listened to Tate play and sing about fear, about being afraid of what we wanted and how lonely the nights were. He sang about it being overkill, and Declan was lost. He wanted to bang on the door, beg Tate to open it so he could fall on the ground at Tate's feet and beg his forgiveness. Instead, he sat and

listened as Tate's beautiful voice took his breath away. Declan wanted to keep the sound and the words Tate sang deep into his soul, if only he hadn't sold his soul to their management years ago.

Silence once again filled the room, and Declan only heard the ticking of the clock. Movement from Tate's room made his heart race, and he heard the door open. Declan went to his door and looked through the security peephole, his breath catching when he looked right at Tate. He was standing at Declan's door with this look on his face, which could only be described as melancholy. Tate raised his hand as if to knock. Declan waited for it, but Tate just rested his hand against the door and leaned his forehead against it. His face was so close, and Declan could see those freckles he wanted to trace with a feather just to get a reaction from Tate. Declan raised his hand and placed it on the inside of the door where Tate's was on the outside. Tate raised his head and was looking at his hand as if he'd felt the touch. He removed it quickly, gave Declan's door a short smile, and then walked off.

Declan was frozen in place. *What the hell just happened?* Declan ran from the door to get his phone, checking to see if Lisa messaged him yet. He needed his best friend now more than ever. Declan called her saying, "Lisa. God, I need you. You won't believe what just happened..."

Declan knew Lisa would listen to his anxiety over this situation and give him ideas on what to do. This was enough. Declan couldn't stand not being with Tate, and if the song and bit at the door was any indication, what Tate felt for Declan three months ago was not over.

Declan formed an idea to test the waters. It might not be the best way to handle it, but Tate wasn't talking to him and he was desperate. Desperate times did indeed call for desperate measures. Declan just hoped they would work in his favor.

Chapter 7

Tate Newman strummed the strings on the guitar, and he sang the last lines of his favorite Men at Work song. The following silence was deafening as he looked around the lonely hotel room. There wasn't much time before he had to get ready for the press conference, and he needed to clean up. He took care to put Chuck's vintage Gibson guitar into its case, because he knew how much the guitar meant to Chuck.

Tate took a quick shower, he stepped out grabbed a towel off the rack, and wrapped it around his hips. He walked to the counter and wiped the steam off the mirror, looking at his reflection. He didn't know what he was looking for.

Tate was having the time of his life on tour with the band, enjoying being a part of Station Zero more than he imagined. When he found the flyer posted at The Roxy of their need for a drummer, he was shocked. Slater was a force on the drums, and the fact he wasn't with them anymore burned his curiosity. He'd toyed with the possibility of auditioning on his morning run, and mulled over it all day. The decision to go for it was made at the last minute.

Tate was a fan of Station Zero. He saw them live many times and their music was always on his iPod. Their songs were ones he would play on his drums to let his aggression out, and he loved the fast-paced tempos. Tate would admit to having a thing for Declan before he met him, though the attraction didn't have anything to do with his decision to audition. It was impossible not to be attracted Declan. He possessed raw talent and an appeal that drew Tate in. The knowledge Declan was gay only fueled the attraction.

Tate had been looking for a way to escape the daily grind, and music had always been a part of him, but it wasn't something he was comfortable attempting to make a living doing. He was a sensible man who needed a steady income for himself and his future. Nest eggs, his father always taught him, a savings account, money in the bank, and a retirement plan, were what made a man. If Tate threw caution to the wind and joined a band, what would his father think? Why, at twenty-seven, was he still worried about what his father thought? That was the question on constant repeat during his run the morning of the audition. That was the question in the back of his mind when he decided he would audition, and that was the question that became his mantra as he handed in his resignation, and left the steady job he had held for the last five years.

Tate was unprepared for meeting Declan at the audition—the playful nature he showed with Chuck—endeared him to Tate. It was different from what Tate saw at shows, the times when he almost walked up to Declan at the merchandise booth and asked if he wanted to get a drink later. The missed moments where Tate never got the nerve to ask out the “rock star”, and now here he was, sharing space with him daily for a short span of six months and Tate wished he didn't feel the way he did. No, Tate wanted to feel the way he did, because he liked the way he felt when he was around Declan. He liked talking to him, playing with him, and he loved the energy he got off his front man. What he didn't understand was what happened the day after the river walk. They'd had a good time. Tate thought he'd read Declan right and he'd enjoyed the night as well, but the morning after was a disaster.

Tate thought about that day a lot, though he willed himself to forget it. The morning was going well, and when Tate met Declan in the hallway, he knew he felt the pull between them. The need was pouring off the man in waves, and Tate was drowning in it. He was sure Declan felt the same. The same emotions that were causing his sleepless nights. Tate didn't know when the shift happened, but Declan slamming the door in his face was not a positive moment in their possible relationship.

The night they walked along the San Antonio River Walk had been beyond amazing for Tate. He let his guard down with Declan so many times, and it was never difficult to do. He wanted to share his past, his struggles, and the secrets he kept hidden from the rest of the world with Declan. Tate saw a future with this man, and it scared him. They hadn't known one another long, but they say when you know, you know, and Tate knew. He replayed the night over and over again, trying to figure out where he read Declan wrong.

Tate had a great time in the common area of the bus, with his bandmates, though his head was a jumbled mess. Their teasing banter and discussion of music made him feel more than just a part of the band. The way they were getting along made him feel like they were true bandmates, friends, and a group of men who respected him. Tate felt Declan before he spoke. He knew the minute he was close, as each hair on the back of Tate's neck stood at attention. It didn't take long for his dick to notice Declan was close either. Tate could see something was weighing on the lead singer. He lacked a good poker face, and the carefree way he looked the night before was gone. In its place was more than Atlas could bear on his shoulders.

When Declan accepted Tate's request to sit next to him at the table, he couldn't help but flirt. He needed to find out what was going on and he simply

wanted to touch Declan. Nothing happened between them other than a few touches here and there. Not that Tate didn't want more to happen. He wanted Declan. It was that simple. He. Wanted. Declan. Tate was surprised and happy Declan wanted to "talk" to him after he touched him. Tate was hard and more than ready to get a taste of Declan. He wanted to take his time the first time he kissed him. Tate wanted to start at Declan's neck and work his way up Declan's rigid jaw line, kissing his way toward his mouth where he could trace his plump lips before he pressed his against them. Tate imagined how their lips would slide over each other, how he would lick the seam of Declan's lips until he opened for him, and how he would finally taste Declan when he licked inside his mouth.

Tate was getting hard thinking of how the kiss would have felt. He took the towel off and ran his hand along his rigid length, squeezing the base. He didn't have time to jack off now since the band was supposed to be down stairs in a half hour for another press conference. Tate loved Balthazar for considering the boys of Station Zero as part of the tour, but he was getting tired of the questions about who he was dating or why he wasn't dating at all.

This would be the first press conference they would all do together, as a band, since Declan blew him off and left him sitting on his ass in the middle of the suite. Declan turned down every other opportunity for exposure with the press, but this was one Max was insisting they attend.

Walking to his suitcase he pulled out clothes to get dressed for the conference. He always chose casual clothes—he'd spent too many days in a suit to have clothes be constricting. Tate pulled on a pair of dark blue jeans. He would have to go commando until his clothes returned from the hotel laundry service. He grabbed the only dress shirt he brought with him, even though it looked more like he should be wearing it on the beaches of Mexico, but the day was warm and the light-colored linen material kept him cool. Tate slipped into his favorite Chuck Taylors, and grabbed the key card from his room, putting it in his wallet, then shoving it into the back pocket of his jeans before walking out of his room.

