

MIND GAMES

by Amanda

Prologue

He noticed that her long tapered fingers shook just ever so slightly as she handed over the check. The amount was correct, possibly even a little extra, so he didn't give it a second glance as he stuffed it into his pocket. He calmly eyed his former client, his expression so neutral as to make one believe he was waiting for instruction as what to do next. A cough, followed by another one, forced his attention to the gentleman standing beside her. A hand reached out for a shake; a word of goodbye was spoken to him. Was that fear he saw in the gentleman's eyes? A catch of desperation in his voice? He hoped so. His large, massive hand with untold strength enclosed the smaller one and gave it a quick shake. A desire to crush it, contort it into an unrecognizable shape overwhelmed him. Almost. He quickly let go of the hand, giving a short nod with his head and turned to walk out of the plush office. A small smile of satisfaction briefly materialized on his lips as he heard the woman behind him break into uncontrollable sobs.

Chapter 1:

Family Values

Xavier Delgado, bodyguard to the elite, now unemployed, drove cautiously down the street, looking carefully at each cookie-cutter house he passed. Finally finding the number he wanted, he swung sharply into the driveway and turned off the radio blaring away with some music he could recognize as only one of those "boy-toy" bands his niece was always swooning over. He locked the SUV's door, mindful of the neighborhood. He hated this area, full of drifters, gangs, and any other low-life scum looking for an easy target. Xavier's mouth twisted into a tight smile as he visualized the possibility of meeting up with one of them.

He walked slowly up the sidewalk, noticing the crumbling concrete and weeds that proliferated around the small house. Damn! Where the hell was all the money he was giving his sister going to, anyway? An excited yell and slam of a door opening dragged Xavier's attention away from the weeds and he looked up to see his niece barreling toward him at top speed. He caught her easily and swung her up high over his head to screeches of delight. Ugh. She was dirty, sticky with God-knows-what and Xavier put her down quickly.

"Lizzy!"

Xavier heard his sister's hoarse voice yelling at her 10-year-old daughter and he straightened up to see Aggie leaning against the side of the doorframe, cigarette in one hand, the other hand resting on her seven-month pregnant belly.

"Are those for you, or the baby?" he sneered as he brushed by her yanking the burning cigarette from her and crushing it underfoot before he went inside.

"Ha. Ha." mocked his sister, trailing after Xavier and following him into her dilapidated kitchen, all the while searching in vain to locate a stray cigarette. She watched as he threw a piece of paper onto the kitchen table on his way over to the refrigerator to search for a beer.

"Hey!" she said, impressed by the size of the check. "What did you do? Knock over a bank?"

"I'm a bodyguard, remember? I get paid well." Xavier yanked open the handle, crouched down, and reached far into the back of the refrigerator. Finding what he wanted he pulled out a cold one and twisted off the cap. He sighed with relief after taking a long gulp, then swore, "Damn Florida heat!"

Aggie glanced at the check again then gave her brother a knowing look. "No bodyguard gets paid this well. You must have scared the shit outta someone real good."

"I get paid to protect."

"I'll bet," she said dryly.

Xavier sighed impatiently. "Just save me 25 out of it," he said, nodding to the check. "You can have the rest. And for Christ's sake, take some of it and clean up your yard!"

Aggie smiled as she walked over to her purse on the counter and shoved the check into it. "Thanks," she acknowledged bluntly. She turned and watched him take a swig from the bottle then dragged a chair out from the kitchen table and settled into it. Propping her feet up on another seat she relaxed and scanned the table, hoping a cigarette was lying around. Finding none, she sighed and eyed her brother with a contemplative stare.

"So, when will you be leaving?"

Xavier gave her a sour smile, recognizing her candid wish to be rid of him as soon as possible. He wiped his mouth, then held the amber bottle up to eye level, swirling the contents of the remaining beer. "Don't know. Maybe a week, two at most. Soon as I find another job, I'll be leaving."

Aggie nodded, then winced as she felt the baby kick down low. "Ouch." Xavier walked over to the trashcan, opened the lid and threw the empty bottle away.

"So, do you know who the father is?" His tone of voice left no question as to his distaste.

"Yeah, and I'm not telling you. I'm not letting you beat the crap outta him like you did to the other one."

"Aggie, believe it or not, this time I really don't care."

She eyed him suspiciously, but knew better than to argue. The blare of the TV from the next room came to life, filling the house with music. "What the hell is all that racket?" Xavier snarled. It sounded just like the music he had heard when driving up to the house and he went to go investigate. Aggie followed her brother into the other room.

"Ever hear of MTV?" she asked sarcastically.

Xavier shot her a dark look in reply then watched his niece dance rhythmically to the song on the TV. He turned to look at his sister with disbelief. "You let her watch this shit?"

Aggie shrugged for an answer and went over slowly to lower herself into a chair. Lizzy danced over to her uncle, a smile beaming from her face as she grabbed his massive hand with both of her own. She tugged hard, trying to drag him over to the couch. "Uncle X! Uncle X! I like them! Sit down with me and watch them, please?" Xavier cringed at the nickname and swore under his breath.

"Let me get another beer first, ok?"

He returned with the drink and flopped down onto the couch. "Okay. So exactly what am I looking at?"

"My favorite group, the Backstreet Boys!" She twirled a little pirouette in front of the TV set. "Aren't they great?"

Xavier gave her a noncommittal grunt and slowly took a sip of his beer. The music had died down and the announcer began to talk about them. Apparently, a new tour was starting, songs from their new album would be covered, most shows were sold out, blah, blah, blah. Xavier didn't listen to the rest. He gazed upward at the ceiling, lost in thought and his sister looked at him carefully, a frown forming on her face.

"Xavier..." she began slowly.

"Shut up."

"Xavier, please don't..."

She was cut off with a vicious glare, a look that left no room for doubt in his meaning.

Aggie felt queasy, a horrible nausea flooding her body and senses. Not sure whether it was from the baby or her growing suspicions, she rose suddenly and hurried down to the bathroom hoping to hell she made it in time.

Xavier never noticed her swift exit. He began to watch the show intently, trying to absorb everything before him. One by one each of the band members were shown, a short biographical story describing his life and association with the group. Xavier leaned forward on the couch, hands clasped, as if in prayer, under his chin. His dark eyes became intense, his body tightly coiled as if ready to pounce on an unsuspecting prey. One by one, Xavier began to engrave into his memory each singer's history and association with the band. As the last one of the group was being documented, Xavier suddenly found himself being taken aback; his mind quickly shifted and he instantly dismissed the others, knowing with full certainty that this was the one. A curious jolt of excitement motivated him to painstakingly study the Backstreet Boy. Intrigued, Xavier watched the young man being interviewed; by far, he was the most charismatic. A connection had been made and Xavier held his breath as he attempted to absorb every nuance of his face, manner, and style.

A cold and clammy hand touching his shoulder brought Xavier out of his reverie and he looked up to find a distressed and pleading look on his sister's pale face. He waved her off with an impatient flick of his hand and turned back to the screen. The show had ended and Lizzy was switching channels with the remote control at a 10-year-old frenzied pace.

Xavier leaned back into the soft support of the couch and, as a quiet calmness spread across his broad face, ignored his sister's growing anxiety. Lizzy had found a channel she liked, something called VH-1, and was humming along to another tune. Xavier looked at

her, a quirk of a smile touching his lips. He knew now what he was going to do, what direction his next assignment would take him, and most importantly of all, the thrill he would get out of it. His fists clenched and unclenched with anticipation as he looked at his niece lying on the floor, her little legs wiggling in time to the music.

"Hey, Elizabeth." She stopped squirming and turned a questioning look towards him. Small brown eyes met larger excited ones.

"How would you like to meet the Backstreet Boys?"

Chapter 2:

Discovery

For the last couple of weeks the baby had been particularly active, so it wasn't unusual for Aggie to be pacing up and down the hallway late at night, desperately wanting a cigarette. Xavier had taken all her smokes away and had threatened (in no uncertain terms) that if he smelled even the slightest wiff, she could kiss goodbye any more support. She smiled sourly at the thought of his promise to withhold financial support and wondered what he would do if he found out that she was going to sell this baby for a nice little profit. Not that he would find out, of course. Aggie's thoughts were interrupted as she noticed a small sliver of yellow light shine from under Xavier's door. He had been locked up his room for over a week now with that damn computer, coming out only for occasional trips downtown. She was glad she had not hocked the computer he had given her sometime ago; even happier when she found out last night that he was leaving soon. She knew it had to do with his fascination over that Backstreet Boy. Aggie tried to put that unpleasant thought out of her head. She recognized without a doubt that her brother was dangerous, but to what extent she never cared to explore. Hopefully, the couple who wanted this kid would pay handsomely and then she'd be gone, taking Lizzy and getting the hell out of Florida; leaving behind the disaster she knew would soon start.

Xavier shut down the computer and leaned back into his chair, a smile of content finally crossing his face. It was done. He had done it, but then he knew he could. Xavier had called in a few markers, made a few veiled threats, and knowing his ability to get what he wanted, was not at all surprised when the managing firm of the Backstreet Boys had telephoned him with a job offer. Xavier smirked as he listened to the HR representative describe the surprising absence of one of their most trusted bodyguards and how thrilled they were to find such a "respected and qualified" bodyguard at such short notice.

As usual, the head of employment had tried to get him to take a ridiculously low salary and they had haggled for some time before coming to a decent offer. Xavier would have taken any amount the young supervisor offered, but knew that the other bodyguards for this group would sooner or later find out his wage and decided to negotiate for similar pay.

It was a little harder to accomplish the rest of what he needed. He loved the Internet, and was quite adept at it, but surprise and then disbelief overtook him as he began his search into the Backstreet Boys. He was dumbstruck at the amount of shit that was posted. It took him many long and frustrating hours weeding through all the sites, discarding this and printing that, but he finally got the information he needed, then checked and double-checked for accuracy. Every now and then he relaxed and smiled as he stared at the pictures of the young singer taped against the computer. Lizzy, in her innocence, had been delighted that her uncle had thought so highly of her favorite Backstreet Boy and had furnished several pictures. She chatted away about things he didn't care about, but listened politely, then carefully guided her into "what if" scenarios

to get her reaction that only a fan could answer. He mentally stored the pertinent information away and thanked her, promising solemnly that he would indeed get autographs for her and that he would do everything possible for her to meet them. She skipped happily out of his room and he snorted with disgust. Yeah, right.

Chapter 3:

Together

A collective sigh of relief escaped from the Backstreet Boys as they collapsed onto the hardwood floor of the exercise room. They had been practicing their movements non-stop, until they had complained that the air-conditioner didn't seem to be working right and that under no uncertain terms would anyone start again until the air was cranked up. As Fatima left to go find someone in maintenance she warned them not to get too comfortable. AJ snorted and muttered "right" then sprawled spread-eagle onto the ground. Kevin and Howie got up and walked over to the water cooler while Nick sat up, reached over to his duffel bag and fished a Nerf football out.

"Heads up, Bri," he warned and tossed the ball, hitting his friend smack in the face.

"Thanks, Nick." Brian gave him the finger and torpedoed the ball back at him as fast as he could. With a quick reflex, Nick rolled, caught the ball one-handed and off-balanced, then let go with a wicked laugh.

"Yesssss! Two points."

"Lucky catch." groused Brian, clapping his hands impatiently for Nick to toss him another throw. The blond singer made a heroic leap as Nick threw a high one, then flashed him a brilliant smile. "Three points!" Brian crowed, rating his catch.

"In your dreams, Rok!"

AJ groaned and rolled over onto his side, hand propping his head, as he watched the two players try to outdo each other's catch. He groaned again, this time more audibly, trying to gain some sympathy. "Doesn't anybody have indigestion?" AJ watched as Nick came sprinting by, then playfully stuck out his leg, hoping he could trip Nick running for a catch. He missed. "And just whose brilliant idea was it anyway to have Chinese food before practice?"

"Howie," answered Kevin, Nick and Brian simultaneously.

"Hey," protested the offended party. "Can I help it if your stomach isn't used to quality food?"

"Hey," mimicked AJ. "Mind if I fart in your direction next time we practice?"

"Better than slapping me in the face again when we're rehearsing. You're timing today is horrible." Howie retorted.

AJ gave Howie a "who me?" expression and Kevin smiled as he sat down next to his reclining friend. The oldest of the Backstreet Boys glanced about the bare room, shaking his head.

"Jeez, you'd think they could afford a chair for us to rest on." Kevin grumbled as he took a sip of his water.

"Naw," replied Howie, "Backstreet management would have a heart attack over the expenditure!" AJ and Kevin laughed at their friend's remark. Sometimes the simplest needs were too hard for their management team to comprehend.

AJ nudged Kevin with his leg and motioned for him to share his drink. Kevin passed the water to him and then watched as his cousin made a between-the-legs catch. "I heard that they got rid of John." commented Kevin. Nick and Brian stopped tossing the ball when they heard that.

"I thought John quit," offered Brian.

"Huh? What do you mean? Quit? Fired? Which one?" questioned Nick.

AJ sighed. "Whatever. Doesn't matter now. We go through bodyguards like water!"

Howie glanced over to the group, all sitting down now, except for him. He splashed some of his water onto his neck and face to cool himself off. "Well, do they have a replacement?"

Kevin shrugged. "They better. Tour is starting soon."

Brian lay down on his back, juggling the Nerf ball from hand to hand until Nick grabbed it. "I wonder who'll get him?"

Howie shrugged. "Does it matter?" he asked.

Chapter 4:

The Meeting

Terri Hamilton sighed with impatience as she waited for the elevator to reach her floor. She could hear the men standing behind her snicker obscenely and she felt like turning around and whacking them hard with her briefcase. The chime of the opening door announced her level and she strode off the elevator, but not before she turned around and called them both assholes. Satisfied, she walked down the hall and opened the door that read BSB Human Resources. Piped music of the Backstreet Boys flooded the reception area and she glared accusingly at her secretary. Startled, her secretary quickly reached over to switch off the music and Terri shook her head in amazed resignation. It was bad enough that she had to work for the organization, but to be constantly bombarded with their music!

As she strode over to her office, Terri glanced offhandedly at a guy sitting next to her secretary. He was huge, a brute of a man, and she assumed it was the new bodyguard they had hired. She was pissed to learn of the new employee's status just hours before; why they hadn't told her sooner irked her to no end. After all, she was the personnel manager. True, she didn't do the hiring and firing, but she controlled just about everything else. She wondered for the hundredth time if it was because she was a woman in this man-dominated company she worked for. As she punched her security code to gain access to her office, she felt a twinge of cramps beginning. Great. Just great. A click of acceptance signaled her to enter and she rushed in, giving the bodyguard one last look before she slammed her door. Let him wait, she thought and hurried over to her desk for the Midol.

Elaine Patrick, Terri's secretary, gave the large man before her an embarrassed smile and shrug. "I guess its not such a good day for her," she apologized weakly.

Xavier gave her his best fake smile. "It's okay." He leaned toward her conspiratorily and whispered, "Us peons have to stick together, don't we?"

She smiled, grateful to have an ally. "You know, if I wasn't working for the Backstreet organization, I would have quit a long time ago."

"Have you ever met anyone of them?" Xavier asked politely.

"No, and neither has my boss. I think that makes her madder than anything."

"Really."

Elaine leaned closer to him, fearful of being overheard. "Well, she was hired originally for the Marketing department, but she got transferred over here." Her voice became even lower and Xavier strained to hear her. "I think she has a crush on Kevin."

"No." Xavier gave her an appealing look for more gossip.

Elaine sat back in her seat and nodded. "It's killing her that she hasn't met him. She constantly talks about quitting, but I think she sticks around because she never knows if she might suddenly run into him."

"So, you've never seen anyone of the guys come here?"

Elaine gave a snort of laughter. "Nope. We have all their private information, know every aspect of their personal and financial status, but we've never met them in person. Funny, huh?"

"Funny, yeah."

Xavier gave her a satisfied grin, happy at the information she so innocently provided.

He stared thoughtfully at the closed door before him for a long time.

Chapter 5:

The Interview

With a quick flick of her hand, Terri threw open the door and signaled impatiently for Xavier to follow. He stood in the doorway and waited respectfully until she gestured for him to sit. He closed the door behind him with exaggerated care and took a seat, careful not to look her in the face.

"So, you're the new hire," she stated sourly.

Xavier looked up and gave her his most humble smile. "Yes. I am so sorry to bother you. I know this is sudden; I'm sure I must be inconveniencing you. Shall I come back at a later time, ma'am?"

Terri was taken aback at his politeness. The Midol began kicking in and she relaxed. "No, no. Now is fine, Mr.?" she left the question hanging.

Xavier jumped up, pretending to act like a nervous recruit. "Xavier, ma'am. Xavier Delgado." He shook her hand ever so gently and Terri was amused at the way his hand trembled.

"Relax, Mr. Delgado. I won't bite."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

"Please sit down."

Xavier sat quietly as she diligently examined the file folder before her, lost in thought. He scanned the room carefully, secretly, then stopped when he saw what he was looking for. The file cabinets were off to one side and he tried not to smile. Bingo. He reached slowly into his pants pocket and closed his hand around the small transmitter, pressing the button firmly with his thumb.

"Okay." She laid down the file on her desk and looked up, clasping her hands together under her chin. "Very impressive. Your resume, I mean."

"Thank you." He gave her a shy smile.

"What makes you think you can bodyguard the Backstreet Boys?" she asked abruptly, her brow furrowed in concern. Her direct question caught Xavier slightly off balance and he took a moment to reply.

"Well, as you can see by my credentials, I have guarded all types of people. I think music stars shouldn't be that much different. Guarding people is a difficult job, but no more difficult than yours." Xavier tried to keep a straight face on the last sentence.

Terri looked at him questioningly. "You think my job is difficult?"

Xavier smirked inwardly. "Why yes, Ma'am." He waved about her office. "All this responsibility, the decisions you have to make on a daily basis regarding the Backstreet Boys and such. Not everybody can do such a demanding job."

Terri looked at him a little skeptically but was nevertheless flattered. "It can be challenging," she agreed.

"I'll bet. Those guys should personally thank you. I would if I were them." Xavier fumed inside. Dammit. He had pushed that button, what the hell was taking so long?

"The Backstreet Boys thank me?" She laughed at the idea.

"Yes, ma'am. I'd make them come here and see you, to see just what it takes to make things run smoothly."

Terri gave Xavier a guarded smile. "And just who do you think you'll be guarding?" She tried to say it nonchalantly but Xavier understood and went in for the kill.

"Not sure, probably that tall, dark guy?"

"Kevin," she sighed.

"Yes."

Xavier could see the fantasies swirling around in her mind. Come on, come on... he willed, angry at himself for hiring such stupid help. He couldn't take much more of complimenting this bitch.

Terri leaned back into her seat, relaxing. "Well, you do come highly regarded, Mr. Delgado. Has my secretary given you all the necessary information you need regarding your job, signed all the paperwork?" Xavier nodded and waved the large envelope before her. "Fine." She stood up to end the conversation, holding her hand out. "Well, it's been nice meeting..."

The wail of a siren cut off her last words and she swirled to find the source of the noise.

"What the..." she trailed.

Finally! seethed Xavier as he moved into action. He stood up swiftly, walked around her desk and grabbed her elbow, none too gently.

"Come on. That's a fire alarm. We need to leave, quick."

Terri stammered, confused. "Ff, fire? Are you sure?"

Xavier went into his bodyguard mode. "Yes. Go! Get out, now! Don't take the elevator, use the stairs."

Terri stood there frozen, scared a little at Xavier's change of behavior. She looked frantically around her office, trying to decide what to do, what to lock up. Xavier sensed this and forced her to the door.

"Go, Ms. Hamilton. Your life is more important than documents."

"But..."

Xavier grabbed her hand and pulled her to the hallway. Elaine, he noted, was already gone. Terri turned, panicked. "My purse! I forgot my purse!" she yelled over the wail of the siren.

Xavier swore under his breath, ran back into her office, grabbed it, then returned, shoving it into her arms. "Go!"

"What about you?" she quavered.

"I'll be down soon. I'm going to check the other offices, see if I can help anyone."

Terri looked at Xavier in awe; he was so calm, in control. He'll make a good bodyguard she thought, as he led her to the stairwell. She turned to look at him, unable to hear anything with the vibrating scream of the alarm, but she saw him smile, mouth the word "Go" and she obeyed.

Xavier didn't wait to see the stairway door close, he ran back into the room and slammed the door behind him, placing a heavy chair behind it when he realized the door would only lock with a key. He hurried into Terri's office, yanking file after file drawer open until he located what he wanted. He grabbed the manila files and spread them over her desk, carefully scanning the info before him. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small camera and began clicking away with a fierce determination.

Terri Hamilton paced nervously outside the building, annoyed that her secretary could look so relaxed. Elaine was leaning up against the wall, smoking and chatting with the others who were waiting to get the okay from the firemen to leave or go back to their offices. Terri wished she could find out what the hell was going on. Everyone she had asked merely shrugged and shook their heads. The glare of the sun was intense and she was disappointed that she had forgotten her sunglasses again. A tap on her shoulder caused her to turn around and squint. There stood the bodyguard and she sighed with relief.

"What's going on?" she asked curiously.

Xavier wiped the sweat off his forehead with the inside of his sleeve. "False alarm. Probably some kids." He looked at her anxiously. "You're okay, right?"

Terri smiled, touched at his concern. "Yeah, fine. Just a hassle, though."

"When it comes to your safety, it's never a hassle, Ms. Hamilton."

Terri shook her head at the corny phrase. "Thank you, Mr. Delgado. I hope this," she waved her hands at the scene before him, "wasn't too much of a problem."

Xavier gave her his first true smile. "Believe me, it was no trouble."

Chapter 6:

Practice Makes Perfect

The Backstreet Boys watched with some trepidation as the crew harnessed the group up, each being checked individually for security. Kevin studied one of the crew members hefting the straps even tighter on Nick, then glanced over to Brian, knowing that his cousin was trying to act calm. He caught Brian's eye and gave him a thumb's up signal to which Brian replied with a half-hearted smile.

Nick, as usual, was excited. "This is so cool, huh Bri?"

"Yeah, cool," replied Brian in a monotone and Howie, who was standing next to him laughed at his friend's discomfort. He slapped a comforting hand onto Brian's shoulder and said, "Well, it wasn't me who thought up this idea."

Nick caught Brian's accusing glare and made a face back at him. "Hey, when I told you about it, you said it sounded great."

Brian sighed. Nick, visiting friends in Phoenix, had gone to see a Phoenix Suns basketball game. During half-time the Suns' mascot, a gorilla, had repelled down from the ceiling and slammed dunked a basketball into the net below. The crowd went wild and so had Nick. The thought of doing the same thing for the opening act appealed to Kevin, Howie, and AJ, so Brian agreed, happy to be rid of the flying boards. The guys had discussed what costumes to wear; Kevin wanted spy clothing, AJ voted for gangster. Howie suggested Nick's comic book characters and everyone approved.

Now, in dress rehearsal, Brian wasn't so sure. He glanced at his own costume, then the others. "I look ridiculous," he stated flatly.

AJ, the last one being adjusted, nodded. "Yeah, you do. I, on the other hand, look awesome. By the way Nick, thanks."

"What for?"

"For making me so true-to-life." AJ glanced down at his over-stuffed hero costume, especially the crotch area.

They all laughed, complimenting each other in lewd terms. A bull-horn interrupted, the stage manager instructing them to get set for the first jump. Up on the catwalk, they waited as the crew adjusted their rigging one more time. It was a tight fit with all them up there.

"I say we let Brian go first," teased Howie.

"Naw," drawled Kevin, "he's too busy praying right now."

Brian's eyes had been closed, but he opened them quickly.

"Screw you, guys."

"Oooohhh..." they said, mockingly.

"I'll go first," volunteered Nick.

"Good," said AJ. "If you fall, I'll have something large to land on."

"No way, super-freak!" retorted Nick. "Watch this! Three point landing." He jumped and all four leaned over to watch as he made the perfect touchdown. Nick looked up, pumping his fist into the air as the guys cheered.

"Damn," said Howie, admiringly. "My turn."

One after another completed the jump, with Brian landing last. AJ came up to Brian, grabbed his shoulders and gave him a small push of congratulations and high-fived him.

Brian, his face flushed, looked up toward the ceiling, then closed his eyes in resignation.

"It's gonna be a long tour," he sighed and the rest laughed.

Chapter 7:

This is Practice?

The Backstreet Boys completed a few more jumps to the satisfaction of the stage manager, then went back to the dressing rooms to change into their regular clothing. They met at the stage of the arena with the band and settled down to do some serious rehearsal. Unfortunately, the practice didn't go as smoothly as the jumps. The sound system kept cutting off, lights came on and went off at the wrong time, the dancers and the boys kept colliding with each other. A break was called, and everyone sighed with relief. The crew left the stage, but the guys sat down on the stage floor, too tired to move.

They looked at each other in dismay, disgusted with the way things were going.

Kevin sat cross-legged on the floor, trying to massage a stiff neck. "Still no chairs," he commented dryly.

"Man, this sucks!" Nick lay back on the floor, covering his eyes with the palms of his hands. "We suck!"

"Speak for yourself, Frack," said Brian, irritated.

"Hey, I wasn't the one who kept running into everyone!"

"Well, maybe if a certain idiot would move his butt when he's suppose to, I wouldn't have!"

"Guys...", warned Kevin, seeing where this was going, but was cut off by Nick.

"Me?" argued Nick, now propped up on his elbows. "Me? Hey, I seem to remember some other "idiots" not moving in sync!"

AJ and Howie turned to look at Nick, then at each other, and began to snicker at Nick's unintentional reference. The rest caught on and the tension evaporated as they began to laugh, howling at the absurdity of it.

"Nick," gasped Kevin, "I don't think I ever want to be in-SYNC. I'm not gay."

They all cracked up, laughing even harder at Kevin's joke.

"Hey, NSYNC isn't so bad. I've got one in my bathroom," Howie added, looking sideways at Nick, who had collapsed on the floor, the others also in assorted stages of deterioration. Various times they tried to stop the laughter, only to be taken up again in a sudden spasm of hilarity.

Finally the laughter died down, and AJ flopped onto back, wiping the tears away from his eyes. "Damn. I needed that."

Brian nodded, unable to speak. He watched as AJ, exhausted, struggled unsuccessfully to sit up, then fall. This set Brian off and he double over again in laughter, causing the rest to join in.

"Oh God," moaned Nick, trying desperately to stop his laughter. "Please, please, I can't take..."

After what seemed like an eternity to them, they were able to quiet down, a few sighs and groans escaping occasionally. Nick seemed the worst for wear and began hiccuping. Howie took pity and managed to get up and walked over to the cooler, fishing out bottled waters for the guys. Passing them out, he sat down next to Kevin, then rolled the ice-cold bottle on his neck. Howie twisted the cap off and just as he was taking a sip, the electricity went out, leaving the arena in complete darkness. Each guy froze in surprise, hearing cursing and yelling from the crew as they shouted for everyone to be calm and that they would have the lights on in a minute.

They sat in the dark, unable to see, not sure what to do. The guys heard Kevin cleared his throat then speak in a mock-serious tone. "God, just imagine what Brian would have done if the lights had gone out when he was coming down the rope."

"He woulda shit in his pants," replied Nick with certainty.

"Ha, ha," came back Brian's sour reply. Suddenly inspired, he took a huge sip of his water, then aimed at what he hoped was Nick's head. A yell of shocked surprise announced his success but it was short lived as Nick returned the favor. Brian took another cold swig and sprayed again, but missed, and he heard Howie swear.

"Whoever that was, your are so dead," informed Howie and he shot a stream, hoping it hit its target. A roar came from AJ.

"D," growled AJ, and Howie felt AJ jump up, searching, hunting for his arm, trying to grab him so he could dump the rest of his bottle onto Howie's head. In the darkness, AJ tripped and fell into Kevin. Kevin immediately doused AJ with his bottle water and AJ tried unsuccessfully to return the favor, attempting to dump his down Kevin's waistband. An uproar followed, and whatever water was left began flying everywhere, yells of payback promised, as each Backstreet Boy did their best to soak each other.

The lights suddenly glared back to life, blinding them, and they stopped, blinking owlishly at each other. Gaining his eyesight first, Nick made a mad dash for the cooler, frantically grabbing any water bottles he could and ripping off the caps. AJ and Brian followed quickly behind, shoving each other in order to get to the cold bottles first. Laughing gleefully, Nick drenched them, and they endured it, each struggling to open their own caps. Coming up from behind, Kevin and Howie tackled Nick. Kevin held Nick in a tight armlock, screaming for Brian to nail him. Brian smiled wickedly as he came up to Nick, then lunged instead at Kevin, grabbing the back of Kevin's shirt and dumping the cold water down his back. Kevin swore, "You little shit," and released Nick, chasing after his cousin.

Howie and AJ turned to watch Kevin pursue Brian around the stage, forgetting about Nick. Now released, Nick rushed over to the cooler searching for more bottles. Noticing none left, he picked up the cooler itself and came up behind the two unsuspecting backs, pouring the freezing slush of ice and water over their heads.

Howie was sure he had a heart attack. The coldness stunned him and he barely heard AJ screaming profanities of an extreme nature. He turned around to see Nick tossing the cooler away and he tried to lunge for Nick's shirt, an arm, anything so he could beat the little asshole senseless. Instead, he slipped, and feeling himself fall, seized the nearest thing for support – which was AJ. As if in slow motion, they both wobbled, trying valiantly to stay upright, but failed miserably. They landed onto the ground in a spectacular crash of tangled arms and legs. Kevin and Brian stopped and rushed over to them, forgetting their chase. Both guys had their eyes closed and Brian bent down anxiously to examine them.

"D? Bone? You guys okay?"

"Brian?" asked AJ weakly, moaning.

"Yes?" Brian leaned in closer.

"Is Nick near you?"

"I'm right here AJ," Nick said nervously. "Are you all right?"

AJ's eyes popped open. "I will be, after I kill you." AJ jumped up easily, surprising them. "Run," he warned Nick, and by the look on AJ's face, Nick needed no further prodding. He vaulted easily off the stage, running up the aisles with AJ hot in pursuit.

"Paybacks a bitch!" hollered Howie as Kevin and Brian helped him up from the ground.

The yells of Nick and AJ echoed into the hallways of the arena as the stage manager looked up to where the other three Backstreet Boys stood. They were soaked from head to foot, completely disheveled, and grinning like mad. The manager walked over and hopped onto the stage to inspect the damage. Except for a lot of water, there didn't seem to be any real harm and that was good, because he would have had to strangle them if there had been.

"Hey, Sam," the three acknowledged uncomfortably.

"Hey, yourself," he replied sourly. "All done?"

The three Backstreet Boys looked at each other.

"Yeah."

"Well, good. Cause I'm gonna make you guys clean up this mess, comprende?"

" They nodded, indicating yes.

Sam turned to a stage crew who had appeared. "Go get as many towels as you can find. And, oh yeah. Find Nick and AJ too. I want them here right now."

Chapter 8:

Contemplation

Having just been given a thorough tour of the arena where the Backstreet Boys were scheduled to play in a few days, Xavier sat in the middle seats of the coliseum with the other bodyguards. Watching the antics of the boys on stage, Xavier grimaced, then turned to question another bodyguard sitting next to him.

"Are they like this all the time?"

Eric Anderson, one of the original bodyguards of the group, smiled. "Nah. You'll find that they are pretty professional on the whole. But they're young, under a lot of pressure. It's tough on them and sometimes they need to let off a little steam."

Xavier nodding, looked down at the paperwork at hand, then sneaked a peak at Eric's. He frowned inwardly. "Exactly whom do I guard?" he questioned Eric, trying to act unconcerned.

Eric leaned over to study Xavier's paper, then pointed out the Backstreet Boy on the far left. "Him. Technically, we guard them all during the concerts and such, but if we're needed to guard individually, we are assigned one on one."

Xavier gave an exaggerated sigh and Eric looked at him inquiringly.

"What?"

"Well, I know this sounds stupid, but would you mind switching guys with me?"

"Switch?"

"Yeah." Xavier gave an embarrassed laugh and leaned over to whisper. "Ah... it's my 10-year-old niece. She has this major crush and I kinda promised..."

Eric grinned. "Sure, no problem. Got a few nieces myself. Besides, I wouldn't mind guarding the other anyway. He can sure attract the type of broads I like." Eric nudged Xavier knowingly and gave him a leering grin.

Xavier nodded and thanked Eric, relieved that it was so easy to manipulate him. He turned his attention back to the stage, watching intently. Nick and AJ had returned to the stage and the stage manager, Sam, had decided to kill two birds with one stone. He made the guys practice their singing as the mopped up. Headsets on and hands full of towels, they got down on their knees, singing and wiping the floor. AJ tried to cheat by standing up and moving his towel half-heartedly with his foot, until the rest threatened to stop and make him do it all.

"Slave labor," he grumbled, getting back down on his knees.

Fascinated, Xavier listened closely for the first time to the harmonizing of the group, noticing the special bond they had with one another. Xavier watched, making sure to give each one special attention. As they began to sing individually Xavier tensed, looking closely at the Backstreet Boy who was singing just now. He didn't look much different than his publicity shots. His mind went blank, taking in the wonderful voice. Xavier felt disorientated, confused by the strange feeling he had when he looked at him. He clenched his hands tightly, angered over the surprising reaction this man evoked from him. Xavier pushed these thoughts and feelings away, not wanting to dwell upon them. He knew what he was suppose to do, he had planned for it, and nothing was going to stop him from getting what he wanted. Xavier gazed at the singer before him. Yes, this was the one.

Chapter 9:

The Introduction

"Oh, Sammy..." sing-songed the group. "We're done." They smirked as their stage manager came to give the once over. "You could eat off this floor," commented Howie.

"I'm sure you have," Nick smart-mouthed.

Kevin, for one, was tired. "Are we done? I just want to leave and take a nice hot shower."

Brian seconded that. "Sounds good to me."

Sam shrugged and looked around for the publicity manager. "Richard! Richard!" he yelled and noticed him talking to the bodyguards. Richard craned his neck around and noticed Sam beckoning him to come over.

"What's up, Sam?"

"You done with these guys for today?"

Richard nodded. "Yes, do you all have the scheduling notes for this week? Good. Remember, 10:00 a.m. tomorrow for the radio gig. Three of our bodyguards will pick you up and drive you there."

"All of us?" moaned Nick. He was hoping he didn't have to go and could sleep in.

"Nick, what does the schedule say?" patronized Kevin. "All of us. This is the beginning of the new tour. In our hometown. It's important."

"Yes, Dad."

Richard held up a hand as he saw the boys turn to leave. "Guys, before you pack up, I want you to meet the new bodyguard we just hired." He motioned for Xavier to come over.

"Holy shit, would you look at him?" whispered Howie to AJ as Xavier came down the aisle. "I pity the poor fan who meets up with him."

AJ elbowed his friend in the side, watching as the bodyguard came into better view, suddenly curious about the dark-haired man who walked confidently up onto the stage.

"Guys, I'd like you to meet Xavier Delgado. He hired on just recently, so don't scare him off too quickly, okay?"

The boys smiled, knowing full well that Richard was serious. A lot of former guards had quit after experiencing the rigors of being a bodyguard for the Backstreet Boys. Kevin

stuck his hand out toward the new recruit. "Hi, I'm Kevin. Glad to meet you." Xavier grabbed the tall man's hand and sized him up. Even intensive studying was not as good as meeting face-to-face and Xavier noted several things. He was definitely the tallest, and Xavier sensed a calm surrounding him, a sureness that didn't exude conceit. Xavier noticed the grip in his handshake, the strength of his body and made a mental note to remember it.

Xavier smiled, letting go of Kevin's grip. "Xavier."

"Hey X, welcome aboard." Xavier stiffened at the hated nickname but looked straight into Howie's brown eyes as he shook his hand. His hand was warm and friendly and Xavier felt true enthusiasm in the shake. It startled him to realize he was without guile, and what you saw was pretty much what you got. For being rich and famous, he seemed down-to-earth.

Xavier turned to greet the next one. "Xavier," he said softly, reaching to shake AJ's extending hand.

"Xavier," repeated AJ. "Hi, I'm AJ." Xavier felt the hesitancy in AJ's grasp and sensed that he was the one being sized up, not the other way around. Xavier gave him a warm smile that did not reach up to his eyes. Here was someone to be reckoned with and it interested Xavier that perhaps AJ could be so perceptive. He made another mental note to himself.

Brian and Nick were the only ones left to acknowledge and he turned in their direction. "Hi. I'm Nick, the most popular one." The guys groaned but Xavier grinned as he shook the young singer's hand. The kid was large, strong, but untrained. Nevertheless, Xavier felt the confidence of this young man and realized that Nick had potential. Brian was the last to introduce himself.

"Hi, ya." Brian's southern twang came through. "Nice to meet you." The blond man's friendliness was contagious and Xavier relaxed for the first time as he felt the singer shake his hand with sincerity and ease. Brian turned to Nick who was searching for his duffel bag.

"Well, gotta go. Nick, are you riding with me or what?"

"Coming." Nick shoved Brian's bag at him as he hoisted his own over his shoulder. Both waved at the others. "See you guys tomorrow."

"Later," came the reply.

They all began to walk off the stage but Brian stopped and turned around. "Hey Richard!"

Richard, deep in talk about the next day's events with Sam, looked up. "What?"

"Who is Xavier going to be guarding?"

Richard looked at his clipboard and flipped a few pages.

"You."

Brian flashed the bodyguard a wave of his hand as he left the stage and Xavier stood rooted there, a strange feeling of exhilaration overcoming him, the same one he felt the first time he saw him on TV. His hands clenched and unclenched unconsciously in anticipation.

Chapter 10:

Getting to Know You

The dark green Ford Excursion pulled over to stop and Kevin saw the other guys inside motioning for him to get in the front seat. He yanked the door open and jumped in, fumbling for a moment with the seatbelt.

"Nice SUV, Xavier," he commented, noticing that this was not their usual mode of transportation. "Yours?"

Xavier nodded in reply and swung out onto the street, heading for the highway. Kevin craned his neck around to see the other guys settled into the back seats. "Where are the other guards and the Suburban?"

Xavier answered for him. "I sent the others ahead to scout the radio station. Figured I'd chauffeur and get to know you guys a little better."

AJ, sitting next to Nick, was curious on Xavier's ability to give orders to the other experienced bodyguards since he was the newbie, but said nothing. Nick was fiddling around with the various gadgets on the SUV and AJ slapped his hand in annoyance. "Stop," he mouthed to Nick, slightly uneasy about Nick screwing around with the bodyguard's Excursion. Nick shrugged, and leaned over to look at Brian laying prone in the very back seat, his hands covering his face.

"You okay, Bri?"

"Yeah," came the muffled reply. "Just waiting for the Advil to kick in." He had woken up with a splitting headache and knew a migraine would appear if he didn't take something soon. "How long till we get to the station?" he asked.

"Half hour, give or take traffic," came Xavier's answer.

"Okay," said Brian, nodding off. "Just wake me when we're there..." Brian tried to smack the hand away that was jabbing into him. "Stop!"

"Bri, were here."

"Huh?" He struggled to sit up. "I just fell asleep," he protested, unable to believe they had arrived.

Howie laughed. "You've been sawing logs for almost an hour; traffic was a bitch!"

Xavier swung his Excursion neatly into a handicapped parking place near the back entrance and smiled convincingly at Howie's disapproving frown. "I'll move it in just a second."

He shut off the engine and motioned for the guys to stay put while he hopped out to survey the area. "What's he doing?" complained Nick, impatient, noticing that there was not a soul on the lot. "There's no fans around."

Kevin shrugged. "He's a bodyguard. Gotta check. Humor him, Nick."

They waited and a few moments later Xavier came into view, opened the door and motioned them to quickly follow him. As they poured out, AJ saw a Suburban with the other bodyguards circling the area. Xavier gave a hand signal and the Suburban rounded the corner of the building and left.

A young man, dressed all in black, was waving them over to the now opened back entrance. They followed his direction and walked inside, Xavier bringing up the rear. Enjoying the dark coolness of the interior, the group trailed the radio assistant through another door and into a secluded lounge area. The assistant motioned them to make themselves comfortable, showed the assorted conveniences at their disposal, and then turned to leave.

"Uh, you guys wouldn't happen to know Metallica, would ya?" he asked hopefully.

"Sorry, dude," replied AJ.

"Fucking boy bands," mumbled the teenage assistant. "We never get anyone good." He closed the door with a none-too-subtle slam and the guys looked at each other in amazement.

"Well," AJ said, clearing his throat. "At least we know where he stands."

Howie laughed, reached down for an apple on the table, then collapsed onto the couch. "Damn. And I was hoping I coulda autographed something for him."

Brian smiled, glad that his headache was gone. He sat down next to Howie and looked over to Xavier who was patiently standing near the door, arms crossed in front of him. "Hey, Xavier. Relax. I don't think anyone is going to be busting down those doors, okay?"

Xavier smiled warmly at him. "Thanks, but you can never too careful. See you guys in a minute; got something to do." He left the room and AJ shook his head as Xavier disappeared down the hallway.

"Man, is he intense. I'm not too sure about him."

"Just doing his job, Bone," said Brian, watching Nick trying to toss a piece of popcorn into his mouth and catch it.

"AJ's right," agreed Nick, as he missed and went searching for the lost kernel. "You should have heard all the questions he was asking about you while you were asleep."

Brian looked confused. "So? He's my bodyguard, right?"

Nick tried to clarify. "What I mean is the way he was asking."

AJ explained. "He wanted to know all about your likes, dislikes."

Brian dismissed this with a wave. "Big deal. My life is an open book already. I'm sure he could read it all in Teen Beat."

"But not about you being gay," Nick warned and AJ covered his mouth with his hand, trying to keep a straight face.

Brian opened his eyes wide, aghast. "Oh come on, you guys didn't tell him I was gay, did you?"

AJ played into the game. "Maybe."

"AJ!" hollered Brian.

Kevin tried not to smile. "How much is it worth to you?" he challenged his cousin.

"You guys...," protested Brian.

Seeing the distress on his friend's face, Nick burst out laughing, unable to contain the practical joke. "God, Rok, you are such a sucker."

Realizing the prank played on him, Brian objected indignantly.

"Yeah, well I remember what happened the last time you jerks did that to me. Took me ages to convince that girl I wasn't gay!"

Howie laughed, trying to pinch Brian on the cheek. "I understand Brian, my brother is gay too," he mimicked in the girl's high voice. Brian slapped his hand away, remembering the incident.

"Very funny. You're never gonna let me forget that, are you?"

Howie leaned over and reached for a drink on the table. "Nope."

AJ sat across from Brian, wanting to get back to the topic. "Seriously Bri, he asked some pretty personal questions."

"You didn't tell him anything, did you?"

The guys shook their heads. "Of course not." AJ looked at Brian with a solemn expression. "I dunno... he kinda gives me the creeps."

Brian looked questioningly at Kevin, Nick and Howie. "Seems okay to me," decided Kevin. Nick and Howie looked at each other, shrugging.

Brian sighed. "Okay. Don't worry, AJ. He's just a bodyguard, right?"

Chapter 11:

The Fiasco

The annoyed assistant came back again and asked the Backstreet Boys to follow him down to the DJ's studio. Chris Felix, a popular DJ in the Orlando area, known for his nickname of "the cat", greeted them warmly as they settled into their chairs. Felix leaned into his microphone, nodding to the guys that they were ready to start.

"Hello, Orlando. For all you fans out there, I have none other than the Backstreet Boys here with me..." he rambled on giving the listeners facts, info and unconfirmed rumors regarding them. The guys relaxed in their seats as they listened and answered politely the standard questions all DJ's seemed to ask. During a commercial break, Felix sipped on some lukewarm coffee and gave a questioning look. "Everything okay? Anything I can get you?" They all indicated they were fine. The commercial was over and Felix resumed his interview, turning to look squarely at the guys.

"We all know about your upcoming tour and how successful your other ones were. Tell me, why do you feel the need to become even richer?"

The guys' faces fell, confused by the unexpected turn in questioning. They looked toward Kevin, making him the designated spokesman. Kevin coughed, stunned by the obvious contempt in the DJ's voice.

"Well Cat, it's not a question of money."

"Really," jeered Felix, his tone now changed to one of hostility.

"Uh, yes. We created a great album and just want to share it with our fans."

"So you charge seventy-five dollars a ticket," scorned Felix.

Nick looked at Brian with a "is that how much we charge" look and Brian gave him a subtle "don't ask" frown.

AJ broke in. "I'm not sure what we charge."

"Oh, I see," the Cat drawled sarcastically. "Your concern for your fans is limited."

Howie wanted to ring the DJ's neck. He could see that Cat was now out to crucify them; he should have suspected something by their sullen teenage assistant. He shifted uneasily in his chair, not sure what to do.

Brian spoke up. "Our concern for our fans is real. We don't charge anymore than other bands."

"How about the disadvantaged? The handicapped? Are you accommodating towards them?"

AJ wasn't sure where this was leading. "We try to be. If there is a problem we don't know about, maybe you could inform us." He glared meaningfully at him.

Felix leaned back into his chair, smiling maliciously. "You guys play to a certain type of audience, mainly adolescent girls. What about your gay following? Don't you have anytime for them?"

The guys exchanged silent looks. *Gay following?*

The bewildered look on the Backstreet Boys' faces was priceless and Felix went on hurriedly. "Well, it just so happens that I've invited some loyal gay fans to come visit the great Backstreet Boys. Fellows, come on in!" Cat signaled to an assistant to allow the group of men to enter. This is going to send my ratings sky-high he thought eagerly. One by one they filed in, till the small room filled to capacity.

The guys' disbelief grew as Felix introduced each gay man, some dressed casually, others only in G-strings or tight shorts. The gazes of adoration and desire made each Backstreet Boy squirm with uneasiness and Cat gleefully noticed it.

"So Boys, what do you think of the boys?"

Howie, ever the diplomat, came to the rescue.

"Uh, Cat, our group appeals to all types of fans. We try not to be particular to one group. We embrace all types." Howie cringed as he realized his mistake of wording. So did the other Backstreet Boys.

Felix pointed to one of the men standing in front. "Come closer, come closer," he encouraged cheerfully. "Tell us, which Backstreet boy do you like? Do you have anything you want to say to him?"

A short, red-bearded man, excited to be chosen, could hardly breathe. "Howie!" he struggled, unable to say more. Howie gave him a weak smile.

"AJ!" yelled another. "You are the best..."

"Brian!" interrupted another one in the back. "Anytime you're ready, I'll be waiting!"

Brian felt his headache coming back and shook his head slowly. *Why me?*

Felix noticed this and egged Brian on. "What's the matter, Brain? How come you're shaking your head?"

Brian glared at Felix then looked at Nick for support.

"Oh, I get it..." said the DJ. "You like Nick." Felix waved his arms expansively to the group. "Sorry guys, he's taken."

"Now just a minute..." exploded Nick and Brian as they sat up from their seats.

"Ooohh... what's the matter guys?" taunted Felix.

Disgusted, AJ sat up too, ripping his headset off. "This is crap. We're outta here." He motioned to Howie and Kevin to stand up. The throng of men, sensing their departure, surged in closer and all five backed away, immediately aware of the potential trouble. They gave each other a silent oh shit, how are we gonna get out of this? look. Kevin and Nick both thought about making a break for it, Howie and AJ wished they could kill the DJ, and Brian was wondering where the hell Xavier was.

Felix, of course, was loving it. He was up, out of his seat, seizing AJ's arm. "Hey, don't leave just yet. Everyone here wants to know more..." AJ angrily ripped his arm away from his grip. "Don't touch me," he growled.

Felix feigned alarm. "Oh, maybe you'd rather have one of them grab you..."

A large arm intervened between AJ and Felix, gripping tightly around the DJ's wrist.

"That's enough," Xavier said quietly.

Felix looked up to argue, but the pain from the bodyguard's grip rendered him speechless. He stared into a pair of brown eyes calmly daring him to disobey, the pressure increasing ever so slightly. Xavier watched him nod his reply, then pushed Felix back into his chair. Leaning over the DJ, massive arms resting on each side of Felix's chair, Xavier spoke in a low voice.

"Now end it. Go to a commercial." Felix looked defiant and Xavier felt his blood boil.

"Now!" he roared and everyone jumped.

Shaking, Felix punched a few wrong buttons before finding the right ones. Xavier turned to see the other two bodyguards who had slipped quietly in and nodded to them. They opened the door and Xavier turned to the guys. "Alright, we're leaving."

Felix, regaining some of his composure, felt brave enough to jump back out of his chair.

"Hey, who are you to come barging in..." he began, his voice faltering as Xavier turned to look at him in disbelief. The intense, raw anger Felix saw caused him to quickly comprehend the threat of the man who loomed before him. Xavier smiled ever so slightly as Felix paled, then stumbled back into his seat. Xavier met the DJ's fearful expression. "Good man," he whispered, satisfied that Felix understood his silent warning. He focused his attention back to the Backstreet Boys. "Ready?"

The other bodyguards, their arms outstretched, had cleared a small path for them and the guys began walking cautiously through. As if sensing a sinking ship, the group of gay men became panic-stricken, realizing that their chance to see their idols was disappearing. A sudden rush toward the Backstreet Boys broke the guards hold, and pandemonium erupted. Frantic to touch them, they grabbed, tugged, pulled, hoping for anything tangible.

"Run!" yelled Xavier to the guys. Trying desperately to see if Brian was okay, he roughly shoved anyone in his way. He discovered Brian, arms covering his head, attempting to fend off the intrusive hands. Xavier grabbed Brian around the waist with one arm and then noticing Howie in a similar situation, grabbed him with the other.

Kevin, Nick, and AJ were faring better, but not by much. The two bodyguards were doing their best to take the brunt of the onslaught, propelling the other three down the hallway, with Xavier running ahead. Xavier kicked the back door lever open with his foot, then released Howie and Brian from his grip, pushing them outside. Kevin, Nick and AJ came rushing up, and Xavier managed to escape outdoors with them, turning around to slam the back exit door. Inside, the two bodyguards ran up to the closed door, then turned around to face the agitated fans. Blocking the door with their bodies, they effectively barricaded the crowd from exiting.

Chapter 12:

The Escape

"Come on," urged Xavier as he motioned them to run to his SUV. Fear gave flight to the five as they raced toward the Excursion, AJ and Nick vaulting effortlessly over a low hedge in pursuit of freedom. Pointing his keyless entry at the SUV, Xavier hopped in and quickly started the engine, barely giving the Backstreet Boys time to jump in themselves before backing out.

"Damn!" cried AJ, looking toward the studio. "I'm gonna kill that asshole, Felix!"

Xavier rammed the SUV into first gear, squealing the tires as he began to race out of the parking lot. Suddenly he hit his brakes and all five guys were thrown forward, causing them to shout in surprise.

"Hang on," he warned them grimly, then slammed into reverse, and hit the accelerator.

"What the hell..." screamed Kevin as he saw Xavier's Excursion fly backwards, its massive rear bumper crashing ruthlessly into a red convertible. The sickening sound of metal against metal assailed their ears and they all turned to look at the crumpled mass behind them. Xavier kicked his SUV into gear and raced down the street, as Brian, his head still twisted to survey the damage, saw figures spilling out from the front of the station, in search of the long-gone singers.

Shocked, Brian met the faces of his friends who were equally stunned. Sitting in the front seat with Xavier, the young singer turned to stare at him.

"What in God's name did you do that for?"

Xavier flashed him a wide grin. "That was the DJ's car."

Shaken, it took a few moments before Xavier's reply began to sink in. Nick and AJ began howling with laughter and the others joined in.

"Oh man!" cried Howie. "This is too much!"

"Xavier, you are da bomb!" crowed AJ.

Brian leaned over to give Xavier a playful punch on the shoulder. "Awesome! You're one hell of a bodyguard. I love ya, man!"

Xavier reacted to the last sentence, and turned to give Brian a startled glance, but Brian missed it as he reached over the seat to high-five Kevin in delight. Xavier drove on, his mind racing with Brian's compliment.

Nick slapped Brian's hand also, then turned to slug Aj good-naturedly in his arm.

"Ow, dammit, Nick!"

"Sorry, Bone." Nick inspected AJ then the others with a critical eye. "Man, you guys got nailed. Look at yourselves!"

This prompted everyone to immediately survey the damage. Kevin pointed out the scratches on Brian's neck and shoulder where his shirt had been ripped open. Nick discovered a few red marks and a small but nasty bruise beginning to color on his cheekbone. Kevin, being the tallest, survived facially intact, but his clothes had suffered rips and tears, and his watch was missing. Howie had more than a few strands of hair painfully yanked out and the beginning of a swollen bottom lip. "I think someone pinched by butt," he complained, feeling a welt on his backside.

AJ snorted. "Hey guys, Howie got to first base!"

Howie took a swipe at him but missed and Nick laughed.

"Say AJ, where's your hat?"

AJ swore as he realized it was missing. "Shit! That was my favorite hat!"

"Don't worry," drawled Kevin. "I'm sure you'll find it for sale soon on E-Bay!"

"Your chain is gone too," informed Brian.

"Fuck!"

Howie shook his head in sympathy then relaxed back into the leather seating, sighing.

"So, just what exactly happened back there? I thought I heard that Felix was a pretty decent DJ."

"Obviously you heard wrong, D," replied AJ dryly.

Howie shrugged. "And I thought Howard Stern was weird. Felix makes him look good!"

Brian spoke up, interested. "I thought you guys hated that interview." He and Nick had missed it due to prior commitments.

AJ looked at Brian. "At least Howard Stern liked us. Felix is just plain psychotic. Man, I hate being set up!"

Kevin took a deep breath and exhaled. "Whatever. We are never, ever going to do anymore radio interviews again, okay guys?"

"But what if they have really cute girls? That's okay, right?" asked Nick hopefully and Kevin shook his head in exasperation.

"Oh, I don't know..." trailed off AJ. "I thought the red-headed guy was pretty cute, but he liked Howie. Damn." This time Howie didn't miss and slugged AJ.

"Kevin's right. I don't want anymore surprise fans," agreed Brian.

Howie nodded and then heaved a sigh. "I need a drink."

Xavier smiled. "It's a little early for that guys, how about I stop off at the next convenience store for some soft drinks?"

The Backstreet Boys agreed and Xavier pulled into the store as they gave their requests. It took just a few minutes before he returned, handing out the cold glass bottles of Coke, ice tea, and water to eager hands. He jumped back into the Excursion, merged onto the freeway and set a course for the arena, where they were scheduled to practice. Kevin took a long sip of his water, not realizing till now just how thirsty he was.

"Nothing like crazed gay fans running after you to make you dehydrated."

Nick agreed and chugged deeply from his glass bottle. AJ saw Brian smile devilishly as Nick downed his drink.

"Hey Nick, let's see if you remember how to "deep throat" it!"

Nick choked, then spewed the contents over AJ who was howling at Brian's joke. Nick swore a blue streak at his friend in between coughing and hacking as the rest laughed at Brian's perfect timing.

Xavier leaned over to the glove box, pulled out some tissues and tossed them to a grateful Nick in the back seat. "You guys are pretty anti-gay, aren't you?" he questioned.

An uncomfortable silence followed and Kevin realized how they must look to the bodyguard. "Xavier..." he began, then faltered, at a loss as to how to explain.

Brian spoke up. "It's like this. We're not anti-gay. We understand that we have a large gay following; a lot other bands do too. To be perfectly honest, all of us are straight and having gay men mob us isn't exactly on our top ten list of fun things. Straight or gay, fans can be dangerous in the wrong situation. So we joke, to relieve the tension, but we're not against homosexuals."

The boys agreed, verbalizing their support.

"It's just us being us. We tend to joke when we're edgy. We can get a little crude," Nick admitted.

Xavier nodded. "A toast then," he declared suddenly, holding up his own bottle of water like a sword, trying to mimic a knight of the round table. "To me, Xavier Delgado,

bodyguard to the Backstreet Boys, death to all who would seek to harm the chastity of these fine virgin young men!"

"Chastity! Virgin!" screamed all five, relieved and delighted to see the aloof bodyguard displaying a sense of humor.

"Hey, you don't have to protect me from nothing!" boasted AJ. "My sword is my shield!"

"You wish," shot back Howie.

Xavier turned to look at Brian, who was grinning at him. The blond singer gave him a thumb's up signal. "Welcome to the group."

Chapter 13:

On Tour

As with every tour, the beginning few weeks were a blend of mistakes, bad timing, and stress. Xavier experienced all three on opening night, when an overzealous teenage girl outmaneuvered him by deceptively agreeing to step back when she got too close to the stage, then ducked under his outstretched hands and raced onto the stage. She flung herself at Nick, then ran over to Howie. Xavier rushed up the stairs as she moved onto Brian, but halted at the edge of the stage when Brian caught Xavier's eye and ever so slightly shook his head at him. Still singing, Brian graciously accepted her hug, then guided her over to Xavier and released her to the waiting bodyguard. Pissed, it took all of Xavier's control not to crush her arm as he guided her back to her seat. He whispered something in her ear before he released her, then watched with grim satisfaction at the shaken expression that spread over her face. After the show the guys had been cool about the incident, blowing it off, but Xavier seethed, mentally abusing himself for the slip-up.

Determined that no mistakes on his part would occur again, Xavier needed only two more shows before becoming proficient in the duties his job required. This then enabled him to take extra time to observe the workings of life on tour. Xavier was surprised at the amount of teamwork needed to complete just one show; it reminded him of an anthill, with hundreds swarming in every direction, frantic to finish the job.

Now seated in the cool arena, Xavier quietly sat in the dark, watching as the group practiced with the band for the show scheduled that night. Even though they had their routine down pat, the guys still practiced before almost every performance, occasionally changing something in the routine if necessary. As with every rehearsal or show, Xavier made time to watch Brian perform. He recognized, to his chagrin, how much he enjoyed it. and it angered and surprised him. Keep to the original plan, keep to the original plan, he chanted mentally, but finally admitted to himself that he couldn't.

The boys had stopped singing, breaking Xavier's concentration. He watched as they gathered up their belongings, preparing to leave. Xavier stood up from his seat and stretched. Much had changed yet so much had stayed the same and it excited Xavier to know that everything was so close. His hands compressed into a tight ball. He just needed a few more days to get what he needed and then... He smiled. Let the game begin.

Chapter 14:

Boredom

Howie yawned, bored, and rolled over in his bed to look at the digital clock next to the telephone. Nine thirty-five p.m. He sighed and closed his eyes wondering if it was better to go to bed now and wake up early or stay up and then sleep in. He knew he'd be the only one eating breakfast alone if he slept now, so he heaved himself up off the bed and wandered down the hallway, barefoot, looking for the gang. The last few days had been quiet, a welcome surprise due to a cancelled concert. An unexpected storm had ripped off part of the arena's roof and it was estimated to take over 3 weeks to repair. To the relief of thousands of anguished teenage fans, distraught over the cancellation, the Backstreet Boys' management promised to reschedule. The guys flew to their next destination and were pleased about the time off, even though there wasn't enough time to fly home and visit family.

Howie heard a faint voice and noticed the door to AJ's room was ajar. He rapped once, then pushed the door open to find Nick, Kevin and Brian sitting at a side table, apparently absorbed in some kind of board game. AJ, across the room, was crouched down, rummaging through the tiny, but well stocked refrigerator. He pulled several small bottles out then turned to give Howie a devilish grin. "Hey! Just in time, I was gonna call you. Ready for an AJ's delight?"

Howie rolled his eyes, wondering what concoction AJ was planning to spring on him this time. He walked over to study his friend's selection and shook his head. "Man, this is going to cost ya! Ever see the prices these hotels charge?"

AJ gave Howie a soulful look and shook his head. "D. Does it look like I care? Come on, live a little!" He reached into the frig and pulled out one of Howie's favorite candy bars. "Here, my treat." AJ reached over to give Howie a friendly slap on the shoulder and sighed inwardly. Out of the five, Howie was the most conservative with money and AJ swore to his last dying breath that he would someday break D's habit.

Howie opened the candy, took a bite, then wandered over to see what the other three were doing. He peered down, then said in surprise, "Monopoly?"

AJ looked up from his bartending duties and shrugged. "Yeah. Nick found it under his bed."

"His bed?"

Brian glanced up at Howie before returning to the game. "Nick loves crawling under strange hotel beds."

Nick kicked him. "I do not. I was looking for my shoe and saw the game there. Some kid must of left it behind. Doesn't say much for housekeeping, does it? Hurry up, Kevin! Do you want Park Place or not?"

Kevin couldn't decide and Brian groaned, combing his hands through his hair. "Jeez, Kev! You haven't changed! No wonder I hated playing Monopoly with you when we were kids!"

Kevin smirked at his cousin. "You hated it because I always won!"

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did not."

"Okay, Kevin doesn't want Park Place," hurried Nick. "Bri, your turn."

"Hey," complained Kevin.

"Too late!" demanded Nick, grabbing the dice. "You snooze, you lose! Bri, roll."

"Sheesh!" commented Kevin. "Just because your Nintendo got trashed, you get all cranky!"

"Hey, I didn't want to play this stupid game, but I agreed to be banker, just to keep things fair!" warned Nick, irritated.

"Fair?" Howie looked at AJ, confused.

AJ was concentrating on mixing his "delight", so he didn't bother to look up to explain. "Whoever loses pays the winner in real money."

Howie whistled, impressed, and leaned in closer for a better look. Brian rolled a six, landing him on an untaken railroad. "I'll buy it," he announced, quickly handing Nick the money and placing the card with the others. "One more," he crowed to Kevin, "and you're in trouble."

Kevin shrugged, unconcerned. He rolled a three and landed on a property Brian owned. Brian stuck out a waiting hand, impatient for his rent. "Okay, okay. Hold your horses," said Kevin as he tossed the Monopoly money over to Brian, who caught it neatly. Kevin turned to Nick who was staring up at the ceiling, bored.

"Nick," growled Kevin, annoyed.

"Hmm?"

"My 200? For passing Go?"

"So?"

"So, I passed Go! Give it to me!"

"Oh. Here." Nick handed Kevin the 200 in fifty Monopoly dollar bills. Kevin stashed the money under his side of the board, then thought the better of it and pulled it out to count it.

"Damn! Nick, you gave me only 150!"

Nick tried his best to act casual. "Oh, sorry." He handed Kevin another fifty.

Brian had his head down but sneaked a quick glance at Nick. Kevin, suspicious, caught Brian's movement and suddenly understood.

"That's it. Game over. I quit." He pointed an accusing finger at Brian. "No wonder I'm losing my ass! You and Nick are cheating!"

"I'm not cheating!" cried Brian, outraged.

"Oh, of course not," scoffed Kevin, folding his arms across his chest. "Nick, how much was Brian going to give you?"

"Half of whatever he won," admitted Nick calmly.

"Traitor!" yelled Brian.

Kevin folded the gameboard in half, mixing all the playing pieces into a jumbled mess.

"There!" He got up and gave his cousin a smirk. "You never could beat me!" he boasted as he walked into the bathroom.

Brian blew him a raspberry then shoved Nick. "Thanks a lot. Remind me never to take you to Las Vegas!"

Nick shrugged, then flopped onto AJ's bed, fumbling with the remote control. He surfed the channels a moment, then stopped at a sports channel, pointing at the screen with an excited yell. "Hey look, guys! There she is!"

They all turned to look at the TV to watch what was happening. "Oh, man!" moaned AJ, forgetting his drinks. "She's even hotter than I thought!" They stared at the screen, mesmerized, remembering the event that had happened just hours ago. The camera showed them singing the national anthem at the baseball game; then just as they were finishing, a zoom shot caught a beautiful and very well endowed young woman racing over to them with her hands outstretched. The camera went into slow motion as the girl bounced and jiggled in her attempt to reach them.

"Shades of Baywatch," breathed Nick, hypnotized.

"Yeah," agreed Kevin, who had emerged from the bathroom. "Too bad she wasn't running after you!"

"How do you know she wasn't?" argued Nick hotly.

"Because," Brian bragged, pointing at the screen, "she was running to me!"

The guys viewed the event before them, watching as Xavier pulled her away before she could reach anyone of them. "Hell," snorted AJ, going back to his creation. "She got nowhere close to grabbing you, Rok!"

"Well, she almost did," said Brian wistfully.

"Damn you, X!" laughed Howie, "keeping Brian here from his dream girl!"

The boys all booed Xavier on TV, then patted Brian on the back, giving him mock condolences for his lost fantasy girl. AJ let out a whoop, and turned to retrieve his slowly melting creations. He handed each guy one, then paused dramatically with Nick. "You're under age," he stated somberly.

"Since when did that ever stop me? Gimme that!" Nick lunged and grabbed the drink out of AJ's hand.

AJ nodded his approval. "Good boy! You're learning well!"

"A toast!" cried Howie, lifting his drink. "To healthy women! May they never stop chasing us!" A murmur of agreement sounded and they lifted the drinks to their lips.

AJ smacked his mouth. "Ah, good stuff, huh guys?"

Kevin coughed. "Ah, strong stuff."

Howie puckered his mouth and Brian crossed his eyes comically. Nick shrugged. "It's ok, I guess," then downed the rest in one gulp. "Any more?"

"Nick!" screamed the rest, amazed.

"What?"

Brian shook his head. "Never mind. I guess you can't kill what isn't there," he commented, rapping gently on Nick's head.

Nick reached playfully towards Brian's half-empty drink, then snagged it. "Another toast!"

"Okay," agreed AJ. "What to?"

Nick thought for a moment, then laughed. "I don't know!"

AJ sighed, then reached for his drink. "No more for you."

"It wasn't that good anyway!" argued Nick and started snooping into AJ's refrigerator.

"Hey, hey! You eat, you pay!" warned AJ.

Ignoring him, Nick crammed some chips into his mouth, and Kevin came over to inspect the rest of the goodies. He grabbed a package and tore it open, relaxing on AJ's bed.

"What is this? Do I look like a flop house?" screeched AJ. "Get outta here!"

Everyone disregarded him, looking for more munchies. A soft knock turned everybody's attention from AJ's stash to view Xavier standing next to the door.

"Hey, Xavier! Come on in." Howie waved the bodyguard into the room. "Care for a drink?"

Xavier shook his head in reply, scanning the room until his eyes found Brian. "Got a minute?" He jerked his head towards the door.

Brian finished a package of cookies, then brushed the crumbs from his fingers. "Sure." He turned to the guys. "I'm leaving. See ya'll tomorrow."

They gave various greetings of goodnight to Xavier and Brian as the two headed down the hallway and turned the corner. As they walked in silence Brian yawned, suddenly tired, and wondered what the bodyguard wanted. Stopping by his door, the young singer struggled to get the entry card out of his pocket. He slid it in the slot, waited for the click, then pushed the door open. Brian turned to face Xavier, slightly confused as to why Xavier hadn't said a word the whole way.

"Hey, thanks for saving my hide today; I could have been smothered!" he joked in reference to the Baywatch fan. Brian looked up into the bodyguard's face, noticing not a trace of recognition to his jest. Unsettled, Brian found Xavier staring down at him. "Uh, have a good trip?" he questioned, remembering Xavier's request for a few days leave of absence during the unexpected cancellation of their show.

Xavier leaned close to the singer's face. "Excellent," answered Xavier, almost whispering.

Xavier's behavior disturbed Brian and he pulled back away from the bodyguard, noticing uneasily that Xavier's mouth had twisted into a cruel grin, his eyes, dark, glittering down at him with a manic satisfaction. Now uncomfortable, Brian glanced quickly up and down the hallway, hoping for a sign of life. Empty. He slowly began to edge backwards into his room, tense, fingers feeling for the security of the door. Getting a grip on the edge he almost slammed it shut, only to feel a mighty smash as Xavier kicked his foot against the closing door, tearing it away from Brian's grip. Heart

pounding, Brian watched as Xavier's large frame entered the room. Panicking, he made a desperate lunge around the bodyguard to escape. Xavier quickly blocked his path, and Brian felt a large hand encircling his neck, shoving him viciously back into the room. Off balanced, Brian fell, painfully twisting his left arm as he hit the floor. Stunned by the fall and too surprised to yell, he watched helplessly as Xavier swiftly closed and locked the door behind them.

Chapter 15:

The Rules

Grimacing with pain, Brian clutched his left wrist as he struggled to sit upright on the floor, his eyes opening wide with fear as he saw Xavier looming over him. He backpeddled furiously with his feet, frantic to get away, but Xavier leaned down and hoisted him up like a rag doll, dumping him roughly into a chair. Trying to ignore the pain that shot through his arm, Brian concentrated instead on Xavier who was calmly walking through the room, double checking the window, telephone, and door latch. Satisfied, he dragged up another chair, sat down, then leaned towards the young Backstreet Boy.

Brian turned his head away from Xavier's stare, unwilling to meet him eye to eye. After a few moments of silence, curiosity got the better of him and Brian spun his head back around. Xavier was still silent, hands clasped under his chin, studying him.

"Well now, Mr. Littrell, where do we start?"

Brian ignored the question and asked one of his own. "What kind of a sick joke is this?" he hissed, angry. "Did Nick put you up to this? You're fired!"

Amused, Xavier stood up, laughed, then turned away. Brian seized the opportunity and shot out of his chair, racing for the door. He succeeded in grabbing the handle only to feel Xavier ripping him bodily away from it. Once again a massive hand clamped down around his throat and Brian began choking, clawing frantically for release.

"Please...please..." Brian cried hoarsely, his blue eyes begging.

Xavier relaxed his grip and watched as Brian slowly sank to his knees, coughing violently. Greedily sucking in great gulps of air, Brian cried out as Xavier brutally wrench the singer upright by his hair, flinging him back into the chair. Exhausted, Brian leaned over gasping, still breathless.

"I take it you won't try that again."

Brian flopped back in his chair, looked at Xavier's questioning face, and nodded a reply, too hoarse to speak.

"Good." Xavier rose, went to the bathroom and brought back a glass of water. He held it out to Brian. "Here." Brian accepted the drink, swallowing painfully as the cool water slid down his throat. Xavier lowered himself back into a chair, his demeanor calm and quiet as he waited for the blond singer to finish his drink.

"What do you want?" asked Brian finally, subdued.

"What do I want?" Xavier smiled, spreading his hands wide. "I've got what I want."

Ransom, thought Brian wearily. "So, it's about money," Brian sighed, glad to know at least where he stood. "How much do you want?"

Xavier leaned over and reached out towards Brian's head. Brian flinched as Xavier's hand came in contact with his hair but was surprised when Xavier tossed his hair, almost affectionately.

"Brian, Brian," he scolded. "It's not always about money."

"Everything's always about money, Xavier!" spat Brian, angry.

Xavier cocked his head to one side as if considering it. "True," he conceded. "But before we discuss that I need you to make a phone call." The bodyguard walked over to the phone, picked it up and carried it over to Brian, setting it in his lap.

Brian stared at the phone in his lap, then glanced at Xavier who was sitting in the chair next to him. "To who?"

"Oh, how about your mom."

Brian felt a shock of adrenalin burn through his body, scared where this was going.

"My mom...," he stated weakly, unable to speak further.

Xavier's massive hand grabbed the receiver and shoved it at Brian.

"Yes."

Brian looked at Xavier's calm face and felt a surge of hatred course through him. "No way. Fuck you."

Xavier sighed, shook his head, then leaned close to Brian. His mouth pressed up to Brian's ear, and whispered, "I would if I were you. Your mom needs to talk to you. Bad." Xavier let his words sink in, then relaxed back into his seat, watching with a smirk as Brian began punching numbers. Shaken, Brian messed up the first dial, then redialed, holding the receiver to his ear as he waited for the connection.

Xavier reached out and took the receiver away from Brian's hand, pressed the speakerphone button, then set the receiver back in the cradle. Both waited as they heard the ring, then the click of the phone being picked up. "Hello?" came a soft voice.

"Mom?" choked Brian, his voice catching. He repeated himself. "Mom?"

"Brian, is that you? Thank God! I've been trying to reach you! Don't you ever listen to your voice mail?"

Brian closed his eyes, fearful. "Sorry Mom, I forgot. Is everything okay?"

Brian and Xavier heard her sigh over the phone. "It is now. Your brother was in a terrible car crash. Terrible. He's in the hospital."

Brian's eyes flew open to see Xavier wink and smile knowingly at him. "A car accident? Is he alright? What happened?"

Brian's mother sounded distressed. "We don't know for sure. Apparently some crazy driver cut him off and he crashed into a utility pole. Harold shattered his left femur and hip bone. The breaks were pretty bad, but the surgery went well and the doctors are very pleased with the outcome."

Overcome with rage, Brian could barely listened as his mother described the rest in detail. "Brian, Brian, honey, are you there?" It took a moment for him to reply.

"Yes, Mom, I'm here. I wish I could be there for you." His voice shook as he glared at Xavier.

"Oh dear, I know. But really, everything is under control. You sound ill, Brian. Are you okay?"

"Fine, Mom, everything's fine."

"Good. Well, I'll let you go now, get some sleep. Call me in the morning. And oh, by the way, say hello to that nice man, Mr. Delgado."

Brian froze. "You've met him?"

"Oh yes, he stopped by just as we were leaving to go to the hospital. Introduced himself, said you guys were all on a short break. Wondered if there was anything he could do for us. Such a nice man! I'm so glad he's your bodyguard, Brian."

Brian looked up to see Xavier grin and he felt a wave of nausea overcome him. "Mom," Brian began, hardly able to get the words out. "Is everyone else okay?"

"Sure. Aunt Ann sends her love. Oh, I just remembered. Don't alarm Kevin, but Sam is missing."

"Sam? You mean Kevin's dog?" Sam was Kevin's black lab, a dog that Kevin had bought as a puppy for his Mom and himself after his Dad had passed away. Sam had been a God-send for the grieving family and Kevin was just crazy about him.

"Yes, we think he ran away, the same day as Harold's accident. You know how attached Kevin is to that dog, so please don't say anything to him just yet. Aunt Ann is trying to find him."

Brian was about to reply when he saw Xavier slowly waving something back and forth - it took a moment to recognize what it was. A red dog collar. Enraged, Brian managed a

quick goodbye before slamming down the receiver and launching himself at the bodyguard. His driving force caught Xavier off-balance and they both tumbled backwards, Brian landing heavily on top of him. Xavier managed to kick him off, but not before Brian delivered a stunning blow with his fist to Xavier's jaw.

"You sick bastard!" screamed Brian, staggering up from the ground. He eyed his room wildly, hoping to find a weapon of any sort. Realizing he had none, he turned to run for the door but fell hard to the ground as Xavier seized his right ankle and pulled. Brian turned on his side, kicking viciously at Xavier's face with his other foot. Xavier grunted with pain but held on, dragging Brian away from the exit.

In one swift move, Xavier stood, lifting Brian up at the same time. A solid punch landed in the middle of the singer's stomach and Brian doubled over. Xavier pushed him onto the bed and Brian curled up in the fetal position, moaning. Walking into the bathroom, Xavier turned on the faucet and wet a small hand towel. He examined his face for a moment in the mirror before returning to the room. Sitting down on the opposite bed, he placed the cool towel to his cheek.

Struggling to a sitting position, Brian drew a ragged breath as a sharp pain shot through him. He found the bodyguard studying him. "Not bad for a Southern white guy," Xavier drawled, impressed with the singer's fighting instinct.

"Why?" panted Brian, his eyes darkened with pain and fatigue. "Why did you try to kill my brother?"

"Kill?" Xavier jumped up, insulted. "If I wanted to kill your brother, I would have just put a bullet in his brain!" Brian watched as Xavier paced, startled by his sudden agitation. "No, this was just to get your attention, to show you who is in control."

Brian rubbed his injured hand, trying to massage away the pain and ignoring the ache he felt in his stomach. Fatigued as he was, Brian again felt anger rising up in him. "Cut the crap, Xavier. Just tell me what this is all about."

Xavier reached over, grabbing Brian's hurt wrist. Brian tried not to cry out as Xavier twisted it. "Okay, pretty boy, here's the plan. You do whatever I tell you, whenever I want."

Brian, shaking from the pain Xavier was inflicting, tried to wrench his hand away. "And if I don't?" he snarled, his blue eyes glaring with determination. Xavier released his hold then smiled at Brian as he sat down to face the singer. Now completely calm, Xavier began to recite a mass of confidential and intimate information regarding the Backstreet Boys' personal lives and the lives of their families. Brian was aghast by the detailed amount of knowledge he possessed. He sagged in his seat, placing his hands over his face as he listened fearfully to Xavier explain in graphic detail the possible "accidents" that could befall his loved ones. Overwhelmed, he could only whisper, "Why? Why me?"

Xavier rose from his seat and crouched down next to Brian. The young singer slipped his hands away from his face to stare at Xavier, now eye level with him. The bodyguard placed a hand on the young singer's shoulder and gave it a shake. "I'm not sure myself," admitted Xavier, almost sympathetically.

"You've done this before, to other people, haven't you." It was a statement, rather than a question.

Xavier nodded, then stood up. "Of course, it's my job."

"Your job. And what exactly is that?" asked Brian dully. "Extortion, terrorism, what?"

"My job is what I want it to be. And this time it's about a game - between you and me."

"A game?" Brian looked at Xavier in disbelief. "I don't understand."

"You will." Xavier's voice was serene, soothing, as if trying to calm a frightened child.

"You're mad."

"Just a little."

Brian's voice shook a little. "Dear God, help me."

Xavier smiled generously. "By all means, ask." He winked at Brian. "But don't expect an answer."

He paused for a moment. "Want to hear about our game?"

Brian said nothing, not wanting to answer.

Xavier went on, animated. ""The game is about fear and control. Your will against mine. Yes, it's really quite fun. And you're my new player."

"And you want to know the best thing about it?" Xavier hurried on, not waiting for a reply. "Yes, the best thing is who wins and who loses. I usually don't like the people I pick, but you're different somehow. I'm not sure why, but I like you Brian. And that's why I'm going to give you a chance. Most people break quickly, but I think you'll be a fighter. You manage to play the game right and maybe, just maybe no one gets hurt. It's really up to you..."

Brian watched apprehensively as Xavier walked to the door, unlatched it, and pulled it open. He stepped into the doorway, then turned to face Brian, a smile of anticipation on his face. "I can see you're a little confused, don't worry, all my former clients were too. We'll talk more in the morning. Get some sleep, ok?"

Brian didn't answer. His mind raced with the possibilities of revenge and Xavier, as if reading his mind, frowned, his face darkening.

"Don't even think about it. You so much as breathe a word of this to the police, your friends, anyone..." Xavier strode back in and grabbed Brian, lifting him roughly off the ground, "and I'll make sure you and everyone else suffers. Got it?" He waited until Brian nodded, then with a hard shove pushed Brian away from him.

He walked back to the door. "Remember who is in control," he hissed, then shut the door behind him.

Chapter 16:

Overcome

Exhausted, Brian staggered over to the door, locked it, then turned to enter the bathroom. Closing the bathroom door, he fell to his knees and crawled over to the toilet, vomiting wretchedly into the bowl. He dragged himself up and reached over to the shower, turning it on. Shaking, he stripped off his clothing and entered the shower stall, then collapsed to the tile floor. The water was too hot, but moving was too much of an effort - he hurt everywhere. Unable to rise, he let the water stream down upon his head, shoulders and back. Finally he was able to pull himself up, adjust the temperature, and let the jet of water flow onto his face. He stood under the water until it ran out of warmth then shut it off. Grabbing a towel, he wrapped it around himself, afraid to look closely at the bruises that were forming on his body. He wiped the steam away from the mirror and looked at his face though. Except for the dead expression that stared back at him, his face was fine. He sighed in relief, knowing he could hide bruises on his body easier than on his face.

He left the bathroom and wandered over to a toppled chair, righted it, then glanced around the room for any other things knocked over. Finding none, he went over the window and parted the drapes away, looking out, not sure why. He placed his forehead against the cool windowpane and gazed out, watching, almost mesmerized, by the movement of the traffic down below. Brian closed his eyes for a moment, lightheaded. Turning away from the window he crawled gingerly into his bed, flinching as his body protested movement of any kind. He willed his body to forget the pain but the mental agony was something he could not remove. Brian tried desperately not to think about the injuries his brother suffered as a result of him, how Kevin would react to his missing dog once he learned that Sam was gone, but his emotions gained the upper hand and his mind flooded with anguish at the nightmare Xavier had created. *Xavier*. Brian knew without a doubt that he was mentally unstable; a madman who took pleasure in inflicting pain. That Xavier thought it was a game made it all the more terrifying. Brian rubbed his eyes, trying to sort out words that clashed around in his head...game... win or lose...control... chance...but they all blurred as he stared up at the ceiling, mentally exhausted. Could he hold on, would he be able to "play" this game without losing his sanity? What about the safety of his family, his friends? Brian closed his eyes, unable to cope, and did the only thing that came to mind. He prayed.

Chapter 17:

The Encounter

Brian snapped upright in his bed, confused and in a panic. Scared, he vaulted over the bed and raced to the door, jerking it open and running out into the hallway. It was naked of people. He caught his breath. He was naked! He turned to see his door closing and rushed back, catching it before his closed on him. A smile of disbelief escaped briefly as he remembered Nick getting locked out before, with almost the same comical consequences.

Brian threw on some clothing and lay down on his bed. He reached over to the remote and turned on the TV, surfing the channels. He sighed, then turned off the TV and listened to the radio. Mentally, he knew what he was doing and berated himself for it. He knew he was stalling, trying not to think of what had happened. A headache was forming and he knew it was from a combination of stress and hunger. He reached into his travel bag and grabbed a couple of Advils then rummaged around the bottom of the bag searching for anything to eat. Finding nothing, he cursed himself, and wondered if it would be suicidal to sneak down into the lobby to see if anything was open this late at night. Brian snorted in disgust. *I'm scared of being mobbed by fans when I have a lunatic bodyguard beating the shit outta me?* He grabbed his wallet, a jacket, and left.

Brian entered the elevator alone then punched the button for the second floor. The elevator chimed at the fourth floor and he held his breath as it opened, expecting a rush of screaming girls to flood in. A small woman entered, pushing her cart of cleaning supplies in and Brian sighed, giving her a smile of relief. She gave him a puzzled look as she straightened her cart, then ignored him. The elevator chimed for the second floor and Brian stepped off, hurrying to find the staircase. He hoped coming off the second floor and then coming down the stairwell would save him from any encounters. He knew the standard procedure for requests was to phone the on-call bodyguard but with his luck, Xavier would be the one to answer.

He eased the stairwell door open a crack, then peeked. Not a soul. Brian couldn't believe his good luck. He slipped into the spacious lobby, looking around for a snack shop, a coffee shop, anything. Nothing. He sighed, walking up to the reservation desk. No one appeared. Brian shook his head. *Where the hell was everyone? What time was it, anyway?* He turned away from the desk to think. *Vending machines!* Why hadn't he thought of them before? Nick and he practically lived off them a few years ago!

Now all he had to do was locate them. Great. With a hotel this big, there should be some somewhere, shouldn't there? He was reluctant to go searching the floors of the hotel and equally reluctant to wander aimlessly. The pool! There were always vending machines there. He pushed a side door open, but not before scanning the area. It looked deserted. He stood still, taking a breath of the cool night air and trying to adjust his eyesight. He saw a small neon glowing to the right and headed over. The vending machines blinked in pink and green as they advertised their wares. Brian slipped a dollar bill in only to have the machine reject it. He tried again with the same results. He used another bill

and wound up looking at the returning dollar. He swore mightily under his breath, pissed.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to see two shivering girls, soaking wet from the pool. They stared at him wide-eyed, their mouths open from surprise. They barely looked in their teens.

"It is him!" said one, pushing her friend.

"Oh my God, " quivered the other. "We heard you guys were here at the same hotel as us!"

Brian took in the two, hoping they wouldn't start shrieking and knowing if he didn't act fast, he'd be in trouble. "Girls," he pleaded, "don't scream, okay? Please? I just want something to eat. Um, could you help me? You wouldn't happen to have change for a dollar, would you?"

The taller of the two nodded, unable to take her eyes off him, while the smaller one raced over to her lounge chair. She came back with a fist full of change, which Brian politely picked out some quarters and handed her his dollar bills. He punched in the numbers for a candy bar and a bag of chips then scooped them out of the bin. He turned to find them standing, staring at him, shaking from the cold. Brian had to laugh at the sight, feeling sorry for them. He opened the bar, looking at one girl. "Care for a bite?" he offered. She shook her head, unable to speak. Brian smiled again then took a large bite.

"You guys are freezing," he commented. "Go get your towels." They continued looking at him, ignoring his suggestion, and he sighed, shaking his head. He walked over to their lounge chairs and grabbed their towels, turning to find that they had followed him. He handed them each one and then sat down on a lounge, finishing up his food.

"How's the water?" he questioned, motioning at the pool.

"Heated," replied the tall one who found her voice. "It's nice."

"Brian, can I ask you something?" questioned the smaller one.

"Okay," agreed Brian. "Ah....?"

"Oh! Jessica."

"Ok Jessica, what?" inquired Brian, apprehensively eyeing the eager teenager, praying she wasn't going to ask for some strange request. Jessica leaned forward, her face hopeful.

"Well...do you know Justin Timberlake?"

Taken aback, Brian stared at her for a moment, then broke into laughter, shaking his head. He started coughing violently and covered his mouth, bending over to keep from hurting his bruised side anymore than possible.

The taller one punched her friend, worried. "Great Jess! Now look what you've done."

She ran over to the vending machine and brought back a cold water bottle. "Here," she offered to Brian, who was now regaining some of his composure. Brian gratefully took the bottle and opened it. He drank slowly, noticing his throat was still sore.

"Thanks..."

"Melissa."

"Thanks, Melissa."

"You're welcome. Can I ask you a question?"

"Wait..." Brian held up his hand to Melissa, then turned to look at Jessica, remembering she asked first. "Um, Jessica, I've met Justin occasionally but I really don't know him. Did you want his autograph or something?"

Embarrassed, Jessica mumbled a reply, which Brian didn't catch so he looked questioningly at Melissa.

"Jess loves N-Sync." she explained. "I do too," she added.

"Oh," replied Brian, feeling slightly foolish at thinking they were Backstreet fans. "Well, uh, yeah. They're a good group."

There was an awkward silence until Melissa spoke up. "We like you guys, too. Just not as much. Sorry."

"It's okay." Brian smiled at her apology, privately enjoying the humor of his mistake.

"It's just...that Justin is so hot!" Melissa said, trying to explain. Jess nodded her enthusiasm at Brian.

Brian shifted uncomfortably. "Really."

"And, oh my God, his voice!" Melissa went on, waving her hands for emphasis.

"Whatever."

Jess jabbed her friend. "How about his dancing?"

Melissa sighed and looked at Brian. "You should see him dance!"

"Alright, alright, I think I get the picture."

"What about JC?" questioned Jess to her friend. "He's good too." Both girls squealed in delight and looked at Brian for his approval.

"If you say so," commented Brian, ego bruised. He turned to Melissa. "Uh, did you still want to ask me a question?"

Melissa nodded her head vigorously. "Well...do you think you could get us tickets to your concert?"

Brian tried not to choke, amazed at their nerve. Oh, this is too priceless. "Sure. Want some backstage passes?" he gleefully offered, watching as they bobbed their heads in unison. He could hardly wait to have the guys meet Jessica and Melissa. He smiled inwardly at the thought of the ego deflating comparison awaiting his friends. AJ is gonna kill me.

"Thanks, Brian."

"No problem. I'll have the tickets waiting for you at the arena's box office, okay?"

"Great!"

Brian sensed, by the way the girls were whispering to each other, that another question was coming. He rolled his eyes. "All right, what?" he asked.

Jessica looked at him sheepishly. "Well, if you have a concert tomorrow, what are you doing here so late at night? Shouldn't you be sleeping or something?"

Before Brian could answer he saw the girls' attention draw up from his face to over his left shoulder. Two heavy hands came solidly down onto Brian's shoulders and he felt the sickening familiarity of it sink home.

"These girls bothering you, Mr. Littrell?" Xavier eyed the girls, giving them a sour smile.

Brian angrily stood up, shaking Xavier's hands off. He knew the girls were watching with interest, so he composed himself and turned to face the bodyguard. "No. Just talking to some fans. You may go." Brian made the dismissal sound formal.

Xavier looked at Brian, mouth twisted into a tight smile. "Wish I could, Mr. Littrell, but there's a long distance phone call for you." He coolly looked into Brian's eyes and both knew he was lying.

"I'd suggest you hurry back to your room," added Xavier.

So the game begins, thought Brian. Fear and control. Brian stood his ground, not moving.

"Tell them I'll call back later; I'm talking to these girls right now." Brian noticed a slight twitch in the bodyguard's right eye.

A heavy silence followed, neither one willing to break the tension. Finally, a faint smile spread on Xavier and he turned his attention to the two teenagers, and then back to Brian.

"Looks like jail bait to me, Mr. Littrell," he commented in a low tone.

Melissa shifted uneasily, glancing back and forth at the two men. She watched as Brian's face grew dark and noticed for the first time the ugly bruises covering the side of the large man's face. She drew in a sharp breath, suddenly suspicious of him.

"Who are you?" she demanded, rather loudly.

"Security," said Xavier bluntly. "Kinda late to be out, isn't girls? Come on, I'll walk you back to your room." He rested his hand on Jessica's arm and gave the Backstreet singer a knowing look.

Brian saw the danger immediately. "They're old enough to find their rooms." He tilted his head towards the hotel. "He's right. It is late. Nice talking to you." Brian hoped his tone was casual as he pleaded with his eyes for them to leave. Melissa and Jessica gave Brian a perplexed look, but they obeyed and scooped up their belongings. Walking to the side entrance, they stopped then turned to glance back at him. Go! Go! screamed Brian silently. He waved as casually as he could and they smiled back before entering the building.

Brian sighed in relief as he watched as the two exited.

"Not bad," he heard Xavier drawl, and Brian turned away, angry. Xavier noticed his face and laughed. "Oh, not about the girls," he explained, "I was talking about you."

Brian spun around to face Xavier. "Me?"

"Yes. I think the game between us is going to be challenging, don't you? I'm glad I picked you." Xavier clasped a hand onto Brian's shoulder and Brian promptly smacked it away, hard.

"Listen, you son-of-a-bitch. Get this straight, okay? First, don't touch me again. Ever. And second, I'm not going lose in your little game of fear and control, got it? You're in for a fight."

Xavier studied Brian for a moment, expressionless, then a slow smile began to form. He took a few steps towards the singer then reached out to grab him by the front of his shirt. Xavier yanked Brian hard, bringing him face to face.

"I'm impressed," he spoke softly. "I was hoping you'd show some backbone. But I think you're forgetting who's in charge." With that statement, Xavier pushed Brian back, releasing him from his grip and slapped him open handed across the face. The vicious smack caught Brian squarely on the side of his left cheek. Brian stumbled back, eyes watering from the stinging blow. Xavier walked next to him, grabbing Brian's upper arm.

"It's late. I suggest you go back to your room," he advised, waiting for an answer. Brian yanked out of Xavier's hold, then wiped the corners of his eyes with the back of his hand, glaring at him. Not giving the bodyguard the satisfaction of a reply, Brian turned and walked away.

Xavier watched as the young Backstreet Boy slipped into the lobby, but his attention was drawn away when he noticed movement to his left. There, crouched next to the vending machines, were the teenage girls. Their hiding place discovered, the two jumped up and quickly ran back inside the hotel. Xavier watched as the door closed behind them, frowning.

Chapter 18:

The Next Morning

Beating AJ by a heartbeat, Howie jabbed his fork at the last waffle on the serving tray and placed it on his plate.

"Hey!" complained AJ, nudging his friend, "that was mine!"

Howie ignored the protest, going over to the serving cart to look for the maple syrup. He found it next to the other condiments and reached for it, drowning his waffle. He turned and found a seat next to Nick who was already working on his second plate of eggs.

Kevin, already done with breakfast, leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee. "Anyone see Brian?" he questioned.

Nick, mouth full, waved his fork in the air, to indicate he hadn't. AJ sat down next to Kevin, but not before snagging a piece of Howie's waffle on the way over. He gave Howie a victorious smirk and then answered Kevin. "Nope."

Kevin glanced at his watch and shook his head. "Alright, who is going to get him?" The three continued eating, not listening to the request. "Howie?" pleaded Kevin.

"Why me?" grumbled Howie. "I just sat down. You go get him, you're done." Howie turned to AJ, who was trying to sneak another piece. "Don't even think about it Bone," he warned, brandishing his fork like a weapon for effect. AJ shrugged and slumped back into his chair, continuing his meal.

Kevin downed the rest of the coffee in one quick gulp, got up and stretched. "Ok, guess I'm elected," he said dryly. He edged around the cart trying to get to the door. The room service had been decent for once, but Kevin hated the confusion it caused by always having it in his room. AJ declined his, complaining that everyone practically lived there anyway, and Nick's and Brian's were a constant mess. Howie wisely never offered his.

"Save something for Brian," he warned Nick.

"Yeah, don't hog it all," came Brian's tired reply as he entered the room. All four glanced in his direction then stared at Brian as he sat down in Kevin's empty seat.

"Damn!" swore AJ, tilting his sunglasses to get a better look at his friend. He noticed the red marks on Brian's neck and face. "I sure hope she was good! Can I have her number?"

"Me first," chimed in Nick, getting up to inspect Brian. Brian waved off Nick's curious stare and got up to see what food was left. Howie and Kevin glanced at each other, then at Brian, concerned. Something was wrong, and both Kevin and Howie recognized it.

Brian slowly spooned some eggs onto his plate, then grabbed a piece of toast before sitting down back down. He kept his head down as he ate. Kevin walked over to Brian and placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling his cousin flinch under his touch.

"Brian, look at me."

Brian continued eating.

"Brian!"

He stopped and looked up at Kevin. "What?" he said flatly.

Kevin and the rest of the guys stared at Brian, amazed. Brian looked exhausted, his eyes weary and bloodshot. Kevin got a closer look at the angry marks on Brian's neck and the splotch of red that was covering the left side of his face. He drew a swift breath, astonished, then signaled to Howie. Howie walked over to Brian and crouched down, coming eye level with him. "Okay, give," he demanded, worried. The others waited quietly for his reply.

Brian had been dreading this moment; at best, he was a lousy liar and he knew it. Unable to rest after going back to his room last night he had wracked his brain for a believable story. Now that the time had come, the lame excuse he invented disintegrated before him as he looked into Howie's concerned face.

Uncomfortable, Brian lowered his head and mumbled, "I don't wanna talk about it, ok?"

"Huh?" came Nick's reply. "What do you mean, you don't want to talk about it? Look at you! You look like shit. Come on Bri, wassup?"

Brian felt his heart racing as he glanced from one friend to another. What could he say? That in a span of 8 hours his life had turned completely upside down? That the bodyguard they all trusted was a complete lunatic and their lives were in danger if he didn't quietly obey Xavier's insane game? Panicking, Brian felt his resolve crumble before the guys' intense stare, and afraid he might break down before them, he jumped up, knocking over his plate of food.

"Damn, what is it with you?" he yelled. "I said I don't want to talk about it! Is that so hard to understand?"

The guys were taken aback by Brian's outburst. "Jeez, Bri, chill out, okay? We were only wondering. Excuse us for caring!" Angry, Nick turned away from Brian giving Kevin a disgusted "who cares" look.

Brian sighed heavily. "Nick...hey...I'm sorry. It's just that last night..."

"Brian and I had a rough time last night," interrupted Xavier coming into the room unannounced. All five Backstreet Boys turned towards the door. Xavier walked over to

the breakfast cart, calmly surveying the remains while Kevin, Nick, AJ and Howie gawked at the bodyguard before them. The left side of his face was scattered with a colorful mass of red and purple bruises. AJ swung his attention from Xavier, to Brian, then back to Xavier again.

"Okay," he said firmly. "I'm not leaving here until you guys tell us what the hell is going on." He crossed his arms defiantly, glaring at the two. Xavier turned away from the cart empty-handed, and caught Brian's eye, holding it for a commanding second, then looked at AJ. On edge, Brian felt a small bead of sweat trickle down the back of his neck as watched Xavier.

"Last night Brian and I encountered an intruder in his hotel room. He tackled Brian by the throat, knocking him down. I managed to drag him off Brian, but not before he gave me a couple of pretty nasty kicks to the face." Xavier turned to look pointedly at Brian.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed Nick. "Who was the guy?"

Xavier shook his head. "I don't know. The kick stunned me pretty hard, and he escaped before I had a chance to stop him."

"Do you know what he wanted?" questioned Howie.

"As for what he wanted," Xavier continued, "I'm not sure. Robbery is a possibility. However, there is another problem. A few days ago, management started receiving some anonymous threats against Brian; I've been checking them out. That's why I came to see Brian last night. I'm thinking this intruder might be linked to the threats."

"Did you call the police?" asked AJ.

Xavier looked at Brian. "No, Brian doesn't want any. Reporters, TV and such. Right, Brian?"

Brian was caught off guard. "Uh, yeah. Too much publicity," he mumbled.

Kevin sat down next to Brian and shook his head, trying to absorb it all. "Do you know how he was able to get into Brian's room?"

Xavier shook his head. "No. I'm looking into that, maybe a master entry key, possibly a maid. However he managed it, he won't get in again. Believe me, I'm right on top of it."

Brian was stunned at Xavier's composed manner, the ease at which he lied to the guys and the skill and cleverness of his story. He bowed his head so that the guys couldn't see him, fearful of what his expression might reveal.

Xavier dug out of pocket a group of cards, passing them around and announced, "Okay, I've taken the liberty of changing everybody's code, here are your new cards. Only I have the new access number." He handed the last one to Brian. Brian reluctantly reached out

to take the extended card only to discover Xavier holding firmly onto it, forcing Brian to look up at him. The bodyguard's dark eyes bore into Brian's as he spoke.

"I've talked to management and the other bodyguards and they are in agreement that I will be acting as Brian's chief bodyguard during the rest of the tour. Obviously I'll need and expect your complete cooperation, okay guys?"

Brian choked down the bile he felt rising in his throat. Not only had Xavier expertly managed to gain access to everyone's room, he had made himself look like Brian's personal savior. Brian felt the now familiar anger and resentment building up inside him.

Nick came over to Brian, placing a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "God, Brian, I'm sorry. You gonna be okay for tonight?" He pointed to the red marks on Brian's throat.

"Sure, Frack. My throat's just a little sore. I'll be okay." Howie walked over to Brian, handing him a glass of orange juice with a "want it?" look. Brian accepted it with a small smile, grateful for his concern.

Kevin stood up from his chair, relieved that nothing worse had happened to his cousin. He studied his new entry card before pocketing it. He was disturbed about the threats and attack but knew without a doubt that if anyone could handle the situation, Xavier could. Kevin walked over to where Xavier was, slapping an appreciative hand onto his shoulder. "Thanks for all your effort, Xavier. We'll help in anyway we can."

Kevin turned to Brian, joking. "Hey Bri, you need to give Xavier here a huge raise!"

It took all of Brian's willpower not to choke on the O.J. he was drinking. "A raise."

Xavier grinned, enjoying Brian's discomfort. "Naw," he said cheerfully. "But I do need a watch. How about a Rolex?" he questioned in a joking manner, but glanced significantly at Brian. Brian understood the game. It was not a request.

Kevin and Howie whistled, joining in the fun. "Yeah, like one of those Presidentials, right?" Howie turned to AJ. "Hey man, you should buy yourself one of those. Then maybe you'd be on time."

AJ was playing absentmindedly with his card, still slumped in his chair, and ignored Howie's dig. There was something not quite right here, a feeling he couldn't shake. Since meeting Xavier he had felt uncomfortable around him; he still felt uneasy even after Xavier had saved their asses at the radio station, then kept Brian from being seriously injured. The guys all seemed at ease with Xavier, which confused things further. Experiencing an unshakable gut feeling that Xavier was not all he seemed to be, AJ rose from his chair, eager to leave. He put his shades on, grateful more than once for the cover the glasses gave him. He didn't want Xavier looking directly at him right now, unsure of how perceptive he might be. He considered talking to Brian later about his

feelings but then dismissed it. By the looks of his friend, he needed one less worry right now.

He slapped a reassuring hand onto Brian's back, giving him a thumb's up signal. "I'm bailing. See you tonight, okay?" Brian nodded, also standing up. "Later, Bone."

Kevin and Howie decided to leave with AJ, each giving words of encouragement to Brian before they left. Nick came over to Brian, a playful grin on his face. "Hey Bri, wanna come with me to the airport? I'm picking up Aaron."

"Aaron's coming here?" Brian looked at Nick in disbelief. He hadn't seen him in quite awhile.

"Yeah, just for a short visit. He's been whining to come visit, so I said okay."

Brian smiled, thinking about Aaron. He could be a real handful. "Sure, why not," he agreed.

"Let me go get him."

Nick turned to Xavier, surprised at Xavier's offer. He didn't notice the look that was exchanged between the bodyguard and his best friend. "No, that's okay, X. I don't mind," Nick said, refusing his offer.

"Nick, think this out. You don't have a car, you don't know the area, and if you and Brian go, you'll probably create a scene at the airport. I know this area, and I can pick up Aaron easily. It would be no problem."

"Well..."

Brian thought furiously, wondering how he could stop Xavier from getting Aaron. The idea of Xavier near Nick's brother sickened him. "Xavier, I thought you had to go check on some security problems at the arena."

"All taken care of." Xavier gave Brian a sly grin, which Brian didn't return.

"Well, we don't mind picking up Aaron. Thanks for the offer, anyway."

"I insist."

Brian caught the dangerous tone in Xavier's voice but Nick shrugged, unaware. "Well, ok, sure. Guess you're right about the airport scene. Thanks. Aaron's coming in on United. Around 1:30. Flight 202."

Brian wanted to scream, except he felt more like throwing up. He watched as Xavier walked to the door, turning to face them before he left.

"What time is it?" he questioned.

Nick looked at his watch. "8:45."

"Great, thanks. I don't have watch on me." Xavier explained, then smirked at Brian as he left.

Nick picked up a small backpack, flinging it over his shoulder. "Guess we're free. Wanna do anything?"

Brian was still looking at the door, lost in thought.

"Rok?"

"Huh? Oh, uh...let's go shopping."

Nick raised his eyebrows in surprise. AJ was usually the shopaholic. "Cool. Where to?"

Chapter 19:

The Visit

Nick sighed impatiently, shifting from one foot to another, and glanced at Brian who was leaning over a glass counter. When Brian said he wanted to go shopping Nick didn't think he meant this. He walked over to his friend, ignoring the stare of the two women employees, and gazed down to see what Brian was examining.

"Come on Bri, decide. Jeez." He reached over and grabbed what was in his friend's hand, whistling at the price. "Eight thousand dollars?" He remembered the joke Xavier made this morning. "You're buying this for X? Damn! You've never bought me a watch."

Brian took the watch from Nick's grasp and gave it back to the salesman, nodding his approval. "You never saved my life, Frack," he said dryly.

"Picky, picky," complained Nick good-naturedly. He was relieved to see the salesman wrapping up the package, eager to head over to the sporting goods store he had spied nearby. Brian shoved the small box into Nick backpack, then placed his oversized sunglasses and red baseball cap on.

Nick did the same, only with wrap around frames and a blue cap. Both surveyed their disguises. "You look like a dork," teased Nick. Brian stuck out his tongue. "Yep, act like one too."

Brian held the door open and waved Nick through dramatically. "Okay, your turn to pick."

Nick pointed out the store across the street. Brian smiled, turned to Nick and said, "Race you," sprinting off before he finished speaking the dare. Nick swore, tearing off after him.

* * * * *

The cab driver swung into the coliseum parking lot and came to an abrupt halt at a maintenance entrance. Brian and Nick both leaned over to inspect the meter and Brian groaned. Nick, on the other hand, crowed with delight at the amount displayed and punched his friend in the arm. "Twenty-eight fifty!" he boasted, delighted. "I'm the closest. I win. Pay him."

Nick jumped out of the car and waited as Brian fished out his wallet. He barely had time to hand the driver his money before the cabbie took off, screeching his tires as he left.

Shaking their heads, they watched the cab driver race away, then looked at each other and began to laugh.

"Damn, he's almost as bad as those drivers we had in Florence!" Brian commented, remembering the tour they had in Italy.

Nick held open the side door as he and Brian walked through. "Almost," he agreed. They hurried down the hallway, searching for the rest of the gang. They had decided to meet them here at 4:00 p.m., but due to an intense game at an arcade shop, Nick and Brian were late. They jogged swiftly until they reached the arena, scanning for life. Except for a few hands milling about on stage, Kevin, AJ and Howie were nowhere in sight.

"Guess we aren't so late after all," said Nick, relieved.

"Yeah. Let's go find the others," Brian suggested, nodding towards the backstage. They hopped up easily onto the stage, nodding their hellos to the stagehands.

"Nick!"

Both Brian and Nick turned around to see Aaron come flying down a side aisle. Nick met him halfway and Brian smiled as he watched the two greet each other. Brian's smile faded as he saw Xavier, slowly walking down the steps behind Aaron. His stomach tightened into knots as he watched Xavier catch up to the two brothers, placing a hand on Aaron's head and giving a playful ruffle with his hair. Not being able to hear what was said Brian watched their movements, seeing Aaron excitedly turn to Xavier. The young kid's face was animated, his arms enthusiastically waving as he told some interesting story to Nick that obviously involved the bodyguard. Xavier nodded at something Aaron was describing to Nick then looked up over Aaron's head to gaze at Brian standing up on the stage. Holding Brian's eyes with his own he smiled, then in an exaggerated gesture brought his hands around Aaron's throat, in a dramatic mock strangle.

Sick to his stomach, Brian heard Nick and Aaron laugh at Xavier's antic, knowing full well Xavier's real goal. He kept his face impassive, realizing Xavier's need to get a rise out of him. He held Xavier's stare, calm, not giving an inch. Xavier finally nodded, a faint smile of defeat twisting the corner of his mouth as Brian recognized that he had won this round. Brian exhaled with a shaky breath, not realizing he had been holding it in. He continued to watch the three down below him, his mind racing. He knew without a doubt that Aaron was in danger. Desperate to get Aaron away from Xavier he nervously bit his lower lip, anxiously searching for an idea. Preoccupied, Brian never heard AJ sneaking up. He grabbed Brian's shoulders and gave them a shake, leaning close enough to yell "Boo!" in his ear.

In shock, Brian swore angrily at AJ, upset by his mischievous prank.

"Whoa! Bri, chill out, okay?" said AJ, surprised by his hostile manner.

Brian replied with a glare and turned his attention back to Xavier, Nick and Aaron. AJ followed Brian's lead. "Hey, there's Aaron. Aaron! Dude!" AJ yelled to catch his

attention. Aaron waved at AJ then continued talking to Nick and Xavier. "Cool. When did he get here?"

"Today," Brian answered, noticing Howie and Kevin entering from the far left of the arena with their duffel bags. AJ, noticing Brian's curt answer, studied his friend who was studying Xavier. Feeling again uncomfortable, AJ figured now was a good time as any to talk to Brian about the bodyguard.

"Hey Brian," AJ began, "what do you think of Xavier?"

Brian stiffened at his question, alarmed. "Think? What do you mean?"

AJ shrugged. "I don't know. He makes me sorta uneasy, ya know? Like he knows a secret that we don't. I don't like him."

Brian felt a rush as his heart began to beat faster. That AJ noticed something peculiar about Xavier was alarming. AJ had good instincts and if he decided to investigate further, the results could be disastrous. Sickened by the prospect, Brian's fear gave way to anger at AJ's chillingly accurate opinion. In alarm, Brian turned on his friend.

"You don't like him?" he sneered. "Because he's good at his job? Because he saved my ass? Because he's my bodyguard instead of yours? I think you're jealous."

AJ, stung by Brian's vicious attack, was at loss for words, but not for long. "Fuck you, Littrell," he hissed, not wanting the others to hear. "I just thought I'd tell you how I felt."

"Nobody cares what you think, especially me. I like Xavier, so screw you."

AJ took his glasses off to glare at Brian, pissed. "Fine, asshole. Just don't come running to me if you have a problem."

Brian matched AJ's glare. "I won't."

AJ left the stage, ignoring the hellos from Nick and Kevin, who were walking up on stage. Howie jerked a thumb at AJ's retreating figure. "What's up with him?" he questioned Brian.

Brian, shaking inside from his confrontation with AJ, shrugged and mumbled, "Who knows?" He felt nauseous and hurried from the stage, in a hurry to find a restroom. He fled past Nick and Aaron, ignoring the interested look from Xavier. Banging the men's room door open with his foot he ran to the sink, hyperventilating. He grabbed the sides of the porcelain sink with both hands, letting the bowl hold him up as he panted, fighting the urge to vomit.

"Brian?"

Brian twisted his head at the sound of his name and saw Aaron standing in the doorway, a curious look on his face. Brian turned away, not willing to face him. He grabbed the sink tighter, trying to compose his thoughts. Finally he swung his head back look at Aaron, hoping he had the guts to do it. First AJ, now Aaron. He took a deep breath.

"What the hell do you want, Aaron?"

"Uh, I just wanted to say hi, see if you're okay."

"Do I look okay?" Brian barked.

"No."

"Smart boy. Now why don't you just leave? Better yet, why don't you go back home?"

"Huh?"

Brian could hear the confusion in Aaron's voice and forced himself to go on. "You heard me. You really are a pain-in-the-ass, Aaron, you know that? Nobody wants you here, especially me. I had planned to do some things with Nick, but we can't, now that you're here."

Aaron couldn't answer, the stunned look on his face preventing him from speaking.

Brian smiled grimly at Aaron, shoving himself away from the sink and walked menacingly over to him. Aaron stepped back a few paces, alarmed by Brian's presence.

"Go home," Brian whispered cruelly. "And quit hanging around Xavier. He's my bodyguard. I'm not gonna pay good money to have him babysit you."

"But Nick wants..." Aaron started.

"Nick doesn't want you around either. He only took you because of your whining. Grow up, you little asshole."

Aaron looked down at his shoes, shaken at Brian's words. "Okay," he said softly.

Brian sucked in his breath, not daring to hope. "Okay, what?"

"I'll leave."

Brian tried not to show the relief in his voice. "Good. And if you're a man, you won't whine and cry about it. Just keep it to yourself, okay?"

Aaron didn't reply, and Brian anxious to make sure, grabbed Aaron's face with his hand.

"Right?"

Brian saw the tears forming in Aaron's eyes but they didn't spill. "Right," he whispered.

"Good. Now get the fuck outta here."

Brian watched as Aaron fled, weak with relief. He could hardly believe it. It worked. He started to laugh shakily at the thought of using intimidation to get what he wanted. That was Xavier's trick and he had just used it successfully in the game of wills against the bodyguard.

Brian walked tiredly over to the sink again and turned on the faucet. He stuck his hands under the cool water then brought them up to his face, watching himself in the mirror. He stared at his reflection for a moment. He thought about the pain and hurt he caused and would probably cause again to insure everyone's safety. But I can do it, he thought with wonder. I can survive this game and I'm going to win. Even if it kills me.

Chapter 20:

Before the Show

Brian was impressed. Under the harsh lights of the dressing room he inspected his neck and face in the mirror. Not a trace of Xavier's marks could be seen. The wonders of stage makeup he thought. The first time AJ had come in to get something he ignored Brian completely. The second time he entered he reached for a certain item, "accidentally" bumping into Brian in the process. Brian sighed, knowing tonight's concert would not be pretty. From past experience, when AJ was ticked off, you could expect the unexpected. Oh well. I can take his crap.

He looked around the room for the ever-present water cooler. He was dead tired, with no sleep last night and the rigors of a concert ahead of him. He needed to start hydrating himself right now, or he would never make it. He filled up a large cup of water, downed it, and refilled another.

"Save some for the fish," joked Xavier. Brian ignored him and finished his drink, pissed at Xavier's ability to appear without a sound. He walked over to bench, picked up a package and tossed it to the bodyguard.

"Here's a little token of my appreciation for all you've done," Brian said bitterly. He watched as Xavier opened the gift and inspected the Rolex. "You do know how to tell time, don't you?"

Xavier slapped the watch on his wrist and grinned, not minding the sarcasm. He reached into his pocket and pulled out two backstage passes. "I've got something for you too," he said slyly, tossing the tickets onto the makeup table. Brian went over to retrieve them, confused, until he realized what they were. He picked them up and stared at them dumbly, unable to accept the meaning these two small pieces of paper held. Finally he turned to face Xavier, powerless to speak.

Xavier seemed to understand and he nodded. "Melissa and Jessica couldn't make it. They had other plans."

Brian sat heavily on a chair, overcome. He looked up at Xavier, trying to hide the horror in his eyes. How could Xavier possibly know about the tickets? How did he know their names? He could hardly form the words. "Please, please tell me you didn't hurt them."

Xavier almost felt bad as he heard the anguish in the young singer's voice. Almost. "Okay," he repeated cheerfully. "I won't tell you I hurt them."

Xavier's nonchalance hit Brian like a sledgehammer. He covered his eyes and leaned forward, rocking back and forth. He stopped after a moment, took his hands away from his face and spoke quietly.

"Why? They were nothing to you. Nothing. I thought the rules of the game..."

Brian didn't have a chance to finish before Xavier came up, grabbing the nape of Brian's neck and forcing him to look upwards. Xavier bent down his face just inches from Brian's. "First," he whispered, "there are no rules. Second, the fun is in watching you suffer." He roughly released his grip and walked away. "Who cares about those two bitches?"

"Then...you didn't harm them?"

Xavier gave him a fake hurtful look. "I told you I didn't. Let's just say though, that I persuaded them that should stick with NSYNC." He laughed at his own joke.

Brian felt a rush of relief and anger flood him at the same time, relieved that the two girls were okay and angered at the way Xavier had tricked him. Unwilling to reveal any of the torment Xavier had just put him through, Brian looked at him unemotionally. "I'm kinda busy here, getting ready for the show. Any more tricks you want to pull, any more watches you need?"

Xavier smiled at the tone in the Backstreet Boy's voice. "No, not at the moment. But I'll let you know."

"I'm sure you will." Brian stood up and walked over to the door. He swung it open, motioning for him to leave. Xavier took the cue with good nature, amused at the singer's insolence. He stopped at the door to give Brian a last shot. He hoped that this one would sting.

"Cute kid," was all he said before he left.

Brian managed to keep his face straight as Xavier left. He swiftly locked the door, barring anyone from entering. He slumped to the ground, his back leaning on the closed door for support. He closed his eyes, trying to clear his mind, to concentrate on anything but what Xavier had just said. It was impossible, of course. Cute kid. He shuddered and hoped desperately that his plan with Aaron worked. Brian pulled himself into an upright position, determined to tough out these mental mind games that Xavier enjoyed inflicting upon him. He unlocked the door, reached for another cup of water, drank it, then began to exercise his voice. It was sore, nothing more.

Chapter 21:

Three Down, One to Go

"Brian!"

Brian jerked awake, disoriented. He discovered two blue eyes peering into his and a hand waving in front of his face. "Hi, Nick," he mumbled, struggling to clear free of the chair he had been slumped in. "Guess I fell asleep. What time is it?"

"About one hour before show time. You okay?" Nick came nose to nose with his friend, smiling comically and crossing his eyes. Brian gave a small laugh and shoved Nick away from him, waving the air.

"I will be after you take some mints. What, did Howie order Oriental again?" His stomach rumbled at the thought.

"Mexican. Come on, I saved some for you. Got any gum?"

Brian shook his head no and they headed down the corridor, weaving past the various backstage help. He could hear the band for the opening act vibrate through the walls and Brian stopped for a second, then motioned for Nick to follow him.

"What?" said Nick, interested. Brian waved him off, heading near the end of the stage, seeing the multi-colored lights blinking erratically. Nick grabbed Brian's arm, yelling to be heard over the music. "Are you nuts? If the fans see us, they'll go crazy!"

Brian cupped his hand to Nick's ear. "Just a peek. They won't see us, I promise." The two snuck up near the edge, far enough to blend into the dark background, close enough to view the arena. Several stagehands gave the two startled looks but said nothing. Brian and Nick watched silently, observing the concert in progress. Nick felt Brian tug at his arm and turned to follow the retreating singer.

They continued down the aisle. "What was all that about?" questioned Nick.

Brian shrugged at Nick. "I don't know. Curious, I guess." He sighed and Nick caught the melancholy in it. He stopped and looked at Brian, waiting for an explanation. "Nick, you ever wish you could go back to the beginning, start all over? That we were just us, not the Backstreet Boys?"

Nick thought Brian was joking and started to laugh. "Sure, all the time Bri. Wealth, fame and all the cute girls you could want isn't what it's cracked up to be!" Brian smiled back at his friend, immediately grateful that Nick thought he was teasing and nothing more. He couldn't afford to let his guard slip like he just did, and it made him realize that he would have to be more careful in the future.

The two Backstreet Boys entered a smallish room to see the rest of the gang finishing up their meal. Brian and AJ's eyes met briefly then AJ broke contact, getting up from his chair and going over to the trash can to dump the rest of his meal. He said a quick "later" and left the room and Brian tried to act indifferent as he glanced at what was left of the take-out order.

Nick sat in the now vacant seat, spreading his long legs before him and clasping his hands behind his neck, watching as Brian scooped some food onto a plate. "I wonder where Aaron is?" he said to no one in particular.

Brian tried casually to place the last spoonful onto his plate and sat down next to Howie. He knew he needed to eat, so he struggled with a few bites before giving up, his appetite gone.

Kevin, reading a magazine, glanced over the top at Nick. "Last time I saw him, he was on the phone, talking to your mom, I think."

Nick snorted. "Big baby. He stood up and stretched. "Guess I'll go try to find him."

Brian kept his head down as Nick left, not hearing Howie's question.

"Brian!"

Brian looked up, startled. "What?"

"I asked how are things going."

"Oh, not bad. Thanks."

Howie glanced over to Kevin and Brian caught the tension between them, especially from Kevin. Brian pushed his food away and looked at his cousin, sensing trouble.

"Okay, what's up?" he said directly to him.

"Oh, I just was wondering when you were going to tell me Harold was in the hospital or that Sam was missing," Kevin drawled sarcastically.

Brian groaned inwardly; so much for Aunt Ann keeping her mouth shut.

"Listen, I swear I was gonna to tell you....," Brian began but was quickly cut off by Kevin, unwilling to listen to his explanation.

"Shit, you're not my only cousin, ya know. And my mom is sick about Sam disappearing." Kevin threw down his magazine disgustedly and jumped up, coming over to jab at Brian's chest with his finger. "I think you need to wear a T-shirt that says, "Me first, second, and last" cause that's only who you care about!"

Brian jumped up too. "You've got it all wrong. I..."

Kevin again cut him off. "There's that 'I' again. Listen, don't talk to me until you learn how to say 'I'm sorry'." He shoved roughly at a chair that was in his way, then stormed out of the room.

Brian watched as he cousin exited then turned to see Howie still sitting in his chair, his face perplexed as he took in the whole scene before him. Brian picked up his now cold food and threw it away, trying not to pay attention to Howie's quizzical stare.

"Hey Brian, whassup, man?" he said so sympathetically that Brian ached from his caring tone. He shook his head, unable to face him, scared that somehow Howie would be able to read his mind if he looked at him. He mumbled something to the effect that he was tired, that the stress of the intruder made him forget. Brian wasn't sure Howie believed him but he said nothing further and Brian sighed in relief, hoping the subject was closed.

The door opened again with a bang and both remaining Backstreet Boys turned, Brian half-expecting another round with Kevin. It wasn't Brian's cousin, but Nick, and if it was possible, he looked even madder than Kevin.

"He's gone!" Nick yelled at Brian.

Howie glanced at Brian and was surprised to see almost relief on his face, as if he knew why Nick was so livid. "Who?" questioned Howie.

Nick ignored Howie and his question completely, marching over to Brian. "Aaron's gone; what the fuck did you say to him?"

"He's left? Are you sure? When did he leave?"

Irritated, Nick grabbed Brian by the shoulder. "Yes! One of the bodyguards told me that he took him to the airport about a half and hour ago. Said Aaron looked like he was crying and that you had something to do with it!"

Brian was alarmed. "Bodyguard? Nick, which bodyguard?"

"Damn! It was Eric! Who cares which bodyguard? I wanna know what the hell you said! Now!"

Trying not to show the elation he felt over one problem solved, Brian realized he had another one looming by not having foreseen the consequences with Nick. "I...I thought it would be better for Aaron to leave, considering the threats and all," he explained lamely.

Nick stared at him, not believing a word. "Threats? You're the one who got them, not Aaron! And why would that make him cry? God dammit, Brian, what did you say to him?"

Drained mentally and physically, Brian felt his temper rise from the sheer frustration of trying to cover up everything. "I just told Aaron that he was a pain-in-the-ass! And he is! I told him to quit being such a cry-baby and not to bug us, to go home. And he did. So what the big deal? He shouldn't be here anyway, when we're on tour. He's just a distraction." Brian tried not to wince as he saw Nick's expression of disbelief change to one of anger.

"What the hell gives you the right? He's my brother, and he can come any damn time he pleases! I can't believe you did this to Aaron, to me! What kind of a fucking friend are you, anyway?" Nick towered over Brian as he shouted his resentment and Brian realized for the first time just how intimidating Nick could be. He took a step back out of reflex but kept firm mentally, knowing he'd probably lost Nick's trust forever but willing to accept that for the sake of Aaron's safety.

"Who cares? He's a pest, I'm glad he's gone," Brian heard himself jeer back. "And if you can't accept that, then maybe I'm not your friend."

Nick looked at Brian, as if seeing a total stranger. He couldn't believe what Brian was saying to him, yet here Brian was, talking to him as if this was no big deal. He backed slowly away from Brian, unsure, confused, and angry, his hands up as if he could ward off any other thing Brian might say.

"Anyone who would do that to my brother is not my friend. I don't know why you did that and right now I don't care. Just stay away from me, got it?" Nick turned around and left, slamming the door with a resounding crash.

Brian stared at the closed door for a moment, trying to regain some of his composure. He finally faced Howie, who had watched the whole scene explode before him. He half-smiled at him, embarrassed that Howie witnessed the whole thing. "Well," he sighed.

"AJ's pissed, Kevin won't talk to me, and I've just lost a friend. I guess you're next."

Howie rose from his seat and walked over to where Brian was slumped in a chair. Brian looked exhausted and Howie felt bad about what had just happened, unsure of what to say or do. Brian's behavior was definitely unusual, but he guessed he couldn't really blame him, considering the past few days. He placed a sympathetic hand on Brian's shoulder.

"Come on. It's almost time for the show. You'll be okay Brian," he said softly.

Brian struggled out of his chair, grateful beyond words at his show of support. He nodded and slowly followed Howie out.

Chapter 22:

After the Show

"What the hell was all that?" screamed Kevin at the top of his lungs, ripping off his ear set and hurling it viciously across the back stage. "What the fuck is going on?" He glanced angrily at each one of the Backstreet Boys as they exited off stage, the concert over, the applause fading away as the arena began to empty. "Well?" He searched each face for an explanation and got none. He pointed a finger at Nick, livid. "Hey, hot-shot, next time you don't come on cue with Brian, I'll make you live to regret it. You're lucky the crowd thought it was a joke." Nick opened his mouth for a smartass reply but saw Kevin's glare and thought the better of it. Kevin turned on AJ. "And just what the hell do you think you were doing? This isn't the Johnny-No-Name show where you hog all the stage. You better not cut in front of us tomorrow night, got it?" Kevin used his height to tower over AJ, making his presence felt.

AJ was braver than Nick. "Hey, someone had to look alive. Maybe you should wake up your cousin over there and tell him we were on stage." AJ smirked at Brian, who was leaning wearily against a wall.

Kevin looked over at Brian, his face in a frown. "You had better get some sleep, because I want to see some major improvement by tomorrow night, got it?"

Even tired as he was, Brian felt resentment stir within him. As he expected, Nick and AJ had made things difficult tonight, but he hadn't counted on Kevin slamming him too. He pushed away from the wall, upset. "Okay, I'll admit I nearly walked through the dance steps tonight, but at least I made sure I sang my heart out, unlike some others here," Brian said, glaring accusingly at Kevin, AJ and Nick.

Offended, Kevin grabbed Brian's arm, not noticing the wince on his cousin's face. "Don't you ever..."

"Anything wrong here, guys?"

Xavier's tone was innocent enough, but Brian tensed as he watched him cross his massive arms across his chest. Startled, Kevin dropped his hand, annoyed at the bodyguard's intrusion. "Nothing that concerns you Xavier."

A cold smile enveloped his face, his eyes boring into Kevin's. "Everything concerns me, Mr. Richardson. And right now, I need to see if Mr. Littrell is okay." He gave a quizzical look at Brian. "You alright?"

Brian nodded, embarrassed by Xavier's exaggerated concern. "Fine," he said curtly, wanting the hell to be out of here. He gave Kevin a quiet look as if daring him to say anything further. Kevin stared right back at him. "Well, I guess everything's been said," Brian stated quietly. He turned and left, walking down the hallway, feeling Xavier hurrying to catch up with him.

Howie sighed, shaking his head, Nick mumbled something vaguely sounding like a curse, Kevin stood silently watching Brian's retreating back, and AJ watched Xavier, uneasy.

Chapter 23:

A Night Visit

Brian rested his head against the coolness of the SUV's window, eyes heavy with fatigue. He watched as the streaks of car headlights flared then dimmed as they passed by, trying to not think about anything but the relief that sleep would soon provide him. He adjusted himself a little more comfortably in Xavier's SUV, hoping they would arrive soon. Too tired to argue when Xavier announced that he would drive them all back to the hotel, Brian passively obeyed, the rest of the guys too tense to disagree. The silence between all five was heavy, each lost in their own reservations and suspicions. Xavier peeked in his rear view mirror to glance at Nick, who was staring somberly out the side window, then back at Brian who finally had his eyes closed. Deciding to enliven things a bit, he rumbled his throat to get their attention. "Hey, where's Aaron, Nick?" he questioned wickedly, knowing full well. Brian's eyes popped wide open and he turned in his seat to look at Nick, then at Xavier.

"Why don't you ask your little friend there," answered Nick, sourly.

Xavier turned his attention to Brian, and by the look of his face Brian realized that Xavier already knew. "He left, went back home," Brian stated simply.

Xavier nodded, not needing anymore explanation. "Not a bad idea, considering the threats and all. You just never know what could happen." He looked meaningfully at the young singer and Brian turned his head away, but not before noting Xavier's grudging admiration at Brian's skill and trickery in winning this round.

Nick listened intently, his mouth ajar. What was going on? Did Xavier seriously think that the threats to Brian could affect Aaron? Nick thought hard about the situation. It didn't take a genius to know Brian was under some strain. Did Brian truly think Aaron was in some danger? In his exhaustion, could Brian's cruel suggestions merely be his bizarre way of keeping Aaron away from danger? Nick realized that he never asked Brian about the nature of his threats. Nick studied Brian sitting up in front with Xavier, feeling confused, but not angry. He wanted to talk to Brian right now, to clear things up between them but he noticed Brian leaning wearily against the window. He smiled ruefully. It could wait until tomorrow.

Kevin knew something was wrong, he felt it, sensed it, and jerked awake with a start. His heart was pounding and he grabbed his pillow for some security, bringing himself up on one elbow trying to see clearly in what little light was there.

"Shit!" he yelled, panicking when he found two glittering eyes staring close to his. His heart raced even faster and he felt weak, collapsing into the softness of his bed as he gazed up at Xavier. "What in God's name are you doing in here?" he hollered, angry. The bodyguard straightened up, cool and composed.

"Just checking on you," he answered calmly.

"In the middle of the night?" Kevin shouted, agitated.

"I found signs that the intruder was here again. I needed to check up...on all of you. I'm sorry if I startled you. Try and go back to sleep, okay?"

Kevin relaxed a bit, heaving a sigh of relief. "Sorry, X. It's just that you scared the shit out of me." He noticed Xavier smiled at that but dismissed it as another thought came to mind. "How's Brian? Is he alright?"

"Everything's fine. He's sleeping like a baby."

"Oh. Well. Okay." Kevin was at a loss for words, trying not to show how self-conscious he felt in Xavier's looming presence. Xavier seemed aware of it though and chuckled, giving the dark-haired singer a goodbye as he exited.

Kevin heard the click of his door closing and lay back down in bed, disturbed. He had a strange feeling that Xavier had been in his room for a lot longer than just a check-up, that Xavier had been studying him for some unexplainable reason. Kevin wondered if Brian felt as uncomfortable with Xavier as he did and decided to talk to him about in the morning. Pulling the covers closely around his body, he wrapped himself tightly as a cocoon, hoping he could fall asleep.

Chapter 24:

The Next Day

Brian slowly opened his eyes, aware that the shaft of sunlight was directly beaming onto his face, then squinted. Throwing a hand over his eyes to keep from being blinded, he rolled over to the middle of his bed and stretched, immediately sorry that he did. A spasm tightened around the calf of his right leg, causing him to gasp. It seemed like forever before the pain lessened enough for him to stagger up from bed, his whole body screaming from aches and pains. He glanced at the clock, his eyes widening in surprise. It was almost three in the afternoon; he had slept longer than he could ever remember and he still felt like shit. He hurriedly took a shower, then shaved quickly, ignoring the ever-changing colors of bruises on his face. Throwing on whatever looked and smelled clean enough Brian sat down on his bed, reaching for the phone and ordered room service, hoping they would hurry. He knew one of the reasons he felt so bad was because he was starving. While he waited for his food he called his mom to see how Harold was, then talked to his dad for a few moments. Satisfied that they were okay, he cut the conversation short when he heard the buzz of room service. Brian hurried to the door and was pleased when an older gentleman ushered in his meal. Usually room service consisted of a nervous, star-struck kid who wouldn't leave Brian alone until he had signed enough autographs to make the kid rich on E-bay. He gave a generous tip to the grateful man then began to devour his food, trying to ease his hunger pains. As he finished the last bite he began to relax and eyed his phone, realizing he should check his voice messages. He punched in a few numbers then listened patiently as the recorded voice announced six new messages. Brian immediately deleted the first two, saved three, then frowned at the last one, cupping one ear to listen better. A woman was crying, talking almost incoherently, and it took a moment for him to finally recognized it as Kevin's mom. His stomach started to twist into knots as he strained to follow what she was saying but he grasped the general idea and swore, slammed down the receiver and flew out of his room, racing towards Kevin's room. Brian found the door ajar and fearful, carefully pushed it open to discover Kevin slumped over in a chair, face in hands.

"Kevin?" he questioned, not being able to keep the fear out of his voice.

The tall singer turned his head to look at Brian, his eyes rimmed with angry tears. Silently he held out a small picture to him, unable to speak. With a shaking hand, Brian came over and took it. He glanced at the picture a second then closed his eyes, trying not to gag. He finally forced himself to open his eyes, to examine the photo displaying the mutilated form of Kevin's dog, Sam. The pet looked like it had been tortured and next to the dead dog was Sam's name and the initials BSB scrawled into the blood-soaked earth.

"I listened to Aunt Ann's message but I could hardly understand her," said Brian. "Did she get a picture too?" Brian's heart sank as he watched his cousin nod his head.

"I loved that dog," Kevin spoke, his voice filled with agony. "What kind of sick bastard would do this?"

Brian knew. He dropped to the ground before Kevin's feet, too weak to stand. Brian began rocking slowly back and forth, his arms wrapped around himself. "I am so sorry. I am so sorry, Kevin," he mumbled over and over.

Startled by Brian's reaction, Kevin looked at his cousin confused, then placed his hand on his shoulder. "Hey, Brian, it's not your fault," he said gently. Brian covered his eyes and moaned when he heard this.

"I'm gonna get that asshole," he whispered and Kevin gazed at his cousin, now more confused than ever.

"Brian, what are you talking about? We'll never know who did this. Look at the initials in the picture. BSB. Whatever sicko killed Sam did it because I'm a Backstreet Boy. To hurt me and my mom. Understand?" Kevin shook Brian's arm to get his attention.

Brian pulled his hands away and looked miserably at Kevin. "Yeah, I understand," he said dully.

As distressed as he was over his dog, Kevin was more troubled by Brian's odd behavior. "Brian, what's wrong?" A sudden thought came to him and Kevin looked concerned. "Is it that intruder? Are you okay? You didn't meet him again, did you?"

"Uh, no. I'm okay, thanks."

Kevin gave Brian a questioning look. "Come on. You don't look that great. Is it about Xavier? Last night Xavier nearly scared the shit outta me when I found him in my room."

Brian immediately tensed up, forgetting about the emotional slip up he made in front of Kevin. "Xavier was in your room?" he questioned, trying to act casual but desperate for more information.

"Yeah. I woke up from a dead sleep and there X was, just staring at me. It was weird. Said he was checking up on everyone; that he thought the intruder was back."

Brian stood up from the floor, struggling not to show the alarm he felt but Kevin knew his cousin too well. "It's Xavier, isn't it," stated Kevin flatly. "He's the problem, right?"

Brian shook his head quickly, feeling himself break into a sweat. He turned away from Kevin, praying he wouldn't notice. "That's it. Is Xavier bothering you? Does he intimidate you?"

Keeping his tone light, Brian forced himself to face Kevin. "Sure, all the time," he joked with a little laugh. "You've seen him, Kev. He's huge."

Kevin waved Brian off. "No, not that. What I mean is sometimes..." Kevin was at a loss to explain and it irritated him. "Oh, I don't know. I don't like him that much. He makes me uneasy. How about you?"

"No, he doesn't," said Brian firmly, relieved at the possibility of throwing Kevin off track. I understand what your talking about, but I think he's just overly anal about his job. He really is a good bodyguard. Remember, he did save me from that intruder..." Brian had a hard time not choking on that, but kept a straight face, waiting to see if Kevin agreed.

"Yeah, I guess so. Still..."

Brian grabbed the opportunity and put on a convincing smile. "Hey, he's my bodyguard Kevin. He's just out to protect me and you guys too."

"Well if it isn't Xavier, it must be that intruder. You've got to admit you haven't been yourself these past few days."

Brian mentally sighed as he saw the way out. "You're right. That intruder has upset me more than I'd like to think."

Kevin rubbed his face tiredly and shook his head. "God, I'll be glad when this concert is over tonight. These last couple of days have really sucked." He looked at Brian, noticing his cousin's angry bruises and felt bad for what had happened to him. "Uh, Brian," he began, "I just want to say I'm sorry about losing my cool last night and yelling. I know you meant to tell me about Harold and all. Guess we both have been under some stress."

Brian heaved a sigh of relief, which showed in his face. "Yeah." He slapped an affectionate hand to Kevin's shoulder.

"Ah, a tender moment. Can I have a kiss?"

Brian and Kevin turned to see Nick poking his head into the door, his mouth puckered exaggeratedly. He grinned, then walked in, waving a new Nintendo game into the air. "About time you woke up, sleeping beauty," he growled. "Look what I just bought!" Nick smiled wickedly at his friend. "Ready to get your ass whipped?"

Brian deftly snatched the game from Nick's hand, studied it for a second, before tossing it back. "You're on. There's no way you're going to beat me." Brian looked at Nick and smiled, knowing from years of experience that this was Nick's way of mending a rift.

"How's Aaron?"

Nick shrugged. "Pissed off at you."

"And you?"

Nick smiled. "Pissed off at you. But I realized you did it because of the threats, Rok. I understand."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt Aaron."

"I know. What about my kiss?" Nick held out his arms.

"Here, you can kiss this," wisecracked Brian, pointing to his ass.

"Girls, girls, take it outside," grinned Kevin, glad to see the tension gone as the two mock wrestled with each other.

Chapter 25:

Disagreement

Brian and Nick were still arguing as they walked down the corridor to the dressing room over who was the biggest scorer in Nintendo and AJ rolled his eyes dramatically at Howie, sick of listening to their constant one-upmanship. He definitely was in a foul mood, still sore over Brian's dissing and seeing everyone kissing up to Brian was enough to make him scream. His stomach rumbled and he wondered what there was to eat, hoping whoever brought the munchies also brought his request for McDonalds. He pushed the door open with his foot letting Howie pass through, then intentionally let the door close before Brian and Nick had a chance to slip by.

"Thanks a lot, AJ," yelled Nick, yanking open the door again to let Brian and himself in. Nick glared at AJ who shrugged innocently and Brian ignored AJ altogether, knowing full well that AJ was still in a fighting mood. Brian walked over to a corner and dropped his duffel bag on the ground then straightened up and immediately stiffened. There sitting next a large assortment of food was Xavier, slouched comfortably, his legs crossed. Kevin held up a fork and waved it at the guys, before taking another bite.

"Hey, look what X brought. Food for all of us. Not bad, considering."

AJ walked over to the spread, searching for his order. "Not bad, considering what?"

"Considering it's all health food."

AJ stopped dead in his tracks and with a finger pushed his sunglasses up to reveal shocked eyes. "You're shitting me," he said in disbelief to Kevin then looked at Xavier when Kevin shook his head. "Where's my McDonalds?"

Xavier spread his large arms wide, a smile of apology on his face. "Sorry. No junk food for you when it's my turn to get it. I saw you all last night. Pretty pathetic. You guys need to eat better, exercise more. Especially Brian."

Brian tensed, knowing instinctively that there was more to Xavier's explanation than just what he was telling the guys. AJ snorted, pissed at Xavier, but pleased to get a jab in at Brian. "Yeah," he agreed. "Bri was pretty bad." He picked up a sandwich, sniffed at it, then shoved it in Brian's direction. "Here. Xavier's idea isn't half-bad. Eat your spinach and maybe you'll get muscles." AJ glanced at Brian and smirked.

"Sorry there isn't anything here to help your voice."

"Okay, let's just cool it," warned Kevin and Howie nodded in agreement, glaring at AJ.

Brian picked up the sandwich AJ had tossed and sat down next to Nick, knowing that it would drive AJ crazy by not responding to his taunt. He took a bite and then smacked his lips in exaggerated enjoyment.

Xavier glanced at AJ then at Brian in amusement. He wasn't sure what was going on between the two, but he was determined to take advantage of it. He reached over to grab another wrapped sandwich and pushing it towards a fuming AJ. "Try this. A garden burger. Guaranteed to hopefully grow some hair on your chest."

Brian didn't know what was funnier, Xavier making a half-decent joke or the look on AJ's face, but a small laugh escaped from him and Nick joined in.

AJ turned towards Brian to give him a look then back at the bodyguard. He picked up the half-wrapped burger as if were poisoned, strolled over to the trash can, dropped it pointedly in, then sat down next to Kevin, a defiant look displayed across his face. "When I ask for McDonalds, I want McDonalds. I don't give a fuck about what you want for me. You be may Brian's bodyguard, but you're not mine, got it?" Any appetite Brian had quickly evaporated and he put his sandwich down, uneasy. He glanced nervously at Xavier then at Nick, Kevin and Howie. All three Backstreet Boy's mouths were wide open in surprise, taken aback by AJ's rude behavior. Brian could feel the tension radiate from Xavier, noticed the involuntary clenching of the bodyguard's hands as AJ coolly stared at him, and felt himself begin to panic.

No, no, no! he thought, afraid. He jumped up, as if standing between the two would calm things down. Brian willed himself to relax and he walked over to Xavier, giving him a small encouraging shake on his massive shoulder. "Hey Xavier, see what happens when AJ doesn't get his fries? Can't live without 'em." He turned to AJ. "Bone, Xavier's just trying to help. I'll go find Eric and see if he can get you some."

Xavier rose, waving Brian off. "No, no my mistake, I'll correct it." Brian held his breath, wondering if he was the only one who caught the sarcasm. Xavier walked to the door, pulled it open, ready to leave. "I've got some things to check on first, so I'll find someone to get the order," he informed the five, then gazed thoughtfully at AJ. "Can't live without them, huh?" he remarked innocently and then gave Brian a wink before stepping out.

"Fucking bodyguard," AJ mumbled and Brian turned on him, worried and angry that Xavier might have heard AJ's last remark. He walked over to AJ, his mouth pressed into a tight line, resentment building at the thought that Kevin and now AJ might be at the receiving end of Xavier's sadistic little games.

"Dammit, you got a problem about Xavier, you come to me, not him. Stay the hell away from him, you got that, asshole?"

AJ, along with the other guys were astounded by his tone, but AJ made a quick recovery. "Oooh, choirboy just swore. I'm scared. I'll be good."

Brian was shaking, more from frustration than anger at his inability to control the situation. Discouraged, he slumped into a chair, running a trembling hand through his hair. "Bone, just leave him alone. Please." His voice was drained, flat, and AJ was

startled by his sudden change. Brian looked directly at AJ, pleading quietly with his eyes, and AJ, noticing the deep fatigue, became concerned.

"Oh, okay," he agreed slowly, feeling slightly uneasy. Brian kept staring at AJ, not believing him. AJ shifted uncomfortably, wanting to break eye contact from Brian's intense gaze. "Alright, alright. Jesus! What? Do you want me to sign it in blood?"

AJ watched as Brian relaxed, a small smile touching the corner of Brian's mouth at AJ's melodramatic promise. AJ frowned inwardly, deciding to leave quickly, afraid to have Brian see what he was really thought. Brian trusted him. Only problem was, he didn't trust himself.

He still disliked Xavier, now more than ever.

Chapter 26:

Disaster

The screaming in the arena was deafening, as it always was, so the guys were pretty good at reading their own sign language to one another when the need arose. Kevin signaled to the others that he was ready to jump over the catwalk, indicating the others to follow as soon as he was clear. Brian leaned over the railing, the last one to jump, holding his breath as he watched his cousin repel down the long rope. The clamor of shrieks rose a notch and Brian felt Nick nudge him. He turned to see Nick grinning at him, and he grinned back, knowing exactly how his friend felt. It was still a rush to hear the shattering blast of music, to feel the vibration of 30,000 fans screaming their names. He leaned over again to see Howie, then Nick glide down. If only he didn't have to do this everytime. He had gotten over most of his fear of heights through sheer necessity, but that didn't mean he liked it.

Brian felt the bump of the steel railing as AJ leaped over the side, hearing him scream enthusiastically at the crowd below. Grabbing the steel rods on either side of him with gloved hands, he hefted his legs over the railing, sitting on the bar. Watching carefully as AJ descended, he began to gauge the distance and time necessary for his drop. Brian's attention was sidetracked as he felt rather than saw the taut rope that was holding AJ scrape against his own. Perplexed, Brian reached to push the swaying line away from his, annoyed that the offending cable was rubbing along his. Grabbing the line, he began to shove it away, only to feel shock as the taut cord jerked then slacken as it slip through his fingers. Frightened, Brian leaned down to see AJ freefall, his body turned upside down as the cord again tightened itself. Brian gasped as he watched AJ try unsuccessfully to straighten himself, hearing the roar of the crowd as they screamed their delight at AJ's comical antics. Only there was nothing comical about it. The rope slipped again another few feet, this time twisting AJ on his side, tangled up from the slackened cable and his own harness. Horrified, Brian tore his eyes away from the sight, seeking Kevin, Howie and Nick who were watching from below. Their faces were enough to let Brian know the seriousness of the situation. He brought up his right hand to his mouth and tore off his bulky glove, his left hand wrapped around the bar to hold him steady. He repeated the process with his left hand, screaming at himself to hurry. A surprised yell of fear floated up to Brian and he froze a moment as he watched AJ drop again, twirling sickeningly high above the crowd. Heart racing, Brian took a deep breath and jumped off the ledge, repelling himself towards AJ, terrified that he would not reach him in time.

"AJ!" he screamed over the crowd, hoping his disoriented friend could hear him. Brian slid down faster, feeling the stinging burn of the rope. AJ looked up, his face contorted in fear as he watched Brian skim down until he was even with him, stretching an extended arm out. He copied Brian's tactic and ripped off his own glove, his other hand clinging fiercely to his harness as he dangled wildly back and forth. Timing his lunge for AJ's hand Brian dived as AJ came close, their fingers interlocking for a brief second only to be ripped away as AJ's rope again jerked then plunged another few yards. Furious

that he was so close to catching his friend, Brian repelled further down, raw determination etched in his face.

"AJ, get ready, get ready to grab!" he screamed, fear now taking control as he realized this might be his last chance to save AJ before the rope broke. He reached out for AJ once more, felt the reassuring grasp of AJ's fingers clasp his, and pulled as hard as he could.

"Grab on, Bone! Let go of your rope and grab me! Hurry!" Brian gasped, trying to close the gap between them. Both felt AJ's rope slip once more, and they lunged frantically at one another, both connecting just seconds before the rope snapped. Brian's yell of pain fell to deaf ears as the crowd erupted into applause, screaming their delight at the "show" orchestrated above them.

Beads of sweat sprung from Brian's brow as the weight of AJ's dangling body strained his shoulders and arms, sharp stabs of laser hot pain racing through his back as he fought to hold onto AJ, both of AJ's hands firmly clamped onto Brian's right wrist. The combined weight of the two made them sway a little and Brian saw the panic in his friend's face.

"Bone! I've got you. I'm not going to drop you!" Brian promised fiercely, determined they would both fall to their deaths before he ever let go of AJ. Still high in the air, Brian realized he needed both of his hands to repel them down. Slowly, agonizingly, he pulled AJ up, heaving with all his strength. AJ managed to wrap himself around Brian's waist and legs, leaving Brian's hands free to maneuver the rope. "Hang on, hang on, we're almost there!" he yelled to AJ, not sure if his friend heard him over the noise of the fans. Ignoring the excruciating pain in his back, Brian descended as fast as he dared, frantically looking down for help below. He felt AJ unexpectedly release his hold and Brian gasped in shock as AJ fell, only to sigh in relief when he realized they were only a few feet above the stage.

He touched the ground and collapsed in agony as the pain took over, curling up into a ball. He sensed a swarm of people surrounding him shouting questions that he couldn't understand, felt Nick and Kevin picking him up as he yelled in pain, saw the stage go dark as they carried him and AJ off the stage. The noise was deafening, the musicians were playing, and the excited yells of the clapping fans made Brian realize that the show was still continuing.

Nick tried to place Brian down as gently as he could, cringing as Brian cried out in pain.

He glanced over to Howie who, with another stagehand, was helping AJ out of his wiring harness and costume. Nick caught AJ's attention. "Are you okay?" he asked, worried. AJ gave a shaky thumb's up as he kicked off the last of the superhero's costume, then ran over to Brian, who was crouched in a hunched-over position. Kneeling to get eye level with Brian, AJ looked questioningly at Nick who shook his head.

"Where's a goddamn doctor?" shrieked AJ, glancing around. "We need a doctor, now!" AJ gazed worriedly at Kevin, then at Howie who was talking, of all things, to Xavier. The large bodyguard came over and knelt down next to Brian, ignoring AJ's heated stare.

"Brian! Brian! Look at me. How do you feel?"

Brian shook his head, unable to speak. "How the hell do you think he feels?" screamed AJ, incensed. Xavier turned from Brian to roughly shoved AJ away from the kneeling singer. He then began to ease the injured singer's costume off, all the while talking quietly into his ear. AJ watched stunned as Brian, now on his hands and knees, began struggling to stand up. Ignoring Xavier, AJ grabbed Brian's arm to help steady him, viewing Brian's face closely. "Brian, no. Don't get up. Wait for a doctor, man."

"I'll be okay, Bone. I can make it through the concert. Help me up."

"No, man. No way."

"I can do it. Let me do it," Brian pleaded, resting on his knees. AJ frowned then looked at the other guys for advice.

"Kevin?"

"Brian, no. You need to be checked out. We can cover for you." Kevin had to shout to be heard over the impatient pounding of feet now coming from the fans. The musicians played on, returning to the same chords over and over.

"Shit!" yelled Nick, edgy from the restless crowd. He glanced at Brian, then back to the stage. "Bri, you think you can do it?" Brian nodded, biting back the pain he felt radiating from his lower back. Brian opened his hand to show the guys two small white pills. "Xavier gave these to me. Pain killers. I'll take them, do the concert, then I'll have a doctor check me out later, okay?"

"No!" argued AJ, upset. He reached angrily for the pills but Brian beat him, shoving the two into his mouth. "B-Rok!"

Brian shook his head in reply. "I'm okay, really. Come on. Give me a few minutes for these to work, then I'll be alright."

Nick glanced at his friends, saw the indecision in their faces, and decided to take control. "Okay, listen up guys. I'm gonna go out there and talk to the audience, stall a little until Brian's painkiller kicks in. Give me a signal when Bri is ready." Giving his friend an encouraging smile, he strode out onto the stage, the crowd erupting into shrieks and cheers. The music died away and Brian heard him laughing and joking to the audience, the crowd loving every minute of this unplanned event.

AJ, uneasy about the pills Brian took, surveyed Brian critically. "Man, are you sure about this, those pills?"

"Bone, they're working already," Brian lied, trying to give him his most relaxed smile. AJ shook his head skeptically, unsure. He locked his own brown eyes onto Brian's bright blue eyes for a long moment, desperately wanting to apologize for his behavior, to thank him for saving his ass. He opened his mouth to speak, but Brian shook his head, already aware of AJ's feelings. "Don't. It's okay," he said simply, understanding.

AJ tried hard not to look at Xavier who was standing nearby, quietly watching. He bent down along with Howie and Kevin to gingerly help Brian into a standing position. They listened in amazement as Nick carried on, obviously enjoying the moment. Brian had to laugh, as much as it hurt him. "What a ham!" he commented.

AJ, determined to help, gave a lop-sided grin to Brian, Kevin and Howie. "Hey," he boasted, "you think Nick is a ham? Watch this!" AJ ran out onto the stage, playfully sneaking up from behind and jumping onto Nick's back. The crowd roared their approval as AJ began to tease Nick, telling little untrue rumors about Nick that almost left the blond singer speechless. Almost. Nick began his own false stories, exaggerating with each one.

Howie laughed, ready to join the group. He tapped Brian lightly on the shoulder. "Hanging in there?" Brian nodded, gesturing for his friend to go onto the stage. Howie left with one last parting glance and the screams once more rose to an ear-splitting level.

Kevin shook his head, his hand wrapped firmly around his cousin's arm for support.

"I think we've started a whole new thing. No singing, just horsing around!"

Brian nodded in agreement, unable to smile. He felt a trickle of sweat trail down his back as he fought for control, afraid of the unknown painkillers he swallowed, afraid of knowing he couldn't continue without them, afraid that they weren't working fast enough. Forcing himself not to think about the consequences, he stared at Xavier who was watching Brian closely. It took all of his willpower not to turn away from his intense gaze but Brian locked eyes with his bodyguard, determined not to let Xavier see the agony he was in, the torture that Xavier's whispered words produced. The pain that shot through his arm and back was nothing compared to the shock of what Xavier had whispered into his ear.

Too bad you saved him.

Brian finally broke eye contact with his tormentor, turning to view the antics of Nick, Howie and AJ on stage. His mind burned with revenge as he wondered how he could stop Xavier, how he could stop all this madness. Somehow, somehow he promised himself, he would kill the one who had nearly caused the death of his friend.

Chapter 27:

Agony

It was the longest and most painful two hours in Brian's life and it was only through the expert and caring help of everyone that he made it through. The pills gave him some relief, enough to make it bearable through half of the show, but then the pain returned with a vengeance. During the last hour the dancers surrounded him during the active dance routines, blinding the audience from his non-existent movements. The camera crew was given instructions to avoid closeups of him on the big screen, lighting made sure to soften any glaring lights pointed directly at him. AJ and Nick took over, exaggerating their dancing and singing to pull attention towards them and away from Brian. But there was little they could do when it was Brian's turn to sing. From years of singing together they understood the unspoken show must go on motto, but cringed inwardly for their friend, aware of the pain he was enduring. Their concern turned to raw admiration as he continued, not missing a beat, his voice ringing strong and clear.

Howie heaved a sigh of relief as the show ended, hurriedly leaving the stage, the screams and applause ringing in his ears as all five exited through the open side door. He turned to check on Brian, who was just behind him only to see Brian double over then sink to his knees. Howie caught him before he hit the floor, yelling at Kevin for help. The two helped carry Brian into the dressing room, followed by Nick, AJ, and an assortment of concerned band and stage crew. As gently as they could, Howie and Kevin laid Brian down on the ground, only to hear the cries of pain as the injured Backstreet Boy coiled in agony.

Kevin swore in despair, dropping down next to him. He tried to touch Brian, to help him, but his cousin slapped his hand away, maddened by pain, even at the gentlest touch. Frantic, Kevin looked at AJ who glanced about the room. He saw Sam, their stage manager pushing his way into the room, followed by what looked like paramedics. Frustrated by the swelling crowd, AJ exploded in anger.

"Get out! Everyone! Anyone who isn't a Backstreet Boy or a doctor, get out!" He began to shove everyone towards the door, trying to make a path. The group took their cue, not willing to deal with an irate AJ and left. The paramedics knelt down to examine Brian, who was now curled into a fetal position. Unable to get a coherent answer from Brian, one paramedic started to question Kevin, while the other began to open a box of medical supplies, pulling out several items. Nick dropped to his knees, trying to get eye level with Brian. "B-Rok! Hold on, we've got the paramedics here. They're gonna give you something for the pain, okay?" He desperately wished Brian would look at him, but Brian moaned and curled up even tighter. Nick glanced up to see Howie pacing the floor, AJ now talking excitedly to the paramedic. Nick tentatively placed a hand on Brian's head to try and reassure him, feeling helpless.

"Nick!" said Kevin. "Move! The paramedic is going to give Brian something for the pain." Nick stood up and moved out of the way, standing next to AJ who was fidgeting.

While the one paramedic began to talk to Brian in a soothing, reassuring voice, the other filled a syringe, holding it eye level to squirt some out. The paramedic nodded to the other one for confirmation, then plunged the needle into Brian's exposed left arm. AJ, who was still fidgeting, knelt down next to Brian.

"Bri, hang on. They gave you something for the pain. It should be working soon." He turned to the paramedic, his voice pleading. "Right?"

The medic smiled, nodding. "I gave him morphine. He'll be feeling no pain real soon."

AJ, relieved, turned back to his friend, already noticing a change in Brian's posture. The injured singer's body had relaxed, he was now lying on his side. Brian breathed heavily, his face covered in sweat, his clothes soaked from perspiration. As the pain wore off, his breathing became more regular, turning from his side onto his back. He placed shaky hands over his eyes, to ward off the glare of the ceiling lights and the worried stares of his friends.

"Now I know how an addict feels after a rush. I love drugs. God bless drugs." Brian removed his hands from his eyes, a tiny smile forming at the corner of his mouth. For a moment no one spoke, astonished. Then the guys broke into relieved laughter, amazed that Brian was able to joke.

Brian reached out and AJ grabbed his hand, gripping it firmly. "You're going to be okay, Rok."

Brian nodded, relaxing in the comforting grasp of his friend. He watched quietly as the paramedics placed him onto a gurney, strapping him down tightly. He closed his eyes as the medics wheeled him out the room, AJ in front, the rest following behind. Feeling embarrassed by his helplessness, he did the only thing he knew how to do, tease.

"Hey, Nick, no practicing on that Nintendo game until I get back."

Nick jogged up to catch his friend. "I won't."

Brian laughed a little. "Yeah, sure. Twenty bucks says I'll whip your ass next time."

Nick, never one to pass up a bet, grinned. "You're on, loser."

Howie shook his head, then smiled at Kevin. "Looks like things are back to normal."

"I hope so," AJ commented wearily. Stopping at the outside door AJ leaned against the inside wall watching the paramedics prepare to transport Brian to the ambulance waiting outside. Each Backstreet Boy came up briefly to give Brian words of encouragement, AJ last of all.

"Thanks for saving my sorry ass," AJ grinned, then quickly placed his sunglasses back on to hide his burning eyes. Brian smiled at his feeble attempt, knowing AJ too well. He looked at his friend, uncomfortable with AJ's gratitude. He wanted to say something,

anything. But how could he say thank you when he knew that he was the reason of AJ's near death?

AJ waited for a reply, watching Brian's smiling face change to one of sorrow and regret? AJ couldn't be sure. Curious, AJ started to say something, only to stop as Brian's expression turn into something he could read. As Brian was wheeled into the back of the ambulance AJ noted anger, pure hatred radiating from his eyes. Confused, AJ turned around. The area was filled with all sorts of people, the curious along with well-wishers.

AJ missed Xavier's form standing to one side, his arms crossed, his eyes glittering back at Brian.

Chapter 28:

Getting Out

Brian winced slightly as the nurse pulled out his IV, placing a bandage over the bruised vein. As she rolled the IV cart out of the room she gave him an encouraging smile and Brian gave her a fake one back. Rubbing his arm, he carefully slipped out of the uncomfortable bed, ecstatic at not having to drag that damn IV tubing around anymore. It had been three days, three days of unbelievable boredom, pain, and tests. If anyone hated hospitals, it was him, and to top things off the doctors had decided to do the annual exam for his heart. He wanted to scream. He walked over to the window and pulled back his curtain slowly, peeking down at the scene below. A throng of girls patiently waited, signs of get well scattered among them. Brian heard a faint scream and he dropped the curtain in a hurry. They knew. Somehow they always knew where he was. He sighed and turned back to crawl onto his bed, searching for the remote control. His hospital gown got tangled up, baring his ass and he swore, trying to straighten it. He heard a male voice chuckle and he turned to see the doctor standing in the doorway.

"What my 14-year-old daughter wouldn't give to see that!"

Brian grimaced. On top of the hassles of the hospital, he had to get a funny doctor.

Ignoring the remark, Brian chose to glare at him instead. The doctor walked in and sat down next to his bed, flipping for a few moments through Brian's chart. Brian impatiently waited for him to finish, eager to ask some questions. The middle-aged physician closed the chart, hugging it to his chest. "Well," he said.

"Well, what?" Brian snapped.

"I bet your ready to leave today, right?"

Brian's mouth fell open, surprised. "I can leave? Today? I thought you told me there were some more tests you wanted to take!"

The doctor shook his head. "No, no more tests. All your results came back negative. Everything's fine. Didn't I tell you? You're a little under your ideal body weight, but I guess that's due to our wonderful hospital food, huh?"

If it was legal to shoot doctors, this one would have been dead a minute ago. Brian fumed inwardly, furious. He opened his mouth to complain about the lack of communication but thought the better of it. He was going to request something and it wouldn't be good idea to get on the wrong side of him.

Brian's physician reached over to give him a pat of reassurance on his shoulder. "Any questions, any concerns I can answer for you before you go?" He peered at Brian over his reading glasses, waiting expectantly. Brian mentally crossed his fingers, praying that his acting ability was up to par.

"As a matter of fact, doctor, I was wondering if you could write me a prescription for some sleeping pills. Strong ones."

Brian watched as the doctor's eyebrows rose in question, sensing his curiosity at the request for sleeping pills. Brian took a deep breath. Here goes nothing. "Well, you see, I haven't been sleeping that well. Tour and all. Different rooms, uncomfortable beds, you know. Sure would help me a lot." Brian gave him a distraught look, wondering if his scheme was backfiring, that the doctor could detect his deception. Brian sensed hesitation on the doctor's part and plunged on, inspiration suddenly hitting him.

"Fourteen-year-old daughter, huh? Whose her favorite Backstreet Boy?"

Distracted, Brian's doctor paused for a moment. "Uh," he said sheepishly, "I'm not sure."

"AJ?" offered Brian helpfully. "I can get AJ to sign a hat for her."

"No, not AJ," drawled the doctor, lost in thought.

"Is it Kevin? How about a signed concert shirt?"

The doctor shook his head, unsure. "Is that the tall one?"

"Yes," agreed Brian. "Wait, no. Nick is tall too." This was getting annoying.

"Nick?" Brian's doctor said slowly, contemplating.

"Yes, Nick. Tall, blond, the youngest?"

"Yeah, I think it's Nick."

Brian nodded, happy to be getting somewhere. "Okay. What would she like? Tickets, backstage passes?"

The doctor brightened. "Tickets. Tickets would be great. Do you think she could she meet Nick?"

"Sure, no problem." Your daughter can marry him, just give me that prescription! promised Brian, biting his lip in anticipation.

Pulling his script pad out of his pocket, he scribbled something on it, ripped it off, and handed it to Brian. "Here's a month's worth. See how it goes. If you need refills, contact your primary care physician, okay?"

Brian nearly snatched it out of his hand, nodding in agreement, silently praising the perks of being a Backstreet Boy. He heard a sharp rap on the open door and he looked

up to see Nick standing there. Brian waved him in. "Nick! Speak of the devil! We were just talking about you. I just promised my doctor here that his daughter could meet you."

Nick shrugged, hitching his hip onto the end of Brian's bed. "Sure, no problem," he agreed, holding out his hand for a shake.

The doctor shook his hand, a frown forming on his face. "You're Nick?"

Nick smiled. "Last time I looked."

Brian's doctor coughed, uncomfortable. "Uh, I thought you had curly white hair."

Nick laughed. "You're thinking of Justin Timberlake."

"Yeah, that's it. That's who Amber likes. Justin of the Backstreet Boys."

Brian smothered a groan, quickly hiding his prescription under the sheets. Nick looked at the doctor, puzzled. "Justin is with NYSNC. Not Backstreet."

The doctor gave an embarrassed laugh. "NYSNC, Backstreet, they're all the same, right?"

Oh, no, thought Brian, smothering another groan as he watched Nick stiffen at the unintentional insult.

"No, not really," Nick replied coolly.

Sensing a problem, Brian jumped hastily out of bed, regretting the instant he did as his back protested painfully. Gritting his teeth, Brian forced a smile at his doctor and placed a hand on his shoulder, walking him to the door. "Thanks for everything. Don't worry about your daughter. I'll make sure she gets tickets and meets Justin." *Even if I have to pull every permed hair out of Timberlake's head to get him to do it!* thought Brian grimly.

The doctor smiled gratefully and gave a nod to Nick. "Nice meeting you," he said, then left.

Nick leaned forward on Brian's bed, watching the doctor head down the hallway, then straightened, shaking his head. He glanced at Brian who was standing by the door and then snickered. "Nice ass, Bri. So, how many nurses did you impress?"

Grabbing instinctively the back flaps to his gown, Brian turned and stuck out his tongue at his friend. "Ha, ha. Knowing you, you'd wear the gown open in the front for them!"

Nick smiled at the thought. "Only the pretty ones."

"Well, I hope you brought some of my clothes, or you're going to get another eyeful."

Nick playfully covered his eyes at the thought, then threw a small bag towards Brian. "Here. Underware and all."

Brian gratefully caught it and dressed quickly, vowing never again to take street clothes for granted. "How did you know I was getting out today?"

Nick, leaning back on Brian's empty bed, snagged the remote and began to surf the TV channels. "Didn't. Xavier told me. Asked me to come pick you up."

Brian sat down on a chair, bending his head low as he slowly tied his shoelaces. "Xavier knew?" he asked, trying to sound disinterested.

"Yeah." Bored with the selection, Nick turned off the TV and began tossing the remote absently back and forth between his hands. "Seems like he knows everything, doesn't it?"

Nervous, Brian began to bite at his thumbnail, then stopped, not wanting Nick to see him.

"I'm surprised he didn't come to pick me up," he commented lightly.

"Couldn't. He's in Florida."

Brian straightened up, confused. "Florida?"

"Took off for a few days. He does live there, ya know."

So do all of us, Brian thought worriedly. His mind raced, wondering what Xavier was up to.

"B-Rok....Bri....Brian!!"

Brian jumped as Nick yelled his name. "Hmm?"

"Jeez. Earth to Bri! What's this?" He held out a slip of paper, trying to study it.

Brian reached over and snatched it out of Nick's hand, grateful that doctors has such lousy handwriting. He folded it and stuffed it into his back pocket. "Just a script."

"Painkillers, huh?"

"Uh, yeah." Brian quickly changed the subject. "So, how did you sneak in here?"

Nick waved his hand. "Piece of cake. Nobody saw me. Nothing's too hard for Nick the Great."

"Really." Brian smiled wickedly. "Go look out the window."

Curious, Nick got up from the bed and pulled the curtains apart. He gazed down and a unison scream of delight rose from below. "Shit!" He let go of the curtain and turned to see Brian smirking.

"They know you're here now."

"Thanks a lot, asshole."

"Anytime." Brian turned around to see a nurse holding discharge papers. He signed as quickly as he could, giving her a sincere smile as she gushed over what a thrill it was to have him as a patient. He signed a few autographs for her then made Nick sign some too.

As soon as she left, Brian packed what little he had. "I'm starving," he announced. "Let's go get the biggest, greasiest hamburger we can find."

"Sounds good to me. Only how are we gonna get past those?" Nick jerked his thumb, indicating the eager fans outside.

Brian slapped his arm. "Nothing's too hard for Nick the Great, remember?"

"It doesn't help when I have Brian the Idiot with me."

Brian laughed as they walked out of his room, each arguing over who had the cleverest escape plan.

Chapter 29:

The Meeting

One by one the Backstreet Boys straggled into the small conference room, dressed in various states of disarray. Howie, the first to arrive, tossed his ever present duffel bag down and flopped into the nearest high-backed chair, bringing his feet to rest on the table. The voice mail had indicated an early meeting for today, located at the arena in which they were to perform tonight. He rubbed his face wearily, mentally noting to himself to remember to shave. In a hurry to be on time he had forgotten to do it. He glanced at the empty room and sighed.

Figures. No one takes these meetings seriously anymore, he thought. He wondered if he had the time right when Kevin showed up. The oldest member gave Howie a nod of greeting and sat on the other side of the table, mimicking Howie's manner.

"So, where's everyone?"

Howie rolled his eyes. "Go figure. What's this meeting about, anyway?"

Kevin shrugged, lacing his hands behind his head. "Most likely about safety measures. Stage crew still trying to figure what happened to AJ's rope."

"Yeah. Makes me a little nervous." They both sat quietly, lost in their own thoughts, until Howie broke the silence.

"You think Brian is up for tonight?"

"Yeah, I think so. I hope so. Hell, I don't know. Let's ask Brian when he gets here."

"Ask me what?" Kevin and Howie turned to see Brian walking in, Nick and AJ following behind, their hands full of McDonalds' take out bags. AJ tossed each one a bag, keeping one for himself.

"Ask me what?" Brian repeated, placing the cardboard carrying case of juice down and handing one to Kevin.

Howie reached into his bag and opened up an Egg McMuffin. Taking a bite, he asked, "We were wondering how you're feeling. You okay for tonight?"

"He's fine," answered Nick for him. "Doctor gave Bri some kick-ass painkillers, just in case." Kevin looked at his cousin questioningly and Brian nodded.

"Nick's right. I'll be fine." He sat down next to AJ, opened his bag and took a bite, hoping the sudden interest in his food would cancel anymore prying questions.

AJ leaned over Brian, reaching for an O.J. "Okay, I'm here, not willingly, but I'm here. What's this meeting...," AJ stopped in mid-sentence as he noticed Xavier and their stage manager, Sam, entering the room. AJ took an exaggerated bite of his McDonald's breakfast then looked at the bodyguard, a smirk covering his face. Xavier ignored AJ's antic, seeking the location of Brian. Catching the blond singer's eye, he nodded once, then sat down across from him, folding his arms across his chest. Brian broke eye contact, resuming a false interest in his food. He could feel Xavier scrutinizing him and his stomach churned a little. It had been four days since he had seen him, four days of relief, even if most of it was spent in the hospital. He felt for the bottle of pills that he carried in his pocket, too scared to let them out of his sight, even for a moment. He took another bite of his food, the taste now like sawdust in his mouth.

"Guys, if I could have your attention, please?" Sam stood up, not wanting to sit. After years of standing on the job, he felt more comfortable that way. "I called this meeting to discuss a few things with you regarding the last concert." Kevin looked knowingly at Howie, then turned his attention back to their manager.

"Xavier and I have gone extensively over AJ's accident, examining it from every angle. We feel that..." Sam was interrupted by a small cough and he turned to see a nervous stage crewmember standing at the door, holding a clipboard in one hand, a cell phone in the other.

"What?" questioned Sam, annoyed.

The young man handed him the board and Sam scanned it quickly. "Shit. I knew it. Okay, tell them I'll be there." He surveyed the five Backstreet Boys before him. "I gotta go. Xavier will explain everything to you, okay?" He glanced at the bodyguard for confirmation. Xavier nodded, waving him to go.

Howie, the first to finish, crunched his bag into a small ball, then brushed the crumbs off of him. "Okay, Xavier, what's up?" Xavier straightened up, his hands folded on the table.

"First of all, I just want to say how glad I am nothing serious happened to Mr. McLean and that I'm personally looking into what could possibly have caused this."

Liar! Brian seethed, keeping his head down, his jaw clenched in anger. You caused it! His fingers slipped around the plastic container of pills and he relaxed, feeling more in control. Soon, he told himself.

Kevin spoke up. "Xavier, have you any idea what caused AJ to fall? Was the rope faulty? Did one of the stage crew mess up?"

Xavier shook his head, spreading his arms wide. "It's still a mystery. The rope was fine. And the crew always double-checks their rigging. As far as Sam and I can tell, it was a fluke. We've replaced all the ropes and wiring harnesses with new ones. We are now triple-checking everything. If anyone of you feels uncomfortable about tonight's jump, speak up."

Nick glanced at his friends around the table, then answered. "I'm okay with it." Howie and Kevin nodded their approval. AJ's fingers were laced together, contemplating the question. He glanced at Brian, with a questioning look.

"B-Rok, you alright with this, man?"

Brian was surprised at AJ's concern over him. Of the five here, AJ had the most to worry about, having experienced the almost-fatal accident. "Yeah, I'm okay if you are."

AJ shrugged his approval to Xavier. "We're cool."

"Good. Next, I want to talk about Brian's intruder." Xavier stood up and walked around the table, placing his hands on the singer's shoulders. "As you all know, Brian and I had a rather nasty encounter with him. I'm hoping it was an isolated incident, that we won't run into him again." Xavier stopped for a moment to look at Brian. "But you never know, right?" Brian felt the subtle but firm pressure being applied to his shoulder and nodded in reply. Xavier relaxed his grip. "All the incidents that have happened recently seem to be random acts, but I'm not going to take any chances. That is why I am still insisting that I have control of the hotel arrangements."

Brian felt despair well up in him, realizing how brilliant Xavier's strategy was. By making himself look like their protector, it pulled any suspicion away from him, enabling him free access. Xavier walked back to his seat and sat down, looking for the five's support. Brian glanced down at his hands, unable to look at the bodyguard.

AJ spoke up, but with another question. "What about the threats Brian was receiving? Is he still getting those?"

The bodyguard leaned back in his chair, giving him a genuine smile. "No. I've was able to track those notes to Florida, but then I met a dead end. That was the reason I was in Florida a few days ago, to check it out."

Of course Brian knew it was all a lie. He fidgeted slightly in his chair, eager to leave. Taking a deep breath he looked up at Xavier. "Well, I think everything is better now, thanks. I don't know about the rest of you but I've got a million things to do before tonight. Thanks for the update." He stood up suddenly and as if on cue, the other four guys agreed, rising to collect their things. Xavier remained seated, his mouth compressed into a tight line as he watched Nick, then Howie leave the room. Kevin was talking to AJ and Brian edged around them, trying to reach the door.

"Mr. Littrell, if you have a moment, I need to speak to you. Alone."

This froze Brian in his tracks and caught the attention of Kevin and AJ. "Really busy now, Xavier. Maybe later, okay?"

"It will only take a second," replied Xavier smoothly. He coughed, looking embarrassed.
"It's, uh, about my salary."

Disinterested, Kevin turned to leave, signaling for AJ to come. More curious than Kevin, AJ grudgingly followed him out, struggling with a sudden temptation to eavesdrop outside the closed door. Not willing to explain his odd behavior, AJ reluctantly abandoned the idea, slowly trailing behind Kevin.

Chapter 30:

Heart to Heart Talk

As soon as the door closed Xavier shot out of his seat, grabbing Brian viciously by the arm. With one swift blow, he smashed his fist into the blond singer's midsection, knocking the wind out of him. Brian fell immediately to his knees, gasping, unable to draw air. Xavier crouched down next to Brian, his face just inches away.

"Where are they?" he hissed, enraged. Brian wheezed heavily, his hands crossed across his stomach and he shook his head, confused. Xavier clamped cruelly down onto the singer's hand, crushing it. "The pills."

Through a haze of pain Brian's mind screamed with fury. How the hell did he know? He looked into the bodyguard's eyes, refusing to answer, matching his will with that of the much larger man. "Where are they?" Xavier repeated, applying more pressure and Brian struggled, determined to fight.

Impatient, Xavier shoved him to the ground, punching him once more, efficiently canceling Brian's resistance. Brian curled onto his side, the pain overwhelming. He felt, rather than saw, Xavier frisk his body, hands patting down his pockets. With a grunt of satisfaction Xavier pulled away, the small container of pills firmly in his grasp. Ignoring the muffled cries of pain from Brian, he held the prescription up to the light, reading the label.

"Sleeping pills," he stated flatly. "Never thought you'd be that spineless to commit suicide."

A choked cry of laughter escaped from Brian as he leaned on one elbow, struggling to sit upright. He finally managed to sit cross-legged on the floor, hands wrapped around his stomach for support. "It wasn't for me," he spat, glaring up at Xavier, "It was for you."

Xavier tossed the bottle absentmindedly up and down in his hand, contemplating Brian's scheme. His eyes narrowed into slits, a small smile forming against his darkly-tanned skin. He bent down on one knee to examine the young singer more closely, then patted the young singer's shoulder, almost affectionately. "You wanted to kill me," he said softly. "I'm impressed."

"Well, don't be," Brian snarled, rising unsteadily to his feet. "I'll try again."

A genuine shout of laughter rang out and Xavier clapped his hands in enjoyment. "That's the spirit! I knew I could count on you! What a game this is going to be."

Brian walked over to the nearest chair, wincing as he sat down. "How did you know?" he asked dully. Xavier, high on the moment, raised his eyebrows in question.

"How did you know I had sleeping pills?"

Xavier cocked his head to one side, a sly smile appearing. "Now what kind of game would we be playing if I told you all my secrets, huh?" He leaned against the side of the conference table, arms crossed, studying the ashen-faced singer. "You know, I didn't hit you that hard. You need to toughen up."

"And I guess you're the one to show me how," sneered Brian. He immediately regretted saying that when he noticed the bodyguard's face light up.

"As a matter of fact, yes. If you were in the right kind of shape, you wouldn't have been in so much pain when AJ grabbed you."

The circumstances of that night flashed back to Brian and he felt himself filled with resentment. "Why did you do that to AJ? I thought this whole "game" was between you and me."

Xavier looked at Brian, his face changed into one of loathing. "He's an asshole. He deserved it. Besides, you don't need him. In fact, you don't need any of them."

Brian sat up a little straighter in his chair, alarmed by Xavier's matter-of-fact tone. He tried to compose himself, troubled by this unexpected turn. "I don't need any of them," he repeated blandly, hoping for an explanation, praying he kept any emotion from showing.

The large man nodded, warming up to the subject. "Yes. You're so much better. You could go solo, have your own career."

Brian shook his head. "Xavier, where I am today is because of the Backstreet Boys. I need them as much as they need me. Our success is because we are a team."

Xavier's face went blank, his enthusiasm gone. "I don't give a shit about the others. You're the one I picked, remember? The game has changed. I think it's time you got ready to launch a solo career, with me as your trainer."

Brian rose out of his chair, anger and defiance etched in his face. "And if I don't?" Xavier quickly stood, his posture imposing. Brian held his ground firmly, not wavering. Xavier suddenly relaxed, giving him a calculating smile.

"Had a pretty busy time in Florida, the last three days. Lots of things to do, people to see..." Xavier left the last sentence hanging, waiting, watching for the sign of comprehension to spread across the singer's face. It didn't take but a moment and Xavier slapped Brian's shoulder approvingly "Good. I'm glad you understand." He grabbed the door and swung it open with a flourish, sweeping his hand to usher Brian out.

"Well, no time to waste," he stated cheerily. "Let's get going with your training, okay?"

Brian paused at the edge of the door, his voice low, his blue eyes filled with bitterness. "I'm gonna fight you every step," he promised.

Xavier's grinned. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Chapter 31:

Chance Encounter

Howie watched AJ with growing irritation, annoyed over the time it took for his friend to decide. He had been here nearly an hour, aimlessly wandering around the small boutique while AJ see-sawed between two distinctive hats. He turned to Howie. "I don't know. Which one do you like?"

"Bone, are you deaf? For the tenth and last time, I like the white one. And why are you asking me anyway?" Howie complained, noticing AJ favoring the black-striped one. "You never listen to me anyway."

"That's not true," argued AJ, as he handed the cashier his credit card. "I listen when you agree with me." He gave Howie a playful grin at the joke and Howie smiled in return, shaking his head. Feeling a poke in his ribs, Howie looked up from a watch display to see AJ motioning towards a young woman who was wandering around in the small store.

"Does that look like Claire to you?" he hissed. Howie craned his neck, trying to get a better look.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "I think so."

"Damn!" AJ hurriedly signed the receipt, stuffing it into his pocket. He slipped up behind the woman, swiftly placing a kiss onto the nape of her neck. She stiffened in surprise and swung around to see a grinning old acquaintance.

"AJ! You scared me half to death!" She gave him a warm hug, which turned into a warmer kiss. Howie came forward, coughing a little.

"Hi, Claire." Claire broke away from AJ's grasp, delighted to see him. "Howie!" She reached for a hug. "How are you?" She eyed him appraisingly. "You're looking better everyday!"

"Hey!" argued AJ. "What about me?"

"For a thousand bucks, I'll tell you," teased Claire, her green eyes full of mischief.

AJ whistled his admiration. "A thousand. Didn't cost me a thousand last time, sweetheart." He winked at her.

Claire took the bait. "It will now." She gazed at Howie, a grin forming. "But for Howie, it's free. He's so cute."

Howie smiled at her, then turned to smirk at his friend. "I'm free," he boasted and AJ ignored him.

"So, I heard you guys were in town. Good timing. How's Kevin?"

"Taken."

"Rats." Claire pouted, then brightened. "Nick?"

AJ was enjoying their teasing. "Immature."

"Not where it counts, I'm sure." Howie and AJ laughed at her lewd joke.

"So, how's choirboy?"

"Bri? He's..." AJ paused, lost in thought. He had seen Brian this morning changing into sweats in the dressing room of the arena. Curious, he had watched as Brian stretched a little, jogging into place. "Wassup, man?" he questioned, "gonna play some ball?" Brian had shook his head, not answering him, grabbing his duffel bag and a couple bottled waters as he roughly walked passed AJ. Pissed by Brian's attitude he almost called him on it, only to stop when he saw the passing look on Brian's face as he hurried down the hall.

Haunted by that look, AJ turned to Claire, an idea forming in his head. "Say Claire," he drawled slowly, "are you busy tonight?"

* * * * *

"B-Rok is so gonna kill you, man," warned Howie, as they leaned into the backseat comfort of their bodyguard's car. AJ shoved his foot at the many packages lying on the floorboard, trying to find some legroom.

"I tell ya, D, you shoulda seen him. If he doesn't need to get laid, I'll eat my new hat here." He patted it happily of his head, leaning over the backseat to get a glimpse of himself in the rear view mirror.

"Hey," warned the bodyguard. "Sit down. I can't see."

AJ shrugged and leaned back into the leather seat. He tried to ignore Howie's accusing look, but couldn't. "Besides, Claire is something special, man. On top of being a great lay, she can really look into the 'ole mind. She's smart. Didn't I ever tell you she almost has a degree in psychology?"

Howie shook his head. "Uh, no. I don't think you ever talked about her "abilities" in that category."

AJ punched him. "Very funny. Anyway, I'm worried about Bri. He's not himself. I think Claire can figure what might be going on."

"And if she can't?"

AJ shrugged and tilted his hat over his eyes. "Then he gets the fuck of his life."

Chapter 32:

Close Encounter

Brian threw the duffel bag down onto the floor, stripping the sweat-soaked clothes off his body. He glanced at the clock on the wall, noting he had three hours before showtime. Good, he thought. I plan on spending it all in the shower. His shoulder and arm ached as he reached for the shower handle, trying hard not to remember how many curls Xavier had made him do with weights. He turned the water on full blast, steam rising instantly as he slipped into the stall, savoring its warmth. He stood there as the water cascaded over his face, neck and chest, letting the heat soak into his tired muscles, relaxing his body as much as possible. After a while he turned around in the shower to let the stream flow down the back of his head and back, his forehead resting against the tile, willing his mind to relax to the heat as much as his body now was. It didn't work. His mind played over and over the events of the last hours, the drilling of Xavier's monotonous voice, the jogging, the weightlifting, even boxing. Brian gazed down to look impassively at the bruises forming on his body, wondering if he would ever look normal, trying to figure out a way to explain if any of the guys saw them. He stared at the fog-free mirror that was hanging on the tiled wall, hardly recognizing the expression that stared back at him. He looked trapped, like a caged animal. He shuddered for a moment, remembering the last hour. Exhausted from a run in the local park, Brian begged for a moment's rest. Xavier had frowned, but motioned for him to sit on a bench. Noticing a refreshment stand nearby, Xavier had jogged over to get them some juice. Brian watched him wearily, his gaze turning towards a church nearby. Almost mesmerized, Brian got up and crossed the street, yanking the heavy oak door open. His senses were assaulted by the quiet coolness of the interior, the smell of burning candles, the soft glow of the stained-glass hanging above. Noticing no one around, Brian quietly sat in the last seat, closing his eyes and enjoying the solitude. He said a small prayer then opened his eyes to see a well-worn Bible sitting next to him. He tentatively touched it, running his finger over the cracked binding and the faded gold-embossed name of the owner who had accidentally left it behind. A small flow of calmness enveloped through him and he didn't hear the creak of the front door open but felt the oak pew groan as Xavier sat down next to him, placing his hand carelessly on Brian's inner thigh. Or was it careless? Brian jumped up as if scalded, shocked and confused. Oh God, was Xavier gay? Was that what this was all about? His disgust showed clearly on his face as he looked at Xavier. "Stay the hell away from me," he hissed, incensed. Xavier stood up, his eyes glittering with an almost mad-like gleam as he grabbed Brian by the collar, hauling him close.

"I should beat the shit out of you right now," Xavier whispered. "Don't you ever, ever, think that I'm queer." He shoved Brian roughly out the church door, past the surprised look of two elderly women who were walking in.

The surreal scene floated before him and Brian grabbed for the bar of soap, as if washing his body would cleanse him of the sight. He finally shut off the water, toweling himself dry and threw on a clean T-shirt and pants. He padded barefoot into the dressing room, scanning the area for something to eat. It seemed like he had gone for days without food, his stomach growling, his hunger pangs almost matching the soreness of his stomach

muscles. He found a couple of apples lying in a wooden bowl and devoured them, relieved that for the moment it would suffice. He rummaged around his duffel bag and brought out his ever-handy Advil, reaching for a bottled water. He downed three in one swallow, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Hearing a small knock on his door he sighed, not wanting to see anyone just yet.

"Come in, it's open," he yelled, closing the cap back onto the bottle. The door slowly swung open and, half-expecting Xavier to pop through, Brian held his breath. He watched in amazement as a girl peeked her head through the door, then hesitantly entered. Clearly she was trespassing and Brian shook his head, wondering how a fan had managed to sneak past security.

"Look, no one is allowed back here..." he began, then stopped as he eyed her, thinking she looked somewhat familiar. Brian noticed that she was almost as tall as him, her curly auburn hair framing an incredible pair of green eyes. She wore a muted-gray silk shirt with matching skirt, a soft black leather jacket finishing the outfit.

She tossed her purse and coat casually onto a chair and gave him a friendly smile. "Hi, Brian, remember me?"

Brian gazed at her, at a loss, until it struck him. "Claire?" he questioned, disbelieving.

She nodded her head yes. "In person."

Brian smiled back, taking her in. The last time he had seen her, her hair had been longer, the makeup more pronounced, the clothes quite a bit more revealing. He recalled now where he placed her and coughed. "Uh, if you're looking for AJ, he's not here at the moment."

"That's okay, I'm not looking for him," she said lightly, her smile widening even further as she gazed frankly at him.

Uncomfortable at being scrutinized, Brian shifted uneasily, at a loss for words. "You look great," he said finally.

Claire watched him carefully for a moment then quickly closed the distance between them, slipping into his embrace, bringing her arms around his neck and drawing his mouth down to hers. She kissed him warmly, savoring the clean, fresh smell of him. Slowly she pulled away from the kiss, still in his arms, frowning slightly. "You look tired."

"I am."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No." Brian smiled tightly, gently easing himself from her hold. He stood a few feet from her, his arms crossing his chest, puzzled by Claire's sudden interest in his well-being. He

found it difficult making small talk with someone he barely knew and struggled with something to say.

"Well, I'm sure AJ will be glad to see you again."

"I guess."

Curious, Brian watched her as she casually wandered about the room, taking everything in. She stopped when she came next to him.

"Actually, I'm not here to see AJ. I came to see you."

"Me?"

Claire nodded. She moved in closer, her face and body mere inches away from Brian's. She noticed that he didn't move away, his blue eyes clear and steady, watching her intently. She held his gaze with her own, searching, waiting for a sign from him.

Brian felt his heart begin to race, a rush of desire and desperation flooding his mind and body. They stood apart, not touching, barely breathing. He broke his gaze, nervously glancing over her shoulder towards the door and she traced his look. Breaking into a grin, she walked over to the door, locked it, propping a chair against it for extra security.

She came back, this time wrapping her arms around his neck, her mouth next to his ear.

"There's nothing worse than being interrupted in the middle of something," she whispered teasingly.

He tried to turn his head only she wouldn't let him, her hands gently framing his jaw. "Claire," he pleaded gently, but she saw denial only in his eyes, his body hungrily responding to hers. Claire found his mouth again and this time kissed him in earnest, her kiss promising of untold pleasures to come. He circled his arms around her waist, his hands sliding lower as he pressed her closer to him. She could feel his growing need for her and she broke the kiss, giving him a sly grin in which he returned. Grabbing his shirt, she yanked it off him in one swift pull, tossing it to the ground. He did the same for her, admiring her for a moment before capturing her in his arms again. Claire laughed as he whispered something in her ear. AJ was right, she thought. He did need this.

Chapter 33:

Aftermath

Giving her hair a quick brush, Claire watched in some amusement as Brian slipped his shirt back on. "Brian, it's inside out," she informed him.

Balancing on one leg as he was pulling on his pants, he glanced at her, confused. "Huh?"

Claire laughed, pointing with her brush. "Your shirt. You put it on inside out."

He gave her a charming grin. "Oops." He corrected his mistake, yanking the shirt back on but not before Claire got a better look at his bruises. She bit her lower lip in distress, reminding herself to talk to AJ about it.

Brian sat down on a chair, lacing up his shoes. He watched as Claire straightened her skirt then glance for her purse. Brian got up and picked up her purse, handing it to her.

He gave her a small kiss, his eyes reflecting the warmth she felt in his kiss. "How much do I owe you?" he said softly.

Claire shook her head. "Nothing."

Brian raised his eyebrows in surprise, not believing her. "Come on. Are you telling me this was a pity fuck?"

Claire laughed and came close, tracing her finger across his mouth. "My, my," she said, sounding shocked. "Such a nasty word coming from a such a beautiful mouth."

Brian kissed her finger, giving her a wicked smile. "I can say more, if you want."

Claire laughed again, a smirk spreading across her face. "I think you said plenty of them a short time ago." She turned and snatched up her shoes, tucking one under her arm as she slipped the other one on. Hopping on one foot, she attempted to place her other shoe on, trying not to lose her balance. Brian caught her before she fell and she giggled as she watched Brian lightly kiss the top of her foot before sliding her shoe on.

"Ah, a Southern gentleman. Is Kevin as chivalrous as you?"

As he stood up, Brian winked at her and shrugged comically. "Don't know. I've never had him kiss my foot." Claire laughed and pushed him playfully. He caught her hand, pulling her closer, his eyes more solemn.

"Seriously, Claire. How much?"

"It's already been taken care of, Brian."

For a moment Brian panicked, his heart racing. He tightened his grip on her hand.
"From Xavier?"

"Whose Xavier?" Claire answered, troubled by the tension she felt in his voice and grip.
"It was AJ."

"AJ!" The astonishment in his voice was obvious. Brian rubbed the brow of his forehead with his hand and turned away from her, struggling to comprehend this. He paced a moment before turning back towards her. Brian gave a small sound of disbelief, then began to laugh. "You know, I am so going to kill him," he vowed, shaking his head at Claire.

"I ran into AJ today, shopping," explained Claire. "He figured you could use a little R & R." She smiled as she touched his face, relieved that he wasn't angry.

"And this is AJ's idea of R & R?"

"Well," said Claire, "it always worked for AJ!" She laughed when she saw Brian's face.
"And from judging, it worked for you, right?"

Brian rolled his eyes upward. "Yeah," he finally admitted. He looked at her. "Mind if I ask you a personal question?"

She heard the hesitancy in his voice and looked at him curiously. "Sure."

"Well, don't take this wrong, but I always thought you girls faked it."

Claire knew where this was going and for the first time in a long time she found herself embarrassed. "We do," she said softly.

"And?" he pressured gently.

She cursed him silently for being so perceptive, angry at herself for allowing her emotions to overrule a business transaction. She sighed, afraid to admit the truth to herself, knowing damn well he already knew the answer. She met his stare. "Yes, we always fake it. But I didn't with you. It was real." Her voice dropped even lower. "I enjoyed it. And I haven't enjoyed sex for a long time." She gave Brian a shaky laugh. "I guess I should be thanking you."

Brian gazed at her for a moment then reached out to pull her into his embrace. He kissed her, holding her until she stopped trembling. Claire rested her head onto his shoulder for a moment, then pulled back, giving Brian a small smile. Neither said a word as he opened the door for her, her hand enclosed in his. She squeezed it once and he returned the squeeze quickly, feeling her hand slip from his. She never turned back to look as she hurried down the hallway.

Chapter 34:

Enquiring Minds

AJ reached out and encircled his hand around Claire's arm, effectively stopping her from moving down the hall. "Hey," he said, "how did it go?"

Claire smiled inwardly at AJ, her arms folded across her as if annoyed. "AJ, haven't you ever heard the phrase 'don't kiss and tell?'"

"Not when a thousand dollars is involved, sweetheart!" snorted AJ. "Spill."

Claire sighed and leaned back against the wall, AJ leaning forward eagerly, excited as a small boy on Christmas Day. Her mouth twisted in a wry smile. *He really is adorable.*

"Well?" he questioned, impatient.

Her thoughts turned back to Brian and suddenly she found herself uncomfortable. "Uh, mission accomplished."

AJ spun around in delight. "I knew it!" he crowed, grabbing Claire by the shoulders and giving her a quick kiss. "Thanks, babe." AJ looked at her thoughtfully. "So, how was he?"

Claire gave him an exasperated look. "AJ!"

AJ shook his head, making a face. "No, no, not that! How did he seem? He's been acting kinda weird lately, like I told you. Notice anything?"

Claire thought for a moment. "No," she said slowly, "he seemed alright." She remembered the bruises. "Oh, the bruises!"

AJ looked at her with a frown.

"Bruises," she explained. "Brian had a lot of bruises, especially around his chest and stomach."

AJ waved a hand, dismissing Claire's observation. "I already know about that. He was injured a while ago." Claire eyed AJ skeptically. The bruises seemed more recent. She shrugged, dropping the subject. If AJ didn't seem concerned, she wouldn't be.

"Anything else?"

Claire paused for a moment. She shook her head. "Not really. He seemed nervous, but he got over that. Real quick." She gave AJ a grin, deciding to tease him. "Wish I could tell you more, but you'll just have to ask him for tips."

AJ looked astounded, but quickly regained his composure. "Tips? What tips could Brian possibly give me?"

Claire patted his face, giving him a contented smile. "Oh, you'd be surprised," she said lightly. AJ reached with his finger to slide his glasses down the bridge of his nose, giving her clear view of the skepticism revealed in his brown eyes. Highly amused at AJ's expression, she laughed, not noticing a large man glare at them as he passed by. She did notice AJ flipping the finger and surprised, turned to see why.

"Good God," she breathed, amazed by just the size of his retreating back. "Who is that?"

"A true asshole," muttered AJ. "Brian's bodyguard, Xavier."

"Xavier?" Claire looked at the young singer standing before her, frowning in thought.

"What? Don't tell me you know him!"

Claire shook her head. "No." She chewed on a fingernail, trying to sort something out. "You know, Brian was rather nervous after I told him there was no charge. He just about jumped out of his skin. Wanted to know if Xavier was behind it. I said no and he relaxed a little bit." She glanced down the empty hallway. "Do you think Xavier has anything to do with the way Brian's been acting?"

AJ rubbed the back of his neck tiredly and closed his eyes for a few seconds. "Possibly. I'm not sure. Hell, I can't even talk to Brian about it without him jumping all over my ass. One thing's for sure, I'm gonna find out."

Claire listened uneasily to the raw strength in his voice. Worried, she gripped his hand, giving him a quick kiss on his cheek. "Be careful," she whispered. AJ nodded, his eyes burning with determination.

Chapter 35:

A Change of Plans

Irritated at the unexpected security meeting, which had resulted in a complete waste of his precious time, Xavier hurried down the corridor, giving scant attention to the strange girl and AJ who were huddled in a corner. Hooker. He could spot them a mile away, no matter how classy they looked. He sensed AJ had made some rude comment as he strode by but he was too busy to respond; any other time he would have enjoyed taking the little shit down a notch or two. He barged into the dressing room, giving formality little thought. Brian jumped up from the chair he was sitting in, a startled and scared look crossing his face. Good. He liked catching the young Backstreet Boy off guard, it heightened the pleasure he got from their "little game". He dragged another chair over to where Brian sat, setting himself next to the uncomfortable singer. Xavier leaned forward in his chair, eager to discuss next day's schedule, when he caught a faint wiff of perfume and froze in surprise. His mind instantly recalled the girl standing outside with AJ and he dwelled on this for a moment, suddenly understanding the "emergency" meeting he was so desperately required to attend. A small flicker of grudging respect at AJ's cleverness grew and Xavier leaned back in his chair, a leer forming on his face.

"Well, was she any good?" His pointed question brought back the results he hoped for. Brian stood up, his face flushed and angry.

"I doubt you're interested in knowing, considering..." Brian insulted, incensed that Xavier found out. Xavier sprang from his chair, reaching over to grab a handful of blond hair. He yanked hard, bringing Brian up off his chair.

"That's gonna cost you, pal. Say about.....\$5000?"

Brian ignored the pain. "Queer," he spat.

Xavier yanked again, his eyes dark with rage. "\$10,000."

It was worth every dollar. Brian pried Xavier's hand away, stumbling backwards. "Faggot." He was unsure about Xavier's true sexual preference but he didn't care - he had found Xavier's Achilles' heel. Smiling with true malice he taunted, "Hey, I'm sure with 10 grand you could manage to find some guy who'd be willing to give you a blow job."

Agitated, Xavier's hands clenched and unclenched, and Brian steadied himself, waiting for the inevitable. It came in the form of one well-placed hit. Brian gasped, the kidney-punch causing him to sag, his full weight being supported by Xavier's massive arms. Xavier released his grip and Brian slumped to his knees, amazed, even in his pain, how one punch could hurt so much. He felt the bodyguard lift him up and place him back into the chair.

"Not bad, not bad at all," Brian heard the respect in Xavier's voice, the quiet admiration. "You play the game well. I let you get to me, to lose control, and no one has done that for a long time."

"I'm glad I made your day," Brian replied bitterly.

"Oh, you'll do more than that."

Alarmed, Brian straightened in his chair holding his side with an arm. "Such as?" he challenged.

Xavier began to walk around the room, animated. "I feel that our game has lost some of it's spice, you know? It's time to crank it up a bit."

A wave of mental exhaustion swept Brian and he fought hard to control it. "Crank it up," he repeated.

"Yes." Xavier came over to Brian, full of anticipation. "I think it's time to start concentrating fully on you leaving the Backstreet Boys. The sooner, the better."

Brian stared at the bodyguard in open-mouth disbelief. "Now? Before the concert tour is over?" Xavier smiled as Brian jumped up from his seat, watching the singer absorb the impact of that information.

The mental torture far out surpassed any physical pain he had endured and Brian cursed Xavier, understanding fully the power Xavier controlled over him in these mind games from hell. Brian turned to the bodyguard, desperation threatening to overwhelm him. He wondered what he could say to change his mind. "Xavier, just wait until the tour ends, then I'll leave. If the group breaks up now, we'll lose millions." Brian noticed his pleading was falling on deaf ears. "Millions, Xavier. Think about it. Money that could be yours, if you just wait."

Xavier grinned at Brian and gave him a thumb's up. "Nice try, Brian. However, as I said before, this is about you and me. And the game." Xavier gave the Backstreet Boy a look of fake sympathy as he patted the singer's shoulder. Brian angrily wrenched his shoulder away, his blue eyes turning a darker hue.

Xavier clapped his hands together and rubbed them in delight. "Okay, that's settled. Now, I'll let you choose. Do you want the easy way or the hard way?"

Brian eyed him suspiciously. He hated Xavier's little puzzles; hated the way he made him struggle for every bit of information. "And the easy way is...?" Fearful of Xavier's explanation Brian turned away from him to search for a bottled water, dread filling him as he heard the enthusiasm radiate from Xavier's voice.

"Well, the easy way is for me to end this group quickly. To be honest, I wouldn't mind taking that fucker AJ down at all. Same goes for Nick."

Trying not to shake, Brian turned slowly to face Xavier, stunned at the bodyguard's confession. He remembered Xavier's secret trip back to Florida and wondered what connection there might be. Brian took a long sip of water to steady himself, fearing the next question.

"What's the hard way?" Brian could see that Xavier was relishing every minute of this and damned him.

"The hard way or as I call it, the fun way, is to watch you do it." Xavier leaned comfortably against the wall, enjoying the expression that formed on the Backstreet Boy.

"Of course, I'll help in any way I can."

"Of course," shot back Brian sarcastically. He began to pace, biting his fingernails in consternation, ignoring the pleased look that spread across the bodyguard's face. Brian thought furiously for a while, finding ideas then rejecting them, planning ways to thwart Xavier, only to realize the futility in it. Then one idea came to mind, so pure, so simple. Brian raised his face to meet Xavier's, beaten but not down for the count. He still had a few cards to play.

"Okay, I choose the hard way. I'll break up the group. My way, understand? If you so much as harm any of the guys, I'll..." Brian left the sentence hanging and Xavier perked up, interested.

"You'll what?"

"I'll kill myself." Brian looked calmly at the bodyguard, pleased that Xavier realized he meant it. "So much for you're little game then, huh Xavier? No Brian, no game."

Xavier pushed himself against the wall, coming up to stare hard at Brian. He didn't speak for a moment, but when he did, it was low, almost a whisper. "You think I haven't thought of that already, you little asshole? What do you suppose I was doing in Florida for three days? Making sure you wouldn't pull that little stunt. Believe me, you try something stupid like that, and everyone of your precious friends and family are gonna pay. Dearly." Xavier grabbed Brian tightly by his shirt, yanking him closer. "Understand?" he hissed at the young singer, waiting until Brian nodded a reply. "Good." Xavier grunted with satisfaction when saw the look of defeat on the singer's face then shoved him back a few feet. Xavier gave Brian an appraising look as he pulled the dressing room door open. "Get ready," he said. "It's almost showtime."

Chapter 36:

Revelation

The door opened with a resounding smash and Brian sighed, wishing for the millionth time that just once his friend could enter a little more quietly. "Nick," he growled.

Ignoring him, Nick sauntered into the room, intently reading a small booklet. He walked over to the chair and slouched into it. He looked up to give Brian a victory grin. "Got it!" he crowed. "I completed all the levels." Brian gave him a confused look and Nick tossed him the guide. He glanced at it quickly, suddenly realizing what Nick was talking about. A sudden pang of jealousy shot through him, envious that Nick has so much leisure time.

"You couldn't wait for me?" he grumbled.

Nick rolled his eyes and shrugged. "I can never find you. What were you doing today?" Nick watched, curious, wondering if he saw Brian blush.

Brian turned away from his friend, suddenly interested in locating a misplaced tennis shoe. "Nothing," he mumbled.

Nick, familiar with Brian's mannerism of being evasive, sat up intrigued. "Okay," he said. "Now I'm really interested. What's up with you?"

"Something was definitely up with Brian, only Claire took care of that, didn't she?" Nick turned to see AJ grinning, standing by the door. He came in and sat next to Nick, giving him a wink and a nudge.

Brian having found his lost shoe pointed it at AJ, shaking it threateningly. "Don't," he said with a warning frown.

"Don't what?" All three turned to see Howie and Kevin entering the room, their hands full of Cokes and bags of chips. They tossed the extras to Nick, AJ and Brian. Howie stood near Brian, taking a sip of Coke, his eyes questioning.

"Dear God, doesn't anyone here respect privacy?" fumed Brian, yanking the metal tab from his drink. Nick, Kevin, Howie, and AJ glanced back and forth at each other.

"Nope," they answered in unison.

Brian gave an exaggerated sigh. "Didn't think so. Well go ahead, AJ. I know you're dying to tell them."

That was all the permission AJ needed. He jumped up theatrically, placing his arms around Brian's shoulders. "Bri did the nasty with Claire!" AJ gave whoop of victory,

pumping his fist into the air. Brian cringed, watching with some trepidation for the guys' reactions.

Nick, his hand halfway to his mouth with a chip, froze. "Claire, you mean AJ's Claire?"

AJ nodded proudly. Nick looked unhappily at Brian and AJ. "Wait a minute. You mean to tell me Claire was here, and nobody told me?" He looked at all four, waiting for an explanation, but Kevin butted in.

"Hey, does she still have the hots for me?" AJ nodded and Kevin smiled contentedly. "Too bad I'm taken," he commented jokingly and AJ laughed.

"That's exactly what she said."

"Hey," complained Nick, frustrated, "why didn't someone let me know?" Kevin, Howie, and AJ completely ignored him, each excitedly talking at the same time about Claire and her talents.

"Man, she said I was a freebie, cause I'm so fine!" bragged Howie. AJ swiped a hand half-heartedly in Howie's direction.

"Only because she felt sorry for you, D!"

Howie made a face back, arguing the merits of himself over AJ and Kevin's loud boasts of who was a better lover. Nick tried to get anyone attention, irritated at not being informed, and Brian watched them all with astonishment, a smile beginning to form as he tried to listen to all four argue simultaneously, not one comment being thrown Brian's way. He shook his head in amusement, wondering why he worried. These were his friends, his brothers, competitive as hell, and he should have know that when it came to talent, games, or sex, no one could admit to being a loser.

Brian took another sip of his Coke, enjoying the comraderie of his friends. He watched AJ mimic some sort of crazy thing he had done with Claire, the others roaring with jeers of disbelief; viewed Kevin, whose was still bragging to anyone who would listen about Claire's uncontrolled lust for him; saw Nick wave his arms at Howie, complaining that he wasn't a kid anymore and shouldn't be treated as such; and looked as Howie, ever patient, trying to calm Nick down with promises of "next time."

Brian's memory took him back to when they were barely starting out, the good times and not so good times they had all experienced together. The five had stuck it out, solid as ever, and as he watched them an anguish so intense that it made him want to weep washed over him. He turned away, unable to watch anymore. Tonight, right now, they were the Backstreet Boys, and he wanted to remember them that way. Tomorrow, it would be the beginning of the end.

Chapter 37:

The Morning After

The back of his head bumped painfully on the floor and it took a dazed moment or two before Brian could focus on the grim face of Xavier who had cruelly yanked him out of his warm bed. Tangle up in his bed sheets, Brian floundered for a minute before being able to free himself. He staggered up, bringing his hand to cradle his head, glaring at Xavier before trying to see what time it was. He peered at the green glow of his clock. It read 4:32. *As in AM?* Unsure, Brian looked again. It now read 4:33. Early morning. Very early morning.