The hotel was holding a convention for knitting. It was the strangest thing Tate experienced, but the hotel was packed. He'd been surprised they each got their own room, even though he'd hoped they wouldn't and he would have to pair up with Declan. Tate hated Declan keeping his distance, but Tate decided to play his game and play it best. Tate wanted to talk to Declan, but unless the man was going to tell him what the fuck was going on, Tate refused to engage in conversation.

Tate headed down the hallway and stopped at Declan's door. He could do it, he could knock and just ask the man... what? Why don't you want me like I want you? Tate raised his hand to knock and laid it against the door, his forehead following suit, and Tate forced himself to breathe. These unrequited feelings made him feel like a teenager again. He was almost thirty years old and he couldn't maneuver into a relationship unless it was with his hand. Tate felt a jolt through the door, a bolt of electricity similar to getting shocked when you dragged your feet on the carpet and touched metal. He pulled his hand back, gave a longing look at Declan's door, smiled regretfully, and then walked away.

Lost in his thoughts, Tate walked to the elevator, pressed the button and waited. The bell chimed as the doors opened and a voice from down the hall yelled at him to "*hold the elevator*". Automatically he pressed hold. It didn't register who'd yelled at him—not until he looked up and saw his shock reflected in Declan's eyes. The smile Declan gave him nearly undid all his resolve. *So much for not being alone with him today.*

"Hey, Tate. Thanks." *Oh, what game are you playing, Morrison?*

"Sure, man. No problem. Anything for a friend." Tate watched the elevator doors close and their reflections stare back at them from the shiny doors. He pressed the button for the first floor.

Declan looked good—he was dressed in a dark pair of slacks that hugged his thighs, and his shirt was a signature Declan number with a mass of colors in dark plaid. Tate loved the odd array of patterned shirts Declan chose to wear because they matched his energy. Declan wore a pair of brown loafers, and on anyone else it would look like they raided their grandfather's closet, but when Declan wore them, they looked edgy and like something you'd see on a runway.

Declan nodded at Tate when the elevator chimed and the doors opened at the next floor. Tate looked up and noticed they were going higher rather than lower, he must have got on the wrong elevator. *Great.* They needed to get to the ground floor for the press conference.

The elevator doors opened and a large group of people, conference goers judging by the amount of yarn and needles hanging out of bags, crowded into the car. Tate moved to accommodate them, shifting to the back of the elevator before feeling himself press up against a body.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Tate turned to apologize face-to-face to the person when he felt a hand on his back and a shiver run through him.

“You’re fine,” Declan whispered in his ear. Tate felt his cock twitch at the words, and he adjusted his stance.

Tate nodded and felt Declan’s hand rubbing small circles on his back. What was he doing? They weren’t talking and now in a crowded elevator Declan decides to molest him? Not that Tate was complaining or anything, but this was throwing him off again and he wasn’t in the mood to be confused.

The elevator stopped at a higher floor, and a few convention knitters got off but more got on. This only pushed Tate into Declan further and Declan’s hand gripped Tate’s hip to steady him. Tate’s pulse raced at the touch. Declan squeezed his hip and released it, placing his hand on his back once again. Declan ran his fingers down Tate’s back, and Tate could feel the heat from them through his thin shirt. Declan stopped when he reached Tate’s waist. Tate felt a rush of air as Declan lifted the hem of his shirt and slid his hand underneath. Biting back a groan at the touch of Declan’s palm against his bare skin, Tate looked around the elevator frantically wondering if anyone was aware what was happening. Thankfully everyone on the elevator was lost in their own world. Tate didn’t know what game Declan was playing, but he knew he didn’t want it to stop.

Tate shifted and pressed his back in to Declan’s hand, and Tate heard a muffled “yes” come from the man behind him. Declan’s fingers drew patterns along Tate’s back, following his spine up to the base of his skull and back down. Declan’s fingers teased the waistband of Tate’s jeans, pulling at it before they slipped underneath. Tate grinned secretly, knowing the growl that came from Declan was due to the fact he wore nothing under his jeans. The grin was wiped off Tate’s lips when Declan’s fingers travelled below the waistband and slid along the crease of his ass. The touch was feather light, but it seared Tate. He was certain it would leave a permanent mark. If his brain function capability worked, he would remember to check for it later. Tate let his head fall back a fraction toward Declan and felt his hand briefly slide around his back to his stomach. The material of the shirt allowed for free movement and them not to be seen. Declan made lazy circles along Tate’s chest and slid lower to dip into his belly button. Tate was ticklish there and couldn’t stifle the laugh with the touch.

“Shh...” Declan lightly bit Tate’s shoulder with the command. Tate was not one for exhibitionism or public displays of affection, but he would not tell Declan to stop for anything right now. He wouldn’t be able to form words, he was so turned on.

The elevator came to another stop. Tate glanced at the floor numbers seeing that they were on floor fifteen. If Declan kept this up the entire way to the ground floor, Tate would come in his jeans. He wasn't in the mood to sit through a press conference with wet jeans, but he would take what he could get at this point. Declan continued his erotic torture on Tate's back as the elevator made its descent, and Tate boldly pressed back, slowly rocking his hips from side to side rubbing his ass against Declan's erection. Yeah, Declan was hard against Tate's ass and it took large amounts of self-control for Tate to not turn around and... Declan's hands were fixed on Tate's hips, digging into them as he pressed forward in small thrusts. Tate was far more than lost at this point.

Tate groaned every time the elevator stopped because Declan stopped what he was doing. The knitting convention attendees walked off at the second floor, leaving Tate alone with Declan. Tate felt Declan's fingers dig into his hips as they watched the last passenger exit the elevator. Tate watched the doors close with wide eyes and felt his breath quicken and his pulse race with excitement and anxiety. The door closed and those hands of Declan's digging into his hips were suddenly at his shoulders, turning him around and pressing him against the wall of the elevator. Declan reached out and pressed the red emergency button to stop the elevator from moving.

"Fuck, Tate. Do you have any idea what you do to me?" Declan's face was inches from Tate's. His eyes were so dark with passion they turned from their gorgeous shade of light brown to near black. Tate was getting lost in the intensity of Declan's eyes when his hands grasped his face, bringing it impossibly closer. "Do you Tate?"

Tate groaned, reached out to grab Declan's hips and brought their bodies in contact. Their erections were hard and pressed against each other, the touch sending sparks flying through Tate's body. "Feel what you do to me, Declan." Tate ground his crotch against Declan slowly. "Feel it. Can you feel it, what you do to me?"

Declan's thumbs caressed Tate's jaw line, and the softness of the touch combined with the slow rut of their groins was maddening. It was erotic and tender, and Tate was so fucking lost in this moment that he was ready to drop to his knees and take Declan's cock in his mouth and the back of his throat.

"Kiss me, Tate," Declan whispered. His words puffed out breaths along Tate's lips, and he shivered. "Kiss me, please. Before..."

Before, what? Tate's erotic haze was pierced by that word. "Before what, Declan?"

“Just kiss me, Tate. I need you to kiss me.” The urgency in Declan’s plea set off warning signals inside Tate. He wanted this, he had wanted it for so long, but there was something missing.

Tate found the strength and pulled away from Declan. “No, Tate. Please no. Just give us this.”

Tate couldn’t speak. Declan was the one who walked away from him with the bullshit excuse of “I’m not in to you” and now he was pleading for a stolen moment? Tate would have given him months of stolen moments if he asked.

“No.” Tate’s hands were still on Declan’s hips, but he pushed Declan away and pulled back against the wall of the elevator. “No, Declan. I can’t. Not like this.”