He shuffled over to the bathroom, ignoring Xavier as he reached for the Advil. He knew he would regret it later taking the pills on an empty stomach, but found an upset stomach over a raging headache the lesser of two evils. Brian could hear Xavier rummaging around in his room, but long ceased to care about it. He remembered the sleeping pills incident; he knew whatever the bodyguard wanted he would eventually find, no matter how careful he was to hide it.

Brian came out of the bathroom to see Xavier hand him some clothing; Brian accepted it without a word and began to dress. Brian could sense the curiosity aroused in Xavier at his quiet obedience and inwardly acknowledged it with a grim smile. Keep the bastard off-guard. He tied the last shoe and straightened up, looking directly at the bodyguard.

"Well?" he said sarcastically. "Time's wasting."

Xavier handed him a water bottle, his curious expression now replaced with a much harder one. Silently they both trotted down the stairway and out the hotel side door. It was cold, too cold for Brian's Southern bones, and he shivered as he glanced around. Except for a few maintenance men, the place was deserted.

"Stretch," Xavier ordered, and Brian began a series of bending exercises, trying to limber up. It took about five minutes and then Xavier growled to start and they both took off jogging. Brian noticed after about a mile that the area changed into a rather slum area and he threw the hood of his sweat jacket over his head, hoping Xavier wasn't leading him somewhere unpleasant. As if I had a choice! he thought glumly, running faster to keep up with Xavier's insane pace. The one good thing about jogging was that in order to ignore the pain in your legs and chest, you had to concentrate on something else. Mercifully Xavier didn't speak so Brian could think.

He relived last night, experiencing the euphoria as all five excitedly hurried off stage, the screaming and clapping for an encore deafening. The concert had been perfect, the timing and execution so incredibly flawless that not only did the group know it, the audience did too. This knowledge heightened their performance onstage, each singer relaxed and happy, each feeding off one another's talents and skills. Brian was determined to enjoy every last second with the group so he basically ignored Xavier's heated glares directed at him during the show.

Nick was beyond excited, he literally bounced off the walls in delight after the show. Kevin, the most serious of the bunch, was slapping everyone's shoulder. Howie and AJ were both screaming for a celebration and Brian smiled as he ran, recalling how AJ had managed to sneak all five out to party after the show without Xavier catching them.

It had been fairly late when they got back to the hotel, Nick and AJ failing miserably to keep it quiet as they stumbled down the hallway. Nervous about Xavier, Brian had kept his drinking to a minimum and was glad he did; he could have never survived jogging with a massive hangover, the little sleep he got would be punishment enough. Brian sneaked a guarded glance at Xavier as they jogged, wondering how much the bodyguard knew. Sighing inwardly he wondered what else Xavier had planned for them today. The two ran past a breakfast diner and Brian's stomach grumbled as the smell of bacon filled the air. I'm starving, he thought but Xavier jogged past and disappointed, Brian followed.

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Brian slumped wearily into his chair, exhausted and famished. He felt his stomach cramp in pain and grimaced, trying hard to ignore it. Xavier had outdone himself, driving Brian to the point of exhaustion with exercise, not letting up for a second. It was then that Brian knew Xavier was punishing him for last night and determined not to let the bodyguard see how fatigued he was, Brian pushed on. Now his body screamed for food and rest, and Brian was too tired to do anything about it. His eye caught a small flashing light and he struggled over to grab his pager. Throughout their tours it was required for all five to carry one, management not wanting the scare it had when Nick had accidentally shown up late for one performance. With a twinge of guilt, Brian scanned the pager, taking some comfort that Xavier had not allowed him access to it when they ran. Brian checked each one, saving some, rejecting others. He gazed uncomprehendingly for a moment at the last one, his mind weary. It read 55555, their own code for emergency among the group. Brian dropped the pager as if scalded, he had only seen that code one other time. His mind raced, trying not to panic and he hurried down the hall in search of Kevin. He knocked hard on the door, kicking it with his foot for good measure. No one answered. He then ran down and turned the corner to Nick's. The same result. *AJ's!* He turned the other way, trying to remember the number. Now he was in a panic, and he flew down the hall to see a door ajar. He rushed in, nearly colliding with Kevin. Wild-eyed he glanced about. Nick was reclining against the bed, his eyes closed. AJ was standing, drinking what looked to be hard liquor. Kevin glared at his cousin, looking too angry to speak. But it was Howie that caught Brian's full attention. He was slumped over in a chair, his hands covering his face. With the sickest of feelings, Brian felt his stomach flip-flop and he broke out in a nervous stutter.

"Wha...What happened?" he pleaded. He looked at Howie again, praying.

AJ came over to him, but not before handing his drink to Howie and ordering him to down it. "Where the hell were you, man? Don't you know what 55555 means? Shit!"

Brian held his hands up in the air. "I'm sorry. I forgot to carry it." He knew he couldn't explain why. He grabbed AJ by the arm. "What's going on?"

Kevin spoke up, being blunt. "Howie's house. It burned down last night."

Almost giddy with relief about not hearing of someone's near death, Brian let out an unfortunate shaky laugh. "That's it? That's all?" He immediately regretted his mistake, seeing the expressions on everyone's face.

AJ smacked Brian's arm away, disgusted. "That's it? That's all?" he mimicked. "Well excuse us for bothering you." He turned away from Brian, going back to sit near Howie.

Nick shook his head in amazement, giving Kevin a "he's your cousin" look. Kevin gazed at Brian, at a loss for words.

Embarrassed, Brian looked straight at Howie and walked over, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry, D." he said softly. "Really. I know how much that house meant to you." Brian thought back to the newly completed house, barely finished before they had to go on tour. Howie had been so excited, asking everyone's opinion on the design, taking advice from all, wisely ignoring AJ's opinion on decorating style.

Howie nodded, accepting Brian's sympathy even if AJ didn't. AJ snorted in disgust over Brian's apology and Brian chose to ignore it. "How did it happen?"

Howie sighed. "I talked to the police last night...." but Brian interrupted, confused.

"Don't you mean firefighters?"

AJ finished for Howie. "He means police. It was arson. Someone has it out for D and apparently was not too subtle about it. His place was soaked with gasoline. Went off like a bomb. He lost everything."

"Everything?"

Howie, holding his now empty glass, looked up and nodded at Brian. His liquid brown eyes held so much hurt that Brian had to turn away, distraught. He hung his head down for a moment, trying to gain some composure. Without a doubt, he knew Xavier had caused it. Brian felt suddenly lightheaded, the information too unbearable to contemplate. He glanced at the four faces before him, all reflecting the sorrow and anger they felt for their friend's situation. Brian took a deep breath, a sudden claustrophobic feeling enclosing around him. He needed to get out. To find Xavier. Right now. He stumbled towards the door, hearing Nick's surprised voice call, "Where are you going?"

"I need to see Xavier," Brian croaked, his voice barely audible.

"Xavier!" AJ roared. "What the hell for?"

Brian turned, his hand resting on the doorknob. "Maybe, Xavier can help," he lied. "He has a lot of contacts down there. He might be able to find out something."

AJ was incensed. "Forget it! Under no circumstances do I want that asshole helping us with anything!"

Brian looked at AJ without saying a word. He turned to go, hearing disbelief in AJ's voice. "Shit, will you look at that! He's running off to find his bodyguard, instead of staying here. Some friend you are!" he yelled at Brian's retreating back, not being able to see the look of anguish on Brian's face as he walked, then ran down the hall.

Chapter 38:

A Battle

It wasn't difficult for Brian to locate Xavier - the bodyguard's room was always located next door to his. Brian tried to keep his building anger down to a minimum; to explode with rage would only get him a sore stomach and no answers. The door was ajar, and suspicious, Brian cautiously pushed it farther open. He saw Xavier, sitting down, phone in hand. He looked up, waving Brian in with a friendly gesture, his posture relaxed, his face peaceful. Brian walked in a few feet and stopped, his nails digging into the palms of his hands for control.

Xavier finished his conversation a minute later. He replaced the phone in its cradle and turned to look at Brian, lacing his hands behind his neck. "So, what's new?" A small smile twitched at the corner of his mouth, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. The smirk was what got to the young singer and Brian felt his control evaporate.

"You know damn well, what's up. Why did you torch his house?" Brian watched in surprise as Xavier nimbly jumped up, coming over to shove Brian's arms up in the air. It took no more than a few seconds for the bodyguard to frisk him. Satisfied, Xavier nodded, and returned to his seat. He noticed Brian's angry look.

"Checking to see if you had a tape recorder. You don't. So, you were saying again?"

Idiot! Brian cursed himself thoroughly, upset that he had never once considered doing that. "Howie's home. Why?" He kept his voice low, even if he couldn't keep the anger out of it.

Xavier yawned, studying his fingernails. "The explosion was rather overdramatic, wasn't it? Hired help. You can never get good hired help."

Brian hated him. Pure, unconcealed hatred shown from his eyes, enough anger showing to make the bodyguard raise his eyebrows. Xavier's face slowly turned cold, his eyes matching the same intensity as the young singer standing before him.

"Judging by last night, it seems like you forgot our agreement. I just thought you needed a little reminder." Xavier smiled, enjoying the reaction he caught on Brian's face. He arose from his seat, turning away from the young singer. Needling him further, he sighed. "The hard part, the really hard part, mind you, was not being able to torch his mom's house. She wasn't there that night, so I figured, why waste good gasoline?"

The smash to the back of the bodyguard's head came suddenly and violently. Xavier dropped like a stone and Brian stood in shock amazement, the heavy metal flashlight that he had grabbed lying on Xavier's dresser, dropping from his hand. He gave an uneasy laugh, nervously running his fingers through his hair. I did it, he thought, an overwhelming sensation of relief and delight flooding him. Looking down at the still figure, Brian edged away, apprehensive. Feeling on the verge of panic, he first eyed the

phone then decided instead to go get help. He ran to the door and paused, turning to view the prone figure. Tie him up first! rushed through his mind, and he glanced frantically about the room. He noticed a black carry-on bag slid half-way underneath the bed and dropped to one knee to retrieve it. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he shakily opened the zipper, rummaging around. His fingers closed around a heavy roll of duct tape and he yanked it out with jerk. Yes. With grim determination Brian stood up, and went over to Xavier, kneeling next him. Ignoring the blood that seeped from the back of Xavier's head, he ripped off a long length off the silver roll, grabbing the bodyguard's massive left hand. Quickly he wrapped the length around Xavier's wrist a few times, reaching across his back to grasp the right hand. That was as far as he got. With a mighty heave, Xavier turned over, knocking Brian's grip loose. Unsteady, Xavier managed to stagger upright and Brian seized the opportunity to sweep kick at the bodyguard's feet, sending the giant of a man crashing down. Brian jumped up, leaping over Xavier to escape. A vise grip encircled his left ankle and Brian tripped, falling hard to the ground. Stunned, Brian felt his body being roughly dragged backwards, closer to Xavier. Fear gave him extra strength, and with a desperate wrench, Brian broke free of Xavier's grasp, scrambling to stand. He almost made it to the door. Grabbing the collar of Brian's shirt, Xavier jerked him savagely back and spun him around. With a well-timed punch, Xavier lashed out, bringing his fist to smash into the singer's midsection. His mind groggy with pain, Brian looked up to see the face of Xavier looming over him.

"When you don't play the game," he said softly, as if lecturing a child, "you have to take the consequences." Wrapping his large hands around the singer's throat, Xavier began to apply pressure. Brian gagged, trying to pry the thick fingers away. His vision began to blur and he saw two faces, both looking at him with a mixture of anger and regret. "Now Brian, I need you to promise to obey, otherwise something else bad might happen. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

Given the chance, Brian would have immediately agreed but the pressure increased and Brian struggled, fighting to breathe, fighting to stay conscious. He looked at Xavier, his eyes trying to convey his plea, willing to do anything asked. Xavier finally released his hold with a satisfied grunt, pleased at what he saw in the singer's face.

Brian swayed, his vision wavering. His body screamed for rest, his mind demanding to be released into the welcoming arms of oblivion. The temptation was overpowering, the allure too sweet to resist. He closed his eyes willingly, thankful for the closing darkness that would surround him and bring relief.

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Kevin tore the offered drink to Howie away from AJ's hand, irritated by the amount AJ was pushing. "I really don't think D needs anymore," he commented with a frown.

Nick jumped off the bed, rubbing his face tiredly. "Ditto. Howie needs to be somewhat sober if we're gonna get him on the next flight out." He glanced at the guys, concerned. "How are we going to get him to the airport? Our bus is leaving soon."

AJ waved that off. "No sweat. We'll have Harry make a detour." Nick raised his eyes skeptically.

"Oh, Harry will love that. He hates unexpected stops."

"Too bad, who's paying his salary, anyway?" Kevin said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He gave a large sigh. "Anybody willing to volunteer to go find Brian and tell him what's happening?"

AJ gave him a sour look, Nick throwing up his hands and shaking his head no. Kevin sighed again. "Yeah, me neither."

Chapter 39:

On the Bus

Kevin stared aimlessly out the bus window, his hand cradling his chin as the scenery flashed before him, mile after endless mile. He usually used the time to catch up on his reading, a passion he never seemed to have enough time for, but now his mind was in such a turmoil he knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate on even a single word.

The guys were more than just a little surprised to find Xavier and Brian already on board – Brian because he was always the last to arrive, Xavier because they never, ever, had bodyguards travel with them.

AJ frowned darkly as he boarded, Kevin shaking his head slightly at his irritated friend, letting him know now was not the time to argue. Howie had tiredly boarded, too emotionally spent to do anything but slump into his seat and close his eyes. Nick hopped on last, his eyes scanning for any empty seats. He stuffed his bag into an overhead compartment, taking the only seat open, one next to Kevin. He raised his eyes questioningly at the dark-haired singer, noticing Xavier sitting in the back, reading what looked to be some financial magazine. Feeling strange at whispering, he nevertheless leaned over, speaking in a hushed tone.

"Where's Bri?"

Kevin jerked his head towards the back of the touring bus. "Asleep," he whispered in reply, not sure why he was also speaking in a low voice, only that it seemed somehow right. "X told me that Brian wanted some extra zzz's."

Nick chewed on his lip a moment, considering. "Should I go check on him?" he asked hesitantly, nodding at Xavier, who's seating position on the bus made it look like he was guarding the sleeping Backstreet Boy.

Kevin glanced at Xavier, then Nick. "At your own risk," he joked. Nick nodded, knowing that Kevin's kidding was serious.

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Brian awoke with a start, staring into the darkness until his eyes adjusted and then he recognized by the sound and feel that he was on the bus. He wasn't sure how he got there; he wasn't sure about anything anymore. He swallowed and a spasm of pain flowed down his throat. His hand reached up to touch his neck and suddenly he remembered. He closed his eyes, the pain and emotions of those last few moments overwhelming him. Slowly the emotions subsided but the pain didn't fade. He lay there, trying to examine, to explain what he felt. But how could he explain it? A feeling so scary, he didn't know whether he was imagining it or not. Pains that wracked his body, jumpy muscles, tingling and numbness, cold, then hot. Hungry, yet he didn't have the energy to eat. Thirsty, yet he had to force himself to drink. Nothing appealed to him. A tight chest,

a feeling as if he was being smothered, yet he knew he wasn't. Shaky inside, yet outside no. Were these feelings there or not? He prayed they weren't, but it seemed that they never went away. He tried to ignore it, but his body reminded him he couldn't. Vaguely, he knew he needed to push himself, push to fight. *But what kind of fight? The physical or mental? And could he win? Ask for help. No! You must fight it alone. You're on your own. There is no choice. You must win. Do something! Do it now! It's your life, the life of others!*

Brian brought his hands up to his face, trying to rub out the thoughts racing through his mind. They gradually faded, but he knew they were still there, hiding. So close to the surface, he knew eventually that they would return. He painfully turned onto his stomach, burying his face into his pillow. He must decide. He must choose, but he already knew the answer. The choice was not a decision, it was a given, a given decided by Xavier.

He turned his face sideways, staring at the slightly swaying wall of his compartment. He felt the tears forming, and he let them flow, unchecked. He needed this release, this emptying of emotions and fears to be washed away if he were to be successful in breaking up the group. It took a while, just when he thought he was done, a wave of fresh tears overtook him and he would ride it out, patiently waiting for the next onslaught to come and finish. Exhausted, he finally closed his eyes, emotionally and physically spent. He felt numb, a feeling he embraced with almost a fevered passion. He wanted this feeling of nothingness, of no pain, of no anguish. He needed control. He felt himself slipping back to sleep and he sighed, mouthing a small confession. *I'm sorry, guys. Forgive me.*

Chapter 40:

On the Move

AJ woke with a start, his elbow dislodged from supporting his head. He stretched, noticing that the smooth highway road had turned into a bumpier local street. He nodded in satisfaction, glad that they were near their destination. He glanced at the softly-glowing luminous dial of his watch, noting the time. Not bad. Even with their detour to the airport to drop D off, they had made good time. Happy to be soon sleeping in a hotel bed, AJ stood up and walked over to Nick, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Hey, sleeping-ugly, wake up."

Nick popped his eyes open instantly. "Speak for yourself." He sat up. "We're here?"

"Almost. Wake Kev, okay?" Nick nodded, and turned in his seat to give his bandmate a not so gentle nudge.

AJ peered over towards Brian's direction, debating on whether or not to go see him. His anger had subsided, now that Howie had departed, and a mixture of interest and worry filled him. Brian had been asleep for an incredible amount of time and no one seemed to be the least curious. He paused, glancing at Xavier, who was asleep, his face turned towards the window. *Fuck it*, he thought, angry at Xavier's ability to intimidate him, even when sleeping. He slipped past Nick, giving the bodyguard a quick once over before turning to check on Brian. He reached to open the small curtain only to have it pull away by Brian himself. AJ stepped aside to let him exit the compartment, watching Brian with a critical eye.

The young singer struggled to leave his bed and AJ instinctively reached out to steady him. AJ felt Brian grab his hand, felt the unsteadiness of his grip, and held onto him until he knew Brian could stand unsupported.

"Hey," Brian croaked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Hey yourself," replied AJ, frowning, not liking what he saw.

"Mind moving?" Brian pointed. "The bathroom."

"Oh, sorry." AJ turned sideways, letting him pass. He watched as Brian held onto the sides of the bus, making his way slowly down the aisle. He stood there a moment, lost in thought, then turned to find Xavier standing behind him, blocking the passage. AJ stood before him, keeping a bored look on his face. He stuck his hand out, motioning Xavier to move so he could pass and go back to his seat.

AJ sauntered down the aisle, flopping down in Howie's vacant seat. He turned a second to view Xavier wrestling with some type of bag, then turned his attention to Nick and Kevin. "Bri's up. He's in the bathroom. Doesn't look too good."

"Hmm. Okay. Well, I'm glad we didn't have a show tonight. What's the matter?" questioned Nick.

"What am I, his mother?"

"Alright, Bone, cool it," warned Kevin. "We'll just ask when he gets out."

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Brian almost laughed when he saw his face in the mirror. That is, if he could laugh. His throat hurt like hell and he reached for the faucet handle, turning it on. He cupped his hands, drinking the cool water, grimacing slightly as the water coursed down his throat. He forced himself to drink a lot, aware of how long it had been since he swallowed any liquid. Finally sated, he splashed the cool water onto his face for several moments, trying to ease the puffiness around his eyes. *I look like I have allergies*, he thought. *Yes!* He realized it would be a good excuse for the way he looked. He stayed in there for several more minutes, trying his best to clean himself up. Knowing that no more could be done, he left, stiffly coming up the aisle towards the guys. He ignored Xavier, and sat down next to Nick.

"Jesus!" reacted Nick, in surprise. "What the hell happened to you?" He bent over to look at the splotted face of his friend. Brian held up his hands to ward off the curious stare.

"I'm not feeling too good," he said, his voice just above a whisper.

Kevin eyed him suspiciously. "Just how sick are you?"

Brian shrugged. "My throat. It's killing me."

AJ jumped up, paranoid. "Oh God, just great. Is it strep?" He shoved his hands in Brian's direction. "Don't get near us!" The idea of everyone coming down with strep throat filled AJ with fear.

Brian flashed him a look, irritated by AJ's paranoia. "No, it's not strep, I promise," he answered hoarsely. "Most likely allergies. I'll be okay."

"Even for tomorrow?" asked his cousin, concerned.

Brian nodded. "Yeah." He looked at AJ, a slight smile crossing his face. "Don't worry, Bone. Besides, I can sing you under the table, even at my worst."

AJ snorted, now on more familiar joking ground. "In you're dreams, Rok."

A wave of pain cramped Brian's stomach and he flinched from the ache. Nick was quick to notice. "Bri?" he asked, worried.

Brian smiled weakly at his friend. "I'm starving! Any chance Harry might hit an open fast-food joint?"

Xavier cut in. "Fast food?" He eyed Brian and AJ found himself annoyed that Brian needed the bodyguard's approval. He watched, curious, as Brian and Xavier looked at each other, fascinated by the way the two seemed to communicate without speaking.

Xavier turned to give AJ a glance, making AJ feel as if he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He mentally cursed himself for being so obvious, vowing to himself never to let his guard down again when scrutinizing Xavier.

Xavier gave him a tight grin, turning back to Brian. "Fast food, huh? Well, I guess once in a while couldn't hurt."

AJ was amazed at how quickly the tension in the bus dissolved. Nick laughed, yelling for Taco Bell, Kevin wanted KFC. AJ caught Brian's eye, and Brian shrugged, happy with anything they picked.

"Okay, let's make Harry crazy. We'll hit them all. KFC, T-Bell, and I want you-know-what." AJ gave a smirk towards Xavier, then turned to Brian. "And you?"

Brian tried to ignore the cramping in his stomach. "I'll have them all," he said truthfully. The other three laughed and Brian smiled, casually but strategically holding his stomach.

Hurry, he pleaded silently.

Chapter 41:

Breaking Down

"Okay, explain to me again *why* you have to exercise instead of coming with us to the movies?"

Brian sighed as he laced up his shoes, keeping his face down. It was gonna be hard enough to do what he had to do; looking up at Nick's confused face would make it impossible. Nick had been hounding him all morning with this, excited that the group had not been scheduled for any planned PR. The latest Harrison Ford movie was out and Nick, along with the others, were dying to go see it.

"I mean, jeez, Frick, it's not like you don't get any. We're gonna sweat our asses off tonight."

"Nick, it's something I need to do, okay? Just because my heart is fixed, doesn't mean I can ignore my health." Brian took a deep breath. "You could stand to lose a few, ya know. No one likes looking at a fat Backstreet Boy." Brian's hands shook as he tied the last knot, his stomach twisted as tight as his shoestrings. He forced himself to look up at Nick.

Nick looked slightly taken aback, as if he hadn't heard his friend correctly, but it quickly sunk in, and an angry look appeared on his young face. Nick pushed himself off Brian's bed, standing.

"Yeah, well screw you. Have you taken a close look at yourself lately? No one likes an anorexic Backstreet Boy either." Nick marched to the door, but paused for one last parting shot. "Guess I'll tell the guys whose company you like better."

Brian closed his eyes for a moment, hearing Nick's comment along with the slamming of his hotel door. He steeled himself, knowing this had to happen, knowing if he didn't start distancing himself with the group, Xavier would. And Xavier would most likely start with Nick. Last night Brian had tossed and turned in his bed, not sleeping well, trying to analyze the "game" when he realized with a sickening clarity that Nick was the last remaining Backstreet Boy not to have fallen prey to one of Xavier's twisted little tricks. Brian reached over to his duffel bag, shoving some things in. He zipped the bag and stood up, slinging it around his shoulder, grim determination etched tightly into his face. He couldn't stop the breakup of the group, but he was damned if he was going let Xavier get to Nick.

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Brian jogged next to Xavier, grateful for the silence as he concentrated on his running. It was getting easier, although not much, considering the bodyguard varied the lengths and intensity at a whim. Brian watched, interested, at the other joggers who came past; some, startled from their run, had recognized him instantly. Brian knew, with out a doubt, that Xavier wouldn't tolerate any fan stopping them for an autograph. He

wondered what the bodyguard would do if it happened. Not willing to find out, he ignored the excited greetings, keeping his face expressionless at the smiles cast his way, thinking instead about what he had said to Nick, ashamed of his comments, but knowing with certainty that crueler things would have to be said in order to keep Nick away from him and the volatile Xavier.

Xavier tapped him on the shoulder, pointing toward a building across the street. Confused, but obedient, Brian followed him across the road, coming to stop in front of what looked like a bank. He glanced up with a questioning look at the sweating bodyguard.

"Yeah, what?"

Brian watched as a well-tanned face grin back at him. "Forgot so soon? You owe me some money, remember?"

Brian stared at him in disbelief. "Now?" he panted, "here?"

Xavier nodded, shoving a small, dark-green nylon bag at him. Brian had seen Xavier sling it over his back before the run, not knowing what it meant. Now he did. He reached out slowly, fingering the zipper. "Xavier, this is ridiculous. I'll just write you a check." He watched as the bodyguard shook his head, his eyes unreadable behind the polarized sunglasses he was wearing. Brian sighed, motioning with an exaggerated gesture for Xavier to follow him into the bank. Again the bodyguard shook his head and Brian understood why. Cameras. He pulled the door open and entered the coolness of the interior, curious and mentally noting to himself to mull that one over later. It had been awhile since he had been in a bank, usually the ATM, his credit card, or management could get what he needed. Uncomfortable, he waited patiently in line, realizing he must look like a mess.

"Next!"

Brian stepped up to the counter, clearing his throat. "Uh, I need to make a withdrawal." The teller, a small dark-haired girl in her twenties nodded, her head pointed down as she filed away some previous paperwork. Finishing her task, she looked up and Brian held his breath, waiting to be recognized. She gave him an impatient look. "ID?" she asked. Brian gave a little sigh of relief and handed her his ID along with his account number. "How much?" she questioned, looking at his ID and punching his number in.

"Ten thousand dollars."

He watched as her as she skeptically eyed his appearance, frowning ever so slightly as she waited for his account number to be verified. Brian had to smile as she coughed then tried to regain her composure as the computer screen confirmed the amount in his account.

"Uh, yes, Mr. Littrell, there should be no problem. Cashier's check?"

"No, cash."

Startled, she looked confused. "Cash?"

Brian nodded, glancing to see if he could see Xavier waiting outside.

"Surely you would rather have traveler's checks?" she asked helpfully.

"No, cash please."

"Are you sure?" She looked around for her supervisor.

Brian noticed Xavier pacing impatiently outside and becoming uneasy with the whole situation, decided to end it quickly. "Yes, cash!" he said, rather curtly. "What's the matter? It may be half of your year's salary, but it's a drop in the bucket to me. Now, are you gonna give it to me, or do I have to cancel my whole fucking account with you guys?"

The pretty teller, stung by his insult, snapped back into a cold professional manner. "There should be no problem, sir. I just don't have that much in my box. If you'll excuse me, I'll be right back." She closed her open teller box and locked it, walking over to her boss. Brian waited impatiently, eager to be done, eager to get the hell out, embarrassed by the way he had insulted her to get quick results. He could hear whispering customers behind him, other tellers trying to look nonchalant and he groaned inwardly, hoping his teller would hurry up.

A tall, very thin woman came up to the teller window, her reading glasses perched on the end of her nose. She smiled warmly at Brian and he read her name tag, Meg Williamson, VP of Finance. Brian bit his lip, annoyed that the dark-haired teller had left. "Mr. Littrell, how can I be of service?"

"You can start by giving me my damn money, right now," Brian hissed.

"And you want it *all* in cash?"

Brian shoved the small nylon bag towards her. "Yes," he said irritated. *God, what if Xavier had wanted more?*

"What denomination? Thousands, hundreds, less?"

Brian sighed, gritting his teeth. Why was this so hard? He felt his composure deteriorating. "No, pennies!" he snapped. He decided on another tactic. He leaned forward, indicating with his finger for the VP to come nearer. "Do you know who I am?" he asked quietly, hating the way it sounded.

The VP hated it too. She leaned forward, her mouth set in a thin line. "Yes, I'd be an idiot not to know."

Brian gave her a sarcastic grin. "Good. Then you know I don't have time for this. Please give me my money, right now. I don't care what denomination, so long as I can carry it easily in this bag. Got it?"

"Yes, *sir*." Brian heard the sarcasm drip from her voice, knowing he deserved it, but not really caring at this point. He strummed his fingers, sure she was counting the money back to him as slow as she could possibly manage it. Finally finishing, she carefully placed it in the now full bag. She handed the bag to him, a fake smile plastered on her face. "I suggest you be careful with that. Someone might steal it."

Brian nearly ripped it from her hand. "Someone already has," he answered angrily, not noticing her puzzled look as he headed out the door.

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Leaning against the elevator wall, trying to wipe his sweating face and neck with his sweat-soaked T-shirt Brian stared dismally at the wrapped power bar in his hand. Slowly he ripped the package open and took a disinterested bite of the bar that Xavier had ordered him to eat, noticing the mud-like consistency of it. Grimacing, he slowly swallowed, wishing he could spit it out, but this was breakfast and lunch combined and he knew better than to throw it away. He took another bite, wearily closing his eyes, way beyond tired. The ding of the elevator forced his eyes open, and he jumped, startled by the loud laughter coming from Nick, AJ, Kevin and Howie as they all rushed in, struggling to be first.

'Whoa!' yelled AJ, surprised to see Brian slouched in the corner. The others fell silent as they too entered, Nick pointedly avoiding direct eye contact.

"Hey," acknowledged Brian, giving Howie a smile when he saw him. "How are you?"

Howie shrugged. "Alright, considering I lost everything. Glad I got good insurance. They're covering everything."

Brian nodded. "Great." He wished he could say more, apologize, but he held back, biting his tongue. "How was the movie?"

Nick spoke up, bitterness in his voice. "Don't wanna say. Might spoil it for you and Xavier."

Kevin elbowed Nick in the side. "Quit it," he ordered. He eyed his cousin, concern in his look. "What's up, Bri? Nick said you *had* to go exercise with Xavier."

Here we go, thought Brian, not ready, not willing to battle now, but not having a choice. He sighed loudly. "Nick lied. I didn't *have* to go exercise with Xavier, I *wanted* to."

"What?" He heard the disbelief in AJ's and Howie's voice.

"Jeez, just because someone here *wants* to look good, to stay in shape, y'all get bent."

"Hey, for your information, you don't look that hot," replied Nick, unable to keep silent.

"Better than you'll ever be," shot back Brian.

"Hold on!" roared Kevin, giving Brian and Nick a glare. "Hold on. If Brian feels the need to exercise, let him," he advised Nick. He turned to give his cousin a glance. "But, I really don't see why you need to," he commented. 'Honestly Bri, you don't look all that great ."

Brian swiped at his brow, still sweating. "Oh, so now we're interested in someone's looks other than yourself?" he shot back, annoyed. "That's a first. I'm surprised you can tear yourself away from the mirror."

Kevin froze, along with the other three at Brian's remark, Howie giving AJ a sidelong glance.

"Whoa, totally uncalled for, Bri," AJ commented. "Kevin's only stating what's true."

"Really," Brian sneered. "Maybe you should check yourself out. Last time I looked, freaky tattoos and frizzy colored hair looked good only in National Geographic."

A bitter look of resentment sprang from AJ's eyes and he reached out to grab Brian by his shirt. Howie and Kevin blocked his way, holding him back. The small elevator felt suffocating and Brian choked down a feeling of panic. He thought he could manage this, could cope with all four standing there, but now he knew he couldn't. His friends' concern mixed with their confused anger at him was too much for Brian to handle all at once. He heard the door ring open, gladly jumped out, heading down the hall to his room.

"Brian!"

He heard his name shouted, but he didn't stop, ignoring Kevin. "Brian, you'd better be ready for tonight!" his cousin warned threateningly. Brian didn't turn around, only replying to Kevin's demand with a well-placed middle finger raised high above his head

Chapter 42:

More Breakdown

Brian slammed the door to his room with a resounding crash, irritated that he had let Kevin get to him with such a simple comment as being ready. He needed to toughen up, to immune himself to the insults that he knew would soon come with increasing intensity.

With a sigh, he shed his clothes and threw them to the ground, heading toward the shower. A full-length mirror caught his attention and curious about Nick's and Kevin's remarks, stopped to view himself. His hair was a mess, sweat-plastered and needing a cut. He came closer to examine his face. Definitely a shave was needed, but otherwise no tell-take marks, of which he was grateful. His neck was another matter. Brian touched his throat gingerly, tracing the red marks that were starting to fade from Xavier's not-so-gentle grip. Making a mental note to himself to remember to hide the marks with some stage makeup tonight, Brian stepped back from the mirror to critically look at his body. Always being slim by nature, he guessed he had lost some weight and wouldn't have been surprised if he had, considering. Never owning a scale, he didn't know how much. He knew for certain that he felt stronger and looked more toned with Xavier's rabid exercise regime; the various fresh and fading bruises over his body testified to that. He finally dismissed the guys' comments on his appearance, more concerned with his mental than his physical well-being.

Brian entered the bathroom and turned on the shower, stepping in to savor the warmth and comfort of the hot water; the heat soothing his body, the warm temperature doing nothing to ease the problem that swirled constantly around in his head. He turned his back to let the water pound gently on his back, closing his eyes to think about what options, if any, he had. Xavier's instructions had been crude but effective, either Xavier broke up the group or Brian did. Brian knew that simply asking the group he wanted to quit wouldn't work. They wouldn't understand why and he couldn't tell them the truth. Verbally they had always agreed to stay together; if one were to leave it would have to be for a pretty damn good reason. He thought of some pretty effective ways of breaking up the group, but that would mean the end of Backstreet Boys altogether, something Brian would not do. He wasn't sure how the public would handle the loss of one Backstreet Boy, but wasn't four better than none? He could be replaced, couldn't he? He knew Xavier wanted him to break the group up, he just never said how. Determined not to jeopardize his friend's careers, he realized the only way he could leave was to have the guys force him out. Brian thought about the difficulty that lay ahead, understanding all too well Xavier's short temper and patience. He didn't want a repeat of Xavier's anger; he knew Nick would be the next target. It needed to be done, now, starting with tonight's concert.

Brian turned off the shower, forcing himself to leave the comfortable confines of the steamy cubicle to search for a towel. He climbed tiredly into his bed, noting the time, then closed his eyes, only to jerk them open again as a sudden rush of vertigo hit him.

He braced himself against the dizziness, waiting for the episode to pass. *Rest!* his mind screamed, *relax!* He gazed up at the wall, wondering what his record would be for most hours of no sleep.

Chapter 43:

Before the Show

The heavy pounding and yelling on the door eventually woke Brian up. Disoriented, he sat straight up in bed, groggy from the short amount of time he had finally managed to get. The pounding intensified, helping to clear his head. He glanced at his clock, and in shock, sprang from his bed in one leap to race for his door. Brian swung the door open, seeing the anxious face of Howie.

"Man, I thought you were dead! Do you know what time it is? Hurry!"

Grateful, Brian rushed to dress, Howie scrambling to help. He tossed Brian's tennis shoes to him, then rummaged around Brian's dresser for socks.

"Forget about the socks!" yelled Brian, quickly stuffing whatever else he needed in his duffel bag. They both raced down the hall, catching the elevator door before it closed. Brian leaned back on the wall, thankful that they were able to catch it. "Are we gonna be okay?" he questioned Howie.

Howie nodded, glancing at his watch. "Yeah. Why didn't Xavier wake you?"

Brian shrugged his shoulders, running fingers through his tangled hair. "Shit, I don't know why," he lied, knowing damn well why. Xavier would have liked nothing better than for him to be late, to stir up trouble. "He's my bodyguard, not my personal slave, you know."

"Coulda fooled us."

Brian knew he should act mad, to alienate himself immediately from Howie; but he found it almost impossible to do with his kind-hearted friend. He hung his head, waiting for the elevator door to open. "Who elected you to come get me?" he asked, curious.

"Nobody elected me, I came myself. Frankly, I don't think anyone else wants to see you right now."

Brian silently damned him as he heard the warmth, the concern in Howie's voice. This was not going to be easy. He raised his blue eyes to stare calmly into Howie's brown ones. "I don't need you to be my mother, D. I can handle things with the guys."

Howie gave a brief laugh. "Sure you can, like you handled it a few hours ago?" He gave Brian a curious look. "What's going on, Bri? You're not yourself. You know it and I know it."

This was the opening Brian was looking for. He came up close to Howie, pushing a finger against his chest. "You know, that's what I hate about you. Always butting in. For your information, nothing's wrong with me, except for you always bothering me. Why

don't you instead concentrate on improving your singing and dancing. God knows you could use it. I'm tired of always being the lead, having you coast through all the songs."

The reaction in Howie's face was exactly what Brian hoped for, only the words weren't. A bewildered then hurt expression materialized on the young singer's face, but he said nothing; not a word. It was almost more than Brian could stand, seeing his friend silent, not uttering a single comeback to his vicious attack. Unnerved and ashamed, the chime of the elevator door was the only thing that saved him from immediately apologizing to Howie. Brian brushed harshly by the dark-haired singer, ignoring the screaming fans lining behind the barriers as he jumped onto the waiting bus.

Disregarding the guarded looks he received from the other three who were waiting for him, Brian walked to the back seat, throwing his bag onto the ground. He stared out through the darkly-tinted window, watching disinterestedly as the bus carefully pulled away from the throng of excited fans, finally turning his head away to close his eyes.

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Brian struggled with his outfit, trying to tighten his pants more snugly. He sighed as he viewed himself in the mirror, realizing that if the pants were too large for his frame, then the others were too. He made a mental note to remind Katie, their seamstress, to alter his clothing as soon as possible, otherwise the fans would be seeing more than just his face.

A rap on the door let him know it was almost time for the show and he straightened his costume one more time, taking a quick glance in the mirror to check his neck and throat for any visible marks. Satisfied there were none, he exited down the hallway, weaving carefully passed the mass of backstage crew who were finalizing their last minute preparations. Brian located Kevin, standing with several of the band members and headed in their direction. The talking died as soon as Brian came into view and his cousin eyed him carefully, giving Brian the feeling of being sized up.

"Ready?" Kevin asked casually, the meaning in his eyes far from it.

"Always," Brian replied, his eyes matching Kevin's intensity. It wasn't hard for Brian to catch the sideways glances exchanged by the band members and he smiled grimly, aware that the tension between the two Backstreet Boys was being noticed. They walked down a way until they reached the other three; AJ being the only one who would look straight at Brian. Brian ignored AJ's heated stare and watched coolly as Nick and Howie did their best to take no notice of him.

One of the band members coughed a few times to get the guys attention, holding his hands out to invite everyone to clasp themselves into a ring. Brian grabbed the nearest hand, head bowed, waiting for someone to speak. After what seemed like an eternity, he looked up, noticing everyone staring at him.

"What?" he asked, irritated. "Why am *I* always the one who has to pray?"

"Because you started this, remember?" sneered Nick, the sarcasm heavy in his voice.

"Well, I quit. Let someone else do it for a change. Howie, your turn."

Startled by Brian's command, Howie hesitated a moment, noticing that everyone was looking at him to see if he would take over. Angry that Brian would put him in such a situation, he felt like saying no, but the ritual was so long-standing, such a habit, that it seemed unnatural not to continue. He bowed his head, giving a brief but heartfelt prayer of thanks. Everyone raised their head after Howie finished except for Brian, who kept his head lowered, seemingly lost in thought. Nick and Kevin gave Howie a roll of their eyes at Brian's attitude; AJ striding away immediately to talk to a stage hand.

"Five minutes," yelled a crew member, hollering it up and down the corridor. Kevin, AJ, Howie and Nick all began following their rigging crew, unaware of Brian's absence until one of the riggers yelled at Brian to hurry up. All four turned to discover Brian, still stationary, staring at the floor.

A wave of unease exchanged among the four as they viewed their bandmate, each elbowing one another to volunteer to see what was wrong. After one particularly strong push an annoyed AJ found himself elected. Irritated, he went over, slapping both his hands none too gently on Brian's shoulder.

"Shit, come on, Brian!" he said, feeling a tremor of shock run through Brian when he touched him. Brian jerked savagely away, his eyes rising to meet AJ's shaded ones, brimming with repressed anger.

"Don't ever touch me like that again, you got it?" he hissed and spun away, leaving AJ, for one of the first times in his life, speechless. He walked back to the other three, feeling their questioning stares as he slowly shook his head, taking his glasses off to look them straight in the eye. "Man, we so need a meeting," he informed them somberly.

Chapter 44:

Morning Discussion

Brian quickly opened the door to his hotel room, startling Xavier who had his master entry card suspended in mid-air, ready to swipe access into the young singer's room. A small smirk of satisfaction crossed Brian's mouth, glad to catch Xavier off-guard, even more pleased that the bodyguard had not been able to use his brutal yank-out-of-bed technique on him. Brian reached out, closing his door with the one swift pull. He eyed Xavier curtly, looking him up and down.

"Ready?" he questioned, not waiting for an answer as he walked rapidly down the hall. Xavier stood there for a moment, his face unreadable. He broke into a jog to catch up to Brian's quickly retreating form. A slow smile of satisfaction spread across the bodyguard's face, happy with the young singer's insolence. Not that he would tolerate his lip, but it made the game so much more interesting when his adversary showed some backbone. Altering today's exercise plan, he grinned wickedly at what he had in store for the disrespectful Backstreet Boy.

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Two blue eyes, followed by a tousled head of blond hair peeked out carefully into the hallway, quickly scanning the area for signs of life. Finding none, Nick sighed with relief, happy that Brian and Xavier had finally left. It seemed like he had waited forever for them, listening with his ear pressed to his door for the two to pass. Now that they had gone he could dare to venture out safely. He quickly tip-toed over to Howie's room, rapping once sharply on his door, shivering slightly and wishing he had remembered to wear something warmer. Howie opened his door and let the youngest shaking member in, rolling his eyes at Nick's choice of scant sleepwear.

"Couldn't you have changed before you came over?"

"Yeah, sure, and if I got caught by Bri or X, how would I explain being fully dressed at this hour?" Nick rubbed his bare arms, going over to grab the blanket that was thrown over the side of Howie's bed. "Shit! What time is it, anyway?"

Howie looked at his watch. "Quarter to six."

Nick shook his head in amazement. "Damn. Brian must be insane to get up that early and go exercising, especially with X."

Howie nodded in agreement, relaxing on the side of his unmade bed as he grabbed the courtesy phone. He made two quick calls and a few moments later, a tired Kevin, dressed in dark blue boxers and a t-shirt walked in, trailed by a very disheveled AJ, barefoot and dressed in a pair of rumpled cargo pants.

Nick grinned at AJ, smirking. "Hey, I didn't know you could sleep in those too!"

AJ eyed him sourly, ignoring the remark. "Did you order us breakfast?" he asked crawling into Howie's bed and flinging the covers over his head, burrowing in.

Nick reached for the phone, stopped by a very determined Kevin. "I'll do it," he ordered. "Last time, you ordered Fruit Loops for all of us."

"So?" replied Nick, offended. "You ate them, didn't you?" He sat down on the bed, rising quickly to sit down on the adjoining bed after a thoroughly pissed AJ yelled at him to stop sitting on his feet.

"Jeez, grumpy, grumpy. *I'm* the one who had to get up earlier than any of you. And by the way, I think you guys cheated," complained Nick, referring to the way he was "elected."

"Can we help it if you fall for it everytime?" replied Howie. Nick heard AJ snicker under the sheets and grabbed a heavy phone book, flinging it in the direction of the large lump situated under Howie's covers.

"Ow, damn it!" yelled AJ, flinging back the sheets to glare at Nick.

"Guys..," said Kevin softly. "We don't have time for this. We need to talk."

"He's right," agreed AJ, waiting for Nick to turn his attention towards Kevin before throwing a perfect pitch, smacking Nick square in the face with a hard-tossed pillow.

Howie and Kevin sighed, looking at each other for support. Howie deftly grabbed the pillow away from Nick's hand before anymore mayhem occurred; Kevin giving AJ a warning glance to stop the horseplay.

"Okay, Bone, you called this meeting about Brian; so go ahead, explain what's going on with him."

"Me? Brian's your cousin; you should know more than me!"

Kevin gave him an amazed look, his dark eye-brows raised high. "How the hell would I know? Just because we're related, doesn't mean I can read his mind!" He turned to Nick, who was figuring a way to get back at AJ. "You're his best friend, you hang out with him more than we do. If anyone, you should know."

Nick opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. "Well, I don't," he stated flatly. "He's not the Bri I know. I can't explain why he's acting so weird. What the hell was up with all that jumping around with the audience last night? He *never* does that."

AJ rubbed his face wearily, agreeing, mentally playing back the night before. Brian had raced around below the stage, touching and grabbing the fans' outreached hands, coming too close for the comfort of the bodyguards who were trying valiantly to keep him safe. "Fuck if I know. That's your specialty," he commented to Nick.

"Yeah, well he pretty much too over the whole damn show, including some of my stuff."

Kevin and AJ nodded. They had both noticed, watching with surprise and then anger as Brian had cut into all their routines, interrupting and disrupting the concert with none of the clowning on stage he was so predictable for. Had the guys not put up with his antics, the show could have turned ugly. During breaks in the show, Howie and AJ had both confronted Brian, yelling their displeasure while Brian calmly sipped at a water bottle, giving little or no response before running back on stage again.

Howie sighed audibly, walking over to sprawl into a chair next to Kevin. He ran a hand over his unshaven face, giving the four a concerned look. "Well whatever is going on with Brian, we had better find out. I've tried to sort some things out, but none of them make any sense."

AJ sat up from under the covers, interested. "What things, D?"

Howie jumped up from his chair, pacing back and forth. "Okay, we all know Brian has been acting pretty strange lately..."

"I'll say..." cut in Nick sarcastically, but shut up when the other three glared at his interruption.

"...the thing we need to know is why," continued Howie. He waved to all three. "Think. When was the first time we noticed it?"

Kevin shrugged. "Dunno. Was it the day after that intruder? He seemed pretty shook up."

Nick agreed. "Yeah, the intruder, those threats. Do you think that's what is causing it?"

"I think it's that asshole, Xavier."

All three turned towards AJ, surprised at the vehemence in his voice. Howie shook his head. "I don't think so. Xavier came weeks before and Brian seemed fine. Kevin's right. It started after those threats, that intruder. Something must have happened, something that we don't know about that is making Bri act so weird."

"You think Brian is hiding something from us?" questioned Kevin, worried about the possibility.

"Maybe," agreed Howie. "It's hard to say. It seems like we never get a minute alone with him. Xavier always seems to be around."

AJ jumped from his bed, agitated. "See? That's exactly why I think it's Xavier! I've never liked that prick, even from the start."

Nick shook his head, trying to sort things out. "Wait a minute. I know you and X don't get along, but think about it. Why Xavier? I mean, he saved Brian's ass with that intruder; hell, he helped us all at the radio station. If Brian didn't want him, or X was causing trouble, all Frick would have to do is fire him."

"True," commented Howie.

AJ threw his hands up in protest. "I still think its Xavier. What else could it be?"

Kevin bit his lip, not wanting to think about another possible cause, but knew it needed to be discussed. "Maybe it's something medical. Look at him, at this health kick he's been on. Could he have found something out at his stay in the hosiptal?"

All three turned to Nick for an explanation. Nick opened his eyes wide in surprise, his hands outspread in defense. "Hey, don't look at me! He seemed fine, anxious to get out, but okay. The doctor gave him some pain medication for his back but that's it. If Bri found out anything, he sure is keeping it a good secret. And why would he anyway? Rok was always pretty outspoken with us about his heart problems."

AJ sighed in exasperation. "It's Xavier, I tell you. Why won't anybody listen?"

"Bone! We *are* listening. It's just that there are too many possibilities here to point at just one!" Kevin, Nick, and AJ sat in silence as they watched Howie paced the floor some more, quietly eyeing each other. "Okay," Howie finally said. "We know that something is wrong with Brian, right?" He waited for their nods before continuing. "And we know that whatever it is, Brian won't explain." More nods. "So, here's what I suggest. We need to tackle this from every side. Kevin, you and Nick see if you can find anything medically wrong with Brian. Ask questions, but be discreet. I'll take the threats and intruder; find out what's happening in that area. AJ, you can have Xavier." Howie returned the smirk that his friend threw his way. "If you're so positive X is the reason, you get to find out why."

"Gee, thanks, D."

"Hey, that's what friends are for," joked Howie. His smiled slowly faded away. "And if we're Brian's friends I suggest we start finding some answers out fast before..." he left the sentence hanging, noticing the questioning looks from the three. "...before he's not our friend anymore," he finished solemnly.

Chapter 45:

A Surprise Announcement

Brian was getting use to the wind being knocked out of him. Eyes closed, he lay prone on the padded floor, desperately trying to drag what little air he could through his lungs. After a few moments he opened his eyes to stare up into the amused brown eyes of Xavier.

"Not bad," Xavier commented admiringly. "You remembered that little trick I taught you of dodging left." He smirked down at the sweating Backstreet singer. "However you obviously forgot how to do it with your right." Xavier reached down to haul the horizontal singer upright, pounding him encouragingly on his back with a gloved hand. "Ready for another go?"

Brian staggered slightly, wondering if he had any stamina left. Whatever vendetta the bodyguard had against him today, it was far from finished. He quickly dodged a punch thrown his way, weaving and bouncing to keep away from Xavier's long reach. He hated boxing, he hated everything about it, and as he glanced wearily at the gym clock he wondered how many more hours Xavier had in mind.

"So, have you finished practicing that new song yet?"

The question took Brian off-guard. His concentration broken, he once again fell to the floor, this time grimacing at the blow to his side. He decided to milk the punch for all it was worth and stayed down several minutes, until Xavier caught on.

"Cute," said Xavier, dragging Brian up. "Well, are you done?"

Brian sighed, dropping his gloved hands to his side. "Xavier, I need a little while longer. It's not like I can do it alone. The band's learning it, we're practicing. What more do you want?"

Xavier started unlacing his gloves. "I want it tomorrow night." He stared straight into Brian's eyes, his look unmistakable.

Brian slowly picked at his lacings, frowning. He needed more time, more work for it to go as planned. He wrestled with the problem, realizing he would have to push the limits of himself and the band tomorrow to accomplish what Xavier wanted.

"I need you to lay off the exercise tomorrow," he said bluntly. "No running, no weightlifting, no boxing. All this "going solo" will be for shit, if you don't let me practice."

Xavier studied him calmly. "Fair enough." He smiled wickedly. "I guess we can add a few more hours today to make up for tomorrow."

Brian threw his gloves off, smiling sourly at the bodyguard, not rising to the bait, patiently waiting for Xavier's next command. It ticked Xavier off and he motioned sharply to the singer to join him over on the stationary bicycle. Brian hopped on, hoping he could last the next few hours without collapsing.

Xavier started his machine, glancing over to see Brian already running at medium speed. He began also, a smile twitching the corner of his mouth. "How do you think the guys will feel when they see you perform your new song?"

Brian bit down on the inside of his lip, angered at the bodyguard's intentional rub. Xavier knew damn well what was going to happen, and so did Brian. He cranked up the speed on the machine, trying to force the scenario out of his mind.

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AJ heard a small tap on his hotel room door and he struggled to get up off his bed, craning his neck to watch the TV as he simultaneously opened the door. He spared a quick glance at the visitor and grinned widely, blowing her a small kiss and waving her in. AJ closed the door behind her then ran over to the remote, clicking Jerry Springer off.

"Katie, babe!" he greeted her warmly, eyeing the coat she carried in her arms. "You were able to fix it?" he asked, dumbfounded. His favorite leather jacket had received an ugly rip a few weeks ago and he was sure it was a goner.

Katie rolled her eyes, giving AJ a mock look of hurt. "Of course. I'm the best, remember?" She handed him the coat and then curled up in a chair, watching as AJ searched in vain for the tear. Unsuccessful, AJ shrugged and tried on his coat, admiring her workmanship.

"You're awesome, sweetheart. How much do I owe you?"

She shook her blond head of curly hair, giving him a half-hearted smile. "Nothing. Consider it my going away gift to you."

AJ removed the coat and placed it on his bed, throwing her a curious look and wondering if he had heard her right. "What? Going away gift? Wassup?"

Katie sighed, wondering if she should say anything, wondering why she hadn't just quit outright. It would have been so much easier to walk out, give no explanation, but her years of association with the group, especially with AJ, made it difficult, if downright impossible to do. She studied her hands a moment, examining the abuse that her rough and raw fingers had endured over the years. She felt a rising anger build inside her, and anger fueled by the fact that no one had taken her welfare into consideration, that no one had thought to inform her what was going on. She looked up into the concerned brown eyes of her favorite Backstreet Boy and gave a harsh sigh. "I'm quitting. As of today."

AJ stared at her. "Quitting? Why? We need you. *I* need you! You're the only one who understands my taste in clothing!" He crouched down and enclosed his hands in hers, giving her a winning smile, hoping to hell she wasn't serious. Katie jumped up, shaking AJ's hands away and began pacing, her arms crossed across her chest. She turned to give him a bitter smile, her eyes glimmering with resentment.

"I guess you don't need me that much, otherwise you guys would have told me."

"Told you," repeated AJ slowly, his expression showing bewilderment. Katie paused, irritated that she had to explain.

"Yes, told me! After all we've been through, I thought at least *you* would have warned me."

AJ sighed, throwing his hands up. "Okay, I give. I don't have the slightest idea what the hell you are talking about, K."

Katie gritted her teeth. *Men!* "I'm talking about Brian. Does that ring a bell? Now do you know?"

AJ's face of frustration turned into one of worry and Katie caught the transformation. She nodded in reply, happy that she was getting somewhere. "So, when was I going to find out? After I read the obituaries?"

"Obituaries?" yelled AJ, now thoroughly confused. He grabbed her arm to stop the pacing back and forth, placing his hands squarely on top of her shoulders to stare firmly into her eyes. "Katie, I really don't know what you are talking about. What's this about Bri? *Spell it out for me, sweetie.*" AJ exaggerated the last sentence, giving her a commanding look.

Katie returned the look with a powerful one of her own. "Okay. Just when were you guys going to tell me Brian has AIDS?" The reaction Katie received was one she definitely didn't expect. AJ's hands flew from her shoulders, as if he had received an electric shock.

"AIDS?" he replied, taking a few steps back, the alarm in his voice making her wince.

Katie nodded, eyeing him suspiciously. "Yes, AIDS. Don't give me that bullshit that you didn't know," she warned threateningly. She wasn't sure AJ heard her as she watched him slowly lower himself to the side of his bed, his hands burying his face. Concern overcame her feelings of betrayal and she sat down gently next to him. Katie placed a consoling hand on his shoulder, her throat tightening in apprehension as she gazed at him, her eyes filled with distress. With a sickening clarity she understood. AJ knew nothing about it. *Shit!* she scolded to herself. *I knew I shoulda just left!*

"How do you know?" questioned AJ quietly, the disbelief heavy in his voice.

Katie smiled sadly, her hands nervously rubbing against each other. "Well, look at him! He's lost weight, his color is all gray," she began before AJ interrupted her with a sharp laugh.

"Katie! Losing weight doesn't mean you have AIDS! Bri's been on a health kick lately."

"AJ! Let me finish. Have you seen his body?"

AJ shook his head no, afraid to speak.

"Well *I* have. He gave me some clothes to take in, to adjust because he's lost weight and we both know he doesn't need to. I had him try on some other clothing and when he slipped off his shirt he had these massive bruises and sores all over his body." She noticed AJ wanting to speak but waved him off. "Massive, AJ. I just saw his chest, but I can imagine what the rest of his body looked like. When Brian saw my shocked expression he kinda laughed, like embarrassed. Said he got them from exercising. I didn't believe him. Nobody gets those kinds of bruises! He seemed real nervous, dressed hurriedly, and asked me not to mention this to any of you guys." Katie snorted in disgust. "Yeah, right." She studied her red and cracked hands. "You know, I'm not sure how many ways AIDS can be transmitted, but I'm not taking any chances. My hands are always cut, cracked, or bleeding. I don't need to be touching anyone's body with sores on it, ya know?" She smiled sadly at her silent friend, getting up and placing a small kiss on his cheek. "I could be wrong, but I don't think so," she whispered sorrowfully. "I just can't take that risk, AJ. I've got a six-year-old to think about." She began to leave, but AJ grabbed her hand before she could. She turned to see the uncertainty, the doubt that was still written all over his face.

"AJ," she said softly, "ask him. Find out. He's lost weight; he looks terrible. If it's not AIDS, its something."

AJ nodded dumbly, unable to talk. He heard the quiet click of the door close as she left and emotionally exhausted he collapsed back onto his bed, covering his eyes with his forearm. He lay there for several minutes, sorting the information, his suspicions growing. He sat up and reached for the phone, his mouth compressed into a tight line.

Chapter 46:

The Battle

Brian hurriedly ripped off his sweat-soaked clothes, quickly eyeing the time before he jumped into the shower, hoping he might be able to shave, dress and pack before the bus was scheduled to leave. Knowing full well how irritated their bus driver could become if someone upset his tight schedule, he raced around like a madman, wishing he had time to eat something. His stomach cramped at the thought of food but he pushed the pain aside, promising himself he'd eat as soon as he could. He picked up his dirty clothing and eyed it for a moment, wondering if he should pack them along with his clean ones. With a disgusted look he discarded them, remembering how sweaty and smelly he had been at the bank today when he had withdrawn another "bonus" for Xavier. He leaned down to grab his packed clothing, wincing and feeling slightly nauseated as he straightened up. He waited until the feeling passed then hurried down the corridor to locate an open elevator and the waiting bus.

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AJ grabbed Eric by the shoulders to emphasize his point, not willing to give his bodyguard any details but determined that Eric would be successful. "Man, I don't care *how* you do it, just do it! Under no circumstances do I want Xavier on that bus tonight. Make up some excuse, make it good, so he won't get suspicious, okay?"

Eric nodded his reply, unfazed by AJ's request; he had done stranger things than this for the Backstreet Boy. He didn't particularly like Xavier, his aloofness and superior attitude had not earned him any respect among the other bodyguards and so Eric had basically left him alone. He knew that Xavier did his job, did it well, but Eric's loyalty lay with the person who paid his check. He chewed on several ideas, finally selecting one. He smiled at the worried singer giving him a reassuring slap. "Consider it done." He paused for a moment, lost in thought. "Well now, let's see..." he drawled slowly, giving AJ a wink, "blonde, brunette, or red-head?"

AJ grinned back, understanding the rules of payback. "Oh, definitely blonde. She was hot."

Eric eyed him curiously, tilting his head. "Really? Well send her my way!"

AJ laughed, shaking his head at the sexual appetite of his large bodyguard. Glancing at his watch, he gave Eric some last minute instructions and warned him to hurry. The bus was scheduled to leave soon and no way did AJ want Xavier anywhere near Brian when the guys confronted him.

* * * * *

All four members of the Backstreet Boys slouched casually in their seats, their face and body movements seemingly relaxed but Kevin knew better. AJ had positioned his hat

low, his sunglasses on, pretending to doze, but the slight constant rubbing of his fingers gave away his anxiety. Howie kept his eyes on a book, apparently engrossed, only Kevin noticed he hadn't turned a page in over five minutes. Nick played with a hand-held game, nothing new to Kevin, except that Nick never swore at it, something he always did. Kevin himself had his earphones on, pretending to listen to some music, only the machine's red light wasn't glowing. They did their best to act indifferent as Brian rushed onboard, managing to look annoyed at Brian's hasty explanation of why he was late again.

The cumbersome bus pulled out of its station, heading carefully towards the freeway and it took several minutes before Brian noticed that Xavier was not aboard. He tried not to panic but his voice was barely steady as he walked up to Harry, their driver.

"Hey Harry, what about Xavier? Isn't he coming?" Kevin, Nick, AJ, and Howie all glanced at each other, noticing the slight alarm in Brian's voice.

Not taking his eyes off the road, Harry waved at the young singer in annoyance. "Beats me! Eric said something about them all flying ahead to check out the next arena. Security problem, or something. I don't know." He spared a quick glance at the blond singer. "Go ask the guys. And sit down! You're not suppose to be up here!"

Brian turned away, concerned. It didn't feel right; somehow, something didn't add up. He wanted to ask the guys if they knew anything, but under the circumstances, decided against it. He walked down the aisle hearing Nick snicker behind his back, "Poor Bri, lost without his X." Brian tensed a little, willing himself to stay calm about the situation and Nick's comment. He picked the farthest seat in the back, turning his face away from the group, ignoring the four. Feeling the lurch of the bus as it increased speed to merge onto the highway, Brian shifted his weight around, trying to find a comfortable position for his aching body. His stomach rumbled with hunger and he sighed, angry at himself for not grabbing anything at the vending machine before he left. He knew his chance was little to none now that the bus was cruising smoothly on the freeway. It was going to be a long ride.

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Kevin sat in his seat for another half an hour, waiting patiently for a signal from AJ. Nick sat in his seat also, giving up all pretense of playing his game and occasionally glancing at Kevin with a "when" look. Kevin shrugged his shoulders slightly, indicating with a small head tilt towards AJ that this was AJ's call. Howie, the boldest of the four, had gone twice to the back of the bus, once to use the bathroom, the other to grab a Coke. On the second trip back, he had glanced secretively at Brian, who was curled up in his seat, head turned sideways against the high headrest.

Howie flopped next to AJ and looked at him intently. "Now is as good a time as any, I guess," he whispered and AJ nodded. He signaled to Kevin and Nick with a quick wave of his hand. Like a shot, Nick sprang up from his seat, his nervousness apparent to the

others. Kevin motioned him to go ahead and he followed the tall blond, giving AJ a quick glance of apprehension.

Howie eased cautiously down next Brian, AJ motioning for Nick and him to sit in the seats that faced Brian. AJ was suddenly glad for the seating design of the bus, which enabled them to face each other, rather than the traditional way in rows. Kevin stood to the side, watching his cousin, who was asleep. It struck him how young Brian looked with his eyes closed, how vulnerable he seemed. Kevin glanced at AJ, who had taken his glasses off and seemed to be studying Brian carefully.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" said Nick, anxiously. "Someone wake him up." Howie had to smile at Nick's request of "someone"; obviously Nick didn't want the job. Howie reached over to place a hand on Brian's shoulder, shaking him slightly. Brian's eyes immediately snapped open and this startled the other four.

Brian's alert but red-rimmed eyes glanced carefully at each one, noting their positions and facial expressions. This was not good. He felt his heart began to race a little faster, the beginning of perspiration begin to form at his brow as he tried to figure what was up.

"Lemme guess, you need a fifth for basketball," he kidded lamely.

"No," replied Kevin, tense. Irritated by his cousin's joking, Kevin threw his preplanned speech out the window and blurted out roughly, "Listen, we want to know what the fuck is going on with you and we want to know right now." Brian sat up a little straighter and Kevin watched as he caught a hint of fearfulness pass over Brian's face before it was quickly replaced with one of nervousness. Kevin felt his stomach lurch, sick with the knowledge that something was not right.

"Nothing is going on, let me go back to sleep, okay?" grumbled Brian. He turned hurriedly away from them, peering through the window, noticing that there was only a short time of daylight left and wishing desperately that he was somewhere, anywhere but here.

"Brian!" Nick's voice shot out, fuming with frustration. Brian jerked his head towards Nick in surprise, eyeing him warily. "Don't give us this crap, especially *me!* Now, do you tell us, or do we have to physically pound the shit outta you to get it?"

Brian fought hard to keep his expression neutral. He noticed each of the guys staring intently at him, and he began to panic, a small wave of claustrophobia enveloping him, threatening to overwhelm him.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about." Brian stood up, not sure what to do. AJ, who had been quiet all this time, jumped up and forcibly shoved Brian back into his seat, his eyes cold.

"Take off your shirt."

Brian's mouth opened wide in surprise, not comprehending. "Do what?" he cried in disbelief.

Howie spoke up. "You heard him, Rok. Take off your shirt." His voice was soft, full of conviction.

Brian knew that they were dead serious. Distrust turned into anger as he shook his head. "No way. I don't know what you guys are up to and I'm not doing anything until *you* explain."

Nick, never one for subtlety, impatiently cut to the chase. "Brian, take off your shirt so we can see. Katie quit today because she said that you were keeping a secret from all of us, that you have AIDS. And so help me, if she's right, I'm gonna kill you before that disease does!"

Brian wasn't sure he heard right, his mistrust turning into one of astonishment. "AIDS?" he barely managed to squeak out, his thoughts returning to when Katie had altered his clothes. He remembered her look, the fear he felt when he caught her staring at him. He thought she had believed his story about too much exercise, only to find out she had let her imagination run wild. Relief, mixed with the absurdity of the situation, caused Brian to laugh. The look of shock on his friend's four faces only aggravated the matter and his hoots of laughter made him double up, holding his sides from the sheer pain of laughing so hard. "AIDS!" he roared, pointing to himself. "*Me?* Oh God, that's a good one!" His deep howling reached up to the front and Harry turned to give him an exasperated look

Nick glanced at Kevin, his face incredulous. "I give up!" he shouted, flinging his hands wide. He pointed to AJ, his embarrassment mounting. "This is the *last* time I listen to you on anything!"

AJ ignored Nick altogether, his eyes never leaving the laughing form of Brian, who was wiping his eyes. AJ's relief was immense - until this moment he hadn't realized how tense he had become. Brian's reaction was too real to be fake, he had known him far too long to believe otherwise. He bit his lip in consternation, his arms folded across his chest, remembering Katie's words: 'if it's not AIDS, it's something.' That was what was bothering him. He waited for the blond singer to quiet down, a grim smile forming when he finally caught Brian's eye.

"I still want you to take off your shirt, Rok."

"You're kidding." Brian's teary blue eyes met AJ's determined brown ones and knew instantly that he was not joking. Brian's smile faded slowly. Realizing that AJ was more than just curious, Brian cursed himself thoroughly. He should have been more alert to AJ's sharp sixth-sense. Brian shifted uneasily in his seat, a rush of anger flowing through him. *Why the hell couldn't AJ just leave him alone?*

"Brian, do what AJ asks," pressed Kevin. "If Katie saw something that scared her enough to quit, then we want to see it too." He leaned his large frame forward to emphasize his

point, and Brian tore his gaze away from his cousin to see Howie and Nick nodding their support, all of them standing now, effectively surrounding him.

Brian rose angrily from his seat, scared at what the four would see, not sure of his ability to manipulate a convincing tale. His alarm at being found out, the consequences of what would happen to them added fuel to his fear and he lashed out. With a furious shout Brian shoved hard, breaking free of the enclosed circle.

Kevin grabbed Brian's shoulder, trying to pull him back, collapsing what little control Brian had left. He threw a hard punch, successfully connecting with his cousin's jaw. Kevin staggered back, amazed by the sheer strength of the blow, his hand coming away from his jaw, splattered with blood. "Get him!" he growled and Nick seized the collar of Brian's shirt, wrenching him back. Brian immediately dropped to the ground, striking out with his right foot to sweep at Nick's unsuspecting ankles. Nick landed with a solid crash to the ground, stunned by Brian's maneuver. Howie gave AJ a quick look, and AJ nodded, a silent message passing between both of them. They tackled Brian simultaneously, their weight too heavy for him to support and he fell to his knees. Brian managed to shove them both off, his desperation giving him an extra surge of power. He jumped up staggering, his vision wavering for a moment, feeling faint. That second in time gave Kevin the ability to clamp onto Brian's wrist, heaving with all his might as he jerked Brian off his feet.

Brian landed sideways, his fall broken by the oversized bus seat. Off-balance, he slid to the floor, only to feel himself being lifted upright, the strong arms of Kevin surrounding Brian's upper torso, pinning his shoulders back. Brian relaxed into the grip, letting the full weight of his body be supported by Kevin. With a sudden twist of his shoulders, he managed to rip free from his cousin's tight grasp. A rush of panic enveloped him as he realized he was still surrounded. Panting from the exertion, he held his hand up warningly, watching as Howie moved in cautiously.

"So help me D, you come any closer and I'll make you regret it!"

Howie took his threat seriously, eyeing Brian carefully. Brian's skills in fighting were surprising; he definitely didn't want spit out any busted teeth. He tried a different tactic. "Come on Bri," he said soothingly. "It's just your shirt, man. Don't make a big deal out of it." Brian shifted his stance, stumbling a little, his eyes wild. Concerned, Howie shot a quick look at AJ. Brian seized the opportunity to knock Howie hard, ramming him with his fist. Howie doubled over, gasping for breath, but managed to stay on his feet. Angered, AJ, Nick and Kevin tackled Brian, their concern for Howie overriding their worry for Brian.

AJ grabbed Brian by the wrist, wrapping his left arm around Brian's throat. Brian struggled, twisting frantically. Kevin clutched his cousin's other arm and shoulder, while Nick caught Brian's wildly kicking legs. Brian cursed them all soundly, the yells and sounds of fighting floating up towards Harry.

"Goddammit, what the hell are you guys doing back there? Don't make me stop this bus!" he warned.

AJ screamed back at Harry, applying pressure to keep his grip tight.

"Shut the fuck up, Harry! Just keep on driving!"

Brian fought harder than ever, his mind now fixed on the sole purpose of getting away. He knew if he didn't, the outcome could be disastrous for them all. He felt the muscular arms of Howie joining the fight, felt himself being strong-armed into submission. His vision blurred again making it hard to concentrate. Brian swayed a little, feeling sick, fighting to stay upright. He blinked, shaking his head, his sight now spinning, the sting of sweat burning his eyes. Brian struggled once more, his effort costing him what little energy he had left. Drooping into the strong grip of the four who held him, Brian closed his eyes, succumbing to unconsciousness.

Chapter 47:

Going From Bad to Worse

"Fuck!" breathed Nick, staggered by the silent form of his friend. He glanced nervously at Kevin, who was as equally stunned. "Quick, do something!" he pleaded with AJ, his voice cracking with emotion.

"Set him down!" commanded AJ, lowering Brian carefully to the ground. He bent over to listen to his heart, fearful that Brian had some sort of heart attack. The reassuring beat and slow breathing of his unconscious friend made him sigh in relief. "He's okay, I think. Just passed out."

Kevin ran his fingers nervously through his hair, rocking back and forth. "Shit! What do we do now?" He looked at the other three, waiting for their advice.

"Take his shirt off," Howie said calmly, remembering what they originally wanted. He ignored the glare from Nick, who hovered over his best friend. "Listen, we all just saw how violent Brian was. Take off the damn shirt, let's see what he didn't want us to see."

AJ nodded. "He's right. Kevin, help me with this."

Kevin knelt down, holding Brian's slumped form upright in his arms while AJ and Nick carefully slipped the shirt over Brian's head.

"Oh God!" moaned Howie and Nick together, not believing what they saw. Red, purple, and yellowish-green bruises were dotted over his chest and back, some perfectly formed, no more than the size of a quarter, others mottled and palm-sized.

"Check his hips, his legs," advised Kevin, grimacing at the sight of Brian's injured chest. Nick tugged off Brian's jeans, carefully scanning. "Look," he pointed, "there's a few on his hip, one on the side of his right knee."

AJ shook his head, trying to make sense of it. "Well, it's definitely not AIDS. I don't know what the hell Katie was thinking." He pointed to Brian's torso. "Jesus! Look at him! He's so skinny! And he's covered with bruises, but not one on his face, neck or arms! What gives? What kind of exercise could do that? Why is Brian so afraid to say anything?"

"Let's find out," Howie said somberly. "He's coming to." They watched as Brian moaned, his hands coming up to cover his eyes. Brian finally pulled away, turning to crouch on his hands and knees to help clear his head. He noticed he was clad only in his boxers and grimaced, ashamed and infuriated at the position he found himself in.

He felt AJ trying to help him up and he furiously slapped the offered hand away, rising on his own power. He pointed a finger at him, the color beginning to rise in his ashen face. "Stay the hell away from me!" he screamed, his voice shaking from rage. He

glanced at the rest of the guys. "All of you!" He ripped his clothing away from Nick's hands, struggling to put them on.

"Jesus, Bri, what's going on? Why won't you tell us? Dude, I thought we were tight!" said Nick, visibly upset. The group watched as Brian bent over, angrily lacing up his shoes. He spoke indirectly, as if talking to himself.

"Couldn't leave me alone, could you? Couldn't respect my privacy, take my word that everything's fine. No, you had to butt in! Ya'll happy now?"

Kevin grabbed Brian's shoulder, disregarding the glare from his cousin. "Everything is *not* fine, Brian. It's hard to miss those bruises. My God, you just passed out on us! It would take an idiot not to realize that something is wrong!"

Brian firmly shoved Kevin's hand off his shoulder, his blue eyes narrowing into slits. "Look here, *idiot*," he spat, "Nothing is wrong, like I've been telling you all along!" He threw a warning look to all four, his tone dangerous. "Just leave me alone!"

AJ shook his head. "No can do, Bri. We're not gonna stop until you come clean."

Brian watched as Nick, Howie, and Kevin nodded in agreement. He was stunned, the conviction in their words, the magnitude of the problem beginning to hit home. He thought he could hide this, keep everything a secret. With all four hounding him, especially AJ, he knew it would be next to impossible to keep Xavier from discovering their intent. That thought, plus his failure to control the situation, pushed him over the edge.

"No!" he cried, a horrible wave of panic engulfing him. He shoved blindly past Howie and Kevin, both who shouted at him to calm down. He couldn't. Chest pounding, his breath coming in short, shallow gasps, he ran to the front, screaming at Harry to stop the bus.

Harry, fed up with the outrageous behavior of the five, had already exited the freeway and was cruising down a side street. Looking for a safe place to pull off in order to determine what they hell was going on back there, he turned to see Brian yelling, his eyes wild with fear.

"I'm just about sick and tired of your shenanigans," he began, when Brian grabbed his arm, trying to force him to open the door. "Hey!" he spluttered in surprise, hitting the brakes hard, the immense bus screeching and smoking its tires in protest. The bus shuddered to a stop and all five Backstreet Boys scrambled back to their feet, having been thrown off balance.

AJ, the quickest to recover, ran over to Brian to keep him from escaping. Brian lashed out hard, trying to untangle himself from AJ's grasp. "Open the damn door!" Brian screamed again, struggling to free himself so he could grab the lever himself. With a

mightily wrench, he pulled free from AJ's grip and lunged for the handle, slamming the bi-fold door open and jumped, taking off at a dead run.

All four watched with disbelief as the fleeting form of their friend became smaller in size. Harry rose from his seat, slamming his fist in disgust. "That's it!" he yelled, what little amount of gray hair he possessed, standing on end. "I quit! School kids are easier than you five!" He marched outside the bus, bending over to open the side compartment to fish out his bag. Tossing the keys to an astonished Kevin, he slammed the side door down with a resounding crash. "I'm out of here." He turned and starting walking away, signaling his goodbye with a quick flick of his hand.

"Wait!" screamed Nick. "Whose gonna drive the bus?"

"Nick! Forget him!" Kevin pulled the lever to the door, closing it with a hard thump. He hopped into the driver's seat, turned on the ignition and floored the pedal. The bus lurched then began to pick up speed quickly.

"Whoa, man, be careful!" advised Howie. He had wisely kept his eye on what direction Brian had taken, tapping Kevin on the shoulder to point. Within a few moments they had caught up to the jogging form of their bandmate and they slowed the bus to a crawl, watching with alarming fascination as Brian continued to run, oblivious to their appearance.

"Damn!" swore AJ. "What do we do?"

"Let him run," advised Howie, and they all turned to listen to his sound advice. "I mean, how far can he go? Kev, just cruise slowly; keep pace. When he tires, and God knows he will soon enough, we'll be able to catch him."

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Brian kept his head down, occasionally wiping his brow with the hem of his shirt. He was dimly aware of the large bus creeping along side of him but he ignored it, too overwhelmed to concentrate on anything but putting one foot in front of the other. The panic attack had not lessened and Brian fought back the urge to scream. He ran on, hoping to find some relief, praying that he could exhaust himself and be rid of this horrible, suffocating fear.

Nick yelled something out the window to him, the noise of the traffic and wind muffling his words, and Brian continued, turning onto another side street. Frustrated, Nick turned to give Howie a pissed-off look. "Let him run," he mimicked, "how far can he go? Shit! He's still going!" Nick came up to Kevin, who was trying his best to keep even with his cousin and watch out for impatient motorists who honked and sped around the slow-moving vehicle. "How far has he gone?"

Kevin spared a quick glance at the mileage. "Around four miles." Nick rolled his eyes, coming back to shake his head at AJ and Howie.

"He's gonna kill himself before he stops," he declared to the two, his voice gloomy. Howie sighed, peering through the window. Twilight was beginning and he wondered how long they could keep sight of Brian before night fell.

* * * * *

Brian wished he had a small towel, the sweat pouring into his eyes was irritating his vision. He had hit his second wind, making it easier to focus on the situation at hand, the panic attack considerably lessened. He took more notice of the bus and its occupants inside, occasionally glancing in their direction. How he was going to explain *this* bizarre behavior, he had no idea. Brian desperately wished he could have handled things better, had the insight and knowledge to know what to do. He understood that under no circumstances could Xavier learn about this incident, that in order to pull this off he must come up with a satisfactory explanation that would put all the blame on his shoulders and garner no suspicion towards Xavier.

Brian's stomach growled, a painful stitch hitting him. A wave of almost indescribable nausea staggered him and he stumbled. He caught himself before he fell and he jogged on, now bent on finding the nearest convenience or fast food place.

"Damn, did you see that?" questioned Nick anxiously. "Shouldn't we grab him now?"

AJ bit his lip, his worry for Brian rising to the point of alarm. Brian's physical stamina was astonishing, something he wouldn't have believed if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes. The abuse Brian was doling out to his body was incredible. AJ was about to agree with Nick when Kevin gave the bus a sudden right turn, causing everyone to frantically clutch for balance.

"What the hell?" Howie shouted in surprise.

Kevin pointed out the window, motioning for the group to notice what was happening. "Brian went in there."

AJ peered at the fast food joint and groaned. "*Burger King*?" The company was their tie-in to the tour and even though the promo was months old, having Brian show up in the state he was in could spell a PR nightmare. "Let me off!" he barked to Kevin, motioning for Nick to follow him. They jumped off the bus, watching as Kevin and Howie wisely pulled out of the parking lot to park discreetly across the street.

Nick grabbed AJ's arm, trying to slow him down. "Hey, do you think it's such a good idea for both of us to go in together?" he questioned, eyeing the car-filled lot. It was Friday night, not a good time for being inconspicuous.

AJ waved off Nick's concern, quickening his step. "Come on. It's not like we're going to eat there. We need to get Brian out as soon as possible, before he causes a scene."

"Like we won't?" grumbled Nick, hurrying to follow AJ.

* * * * *

Brian was glad to see no one standing in line; he was dying of thirst. He walked up to the nearest helper, a young, red-headed boy whose head was bent down, intent on cracking open a roll of quarters. Brian waited a moment, then realized the boy was more interested in opening the roll than in serving the next customer. He coughed, then coughed once again, more forcefully. The server still kept his head down, successfully dumping the broken roll of quarters into his register.

"Yeah," he drawled, "can I help you?"

"First of all, I need water, two big glasses of it, okay?"

The young cashier finally raised his head and eyed Brian guardedly, taking in the disheveled and sweaty man before him. "Hey, we don't serve transients here, get lost."

Amazed that he hadn't been recognized, Brian dug into his wallet, throwing a \$100 dollar bill onto the counter. "Will this help?" he smirked.

The helper smirked right back, picking up the hundred as if it was fake. "We don't accept anything larger than a twenty, pal."

Brian was losing his cool, fast. He pulled out a debit card, handing it over. "I *know* you take debit."

The young boy took the card, suspicion written all over his face. With a nod of "just a second" he sauntered over to his supervisor, handing the card and pointing in Brian's direction.

Brian watched as the older supervisor, who was barely out of his teens, look at the card, glance at Brian, then look at the card again. Brian sighed, wondering when he would be recognized. It didn't take long. A small scream of surprise emitted from a co-worker just as she was handing a take-out order over the counter. "Oh my God!" she shrieked, her hand coming up to her mouth. She pointed a shaky red fingernail at him. "It's you!" She started jumping up and down, oblivious to the customer who was holding his hand out to grab his order. The irate customer leaned over to snatch his bag, giving Brian a who-the-hell-are-you-look before leaving. Brian gave her a weak smile, his thirst at an all time high.

"Can I have a drink of water miss?"

She nodded happily in reply, nervously spilling most of the contents as she handed him the small courtesy cup. Brian downed the water in one gulp, holding the cup up for her to see. "How about your largest cup this time, okay sweetheart?"

She swooned at the nickname, just as Brian thought, and he smiled thinly as she anxiously stumbled over herself again to hand him the water. He thanked her and drank heavily, ignoring the stitch growing in his side.

"Yo, Bri, let's *go*, man!"

He heard AJ yell his name loudly and he turned, including everyone in the restaurant. Brian held up his hand for AJ to hold on, turning back to face the astonished manager and his rude helper. "Can I order, or is something wrong with my card?" he asked, pointing to it.

"I, I," stammered the supervisor. "Management never told me you guys were coming!" he whined, his eyes wide as glanced at Brian, then at AJ and Nick who had now appeared at his side.

"Management doesn't know," whispered Brian, as if it were a big secret. He turned to give the two a questioning look. "Want something? I'm starved."

AJ shifted nervously, noticing the growing attention they were receiving. "Rok, let's *go*," he hissed.

"Order me a number 6," said Nick, pausing to wink at the cute Burger King girl before noticing AJ's heated stare. "What? So sue me. I'm hungry too."

The red-headed boy shook his head as the two began arguing over whether they should order for Kevin and Howie. Brian looked at the helper, confused by the young kid's expression. "What?" he asked, now annoyed.

"Well," began the boy, his face in disbelief, "you guys make millions, right?" AJ and Nick stopped arguing to listen to him.

"Yeah, so?"

"What the hell are you doing here, eating this shit?"

"Good question," replied AJ sourly, wishing Brian had chosen McDonalds.

Brian looked at AJ. "Have it your way..." he sang, punching AJ lightly on the shoulder. The slightest ghost of a smile crossed Brian's lips and AJ heaved a large sigh, glad to see some of the old Brian returning.

"Hell," he grumbled, "give me a number six too. Make that the same for Kev and D. And hurry it up!" he groaned to Brian, groaning with resignation as four giggling teenager girls came up, pens in hand.

Brian sent Nick over to pick up some condiments and was signing the receipt when he felt a tug on his arm. He straightened up, handing the pen back and noticed a dark-

haired teenage girl literally clinging to his arm. She batted her eyelashes at him in her most inexperienced seductive way.

"Hi!" She nodded at his order that was being prepared. "Are you *having it your way?*" she cooed.

Brian looked her once over, pausing at the tone in her voice. "Uh, yeah."

She smiled, coming in closer. "My name's Sandy. I can make sure you have it your way too."

Brian almost choked. "I'll bet," he muttered under his breath. She was small, barely five feet tall, her size was overwhelmed by an outrageously grown-up figure. Brian politely pried her hand off his arm. "Call me when your legal," he whispered with a smirk and a wink. She frowned at him, then gave him a cold stare before setting her sights on Nick. Brian had to shake his head as he watched her circle like a hawk near Nick, who, now with AJ, was trying desperately to fulfill autograph requests.

"Here you go, *sir*" sneered the red-head, handing two bags and a drink holder to Brian. The singer ignored the sarcasm, glad to leave, almost faint from the tantalizing aroma of hot food. He turned to locate Nick and AJ, feeling slightly sorry at the ambush they were receiving. His mouth nearly dropped open when he noticed the dark-haired girl leaning over the table where Nick was seated, her blouse completely off. Bending over seductively in her tight pink bra, she pointed to a red-faced Nick where to sign his name on her chest.

A large, well-built young man, in his late teens, grabbed the near naked girl in anger. "Amy!" he yelled, irritated. "Put your shirt back on. You're acting like a whore!"

Amy shoved her boyfriend hard, glaring at him. "Shut up Zach! You're not my dad."

A large muscled arm reached in and grabbed Amy, ripping her away from Nick who was trying to finish signing his name. "Hey!" said Nick, looking up from where he sat, startled.

Zach elbowed his way in, shoving the small crowd apart. "Fucking Backstreet Boys!" he sneered, leaning in close, turning his anger onto Nick and AJ. "Thinking you can have any and every girl! Making them act like sluts for your enjoyment!"

Nick nervously glanced at AJ, noticing that the room had become deathly quiet. Tossing his pen aside, AJ stood up and held his hands up in peace. "Listen dude, we're outta here." He motioned for Nick to follow him and Nick got up only to be shoved roughly down in his seat. Nick's blue eyes glared up at Zach's angry ones.

"Better let me go," he advised Zach, his voice threatening.

Zach caught Nick's warning tone, his anger rising to a pitch. "Prick!" he jeered as he pointed a finger, an impulsive sense of superiority filling him. "I should kick your ass!"

Alarmed, AJ shoved his way towards Zach, his mind bent on one thing: getting to Nick.

Worried, Nick had the same idea, getting to AJ and getting the hell out. Nick jumped up hurriedly from his seat, AJ coming from behind, effectively boxing Zach in between the two. Feeling threatened, Zach slammed an elbow into AJ's chest, sending him reeling backwards. He crashed against a large metal railing, slumping to the floor, dazed. Wide-eyed, Nick stared in disbelief at his friend lying on the ground, then turned to look at Zach, too late to protect himself from the vicious blow aimed at his face. A powerful hand enclosed around Zach's fist, stopping the punch just inches from Nick's jaw. Zach turned awkwardly to see Brian twisting his hand, forcing Zach painfully backwards. Brian kept up the pressure, crushing his hand, his blue eyes dark with anger.

"You want to fight?" Brian taunted. "Okay, how about me?"

Nick rushed over to AJ, helping him up. They watched in morbid fascination as their bandmate overpowered Zach, skillfully bringing him to his knees. Both heard the gasp of pain from Zach as Brian continued to squeeze, the muscles in his right arm bulging from the effort. Brian bent over, his face inches from the sweating one of Zach's.

"Now are you going to be a good boy if I let you go?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. Zach nodded his reply, his words lost in a haze of pain. "Good." Brian slowly released his grip. He turned to glance at Nick and AJ, his face tight, and with a shock AJ realized that Brian sounded just like Xavier.

With the power and agility of youth, Zach sprang up instantly, a murderous glint in his eyes. He swung wildly, hoping to connect with any part of Brian's anatomy. Brian dodged the throw easily, coming back with a one-two punch that quickly sent the angry boyfriend to the hard floor. Stunned, Zach gingerly touched his jaw and mouth, pulling his hand away to gaze stupidly at the bright red blood that covered his fingers. He turned his face towards his worried girlfriend to listen uncomprehendingly to her reassuring words of comfort.

Brian grabbed the bags of the now-cooling food from the bystander he had shoved them at, nodding his thanks to the opened-mouth spectator. He turned to Nick and AJ, his face changed from one of anger to concern. "You guys alright?" he asked calmly. AJ nodded his head, rubbing his midsection. "Let's go before the food is completely cold." Brian hurried outside, handing the drink holder for Nick to carry. He took off at a jog, Nick and AJ following close behind.

"Damn!" swore Nick, his voice filled with awe. "Remind me never to get into a fight with you! Can you teach me those tricks?"

Brian turned his head to find Nick smiling.

"Sure, anytime, Frack."

Nick looked back at AJ who was doing his best to keep up with a sore stomach. "Here that Bone? Bri's gonna teach me, how about you?"

AJ grimaced as he ran to catch up, not answering. *Never in a million years.*

Chapter 48:

Opposing Views

Kevin was glad he took Howie's advice and kept the bus' engine running. Tending to his jaw with an ice pack, he missed the expressions on Brian, Nick, and AJ as the three hopped on, but jumped quickly to attention as AJ and Nick screamed for him to "take off!" Hurriedly slamming the door, Kevin floored the gas pedal, narrowly missing a parked car. Wondering what the hell was happening, he checked the large side mirrors outside the bus but saw nothing, his view blocked by nightfall. As he urged the bus for more speed he spared a glance in the rearview mirror to see Howie catching a Burger King bag that was tossed by Brian. "What's going on?" he yelled over his shoulder to Howie. Howie glanced inside the bag for a moment, before turning his attention to AJ.

"Yeah, what happened?" he quizzed, noticing AJ wincing slightly as he sat down.

"It was so cool D," explained Nick, jumping in. "AJ got clobbered by an jealous boyfriend, and Bri nailed the son-of-a bitch!"

Kevin craned his neck to hear. "AJ has a jealous *boyfriend*?"

"No!" yelled Nick and AJ simultaneously. AJ looked at Nick, exasperation on his face.

"Nick, let *me* explain." He turned to face Howie and Kevin. "A fan wanted her autograph signed by Nick, so she took her shirt off." Howie shook his head, still confused.

"She took her shirt off so you could sign the shirt?"

"No!" screamed Nick and AJ again. "Sign *her*!"

"Right on her chest!" explained Nick and Kevin and Howie suddenly understood. "They were awesome!" Nick added and now Kevin and Howie *really* understood.

"So what's this about you nailing someone?" Howie asked, curious. He took a handful of fries and sat down next to Brian, giving him a nudge.

Brian mumbled, "It was nothing," and took another large bite of his sandwich. Slightly shocked at the way Brian was cramming his food down, Howie glanced at AJ, raising his eyebrows with a *what gives?* look. AJ shook his head, just as puzzled.

Nick decided to fill Howie in. "Nothing, my ass! Brian nearly punched his lights out! You shoulda been there, D. This guy almost smashed my face in but Brian saved me," he crowed, reaching over his seat to steal a large handful of AJ's fries.

"Too bad he did," replied AJ sourly, trying unsuccessfully to smack Nick's hand away.

A small but genuine sound of laughter burst from Brian. Surprised, all four turned to stare at him. "He laughed!" shrieked Nick, pointing dramatically. "Frick is back from the land of the weird." There was a moment of awkward silence as Nick's statement hit home. Embarrassed, Nick coughed, his face reddening slightly. "Sorry, Bri," he mumbled, wishing he could kick himself. "I didn't mean it."

"Yes, you did," said Brian good-naturedly, a small blush of embarrassment growing. He felt self-conscious as they all looked at one another, waiting for him to break the ice. He knew his odd behavior demanded an explanation; somehow he had to convince everyone that he alone was the one to blame for his eccentric mood swings. It was now or never. He bowed his head, unable to keep eye contact. "I know I haven't been acting normal lately," Brian spoke, almost in a whisper. "I'm sorry." Brian paused, gathering his thoughts. Nick, Kevin, AJ, and Howie held their breath, not daring to speak. "As you know, this tour has been kinda hard on me. I just want y'all to know that none of it is your fault. I'm to blame. Me and me *only*." Brian closed his eyes a second, praying that they would believe him.

"Explain the bruises," prodded AJ gently.

Brian looked up, his face weary. "It's from exercise, like I told you," he lied. "I asked Xavier to teach me boxing, to learn some fighting skills. The bruises are from when we spar." He hoped his face was expressionless, because his thoughts were not. He tried to ignore the unpleasant flashbacks of when Xavier had hit, punched, or strangled him.

Kevin knew Brian was the most athletic of the five, but he had a hard time believing his cousin could put himself through this shit. "And you *enjoy* doing this?" he asked from the front, in total disbelief. Brian gave a small snort, looking at Nick and AJ.

"Hell no, I usually hate it, but it sure saved your ass, didn't it?"

AJ gave Brian a small smile of acknowledgement. "Yeah... it did. Okay, what about your weight loss?"

Brian felt like AJ's eyes were trying to pierce right through him. "Two things. One, I'm eating better." AJ frowned as he glanced at Brian's Burger King bag. "Okay, okay, I'm trying to. Xavier has me on a better diet. Two, all this exercise has made me lose a lot."

Three, cause I'm starving to death because Xavier watches me like a hawk and I never seem to get a chance, Brian thought resentfully.

AJ crunched his bag up, tossing it one-handed into the trashcan. "Alright, one more question." Brian inwardly tensed up, a feeling of alarm sweeping over him. He sensed his false confession had pacified Nick, Howie and Kevin, but AJ was an entirely different matter.

"Shoot," Brian said calmly, anything but.

"Look at me straight and tell me Xavier isn't causing any problems for you," asked AJ bluntly, his arms folded across his chest.

Brian knew it was coming, but the question still hit him like a sledgehammer. He noticed all four watching him with extreme interest and knew the way he responded could either spell success or disaster. Brian found himself biting the inside of his mouth hard, hoping the pain would quell the fear rising in him. *Answer!* his mind screamed, *now before they begin to suspect!* He didn't come this far to fall short on one simple question. Sending up a small prayer, Brian showed his most sincere smile.

"Well, sure he causes problems Bone, everyone knows he's a pain-in-the-ass bodyguard! But I *want* his help, I asked for it, and he's trying his best to teach me."

"Teach you what, exactly?" asked AJ, "how to drive yourself into an early grave?"

"No. How to improve myself; to try new things."

Howie snorted in reply, got up and also tossed his garbage away. "You sure are going about this the hard way," he muttered.

Brian turned his attention away from Howie to AJ who was shaking his head. "You really haven't answered my question, Rok. What I want to know is, is Xavier bullying you, threatening you in any way?"

A small bead of nervous sweat tricked down the side of his temple and Brian causally wiped it away, hoping no one noticed. He tried to read AJ's expression but he had put on those damn sunglasses again, making it impossible for Brian to see.

Brian yawned, hoping it masked his nervousness. "AJ, do you really think I would allow a bodyguard do that?"

"I don't know, why don't *you* tell *me*."

A flush of anger swept through Brian. *Damn him!* Why couldn't AJ just accept his *explanation*? He rose from his seat, his eyes narrowing into slits as he came nose to nose with AJ. "What is it with you, huh? What do you want me to say? That Xavier beats me senseless, that he threatens my life, that he's holding me hostage in some bizarre way?" Brian's voice raised to a higher pitch. "Well, you're outta luck, pal!" He swung his hand around. "You know, I'm getting tired of all your crap!" Brian pointed his finger at AJ. "Especially yours! I gave you guys the truth, if you can't accept it, well tough shit!"

Nick reached out to lay a concerned arm on his shoulder, only to have Brian move away. A sudden wave of exhaustion caused him to sway a little and he rubbed his forehead with his hand. "I'm going to lay down," he said curtly, turning on his heel and heading towards his bunk.

For a moment, no one said anything, then Nick rolled his eyes at AJ. "Went a little overboard, don't you think?" he questioned as he headed up front to see Kevin.

AJ gazed at him sourly. "You mean me or Brian?" he grouched, not wanting a reply.

Nick didn't care to answer. He sat behind Kevin, watching the oldest Backstreet Boy drive. After a moment Nick heaved a heavy sigh and tapped Kevin on the shoulder. "Know where you're going?"

"Nope."

Nick gave a small snort of disbelief. "You're kidding, right?"

Kevin drove on. "Nope."

"Well, damn! Where are we?"

Kevin pursed his lips, thinking. "The same state, I think."

"Very funny, ha, ha."

Nick paused for a moment. "Kev, what do you think about Brian?"

Kevin shrugged. "I don't know...maybe we should just lay low for awhile, give it a rest. Let Bri rest too. The only thing I know for sure is that he's exhausted. And if Brian doesn't get better, our tour is in trouble, that's for sure."

Nick peered into the darkness, running a hand dejectedly through his blond hair. "Yeah."

He glanced back at AJ and Howie, who were deep in conversation, then chewed on his lip, upset by the turn of events.

"Shit, this is just great! One, our bus driver has abandoned us; two, Bri looks like he's gonna have a nervous breakdown; and three, we have no idea where the hell we are."

Kevin turned to give Nick a quick look. "Four, you got to sign a great pair of tits."

Nick stared at Kevin, unsure he heard right until he saw Kevin give him a wicked grin, trying to ease the tension. Nick gave a sharp laugh, shaking his head. "Right! Sure. Well I guess that makes up for everything!"

"Good." Kevin pointed to the glove compartment. "Now go find the map. Let's see if you're smart enough to read it, or are you just another pretty face?"

Nick hopped into the passenger's side, rummaging around the compartment. "I'm both," he smirked.

* * * * *

Howie handed AJ a Coke, the last one remaining in the small refrigerator. "Here," he said, shoving it in front of AJ, who was bent over in his chair, lost in thought.

AJ accepted it, popped the ring, and took a long swig. Howie patiently waited for AJ to finish his drink, sitting quietly.

"He's lying," AJ stated flatly, his voice holding no emotion. Howie glanced back at Brian's sleeping compartment, then gave his friend a quizzical look.

"How do you know?" he asked, lowering his voice to a whisper.

AJ gave Howie an irritated look. "How the hell could you *not* know? Shit Howie, we've been together how many years?"

"Well excuse me for not being the all-knowing AJ McLean!" hissed Howie, his brown eyes flashing in anger.

AJ sighed, his irritation fading. "Sorry, D.," he apologized, rubbing his forehead tiredly. "It's just that everything is so incredibly fucked up."

Howie nodded in reply, rubbing the palms of his hands absentmindedly on his jeans. "So, what is Brian lying about?"

AJ stood up, stretching. "Everything...something... I'm not sure. I just know he isn't telling us the truth."

"Well if Brian is so intent on keeping it a secret..." Howie paused, "...I guess there's nothing we can do then, right?"

"Wrong. We had goddamn better well do something."

Howie stood up, worried by the frustrated tone in his friend's voice. "AJ, what are you saying?"

AJ gave him a hardened look, grabbing Howie by the arm and pulling him close. "D," he said slowly, his voice dropping so low that Howie strained to hear it. "I've got a feeling Brian's secret is going to take us all down." Howie looked at AJ. The same distressing feeling had been nagging at him for some time now and he nodded slowly, his belief confirmed by AJ's sobering expression.

"What should we do?"

AJ shook his head, taking off his glasses to look clearly into Howie's worried face. "I'm not sure. But I'll be damned if I going to let him do it."

Chapter 49

Brian reached with his hand to massage the back of his neck, trying to rub the soreness out. He glanced at his watch, noting the time. It had been a long and exhausting afternoon, the band and dancers practicing over and over again to get the new song down pat. Brian deliberately ignored the undisguised looks of resentment and hostility thrown at him as he ran them through another rehearsal, wishing he could just as easily ignore the dark shadow of Xavier who sat quietly in the front row, observing. Brian didn't need to turn around to know he was being watched, he could feel the penetrating stare of the bodyguard burn into his skull. The last note of the song was a long one, and as he finished it Brian opened his eyes to see the rest of the group surveying him, waiting sullenly for him to repeat, "one more time."

"Uh, I guess that's it, y'all. Thanks for taking the time to work on this."

Brian heard mutter of "as if we had a choice" and "do we get paid overtime?" filter by him as they left the stage. Walking over to the cooler on the quickly deserted stage, Brian reached down to search for a cold bottle of water. He felt Xavier surface up from behind him and Brian took his sweet time drinking, not wanting to face him. Brian finished the bottle and with irritation turned to look at the bodyguard who had waited patiently for him to acknowledge his presence. He gave Xavier a sour look, tossing the empty away and bent down to reach a towel to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"Everything to your satisfaction?" he scoffed.

Xavier ignored him, sticking his hands casually into his pockets as he wandered around the stage, nonchalantly examining the band's equipment.

Brian shrugged. "Great," replied, answering his own question. He snatched his bag and headed towards the dressing room. Fingers of steel wrapped around Brian's upper arm, stopping his exit. Dragging the young singer close, Xavier stared at him a moment, looking him over.

"So what happened?" he questioned calmly, his eyes searching Brian's.

Brian tried to wrench away, but gave up as Xavier's hand tightened into a vice-like grip. "What are you talking about?" he asked evenly, his stomach twisting with fear, wondering just how much Xavier knew.

"Don't fuck with me," said Xavier lightly. "Harry quits, you punched someone at Burger King..." Xavier prodded, waiting for an explanation. Brian coolly looked down at the beefy hand that was crushing his arm, then up at Xavier.

"Let me go."

Xavier eyed him for a moment then released his stronghold. Brian moved away, massaging his arm. What should he say? His mind raced, trying to figure how much

Xavier knew, how much he didn't. No one knew where the hell Harry was and Brian was positive none of the guys had talked to X. He decided to go with what Xavier had already questioned him about.

"Harry quit because we were all horsing around in the bus and he got angry," answered Brian simply, leaving out the real reason. "He lost his temper, took off, left us right in the middle of nowhere." Brian kept his voice steady, trying to sound bored. "All of us were hungry so we stopped at Burger King and some kid got jealous because his girlfriend was flirting with Nick. He was about to punch Nick when I decked him. End of story."

Xavier had hitched his hip onto the end of a massive speaker, his hands crossed in front of him as he listened to Brian's explanation. "Just horsing around, huh?"

Brian wondered if Xavier could see how shaky he felt. "Yeah, horsing around," he repeated, fighting to keep his expression neutral.

Xavier stood up and gave a massive stretch. "Hmm," he said, noncommittal. Brian watched him, unsettled by his casual manner. Did Xavier believe him or not? Ill at ease, Brian edged past the bodyguard, anxious to leave. He almost made it past but once again the quick hand of Xavier blocked his way. Xavier leaned in, his mouth brushing against the blond singer's ear. "You're a poor liar. But that's okay. It just makes the game more interesting."

The closeness of his mouth, the warmth of Xavier's breath against him made Brian physically sick. He yanked hard, ripping free of the bodyguard's hold and vaulted off the stage, running up the aisle. He reached the top and kept on running, unable to rid his mind of the sinister laughter that floated up behind him.

* * * * *

Nick was in a foul mood and everyone knew it. It had been a particularly pain-in-the-ass day starting with Brian begging off a PR meeting, complaining of a headache, and asking Nick to fill in for him. Nick reluctantly agreed and left with the limo driver, only to have the driver get them completely lost. Finally reaching their destination, after an hour of confused driving. Nick's tolerance level dropped another notch when he discovered the publicity meeting had been canceled. Leaving, he had climbed back into the limo, only to get stuck in freeway traffic for two more hours due to an overturned semi. Nick waited in agony, needing to pee bad, having unwisely drunk a large soda before he left. Now, back at the arena he just wanted to enjoy a few moments in the game room before starting the tedious job of getting ready for another show.

Nick walked along side AJ, on their way to their dressing room, when he saw their drummer striding towards them. Nick said a quick hello, his hand frozen in mid-air as the drummer ignored him, not giving Nick a second glance. Nick noticed their lead guitar guy right behind the drummer and called out to him.

"Hey, seen Bri anywhere around?" asked Nick hopefully, wanting to see if Brian would go a couple of rounds with him. It seemed like forever since they had played against each other. The guitarist gave the blond singer 'a what-planet-are-you-from look' and walked away with a disgusted wave of his hand. Nick turned to AJ in amazement.

"Damn! All I wanted to know is if he knew where Bri was. What the hell is the matter with him?" AJ shook his head tiredly as they rounded the corner to enter the dressing room. Irritated, Nick whacked the door open then slumped down dejectedly on the couch. "Get the feeling that everyone is ignoring me?" he questioned. He gazed up to see AJ not listening, his hip hitched over the edge of a chair, punching a few numbers on his cell phone. Nick sighed. "Yep."

Chapter 50:

A Change in the Program

Nick felt Kevin accidentally jostle him as the guys ran off stage, the jittery streaks of blue lights dancing across their faces as they quickly struggled out of their outfits and into the last ones for the night. Kevin slapped Nick apologetically on the shoulder for his clumsiness and flashed him an index finger indicating one song, one more song, and the night was over, finished. Nick heaved a sigh of relief and grinned back at the dark-haired singer, nodding in agreement. A towel was shoved in front of his face and he took it gratefully, wiping the sweat off his forehead and neck, hurriedly glancing around for the others.

The stage crew were feverishly helping Howie and AJ to adjust their headsets and he craned his head around to hunt for Brian. Unable to locate him, he turned to AJ, who looked like he was also searching for Brian's whereabouts. Without warning, a mad eruption of screams arose from the audience, startling all four. The band began to play, the voice of Brian heard rising above it all.

Incredulous, Nick and AJ's eyes met, confirming their bewilderment. Nick hand signaled a question mark to AJ who shrugged his shoulders, unable to reply due to the blaring music. All four rapidly elbowed their way to the edge of the stage, astonished at the sudden change in program.

Howie leaned across AJ for a better look. "Look..." he breathed.

Brian was on the left side of the stage, bending over the edge, waving and singing to the crowd as the dancers swayed behind him. The music was something totally new to them, the song never heard before until now. The tempo was upbeat, the rhythm and style suggestive of the band Santana.

Opened-mouthed the four watched the intricate movements of the dancers, Brian intertwining himself between each dancer as he sang. AJ listened, mesmerized. It was good, very good, but nothing like a Backstreet song. It was a song designed for one person and one person only, not a group of five.

"What does Brian think he's doing?" yelled Nick to the others, exasperated.

AJ knew. Heart sinking, he grabbed Nick's arm a moment for support, the shock hitting him hard. He knew without a doubt what Brian was doing because he himself had dreamed about it. Brian was leaving Backstreet. Going out on his own. The only difference was that AJ would never up and quit the band. His ties were too strong, his devotion to the guys too great. His plans were for the far future, when the Backstreet Boys were no longer a group. He felt his resentment grow as the picture began to fit together, like so many pieces of a puzzle falling into place. He understood now the reasoning behind Brian's strategy for a new look, a different style that would separate himself from the group. AJ gritted his teeth. It also explained Brian's recent behavior,

his angry outbursts and sullen moods. Somewhere along the way Brian had also brought Xavier into it, possibly as his advisor, maybe more. Barely able to contain his anger he explained to Nick and the others. "Guys, Brian is going to quit."

"Huh? What?" Kevin looked at AJ in disbelief. "Are you crazy? Brian wouldn't do that!"

AJ turned around to glare at Kevin, his face dark. "Oh, yeah? Think about it. Think hard." AJ jerked his thumb viciously at the stage. "So what's Brian doing, singing a new song? Did we know about it? No. And how about the way he's been acting lately, his association with Xavier? All strange."

"But," began Howie, upset.

AJ cut him off with a sharp slash of his hand. "D," he growled, "I know. I know because it's what I want to do." He saw the shocked looks on his friend's faces and shook his head. "Not now! Someday, when Backstreet is no more, when we all decide to go our separate ways."

Howie nodded, remembering a long ago conversation he had with AJ. They had talked about 'what if' scenarios, each coming to the same conclusion that they would try individual careers once the group was finished.

Nick let out a harsh noise and all turned to stare at him. His blue eyes were filled with loathing, his face hardened with shock and anger as Brian's betrayal set in. "I'm gonna kill him," he stated, his voice heavy with bitterness.

Kevin sagged against the side of a steel pillar as if the support was the only thing keeping him up. "It makes sense," he spoke wearily, a look of hurt spreading across his face. He abruptly straightened up, his injured expression turning into one of rage as the music faded away and Brian rushed backstage, his face flush from the moment.

Furious, Kevin reached out to grab his cousin only to find AJ beating him to it, slamming Brian up a wall, his face mere inches from Brian's. "You traitor!" he hissed savagely. "All this time, we were concerned about you but you were just jerking us around, weren't you?"

Stunned from the blow, his head swimming from the force of AJ's ambush, Brian began to struggle, only to feel himself being body-slammed again as AJ roughly pinning his shoulders against the hard wall. He felt, rather than saw Howie pull AJ away, screaming at AJ "not now!" as he shoved the whole group towards the stage for the final song.

Howie grabbed Brian by his shirt, yanking harshly as he pulled him back on stage. The others followed and the music began, the routine so automatic by now, that it took little thought or effort to finish the song and say goodnight.

Whether the fans caught the mood of the five was questionable, but the grip on Brian's hand was not as they all bowed simultaneously to the crowd. Brian could feel the rage, the surge of anger course through Nick's hand as he crushed Brian's fingers mercilessly. Trying not to wince, he broke free of the grip and ran off the stage first, rubbing his hand painfully. Brian turned to see the other four exiting off stage, heard the frantic yells of

the stage crew to "hurry" so that all five could run to the safety of their waiting bus before the music died.

AJ had other plans. Effectively blocking Brian's path down the hallway, he ignored the excited cries of the crews' "come on" and advanced menacingly toward the blond singer. AJ shoved Brian hard, causing him to stumble backwards a few steps. He shoved again, this time harder, and Brian would have lost his balance if not for the wall that he crashed into.

AJ ripped off his glasses, flinging them away. "Mind explaining yourself?" he screamed.

Brian braced himself against the wall and straightened up, praying for control. "What's there to explain?" he replied, his voice maddeningly calm.

Kevin rushed up to Brian, his hand pushed hard against Brian's shoulder. "Don't give us that!" he snarled, his green eyes glittering with anger. "You're up to something, aren't you?" Brian gazed into his cousin's eyes, not saying a word. Furious at Brian's silence, Kevin leaned closer. "Aren't you?"

AJ felt the nervous tug of a stage crew pulling at his sleeve, and turned away from Brian and Kevin, eyeing the now crowded hallway, irritated by the sudden swell of spectators. He spread his arms wide, pissed. "Is this any of your business? Get outta here, before somebody loses their job!" The hallway scattered quickly, leaving only the five Backstreet Boys.

Howie, who had been silent all this time, walked up to Brian. He glanced at Kevin, who was still fuming, waiting for Brian to answer. Howie reached over and pried Kevin's hand off his cousin's shoulder, wedging himself between the two. "Brian, don't screw around with us. Are you thinking about leaving the group?" Howie's voice was composed, his dark eyes commanding Brian to answer.

"Yes."

The simple answer, barely audible from Brian, drew a sharp breath from all four, stung by his confession.

Heart pounding, shaking from his admission, Brian watched in dark fascination as the scene around him took on a surreal, slow-motioned effect. Kevin backed away, the anger and shock registering on his face almost too painful for Brian to bear. He turned in a dreamlike motion to see the fierce loathing radiating from AJ's eyes, to view the incredible expression of betrayal coming from Howie. Brian seemed to be floating, his mind disconnect from his body. Feeling unsteady, he sought support, propping himself against the firm wall to search for the face of his best friend. Brian but had a second to locate Nick's position before he was tackled, the larger body of the youngest Backstreet Boy knocking Brian completely off his feet. Brian and Nick fell in a heap, a sharp pain shattering Brian out of his trance-like state as his left wrist snapped underneath his

body. He felt Nick grab a portion of his shirt to haul him upright, felt the blow of Nick's fist smash across his mouth.

The pain that radiated from his wrist and lip was no match for the agony Brian felt when he saw Nick's face. It was one of raw hatred, the total destruction of their friendship exploding in one savage look.

"You lying son-of-a-bitch!" screamed Nick, his sobs of rage mixing in with his wild swings. Brian took the blows, not fighting back, hoping Nick's physical punches would numb his mental torment.

Three sets of hands ripped Nick bodily off Brian, holding the angry Backstreet Boy at bay.

"Nick!" yelled Howie, as Kevin, AJ, and he struggled to keep Nick from lunging back at the fallen singer. "Nick! Stop it!"

Brian struggled to sit up, wincing at the razor sharp pain that lanced through his wrist. He switched to his right hand to push himself up, then staggered upright. He wiped the blood away from his cut lip with the sleeve of his shirt, breathing heavily. "Whose next?" he coughed, as he spat some blood onto the ground.

AJ let go of Nick and came up to Brian, trying to contain his anger. "Me, if I knew that would help." AJ leaned in closer, his voice low and clear as he poked Brian viciously in his chest. "But how's this for starters, Bri? I'm not gonna let you go. In fact, none of us will. No matter how much shit you pull, you're staying with Backstreet. We haven't come this far to let you destroy the group."

The shock in Brian's expression was more than AJ could hope for. He watched as the bloodied young singer's face fell, almost swearing he read fear and disbelief in Brian's eyes. Brian turned his attention towards Nick, who was still being held back by Kevin and Howie. Nick nodded his approval and Brian slumped with defeat, hanging his head. AJ looked back at Kevin, Howie, and Nick, a smile of grim satisfaction spreading. His smile faded as his attention was caught by a massive shadow that was reclining quietly against the wall, the lone witness to the confrontation. AJ frowned, his temper frayed by Xavier's defiance to his order for everyone to leave. "Same thing goes for you, Xavier. I don't know what your little plan with Brian here is, but I can tell you it isn't going to work."

Xavier unfolded his arms that were wrapped across his chest and slowly came into view, his face calm and collected. "Hey, I'm just as in the dark as you guys. I had no idea what Brian was up to."

AJ snorted his disbelief as Nick, Kevin, and Howie turned to look at the bodyguard in surprise. No one noticed the strange look Brian directed towards the bodyguard.

Xavier shrugged, his tone bored. "As you know, Brian hasn't been the easiest to bodyguard, what with that intruder and threats. When he asked me to help him out, get

in shape, I didn't feel like I had the right to refuse his requests, even if they seemed a little strange. Hey, I've been thinking about asking management to reassign me for quite a while. I may bodyguard Brian, but I work for Backstreet."

AJ stared at Xavier, astounded by his declaration. Could it be possible that he was wrong about him? He shook his head, uncertain. He disliked Xavier, hell, he hated him, but he was the only one in the group who did. Could it have been borne out of his frustration with Brian's recent behavior? He noticed that Xavier had not come to Brian's rescue when Nick was pounding the shit out of him, nor did he seem particularly concerned about the bruised and bleeding Backstreet Boy right now. Too confused to consider the ramifications at the moment, AJ ignored the bodyguard and turned his attention to Brian.

Brian was looking over AJ's shoulder to stare at Xavier, dumbfounded. His mind reeled with the bodyguard's sudden confession, completely taken aback. What was going on? His mind raced for an explanation, knowing Xavier too well to believe his story. It would be just like Xavier to change the "game" completely, to throw Brian off-track. Ignoring the pain as his wrist began to throb in earnest, Brian berated himself for not realizing the possibility of Xavier outmaneuvering him. This was a game after all, guided by Xavier's whims, not rules. Brian now saw the logic in it, the brilliance in setting him up, of pitting one Backstreet Boy against the other. Now with Brian's betrayal, Xavier could enjoy the fruits of his labor by watching the disintegration of the trust, respect, and friendship Brian had with his bandmates. This pleasure would far outshine anything Brian had to offer Xavier by going solo, for now he had to endure the humiliation of staying with the group, knowing any hope of forgiveness from the guys was forever shattered. Xavier stared back at Brian, a hint of a smile quickly passing across the bodyguard's lips. That quick flicker of understanding between them was the only thing Brian needed to confirm his suspicions.

Xavier walked over to Brian, grabbing his wrist in a less than gentle manner and examined it. Brian gasped out in pain as Xavier nodded.

"Looks like you broke it," he stated off-handedly. "Better see a doctor." Xavier turned to talk to Nick, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You throw quite a punch," he commented as Brian caught a peculiar tone in his voice. Xavier glanced at the other three. "Looks like you guys need a diversion now to escape out of here. What do you say I create one?" With a flick of his hand he ushered the four down the hallway, no one pausing to glance back at the lone figure holding his broken wrist upright.

Chapter 51:

Test of Wills

Brian flinched as the young intern positioned his hand for a flat x-ray. He had warned the young singer that the possibility of it being broken was great. No shit! thought Brian sourly as his hand was repositioned for another scan. He waited patiently for the technician to return with the film, trying his best to ignore the stares and giggles of a flood of nurses who seemed to endlessly stroll past his exam room. He glanced at his hand, watching in dismay at the dark discoloration that had spread out past his wrist.

He wriggled his finger's experimentally to see if he could move them without pain. Nope. He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment's rest only to snap them open. Great. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see Nick's face, the accusing anger radiating from his eyes. Not wanting to dwell on that, Brian turned his attention to stare at the various boring educational posters on the wall. He tried reading them from where he sat, the print too small to understand. His thoughts turned back to Nick and annoyed, tried to shove them away. There was something nagging at the back of his mind, something he should be investigating, but right now he was too weary to care.

A sharp rap at the door announced the radiologist's return and Brian turned to see him placing the x-rays on the viewer. "Good news," he announced, "you've broken your wrist... right here," pointing at the screen.

Brian snorted. "That's good news?"

The doctor gave him a look. "Yeah. Anywhere else and I would have recommended surgery to place some pins in. All you need is a cast."
"Oh." Brian felt foolish, wishing he were anywhere else but here.

The doctor nodded, snapping down the x-ray. "Yes, very lucky." He came over to give the Backstreet Boy a sympathetic smile. "We'll have you fixed in no time. There should be someone here shortly to start the casting."

Brian nodded, then remembered something. "Hey, what about something for the pain?" he yelled at the doctor's retreating back. Sighing, he rolled his eyes, looking at his watch. He had been here over three hours; even with his status the only thing he had been granted was privacy, still having to wait his turn for treatment.

He swung his legs in boredom, scanning for a phone. Brian gave a short laugh. Who was he gonna call - Nick? Irritated that his thoughts turned again towards his best friend, he forced himself to think of something else. He couldn't. What was it that was bugging him so much? He gingerly eased himself off the examining table, his mind in a turmoil as he paced the small room. He flashed back to the falling out, the look in Nick's eyes, the look in Xavier's eyes....

Brian stopped dead in his tracks, his heart pounding in fear. *Oh God!*

He now remembered the peculiarity in Xavier's voice when he commented on Nick's punch, the way he offered to take all four back to the hotel without offering any help to Brian. Xavier wanted Brian away, by himself at the hospital, while Xavier had the guys at his disposal. Especially Nick. Without a doubt Brian knew that Nick was next in line for one of the bodyguard's nasty little surprises.

He rushed to the door, only to be stopped by a young technician carrying the casting supplies. "Whoa, hey there!" he cried in surprise. "I'm here, I'm here."

Brian grabbed him with his good right hand, pulling him close. "How long is this gonna take?" he questioned urgently.

The technician shrugged. "Maybe an hour."

"I'll give you a thousand dollars if you can do it in twenty minutes. Also, call me a cab."

Eyes wide open in surprise, the young man began to argue but stopped when he saw the expression on Brian's face. He held out a hand, indicating for Brian to hop back onto the table and gave the singer a crooked grin. "Let's rock!" he agreed not noticing the wince Brian gave to the unintentional nickname.

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Brian ground his teeth in desperation, furious at the taxi driver who seemed to be taking forever to reach the hotel. Having been in enough taxis to know the routine, Brian leaned over the front seat with the promise of a huge tip on his lips, when he noticed a dull shine of silver glinting on the front passenger seat. Looking closer, Brian saw a very slim, very illegal switchblade, lying across the cab driver's clipboard. Brian slowly eased back in his seat, his mind racing. Ripping open his wallet, Brian waved an impressive bill, the universal language to all cab drivers, and in less than ten minutes Brian was tearing out the taxi, switchblade tucked safely in his pocket and sprinting into the hotel lobby. It was relatively deserted, relative being a vague term, as die-hard fans were still camped inside the lobby, hoping against hope to catch a sight. Taken by surprise, they had only few moments to stare open-mouthed as Brian sped by them, catching an open elevator door and waving a quick goodbye as the doors shut closed. Brian hit the eighteenth floor, pacing in the elevator's small enclosure. *Hurry, Hurry...* he screamed to himself, a wave of dread surrounding him. The door opened with a small chime and he jumped out, not giving Eric, the night bodyguard, more than a quick glance as he raced down the quiet hallway.

Brian stopped halfway, confused about the room number. He turned to Eric, who was staring at him in a perplexed way.

"Eric! What room is Nick in?"

"1809," replied Eric. "But he's not there."

A fine bead of perspiration trickled down Brian's forehead and he wiped it quickly away. "Where is he?" shouted Brian, the panic now noticeable in his voice. Eric frowned at the agitated singer and strode over to him.

"With the other guys," he replied slowly.

"And where exactly are they?" yelled Brian.

"With Xavier."

"Where's Xavier?" screamed Brian, now at his wit's end.

Eric shrugged, unresponsive.

"Someone looking for us?"

Brian and Eric turned to see Xavier walking calmly down the hall, followed by Kevin, Nick, Howie and AJ. An awkward silence followed, each guy uncomfortably eyeing a disheveled Brian and his newly-cast wrist. Xavier gave a short nod to Eric and Eric sighed in relief, glad his shift was over. He looked at all five of the tense Backstreet Boys and made a mental note to ask management for a raise. A big one.

"Where have you been?"

AJ caught the shakiness in Brian's voice and started to reply when he noticed the question was not directed at them, but to Xavier.

Xavier shrugged nonchalantly. "Just chauffeuring the guys around."

Brian turned to look at the guys for confirmation and it annoyed AJ that he had to be held accountable for his whereabouts. He brushed by Brian, not giving him an explanation, and the others followed suite, Nick being the only one to comment snidely if Brian's hand hurt as he walked by.

Holding direct eye contact with Brian, Xavier said nothing until he heard the respective clicks of doors closing. He scrutinized the singer's hand, an eyebrow raised. "Looks painful." He paused for a moment, waiting for a reply. Receiving none, he continued. "Guess I'm going to have to teach you how to box one-handed. Better yet, maybe I'll teach Nick. Kid's got potential."

"You so much as touch him..." threatened Brian, "I'll kill you."

"You and who else..." began Xavier, his voice trailing off as he discovered the tip of a very sharp switchblade poised at the edge of his throat. Xavier recognized the make, impressed that Brian was able to locate such a deadly weapon. His eyes glittered with grudging admiration but his senses screamed to be careful. Brian had more than enough

skill to kill him where he stood and by the look in his eyes, the desire to do so. Xavier backed away carefully. "Well, you surprise me."

Brian kept the blade open, his hand steady, allowing a ghost of a smile to pass his lips. "Good. Guess I'm not the only one who can change the game."

"Ah," spoke Xavier, nodding. "I knew you'd catch onto my change of plans soon enough." He leaned against the side of the hallway, completely relaxed and seemingly unconcerned about the blade Brian still wielded. "Looks like I'm still your bodyguard for the tour." He stretched, trying to stifle a yawn as Brian absorbed the information.

"Yeah," continued Xavier, "the guys I and discussed it tonight. As much as I protested, they begged me to stay with you." Xavier flashed an evil grin, his amusement great as he watched the switchblade waver for a moment. "I said okay but on two conditions. First, a big raise." He paused, not elaborating on the second one.

"And ...?" Brian questioned, pissed at Xavier's little game of always making him prod for the rest of the information.

"Two, no questions asked on the way I have to keep your sorry ass under control for the rest of the tour."

Xavier smirked at the expressions that flickered across the Backstreet Boy's face, first disbelief, then shock, and finally hatred. No questions asked would give Xavier free reign in the game, any unconventional behavior on the bodyguard's part would be ignored by the guys, thinking it was just a part of Xavier's way of keeping Brian in check. He felt the bile rising in his throat.

"Yep," Xavier sighed, with great exaggeration, "looks like you screwed up real good. You should of let me break up the band, instead of you. Now it looks like you're stuck with me and your pissed off Backstreet buddies." A wide grin spread across the bodyguard's face, indicating that was exactly what he had planned all along.

The blade lowered a little, but not enough to make a difference. "What else?" asked Brian, his voice filled with bitterness.

"Else?"

"Come on, I know there's more."

A true expression of approval crept across Xavier's face. "Smart. I like that. Well, to tell you the truth, I think it's time to change the game. I'm bored again."

Brian snorted in reply. "The truth? As in 'when you wanted me to go solo' truth?"

"Yeah, I did kind of mess with your mind, didn't I? Hmmm. Well, you'll believe this because you yourself told me."

"Told what?" Brian's painkiller was wearing thin as well as his patience.

Xavier leaned forward, pushing himself from the wall. "Everything's always about money, Xavier!" he recited back to Brian.

Brian stared back at Xavier, remembering the accusation he had screamed at him. His heart skipped a beat as he realized this might be the way to get rid of him. "So, you figured money is what you really want, huh?" he mocked. "How much to leave me alone?"

The bodyguard gave a hoot of laughter. "It's not that easy. Sorry. I'm still enjoying our game immensely. No, I figured I'm not getting any older and you're not getting any poorer, so why not share the wealth? I don't want to be a bodyguard forever, you know?"

"Really." Brian's voice dripped with sarcasm. "And just how much is it going to take to make you a happy ex-bodyguard?"

"Depends," answered Xavier and Brian sighed at his vague reply, suddenly tired beyond belief. His right hand shook from holding the knife, the left demanding a painkiller.

Xavier tilted his head at the gleaming switchblade. "Are you planning to use that or what?" he jeered.

"Possibly. I suppose it depends on when, doesn't it?"

Xavier eyes narrowed, the bantering between them gone. "A threat? Good. I like being on familiar ground." He walked up to the blond singer, the blade just touching under Xavier's ribcage. Throughout their talk Xavier had studied Brian carefully, examining his stance, his attitude. He now knew that given the heat of a moment, the singer was capable of killing, but once his anger subsided was unable to do so.

He decided to test it.

"Go ahead, stick it in me. Do it. No one will see," he purred. Brian's eyes opened wide and Xavier could see the temptation in them. "Yes, I can see you want to," he soothed, "and it would be so easy, wouldn't it? All your problems, fears, gone. Do it," he whispered, "come on."

Tears of frustration welled up in Brian's eyes as his hand shook, the desire overwhelming, the nightmare over if he could just push the blade a mere six inches further. He knew it was a test, a strength of wills between them. His blue eyes stared, transfixed on the wavering blade he clutched tightly, trying to work up the fury he possessed just minutes ago. Slowly Brian flipped the blade into a closed position, backing away. Disgusted by his lack of nerve, he turned and walked away, heading for the solitude of his room as Xavier's satisfied laughter echoed down the hallway.

Chapter 52:

Contemplation

Kevin flopped face down onto his bed, too drained to do anything but grab a pillow and bury his face in it. He hoped to squash the memory of the past hours, especially the one of Brian standing in the hotel hallway, panic-stricken. He had looked overwhelmed, distraught, as if disaster had already struck. Worried, he thought to call out to his cousin, but stopped as his eyes fell on Brian's newly cast hand. The sting of Brian's betrayal became painfully fresh and his resentment quickly replaced his concern as he brushed by him, silent.

With a snarl, he threw his pillow across the room in anger. Glancing at his phone, he saw the red blinking light, indicating voice mail. He didn't feel like talking to anyone, especially his family. When they found out, and they would soon enough, all hell would break loose. He sighed, closing his eyes. He had argued with the other guys tonight, wanting to confront Brian on *why* he wanted to quit, but they all shot his idea down, feeling that what he did was explanation enough. He thoughts turned to next month, when the tour took a week hiatus for the upcoming holiday. Maybe on the flight home, *if* he was on talking terms with Brian, he could discover what made his cousin do what he did.

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Howie closed his door, then locked it, tossing his entry card next to his telephone. He felt the urge to pick up the phone and call AJ, but having already spent most of the night discussing Brian, AJ would have been pissed at him trying to rehash everything. Of the four, only Howie was the one who thought it was best that Brian left; it wasn't until after considerable pressure put on him by the other three that he gave in, agreeing to their decision to force Brian to stay with the group.

He walked into the bathroom and turned the shower on full force. Through a mist of steam he stripped then eased himself into the blasting spray, hoping the pulsating heat would sooth his frayed nerves. Never in a million years would he have thought what he witnessed tonight would actually happen. Equally surprising was Xavier. After missing their bus, Xavier had quickly managed to get all four safely out of the arena and with deceptive ease. He then chauffeured them around, taking them to the most secluded bar he could find so that the guys could talk undisturbed. When they had asked Xavier to join them, he seemed hesitant, almost uneasy about discussing Brian. He had expressed a desire to transfer, not willing to bodyguard Brian anymore. After much pleading they had persuaded him to stay, agreeing readily to his stipulations. Howie knew AJ's feelings regarding Xavier, so he was pleasantly surprised when he had to only kick AJ a couple of times under the table to agree.

He shut the water off, sighing as he toweled himself dry and crawling wearily into bed, wondering if the other guys were just as exhausted. His mind flashed back to Brian, standing isolated in the hall as they warily passed by him. For a moment he felt a twinge

of guilt, then shook his head in exasperation. If it weren't for him, none of this would be happening. Priorities, he had to remind himself. Band first, Brian last.

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Not caring to see if the door shut, AJ marched over to his well-stocked refrigerator, pulling every small bottle out that even remotely looked alcoholic. He was determined to get rip-roaring drunk, having been unable to do so at the sleazy bar Xavier had taken them to because the guys "*wanted to talk.*" What was there to talk about, anyway? Brian had tried to screw them over, but good, and if it wasn't for *him*, might have. Ripping the cap off the tiny bottle, AJ gave himself a congratulatory gulp, threw the empty down, then knocked back another. As the bitter liquid flamed down his throat he relaxed for the first time tonight. He struggled to kick off his shoes, eyeing the telephone. He wondered if he should call Howie but shrugged it off. It was late, and his friend would probably kill him, knowing he wanted to go over the night's events again.

He slumped into an easy chair, punching the TV remote. As it flared to life AJ sat back, staring blankly at the screen before him. *What a fucked day. What a fucked tour. Fuck.* He liked the word, always had, and now everything seemed to express his feelings in one simple, sweet word. AJ opened his third bottle, eyeing it moodily, then took a hefty sip. *Xavier.* Now *that* was something. His change of allegiance was startling to say the least, and he didn't buy it for a minute, even if the other guys did. He only went along because at the time he didn't care, agreeing to anything just so Howie would quit kicking him. Now he wasn't so sure. He squinted at the time displayed on the TV, sighing with resignation. Should he call it quits and get some sleep, or should he finish the rest of the bottles? Deciding on one more drink, he tossed it down quickly then gratefully climbed into the warm comfort of his bed. *I hope Brian sleeps as well as I will tonight,* he thought spitefully, remembering the pained expression on Brian's face as they uncomfortably crossed paths in the hallway.

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Nick stood in the middle of his room, at a loss. His body felt numb, his mind a mess of jumbled emotions, the most noticeable being the hostility he experienced when he saw Brian in the hallway. Somehow he didn't expect to run into him, and when he did, a flood of resentment coursed through his body. It was enough to make him want to punch Brian on the spot, the only thing stopping him was noticing the white cast encircling Brian's wrist. He didn't feel a twinge of regret, in fact he hoped it hurt like hell and made a point to say so as he strode past him. Now, looking at his phone he felt an impulsive urge to call Brian, to wish him a sarcastic goodnight. He thought the better of it, knowing it would just stir up more bitterness in him. And it looked like he was gonna have enough to last the whole tour. He eyed his bed suspiciously, wondering if he could relax enough to sleep. He knew he should take a hot shower, try to clean up, but he couldn't force himself to expend the energy. Flopping down on his bed, he grabbed the edge of the bedspread and pulled it over him, not bothering to undress. Why should he? He had a feeling it was going to be a long, sleepless night.

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The instant as he reached the confines of his room, Brian fished the medication out of his pocket, unsteadily opening the cap. Shaking two Tylenol with codeine out, he grabbed a courtesy cup in the bathroom and quickly swallowed them, praying the pain reliever would work soon. He looked into the mirror, despising what he saw. Once confident, happy and content, the face that stared back at him reflected only an empty, depressed, and frustrated young man. Brian went over to the side of his bed and sat down carefully, cringing as the codeine hit his empty stomach, trying to keep his mind off the cramps as he waited for the pain to lessen. He felt the sharp poke of the switchblade and dug the knife out of his pocket, staring at it bleakly. He berated himself for not having the guts to kill Xavier outright, the defeat so bitter he could still taste it. He knew, as had Xavier, that it was impossible, and so the test had been another one of Xavier's little ways of showing who was in control.

Brian's mouth turned into a sour smile. Tests, games, control...all these things he had competed so hard against Xavier, yet achieving only small victories as he was outmaneuvered at every turn. But if Xavier had one flaw, and he did, it was that he underestimated him. *I may not have control of the game, but I'm still playing.* Years of hard work, ambition, and persistence had molded him into the person he was now, and no way was he ready to give it up, not even against likes of Xavier. *I'm alive, I'm still here, he reassured himself grimly. If I go down, I'll go down kicking.*

Brian relaxed a little as the painkiller began to ease the ache. He examined his hand curiously. Having never broken his wrist before, he wondered idly how much trouble it was going to give him during the upcoming concerts. *That's the least of your worries, Littrell! How are you going to handle the rest of the tour with four guys who hate your guts?* He hoped Howie and Kevin might come around sooner or later and forgive him, but he could pretty much write off ever being friends with AJ or Nick again. Nick. Brian felt a sharp stab of regret as he realized he would never regain the trust of his friend. Of all the things he had suffered, the loss of Nick's friendship would be the hardest to cope with. *I'll be okay, he thought, just as long as Xavier stays away from him.*

Xavier! Brian bolted off his bed like a shot. *Xavier was the on call bodyguard for tonight! It would be just like Xavier to do something this night, considering the state he was in.* He bit his lower lip in consternation, wondering how to protect Nick. Knowing Nick was in his room, probably asleep, did nothing to alleviate his fear. Xavier still had access to everyone's room, including Nick's. Grabbing a single pillow from his bed, Brian headed down the quiet hallway towards Nick's door and gently eased himself to the floor, taking care not to jar his wrist. He wondered just how idiotic he looked, sitting cross-legged on the floor, waiting, not a soul in sight. He felt for the reassuring comfort of the switchblade in his pocket. *Good.* With a huge yawn he stretched, then adjusted his pillow. *Don't get too comfortable,* he warned himself.

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If his sleep was any indication of how his day was going to be, then he was in deep trouble. Nick sighed irritably, glancing at his digital clock for perhaps the hundredth time. 6:27 A.M. He guessed he had dozed periodically, but it sure didn't feel like it. Considering it a lost cause, he threw back the bedspread and hauled himself reluctantly out of bed, heading for the bathroom. The warmth of the shower did nothing to help settle his frame of mind as his thoughts flashed back to the situation between him and Brian. How long could he stand being with him, seeing him, working side by side each night, knowing what he tried to do to the group? Nick sighed resignedly, understanding that for the sake of the others he'd have to tolerate it the best he could. He turned off the water and got dressed, throwing on whatever he found lying around, running his fingers through his wet hair and shrugged as he viewed his appearance. He didn't care. In fact, he didn't care about anything except getting something to eat and maybe locating some sleeping pills. Wondering if Kevin or AJ might be up, he shoved his wallet into his pocket and quickly opened his door, almost stumbling over the reclining form of Brian.

Nick inhaled sharply, too stunned to do anything but stare. A painful rush of fear surged through his body as he bent to inspect Brian, sure that he was dead. Nick heaved a sigh of relief as he realized Brian was asleep, curled sideways on the carpeted floor, a pillow supporting his busted wrist. Shaking his head in disbelief, Nick knelt down on one knee to give him a shake but stopped when he noticed a slim object glinting on the floor, inches from Brian's right hand. He picked up the metal object, holding it closer for a better look as he turned it over and over in his hand. Bewilderment turned into shock as he carefully flicked the switchblade open, eyes glued to its razor sharpness. Nick slowly stood up, shaking, as his mind raced furiously for an explanation. He couldn't believe what he was thinking, yet here Brian was, camped outside his door, obviously waiting for him with a switchblade! *What the...?* Uneasy, Nick snapped the blade shut and carefully stepped away from the sleeping form, trying not to make a sound as he hurried down the hallway and turned the corner. *Hurry!* His mind raced, frantically wondering who he could tell. His decision was made as he saw AJ's door ajar and he rushed in, searching around. The room was empty. Distressed, he turned to leave, only to hear AJ coming out of the bathroom, rubbing his wet hair with a towel.

"Hey!" yelled AJ, startled by Nick's unexpected appearance. "How'd you get in?"

"Your door was open again; you gotta remember to shut it, Bone!" Nick yelled, chewing him out.

"Okay, *okay!*" AJ looked Nick up and down, giving him a frown. "What's your problem? Can't sleep either?"

Nick rushed up to AJ, grabbing him by the arm. "*This* is my problem! Come here, look!" Nick propelled AJ forward, leading him down the hallway to point to the still figure lying prone on the floor. AJ blinked in surprise, and turned to give his agitated friend a questioning look. With a nod of his head, Nick signaled to AJ, and they crept back into to his room.

"What's going on?" cried AJ, exasperated. "Why is Brian *sleeping* outside, next to your door?"

Nick began to pace, locking his hands behind his head. "I'm not sure, but it *looks* like he was waiting for me!"

"Waiting for you? What for?"

Nick flipped the blade open slowly, for effect. "I found *this* on Brian, he's parked outside *my* door, and by the looks of it, waiting for *me!* It doesn't take a genius to figure out what he wanted."

"Damn," breathed AJ. "Are you sure?"

"No, I'm not *sure!*" hissed Nick, not wanting his voice to carry. "But what else could it be?"

AJ covered his eyes with hands as he slumped into a chair. "I need a cigarette," he groaned.

"Forget that!" snapped Nick, exasperated. "What are we gonna do?"

AJ tore his hands away from his face to glare at Nick. "I don't know, I don't know!" he replied, frustrated. "Lemme think, okay?"

"Should we tell X?"

"No!"

"Call the police?" offered Nick.

AJ stared back. "Hello? Are you crazy? Today's headlines: Backstreet Boy tries to kill best friend, stay tuned."

"Okay, okay I get the picture," groused Nick. "And he's not my best friend," he added. "So what are we gonna do?"

"I thought you were going to let me think! Shut up, will ya?"

"Well, while you're *thinking*, I'm going to see Kevin. Maybe he can help," grumbled Nick, leaving the room. Before AJ could retort with a suitable reply, Nick was back, his face pale.

"He's gone."

"Who, Brian?"

"Yeah, he's gone. He must have woke up while we were talking."

"Just great," muttered AJ, standing up. "Let's go wake the others."

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A sharp, stinging slap to his face woke Brian up and he struggled frantically to sit upright, only to feel the strong arms of Xavier lift him off the ground.

"Wake up," sing-songed Xavier. "Time to rise and shine, golden boy."

Brian blinked a few times, trying to wipe the cobwebs of his drug-induced sleep from his mind. He searched anxiously in his pocket for the switchblade, only to come up empty-handed. Xavier laughed in amusement.

"Lost it, huh? Someone take it while you were sleeping?" He smirked, glancing at Brian, then Nick's door. "Some bodyguard you are," he mocked. With a not-so-gentle shove he pushed Brian down the hallway. "Come on. It's a brand new day. Time to look alive." Warily, the blond singer headed for his room and Xavier caught up to him, grasping his arm tightly. "If I wanted to hurt your buddy, there's not one thing you could do to stop it," he hissed, "so you might as well stop trying."

Brian ripped his arm away, giving Xavier a look of pure hatred. "I'll never stop trying. You haven't won the game yet."

Xavier stopped, a smile creeping onto his face as he watched his opponent march down the hallway. "Oh, but I will. I always do," he whispered.

Chapter 53:

An Understanding

Kevin picked lethargically at his breakfast, his appetite gone. Finally giving up, he sighed and stood up, collecting the half-touched food from the rest of the guys to toss away. It had been a stressful morning, with AJ and Nick waking Howie and him up, informing them about Brian. Now, two hours later, and after many heated discussions, nothing had been resolved and everyone's patience was wearing thin.

Kevin sat back down, rubbing his face briskly with his hands in hope of stimulating both his weary mind and body. "Okay, looks like we're pretty much back at the beginning," he started, trying to ignore Nick's impatient glare. "Now I know it looks suspicious, but I just can't believe Brian would try to hurt Nick. It doesn't make any sense to me. I mean, come on, why would he want to?"

"Oh, maybe because I broke his hand and beat the crap outta him? Could that possibly be it?" Nick jeered.

Kevin returned the glare, pissed. "You know, I'm getting pretty sick and tired of your lip. I thought we all came here to discuss this, but I guess not. So why don't you just leave?"

Nick jumped up, his hands clenched in anger. "I'm just telling you what I saw! But I guess your loyalty lies with *family* rather than anyone here, doesn't it?"

Kevin rose to match Nick, his green eyes dark with resentment. "I'm not going to take this, especially from you..." he began, only to have his vision blocked by Howie's form standing between them.

"That's it!" yelled Howie, in frustration. He pointed both to Kevin and Nick, his temper barely under control. "Sit down! What the hell is the matter with you two?" Taken aback, the two Backstreet Boys sat down hesitantly; AJ smiling in approval at Howie's forceful stance.

"You tell 'em, D!" he crowed.

Howie spun on him. "Shut up, AJ!"

AJ dropped his mouth in surprise but quickly closed it when he saw the no-nonsense look directed at him. "Okay," he agreed meekly.

"Good." Howie paced around the crowded room, rubbing his forehead as the rest watched cautiously, waiting for his opinion. After a minute, Howie threw up his hands in defeat. "I give up."

All three looked at Howie in surprise. "Huh?"

"I said, I give up! I can't figure any of this out, can you?" Three heads shook no in unison. "But I do know that for the rest of this tour, working with Brian is gonna be a bitch. My loyalty is with you guys, so I'm not going to let Brian ruin our friendship. We gotta stick together, okay? No fighting, no bickering between us, otherwise this is going to tear us apart." He glared meaningfully at Kevin and Nick "After the tour, we can figure out what to do. But for now, we're going to have to stick together and make sure Brian doesn't do something that can hurt us all."

Howie paused for a second to let his words sink in before glancing at his watch. "And speaking of sticking together, did anyone remember we have a photo shoot today?" Collective groans emitted from Kevin, Nick and AJ. "Yeah, yeah, I know," Howie agreed. "And by the looks of us, we had better get some sleep before it's time to go."

* * * * *

"Here." Brian heaved the heavy black bag as hard as he could towards Xavier who was patiently waiting outside the bank. Brian hoped it would break open and scatter its contents to the wind, but Xavier caught it deftly, raising his eyebrows in delight at the weight. "Guess you're on your way to be coming a rich ex-bodyguard."

Inspecting the money, Xavier gave a satisfied nod. "It will do...for now." He grinned at the sullen Backstreet Boy. "Come on, let's eat." He patted the overstuffed bag. "My treat, of course." Brian ignored Xavier's laugh as they headed towards the parking lot, flinching when Xavier gave him an appreciative rub on the back. "Say, who would of thought a skinny white boy from Kentucky could make so much money?" Xavier leaned in closer to Brian. "I tell ya, it's a crime," he whispered, his lips a hair's breadth away from the singer's ear. The warmth of Xavier's laughter on his neck made Brian squirm with revulsion. He shoved angrily away, hatred shining openly in his eyes.

"You've got enough money to buy whatever you want; I suggest you go find someone else," Brian spat, his tone leaving no doubt as to what he meant.

Xavier's mouth compressed into a thin line, the only emotion Brian saw displayed on the bodyguard's face. An old couple walked feebly by and Xavier kept his silence, holding Brian's gaze coolly until they had past. "And what if I want *you*?" he challenged, his meaning crystal clear to both of them. Brian's struggled to maintain his composure, the game now taking on a more disturbing turn. He looked squarely into the eyes of his bodyguard. "Well, I'd say your outta luck."

"Luck?" scoffed Xavier, his disbelief plain. "Since when did I need luck? I *take* what I want." Xavier let his eyes roam suggestively up and down Brian's form, the slightest hint of a smile tugging at his mouth.

Unnerved, Brian desperately tried to hide his growing anxiety, the swell of nausea almost overwhelming him as it gnawed in the pit of his stomach. "I thought you weren't gay," he flung back accusingly, remembering the church incident.

Xavier's faint smile grew wider and Brian suddenly found the bodyguard looming over him, Xavier's immense size overpowering. Instinctively Brian backed up, desperate for escape, only to find his freedom blocked by the side of their parked car. Slowly Xavier brought his face down, inch by inch, with such excruciatingly slowness that it froze Brian to where he stood, transfixed by Xavier's intense stare. Shaking, Brian could feel the warmth of Xavier's lips just barely graze his own mouth. Fully expecting Xavier to deepen the kiss, Brian was surprised when Xavier pulled back, a sly grin forming across the bodyguard's face.

"What makes you think I'm gay?" he asked lightly, his voice filled with amusement. "I'm not." He winked at Brian as he opened the door to their SUV. "Fear and control," he stated simply, indicating for the singer to hop in.

Brian numbly got in, stunned by Xavier's strategy. With sudden clarity he saw how easily Xavier had trapped him, using the singer's suspicions to full advantage. Xavier had played the game brilliantly. Brian turned to look at Xavier, who was watching him intently. Nodding with satisfaction that Brian now understood, Xavier turned on the ignition and skillfully drove out of the parking lot, picking up speed as they headed towards the local gym.

Brian ignored the passing scenery, his mind racing as he sat uneasily in his seat. *Was Xavier gay? Would Xavier's promise to "take" what he wanted come true?* Xavier's trick to make him uncertain of Xavier's sexual preference had worked. The anxiety of not knowing was the mind game Xavier was now playing with him. Brian closed his eyes, shuddering. Xavier had control. And control gave power. Deep within him he knew that Xavier had already decided. It was now not a matter of how, but a matter of when.

Chapter 54:

Smile

Peter Swan sighed in exasperation as he adjusted the setting on his camera. He looked through his lenses, then shook his head. In all his professional years of photography, these four were the most irritating, disagreeable group he had ever worked with. He could care less that he was shooting *the* Backstreet Boys, he had shot other famous groups and none had ever been this troublesome. *I don't need this!* Annoyed, he glanced up from his camera, waving his hand. "Hey, you, yes you, blondie, move a little closer to tattoo man."

Nick glared back at him, pretended to move over, then glared again. Peter bit his lip. "Oookay..." he gripped his camera tighter, wishing he could just smash it across the smart-ass's head. Finally finding a pose he thought satisfactory, he snapped away until the tall blonde moved, unable to stay stationary.

Peter laid his camera down with exaggerated care, his mouth puckering in a sour smile. *I'll bill them double* he promised himself, as he walked over to the group. "Great shot!" he lied. He rubbed his hands together, looking around his small studio. "Now, where is the fifth guy, uh, the one who can sing?" He hoped *that* pissed them off. It did. "How the hell should we know?" growled AJ.

"Yeah, are we done now?" complained Nick, glancing at the studio clock.

Peter gave him an amazed look. "Uh, you've only been here 20 minutes."

"So?"

"Soooo, a photo shoot usually takes about four hours," Peter patiently explain, his voice the condescending tone of a teacher to a six-year-old child. Nick caught it, and smiled sweetly back.

"I'll give you another half hour, then it's time for recess." His voice mimicked the tone of the six-year-old and AJ and Howie snickered at Nick's sarcastic remark.

"That's it!" fumed Peter. "I'm not going..." his voice cutting off as he heard the muted boom of his studio door being closed. A young blond man entered, holding a small duffel bag, a much larger man standing right behind him. Peter waved them in impatiently. "Come on, come on, we haven't got all day, or so I'm told."

Brian walked slowly up to the photographer, tossing his bag to the ground. Peter stared at him in astonishment. "What's this?" he questioned, waving his hands wide. "How am I suppose to work with this?" he shouted to the ceiling. Peter touched Brian's clothing, gesturing to his broken wrist. "You're still perspiring!" he shrieked, eyeing Brian's slicked back hair. "Where did you just come from, the gym?"

Brian shrugged in reply, motioning toward the front where the guys stood. "So where do you want me?"

"Where do I want you?" asked Peter in disbelief. "How about *what* am I going to do with you?" He thought furiously, an idea springing to mind. "Wait...wait just a sec. Yeah. This should work!" Excited, he motioned to the other guys. "Go to the bathroom. Get your hair wet. All of you!" He hummed to himself, lost in thought. *Yes, it could work. Maybe the grunge look could come back. After all, most of the photos he had seen of them were too slick, too polished. A sweaty Backstreet Boy...hmmm. It could have possibilities...*

Howie, Nick, Kevin, and AJ reluctantly trudged back from the bathroom, dripping, and shifted uncomfortably as Peter tossed their hair, trying to achieve the look he desired. Grabbing Brian hurriedly, Peter unceremoniously pushed him next to Nick, causing a collision.

"Jeez," commented Nick sourly. "You stink."

"Its called exercise. You should try it," Brian hissed through clenched teeth.

Peter grabbed Brian again, adjusting and tilting Brian's position, then took another shot. Not satisfied, Peter reached and pulled Brian out of the line up, tugging at the singer's shirt. Brian stiffened noticeably, the look not lost on the other four. Placing Brian back next to AJ, Peter felt the friction radiate through both Backstreet Boys. Good. He didn't want togetherness, he wanted a look of anger, a look of contempt to shine through for the camera. Whatever was going on between the group, it was definitely going to show up on film. Excited, he clicked away, shooting from every possible angle, hoping to catch the perfect shot. After a few moments he put his camera down, frustrated. Something was not right. Everyone was set correctly, except the small blond one. Irritated, Peter pulled Brian once more away from the group, fussing with the singer's clothing, his posture, his hair; touching and pulling, not noticing the disgust that was radiating from the man's eyes.

"Stop that!" Brian snapped, a shudder of revulsion sweeping through him, barely able to tolerate the photographer's constant touching. "Don't."

"Hmmm?"

Peter raked his hand through Brian's hair, not listening.

"I said quit it." A fine sheen of sweat shone on Brian's forehead and it had nothing to do with his recent workout.

Peter frowned at Brian's cut lip, touching it lightly, wondering how to cover it up. A firm hand wrapped around the photographer's wrist, wrenching it away.

"What part of stop don't you understand?" Brian snarled, his anger rising.

"Yes, yes! That's it! Hold it, hold that look!" Peter lunged for his camera, clicking furiously in Brian's face. Brian ripped the camera out of the startled photographer's hand and with a mighty heave smashed it against the floor.

"Take a picture of that, you freak!"

Shattered pieces flew everywhere and Peter looked down at his ruined camera in shock, then at the wild-eyed Backstreet Boy shaking before him. "My camera! You're going to pay for that! You've ruined it!"

Brian smiled nastily. "Good!" He walked over to the lighting equipment, a fiendish look in his eyes. "Charge me for this!" He kicked the heavy equipment over, the super-heated bulbs exploding on impact.

"Oh my God!" screamed Peter, covering his head to protect himself. Nick, AJ, Howie, and Kevin scattered, trying to dodge the flying shards of glass.

"Brian!" shouted Kevin, trying to weave his way over to stop his obviously insane cousin from smashing another object. "Stop!" He signaled to the other three guys for help.

The sickening crash of another expensive piece of equipment came a second later. Peter moaned and Brian gave him a feral grin, managing to send one last thing into oblivion before Xavier wrapped his arm around the singer's waist and yanked him forcibly away. Brian struggled fiercely in the bodyguard's tight grip, kicking violently.

Careful to keep away from Brian's wild kicks, AJ and Nick came over. Xavier held on calmly, holding the thrashing Backstreet Boy firmly in his arms until Brian stopped, exhausted from his struggle.

Howie, Kevin, and Peter edged closer, eyeing Brian warily. Howie glanced at Xavier and Xavier nodded his approval, releasing the panting singer from his grip. Peter moved in suddenly, grabbing Brian by the shirt. "You little punk! I'm going to sue you!"

As tired as Brian was, his strength flared anew. He shoved Peter, causing the photographer to stumble, Nick and AJ catching him before he fell. Brian ducked from Xavier's outstretched hand, coming up to the photographer. "I told you to stop. You didn't listen. You got what you deserved, you little faggot!"

Wisely, Nick and AJ held onto Peter, who screamed with rage. "Faggot?" He eyed Brian's gaunt appearance. "You look like a walking ad for queers! No wonder your girlfriend dumped you!"

All four Backstreet Boys sucked in their breath at Peter's statement, ill at ease. The media had gone crazy with speculation over Leighanne's breakup with Brian; Brian had been tight-lipped, even with the guys, saying only it had been an amicable split. From the bitterness in his eyes, they had delicately avoided the subject.

Brian lunged for Peter, his path blocked by Xavier's quick movement. The bodyguard grabbed Brian firmly by the shoulders, then turned to the guys. "Time to go," he advised. Nick and AJ hurried to get their gear, shoving Kevin's and Howie's at them as they left the studio. All six listened to Peter's rantings as he hounded them down the hallway, yelling threats of lawsuits as the singers entered the elevator. The doors closed with an electronic swoosh, and Nick raised his eyebrows, shaking his head.

"Well, I must say that was the most unusual photo shoot I ever experienced. How about you, Brian?"

Brian kept his head bowed, not rising to Nick's bait. His whole body trembled, caused by a mixture of mental and physical exhaustion. Howie nudged Nick, giving him a not-so-subtle frown, but Nick wasn't done quite yet.

He turned to the bodyguard, ignoring Brian. "Say Xavier, what's up with all this gay talk Brian was yelling about to the photographer?"

Brian brought his head up slowly, his eyes glittering with an intense anger.

Xavier shrugged nonchalantly. "Beats me."

Chapter 55:

No Way Out

All five Backstreet Boys shifted restlessly in the cramped elevator, tense, the elevator chiming their descent with excruciating slowness. Finally the doors opened and they simultaneously breathed a sigh of relief, free from the cloying confines of one another.

A flood of screams assaulted their ears, flashes of light blinding them as they exited the elevator, stumbling back in surprise. Being the last one out, Brian received less of the impact and shielded his eyes, confused but not for long. Years of experience kicked in and he stepped away from the throng of excited fans, hearing the faint ding of the elevator door beginning to close behind him.

He lunged for the closing doors and impulsively grabbed the nearest guy standing in front of him, yanking hard. Caught off-balance AJ stumbled backwards, his body crashing into Brian's as they both fell to the elevator floor. He had but a moment to view the mayhem of agitated fans surrounding Nick, Kevin, and Howie before the doors closed, blocking the scene.

AJ nimbly jumped up, not noticing Brian's slumped form until a moan of pain caught his attention. Brian twisted around until he could sit up, holding his cast wrist upright and grimacing. AJ leaned down to help him up but Brian waved him off, nodding to the levels.

"Hit the highest floor, hurry!"

AJ understood immediately, and punched the 16th floor. They had been caught in similar circumstances before. The speed in which fans could climb stairways was amazing, and only through past experience had the guys learned to aim for the top floor instead of a few levels above.

Brian stood up on his own power, leaning heavily onto the side wall of the elevator as they watched the elevator ascend, opening with a quiet chime to announce their arrival at the 16th floor.

AJ eyed Brian critically. "You okay, man?"

Brian fished out two pills and popped them in his mouth. "I will be now," he said grimly and AJ frowned, uneasy with Brian's blunt answer. "Come on," Brian waved to AJ as they jogged down the softly-lit corridor. "Let's find a place to hide."

They came upon the first door, its gold lettering stating Miss Sherri's Dance Studio. "Uh, no, not that one," remarked AJ. Hurrying down the hallway, they glanced at the next. Longfellow's Family and Children's Service. Glancing at each other, they shook their heads. The next door was marked Kid Celebrations. "What's going on?" snorted AJ in disbelief as he stared at the sign. Brian went ahead, scanning each door.

He gave a sharp whistle, motioning AJ to come look. ABC Tax Service.

"Looks good to me!" AJ admitted. They quickly entered the small interior, startling the elderly receptionist. She stood up with difficulty, peering over her reading glasses as she scrutinized the two before her, taking in their rumpled appearance and especially AJ's various tattoos.

"We don't keep anymore than 20 cash on us," she quavered, her eyes nervously flickering back and forth between the two.

AJ stared at her dumbfounded and Brian put on his best smile, trying to ease the anxious woman before him. "Ma'am, we just need to use your office for a moment," he twanged, letting his polite Southern accent come into full force. He went on hurriedly, before she could object. "We're sorry to bother you. My name is Brian and this is AJ. We, uh, got separated, uh, from our group, and ahh..." Brian stumbled, noticing the confusion in her face.

"We got mobbed downstairs. Fans. We're in a group called the Backstreet Boys," interrupted AJ. "Ever heard of us?"

The silver-haired lady relaxed. "Of course, young man. I may be old but I'm not stupid!"

Brian smirked at AJ's embarrassment. "If you could let us hide out here for a while, we sure would appreciate it, miss..." he questioned, indicating her name.

"Evelyn." With a flick of her hand she motioned to them. "Please, follow me." Brian and AJ trailed after her, entering a small room, a conference table taking up most of the space. "Will this do? Good. Can I get you anything? Coffee, soft drink?"

"Water. Water would be just fine, thanks," replied Brian. He could still taste the bitterness of the painkillers he swallowed.

"Okay." She shuffled away, pausing to touch AJ. "Too many tattoos, young man," she admonished.

AJ rolled his eyes, amused. "Yes, grandma," he teased. She wagged a playful finger at him as she left the room.

Brian went over to the window and pulled back the blinds, peering down.

"See anything?"

Brian shook his head, letting the blinds drop. "Nope. We're facing the north side, not the south."

"Wonder how the guys are doing."

Brian shook his head. "Don't know." He glanced at the phone sitting on the edge of the table and stretched out to snag it. "Guess I'll call Xavier to come get us."

Instantly AJ reached over and ripped the phone from Brian's hand. "No thanks. I'll call Eric," he said harshly. Brian met AJ's gaze, seeing the bitter hostility in his eyes.

"Whatever," he replied evenly and walked over to the farthest seat and sat down, examining his broken wrist. Evelyn came back with glasses of iced water in hand, noticing the sudden tension. "Everything alright?" she asked, handing Brian his glass, then to AJ who had hung up the phone.

"Fine, everything's fine, thanks." AJ took a sip of his water, noticing that Evelyn was staring intently at him. "What?" he asked, chafing under the scrutiny. "Do I smell or something?"

"I was just thinking. Maybe I should charge you for the water? You guys have sure cost me a pretty penny. I've got granddaughters, you know!" she teased, holding up four wrinkled fingers.

AJ relaxed, his mouth twisting in humor. "Evelyn...Evie," he pleaded, holding his hands out wide. "I'm forever in your debt. How ever can I thank you?"

Evelyn smacked his hand away gently. "Your charm won't work on me, you rascal," she scoffed laughingly. "Save it for the young ladies." Evelyn turned to see Brian sitting in silence, looking dejected. She suddenly felt a strong urge to give him a motherly hug but refrained, remembering her daughter's warnings that her maternal instincts always seemed to get her in some sort of trouble. She cleared her throat instead.

"Well, guess I should be getting back to my desk. You're welcome to stay as long as you want." She paused at the door, glanced at the two, then closed the door with a soft click.

Chapter 56:

Showdown

Brian nervously picked at his fingers, feeling the concentrated stare of AJ burn right through him, the soft hiss of the heating unit the only sound that came between them.

He hoped help would arrive soon; the idea of being cooped up with AJ right now didn't appeal to him in the least. He glanced up quickly at AJ who was leaning against the edge of the conference table with his arms crossed, studying him. Sighing inwardly, he dropped his gaze, renewing fake interest in his hand.

AJ coughed loudly. "So, are you going to sit there like an idiot ignoring me, or do you want to talk?"

"Talk?" mumbled Brian, keeping his head down. "What about?"

"Oh, how about the way you just acted in the photography studio? Remember that? Or why you were sleeping outside Nick's door? What about that little surprise you pulled on stage?"

AJ's frustration grew as he watched Brian sitting quietly, not saying a word. He got up and walked over to Brian, slamming his hands down on the table with enough force to make it shake. "Maybe you could tell me just what the hell is wrong with you!"

Brian jumped up from his seat and turned away, rubbing his forehead tiredly with his hand. "There's nothing wrong with me, Bone."

AJ snorted in reply. "Yeah, *right!* Come on, Brian! Why are you doing this to yourself... to *us*?" Brian heard the catch of desperation in AJ's voice, the pleading. AJ's hand snaked around the upper part of Brian's arm, pulling him around to so that they were face to face. The hurt, the confusion was so plain that Brian could not bear to look at him and he shook off AJ's grip. He went over to the window, glancing down at the traffic below.

"You can't hide forever, B-Rok," AJ whispered. "This is tearing you apart. Can't you see that?" AJ took a step closer, eyeing him closely. "Brian....Brian!"

The young singer jerked his head back from the view and AJ sucked in his breath. There it was, all the pain, all the suffering, reflecting clearly in the anguished blue eyes of his friend.

"Just tell me what's wrong... *please.*" AJ's reached out, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. Brian closed his eyes, forcing the tears back. If he spoke now, he knew there would be no stopping. He almost swayed with the longing, the wish to release all his fears and to be free of the constant agony he endured. AJ was close, so close to getting what he wanted that the enormity of it jolted Brian back to reality.

" I ... I can't."

"You can't...or you won't?"

"Both."

Brian opened his eyes and AJ knew he had lost. The pain that was so evident a moment ago had disappeared, replaced with bright blue eyes of determination. AJ's mouth turned into a harsh smile as he slowly placed his glasses back on.

"Well, I guess that's it, huh?" he said. Brian could not see the bitterness, but heard it AJ's voice.

"Yeah,...I guess so."

They looked at one another, neither willing to say more. A tentative knock on the door announced Evelyn's return. She glanced back and forth at AJ and Brian, uncomfortable about interrupting an obviously awkward moment. "Um, there's someone here to get you," she informed.

AJ broke contact first, nodding. He turned to see Xavier enter and compressed his mouth into a thin line, the only sign visible of his displeasure at seeing the unwanted bodyguard.

"Where's Eric?" he asked stiffly.

"He's handling things downstairs with the guys. It got pretty crazy." Xavier disregarded AJ, looking straight at Brian. "You okay?"

Brian ignored the question and asked one of his own. "Anyone get hurt?"

"Nick."

Xavier heard their sharp intake of alarm and motioned for them to hurry and follow him. "He's going to be okay. We're checking him out right now. Nick was the only one injured; none of the fans were, thank goodness. Come on." He gave Brian a tight smile as they headed down the hall.

Brian felt his heart pound with fear, understanding all too well Xavier's look. Xavier had warned him that he wouldn't be able to keep Nick safe. And he hadn't. With a deepening dread he walked faster, not wanting to know what Xavier had done to Nick. He knew he would find out soon enough.

Chapter 57:

Separation

"Does it hurt here?"

"Ow, yes, dammit!" Nick scowled at Kevin, trying to swat away the older Backstreet Boy's hand. "Get away!"

Wincing, he carefully peeled away his sock to reveal an ugly bruise forming at the base of his middle toe. Kevin and Howie bent over to take a better look.

"It's broken," he wailed, touching it gingerly.

"How do you know?" questioned Howie.

Nick glared at him. "Because it *feels* like it!" he shouted. "Jeez!"

Kevin placed a reassuring arm on Nick's shoulder, relieved. With the mauling Nick had received, it was a wonder he hadn't been injured more severely. "You were lucky."

"He was damn lucky," commented Xavier dryly.

Heads turned as they saw AJ and Brian entering the room; Xavier leaning in the doorway, his arms crossed. Brian sensed the frustration in Xavier's voice and knew that the bodyguard had intended for something more serious to occur.

AJ shook his head. "What happened, Nick?"

"Well, as soon as we got off the elevator, I got mobbed. I felt someone grab me and pull. Since it was a guy's hand, I thought it was Xavier, ya know? Trying to help me. But it wasn't. It was some other dude, and he kept punching me! I tried to jerk away, but he was strong. Then all of a sudden he let go. I think he got pushed outta the way by a bunch of girls. Anyway, I heard Kevin and Xavier yelling at me to run. I managed to break free, but not before I tripped. I smashed my foot into something."

Nick gazed intently at his left foot, experimentally wiggling his toes, then grimaced. He looked up at AJ. "Yeah, it was weird, like that dude wanted to hurt me instead of grab at me like most of the fans try to do. I don't know...." Nick shrugged, at a loss. "I wonder how the fans knew where we were? We usually don't get ambushed that easily."

Carefully keeping a straight face, Brian leaned over, examining Nick up and down, thanking God that things didn't go the way Xavier had planned. Except for being extremely irritated, Nick looked fine. A wave of indescribable euphoria washed over him and he gave a relieved laugh.

Nick stared at Brian, a weird expression crossing his face.

"I shoulda known you would laugh," he sneered. "It wouldn't surprise me if *you* planned it."

Brian froze, his smile evaporating. The other three shifted uneasily, stunned by the vehemence in Nick's voice.

"Nick...hey, I wouldn't do that...why would you think I'd try to hurt you?" The disbelief in Brian's voice was unmistakable.

"Oh, I don't know," Nick jeered, "Maybe finding you outside my door with a *switchblade* has made me a little paranoid! What do you think?"

So that's where it went, thought Brian. He opened his mouth, then closed it, slumping in defeat. There was no way he could explain. He met Nick's angry gaze and said nothing, backing slowly away from him. Nick shook his head disgustedly, taking Brian's silence as admission to his guilt. Glaring meaningfully at AJ, Kevin, and Howie, Nick's eyes dared them to object. None did.

Brian turned to each one, hoping, praying for a flicker of support. Kevin stared back, his distaste evident. Howie bowed his head, his gesture saying more than words could. AJ was unreadable, his face set in stone. Brian nodded numbly. The damage was done, complete. Brian turned stiffly away, meeting Xavier at the door, feeling the burn of Xavier's smug satisfaction.

"Let's go," he said lifelessly.

Chapter 58:

A Slight Distraction

Kevin handed his bags to their new driver, jumping easily into the bus to locate the nearest empty seat. He nodded at Howie who was already there, waiting to begin the ride to their next destination. Kevin adjusted the seat to accommodate his large frame, then settled down to wait for the others.

With an exasperated shake of his head, Kevin watched as AJ boarded unsteadily, looking blearily around for a seat. Nick hopped on a few minutes later, his eyes bloodshot. Both had been out late, enjoying the nightlife, taking advantage of their mutual desire to stay away from Brian as much as possible.

As usual, Brian was the last to arrive, followed by his ever-present shadow, Xavier. Kevin watched as his cousin trudged on board, obviously exhausted, even though it was almost noon.

Brian gave him a small nod of recognition as he walked past. Kevin pointedly ignored his cousin, feeling a small twinge of guilt as he faked interest in the paper that lay in his lap. His anger towards Brian had begun to cool somewhat, allowing him the chance to secretly study Brian for the past weeks, curious if the others had too. He wished he understood what made Brian act so bizarre, but lacked the desire to investigate deeper, not willing to rock the boat now that some air of normalcy had been restored, even if it was sorely strained.

Exiled from companionship, yet bound by obligation, Brian had continued on, pouring what little energy he possessed determinedly into each performance. Kevin knew that professional pride kept Brian on edge, not willing to give anything less than a hundred percent each time he took the stage. Down time was another matter. With lack of friendship came boredom, with boredom came lethargy. It seemed to Kevin that if Brian wasn't dozing he was somewhere with Xavier. He was glad that the bodyguard had upheld his end of the agreement and kept his cousin busy. Xavier had him under control, and best of all, Brian's daily absence was just the balm needed to keep the still open wounds of his betrayal from festering.

A bag containing his lunch was thrust at him and he took it gladly, grateful for something to do. He took a bite of his sandwich and watched as the others fished out theirs, noticing Brian declining the food offered from the bus driver.

Kevin chewed on his food thoughtfully. *What gives?* Now that he thought about it, it seemed that he never saw Brian eat. He wished he could talk to the guys about it, but the last time he had mentioned Brian's name, Nick and AJ had nearly snapped his head off. Sighing dejectedly, Kevin took another bite, and found he had lost his appetite. He suddenly understood how Brian felt. It was hard to feel hungry when your stomach was all ready full of despair.

* * * * *

The bus drove on, mile after endless mile, the drone of the engine finally lulling Brian into a light sleep. A quick and severe lurch of the bus woke him instantly and he sat up, hearing the colorful swearing of their new bus driver. He turned questioningly to look at Xavier, who instead was staring outside the bus window, along with the other guys. Curious, Brian peered out, his eyes widening in surprise.

He recognized nothing of the scenery outside, only to note that they seemed to be cruising through a very flat, God-forsaken terrain; the only thing significant being the school bus that was driving side by side with theirs, much too close for comfort. It seemed to be keeping pace intentionally and Brian glanced in confusion at the other guys who had their noses pressed to the window.

"What's going on?"

Kevin shrugged, his face still plastered to the window. "Not sure. Looks like some kind of bus with their team inside. They're waving like mad at us."

Nick scanned the side of the bus. "Yeah! Look! The Spartans," he read. "Must be a football team, maybe basketball." He turned to AJ, who had taken off his sunglasses for a better look. "What do you think they want?"

AJ pursed his lips. "Dunno. Find out."

Nick gave a small shrug of his shoulders and then began to tug at his window. It was stuck, so AJ leaned over to help him loosen it. It gave with a small snap and Nick leaned out, trying to hear what they were screaming. Interested, Howie did the same thing too.

"We're number one! We're number one!" came the energized chant, screaming their excitement as they waved various forms of gear and equipment out their window.

Nick sat back in his seat and turned to the guys. "I don't think they know who we are! They just want us to see them, I guess." He waved enthusiastically back.

AJ took in the scene before him and gave a snort of amazement as he peered closer. Turning to find Brian next to him he forgot his animosity for a moment and pointed. "Damn! Does that look like a bra to you?"

Brian stared intently, seeing several white objects whipping in the wind. "Uh, I see a lot of them."

"Cheerleaders?" AJ perked up, putting his fingers together to whistle. "Hey baby! Come to papa! Show us more!" All five laughed at AJ's antics, shaking their heads at his wolf whistle.

Nick leaned dangerously out, eager to see more. The high school bus merged closer, causing the Backstreet Boys' driver to swerve away. Nick yelled in shocked surprise as he felt himself slip, only to feel a firm grip yanking him back into his bus seat. Brian held on tightly, not letting go until Nick was able to regain his balance.

Shaken, Nick straightened up, seeing the scared but relieved looks on Kevin, AJ, and Howie's face. Nick glanced at Brian and flushed with embarrassment, painfully aware that Brian had been the one to rescue him. "Uh, thanks Frick." He managed a small smile, and Brian gave him a hesitant smile back.

"No problem. You sure get carried away by bras, Frack!"

The tension shattered, evaporating the bitterness that had been building within Nick over the past weeks. He gave Brian a wider grin and started to say something, only to be cut off by Howie, who was reaching blindly backwards for the two, his eyes never leaving the window. "Look!" he yelled, his laughter filled with disbelief. Nick and Brian broke their locked gaze and turned to see what was happening.

"Yes!"

AJ pumped his arms like crazy, enjoying the show before him, the wind blowing crazily in his face. Various parts of naked anatomy were posed strategically at them, bare asses either mooning them, or naked breasts jiggling in time to the bouncing bus. They heard several small items hit their bus and realized it was the team trying to pitch various articles of clothing to them. AJ caught one, crowing with delight as he paraded the bra before the others.

Brian heard Kevin laugh appreciatively, his eyes sparkling with delight. On a whim, he tapped his cousin on the shoulder, handing him some hats with the BSB logo on it.

"Toss it to them," he encouraged.

"I need more weight," Kevin frowned, looking around the bus. His search was interrupted by the loud chanting of "Spartans, Spartans, Spartans..." and he paused for a moment before leaning out the window.

"Backstreet, Backstreet, Backstreet!" he screamed, and all four looked at the normally reserved Kevin with surprise.

"Yeah!" shrieked Howie out the window, his enthusiasm catching. "Backstreet rules! We're number one!"

Brian, Nick, and AJ stuck their heads out simultaneously, screaming at the top of their lungs their chant. Now knowing their competition, the guys watched in amusement as they saw the cheerleaders push aside the team players, straining for a better look.

The girls screamed their delight, blowing kisses, arms reaching out in the futile attempt to touch them. Nick, AJ, Kevin, Howie, and Brian laughed at their antics, enjoying the flirting. Nick teased the girls with looks of passionate desire, AJ happily yelling comebacks to the girls' frank suggestions.

With groans of dismay, they guys watched as the school bus turned onto another highway, the waving hands and screams of goodbye fading away. All five flopped down in their seats, grinning at each other, pumped up.

Nick sighed. "Man, that was so awesome."

"What, the girls or their tits?" snickered AJ.

"Both," beamed Nick happily, and Kevin hooted at his expression.

"Time to get Nicky a *real* woman," laughed Kevin wickedly.

"Hey, I can get one all by myself, thank you!"

Kevin cracked up at Nick's defensive outburst, taunting him. Howie and AJ listened, laughing hard as Nick and Kevin tried to outdo each other with insults. Exhausted, AJ leaned back in his chair, wiping his teary eyes with the back of his hand. *Damn. He couldn't believe how good it felt, how much he had missed this kind of camaraderie from the guys.* Turning in his seat, eager to join in, he opened his mouth, only to stop as he caught sight of Brian, listening intently to what Xavier was telling him. Curious, he secretly eyed the two, noting the resentment and that had settled back into Brian's posture and face. Like Nick, he had been fully aware of the irony of Brian saving Nick from injury and the awkwardness that resulted from it. He wondered if any of the other guys felt as confused as he was. Brian was a true Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and AJ saw-sawed between hating his guts to loving him like a brother. Pretending to listen to the guys excited banter, he watched out of the corner of his eye as Xavier lumbered up to talk to their bus driver. Brian was now sitting in the back, arms crossed, staring out at the passing scenery. AJ took a chance and leaped up from his seat to plop himself next to Brian.

"Wassup, Bri?"

Brian swiveled his head to stare hard at AJ. "Nothing that concerns *you*." The words were cold, sarcastic and the resentment in his eyes held nothing but contempt.

AJ nodded as if expecting it and stared back at Brian, his brown eyes containing the same intensity as Brian's blue ones. Without a word, he rose up and left, not hearing the faint sigh escaping from Brian.

Chapter 59:

A Warning

Xavier grabbed a Coke from the bus' small fridge and snapped open the ring, dropping heavily into the seat next to Brian. "We should be there within the hour," he informed the quiet singer, raising his eyebrows as Brian ignored the information.

"Want a sip?" he questioned. Xavier smirked as Brian stared absorbedly out the window.

"Ahhh...you're not mad at me because of what I said, are you?" he whined in a soft, mocking tone, placing a massive hand on Brian's upper thigh. "I couldn't stand it if you were mad at me."

Brian shoved Xavier's hand forcibly away, glancing up quickly to see if any of the guys were watching, then glared darkly at the bodyguard. Over the past weeks, Xavier had intensified his caresses, making sure to do so only in public. Brian knew Xavier was shrewd, subtle with his gestures and clever enough not to cause suspicion but just intimate enough to keep him extremely uncomfortable. With one more vicious glare Brian turned in his seat, shrinking as far away as he could from Xavier.

Xavier laughed quietly at Brian, amused that he could plainly see how he affected the young singer. If he had known how entertaining this discreet game of sexual intimidation unnerved Brian, he would have started sooner. That he was attracted to the small Backstreet Boy was a fact, one that he now acknowledged freely to himself. He had wrestled for quite a while with that realization, uncomfortable at his discovery, never having been in a situation where he actually desired the person he chose as his next victim. Xavier glanced at Brian, who was shifting uneasily in his chair. Xavier shrugged, indifferent. As much as he wanted the blond singer, he prided himself on maintaining control, sexual or otherwise. As long as the game was continuing, he was satisfied, and sexual relief didn't factor in. Xavier knew any weakness on his part was a liability, and getting involved was a risk that he was unwilling to take. Xavier gave another small laugh. Still, it didn't hurt to have some fun and torment him ...

Xavier snapped out of his musing as Nick playfully slammed into the opposite seat, waving a hand-held game under Brian's nose.

"Hey Bri, wanna play?"

Once again, Brian knew it was Nick's peace offering, trying to mend their strained relationship. He stiffened, sensing Xavier's intimidating eyes bearing down on him. He struggled internally, remembering all too well Xavier's menacing threats a few moments ago. Angry at having to ruin their fragile truce, Brian leaned forward towards Nick, his words harsher than he intended them to be.

"Jeez, Nick! Just because you almost fell out of the bus, you think we're now friends." Brian held up his cast, as a reminder. "Don't think I haven't forgotten this. Oh, by the

way, have you ever thought that maybe I was really trying to *push* you out instead of pull you in?"

Nick backed away slowly, stung by Brian's vicious words. His eyes locked onto Brian's, the hatred clearly visible. "I wish I had broken more than your wrist," he whispered with such fury that even Xavier was impressed by the young man's wrath.

They both watched as Nick strode angrily back to his seat before Xavier turned to give Brian a thoughtful look. "Damn. Maybe I should have picked him instead of you." He knew this would set Brian off and it did.

"Leave him alone or by God I swear I'll find a way to kill you."

Xavier gave a small snort of derisive laughter and reclined in his chair, closing his eyes, not noticing the true hunger that lay in Brian's bright blue gaze.

Chapter 60:

Reflection

Everything was falling apart and there wasn't a damn thing AJ could do to stop it. He resignedly followed the other four guys into the media room, taking a seat quietly as he patiently waited for another mindless interview to begin. He had purposely chosen the darkest shades he could find, not wanting anyone to see him. If they did, they would be surprised to see the desperation, the despair that shone plainly in his dark brown eyes.

The interview began and AJ hoped the questions would be held to a minimum, he had no desire to answer the same old questions he had heard a million times before. He scoffed under his breath as he listened to Nick, Howie, and Kevin repeat how tight the group was, that they were more than friends, they were like brothers, blah, blah, blah.... AJ answered a question tossed at him with a noncommittal grunt, not caring about the strange look the interviewer threw his way. Right now his worry lay with Brian, who sat on the opposite side of him. Brian kept his head down until asked a question, then answered in soft replies, all the while restlessly playing with a pencil. From behind his glasses AJ stared frankly at him, taking his time to study him thoroughly.

Last week had been pure hell, a total of six shows in seven days, and with every show their relationship with Brian had deteriorated further, to the point where AJ seriously considered if it was a mistake in forcing him to stay with the group. Any resemblance of warmth towards Brian was held strictly on stage for the fans; once they exited the arena it became a war zone. No one was taking prisoners, each doing their best to destroy with harsh looks and even harsher words. Brian took their shots with comebacks of his own, often more bitter than what he received. Soon however, he ceased to answer back. He withdrew into a stony silence, making his presence scarce, gone for long stretches at a time with Xavier, only to reappear just before showtime. What Brian did during those long hours was anybody's guess, but his absence was the only thing that kept things sane.

AJ tore away from his thoughts long enough to listen to Brian's explanation of his sudden weight loss. He had begun to recently wear thick sweaters along with heavy leather coats, the size of his clothing trying to add deceptive bulk to his frame. Their fans were far from stupid and it did not go unnoticed on the various internet websites regarding Brian's appearance. It was only natural for the interviewer to ask, since it was so obvious. Interested, AJ strained to catch what Brian would say, only to hear Brian's standard answer about a "new look," and "wanting to get in better shape."

He spared a quick glance at Nick who was rolling his eyes dramatically. He bit his lip, pissed at Nick's lack of control, but knew better than to call him on it; Nick was spoiling for a fight and it wasn't hard to see how the emotional and mental turmoil was taking a toll on him.

AJ listened offhandedly as the interview came to a close, glad to be out of there. Tonight was their final show before taking a hiatus and the lure of flying back home and zoning out for a week was sounding more and more like pure heaven to him. The interview

finally over, AJ sat up and stretched, giving Howie a "lets go" nod. In mid-yawn, he watched as Xavier came over to slap his massive hands down on Brian's shoulders, shaking him almost affectionately as a signal to get up and leave. Brian stiffened for only a fraction of a moment, but AJ caught it and the look of disgust that flickered across Brian's face. Surprised, AJ experienced a flash of deja vu. He thought hard for a moment, trying to place where he had witnessed something similar, then shrugged, irritated at being unable to pinpoint it.

He watched as the two left together, conceding to the fact that as much as he disliked Xavier, the bodyguard had done a good job of keeping Brian under control and out of sight. He just hoped the bodyguard would be as successful for the second half of their tour. Howie slapped AJ gently on the arm, breaking him out of his reverie, indicating it was time to go. AJ nodded and followed him out.

Chapter 61:

A Surprise

Brian came out of the bank, hurriedly checking his watch for the time. He hefted the heavy bag into the waiting taxi, waving off the driver's assistance to help. He was late and he nervously bit his fingernails as the taxi weaved through heavy traffic. He knew that the guys were going to be pissed, but he couldn't help it. Xavier's sudden request for a late withdrawal at the bank, and an expensive one at that, had him troubled. Always accompanying him before, this time Xavier had demanded Brian go alone. Something was up and it set Brian on edge, trying to figure out what Xavier's little game might be.

He closed his eyes for a moment, wanting to savor what little time he had alone. The past days had been a nightmare, the only thing that had kept him going was the thought of flying home for the holiday to see family. Of course, Xavier had canceled that at the last moment and Brian was furious to find that the bodyguard "had other plans" for them. He tensed at the phrase, wondering exactly what Xavier meant. To his immense relief, none of Xavier's veiled sexual suggestions had come to pass, but that didn't mean it couldn't, as indicated by Xavier's constant taunting and subtle touching.

The cab came to an abrupt stop and Brian opened his eyes to discover their arrival at the arena. Grateful for the taxi driver's speed, Brian tipped him generously and hurried into the cool confines of the arena's side entrance, jogging as best he could with the heavy duffel bag to the dressing rooms.

Brian caught sight of Kevin and gave him a cautious nod of hello, trying not to notice Kevin's sour glance as he jogged past. Brian could only wonder what his cousin would say as soon as he discovered that he would not be flying home with him. He hit the dressing room door with his foot a bit too hard and it slammed with a solid thud against the wall, causing Nick, Howie, and AJ to jump in surprise. Embarrassed, Brian muttered a quick sorry as he heaved the bulky duffel bag into a corner. He knew he should apologize for being late, but realized it would fall on deaf ears, so he began to change, quickly and quietly as he could.

He heard AJ rumble his throat several times, cough, then aahh in the mirror as Howie and Nick looked on.

"You'll be fine, Bone," advised Nick, "it's just one more show." Curious, Brian glanced up from untying his shoes to watch AJ massage his throat.

"Well, it's not allergies, I can tell you that," he moaned. "So its gotta be the beginning of something bad. Damn! I had planned to spend all next week in bed and not with a cold, if you know what I mean!"

Howie patted his friend unsympathetically. "Yeah, yeah, poor baby, we know."

"Whose poor?"

Nick turned to see Kevin and Xavier enter, the dark-haired singer holding an expensive-looking gold-wrapped box.

"AJ," informed Nick. "He thinks he's sick. What's that?" he questioned, pointing to the square box Kevin had placed on the table.

"Chocolate. Flown in specially from Switzerland." Kevin picked up the card and read it.

"Congratulations on your successful first half of the tour." Kevin ignored AJ's snort of sarcasm and carried on. "Good luck to all and enjoy." He tossed the card away. "It's from Backstreet Management."

Nick eyed it eagerly. "Well, open it up! Hey AJ! Maybe your throat will feel better."

AJ shrugged. "Whatever. I'll try anything." He accepted a dark chocolate and popped it in his mouth, trying to savor it slowly. He made a face as he finished it, watching as the others sampled the large box. "Kinda gritty. Gimme a Hershey kiss over that anytime," he commented and Nick agreed.

"Yuck. The Swiss have weird tastes."

Brian waited until the other guys had finished then strolled over to view the selection. He reached down to pluck one out of the box only to find Xavier's hand clamp down firmly on his.

"No chocolate for you, remember?"

"Yeah, he shouldn't lose his girlish figure," wisecracked Nick.

Brian ignored Nick, startled by Xavier's sudden interference. He looked up to see Xavier imperceptibly shaking his head, his dark eyes glowing with hidden meaning. With a sickening flash of realization, Brian stepped away, terrified by Xavier's warning. He pleaded with his eyes, desperate to know what Xavier had done, but the bodyguard just smiled mysteriously. Shaken, Brian found it hard to breathe and rushed from the room, scared he was about to have another anxiety attack. Howie, AJ, and Nick exchanged glances, Howie shaking his head resignedly as he watched Xavier follow him out. He licked the rest of the chocolate off his fingers. "Man, Brian gets weirder every minute."

"Tell me about it," grumbled Kevin. He raised an eyebrow at the others, curious if there were any more takers for the strange-tasting candy. Shaking their heads no, Kevin threw the remaining chocolates in the garbage and reached for the door. "Coming?"

Nick and Howie followed, AJ holding up a hand. "Go on, I'll be there in a sec." The bitter aftertaste of the chocolate still lingered and AJ glanced around irritably in the strange dressing room, trying to locate the room's mini refrigerator.

He found it tucked back into a corner and yanked open the handle, only to find Brian's duffel bag blocking entry. Swearing under his breath, he kicked it away. It wouldn't budge. Now thoroughly pissed, he reached down to shove it away, amazed by its weight.

"Dammit!"

AJ gritted his teeth as he knelt down, ripping open the zipper to see what the hell was so heavy. A soft hiss of surprise escaped from him as he slowly pulled out a sealed packet of money and stared at the contents, dumbfounded. Sitting cross-legged the ground, he pulled out another packet, touching it gently in awe, then withdrew another and another, each identical as the first. Holding the money up for a closer look, AJ fanned the pack. *There must be thousands here!* Confused, he stared at the bag for several minutes, trying to make sense of it. *What was Brian doing with so much money? And why was he carrying it around in a duffel bag?*

AJ glanced around, suddenly nervous. He stuffed the money back in, quickly zipping the bag closed. Standing abruptly, he felt a sudden rush of warmth overwhelmed him and swayed a little, feeling a fascinating wave of pleasure coursed through his body. Puzzled, AJ shook his head as another intense flow wove up and down his spine. He knew he should concentrate, a slight nagging in the back of his mind screamed to think about the money, but the euphoria he was experiencing felt so incredibly good it seemed to block out all reason. AJ walked over to view himself in the mirror, sure he would see something that would explain his elation. So preoccupied with his feeling of goodwill and friendliness he hardly noticed Xavier come in, but managed a warm smile as he watched Xavier bend down to pick up Brian's duffel bag. Xavier studied AJ for a moment and gave him the slightest twitch of a grin back. As he left, AJ could have sworn Xavier knew just how he felt.

Chapter 62:

Finding Out

Brian walked shakily up to the sink, leaning over to breathe deeply. Gripping one side for support, he turned on the faucet to splash cold water onto his face and to rinse out the bile that had risen in his mouth. He heard the door open and without turning knew it was Xavier. *God, give me control*, he prayed as he forced himself to look unemotionally at the one he despised with all his soul.

"What did you do?"

Brian kept his voice cold, hoping his voice sounded reasonably commanding.

Xavier shrugged casually and said nothing, a bare hint of a smile teasing the corners of his eyes. He scanned the interior of the bathroom, lost in pretend fascination, ignoring Brian's demanding look for several moments.

"For God's sake, Xavier...please," Brian finally begged, his voice beginning to crack with desperation.

Nodding with satisfaction at the young singer's submissive pleading, Xavier looked straight at him. "That's better. What were you saying again?"

Brian gritted his teeth, compelling himself to remain calm. He had to know. "What did you put in the chocolate?"

A wicked grin erupted over the large bodyguard's face. "Nothing that will hurt them. Let's just say that this will be a concert that you and the guys will never forget."

Knowing all too well the difference between his and Xavier's definition of hurt, Brian exploded in fury, sick and tired of Xavier's twisted little riddles. He launched himself off the sink, hitting Xavier with all the force he could muster in one punch, hoping to wipe that infuriating smirk off his face. Caught off guard, Xavier tumbled backward, landing hard against the tiled floor.

"You bastard! It's not about money! It's this sick game that really gets you off, isn't it?"

Xavier jumped back up, hands clenched in anger, amazed how easily the young singer still could make him lose his temper. Intending to teach Brian a lesson, he reached for him then stopped, remembering the bag of money. Fighting for control, resisting the urge to lash out, he gave Brian a tight smile.

"I'll admit I enjoy making you squirm but,... where's my money, Brian?"

Brian smiled nastily. "What was in the chocolate, Xavier?"

Xavier studied him, his eyes narrowing slightly as he realized Brian was toying with him. "Give me the money first," he challenged.

"No, not until you tell me what you put in the candy." Brian stood his ground, not giving an inch, his eyes locked onto Xavier's.

Xavier pursed his lips for a moment in contemplation, then smiled. "Ecstasy."

Enjoying the stunned look that passed over Brian's face, Xavier laughed. "Should be a real interesting show tonight, don't you think?"

Brian's mind raced, desperately trying to recall what he knew about it. Ecstasy was an extremely popular drug among the teenage crowd and he remembered hearing that it could make you feel unbelievably good. Other than that, he hadn't a clue. Feeling Xavier's fingers wrap tightly around his arm, Brian winced as he looked up into Xavier's dark eyes.

"Where's the money?" Xavier demanded again, his voice menacing.

Desperate for more information, Brian willed himself not to react to the pain.

"You said it wouldn't hurt them. I don't believe you. What's going to happen?" Xavier applied more pressure, his patience thinning. "Last time. The money?"

Brian grimaced, but refused to answer his question, glaring meaningfully at the bodyguard.

Finally Xavier stepped back, releasing his grip. "Make sure they drink lots of water." It was the only thing Xavier divulged and Brian nodded, rubbing his sore arm tenderly. He was amazed he was able to get that much out of him.

"The money is in a dark blue Backstreet bag. It's in the corner of the dressing room."

Brian watched as Xavier hurried out of the bathroom, then began to paced nervously, anxious to know if any of the guys were feeling the effects already. *I should go check, but what then? Xavier seemed to think the guys could perform, but he also said it would be a night we'd never forget. Damn!* Brian could feel the beginning of a fine sweat break out on his brow and he fought hard for control, the ominous signs of panic struggling to envelop him. *No, not now!* he screamed silently, wrapping his arms around himself to help calm the trembling. Hunched slightly over, he squeezed his eyes tightly shut, concentrating. Finally opening his eyes, Brian gazed into the mirror that reflected his image. Two blue eyes, now devoid of emotion, stared steadily back at him. He nodded to himself, knowing now what he had to do. There was no way he was going to let Nick, AJ, Kevin, and Howie go on stage tonight and ruin their careers, possibly their health. He shuddered to think what would happen if the press ever discovered Xavier's little "gift". Knowing he needed to stop that at any cost, Brian flung open the door and hurried down

the hallway, grim with determination. He was going to need that strength to get him through this.

Chapter 63:

Admission

Kevin looked helplessly on, watching in total disbelief as Howie laughed uncontrollably at Nick, who was hopping up and down with the enthusiasm of a ten-year-old boy on his birthday. Only a moment ago they both had been complaining of feeling dizzy and Kevin had panicked, ushering them back into the dressing room, concerned. Now he just shook his head, frowning as he watched Nick spin happily around the room. He gazed in dismay at Howie, who seemed to have taken a sudden interest with the dressing room lights. Kevin wondered if they were playing another one of their practical jokes on him and warned them to stop acting so goofy.

Howie and Nick came up to Kevin, arms draped around each others shoulders, contented smiles on their face. Nick let go of Howie, throwing a friendly arm around Kevin. "Ahh... Kevvvvy, what's the matter?" He began to finger the supple leather of Kevin's coat, almost caressing it. "Hey, nice jacket! What is it?"

Kevin pried Nick's fingers away, annoyed. "It's leather, you dumbass."

Nick smiled, nodding his head. "Right!" He looked at Howie, waving his hand. "Hey, D! Feel Kev's jacket. It's awesome!"

Howie started stroking the soft leather, oohing and ahing, until Kevin smacked his hand away. "Stop it! What the hell is the matter with you?"

Howie frowned, looking hurt. "You're not mad at me, are you?" he asked in wonder. He turned to Nick, then to AJ who had been quietly watching them all from the couch. "I think he's mad at me!" The ridiculous smiles Howie received from both Nick and AJ would have been laughable if Kevin hadn't been so exasperated.

AJ rose from the couch, coming over to admire Kevin's jacket. "It is nice. I gotta get me one!"

Kevin hissed in frustration, peeling AJ's hand off him. "You *do* have one. Shit! Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

"I will." AJ smiled good-naturedly at Kevin and stretched lazily, marveling at how sensual it felt. Noting the confusion on his friend's face, AJ stopped, feeling sorry for Kevin. He understood what was happening and somewhere in the back of his mind it bothered him that it *didn't* bother him. He looked at Kevin, ready to explain, when he zeroed in on the tall singer's eyes. *Damn, they sure were green!* He wondered if Kevin knew just *how* green. He was positive Kevin would appreciate it so he opened his mouth to say so but Nick cut in.

"Guys, have I told you that I love ya?" Nick threw his arms around Kevin and AJ, squashing them tightly into a big bear hug. Howie nodded, joining in the group hug.

"Ugh, yuck! Get off me!" Kevin pushed everyone apart, looking up to see Brian standing in the doorway. "There! Go over there and hug Brian instead."

Nick frowned at Brian, not sure. He disliked him a lot. He looked at Howie, reading the same confused expression. "Maybe later, okay?" Howie nodded at Nick's decision.

Kevin sighed, turning to AJ, who was staring intently at his face. "Bone! You said you know what's going on?" Despair welled up in his voice, grabbing the singer's tattooed forearm to give it a shake. "Tell me!"

AJ tore his eyes away from Kevin's, still mesmerized by their color. "Oh, yeah, yeah, right. Well, somehow, we've all taken E." He nodded sagely, as if that explained it all.

"What?" cried Kevin as Nick and Howie looked at each other in surprise.

"E. Ecstasy. The feel-good pill."

Kevin couldn't believe it. "How?"

"I'd say it was in the candy. In fact, I'm sure of it." Once again he nodded. *Damn! Sometimes I'm so smart, it scares me!*

Kevin shook AJ's arm again. "You're sure? How can you be so sure?"

AJ smiled serenely. *Kevin could be so naïve at times.* "I took it once," he admitted freely.

"What?!" Kevin repeated himself, this time in total shock.

"Hey, don't worry, okay? It just makes you feel incredibly good, and I mean *incredibly.*" He glanced down at his crotch to explain.

"Oh my God," moaned Kevin, thinking. "The concert."

Nick spoke up, concerned. "You mean we're gonna have hard-ons during the show?"

AJ ignored Kevin's groans, shrugging. "So what? Like you never had a boner on stage? Give me a break!"

"But ...all the time?"

AJ shrugged again. "It could happen. It could not. Don't *worry* about it." He glanced at Howie who winked at him, several times in fact. "Hell, D! Get that winking under control! I don't want to see you doing that all night!" AJ glanced at Kevin, who still seemed in a state of disbelief. "Man, how come you aren't affected? Or are you always this way, drugs or not?"

Kevin smiled sourly at AJ's joke. "I spit the chocolate out. Apparently I was the only *smart* one here."

Howie looked at Brian, who had stayed near the door the whole time, observing. "Wait a minute! Brian was smart too. He didn't take any, remember?"

Kevin stared at his cousin and Brian stared back, his face emotionless but his eyes revealing everything Kevin needed to know. "Son-of-a bitch!" swore Kevin heatedly as he watched Brian lower his head. He walked over to Brian, a rising anger beginning to burn inside him. He stood before his cousin, his arms folded across his chest, his voice low. "*You* did this to us, didn't you." Brian nodded his head, glancing up to see the disbelieving looks spread across Nick, AJ and Howie's face. Kevin was taken aback by Brian's calmness, his total lack of concern.

"Brian, damn you, why?"

Brian turned to look at Kevin, hearing the anger, the emotional betrayal and despair spoken in a few short words. He faltered for a moment, wishing with all his heart that someday they might be able to forgive him for this. "Because I wanted to," he lied simply.

Brian heard a sharp hiss as AJ came over to glare at him. "You really hate us that much that you would do this to us?" AJ felt the heightened sense of clarity that the drug gave him and he nodded, answering his own question. "Of course you would. Anything to keep you ahead, right? What kind of mind games are you fucking us with?" He noticed Brian jerked a little at the last sentence but carried on. "Figured if we didn't let you leave you could try and screw our lives in another way, huh?" Finding it difficult to sustain his anger when a feel-good drug was coursing through his system, AJ looked at Brian, his eyes dark and full of longing.

"I really wish I could beat the crap outta you Brian, but I can't."

"Here, let me help," replied Kevin, catching his cousin with a well-timed blow to his stomach. The punch sent Brian to his knees, and he groaned in pain, his hands clutching his midsection. Before he could bring up his hands to ward off another blow, Kevin hit him again and Brian felt his mouth fill up with a bitter taste, his teeth cutting the inside of his mouth. Brian leaned over, spitting out the overflowing blood before he gagged on it. Kevin leaned down and heaved his cousin back up, ready for another punch. Brian dimly felt Kevin being yanked away by Howie, the roar of pain in his head too loud to hear Nick and Howie screaming at Kevin to stop. Brian fell to the floor again and lay there, trying to press the hem of his shirt to his mouth to stop the bleeding.

Howie picked Brian up and none-too-gently pushed him into the nearest chair, glaring at him. He walked over to the small freezer and pulled out some ice chips, thrusting it and a clean cloth at Brian. Brian nodded his thanks but Howie shook his head. "Don't thank me," he warned harshly, "I just want to be able to talk to you." Brian sucked on the ice, wincing at the pain and looked up at him. Howie's eyes were blank, unreadable as he stared down at Brian, waiting patiently until Brian had finished attending to

himself. Kevin and AJ began to object, but Howie held out his hand, frowning at them sharply, then turned his attention back to Brian.

"Well, you got what you wanted. There's no way we can go on tonight. Satisfied?" he questioned, his body shaking. He hated the way he felt right now, his adrenalin of anger clashing with the euphoric feeling of the drug. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Brian could see what was happening to Howie and cringed inwardly. He knew all four were waiting for an answer and he hesitated for only a second, knowing if he didn't say something now, he never could. "Yeah, I'm satisfied," he said heavily, trying to wipe away the last remaining blood from his lips. "I'm satisfied we're not going on tonight."

For reasons you'll never know. He stood up, facing Howie, trying his best to act indifferent.

Nick came over. "Wait a minute. Why do we have to cancel? I can go on. I feel okay. In fact, I've never felt better!" He bounced on his toes to emphasize his point and looked at AJ for support.

"I know I can do it," stated AJ simply. Nick threw an appreciative arm around his friend and grinned.

Kevin shook his head. "Uh-uh, no way."

"Why not?"

Kevin gave an exasperated sigh. "Because I don't know how this drug is going to effect you guys on stage!"

AJ waved his hands and laughed easily. "I already know, remember? Nothing bad! It'll be alright. E just heightens your senses...a lot! Look." He sung a few bars of "Everybody" and danced an intricate step. "See? No problem!"

Howie frowned but felt more positive than the moment before. He sang a few lines himself as a test. Nick nodded and smiled, joining in, hearing AJ finish the last line of the song with them. They were in perfect harmony.

"No, no. It's too much of a risk."

Nick glanced at his watch. "A risk! Kevin, the arena is already filling up! Do you want risk canceling before 40,000 screaming fans? It's gonna be ugly."

Kevin kept shaking his head, unconvinced.

Undaunted, Nick continued. "Well, *I'm* going on. AJ, how about you?"

"I'm there, man."

"D?"

Howie hesitated, but only for a second. *He did feel good.* "Count me in."

Brian gazed at the three, taken aback. *Surely they couldn't be serious about going on!* He watched in despair as his plan to keep them off stage backfired, disintegrating before his own eyes. Gritting his teeth, he bitterly realized that Xavier had succeeded again. He shot a frustrated glance towards Kevin, who seemed to be just as upset.

Kevin started to object again, but Nick cut him off. "Come on! We can do it! Besides, you and Brian can keep us under control, watch us to see nothing weird happens."

At the mention of Brian's name, the room fell quiet, four pairs of inquiring eyes turning to look at him.

"That's the point!" cried Kevin, irritated. "Are you going to trust *him* to help you after what he just did?"

Nick looked solemn as he walked over to where Brian stood, cocking his head to one side as he contemplated it. "Yeah," he said softly, "I'm gonna trust him." He paused for a moment, his eyes boring straight into Brian's. "We all are. Because it's his ass out there as well. If we go down, I'm making sure he does too." A slight smile formed as he thought of the many satisfying ways he could do it.

AJ stared pointedly at Brian, then slowly put his sunglasses on. "Yeah. If we fuck up, I'm helping Nick bring you down."

Kevin elbowed his way past Nick, grabbing Brian's forearm in a tight grip. "Guess you don't get your wish after all," he hissed. "All I'm going say is Nick and AJ won't have anything on me if you screw this up tonight. I'll make sure your life will be a living hell." He gave Brian a rough shove and then signaled for the other three to follow him out of the dressing room.

Brian closed his eyes. "It already is," he said softly.

Chapter 64:

The Show Must Go On

Kevin glanced nervously at AJ, hoping his impulsive friend wouldn't do anything too crazy. The opening song had gone smoothly enough, with no time for horseplay, mainly because it was a big production number that would not allow for deviation. *Unlike the next song*. Kevin felt a fine sheen of nervousness trickled down his back as he noticed out of the corner of his eye the faces Nick and AJ were making to the crowd. *Shit!* He grabbed a spare microphone and walked over to the two, the band playing soft background music as they waited for his cue. Kevin had given them specific instructions not to continue the next numbers until he gave the say so.

"Hey, all you Backstreet fans!" yelled Kevin into the microphone. He not-so-innocently butted in between Nick and AJ, wrapping his arm tightly around Nick to calm him down. "Wassup?" he yelled and got a resounding rush of delighted screams. Kevin took that split second to turn his back to the stage and frown threateningly at Nick and AJ. "Stop it!" he mouthed, his eyes dark with irritation. Unconcerned, Nick shrugged comically and AJ bounced away from Kevin. Groaning inwardly, Kevin turned back to the stage, only to catch his breath. Howie was leaning precariously close to the edge, waving and blowing kisses to the front row. He had already unbuttoned his shirt. Trying to keep from screaming, Kevin anxiously searched for Brian, catching his gaze with his own and glared meaningfully at his cousin for help.

"Hi, ya'll! Told you we'd come back, didn't we?" announced Brian to the audience. Once again the high-pitched screams filled the arena.

Kevin thought furiously. "As you can see," he drawled, waving his hand expansively in Nick, AJ, and Howie's direction, "we're happy to be here. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to see..." Kevin "oofed" as Nick jumped joyfully onto his back and ruffled his hair. Kevin smiled weakly as the crowd roared their delight. "Yes, um, well, as you can see Nick is in a playful mood tonight." Realizing this was going nowhere and not trusting AJ and Howie who were whispering something, Kevin quickly signaled for the band to play.

Brian took over, the first stanza his. He sang, his eyes not on the crowd, but on Nick who seemed to be staring intently at his crotch. *Oh God*, moaned Brian as he hurriedly walked over, slapping Nick on the back and holding up the microphone. Startled, Nick looked up, but came on cue easily, singing with Brian, his mind concentrating now on the song. AJ and Howie were over on the other side of the stage, arms wrapped around each other, harmonizing. Brian turned his attention to Kevin, who had protectively followed the two. As the song ended, the lights dimmed, but not before Brian had a chance to see the look of sheer amusement plastered all over Xavier's face.

* * * * *

All five Backstreet Boys rushed backstage, hurriedly changing their costumes with practiced ease. They were three-quarters of the way done and Kevin had started to relax

a little, not hovering over them to the point of suffocation, as he had done in the beginning.

Nick bumped into AJ accidentally while trying to change into his other pants. "Will you quit staring at your crotch?" said AJ, sorry he ever mentioned one of the more pleasant "side-effects" of the drug.

Nick flushed, embarrassed. "I can't! I'm scared something is going to happen!"

AJ grinned, shaking his head. "You have thousands of girls out there lusting after you, E running through your system, and you're telling me you're not hard yet? Damn!"

Nick swung his arm out half-heartedly in AJ's direction. "And I suppose you are?"

AJ gave him a look of surprise. "How could you *not* notice?" he bragged.

Nick glanced at AJ's crotch and shrugged. "Probably because that's how big I am *without* a hard-on!" he boasted, a smirk forming across his face.

AJ opened his mouth for a comeback but found a water bottle shoved into his face. He turned to look at Brian, who had been pushing water incessantly at them all night. "Take it," he said quietly. "Otherwise you'll get really dehydrated."

"I know," he said grimly, understanding the effect E had on raising your body temperature. Apparently so did Brian. AJ smiled grimly. Without a doubt that knowledge confirmed Brian's guilt. He sipped his water, eyeing Brian coldly, wondering why he ever thought Xavier was the cause of all their problems. He heard the beginnings of the next song start and he hurriedly put on his ear set. AJ took a long sip of the cold water, swishing it around in his mouth before spitting it out, his aim directed at Brian's feet. Brian jumped away and AJ nodded in satisfaction as he glared at him, rushing onto the stage with the others.