“You want me, Tate.”

“I do, but I won’t do it like this,” Tate’s insisted.

“What the fuck do you mean?”

“Declan.” Tate looked at him, really looked at him, and saw how exhausted he looked. Tate worried he wasn’t taking care of himself. They were like ships passing in port as much as they saw each other lately, but Declan looked like he was close to the edge.

“Declan, you don’t want me, remember?” Tate hated throwing that back in his face, but he needed to snap himself and Declan out of this.

“Tate, about that. I wanted...”

“Hello?” A voice came over the internal speaker of the elevator. “Are you okay? Do you need emergency assistance?”

Tate looked at Declan and saw the war that was waging inside him. Tate wanted to help him, help him fight his battles, and he would if Declan could open up and trust him. Tate knew how hard it was to trust. He’d been trusting before with his ex-boyfriend and faced the consequences. He offered his trust to Declan and it was thrown back in his face, but he would try again if only Declan would give him the smallest indication that it was wanted.

“Yeah, um.” Tate cleared his throat. “Sorry about that. We’re fine.” Tate pressed the emergency button to release the elevator. They rode it the rest of the way to the ground floor. Tate turned to Declan whose head was hanging down; his shoulders slumped, and he displayed the body posture of a man who once oozed confidence but now looked defeated.

"I'm sorry, Declan. I really am," Tate offered the apology as the doors of the elevator opened and they walked through them into the lobby. He needed to get through this damn press conference, the show tonight, and would deal with the rest when he could.

What was he going to do about this? What the hell just happened between them on that elevator? Declan went from zero to *I want to fuck you like an animal* in such a short time; Tate needed to take a step back and downshift. Tate needed space. Odd to want that after months of having it, but he needed time to think this through.

Tate grabbed the towel to wipe the sweat off his face, neck, and bare chest. The Glass House was the hottest venue they'd played yet; he felt like he was suffocating in this place. The murmur of the crowd began to sound like a hundred bees on a hot summer day, hungry for more, and the set list Station Zero played wasn't cutting it. The dates they played in Southern California were the toughest ones of the tour, as the hometown crowds weren't giving them any slack. The new songs were getting the crowd moving, but they wanted the old school songs they fell in love with. Tate raised his arms above his head, grabbed his right wrist with the left hand, and pulled to stretch his shoulders. He repeated the stretch with the opposite wrist, the cracks and pops of his body making him feel older than his twenty-seven years. The tour was the longest the band had been on and they needed the exposure. Their manager was in talks with a new record label that was showing interest. These shows could mean a chance at a real record deal and the opportunity to take their careers to the next level.

Tate twisted the towel in his hand, snapped it in the air, and then looped it around his neck. He grabbed his boxer's-style water bottle, and drank deeply. He watched as the members of Station Zero switched instruments with the roadies to enter the second half of their six-song set. Their instruments were taking a beating on the tour, but they were able to share the roadies with the boys from Balthazar, which saved them money and gave them the opportunity to sound their best.

Tate scanned the stage and watched Declan walk toward him with a natural swagger to his hips that screamed sex. Tate shifted on his stool as he watched Declan's eyes flick to his briefly, before he walked past him and straight to Chuck. *Ignoring me, asshole?* Tate knew he fucked up earlier. He fucked up and he wished he could take back those few minutes between him and Declan

in the hotel elevator when they came close to crossing the line. He could still smell the man, and feel his breath on his face as their lips were less than an inch apart. Why didn't Declan take what he wanted? What was he waiting for? Tate wouldn't be the one to make the first move. Declan told him bluntly that he wasn't interested, even after the night on the River Walk. But night after night, sleeping on the bus under the man, the sounds coming from the bunk above him made him wish it would disappear and Declan would be on top of him, skin to skin. Tate took a deep breath as his dick twitched. He was thankful he was behind his drum set and made the choice to wear a loose-fitting pair of basketball shorts tonight. He didn't need the local press or his manager to see him as a walking hard-on for his lead singer. Speaking of his lead singer, what the fuck was Declan doing with Chuck? They never broke this long between songs. Tate scanned the stage and watched Chuck lean in to Declan, placing his arm on his shoulder and whispered in his ear. Declan returned his whisper, when they pulled back the pair grinned and did their signature fist bump. Declan stalked off to the front of the stage and grabbed his microphone.

"How you feeling, Pomona?!" Declan shouted into the microphone and held it out as the crowd cheered back.

"It's good to be back in Southern California with you sexy motherfuckers!" The cheers from the crowd grew when Declan raised his fist in the air and performed his Q&A with them. Tate loved to watch him work the crowd. Declan possessed a magnetism that drew man, woman, child, *and Tate* to him. The man didn't have to say much, he just looked at you to make you his. Tate knew the look since he'd been getting it lately from Declan. The look held promise, a promise Tate used many times alone in the shower when he jacked off. Tate wanted to see the look on Declan's face as he fucked him. Two years was a long time without intimate contact from another man. Tate tried the hook-up deal, Grindr, and random encounters at clubs, but they left him empty. He wanted the raw emotion that came from being claimed by a man who wanted him for more than just his ass. Tate was a romantic soul and he wanted it all. He wasn't a blushing virgin and wasn't waiting for marriage, but he wanted more than previous boyfriends had given him. He was still putting the pieces of his broken family and self-esteem back together after his ex-boyfriend had torn his world apart.

The sound of a blues riff being played on the guitar by Chuck pulled Tate out of his trip down amnesia lane. *You have to be kidding me!* The familiar riff was soon joined by Keith on bass. The sounds blended together, and Declan's voice came through the speakers as he sang the opening lines to Led Zeppelin's

“Whole Lotta Love.” Tate knew he had less than fifteen seconds to grab his sticks and get his shit together to play his part. *What the actual fuck was this?* Tate grabbed his sticks, beat them on the toms, hit the cymbal, and pumped the bass pedal in time while watching as Declan ripped his shirt open and strut to the side of the stage to sing the first chorus with Keith. Thank fuck Tate knew how to play this song blindfolded because he couldn't take his eyes off Declan or his now naked chest. The open shirt showed off Declan's toned chest and abs; the stage lights highlighted the outline of his muscles as he gripped the microphone, bounced on his toes, and shook his ass on stage. Tight jeans hung low on Declan's hips, far too low for Tate and his now half-hard dick to take in as he seductively danced on the stage with the other members of Station Zero. Tate knew those hips, knew the outline of them, and he knew those abs held the finest of hair on them that after a shower would rise and catch the rays of early morning light strewn through the bus windows.