He started the next song quickly, cutting in on Brian's beginning part, not caring if the crowd noticed. As he began to dance with the others AJ realized that he was starting to feel more normal, which in his case, meant less cheerful. *Good*. The effect of the drug was wearing off sooner than he thought, probably because he had chewed the Ecstasy rather than swallowed it. He wondered how Howie and Nick were managing. He danced past Brian, hearing Nick singing "Am I sexual?" *Not tonight Nicky*, he smirked, reminding himself to tease Nick mercilessly about it later. He crossed paths with Brian again, throwing a hostile look towards him, but Brian refused to acknowledge it. The song ended to the deafening shrieks of the crowd, and AJ saw Kevin nod in his direction, the relief on the dark-haired singer's face evident. As nerve-wracking as the night had been, they had all managed to come through without a major embarrassment. *But lots of little ones!* Sighing, AJ began the next song. Just three more and they were through, finished, done. The joy of going home, even if it was just for a week, never seemed more appealing than it did at this moment. AJ waved at the audience, pleased at the thought of no more concerts, no more problems, and especially no more Brian.

Chapter 65:

Leaving on a Jet Plane

The wind whipping in their faces, Nick threw Howie a grin as they ran onto the tarmac, past the attendants who were loading their suitcases. Backstreet Management had surprised them, chartering a Gulfstream for their convenience due to the mad holiday rush. Kevin grunted in reply when informed, saying he thought the gift of chocolates had seemed pretty second-rate on management's part. Eyeing the sleek plane, Kevin nodded his approval. This *definitely* made up for it as he high-fived AJ, eager to climb aboard.

Xavier had driven them all to the airport and was now patiently waiting for them to board. Howie went first, followed by Nick. AJ jogged up the stairs then turned, sure he heard his name being yelled above the noise on the runway. He saw Brian shout something to Kevin, then Kevin holler something back, grabbing his cousin's arm to give it a rough shake. Unable to hear what was going on, but knowing it wasn't good, AJ gritted his teeth and hurried back down the steps. As he got closer he caught Kevin screaming "Come on!" with Brian forcefully shaking his head. Frustrated, Kevin turned as AJ grasped the older singer by his shoulder, giving him a questioning look.

"Brian's not coming!" Kevin shouted, obviously enraged.

"What?"

AJ glared at Brian. He was so close, so close to going home, and now *this*.

"Go on!" yelled Brian, indicating them to leave with a wave of his hand. "I'm not going home."

"Dammit, Brian, why?" argued AJ, glancing up to see Xavier standing close.

Brian shook his head again. "I've got other plans," he said vaguely.

"More important than family?" yelled Kevin angrily. Brian shrugged, not answering. Kevin threw his hands up, way beyond pissed at his cousin. "Let's go!" he cried to AJ, "forget him!" Kevin walked furiously towards the plane, noticing the curious stares of Nick and Howie peering through the jet's windows.

AJ stood where he was, livid that Brian was able to screw things up, even at the very last moment. Kevin would now have to bear the brunt of his vacation time trying to explain to everyone back home about Brian's bizarre decision. AJ glared at him for a moment, hoping that Brian could read the contempt in his eyes. Disgusted, AJ turned away and headed back to the plane, stopping at the base of the stair ramp to glance once more at him. Brian stood there head bowed, hands in pockets, looking dejected. Xavier came up from behind, bringing his hands down firmly onto Brian's shoulders, shaking him as if to say "let's go." AJ noticed Brian shudder, a quick look of anger, disgust, and panic all rolled into one. Brian's eyes met AJ's briefly then he quickly turned away, following after

the large bodyguard. AJ stood frozen to the spot, suddenly remembering where he had seen Brian's look of loathing before. He gripped the stair rail tightly, watching uneasily as Xavier and Brian walk back into the terminal, merging with the crowd, until they finally disappeared.

Chapter 66:

Realization

AJ stalled for a moment, unsure, then reluctantly climbed aboard the plane, not hearing the flight attendant's cheery hello. He strapped himself into the seat next to Howie, his heart pounding painfully, his mouth dry, as he struggled to maintain his composure. The high-pitched whine of the turbine engines commenced and the jet began to creep slowly along the runway, only to explode into full throttle for take-off. The jet rose quickly, then banked, heading south. AJ bit his lip in consternation, ignoring Howie's excited grin as he closed his eyes to concentrate.

Think, he screamed silently to himself, *What's going on? You're so close, come on, come on...* AJ willed himself to relax, to let his mind see what his emotions could not. He allowed the thoughts to flow freely, to accept any image or insight that would present itself. A variety of visions came to fore and AJ viewed each one, patiently trying to sort them. He began at the beginning... noticing the radical change in Brian's appearance... the bruises... Brian's angry denials... his mercurial mood swings... AJ remembered the longing, the desire in Brian's eyes to disclose what was the matter, only to be quickly replaced with stubborn defiance. He pictured the silent looks of communication passing between Brian and Xavier, messages that only they seemed to understand. Xavier. AJ's mind veered towards the bodyguard and he grimaced. That damn Xavier, seemingly everywhere, smirking, somehow *knowing*, always one step ahead, constantly at Brian's side, almost like an obsessed fan. Obsessed. AJ mulled that one over. Xavier seemed possessed, fanatical when it came to guarding Brian, almost consumed by it. He recalled the look of revulsion on Brian's face when Xavier had shook him on the runway, remembered clearly the loathing Brian showed when Xavier had slapped his shoulders at the press interview, considered how he himself had grabbed Brian roughly just before the beginning of a concert. "*Don't ever touch me like that again, you got it?*" Brian had screamed at him, his eyes brimming with disgust. AJ couldn't erase it from his mind. Over and over again he saw it, each mental picture revealing the agony and fear in Brian's eyes, exposed in small, unguarded moments whenever Xavier was near. AJ bit his lip, angered at his stupidity in not recognizing the connection sooner.

AJ popped his eyes open, his thoughts disrupted by a friendly touch on his shoulder. The flight attendant was handing him a drink and he took it, sore at being interrupted. He took a quick sip, noticing Kevin leaning over him to reach up into the overhead compartment, trying to pull out his duffel bag. "Head's up," Kevin growled. With a thump, he set the heavy bag down next to AJ, bending on one knee to struggle with the zipper on his overstuffed bag.

Heart hammering, AJ shot up out of his seat and stood there, staggered.

He remembered.

Brian's bag of money! How the hell could he have forgotten?

"Bone? Are you alright?"

Oh God... Xavier had picked up Brian's bag.

"AJ?"

Because Xavier knew what was in there.

"Guys, something's wrong with AJ!"

With sickening clarity AJ recalled Brian's angry outburst on the bus, the strain of tension on his face when AJ had asked if Xavier was threatening him.

What do you want me to say? That Xavier beats me senseless...

The bruises!

That he threatens my life...

Shit! That unknown intruder was Xavier!

That he's holding me hostage in some bizarre way?

The bag of money!

Well, you're outta luck, pal!

The sheer panic he felt when he discovered the outrageous amount stuffed in there was *nothing* compared to what he was feeling right now.

"Oh God, oh God, please, don't let it be," he moaned outloud, his mind exploding with terrifying comprehension.

Nick, Howie, and Kevin were now surrounding AJ, their faces in shock over AJ's bizarre behavior. Howie reached out to AJ, who was covering his face with both hands. Shaking with understanding, AJ pulled his hands away to look at them, his eyes filled with fear.

"Guys, Brian's in trouble."

Chapter 67:

On the Road

For being such a large man Xavier moved amazingly fast, quickly weaving in and out of the crowd effortlessly. Brian struggled to keep him in sight, infuriated that Xavier was making this into a racing game, angry at himself as he obediently chased after him. He followed Xavier out the south terminal doors, hearing the roar of a jet fly over them. Brian looked up, seeing the Gulfstream scream overhead and a wave of sorrow and relief flooded him. Brian sighed, thankful that at least the guys were safe. *Out of sight, out of mind*, he thought. Or so he hoped. He could never be sure with Xavier.

Xavier led him to their awaiting vehicle and Brian jumped in, wondering why their luggage was strewn haphazardly across the back seat and not placed in the car trunk. He frowned, remembering that Xavier hadn't said a word about where they were headed. He buckled his seat belt then took a good look at the car. Xavier had rented a white Chevy Lumina, a plain, non-descript car, the kind that blended in well, making it virtually unnoticeable. Brian knew Xavier had not rented the car without a specific reason and he shifted uneasily as Xavier exited the airport parking lot.

"So, mind telling me where we are going, or is that a game too?"

Xavier threw the blond Backstreet Boy an amused smile. "Do you want it to be?" he challenged.

Brian caught the note of anticipation. "No. Cut the crap, Xavier. Where are we headed?"

Xavier glanced in his rear view mirror, changed into the fast lane and picked up speed. He silently drove on, saying nothing, oblivious to Brian's angry glare. Brian turned away, too stubborn to ask again. He watched road sign after road sign whip by in fuming frustration, not paying attention until Xavier merged onto a highway. Interstate 10. Brian paused, trying to gauge their location. As far as he could tell, they were traveling west, on the same route as the tour and equipment buses. The second half of the tour was scheduled to start in Tucson, weaving its way up to Phoenix and then onto Las Vegas. For all intents and purposes, it looked like Xavier was heading towards Arizona.

Tired, Brian leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes, trying to adjust to the contours of the passenger's seat. If Xavier wouldn't talk to him, fine. He wouldn't say a word either.

"Ever been to Mexico?"

Brian jerked awake, startled.

"Huh?" Brian looked around, noticing the unfamiliar scenery flying by. He must have fallen asleep, and as his aching body informed him, for quite some time.

"Ever been to Mexico?"

"Mexico?" he repeated weakly. Xavier's question came out of the blue and it took Brian a moment to register it. He felt himself tense up, suspicious. *What the hell was in Mexico?*

Xavier shot him a quick grin. "Yeah. Mexico. Nogales, to be exact. We've got some business down there." He gave the blond singer a quick wiggle of eyebrows. "Among other things."

Among other things. Brian caught the suggestive tone and felt his stomach twist into knots. Business he could handle. 'Other things' he could not. Brian fidgeted in his seat, anxious. Once again, Xavier had put him on edge, just as the bodyguard had intended to do. He mentally ordered himself to remain calm, not to play into Xavier's little sexual mind games.

"Business, huh? What kind of business can you do down there that you can't do here?"

"A money transaction. A big, illegal one. Courtesy of you, of course."

"Of course," replied Brian sarcastically, then sighed bitterly. "So that's it? *That's* why you had to cancel my break? Because of money?"

"Among other things." Xavier's mouth twisted comically.

There it was again. Brian bit his lip. He despised asking, but he had to. "Other things?"

"Oh, I'm so glad you asked," Xavier smirked, noticing the dark look Brian shot back at him. "I've been meaning to tell you all about it."

Brian's heart sank, listening to the mocking tone in Xavier's voice. He turned his head away. "Tell me what?" His voice was flat, emotionless.

The suddenly slowing of the car swung Brian's attention around to see Xavier maneuvering their car off the highway. They crept into a small, run-down gas station and Xavier hopped out, Brian following, stretching stiffly.

"Tell me *what*, Xavier?"

Xavier ignored him again and began filling up the car with gas. Brian sighed and glanced around, shifting restlessly, viewing the god-forsaken area, the vast expanse of desert spreading barren and quiet for miles around. Feeling the burning eyes of Xavier bearing down upon him as he studied the landscape, Brian turned to face Xavier, not willing to play this asinine waiting game anymore.

"Dammit Xavier, what the hell were you going to tell me?"

Xavier hung up the gas handle with a snap and grabbed the receipt, stuffing it into his pocket. "I was going to tell you about our new game."

Brian hung his head for a second, then raised it, his face fatigued. "Our *new* game."

Xavier nodded, his eyes glowing, regarding the young Backstreet Boy with eagerness. "Our *final* game," he whispered dramatically. Brian stiffened noticeably and Xavier smiled in satisfaction, watching the young singer's self-control fade. Brian leaned heavily on the side of the car, drawing in a ragged breath. A vein of pure raw hatred surged through him.

"Okay Xavier, just tell me," he snarled. "Quit acting like an asshole."

Xavier grinned, grabbing a paper towel and squeegee from the station's well. He carefully cleaned the bug-splattered window, taking his time, enjoying Brian's discomfort. The large bodyguard leaned over and gently wiped a missed spot. Brian shoved away from the car, now livid at Xavier's deliberate stalling. "You said this is the *final* game?" he screamed in frustration. "Why? How come it's the last?"

"Because after this last game, I'm *gone*."

Xavier smirked, watching the stunned reaction on Brian's face. "You didn't think I was gonna stick around forever, did ya?" he cooed mockingly, reaching over to pat the side of Brian's cheek.

Brian abruptly smacked the massive hand away, his heart pounding. *Dear God, could this be the end of the nightmare?* He paused for a moment, reality rearing its ugly head.

"There's more to it than that, Xavier," he sneered. "I know you. There's *always* more."

Xavier shrugged nonchalantly, conceding to the fact. "Well, ... this time the game has a *little* surprise in store for you." He watched as Brian's anger turned to worry before he continued on. "Or should I say, for one of the guys."

"A surprise?" Xavier's surprises were never the nice kind. Brian started to feel panicky, his last little bit of control slipping away. "What sort of surprise?"

Xavier sighed exaggeratedly, ignoring Brian's question. "Wish I could give it to *all* four, but it just wasn't possible."

Brian couldn't stand it. "Which *guy*, Xavier?"

Xavier wiped the corner of the window, cocking his head to view how clean it was. "Well, actually, that's what the game is all about. Which one."

Brian grimaced, hating Xavier's vague replies. "So, are you gonna tell what this game is about or not?"

Xavier grinned. "Don't I always?" He finished wiping another window.

Brian forced himself to remain silent, knowing from past experience that Xavier would soon be unable to contain himself. Staring straight at the bodyguard, he waited, watching. Xavier attacked another window, his movements becoming more animated. He leaned forward to reach the middle of the back window. "Well, this game... you see... is really... four games in one..."

Brian rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"One game per each guy. Each time you successfully complete one, I'll let you guess who my surprise is for. No, wait! Better yet, I'll tell you who the surprise *isn't* for." He nodded happily.

Brian gaped at Xavier in shock. *Oh my God! Was Xavier just making this up as he went along?* He felt himself start to tremble, realizing just how mentally ill this madman was standing next to him.

"Yeah! Each time you're successful, one of the guys won't get my surprise."

"Successful? What happens if I'm not?"

Xavier smiled, throwing away the dirty paper towels. "Oh right, thanks, I forgot to tell you." Xavier threw an encouraging arm across Brian's shoulder. "Listen, you gotta try *real hard* to win, okay?" Brian began to squirm and Xavier pressed closer, snaking his hand up to grip Brian's neck firmly. "Because the first time you fail," he breathed softly into the Backstreet Boy's ear, "the game is dead, and so is one of your buddies."

Chapter 68:

Agony

Kevin grabbed the drink from Howie's offered hand and ordered AJ to down it one gulp. Needing no further prodding, AJ tossed it back, grimacing a little as the fiery warmth slid down his throat. He shook his head as another drink presented itself, then slumped dejectedly in his seat, viewing the concerned faces surrounding him.

"Jesus, man, I've never seen you look so upset," commented Kevin, sitting down next to him. "What's all this about Brian being in trouble?" AJ rubbed his forehead for a moment, gathering his thoughts, then motioned with a shaky hand for Nick and Howie to sit down across from Kevin and him.

Nick dropped into the leather seat, concerned. He spared Howie a quick look and Howie returned Nick's, apprehension written all over his face.

AJ sighed heavily. "I know what's going on," he began painfully, his voice so low all three strained to hear him. "It took me forever, goddammit, but now I know."

"Know what?" asked Nick quietly.

Shaking, AJ hoped he could tell them before he broke down. He clenched his hands as if in prayer, pressing them against his forehead. "Guys, ...Xavier has been blackmailing Brian." Declaring it verbally proved to be too much for him and he leaned over, trying to choke back sobs of despair, but failed. AJ began to weep, rocking his body with cries of such anguish that Kevin grabbed him into a tight hug, afraid.

"Bone, Bone! Hang on buddy. It's gonna be okay." Kevin looked up to see the shocked faces of Howie and Nick.

AJ moaned, shaking his head. "No, no, it's *not* going to be all right." He wiped the tears away from his face with the back of his hand. "Oh God! Listen! Remember when we ate that candy? Well, it tasted so bad I went to the refrigerator to get some water. Brian had placed his duffel bag next to the refrigerator, so I shoved it away. Only it was so heavy I couldn't! So I opened the bag to see what the hell was so heavy." AJ turned tear-stained eyes to Kevin. "There was a lot of money stuffed into it. A *lot*. Thousands! What's Brian doing with that kind of cash? And then a few minutes later Xavier came in, went *straightt* over to the bag and took it! *He knew!* He knew what was in it!" AJ shuddered, remembering Xavier's little smile.

Nick, Howie, and Kevin sat in silence for a minute, stunned, letting the information sink in. "AJ," began Nick, "don't take this wrong, but are you sure?"

"Nick, I'm positive. I'd stake my life on it."

Nick saw the unmistakable firmness in AJ's eyes, the conviction in his voice and sighed heavily. He leaned wearily into his seat, convinced but troubled.

AJ stood up slowly, gripping the back of the seat tightly. "There's more guys."

Howie sucked in his breath and closed his eyes, not sure if he wanted to hear it. "More?"

AJ nodded. "Umm..." he started, not sure how to soften the news.

"AJ? Come on, tell us."

AJ took a deep breath and plunged forward. "I'm pretty sure Xavier has been abusing and threatening Brian too."

"What?" cried Howie, jumping up.

"Oh, God," Kevin moaned, shaking his head.

"No, no! We would have known! I don't believe it," stated Nick flatly.

"Why?" shot back AJ, suddenly irritated at Nick's denial. "Because you don't want to? Because you're afraid you'll see the truth?"

Nick shot AJ a look of pure acid. "I'm not afraid! Go ahead, prove it to me!"

AJ glared at Nick, then softened, realizing Nick *was* scared. "Look, let's think this one out, okay?" he reasoned quietly. AJ paused for a moment, glancing at Howie and Kevin. "All of us." He saw Nick relax a little, then nod to AJ.

"I'd like to think we all know Brian, probably better than anyone else," he began. "He's like a brother to me, hell, you all are! And we've never seen him change, never seen him stop being the Brian we all know and understand, until now. Until *Xavier*. Think back. When did all this shit start happening with Brian? After Xavier. Not before! I've caught the looks of disgust, the hatred Brian displays at Xavier when he thinks no one's watching. When I questioned him a while ago he was *this* close to telling me what was wrong, what was happening and then he suddenly backed off, afraid. I'm sure he was going to tell me Xavier was the problem. You know, I've hated that asshole from the start."

Howie shook his head. "But Xavier saved Brian from that intruder!"

"D! Think about it! Xavier *was* the intruder! Xavier was the one who announced it, not Brian. Xavier was the one who always had access to our rooms!"

Kevin nodded. "AJ's right. I woke up one night and found Xavier in my room, just staring at me. Scared the shit outta me."

AJ glanced sharply at him. "He did? You never told us that."

Kevin shrugged. "I forgot to tell you because of Sam...." He trailed off, remembering. "Oh God!" exclaimed Kevin, wide-eyed. "When Brian saw the mutilated picture of Sam he started moaning, saying over and over that he was so sorry, that he was 'going to get that asshole...'"

Kevin now understood and he looked at his friends, stunned. "Brian was talking about Xavier. Xavier killed my dog."

Nick jumped up, agitated. "Xavier killed Sam? When could he have done that?"

Kevin smiled grimly. "Remember our cancelled concert? He took some days off..." Kevin's voice faltered, a look of horror crossing his face. "Harold!"

The tall singer jumped up, pacing back and forth. "Mom told me a stranger had tried to run Brian's brother off the road. *And* Mom happened to mention that Xavier visited Aunt Jackie, to see if he could help them! Shit!" Kevin ran his fingers through his hair, angry. "Why didn't I put two and two together?"

AJ shook his head. "Kevin, don't beat yourself up, man."

Howie spoke up. "Could Xavier have torched my house? It was arson."

Nick groaned with understanding. "Remember the first thing Brian did when he found out?"

Kevin nodded. "He went to find Xavier. It pissed me off because he wanted to go see Xavier, instead of staying with us."

Howie looked at AJ. "What about your accident with the rope?"

AJ snorted. "That was no accident. Remember who investigated it?"

All four thought back to the near tragedy. "Damn," said Nick, shaken. He suddenly remembered Aaron's visit, how Xavier insisted on picking his brother up, how Brian instantly objected. As plain as day Nick saw the fear and frustration in Brian's face when Nick confronted him after finding out Brian was the cause of Aaron's sudden departure. Nick had been livid, wanting to beat Brian senseless for that. His mind flashed instantly to Brian's chest and stomach injuries and he groaned, his fear growing. "Brian's bruises," he said softly, catching Kevin, AJ's and Howie's attention. "Guys, Xavier caused the bruises. He's been *beating* Brian!" Everyone was silent for a moment, not wanting to think about it. Nick began to shake and sat down, covering his face with his hands. "Oh no, oh no," he moaned, his voice cracking from the strain as he realized who had caused the massive bruises. *And he had added to them!* He looked up at the three, his voice quavering. "I hit him! I hit Brian! I *broke* his wrist! I was angry, angry at all the shit he was doing, and all the time it was really Xavier!"

He broke down, shaking, tears silently falling in the realization of what he had done. Howie reached over to console him, only to find AJ shaking his head.

"Don't," he advised Howie, his voice cracking with emotion. "Let him get it out of his system." Howie nodded and sat quietly next to Nick, offering his silence and companionship.

Kevin waited in agony as Nick continued rocking back and forth, the youngest Backstreet member crying with ashamed guilt. Not being able to stand it any longer, Kevin reached out, grabbing Nick in a firm embrace. "Nick. Nick. I know. I hit him too." The enormity of what he had done to his cousin struck Kevin hard and he clung to Nick tightly, a wave of grief overwhelming him. Kevin felt Howie's and AJ's arm reach over for support and they all sat there, each overcome with emotion.

Howie finally let go, sighing heavily. He got up and found some bottled waters, along with some Kleenex and passed them out. He didn't want to bring up the subject of Xavier but knew he had to.

"So what are we going to do about X?"

Kevin rubbed his eyes, too overwhelmed to think clearly. "I don't know."

Nick finally raised his head, the anger in his blue eyes intense. "I'm going to kill that son-of-a-bitch!"

"Me first," said AJ.

"I have an idea," Howie said softly.

AJ smiled tiredly. "Good old D. What is it?"

Howie chewed his lip in contemplation. "I think we need to find out more about Xavier."

Nick nodded, listening intently. "Go on."

"Well, what do we know about him, anyway? That he's a bodyguard? What else? What about him, his past? Was he ever in trouble with the law? Just how dangerous is he?"

AJ snorted in reply and Howie went on. "We need to investigate, check him out."

Nick shook his head. "How can we do that?"

Kevin pressed his lips into a thin line, his self-control coming back with a vengeance. "Nick. We are the fucking Backstreet Boys. *We can do anything.*" His voice shook with the assertion, his green eyes firm with determination.

AJ crossed his arms. "Damn straight. Let's use our influence. Let's get that bastard."

Howie cut in. "Not so fast guys." Kevin, Nick and AJ turned to stare at him. "You're forgetting one thing. Brian. He's with Xavier. And we don't know where they are." Howie's final sentence struck home, the ramifications of it hitting hard. "We need to be careful, go slow."

"We can't!" cried Nick. "Brian's out there, right now, somewhere with him, and we don't know what kind of trouble he might be in!"

AJ rubbed his hands nervously. "D's right. Xavier doesn't know that we know. We have to use that to our advantage. If Xavier discovers that we're on to him, God only knows what might happen to Brian!"

"Let's notify the police," suggested Nick hopefully. Kevin shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. The media would catch wind of it and then so would Xavier. I agree with Howie. We need to be careful, but we can't be slow. We need to find out, right now." He turned to AJ. "Looks like our vacation is going to be cut short."

AJ nodded. He sat down, motioning for the others to do the same. "Come on. We've got a lot of planning to do before this plane lands."

Chapter 69:

Game One

Brian learned more than he ever wanted to know about the desert during the next few hours he spent driving in the car with Xavier. Too disturbed by Xavier's grim statement to talk, he sat in troubled silence, feeling Xavier glance his way occasionally, as if sizing him up. Brian kept his head turned towards the side window, his chin resting in the palm of his hand as he stared out at the passing scenic landscape. If scenic was the correct word. He knew many considered the southwestern desert to be breathtaking, its vast and untamed land picturesque, but to Brian it looked exactly the way he felt, dead and desolate.

He carefully considered Xavier's last statement, painstakingly going over any way he could thwart Xavier's mad little game from happening while also trying to keep everyone safe. In the back of his mind he heard himself vowing to continue on, to go for it, play the game so that he could be rid of Xavier once and for all. The temptation was alluring, the desire overwhelming to know that this insane bodyguard could be gone forever if he was just able to keep his wits about him and win. On the other hand, Brian wanted to take flight, to escape from Xavier's clutches anyway possible and damn the consequences. He hung his head, ashamed at his weakness, at his desire to finally concede defeat and accept whatever outcome, good or bad. He sighed inwardly and closed his eyes, praying for strength. It had been a long time since he had done that, his mind so filled with turmoil that he had given little thought towards prayer. Several passages came to mind and he reflected on them, discarding them one by one. He finally selected a verse. *God is my refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.* He repeated it over and over again in his mind, making it a mantra. A calmness surrounded him and he relaxed for the first time that day, his mind finally clear. He was not going to give up, he was going to fight, fight to win even if he lost everything dear to him. He owed himself that much. He owed that much to the guys.

Stomach growling in protest, Brian curiously glanced at his watch. 3:00 p.m. They had passed several diners on the way, none catching Xavier's attention. By the way he was driving, it looked like it would be hours more before they stopped, so Brian was surprised to see Xavier cut sharply off the highway, entering a dusty road that looked barely serviceable. The car bounced hard against the large and small potholes that dotted their path; Xavier not caring to adjust his speed as he hurried on and Brian soon lost sight of the freeway as they traveled further up and in.

Brian held onto his armrest tightly as they hit a particularly deep rut, then shot Xavier a startled look. Xavier seemed to be searching for something, his eyes darting back and forth along the road. With a quick twist of the wheel the bodyguard turned the car to the right then abruptly stopped. Brian peered out the window, noticing that they were positioned next to a dry river bed. Xavier popped the trunk release and then hopped out of the car, hands on hips as he scanned the area. Nodding in satisfaction, he waved for Brian to get out. Leery, Brian hesitantly opened the car door and slowly stepped out, noting that Xavier had still left the engine running. He walked over to find Xavier

reaching into the trunk, humming cheerfully as he pulled out a small nylon bag. He hauled another bag out, a mesh one filled with empty beer cans. Xavier shot Brian a quick grin, holding up a hand to keep Brian's questioning look at bay. Slamming the trunk down hard, he knelt and zipped open the smaller of the two bags, bringing out a handgun. Brian drew a surprised breath as he found the large bodyguard shoving the weapon unceremoniously into his hands. Xavier withdrew another, an exact duplicate, handling it with practiced ease.

With a gleam in his eye, Xavier examined the gun admiringly. "A Glock. Pretty, ain't she?" He brought up his gun and sighted it, targeting a nearby sage bush. He turned to smile at Brian, who was staring dumbly at the large gun in his hand. "Ready for some target practice?" he asked excitedly. Xavier reached over to grab the mesh bag of cans, moving towards a fallen mesquite tree. "Be careful," he called over his shoulder, "it's loaded."

Brian stared thoughtfully at the weapon, then hefted the grip experimentally, feeling the weight press solidly into his hand. He clamped his fingers tightly around it, closing his eyes for a moment as a rush of wild desire flooded him. Quickly he snapped them open watching Xavier painstakingly line up can after can on the decrepit trunk limb. Shaking slightly, Brian slowly took a small step forward then turned to gaze back at the car, hearing the engine drone quietly in park, tempting him with sudden freedom. Tearing his attention away from the car Brian took another step forward, this time not so hesitant, and then another, gaining confidence with each step. He raised the gun carefully, sighting the middle of Xavier's back. *Do it!* Brian screamed to himself. *You had your chance with the switchblade and you blew it. Do it, now!* A small smile that turned into a wicked grin spread across Brian's face, high on the knowledge that he was going to kill Xavier. But first he wanted to see Xavier sweat, to see the expression of terror spread across the son-of-a-bitch's face before he pulled the trigger.

'Xavier!' yelled Brian, walking closer, pointing the gun directly at Xavier's heart as the large bodyguard turned around.

Xavier stiffened slightly, his eyes narrowing as he stared hard at Brian then at the gun held confidently in the young singer's hand. He glanced back to his own weapon, out of reach, having placed it down in order to set up targets. "You don't have the guts," he sneered, taking a menacing step forward, his eyes boring directly into Brian's.

"Oh, I think I do," grinned Brian confidently, his finger pulling the trigger when he saw Xavier take another threatening step.

The loud, empty click of the Glock snapped Brian instantly out of his bloodlust. Taken aback, he pulled the trigger again, then once more, the chamber clicking uselessly with each pull. Xavier began to roar with amusement, his laughter echoing loudly in the still desert air. He walked over and quickly snatched the gun out of Brian's slumped hand, holding it up like a victory prize.

"Damn! You did it! I wasn't sure you would, but I was hoping, I really was!" He grabbed Brian by the shoulders, giving him an affectionate hug, smiling at the incredulous look that was plastered over the young singer's face.

"Look, I want to show you something," Xavier revealed, still holding Brian firmly in his grip. He raised the gun and aimed at a beer can, pulling the trigger. The can exploded, along with another sitting next to it. "See? If you just had pulled the trigger once more, you woulda got me! I guess I didn't leave the gun *completely* empty." He roared again with delight, highly amused.

Stunned, Brian could hardly believe how close he had come to freedom, the bitter irony burning within him. This had all been a set-up, a test, a game, planned to down to the last exacting detail and executed to perfection. Enraged, he spotted Xavier's gun, lying perched a few yards away. Without thinking Brian viciously slammed his elbow into Xavier's midsection, ripping away from Xavier's grasp. Running as fast as he could, he scooped up the other gun and turned, hoping for a quick shot. Xavier tackled him, his flying leap knocking the gun out of Brian's hand. They both fell backwards, rolling together in the hot desert sand. Struggling upright first, Brian frantically searched for the lost gun, panicking as he heard the grunts of Xavier coming up from behind him. Catching the glint of the gun resting half-buried in the sand Brian dove for it, circling his fingers around the grip. Xavier slammed into Brian again, this time knocking the breath completely out of him. Brian lay flat on his stomach, his vision wavering as he gasped desperately for air. Xavier yanked him roughly up onto his knees then leaned over with one arm to reach for the fallen gun, the other massive hand clamped brutally onto Brian's wrist.

Brian watched in horror as Xavier slowly brought the gun up, carefully placing the end of the barrel against Brian's forehead. Terrified, Brian stared at Xavier, seeing nothing but sheer madness in the bodyguard's eyes.

A small smile formed at the corner of Xavier mouth as he felt the young Backstreet Boy tense, waiting until Brian closed his eyes in defeat before pulling the trigger.

Click.

Brian jerked violently, his eyes flying wide open as shock set in. Xavier released his hold and Brian slumped to the ground, too traumatized to stand upright. His body shook uncontrollably, the razor sharp pain of adrenaline making him grimace. A shadow crossed over him and Brian weakly raised his head to see Xavier standing over him, grinning.

"Oops. No bullets in this one either."

Xavier laughed uproariously, watching as Brian collapsed back down into the sand, then went over to gather up the two guns, stuffing them back into the bag and throwing the whole thing into the car trunk. He eyed Brian, still lying on the ground, not moving. He waited for a moment then walked over, frowning.

"Come on, rise and shine," he ordered, grabbing the collar of Brian's shirt and heaving upwards. He studied Brian, watching as some color returned to the young singer's face.

"You've done good," Xavier admitted, leading Brian towards the car. "You won."

"Won?" croaked Brian as he swayed unsteadily.

"Yeah. Game one. That was game one. Want to know who the surprise isn't for?" The animation was back in Xavier's voice and Brian looked at him in a daze, not comprehending.

"How...How did..." he questioned, before being interrupted by Xavier.

"Nope, not Howie," smirked Xavier, pleased at his joke. He opened the car door, shoving Brian in, then jogged around the other side, enthusiastically jumping in.

Brian slumped in his seat, his face resting sideways against the headrest, exhausted. Xavier gunned the engine hard, the car fishtailing in the soft dirt as they headed back towards the road. Without pausing to stop, Xavier recklessly entered the highway, giving a whoop of glee as he floored the pedal.

"Damn! We're gonna make some good time! Nogales, here we come!" He grinned gleefully at Brian, joyfully slapping Brian on the shoulder and ignoring Brian's wince. "I'm proud of ya, son!" he mimicked in a deep fatherly voice. "In fact, you deserve some brownie points! You're the first who didn't piss in his pants!"

Brian shuddered, wondering how many others had been victim to Xavier's cruel gun trick. Xavier carried on, full of enthusiasm. "Yes, brownie points are in order. Tell you what. Since the next game is going to be tougher than this one, I'll let you know when game two happens. Just so you'll be ready, okay?"

Brian turned his face away, not wanting Xavier to see the stunned look on his face. *Game two would be tougher?* The first one just about killed him. Numb, exhausted, and at the brink of despair, Brian wondered if he could survive the next three. For the first time since this whole nightmare started, Brian realized with a sinking feeling that he probably wouldn't.

Chapter 70:

Team Effort

AJ watched with concern as Kevin glumly sat down next to him, the tall singer rubbing his forehead tiredly. He gladly accepted the offered drink from their flight attendant, downing it in one gulp, then reached out to snag AJ's rum and coke.

"That bad, huh?" asked AJ sympathetically.

Kevin shrugged. "I suppose it could have been worse, but I'm not sure how," he admitted. "Kristin wasn't too happy with me when I told her I'm wasn't coming home, especially when I said I couldn't tell her why."

AJ sighed. He figured as much. All four had individually called their families to tell them they weren't coming home and each had received pretty much the same friction as Kevin.

"Well, tough shit," spat out Nick, who was now sitting next to Kevin. "She'll live. Brian might not."

Kevin glanced at him, pissed. "I know that! I'm just telling you what happened..." he began, then stopped, his irritation fading away as he observed Nick. As hard as AJ's startling news was to everyone, it seemed to hit Nick the hardest. Kevin could see the worried lines etched in his young face, the anxious and troubled look that had settled into his posture and eyes. If they were going to be of any help to Brian, Kevin knew that he and the rest of the guys would have to work together as a team.

"Nick, I'm sorry. This whole thing with Brian is just so...hard for me to handle. I feel like I'm in a bad dream, ya know?"

Nick sighed, rubbing his hands dejectedly through his hair. "Yeah, me too. God, Kevin, I just can't stop thinking about the all stuff I did to Brian!" Nick's voice started to tremble, recalling the unpleasant incidents. "All those horrible things I said to him..." his voice faded away, too emotional to continue.

Howie grabbed Nick's arm to get his attention. "Nick! We *all* did it. We all gave him grief. You're not the only one, remember? I have to live with what I did to Brian just as much as you, AJ, and Kevin do!"

Nick sighed, letting out a harsh breath of acceptance. "Yeah, but..."

"No buts!" argued Howie. "We've got to make the best of it and move on, try to forget it, because right now Brian needs our help, not our sympathy!"

AJ nodded at Howie and reached over to lay a reassuring hand on Nick's shoulder. "Nick. This is tearing me up inside too, more than you'll ever know. But I want to help Brian and we," he gestured to Howie and Kevin, " need your help or we're not gonna make it."

AJ saw the weary but calm acceptance in Nick's eyes. "You're right. Sorry, guys."

Kevin sighed and gave Nick a reassuring smile. Nick smiled tentatively back.

"Okay. What should we do first? Where should we go? Who do we talk to?"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down!" said AJ. He looked at Howie and Kevin, who were smiling slightly at Nick's eagerness. "Well?" AJ questioned his friends. "Any ideas?"

"I suppose we could start at Backstreet Management. Check up on Xavier's records. See what we can find," Howie offered.

Kevin nodded. "Good idea." He leaned back into his seat, frowning. "Management is in downtown Orlando, isn't it?"

Nick shrugged, looking at the others. "Beats me. I've never been there."

"Me neither," admitted Kevin. "But I guess it's as good a place to start as any." Kevin turned to AJ. "Looks like we all are gonna be bunking at your house, okay Bone?"

"Sure, no problem. Sorta like old times, huh?" All four thought back to when they had housed together.

"But without Brian," spoke Nick gloomily.

"Nick!" threatened Kevin, Howie, and AJ simultaneously, giving him a warning look.

"Yeah, yeah, okay," replied Nick defensively. "I'm sorry, but I just can't help thinking about Brian."

Howie, AJ, and Kevin nodded. It consumed their thought too, only they weren't as verbal as Nick.

Nick shifted agitatedly in his seat, unable to remain silent, his distress still eating away at him. "I mean, what is he doing now? Where is he? Is he okay?"

AJ heard the soft dings on the intercom indicating the pilot's warning that they were about to land. AJ motioned to the others to buckle in, filled with determination as he looked into his friend's troubled blue eyes.

"That's what we're gonna find out, Nick."

Chapter 71:

Intruder

AJ entered the foyer of his home with one thing on his mind. "Guys?" he hollered, his voice echoing throughout. "Jack? Vegas?" His put his fingers to his mouth to let out an ear-splitting whistle.

"Jeez, AJ! I think every dog in the neighborhood heard that!" complained Nick, shaking his head and wiggling a finger in his ear.

AJ ignored him, clapping his hands impatiently. "Come to papa!" He grinned in delight as he heard the faint yapping of his two dogs become louder, watching humorously as they frantically raced around the corner, sliding into each other as they scrambled to gain footing on the tile floor.

"My babies!" he crowed gathering them up. They tried desperately to lick his face, their tails wagging furiously.

Nick rolled his eyes at Howie. "He's as bad as Brian," commented Nick, shaking his head at AJ, who was now playfully chasing the two dogs around the foyer table. The youngest Backstreet member paused to inspect AJ's home, trying to remember the last time he had visited.

"Hey, Bone, where can we stash our stuff?" Nick hefted his bag with a questioning look. AJ was now lying flat on his back, the dogs a top his chest. He pointed a finger down the hallway, not bothering to answer. Nick shrugged and went in search of a room, Howie and Kevin trailing after him.

* * * * *

Even as troubled as he was, Brian found it difficult if downright impossible to stay awake during the long, tedious drive through the Arizona wilderness. He vaguely remembered them stopping in Phoenix, rousing himself for a few seconds to see Xavier filling up the gas tank before closing his eyes again in fatigue, succumbing to the welcoming arms of sleep.

Now fully awake, he began to take more notice of his whereabouts, trying to figure where he was without asking Xavier. He glanced at the time. They had been on the road for several hours and Brian felt queasy, the combination of no food and motion sickness taking a toll on his body. *Surely it can't be much further!* Brian sneaked a quick look at Xavier. The bodyguard seemed to know where he was going, his relaxed, almost casual attitude as he drove grating harshly on Brian's nerves.

Brian was about to break down and ask Xavier how much longer when he noticed a large sign ahead. He squinted to read the words, catching INTERNATIONAL BORDER- LAST 2 US EXITS as they drove past. Brian gulped nervously, suddenly aware that they were

close to the border. Xavier smoothly exited onto the highway off-ramp and soon entered the beginnings of what looked like a ramshackled town.

"Nogales," indicated Xavier, "or as I fondly call it, Nogie."

"We're here? We're in Mexico?" said Brian in disbelief. He didn't remember crossing the border.

Xavier shook his head. "Nogales, Arizona. We're on the north side of the border. There's a Nogales, Mexico too. We'll be crossing that tomorrow."

"Oh." *Tomorrow*. Brian wondered what they were going to do tonight. It made him uneasy, to think that he would have to wait until tomorrow to cross into Mexico. He was hoping that whatever illegal transaction Xavier had planned would have taken place today. Brian stared out the window, trying not to dwell on any future problems. He had enough to worry about right now. And one seemed to be coming up. He watched as Xavier pulled their car into a sleazy-looking motel, its office sign hanging crookedly and blinking a feeble "Vacant".

Xavier stopped the car in front of the motel office and jumped out easily, turning to frown at Brian.

"Stay," he mouthed wordlessly, pointing a finger warningly. His silent one word command contained more threat of bodily harm than if he had actually spoke it.

"As if I had a choice," muttered Brian under his breath, noticing Xavier glance occasionally at him through the office window while he finished his transaction inside.

A few minutes later Xavier was out, waving a red motel key ring and opening the side door to fish out their luggage. "Come on," he ordered, "help me with this." He shoved Brian's luggage at him, grabbing his own and headed down the dilapidated walkway.

Brian reluctantly trailed after him, a sense of dread causing him to slow down even more. The last thing he wanted to do was to follow Xavier into a strange motel room. Brian steeled himself as he entered the doorframe, mentally noting the number, 112. The smell that greeted him made his already unsettled stomach lurch. Brian stepped quickly back outside, the body odor, cigar smoke, and smell of rancid food too much to handle.

Xavier noticed the grimace on Brian's face and nodded. He walked around the small room, surveying the torn drapes, the dirty carpet, the unmade beds. "Yeah, well what do you expect for \$29.95 a night?" Dropping his suitcase next to the twin bed closest to the door, he placed his massive hand on the end of the mattress and gave it a couple of pushes. It creaked noisily, groaning under Xavier's handling.

"Pretty loud." He turned to wink at Brian. "But I don't think anyone will complain about us too much."

Brian gave him a sour look, ignoring Xavier's sexual innuendo. He took a deep breath before entering, deliberately placing his stuff as far away as he could from Xavier's. He was glad now that he had slept for so long in the car because there was no way he was going to fall asleep tonight in this hellhole.

* * * * *

Nick walked over to the large refrigerator to get another beer. He sighed as he stared forlornly at the empty frig; empty of food that is. AJ had quite a selection of imported beers, all neatly lined up according to brand. Circling his fingers around two Heinekin, Nick yanked them out and slammed the door shut. Handing one to Kevin, he popped the top of the other and hopped onto the kitchen counter, swinging his legs.

"Jeez, I'm starving," he grumbled to Howie. "How long does it take to get pizza?"

Howie shrugged. "I *told* AJ to phone it in, but no. He said they always screw up the delivery, so he went to go get it himself."

"Hmmpf. Well he had better hurry, cause these little rats of his are starting to look pretty tasty," commented Kevin, eyeing Jack.

"Hey, I heard that," objected AJ as he entered the kitchen. "My babies are not rats." He placed the two large pizza boxes on the table. "Are you?" he cooed to them as they danced excitedly around him. He opened the first box, swatting away Nick's hand. "Dogs first." AJ ignored Nick's groan and carefully plucked out a slice, tearing miniscule pieces and tossing it to the two eagerly awaiting mouths.

Howie opened the other box, a frown forming across his face. "Where's the sausage?"

AJ leaned over, pointing with his finger. "There."

"Hell, that's not sausage. It looks like ground hamburger."

AJ peered closer, swearing under his breath. "They fucked up the order again!"

"Who cares," replied Nick, taking a large bite. "Meat is meat."

"It is not," argued Kevin, trying to remove the offending topping. He gave AJ's dogs a sour look, gently push the begging two away with his leg. "Bone!" he complained.

"Hey, you two! Out!" AJ gave a sharp command, which the dogs ignored totally. AJ leaned over, scowling. "Jack, Vegas! Out, *now!*" They wagged their tails, the only thing intent on moving.

Kevin snorted and rolled his eyes. "Get some real dogs," he scoffed. He could never understand why the guys adored such little drop-kicks. AJ threw Kevin a scathing look.

Nick laughed, licking the rest of the pizza sauce off his fingers when he couldn't find a napkin in sight.

"Man, those beers are going right through me," he commented to no one in particular, heading towards the bathroom situated just off the kitchen. Nick entered the bathroom, giving his head a shake at the enormous size of it. If there was one thing AJ loved, it was bathrooms and even a lowly kitchen bathroom was not immune to AJ's craving for lavishness. Nick admired the marble floors but frowned at the large floor to ceiling window next to the toilet. Where was the privacy? Nick shrugged as he unzipped, guessing that the massive foliage outside in AJ's backyard would ensure enough seclusion.

He glanced casually outside, interested to see if AJ had added any other statues to the various ones he had already accumulated out back. Nick laughed quietly. He wouldn't have been surprised to see the actual statue of David out there....Nick froze immediately, his eyes not believing what he saw. He held his breath, his heart pounding painfully as he viewed a black clad figure jumping easily over AJ's retaining wall.

Quickly zipping up, Nick moved away from the window, pressing against the wall as he tried to peer outside without being seen himself.

"Kevin!" he hollered frantically. "Kevin, come here!" Nick waited impatiently, not wanting to lose sight of the stranger who appeared to be crouching behind a large tree. "Jesus!" Nick swore heavily, his sight fixed on the intruder who was now cautiously making his way closer. "Kevin!" he hollered again.

"What?" came Kevin's exasperated reply, "you get your dick stuck in the zipper again?" He pushed opened the unlocked door, munching on a piece of pizza as he viewed Nick plastered against the bathroom wall.

"Funny," scowled Nick. "Don't move," he hissed, savagely slashing his arm as Kevin took a step forward. Nick jerked his head towards the window. "There's an intruder outside. I just saw him jump over AJ's wall."

Kevin looked at him in wide-eyed wonder. "Shit!" he breathed softly. "Can you see him?"

Nick nodded. "Yeah. He's now near the right side of the patio, just hiding behind a pillar."

"Do you think Xavier sent him?"

Nick spared a quick glance at Kevin. "Well he sure ain't no *fan*."

Kevin smiled grimly. "I'm gonna get the SOB." He backed out of the bathroom, holding his hand up to Nick. "Stay there, watch him. Yell if you see him leaving."

Nick gave him an okay signal, his eyes never leaving the shadowy form of the intruder. He felt a fine sheen of sweat break out on his forehead and he wiped it away hurriedly.

Suddenly Nick caught the trespasser looking directly at the bathroom window and he felt his heart go up to his throat, wondering if he had been spotted. He held his breath then released it with a sigh of relief as the dark-clad figure turn his attention away and started to cautiously circle around the other side of the pillar. Nick prayed that Kevin had already warned Howie and AJ of the intruder, hoping that AJ's dogs wouldn't start yapping and scare him off.

Nick shifted nervously as he watched the intruder come up closer to the kitchen windows. *What the hell is this guy looking for? And where the hell is Kevin?* Nick wished now he had gone with him, knowing that as strong as Kevin was, two were better than one.

Nick strained to distinguish the features on the prowler's face; he was under the shaded patio now and twilight was just setting in, making almost impossible for Nick to see him clearly. The stranger was now trying to peer carefully into the window, crouched on one knee. A slight movement to Nick's left caught his eye and he watched fearfully as he saw Kevin sneak up behind the squatting figure, Howie just a few feet behind Kevin.

"Come on, come on," chanted Nick, his hands clenched in anticipation. "Get him!" As if he could hear Nick, the intruder turned abruptly and stood up, ready to flee. Kevin and Howie landed on him simultaneously, each grabbing a hold of the prowler's arms. A fierce struggle ensued and Howie lost his grip on the intruder. Nick instantly bolted out of the bathroom, tearing through the kitchen and raced outside.

Kevin fought hard for control, holding on to the intruder's shoulders while Howie figured out a way to join in, the man's wildly kicking feet keeping him away. Angered, Nick flung himself at the intruder and took a fierce swing. The punch landed squarely on the stranger's jaw, effectively canceling any more resistance. He sagged in Kevin's arms, stunned.

AJ walked outside, his eyes round as he surveyed the scene. He was carrying both his dogs, his hands having gently covered their muzzles to keep them from scaring off the intruder.

"Holy shit! Way to go, Nick!"

Panting a little, Kevin nodded. "Help me," he ordered to Howie and Nick, indicating for them to carry the dark-clad man inside. All three hefted the moaning man up and carried him indoors, unceremoniously dumping him onto the kitchen floor.

Hyped up, Nick gave the stranger a contemptuous kick with his shoe. "Who are you? What were you trying to do? Who sent you?" Nick leaned down to get a better look at the young man who was holding his jaw, trying to stem the bleeding from the corner of his

mouth. Dressed all in black, the young intruder looked like a thousand other transients Nick had seen in Florida, unkempt, greasy hair, a slightly glazed look to his eyes.

"I think he's high," informed Nick, straightening up.

AJ went over and opened his large pantry door, grabbing a handful of dog food and scattering it on the ground. He placed Jack and Vegas down then shut the door, going over to view the cross-legged man.

"Yep," confirmed AJ.

"So what do we do now?" questioned Howie. He eyed the stranger closely, not willing to take his eyes off of him for a second. "Police?"

The scruffy man looked up, uneasy. AJ caught the look and smiled, pulling up a chair next to the intruder and sat down.

"Naw, I don't think so." The intruder gave AJ a puzzled but suspicious look. "I think we can work something out, don't you?"

"Huh?" replied the stranger dully, not sure.

"What's your name?" questioned Nick.

The injured man glared at Nick and pressed his mouth into a thin line.

AJ nodded. "I thought so," he said, almost to himself. AJ pointed to Nick and Kevin. "Watch him. I've got an idea, I'll be back in a second." He hurriedly left the kitchen and all four heard him scramble upstairs.

"What is AJ doing?" Nick cried in exasperation and Kevin and Howie shrugged, equally mystified. The stranger moved to a more comfortable position and Nick pointed warningly at him. "Don't move, don't even breathe. There's nothing more I'd like to do than to kick your ass again."

Two defiant eyes met two determined blue ones and the blue ones were victorious. The stranger hung his head, not lifting it until he heard the delighted cackle of AJ's voice.

AJ resumed his seat, waving a thick envelope in front of the stranger's face. He pulled out a hundred dollar bill, then another.

"Your name."

The man hesitated, but only for a second. "John. John Smith."

Kevin snorted in reply but AJ waved him off. "Okay, okay, that's a start. Here's your two hundred, *John*."

AJ held out the money and the intruder's hand reached out tentatively. "But one more lie, *John*, and instead of becoming a rich and free person, you'll become a poor and imprisoned one. Understand?" AJ smiled nastily as he watched the stranger nod quickly.

"Good." AJ pulled another few bills. "Remember, no more lies. We have a pretty good idea already why you're here. Besides, you don't want to get Nick mad again, do you?"

Nick looked at John stonily.

"Okay, good," continued AJ. "First, who sent you?"

John paused and AJ took another hundred out.

"I don't know."

AJ frowned, glancing up at the frustrated faces of Nick, Kevin, and Howie. AJ jerked back the bill. "Not the right answer, John."

"Really, dude, I don't know his name," pleaded John, his eyes wide. "He's a big mother, mean as hell. He never gave me a name."

AJ pondered this for a moment. "Okay. How much did he pay you?"

"Five hundred."

AJ slowly counted out six hundred. "You're mine now, got it?" he said in a firm voice. He watched as John licked his lips, considering the deal. AJ fanned open the envelope, giving John a peek at future riches.

John nodded. "Sounds good to me, man," he agreed, immediately switching allegiances.

AJ smirked at the guys and leaned back into his chair, satisfied. "Ah, the power of Ben Franklin. He's all yours, guys."

Howie spoke up first. "You said you didn't know his name, right? Okay, is this guy dark-haired, brown eyes? About 6'2"?"

John nodded and Howie glanced meaningfully at his friends. "What exactly did this guy want you to do?"

John thought for a moment, trying to find the exact words. "Uh, he wanted me to positively identify you," he answered, pointing directly at AJ, "and he wanted to make sure you that you were home. Yeah, that was it." He nodded, looking pleased.

"Why?"

John made a face. "I dunno. He just wanted me to call him when I found out."

Nick spoke up, interested. "Call?"

John gave Nick a sour look, unconsciously rubbing his tender jaw. "Yeah. The dude gave me a number to call." He stuffed his hand into his back pocket and pulled out a limp scrap of paper. "Here."

Howie grabbed it eagerly, studying the number. "When were you suppose to call?"

John stalled, eyeing AJ. AJ pulled out another hundred and John snatched it quickly.

"Tonight."

Kevin rubbed his chin, raising his dark eyebrows thoughtfully at his friends. "Time for old John here to make a phone call, don't ya think?" The tall singer looked at AJ. "Bone, go get every portable phone you have. I wanna listen in." AJ nodded and motioned for Howie to come help him. Kevin glanced at Nick for a moment before coming closer to John, his eyes narrowing slightly as he studied their intruder. "You're going to be on your best behavior, right? Cause if you screw up this call and this guy catches on, I'll make sure you wished it was *him* instead of *me* coming after you."

Chapter 72:

Hold the Mayo

Brian could sense the large form of Xavier standing behind him, much too close for comfort. Not wanting to show the alarm he felt radiating throughout him, Brian kept his back to him, taking his time as he searched for clean socks in his suitcase. He finally straightened up and turned, only to find that Xavier hadn't moved an inch.

Brian calmly edged around him, hoping his look of annoyance was believable enough to mask his uneasiness. He sat down on the edge of his bed and put on his socks and shoes, the only clothing he had not brought with him into the bathroom. As much as Brian hated the idea of taking a shower in that filthy bathroom, knowing all too well that a flimsy locked door was the only thing that separated him and Xavier, he braved it, wanting desperately to wash away the dust and grime of the Arizona desert.

Now feeling the burning eyes of Xavier bear down upon him Brian gave up all pretense of civility. "I hear that south of the border you can satisfy any weird craving," he insinuated nastily.

"Yeah, but what if I'm really hungry right now?" taunted Xavier, his eyes roaming.

"Go to Burger King. *Have it your way...*" he sang sarcastically.

Xavier laughed, amused. "I will," he promised. "You know I always do."

Brian stood up. "Yeah, right," he said scornfully. "Speaking of *food*, are we ever going to eat?"

Xavier opened their motel door with a flourish. "Yep. I've got a big night in store for us. A real night on the town."

Brian frowned at him as they exited the room. "Great," he muttered under his breath.

* * * * *

Brian watched helplessly as Xavier passed yet another restaurant, his stomach hurting past the point of aching. It was now a dull throb, an occasional spasm that made him want to curl up in agony. A vicious headache was beginning to take hold and it distressed Brian that he had forgotten to take some pain medication.

Another diner flew by and Brian was beginning to feel the threads of anger surging through him. "Xavier, we just passed by a place to eat! What's your problem? Come on, I'm hungry."

"Ah, poor baby. We'll be there soon enough. You'll like it, I promise, okay?" Xavier flashed him a fake smile.

Brian crossed his arms across his chest. "Whatever," he mumbled. He gazed outside the window, trying to forget the cramps in his stomach. Nogales was strangely fascinating, a border town that was struggling to keep American standards but failing miserably. Brian read several signs as they drove by, a combination of Spanish and English intermixed. He wished he had paid more attention when Howie has spoke Spanish, maybe even asked him a few pointers, because nothing seemed to make sense in this hodgepodge town. Brian shot a quick look at Xavier. Of course, the bodyguard seemed right at home, knew his way unerringly, and it made Brian apprehensive about where they were headed.

He picked at his fingers, edgy. The first day was not even over and he felt like he had been to hell and back. *Six more days to go. I'm not sure I can do it.* He thought about the next three games, trying to figure what Xavier might have in store. *He said harder. Does that mean physically or mentally?* He prayed it meant physically. In his own heart he knew that another mental game would probably send him over the edge.

They paused at a red light, waiting for it to change. Brian stared at a white stucco building next to him, Banco de Nogales. *Even I can figure that name out,* he thought as the light turned green and Xavier turned left. He wondered why they were going to cross the border tomorrow to do their money transaction. *Tomorrow. Why tomorrow?* The question raced repeatedly through Brian's mind. *Think. There's something strange here...* He shook his head. *It didn't make any sense. If Xavier got his money tomorrow he'd be rich, so wouldn't he just disappear, vanish from sight? Yet Xavier spoke of three more games to play. Why would he be foolish enough to get his money, then still continue to play the games? Unless...* Brian tensed his seat, feeling slightly lightheaded. *Unless Xavier wasn't going to play the next game, that this was all a trick, a ruse to lead me on, make me think about the next challenge, to keep my mind occupied.* With sudden clarity Brian saw through Xavier's plan. *He's hoping I'm concentrating on the next three games, games he had no intention of playing because by tomorrow he'll be rich and in Mexico where no one can touch him.* Brian now saw the clever strategy in completing the money transaction in Mexico. *And I'll be with him, in a foreign country, out of touch...* Brian felt numb, a sinking feeling enveloping him as he understood that whether he had won or not in Xavier's phony games, Xavier was still going to follow through with his planned surprise for one of the guys. *Xavier would like nothing more than to hurt one of them, hell, he said he wished he could have gotten them all!* Xavier wanted Brian away from them, not taking a chance that Brian could ruin his surprise. *The surprise. It sounded ugly.* Brian corrected himself. *No, it would be ugly.* Brian gulped in fear, thinking about the guys. Trying not to show the extreme agitation he felt, Brian kept his face turned towards the passenger window. He needed to get in touch with the guys, now, tonight. But how? Xavier had taken his cell phone and pager away, just after the gun incident and Brian understood why. Xavier was watching Brian like a hawk, 24/7, never leaving his side. Brian knew he had little chance of getting to a phone.

Brian sighed bitterly. Even if he did manage to reach them, how could he convince them? *Do I say, watch out, be careful? Xavier is going to hurt you?* Brian could hear the snort of disbelief and sarcasm in Nick's voice before hanging up on him. *Aren't you a little confused there, Brian? Don't you mean you?*

His best chance was with Kevin. He hoped that their family bond was strong, even stronger than their friendship. He knew Kevin was the most sensible, the most rational of the group. He would just *have* to make Kevin understand. Brian could feel the curious stare Xavier was giving him and he quickly snapped out of his musings, scared that Xavier could somehow read his thoughts.

He pointed to another restaurant that had just passed by. "There, right there, what's wrong with that one?" he barked, trying to mask his nervousness with anger. "Anything will do..."

Brian backed off on his outburst, alarmed that he had pushed the bodyguard too hard when Xavier suddenly swerved the car into a McDonald's parking lot and shut the engine off quickly.

"Here we are!" Xavier waved his hand expansively and jumped out of the car.

Brian crawled out, disbelief scrawled plainly on his face. "McDonalds? You hate McDonalds!"

Xavier laughed, his dark eyes enjoying Brian's incredulity. "Naw. Not this one. This McDonalds is the only one that serves jalepeno relish with their food." He rubbed his hands in eager anticipation. "Come on!" He bounded inside, almost boyishly. Brian shook his head, eyeing the busy restaurant before reluctantly following in. *What was Xavier thinking? I'll get recognized for sure!*

Brian opened the heavy metal doors and was greeted by a whoosh of warm air and the sound of various employees greeting the overflowing customers. They all seemed to be speaking Spanish. Everyone of them. Brian wandered over to Xavier, his mouth slightly open as he read the menu. Everything was written in Spanish too.

"Are you sure we aren't across the border?" he asked suspiciously.

Xavier laughed as he stepped up to the counter. "Yes. Go sit down, over there," he pointed. "I'll get the order."

Brian looked to where he was pointing. Far away, tucked back into the corner was a table with two seats. Sitting down, Brian sighed as he viewed the sea of dark-haired people before him. He felt like he was the only American here, well light-skinned and blonde, that is. He realized he must stick out like a sore thumb...but as for being easily recognized he was pretty sure now, as Xavier was, that these customers hadn't the slightest idea or interest in the Backstreet Boys. Brian watched as Xavier gave the McDonald's employee what looked to be a lengthy order then gazed casually around at the milling crowd, all patiently waiting to be next. Looking down at his hands, he studied them, picking at his nails when suddenly he felt that unmistakable stare bearing down upon him. Sighing, he glanced up, wondering what Xavier wanted now. Instead he looked up into a pair of light brown eyes, belonging to a very pretty young face. The girl was on her cell phone, but not talking, her mouth hanging wide open in surprise as she

stared directly at Brian. She elbowed her friend who was standing next to her, who in turn was standing next to Xavier.

Brian smiled weakly back at her, realizing he had been spotted. His smile faded as he zeroed in on her cell phone, his heart doing a flip-flop as an impulsive idea sprang to mind. On edge, he looked at Xavier who was still waiting for the order to be rung up. With a wave of his hand, Brian motioned the two girls over, putting his finger up to his mouth indicating for them to be quiet. The two girls nodded and hurried over.

"Oh my God, it's you isn't it?" she gushed.

Brian nodded, trying to be polite and keep a watchful eye on Xavier at the same time.

The dark-haired girl squealed a little and Brian gave her a warning look with his eyes.

"Oh, oh, sorry. I really am. Can I have your autograph?"

"Sure." Brian gave her a "anything to write with" look and she began immediately to scour her purse.

"Here," said her friend, handing Brian a pen, her eyes never leaving his face.

"Thanks, uh?" questioned Brian, indicating her name.

"Rosie. This is Lupe," Rosie pointed to her friend.

Brian smiled warmly, signing the paper as quickly as he could with out looking like he was in a hurry.

"You're here for the Tucson concert, aren't you?"

Brian nodded, looking over Rosie's dark head to locate Xavier. "Uh, yeah, you guys going?" The bodyguard was just now getting some of his ordered served up. *Hurry!* he screamed to himself. *Ask them!*

The two girls shook their heads unhappily. "Nope. Sold out before we could get tickets! And we were only 30 behind in line."

"Too bad," sympathized Brian. *Now, do it now!* "Say listen, I feel bad about that. Tell you what. See that large man over there? Yeah? Well, he's my bodyguard and he's almost got our order ready, so we'll be eating soon. He's not in a very good mood right now, so he won't be too happy seeing you guys here. But I want you guys to go to the concert." Brian had to hurriedly hush them up as they began to express their happiness. His eyes flickered nervously as he saw Xavier reaching for the condiments. He had only a few more moments. "I'm going to ask a strange request, so say no if you don't want to."

The girls wiggled a little in anticipation, nodding their heads. Brian took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing!* "I need to borrow your cell phone," he asked watching their faces intently. "Mine, uh, broke, and even though my bodyguard has one, his batteries are dead." *God! Xavier was grabbing napkins!* Sweating, Brian hurried on. "I'm planning a back stage surprise party for Nick," he heard their gasps of delight, "after the Tucson show. If I can borrow your phone, I can get you tickets to the show and the party. Interested?"

Please, please, please... begged Brian, closing his eyes, not wanting the girls to see the desperation in them. He felt a nudge on his arm and opened his eyes. Rosie was smiling, holding out her phone to him.

"Here," she offered, "take it. It's my dad's anyway," she said offhandedly, unconcerned.

Brian nearly snatched it from her hand, quickly shoving the phone in his jacket. "Thanks! I'll give it back to you at the concert." Noticing their hesitancy, he hurried on. "Front row seats okay for you and Lupe?"

Shit! Xavier was now on his way over, a curious look on his face. "I'll have everything ready and waiting for you at the arena, I promise."

Xavier placed the food down, his smile strained. "Girls?" he said sourly. "You're not bothering Mr. Littrell, are you?"

If Xavier's body wasn't imposing enough, his tone was. The girls backed away. "No, no, just talking. I got his autograph." Lupe smiled nervously, showing her scrap of paper.

"Well good for you," Xavier sneered, his sarcasm showing. "Now get lost."

Brian smiled apologetically as the girls moved even farther back. "Goodbye." His eyes conveyed thanks. Rosie nodded, understanding, and poked Lupe in the ribs. "Let's go."

She turned back in surprise. "Oh!" Rosie ran over to give Brian a hug, startling Xavier and Brian both. "The lock out code is 922," she whispered in his ear and pulled away, giving the bodyguard a victorious smirk. "Bye!" She waved playfully at them both, then ran giggling out the door with Lupe.

Xavier looked at her with disdain, Brian with relief. The cell phone had a lock out feature, meaning it was useless to use unless he had the code. He drilled the number into his brain. Smiling inwardly at Rosie's cleverness he began to eat what Xavier shoved at him, vowing to repay her a thousand times over.

* * * * *

Kevin looked grimly at John Smith or whatever-the-hell-his-name-was, and wondered if he was doing the right thing. AJ, along with Howie, had rounded up five portable

phones and Kevin leaned over, his posture threatening, as he handed one to John who was now sitting in AJ's living room.

"Remember, play it cool. Don't talk too much."

John nodded and grinned slightly as he saw AJ perched on the edge of the couch, waving more money at him. Kevin punched the number in and held his breath as he gave the ringing phone to John then covered the speaker on his phone, indicating for the rest of the guys to do the same. Howie, AJ, and Nick all clicked on, hearing the faint ring.

"Yeah?" came a rough growl.

John spoke up. "Hey, dude, its me, uh Jim." John, now Jim, flinched at Kevin's scowl.

"Did you locate him?" All four guys listened quietly as Xavier's snarled his command.

"Yeah, he's here, came in awhile ago." John/Jim replied calmly.

"Good." There was a pause, a lengthy one at that, and it made Kevin nervous. "Where the hell are you calling from?" All four Backstreet Boys froze, not daring to even breathe. Nick gazed wide-eyed at Kevin, a panicked look to his face. AJ waved dramatically to all and mouthed silently, *my number is blocked*

. John/Jim laughed easily. "Dude, from inside his house!" AJ rose out of his seat, alarmed, but Kevin waved him back, understanding the intruder's reasoning. If Xavier had any suspicions, it was better to tell a half-truth.

"His house?" Xavier tone indicated that he was not pleased.

"Yep, he and that blond kid went out, to go get something to eat, I think. I just picked the lock, so I decided to call you. Hey, can I steal something?"

"No!" roared Xavier over the line and everyone winced. "Did you say that blond kid?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Shit. I gotta call someone now, tell 'em he's not at his house. I didn't think blondie was going to stay with that punk. Did you see anyone else?"

John/Jim eyed Kevin who was following the conversation closely. Kevin gave him a heads-up sign and John decided to push a little further. "Like who?"

Nick heard Xavier snort in exasperation. "Come on asshole. You know who I mean. Any other fucking Backstreet Boys?"

"Nope."

"How come his alarm didn't go off?"

Kevin did a double take, surprise by Xavier's sudden question. He sensed the suspicion in Xavier's voice and found himself beginning to sweat, but John/Jim answered coolly. "Guess he forgot. He's got dogs, maybe they would alarm the sensors. Hey, are you sure I can't take anything?" he whined convincingly getting off the subject.

"Goddammit, no. I paid you to watch, not to steal. Don't fuck with me. And get the hell out of the house, now."

"Okay, boss." All five heard loud shrieks of girly delight in the background.

"What was that?"

"Nothing!" snarled Xavier. "Brian, let's go!" he yelled faintly. In the background Nick, AJ, Howie and Kevin tensed as they heard Xavier yell Brian's name.

Xavier returned to the receiver. "Gotta go, fan problem. Get out of that house. And don't ever call me again, got it?" With a click the line went dead and all five hung up too.

Nick shook slightly, throwing the phone onto the couch. "Bri's with him. I hope he's okay." He placed two shaky hands up to his face and slumped into a chair. Kevin looked at AJ, Howie, then at their intruder.

"Well, *Jim*, you did good. Guess I'll let you live." John/Jim knew by the look on the dark-haired singer that he was not joking. Kevin eyed him up and down calmly. "By the looks of you, I don't think you stay in one place for very long, do you?" Kevin didn't wait for a reply. "Yes, I think a fresh start is just what you need." Kevin walked over to Howie who was sitting next to Nick. "Howie, grab AJ's keys and give Jim a ride to the airport. Pay for a ticket, I don't care where. Just make sure he gets on, okay?"

Howie nodded and caught the keys AJ fished out of his pocket then placed a hand on Jim's shoulder, telling him to get up. As they walked to the door AJ stopped them, stuffing a few more hundred into Jim's shirt pocket. Jim started to smile, then stopped as Kevin came up from behind.

"Hey, just remember this. We...are... the... Backstreet... Boys," Kevin spat, enunciating every word. "You do anything, *anything* to fuck this up and I will use every last dollar to see that your life is pure hell. And I've got millions," he whispered, his last sentence telling Jim everything he needed to know. Jim gulped once, seeing the looks of agreement on the other three. Right now, a trip out of Florida was looking pretty good to him.

Chapter 73:

Argument

AJ hurried to let his dogs out of the pantry, scared to see what kind of mayhem those two had caused during their lengthy stay in there. AJ surveyed the damage and sighed with relief, noting only two little "deposits" in the right corner, courtesy of the scattered dog food he had thrown down. Jack and Vegas scampered out with enthusiasm, running around in circles before they took off for the living room, jumping their tiny little bodies onto Nick's larger one.

Nick looked up, irritated. "AJ!" he yelled, "*do you mind?* I'm really not in the mood for your psycho dogs right now."

AJ scooped them up then threw a concerned look towards Kevin who was sitting opposite of Nick. AJ placed his dogs outside and locked the doggie door, barring them from entering. Walking back to the living room he noticed Kevin had left his chair and was sitting next to Nick.

"Nick, Nick, come on man. You're not doing yourself any good by beating yourself up about this. Hey, look on the bright side. At least we know Brian's okay, that he's with Xavier."

Nick raised his head, amazed. "Huh? Bright side, Kevin? What bright side? You think that being with Xavier makes it okay?" Nick's voice raised a notch higher as he stood up and began pacing.

"Hey, at least we know he's not dead, Nick," consoled AJ. Nick glared at him and AJ cringed, realizing how trite he sounded. "Uh, sorry. You know what I mean."

"No I don't! I don't know what anything means anymore!" cried Nick in frustration. "Here we are, thousands of miles away, catching amateurish crooks, secretly listening in on Xavier, wondering where the hell Bri is..." Nick sighed forcefully, shaking his head. "I don't know, guys. I'm getting a terrible feeling about all this, like whatever we do, its not going to be enough to help Brian..." Nick trailed off, his gloom permeating into Kevin and AJ.

"So what do you expect us to do, Nick? Give up before we even try? I don't think I can live with myself knowing I didn't give it my best shot!"

Nick frowned at Kevin. "Yeah, but what is our best shot? That we are the *fucking Backstreet Boys?*" he mimicked, citing Kevin's words on the plane. "Well excuse me, but I never knew that being a Backstreet Boy meant being all-powerful! I still think we should call the police." He flopped back onto the couch, slumping over to stare dejectedly at the floor.

AJ took a deep breath, seeing where this was all going. "Nick," he said softly, "we *can't* go to the police, at least not right now." He held up his hands when Nick started to give him an angry look. "Hear me out, okay? There's not a minute that goes by that I don't remember some incident, some thing that let's me know what an idiot I've been. I was too busy being angry at Brian and too blind to put it all together. And now that I understand, I realize just how dangerous Xavier is. It scares the shit outta me. I'd like nothing better than to hand this over to the police, but at what cost?"

Kevin nodded, rubbing his brow as he slumped into an easy chair, having listened to AJ as he made himself a hard drink. "Nick, we know more about Xavier than the police do. I'd say, hell yeah, let's call the police, but how much time do we really have? How much time does Brian? A day, a week, a month? Can we convince the authorities? And with what? We've got nothing on Xavier, nothing, just our suspicions. I really think we can get better results." Kevin gazed at the youngest member of the group. "Nick..." Kevin faltered for a moment, then went on, "I know how hard this is on you. But you gotta believe in us, in yourself. Nobody wants to help Brian more than us. Nobody. And if we can just think straight, put our heads together, we can do it. *We will do it.*"

Nick smiled a sad smile at Kevin, his blue eyes reflecting his anguish. "I know. I know you're right, Kevin," he said quietly. "It's just that I feel so...frustrated." Nick looked at AJ. "I want to be the shit outta someone, ya know?"

AJ threw his hands up, in mock fear. "Whoa, don't look at me! I'm just a skinny little dude. Attack Kevin. I've always wanted to see someone beat the shit out of him anyway. Go for it, Nick."

Nick, Kevin and AJ laughed, each relaxing a little from the stress. "Okay, what's our plan of action, O Wise One?" Nick asked to Kevin.

"Why me, why am I the Wise One?" grumbled Kevin. "What about Howie?"

"He's not here, so you're it," advised AJ. "Besides you're so much *older.*"

Kevin refused to be baited by that tired joke. "Oh, all right. I want to pass this by Howie when he gets back, but I was thinking of us heading downtown tomorrow to check out Backstreet's HR. See what we can dig up on X."

Nick rolled his eyes. "They won't give you that information Kev," he began but stopped when he saw Kevin's eyebrows raised in reminder. "Oh, yeah, I forgot. We're the *Backstreet Boys, we can do anything,*" Nick chanted, a grin of amusement forming on his face.

"Damn right," growled AJ.

* * * * *

Brian tried to hide his smirk as Xavier and he waded slowly towards their car, surrounded by at least fifteen overly excited girls. He wanted to say *I told you so, Backstreet fans are everywhere*, but by the annoyed look on Xavier's face, wisely refrained. Brian signed as many autographs as he could as they edged forward, knowing by the clench of Xavier's jaw that he was barely controlling his temper as he kept the group of teenagers from swarming all over.

With sorrowed sighs and screams of "I love you" ringing in their ears, Xavier tore out of the parking lot, ignoring Brian's yell of 'watch out" as they nearly collided with a large van.

"I don't think a dead Backstreet Boy is gonna get you much," Brian said sourly, hurriedly trying to buckle in.

"Yeah, but it's sure gonna give me a hell of a lot of satisfaction," muttered Xavier as he navigated a corner sharply. Brian sucked in his breath, wondering if Xavier had realized his mistake in wording. *So he is planning to hurt one of the guys!* He secretly felt for the reassuring comfort of Rosie's cell phone, desperately wondering when he would get a chance to use it.

Hoping to draw Xavier's attention away from what he inadvertently had said, Brian laughed snidely. "So, this is you're idea of a night on the town? I think you need to get a life, Xavier."

Startled by the young singer's sarcastic remark, Xavier looked him once over. "Who said anything about it starting? It hasn't." He glanced at his watch. "But in about 20 minutes it will." Xavier leered at Brian and Brian slunk down in his seat, wishing he had just kept his mouth shut.

Chapter 74:

On the Town

Howie hurriedly put AJ's Mercedes in the garage and got out, hitting the alarm key. He was glad to get back, having listened for over two hours to the endless chatter from John/Jim. It was like a flood-gate had opened and suddenly he was the intruder's best friend, confiding in him as they drove by house after house, John/Jim excitedly pointing out what mansion he had robbed, what car he had stolen... Howie was that close to telling him to shut up when John began to talk about Xavier. Howie perked up, listening quietly as the intruder spoke of how he met him, how the large man never gave his name, how he always paid ahead in cash.

Now as he let himself in, he was eager to share with the other guys what he had learned. He trotted into the kitchen; no one there. He tried the living room. Same results. Not willing to search every nook and cranny, Howie went over to the nearest intercom and punched a button.

"Hey, AJ, guys! Where are you? I'm back."

A bit of static announced AJ's voice. "D? We're in the TV room."

Howie snorted as he headed downstairs. *TV room?* It was a freakin' theater, complete with every creature comfort known to man. He had argued to deaf ears that it was overkill but AJ wouldn't listen, going so far as to installing heaters in the leather reclining seats. Now as he sank into one of them he had to admit it felt incredibly good and sighed in relief.

AJ smirked at Howie, then winked at Nick and Kevin who were lounging in the other seats. "Nothing like a nice warm ass to soothe ya, huh D?"

"Shut up," groused Howie good-naturedly. "I've been listening to our intruder talk non-stop for the past two hours, let me relax for a moment, okay?"

Kevin reached over for the remote, turning off the movie all three had been watching as they waited for Howie's return. "Talk? What do you mean?" he asked curiously as he handed his band mate a beer. Howie took it gladly, twisting the top.

"Well, it seems like our intruder couldn't keep his mouth shut when it came to talking about Xavier."

AJ glanced sharply at his friend. "You never mentioned X's name to him, did you?"

Howie shook his head as he took another sip. "Nope. I just let him do the talking. Seems like our John/Jim guy has quite a little criminal history. He's hit a lot of houses around this area."

"Do you know if Xavier has used him before?"

Howie stretched out in the recliner. "No. I asked him. Said he met X only once, at a bar, and that's when Xavier paid him for the job. In advance. In cash."

AJ shook his head. "Using the money he's been extorting from Brian."

Nick snapped his fingers. "Remember when I went to go pick up Bri from the hospital? Xavier asked me to do it cause he was in Florida for those few days. I bet that's when he met our intruder."

Kevin scratched his chin. "Hmm. That was a while ago. Damn. That means he's been planning this for sometime. Makes me wonder what other surprises he has in store."

Howie stopped in mid-sip, frowning. "Hey, do you guys remember when Xavier found out that Nick was here with AJ?" The other three nodded. "He sure sounded pissed. Didn't X say he was going to have to call someone?"

"Yeah, he did," drawled Kevin, thinking. "Xavier was expecting Nick to be at his own home." Kevin gave Howie a thoughtful look. "He probably didn't know where you were going for the holiday."

AJ scoffed. "D *doesn't* have a home to come back to. Xavier took care of that."

"Hey Howie, did you happen to mention to X where you were going?"

Howie paused for a moment. "No, I never said anything to him directly. Course he might have heard me talking about going to see my family, but I can't be sure."

AJ rubbed his eyes wearily, the happenings of the day taking its toll. "All right. One, Xavier obviously knows I'm home, thanks to our intruder; two, he thought Nick was going home, so he had someone watching his house; three, Howie doesn't have one, so he's out of the picture, unless X has someone scouting his family's homes, and four...." AJ looked worriedly at Kevin. "I guess he was expecting you to go home, right?"

Kevin nodded. "But Xavier doesn't know where I was staying because I wasn't sure myself. Kristin and I hadn't made any firm plans on who we were going to stay with. She was going to tell me when I met her at the airport."

"So Xavier would have a hard time trying to place you, right?" asked Nick.

"Well, not that hard. I was either going to go to Mom's cabin or to one of my brother's."

Howie spoke up. "Xavier did ask John if any of us were with AJ, remember? Why would he be so concerned about it, unless he had something planned?"

All four were silent as they let Howie's statement sink in. "Yeah," breathed Kevin quietly. "Xavier is up to something. You don't pay someone just to find out whether or not they arrived home. Xavier wanted to make sure, he *needed* to know that we were home. The big question is why?"

AJ jumped up, nervous. "Ah, I think I'm gonna set the security alarm, okay guys? You need anything outside? No? Good." He dashed out of the room.

Nick curled up in his seat, feeling suddenly cold despite the warmth his heat-activated chair had to offer. "I don't like this," he spoke softly.

* * * * *

Nogales was not a large town, its sporadic clusters of light and dark attesting to that fact. Brian watched with curiosity as Xavier drove them confidently through the town, weaving in and out of traffic with ease. *He looks like he knows this place like the back of his hand. I wonder if Xavier was born here?*

Feeling more nervous by the moment, Brian glanced quickly at his watch. *Xavier said we'd be there in 20 minutes but it's been over 45.* Feeling the smooth blacktop give way to a gravel road, he held on tightly to his armrest for support, the car bouncing roughly as Xavier drove way too fast for the terrain. An overhanging palo verde tree limb brushed against the car's windshield causing Brian to wonder what the hell Xavier was doing. He felt like asking the bodyguard but then realized Xavier would most likely ignore his question. By the way Xavier was driving, Brian guessed he was going to find out soon enough. Another heavy smack of an overgrown bush scraped the side of their car, startling him. He peered outside, trying to see anything in the inky blackness of night. Brian caught the dim twinkle of lights off to the right, the only illumination showing in the darkness besides the car's headlights.

Xavier pointed to his right, turning at the same time. "There it is."

"There *what* is?" questioned Brian, not sure if he really wanted to know. Xavier drove into a small clearing, free from scrub brush, and stopped to park next to a beat-up Ford pickup. Jumping out of the car, Xavier stretched, then with a grin motioned for Brian to get out.

With every raw nerve on end Brian cautiously exited the security of their car, taking note of the several trucks and motorcycles that were parked erratically in the gravel lot. Brian shivered a little, surprised that the desert air had become quite chilly and zipped up his leather jacket. The faint din of laughter, music, and crash of broken glass caught Brian's attention and he glanced towards the softly-glowing neon sign hanging above a small building. *Dos Pesos.* They were at a bar, and by the looks of it, not just any bar. A bar that was in the middle of the desert, miles away from civilization, a bar that looked and sounded like ... a bar that he was suddenly afraid to enter.

Xavier slapped Brian enthusiastically on the back. "Promised you a night on the town, didn't I? Well, come on." He looked at Brian impatiently when the young singer stood rooted to the spot, not moving. Xavier leaned down, whispering into his ear. "Don't worry. I'll protect you." He laughed, giving Brian a push. Brian took a hesitant step forward, his mind and nerves screaming *run!* He glanced into the darkness of the desert night, wondering if he could make it. As if reading his thoughts, Xavier's massive hand came down upon Brian's shoulder, making him flinch as the bodyguard applied pressure.

"Don't even try."

Xavier shoved Brian, this time harder, and he stumbled. Regaining his balance, he walked slowly to the heavy wooden door, its face scarred with numerous dents and carved graffiti. Xavier reached over Brian's shoulder to push the door, only to have the door swing open on its own, a cheerful and rather intoxicated man staggering outside. The man nodded woozily to the two then shuffled a few yards more before collapsing in a drunken heap.

Xavier gave a laugh of amusement, turning his smile on Brian. With a flourish of his hand he waved to the Backstreet Boy. "After you."

Brian gazed sourly at him then entered, the stark brightness of the room blinding him for a moment before he was able to regain his eyesight. He wished he hadn't. Sucking in his breath, he examined what lay before him, his mouth almost dropping open in surprise. The inside of the bar looked exactly like the kind one saw in a low-budget biker movie. The floor was made of concrete, the bar itself one long extension of a continuous slab of wood. Dark, crudely made tables and chairs were scattered around, and, by the looks of the rough crowd, were most likely broken on a nightly basis. A small, raised, half-circle of cement was located in the corner, which Brian assumed would hold a band, if they ever had one, but right now held two people, laughing and singing off-key to some karaoke song. To the side of the obviously drunken singers were various pinball and computer games, all being used, and at the very end, an old, well-used pool table. Brian tried not to stare, not wanting to attract attention but realized it was too late as several eyes turned curiously towards the door.

"Well, I'll be damned!" boomed a large masculine voice. "Will ya look at who the hell just walked in!"

Brian cringed inwardly. He heard the various hoots of disbelief, mixed in with an assortment of catcalls. He steeled himself as he watched a giant of a man come rushing over, hoping he wouldn't be crushed. The excited man brushed by him, embracing and slapping the bodyguard enthusiastically on the back.

"Xavier! Damn! Long time, no see buddy!"

Xavier nodded in reply, a wide grin on his face. "Yeah, well..." he began, a cry of delight drowning out his reply. Another man, even taller than the first strode over, his grizzled face animated in delight.

"Hey, you son-of-a-bitch, you still owe me 500 dollars!" He punched the dark-haired bodyguard affectionately, laughing.

"I've got it, Abe. With interest." Xavier grinned at his friend, waving a wad of bills clutched in his hand. Abe snatched it away, eyeing it appreciatively before stuffing in into his pants pocket.

"Hey, last time I heard, you were guarding some bitch in New York! Still doing it?"

Xavier shook his head, then nodded at Brian. "Nope. Got me a new job."

Two pairs of eyes stared down at Brian, examining him with unfriendly curiosity. Brian shifted uncomfortably, aware of the harsh scrutiny. *So this is where Xavier wanted to take me*, he thought, his mind racing. *To some God-foresaken hell hole of a bar, in the middle of the nowhere.*

"Kinda puny, ain't he, Xavier?" mocked Abe, elbowing his friend.

"Puny and *rich*," winked Xavier.

New appreciation was thrown his way as they resized him up. "So you're Xavier's next victim, huh?"

Brian was taken aback, startled by Abe's knowledge of Xavier's "occupation." Before he could reply Xavier was pushing him along towards a back table, close to the swaying Karaoke singers. Shoving Brian none to gently into a seat, Xavier sat himself, the other two joining in. Brian felt the small lump of Rosie's cell phone in his side coat pocket and he secretly slipped his fingers around it, trying to gain some composure as the three large men encircled him. Ignoring the blatantly curious stares of Xavier's two "friends", Brian craned his neck for a better view of the room. It was surprising well lit, empty of any decoration, except for the various neon beer signs hanging behind the bar. He let his eyes roam slowly, taking in the clientele of the place, most of who looked liked hard-core regulars. He tried hard not to stare at any particular person for long, aware that he was being scrutinized too. Turning away from the crowd, Brian sat quietly, listening to Xavier, Abe and his friend talk. From the constant teasing and joking, Brian guessed Xavier had known these men for a long time, that they were more than just casual acquaintances. He wondered if they were family, then immediately rejected that idea, viewing the two before him. The unnamed man sitting next to him was about the same height and weight as Xavier but that was where the similarity ended, his long straggly red hair, his pitted and ruddy complexion a stark contrast to Xavier's dark looks. Abe, even larger than Xavier, was sporting a massive beard, compensating for his rapidly receding hairline.

A small cough announced the arrival of their waitress, a tired-looking woman whose hair was pulled back into a severe ponytail. She sighed and pulled out a small flip book, her pencil ready. "Okay, what do you want?" she asked dully.

Abe grinned, one eyebrow cocked in question as he leaned back in his seat, a heavy boot coming to rest on the table. "Xavier? This one on you?"

Xavier mimicked Abe's stance. "Nah. It's his treat." He reached over to slap Brian affectionately on his shoulder.

"Well, damn! If you say so! Sweetie, give me a whiskey. Hell, give me a whole bottle!"

Abe grunted happily, punching his friend next to him. "It's blondie's treat, Benny. What do you want?"

Benny, running a hand through his red hair, studied Brian for a moment. "Just how rich is he?" he drawled, his smile showing the few remaining teeth still intact.

Xavier shook his head at Benny and grinned. "Just give old Ben here a bottle too, okay sweetheart?"

The waitress ignored Xavier's wink and pointed her pencil at Brian. "What about him?"

Brian turned to look at her, opening his mouth to say no thanks when she cut in. "Hey, you look kinda familiar. What's your name?"

Brian stiffened and Xavier laughed humorously at Brian's discomfort as he leaned over to whisper loudly, "Meet Brian Littrell. He's a Backstreet Boy."

The waitress's eyes went round, her mouth open. "Really?" She looked at Xavier for confirmation, ignoring Brian. "Really?" she asked again. She turned to Brian, stammering. "I... I've never met anyone famous before. I mean, I don't listen to your music, sorry, but uh, can I have your autograph?" She shoved her pencil and order book in front of Brian's face, not waiting for a reply.

"Sure," Brian mumbled, taking the pencil. "What's your name?"

"Sarah. Yeah, write it - to Sarah, you are the best. All my love, Brian." She smiled brightly, happy at her wording.

Brian scribbled it out, handing it back to her. Sarah looked at it a second then pressed it to her chest, hugging it. "Thanks! Hey, is it worth anything?" She looked at Xavier with hopeful eyes. "Do you think I can sell it?"

Xavier burst out laughing, roaring his delight. "Damn if I know. Give it a try. You never know." He shook his head, grinning. "Hey Brian, give her your jacket. Poor girl needs some extra cash."

The cell phone! "No!" Brian panicked, his voice strained. Seeing Xavier frowning at him Brian forced himself to remain calm. "Uh, I'm kinda cold," he explained apologetically to

Sarah, giving her his best smile. "I'll send you something, okay? How about tickets? You could always sell them."

Sarah perked up, nodding. "Great, thanks." She wrote out her name and address, handing the piece of paper to him gratefully.

"Hey, what about my whiskey, sweet cheeks?" grumbled Abe, tired of waiting.

"Yeah!" roared Benny, impatient too. "Get that cute little ass of yours moving. We're thirsty." He reached over to swat her on the backside but Sarah was no novice and she easily avoided the swipe with well-practiced ease. It took only a moment before she returned, Abe and Benny whooping in delight as they saw the bottles.

"Oh yeah, here we go," crowed Abe, reaching for his bottle and twisting off the top. He took a hefty swig, sighing in pleasure. Benny mimicked Abe only trying to down a larger gulp. Benny tilted his head towards the waitress as she walked away, leering after her. "Nick piece of ass," he commented, looking at Xavier. Xavier was still curiously studying Brian, so he missed Ben's remark. Abe eyed Ben, giving each other a questioning look.

"Hey, ya old coot!"

Xavier swung his attention to Benny.

"I said, nice ass." He winked at Xavier.

Xavier shrugged, not replying.

"Whassa matter? Your tastes lie somewhere else?" Ben snickered, giving Abe a poke and a grin, not noticing Xavier's cold stare. Brian did. He wondered if Abe and Benny knew about Xavier's sexual preference. It was obvious that Abe and Benny had noticed Xavier's lack of interest towards Sarah but were they just joking with Xavier or was the question a little more serious? Brian couldn't be sure.

"Damn. Almost as good as a lay," Abe moaned as he leaned back in his chair and took another sip.

"I'll say. And a lot cheaper, thanks to blondie." Ben tipped the bottle Xavier's way.

"No, thanks."

Ben shrugged. "Whatever. Please yourself." He took another healthy sip, wiping his mouth. "Or should I say, let Blondie please you." Ben roared at his joke, Abe joining in.

Xavier's mouth became tighter, a small twitch forming in the corner of his eye. *Were they baiting Xavier?* Brian looked curiously at the two, who were nearly falling over themselves with laughter, then turned his attention to the occupants of the room. From the looks of the bar and its testosterone-demented occupants, it seemed like there would

be little or no tolerance for anyone in there who wasn't heterosexual. Brian could feel the tension radiate throughout the bodyguard and he shifted uneasily in his seat. Xavier continued to look at his friends, an expression of aggravation and frustration crossing the massive bodyguard's face.

Suddenly Brian saw why Xavier had taken him here. Xavier wanted to show him off. Like a prize, or a trophy, Xavier was hoping to impress his friends, to gain admiration and awe from Abe and Benny, or whoever else was in the bar. Only he wasn't getting the respect he wanted. For whatever warped reason, Brian saw as plain as day the need, the desire to make an impression on these two.

"Go sing something," Xavier said gruffly, ignoring the snorts of laughter coming from his friends.

Startled, Brian looked at him, confused. "Huh?"

"You heard me. Sing. Go up on stage and sing something."

Abe and Benny stopped laughing, eyeing Brian. "Yeah, you can sing can't you? Go sing."

It seemed as if all heads in the bar turned his way, a quiet tension filling the room. Brian held his breath, gripping the edge of his seat as he paused, uneasy. Xavier leaned back in his chair, crossing his massive forearms across his chest, the infuriating smirk of a secret smile beginning to form across his face. Brian felt a surge of anger and dread build up inside him. *Could this possibly be game number two?* He was sure Xavier wasn't planning any more, but maybe he was wrong. It was still before their cross-over to Mexico, so it was possible, yet Xavier had promised to warn him when game two was coming.

Xavier said the next one was going to be harder. "Is this number two?" he asked, looking directly at Xavier.

Xavier tilted his head, a little surprised. "Two?" "You know. Game two. Remember? Brownie points? You said you'd tell me when game two starts."

Abe and Benny looked at each other in confusion. "What the fuck is he talking about? Number 2? Does he have to take a crap?" This set the two off again, rolling with laughter.

Xavier ignored them, staring at Brian. "No," he said simply. Brian sagged from relief. Just as he thought, Xavier never had planned for a second game. Tomorrow they would cross the border, do the bank transaction, and after that... Brian didn't know what would happen, except that Xavier was going to make good on his promise to hurt one of the guys. Only he wasn't going to let him. Brian stood up slowly, a crazy idea forming, so off the wall he couldn't believe it crossed his mind. He was taking a chance, a very big chance, one so iffy that if it backfired...Brian winced inwardly. He didn't even want to think about it. *But, if it did work, if he was successful...*

Filled with determination, Brian took a deep breath and looked around in the suddenly still bar, feeling the silent sneers of the hardened crowd bearing down upon him. Brian realized he would much rather have a loaded gun to his head than face this crowd but he walked coolly over to the so-called stage, eyeing the Karaoke machine. He hadn't a clue how to work it, much less know if the song he was about to sing was on it. It didn't matter. He wasn't going to use the machine anyway. Brian grabbed the portable microphone, tapping it gently to see if it was on. It was. Mentally steeling himself, he walked over to where Xavier sat, not wanting to stay up on stage. If things went right, he would only need to sing a few lines before all hell broke loose and he wanted to be as close to the door as possible.

He cleared his throat exaggeratedly, wanting to capture everyone's attention.

"Ah, I want to dedicate this song to my bodyguard...my friend... *my lover*." He enunciated the last words, staring directly into Xavier's eyes. "I just want to say how much he means to me."

Xavier jerked in surprise, turning his head to see everyone in the bar looking at him in complete shock.

"Lover?" yelled Benny. "Lover? You're fucking gay?" he screeched at Xavier, astonishment written all over his face. "Holy shit!" Benny turned to Abe who was as equally stunned.

Brian smiled at Abe and Benny. "You didn't know?" he cooed innocently, a fine bead of nervous perspiration trailing down his back as he tried to act calm. Brian gave Xavier a sweet smile but his eyes were dark with malicious harm.

*You are my fire....*he began, seeing the rage beginning to burn in Xavier...

*The one deeeesirre...*Brian trailed intentionally, hearing the hoots of disbelief and laughter....

*Believe when I say....*Brian ran a swift hand through Xavier's hair and quickly moved away from the bodyguard's reach...

*I want it that way...*the oohs and jeers of the crowd filled Brian's ears so he couldn't hear the harsh words coming from Benny's mouth, but he could definitely make out the raw anger in Xavier's face as the bodyguard listened to his friend

Brian eyed the door, the weight of Rosie's cell phone pressing against him. *Come on...* he pleaded silently, his hopes soaring as Benny angrily shoved his chair away, glaring at Xavier.

But we are two worlds apart... Brian carried on, the crash of another chair hitting the floor as Abe stood up too...

Watching Xavier rise from his seat, Brian completely forgot what came next, his heart beating so fast it ached. "*Uh, I never wanna hear you say...*" he sang, reaching for any verse as he edged backwards towards the door. He bolted for the exit when he saw Benny leap wildly at Xavier, a mighty crash of splintered wood and glass filling the air.

Excited chants of "fight, fight" came from the crowd as they swarmed in closer, eager to join in the fray.

Brian slipped out the front door, his hands shaking from excitement as he fished out the cell phone from his pocket. A powerful smash resonated against the inside of the door and Brian jumped in surprise, moving quickly away. The light was too dim, the location too dangerous for him to stay so he ran around the side of the building searching for a reasonably safe spot. He spied a single outdoor light, located near the corner of the parking lot and raced towards it, hiding behind the cover of a white truck.

Flipping the cell phone open Brian stopped for a moment, alarmed. *The lock out number! I can't remember the lock out number!* He thought furiously for a moment. *911? No, idiot, that's emergency. 9...9...Oh God!* It was 9 something, something, so he punched 922, ready to hit every number remaining until he found it.

The lockout signal vanished and Brian sent up a silent prayer of thanks, flinching a bit as the blast of a shattered window and agitated sounds of fighting filtered by. Ordering himself to remain calm, Brian punched in the number for Aunt Ann and placed a hand over his other ear to block out the noise coming from the bar.

He listened impatiently as the phone rang and rang, mentally urging someone to pick it up. The answering machine came on, its automated message droning to leave a name, number...Brian grimaced and hit the end button, biting his lip. *Who now?* He punched in Nick's number and brought the phone up to his ear, peeking cautiously around the truck. The front door was now half-open, courtesy of the fallen body of an unconscious bar patron. The fight seemed to be in full force and Brian grinned savagely, praying that Xavier was getting the shit beat out of him.

The click of the phone swung Brian's attention away from the bar and he heard Nick's voice. Brian excitedly yelled to him, then stopped as he realized he was listening to Nick's recorded message. He heard the beep and swore desperately, hitting the end button again in anger. Brian began to panic a little. *Where the hell was everyone?*

Trying once more, he hit AJ's number and bounced nervously on his toes, sneaking quick glimpses towards the bar. Another unconscious person had fallen over the prone figure lying in the doorway and Brian anxiously bit his fingernails as he listened to the repeating ring in his ear. For a second he froze, wondering what to say. He really hadn't thought about it, positive he would reach his cousin instead of AJ. How could he convince AJ? Out of the four, he would be the most skeptical, the most cynical.

"Dude, who ever this is, you're so dead for calling me at this time of night," AJ's voice warned, his irritation obvious.

"Bone?" Brian whispered apprehensively, fearful that AJ would hang up before he had a chance to talk to him. "AJ?"

"Brian, is that you?"

AJ sounded upset, distressed, but Brian couldn't be sure as he heard the cheers and sounds of fighting become louder. He looked up in alarm as he saw Xavier stumble outside, the crowd of spectators spilling out of the bar, cheering as Xavier held onto a death grip around Benny's neck.

"Brian!"

"Uh, yeah, sorry to call you..."

"Where are you?" AJ screamed and Brian recoiled from the sound.

"I'm outside, on a cell phone," he answered, trying to concentrate on Xavier and AJ at the same time.

"No," yelled AJ, "I mean, *where* are you calling from?"

The fighting was coming closer, the crowd excitedly rooting for Xavier, who, although battered and bloody, was obviously winning the fight. Brian winced as he watched Xavier slam mercilessly into Benny, the sickening sound of bone snapping, being heard by all.

"Oh my God," moaned Brian, shocked by the sound, realizing he had little time left. He frantically glanced around, looking for escape.

"Brian, B-Rok!" came the worried shout from his cell phone. Brian ignored AJ for a moment, beginning to panic. There was no where to go. Crouched next to the truck he peered inside the cab and caught his breath, seeing the glint of keys dangling from the ignition. Shaking, he quickly opened the door and hopped in.

'Answer me!' screamed AJ. "Brian!" Brian put the phone back to his ear.

"AJ," he spoke urgently, "listen! Don't talk! Something's gonna happen, please God, *just listen!*" he pleaded as he heard AJ beginning to speak. "Be careful man, I need you to be careful, *all of you!* Xavier has something planned, something bad, I don't know what..." Brian trailed off, seeing Benny lying in a heap, not moving. Xavier struggled to stand upright, the bodyguard no more than 20 feet from him. Brian fumbled for the keys to turn on the ignition. "I know you don't believe me, but please AJ, God, please watch out...*oh no...*"

The door to the truck tore open and Brian turned in shock, the bloody but grinning face of Abe just inches away from his. With a snarl, Brian gave Abe a hard kick, then frantically turned on the ignition, trying to put the truck in gear. Two strong arms

reached in and ripped him bodily away from the cab, his cell phone dropping unnoticed into the soft dirt.

"Nick little trick there, Mr. Backstreet Boy," sneered Abe. "I knew something wasn't right. Xavier screamed at me to get you, said that you were escaping!" He shook Brian like a rag doll. "I just earned me 200 bucks!"

Brian stared up into the wild eyes of Abe, the grip from the giant man's arm even more powerful than Xavier's. In a flash, Brian brought his knee up, viciously slamming into the large man's groin. Abe screamed in agony and bent over but held onto the struggling singer. Enraged and in excruciating pain, Abe flung Brian as hard as he could into the side of the truck.

Brain had only a second to see Xavier's battered face before his own hit the corner of the truck's bumper, his limp body falling to the desert floor. Xavier leaned over the unconscious Backstreet Boy, turning him over to view the nasty cut on the side of Brian's left temple. Frowning, Xavier straightened up stiffly, going over to watch unsympathetically as Abe threw up repeatedly on the ground.

"I asked you to catch him, not kill him," growled Xavier, throwing some crumpled bills near the kneeling man. "Asshole."

With difficulty, Xavier walked over to the fallen singer, picking him up in his arms. He winced as a sharp pain stabbed through his side but ignored it as he carried Brian over to their car. He placed the injured singer in the back seat and gingerly got into the driver's side, this time swearing as the pain in his rib burned with a vengeance. *Broken.* He made a mental note to stop at the local Walgreen's for some bandages, then took a quick glance at the still figure crumpled in the back seat. *Butterfly bandages too.* Xavier tore out of the parking lot, noting how quickly the crowd had disappeared after the excitement had vanished. He gave one more quick look at Brian, his fury at having his night ruined overshadowed by his admiration at the cleverness of Brian's plan. *Kid's got guts. Too bad.*

* * * * *

A slim, but shaky hand reached for the fallen cell phone, not seen by anyone except for the person who picked it up. Eyeing it carefully, seeing the green light still on, Sarah placed the phone to her ear. "Hello?" she said softly. "Anyone there?"

Chapter 75:

Across the Miles

AJ tossed Nick a couple of blankets then went over to gently cover Howie and Kevin, who both had fallen asleep in the large reclining chairs. It had been a long day, filled with anxiety, tension, and fear; the toll of it showing on the exhausted faces of all four.

Not wanting to admit his alarm at sleeping alone, Nick suggested they all stick together, that AJ's leather chairs were more than comfortable enough to sleep in for the night. The others readily agreed, their own reasons for not being apart pretty much the same as Nick's.

AJ dimmed the lights in the room, sufficient to sleep undisturbed, but bright enough that if someone had to use the bathroom they wouldn't have to feel their way out. Nick had placed a blanket on AJ's chair, himself already curled up in his. AJ settled in, giving a long and tired sigh. He glanced over at Nick, seeing two bright blue eyes staring intently back at him.

"Want me to hold your hand so you can go to sleep?" he teased.

"Screw you. You know you're just as scared as I am."

AJ gave him a tiny smile. "Nah. I've got my guard dogs to save me."

Nick snorted. "Where are they anyway?"

"Outside. They're not too happy about it, but I figured with their yappy little voices, we'd hear if anything was happening."

Nick nodded. As annoying as AJ's dogs were sometimes, they sure could bark, their incessant yaps enough to make fingernails scraping on chalkboard sound soothing.

AJ turned on his side, his hand propping his head. "Wanna talk about it?"

Nick's blue eyes clouded a little. He knew what AJ meant. "Do we have to?"

"No," drawled AJ, "but it might help. Everyone here can see how it's eating away at you."

Nick sighed and straightened up. "And it doesn't you?" he questioned harshly.

"You *know* it does!" replied AJ heatedly, getting angry.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, Bone. I'm not looking to argue."

AJ calmed down, hearing the fatigue in Nick's voice. "Me neither."

Nick leaned back in his lounge and closed his eyes, not speaking. AJ had almost fallen asleep when he heard Nick cough hesitantly, then began speaking in a hushed tone.

"I'm scared Bone, scared for us, for Brian. I just can't get it out of my head that if I *really* had been Brian's friend, I would of known how unhappy he was."

"Nick..." sighed AJ heavily, but Nick shut him up.

"AJ! Stop! Don't tell me that crap about how it isn't my fault, how you and the guys understand how I feel. You don't and never will, all right?"

Nick paused and AJ heard his friend heave a dejected sigh. Knowing Nick was struggling to say something else, AJ wisely kept silent, waiting.

"I mean, I pray Brian's okay, but I get this gut feeling he's not. I'm afraid I'll never see him again, never get to say how sorry I am."

"And it's killing you."

"Yeah," came Nick's sad whisper.

AJ's heart ached as he saw the grief in Nick's face. He felt the same way, only he had been too afraid to admit it. AJ swung his legs over the side of the recliner, his hands covering his face as he bowed his head. "Nick. It's okay to think about it, to talk about it. To worry about it. I'm not as brave as you. I want to ignore it. I don't want to feel. I don't want to know." Nick heard the catch in AJ voice. "Cause if I do, I feel like I might go crazy. Totally."

Staring hard at him, Nick reached out to pull AJ's hands away from his face. In the dim light he saw the shine of unshed tears before AJ twisted away, closing his eyes tight.

"AJ," he choked, his voice breaking at the thought of the pain his friend was going through.

"I'm okay," he said roughly, refusing to look at Nick. The quiet ring of the phone broke the agonizing moment. AJ sighed, reaching over to snag it before it woke Kevin and Howie.

"Forget it," Nick advised.

"No, I'll get it. But whoever it is, they had better have a good reason for calling me so late."

AJ leaned back in his recliner as brought the phone up to his ear. "Dude, whoever this is, you're so dead for calling me at this time of night."

"Bone?" AJ heard a pause. "AJ?"

AJ nearly jumped out of his skin. "Brian, is that you?" Eyes wide, he frantically punched Nick, signaling wildly for him to wake up Howie and Kevin. He pressed his ear closer to the phone, cupping his hand over his other ear. He thought he heard a lot of yelling and screaming and he began to panic a little.

"Brian!" AJ yelled loudly, scared that Brian couldn't hear him.

"Uh, yeah, sorry to call you..."

Sorry! AJ turned towards Kevin and Howie who were now fully awake, their faces reflecting the anxiety they heard in AJ's frantic voice. "Where are you?" AJ screamed into the phone and Nick winced, alarmed. He grabbed the phone away from AJ's hand, hitting the speakerphone and set the phone into its cradle.

"...outside, on a cell phone," came Brian's reply. Nick found himself almost lightheaded with relief as he listened to Brian speak. He strained to make out what was in the background, but all he heard were faint cheers.

"No, I mean *where* are you calling from?"

Now all four could hear the clear sounds of people yelling...*fight...come on...yes!...kill 'em...*and they looked at each other in confusion. A loud roar of approval filled the speakerphone; apparently something significant had happened.

"Oh my God."

The agony in Brian's voice caused everyone in the room to freeze with fear.

Kevin shouted into the phone, "Brian!" while Nick said at almost the same time, "B-Rok!" There was no answer, the din of the crowd fading away. AJ could make out the panicked breathing of Brian, as if he were trying to do something.

Frustrated at not knowing what was going on, AJ screamed, "Answer me! Brian!"

Brian returned, the stress in his voice apparent. "AJ, listen! Don't talk! Something's gonna happen..."

AJ broke in, desperate to let Brian know that he and the guys knew about Xavier. "Brian! We all ..."

"Please God, *just listen!*" cried Brian. Nick could feel the terror in his words. "Be careful man, I need you to be careful, *all of you!* Xavier has something planned, something bad, I don't know what..." Kevin heard his cousin's voice trail off and leaned forward toward the phone, giving Howie an anxious look. Before he could say anything, Brian spoke again. "I know you don't believe me, but please AJ, God, please watch out...*oh no...*"

AJ, Nick, Howie, and Kevin heard the heart-stopping moan of Brian's last words and tensed with fright as they heard a vicious snarl coming from the speaker.

"Brian!" screamed Nick, "Brian!"

AJ grabbed Nick and shook his head, struggling to hear what was happening. Each guy held their breath, striving to catch any sound, but they heard nothing, the cell phone clearly dead.

"Oh *shit! Shit!*" Nick shouted in frustration, his hands running frantically through his hair. "*Do something!*" he yelled at all three, his eyes wild with despair.

"Nick," Howie spoke, his voice shaking, "what? Do *what?*"

"I don't know!" shrieked Nick. "The police! That's it! I'm calling the police!" He pointed a warning finger at Kevin. "No! Don't stop me! I'm not gonna..."

"Hello? Anybody there?"

All four turned to look at the forgotten speakerphone, shocked at the quiet but clear voice coming from it.

"Hello?"

Howie broke out of his astonishment first, leaning over the speaker. "Yes, yes! We're here! Hello! Who are you?"

A moment passed and all four panicked at the thought of the unknown caller not answering.

"Sarah. My name is Sarah."

AJ took over. "Sarah, hi, it's me AJ. Hey sweetheart, don't hang up, okay? I need to ask you a few questions."

"Um, well...."

AJ and Kevin looked at each other in concern, hearing the reluctance in her voice. AJ spoke up, trying to keep his tone light, sensing Sarah's hesitation. "Sarah, I'm a friend of the guy who's cell phone you have. Can you tell me if he's okay? Is he there?"

"I got his autograph." Sarah was quiet for a moment. "He promised me some tickets."

"I'll make sure you get them, Sarah. Listen, please, can I ask you some questions?"

"Okay, I guess." All four Backstreet Boys could hear her rustling around for something

. "Uh, could you hold on for a moment? I'm gonna need a cigarette first."

AJ didn't like the discouraging note in her voice and glanced at the others. They had caught the tone too; Nick's face as somber as AJ had ever seen. "Sure, I could use one myself right about now. Light one up for me, okay?"

Sarah gave a small laugh and Kevin nodded, signaling a thumb's up sign of approval to AJ. The oldest Backstreet Boy glanced quickly at Nick, who was gripping the back of his chair tightly, then at Howie, who trying his best to remain composed.

"I'm back," Sarah announced. "Say, are you a Backstreet Boy?"

"Sure am, sweetie. My name's AJ. Nick, Kevin and Howie are here with me too."

They all heard the brightness in her voice, the interest. "Really?"

"Hi, Sarah," said Kevin and Howie simultaneously.

"Ask her about Brian!" hissed Nick, impatient with all the small talk.

"Hi, hi," she stuttered.

Kevin became alarmed. "What's the matter, Sarah? Are you okay?"

"Sure. My teeth are just chattering. It's cold out here."

"Where are you?"

"Outside a bar called *Dos Pesos*. It's where I work. I should be getting back, but I think that might be a problem."

Nick butted in. "Sarah, this is Nick, Brian's friend. *Where* is Dos Pesos? *What* city?"

"Oh! Just outside of Nogie."

"Huh?"

"Nogales."

"Okay, I'm lost. Nogales, what?"

"Arizona. Nogales is on the border, just south of Tucson."

AJ and Kevin looked at each other, puzzled. *A border town?*

"Well at least we know where Bri is," whispered Howie to everyone. "Tucson is our next concert after the break, remember?"

"Hello?" Sarah's voice came back, confused at the sudden silence.

"Sorry, sweetheart," replied AJ. "Just thinking. Sarah, do you know where Brian is? Can we talk to him?"

"He's not here. He's been hurt." Sarah could hear their sharp intakes of surprise and hurried on. "Some big guy threw him against a truck. I think Brian was trying to get away and got caught."

"Sarah," Nick struggled, "Sarah, can you tell me how bad Brian's been hurt?"

"No, I'm sorry. He was unconscious and another big guy picked him up and took him away."

"Another big guy?" Nick looked at AJ, seeing the same confusion.

"Yeah, the one he came into the bar with. Dark hair, dark eyes."

Xavier, mouthed AJ.

A weak beep beep came through the speakerphone. "What was that?" asked Nick, startled. "Do you have another call?"

"No, the cell battery is low," warned Sarah.

Shit! The news troubled AJ. "Sarah, babe, I gotta ask you some more questions! Do you know why Brian was there?"

"Well, it looked like the big guy wanted Brian to meet some of his friends."

"Xavier," said AJ. "The big guy's name is Xavier."

"Oh yeah, right, I remember now."

Beep.

AJ panicked. "Tell me everything that happened."

"Well, Xavier wanted Brian to sing. So he got up. Told the audience that he wanted to dedicate a song to Xavier because..."

All four could hear the uncertainty in her voice, as if she was holding something back. "Sarah, go on," prodded AJ.

"Uh..."

Beep, beep.

AJ began to sweat. "Sarah! The phone! Come on."

"Brian, um, said because Xavier was his lover."

"What?!"

"Yeah, as soon as he said that the whole bar went crazy. Xavier got into this huge fight with another guy and Brian ran outside. I followed cause I didn't want to get hurt."

Another beep. "Go on!"

"I ran outside but the fight spilled out into the yard. Xavier was really hurting that guy bad. Anyway, I was hiding behind a car when I saw Xavier's friend grab Brian out of a truck. Brian managed to kick him in the balls, but the guy hung on and threw Brian against the side of the truck. Xavier was pretty mad at his friend for doing that. He picked Brian up off the ground, put him in a car and drove away."

AJ shuddered, unable to say anything as Howie stared desolately at the phone. Kevin, weak at the news, hung his head.

"Sarah," Nick spoke up, his voice trembling, "do you know where they went? Did you get..."

The phone went dead, its battery spent.

"Fuck!" screamed Nick, livid. "Fuck!" He stared at the speakerphone for a moment then reached for it, ripping it away from its base. He threw it furiously against the wall, trying to smash it. "Son-of-a-fucking-bitch!" Nick clutched his hands tightly, shaking. "Why didn't we get her number? Why?" he shouted accusingly to all three. "God dammit!"

Kevin reached out to calm him. "Nick," he began but Nick slapped his hand away, enraged.

"Stop! Get away," he shrieked, his eyes wild with anger.

Kevin glanced worriedly at AJ and Howie, but AJ didn't catch it, his attention directly solely on Nick. Nick paced agitatedly back and forth across the room, ranting. "I'm gonna kill that asshole! As soon as I see X, I'm gonna put a bullet in his brain!" Nick mimicked pointing a gun. "Bang!" He started swearing again with a vengeance.

AJ let him continue, shaking his head warningly at Kevin and Howie not to interfere, knowing Nick needed to release his pent-up anger. His friends watched solemnly as Nick carried on and on, not letting up, his promises becoming more extreme, his threats

filled with hatred. Concerned for his friend's mental well-being AJ finally grabbed Nick by his shoulders and shook him hard.

" Nick! Enough! That's enough!"

Startled out of his fit, Nick looked at him with a blank expression for a moment then pushed AJ away. He slumped into the nearest chair and covered his eyes. No one spoke for a few minutes, each immersed in their own thoughts over what had just happened. With a deep sigh Nick stood up, his face haggard.

"I'm sorry," he apologized dully. "I guess I lost it." He walked quietly out of the room and Kevin sat down, rubbing his eyes tiredly as he looked at AJ and Howie. AJ glanced at Kevin, then at the door.

"I'm going to see about Nick," he announced and left.

Kevin sighed resignedly and felt Howie's concerned hand on his shoulder.

"Kev, Nick's tough. He'll be okay."

Kevin nodded and turned away, not willing to let Howie see his fear. *I hope so. I don't think I can stand losing another.*

* * * * *

My head. Why is my head killing me? Brian groaned, reaching up to touch the pain but felt a firm hand pushing his away, too strong to argue with. *All right, all right, but it still hurts. Make it stop hurting, okay?*

The rim of a glass was forced between his lips and Brian shook his head, too tired to drink, too tired to even open his eyes. The pressure increased and he resisted until he felt fingers prying his mouth open, none-too-gently. Unable to fight Brian opened up, realizing a pill was being pushed down his throat along with stale water. He gagged, trying to vomit it up, but strong hands clamped down upon his nose, then mouth, forcing him to swallow.

Breathing heavily, he smelled the sour odor of bed sheets, the rankness of his own sweat mixed in with dried blood. He tried once more to put a hand up to his head, only to find larger ones already there, poking, prodding at the pain. Brian winced as a stinging solution was applied to his temple, squeezing his eyes even tighter as the fluid ran into the corner of one eye.

Moaning, Brian struggled to make sense of it all, but the pain, the blinding pain refused to cooperate with his mind. With herculean effort Brian forced his eyes open, gasping at the vertigo that hit him with a vengeance. He immediately closed his eyes, praying that his stomach wouldn't heave, not from the dizziness in his head, but from the sight that greeted him for just an instant. Xavier's face floated up behind his eyes, a vision of

massive cuts and bruises, all blended in so that he couldn't tell where the injuries started or ended. Brian bravely peeked once more, this time the vertigo not as severe.

Xavier studied him quietly, putting the finishing touches of a butterfly bandage to the young singer's brow. Brian flinched at his administrations and Xavier snorted, shaking his head. "You'll live," he said curtly.

Rising with difficulty from the edge of Brian's bed, Xavier went over to his own, rummaging through his suitcase. Brian watched him intently, noticing Xavier wince in pain as he slipped a shirt over his head, the thick bandages swathed tightly around his chest and waist. Apparently the bruises were not just exclusive to Xavier's face, but to his back and sides as well, and Brian took grim satisfaction in Benny's handiwork as he remembered clearly the vicious fight between the two. What he couldn't remember was how he got the cut on his head. Tentatively touching his wound, he grimaced, pulling his hand away quickly.

Xavier grunted, seeing the pained expression on the young singer's face. "Nasty little cut there. I suggest you don't touch it."

"What happened?" As much as Brian hated asking, he needed to know.

"You don't remember?"

"I remember hoping Abe and Benny would beat the crap outta you."

Xavier propped himself against the back of the bed's headboard and gave Brian an inscrutable look then shook his head, giving a quick hoot of derisive laughter. "Damn near did. Would have too, if Abe hadn't of decided that money was more appealing than fighting."

Brian threw Xavier a confused look.

"Abe was the one who threw you into the side of a truck when he caught you trying to escape."

Brian shifted uncomfortably. He now remembered the grinning face of Abe popping up before him, of the massive arms that reached out to drag him from the truck. He also remembered Rosie's cell phone. Brian wondered what happened to it, if Xavier had discovered his call to warn the guys. Before he could figure a way to find out Xavier spoke up, his words forming a statement, not a question.

"You knew there was no second game." Xavier eyed Brian closely and the young Backstreet Boy stared back, his gaze unwavering.

"Yeah. I figured you wouldn't do anymore once you got your money."

Xavier stared at his bruised knuckles for moment, then gave a sharp laugh, the corner of his lip turning up mockingly.

"Smart boy. I always knew you were sharp. So you took a chance, hoping if you were able to start a fight between me and my buddies you would be able to escape, huh?"

Brian's heart skipped a beat, hopeful. Xavier had not mentioned anything about discovering a cell phone, or about trying to warn his friends. Not sure if Xavier was leading him on, trying to lure him into saying something about it, Brian decided to steer clear and try a different approach.

"I was really hoping they'd kill you," answered Brian bluntly. "No Xavier, no Mexico, no money." He stared at Xavier frankly.

Xavier gave Brian a tight smile. "I thought so. You millionaires sure are tight with your money, never willing to share," he scorned jokingly.

Brian tried hard not to show the excitement he felt. *Xavier didn't know about the cell phone!* He prayed that AJ had listened, had taken his warning seriously. He knew that even if there were no more games, Xavier still intended to give his surprise. *That means I might have another chance to warn the guys!* His elation turned to surprise as he suddenly swayed, clutching at his bed sheets for support. *What the...?*

He heard Xavier cluck in fake sympathy. "Oh sorry, forgot to tell you. That pill you took? Just a little something to help you sleep."

Brian blinked slowly, his head swimming. Unable to stay upright he slumped into his pillow, watching Xavier's face waver before him.

"Nope. Can't have you trying to escape again. Not when I'm so close to becoming a rich ex-bodyguard."

Opening his mouth, Brian struggled to say something, anything, but the ability to speak was beyond his control. Resisting the temptation to close his eyes, he fought, striving to stay awake. Xavier gave an amused laugh and stiffly swung his legs over the side of the bed, ignoring the sharp stab from his right side. He leaned over to study the drugged singer, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Bit by bit Brian's eyes drooped lower until they finally closed and Xavier smiled, satisfied. He watched as Brian's breathing became regular; the slow rise and fall of his chest indicating that the young singer was completely under.

Carefully Xavier reached out, his fingers running lightly through Brian's hair. "Yes, tomorrow you and I will be in Mexico." He bent over, gently planting a kiss on Brian's injured forehead. Brian's eyes fluttered for a moment at the touch, then went still.

"And who knows? If I'm feeling nice enough, maybe I'll let you live."

Chapter 76:

North of the Border

AJ expected any moment to hear the wail of his activated alarm system, sure that Nick was going to leave the security of the house and take off. Scared, AJ called out Nick's name several times, hearing no reply. Noticing no alarm being triggered, AJ began to search hurriedly for his whereabouts, checking the kitchen first, then the lower level bathrooms. No sign. Crossing the hallway AJ paused, hearing clinks of glass coming from his den. AJ entered, trying to adjust his eyes to the dimness of the room and then sighed in relief. There, behind the bar was Nick, bent over and searching irritability for something to drink.

AJ walked up and sat on a stool, leaning over the bar counter to watch Nick. "Here, let me," he ordered, getting up off his seat and coming around the corner. "I hide the good stuff." He shooed Nick away and crouched down, reaching in to pull out a dusty bottle. "Cuervo. Anejo." AJ licked his lips approvingly and poured Nick a double shot. "Sip. Don't gulp," he advised.

Nick ignored him and tossed it back in one swallow. "Gimme another."

AJ began to argue, then thought the better of it. He had seeing the grimace Nick had made when he had knocked it down. He poured another shot and handed it to him, smiling inwardly as Nick took his advice and slowly began to sip the tequila.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Nick stared at AJ in amazement. "That's the second time tonight! What are you, my shrink?"

AJ smiled but said nothing, capping the bottle tightly and quietly put it away. Nick looked at him sourly. "All right. Jeez. So I came unglued a little. Big deal." He glanced down at his drink, swirling it absentmindedly, then looked up, noticing AJ's lack of comment.

"Well?"

"Well, what?" AJ replied.

"Aren't you gonna say something....uh, Kevin-like?"

AJ gave Nick a look of mock hurt. "Man, what a cut. Thanks a lot."

Nick sighed in exasperation. "You know what I mean, Bone."

AJ smiled tiredly at his friend and nodded at the drink. "Finish it up, Nick. It's your last for the night." He glanced at his watch. "Or, should I say, morning."

Nick shook his head and handed his drink back to AJ. "No thanks. I think that first one was more than enough." Leaning over the bar top Nick crossed his arms then rested his head wearily on top.

"What do you think about what Brian said?" Nick posed the question so softly that AJ was barely able to catch it.

"Um, which part are you talking about?"

Nick raised his head to see AJ fiddling nervously with an ice tong. "You *know* which part."

AJ threw the tongs back into the ice bucket, distressed. He really didn't want to talk about it, much less *think* about it. "Nick, I don't want to go there, okay? What Brian said about Xavier and him and what actually is true could be two worlds apart."

Nick wasn't about to give up so easily. "Yeah, I know, but haven't you ever wondered exactly what sort of hold Xavier has over Brian?"

AJ rubbed his brow. "It could be a lot of things, Nick. Physical abuse, obviously. Blackmailing? Absolutely."

Nick frowned at AJ. "Yeah, but Brian is incredibly strong-willed. X would have to be doing something pretty awful to keep Bri so afraid."

"Don't you think I know that?" shot back AJ, exasperated. "I *know* Xavier. I know whatever he did or is doing to Brian has to be terrible."

"So, what about sexual abuse?"

AJ looked away. Nick had finally said it, damn him, the one thing he didn't want to talk about.

"Bone? Answer me." AJ could hear the harshness in Nick's voice. "Do you think Xavier is sexually abusing Brian?"

AJ slowly turned back to face Nick and Nick caught the despair, the torment in his face.

"I don't know Nick. I really don't. Yeah, I remember what Sarah said about Bri being X's lover. I'm just praying he said that to get Xavier into a fight, to escape. I'll be honest with you Nick. I'm not sure I can handle this right now. It's too much and I ... we need to focus on getting Brian back and not on what might have happened to him."

Nick nodded, hanging his head, letting the information sink in. He sighed and glanced up, giving AJ an encouraging look. "Okay. You're right, as usual." Nick smiled faintly at AJ. "I guess we'll be able to find out a lot more tomorrow, huh?"

"More like today," AJ replied, reminding him again how early in the morning it was. "Come on, let's see if we can get a few hours of sleep. I have a feeling we're gonna need it."

* * * * *

Hurriedly stumbling into the bathroom, Brian was barely able to make it to the toilet before miserably vomiting the side effects of the painkiller/sleeping pill Xavier had shoved down his throat. Upon awaking, it had taken him several minutes to figure out where he was, the pain in his head and stomach excruciating. He had heard Xavier rustling about, getting dressed, and had turned painfully on his side to watch the bodyguard getting ready for the day, humming quietly as he inspected his belongings.

Xavier had glanced at Brian. "Get up. Time to get moving." Brian had struggled to comply, hearing the firmness in Xavier's order.

Now, as the spasms from his stomach quieted, he listened to the sarcasm in Xavier's voice as the bodyguard peered into the bathroom, noticing Brian slumped exhaustedly on the tile floor.

"Guess the big breakfast at Denny's doesn't sound too good right now, does it?"

"Sure it does," snapped Brian. "Then I'll make sure to puke all over *you* after I'm done eating it."

Xavier snorted, giving his head a shake. "Testy, testy." He leaned over to yank hard on the showerhead. The hot water sprayed out, a fine mist of steam curling upwards. "Come on," he ordered, "time to take a shower. You're a mess." Xavier eyed Brian thoughtfully when the singer made no move to stand. "Hmm. Perhaps you need some help undressing?"

Brian quickly struggled to stand upright, a panicked look crossing the young singer's face. Xavier laughed as Brian closed the bathroom door with a solid slam.

"I guess not."

* * * * *

Kevin rubbed his face as he trudged wearily into AJ's kitchen, hoping to God there was fresh coffee brewing. He needed about a gallon of it. He glanced disappointedly at the unlit coffee machine and sighed, wondering where AJ kept the coffee filters. Noticing a slip of paper lying on the countertop, Kevin picked it up, recognizing AJ's scribble.

Guys, took Howie, went to Mickey D's. Back soon with breakfast.

Ugh. Kevin hated McDonalds. "Just remember to bring back some coffee, please?" he pleaded.

"Remember to bring back what?" questioned Nick as he straggled in, his hair defying the laws of gravity as it poked up in various directions.

Kevin sat on a kitchen stool. "Coffee. I hope AJ brings back coffee. He and Howie went to McDonalds." Kevin eyed Nick curiously as the youngest singer hopped easily onto the granite countertop. "How ya doing? You okay?"

"Yeah, fine." Nick yawned expansively. "Not much sleep, though. How about you?"

"I'll manage." Kevin strummed his fingers, impatient. "Come on, guys. I need my coffee."

Nick shook his head, amused. "You really need that stuff to wake you up? I don't."

Kevin stared at Nick in disbelief. "Whaddya talking about? How about all that sugar cereal shit you eat in the morning? Don't talk to *me* about not needing a buzz."

"It's not as bad as coffee."

"Are you kidding? It's worse," scoffed Kevin.

"You're full of it, Kevin."

"Me? Who's grumpy if he doesn't have his bowl of Twinkies in the morning?"

"Fruit Loops. Not Twinkies."

"Whatever. It's still crap. You need to stop..." Kevin trailed off, his lecture forgotten as he heard, then saw AJ's dogs dance excitedly around Howie and AJ as the two entered the kitchen, their arms loaded with take-out bags.

"About time," grumbled Kevin, searching the various McDonalds bags for his treasured caffeine.

"Aw, damn it AJ, you forgot the..." Kevin's eyes widened in surprise as a Starbuck's insulated cup was shoved in front of his face. AJ smirked as he also waved a tantalizing onion bagel loaded with crèam cheese, eliciting a groan of pleasure from Kevin.

"Thanks, AJ. I'd kiss you if you weren't so butt-ugly in the morning."

"*This* is the appreciation I get for driving five miles out of my way?" AJ moaned theatrically, turning to Howie, who was diving, along with Nick, into the McDonalds bags.

Howie shrugged, licking his fingers. "Well, you *are* butt-ugly in the morning," he admitted, dodging a biscuit thrown his way. Jack and Vegas eagerly scooped it up, trotting out the doggie door before their master had a chance to stop them.

AJ frowned at his departing dogs for a moment before turning his attention to Howie. "Hey D, I hear the grease in your sausage biscuit can do wonders for your hair."

Nick snickered, grinning at Howie's look of pretend hurt and threw a piece of his own sausage patty at him. "Here, try it."

Howie tore off a piece of his food, ignoring AJ's cries of "no food fight!" as he sailed one at Nick. Nick moved quickly and the piece of biscuit landed squarely into Kevin's open cup of coffee.

Dark, emerald green eyes rose to match Howie and Nick's scared ones, promising dire payback. "Uh, I'm gonna go get ready," announced Howie and Nick agreed, snatching his food and running out of the kitchen with Howie.

Long fingers picked the offending floating particle out of his cup, and with a sigh Kevin flung it away, hearing the muffled laughter of Nick and Howie heading down the hall. AJ smiled at Kevin's long-suffering look and shook his head sympathetically.

* * * * *

"Oh, come on," pleaded Nick in an intentionally whiny voice, "let me drive your Mercedes, pretty please?"

AJ held the keys away from Nick's wiggling fingers, shocked. "What? And let you dent my baby? No way, sorry," he said, not in the least. He motioned for Howie and Kevin to follow him into the garage, tossing another set of keys to Howie. After the near breakfast food fight, all four had quickly showered and shaved, eager to head downtown. They decided to pair off, taking two of AJ's vehicles for safety. AJ began to regret his pairing up with Nick, as the youngest Backstreet Boy continued begging, unfazed by AJ's refusal to hand over the car keys.

"I *swear* I'm a good driver, right?" he asked Kevin, waiting for a reply. Kevin rolled his eyes, not wanting to answer and hopped into AJ's Landrover with Howie.

Nick, sensing defeat, turned back to AJ. "Okay, so I dinged my SUV a little."

"A little?" AJ's voice rose a notch.

"Um, okay, maybe a lot. But it happened in the parking lot, I swear. It wasn't my fault."

"Yeah, sure."

Nick ran in front of AJ, his hands clasped in prayer. "Come on, AJ! Just this once. Pleeease." He threw a quick glance at the black gleaming Mercedes. "I promise, if a bird so much as craps on it, I'll have it repainted."

"Wow," drawled AJ sarcastically. "What a deal." He heaved a sigh as he looked into Nick's beseeching eyes. "Oh all right, you big whiner," he conceded, tossing a delighted Nick his keys. AJ signaled to Howie his intentions, ignoring Howie's warning look of disapproval.

Nick hopped happily into the sleek car and started it, admiring its many gadgets as he waited for AJ to enter the passenger side. "Sweet!" he commented, giving AJ a look of admiration.

"It should be," admitted AJ grudgingly. "It cost me a fortune."

Nick leaned over and punched the CD player, his face wide-open in shock as the beginning verse of the song began to play. He started hooting with laughter as AJ hurriedly hit the eject button.

"Oh my God, you've got to be shitting me!" howled Nick, pounding his hand on the dashboard in delight. "Britney Spears? You're listening to a Britney Spears CD?"

"It's not mine," denied AJ heatedly, knowing his face was turning red. "Uh, ... it belonged to the last chick I was dating."

"Oh sure," drawled Nick, not believing a word. "I remember her! She was like, uh, 13 right? Yeah! That's it! The 21-year olds were getting just a little too old."

"Fuck you," growled AJ, irritated. "Do you want to drive this thing or not? Cause right now, I'm having second thoughts."

"Okay, okay," said Nick, trying hard not to laugh. He put the car in gear, glancing at AJ.

"Ready?" he questioned as AJ struggled with his buckle. Nick took off without warning, the tires smoking in protest as he floored the Mercedes, wanting to see if AJ's boasts about the awesome power of his car were really true.

"Nickkkkkk..." Kevin and Howie heard AJ scream, as the Mercedes screeched out of the driveway and turned the corner. Howie hurriedly put the Landrover in gear, sighing, hoping he could keep up with "Mario Andretti" Nick.

* * * * *

Whether it was atop a hamburger or a breakfast sandwich, Brian noticed with disgust that Xavier still had a craving for jalepeno relish. The drive-through McDonald's cashier handed the bodyguard several packets of them and Xavier whooped, delighted in the amount.

He pulled into the restaurant's parking lot and turned off the ignition, nudging at Brian to eat something. Brian slowly peeled back the paper to his bacon-egg and cheese biscuit,

hoping he could force it down without gagging as the greasy smell of it cramped his still upset stomach.

Xavier watched Brian carefully, noting his reluctance. "Believe me, this food is gourmet next to what you'll find in Nogie. That is, if you're brave enough to try it down there. Eat." He prodded an elbow at Brian, his look commanding.

Brian took a small bite, trying to ignore his roiling stomach as he gazed outside the car window. He was glad they were at least eating in the car, not wanting the stares and looks of amazement coming from the customers who would see their battered faces. Brian had gazed once and once only after he had finished his shower, not willing to believe the magnitude of the ugly gash and bruise crossing his brow. Xavier looked even worse, his injuries even more intimidating that the sheer size of the massive bodyguard himself.

Brian noticed Xavier getting out of the car, having already finished his food. He hastily crammed the rest of his sandwich in his mouth, praying that it stayed down. Exiting the car, Brian stared suspiciously at Xavier, wondering what they were going to do next. Xavier locked the car, motioning with a quick hand for Brian to hurry as he took off at a brisk walk. Brian caught up to him, wincing slightly in pain as he placed his sunglasses on to protect against the bright southwestern sun.

"Where are we going?" he asked curiously, trying to keep pace with the longer strides of the bodyguard. Xavier pointed a finger and Brian strained to look.

"The border is right over there. We're gonna walk across."

"We're not going to drive?"

Xavier gave the singer a snort of sarcasm. "Yeah, right. Cross the border with guns in our back trunk. You may be in a hurry to rot in a Mexican jail, but I'm not." Xavier jaywalked across the street and Brian raced across, ignoring the blare of horns as he tried to catch up with him. "Besides," Xavier added, "it's not that far to the border. Maybe a half-mile or so." Xavier placed dark sunglasses on himself, throwing the Backstreet Boy a satisfied grin as he picked up the pace, eager. "Yep, soon I'm gonna be a rich man."

* * * * *

"You are so fucking lucky you didn't damage my car," threatened AJ as all four piled out of the cars. He walked around, inspecting it closely as Nick smirked at Kevin and Howie. AJ sighed in relief, vowing never to let Nick even breathe on his Mercedes again.

"Lucky?" scoffed Nick, crossing his arms in protest. "Who was the one who managed to swerve just in time to avoid that idiot?" Nick nodded importantly, pleased at his quick reflexes. A blue truck had narrowly missed them, coming from a blind spot on the road.

"If I remember correctly, and I do, you were screaming at the top of your lungs as I saved our asses."

AJ placed his shades on, staring up at the tall building towering over them. They had found the Backstreet Human Resource address easily, thanks to the Mercedes' Northstar navigation system. Ignoring Nick's gloating and not willing to acknowledge Nick's skill at preventing an accident, he turned to Kevin instead.

"HR knows we're coming?"

"Yeah, I called them this morning, talked to the secretary. She seemed kinda pissed; sounded like they were planning to leave early for the holiday weekend."

"Well boo-fucking-hoo," scoffed Nick, anxious to go in. "Like I care."

Howie grabbed Nick's arm, worried. "Jeez, Nick, remember what we're trying to do here. If you go in with that attitude, we'll never get the information we need on Xavier."

AJ nodded as the four entered the building. "D's right. I don't know what information we can pull from them, but I'd rather have them happy than pissed."

Crowding into the elevator, Nick punched the 11th floor button, then glanced at the other three. "Okay. Time to turn on the Backstreet charm." He threw a cheesy grin and Kevin groaned exaggeratedly.

"Sheesh, now I know we're in trouble."

* * * * *

"Oh, shit, hurry, *hurry!*" yelled Terri frantically at her secretary who was struggling to make the office look presentable. Elaine threw Terri a resentful look, noticing that her boss had no time to help her but had plenty of time to put the last finishing touches of makeup on.

"There, best I can do," Elaine said dryly, hiding the garbage can under her desk before sitting down.

Terri frowned, meaning to chastise her when she noticed the office door open, Nick, Howie, AJ, and Kevin entering. Terri froze to the spot. *Oh my God. Kevin.* Terri threw Elaine a nasty look. *The little bitch! She never said anything about Kevin coming! If I had known, I would have changed into something sexier!*

Elaine smiled inwardly, maliciously enjoying the surprised look on her boss's face and coolly turned towards the guys.

"Hi, how can I help you?" she asked, using her usual standard greeting to everyday customers.

Terri snorted quietly in disgust, extending her hand professionally to Kevin. "Hello, I'm Terri Hamilton, VP of Human Resources." She about swooned as she felt Kevin's strong hand grasps hers in a warm handshake. She kept a firm grip on Kevin's hand, not letting go. "I'm *honored* to have you all here," she announced not giving the others a second glance. She smiled, her gaze fixed only on Kevin.

The look was not lost on the other three; they had seen that lustful look too many times before. Nick sneaked a peak at Elaine and grinned, and Elaine grinned back, rolling her eyes.

Kevin cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Uh, if you don't mind, Ms. Hamilton,..."

"Terri, *please*."

"Terri. Okay. We'd like to ask you a few questions..."

Once more Kevin was interrupted, only this time it was a male voice and coming from the open office door.

"Kevin? Howie? Is that you?"

All six turned to see an older gentleman standing by the door, a leather briefcase in hand. Kevin smiled gratefully at the interruption, recognizing Daniel as one of their accountants.

"Dan! How are you? You're located in this building now?"

Daniel walked in, grinning. "Yeah. Moved in a month ago. Management thought it would be easier to keep track of everything if we were all located in one place." He shook hands with all four Backstreet Boys, nodding politely.

"What brings you guys down here? Need a loan?" he joked.

Terri butted in. "They're here to see *me*, Dan." Her eyes were shooting little daggers of "get lost."

Daniel smiled good-naturedly at Terri, taking the not-so-subtle hint. "Oh, well. Guess I'll be going, let you guys get down to business." He turned towards the door, then stopped and turned to face them again. "Say, Brian wouldn't happen to be with you, would he?" Daniel didn't notice the tension that suddenly filled the room.

"Uh, no, Brian isn't here. Why?" questioned Howie.

"Well, I've been trying to get a hold of him lately. I wanted to talk to him about his bank account. I guess it can wait. When you see him, let him know I want to talk to him, okay?" Daniel waved a friendly goodbye and left.

AJ threw Kevin a concerned look and Kevin caught the look, giving AJ one back. He glanced at Terri, who was trying to mask her adoration, but failing miserably. He sighed inwardly. "AJ, Howie? Why don't you guys go talk to Daniel, all right? I think I'll be able to handle things here with Nick." He looked meaningfully at AJ who nodded, understanding completely. Whatever information they pried out of Terri, Kevin was obviously the man for the job.

AJ punched Howie lightly in the arm. "Let's go. I need to ask Daniel a few questions."

The two left and Terri turned towards Kevin, ecstatic. She stuck out a well-manicured hand, pointing the way. "Won't you come into my office?"

"Said the spider to the fly," whispered Nick wickedly, giving Kevin a grin.

Terri looked at Nick confused. "Um, did you say something?"

Nick shook his head innocently. "Nope. Say Kev, why don't you go on in? I think I'm gonna stay out here and get acquainted with my new number one fan." He gave Elaine a flirtatious wink.

"Thanks, Nick."

Nick heard the payback in Kevin's voice and gave the dark-haired singer a sickeningly sweet smile. "You're welcome." He chose to ignore the look Kevin gave him before Terri's door closed, turning his attention to Elaine. "Okay, number one fan, what do you want to talk about?" The secretary's eyes lit up and Nick had a feeling he was going to learn a lot.

* * * * *

Brian, along with several other tourists, waited patiently for their turn to walk through the metal revolving door, their entrance into Mexico. He was surprised that no one asked for a passport and Xavier explained sarcastically that no one ever wanted to *live* in Nogales, just visit. It was on the way back that border patrol looked for aliens trying to illegally cross into Arizona.

"But I'm sure border will check *you*, what with your dark complexion and all," mocked Xavier.

Brian ignored Xavier's taunt as they passed through the metal bars, trying his best to sightsee as he struggled to keep up with the bodyguard's fast pace. Having been exposed to many foreign lands he was sure he had seen it all, but what lay before him took him by surprise. Various vendors dotted their pathway, colorful blankets spread on the ground to display their wares. He stumbled for a moment, tripping over a large crack in the crumbling sidewalk and made a mental note to be more careful. The waft of an indescribable odor floated in the air as they saw a local street peddler cooking on a makeshift grill.

Xavier nodded knowingly at the grimace on the young singer's face. "Told you," he said as they paused to look at the chunks of questionable meat searing over an open flame. Xavier picked up the pace again, weaving skillfully through the tourists. They passed by several open-air shops, their hard-core owners standing just outside, eagerly looking for their next possible customer. A number of determined owners cut in front of Brian, each with a large smile, an open arm, greeting him in broken English to come inside and inspect their goods. Xavier cut them all off with a frown and a few harsh words spoken rapidly in Spanish. From the look in their eyes, Brian knew that whatever Xavier had said stop them dead in their tracks, wise enough to know when to quit.

The local beggar children were made of sterner stuff. Raised on the streets, quick to pick out what tourist looked like an easy patsy, they zeroed in on Brian, their soulful brown eyes, grubby clothing, and pleading cries as they held out dirty styrofoam cups enough to melt the most callous of hearts.

Brian stopped, fishing out his wallet, dropping a twenty dollar bill into the nearest cup. It was definitely the wrong thing to do. From out of nowhere he was suddenly swarmed by a horde of hopeful faces, each trying their best to joggle for best position as they tugged and pulled at Brian, their outreached hands waving wildly.

Brian had to laugh a little at the sight as he tried valiantly to accommodate them. A large hand reached in, clamping onto Brian's wrist and yanked the blonde singer away from the excited group of beggars, throwing a heated warning at them. They scattered, gone as quickly as they had come.

"Why did you do that?" asked Brian exasperatedly. "You know, I've got enough for you too."

Xavier frowned warningly at the sneer on Brian's face. "You just gave them more money than they earn in a week. Stuff like that doesn't go unnoticed by others. Others that wouldn't think twice about helping themselves to what you've got, dead or alive."

Brian tried to hide his uneasiness. "Well, I guess that's what I'm paying you for, isn't it? *To protect me.*" He spoke the last three words sarcastically, both understanding the lie in it.

Instantly Xavier was all over him, grabbing Brian tightly around his upper arm. "You're pushing it," he hissed. "You're lucky I need your hand to sign at the bank, otherwise I'd snap it like a twig. Remember Benny?" he said lightly, waiting for Brian's reaction.

Brian nodded, the throb of Xavier crushing his arm enough to make him realize what horrible pain Benny must have experienced.

"Good."

Xavier relaxed his grip, his face smoothing out. He turned away from Brian to scan the street, catching the eye of an observant taxi cab driver and waved him over. The battered

station wagon rattled up and the over-exuberant driver jumped out, waving for his customers to enter. Reluctantly Brian stepped in, holding his breath as the cab driver took off, barely missing another car. Having hopped into the front passenger side, Xavier turned around to smile at Brian, his voice radiating enthusiasm.

"In about an hour I'm gonna be an ex-bodyguard. Think you can handle it?" He laughed uproariously as Brian looked back at him, expressionless.

Chapter 77:

Tracking it All Down

Howie and AJ found Daniel's office a few doors down from Backstreet HR and they walked in, impressed by the elegant furnishings and quiet ambiance of the place.

"I think we're paying these guys too much," whispered Howie, listening to the strains of Bach float soothingly throughout the room.

"We pay everyone too much," grumbled AJ. He curiously peeked down the long hallway, wondering where the secretary was. Shrugging, he motioned for Howie to join him and the two wandered down the hall, glancing into every opened door. They found Daniel in the third room, his office every bit as stylish as the reception room. AJ rapped on the open door, startling Daniel, who had been reclining in his high back leather chair, phone in hand.

"Gotta go, call you later," he announced, hanging up the phone. Daniel stood up, his hand ushering for AJ and Howie to take a seat.

"Mr. McLean, Mr. Dorough, won't you sit down?"

Howie eased into his with a smile. "Danny, come on, call me Howie, okay? But you can call AJ anything you want."

AJ threw Howie a sarcastic smile as Daniel laughed, sitting back down. "It's good to meet you, AJ. Paul is the one who handles your account, right?"

AJ nodded, feeling out of place in this office that reeked of establishment.

"So, what can I do for you gentlemen?" Daniel leaned back in his chair, his hands folded, bright blue eyes flickering from one to another.

AJ cleared his throat, deciding to be blunt. "We heard you talking about Brian's bank account and wanted to know what's up. We're thinking maybe we could help you with some of your questions."

Daniel smiled, shaking his head. "Sorry guys. Confidentiality clause."

AJ shifted in his seat, leaning forward. "Maybe you don't understand, Daniel. We need to know, and we need to know right now."

Daniel pursed his lips together, frowning. "AJ, I'm sorry, I just can't. Legally, my hands are tied. I'm sure you understand."

"Then you're fired."

AJ turned, slightly shocked at Howie's announcement. Daniel blinked in surprise, not believing what he just heard. "Excuse me?"

Howie look straight at him, calm and composed. "You're fired. You and who ever else are our accountants. As of this moment." He glanced at AJ for confirmation and AJ nodded, the slightest smile touching the corner of his lips. *Go Howie!*

"Now just a moment..." began Daniel, alarm rising in his voice.

"Dan," said Howie soothingly, "we have to know. It's an emergency. Either you help us or you can walk out right now. I promise, in writing if you want, that we won't hold you responsible. We think Brian is in some sort of trouble and we need your help."

Daniel stood up and nervously paced for a moment. Backstreet was huge, their largest account. He could kiss his lifestyle, along with his partner's goodbye if they lost it. He glanced sourly at Howie, then AJ. "Are Kevin and Nick in agreement?"

"Yes," replied AJ firmly, happy to see Daniel beginning to waver.

"And you all will sign, not holding me accountable?"

Two eager nods.

Daniel sat down and heaved a sigh. "Okay, what do you need to know?"

* * * * *

Damn Nick! I'm gonna kill him just as soon as I get out of here! Kevin smiled weakly at Terri, who was trying her best to make him feel more comfortable. She had insisted on taking his coat and was now offering a drink, a hard one at that.

'Uh, it's a little early in the morning don't you think?"

Terri frowned prettily and indicated for Kevin to take a seat. She hopped onto to the front of her desk, crossing her legs, her dress not-so-innocently hiked higher than necessary.

Kevin groaned inwardly. He was surprised at how nervous he was, not accustom to the femme fatal wiles of an older woman. Screaming, fainting, I-love-you teenagers, no sweat. Blatant come-ons from a Backstreet employee, not so easy.

"Now, Kevin, you don't mind me calling you Kevin do you, how can I be of *service?*"

Kevin tried to keep his face blank as possible, hearing Terri lower her voice seductively on the last word. "Um, first of all I'd like to say that the guys and I want to thank you for all the tremendous work you have been doing for us." Kevin knew he didn't need to

praise her, she was already glowing, but he figured it wouldn't hurt. "I'm also wondering if I can talk to you about one of our bodyguards, Xavier Delgado."

Terri brightened. *That wonderful man! He said he would try to get them over to see me and he did!* She made a mental note to thank him the next time she saw him. "Oh, Mr. Delgado! Such a gentleman!"

Kevin coughed. "Uh, yeah. Well, you see he has helped us a lot." *More than you could ever know.* "The guys want to thank him, surprise him if you will, with a ..." Kevin thought furiously, "with a birthday party. Only he's so stubborn. Xavier never tells us anything about himself. We want to see his personal records so we can find out a little more about him, when his birthday is." Kevin tensed, wondering if Terri would believe him.

She did. "Oh, how nice! However, I can't release that sort of information."

Kevin frowned inwardly. "Even to me?" He gave her a pleading look, staring directly into her eyes. "Please?"

Terri's heart skipped a beat. *Oh my God! He's so gorgeous! He sounds like he really needs that information.* A slow smile crept across her face, wondering how far she could push it. *Here goes nothing!* She shook her head reluctantly. "Even to you. I'm sorry."

Kevin sighed. *Great. Now what? Force her to? Fire her?*

"Unless..." she drawled, hopping down off her desk and coming up close to Kevin.

Kevin caught the tone in her voice and looked at her hopefully. "Unless? Unless, what?"

Terri smiled, a smile that made Kevin suddenly edgy and he stood up, staring down at her.

She placed a light hand on his chest, then looked up at him. "Unless you and I might be able to work out an agreement, say something that might be beneficial to both of us?" She barely finished the last word when she snaked her hands up to his face, bringing his head down to firmly plant a passionate kiss on his lips.

* * * * *

Nick could hardly contain his delight. Elaine was a veritable goldmine, showing him anything he wanted on her computer. Every few minutes Nick pointed to the screen, nodding his head for her to make a hard copy as he searched for what he was looking for.

"Damn! I never knew you guys had this much information on us!"

Elaine clicked away on her mouse. "This isn't the half of it. My boss's office has a ton too."

Nick threw her a teasing smile. "Say, doesn't the Enquirer pay big bucks for this info?"

Elaine laughed easily, leaning back in her chair. "I happen to enjoy my freedom, Nick. Besides, my boyfriend wouldn't be too happy visiting me in prison."

"What?" cried Nick, shocked. "So *I'm* not your boyfriend?" He was enjoying their flirting, knowing neither of them was taking each other seriously. He couldn't remember the last time he talked to a girl the same age as him without her swooning all over him.

"Well, *maybe* you can be," she drawled jokingly. "Do you like bikes?"

Nick nodded. "You bet. Harleys, low riders..."

"No, no, no. I mean mountain bikes, racing bikes. You know, ironman? My boyfriend is a triathlete."

"Oh." Nick gave her a defeated pout. "One of *those*. Lean, mean, a real stud."

Elaine pouted along with him. "Poor baby, I'm sorry. You're cuter than him, does that help?"

Nick sighed dramatically. "I guess." He noticed another screen. "Hey, give me that too." He tried not to show the excitement he felt as he studied Xavier's personal bio for a moment. Ecstatic over obtaining the information, Nick looked up and smiled sincerely at Elaine. "Ya know, you're really helpful. I say we give you a raise."

Elaine's eyes opened wide. "I say we give me a raise too!"

* * * * *

Howie raced to catch up with AJ as he hurried to Backstreet HR. "Do you think that was such a good idea freezing Brian's bank account? What if he needs money?"

AJ stopped just before the HR door, turning to Howie. "D, didn't you just see the amounts Xavier pulled from Bri's account? Shit yeah, it was a good idea! Besides, it's not completely frozen, he can still get \$500 a day. We didn't leave Brian completely broke."

"Do you think Xavier will know it was us?"

"How the hell could he? He still doesn't think we know anything, remember?"

Howie fidgeted nervously. "Yeah. Well let's see how Nick and Kevin are doing. I want to get out of here."

"Me too." AJ opened the door and both walked inside, noticing Nick leaning over Elaine, staring intently at her computer. "Wassup?"

Nick turned to them, a wide grin spreading across his face. "A lot." He waved several pieces of paper excitedly at them. "Jackpot."

'Great! Where's Kevin?'

"In with the spider."

"Huh?" Confused, AJ looked at Nick as Elaine tried to smother a giggle.

"Never mind."

"Well, go get him, Nick. We gotta talk."

Nick nodded, shoving his papers at AJ. "Okay. Read these. Really interesting." He walked over to Terri's door and opened it, not bothering to knock. There, pushed almost all the way into a corner of the room was Kevin, Terri's body pressing against him.

Startled, Kevin looked up, relief washing over him at the interruption. Nick just stood there, mouth agape. Kevin pried Terri's arms away from his neck, coughing apologetically. "Uh, well I see Nick is here. Time to go?" He questioned Nick, not waiting for an answer. "Oh, okay, sure," he babbled nervously, grabbing his coat and walking quickly over to Nick, who was still frozen to the spot. He pushed Nick out the door, glancing back at Terri. 'Um, sorry. I have to go. See ya." He closed her door, heaving a huge sigh.

"What the hell was all that?" cried Nick, finally finding his voice. Kevin ignored his question and marched out into the hallway, AJ and Howie following closely behind. Nick shot Elaine a quick look and waved goodbye to her before running out. He caught up to them at the elevator, Kevin punching the down button furiously. He turned to Nick before the blonde singer could open his mouth.

"Don't say a word. Not a goddamn word, okay?" he warned, his index finger pointed directly at Nick.

Nick grinned wickedly and turned to AJ and Howie, who were watching them both curiously. "Hey, when I said let's pour on the Backstreet charm, I didn't think Kevin would take it *that* seriously." Nick cracked up, shaking his head.

Howie looked at Nick, then Kevin. "Huh?"

"Shut up, Nick."

"What's going on?" asked AJ, irritated, looking up from the papers Nick had handed him.

Kevin hit the down button again, swearing under his breath. "I didn't get the information we wanted. Ms. Hamilton uh, sorta wanted to make a deal."

"*Seal* a deal is more like it," smirked Nick.

"Nothing happened, Nick, *nothing*," growled Kevin. "But if you so much as breathe a word of this to Kristin, I'll break your scrawny neck."

"She came on to *you*? Our HR person?"

Kevin frowned at AJ's disbelief, his pride hurt. "Yeah, AJ. Newsflash. Even I, an old married man can still turn on women."

AJ snickered, then started to laugh along with Nick and Howie. 'I'm sorry, Kev. Really. I didn't mean that way, it's just ...damn! I would have loved to seen that! Quick Nick, tell me all about it."

The elevator door opened and all four piled in, Kevin unsuccessfully trying to shut Nick up as Nick gladly spilled his guts.

* * * * *

For the first time since crossing the border Brian felt on more familiar ground. He looked around at the surroundings before him, noticing with some curiosity the similarity between American and foreign banks. Tellers, customers, bank vault, all the same except that here everyone spoke Spanish.

Xavier had been in high spirits when they arrived, the most enthusiastic Brian had ever seen him. Various papers had been shoved Brian's way and he signed each one, not giving so much as a glance at them. Brian could feel the curious look from the bank officer but he didn't care, his own eagerness growing as he realized that any moment he would be rid of Xavier. He knew with out a doubt that Xavier would never cross back into Arizona, that he would take the money and run.

Now as they both waited anxiously for the bank officer to come back from processing the transfer Brian felt a wild triumph coursing through him. Free. Free from the agony, the pain, the nightmare that this human monster sitting next to him had created. Brian craned his neck around, searching for the dark-haired officer and located him standing next to a teller, both of who were staring intently at a computer, the teller shaking his head and pointing to the screen. Brian smiled. *Probably can't believe how much I have in there.*

Brian sneaked a quick glance at Xavier, noticing the large bodyguard watching the two bank employees with interest. He wondered exactly how much he had signed away to Xavier but then realized he didn't care, any amount was worth it if it meant getting rid of this madman. Both watched with anticipation as the heavy-set bank officer sat back down, folding his hands carefully in front of him. The officer spoke slowly and Brian grasped that the officer wanted him to understand what was being said by talking in English.

"Gentlemen, lo siento, I am sorry. We cannot complete the transaction. Senor Littrell's account has denied the transfer."

"Denied?"

Brian hadn't realized that he had been holding his breath until he exhaled in shocked surprise. He turned to face Xavier, noticing the quiet fury seething in the bodyguard's eyes. "Why was it denied?" he asked frantically, a wave of utter desperation overtaking him as he saw his freedom evaporating before his very eyes.

The bank officer shrugged kindly, hearing the anxiety in the young man's voice. Xavier began to speak to the banker rapidly in Spanish, the sharp, barking language telling Brian in no uncertain terms that Xavier was incensed, even if he didn't understand the words.

The banker tried to calm Xavier, his voice soothing as he spoke quietly in Spanish to the bodyguard. The officer glanced around his bank, his eyes darting back and forth to see what effect Xavier's angry words had on his customers. No curious heads swung in their direction and the bank officer sighed in relief, turning his attention back to his two customers. The seats were empty.

Chapter 78:

Splitting Up

Realizing that they needed to talk, all four Backstreet Boys huddled in the corner booth of the nearly deserted coffee shop, located on the first floor of the building. Nick had made sure that Elaine printed several copies so that they were all able to look at their own copy. They scanned the information quietly, waiting for the waitress to hand them their drinks before saying anything.

Kevin sighed and placed his copy down, stirring his coffee. "Well?" he questioned.

"Backstreet sure has a lot of personal information on us," observed Howie, not liking what he saw.

"No shit," agreed AJ. "Now it's all starting to make some sense. Somehow Xavier was able to get a hold of this information. I wondered how X was able to do some of the things he did. Now I know."

Nick nodded, leaning back into the cushion of the high-backed booth. "I think we need to tighten up a lot on our security."

"Well, we already closed Brian's bank account," announced Howie, nodding at Nick and Kevin's surprised look.

"How did you do that?"

AJ smiled, punching Howie lightly. "D made Daniel an offer he couldn't refuse," he informed. "We got a look at how much X was stealing from Brian. Unbelievable! So we had Daniel put a hold on his account. I wish I could see the look on Xavier's face when he finds out he can't get his hands on anything!" AJ grinned wickedly and sipped at his coffee.

Kevin looked at AJ and grinned, taking a sip of his own brew. "Not bad. Do you think Xavier will know it's us?"

"That's what D said. No, I don't think so. Hopefully he'll just think it's a computer glitch."

"Well the last thing we want to do is make Xavier suspicious of us. That could ruin everything. We gotta be careful." All three nodded solemnly at Kevin's statement, aware of the terrifying consequences if Xavier ever found out.

"Okay, we've stopped Bri's account. We know where X got the info on us. Now what?" Nick looked at Kevin, Howie and AJ with eager eyes.

Howie was still studying his paper on Xavier, his hand covering his mouth in contemplation. He tossed the paper onto the table. "I say we go look up Xavier's sister."

AJ turned to Howie, confused. "His sister?"

"Yeah. Look. Notice how X didn't give an address for himself? But he put one down for his sister. Must have been living with her. And, she lives here in Orlando." He pointed the address out to AJ and AJ grimaced at the location.

"Great."

He thought for a moment, trying to figure things out. "Okay, here is what we'll do. D, you and I will go check out his sister, see what we can dig up. Kev, you and Nick head back to my house, wait for us. Read over the info again, okay? See if you can find anything else worth looking into." AJ stood up with the rest of the guys, throwing a twenty on the table.

"Hey, why can't we come with you?" argued Nick, not liking the arrangement.

AJ put his glasses on and stared at Nick, looking him up and down exaggeratedly. "Because, *Nicky*, your lily white ass is gonna be toast if they see someone like you down in that area. And, as much as I worry about you, I'm more worried about my Mercedes. I'm not letting my baby in that neighborhood!"

Nick perked up. "So I can drive your car home?"

AJ snorted, tossing Kevin the Mercedes keys as they headed for the parking lot. "No way." He gave Nick a warning look. "I mean it Nick. No driving." Howie and AJ hopped into the SUV and started to drive away, AJ's threatening scowl still visible as they exited the parking lot.

Nick turned to Kevin, an evil smile forming. "All right Kevin, hand them over," he demanded, his hand outstretched.

* * * * *

Brian winced in pain as they hurried, almost raced along the broken, crumbling sidewalks of Nogales, Xavier's hand wrapped cruelly around Brian's upper arm. Half dragging, half-pulling the young singer along, many tourists stopped to view the sight, stunned by the raw anger in the strange man's face, sympathetic to the younger man's fear.

Xavier refused to take a cab, instead walking the distance to the border, his anger fueled to the point of boiling over. He refused to listen to Brian's excuses, wanting instead to sort the matter out himself as he yanked the Backstreet Boy along the way. For a moment Xavier stopped, his hand held upright as he motioned for Brian to remain still, his eyes promising dire consequences if he didn't obey.

Flipping open his cell phone, Xavier dialed a number, waiting impatiently for someone to answer. He swore mightily as the phone searched for a satellite, roaming, trying to connect the call, the tall, dilapidated buildings on the street blocking a clear shot. He flicked the phone shut and shoved it into his pocket, ignoring Brian's curious stare as he picked up the pace again. In short time they were at the border entrance and Xavier immediately relaxed, shaking himself into a composed manner. As he expected, they let Brian through, only stopping him briefly to ask if he was a U.S. citizen. Xavier immediately showed his driver's license before being asked, the border patrol officer more interested in the bodyguard's facial injuries than the legitimacy of his citizenship. The officer waved them both through, his attention turned to the people waiting behind.

Satisfied that he could now get through, Xavier stopped after a few hundred yards, pulling his cell phone out once more. He quickly punched in the number, tapping his foot impatiently as he waited.

"You there?" he barked into the phone, listening intently. "Good. Do it." He closed the cell phone and gave Brian a satisfied sneer of revenge. Brian's knees buckled underneath him, too overwhelmed with anguish and he realized Xavier had just ordered the "surprise."

* * * * *

"Jeez, D, will you relax? It's not that bad!" AJ had to laugh a little, noticing his friend's nervousness as they cruised slowly down the derelict residential street, trying to pinpoint the exact address.

"Yeah, well how would you know? You don't live here around here. For all we know, this address could be fake!" He yelled as a group of rough-looking teenage boys suddenly jaywalked right in front of them, causing AJ to hit the breaks a little too hard. "See that? Did you see that? They didn't even look! Damn! Aren't they suppose to be in school or something?"

AJ held his hand up to his mouth, trying to cover his smile as he decided not to tease Howie about his "mothering" attitude. They waited patiently for the swaggering youths to cross, both careful not to make any aggressive eye contact with the group, who were now staring menacingly at them.

Howie prodded AJ. "Man, we are so lost. Let's get outta here."

AJ shook his head, tapping the piece of paper that held the address. "Not until we find that house. Say, roll down the window and ask those guys for directions, okay?"

"Are you *nuts*?" yelled Howie, his face registering his shock. He relaxed when he saw the smirk on his friend's face. "Real funny AJ, ha ha. That's what I've been trying to tell you! This area is pretty scary."

"Exactly why I wasn't going to drive my Benz down here!"

"Okay, so let me get this straight. We're expendable, but your car is not?"

"Yep," answered AJ, not listening to Howie's heavy sigh. He turned onto another street, sure they were close to finding the address. AJ nudged Howie, pointing with his finger at a non-descript house sitting on a corner lot. "Bingo!" He swung the Landrover into the driveway and parked, his eyes bright with anticipation. "Come on, D. Let's go see what we can find."

* * * * *

Kevin wondered what had possessed him to let Nick take the wheel, knowing that AJ would freak once he found out. He braced himself against the dashboard as Nick turned the corner, the tires squealing in protest at the high speed.

Nick threw the oldest Backstreet member a crazy grin, thrilled by the engine's raw power. "Isn't she awesome? I'm gonna get me one!"

'Nick, slow down! Jesus! You won't *live* long enough to get one!"

Another wicked grin was tossed Kevin's way and he groaned, knowing Nick wasn't listening to his advice. Another corner, taken faster than the first, put Kevin's heart up to his throat and he quickly understood AJ's fascination with this car. Nick floored the pedal, the sleek car effortlessly matching the demand for speed. Caught short by the timing of a red light, Nick suddenly hit the brakes.

"What, no beating the red light?" mocked Kevin dramatically.

"I'm a *responsible, careful* driver," Nick joked in a high, prim voice, his eyes glancing into the rear view mirror.

"My ass you are," scoffed Kevin, shaking his head.

"*Kevin.*"

Nick's voice had changed, the tone a mixture of alarm and apprehension. Kevin glanced at him curiously, noticing that Nick's entire body was tense.

"What?"

"Keep your head forward, don't turn and look," spoke Nick quietly, his eyes trained on the red light. "Remember when AJ and I almost got into a accident coming downtown? It was with a blue truck."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, the same truck is right behind us."

Involuntarily, Kevin began to turn his head around and Nick barked at him. "Don't! Don't move. He's watching us! *Shit!*" He tapped his long fingers anxiously on the steering wheel, biting his lip.

"Are you sure?"

Nick nodded slightly, his eyes flickering nervously at the rear view mirror. They both heard the ominous sound of an engine rev up from behind them, indicating the driver's intentions. "Somebody Xavier sent?"

Kevin could feel the panicky sheen of sweat spring to his brow. "I don't know. Why is he revving up like that?"

"Because as soon as the light changes he's gonna floor it, maybe shove us off the road."

Kevin couldn't believe it. *It was the middle of the day for Christ's sake, on the outskirts of downtown Orlando!* He immediately noticed that the intersection was void of cars, a strange lull in the normal daily flow of traffic. *Son-of-a-bitch!* Kevin suddenly understood the truck driver's intent. So did Nick.

With a squeal of power the Mercedes and the truck's tires raced for position as the light turned green, the truck illegally jumping the gun and shooting ahead just fractions before the light turned. Kevin watched in shock as he saw the truck come up even with the Mercedes, the truck's body dangerously close to scraping the driver's side of their car. Nick concentrated on his driving, expertly maneuvering the Benz away from the truck's attempt to sideswipe them. He floored the gas pedal savagely and the Mercedes kicked into high gear, sending it screaming away from the truck. But not for long.

"Fuck!" breathed Nick, shaken by the truck's power as it quickly pulled up next to the Benz. Both machines jockeyed for position as they raced along the nearly deserted street, the truck edging closer.

Wild-eyed, Kevin clung on, scrambling to get a closer look at the driver. He felt Nick slowing down and wondered why, turning his attention to the front and noticed a construction site looming, their lane forming into one. The truck slowed too, matching Nick's speed, and now Kevin could see the driver clearly, the passenger side window rolled all the way down.

Kevin blinked in surprise, his mind registering in slow motion the glint of a gun being pointed at them. With a surreal, dreamlike cry of desperation Kevin lunged for Nick, yanking him and the car's steering wheel hard towards him, the sharp crack of their shattered window exploding around them, just seconds before the Mercedes plowed head on into the construction site.

Chapter 79:

Aggie and Lizzie

Howie gave AJ an irritable look as they both stood before the front door, poking his friend in the ribs when AJ leaned forward to ring the doorbell. "Take those stupid sunglasses off," he ordered. "No one likes talking to someone they can't see!"

AJ heaved a sigh, reluctantly pushing his shades up to rest on his head. Howie was right, of course, but it still annoyed him that his friend never stopped ragging him about it. The glasses were now such a habit that he felt naked, insecure without them. He pushed the bell again and turned to see Howie giving him an approving nod. AJ tossed him a peevish look, quietly mouthing, *screw you*. Intent on returning the compliment, Howie opened his mouth but stopped when the door suddenly opened.

A young, obviously exhausted young woman stared at them harshly, her eyes shifting questioningly at the two men before her. She swayed back and forth, the natural motion of a new mother who held her baby in her arms. A curious head popped around the mother's waist, two brown eyes filling with excitement.

"I know who you are!" she announced importantly, jumping out from behind her mother.

"You're AJ and you're Howie!" She turned to her mother, her voice filling with pride. "*I told you* Uncle X said I could meet them. I told you, but you didn't believe me!" Her bright smile was contagious and AJ and Howie grinned back, charmed by her childish confidence.

"Where's Brian?" she asked suddenly, her eyebrows knitting together in concern. "He's my favorite. Didn't he come?"

Howie could hear the disappointment, the hurt in her voice and bent down to come eye level with her. "Uh, no sweetheart, Brian couldn't. He's sorry. He's with your uncle right now." Howie looked up from his squatting position to catch the mother's uneasy expression. AJ caught it too and gave Howie a knowing look, one eyebrow raised high.

Howie stood up, offering the apprehensive woman an easygoing smile. "Aggie, right?" She nodded, switching the sleeping baby to a more comfortable position. "Would it be possible to talk for a moment? We won't take much of your time, I promise. I can see you have your hands full." Howie smiled again, looking politely at her and the baby.

Aggie stared at Howie, her excited daughter, and then at her sleeping baby. The instant she had opened the door her heart had sunk, understanding why they were here. She had hoped to be long gone by this time, out of state, away from the whole mess, but the couple whom she decided to sell the baby to had refused to pay her exorbitant fee. Not liking the way she had smoked, the way she had taken care of herself during her pregnancy, they went searching elsewhere, looking for a more *"suitable"* mother, as they

had so scornfully informed her before leaving. Now she was stuck with another mouth to feed, no money, and no prospect of leaving Florida anytime soon.

Aggie eyed the two Backstreet men before her, a tiny smile creasing at the corner of her mouth as an idea began to take shape. She ushered them both in with a wave of her hand and led them to the family room, shoving the toys off the couch. "Lizzy!" Aggie shouted to her daughter, "go get them something to drink!" She glanced at AJ, then Howie, who both shook their heads as they sat down. "No? Okay. Liz, go get me a Sprite."

Declining to take a seat, Aggie stood, cautiously checking to see that her daughter was out of earshot. "Okay," she whispered hurriedly, "I'm not going to beat around the bush. I know exactly why you're here. You want information - I've got it. But it's gonna cost you. A lot." She stared directly into AJ and Howie's eyes, her no-nonsense attitude almost as intimidating as her brother's.

AJ was more than glad to stop the petty small talk before it even began. "Done. How much do you want?" he asked bluntly, pulling out his checkbook. Aggie thought for a moment then named a number, mentally scolding herself for not asking more when AJ calmly wrote the check out and handed it to her.

Lizzy came back with the drink, careful not to spill. Aggie frowned, wondering how to get rid of her daughter so that they could talk. Howie sensed her hesitation and smiled at Lizzy, grabbing her small hand and pulling her over to him.

"Hey, Lizzy. Your mom, AJ and I need to talk privately for a moment, okay? Nothing about you, just some grownup talk. Would you mind drawing, coloring something for Brian? He's not feeling too good right now and I think a picture from his number one fan would really cheer him up!"

Lizzy's eyes lighted up, nodding her okay. She ran towards her room, stopping to pause at the doorway. "What should I say?"

All three smiled at her eagerness. "Anything sweetie," replied AJ. "Anything you want." Lizzy nodded, skipping away. AJ turned his face away from the departing child, his smile turning into a frown. "Xavier has a niece that sweet? He's doesn't deserve her."

Aggie shrugged indifferently, staring down at her child who gave a sickly cough. "Whatever. So what do you want to know?"

AJ stared at her. *Lizzy doesn't deserve you either*, he thought contemptuously.

Howie took over, curious to ask a question that had been bugging him. "Aggie, Xavier is your brother. Why are you willing to make a deal with us, to betray him?"

Aggie looked up from examining her baby, her dark brown eyes glittering. "Because he's a monster," she answered, her voice filled with loathing. She looked at the distressed expression on the two singer's faces and nodding perceptively.

"But I'm guessing you already know that."

AJ sat on the edge of the couch, his hands rubbing together agitatedly. "Yeah. So, what's going on? I mean, what's this all about? Why is Xavier doing this?"

Aggie sighed and put her sleeping baby into a portable playpen then straightened up, her face drained. "Because he *likes* it. Because it *amuses* him! Because it's all just a *game* to him." She noticed the confused looks exchanged between the two Backstreet Boys and continued. "Lemme explain. You see, Xavier will pick out a victim, always someone rich. He'll study them, find their weakness, then use it to his advantage to carry out his sick little mind games, if you want to call it that, until the person breaks. Then he moves on to his next target and starts all over again."

Howie gulped. "Until they break?"

Aggie nodded, now sitting across from the two singers. "Yeah. Xavier says half the fun is seeing how long it takes before they crack." She gazed solemnly at them. "It's a contest. He likes the challenge, the game of power and control between him and his victim."

It took a moment before AJ found his voice. "What kind of things does Xavier usually do to his victim?"

Aggie pressed her lips together, wondering how far she should go. *Well, he did pay me for it.* She decided to be honest.

"First, he usually gets their confidence, their trust." She saw them both nodding their heads and carried on. "Then Xavier will do something, something to terrorize the person. Like beat 'em or intimidate 'em with promises to hurt their loved ones if they don't play along." Aggie noticed Howie's head bow and she sighed. "That's what happened to Brian, right?"

"Yes," said AJ roughly. "Go on."

"Well, it usually ends after a few weeks or until" Aggie was roughly cut off by AJ.

"A few weeks?"

A sick look crossed over their faces and Aggie tilted her head curiously at them. "Yeah, why?"

AJ got up and turned away, the pain almost too hard for him to bear. Howie stood up too, his eyes closing for a moment in distress before opening them to see Aggie's inquiring stare.

"Because this has been going on for *months*."

Aggie sucked in her breath, shocked at Howie's announcement. "He, he never does that," she stammered, at a loss. "Xavier gets bored pretty quick, he's always careful not to stay too long, in case he slips up and gets caught. I can't believe my brother has been with your friend for that long. It doesn't make sense."

AJ tried to remain calm as he turned towards Aggie, the nagging suspicion he carried for so long finally becoming a reality. "It would make sense if Xavier is attracted to Brian." He watched the young mother carefully, seeing her face fall. Aggie lowered her eyes, unwilling to look at him. AJ walked over to her, bending down to grab her hand and forcing her to look up.

"That's it, isn't it?"

"No, no," stumbled Aggie, confused. "Xavier's not like *that*, he's not gay..." she trailed off, recalling the fascination, the look of excitement Xavier had displayed when he saw the young Backstreet Boy for the first time on TV. That predatory look had made her queasy and she knew now that it had nothing to do with her being pregnant.

"I know Xavier was pretty obsessed about the whole thing, more than I've ever seen him, but I thought it was just because it was a new victim; not someone he was attracted to..." she whispered, almost apologetically.

AJ stood up resignedly, rubbed his eyes then put his sunglasses on. "Just how dangerous is Xavier?" he asked quietly, trying to keep any emotion out of his voice.

Aggie glanced at Howie, seeing the pleading in his eyes for the truth. "He scares me," she whispered. "More than you'll ever know. He'll stop at nothing to get what he wants." She stood up, alarming both men with her last words. "And Xavier never loses."

* * * * *

The shock of being shot at scared Kevin more than the crash itself. Not being able to see the collision due to yanking Nick and steering wheel towards him, Kevin instead felt the impact of the crash, his neck and back slammed hard by the side air bag of the Mercedes, which had instantaneously exploded on contact. Nick fared a little worse, not having the advantage of sitting upright when the front bags burst. His left shoulder and face were hit by the front passenger airbag, smashing him into Kevin's upper body.

Hearing Nick moan, Kevin struggled frantically to sit upright, finding it impossible as he was pinned firmly by the air bags and Nick.

"Nick!" he yelled hoarsely, his throat raw from inhaling the gas and chemicals of the exploding bags. "Are you okay?" He winced in pain as he tried to move a little, not sure whether it was because he was wedged in so tightly or that he actually might be hurt. He felt Nick move a little, his moan louder. Trying desperately to shift around, Kevin began

to thrash wildly about, determined to see if Nick was all right. He suddenly felt himself fall backwards, a pair of strong arms yanking him out as his door was wrenched open.

"Hold on, hold on, we gotcha," came a deep masculine voice, filled with concern. Lightheaded, Kevin shook his head to clear it as he was carried away from the crash, straining anxiously to locate Nick. Gentle arms laid him down on the ground, excited voices telling him to relax, that help was on the way. Kevin ignored the advice and sat up, frantically calling out Nick's name.

"I'm here, Kev."

Kevin heard Nick's reply and followed his voice to where Nick stood a few yards away, holding the side of his head with his hand as if trying to keep it upright. Concerned, helping construction workers led Nick over to where Kevin sat, gently lowering Nick to the ground. The faint wail of a siren vibrated in the background as Kevin reached out to grab Nick in a weak embrace.

"You okay, Kev?"

"Yeah, I think so," Kevin nodded, releasing Nick to inspect the blonde singer closely. Except for the bright red mark on the side of Nick's face, he looked pretty good. "How about you?" Kevin brushed some of the shattered glass gently off Nick's clothing.

"I think I'd better start looking for a new Benz for AJ," Nick stated soberly and Kevin laughed a little, giving Nick another thankful hug that he was feeling well enough to joke.

A creaking, groaning noise pulled their attention away from each other and they turned in astonishment as they watched several workers scramble away from the Benz. Like a whale's tail that rises up then sinks back under water, the Mercedes' rear bumper tilted upwards then slid quickly into a deep hole, a vibrating boom and dust filling the air. Nick helped Kevin up, both staggering slightly as they walked over and peered down into the black cavity. Blue eyes met green ones, both in obvious shock. The only thing that had kept them from crashing into the deep construction pit had been the quick rescue of their helpers and a small but very important mound of dirt that had acted as a barrier between them and certain death.

* * * * *

Noticing that his Mercedes was not already parked, AJ was pissed but not surprised when Howie and he drove into the garage. *Oh man, I knew it! Kevin let him drive!* Hopping out, he slammed his SUV door hard in frustration, his eyes narrowing dangerously as he looked at Howie.

"He's not here," he announced in a warning tone.

Howie sympathetically threw his arm across AJ's shoulder and sighed dramatically. "What can you do? He's young, he's in love," he mocked jokingly, trying to account for Nick's absence.

"With *my* car," retorted AJ gruffly, smiling a little at his friend's humor. He eyed Howie curiously as they entered the house. "Hungry? I can make you a special AJ gourmet delight while we wait for the guys."

Howie frowned, his voice tinged with concern. "Is this anything like the last one you made?"

AJ nodded enthusiastically, pulling open his refrigerator. "Yeah. Even better!"

Howie groaned and slumped dejectedly into his seat, bravely preparing himself.

* * * * *

AJ leaned over the counter, his hands clasped as if in prayer, as he watched Howie intently.

"Well?" he questioned impatiently, annoyed that Howie had curled his lip before taking a bite. Howie chewed slowly, his eyes closed, waiting for the gag reflex to kick in. His eyes popped open in surprise as he swallowed.

"Not bad!" he lied, hoping he could keep it down.

AJ grinned in delight, giving a whoop of satisfaction. "Told you!" he nodded, grabbing a plate for himself.

Howie sighed inwardly. *The sacrifices I make!* He picked a huge chunk off of his plate and secretly dropped it into the waiting mouths of Jack and Vegas, smiling politely and nodding his approval every time AJ looked his way.

"When do you suppose Nick and Kevin will get back?"

Hoping it landed somewhere near the dogs' eager mouths, Howie hurriedly dropped another piece to the floor just as AJ swung his attention towards the kitchen's clock.

"Better be soon. This food isn't going to last forever, ya know!"

Howie glanced at a piece skewered on his fork. *It will be, the way you made it!* He managed to toss several offending pieces to the floor when AJ stood up and went to search for something in the refrigerator.

"Good God, what is that *smell?*"

AJ poked his head out of the frig, seeing Nick and Kevin walking awkwardly into the kitchen, their movements stiff.

He opened his mouth to reply when he realized that he hadn't heard the sound of the garage door opening. Suddenly suspicious, he walked over to where the two were gingerly lowering themselves into chairs. He eyed them warily.

"Niicckkk," he sing-songed in a warning tone. "Where's the Benz?"

Nick rubbed the back of his head and winced at the touch, finally getting the nerve to look AJ straight in the face. "Um,...what color would you like?"

AJ opened his mouth to scream but stopped, carefully giving Nick and Kevin a closer look. Their faces were creased with fatigue and distress, their clothing rumpled and dirty, the side of Nick's face reddened as if he had been sunburned.

"What happened?" asked Howie, a step ahead of AJ. He abandoned his food, giving AJ a worried look as he went over to inspect them both.

"A little surprise from Xavier," snapped Kevin grimly, informing them of what had happened.

Nick watched AJ as Kevin explained, grimacing slightly as Kevin demonstrated with his hands how the Mercedes took a nose-dive. AJ looked at Nick in shock and Nick feebly smiled up at him, waiting for the ranting and raving to begin. Instead, he got pulled into a fierce hug, AJ clinging to him tightly.

"Oh, God," he choked, his voice blurred.

"I'm sorry about your car," Nick began but stopped when AJ pulled away from him in amazement.

"Nick! I don't give a shit about the Benz! It's just a car. I can replace a stupid car. I can't replace you and Kevin." His voice shook with emotion and Nick placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, giving AJ a warm smile as he turned to look at Howie and Kevin. For a moment they were silent, each realizing how close Xavier had come to destroying their lives. Nick coughed, breaking the silence.

"Does this mean you'll let me drive your new one?" he asked, giving AJ a smirk.

The emotional tension shattered and everyone laughed, AJ shoving Nick playfully away from him. "No way. I love you man, but not *that* much!"

Nick nodded, a fake look of hurt crossing his face. "AJ *really* doesn't love me," he pouted to Kevin as he sat down again, noticing that AJ had placed a plate of food before him. "What is *this*?" he pointed, his tone changing to shocked disgust.

Howie smiled maliciously. "AJ's gourmet delight," he informed him. "Go on, try it."

* * * * *

AJ glared at Nick's dramatic groans of pain as he clutched his stomach. "Oh shut up, you big baby, it wasn't that bad!" he said crossly, tossing Nick a couple of antacids. They were still in the kitchen, finishing up the rest of a Chinese take out after Kevin emphatically refused to touch AJ's cooking.

Howie popped four beers, handing one to each guy before sitting down. "Okay, as much as I'd like to spend the day debating AJ's cooking skills, we need to seriously decide on what to do next."

Nick nodded, chewing the tablets quickly and washing them down with his beer. "D's right. Now that we know Xavier has tried once, do you think he'll try again?"

Kevin frowned as he studied his beer bottle. "Possibly. I'm sure he knows by now that we're not dead. What he doesn't know is that *we* know he was behind it."

Vegas jumped into AJ's lap and he rubbed the little dog's head absentmindedly, troubled by what he was thinking. "Guys, listen to this. X was trying to hurt us, kill one of us. So, if he had been successful, what would have happened? The tour would have stopped, been canceled, right?"

"Yeah..." said Howie, curious.

"Which means that Xavier *never intended* on coming back for the second half of the tour to be a bodyguard!" reasoned AJ.

"So why did X take Brian with him, if he planned on there not being a tour? Why not just leave and go on to the next victim, like Aggie said?"

"Because he's not through with Bri," explained Nick, closing his eyes tightly, sickened by the realization. "He needs him, ...for whatever reason."

Kevin could hear the panic in Nick's voice, the alarm. "Nick, hang in there," he said quietly, praying that Nick wasn't going to lose it again.

Nick opened his eyes and bit his lip hard, trying to gain control of his emotions. "Guys, we need to find Brian. Quick."

AJ placed his dog on the floor, rising to his feet. "I think I know how. We need Sam."

Nick looked at him quizzically. "Sam, our manager? I thought we were gonna keep this to ourselves."

"Yeah, well plans change."

"So what's your idea?" asked Kevin.

"Well, I'm thinking Sam might know how to get a hold of Xavier. If Sam can reach Xavier he could tell him that there's been an emergency, oh, have him say that a few of the dancers and musicians quit suddenly and that we need to meet immediately in Tucson to rehearse with the new group before our next show. And, in order to do that, we need *Brian there*." AJ looked at all three. "See where I'm going? Xavier has no reason not to believe Sam. I'm figuring Xavier will bring Brian to us, especially if Xavier is still playing his "game."

Nick nodded, trying not to get too worked up. "That's *if* Sam even knows how to reach Xavier."

AJ looked at Nick. "You've got any better ideas?"

Shaking his head, Nick grabbed the portable phone. "No. Call him."

* * * * *

Brian barely felt Xavier shove him back into their grimy hotel room, still too shocked to notice much of anything. He stood numbly where he was, sickened by the fact that he had not been able to stop Xavier; that no matter what he had tried, it had all been a pathetic, worthless effort. It would have been laughable if not for the fact that his failure would now cause untold suffering; that his lack of courage and insight would forever haunt him at his inability to save his friends.

Brian glanced bitterly at Xavier, remembering the look of pure revenge Xavier had thrown him when he ordered the "surprise." A raw wave of anger coursed through him, a burning of such intensity that it snapped him out of his trauma. Brian heard the small beep of a cell phone and watched as Xavier calmly opened it, as if he was expecting the call.

"Is it done?"

Brian saw the transformation in the bodyguard's face as it went from relaxed to furious, Xavier's hand gripping the cell phone tightly.

"Are you sure?"

Brian heard the stunned disbelief and watched with interest as Xavier swore mightily at the unknown caller.

"I paid you three grand and they didn't even get a scratch? I shoulda known better than to hire you, " he hissed savagely.

Brian felt a heated rush of relief, realizing Xavier's surprise had somehow gone sour. *They're okay! They're not hurt! Xavier wasn't able to carry out his plan!* A wild thrill of

satisfaction ran through him as he observed Xavier closely, the bodyguard's face twisted in fury. The idea that Xavier's carefully laid plans had so spectacularly backfired on him made Brian laugh outright, a exhilarating feeling of satisfaction flooding his senses. He laughed again, the time more forcefully and Xavier stared at him hard, his eyes narrowing as he snapped his phone shut.

Right then Brian realized Xavier was not invincible, that he could be thwarted at his own game; that no matter how careful and exacting plans were, fate could come in and screw everything up. Feeling a fierce desire to ridicule the livid bodyguard standing before him, Brian threw Xavier a wicked smile of contempt, suddenly unafraid, not caring anymore what happened to him or anything else for that matter.

"Ah, poor Xavier. Too bad. Life sucks, doesn't it? No money, no Backstreet Boy, *no nothing*."

Xavier eyed him darkly. "Says who?"

"Says me. Game's over. You lost."

Xavier cocked an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

Brian ignored the agitated clenching and unclenching of Xavier's fists. "Because I'm not playing anymore. Because you can't make me."

"Oh really?" Xavier purred, a tone of sexual intimation heavy in his voice. "I'm pretty sure I could convince you," he challenged, grabbing Brian's arm into a tight grip, his warm breath barely grazing the young singer's ear.

"Could you?" Brian sneered, seeing the intense desire in Xavier's brown eyes. "I don't think so, *faggot*." Giving a sharp tug, he yanked himself out of Xavier's grasp. "Face it, Xavier, you're a fucking loser."

Brian knew the first punch was coming and prepared himself for it, the blow coming down low, across the small of his back. *I can take this*, Brian thought, *it's not too bad...Oh my God!* Brian's mouth hung open in a silent cry, as the force of the second punch paralyzed him, sending him quickly to the floor. Without a pause, Xavier slammed into him again and Brian refused to scream, to let Xavier know the extent of the agony he was inflicting. He could hear his own erratic wheezing of his lungs, the pounding of his heart as he struggled to stand upright, to ward off another blow, but he was too late as another punch landed on his right shoulder, a sharp stab of pain piercing right through him. He screamed or maybe he didn't, he couldn't be sure. It didn't matter anymore as he looked up into Xavier's expressionless face. The bastard knew exactly what he was doing and he was taking careful, well-timed blows, trying to extract the most amount of pain with the least amount of effort.

Brian didn't think it was possible to endure any more, but he did, feeling each hit become surprisingly less painful, replaced by a kind of numbness that he welcomed

gladly. He swayed a moment, but managed to regain his balance, staring coolly into Xavier's eyes, daring him with a silent *hit me, go ahead, I've come this far*.

A small twist of Xavier's lips let Brian know that Xavier understood his unspoken boast. He took the next hit and cried out, but the cries were of triumph, not pain, as he grinned savagely to let Xavier know that he could stand it, would stand it, not matter what damage he inflicted.

Xavier nodded when it was finally over, rubbing his knuckles tenderly as he stared impassively at the unconscious form sprawled out on the floor. He regretted his actions only for the sole purpose that he now didn't know what to do. With a conscious, awake Backstreet Boy he could still continue, still have an opportunity to play the game, to get more money. But now that was gone, due to his lack of control. He sat down on the edge of the bed contemplating his rash action, irritated that Brian could make him lose his self- control, something he prided himself on maintaining. He stared at the unconscious singer, slowly regaining his composure as he brooded over what to do next. Obviously the young Backstreet Boy needed medical attention but there was no way he was going to seek medical help. Something told him he should quit, take his losses and run, but his perplexing attraction to this clever and determined young man ruled out any idea of leaving.

The small vibrating hum of his pager jerked his attention away from the fallen singer and Xavier tugged the pager out of his pocket, eyeing in quiet surprise. It was displaying AJ's home number. Only AJ should have no way of knowing his pager number. The pager was used for one thing and one thing only: that Sam, the stage manager needed to get in touch with him right away. Curious, Xavier picked up the phone and dialed the number.

Chapter 80:

Sam

Sam rubbed his face wearily as he leaned back into his seat, quietly listening to AJ and Kevin, his eyes clouding over occasionally when AJ described some of the suffering Brian had been put through.

"I sure wish you guys had told me sooner," he exhaled with a heavy sigh.

"Well, we didn't," Nick spoke up, annoyed at Sam's disapproval. He had been standing quietly in a corner but now crossed the room, flinging his large frame into the nearest chair, his hands running irritability through his hair. "We wouldn't have told you at all, except that we need to know if you can help us."

"I think you need the police, not me," Sam said bluntly.

Howie shook his head, wondering if it had been a smart idea to inform their manager of what was going on. He glanced over and noticed that Kevin was having the same misgivings.

"Sam, the guys and I have decided not to get the police involved. Whether that's wise or not, who knows? But knowing Xavier, and believe me we do, we sure don't want to endanger Brian by some police foul-up."

Sam stood up, restless from sitting down too long. "Okay. I don't agree with you, but I respect your decision. What can I do to help?"

Relaxing for the first time since Sam had arrived, Howie gave him a relieved smile. "We need to know if you can locate Xavier, get in touch with him. Brian's with him and we gotta find a way to get to him away from X."

Their manager began to pace, a routine habit that all four had witnessed when Sam was faced with a problem. "Yeah, I can reach him. Every one of the stage crew and help are required to carry a pager so that we can get a hold of them at a moment's notice. Xavier should be carrying his, but by the way you've described things, he might not be." Sam stopped pacing for a moment, his temple furrowed in concern. "So, say we get in touch with him. What then?"

Nick looked expectantly at AJ. "Bone?"

"Well, check this out," explained AJ. "We're not expected in Tucson till the first of the week, right? So we need a reason to be there earlier. What if we tell X that some of the crew quit, that we need to regroup quickly and practice with the new hires?"

Sam gazed up at the ceiling for a moment, letting AJ's suggestion sink in. "Not a bad idea, but I don't think it would work. Xavier knows the crew too well and would check it

out. So we would *really* have to fire someone and if we did that, it would be impossible to find someone new on such short notice. If Xavier is as smart as you say he is, it wouldn't be too hard for him to figure out that we were lying. No, we need a fool-proof excuse, one that he would believe totally."

Nick perked up, interested. "Such as?"

Sam gave the young blonde singer a reassuring smile, reaching over to snag AJ's phone and punched in Xavier's pager number. "Watch," was all he said.

* * * * *

More than just a little curious as to why Sam would be paging him, Xavier waited impatiently as the phone rang and rang, not sure if anyone was going to pick up. He eyed Brian, still slumped on the floor, one arm wedged unnaturally beneath his body. Xavier contemplated for a moment, wondering if he had broken the young singer's arm, then quickly dismissed the thought, confident enough in his own expertise to know if he had. His attention swung away from Brian when he heard the abrupt click of a phone being picked up.

"Cooper speaking."

"Sam? This is Xavier. You paged?"

"Yeah, hold on a minute." Xavier could hear the clatter of a phone being settled into its cradle. "I've got you on speakerphone cause AJ, Nick, Howie, and Kevin are here with me."

Nick shot Sam a look of pure shock and jumped out of his seat, turning his astonishment towards Kevin. Kevin had his hand over his mouth, studying Sam intently, and shook his head warningly at Nick.

"Okay," they heard Xavier cautiously reply, his voice holding a hint of suspicion in it.

"I've been trying to locate Brian. His cell phone and pager don't seem to be working. Do you know where he is? We've got some problems."

Xavier glanced at Brian lying on the floor, remembering the deactivated devices shoved into his suitcase. "Brian's here with me. But he's taking a shower right now."

Howie glanced at AJ, who was frowning at the way Xavier ignored Sam's question about Brian's cell phone.

Al four guys listened as Xavier grunted into the speakerphone, as if trying to stand up. "What sort of problems?" he asked brusquely.

Howie, AJ, Kevin, and Nick looked at Sam expectantly, wondering what he would say, their faces taut.

"All sorts of fucked-up problems," Sam answered harshly, his irritation clearly evident over the phone. "Someone broke into AJ's house and some things were stolen..."

Xavier eyes narrowed. *That little prick! I told him not to take anything!*

"...then some jerk tried to run Nick and Kevin off the road..."

"Kevin?"

AJ could hear a trace of incredulity in the bodyguard's voice, realizing X thought Kevin was still back home. A fine bead of nervous sweat trailed down his back as he shot the dark-haired singer a concerned look.

Kevin butted in, understanding Sam's aggressive approach, realizing the best defense was to use an offense tactic.

"Kristin and I had a little *disagreement* at the airport Xavier, so I came here," Kevin drawled, making his voice sound bored and annoyed at the same time. "It's not something I'm really want to go into, okay?"

Xavier relaxed a little, his wariness gone. He smirked a little at the tone in Kevin's voice. He had heard rumors about some of their fights and realized Kevin must have flown back to Orlando.

Sam continued on, acting as if the interruption between Xavier and Kevin hadn't occurred. "...and now I've got security problems at the Tucson McKale center! I'm sick and tired of all this shit! So I'm calling a meeting..." Sam's voice faded, as if he had turned his head,... "and don't give me that look, AJ! I don't care if I *am* interrupting your time off!" Sam's voice became clearer. "I'm not too happy about our standard of safeguards for these guys, so I'm assembling everyone early in Tucson to overhaul security. The last thing I need is for some idiotic person to get to these guys. Then you, me and everyone else can kiss our jobs goodbye, got that?"

Xavier bristled at Sam's contemptuous tone but stopped, his lips pursed, his mind racing as he glanced once more at Brian's limp form. *Oh, this is too good to be true!* he smirked, a wicked grin forming when he suddenly saw the chance, the break he had been searching for.

"Sam, I completely agree. Security has gotten sloppy. In fact, *we* ran into trouble today too. Some over-infatuated fans. Being just one bodyguard, I wasn't able to keep him completely safe. Brian got knocked around a little." He nudged Brian's motionless figure with the tip of his shoe, not expecting a response and not getting one.

By now Nick was literally jumping up and down, fuming with rage, his face contorted as listened to Xavier, hearing the smooth lie in the bodyguard's calm voice. Kevin grabbed him by the arm, his eyes wide with concern.

"How is he?" questioned Sam, butting in before Nick could say anything. "Is Brian okay?"

Xavier eyeballed the fallen singer, a satisfied grin on his face. "Yeah, he should be just fine. I'll make *sure* of it."

"X, this is AJ. Put Bri on the phone for a minute, will ya? I need to speak to him." The rest looked at AJ in alarm, surprised by his request. They listened with baited breath to see what Xavier would do, Nick praying that Brian would indeed pick up.

"Wish I could, but as I said, he's in the shower right now. I'll make sure he calls you." Xavier's voice was cool, in control, unnerving all four Backstreet Boys with his chilling demeanor; all of them knowing Brian would never call, just as they knew he was not taking a shower.

Xavier quickly changed the subject. "When and where do you want to meet?" He listened intently, jotting down the information Sam instructed to him. Xavier hung up, a gleam of pleasure displayed upon his face as he got up off the bed, bending down to lift Brian up. "Looks like our lucky day," he informed the unconscious figure. "You're still get to make me a rich man." He placed the blonde singer gently on the unmade bed, propping a pillow under his head. Xavier studied the Backstreet Boy for several moments, frowning as he took note of the injuries he had inflicted upon the young man. Reaching over into his bag, Xavier pulled out a fine nylon rope, thoroughly tying Brian up, careful not to make it too tight. Making a mental list of the things he would need, Xavier patted Brian's face tenderly, careful to avoid touching the angry wound to his temple, which was now oozing blood from the fall. He checked his handiwork once more then headed out the door, turning back to view Brian lying prone on the bed.

"Gotta make a run to the border," he notified the silent form, "so don't get too comfortable, okay?" He laughed a little, then shut the door.

Chapter 81:

Planning

Sam hung up the phone, his eyebrows raised in question as he glanced at the four guys before him.

"So, how was I?"

"Awesome," replied Howie, coming over to give a congratulatory slap of approval. "Your idea was perfect. I don't think Xavier doubted you for a minute."

Sam nodded his agreement and sat down on the couch, taking a sip of the cold drink offered to him by Kevin. "Yeah, well I figured our story would be more believable if it was based in fact. Since Xavier knows already what I've told him, he won't check deeper into it." He took another taste from his drink, scrutinizing AJ and Nick who were in the corner talking quietly to one another.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Sam asked to Kevin, concerned about Nick's dark and brooding behavior.

"Nick should be all right," sighed Kevin, watching closely. AJ had one arm wrapped around Nick's shoulder, Nick nodding every now and then in reply to what AJ was saying to him. After a minute they broke up, coming over to the group. Kevin raised his dark eyebrows at AJ with an inquiring look.

"I'm *fine*, Kevin," answered Nick exasperatedly, not giving AJ a chance to respond. "I can handle it. But once I see Xavier, all bets are off. I'm still gonna put a bullet in his brain." Nick smiled bitterly at his boast.

"Bullet is too good for him, Nick," AJ snorted. "I bet we can come up with something better than that!"

"You guys can plot revenge later, okay? Cause right now, we've got more urgent things to do," stated Sam.

"Like what?" AJ tilted his head to the side, interested in what Sam had to say.

"I wasn't kidding when I told Xavier we need better security measures. That X has so much personal information on you is scary and if what you told me is only *half* true, you're in deep trouble. We need to change things as much as possible before we leave. Phone numbers, bank accounts, anything you think Xavier has access to, change it. Get your door locks re-keyed. Alter security codes. Understand?" Sam waited until he saw four heads nod in response before carrying on. "I know it's the holiday weekend, so it's gonna be a headache. Anyone that you trust, family who could help out...*oh shit!*"

Sam shot up out of his seat and began pacing intensely as all four guys looked at each other, then at Sam in distress.

"What?" said Kevin and Nick simultaneously, on edge.

Sam rubbed his head wearily and heaved a big sigh, stopping his pacing to look directly at the worried singers. "Your families. I forgot about them. If Xavier has info on you, he sure as hell has it on them. Sam watched as their faces fell, confirming his fears. He nodded grimly. "There's no way we have the time to change their records. And, from what you've told me, you don't want them to know what's going on, right?"

"So what do we do?" asked Howie, a small note of panic creeping into his voice.

Sam hung his head for a moment, deep in thought. He brought his head up, a small, mysterious smile playing upon his lips. "It's gonna cost ya, big time, but I don't think you'll mind."

"Sam, don't beat around the bush. What?" cried Nick.

"I'm going to hire private security. The crème-de-la-crème. Twenty-four hour protection for everyone that you think might need it. It's probably not as good as carting everyone off to a deserted island, but damn close."

Kevin nodded in agreement. "What kind of security people are we talking about?"

"Ex-Secret Service, ex-FBI. Maybe ex-military who've gone private. I want to hire people that are experts in low-profile, so that your family doesn't know they're being guarded. Sound okay to you?"

AJ heaved a sighed, impressed. "Yeah." He glanced at Nick, Howie, and Kevin, each expressing their approval. "Get the best. Money is no object."

Sam nodded. "I thought so." He reached into his pocket, bringing out a small personal recorder and pressed the button. "Call Mark. Inform him on change of plans. Have him call other crew, set up meeting times. Get in touch with Eric, inform other bodyguards. Call Chris to discuss hiring security." He clicked off the recorder for a moment, a frown on his face. "Well?" he barked irritably. "Do I have to do this all by myself? Get off your ass and help me!"

Nick, AJ, Howie, and Kevin sat there for a second, frozen, then shot up out of their seats, each scrambling to obey as they hurried off in different directions. Sam smiled a little at their madcap rush, shaking his head. "Amateurs," he scoffed good-naturedly, then turned his attention back to his recorder and flicked it on.

* * * * *

A drenching shower of cold water stunned Brian's system, his body stiffening as the iciness shocked him into consciousness. He felt himself being supported upright, too much in a stupor to do anything but blink the dripping water out of his eyes. The shock of his abrupt awakening faded as the coldness of the water took effect. It was sheer heaven, the coolness bathing his body, the cold rawness soothing the burning ache. It felt better than anything he had ever felt, ...Brian arched and screamed a silent cry as his body slammed full force into reality, the pain savagely ripping his breath away as it coursed throughout him. He wildly flailed his arms about, struggling against the strong hands that held him down.

Xavier's face loomed suddenly before him, trying to get his attention, but Brian was in too much pain to notice. He felt Xavier grab hold of his face, forcing him to look straight at the bodyguard. A pill was being shoved powerfully into his mouth and Brian shook his head no, fighting, clamping his mouth tight.

"Brian!" rasped Xavier angrily. "Take it. Otherwise you won't be able to stand the pain."

A fierce wave flowed up and down Brian's body, confirming the fact with a vengeance. He gasped in agony and Xavier took the opportunity to pop the white pill in his mouth, forcing him to swallow.

With every ounce of energy left, Brian shoved Xavier away, coiling his body into a ball and panted, his blue eyes dark with pain. "How long?" he pleaded hoarsely.

"For the pain to go away? About five minutes."

Brian moaned and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to bear the pain. *Five minutes! It might as well be five years.* He curled his arms around his stomach, as if holding himself would help to alleviate the agony. He tried to count off the minutes. *God, this is worse than anything I've ever felt!* He wanted nothing more than for the pain to go away, for someone, *anyone* to put him out of his misery. He knew he would have no suck luck. Bravely, he cracked one eye open to find Xavier staring calmly at him, waiting. Brian curled up tighter as another spasm of pain hit. "I thought you said five minutes," he gasped harshly. "It's not getting any better."

Xavier frowned a little then walked over to Brian's bed, sitting his large frame down on the edge. He fished a plastic bottle out of his pocket and shook out one more. This time Brian needed no prodding. He snatched the pill out of Xavier's hand and quickly swallowed it.

"You're gonna be okay, if you follow my instructions," began Xavier in a soothing, almost hypnotizing voice. "I hit you, hit you hard, but only enough to do external damage, not internal." He stopped for a moment to observe Brian's breathing. "It's working, isn't it?"

Brian nodded, brushing a trickle of sweat from cheek with a shaky hand. His body relaxed a bit, enabling him to straighten out on the bed.

"Good," grunted Xavier, rising from the edge of the bed. Xavier followed Brian's gaze and noticed the young singer staring longingly at the bottle of pain pills he had inadvertently placed on the side table. Xavier reached over to seize the bottle just seconds before Brian did, clucking his disapproval.

"No, no, no," he chided. "Anymore and you'll be a walking zombie. I need you awake and alert."

Brian pushed himself into a sitting position on the bed, slightly amazed and slightly worried at how good he felt. He knew without a doubt that he would not be able to function without those wonderful pills. Brian shifted uneasily, realizing that Xavier had complete control over his pain. He tried to block the thought of seeing himself begging, pleading to do anything Xavier asked if only he would give him another pill.

"So why do you need me awake and alert?" he asked suspiciously. "Game's over, remember?"

Xavier let loose with a hearty laugh, shaking his head at Brian's bewilderment. "Sorry to disappoint you, but it isn't. Change of plans. You can thank Sam for that."

"Sam? My manager?" Brian watched as Xavier went into the bathroom, hearing him yank the handle to turn the shower on full-force.

Xavier came back. "Yep. Seems like he's unhappy with security measures. Wants us all in Tucson early to go over some new strategies. Apparently you guys have been having some trouble. Gee, I wonder how that could of happened?" he smirked, enjoying his sarcasm. "Anyway, the game's still on. Banks are closed for the holiday, but come next week you and I got some business to finish. Okay, come on, strip."

Brian was trying to digest all the information, so he almost missed Xavier's last words. He jerked his head upright, his blue eyes filled with confusion. "Huh?"

"You heard me, strip. You need to take a shower, and I need to see what damage I did to you, see what needs to be fixed."

Brian's eyes of confusion turned to ones of fear. "No."

Xavier shook his head exasperatedly and gave a short scoff. "I'm not going to molest you! As tempting as that sounds, being rich is more of a turn on."

"No."

Xavier's eyes narrowed dangerously, impatient. "You think you can refuse?" He strode over to the Backstreet Boy, towering over him. "I'm asking you nicely. I won't ask nicely again."

Brian swung his legs over the edge of the bed, avoiding eye contact with Xavier. He now knew better than to argue and slowly grabbed the edge of his shirt, wincing slightly as he pulled it over his head. He wondered if the pain medication could be wearing off so soon, scared that if he angered Xavier anymore he wouldn't get the relief he needed.