Tate's cock was now at full mast with the combination of his R-rated memories and the way Declan was performing the classic rock song. The music slowed and Chuck started his partial solo, mimicking the sound of a bow being pulled across his guitar the best he could with Keith filling in to make the sound complete. Declan walked behind Keith, grinding and thrusting against him as his fingers fondled the guitar's neck, playing the chords with him. Tate waited to add the full sound of his drums back to the song when Declan's voice came through the speakers. He panted, moaned, and grunted to the sounds of the guitars in a way that could only be described as orgasmic. Declan turned to Tate and held his gaze as he thrust his hips against Keith, and throwing his head back with one final groan, he leaned forward and licked Keith's neck. Tate gripped his drum sticks hard, glad there were only a few notes to play and that classic rock didn't require a double bass pedal, because he might do serious damage to his dick if he moved both feet and legs right now. Declan was doing a fine fucking good job of teasing him, and for what? Because Tate wouldn't kiss him when he wanted it? *Well, fuck you too, Declan Morrison.*

The song picked back up to its regular tempo. Declan walked to the drums and started singing the next verse... straight to Tate. Tate made eye contact with his lead singer, unable to look away if he wanted to, and the fact was, he didn't want to. It was stupid how Declan could turn him on like this when he was playing with him, torturing him, showing him everything he wanted. Declan played air guitar, tossing his head back and forth with the song as it pulsed through the small venue. The tempo slowed once again, and Tate heard Declan change the lyrics from “woman” to “man” while walking around the

drum set to stand behind Tate. Tate held his breath as he got close. He heard Declan sing the last few lines of the song, and when he stood behind him, Declan put his left hand on Tate's back. He slid it down and through the sweat that even playing the drums in a well air conditioned room could produce. Tate stilled as Declan's hand slid around his chest. He took a shuddering breath when Declan grabbed and pinched his nipple and pressed into Tate's back. Tate groaned at the touch, thankful he didn't have a microphone at his drums to be heard, and Declan started to pant into his microphone again. Tate felt the thick bulge of Declan's hard cock through the jean material digging into his back as Declan sang about the type of man he wanted to be. Tate leaned his head back against Declan's chest. Without missing a single beat of the drums, he closed his eyes letting the song, the touch, and the closeness of this man, wash over him. Declan ran his hands through Tate's hair softly before he gave it a tug, shoved Tate's head off his chest and walked away. Tate felt the rush of the warm air across his skin when Declan left, but the sting and the chill of loss was like ice in his veins.

The last notes of the song were played out with Declan slinking across the stage, dancing and grinding on his bandmates. The crowd broke out in applause, screams, and whistles for the boys. This was what they needed, but Tate could only focus on the dark-haired man in front of him as he rose from his drums and took a bow in time with the band. Declan walked to the front of the stage, bowed again and turned with a wave of his hand and screamed into the microphone "Give it up for my boys... Station Zero!" The crowd went crazy! Tate took another bow with the band. When he came up he found Declan staring, looking Tate up and down, and stopping when he got to his noticeably hard cock. Declan gave a short bow to Tate, meeting his eyes with a raise of his eyebrows and a smirk. Tate put both drum sticks in his right hand, grabbed his cock with it, and flipped Declan off, giving him a smug smirk right back. Declan laughed, shook his head and led the crowd into the next song. Tate adjusted his dick before he sat behind his drums again and counted them off into "Iron Gates." The crowd started jumping to the upbeat rhythm.

Tate narrowed his eyes at Declan's back while he sang to the crowd. *Paybacks are a bitch, Morrison.*

Chapter 8

~September, present day~

Four words...

I want you, Declan.

Declan stared at the hotel wall, playing those words over and over in his head. They'd been on the road for six months together, through the drama he created, yet Tate wanted him... still? He began to pace between the door and window, mulling over the last few hours. He wasn't prepared to hear that Tate wanted him after what he'd done. Declan wanted it, wanted Tate but was stunned to hear Tate wanted him. He knew he was messing with his future in too many ways and yet he wasn't willing to stop.

He'd told Tate too many lies and he needed to come clean with him. Fast. There wasn't time to talk on the bus after Tate's confession, not with the rest of the band awake and preventing any private moments. It didn't help that Declan took the coward's way out and snuck off the bus when they arrived in Los Angeles. After that, the band needed to concentrate on the preparation for tonight's show at the Whisky a Go Go and the meeting with the new label. Declan knew Rick would be pissed but *fuck Rick*. He wasn't going to let him tell him who he could love. *Love?* Declan would walk away from Station Zero before he walked away from Tate, again.

Declan grabbed his duffle bag off the hotel chair, took out his laptop, opened it and glared at the screen—he knew what he had to do. He'd done a damn good job of getting the pictures of he and Tate off the internet before they went viral. Sure, there were a few sites who still posted them but they were buried now after three months and he was lucky Tate wasn't one to troll those sites.

Declan pulled up the original email from Rick; the one that started his downward spiral of lies. He'd never been able to bring himself to delete the email or the pictures. He hated the invasion of privacy that led to them being taken, but deep down, Declan thought he was lucky to have photographic evidence of the day he fell for Tate. Not many people could claim the same. Declan scrolled through the emails between him, Rick and the CEO and President of *Free to Be Records*. Declan got a twisted kick out of their label name, free to be what? Obviously not a gay man in a rock band in a relationship

with his gay drummer according to Rick. It was insanity at best the way this business worked.

Declan click “forward” on the email and typed out a quick note to Tate.

Tate,

*This is a pretty shitty apology but after this morning on the bus.
I need to explain. Read the entire thread of emails, please.*

It's all I ask.

Declan

Declan stared at the email, knowing this could end one of two ways. He hoped for the best, but life taught Declan nothing was easy and the best was out of his league. He hit *send* on the email, closed his laptop and knew he needed to get out of the hotel room before he lost it. Declan grabbed the brochure for the hotel, looking at what amenities the posh Luxe at Sunset Boulevard Hotel offered. *A heated pool, eh?* An exhausting swim could be just what he needed.

The warm water broke as Declan surfaced and stroked his way across the hotel pool. He alternated strokes with each set of ten laps he swam. He flipped underwater and came up to float on his back, reaching his right arm behind his head to cut down through the water in a new set of back strokes. He stared up as the sun fell, coloring the sky in shades of blue, orange, and purple. With the green trees surrounding the pool and red flowers in vases on the tables next to the lounge chairs, Declan was swimming surrounded by a rainbow. The thought would have made him smile if his stomach wasn't in knots waiting for Tate's response to the emails.

Whatever the outcome, Declan would deal with it and move on. Sending Tate those emails, seeing the back and forth he did with Rick, pleading for him to understand and let them try to keep things quiet but be together, they were the most honest thing Declan had done... for himself.

Declan's stroke stuttered as the pool rippled in waves as if someone dove in. The solitude was gone. He pushed himself under water, then floated back to the surface and was face-to-face with Tate. Declan treaded water as he stared at his drummer.

Tate's face was emotionless, making it hard for Declan to read him. Forcing himself to speak, he willed his voice not to break along with his heart.

“Tate?” he asked carefully.

“Declan?” Tate responded.

“Um... did you get—” Declan’s question was interrupted.

“The email?” Tate nodded “Yeah, I did.” Tate swam a fraction closer to Declan. “I read all of it, Declan.”

The tone in Tate’s voice put Declan on the defense; he never heard Tate talk this way. His voice was an odd combination of menace and seduction, and Declan wasn’t sure which way was up. He started to swim backward to get some space between them.

Tate swam toward him. “I read it all, Declan. It’s what you wanted me to do, right?”

Declan’s heart was pounding as the sensation of being stalked by Tate sent a jolt of anticipation through his body. He turned and started to paddle to the shallow end of the pool where he could stand and get his footing. Tate swam closer once again as Declan swam to the side. It was like they were dancing around each other through the water. It would have been a romantic moment if Declan’s heart wasn’t racing with the unknown.

Tate darted forward and swam behind him, grabbing his arm and dragging him against his body. Declan’s breath caught as his back bumped against Tate’s chest, sliding against it through the water, and Tate wrapped his arm around Declan’s chest and shoulders.

“Shhh... you’re fine.” Tate’s mouth was right next to Declan’s ear, the warm caress of his breath sent blood flow straight to his dick. Declan looked around the pool to see if they were alone, thankfully they were.

Declan couldn’t relax, he wasn’t fine. He could feel Tate’s erection hard against his ass as he swayed in the water. The thin fabric of their shorts left nothing to the imagination. Tate’s right hand slid down Declan’s chest and began dragging his fingers against his nipple with maddeningly slow strokes.