Xavier studied Brian's chest for a moment. "Stand up," he barked. "Take your pants off."

Hoping to keep his shaking hands to a minimum, Brian stepped out of his pants. "Turn around," instructed Xavier. Brian complied, feeling the intent gaze as the bodyguard scrutinizing his back closely. He felt Xavier's hand press into the small of his back, examining a bruise. "Okay, now face me."

Once more Brian obeyed, meeting Xavier with defiant eyes. "I'm not taking anything else off."

Xavier rolled his eyes dramatically. "Did I ask you to?" he jeered. He jerked his head in the direction of the bathroom. "Go on, take a shower."

Brian wobbled unsteadily towards the bathroom, stopping to regain his balance and glared at Xavier's silent look of "need any help?" He'd rather fall flat on his face than let Xavier "help" him.

Xavier nodded in respect as the young singer made his way into the bathroom, encouraged by Brian's determination to do it alone. Determination that Brian was going to desperately need if he was going to pull himself through the next few days. Because Xavier had seen the damage he had inflicted on the young Backstreet Boy and was disturbed by what he saw. Apparently he had overestimated his boasts about not damaging him internally.

Chapter 82:

Getting Ready

So intent was Kevin on finishing up the last of his phone calls that he felt rather than saw Nick leap onto the bed. He made a mad attempt to keep the papers from scattering everywhere, but failed. Jotting down the last of the information on the back of his hand, he hung up the phone, giving Nick a sour look of exasperation as he arose from the edge of the bed.

"Thanks for nothing, Nick. You coulda warned me."

"Where's the fun in that?" Nick said, smiling. Kevin shook his head, amazed by the sudden transformation in him, gloomy one minute, excited the next.

"What are you? Bipolar?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

"So, did you get us a flight?"

Kevin had to grin at that. "Yep. I used a little of the Backstreet Boy muscle. Got us a charter flight. Ready to go anytime we are." He motioned for Nick to follow him and they headed down the hallway, in search of the others. "You know, some days it pays to be a prick," he bragged.

Nick turned to him wide-eyed, giving him a sweet, perplexing look. "Since when *aren't* you?"

Nick whooped in laughter as Kevin took a swipe at him, racing away like mad, knowing he was going to get his butt kicked.

* * * * *

Sam was still in the same spot when AJ and Howie returned, talking feverishly on the phone and doing what he did best: barking orders. Both guys sat down, respectfully giving Sam his space as they waited for him to finish. Nick and Kevin came careening around the corner and stopped when they saw the warning slash of Howie's hand telling them to settle down. Kevin gave one retaliating push at Nick then sat down on the couch. Nick came over to AJ, crouching down.

"You guys all done?" he whispered, not wanting to annoy Sam.

AJ nodded. "Yeah. Not a whole hell of a lot we can do about the banks, but everything else should be taken care of by the end of today." Nick glanced at Howie, who confirmed the same success.

"Cool. Kev got us a flight out. We can leave anytime tomorrow."

AJ raised his eyebrows at Kevin, impressed. "Great. Now all we have to do is wait for Sam."

Sam continued speaking on the phone, oblivious to the four sets of staring eyes trained directly on him. There was a pause as he was put on hold and he glanced up. He looked incredulously at the four. "You're all finished?"

They all nodded, pleased.

"What about a flight?"

They all pointed to Kevin, indicating it was a done deal.

Astonished, Sam told the caller he would get back to him later and hung up. "You're talents are going to waste. You should be in management."

AJ grinned. "Yes, but we get paid soooo much more singing."

* * * * *

Brian held onto the neck of the showerhead, letting it support him as he leaned into the heated spray. He breathed deeply, trying to suck in as much heat and steam his lungs would allow. He decided to stay in as long as his trembling legs would support him, not sure if he could physically make it back to his bed now without help. Gathering up all his strength he let go of the showerhead, testing his ability to stay upright. A few seconds later Brian grabbed the neck again, discouraged. Once more he let go, standing upright just a few seconds longer than the first try. A savage grin of success crossed his face and he goaded himself on, willing himself not to sway as he released his hold for the third time. How long he forced himself to stay upright he had no idea, but knew he would have to stop when he noticed that the water was losing its warmth. Shutting off the flow, Brian cautiously dried himself off, breathing in deep gulps of air as he winced from the pain and shock at seeing his body. Xavier definitely knew what he was doing, the ugly, raw marks of a closed fist still imprinted on various parts of him. He dressed slowly, his hand touching a sensitive spot as he pulled his shirt back on. He felt for the soreness, realizing with a grimace that it hurt right where his kidney was located. *Great. A bruised kidney.* He remembered that Xavier had also touched the spot when he was examining him. Glad to know that he couldn't see the injury, Brian finished dressing and exited the bathroom, stopping in surprise. The room had been cleaned, a fresh bed awaiting him. Xavier sat on his own bed, watching the news, eating what looked to be some sort of take out.

Xavier put his food down, motioning Brian to get into his clean bed. The feel of the cool, smooth sheets almost sent Brian into ecstasy, relishing the fresh smell. He curiously looked at Xavier, noticing the bodyguard handing a styrofoam cup of soup to him.

"Albondigas soup. Try it."

Brian took a few tentative sips of the steaming broth, savoring its exotic flavor, noticing the abundance of rice and vegetables mixed in. He took a few more hefty swallows, suddenly starved. Xavier nodded in satisfaction and gave Brian some warm flour tortillas, lightly coated with butter. Brian wolfed those down too, not being able to remember the last time he had eaten decent food. He winced in pain, not sure if he was cramping from the rapid inhalation of food, or whether his painkiller was starting to lose effect. Xavier noticed Brian's expression and frowned, pulling out another pill. Brian eyed it secretly, not willing to show the eagerness on his face when Xavier handed it to him. He returned to finish the last of his food after swallowing the pill, ignoring the queasy rumbling in his stomach.

A sudden wooziness overcame Brian, his eyes too heavy to keep open. His vision became blurry and he blinked questioningly at Xavier. Xavier's eyes gleamed, his mouth curled into a pleasant smile. "Painkiller *and* sleeping pill. Amazing what you can get south of the border." He peeked at his watch, counting. "I'd say in about three minutes, you'll be sleeping like a log." He glanced up, noticing that Brian had already closed his eyes, his head turned sideways, already asleep.

* * * * *

Last night's sleep was a definite improvement over the night before and Howie felt a lot more positive as he entered AJ's kitchen, looking for something to eat. He found Nick already there, digging into a bowl of cereal. Mouth full, Nick motioned with his spoon to the assortment of breakfast fare displayed on the kitchen table, all certifiably junk food.

"What did you do, buy out the whole convenience store?"

"Sorta," admitted Nick. "See anything you like?"

As much as Howie hated to admit it, he did. He scanned the selection before him, deciding what might be the healthiest of the lot, when he stopped. "Oooh! Hostess snowballs!" He remembered eating them when he was a kid. He quickly tore the package open, guiltily stuffing one of them into his mouth, glancing nervously to see if anyone was looking.

Nick snorted in laughter, watching Howie enjoy his guilty pleasure. "Jeez, D, you're acting like you've committed some sort of illegal act!"

Howie licked his fingers, starting in on the other one. "Umm. Good," was all he mumbled, inspecting what other sinful treats were there. His eyes opened wide when he saw the Pop-Tarts and began to open the box. Nick hooted again in laughter.

"What's so damn funny at eight in the morning?" grouched AJ as he straggled in.

Nick smirked at AJ. "You mean besides you and your bed head?"

AJ smiled sourly at Nick. "Have you taken a look at yourself, Zit-boy?" Before Nick could make a suitable comeback, AJ spoke again, sounding just like Howie. "Oooh! Snowballs!" He grabbed a package, eagerly ripping it open.

"What?" he muttered irritably, his mouth full, as he watched Nick and Howie begin to laugh uproariously.

* * * * *

Brian could sense Xavier's presence, but in the dark he had no idea what the bodyguard was doing until he felt strong arms pulling him upright, forcing him out of bed and out of his dreamless sleep. Brian protested weakly but suddenly understood what Xavier was doing. He barely made it into the bathroom before he vomited. Xavier held him until the heaving subsided, then literally carried him back to his bed, the blonde singer too exhausted to walk the few short steps.

Brian weakly accepted the water Xavier handed him, frowning slightly as he noticed another pill placed into his hand.

"It may make you sick, but it also makes things tolerable," advised Xavier. "Take it. If I hear you gagging in your sleep again, I'll help you."

Reluctantly Brian slipped it into his mouth and swallowed. He closed his eyes, praying for sleep, praying he would never wake up, ever.

* * * * *

Kevin walked into the kitchen, staring incredulously at the amount of torn and scattered wrappers on the kitchen table. He frowned, eyeing them all suspiciously as the guys gave him a happy hello.

"Is Nick on his sugar high again?"

He picked up an empty, sticky wrapper with the tips of his fingers, carefully looking at it. "Snowballs? Oh my God. I haven't had one of these in years!" He looked eagerly at the three. "Got any more?"

* * * * *

Brian wasn't sure what time it was, nor did he care. Everything seemed to be blending into one routine of getting up, going to the bathroom, eating, taking medication, then sleeping again. He loved the sleeping part, treasuring every minute when he wouldn't have to experience the pain, the nausea, the weakness. He knew every time he woke up

he felt a little bit better, a little less groggy, but wasn't willing to admit it to Xavier, who hovered over him like a mother hen. For the umpteenth time that day, he drifted back into the blissful arms of sleep, still praying it would be the last time he ever woke up.

* * * * *

Sam was the last one to board the chartered jet, giving the steward a nod, and headed down the aisle to find an empty seat. He threw his carry-on into the overhead compartment and sat down next to Kevin, smiling his approval. "Things are looking good," he confirmed. "We should be in Tucson in about four and a half hours."

Kevin tossed the newspaper he was reading to the side and reclined a little more comfortably in his seat. "Everyone able to make it to Tucson on time?"

Sam picked up Kevin's newspaper and tucked it under his arm. "Practically. Most are going to make it ahead of us, some a little later. I've been informed all Backstreet security will be there right on schedule."

Kevin listened to Sam as he watched AJ, Nick, and Howie argue about something. "And when exactly is our meeting with Xavier?" He felt his stomach automatically tighten into knots when he mentioned the bodyguard's name.

"Later today. Five p.m. in one of the McKale conference rooms."

"So this is it."

They looked at each other silently, understanding the magnitude of those four simple words Kevin spoke, knowing that in a short time they would finally be able to reach Brian. Sam saw the twinge of grief in Kevin's eyes before the dark-haired singer closed them, his jaw set into a firm line. He shook his head sadly, wondering how Kevin held up in times like these, knowing that a close member of your family was suffering and you were too far away to do anything about it.

Kevin pushed the very thought Sam was wondering about out of his mind. He knew that if he didn't, he would be a nervous wreck once he got off the plane in Tucson. He sighed and opened his eyes as he heard arguing behind him. Wondering who was louder, the jet's engines whine for power or Nick, Howie, and AJ's fighting, Kevin decided he would rather listen to the engines. Kevin excused himself to Sam. "Think I'm gonna knock some sense into those guys," he stated, getting up from his seat. Sam nodded and picked up Kevin's paper, studying it.

* * * * *

The tantalizing odor of hot food lured Brian out of his sleep and he opened his eyes to see Xavier standing over him, a tray in his hands.

"Rise and shine!"

Brian ignored the fake cheerfulness. "What time is it?" he groaned, stretching. He immediately regretted doing that as he felt his chest and back constrict with pain.

"Early afternoon," informed Xavier. "We have a meeting to attend to, remember? Better eat and get your ass moving. The more you move around the better you'll feel."

Brian seriously doubted that but refrained from saying so when he saw the determined look on Xavier's face. Whether he liked it or not, Brian knew Xavier intended to have him up and about. Xavier set the tray down next to Brian, indicating with a wave of his hand to eat. Brian looked at the meal before him. Soup. Again. He bit his lip in frustration. Soup had been fine the first couple of times, in fact he had welcomed it, but now he was tired of it, tired of the same Mexican soup Xavier brought to him every time.

Xavier seemed to know what he was thinking and nodded. "Boring, but good. Besides, it's a lot easier to throw up soup than it is solid food."

Xavier had him there. The last two times he ate he had been successful in holding his meal down, but before that, impossible. He knew, as well as Xavier, that the pain medication he was taking was making him sick, but nausea over intense pain was the lesser of two evils. He finished quickly, drinking a large glass of water in hopes of rinsing the soup's taste away.

Satisfied that he had completed his meal, Xavier indicated impatiently for Brian to get up. The young Backstreet Boy threw him an unpleasant look but nevertheless complied, understanding that if he didn't do it, Xavier's large hands and fast temper would. Cautiously, but as quickly as he could, Brian swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up, hoping he wouldn't completely keel over. To his surprise and Xavier's satisfaction he felt no dizziness and no trembling.

"Now comes the hardest part," stated Xavier.

Brian glanced up, realizing he had been staring at his feet. "Hardest?" he repeated.

"Yeah. Walk."

Tentatively Brian took a small step, then another. Xavier snorted in disgust at Brian's hesitant movements forward.

'Not baby steps! Regular ones. I want to see if you can walk to the door and back." Brian began to walk over. "No! Normal steps!" Xavier barked.

Gritting his teeth, Brian walked as normally as he could over to the door. He turned to see a disagreeable look plastered over the bodyguard's face. "This is the best that I can do, Xavier, considering I just got the shit beat outta me!"

A smile of approval instantly replaced the sour one. "Spunk. I like that. Anger is gonna make you heal quicker."

Brian walked over to the bathroom, his stride more confident. Maybe Xavier was right, but he wasn't going to let him know that. "You're full of it," he commented, before slamming the door shut, ignoring Xavier's pleased laughter.

* * * * *

Nick shook his foot nervously, too uptight to play any of the games he had carted on board. He couldn't believe they had two more hours to go, the first two seemed to take forever. Kevin had informed them early on that he wasn't going to tolerate listening to them squabbling the whole flight and had effectively cancelled their argument with one threatening look. Now, Kevin and Howie were both asleep, and AJ was reading some sort of magazine. Nick glanced over to see what AJ was reading and AJ turned his shoulder away, successfully blocking Nick from seeing anything. Nick snorted in disgust.

"It's okay," jeered Nick, "we all know you like Britney. Come outta the closet, Bone. I wanna read *Teen Beat* too."

AJ continued to read, a middle finger pointing up to the ceiling to explain what he thought of Nick's comment. Kevin laughed out loud and opened his eyes. Nick turned to him in surprise, pissed that Kevin had been pretending to sleep.

"Thanks a lot Kevin. Here I've been trying to be quiet this whole time and you've been faking it. I've been bored out of my mind!"

"So what did you want me to do? I'm not going to play any of your stupid games with you."

"Well at least you coulda talked to me."

"About what?"

"About Brian."

Kevin heard the depressed tone in Nick's voice and felt a twinge of guilt. AJ peeked over his magazine, concerned, hearing the same thing Kevin had.

"Okay, Nick, what about Brian?"

Nick leaned back in his seat, staring at the overhead reading lights. "Well, has anybody thought about what we're gonna do when we see him?" Nick noticed that Howie had "just woke up" and rolled his eyes in exasperation, aware that Howie didn't look very sleepy.

"Hello, D."

"Do?" questioned Howie, ignoring Nick's sarcasm. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, how do we let Brian know *we* know? Xavier is gonna be all over him. How do we get Brian away from Xavier, safely?"

AJ frowned, lowering his magazine. "Yeah. We've been so excited about finding Bri that we haven't thought this thing through."

"Okay, let's figure this out," began Kevin. "First time we see Brian will be at the conference, right? And Xavier will be with him." He paused for a second, thinking. "Xavier doesn't know that we've found out about him. If Sam's plan is solid, X should think that this is just an emergency meeting."

"So he shouldn't be suspicious," added Nick.

"More like pissed," answered AJ. "Remember his failed attempts? I don't think he's going to be too happy to see us."

"Which is why we gotta act like we're not happy either, that we're still mad at Brian. We need to convince Xavier that nothing's changed. If X doesn't feel suspicious, we should have more access to Bri."

Nick sighed and massaged his temples. "That still doesn't answer my question. What do we do when we get Brian away from X?"

Kevin stared at Nick. "We convince him that we know all about it. It shouldn't be too hard."

Nick jumped out of his seat, agitated. "No! Jesus! You're all missing the point! Xavier didn't *have* to come back! He didn't *have* to bring Brian! He wasn't coming back to the tour in the first place. Think! Why is X coming back?"

AJ saw where Nick was going and felt sick. "Because Xavier still has something planned for Brian. He's not finished with his *game*."

Nick spun on his heel, pointing at AJ. "Exactly! I was trying to figure out why Xavier was coming back. The only thing I could figure was that whatever Xavier was trying to do, it didn't work. I don't think he's coming back because he failed to hurt *us*, I think he's coming back because he failed to get what he wanted from *Brian*."

Kevin groaned. "Shit, Nick, you're right. And if X didn't get what he wanted, he's gonna try again. Which means, he still has some kind of hold over Brian. Fear, intimidation, whatever. I'm not sure we can convince Brian that he'll be okay."

"Why can't we just get a couple of our bodyguards to grab Xavier, beat the crap outta him, threaten him never to come back and be done with it?" said Howie. "Then we have Brian, and no Xavier!"

AJ gave him a severe look and Howie sighed. "Okay, okay, I know. Wishful thinking."

"We need to get a hold of Brian, alone. If we can talk to him, find out what kind of pressure Xavier is threatening him with, then we can figure out how to stop him."

"The key word: if," Nick said discouragingly.

The other three nodded solemnly, Nick's gloomy mood contagious to them all.

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Brian tried not to show the excitement he felt as he rode north to Tucson with Xavier, on their way to the designated meeting. He felt better than he thought possible, thanks to Xavier's decision that he take two pills instead of the regular one. He resisted at first, then gave up, knowing Xavier would find a way to shove them down his throat if he refused. Brian shifted uncomfortably in his seat, wondering why if he felt so good would his lower back still hurt. Xavier noticed his movement and studied him for a second before turning his attention back to the road.

"Back hurt?"

Brian nodded, curious that Xavier seemed to know what was the problem. "Yeah."

"Does it hurt to take a piss?"

Startled by Xavier's questioning, Brian thought for a moment. "I don't know. I don't think so. Who can tell with all the pain medication you've been shoving at me?" Brian didn't like the way this conversation was going. "Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"No reason."

Brian knew that was a bald face lie but said nothing and stared out the window, thinking.

* * * * *

Nick, Howie, Kevin and AJ all piled into the taxicab, saying goodbye to Sam, who was taking another cab, anxious to get to the arena as soon as possible. They waited for the driver to place their luggage in the trunk, feeling the sweat springing to their brow. It was already warm in Tucson, making them wish they had brought lighter clothing. Being stuck together in the cramped quarters of the taxi, they all could feel Nick's nervous excitement. AJ frowned, studying Nick, then Kevin, then Howie. They had the same sort of anxious animation as Nick, only in varying degrees.

The taxi driver hopped into the driver's seat, turning to face them to await instructions. Glancing at his watch for a moment, AJ nodded. They still had time. "Take us to the nearest bar," he ordered. Noticing the curious stares from his friends, AJ explained.

"I think we all need a good stiff drink to calm our nerves," he announced. "We need to be as calm as possible if we are going to pull this off."

Kevin agreed. "Let's go."

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Brian turned his head as the sign flashed by, Tucson, fifteen miles. A knot of nervous elation boiled in his stomach and he clutched the armrest tightly to try and relieve some of the tension.

"Ready?" questioned Xavier and Brian looked at him. Through the whole drive up to Tucson, Xavier had asked and answered with single words, letting Brian know that the bodyguard was thinking intently about something else.

"Ready?" Xavier questioned again.

"Ready? What do you mean? Of course, I'm ready," said Brian sarcastically, irritated by Xavier's simple question.

"No, I mean *really* ready."

Brian froze, hearing the satisfied smirk in Xavier's voice. It had been a while, but it all came back with a horrifying rush. It was the confident, mocking voice, indicating that it was time for a new game.

"Xavier, please," he heard himself begging, hating himself for it. "You said all you wanted was to finish what we started. Then you would be gone, right?" Brian stared hard at Xavier. "Right?"

Xavier turned to flash him a repulsively twisted smile. "Depends."

Brian despised his vague replies, but played along. "Depends. Depends on what?"

"Depends on how good of a boy you're going to be."

Brian waited, saying nothing, knowing the routine by now.

Swinging onto the Broadway off ramp, an arrow indicating the way to the arena, Xavier finally spoke. "Yes, it should prove interesting. How well you can behave." Seeing that Brian was not taking the bait, Xavier fumed in frustration, turning his teasing into an angrier tone. "Behaving. Reckon you do that, Brian? Huh? Cause if you can't, I'm thinking about sticking around for a long time." Brian turned to see the promise in Xavier's eyes. "A long, long, time."

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It took more than one drink to settle their nerves, but Kevin made sure that no one had more than two. They walked silently down the corridor, led by one of the arena's security guards. The guard stopped by a double door, giving the four a bob of his head,

then left. They stared at the closed door for a moment then looked at each other for reassurance. Out of the four, Nick was the most composed and it surprised Kevin. He glanced at the youngest Backstreet Boy, his green eyes forming a question. Nick looked calmly back, his face serene.

"Let's do it."

AJ and Howie nodded their agreement and entered the room, their eyes searching for Brian. They found Xavier first, slouched in a seat, one booted foot planted unceremoniously on the conference table.

They all quickly dismissed him, trying to locate the one they were here for. Their eyes finally rested on Brian, who sat on the opposite side of Xavier, his head bowed, staring fixedly at his hands. Slowly, little by little, Brian raised his head to meet the eyes of Howie, Kevin, Nick, and AJ.

Chapter 83:

Together Again

Being the first to arrive, Brian quickly grabbed the closest seat he could find and eased his battered frame into the chair. It had been a struggle, trying to keep pace with Xavier's long strides as they walk through the lengthy corridors of the arena, knowing that Xavier was intentionally keeping up a brisk pace. Brian fumed in angry silence, his back and chest throbbing fiercely as he shifted painfully in his seat, wondering if it was too soon for another pill. Before he could ask, Sam and the others arrived, the room filling with Backstreet security, many nodding their recognition at Xavier and him, while others just stared outright at the injuries marking their faces. Without thinking Brian touched his forehead, suddenly embarrassed by his appearance and bowed his head. He realized what he must look like, and wondered for the hundredth time what reaction, if any, he would receive from Howie, AJ, Kevin, and Nick once they arrived. His eagerness, his impatience at seeing them again was tempered by the fact that he did not know what to expect, what kind of a welcome would be thrown his way. He slowly looked up, hoping for the best and bracing for the worst as he heard them enter, dread and excitement filling his entire body.

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Howie gave no nod of recognition to Brian as he walked into the room, remembering the guys' firm agreement: to play it safe, to act as if nothing had happened. Easier said than done. He took a seat, the farthest away from Brian and Xavier as he could, wanting to secretly study them both, especially Brian, without being noticed himself. Picking up a packet of information that had been placed at his seat, Howie casually skimmed through it. He felt his heart pounding erratically, the rush of nervousness beginning to make him sweat. He offhandedly placed his hand over his mouth, as if contemplating what he was reading before him, hoping to masked any facial expressions that he feared would betray him.

Stay calm, be cool he chanted mentally to himself, *you've been mobbed by thousands of fans in Rio, you sang the national anthem in front of millions! Being in a small conference room with people you know shouldn't bother you!* And yet it did. He realized the thousands of nameless faces were just that; nameless, anonymous people that meant nothing to him. Not like the small figure that was hunched over a few yards away from him.

It was his eyes that Howie noticed first. The way Brian slowly glanced up when he first heard them enter the room, the small flicker of elation, the barest glimmer of relief revealed for a split second before it vanished, replaced by a vacant blue-eyed gaze, void of any emotion.

The second thing he noticed almost caused him to gasp out loud. The few short days apart had taken its toll on Brian, the ugly gash on his forehead, the dull and lifeless pallor to his skin attesting to that fact. Fighting hard for control, Howie bent his head

down, pretending to read the paperwork in his hand. Instead, he prayed for strength, his lips forming soundless words, not realizing until he finished that he had said the prayer completely in Spanish.

It was only natural for Kevin to show more concern for Brian than Xavier when he saw their facial injuries; after all he was family, and family was always came first.

"What in God's name happened to you?" he questioned directly to Brian, ignoring Xavier. He already knew, but realized such a noticeable injury demanded a curious inquiry. He kept his face straight, impassive as he listened to Brian's fake story about the over-eager fans and how Xavier got hurt in the process, trying to protect him. Sickened by the obvious lie, Kevin felt despair when he saw Brian glance at Xavier, as if asking for his approval.

Kevin nodded after Brian finished his story, hoping he sounded reasonably businesslike to Xavier. "Hmm. Another reason I'm glad we're here early to meet about security. Looks like everything is falling apart." Kevin turned to Sam, who had taken the end seat at the head of the table. "Sam? Everyone's here. Let's get started." Kevin leaned back expansively in his chair, arms crossed. Pretending to take note as Sam began to review and assess the current situation, Kevin instead concentrated on his cousin, desperately wanting to capture his attention. *Come on Brian! he hissed inwardly, look at me! Let me see that you're okay! God, Brian, give me a sign, anything that says you're all right! Cause if you don't, I'm not sure I can sit here much longer acting indifferent!*

As if forcing Brian with just his strength of determination, Kevin saw Brian glance up and look his way. Their eyes locked for only an instant, but it was enough. Enough to make Kevin want to weep with frustration and anger for they held no hope, no trace of happiness, only fear, trapped and consumed by resignation. Kevin was staring into the eyes of a walking dead man.

If he could just control his anger he would be okay. AJ knew that his smile right now looked like a grimace, but he also knew that's how he always looked, so he wasn't concerned. His eyes were another matter. Knowing that his ever-present glasses were the only thing saving his ass right now, he relaxed behind the dark shades, letting his eyes display the anger his actions could not. AJ felt a grim pleasure in directing his glare towards Xavier, knowing that X could not read the hatred in his glance. It was therapeutic, liberating and healing at the same time to express his rage without being caught. He wished the guys had the same outlet as he, knowing by years of togetherness, that they were suffering inwardly.

AJ turned his attention to Brian, his eyes softening as the anger he felt evaporated into sorrow. Brian looked so alone, so lost, sitting there by himself. He wanted to stop the whole meeting right now, to shout to Brian that everything would be okay, that the

monster sitting near you would soon be gone, the nightmare over. He couldn't, of course, but knew all he had to do was wait, hold on, because soon, very soon, it would.

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Nick didn't know whether it was the two drinks he had or his strength of mind that kept him so calm, so he gave silent thanks to both. On the drive over to the arena, he had paid careful attention to Kevin, AJ, and Howie's advice on how to act, patiently listening as they drilled instructions over and over again, until he had snapped back at them to shut up, irritated that they thought so little of his self-control at a time like this.

Now that he was in the conference room, he knew that the others were having trouble maintaining their composure. What kept him relaxed was the knowledge that Brian was finally here, sitting across from him, and although the worse for wear, still breathing. That was enough for Nick. Frick and Frack, together again, the way it should be, and starting right now, he was never gonna let Brian out of his sight.

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Brian exhaled his breath in a sad sigh. He should have known better than to get his hopes up once the guys had arrived. Their aloof and business-like manner had made it very clear that nothing had changed between them. He watched as Howie chose the farthest seat away, taking a sudden interest in the papers laid before him, not willing to meet him eye to eye for even a second. *And why should he? You gave him nothing but grief!* he thought bitterly.

Kevin's curt-like question about his injury had showed no cousinly concern, just curiosity. Brian noticed Kevin listening half-heartedly to his explanation before making a short comment, then turned his attention towards Sam and the meeting, impatient to start. As Sam began, Brian felt his cousin's eyes burning through him, willing him to look up. Reluctantly, he glanced up for a moment to stare at Kevin then glanced back down again, resigned to the fact that Kevin had not changed, even a tiny bit.

AJ was definitely pissed at him. Even through the darkened shades, Brian could feel his fury at having to be here early, at having his vacation time ruined. Whatever the cause, Brian knew AJ blamed him solely for it. He wished he could apologize and would try to do so later, but right now he just wanted to shrink away from AJ's intense stare. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, wanting another pain pill.

Nick, out of the four, seemed completely calm, almost bored with the whole meeting. Brian knew he was probably thinking how long it would be before he could leave, only here because it was required. Brian felt no hostility radiating from Nick, unlike AJ, but then he felt no affirmation of friendship either. Sighing inwardly, he accepted that fact that his relationship with the guys was no better and, by the looks of everything, probably worse than before.

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Xavier leaned into his seat, relaxed and confident. For the first few minutes he had been cautious, suspicious of everything and everyone, his senses screaming to watch out. He had studied Nick, Howie, Kevin and AJ closely, scrutinizing every move, every reaction as they entered the room. Unless they were superb actors, they seemed genuinely annoyed at being here, especially AJ, and no love was lost upon their meeting up with Brian. Finding Brian's expressions easier to read, Xavier noticed the quick flash of hope dying in the young singer's eyes, wounded by his friends' reactions to him. Nodding in satisfaction, he crossed his arms as he pretended to listen to Sam's boring lecture and recommendations on security, instead concentrating on how soon it would be before he could get Brian's mix up at the bank cleared.

He watched as Brian shifted again in his chair and frowned, knowing Brian was experiencing more pain. He felt for the small bottle of pills in his pocket and shook it experimentally, reminding himself to keep a better eye on controlling Brian's pain. He would not allow the young Backstreet Boy to become incapacitated before he got his money. He smiled inwardly, hardly believing his good luck. He had thought the game was over, that he would have to move on due to his quick temper, but here he was, once more back in control. It was all falling into place so perfectly that he had a hard time not laughing outright in glee.

Chapter 84:

Meeting's Over

"And so, with the repeated security breeches, I've found it necessary to change a few things," Sam droned on, pointing to a screen. "Look at page 3..." he continued, and several flips of the pages could be heard as Nick, AJ, Howie, and Kevin did their best to look interested. During the meeting they had noticed Brian shifting in his seat, a flash of pain crossing his features as he tried to settle into a more comfortable position. When Xavier wasn't looking AJ and Nick had exchanged concerned glances, noticing the more the meeting dragged on, the more tense and withdrawn Brian had become.

"...now because of the near fatal accident involving Nick and Kevin, I feel we need to tighten up on guarding the guys, making sure that..." explained Sam, and Nick felt the intense stare of Xavier bearing down upon him. Nick frowned inwardly, unsure what to do. He looked back at Xavier with a quiet aloofness, wondering what the bodyguard was thinking, wondering if Xavier wished he was dead. Nick snorted quietly in disgust. *Of course he does!* He finally broke contact with Xavier, questioning how much longer he could sit still, acting detached, when he knew Brian was suffering both mentally and physically. Knowing the guys felt exactly the same way, Nick became antsy, unsure on what he could do to keep from going crazy. Rubbing his sweaty palms on his knees, he stopped and stared at his hands. *You idiot! Draw!* It always soothed him and he grabbed a pencil, beginning to sketch little nonsensical pictures. He tore off one page, dissatisfied, and started in on another when suddenly an idea took shape, one so inspired that he froze for a moment in astonishment. He remembered a trick that Brian and he had played several years ago when they both were being tutored on the road. He thought furiously for a moment, wondering if he dared. He looked at Brian's heartbreaking appearance. He dared. Scribbling a few words onto a small piece of paper, Nick drew a small picture to disguise the meaning. Wadding it up into a small piece, he stuck it in his mouth for a moment, gathering up the wetness needed for its flight over towards Brian. With any luck, Xavier would see it as a contemptuous act and give it little thought, not suspicious of the gooey mess. He sailed the spit wad directly at Brian and it hit him squarely in the chest, bouncing into his lap. *Come on, Bri, remember!* Nick noticed several Backstreet security glancing his way, shaking their heads at his childish antics. Nick knew better and by the looks on Howie, AJ's, and Kevin's face, knew that they did too. He sailed another over, this time landing directly on the edge of the table, in front of Brian. Nick saw a smirk come from Xavier as the bodyguard watched him, elated that Xavier thought he was trying to antagonize Brian.

Brian reached over slowly to brush the offending damp ball off the table and then looked up at Nick, a small frown creasing his brow.

Dammit, Brian, think! The messages we use to send to each other! That's how we swapped answers to test questions! Open the damn paper! Nick gave Brian a malicious smile, one he knew Xavier caught, but the smile was not one of malicious intent. Nick's heart skipped a beat as he saw the slightest flash of understanding in Brian's eyes. Once

more, he soared another wad, successfully landing it next to Brian's hand. Brian reached over and casually picked it up, his face showing agitation at Nick's prank.

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His heart pounding, Brian tried to act casual as he nonchalantly placed the wad in his lap, his fingers closing around the damp ball. He hunted for any signal in Nick's eyes, any hint of revelation, but Nick stared back impassively, his blue eyes cool and calm. Brian remembered their old trick from tutoring and for a minute he eagerly thought Nick might be trying to communicate with him, to say something that couldn't be said out loud. But, by the look of Nick's chilly expression he realized he was wrong, and that there would probably be some sort of sneering comment written instead. With an inaudible sigh, he secretly peeled the paper open with his fingers, not looking down, taking his time to make sure Xavier wasn't watching him. Feeling the last of the paper smooth out, he sneaked a quick glance down.

We know.

Two little words, carefully drawn as dragon's smoke to hide its meaning. Almost impossible for anyone to find, but Brian did, just as he was able to many years ago.

We know.

Beginning to tremble, Brian didn't need to look down at the crumpled piece of paper again to understand its meaning, but did so once more out of complete shock. He bunched the paper back into its balled-up shape, tossing it underneath the table. He glanced up, noticing all four staring directly at him, Nick's eyes piercing right through to his soul.

This time Brian saw the compassion in their eyes, the silent understanding. Feeling slightly light-headed, Brian closed his eyes, praying he wouldn't pass out. The shock of them knowing, the agonizing pain he was enduring sent him into a panicked fright.

We know.

How? How could they possibly know? What could have happened that they were able to put two and two together? Brian's eyes flew wide open. Xavier! Brian glanced over to see the bodyguard calmly listening to Sam, occasionally jotting down a few notes. Xavier doesn't know! Brian felt his heart lurch into his throat. Oh God! If Xavier discovers their secret ...!

He could hardly believe that a few short words could change everything and he felt a bitter flash of resentment beginning to grow. He had been close, so close, just a few more days and Xavier would have been gone, forever, completely out of his life. But now *this* had to happen and he knew it would be almost impossible to keep Xavier from finding out. Brian shuddered as he remembered Xavier's promise to stick around for a long time if he didn't behave, if he didn't play the game. Now everything was at risk, his

life, theirs, all in danger because somehow *they knew*. *Damn them!* An irrational anger took hold of Brian, fueled by his constant pain. He knew he should be thinking more clearly, more logically, but the nagging, infuriating pain would not release him from its tight grip. He shot a look of pure acid at Nick, then at the others, feeling the bitterness eating him up inside. Scarcely listening as Sam wrapped up the meeting, Brian ignored everyone as they rose from their seats.

"Okay folks, time to take a tour of the facility; I need your input on how to improve safety measures." Sam frowned a little at Brian, seeing that he was the only one still sitting down. *That's the guys' problem, not mine. My job is to get Xavier away from Brian.* With a quick motion of his hand, he pointed to Xavier. "Delgado. You and Anderson, with me. This may take a while. I need your help." With a no-nonsense attitude, Sam headed for the door. Xavier paused for a second as everyone began to file out, noticing Brian and the other four not moving.

Taken aback by Brian's resentful look, it took a moment before Howie saw the danger. With a dramatic sigh, he stretched and groaned. "I'm leaving," he announced loudly. "See you later." As much as he wanted to stay, to find out what was causing Brian's fury, he realized the risk in remaining. With a quick nod to all, he left.

Kevin picked up on the problem and turned to Sam, slapping a hand onto his manager's shoulder. "Hey Sam, hold up. I'm coming with you. I'd like to see where the problems are." Kevin coolly raised an eyebrow at Xavier.

"Ready?"

He knew AJ and Nick desperately needed time alone with Brian right now. He had pretty much figured out what Nick had said in his message and was surprised, then alarmed by Brian's bitter reaction. To have Xavier come back unexpectedly and discover them talking would be disastrous and Kevin was determined to keep a close watch on him so that wouldn't happen.

Following them out the door, he spared one quick glance back at Nick and AJ, then at Brian. He didn't like what he saw and his stomach churned in fear as he hurried to catch up with Sam and Xavier.

Chapter 85:

Finally Alone

As soon as he saw the conference door closing, Nick swung his attention to Brian who was still quietly sitting. Throughout this whole ordeal, his main objective had been to find Brian, to reach him. Now that he was here, alone with him, Nick felt tongue-tied, embarrassed, uncomfortable. An awkward silence filled the room and Nick glanced nervously at AJ, who seemed to be as ill-at-ease as he was. They both had been stunned by Brian's severe glare, hoping instead to see the forgiveness in Brian's eyes, to know that everything would be okay, that their bond of friendship was not forever shattered. They received no such acknowledgment. Brian sat in his chair, leaning over, his hands covering his face as if in pain. Frightened by his manner, Nick threw a concerned look at AJ then took a few tentative steps towards his friend.

"Brian," Nick spoke softly, scared.

Brian pulled his hands away, a pained and resigned look on his face. "What?" he replied harshly. He began to rise from his seat, grimacing and swaying as he struggled to stand upright.

Nick was there in a split second, grabbing Brian, crushing him into a fierce embrace. He felt a sob rising in his throat and choked it back, still clinging to Brian, not sure who needed the support more. Nick felt them both shaking, trembling, Brian's muffled words lost as he hugged him harder.

"Nick! Nick, let go of Brian!" shouted AJ, yanking on his arm. "You're hurting him!"

Shocked, Nick let go of Brian instantly. Brian's face was pale, his mouth contorted in pain. Leaning heavily onto the edge of the table, Brian waved off their alarmed looks.

"Just give me a second," he said weakly.

AJ nodded, watching him like a hawk, ready to catch him if he fell. He nervously glanced at the closed door, knowing that Kevin was doing his best to keep Xavier occupied but not sure how long that would last. Reaching out, AJ placed a hesitant hand on Brian's shoulder.

"Bri, are you okay?"

Brian stiffened at his touch, straightening up. "Yeah, fine, just great. Couldn't be better!" he snapped. "How about you?"

Stung by the harshness in Brian's voice, AJ pulled his hand away and took a step back.

Nick spoke up. "Brian, listen to me. We finally figured what's been going on. Kevin, Howie, AJ, me, we all *know*. We found out about Xavier...."

"Wow, I'm amazed you could figure it out."

Desperate for relief, Brian sarcastically cut Nick off. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with an unsteady hand, wondering how long it would take to locate Xavier and the pills. Shaking from the pain, he gave a contemptuous laugh.

"Hey, it's not because I always looked and acted half-dead, right? The bruises and cuts couldn't have possibly tipped you off, could they?"

He glanced down at his watch, trying to remember how long it had been since he had taken a pain pill. Damn Xavier for not giving him another! He looked up to see the stunned expression on Nick and AJ's face then glanced longingly at the door.

"That's it," announced AJ firmly, forgetting about their plan when he saw Brian trembling. "Come on, I'm taking you to the hospital."

AJ's statement shocked Brian out of his insolence and he retreated, backing away from AJ's outstretched arm.

"No," he whispered. "Please, no. No hospital. I...I just need some pain pills. I'll be okay once I get some." Brian turned pleadingly to Nick when he saw AJ shaking his head, unconvinced.

"You don't understand! I only need a few more days. Just a few. Then Xavier's gone. He promised. He promised." Brian knew was babbling but he couldn't stop, grabbing Nick in desperation. "Nick, come on! All he wants is the money. That's all! Just the money. Then he'll be gone. *Please.*"

"Well, he's not gonna get it, Rok," explained AJ calmly. "We had the bank freeze your account. Xavier can't touch it."

Brian froze at the announcement, stunned. Hardly believing AJ, he turned to see Nick nodding his head. *Oh God, if what they're saying is true...* a wave of pain flowed up and down his spine and Brian winced, reminding him vividly of the merciless beating he had endured because of their decision.

He spun on them both, livid. "Who said you could do that? Do you have *any* idea what you just did?" Grabbing at his shirt, Brian raised it up past his shoulders, ignoring their shocked looks as he turned once around to give them full view. "Courtesy of Xavier," he spat, pulling his shirt back into place. "Just a little present because he wasn't able to get his money." Exhausted and in pain, Brian lowered his voice, sounding defeated. "Nick, he was going to leave, take the money and leave. He was going to stay in Mexico. He wasn't coming back."

Nick could barely stand to hear the hurt in Brian's voice, the misery, knowing that their hasty scheme had backfired, causing him so much suffering. It also took all he had not to gasp out loud when he saw Brian's injuries, stunned by the massive and ugly bruises.

Determined that Brian was not going to suffer one minute more, Nick shook his head firmly. "Bri, AJ's right. We need to get you to a hospital. You'll be okay, now. Xavier can't harm you anymore. We're here."

A sharp, cynical laugh escaped from Brian, his blue eyes dark. "You just don't get it, do you? Xavier won't stop until he gets his money." He sucked in his breath, trying to ignore a sudden stab of pain. "He doesn't care who's in his way. If he has to kill you, he will."

AJ frowned at him, stubborn. "Brian, we can stop him, I *know* it."

"Knowing and actually doing it are two different things, Bone!"

Brian wasn't sure how much longer he could stand and argue; his knees felt weak, his back throbbing in earnest. "Well *I'm* not willing to bet anyone's life on it. All I want is for Xavier to get his money. He'll leave, I'm sure of it. It's what he planned to do in the first place!"

AJ snorted in disbelief and Brian grew tired of trying to convince him, wanting to scream in frustration and pain. Gathering up what little strength he had left, he narrowed his eyes, his mouth set into a firm line. "I've come this far," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I can wait two more days. And so can you." He turned to leave, feeling a fine thread of panic beginning to envelop him. He needed to find Xavier right now, knowing it wouldn't be long before he would be crawling on his knees from the pain.

Nick's fingers wrapped around Brian's arm, forcing him to stop. "Brian, X is never gonna let you go," he stated, his voice low. Nick saw a quick flicker of fear in his eyes before Brian stared down at the hand that was clenching him tightly.

"Nick, let go."

Brian felt the slow release from his arm and began to back away carefully, heading for the door. "Stay away from me," he warned. "Don't get involved. If you really want to help me, *just stay the hell away.*"

Nick looked at AJ in disbelief and then turned back, only to catch the fleeting form of Brian running down the hall.

He hung his head in despair.

Chapter 86:

Confusion

It took all of his willpower to concentrate on what Sam was saying while at the same time trying to discreetly watch Xavier. Tensing up whenever the bodyguard spoke, Kevin kept himself as distant as he could from Xavier, not completely confident of his own ability to mask his feelings. He sighed inwardly, wanting badly to know how AJ and Nick were faring with Brian but knew he'd just have to wait and find out later.

Sam seemed to be doing a pretty good job at keeping Xavier busy, posing all sorts of questions to him and the other bodyguard, Eric. Kevin sneaked a quick glance at his watch as the three rounded the corner ahead of him, trying to gauge how much time Nick and AJ needed. He bumped right into Xavier, who had halted abruptly in front of him and Kevin looked up, startled.

"Oh, sorry about...", he blurted out then stopped, his voice fading as he saw Brian standing next to Xavier. His cousin's face was flush, his eyes too bright and Kevin had to stop himself from asking frantically what was wrong. Xavier knew though. With a special smile he fished out a small bottle, shaking two pills out. Brian impatiently snatched them from his hand and swallowed them whole, closing his eyes. When he opened them a second later, he looked directly into Kevin's eyes, daring him, challenging him to pass judgment.

Knowing Xavier's eyes were upon him, Kevin shrugged indifferently, as if bored by the whole interruption. Inside, his mind was screaming. *What was Brian doing here? Where were AJ and Nick? What could have possibly happened in that short amount of time?*

He listened carefully as Brian told Xavier in no uncertain terms that he wanted to leave. The bodyguard nodded and turned to Sam, his eyebrows raised in question. "Need me for anything else?" Xavier didn't give Sam time to object. "No? Okay. Guess I'll take Brian back to the hotel." He slapped a heavy hand onto Brian's shoulder and Kevin watched his cousin wince as they walked away.

Throwing Sam a concerned look, Kevin quickly turned and shouted, "Hold up!" Xavier and Brian twisted their heads to see Kevin hurrying to catch up with them. "I need a ride to the hotel too," he informed them bluntly and walked ahead of them, opening the exit door with a flourish. He ignored Brian's peculiar stare and smiled grimly to himself, vowing to find out once they reached the hotel just what the hell had happened.

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AJ grabbed Nick and hauled him back, keeping him from running after Brian. "Don't!" he said harshly, shaking his head. "Brian is in too much pain. Let him go. We can find him later."

"But....," began Nick, his head turning frantically from AJ to Brian as he watched his friend disappear around a corner.

"Nick! I said let him go! If you follow him, he'll only get angrier!"

Nick ran his hand through his hair, spinning on his heel in frustration. "God, AJ! What the hell are we going to do?"

AJ closed his eyes in resignation. "I don't know." He followed Nick out of the conference room and stopped for a second to put his glasses on. "Let's go find someone to take us to the hotel. We gotta talk to D."

* * * * *

Brian could sense the slight aggravation in Xavier's attitude as he drove them to the hotel, but was too tired to give it much thought. All he wanted to do right now was to make it to the hotel and sleep for about a hundred years. Sleep. It had such a soothing, alluring appeal, something he thought about constantly. It offered everything he wanted. No pain, no fear, no nothing. Glancing at Xavier's coat pocket, Brian felt a flush of anger surging through him, resentful that he had complete control over the pain killers. Brian wondered how many Xavier still had, how many it would take to guarantee no more pain, ever. A dull throb pulsated down his back and jolted Brian out of his daydream, slightly shocked at where his thought process was going. Was he thinking about himself or Xavier? Did he wish it was him or the bodyguard that was dead? Dismayed and shocked at how the medication warped his thinking, he pressed his lips together tightly, vowing to wean himself off the pills, regardless of how desperately he wanted them. He needed to be thinking clearly for the next few days. Just a few more days and then this nightmare would be over. He could last till then. He must. He would.

* * * * *

Kevin kept his face turned towards the window, his elbow propped on the armrest, his hand covering his mouth as if casually contemplating the passing scenery. Instead, his mind was racing, screaming with worry, trying without success to figure just what had happened back at the arena. The plan had seemed so simple, so perfect. Find Brian. Convince Brian. Save Brian. End of story. Only everything had exploded into one big mess. Not only did it look like AJ and Nick were unsuccessful, Brian's wild-eyed plea to leave only confused things further. And what the hell had Xavier given Brian? He had seen Xavier's knowing little smile, had known that Brian frantically wanted the pills. Was Brian addicted? Is that how X had control over him? Through drugs? Kevin shook his head. There was more to it than just that. Much more. But what exactly?

Kevin turned his gaze away from the window to glance at his cousin. Brian seemed asleep, something for which Kevin was grateful for. He wanted Brian to get all the rest he could cause as soon as they reached the hotel he was going to get to the bottom of this, once and for all.

* * * * *

Nick felt AJ slap him on the arm, pointing down the hallway to where the rest of their bodyguards stood. He nodded, following the smaller singer over to where they were, his mind playing over and over again what had happened just moments before. He was still in a state of disbelief, in complete shock over Brian's appearance and behavior. He had been so sure, so positive that everything would be all right once they reached Brian that it never dawned on him that things might not turn out as planned. Everything had exploded in his face, gone so wrong, so horribly wrong that it took all he had not to cry out in despair when he saw Brian's chest. He felt like breaking down right then and there when he realized what Brian had suffered because of their stupidity with the accountants. Now, Brian didn't want to have anything to do with them and rightfully so. Nick knew he had been no help to Brian at all, in fact he had only exasperated the situation further to the point where he felt like a complete failure. Nick wondered if he could ever again redeem himself in Brian's eyes, to make up for all the mistakes, the grief he had knowingly and unknowingly caused. A bitterness so intense, so deep overwhelmed him that it took the excited shouts of crew members and the soft boom of a crash a few yards away to snap him out of it. Nick looked over to see a portable cart, filled with sound equipment scattered over the floor, an excited stagehand yelling defiantly that it wasn't his fault. Nick eyed the young man curiously, a slim, weasely type of person that had recently hired on. Nick had heard some strange rumors, some wild gossip floating around about him but had shrugged it off, not really interested at the time. Now as he studied the red-faced youth more closely, an idea began to form and suddenly he was interested. Very interested indeed.

Chapter 87:

At the Hotel

Well this is just fucking great!

AJ threw his bags down in disgust, wondering where the hell everyone was. Nick had bailed out on him at the last moment, staying behind to talk to a creepy little stagehand, saying he would see him later at the hotel. Shaking his head, AJ had gone around the arena, searching for Kevin and Brian, unable to find either until his bodyguard informed him that they had left with Xavier. The hotel concierge was no help at all, shrugging his shoulders politely when asked about Howie's whereabouts. Irritated, AJ repeatedly phoned Howie's room only to have the answering machine pick up every time. Pounding on Howie's door had produced no results and so AJ resignedly returned to his room, ordered room service, and as he waited for his food to arrive, contemplated on what to do next.

Hands stuffed in his back pockets, Les shifted nervously from one foot to another, looking at Nick in disbelief. Taken aback when the young Backstreet Boy had approached him, Les was even more surprised by his request and by the fact that Nick knew exactly who to ask. "You sure?" Les questioned, scanning the area to see if anyone was eavesdropping.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Les perked up, interested. "It's not that easy to get, ya know."

Nick knew a scam artist when he saw one and leaned over to whisper. "Well, if that's the case, maybe I should just go ask someone else." He emphasized the last two words by shifting his eyes towards the other crew hands.

Les nodded, catching Nick's meaning. "Nah. You came to the right place. I can do it." A small smirk began to form. "It's gonna cost you."

Nick matched Les's smirk with one of his own. "Like I'm really worried about that. Just do it, okay?" Fishing out his wallet, he pulled several bills, shoving them into Les's hand. "And hurry."

Xavier slammed the car brutally into park, the car shuddering to a stop. Brian dozed on, oblivious that they had arrived and Kevin frowned inwardly, wondering for a moment what to do as Xavier exited the car and began to unloaded the trunk. With a tentative hand he reached over and gently shook Brian on the shoulder.

"Brian, Brian, wake up." He shook a little harder. "Wake up. We're here." No response. With his heart beating a little faster, Kevin hopped out and yanked open the front passenger door, reaching in to catch Brian before he slumped over. "Brian! Jesus! Wake up!" He hoped Xavier couldn't hear the panic in his voice, glancing worriedly at Xavier who was talking to a bellhop. Brian moaned and tried to swat Kevin's hand away, mumbling an incoherent reply. Relieved that his cousin was stirring, Kevin grabbed him by the arm, forcing Brian to look up at him. "Brian, come on, man. Get out of the car." Helping him out, Kevin held him steady as Brian blinked several times, his hand shielding his eyes against the bright sun.

"Okay... all right. Jeez, wait a sec," Brian grumbled, trying to shrug off Kevin's supportive grip but gave up when he felt Kevin's fingers wrapping tighter around him.

Clutching Brian securely, Kevin noticed Xavier's shadow looming over them. He turned to gaze at the bodyguard, setting his face into an exasperated expression. "X, looks like Brian is having some trouble here. Go and get our rooms confirmed and we'll meet you at the elevators." Kevin almost backed down when he saw the frown forming on the large man's face. Gritting his teeth, Kevin held firm, trying his best to look annoyed. "Go on. I can manage this." With an inner sigh of relief, Kevin watched Xavier pushed the heavy glass doors open, entering the lobby.

Brian sagged in his arms and Kevin struggled to keep him upright. "Brian!" Kevin switched his grip. "Shit! Brian, stand up. That's it. Come on." He helped him over to the covered breezeway, eying the surrounding area, glad that they had arrived earlier than expected. Except for a few curious glances, nobody had recognized them. Brian looked up at Kevin, rubbing his red-rimmed eyes with the heel of his hand.

"What is God's name did you take?" Kevin asked worriedly, his voice harsher than he intended.

"None of your business. In fact, do me a favor and leave me the hell alone."

Kevin dropped his hand away from Brian, shocked by the bitterness in his voice. *Huh? What the ...didn't Nick and AJ explain things to him?*

"Brian, listen. I don't think you understand. Me, the guys, we know what's been going on! We all know about Xavier. We're gonna help you."

Brian gave him a furious glare, then struggled over to the hotel entry wall to lean against it for support. "No, *you* don't understand. I don't need your help. I don't *want* your help. I've had more than enough of your help already."

Kevin walked over, his green eyes filled with a mixture of exasperation and concern. "Brian, why are you acting this way? What's the matter?"

Brian cocked his head to one side, his blue eyes flashing with resentment. "What's the matter?" he mimicked sarcastically. "What's the matter? What makes you think

anything is wrong?" His voice began to rise. "And why the sudden interest now, Kevin? You never cared before."

Brian pushed agitatedly away from the wall and they both winced simultaneously; Brian from the sudden movement, Kevin from the fury in his cousin's voice. Glancing for a second into the lobby, Kevin saw that Xavier was almost finished signing some papers at the reception desk. He turned to see the exhaustion on his cousin's face and realized now was not the time to argue. Reaching in for Brian's arm again, Kevin gave him a no-nonsense look.

"Come on. Let's go inside."

He ushered Brian in, letting go when he felt Brian yank angrily away from him. They stood by the elevators in silence, neither willing to look at one another. With a deep sigh, Kevin watched as Xavier came towards them, noticing that the bodyguard was glancing down at one of the room's entry cards. A slight shock ran through him. *He's memorizing Brian's room number!* During the meeting, Sam had given specific instructions that everyone was responsible for their own entry cards; that from now on no master cards were to be given out, even to security. Kevin remembered the tight look on Xavier's face as the bodyguard objected but Sam had cut him off, stating that room safety wasn't an issue and that there were more pressing security problems to address.

Startled into action, Kevin reached out with a bored hand, faking impatience as he waited for Xavier to hand over the cards. "Say Xavier, I can't seem to find my pager. I think I might have left it the car. Go have a look, okay?" He saw Xavier stiffen, knowing that the bodyguard wanted to accompany them to their rooms. Sam, in his infinite wisdom, had situated the bodyguards on a different floor, citing that he was unable to find adjoining rooms.

Kevin hurried on, not waiting for Xavier's reply. "Thanks. And, oh, if you find it, you can just give it to me tomorrow." Hearing the chime of the elevator door, he scooped up his small duffel bag, then Brian's and steered Brian into the steel enclosure. Just before the doors closed, Kevin nodded curtly, enjoying the frustration on Xavier's face. "See ya."

* * * * *

Howie ran a nervous hand through his hair as he strode down the hallway, impatient to find out what was happening. He had been late getting back to the hotel, making a few stops around town with his bodyguard before returning. Pleasantly surprised at Tucson's laid back attitude, he was quickly able to find what he needed and with little hassle. It didn't hurt that he also spoke Spanish, noticing a large majority of the population were Spanish-speaking.

He rapped on AJ's door then shook his head in exasperation when he realized it was ajar. Pushing the door open he saw AJ reclining on his bed, finishing what looked like the remains of dinner.

"Save some for me?" Howie quipped, coming over to inspect.

AJ snorted. "Don't I always?" He pointed with his knife at a covered serving dish then sat up straighter, criss-crossing his legs. "Where the hell were you? I've been searching all over!"

Howie shrugged, his mouth full. "Had to do a few things," he mumbled.

"You and Nick," groused AJ.

Howie looked up. "He's not here?"

AJ rubbed his face tiredly and glanced at his watch. "Nope. And neither is Kev or Brian. At least, I don't think they're here."

Grabbing a napkin, Howie wiped his hands. "So, how did it go? What happened after I left?"

"You want the bad news or the bad news?"

"AJ, quit joking around. What's going on?"

AJ jumped up and began to restlessly pace the room. "I'm not joking. Everything is totally fucked up, D. After you left, Nick and I confronted Bri about what we knew. He was furious at us."

Howie paused, his fork suspended in mid air. "*What?* Furious?"

"Yeah, told us to butt out. Said he didn't need our help, that we had only screwed things up for him." AJ sighed heavily. "And we did."

Not liking the tone in his friend's voice, Howie put his fork down on his plate and looked up questioningly.

"That brilliant idea of closing Brian's bank account backfired, big time. X was trying to make a withdrawal and it rejected." AJ turned away from Howie for a moment then turned to face him again, his face bitter. "Seems like Xavier was going to make one last withdrawal and then leave, disappear for good. When the bank refused the request X totally lost it. He beat the crap outta Brian."

Howie was too shocked to notice that his plate had slid from his lap, falling to the floor. His eyes met AJ's in horror and AJ nodded grimly.

'I saw it, D. I saw it. Brian pulled up his shirt. God, there were bruises everywhere! I don't know how he managed to survive a beating like that! It was horrible."

Howie sucked his breath in with a sharp hiss, glad he hadn't been there to witness it. "You should of taken him to a hospital, AJ!"

"I wanted to! Nick wanted to! Brian refused. Pleaded with us to give him a few more days and then Xavier would be gone."

Howie snorted in sarcasm. "Right, and you believe that?"

AJ stopped his pacing to turn and face Howie. "Yeah, I do. Xavier didn't have to come back. He could of left after he beat up Brian, but he came back. Remember what Nick said? That X isn't done with Brian? Xavier wants to try and get his money one more time."

Howie sagged in his seat and closed his eyes for a moment. "And do we let him?"

"Damn straight we do. I want that fucker outta of here once and for all. If it takes more money, so be it. I'm not willing to risk Brian's life again, are you?"

Howie shook his head and looked up at AJ, a mixture of resignation, defeat and anger framed in his brown eyes. "No, I'm not."

* * * * *

If the silence between them at the elevators was painful, the ride up the elevators was downright unbearable. Kevin desperately wanted the chance to talk, to help, to make amends; hell, *anything* if only Brian would let him. But, by the way he was slumped against the side of the elevator, avoiding direct eye contact, Kevin knew that Brian was not going to give him that chance.

He fingered his room entry card, glancing down to read the number. 2481. Tilting his head slightly, Kevin examined the card Brian held. 2441. 2441. Brian's room number, the one Xavier had memorized. Kevin stared thoughtfully at Brian's number for a moment, then at his. The soft chime of the elevator announced its opening and Kevin grabbed a hold of Brian's shoulder, stopping him from exiting. "Here, this is yours." Kevin held out 2481. Reaching for Brian's, he quickly swapped cards.

Brian frowned then gave in when he saw the look on Kevin's face, too tired to argue. Taking the card he slowly tread down the hallway, looking for his hotel door, wondering if he had the strength to even open it.

* * * * *

Hearing a couple of sharp taps, AJ strode over to the door and let Nick in, giving him a curious stare.

"About time," he grumbled. "What the hell was so important that you had to stay and talk to that little piss ant instead of coming with me?"

Nick shrugged nonchalantly, studiously ignoring AJ's heated question as he viewed the room service cart before him.

"Hey, didn't you order anything for me?"

"No, I didn't order anything for you," AJ replied, mimicking Nick's hurt tone. He reached over and plucked a menu from the cart and tossed it impatiently to him. "Here. Order yourself, you big baby."

Nick raised his eyebrows exaggeratedly at AJ. "Whoa, what crawled up your ass and died?"

"You mean besides your irritating whining?"

Nick glared at him. "Yeah! And I'm sure there's been more interesting things than *that* stuck up there."

AJ threw him a sneer. "Fuck you, Nick."

"Really?" Nick glanced down pointedly at AJ's crotch. "With what?"

Howie quickly jumped in between them. "Okay, stop!" he barked, holding his hands out in either direction, amazed at their sudden hostility. "Just stop. What's the matter with you two?"

AJ was the first to break eye contact with Nick, embarrassed by his sudden anger. "I...I don't know," he muttered, turning away. "Sorry Nick. I'm sorry." He waved a hand miserably. "Things. Things are bothering me, ya know?"

Nick relaxed, understanding all too well AJ's vague explanation. Things. Some things. *Everything*. They were all beginning to crack under the pressure, a small but significant break that was causing them to snap at each other at the smallest of incidents.

"It's okay. I'm sorry too." In a hurry to change the subject, Nick looked at Howie. "Did AJ fill you in about Brian?"

"Yeah."

"All right. Good. So you know. Has anybody seen Brian? Is he here?" Nick looked back and forth between AJ and Howie. "We still gotta talk to him, see how he's doing."

Howie frowned, shaking his head. "I haven't seen him. Neither has AJ. Lets go track Kevin down, see what he knows." Picking his fallen dinner plate up off the ground, Howie tossed it away and then opened the door for the other two, all three exiting in a hurry, eager to locate the oldest Backstreet Boy.

Chapter 88:

In the Hotel

Howie, Nick and AJ entered the hallway, stopping dead in their tracks as they watched Brian, with Kevin trailing closely behind, walk slowly towards them. Head bent low, glancing at the card in hand, Brian almost bumped into them. Startled, he took a few steps back and an awkward moment of silence fell as Brian stared blankly at them, the exhaustion evident in his blue eyes. Nick tore his gaze away from Brian just long enough to give Kevin a desperate, inquiring look. Pursing his lips together tightly, Kevin shook his head in a quiet warning. Nick swung back to his best friend and shuffled uneasily, at a loss of what to say or do.

"Hey."

It was a stupid, stupid thing to say and Nick kicked himself mentally, angered at his childish acknowledgment.

Brian blinked a few times. "Hey, ... Frack."

Nick's heart soared in relief, glad that Brian had spoken his nickname. It was an opening, an opportunity, the beginning he needed to

"Stay the hell away from me."

Brian brushed by hurriedly, not noticing the stunned look on Nick's face. Grimacing a little, he swiped his entry card, pushed open the door, letting it close with a soft click.

* * * * *

Nick stared at the closed door, his mouth dropped open in astonishment. Snapping it shut a second later, Nick threw his arms up in the air, shaking his head. He turned to Kevin, frustrated.

"What's going on?"

Glancing once more at Brian's closed door, Nick's eyes narrowed. "Okay, that's it, I've had it! I'm gonna...."

Kevin reached out and placed a solid hand on Nick's shoulder, preventing him from taking another step. "Nick, don't. Stop. Let Brian sleep. He needs it." Kevin faced the others. "I saw Xavier giving Brian some pills at the arena. Looked like painkillers."

AJ, Howie, and Nick glanced at each other and Kevin gave a concerned frown. "What? You guys *know* about that?"

"No, but we're not surprised," explained AJ. "Xavier hurt Brian pretty bad." Noticing the sudden alarm in Kevin's face, AJ rubbed his forehead tiredly, nodding at Howie to continue.

Kevin turned to Howie. "I'll fill you in," Howie said quietly, glancing up and down the hallway, "but not here. In fact, we all need to talk about this. Let's get settled, then meet in Kevin's room, say, in about 30 minutes?" Howie glanced up from his watch to see everyone nod in agreement. "Okay? Good."

* * * * *

Brian didn't even notice the duffel bag slipping from his fingers as he crawled exhaustedly onto his bed, grabbing the closest pillow into a tight embrace. He buried his face into its soft depths and willed himself to relax, to breathe normally. He could do neither. His body ached, a raw and constant burning, his chest rising erratically in short and shallow gasps. Brian turned over on his side and squeezed his eyes shut, praying for the constant throbbing in his lower back to go away. He knew without a doubt that if Xavier were here right now, he would rip those pills out of Xavier's hand and pour every last one of them into his mouth. Brian sighed, angered at his weak self-control. He hated the way the painkillers made him feel; queasy, disoriented, scared by the crazy thoughts that raced through his head. Forcing himself off the bed, he stood up, determined to endure the pain, no matter what. *Just another mind game*, he thought bitterly, *only now it's between me and myself*. He headed for the bathroom and turned the shower on as hot as he dared, hoping the water's warmth would provide some temporary relief.

* * * * *

Kevin swore, quickly drying his hair and then wrapped the towel around his waist, hurrying to stop the pounding on his door. Irritated by the incessant knocking, he ripped the door wide open, pissed at the guys' early arrival.

"Shit, can't you wait just a...." Kevin's voice trailed off as he stared directly at Xavier.

Not sure who was more startled, Kevin regained his composure first. "Xavier? What's up?" He tried to give the large bodyguard an annoyed look, feeling a small thrill of fear course through his spine. *Xavier was looking for Brian!* Thankful that he had the insight to swap entry cards at the last moment, Kevin leaned casually against the doorframe, his eyes coolly examining Xavier. "Something so important that you couldn't wait until tomorrow?" Kevin tried to tinge the sentence with a small taunt, hoping it took the bodyguard off balance. It did. Kevin saw the confusion, the embarrassment spread across the broad man's face.

"Sorry. I thought this was Brian's room."

"Obviously it's not."

Xavier shifted his large frame uncomfortably. "Mind letting me know which room Brian is in? I've got something for him."

Kevin waved his hand vaguely down the hall. "I don't remember, Xavier. Sorry. By the way he looked, I'm guessing Brian is probably asleep right now, so I wouldn't recommend knocking on his door." A sudden idea came to mind and trying not to show his eagerness, Kevin stuck out his hand casually, hoping Xavier was still flustered by his mistake. "Here, you can give me Brian's pills ... I'll give them to him when I see him." He wiggled his fingers impatiently. "That is what you came to see him about, isn't it?"

Kevin watched as Xavier slowly dug out the container from his pocket, knowing that the bodyguard was unable to come up with another suitable excuse. Kevin plucked the pills from Xavier's hand and gave him a quick nod. "I'll make sure he gets them. Thanks." Kevin managed to stare evenly into Xavier's eyes, elated by his success. He watched as Xavier turned and lumbered down the hallway, not being able to resist one last jab.

"Your'e doing a great job, thanks Xavier." He smiled wickedly when he noticed a slight twitch in Xavier's neck and shoulders as the bodyguard headed towards the elevator.

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Brian tolerated the near-scalding heat for as long as long as possible then finally gave up, too tired to stand any more under the steaming warmth. He gingerly eased himself out of the enclosure, toweling himself off lightly, trying not to stare at the various colorful bruises that stained his body. Wiping a small circle of steam away from the mirror, he gently touch his cut brow with a curious finger, wondering what kind of a scar the deep cut was going to leave. He knew he needed to change the bandage, but upon noticing the angry rawness of the wound, decided he wasn't brave enough to attempt peeling away the dressing. Being careful not to move suddenly, he eased into the most comfortable clothes he could find and slowly lowered himself onto the edge of the bed, somewhat amazed at how much better he felt. Laying his head down on the pillow, Brian curled up slightly in the fetal position and relaxed for the first time, hoping he could get some sleep. *Not bad, not bad at all...* then cringed as a sharp pain lanced right through him. *Not good...*

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Kevin watched as Xavier stepped into the elevator then quickly closed his door, scrambled into a pair of pants and raced out of his room, running barefoot to locate AJ.

It took a moment before AJ answered Kevin's frantic knock, opening the door with a toothbrush his mouth.

Kevin pushed by AJ, running a hand nervously through his dark, damp hair. AJ peeked out into the hallway, curious, then held up a hand, went into the bathroom, spat and rinsed his mouth. Walking out of the bathroom, AJ wiped his mouth quickly with a small hand towel.

"Okay, what happened?"

Kevin uncurled his fist to show the small bottle of pills.

"Shit!" breathed AJ, coming over to look. "Are those Brian's?" Kevin nodded.

"How? What? I mean, where did you get them?"

Kevin sat down on the edge of AJ's bed. "Xavier gave them to me."

"Huh? Xavier just *gave* them to you?"

Kevin grinned devilishly at AJ. "No, I asked for them. Xavier was at my door a few minutes ago, knocking on it, thinking it was Brian's room. Only I had switched rooms with Brian. Intentionally."

AJ smiled at Kevin, impressed. "Go on."

"Well, I knew X was startled, embarrassed. He mumbled about needing to give Brian something. I knew he was lying so I took advantage of the situation and asked X for the pills."

"Damn." AJ looked admiringly at Kevin. "Not bad."

"Yep." Kevin leaned back on AJ's bed, tossing the bottle gleefully up and down with one hand.

"Hey, I thought we were suppose to meet in Kevin's room."

AJ and Kevin both looked up to see Nick and Howie entering through the still open door, Nick coming over to swipe at the air-borne container. He eyed the bottle suspiciously. "What are these?"

"Brian's pain pills. Xavier made a surprise visit." AJ watched their shocked faces before continuing. "Only X visited the wrong room, courtesy of Kevin's neat little trick of swapping rooms with Brian."

Howie whistled and Nick nodded in appreciation. "Nice going." Howie grabbed the pills from Nick's hand and studied the label, a slight frown on his face. "Should we give these to Brian? He looked like he could use them."

"Not now," advised Nick. "I had my ear pressed to his door just a moment ago and it sounded like he was in the shower." Nick opened his eyes wide in defense. "What? What? He's my best friend and I'll eavesdrop any damn time I feel like it!"

Kevin stood up, slapping a hand on Nick's shoulder. "Chill, Nick. It's okay. We were surprised, that's all. I'm just glad Xavier didn't see you." He turned to the others. "You know what this means, don't you?"

AJ nodded grimly, reaching over to snag the phone of its hook.

* * * * *

Xavier reached over to rip a heavy boot off his foot and threw it in disgust across the room. It had been a while since he had made such a stupid mistake, mixing up something as simple as a room number. He would have been immediately suspicious except that Kevin had seemed genuinely annoyed at being disturbed. Caught off guard, not being able to think of a quick enough excuse, he had chastised himself all the way back to his room for handing over the painkillers. Xavier rubbed his hand thoughtfully over his chin, staring off into space. The chances were slim to none that Brian would still be awake; his grogginess getting out of the car just a while ago testified to that. It would be unwise to try to locate him now, now that he had made such a blatant error in front of Kevin.

Tearing off the other boot, Xavier walked over and grabbed a drink from his small but well-stocked fridge. Settling down into a chair, he flicked on the TV, more for illumination than entertainment. He forced himself to relax, to think clearly, not to let his temper get the best of him. Only a few more days, just two and he could kiss this lifestyle goodbye. *Kiss*. He took a sip, his thoughts turning towards the young blonde singer. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, wondering that if maybe he had had more time, things might have been different. *Hmm. Time*. He took another sip, really a gulp, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. *Maybe I don't need more time. I'll have the money soon. I'll be rich*. With a quick tilt of his head, he finished the bottle. *Money. Brian. Money and Brian*. He smiled and folded his hands behind his head. *Yeah. It was possible. He could have both*.

* * * * *

AJ hung up the phone with a flourish and turned to the other guys, a fiendish smile on his lips.

"Done."

Howie nodded in approval. "So you think Eric can keep Xavier away?"

AJ gave Howie a mock look of hurt then shoved Nick over so he could hop on top of his bed. "He's the best, D. If there's one bodyguard I trust, it's Eric. Besides, I warned him it's his job if he doesn't."

Nick rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. "Nothing like the threat of losing your job to get results, huh?"

AJ grinned.

* * * * *

Pissed, Xavier slammed down the receiver, picking up his wallet and keys as he headed out the door. He hated late night emergencies, especially when he knew Eric could handle it easily enough by himself. Now, by the sound of it, he'd be up all night working on the so-called problem. *Relax, relax*, he chanted mentally, punching the button as he waited for the elevator to come and bring him down to the main floor where Eric was impatiently waiting for him.

* * * * *

So much for sleep.

Brian stared up at the ceiling, biting his lip, waiting for the next onslaught of pain.

* * * * *

Nick came running back into the room, his bare feet padding silently on the carpeting.

"Shit, O shit!"

AJ stopped in mid-conversation with Kevin and Howie, confused; he hadn't noticed that Nick had left the room in the first place. "What? What's happening?"

"Brian. I listened again. I can hear him moaning. He's in pain! We gotta do something, guys!"

Kevin rose from his seat, throwing AJ and Howie a grim look. "You sure X is gone?"

AJ nodded, rising up from his bed. "Positive."

"Good, come on then."

All three hurried after Kevin, Nick's eyes wide. "What are we going to do?"

Kevin reached Brian's door then turned to Nick. "Make Brian open the door."

"What if he won't?"

"Then we're gonna break the goddamn door down."

Chapter 89:

Pain and Anguish

Through a haze of pain, Brian strained to make sense of the noise coming from outside his room. Weakly struggling upright in bed, he heard his name being called out, accompanied by vigorous kicks and thumps on the door.

"Brian! Brian! Open this door. Right now."

Glaring at the closed door, Brian wearily laid back down. The guys. The last thing he wanted or needed was to be seen like this, curled up and in pain. As a vicious reminder, a wave of heat streaked up his back, causing him to gasp from its sharp intensity.

"Go away," he managed to shout and the effort doubled his agony. He leaned over the side of the bed, panting, the small droplets of sweat stinging and blurring his vision.

"Brian, dammit, open up!"

He could hear their insistent pounding and immediately thought of Xavier, knowing that any moment the bodyguard could discover all four outside his door. Panic caused him to crawl off the bed; scared to answer the door, scared not to.

"Please, just go away."

"Brian, if you don't open this door right now, I'm gonna kick it in!"

Brian heard Kevin's angry yell and closed his eyes his frustration, knowing that his cousin would make good on his threat. Biting back the pain, Brian shuffled over to the door, giving a quick swipe to his sweat-soaked forehead before reaching out to flip the latch.

Keeping his head down, Brian wrapped his arms around his waist as Kevin, Howie, AJ and Nick quietly filed in, feeling their prying eyes as they passed by him. With a quick click he locked the door, brusquely brushed by all four and reached for the remote control, thumbing it on.

The TV cast an eerie blue glow to the room and the guys watched as Brian settled against the bed's headboard, staring stonily at the screen, ignoring them all.

"Brian..." began Nick, only to be cut off by TV's sudden rise in volume.

"Brian, come on..." and was once again drowned out.

The blue cast suddenly faded and Nick turned to see Kevin holding the severed black cable in his hand. Brian threw the remote to the ground, finally dragging his vision up to see four sets of eyes trained intently on him.

"Well, if it isn't one big happy family." He finished his jeer with a gasp as a spasm of pain caught him off guard.

"Brian!"

"Just go, *please*." He felt his hands beginning to shake and grabbed a pillow, hugging it to his chest and buried his face in it. He didn't want them here. Why couldn't they see that? If they would just leave him alone...his bitterness was fueled by the pain that was now a constant throb, pounding away relentlessly.

"Brian, Nick heard you moaning," explained Howie softly. "You're in *pain*."

The absurdity of Howie's statement hit Brian full force, his composure crumbling away as he yanked the pillow away from his face, his blue eyes flaring in anger.

"Really?" he mocked. "Ya think so?" His voice raised a notch higher as he struggled off the bed. He stumbled for a second, caught himself, shaking off AJ's quick hand. He glared at Howie, then the others. "What makes you think I'm in pain?" he asked snidely, not waiting for a reply. "And if I am, so what?" Not caring to mask the pain anymore, Brian winced visibly, rubbing a trembling hand across his brow. "It's not like any of you care," he whispered dejectedly, turning away from the four. A rush of vertigo hit Brian and he swayed unsteadily, feeling strong arms grabbing him before he collapsed. "Not that you care," he repeated over in an anguished moan, his agony evident.

Trying to be as gentle as possible, the guys physically carried him over to the bed, but it made no difference as Brian writhed in pain, shaking in such deep earnest that it sent Nick into a panic.

"Kevin! Do you have the pain pills? Good. Give them to me!"

Nick caught the container one-handed, barking at AJ to find some water as he flipped the top off. He shook two out into his palm, having them almost knocked away when he felt the tight grip of Brian's hand upon his wrist.

"Where did you get those?" Brian hissed, his eyes bright with pain. "Where?"

"Kevin. Kevin made Xavier give the bottle to him."

"Give?" Brian curled up in agony, his voice incredulous.

Nick reached for the glass of water AJ had presented. "Long story, it doesn't matter. Here, take this." Nick shoved the pills into Brian's hand, bringing the glass up to his lips. With a quick slap, the pills and water went flying and Nick looked at Brian in shock.

"No. No pills."

"Brian, man, take it! You gotta. You'll feel better."

"No!" came Brian's sharp reply, turning his head away. "You don't understand. They're worse than the pain."

Concerned, Howie grabbed the bottle away from Nick's grasp to examine the label. "Brian, why are they worse? What happens when you take them?"

"They make me sick, nauseous. I get weird thoughts," Brian moaned, his voice muffled as he buried his face into the mattress.

Howie glanced at AJ and Kevin, then walked over to the bed and crouched down to get eye level. "Brian. Brian!" He caught Brian's hand and forced him to look. "I think you're having a bad reaction. To these pills. They're hurting more than they're helping you." Still crouched, Howie twisted his head to look at AJ.

"Bone, you have some painkillers, don't you? From the oral surgeon?" he reminded, seeing AJ's confused face.

AJ snapped his fingers and pointed at Howie, remembering his dental surgery. "Yeah. I've got 'em. I think it's codeine."

Kevin slapped AJ on the shoulder, tilting his head towards the door. "Let's go get 'em."

Howie watched as Kevin and AJ left then turned and frowned a little when he saw Brian's face bathed in sweat. "Brian, are you allergic to codeine?"

Brian shook his head. "I don't know. I don't think so," he gasped. He rolled onto his back, panting lightly. Nick hovered over him, troubled, throwing Howie a troubled look.

"What *if* Brian is allergic to codeine? What do we do then? He needs to go to the hospital, now."

"NO!"

Howie and Nick nearly jumped out of their skin as Brian sat up, his eyes wide with fear. "No. No hospital. I'll be okay."

"But Brian, please..." pleaded Nick, before being cut off by a vicious glare.

"Nick, no! I'm not going. I've only got two more days, two more days before..." Brian's voice faded when he saw Kevin and AJ returning and reached out with an impatient hand to grab the pills AJ offered. He swallowed them whole, too much in a rush to wait for something to wash it down. Still trembling, Brian drooped back on the bed, Nick trying the best he could to cover him with a blanket.

In the soft glow of the only lamp lit, all four Backstreet Boys watched Brian in uneasy silence, occasionally glancing nervously at each other as they waited for the pain medication to kick in. Nick sat on the edge of the bed, his face almost as flushed as

Brian's. He bit his lip in dismay as he saw Brian silently claw the bed, the sheets clutched tightly in his fingers as another spasm of pain took over. It seemed to take forever but Nick finally noticed Brian's breathing becoming less ragged, his body straightening into a more peaceful position. Nick turned to the guys, his face hopeful, and saw the same optimistic expression on theirs.

AJ nodded in relief, finding himself slightly weak in the knees. Sitting in the nearest chair, he laced his fingers together and propped his chin on the top of his hands, trying to regain some of his composure. He glanced at Kevin, who was still standing in the same position as when they had returned with the pills.

His dark brows knitted in worry, his hand covering his mouth, Kevin watched his cousin like a hawk, ready for even the slightest sign that he would react badly to the drug. Finally convinced that Brian was going to be okay, he relaxed and sighed heavily, giving AJ and Howie a weak smile.

Howie smiled back then hefted the container of painkillers that had caused Brian so much misery. With a couple of strides he was in the bathroom, flushing the contents of the bottle down the toilet. He returned a moment later, seeing Kevin nod in agreement to his decision. Walking over to where Brian lay face down on the bed, Howie glanced at Nick.

"How's he doing?"

"Better."

Nick peered at Brian and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Brian? You're feeling better, right?" He leaned in for a closer look. Brian's eyes were still shut tight but the taut lines around his face had relaxed somewhat.

"Brian?"

Eyes fluttering open, Brian studied Nick's anxious face a moment. "I'm all right," he finally replied, hearing the collective sighs of relief around the room. Shifting his position, he managed to weakly sit upright on the bed, embarrassed by the situation, self-conscious that they had witnessed the whole thing but relieved that the pain had subsided. Afraid that Xavier might pop up at any moment and discover them here, Brian began to twist the bed sheets nervously.

"Uh, I'd appreciate it if ya'll would leave now."

AJ rose from his seat. "Huh? What are you talking about? We're not going anywhere, Rok. We're staying right here."

Brian frowned at him, agitation beginning to show as he apprehensively glanced at the door. "You can't. What if Xavier finds you here?"

"He won't. I took care of that."

Not comprehending, Brian began to panic. "What do you mean, you took care of that?! I told you to leave me alone! Why can't you all just leave me alone? Why?"

AJ shook his head. "Cause now we know. We understand what's been happening to you..."

Brian cut AJ off with an explosive slash of his hand. "No, you don't! You haven't a clue, any of you!" His face flushed in distress, Brian struggled with some difficulty to rise from his bed. "How could you *possibly* know the hell I've been through? Huh? You'll never understand. Never! He swung his glare to encompass all four. "And it was all for you! You!" he spat, his eyes glittering darkly.

Brian knew he was losing control but couldn't help it. "Oh no, you were too busy enjoying making my life miserable to notice what was really going on!" He saw the flash of pain in AJ's face but continued on, his agony, worry and frustration spilling over with a vengeance. "Do have *any* idea how hard it was for me seeing your disgust, feeling your hatred?" He walked up to Nick, the hurt in his eyes evident as his voice began to tremble in anger. "Well, do you?" Nick hung his head, unable to reply. Brian swung his gaze to Kevin. "Well?"

Brian's voiced faltered, his sadness evident, his anger dissolving when he saw their ashamed looks. "Trying to keep everyone safe, doing whatever Xavier wanted, hoping, *praying*, that somehow it was all just a nightmare." His blue eyes reflected the misery that Nick, AJ, Howie, and Kevin felt. "Only it's not a nightmare, is it? It's real. And it's not over."

Brian looked at the four before him, his shoulders slumped dejectedly, his despair unmistakable. With a sudden rush, Brian was caught into a firm hug, Howie wrapping his arms around him, pulling him tight. Howie's body began to tremble and with a start Brian realized that Howie was crying and crying hard.

"I'm sorry Brian, I am so sorry," he mumbled through his sobs, clinging fiercely. "I should have known, I should have seen!" he choked, his voice hoarse with grief as he apologized over and over again.

Startled by Howie's heartbreaking outburst, Brian felt himself splintering into a million little pieces. No longer able to contain himself, he broke down with an anguished cry of his own and sagged to his knees, rocking desolately back and forth. Not aware of the caring hands that reached out to console him, Brian covered his face and shed hot tears, releasing all the suppressed fear and agony he had kept in for so long.

It took a while, just when Brian thought he couldn't cry another tear, another wave overtook him and he wearily rode it out. Totally exhausted, he finally relaxed into hold of the sympathetic arms that still supported him, glancing up to see the guys kneeling around him, their faces filled with concern.

"I'm okay," he said softly, suddenly embarrassed and uncomfortable. He twisted out of the hold and scooted back on the floor to recline his back against the edge of the bed, his head bent down. Nick came over and waved a box of tissues under his nose and Brian reached out to snag one. Still holding the box, Nick shook it until Brian took another tissue. Shaking the box once more, Brian gazed up to see Nick smiling at him, urging him to take some more. With a sigh, Brian grabbed a handful.

"That bad, huh?" Brian asked, wiping his eyes and nose.

Nick flopped down next to him, stretching his long legs out. "Well, you certainly aren't gonna win any beauty contests."

Brian gave a little laugh and shook his head. "Neither are you," he retorted, noticing Nick wiping his eyes. He turned to look at Howie and Kevin, then reached over to grab the box out of Nick's grasp. "You okay?" he asked both, reaching out to offer the box.

"Fine, never been better," quipped Howie as he accepted the tissue.

"Yeah, let's never do this again, okay?" replied Kevin gruffly, yanking a few out of the box.

"Bone?" Holding out the tissue box questioningly, Brian eyed him carefully, noticing how quiet he was.

AJ stood there for a moment, his arms crossed. "*Real* men don't cry," he stated bluntly. Seeing their stunned reactions, AJ reached out and grabbed several tissues. "*They blubber*," he announced proudly, blowing his nose several times.

Kevin, Howie, Nick, and Brian collapsed in laughter, AJ joining in, their laughing just as much a need for release as their crying had been. After a while they managed to calm down and Nick began to hiccup loudly. Unable to stop, he held his breath, his expression so comical that it set all five off again into spasms of amusement.

"Howie, Howie, save me," Nick pleaded and Howie groaned, getting up to go get Nick a drink of water.

"How come every time you start hiccupping, *I* have to be the one who gets you the water?" he grumbled, handing Nick a glass.

"Because you're the most gullible," Nick stated simply as he down the water quickly. He hiccupped again. "Rats!" He held up his empty glass, giving Howie another pleading look.

Snorting unsympathetically, Howie turned to see Brian struggling to rise and hurried over to help him up. Brian flinched from his touch as Howie gently guided him to the edge of the bed.

"Brian, do you mind?" he indicated with a nod at his shirt. "I'd like to check your injuries."

Brian opened his mouth to object to the request but stopped, seeing only concern and worry in Howie's eyes. He sighed softly in acquiesce and with a tired hand pulled his shirt over his head. Trying to ignore Howie's sharp hiss of surprise, Brian closed his eyes as he felt his friend lightly touch his chest.

"Xavier did this?"

Brian opened his eyes at the sound of Howie's anger.

"Yeah. After he found out he wasn't able to get the money at the bank."

Unable to look anymore at the horrific bruises Howie turned away, his hands on hips as he stared pointedly at the ground.

"Son of a bitch," he swore heatedly. "I'm gonna get that bastard."

The tone in his voice made Brian look at his friend in worry. Remembering AJ's comment a while ago, he turned to him, who along with Kevin, had been examining his upper back.

"Bone, what did you mean when you said 'I took care of that'?"

"Xavier? I had Eric invent some emergency so that X would be gone for the whole night." AJ gave Brian a reassuring look. "There's not a chance in hell of him returning before tomorrow morning."

Brian heaved a sigh of relief then jumped. "Ow! Hey!"

"Sorry, sorry," apologized Kevin, pulling his hand away. "You have a really nasty bruise on your lower back."

Brian's fingers crept around to locate the injury. He grimaced a little as he touched it. "There?"

"Yeah."

Brian sighed. "What's it look like?"

"Like it needs to be checked out, right away."

Stiffening, Brian shook his head. "No, not now."

"*Brian...*"

Yanking his shirt back on, Brian crawled to the middle of his bed, away from his cousin. Grabbing a pillow, he laid down, cradling the pillow against his chest. "No."

Kevin walked away from the edge of the bed and sat down in the nearest chair, shaking his head exasperatedly as he looked at the guys for help.

AJ took over, coming to hitch his hip on the side of the bed. "B-Rok...", he began but was interrupted.

"How did you know? I mean, when did you know, when did you find out?" questioned Brian, his voice muffled against the pillow, eager to change the subject.

Confused, it took AJ a moment or two before he understood what Brian was asking. "On the airplane. I saw the way Xavier brought his hands down upon your shoulders at the airport. And then I remembered him doing it other times and the faces you made when he did it. Oh, and the money in the bag was also a big tip off."

Brian shoved the pillow down to get a better look at AJ. "You saw the money?" he asked in disbelief. "When?"

"Just after the candy. I probably would of put two and two together sooner, but the Ecstasy really screwed me up."

Brian's blue eyes lowered in shame, recalling the incident. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

AJ's mouth nearly dropped open in surprise. "Sorry? Brian, X was the asshole. He was the one who did it, not you! There was nothing you could do!"

Brian turned his head away and AJ frowned. "Bri?" AJ reached over to touch his shoulder. "Brian? You're not blaming yourself for all this, are you?"

Brian snapped his head back around and AJ was shocked to see the bitterness in his eyes.

"Who else is there to blame? Huh? There were a lot of things I could have done different but I was just too gutless," he spat out.

Nick came over to sit next to AJ. "What could you have done different, Frick? Nothing. Nothing!"

Brian leaned up on one elbow. "I could have killed him! I had the chance, I had the chance to stab him, but I didn't!"

Nick stared Brian, remembering. "The switchblade?"

Nodding miserably, Brian slumped back down. "Yeah."

"I found you outside my door, asleep on the floor. I thought you were waiting to hurt me." Nick's voice lowered in embarrassment.

Brian rubbed his eyes tiredly. "No. I was scared Xavier was going to hurt *you*. Every time I did something that made him mad he would take it out on you guys." Brian's voice matched Nick's in discomfort. "I never knew what would set him off. It was all a mind game, his will against mine. And then Xavier would change everything, everything, and it would start all over, a new game, something different to keep him amused."

"And you were the pawn," breathed Howie, glancing over to see Kevin's pained expression.

"Yeah," admitted Brian, exhaling heavily. He turned with pleading eyes to the four. "I tried to play his games, to do what he wanted me to do. He threatened that he would harm everyone I knew if I didn't play along." Brian's face showed his disgust. "And we all know how well I did, don't we?"

"My house," said Howie.

"My dog, AJ's rope breaking, the car accident," recited Kevin.

Brian could feel the tears beginning to well up again. "Yes," he choked.

Nick leaned near Brian, reaching out with a tentative hand to touch Brian's shaking shoulders. "Frick..." he started and saw his friend recoil quickly at his concerned touch. With a sharp intake of breath, Nick looked over at AJ, both their faces troubled.

"There's something else," Nick asked quietly, "isn't there."

"No."

"Brian, we talked to Sarah. Remember her? The barmaid? She told us what you had said about Xavier and you."

Brian remained silent.

Nick threw AJ a look. AJ rubbed a nervous hand through his hair, glancing at Nick's tense face then back at Brian's too still form. "Brian, has...has.." AJ bit his lip, not sure how to phrase it, "...has Xavier hurt you in um, other ways?" He cringed at his lack of nerve in coming outright and asking if X had sexually abused him.

Nick could feel the tension build as they watched and waited for Brian's answer.

"No, not really," came Brian's vague and soft reply.

"Not really," repeated Kevin, confused. "What's not really?"

Brian lowered his eyes. "He's kissed me. He's touched me intentionally to make me feel uncomfortable. He said he wants me, has threatened me, but hasn't done anything about it...yet."

Kevin had to turn away, the bile rising in his throat. He felt his hands clenching in anger, a wild desire bursting forth to smash everything in sight. The idea that his cousin had borne all this mental and physical torment along with the sexual advances of that insane bodyguard made him want to scream in rage.

He turned back to face his cousin, his eyes narrowed in fury, determination in his voice. "As soon as I see that asshole, I'm gonna..."

"Do nothing!" Brian said fiercely, struggling off the bed to come over to face him. "Nothing, Kevin. Everything is going to stay the same, do you hear me? If Xavier so much as suspects you guys know..." Brian trailed off, shuddering inwardly at the thought of it. "Promise me you won't do anything." Brian's pleading look encompassed all of them. "Promise me."

Nick turned away while Howie shifted in discomfort, silent. Mouth wide open in disbelief, Brian turned to stare at Kevin and AJ, the look of pure vengeance burning in both their eyes.

"No," said Brian desperately, "no, I'm not going to let you!" He reached over to grab Nick's shoulder, yanking him harshly around. "Nick, Xavier will be gone soon. All he wants is his money! You know that." Brian swung his attention to the others. "You all do!" Fear made Brian beg when he saw their skepticism, their doubt. "Please, please don't do anything," he asked, his voice cracking with emotion. "He'll be gone soon, I swear! Please, for me," he finished softly, exhausted beyond belief as he slumped into a chair.

Troubled by Brian's weariness and state of mind, Nick looked at the other three for confirmation and saw them agree. "Okay, Bri, we won't do anything....for now." Nick nodded as he saw his friend's face change at the forewarning. "We'll wait. But not for long."

Brian's hopes soared and he nodded, slightly giddy with relief. "Thanks. Xavier came back only for the money. Once I finish the concert and we head up to Phoenix..."

"Wait, whoa, just a minute," broke in AJ. "Concert? What concert? You're not going on tomorrow." AJ shook his head at Brian's determined look. "Nope, no way, Rok." AJ looked for support. "Kevin?"

"AJ's right, Brian. Look at yourself. You can barely sit upright. There's no way you'll be able to endure a two hour concert."

"I'm going on."

Howie sighed in frustration. "Brian, we can handle it ourselves. It's not like we haven't sung with just four before." He looked at Kevin. "Right?"

Kevin nodded. "Absolutely. We can do it. You need to rest, get better."

"I can still sing," Brian argued, "I'll be fine." He rested one elbow on the arm of the chair, his eyes half-closed.

Kevin rubbed the back of his neck, sighing inwardly at his cousin's stubbornness, wanting to argue the point but realizing it would not get them anywhere right now. "Okay, how about this. If by tomorrow night you feel better, a lot better, you can do the concert." Watching Brian's eyelids fully close, he shook his head at AJ's, Nick's, and Howie's glare, letting them know he was lying about his promise.

"Okay," mumbled Brian. "Tomorrow."

With a flick of his hand, Kevin indicated for the others to help him get Brian over to the bed. It took but just a moment to get him comfortably situated, the half-asleep singer offering no resistance. Kevin studied his cousin's quiet form for a moment then turned to the others who were also watching Brian closely.

"This isn't good," he whispered. "He isn't good. From now on, I don't want Xavier alone with him for even a second, okay? I want Brian watched." Kevin grimaced at Brian's bruised and battered body. "Xavier is never touching him again, ever," he vowed.

Nick agreed, his mouth tightening into a thin line, remembering how quickly that creepy little stagehand had been able to fulfill his request.

"Don't worry," he said quietly. "I'll make sure he won't."

Chapter 90:

Before the Storm

Nick yawned, then stretched with difficulty, annoyed at being unable to find enough room for his long legs. Damn hotel beds! Sighing, Nick blinked a few times to clear his vision and saw Brian lying next to him, already awake, watching him with curious fascination.

"Do you know that you still drool in your sleep?" Brian informed him solemnly.

Nick scrunched up his face. "Do you know that you have like, the worst morning breath, ever?"

They looked at each other for a moment in silence.

"Marry me," swooned Brian.

"Show me the ring first," countered Nick.

They cracked up simultaneously.

"Ow, ow, shit!"

Nick sat quickly up in bed, watching Brian painfully hold onto his right side. "Pain pills?"

"Yeah," breathed Brian heavily.

Nick shot out of bed and in an instant was back with some water. "Here."

Grateful, Brian took the glass and hurriedly swallowed the medication. Closing his eyes, he could feel Nick hover over him anxiously. "Jeez, Nick, take it easy. Just give me a sec, all right?" Brian felt the bed lower under his body as Nick sat back down again.

"Okay. Let me know if you need anything."

Keeping his eyes closed, Brian kept himself as still as possible, waiting for the dull throb to lessen. It didn't help that Nick couldn't keep himself from moving around, jiggling the bed with his nervous agitation.

"That's it, the marriage's off," stated Brian. "I can't live with you. Your bedside manner is horrible."

Nick stopped squirming. "Well, that was the shortest engagement ever," he grumbled.

"Glad I found out before we got married," scoffed Brian.

"Hungry?"

"Starving," admitted Brian.

"Me too." Nick bounded off the bed in one leap, heading for the phone.

"Ow! Watch it, will ya?"

"Oh God, sorry Frick. I didn't mean to kick you."

Brian opened his eyes, glad that the pain was finally lessening. "Eggs, toast. Juice too."

Nick punched the button. "Okay."

"Oh, and some cereal."

Nick nodded and started to give the order.

"Bacon!"

Nick raised an eyebrow slightly.

"And sausage, don't forget the sausage!"

Nick sighed dramatically as he continued giving the order. "Anything else?"

Brian thought. "Biscuits and gravy?"

* * * * *

Xavier tossed his keys angrily on the dresser, easing himself out of his grimy clothes. He glanced at the softly-glowing clock next to his bed. Nine-thirty am. *Shit!* Eric's stupid emergency had taken the whole night and part of the morning to complete. He still wasn't sure if it had been necessary in the first place and Xavier's mouth tightened in frustration. Still, there was no way of getting out of it without looking suspicious and the other bodyguards had seemed as unhappy as he when the unexpected call came through.

Shedding the last of his clothes, he hopped into the steaming shower, trying to ease the tension and soreness out of his shoulders. The warmth of the water began to soothe his frayed nerves and he relaxed, his thoughts drifting to Brian. He wondered how well the young Backstreet Boy had slept, wondered if the pain medication was keeping everything under control. He felt himself tense a little when he thought of Kevin and how he had managed to take over control of the painkillers. Well, nothing could be done about it now. He just hoped Kevin was smart enough to know when to give Brian the pills to keep him from being incapacitated by the pain. He needed Brian alert and awake for the next few days. Needed. Brian. Xavier glanced down at his growing hard-on. He

smiled and closed his eyes, enjoying both the heat of the water and the heat between his legs.

* * * * *

"You forgot the cinnamon rolls!" accused Brian as Nick watched in amazement at the amount of food Brian was downing.

"You never asked for them!" Nick shot back, swiping a biscuit off the overloaded breakfast tray. "You managed to order everything else under the sun, but not that."

Brian mumbled a reply, his mouth too full to be understandable.

"What are you, eating for two?" Nick asked in disbelief.

Brian gave him a coy smirk. "None of your business," he mocked primly.

Nick laughed. "Okay, now *who* would ever want to fuck you?"

Brian's smile faded and Nick swore at his own stupidity.

"Shit, Brian, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking..." Nick's voice faded off, embarrassed. They ate the rest of the meal in silence.

* * * * *

Xavier climbed wearily into the soft comfort of his bed, enjoying the crisp freshness of the cool sheets. He had forgotten how hot Tucson could be, even at nighttime, and it hadn't helped his temper or disposition any to be stuck outside for the whole night, checking on security backups that he had deemed totally useless the very first hour he was there.

His eye caught the soft blinking glow of his telephone, indicating recent messages and with a grunt leaned over to snatch his pager off the end table. More incoming messages. He made a mental note to check them all later, too tired to take the time right now. In just a few short hours he needed to be up and about, preparing for tonight's concert. His thoughts drifted back to Brian, wondering if he would be able to perform. Probably not, if yesterday was any indication. He was slightly surprised at his disappointment. Even after countless performances, he still looked forward to seeing him on stage, hearing him sing.

He winced a little as he lay on his back, trying to find a comfortable position, propping a pillow against his side to support his sore ribs. He knew it would take awhile before his broken ribs would start to knit and it frustrated him that he had to constantly pamper the aching tenderness. He gave a feral grin in the darkened room. Well, a few more days wouldn't kill him; he'd survive, and then he could treat himself to a different kind of pampering.

* * * * *

Through out the morning and into early afternoon, the guys had taken turns keeping Brian company, either letting him sleep, which he did mostly, or quietly sitting together watching television. Kevin had cancelled all interviews except for one, a radio gig that only took a half hour to complete. He spoke with the local DJ's regarding the second half of their tour; how great it was to be back on the road; and as a precautionary measure talked about Brian's little encounter with some over-eager fans and his physical appearance. Explaining that Brian was still iffy in making tonight's performance, he warned an on-line listener that if his cousin was able to perform not to expect him to do anything much more than sing. The fan "oohed" in disappointment and Kevin smiled, gently joking that his cousin couldn't dance anyway, so it wouldn't be that big of a loss. Kevin finished the interview and hurried back to the hotel, anxious to see how Brian was.

Nick opened the door, shrugging at Kevin's questioning look. "Come see for yourself," was his cryptic reply, ushering him inside. Kevin found Brian sitting up in bed, surfing the channels with a bored expression.

Throwing down the remote, Brian looked up from the TV screen. "How'd it go?"

Kevin sat down next to him. "Okay. I warned the listeners that you wouldn't be able to make it tonight."

Brian sat up a little straighter. "What?" he asked sharply.

Nick smothered a groan. *Uh-oh.*

"I said, you're not going on..."

"I heard you. Who said I'm not?"

"Me."

"You and who else?" challenged Brian.

Nick picked up a magazine and buried his nose in it.

Kevin sighed and leaned forward in his chair, his hands folded. "Brian, I'm not gonna argue about this with you..."

"I know, cause I'm going on tonight. End of argument."

"No."

"Yes."

Kevin glanced over to Nick for help. Nick stared raptly at the magazine. "Nick?"

"Hmm?"

"A little help here?"

Nick rolled his eyes and tossed the magazine away. "Can't. Brian's mind is made up. I've been fighting with him for the last two hours about the same damn thing."

Kevin turned back to Brian. "No." And he meant it.

"Yes." Brian did too.

Before Kevin could speak again, Brian continued. "Look, I'll be fine, really. Really! AJ's pain medication has helped." Seeing the doubt in Kevin's eyes, Brian hurried on. "Kevin, if I don't go on, what will I do? Just watch? With Xavier?"

Brian had a point. A very good point. Too good. "You sure you're feeling well enough?" Kevin saw a quick hesitation in Brian's face before he nodded.

Frowning, Kevin pointed a finger warningly at him. "Okay. You're on. But you gotta promise me this, no dancing, no running around. Just singing. And if you're feeling bad, you pull out, even if it's in the middle of a song." Kevin watched skeptically as his cousin agreed too readily. "Oh yeah, one more thing. You gotta swear on the Holy Bible that you will."

Brian's mouth opened then snapped shut in frustration. Nick snickered. Kevin hadn't used that trick in a long time, but it always got the results he wanted.

Glancing sourly at Nick, Brian sighed. "All right."

Kevin wasn't going to let him get off that easy. "All right, what?"

Brian glared. "All right, I swear on the Holy Bible. There, satisfied?"

Kevin nodded and rose to leave. "Good, get some rest. We'll be leaving soon enough."

Brian watched as Kevin left then turned to see Nick leaning over, studying his back.

"What are you doing?" he asked, irritated.

"Just checking to see if you were crossing your fingers," smirked Nick.

* * * * *

Xaiver rapidly shaved, then hurried out of the bathroom, glancing at the time. Throwing on the first available clean clothes he could find, he finished tying his shoes, peeking once more at the clock. He nodded. Good. He had managed to wake up before the alarm, so he had a few extra minutes to spare. Deciding to check his pager first, he scanned it

quickly, ignoring most of the numbers. Stopping at the last one, he frowned, staring thoughtfully at his pager for a moment before reaching over to snag the phone off its hook. Drumming his fingers, he waited impatiently for someone to answer and started to hang up when he heard a click and a confident "This is Terri Hamilton, may I help you?" in his ear.