“Tate?” Declan pleaded.

“Dec...” Tate replied with a hint of annoyance.

“Did you read the emails?” he asked.

“Mmm hmm...” Tate ran his nose down the side of Declan’s face and nuzzled behind his right ear. Declan shivered in the warm water, the touch was

too much to take. Tate's hand left his chest, coming up to cradle Declan's jaw, and as he tilted his head, Declan almost came right then and there when he felt Tate's warm tongue tracing the shell of his ear. Tate licked and nibbled on his lobe before taking it fully in his mouth to suckle. If it weren't for the arm holding him up, Declan would have gone underwater.

"Tate?" How many times could Declan say his name as a question? "The emails?" he prompted. "W-what did you think?"

Tate's hand, which was stroking Declan's nipple, stilled at the question, and he felt a sting of pain on his ear lobe when Tate bit down harder than before.

"What did I think?" Tate slid his hands down Declan's torso slowly, resting his hands on his hips, squeezing and digging his fingers in. Declan hissed at the rough contact. Tate pushed Declan away, the water moving him about weightlessly, until he was at arm's length and turned him around to face him. Tate smirked and pulled him close until their chests bumped and their dicks met. Declan grasped for Tate's biceps, trying to find purchase in the slick water.

"What did I think, Declan?" Tate's gaze roamed over every inch of Declan's face as his hands slid up from Declan's hips, traced the lines of his abs and up to his chest. His fingers teased circles around each nipple before his hands travelled up and over his shoulders, sliding behind his neck and up to cradle Declan's face in his hands. Declan's cock was hard and throbbing as he panted under Tate's thorough exploration of his upper body. Tate rubbed his thumbs along Declan's jaw line and brought Declan's lips a breath away from his and whispered, "I think you're a fucking liar."

Declan struggled against Tate as he was shoved underwater. He reached for Tate's hands which were now on top of his head and twisted in his hair—Declan kicked, trying to get out of his grasp. His right foot made contact with Tate's thigh, making Tate lose his hold, and he swam away until a grasp on his foot dragged him back.

Declan came up gasping for air, barely able to drag quick breaths in before Tate was on him again, his hands on his shoulders pushing him under once more. Declan thrashed, and his lungs were burning from lack of air. He reached to grab Tate's wrists, digging his blunt nails into his skin and kicked out as hard as he could. He felt his foot make contact with flesh, where it landed he didn't know and he didn't care. He needed to breathe. The kick did its job, and Declan was released and pushed away from Tate.

Declan sputtered as he surfaced, shaking his head to get his hair out of his eyes when he could breathe. He gulped in air, paddling in circles as his brain received oxygen and he could think... *What the fuck?*

Declan waded into the deeper water, turning to find Tate swimming to the shallow end of the pool. He was standing in waist-deep water, his arms crossed over his chest and the scowl on his face told Declan exactly what he thought of the emails. As if the almost drowning or the fact he'd called him a liar wasn't a clear indication. And Declan was a liar, he couldn't argue with that, but there was a reason he lied.

"You done?" Declan yelled from across the pool.

"I haven't even started," Tate responded through clenched teeth. His voice was low and yet it carried like an echo across the pool.

"What am I supposed to do, Tate?" *What am I supposed to do?* "I'm sorry..."

"You're sorry?" Tate waded further into the water. "You're sorry, Declan? Just what are you sorry for?"

Declan noticed the dark look in Tate's eyes. He wanted more than anything to swim away from him but he'd run enough already. With deliberate strokes, Declan swam toward Tate.

"I'm sorry for everything, Tate." Tate made a strangled sound, showing how much he believed Declan. "What's *everything* to you?"

Declan couldn't say what he wanted to with a pool of water between them. He dove under the water, opened his eyes and swam straight to Tate's legs. He came up and met the most beautiful face he had ever seen. He knew how he felt about Tate; he just hoped there was some way he could show him. Declan knew by now that his words meant shit.

"Tate, *you* are everything. I know words aren't going to be enough here, but you have to listen to me." Declan reached for Tate's hand under the water. "Will you listen to me?"

"I haven't moved, have I?" The harsh words were accompanied by Tate's fingers twining with Declan's.

Declan could see the confusion etched across Tate's face. His lips were drawn in a tight line, and Declan wanted to kiss it away. To make Tate smile and kiss him until his lips were swollen from it.

"I know I fucked up, Tate. I'm not crazy enough to miss the fact, but there were reasons for what I did. I hoped in the emails you would see I fought *not* to have this happen. I've done nothing but fight for this band from day one and I don't know anything else." Declan searched Tate's face, but it revealed nothing. "But you, I wasn't expecting you, not the way you..."

"How am I, Declan?" Tate grew tense.

Declan leaned his head back and closed his eyes, asking the universe, the sky, even the freaking chlorine in the pool, to give him the strength to say what was needed.

"Cut me a break here, Tate. I'm not used to this, okay. I'm not the guy who wants anything more than a random hook-up. But this time, this time with you... you make me want things I never knew I could. You make me want things I shouldn't. You make *me* want *you*."

"*I make* you want me?" Tate pulled his fingers away from Declan's. "How do I make you do anything, Declan? Did I make you lie to me? Did I make you throw away what we could have had for *three months* so you could play 'yes man' to Rick? Did I make you hide things from me? Did I make you play with my head and my emotions after all I told you back in San Antonio? Tell me, Declan, how I make you do anything?"

Declan was twisted inside and out. He couldn't back pedal his way out of this mess he created.

"Fine, bad choice of words. You didn't make me do anything, Tate. You didn't do anything at all. You just accepted what you were told and didn't fight."

Tate's hands came out of the water and back in a slap, spraying water across Declan. "What was I supposed to fight for, Declan? Someone who didn't want me? Someone who wasn't interested in me as anything but a friend?" Tate smacked the water again. To a passerby it would have looked like playful splashing, but the force behind each movement Tate made was fraught with frustration and anger, and it was all for Declan.

"I lied. Fuck it, I lied." Declan threw his hands up in the air. "It was stupid and I wish I could take it back but it's done." Declan gripped his hands and brought them on top of his head. "It's done. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to take responsibility!" Tate yelled.

"That's all I do, Tate!" Declan yelled back.

“Not for the band, Declan. For you!” Tate pointed at him, jabbing his hand, if it were close it would have bruised Declan. “For your actions.”

“What do you want from me?”

Declan stared at Tate, counting each second as it passed before Tate answered him. He would have to wait it seemed. Tate fell back against the water with a splash. His body came to the top and he just laid there and floated. He floated as if he didn't have a care in the world. He floated on the warm water of the damn hotel pool where they would have a meeting soon with the new label like it was the only thing he needed to do right then and there. He floated like Declan wasn't mere feet away from him. He floated like... *Well fuck.*

Declan sighed. “I get it, Tate.”

“Do you, Declan?” Tate's arms were stretched wide; he looked like some sort of water angel with the late sun shining down on him creating a halo of light.

“Yeah.”

Declan dunked himself under water, needing to be alone for a single second. The small act on Tate's part spoke volumes. Declan knew what he wanted, and he wanted Tate even though he didn't deserve him. He'd played with the man's emotions while he screwed with his own. Each moment together played over in Declan's mind. From the ridiculous first time they met, to their date. *It was a date!* To Declan's lies, to the elevator where he begged Tate to kiss him.

He swam toward the opposite side of the pool and pulled himself out and onto the warm deck. Declan laid on his stomach, crossing his arms in front of him and placed his head to the side to watch Tate float in the pool. *This is it, Morrison. It's now or never.*

“I'm sorry,” Declan simply stated. He closed his eyes and waited for Tate's answer. He knew whatever it was, he could deal with it. Though Declan never had to mend a shattered and broken heart before, he knew he could do it. It would just take a number of phone calls to Lisa and probably a vacation somewhere with cabana boys who liked to offer more than drinks off the menu.

Declan was brought out of his maudlin thoughts by a splash of water landing on his back. He opened his eyes and was met with the blue of Tate's boring into his all the way to his soul. His skin peppered with goose bumps at the sight of Tate so close Declan could touch him. Physically he could reach

out his right arm and run his hand across the close cut of Tate's hair, but emotionally, they were so far apart.

"I'm sorry, too, Declan." Tate's voice was barely above a whisper.

"What do you have to be sorry for?" Declan asked incredulously.

"I'm sorry I didn't fight for you." Tate gave a soft smile. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to help you when you needed it and you carried this alone." Tate leaned forward into Declan's space. "I'm sorry I didn't go after what I wanted when I saw the signs you wanted it too."

"Was I that obvious?" Declan muttered.

"You *were there* each time with me, right?" Tate chuckled. "Yeah, Dec. You were obvious, but I couldn't figure out why the switch happened." Tate crouched down in the water, as he rested his hands on the edge of the pool and propped his chin on top of his hands. "I get it now, and Declan, I'm so sorry."

Declan sighed and stared at Tate. He didn't deserve such understanding from this man; he lied to him, kept things from him, and took advantage of their situation.

"Tate?"

"Yeah?"

"What do we do now?" Declan was asking for his help for the first time.

"We move on," Tate said. "We talk, we find common ground, and we move on."

"You saw those emails, Tate. How do we deal with that?" Declan pushed himself up and sat crossed legged on the deck.

Tate grabbed the deck and pulled himself up and out of the water to sit next to Declan. Tate's bare arm resting against his, the casual touch sending shivers through Declan's body and made his stomach flip. "Lisa is how we deal with it," Tate said.

How could he be so stupid? Declan smacked the deck at his moment of memory lapse. His best friend and cousin was a paralegal who worked with some of the top lawyers in Los Angeles. He knew all he had to do was pick up the phone and tell her he needed help and Lisa would move mountains, or at least move bigoted record labels and managers for him.

Declan leaned into Tate's side and let his head fall back to watch the thin clouds move across the darkening sky.

“You’re pretty smart, Newman,” Declan declared.

“You’ve no idea the ideas I have in my head,” Tate’s whisper was given with his lips against Declan’s ear.

Declan held his breath as Tate’s hand came down to rest on his and he threaded their fingers together.

“It’s almost time for the show,” Tate said.

Declan looked at Tate, and watched a mischievous smile slowly spread across his face before he planted his feet on the deck, stood and pulled him to stand, dragging Declan toward the lounge chairs hidden under canopies.

“What are you doing, Tate?” Declan’s dick hoped he knew the answer because it was standing up proudly, begging to be noticed.

Tate turned and took both of Declan’s hands in his and walked backward until his legs met one of the lounge chairs. His sudden stop brought Declan forward, and he crashed into Tate. Declan placed his hands on Tate’s chest, feeling the bare skin still wet from the pool. Declan let his hands ghost down Tate’s hard chest and flat stomach to rest on the waist band of his swim trunks.

Declan yelped as he was pulled by Tate, who fell back against the soft cushion of the chair, bringing Declan with him. Tate’s arms wrapped around Declan’s shoulders as he embraced him; Declan laid his cheek against Tate’s chest and let himself be held. Declan couldn’t remember the last time he was held this way. Lisa hugged him, but when was the last time he was held by someone who didn’t want anything from him?

Declan grinned as Tate’s erection prodded him in the stomach. Tate didn’t want anything from Declan, not the way he was used to. But Tate did want him, and Declan would take what was offered.

Tate’s hold relaxed and his arms slid down Declan’s and began lazy swirls around his bare skin.

“I’ve wanted to do this for so long,” Tate whispered. “Just to hold you, like this.”

Declan’s heart felt like it was on a race and he was out of breath with Tate’s declaration. He felt there was more with Tate from the start, but he thought the wild romantic day dreams and vivid erotic fascinations was mostly one sided. He was lost for words.

Declan raised his head and nuzzled Tate’s chin with his nose.

“Mmm... I like that, Dec,” Tate groaned.

Declan repeated the motion. “I like when you call me Dec.”

“Do you?” Declan nodded, and Tate hooked his finger under Declan's chin and raised his head. Tate's eyes were fixed on Declan's mouth, and Declan licked his lips, wanting to feel Tate's lips on his.

“Dec...” Tate said softly and leaned toward Declan. He placed his hands on the cushion on either side of Tate's chest and rose up to meet him halfway.

“Um, Declan?” The soft voice of his bassist came from the outside of the cabana.

“You have to be fucking kidding me,” Declan swore under his breath. “How many times can we be cock blocked?” He banged his head lightly against Tate's chest, feeling the man's laughter before he heard it.

“It's kind of funny...” Declan stopped Tate's next words from coming out by pressing his hand against his mouth.

“Don't say it.” Declan started to laugh—a full-bodied laugh which allowed him to relax and be in this moment with Tate. Keeping his position stretched out on Tate; Declan craned his neck to see the outline of Keith through the opaque curtains hanging from the cabana. Keith was standing a few feet away and looking at anything but them.

“What's up, Keith?” Declan asked. Tate's distracting hands started roaming lower along his back, finding their way to his ass, grabbing it with both hands and pulling Declan against him. He groaned and pushed back against Tate's hands before he rocked forward, sliding their still hard erections against each other.

“Fuck, Dec,” Tate hissed in his ear and thrust up to meet Declan. All thoughts of someone standing close enough to watch fled Declan's brain. He was lost in all that was Tate. The rest of the world be damned.

“I want you,” Declan panted out each word.

“I want you too, Declan.” Tate's hand slipped under the waist band of Declan's trunks and was teasing the crease of his ass, dipping between his cheeks to stroke and tease Declan out of his mind.

“Hey?” Keith cleared his throat. “Not to be a total asshole, but we have an interview to do before the show. We should get going soon.”

Declan pushed back against Tate's hand as Tate groaned, tossing his head back and exposing the long tanned column of his throat that Declan longed to taste.

"Yeah, Keith." Declan raised his head and licked Tate's throat, as he felt the rumble of Tate's moan in and through this mouth. Declan reveled at the sound and sucked on his Adam's apple. "We're coming."

"Keep doing that and we will," Tate ground out in his ear.

"Right, boss, see you soon and..." Keith laughed. "Shit guys, I'm sorry."

Tate's hand stilled as Keith walked away. Declan looked up at him. The lust had darkened his eyes and his mouth looked delectably kissable.

"We should get ready, Dec," Tate said.

"I know, I just... I want." Declan couldn't get the words out.

"What do you want?" Tate asked.

"You, Tate. I want you." Declan spoke the truth.

"Can you answer me something, Declan?"

"Anything," Declan answered honestly.

"You take on so much with the band." Tate placed a finger over Declan's mouth. "No, shh. Let me talk, please."

Declan kissed Tate's finger and nodded.

"You do so much for everyone else, always putting yourself last," Tate told him.

Declan ducked his head, not wanting to meet Tate's gaze anymore. Why did he have to bring this up *now*?

"You're so strong for so many, but Declan?" Tate pressed.

Declan glanced at Tate under his lashes.

"Can you be strong for *you*, Declan?" Tate raised his eyebrows with earnest. "For what you want?"