Xavier switched into his respectful tone. "Ms. Hamilton, this is Xavier Delgado. You paged me?" He held the phone to his ear with his shoulder, going over to his dresser to pocket his wallet, keys, and change.

"Oh, Mr. Delgado, I'm so glad you called," she gushed and Xavier rolled his eyes in disgust. "I just wanted to thank you for everything." Xavier grimaced. He really didn't have time to listen to this bitch.

"You're welcome," he said bluntly, dropping his polite tone as he scanned the room one last time before he left.

"I was so surprised when all the guys visited me, it came out of the blue! But I knew you sent them. I just knew it."

Xavier sat down slowly.

"All of them visited you?" he asked softly. "When?"

"Why just a few days ago! They were so sweet, so concerned about you."

"Me."

"Yes, wanted to know all about you. Asked if they could see your personal file."

"Really."

"Naturally, I said no, that as much as I wanted to help, it was confidential information."

"How considerate of you."

"However, I must warn you. I think my secretary wasn't as professional as me. I'm sure she accessed her computer to give information to Mr. Carter. I fired her, of course."

"Of course." Xavier's eyes glittered. "Ms. Hamilton, do you have a second? If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a few more questions."

* * * * *

Les was a nervous little shit, shifty, untrustworthy. Xavier liked that. Towering over him, Xavier smiled down at him, a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Okay, Les, once again. What exactly did Nick Carter want you to do?"

Chapter 91:

Storm Warning

With a soft click the door opened and Xavier walked calmly into the room, his eyes adjusting rapidly to the semi-darkness. The room was a mess; clothes strewn everywhere, damp towels thrown carelessly on the floor, half-empty cans of soda perched precariously on top of the TV. Xavier ignored it all, his eyes searching carefully for what he knew would be here. He paused for a moment, pondering, then knelt down under the bed, reaching with a long arm to drag out what he had been seeking. His eyes glittered in satisfaction and he stared long and hard at what lay before him, impressed. It took only a minute to complete his task and then he gone, leaving as quickly as he had come.

* * * * *

Nick hurried down the corridors of the McKale center, in a panic. *Shit! Shit! Shit!* It was all he could do to keep from screaming as he frantically searched the arena, not stopping for a second as he questioned anyone and everyone about Brian's whereabouts. He was met with blank stares or indifferent shrugs and frustrated, he continued on, picking up the pace, hoping the guys were having better luck than him.

It had taken only a moment, a bare split second, and Brian was gone, vanished. Nick had been laughing, joking with him as they dressed for the show and then bam! he had turned around to find that Brian had disappeared.

Alarmed, Nick had rushed to locate AJ, Kevin and Howie. He found them deep in conversation with Sam but upon seeing Nick's flushed and anxious face they had immediately stopped. Even though Sam swore Xavier was with Eric at that very moment, Nick would not calm down and they had all split up, taking a different section of the arena to search for Brian.

Some twenty minutes later Nick had still not located him. Panting from exertion and fear, he leaned against a wall, closing his eyes to try and regain some control. He prayed that it wouldn't be much longer until....Pray! Nick's eyes shot open and he pushed away from the wall. Pray. He knew that every arena had some sort of chapel room, a small place for team players or visiting guests. Now all he had to do was find it. Grabbing the nearest maintenance help he urgently asked for directions. The young helper looked at Nick with disbelief, then pointed sarcastically to a room a mere twenty feet away.

Nick stood before the door, hesitant. Cautiously, almost timidly he slipped in, scanning the small room. There in the dim light, faintly illuminated by an arched stained glass overhead, sat Brian, his body slightly bent over. Nick heard the faint whoosh of the air conditioner kick in but it didn't muffle the bitter, anguished words as Brian pleaded, begged God for help.

"Why didn't you rescue me?" Nick heard Brian demand, his voice in torment. "Where were you? If you loved me, where were you?"

Nick leaned his head dejectedly against the wall, knowing Brian's words were meant for God, but felt the meaning hit home to him personally. *Why hadn't he been able to rescue his friend? And was he truly a friend? If so, why didn't he see the agony, the suffering Brian had endured?*

"Nick?"

Nick jumped noticeably, seeing Brian twisted in his seat, a concerned look on his face. Nick shifted uncomfortably.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes." Nick shook his head. "No." He sighed. "I don't know."

"Yeah, me neither." Giving him a tired smile, Brian indicated for him to sit down.

"Jeez, Bri, you scared the shi..." Nick glanced at the cross..."uh, daylights outta me. I've been looking all over for you! Next time, just tell me where you're going, okay?"

Brian smiled apologetically and leaned back against the chair. "Sorry."

Nick eyed him closely and glanced at his luminous watch. "It's almost time. We need to go. You, uh, finished here?"

Brian gave a small grin, seeing Nick's discomfort. "Yeah. I was just having a little one on one argument with God."

"Who won?"

Brian burst out laughing, shaking his head and Nick grinned back, happy to see Brian relaxing a bit. He began to rise when he felt Brian's tight grip around his wrist. Startled, he gave Brian a puzzled look.

"Nick? Would you mind if I prayed? With you? You don't have to say anything," he added quickly, sensing Nick's hesitation.

Slowly sitting back in his chair, Nick nodded, seeing the pleading look in his friend's eyes. "Sure, Frick."

He watched as Brian leaned forward, his hands intertwined, his head bowed. For a moment Brian said nothing and Nick began to fidget awkwardly but stopped when he heard Brian's earnest plea, the soft drawl of his accent heavy with sincerity.

"Heavenly Father, help me to let go of my fear, my doubt and confusion. Help me go forward in peace and confidence. Today I am willing to face my discomfort, knowing that healing and release are on the other side. I will do my part, including letting go of fear and trusting you to do the rest. God, help me remember that what seems hopeless today can often be solved tomorrow, even if I can't see the solution. Help me go on with my life, in spite of my circumstances, trusting that things will work out. Amen."

Brian kept his head bowed for a moment longer then sighed and glanced at Nick with a small smile. "Thanks."

"No problem."

Noticing the stiffness in Brian's movements as he tried to stand, Nick reached out to lend a supporting hand. Brian gave him a grateful look and Nick nodded, holding the door open for him. "Everything is going to be fine," he promised as he followed Brian outside. Nick's eyes narrowed in determination "Trust me. I'm gonna make sure of it."

* * * * *

Another dead end. Howie sighed in frustration as he scanned the deserted hallway. *Where the hell was Brian? If we don't find him soon...*he took a quick glance at his watch. Shit! It was almost time to go on. He turned and hurried back the way he came, seeing AJ and Kevin standing at the end of the hall.

"Any luck?" he panted as he jogged up to them.

"Nope." Kevin rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Let's go get Nick. Maybe he's found Brian." All three rounded another corner and simultaneously stopped, the large form of Xavier blocking their way.

Chapter 92:

Double-Edged Sword

"Guys? What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be on stage in a few minutes?"

Xavier stood before them, his face calm, arms crossed against his massive chest. He smiled benignly, his voice oozing with concern and AJ immediately picked up on the veiled insolence.

"Yeah, we're aware of it."

Quickly donning his sunglasses, AJ hoped that Xavier had not seen the alarm, the unease his sudden appearance had caused. "What are you doing here?" he asked gruffly. "Aren't you supposed to be guarding?"

"Sam sent me to come look for you."

Xavier's smooth lie sent a sharp chill through AJ and Kevin as they saw how natural, how effortless the bodyguard's skill in deceit was.

"We were looking for Brian," divulged Howie, sensing the tension in his friends. "We can't find him."

"Well, that's my job, remember?" Xavier purred. "You should have called me." His manner was superficial, patronizing, and Howie hated it.

With an exaggerated wave of his hand, Xavier ushered the three forward, talking as they headed down the corridor. "Nope, not wise, not wise for you to be wandering off by yourselves, taking matters into your own hands. You just *never* know what could happen in these hallways. A crazed fan. A disgruntled employee. Someone could get hurt. Bad."

Trying hard not to stare at him, AJ shivered inwardly at Xavier's admonitions. *If I didn't know better, I'd swear Xavier knows all about our secret!* AJ shook his head. Impossible. *If Xavier knew, why would he still be here and risk getting caught?* He spotted Kevin's quick look and realized Kevin was thinking the same thing.

Irritated by Xavier's condescending attitude, AJ decided to push him a little. "So, X, how's the tour been so far for you? Up for the next half? Think you can handle it?" Ignoring Howie's dark frown, AJ reached up with his middle finger and slowly dragged his glasses down the bridge of his nose, staring calmly at Xavier.

The middle finger gesture was not lost on Xavier. He smiled slightly, amused by AJ's insolent little game. *He wants games? I'll give him games.*

"I'll admit it's been difficult, but not impossible. I want to thank you guys for having so much trust in me, allowing me to take matters into my own hands with Brian. I couldn't have done it with out your support. Really." Xavier held back a nasty grin as he saw a subtle twitch in their shoulders, a sudden flash of pain in their eyes. They rounded another corner and Xavier dug deeper. "No, I gotta hand it to you guys. You sure helped me out. I only hope that I'll be to repay the favor....and soon. Ahh, here they are!" Xavier motioned with a satisfied smile as he saw Nick and Brian walking towards them.

Relieved to see that Nick had found Brian, AJ hurried over to them, ill at ease with Xavier's bogus flattery.

"You all right?" he asked worriedly, looking Brian once over. "Where were you?"

"Brian's fine," pacified Nick. "He was just in the chapel room."

Xavier walked up with Kevin and Howie, nodding his head sagely. "Prayer. Always a good idea. Especially when you need something, right Brian?"

Nick turned his attention to Xavier, feeling a slow burn of anger crawling in the pit of his stomach. The very sight of the massive bodyguard repulsed him. Trying to contain his fury, Nick kept his voice low. "Xavier? I think security could use some help."

Xavier's dark eyes bore into Nick's, a small smile curling at the corner of his mouth. "Naw, they're fine." He glanced at his watch, tapping the crystal face with an impatient finger. "But I think you guys won't be if you don't hurry up. It's almost time."

Howie nodded, eager to be away from the overbearing presence of Xavier. "Let's go," he indicated with a snap of his head and all five Backstreet Boys headed for the backstage.

Quick fingers wrapped around Brian's arm and with a sudden jerk stopped Brian short, almost causing him to stumble.

"Oh. Sorry. Guess I don't know my own strength," chuckled Xavier, giving Nick, Kevin, AJ and Howie an apologetic shrug of his shoulders. "Go on, Brian will be there in a moment, I just need to tell him a few things."

"Xavier, I don't think now is the time..." began Kevin angrily but Brian cut him off, worried that his cousin's temper would get the best of him and he'd do something rash.

"It's okay. I'll just see what Xavier wants, then I'll be there." Months of practice enabled Brian to keep a composed face, not wanting the guys to see the panic he felt inside. *Go, go!* he screamed silently, praying that they would not accidentally reveal the secret. Kevin seemed to understand and he nodded, his face changing from one of anger to indifference.

"All right. Hurry. I don't want the show to start late again. You've caused us enough trouble already."

Brian wordlessly gave thanks, grateful for Kevin's quick thinking. He watched as the four exited the corridor and turned to find Xavier following the boys' departure, a faint expression of amusement displayed on his broad face.

Brian frowned, uneasy. "So what the hell is so important that it can't wait until after the show?"

Xavier's face lost all its glee as he faced the young singer, giving him a thorough look.

"Well, sure seems like you're doing better. Guess those painkillers are working, huh?"

Brian heard the bluntness in Xavier's voice and shrugged nonchalantly to hide his nervousness. "Yeah, well, I'm still hurting, just not as much." He hoped Xavier wouldn't ask for the pills back, not sure how he could explain their disappearance.

Hearing the faint chant of the excited crowd Brian took a step backwards, glancing for a way to escape. He didn't like the way Xavier just stood there staring at him, as if trying to figure something out. "Anything else? Any kinds words of advice you want to share before I go on?" Brian tried to keep the bitter sarcasm out of his voice but failed.

"I hear the Mexican Riveira is nice this time of year."

The comment was so out of the blue that it surprised Brian and he took another step back, leery.

"I wouldn't know," he said sharply. Waiting for a reply and receiving none, Brian shook his head and turned to hurry down the hall, not hearing as Xavier finally spoke.

"You will."

* * * * *

Les was trying his best to look helpful, which meant trying to do the least amount of work possible. He reached over to semi-straighten various cartons, which had been already stacked for future loading, then headed over to watch the backstage hands scurrying around. The show was in mid-swing and he adjusted his earplugs a little tighter, not to protect his hearing but to eliminate as much of the god-awful music as he could. For the hundredth time he wished he had landed the Metallica gig instead of this one. Still, one couldn't fault the groupies that followed the tour and felt more than compensated in *that* area.

He edged closer to peer at the stage. He noticed that that little skinny dude was sitting down, his legs swinging comically over the edge of the stage. The other guy, Nick, flopped down next to him, mimicking his friend's foot movements and they both seemed to be laughing.

Les tore his attention away from the two and scanned the front wondering if he could locate Xavier. Nope. Nowhere. The song ended and the applause and screams rose another octave. Les shook his head as he watched Nick help his friend to a standing position, remembering the look on Xavier's face when he informed the bodyguard what Nick was up to. In a way, he pitied the young singer, knowing all too well never to get on the bad side of Xavier. Which is why he agreed to....

"Hey, ow!" Les found Xavier's tight grip clamped down upon his shoulder.

"I'm assuming you're ready," hissed Xavier, pulling Les's earplug out with a nasty yank.

"Yeah, sure, of course I am," lied Les. He tried not to show his nervousness, his lack of confidence. If Xavier thought he could do it, who was he to argue? Besides how hard could it be? True, he had never done it before, but many others had, and it didn't look too difficult. And the money was more than enough incentive.

"Good, don't fuck up," hissed Xavier again and Les saw in the bodyguard's dark eyes the consequences if he did.

Les gulped. "No problem, relax. I'll be there, waiting."

With a rough shake, Xavier let go of Les's arm. "You'd better."

* * * * *

Howie sighed in relief. This was an easy part, the crossing of the bridge back to the stage, and they all took their sweet time in order to give Brian a rest. Throughout the show he had been nervously glancing over at Brian, sure that at any minute he'd see him collapsed on the ground, unable to continue. But Brian had surprised them all, managing to find enough strength and willpower to carry on. Nick had been hovering over him, much to Howie's amusement, playing mother hen, and would gladly have carried Brian piggy-back the whole show if Brian would have let him. Finishing the song, Howie saw AJ's and Kevin's cheerful nods of encouragement and he gave a confident smile in return. They were more than halfway finished, just a few more songs, and then they'd be done, on their way, racing for the bus to take them up to Phoenix. Things were looking good. Unbelievably good. And, in just a short time Xavier would be gone, out of their lives forever. Soon. So very soon. Howie smiled at the crowd, the band, the guys; happy, ecstatic beyond belief that he wouldn't have to do what he had originally planned.

* * * * *

Brian felt the firm grip of Nick and Kevin holding his hands as they all bowed to the cheering crowd. He felt slightly woozy as he straightened up and swayed just a little, feeling the concerned grasps tighten a little harder to keep him upright. He was exhausted, in pain, and glad it was over. He had done it. He had made it to the end. Now all he wanted to do head for the bus and sleep. Bowing once last time, Brian came up to catch the figure of Xavier standing in the front row, staring straight at him. Their eyes

locked and as much as Brian wanted to break away, he couldn't. Xavier pinned him with such a forceful stare that he found himself shaking from the intensity of it.

He knows, he knows, oh God, he knows...

He wanted to shout, to scream, to let the whole world hear his fear. At the insistent tug of Kevin's hand pulling him offstage, Brian followed, his breath coming in shallow gasps. *Breathe, breathe! Don't lose it!* he prayed silently, feeling himself being propelled by unseen stagehands towards the bus. Brian felt Nick behind him, trying to gently hurry him along and he twisted his neck around in order to capture Nick's attention.

"Nick! Nick! Something's wrong!" he hollered over the excited voices of the crew members as they shouted instructions left and right.

"Huh? What? Wait until we get on the bus, Brian!" yelled Nick back, indicating with a point of his finger at the bus that loomed before them.

The last two to arrive, Brian and Nick quickly hopped on, Nick frowning slightly in surprise when he saw Les sitting in the driver's seat. *What the hell is Les doing here? Where was their regular driver?* Both he and Brian stumbled a little as Les hurriedly slammed the door shut, quickly putting the bus into high gear, the engine groaning under the unskilled hands of its inept driver. As the bus began to race away from the curb, Nick turned his attention away from Les to locate a slow, sinister chuckling that seemed to float throughout the entire length of the bus.

With wide eyes, Nick discovered the sound and the person who was producing it. He tried not to panic as he saw Xavier standing menacingly in the aisle, tried not to panic as he viewed the fearful expressions of AJ, Howie, and Kevin who sat terrified in their seats, tried not to panic when he heard the agonized moans of Brian who slumped to the floor in despair.

He did panic at what came next.

Chapter 93:

Showdown

Xavier walked slowly up the small aisle, stopping just a few feet from Nick, whose mouth and eyes were wide open in fear.

"By the time I get to Phoenix, you'll be all dead..." he sang sweetly, a soft menacing smile curling his lip. He began to roar with amusement, shaking his head. "Sorry, I couldn't help it, I just had to sing that!"

He glanced for a moment at Brian. "Not you, of course. You're mine," he cooed with a knowing leer.

Nick watched as Brian stared back at the bodyguard, a look of utter hopelessness on his face. That was all it took to snap Nick out of his shock, a rage so consuming; a hatred so primal that it instantly flooded every fiber of his being. With an outraged shout he launched himself at Xavier, tackling the large man with such brute force that it sent them both reeling, collapsing to the bus floor in a wild tangle of arms and legs. He managed to land a punch, feeling the painful crack of his knuckles coming in contact against Xavier's brow. Nick ignored the excruciating pain of busted fingers as he fought to keep Xavier off-balance, shoving, kicking to get out from underneath the bodyguard.

It was a losing battle. Xavier's massive weight bore down upon him with a vengeance, trapping him, no chance to break free. Xavier's hands finally found their target, his enormous fingers snaking around the young singer's throat. Nick struggled fiercely, twisting madly to keep those strong fingers from tightening around his neck. He barely heard the yells and shouts above him, barely saw the glowing rage in Xavier's eyes, he only felt the massive strength, the vice-like grip squeezing his throat harder and harder as he gasped desperately for breath.

Xavier's clutch relaxed for a split second, giving Nick a quick gulp of precious air as the enraged bodyguard hit Kevin with a vicious backhand, sending the tall Backstreet Boy, who had been trying to drag him away from Nick, crashing into Howie. Nick clawed frantically at Xavier's face, hoping to strike a vital blow to one of Xavier's eyes, but managing only to rake a bloody nail down his cheek before Xavier knocked his hand away, tightening his grip around Nick's throat even more cruelly. Nick's vision blurred from lack of oxygen, the faint, desperate cries of Brian's and Xavier's name being shouted... *Brian, why was someone hysterically calling his name over and over?* Nick tried to concentrate, to search for Brian, but his lungs screamed for air, for life that was fading too quickly away...

With one last sadistic choke, Xavier released his hold. Feeling the pressure lift from his throat, Nick struggled to his hands and knees, a burning fire coursing down his lungs as he gasped for air, greedily sucking in great gulps. He lifted his head in amazement, wondering what had happened to cause Xavier to let go. With Howie's help, he struggled upright, his vision clearing enough to see Xavier, Kevin and AJ bending over Brian.

With a shaky cry, Nick shook Howie's hand off, pushing and shoving to reach Brian.

"What happened? What's going on?" he yelled hoarsely, panic-stricken as he saw Brian slumped into a seat, cradling his left arm with his right hand.

"It's his heart," said AJ bluntly, hovering protectively over Brian. "He started having chest pain." Ripping his glasses off, AJ stared hard at Xavier. "We need to get him to a hospital, *now*."

Xavier pursed his lips for a second, his hands on hips, watching Brian closely. Brian's eyes were wide open, watching Xavier just as closely, his face twisted into a grimace.

Xavier narrowed his eyes slightly then relaxed, a small smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. "No. No hospital. I think Brian is going to make a *miraculous* recovery, don't you, Brian?"

Realizing Xavier had discovered his deception, Brian dropping his hand away from his arm, and shrugged, his eyes burning with an intensity that matched the amused bodyguard's. With a silent nod of credit to the young singer, Xavier glanced at the other four, his gaze landing on Nick who was still breathing erratically.

"Well, Brian sure saved your ass with that cute little trick. You're lucky to be alive. But luck doesn't last forever, does it?" With a warning finger, Xavier motioned for them all to stay put as he lumbered up to check on Les.

"Shit! Don't ever do that again!" rasped Nick angrily, as Kevin, AJ, and Howie all nodded their agreement, still in shock over Brian's little ruse.

"What, have a heart attack or save your life?" shot back Brian, not waiting for an answer. He eyed Nick critically. "How's your throat? Are you gonna be okay?"

Nick massaged his neck gingerly then winced as the pain from his broken fingers began to throb in earnest. "Yeah, I guess, but I think I broke my hand."

Fishing out his painkillers, Brian tossed them to Nick. "Here, take some, quick, before Xavier returns." Nick glanced nervously at the broad back of Xavier who was giving directions to Les up front and rapidly downed two.

Brian turned to his cousin, watching as Kevin tentatively wiped the blood away from his mouth with the back of his hand. He raised a questioning eyebrow at the injury and Kevin waved off Brian's concern, indicating that he was okay.

"Fuck," breathed AJ as he saw Xavier returning, "what are we going to do now?"

"Let me handle it!" hissed Brian, looking at all four. "Understand? He wants me, not you."

"No! Brian!" argued AJ but was cut off by Xavier's quick appearance as the bodyguard thumped two heavy hands down upon AJ's shoulders.

"Boo!" he yelled in his ear, laughing wickedly as he watched AJ jerk from the sudden scare.

"Fucking asshole," spat AJ.

"Bone!" warned Brian.

AJ ignored him, sneering as he faced Xavier. "Fucking moron. Too God damn stupid to realize it's over."

"AJ, stop!"

Xavier calmly crossed his arms as he studied AJ, his quiet interest alarming Brian.

"So... let me guess. It was *you* who discovered what was going on, right?"

Brian tensed, hearing the warning scorn in Xavier's voice. He edged closer to the two, uneasy.

AJ met Xavier's cool gaze with one of his own. "It's over, Xavier. Done. Give it up. We know all about you, Sam does too...." AJ stopped, hearing an uproarious laugh coming from the bodyguard.

"Sam? Sam? I don't think Sam in a position right now to care...." Xavier studied his nails nonchalantly, not hiding his smirk.

"Oh God," moaned AJ, seeing the stunned expressions on the other guys' faces. "If I find out that you so much as breathed on him..." growled AJ coming up face to face with Xavier, "I'll..."

"You'll what?" said Xavier, his eyes narrowing dangerously. He reached out with a firm finger to poke AJ in the chest. "You'll what?" he repeated, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Stop me?" Poke. "Hurt me?" Another vicious poke. "What, you filthy, tattooed little freak?"

Xavier smiled threateningly, goading AJ on. "Come on. Come on, you little punk. I know you'd like to take a swing at me. Go for it." He ended his invitation with a light stinging slap across AJ's face.

AJ rushed Xavier, enraged, but Howie managed to slip in, wedging himself between AJ and Xavier and grabbed his friend by his shoulders, stopping him.

"AJ! Don't! Don't be a fool!" He glanced back at Xavier guardedly, bracing himself against AJ's struggling form. "AJ! Stop! Do you wanna get yourself killed? Huh?" Howie stared hard into AJ's eyes, trying to shake some sense into him.

AJ slumped then shoved himself away from Howie, the bitterness evident in his face. Xavier clapped his hands dramatically, nodding his approval.

"Nice, very nice. I think I've underestimated you," he said appreciatively to Howie.

Howie turned to Xavier, his brown filled with loathing and whispered a scathing epithet to the bodyguard in Spanish. Xavier raised his eyebrows in surprise, then furrowed them together in a tight frown as he took a step forward.

This time Brian managed to interrupt, his arms outstretched to ward off the advancing bodyguard. "Xavier! No! No! You've got what you want...don't! Please." Brian lowered his voice. "You've got what you want," he repeated softly, trying to make his meaning unmistakably clear.

Xavier stopped, tilting his head sideways. "Do I?" he asked coolly as he slowly eyed Brian up and down for confirmation. Forcing down a wave of revulsion, Brian nodded solemnly, his eyes pleading for Xavier not to harm his friend.

Still suspicious, Xavier reached out with a quick hand and wove his fingers through Brian's hair, yanking hard as he tilted the young singer's head back. Wanting to gauge his reaction, Xavier bent down and kissed him firmly, taking his time to savor the taste, waiting for Brian to resist. He didn't, and Xavier pulled away, impressed.

"I guess I do have what I want," he said, a slight smirk forming as he released his fingers entwined in Brian's hair.

He glanced over to see the grim and quiet expressions on the guys' faces, taking delight in Nick's dagger-like if looks could kill glare.

"Ah, what's the matter? Wish it was you?" taunted Xavier, coming over to Nick. Nick turned his face away and Xavier grabbed his jaw with one hand, forcing Nick to look at him. With his thumb, Xavier leisurely grazed the bottom of Nick's lower lip, enjoying the murderous look in the blonde singer's eyes. "You know, it might have been you. Really. You were *that* close!" Xavier brought his fingers together, showing a little gap, then laughed as he shoved Nick's face away with his large hand, causing Nick to stumble and fall.

Brian hurried over to help Nick up, his face dark with warning as he looked at Xavier's amused expression. "Xavier, that's enough. Back off. If you want me you've got ..."

The bus swayed unsteadily and everyone grabbed on for support, Xavier turning in surprise as the bus entered precariously onto the freeway. "Fucking idiot!" he shouted, racing up to the front to see what had happened.

Nick brushed himself off and sat wearily down in his seat, the others coming over closer. Brian sat across from Nick, wincing slightly as he eased into the high-backed seat.

"You hurting?" asked Howie, frowning in concern.

Brian shrugged indifferently. "It doesn't matter." He twisted in his seat to glimpse at Xavier who was apparently irritated at Les's driving skills and letting him know in no uncertain terms how he felt about it. Nick followed Brian's gaze, a tight anger forming in the pit of his stomach as he saw Xavier rebuking Les soundly with the back of his hand. His own fingers throbbled in sympathy and Nick hoped that the painkillers he took would kick in soon. Nick leaned back into his seat, watching as Brian winced once more in pain.

"He's not touching you," he promised heatedly, "no way is that son-of-a-bitch gonna lay a hand on you."

Startled by Nick's vehemence, Brian fidgeted worriedly. "You're not going to do a thing! Nothing, Nick! You hear me?" Brian's glanced anxiously at all four. "Any of you. This is between Xavier and me!"

"Like hell it is," hissed AJ. "Nick's right..." AJ stopped as he watched another flash of pain overtake Brian. He took a quick glance at Xavier, who was still talking to Les and then at Brian, seeing clearly now the glazed look of agony in his eyes, the fine sheen of sweat upon his brow.

"How bad are you?" he asked quietly.

Brian smiled weakly. "Not too bad. The pain..."

"No!" whispered AJ harshly. "No bullshitting around. *How bad are you?*" He enunciated each word sharply.

Brian felt four pairs of eyes trained on him and he lowered his head for a moment before raising it back up to face the guys. "Bad enough to know that Xavier isn't going to get what he wants," he murmured.

AJ gawked at the others, aghast. He now understood why Brian was so willing to sacrifice himself, to surrender to Xavier's wishes. He set his mouth into a firm line. There was no fucking way he was gonna let Brian do this. And, by judging Nick's, Kevin's and Howie's expressions, neither were they.

"Xavier!"

Brian jerked at the anger in AJ's voice.

"Xavier!"

Alarmed, Brian grabbed for AJ's arm, but AJ easily avoided it, shouting Xavier's name one more time, glancing at Kevin and seeing his nod of approval.

"You called?"

AJ watched as Xavier walked over to them, the sarcasm heavy in his voice.

AJ stared at him calmly, his hands akimbo. "Game's over. We're not playing anymore. You lose."

Xavier's smirk faded into a frown as Nick stood up, joining Kevin, AJ, and Howie as they faced the bodyguard, effectively blocking Brian away.

"There's no way you're gonna get away with this. We know all about it; others do too. Brian's bank account is closed, you can't get any more money." AJ ignored Brian's plea to stop and continued on. "We've hired the best to guard our families, so your outta luck there too, pal."

"Oh, really," sneered Xavier and Nick shifted nervously, watching as Kevin and Howie prevented Brian from getting up. With a quick glimpse he spied his duffle bag, lying just a few feet away and he sucked his breath in with a quick hiss. He took a small backwards step, then another, trying to drag it over with the toe of his shoe.

"Really," mimicked AJ harshly.

"Hmm. I'm fascinated, truly. Tell me, I'm dying to know, just who is going to stop me?" AJ watched as Xavier rhythmically clenched and unclenched his hands.

With a trembling hand, Nick slowly reached down to pick up his bag, his fingers curling around the handle and hoisted it up to the seat. He felt a small trickle of sweat snake its way down the side of his temple as he blindly fumbled for the zipper, glad that AJ and Kevin's bodies were partially blocking Xavier's view.

"We are," stated AJ simply, with a wave of his hand. "And while you might be big, I seriously doubt that you can take us all at once." Kevin moved a step closer, his green eyes agreeing with AJ's every word.

Brian shoved Howie's restraining away, his panic evident. "No! No! God, please, I've seen what Xavier can do!" He struggled to come between them, trying to grab a hold of AJ's wrist.

Xavier stood there for a second, rooted to the spot, his face inscrutable. He exploded with lightening speed, shoving AJ back, causing AJ to fall sideways in the small confines of the bus. He reached in with a swift hand and grabbed Brian, hauling him backwards. Fear gave Brian power and he savagely ripped away from Xavier's grasp, his momentum hurling him to the ground.

"Hold it! Hold it right there!" shrieked Nick over the commotion and everyone turned to see him pointing a gun aimed directly at Xavier's head. "Don't move!" he screamed. "You so much as move an inch and I'll blow your fucking head off!"

Wincing in pain as his broken fingers tightened around the grip, Nick walked up the aisle, his arm shaking a little as he waved the tip of the gun at Xavier. He glanced quickly at Brian to see if he was all right. "Okay, now back off!" he barked. "Step back or you're dead!"

Having a gun pointed directly at him by a wild and distraught man didn't seem to faze Xavier in the least, and with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Brian watched as he began to laugh. The intimidating bodyguard took a threatening step towards Nick and suddenly Brian knew exactly what was going to happen.

Nick pulled the trigger, then again, then once more. Each pull was met with a dead click, the chamber empty. Completely dumbfounded, Nick was too slow to react and Brian, too much in pain, to reach Nick before Xavier reached out and snatched the gun away, brutally pistol-whipping Nick across the face.

With an ugly-sounding crack, Nick fell backwards, clutching the side of his face. Brian and Howie reached him in the same instant, Howie grabbing the nearest cloth to staunch the flow of blood. With a dark, warning glance at Kevin and AJ, Xavier came over to where Nick lay dazed on the floor, his massive presence looming over all three.

"That will teach you to trust a sneaky little weasel like Les, especially when he works for me," he admonished. "Right, Les?" yelled Xavier to the front of the bus, not taking his eyes off Brian, Nick, and Howie. He ignored Les's faint reply and hitched a hip on the side of a chair, studying Nick unsympathetically as the young singer gagged into a towel, spitting out a few bloody teeth. "Not much of a gunman, are you? You should have known just by the weight that the gun was empty."

Twirling the trigger of the gun absentmindedly round and round his finger, Xavier watched the three before him indifferently, as if lost in thought. His occasional, sharp glances towards AJ and Kevin let them know that the bodyguard was indeed keeping a watchful eye on them. They sat, troubled, unsure if they should stay where they were or go over to help Nick, Howie, and Brian. Xavier trained his attention on Brian. The blonde Backstreet Boy had managed to find some ice for Nick and was helping him hold the make-shift ice pack to his face.

With a huge sigh that startled the five Backstreet Boys, Xavier stood up and smiled. "Well, this certainly has been interesting, to say the least. But I think it's time to crank it up a notch, don't you?"

With a booming cry of "Les!", which made the guys jump again, Xavier backed carefully up the aisle, never taking his eyes off the five. "Turn the bus around."

Irritated by Les's perplexed reply, Xavier barked his command again. "I said turn this bus around, dammit! Now! This very second!"

The heavy and cumbersome bus groaned under Les's amateurish maneuverings and the bus swayed and rocked as it plunged into the unfortified median, the scratching and crunching of desert scrub brush scraping the underside of the bus. The headlights danced erratically over the uneven ground, Les weaving wildly to steer the bus through. With a heavy whine of acceleration, the tires spun in the soft sand before grabbing hold, propelling the immense bus onto the other side of the highway, heading south.

With a derisive snort at Les's driving skills, Xavier turned to see that Brian had stopped administering to Nick and was staring straight at him. The beads of sweat were visible as Brian's voice filled with pain and anger. "Where are we going?" he asked, rising with difficulty up off his knees. "*Where are you taking us, Xavier?*" he snarled with such intensity that Xavier raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Shoving the gun in the waist of his pants, Xavier swung his attention to AJ, who was staring sullenly at him. "Why, you can thank Mr. McLean over there. He gave me the idea. Since he so kindly informed me that he's blocked my every avenue for being a rich ex-bodyguard, I feel it's only fair to return the favor."

"Cut the crap, Xavier!" screamed Brian, fed up with his infuriating little clues. "Where are we going?"

Xavier walked over to Brian, his eyes glittering with anticipated glee. "Why, Mexico, of course. But first, it's time for us all to play little game." With maddening calmness he pulled the gun out, inserted a lone bullet and rolled the chamber.

Chapter 94:

Face Off

Leaving Howie to tend to Nick's injuries, Brian stood in front of Xavier, his slight frame dwarfed by the bodyguard's much larger one, rage and bitterness the only things that kept him standing upright. He willed away the pain, the fatigue, the dizziness that he would have gladly succumbed to if given half the chance.

"No, no more games. No more tricks, no more pranks, Xavier. It's finished. It's over. You win. Hear that? *You win.*" Brian tried to keep his words blunt, his voice composed, all the while trembling inwardly from the shock at what Xavier had in store. He tried not to stare at the loaded gun clutched firmly in the bodyguard's hand. "That's what you want, isn't it? To win? Well, you have."

Xavier smiled at Brian's pathetic little attempt to pacify him and reached out with a cupped hand to caress his chin. "Nice try," he said mockingly. "But that's not *all* I want. You've been quite a challenge for me, a true fighter. I appreciate that, I really do."

His hand clasped cruelly around the young singer's jaw. "But no one, *no one*, not even you, tells me when the game is over. Got that?" Xavier roughly released his hold on Brian, the dull red lines from his crushing fingers noticeable upon Brian's jawline and cheek.

Glancing down to check the gun once more, Xavier brought his gaze up to smile happily at the five. "Okay," he announced brightly, "who's first?"

"Me," said Brian harshly, his eyes glittering darkly.

"You just don't give up, do you?" declared Xavier. "No, no, no, you had your turn once before, remember? You passed. Time to let someone else have the fun."

"Xavier!"

Xavier ignored Brian, fondling the gun in his hand as he nonchalantly spun the chamber round and round. "Hmm, let's see, who's gonna volunteer..." Xavier frowned at Nick, AJ, Kevin and Howie, who were all sitting down, watching him with careful, wary eyes.

"What? No takers?" he scoffed. "Come on!"

It was easy, too easy, to push Brian aside with a single rough shove and Brian crashed into the pointed edge of a table, trying not to cry out in pain. AJ quickly jumped up, coming over to help Brian, but Xavier stopped him with a wave of the gun.

"Ah, our first contestant, and one of my *very* favorites too," sneered Xavier, grabbing AJ harshly and thrusting him into the nearest chair. Kevin and Howie leaped out of their own seats shouting, coming forward, the panic and fear evident in their voice and face.

Wrapping his hand around AJ's neck, Xavier placed the gun to the young singer's temple, signaling with a fierce glare for Kevin and Howie to back off. He disregarded Brian's screams of *no!*, keeping his eyes glued to the three before him. He felt AJ move a little and so he tightened his grip, pressing the muzzle deeper into his skull. He had to give the little freak credit as he glanced quickly at him. AJ was sitting still, calm, almost too calm, while everyone around him was yelling in terror.

"Ready?" Xavier questioned to all, his eyes not on AJ, but on Brian who was shaking, pleading for Xavier to stop.

"Just do it, you stupid son-of-a-bitch!" spat AJ furiously, his voice filled with hatred. "What are you waiting for?"

Startled by AJ's vicious contempt, Xavier jerked back a second in surprise then pressed his mouth into a grim line as he pulled the trigger. The gun's chamber turned, the only thing being discharged was the sound of a dull click. The desperate shouts from all four Backstreet Boys froze in mid scream as it took a few seconds to comprehend that AJ was still alive.

Xavier abruptly released his hold from AJ and with a grunt, gave him a hard shove forward. Kevin caught AJ before he fell, grabbing AJ into a tight hold to try and calm the trembling that was coming from AJ's traumatized mind and body.

"Damn, this must be your lucky day!" mocked Xavier. He spun the chamber once more, a manic grin lighting up his face. "Who's next?" he asked, waving the gun inquiringly in the air. "Aw, come on, don't be shy!"

Xavier scanned the silent group before him. "Nick?"

Hand cradling the makeshift icepack to his face, Nick paled noticeably, recoiling away from Xavier's impatiently beckoning hand. A second later, Brian was blocking the way, his breathing haggard, the pain in his body evident, but his eyes and voice firm with defiance.

"No, Xavier. No! You're going have to kill me first before ..." Brian was unable to finish his threat as the bus swayed, buffeted by a sudden blast, a howling whine that swirled around the enclosure of the large bus. What sounded like fine particles of rock began to hit the outside of their windows, the darkness of the night not allowing the passengers to view what was assaulting them. Immediately shoving his gun back into the waistline of his pants, Xavier threw a warning scowl to all five and hurried up front to see what was happening.

Les, his small frame cloaked by the large captain's chair, was struggling to keep the moving bus on course, gusts of blowing dust smacking the windshield with ebbing and flowing waves. He felt the bodyguard's presence and sneaked a quick glance at Xavier before returning his attention to the road. The visibility was almost non-existent as he tried to gauge the outlines of the road. "What's going on?" Les asked nervously.

"Slow down, slow down, you idiot!" hissed Xavier. "It's a dust storm. You'll run us off the road if you're not careful!"

Les began braking, slowing the bus down to a crawl, the headlights barely able to penetrate a few feet ahead as the clogging dust enveloped them from all sides.

"Shit!" breathed Xavier. "Go slower. No! Forget that. Pull over. Stop. Now. You're going to get us all killed by trying to stay on the road." Les guided the massive bus over to the edge of the road, feeling, rather than seeing, the bus's tires bump slightly as the smoothness of the paved highway gave way to the uncertainty of the unstable ground beneath them.

Pleased at his driving ability, Les put the engine into park, grinning at the agitated bodyguard. "Not too bad, huh?"

Irritated, Xavier lightly cuffed Les on the back of his head and then began fishing underneath the passenger's chair, pulling out a compartmental box and grabbing a large flashlight. "Turn off the engine, kill the lights," he barked. Seeing the confused look on Les's face, Xavier sighed.

"You really are a fucking idiot, you know that? Our lights, tail lights, will be visible to the other blinded drivers behind us. They'll follow our lights and ram right into us!"

"Oh," replied Les meekly, quickly shutting down. Xavier snapped on the hefty flashlight, its beam jumping erratically as he swiftly returned to the subdued fivesome.

Holding the light under his face for a second, Xavier smiled wickedly. "Anyone want to hear a scary story?" Laughing at their sullen faces, Xavier slouched casually into the seat next to them. "Guess not." With a flick of the flashlight, Xavier pointed outside. "Dust storm. We have to wait it out. Shouldn't be too long." Stretching with a large groan, Xavier settled in his seat more comfortably as the swirling dust outside surrounded the bus like a hoard of angry bees.

"Guess it's time for another game," he announced, enjoying the panicked look that flashed in everyone's eyes. "Truth or dare is always fun," he announced with a smirk. "Hmm, no objections? Good. I'll go first. Kevin." Kevin jerked at the sound of his name, questioning eyes meeting Xavier's. "Truth or dare?"

"Uh, truth..." hesitated Kevin, biting his lip.

Xavier snorted. "Whimp. Okay, truth. How did you feel when you saw that picture of your dog mutilated?" Xavier ignored Kevin's angry, choking sound and continued. "Boy, that dog of yours was sure a pain in the ass to kill. Took me a while." Xavier voice drifted, as if lost in thought. "Yep, a real pain." Raising his eyebrows, Xavier suddenly smiled as Kevin desperately struggled to contain his anger. "Oh, not answering? All right, you lose your turn. Howie."

Realizing that Xavier was trying to lure them into making a rash move, Howie shifted uneasily and hesitantly looked at Xavier.

"Truth or dare."

"Truth."

Xavier shook his head, disgusted. "Another whimp. Tell me, how does it feel to know that your Mom was this close to being torched?"

Howie's eyes opened wide as he tried to regain his composure, fighting the nausea that roiled in his stomach as he remembered the arson to his home.

"Yes, I hate having a job half-done. Maybe when I get a little extra time, I'll see what I can do about finishing it."

The dark-haired singer rose up from his seat, too furious to reply. "Howie!" yelled Brian and AJ simultaneously, their voices snapping Howie out of his bloodlust. "He's just baiting you!" warned AJ harshly. "Sit down. Sit down!"

With his free hand, Nick grabbed at Howie, tugging him back. Nick shook his head at his friend, his jaw throbbing, in too much pain to talk. Letting his eyes speak for him, Nick pleaded with Howie to sit back down. Reluctantly Howie sat, silent, glaring at Xavier.

"Well, this is no fun!" growled Xavier. "Howie loses his turn too." A tiny grin formed as he turned his head. "AJ."

AJ stiffened, waiting for the question.

"Truth or dare."

AJ closed his eyes for a second. *Take dare*, he screamed silently. *Take dare!* With a sigh, he opened his eyes. "Truth."

This time Xavier had no comment on the choice and he pushed up out of his seat, coming over to where AJ sat next to Brian. He leaned over slightly, the light from the flashlight emitting an eerie glow to Xavier's dark eyes.

"How does it feel to know that I'm gonna fuck Brian senseless and that there's not a damn thing you can do to stop it?" he whispered.

Xavier's pleased laughter was drowned out as the blood rushed to AJ's head, his fury overtaking his rational thinking. With an enraged shout, AJ shot up out of his seat, bypassing Brian's outstretching fingers as he lunged for the amused bodyguard's face.

Xavier quickly sidestepped him, clamping down with a massive hand upon the back of AJ's neck and wrenched him backwards with a hard jerk. Tumbling to the ground, AJ immediately sprang up, a murderous look in his eyes.

The sudden banging against the side of the bus and yelling of excited voices outside startled the inside occupants, halting the fight. Confused and in a panic, they all strained to hear the faint but distinct cries of "Nick! Nick! Are you in there?" mixed with girlish squeals of delight as more voices shouted out the other band members' names.

Livid, Xavier rushed up to the front, peering out into the inky darkness. The dust storm had lessened considerably, making visibility a little easier and in the dim illumination of a strange car's headlights, Xavier was able to make out the shadowy figures of several teenage fans.

"Damn," said Les, with a surprised whistle. "They must have followed us up from Tucson!"

"Start the bus," Xavier barked, "now!"

Knowing better than to argue, Les snapped to attention, turning on the ignition. The bus's headlights flared to life and Xavier counted just one lone car and five overly excited fans.

With a snarl, Xavier yanked Les out of his seat and climbed in, shifting the cumbersome bus into reverse. Slamming on the accelerator, he ignored the screams of the girls as they scattered haphazardly, trying to avoid the careening bus as it found its target, smashing solidly into the girls' small compact. Grinding the gear, Xavier shifted into drive and floored the gas pedal, the tires spinning for just a second as it gained traction in the soft desert ground. Xavier's foot still pressed all the way down, the enormous sized engine rose to meet the challenge and screamed with power, pushing the heavy bus up onto the highway in a reckless manner. The squeal of distant tires and honks faded behind them as the bus picked up speed, the fading dust storm being replaced by scattered drops of rain. Yelling at Les, Xavier expertly slipped from behind wheel, shoving the startled young man quickly back into the driver's seat.

"Get going," he ordered grimly. "Head for the border as quick as you can." Marching down the aisle, Xavier disregarded the five Backstreet Boys as he began grabbing several items and shoving them into his large duffel bag. The Boys watched, looking at each other with quiet unease.

During Xavier's time in the driver's seat, Howie had changed positions, sitting in front of AJ and Brian while Kevin stayed back to watch Nick. Glad that Xavier was too distracted to notice the change in seating arrangements, Howie caught AJ's anxious look and studied Brian with a worried eye. His complexion pale, his eyes and mouth pinched from pain, Howie could tell that Brian was faring poorly. His attention was dragged away by a sudden flash of lightning, followed by a heavy smack of rain as it began to bombard the sides of the bus with a fury.

An illuminated sign passed overhead, the spotted patches of light outside indicating civilization was near as the bus sped on. Another sign flashed by and Howie was quick enough to catch the wording: two more U.S. exits before the international border. Heart in his throat, Howie knew that Xavier had seen it too by the way the bodyguard was deftly zipping up his bag. Cautiously moving forward in his seat, Howie rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms on his knees, his right hand trailing slowly, slowly down to lift the edge of his pant leg up. He looked up to see Xavier looming over Brian and AJ, the bodyguard's commanding hand reaching in to capture Brian's wrist. "Come on," he said quietly, his tone no-nonsense. "We're leaving. Let's go." With a sharp tug Xavier hoisted Brian out of his seat, Brian trying his best to worm out of Xavier's grasp.

Xavier turned to glare threateningly at AJ, Nick and Kevin, who had jumped up with angry shouts of "no!" Backing up slowly, Xavier sneered warningly. "I will break his arm," he promised, squeezing cruelly on Brian's forearm to make him cry out in pain, "if you so much as move another inch."

"I think you have it the other way around, Xavier. Don't *you* move another inch," advised Howie softly.

In the sudden silence that followed, Xavier felt the sharp sting of a knife being pressed strategically into his lower back. "Don't move," hissed Howie again, his voice cold with revenge as he pushed every so slightly.

Rigid in surprise, Xavier winced as he felt the razor-sharp blade dig into his back, a small rivulet of blood zigzagging down his lower spine.

"You're right, you *did* underestimate me," Howie said tightly. "Let go of Brian before I...", ending his warning angrily in Spanish. Xavier's eyes narrowed in rage and Howie took the opportunity to remind him once more with a tiny thrust. Wincing in pain, Xavier reluctantly released his hold on Brian just enough to let the young singer rip out of his strong grip.

Brian staggered back, his head spinning from pain, shock, and elation. He felt AJ's concerned hand bracing him, but he swayed again, this time violently as the bus began to squeal in protest, Les locking up the brakes as he saw the blurry, rain-soaked form of a large animal positioned directly in front of him. The slickness of the road, the speed of the bus caused the tires to hydroplane, sliding, slipping as Les tried wildly to overcorrect.

Feeling Howie stumble backwards, the weight of the blade gone, Xavier turned with a snarl and shoved Howie viciously. The momentum sent him sprawling to the floor, the knife spinning out of his hand. Unable to keep himself upright with the movement of the bus's heavy fishtailing, Xavier staggered and dropped to his knees. Leaning as far as he could forward, he reached out for Brian again, finding contact, and curled his fingers around Brian's lower leg, jerking hard. Caught completely off-balance, Brian fell on his back, the wind knocked out of him, feeling himself being dragged forcefully into the clutches of Xavier's strong hands. Barely sensing the bus's collision with the large

animal, Brian gasped for breath as he wriggled frantically to free his left ankle from Xavier's tight grip.

Miraculously, Les managed to bring everything under control, the bus beginning to slow down. Regaining his balance, Xavier released Brian's left leg, quickly jumping up. Looming over the fallen singer, Xavier bent over to yank him to a standing position. It was all Brian needed. With perfect timing, Brian brought his right foot up, the heel of his boot smashing squarely into Xavier's jaw. With a sickening crack, Xavier's head snapped back and he reeled backwards, crashing into Howie who had finally managed to stand upright. Like a domino effect, Howie was flung backwards, the force of Xavier's body sending him directly into the backside of Les. The momentum caused Les to lose his control of the wheel and within seconds, the bus plunged off the side of the rain-slicked road, the sodden, unstable ground unable to support the colossal weight of the bus. Tilting sideways, the bus leaned precariously on two wheels, the occupants inside tumbling, tangling, smashing into one another and any other object that came flying their way. With a groan of straining sheet metal, the off-balanced bus finally gave way to the pull of gravity, a mighty crash erupting as it fell on its side, the tires still spinning wildly as the rain pelted mercilessly down.

Chapter 95:

Search

"Holy shit, would you look at that!" pointed Zac excitedly, yanking on the car door handle, jumping out before their small truck had even stopped. Bringing his hand up to shield his face from the stinging rain, Zac motioned for his friend to hurry up, then began scrambling down the small, muddy embankment in a rush to get a closer look. Turning around, Zac caught sight of his friend, half-slipping, half-sliding behind him, trying hard not to lose his balance.

Zac reached out, catching his friend's hand to steady his wobbly descent. "You okay, Matt?" shouted Zac, flashing him a smile when he saw a thumb's up sign.

"Hey, it's the same bus that cut us off a while ago!" cried out Matt, stunned. "I'm positive!"

Zac nodded in agreement, remembering how the gigantic bus had appeared out of nowhere, nearly colliding with them when it suddenly swerved onto the freeway during the dust storm. With a yell of "come on", Zac carefully wove his way towards the toppled bus, the feeble glow from the bus's interior lights the only illumination helping to guide the way. He grimaced as his hand came in contact with a needle sharp bush and wisely raised his hands above his head, thankful that he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt and denim jeans.

The underbelly of the bus appeared before them, effectively blocking Zac and Matt from any kind of a view inside, so Zac signaled to his friend to split up and they separated, circling the enormous bus from opposite ends. Trying to keep the driving rain from pelting their faces, Zac and Matt bent their heads, their hands carefully outstretched as they traced the perimeter of the bus, hunting for any sign of an opening.

Rounding the left side of the fallen bus, Zac's fingers came in contact with an immense windshield. Excited, he began rubbing the mud-smearred window with the back of his sleeve in a wide, circular motion, hoping for a better look. Finally clearing a large enough section to see through, Zac pressed his face against the window, gazing in. With a dissatisfied grunt, Zac scooted over to the other side of the windshield, vigorously wiping in a different spot, unable to see anything on the first try. Another circular hole, another attempt to peer through...*oh, shit!* Zac stumbled backwards into the muddy brush, screaming in horror as the grotesquely mangled and bloodied face of the driver stared lifelessly back at him.

Turning his head, Zac knelt on one knee and breathed in deep gulps of air, trying desperately to suppress the urge to vomit. Careful not to glance at the windshield again, Zac struggled upright and began to curve around the corner of the bus, still searching for an opening. Hands pressed upon the bus's exterior, it took him only a second to recognize that he was touching the roof. Zac stood there in frustration, thwarted in his attempt to reach any occupants inside, knowing that the bus's side door was inaccessible

to him. Wondering what to do next, Zac froze for a moment, not sure if he heard his name being called out. The rain and wind had lessened in its intensity and he cocked his head to one side, straining to listen. *There!* Hearing the muted but excited cries of his name being shouted, Zac struggled in the muddy soil to locate Matt. He found his friend at the bus's rear section, pointing animatedly at the back window, watching with fascinated alarm as the window shook again and again from repeated forceful blows.

Before Zac could get closer, the window cracked then shattered as a heavy boot smashed through. Once, twice more the boot lashed out, kicking the remaining shards away. An arm, then shoulder, and finally a head popped out, the bloody face almost unrecognizable. Swallowing down his nausea once more, Zac hurried over to him, yelling for Matt to come help. With great difficulty they managed to ease the wounded man out, all three panting from the exertion.

Stepping back a moment to wipe the rain from his brow, Zac was startled to see Matt frantically struggling with the injured person, a huge, brute of a man who was shaking Matt like a rag doll. Horrified, Zac rushed near to help his friend, only to be backhanded viciously across the face.

"Where, where?" Zac heard the man scream, watching as Matt pointed up towards the road. "Give me the keys, now!" roared the obviously insane man, his demand terrifying by the way his massive hand was wrapped around Matt's throat. Gagging, Matt fished wildly into his pocket, dropping to his knees as the bloodied man released him to snatch up the offered keys.

Incensed, Zac lunged at him, only to be shoved violently backwards. Zac tumbled into Matt and they both crashed to the ground in a tangled heap. Helping his friend back up, Matt watched in disbelief as the injured man made a mad scramble up the embankment, disappearing from view.

"He's stealing our truck!" rasped Matt hoarsely, trying to shake free from Zac's grip in order to give chase.

"No! Matt, no! Are you crazy? He's twice as big as you!"

Zac yanked hard on his friend's shoulder. "Forget it! Let him go!" Remembering the busted rear window, Zac glanced back at it and then faced Matt. With one hand he reached out to grab a hold of Matt's sleeve, dragging him towards the bus. "Come on, come on, we gotta help!"

Sliding one leg in, then another, Zac carefully maneuvered himself through the exposed window, turning to help haul Matt in. Stepping on some overturned object, Matt nearly lost his footing and reached out to grab Zac before he stumbled. Righting himself, he didn't hear the sharp intake of breath coming from Zac, nor heard what Zac said, his own words drowning out Zac's.

"Holy Mother of God," Matt breathed, viewing the scene before him.

Chapter 96:

Rescue

Ignoring the throbbing pain in his jaw and left arm, Xavier scrambled up the side bank, heaving himself up towards the highway. Squinting in the dim light for the truck, he spotted the vehicle a few hundred feet away and limped to it, wondering if he had also injured his leg in the crash. Not feeling any noticeable pain in his leg, he shrugged it off, not concerned with anything but reaching the safety of the truck and getting the hell away. He opened the door deftly, glad that he still had use of his good right hand. It had been only through a miracle that his fall had been cushioned by the body of a Backstreet Boy, otherwise he knew he would have been more severely injured.

Squeezing his large frame into the small cab of the truck, Xavier fumbled for a moment with the unfamiliar keys before finding the right one. The little truck roared to life and Xavier shifted it into gear, thankful that it was automatic, rather than standard shift. With a squeal he merged onto the highway, not pausing to seeing if any traffic was coming his way.

* * * * *

Zac and Matt both stared in shock, dumbfounded at what lay before them. It looked like an explosion had occurred; bits and pieces of gear, luggage, and whatever broken remnants had been violently thrown out of their containers. The tilt of the crushed bus gave it a bizarre perspective and it took Zac and Matt a moment to visually correct their sight. It was then that they noticed the bodies, the weird and twisted shapes of the bus's occupants.

"Shit!" inhaled Zac with a sharp hiss. Wading through the paraphernalia, trying to hop over the slanted seats, Zac snarled in frustration as he tried to reach the first prone figure. The man was lying on his side, face turned away, and Zac stretched as far as he could to touch him. No response. Scooting, wedging himself as close as he could, Zac managed to get a hold of the guy's wrist and wrapped his fingers around it, feeling for a pulse. *Good!* It was strong, not the least bit thready.

"Matt, I've got one! He's alive! Can you get to yours?"

"I'm trying!" grunted Matt, crawling haphazardly through the chaotic mess. It was more difficult to reach the other man than he thought, having to weave himself past Zac without banging into him. He passed Zac and the hurt young man, stopping for an instant to look. All he could see in the soft illumination was the man's dark jacket and pants, a stark contrast to the blonde hair that was matted in blood. "Is he gonna be all right?" Matt huffed as he heaved himself closer to the collapsed figure.

"How the hell should I know?" hissed Zac. "*You're* the one whose dad is a surgeon!"

"Oh, and that makes me automatically a doctor?" scoffed Matt angrily. "I got a scholarship in athletics, not medicine, Zac!" They both glared at each other, nervous, troubled, and afraid. A soft moaning broke eye contact and they turned to see the injured blonde man moving slightly.

"Okay, don't move him!" advised Matt. "Talk to him, ask him where he's hurt. Don't move him!" admonished Matt again as he crept towards the other slumped figure.

"All right, all right!" agreed Zac, biting his lip. He tentatively touched the man's shoulder, then withdrew, remembering Matt's warning. "Hey...hey you, wake up. Wake up. Listen to me. Can you hear me?" Anxious, Zac glanced at Matt who had now reached his target. With a more audible moan, the blonde man moved a fraction more, turning his head to Zac's side. Zac peered closer, trying to see. Except for a rather nasty injury running along his jawline and a cut high on his forehead, he seemed facially intact. Zac breathed a sigh of relief, remembering all too well the mangled face of the dead driver. Bending nearer, Zac nervously touched his face, trying to wipe some of the blood away. The injured man's eyes flew open, blue orbs staring back at him in panic.

"It's okay, it's okay," soothed Zac, not sure exactly what to do. "You're gonna be all right. We saw the bus tip over. We'll help you. Are you okay? Where does it hurt?"

The young man mumbled a reply and Zac strained to listen. "What? What? I can't hear you! What's your name?"

Zac caught the name. Nick. Or was it Rick? He couldn't be sure. "Okay, Nick, look at me. Look at me! That's it. My name is Zac. Can you see two of me?"

"Idiot!" yelled Matt, listening. "Ask him where he's hurt! Jesus!" Shaking his head, Matt returned to examining his own injured person.

"Right! Right! Okay Nick, how ya feeling? Where does it hurt?" Seeing the blood oozing freely down Nick's forehead, Zac yelled at Matt.

"Hey, he's bleeding! A lot!"

"Don't move him!" reminded Matt. "Find some kind of cloth. See if you can get him to press it to his wound!"

Nodding, Zac scanned around, finding, of all things, a sock. Snatching it up, he leaned over Nick only to find the bloody young man struggling to sit up.

"No, no! Don't get up. Stay where you are!"

Nick groaned, ignoring Zac's warning. His jaw hurt like a son-of-a-bitch and this guy's frantic cries only added to the pain. "I'm okay, I'm okay...I think," admitted Nick, wincing as he sat upright. "Leave me alone...Jeez!" He swatted irritably at Zac's hand when he realized Zac was trying to shove something into it.

"Take it, take it!" urged Zac.

"No."

"Nick, you're bleeding!"

Nick blinked several times, uncomprehending. "Bleeding?" he asked, surprised.

"Yeah! Bleeding! Here, here, like this, press it like this." Matt gently guided Nick's hand up to his face. "There, that's it, right there."

Nick winced as he pushed on the wound, the pain immediately clearing his bewilderment. "Oww! Shit!" He suddenly realized that not only his jaw and head throbbed, other parts were now too screaming for attention. "Oww, God, it hurts!"

Zac's eyes opened wide. "Where? Where?"

A wave of nausea overtook Nick and he turned, gagging from the taste of blood. "Everywhere," he replied weakly, wiping his mouth. "Help me."

Agitated, Zac shot a frantic look over to Matt, who seemed to be helping a man sit upright "Matt! Matt! We need more help!"

"I *know!*" yelled Matt back in frustration. They had tried to call for help as soon as they had seen the accident, but the combination of rain, wind and location had rendered the cell phone completely useless. "What the hell do you want *me* to do about it?" he shouted, glaring at his friend.

Matt turned back to the dark-haired man who was bent over, swaying a little. Glad to see no visible injuries, he touched him tentatively. "You okay? Are you gonna be all right?" Matt studied the slim-figured man, watching him cautiously as he nodded his agreement. Sighing audibly, Matt grinned. "Great. My name is Matt. Do you have an emergency medical kit on board? Your friend there is hurt."

Startled, this news seemed to shake the last cob-webs of confusion away and the young man straightened up. "Yeah, we've got a med kit." His brown eyes widened for a moment as he took in the sight before him. "Oh my God," he whispered and Matt moved closer, a worried line creasing his brow.

"It's okay, you're okay. Everything will be fine. What's your name?"

"AJ. My name is AJ." With a shaky hand, AJ rubbed his mouth. He couldn't seem to think clearly. *Oh yeah.* "The med kit." His eyes darted around the tumbled interior. "I don't know where the kit is," he said helplessly. Remembering Matt's words, AJ's fingers dug tightly into Matt's flesh, alarmed. "Hurt? Who's hurt? Who?"

Seeing him clearly for the first time, Matt gazed at him curiously. He sure looked familiar. "Uh, your friend over there... Nick." He pointed towards Zac, who was hovering over Nick.

"Nick? Nick!" AJ struggled to remember something else, something that also screamed for his attention, but for the life of him he couldn't concentrate on anything but finding his friend.

Matt heard the beginnings of panic in AJ's voice and frowned as AJ began to stumble over towards Nick. "Hey, no! AJ! Wait!" Realizing that AJ was not going to listen, Matt crawled after him, shaking his head in exasperation. He caught up, watching along with Zac as AJ hesitantly skimmed his hands over Nick, his voice shaky with concern.

"Nick, Nick! Look at me. It's AJ, man. Come on."

AJ's pleading struck a chord in Nick and with some difficulty Nick turned his head towards him, his blue eyes glazed with pain. "AJ?"

"I'm here."

"What happened?"

"The bus crashed, Nick. Remember?"

"Yeah." Nick groaned a little.

"Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere." Narrowing his eyes a little, Nick surveyed his friend, troubled. "Are you hurt?"

AJ shook his head. "Naw. Bumped my head pretty good, but otherwise I'm fine."

Nick groaned again, grimacing as he shifted gingerly into a more comfortable position. "How come you are always so lucky? I hate you, you know that?"

AJ visibly relaxed, feeling slightly giddy with relief. "He'll be okay," he informed Matt and Zac with a slight tremble in his voice. "Anytime Nick can joke, means he's fine."

Nick glared then applied more pressure to his jaw. Recalling who had caused the pain, Nick glanced at AJ in dread.

"Where's Xavier?"

Startled, AJ scanned around, his gut wrenching in fear. "Good question. I don't know."

He rubbed his head gingerly, wincing slightly at the touch. *Why couldn't he think straight? He was missing something, or someone...*

"Xavier? Is he large, dark-looking?"

"Yeah."

"Is he a friend of yours?" asked Zac.

"No."

"Oh, well he smashed out the back window and just about strangled Matt trying to steal our truck! I feel sorry for the person who makes him really angry." Matt and Zac shook their heads in disbelief.

AJ wavered for a moment, suddenly remembering. "Brian."

Nick looked at him, their shock simultaneous as they gaped at each other in alarm.

"Who's Brian?"

"Brian! Brian!" yelled AJ, as if he was an idiot. Frantically peering into the depths of the bus, AJ grabbed Matt. "There's more!"

"More?"

"Yes. Oh God! Brian! Kevin! Howie! There's more! Help me find them!" Shoving roughly away, AJ started a mad scramble towards the front of the bus.

Chapter 97:

Time's Running Out

Xavier stared grimly in front of him, weaving recklessly in and out of highway traffic, ignoring the annoyed honks of motorists as he sped through on his way to the border. He checked his watch and frowned, noting the time. It would be a close call as to whether he made it across, the border patrol not allowing any motor vehicle passage after 1:00 A.M. Flinching a little as he bumped his left arm against the small confines of the truck's cab, he swore vehemently, then swore again as his jaw spasmed in painful protest to the movement. Delicately tracing the hinge of his jaw line with his fingertips, he explored, examined. *Yep. Cracked, if not downright broken.* He berated himself for his careless move; he knew better than to crouch over an adversary, exposing his neck and face like that. Brian knew it; hell he had taught him that move! A grudging respect at Brian's cleverness surged through him, slowly turning into bitterness as he contemplated on the sudden turn of events. Feeling himself burn with resentment, he gripped the wheel, angry at how close he had come to having everything, *everything*.

And now it was gone, vanished, *over*. The game had ended, not with a bang, but with a whimper. Drumming his fingers lightly on the steering wheel, he thought about his lost opportunity for success, for wealth, for *Brian*. In pain and in a panic he had fled the accident, only wanting to escape. Now he felt a twinge of remorse at not taking the time to locate Brian. Was he alive? Was he dead? The frustration of not knowing gnawed at him and he crossly shoved his feelings aside, angered at his distress, his worry, his desire for the young Backstreet Boy. He sighed heavily. Well, there was nothing he could do now. Nothing.

Xavier's eyes caught the small glowing light of a cell phone, wedged into the crux of the passenger seat along with a pack of cigarettes. Reaching over carefully, he picked it up, wincing as he made his injured left hand steer the small truck. Grazing his thumb over the keypad gently, Xavier drove on, thinking, wondering. There would be nothing he'd enjoy more than to see tomorrow's paper declaring the deaths of Nick, Howie, Kevin, and especially that asshole, AJ. But along with that announcement would surely come the notice that Brian was dead too. *If he wasn't already. If.* He swore inwardly, maddened that someone could have so much sway over him. He tap, tap, tapped the cell phone against the dashboard for a moment, irritated, completely at odds with himself. He began to punch a number, cursed himself for his weakness and hit the end button, canceling the call. Closing his eyes for a second, Brian's face came into view and he wavered, his fingers gripping the base of the phone tightly. *Maybe the game wasn't over. Maybe, just maybe it could continue, could begin again. Sure, the rules would have to be different, but the player would be the same...* His mind screamed against the danger in it, the madness, but for the moment he didn't care, his desire for success, for Brian overpowering any logic. Punching the pad again, Xavier brought the phone up gingerly to his face, waiting for the call to go through, half-scared it would, half-scared it wouldn't. Hearing the click of directory assistance, Xavier checked a freeway mileage marker, made a mental note, and then proceeded to give instructions to the emergency operator.

* * * * *

The bus was immense, huge, beyond mammoth, and Matt gamely scrambled after AJ, figuring the young man knew more about the location of his friends than he did. He was shook up a little at the knowledge that there were more; he had just assumed by visual inspection that Nick and AJ were the only ones on board. Hearing AJ's excited yell and furious grunts, Matt found himself crouched next to AJ, assisting him in lifting a heavy object off the floor.

"Howie!" inhaled AJ sharply, desperately flinging off other odds and ends as fast as he could.

"AJ!" shouted Nick, his voice pitched high in fear, "what's going on? Did you find Howie?"

"Yeah! He's unconscious!"

"Oh, God!" filtered Nick's voice from the back. "Help him!"

"I'm trying!" yelled AJ. He glanced worriedly at Matt. "What do we do?"

Matt ignored AJ's frantic question, bending down to push the long hair away from Howie's neck. Snaking two fingers, Matt sought for the artery in his neck, seeking a pulse. Nodding happily, Matt pulled his hand away. "He's alive. How bad he's injured, I don't know. The interior lights of the bus flickered then dimmed a bit and Matt glanced up in dismay. Meeting AJ's worried look, Matt frowned. "Your generator is running low. I don't know how much time we have left before the lights go out."

AJ chose not to acknowledge that bit of information, choosing instead to concentrate on Howie. He repeated his question to Matt, the desperation in his voice more evident.

"What do we do?"

Matt closed his eyes for a moment in frustration. *Think!* he screamed to himself. *Think!*

He snapped his eyes open when he felt AJ's anxious hand on his shoulder. "Okay, okay," Matt said, racking his brain, trying to remember, trying to visualize. *Why hadn't he listened to his Dad more?*

He glanced at Howie's unconscious form. Unconscious. *Any unconscious person who remains on his or her back is at risk of inhaling vomit or having the airway blocked by a relaxed tongue.* Matt started. Where the *hell* had that come from? Grateful that some of his dad's teachings had sunk through, Matt reached over to touch Howie.

"Help me turn him," grunted Matt, signaling to AJ. "We gotta put him on his side."

"But what if he's injured bad?" questioned AJ.

"It won't matter if he dies from aspiration from lying on his back!" argued Matt heatedly. "Just do it!"

Both men crouched around Howie, Matt instructing AJ how to hold Howie's head and neck, warning him to support it with extreme care. "Ready?" AJ nodded. "Okay, one, two, three!" Using their combined strength they pushed to roll Howie over. "That's it, that's it," encouraged Matt. "Yes! Keep his head down, yeah, like that, and tilt, here let me do it. See? Tilting his head this way will cause any vomit to spill out and not down his airway. Okay? Good."

Confident that Howie was not going to right himself, Matt motioned to AJ. "Can you see any visible injuries?" he questioned. "Come on, help me look."

With trembling fingers AJ poked and prodded gently, shaking his head. "I don't see anything. Shit! I'm not a doctor! What if..."

AJ's fearful reply was interrupted by one of Nick's. "AJ! What's happening! What's going on? Can you see Brian or Kevin?"

"Nick! Hold on! Howie's still out, but Matt and I don't see any injuries..." The lights flickered once, twice more, then remained steady.

"Fuck!" swore AJ, breathing heavily as he glanced wild-eyed at Matt. "We gotta hurry. There's no telling how long we have left..."

Matt nodded his agreement, wiping the nervous sweat from his brow. "Zac!" he yelled out, turning to crane his neck. "It's going to be hell in here if the lights go! See if you can help Nick out through the back window! If you can, come back and help us, okay?"

Zac shouted back a faint okay, already struggling to help Nick up from his sitting position. Matt turned back to face AJ. "How are you? Doing okay?" he eyed AJ up and down critically.

"I'm fine, forget me," hissed AJ, his eyes glittering with determination. "Let's find Kevin and Brian." AJ began to crawl forward, Matt not far behind as they both kicked and pushed away the scattered and broken remains that blocked their way.

"Who are we looking for?" asked Matt, scanning the interior restlessly.

"Kevin, Brian. Brian is small, blonde; Kevin is tall, dark."

"I think I found Kevin," breathed Matt.

AJ edged quickly over as Matt scooted frantically backwards, recoiling from the dark-haired man who was lying sideways, curled up. Eyeing Matt with surprise, AJ suddenly understood when he saw Matt raise his hand. It was covered in blood.

Chapter 98:

Time's Up

AJ shoved Matt roughly aside, not caring about anything but getting to Kevin quickly. He knelt down as best he could, sliding a hand in to check for a pulse. It was weak but steady and AJ breathed a sigh of relief, nodding at Matt that Kevin was alive. With a grimace, Matt stared at his hand for moment before hurriedly wiping the blood off onto his pants leg, the shock of contact fading as he bent next to AJ to examine the fallen man.

In the increasingly dimming light, Matt pointed to Kevin's right leg, indicating the injury.

"AJ, I've got to cut off his pant leg, see how much damage is done," explained Matt.

"How?" asked AJ, frowning at the dark denim jeans Kevin wore. "I don't know where any scissors are."

With a flourish, Matt whipped out a small Swiss Army knife from his pants pocket, grinning in the darkening glow. "A good boy scout always comes prepared."

AJ snorted and smiled thinly. "Wouldn't know. I'm *never* good."

Matt smiled back, motioning with his hand for AJ to come closer. "Your friend here is bleeding pretty good. It looks deep but I can't be sure. I need you to find some kind of dressing, anything clean, that I can apply for pressure. Okay?"

AJ took off like a shot, scrambling through the various articles strewn about until he located a plain white t-shirt. "This okay?" he panted, holding it up for inspection.

"Perfect, great."

AJ hurried back, handing over the shirt and chewed on his lower lip in alarm as he viewed Kevin's twisted body.

"AJ!"

Startled, AJ looked at Matt.

"Come on, I need your help. It's not going to be nice. Are you up for it?" Matt's eyes questioned AJ commandingly.

"Yeah, sure." The tone was firm, his voice steady and Matt nodded in approval.

"Okay. I need you to apply pressure, directly over the wound." He guided AJ's hands, making sure they bore down on the injury. "Yeah, that's right, we've got to staunch this flow of blood. He's lost a lot already." Matt glanced at AJ for a second before beginning the delicate task of tearing open Kevin's pant leg. Taking a deep breath, AJ watched as

Matt began cutting, trying not to pay attention to the blood that was oozing between his fingers. Feeling his grip become slippery, AJ pressed down harder. "You see, I'm looking to see how bad it is, how to treat it," spelled out Matt in a soothing tone, feeling AJ's uneasiness. "I need to know....ahh!" Matt stopped his explanation as he threw the bloodied scrap to the side. "Okay, AJ, I want to release your grip for a second so I can get a good look. Ready? Now!"

AJ pulled his hands away as Matt peered closely. "It's a puncture wound. Something must have pierced him good. Look."

AJ really didn't want to but did as he was told. He saw Matt pointing to the perforated injury, watched as Matt gently checked the wound for any foreign matter.

Grabbing the t-shirt, Matt ripped into three pieces, taking one of the shredded pieces and wrapping it into a small, tight ring. Gently placing it over the puncture wound, he took the other strip and wound it over the ring and around Kevin's thigh, stabilizing it. With the last piece he rolled up the cloth up tightly, placing it on top of the puncture and grabbed AJ's hand, forcing him to apply pressure.

"There, that should help."

AJ heard the slight shakiness in Matt's voice and gave him an encouraging smile. "That was awesome. Where'd you learn that?"

Matt shook his head. "Didn't. My dad's a surgeon though, so I guess through osmosis because I sure as hell never listen to anything he says!"

AJ gave a short, sharp laugh. "Yeah." He eyed Kevin's unconscious form. "Okay, now what?"

"Same thing as Howie. Side position. Then we need to elevate his leg."

AJ reached over to support Kevin's head and neck, ready for Matt's count when he felt a weak hand reach out to touch him.

"AJ."

Startled, AJ almost lost his hold when he saw Kevin's green eyes open wide, glittering in pain. "AJ, *it hurts*," he whispered. "Help me, make it stop."

"Kev, Kev, I know. I know it hurts. Hang in there. We've got the bleeding almost stopped. We tipped over, the bus crashed. Do you remember?"

It was too much to absorb all at once and Kevin closed his eyes, gasping as he involuntarily shifted his weight to make himself more comfortable.

"Don't move, don't move!" barked Matt and Kevin squeezed his eyes open at the strange voice.

"Who are you?" he asked faintly.

AJ cut in. "Kevin, this is Matt. He and his friend Zac found us, they're helping us."

Kevin nodded, trying to bite back the pain. "Tell me, who's hurt?"

AJ leaned closer. "Nick's hurt but I think he'll be okay. Zac managed to get him out of the bus. Howie is unconscious." AJ felt Kevin's grip around his fingers, revealing his alarm. "We can't find any injuries, yet."

"Brian."

AJ threw a nervous look towards the unexplored front bus and then at Matt. Matt shook his head slightly, in warning.

"Uh, Brian...well, Brian..." he began and stopped as he noticed Kevin's rapid, shallow breathing. "What, what is it?" hissed AJ, watching Matt's fingers wind around Kevin's wrist.

"He's going into shock," stated Matt, leaning over Kevin to look at him square in the eye.

"Kevin, Kevin, you're going into shock. I need you to lie down, lie down, yes that's it. AJ! Elevate Kevin's leg, somehow, with anything you can find!" Keeping his eyes trained on Kevin's he spoke calmly, assuringly. "Kevin, I want you to fight this, okay? Come on, talk to me. Keep your attention on me, that's it." Matt turned his eyes for only a second to see AJ gently placing a ragged duffel bag under Kevin's injured leg. Feeling a jacket brush against his shoulder, Matt accepted the covering gratefully, laying it over Kevin. "Okay, thanks. You're doing good Kevin. Talk to me, talk to me, man."

"What about?" grimaced the dark-haired man. "I'm thirsty."

"Yeah, that's to be expected. You lost fluid." Matt turned to AJ. "Go find something, water, juice, anything."

What about Brian? AJ mouthed, worried.

"Not now," Matt said firmly. "Go find some water. Hurry!" Matt's urgency made AJ forget as he rushed to locate the bus's small refrigerator. He found it easily, the contents of the small fridge still intact. Grabbing a couple of bottled waters, AJ scrambled back to the two.

"Here," he offered, twisting off the tops quickly. Matt grabbed one, carefully slipping a hand around Kevin's neck to support him and let Kevin sip, mindful not to let him gulp

the water. Matt could see AJ's nervous agitation as he crouched next to them, his eyes darting repeatedly towards the front section of the bus.

Matt gave him a quick nod. "Go," he said simply and AJ left.

"Go? Go where?" asked Kevin dazedly, struggling to sit up.

"Not you! AJ. He's gotta, uh, do something. Hey, lay back down. Talk to me. Don't close your eyes okay, Kevin? Okay?" Panicked, Matt shook Kevin a little more forcefully than he should when he saw the large man's eyes flutter wildly.

"Skay," slurred Kevin. "Where's AJ? Where's Brian?"

Matt glanced up worriedly, trying to pinpoint AJ from where he knelt. The bus's interior air was stifling, oppressive and he wiped his brow hurriedly. "AJ?" he yelled out, "how's it going?" He tried to keep the anxiety out of his voice as he waited for AJ to reply, smiling with fake confidence at Kevin.

"AJ?"

Matt heard the grunts as AJ strained to lift objects aside, ignoring Matt's query as he struggled to locate Brian. Matt gave Kevin another fake smile, keeping his ears trained on AJ, his sight on the injured man before him. "AJ must be pretty busy. So, who's Brian?" He tried to make the conversation light, troubled by Kevin's pale complexion.

"Brian." Kevin closed his eyes for a moment, concentrating. "Brian's my cousin."

Matt nodded, not really listening, his hearing zoned in on AJ. "That's nice," he murmured. "You guys sure have a huge-ass bus."

"It's for the tour."

Kevin coughed and Matt immediately reached over with one hand to touch Kevin's forehead. It was cool and clammy. Frowning, Matt glanced at the back end of the bus. *Where the hell was Zac?* He shifted uncomfortably, his knees beginning to ache as he knelt next to Kevin, wondering how AJ was doing, glancing back apprehensively at the still unconscious form of Howie.

"Tour," he repeated. "You guys all on vacation?"

Kevin gave a small bark of a laugh. "I wish." He cringed as a spasm of pain flowed up and down his leg and Matt instantly checked it. Blood was still seeping through, but not as much.

"Take it easy, come on, yeah, you're gonna be okay, Kevin."

Kevin seemed to sense the hesitancy in Matt's voice and knitted his brows in distress.

"How bad is it?" he asked his voice amazingly calm, his green eyes displaying the turmoil within.

"Do you have a cell phone?" Matt bypassed the question with one of his own. Knowing that no amount of hand-holding and waiting patiently was going to get them the medical attention needed, he decided to throw caution to the wind. "Ours got stolen, and we are out in the middle of nowhere." He looked hopefully at Kevin, also praying that the reason Zac was so late getting back was that he was trying to flag down a passing car.

Kevin waved a weak hand. "Yeah, I've got one, I think. Yeah, in my bag." Another tremor of pain rippled through him and he gasped, gritting his teeth.

"Where does it hurt?" asked Matt, now knowing that Kevin was injured somewhere else.

"My ribs," replied Kevin softly. "It feels like they're broken. It hurts to breathe..."

With a concerned nod, Matt lightly touched Kevin's ribcage, exploring, his fingers pulling back in surprise when he heard AJ shout.

"I found him! Matt, I found Brian!"

* * * * *

Obediently waiting for him after receiving Xavier's urgent phone call, Abe sauntered over to the truck window, peering through.

"Man, you look like shit. What happened?" he chuckled, scrutinizing him with a humorous eye.

"Shut up and get in," growled Xavier, "we gotta hurry." He waited impatiently for Abe to settle in, revving up the little engine. Tearing out of the run-down gas station, Xavier stomped on the gas, pushing the small truck's ability to the limit.

"Damn, slow down a little, will ya? You're going to get us killed, driving like that!"

Xavier swiped a peek at the time, his mouth compressed into a thin line. It would be close. No way did he want to cross the border on foot. Sparing a quick glance at Abe, he frowned sourly. "You got them?"

Abe held up the small bottle of painkillers and Xavier took four on the spot, swallowing them whole, all the while driving like a maniac.

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Matt jumped up, excited and fearful. He glanced worriedly at Kevin, wondering what to do as he heard AJ's cry to come help Brian.

* * * * *

Against the light sprinkling of rain, Zac squinted as he helped Nick try to find a comfortable place to lean against the bus. Nick gave a low moan as he rested against the steel side, his body shaking from pain. Zac looked at Nick, uncertain, questioning whether to stay with him, go back and help Matt, or climb up the side to try and get help.

He squatted down on his heels, grabbing Nick's attention. "Hey, hey! Nick! How ya doing?" Zac chewed on his lower lip, deciding on a course of action. "I'm going to climb up, Nick!" he said, pointing towards the highway. "We need help. Think you'll be all right?" The young blonde man gave no reply. Zac ran a hand through his hair, worried. "Nick! Did you hear me? I'm going..."

"Go!" shouted Nick, his eyes ablaze with agony. "Go!"

"You sure?" asked Zac, hesitant.

"Go!" cried Nick once more. "Yes, get help! I'll make it, just go!"

Zac was off like a shot, tripping, clambering up the embankment and disappeared over the edge just as Nick let out a scream of pain and curled up into a tight ball.

* * * * *

Taking a calculated risk, Matt left Kevin, scurrying over as fast as he could to AJ. He located AJ at the very front of the bus, crouched down. Matt came up from behind him and gasped involuntarily, turning away at the sickening sight before him.

'No! No! That's not Brian!' said AJ, grabbing a hold and jerking hard on Matt's arm. "That was our bus driver. Here, over here, that's Brian."

Relieved, Matt avoided his eyes at the mutilated form of Les's crushed face, concentrating on the slumped figure wedged into the stairwell of the bus's entry door.

"Hey, wait! AJ, hold on just a second. Let me help," Matt instructed, waving for AJ to move away so he could inspect Brian. Obeying, AJ stood upright just as the lights wavered one more time, then spluttered out, leaving them in total darkness.

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Slipping out of the driver seat, Xavier motioned for Abe to switch seats as they waiting patiently to drive across the border. Curious, Abe did as he was told, figuring Xavier knew better than he about these things. Not that they were likely to be stopped. Border patrol really didn't care *who* was entering Mexico, it was *who* was trying to get out that mattered to them. Unless they were wanted by the law, and last time Abe checked, he wasn't, odds were that they would make it across without so much as a second glance.

* * * * *

AJ and Matt froze, reaching out with uncertain hands to locate one another. With nothing to light their way they stumbled, managing to right themselves with each other's help. Kevin's agitated cry carried to them and Matt shouted back an encouraging reply, ordering him to stay put. AJ's grip was tight, unwilling to let go for even a second.

"Shit! Matt! I can't see a thing! What should we do?"

"I'm going to have to feel my way out, AJ. It's the only thing. I need to get to the freeway, see if I can wave anybody down for help."

"Let me go," Matt heard AJ say passionately. "I know this bus better than you, even if it is upside down. You need to stay here, take care of Brian."

"But I can't see!" protested Matt. "How can I...AJ!" he yelled in irritation, feeling AJ's fingers slip away. Listening to AJ's words of "wish me luck", Matt shook his head. *Luck? It was going to take a miracle.*

* * * * *

Nick tilted his head up to catch the cool breeze of the desert night, the final drops of rain soothing to his swollen mouth and jaw. Breathing in great gulps of air through his nose, he willed himself to think about anything but the agony his face and back was enduring.

Come on Zac! he screamed silently in prayer. *You can do it! Find anybody, anyone, that's all it takes, just one.* Straining to listen, he couldn't seem to hear over the pounding throb that filled his head, his ears, and now his eyes. He closed them and in an instant a vision flashed before him, the tumbling of the bus, the wild tangle of arms and legs as everyone was tossed about. His last view had been of Brian, his body thrown forward violently. Squeezing his eyes tighter, Nick thrust the picture out of his mind, beginning another prayer. *Come on Brian, you can do it....*he began, repeating it over and over....until a bright light forced him to open his eyes.

* * * * *

AJ used Kevin's light moans as a guide as he crawled nearer, careful to watch his head after painfully bumping it into something. He felt a small trick of blood course down the back of his neck and he ignored it, moving on, his nimble fingers showing him the way. He passed Kevin with words of support as he wove his way to the back of the bus. *Just a little more, that's it,* AJ coaxed to himself, knowing he was close as he smelled the stagnant air become cooler, fresher.

"Matt, I'm almost there!" he yelled excitedly, hearing the crunch of the rear window's broken glass under his feet. Wondering why Matt didn't reply, AJ didn't have time to ask again as the bus's interior exploded with an intense brilliance, massive beams directed at him, through him, above him, flooding everything with wonderful, glorious light.

* * * * *

Strong arms pulled him easily out, into the illuminated brightness of flood lights, blinking, swirling colors of red and blue intermixed. AJ wavered for an instant at the intensity, shielding his eyes as his mind fought to make sense of the shouting commands and tense replies of unknown people. He turned away from the light, back to view the window, watching in amazement as several paramedics crawled through the opening. Gaping in disbelief and wonderment, AJ felt several hands tugging at him, coaxing him away, but he would have none of it, shaking off their assistance angrily.

"No!" he shouted, twisting. He stumbled into another person, feeling the stranger grab onto his shoulder.

"AJ!"

AJ saw Zac holding him, an excited smile lighting up his face. "Come on, come over here, out of the way!" Zac led him gently a few yards away, out of the mad rush of firemen, paramedics and police, all trying in mass to set up a makeshift search and rescue.

Eyes adjusting to the harsh glare of emergency lights, AJ waved off a concerned paramedic with a harsh, "I'm fine", pointing to the bus. "Please, please, get them out!"

Zac gave an okay nod to the medic, stating he'd stay with AJ. The paramedic took off, lost in a sea of uniformed men.

"Holy shit!" exhaled Zac, flabbergasted at the number of emergency vehicles, the amount of policemen and EMTs, the magnitude of the whole thing. He had never seen such a massive and intense rescue as this. Standing next to AJ, he watched wide-eyed, disbelief and suspicion growing by leaps and bounds. Turning, Zac frowned, looking at the disheveled man before him.

"Hey, just who the hell are you guys, anyway?"

* * * * *

The Border Patrolman slouched nonchalantly, one hand rested comfortably on top of the truck cab, the other hitched on his hip, next to his gun. His demeanor calm, his eyes not, the guard coolly scrutinized the two occupants inside.

Abe tried to act indifferent, but he wasn't much of an actor and began to sweat as the patrolman indicated with a finger to roll the window down. *Damn Xavier! What had he gotten them into this time?* Abe shot a quick glance at Xavier, who, by all accounts, seemed bored and motioned for him to do what the guard wanted.

Abe hurriedly lowered the window, trying to ignore the nervous tic in the corner of his eye. "Officer?"

The Border Patrolman said nothing for a moment, his gaze roaming the interior of the truck. "Got into a fight?" he finally asked, his voice butter-smooth.

Xavier blinked once and slightly smiled. "More like a bus crash, officer."

The guard perked up. "Crash? Where? I didn't hear anything about it."

Xavier smiled once more. "You will." Reaching over, Xavier handed the young patrolman his ID card. "I'm a bodyguard for the Backstreet Boys. Their bus overturned. Huge accident."

Taken aback, the guard frowned. "Looks like you need medical treatment. How come you're here crossing the border so late at night?"

Handing over another ID, Xavier watched as the suspicious guard scanned it.

"Dual-citizenship," explained Xavier evenly. "And yes, I do need medical help but I would rather seek it in Mexico. My own doctor and all," he added helpfully. Not sure if the guard had accepted his explanation, Xavier smiled lopsidedly. "Besides, you wouldn't be so cruel as to make see the medical doctors *here*, would ya?"

The patrolman snorted in disgust, understanding all too well how notoriously incompetent Nogales doctors were. "No, no, I'm not that mean," he laughed, giving a short shake of his head. Handing back the cards, the young guard signaled that everything was okay. "Good luck," he replied. "Oh, by the way, I hope nothing bad happened to the Boys. AJ is my little sister's favorite."

As the truck began to pull away, Xavier waved his hand casually, turning away to hide his sneer. "Yeah, I hope nothing bad happens to AJ. He's my favorite too."

* * * * *

"Look!" said Zac with a gentle poke, tearing AJ's attention away from Nick, who was being attended to by the paramedics. Turning in the direction of Zac's pointed finger, AJ saw Howie being carefully lifted out through the back window, strapped down to a body board. With a quick squeeze to Nick's hand, AJ rushed over, desperate for a closer look.

Howie's head was turned his way, his eyes closed, a large bruise now visible on the side of his face and temple. Forcing down the fear that rose in his throat, AJ tried to capture one of the EMT's attention, shouting his concern, but was overshadowed by the sudden wind and noise of two Air-Vac helicopters touching down a few hundred yards away. Anxiously trailing behind, AJ stepped back as a swarm of medics surrounded Howie, shouts and yells of urgent medical orders too complicated for AJ to follow. Turning to Zac with bleak despair, Zac could only shrug back helplessly, offering a consoling hand as they both stood and watched.

A sudden flurry of commotion behind them caused AJ and Zac to turn around simultaneously, the horizontal body of Kevin being the next to be transported out of the crushed bus. AJ ran over, heedless of Zac's concerned shout, disregarding the displeased cries of the paramedics to stand back. Kevin's eyes were squeezed shut, the pain evident by the creases lined tight around the corners of his mouth.

"Kevin!" yelled AJ, shaking off a medic's hand. "Kevin!"

With supreme effort, Kevin opened his eyes, seeing AJ peering down at him. "Bone," he said exhaustedly, "did they get Howie out?"

"Yeah, yeah they did. They're working on him right now, Kevin."

"Good ... good," Kevin replied, his voice fading. "What about Nick?"

"I'm here, Kevin."

Shocked, AJ saw Nick standing beside him, his forehead swathed in a bandage, a blanket wrapped securely around him.

"Nick..." began AJ but stopped, seeing Nick holding up his hand in protest.

"I'll be okay, AJ," he promised, his blue eyes dulled from the painkillers administered. "I'm leaving for the hospital just as soon as they Air-Vac Howie and Kevin out." Nick studied Kevin for a moment, watching as the paramedics readied him for flight. Quickly weaving his fingers through Kevin's, he squeezed Kevin's hand encouragingly for a brief instant before their hands were pried apart, the medics flocking around their patient to transfer him to the awaiting helicopter.

Both AJ and Nick moved back, taking it all in: the glare of the unforgiving search lights, the orange shapes cones outlining the perimeters, the policemen as they talked excitedly into their walkie-talkies, their neon jackets reflecting eerily off the headlights of slow-moving traffic. Adding to their disorientation was the high-pitched whine of blades, the helicopter vibrating impatiently for take off. Shielding their eyes from the buffeting winds, AJ and Nick watched as the helicopter rose gracefully in the air, banked and headed north, disappearing quickly into the night. Still too stunned by the whole event, it took Nick and AJ a few moments to comprehend what Zac was shouting at them.

"Come on! Come on! They're bringing your friend out!"

* * * * *

Xavier stroked his jaw lightly, not sure if the painkillers he took were having any effect whatsoever. Pissed, it took every ounce of his willpower to keep from screaming out in frustration. Another delay, another setback, another glitch in his desire to get back on track. Irritated, he glanced at Abe, who was now weaving through the traffic of Nogales,

Mexico. He truly hated Abe and with a deep passion, but the giant oaf served a purpose and he was never one to hold a grudge if it meant not achieving his objective.

Sighing heavily, he barked instructions at Abe. Xavier's hostile outburst took Abe by surprised and he glanced at him curiously.

"What?"

Xavier rolled his eyes exasperatedly, the slight movement sending jagged ripples of pain throughout his face and jaw. "I said, hurry! I need to find the nearest open pharmacy!"

"Huh?"

"Jesus Christ! Are you deaf? There! Right there! Pull into there!" shouted Xavier harshly as he saw the red glow of an open store.

Startled by Xavier's violent insult, Abe did as he was told, cutting wildly across the lane to reach his goal. The deafening screech of hydrolic brakes filled their ears, the blinding light of oncoming headlights filled their view, and with a sickening realization Xavier turned his head at the last minute to see that the semi had no time, no time at all in which to avoid smashing violently into the small truck.

* * * * *

Racing over to where Brian was being worked on, Matt managed to stop AJ and Nick with a violent shake of his head, thrusting his hands out, barring them from getting closer.

"Stop!" he ordered, his voice shaky but firm in conviction. "Don't get near. Let the paramedics work on him, give them some space!"

Nick stared at him for a brief moment and then shoved past him, AJ following suit. Standing as close as they dare, Nick and AJ fairly screamed with nervous worry, their agonized faces peering down over the heads of the paramedics.

Brian's face was turned towards them, small bubbles of bright red edging the corner of his mouth, his hand dangling limply as the medics rushed to hook him up to an IV. Curt, brief words were spoken between the two paramedics, a medical shorthand that only they seemed to understand as the others watched haplessly on. AJ spared a quick look at Matt and Zac standing a few feet away, Matt's face filled with alarm.

"You know, *you know* what they are saying," said AJ, his fear increasing ten-fold. Matt took a few steps forward, his eyes never leaving the paramedics as he nodded silently.

"Your friend there is hurt bad," began Matt solemnly, " I had to administer CPR on the bus. He regained consciousness for just a minute and then passed out again. By what

they are saying," he nodded at the medics, "Brian has severe internal injuries. They are trying to stabilize him for transport."

"So why aren't they?" cried Nick. "Why aren't they putting him on the helicopter?"

Matt seemed to be in a daze, not hearing what Nick demanded, his attention focused on the scene before him.

"What?" yelled AJ, his gut tightening in terror at Matt's expression. "What?" He took in the paramedics, Brian's still form, then glanced back to Matt again, shaking his arm with fury. "What?!"

Matt blinked, his face a mixture of sorrow, surprise, and fear. "Level One Trauma," he said simply, as if that explained it all.

Nick would have nothing of Matt's vague explanation and towered over him, terrified and angry. "What the hell are you talking about? What's going on? What's going on?"

"Level One Trauma is for severely injured patients," said Matt. "Not many hospitals have that kind of specialized care. They're trying to decide where to fly him."

"So?" cried Nick, now furious. "So, fly him to the hospital that has it!"

Matt raised his eyes to Nick, a sadness so deep it shook both AJ and Nick. "Nick," he said softly, "it won't matter. Brian isn't going to make it."

Chapter 99:

Picking Up the Pieces

As he was waved through by hospital security, on his way to the unoccupied waiting room, Nick shook his head slowly in resignation. It had been a nightmare, it was *still* a nightmare, and as far as he was concerned, things would continue to be a nightmare for sometime to come.

It had been difficult to visit anyone, the wide-spread publicity of the accident making his every movement almost impossible; the endless stream of reporters vying for an interview, the media and fans camped out in front of the hospital, clamoring for anything tangible. Security, as expected, had kicked into high gear, not allowing anyone access until being checked and then double-checked. But he endured it, gladly, just for the opportunity he received from a sympathetic nurse who would sneak him in for unauthorized and after-hour visits. It was the only thing that kept him sane, and by the frequency of AJ's visits, suspected it also held true for AJ.

Catching the end of the coffee table with the tip of his shoe, Nick dragged it close enough towards him to prop his feet up. Slouching a little more comfortably into the upholstered chair, he made sure not to make any sudden downward movements with his head, noticing that the injury to his jaw had seemed to affect his equilibrium. The doctors had said it would be just a matter of time before his balance would return to normal. *Normal!* Nick snorted in contempt. And what exactly *was* normal? Certainly nothing in his life.

Normal to him consisted now of never ending visits to the hospital, long waits for vague answers, eating bad cafeteria food and drinking even worse coffee. He wondered if it wasn't more sensible to just stay at the hospital, find a little room where he could relax and sleep. Not that he slept all that much. He only manage a few hours before he found himself awake, soaked with sweat from the terrifying dreams he could not seem to shake. The visions of Brian's limp form as the paramedics bent over, frantically trying to save him, of him sobbing and pleading for them to do something, anything....Nick shuddered. It would never go away, he would never be free of that mental picture as long as he lived. Lived. Life. Death. Brian. Of late, Nick found himself thinking in one words sentences, the only thing his brain seemed to comprehend with true certainty.

His attention was caught by a passing nurse on her way to deliver some medication. She gave him a quick nod of hello and Nick stared back, too tired to acknowledge her presence. Glancing at his watch Nick noted the time, wondering where AJ was. AJ had called him at the hotel, excitedly telling him to get his butt down here cause the doctors were thinking about discharging Howie soon. Nick remembered being the first to be discharged from the hospital, followed shortly thereafter by Kevin. Then the waiting had begun. It took several days before Howie regained consciousness, his concussion so severe that neurological specialists had been flown in for their opinion. It was touch and go for a while, no one knowing whether Howie would ever awake from his coma. It had

"I guess. A lot better now, due to this," Nick admitted, waving the folded newspaper.

"Yeah," said Matt, a slight smile forming.

"Listen, I want to thank you for everything you've done, man. If it hadn't of been for Zac and you...."

"It's okay, Nick. I just wish I could of done more."

Nick gaped at Matt. "What do you mean, done more? You did everything you could! Everything!"

Matt stared at the floor for a moment. "I dunno. Brian..."

Nick interrupted him with a slash of his hand. "No! It's okay. Really. I understand. We all do. Hell, how were you to know? How were any of us? How could we have possibly known that Brian would live?"

* * * * *

Nick tip-toed into the room, giving the nurse a wink of thanks. The room was quiet, cool, and Nick could barely make out Brian's sleeping figure in the dim light of the room.

Treading softly, Nick came up to the side of the hospital bed, staring down at Brian, his breath catching for an instant. Brian looked so still, so lifeless, just like when the paramedics had lifted him onto the Air-Vac; his frantic screams to save his friend overshadowing even the high whine of the rotating blades. He remembered how it took all of AJ's, Zac's, and Matt's power to keep him from boarding the helicopter with Brian, wildly thinking that if he were aboard, he could keep Brian alive, that somehow he could do what the paramedics said was impossible. Well, Brian proved them wrong. He fought for his life, fought harder than Nick thought anyone possibly could, wavering between life and death for two days before doctors declared him out of the woods, shaking their heads and declaring it a miracle. And it was. Never again would Nick take the power of prayer for granted, the hours he spent in the chapel, the ICU, the waiting room, enough to prove to him that God had indeed heard.

Wondering if he should just let Brian sleep, his question was answered by the flutter of Brian's eyes opening, a weak smile spreading to his eyes when he saw Nick's concerned face.

"Hi."

"Hey, Frick. Didn't mean to wake you."

"Naw," said Brian softly. "You didn't."

Nick was almost afraid to ask, but did anyway. "How are you doing?"

Brian closed his eyes for a second. "Not too bad. I guess I'm going to be staying here a while longer, huh?"

Nick gulped. *Yeah, a while longer. A lot longer. And I'm with you every step of the way.*

"Just a bit," he admitted. Wanting to change the subject, Nick waved the paper in front of Brian's nose. "Got something for ya. I think it will make you feel much better."

A bit of the old Brian showed through his eyes, a slight smile twitching at Nick's teasing.

"Okay, lemme hear it."

Excited, Nick carefully hitched a hip on the end of the bed and began reading as quickly as he could. Finishing, he brought down the paper to see Brian's reaction. Brian's head was bent, his face shadowed by the faint lighting in the room.

"Bri?" asked Nick, slightly panicked.

Brian raised his face to meet Nick's anxious one, his eyes glittering joyfully with sudden understanding.

"I won," he said softly.

Epilogue

He lay on his stomach, enjoying the warmth of the sun as it burned into his shoulders. He shifted to get more comfortable on the slatted lounge chair, mindful not to move too suddenly. He still wasn't completely healed, he wouldn't be for a while yet, and he wasn't about to take a step backwards on his road to recovery. People had been surprised at his weight loss, but that wasn't surprising, considering what he had been through. It would just take time and time was something that he had a lot of right now.

Wiping the sweat off his brow, he adjusted his sunglasses and reached down to turn the page of the magazine he was reading. He didn't remember who had brought it to him, and he didn't care, finding it amusing and slightly amazing that there was so much junk written about them and the accident.

A small bump interrupted his reading, a shy "sorry" was offered and he nodded, returning to the story. He leaned out to trace the pictures, remembering when they were taken. It seemed like years ago, but actually it was taken just before the start of the tour. The tour. Well, that was out, obviously; postponed. Not that it mattered to him. He had enough money, more than enough. No, money was not a concern, thank God.

Another bump, this time harder, accompanied by a large splash. Gritting his teeth as the cold pool water shocked him, he sat up, livid. "Elizabeth!"

"Sorry, Uncle X! Really!"

Lizzy swam away, kicking her legs furiously, sending smaller splashes his way.

"Aggie!" growled Xavier, his warning clear.

Bringing a towel over, Aggie gently wiped her brother's back. "You're burning," she said softly.

"Gimme that!" snarled Xavier, wiping off the water himself. "I warned you Aggie, if you wanted to come to Mexico, you'd have to keep her under control!"

"She's just a little girl, Xavier, let her enjoy her vacation," protested Aggie, shutting up when she saw his glare.

She left, calling out to her daughter to get out of the pool.

Good. Xavier snorted in disgust, not sure exactly why he had let them come. He returned to the story, finished it, and then tossed the thin magazine aside. He flipped over onto his back, his body protesting the gentle movement. Yes, it would take more time to get well, but he was okay with that, glad that he was still alive, his years of razor sharp reflexes the only thing that had saved him as he jumped at the last possible moment from the truck. He had hit the ground and hit it hard, watching in morbid

fascination as the truck disintegrated before his very eyes. Poor Abe. Xavier felt a small stab of pity for the fool, which had quickly turned into amazement as he realized just how easy it would be to change identities. The Mexican authorities were idiots and he used that to his advantage. Abe was Xavier and Xavier was now Abe. He smiled, closing his eyes against the glaring sun. With a few more adjustments to his face and figure... well the possibilities were endless. Smiling once more, Xavier settled into his lounge, dreaming of the promise he made to himself, to the Backstreet Boys. It might take awhile, but he could wait. He could wait.

The End