"What I want?" Declan pushed up and off Tate's chest. "What about you Tate?" He slid to the end of the lounge and sat with his back to Tate. "What do you want?" He knew it was stupid to ask, but he hated where this line of questions was going. Declan shouldered responsibilities he couldn't walk away

from. There were people depending on him to do the right thing for them all. He didn't have the luxury of being selfish.

"I told you what I want this morning on the bus..." Tate said, and Declan felt the weight of the lounge chair shift as he rose to his feet. Tate walked to Declan, standing in front of him and nudged Declan's foot with his toe. "Look at me, Declan."

Declan took a deep breath and obeyed.

"I want you, but more than that, Declan—I want you to find the space to take what you want." Tate smiled sadly. "With or without me, I want that for you so much it hurts."

Declan wanted Tate, he wanted the redemption he was offering, but could Declan be strong enough to take it? Who would he put first this time: him or the band?

Declan watched as Tate walked away, his back disappearing through the glass doors of the hotel. They had to get this show over with and the meeting with *Free to Be Records*, and then he could decide.

Fuck!

Why did this always have to be so hard? Declan knew what his heart was telling him, he just needed his heart to kick the shit out of his brain so he could have it.

The stage lights dimmed, bringing the band into darkness. The only visible light came from the open door behind the stage and the bar. The black lights from balcony seating illuminated the crowd as shadows danced over their faces. The crowd started buzzing with anticipation, as Station Zero closed each set with their one Chuck-penned ballad. Fans ate the song up even though it was a complete departure from their normal sound, and the boys in the band figured if *KISS* could get away with it, so could they. Their arrogance paid off.

Declan watched as Chuck removed his Stratocaster and set it on the stand at the edge of the stage. Their head roadie handed him his vintage acoustic guitar and went to set the stool at the front of the stage for Chuck's solo performance. Declan smiled in encouragement as his friend readied himself. Chuck loved to play the fool on stage, but showing off his vocal talent also showed his vulnerability and it was something he struggled with. Declan knew all too well about the struggles of being vulnerable. He couldn't think about the fight with

Tate this afternoon or what happened after in the cabana; this gig had too much riding on it to let it get in the way. He wanted Tate, he knew Tate wanted him, but the baggage and lies of the last few months could be dug out with a fork lift, and Declan wouldn't let himself be thrown off balance. Not now. He had to have his head in the game. People were counting on him.

A movement from the back of the stage caught his eye, as Tate rose from behind his drums and walked over to Chuck. He placed his hand on the Gibson and whispered something in Chuck's ear who responded with wide eyes. A nod and he released his prized possession to Tate. Tate strapped on the guitar and walked to the stool set up for the solo performance. *What the fuck was he doing?* Declan stood rooted in place as he watched Tate sit and adjust both microphones.

"Hi. I'm Tate." Tate introduced himself with a wave of his right hand holding the bright yellow guitar pick, and the crowd went crazy with applause, cheers, and whistles. "I know Chuck normally does the last song but tonight is special for us."

Tate turned and looked at Declan, and Declan stopped breathing. The blood left his head, went straight to his dick and made his jeans so tight Declan had to adjust himself. Tate grinned at Declan, noticing his crotch adjustment and winked before turning around to address the crowd.

Fucker.

"Chuck was kind enough to let me have this tonight. The song isn't ours, but I hope you like it and I hope..." Tate kept his body faced to the audience as Declan took small steps toward the front of the stage; the pull of this man was never something he could deny. Tate looked over his shoulder catching Declan's gaze and spoke five words which made him stop midstep. "I hope you get it."

Declan stood frozen in place as Tate started to strum the intro chords to Sheryl Crow's "Strong Enough". He loved to hear the sexy sound of Tate's voice, a rich baritone which lent to the song well. Tate's song choice was telling; the lyrics flowed from him and hit Declan in the gut. Tate sang about being strong enough to be with him.

Oh, Tate. If you only knew.

Declan looked over the crowd as Tate sang. He wasn't surprised to find them in awed silence, he was much in the same state. Declan spun around as the sound from a bongo drum came into the song. Chuck beat on the drum with

bare hands and grinned like the Cheshire Cat at Declan. He shook his head and got emotional at the support.

The crowd started to sway to the beat of the song and people held up their cell phones. Declan closed his eyes as Tate sang into the chorus, the lyrics changing to a deeper meaning than he would have imagined possible hearing Tate sing them.

Declan lied and Tate was still here. The decision he wrestled with for months blew up in his face. Tate asked if Declan could be strong enough for himself, and he felt he could do anything, with Tate by his side.

Declan did the only thing he could and grabbed a microphone off the stand. Walking up to stand next to Tate, he sang the next verse with him. Tate turned and they sang the last lines together and into the chorus. Tate strummed the guitar as he rocked on the stool; his eyes never leaving Declan's face and nodded—Declan sang the last verse alone. He sang the last verse to Tate; setting free all the emotion he felt. The emotion he couldn't usually let himself feel for fear of failing everyone around him. They sang the final chorus together, and the club fell silent. Darkness washed over them as they lights went out.

Declan watched Tate by the small lights on the stage floor, as he lifted the guitar up and off of his body, setting it carefully on the stand at his feet. He turned to face Declan, his hands resting on his thighs and his back straight with tension.

Declan dropped the microphone and the sound bounced through the speakers as he took the two steps it took to get to Tate. Grabbing his face between his hands, he brought their mouths together.

Tate clutched at his arms as the stool tipped back and found purchase with Declan's biceps. Declan felt the soft wetness of Tate's tongue sliding along the seam of his lips and opened without hesitation. Tate pulled Declan closer and dug his fingers into his arms as he slanted his head to deepen the kiss. He groaned as Tate licked inside his mouth and Declan licked back. Their tongues danced with one another and explored their mouths. The kiss was raw, passionate and unlike anything Declan experienced before. Their mouths slanted over and over again, and though Declan's lungs were screaming for air, he couldn't tear his mouth from Tate's.

The sound of applause was faint, but Declan could only feel, could only taste Tate, the man he has wanted for so long.

Tate was the first to break the kiss, and a thrill shot through Declan to know he was in the same state. Their breaths mixed as they panted from the kiss, resting their foreheads against one another.

“Tate?” Declan could barely get his name out. The blood was pounding in his ears. The fear of the PDA he just put Tate, who wasn't out in this world yet, through scared the shit out of him.

“Dec, it's okay...” Tate kissed his nose. “But we are putting on a show.”

Declan turned to look out to the crowd and realized the applause he heard was for them.

“Shit, Tate.” Declan's words were cut off by the softness of Tate's mouth against his. This kiss was different from the one they just shared, it was reassuring and intimate.

“It's okay,” Tate said again. “I just really need to get out of here, Declan.”

Declan nodded and grabbed Tate's hand as they turned and waved to the crowd as it erupted in applause. He glanced at Tate who looked like a deer caught in headlights and tugged on his hand.

“Let's go!” he yelled above the noise.

Keith and Chuck were waiting by the back door of the stage. “Your get-away car awaits, gentlemen.” Keith bowed and Chuck shoved them out the door.

Declan stumbled and fell into Tate as Keith opened the door to a black car he didn't recognize. “Whose car is this?”

“The new label sent it to take us back to the hotel,” Keith affirmed. “You two take it and get out,”—Keith waved his hand—“what you need to get out before the meeting.”

Tate climbed in the car and Declan followed. Chuck stopped him from closing the door by shoving a plastic bag in his hands.

“What's this, Chuck?” Declan eyed the bag with confusion.

“Provisions dude!” Chuck laughed and shut the door, rapping on the roof two times, and the car pulled away and onto the busy Sunset Strip.

The silence of the car engulfed them, as Declan reached across the seat and found Tate's hand. He laced their fingers together and turned in the seat to look at him. Tate was in the same position with a beautiful smile across his face.

“To the hotel, gentlemen?” the driver asked.

“Not yet,” Tate answered and tugged on Declan’s hand. Declan let himself be manhandled as Tate arranged him on his lap. “Take the scenic route if you would.” Tate rubbed Declan’s thighs through his jeans, coming up to cup his erection. Declan’s head fell back and Tate leaned forward to suck on his neck.

“As you wish, sirs,” the driver replied and the partition started to close.

Declan ran his hands over the short hairs on Tate’s head, tipping his head back to give Tate better access to his neck and holding him in place. He was lost in what happened, but he would be stranded on an island if it would mean he could continue to feel the way he did right now—or better yet, stranded on an island *with* Tate.

“Declan?” Tate murmured against his neck.

“Mmm hmm...”

“How quiet can you be?” Tate asked as his hands were busy undoing Declan’s fly.

“Fuck, Tate,” Declan hissed as Tate’s hand slid into his jeans and stroked his cock through the cotton of his boxers.

“Oh I plan to...” Tate promised.

Epilogue

Declan stretched out on his stomach, resting on his elbows as he scrolled through the numerous unanswered emails filling his inbox. He tensed and listened as the quiet of the early morning he favored was disturbed by the sound of footsteps padding on the carpet and the smell of coffee wafting toward his nose.

Declan smiled as the mattress dipped under the weight of a body, and a cup of coffee was placed in front of him.

“Coffee for your thoughts?” Tate’s question was accompanied by a kiss on the top of his head. Declan reached his hand up, caught Tate’s coffee-free hand and brought it to his lips to kiss his palm.

This Sunday would be their last in San Antonio. After a back-breaking pace of dealing with the new label and laying down tracks for the new full-length album, Tate and Declan decided to take a small vacation to celebrate the anniversary of their first non-date. Spending the morning in pajama pants and T-shirts, lounging on a king-size bed with Tate was the perfect way start the day.

Declan took the coffee cup, sipped it and sighed. “Thanks. Just looking through emails wondering if I should answer any of them.”

“No. Not today, Declan. It’s our last day here,” Tate replied with stern sincerity. “Let’s enjoy it while we can.”

Declan set his cup of coffee on the low table he had dragged across the room to set their many forms of technology on. Between their individual laptops, cell phones and portable game system Tate insisted on bringing yet they never touched, they needed the extra table space.

Declan craned his neck to see Tate shuffling behind him in the spacious hotel room. Tate grabbed two pillows off the chair that sat adjacent to their bed. He shoved one under Declan’s feet and used the other under his shoulders as he laid down and used Declan as a cushion, resting his head on the small of Declan’s back. The warm weight of the man against him sent a thrill through Declan’s body and landed straight at his dick. He moved his legs to adjust his filling cock.

“You’re fast to respond, Dec,” Tate teased and braced his feet against the wall above the headboard.

“Screw you, Newman.”

“Anytime, anywhere...” Tate smacked Declan’s ass. “And always, Morrison.” His fingers were now running slow lines up and down Declan’s thigh.

The last nine months passed quickly, but Declan cataloged each moment in his memory. After their night of official PDA, Declan and Tate became lovers. Lovers was a small and insignificant word for what they were: lovers, friends, bandmates, partners... each and every word Declan could find in the romantic glossary of “in ridiculous love” with each other would fit what he and Tate became.

Declan never thought he would or could be the guy to fall in love—of course that was before he met Tate. Tate made him better, made him want to be better and made him want more. Together they worked with Lisa and her boss at the law firm to draw up a proviso on the morality clause of their new contract with *Free to Be Records* to allow them to be together. Declan wanted his career as a musician with Station Zero, but he was done sacrificing his life for the band.

The suits at *Free to Be Records* were shocked when they were presented with a counter offer on the contract—it impressed them. Declan and Tate had been in more meetings and on more conference calls with the label since they signed. They were now fully involved in deciding which direction to take the band. Standing up for their relationship earned them respect from the label and allowed them to fire Rick Mathias. After Declan learned the label never forced the issue of him and Tate being together, and it was Rick’s own homophobia talking, firing him was the easiest decision Declan ever made.

Almost as easy as letting his heart finally decide to be with Tate.

Tate knocked his head on Declan’s back. “Are you listening to me or did I lose you inside that overactive brain of yours, again?” Tate teased.

Declan turned on his side, careful not to dislodge Tate from his back, and ruffled his hair. He’d been growing it out again since they ended the tour. Declan threaded his fingers through the soft strands, twirling them as he thought.

“What’s on your mind, Dec?”

“Not much, just reflecting, you know? Thinking of where we were when this all started, where we are now and where this is all headed.” Declan smirked as Tate’s eyebrow lifted.

“That’s a lot of thought so early in the morning,” Tate said as he nodded, silently acknowledging the similar exchange they’d had months earlier.

Declan looked down Tate’s body; the long-sleeved, white T-shirt was snug against his chest, tapering down to his flat abs to where a small patch of skin visible above the waistband of his pajama pants. The pants he often wore with the silly drum sets all over them that made Declan laugh. Smirking, his eyes carried on their trail down and... Declan eyed a book on Tate’s lap.

“Hey, what are you reading?” he asked.

“One of those gay romance novels Lisa sent you,” Tate replied as he flipped through the book.

“Seriously? Which one?” Declan was curious what book his best friend thought he and Tate would want to read.

Tate lifted the book and turned it to show Declan the cover.

“*Catch my Breath*,” Tate answered. “It’s the one she swears by; with a gay for you story line she goes crazy for.” Tate shrugged and opened the book. “She says it reminds her of us.”

“Gay for you? Do you think it’s possible?”

“Not sure I’d call it gay for you, but I think anything is possible, Dec.” Tate leaned his head back and smiled. He adjusted his glasses and Tate’s eyebrow lifted in the sexy way Declan would never get enough of. “Have you seen who Chuck’s been hanging out with lately?”

“You don’t think...” Declan wondered.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to read this book and do some research for our boy,” Tate declared.

Declan laughed, he was in a different world than he was a year ago—with all the drama they endured, all the lies he told—he wouldn’t trade them for anything. He didn’t like the things he did, but working through it with Tate was more rewarding than he imagined. He found a partner in Tate, and that was worth everything.

“Dec-lan?” Tate called his name in a singsong voice, reached back to wave his hand in front of his face. “I lost you again... am I going to have to fuck you stupid to get you to pay attention as I read this?”

Declan tugged on Tate's hair, smiling at the easy and teasing exchange between them. He rolled to his back, stretched his arms over his head and was followed by the hard length of Tate sliding on top of him.

“You say the most romantic things, Tate.”

The End

Author Bio

Elizabeth Daniels is the possible made up persona of a girl who loves love and loves to read about love.

Elizabeth is a wife and mother who lives in the desert valley of Southern California surrounded by gorgeous mountains that are covered with bright orange poppies every spring. She shuffles a home full of boys and finds it unnerving to be the minority in the house most of the time. She loves animals, doesn't eat them, and has rescued the three canines that lay at her feet as she writes.

She recently took her love of boys who love boys on a challenge to let the characters out of her head and tell their own stories.

She is taking a chance at this thing called writing, when she is not busy being lost in a book.

She may be crazy.

She may be brilliant.

She may be trying not to talk about herself in the third person because it's pretentious and creepy.

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