



NOWHERE TO RUN

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Chapter 1

Lila rolled over in her bed and stared at the clock. 3 am. Wonderful, she thought. Just wonderful. The vacation of a lifetime has just turned into her worst nightmare. All she had wanted was the beach and Disney. That was all. It was the perfect spring break. The arrangements had been made months ago. Lila, her roommate Marie, and another close friend, Ellie, had planned to come down to see Ellie's best friend Julie, who went to college in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. Lila's own best friend, Becca, (it was short for Rebecca, but most people preferred to call her Becca), was to meet them there. Lila and Becca had been best friends all throughout high school. The general rule that high school friends always drift apart didn't seem to apply to them, for it was their junior year in college, and despite the thousand miles or so that separated them, they were closer than ever. Becca went to a school in Texas, close to their hometown of San Antonio, while Lila and her two friends attended college up in Virginia. They had been looking forward to this trip forever, and now that it was finally happening, Lila was sick as a dog.

At first, Lila had dreaded the thought of going to Florida. Anywhere but Florida, she had thought. I'd rather be abandoned in Antarctica in a tank top. That had surprised her friends. They knew that something had gone wrong when she had been there, but she had never told them exactly what, despite their pleas. And it would stay that way. She had finally relented and agreed to the trip, but only because they were nowhere near West Palm. She had sworn to herself that she would never again set foot there, and it was a promise she intended to keep. God Himself couldn't make her go back, and that was that.

The plan was to meet up in Ft. Lauderdale on Friday, and spend Saturday night there together, giving them the chance to talk and catch up on things. After that they were headed to Orlando. It was now Saturday night, and Lila was miserable. She had started feeling sick on the plane, and once they were there she was stuck with a full-blown case of the flu. She felt horribly guilty, her friends had cut their evening short just because of her. Who else would be in bed by midnight on a Saturday night on their spring break? It was just typical. They had done this partly to help cheer Lila up. Marie knew how difficult things had been for her lately, and wanted to make sure she had a fun vacation and get the chance to visit with her best friend. And now this.

She tossed and turned for a few more moments, and then reached over to the nightstand and fumbled around for the box of Kleenex. Empty.

"Shit," she muttered.

Lila couldn't take it anymore. She hauled herself out of bed, her aching body screaming in protest. She almost tripped over Marie in the process, who was bedded on the floor. The five of them had decided to squeeze into one hotel room while they were in Ft. Lauderdale, saving the extra money for Disney and the beach. She threw on whatever clothes she had laying around, and grabbed her purse. She had to get medicine of some kind. She peered through the darkness at her reflection in the mirror. Yup, she thought. I look about how I feel. She half-heartedly grabbed a hairbrush and ran it through her

blonde hair. She tucked the long strands behind her ears and turned around to the still form of Becca in the double bed they shared. She went over to her and shook her arm.

“Bec?” she whispered. Nothing. She tried again, this time shaking her more violently. Still no reaction. Lila should have known better, it was virtually impossible to wake her friend up. It was a running joke they had, trying to see what creative ways they could come up with to wake her from the dead. There was still no surefire method. She was the soundest sleeper Lila had ever seen.

She gave up on her and crouched down by Marie. Lila and Marie had been roommates since their freshman year in college. They knew all of each others habits, quirks, and secrets only people who lived together could know. They were great friends. Marie could be woken up. She just didn’t like to be.

“Marie?”

Her eyes opened just a slit.

“Yeah?” she croaked. “What is it, Li?”

“I’m going out to that little corner shop to get something for this cold. I’m about to kill myself here.”

“Why don’t you just go to the gift shop? They have all that stuff,” she mumbled sleepily.

“Because I don’t think that they’re open at 3 in the morning.”

“Oh.”

“There’s a little gas station on the corner with a store that’s open 24 hours. I’m going to go there and be right back, ok?”

“Sure, sure. Whatever.”

Lila stood back up, and paused for a moment to let the nausea pass her by. She grabbed one of the hotel keys lying on the dresser, and snuck quietly out the door.

The warm Florida breeze struck her face as she exited the hotel doors, washing over her body and playing with her hair. It was the best she’d felt since they’d landed. Even this late, the temperature was perfect. She headed quickly over to her destination. She prayed that this would go away quickly. They were going to Disney on Monday, and she didn’t care if she was on death’s door. She was going. After a few days there, they were headed for the beach.

She pushed open the doors of the small store, and glanced around. She spotted a haggard looking woman behind the counter, flipping listlessly through a newspaper. She looked like someone who wished her life had turned out any way other than what it was

right now. Lila sympathized with her. A man who appeared to be in his forties was browsing the beer section, (he looked like he had had a few already as it was) and another woman who looked as if she'd just gotten off work somewhere was picking up a few groceries.

Lila found her way over to the medications, and began looking for something that would subdue her misery.

Chapter 2

“Man, the vending machines here suck,” Nick complained. “I have got the serious munchies.”

“Stuff your sock in your mouth. That ought to kill your appetite,” A.J. replied. Howie snorted, and Nick shot them both a killer look.

“Are y’all picking on my poor little Frack?” Brian said, looking wounded. He walked over to them and put an arm protectively around Nick’s shoulders.

“Thank you Frick. It’s nice to know that someone... hey!” Nick was cut short as Brian reached his hand up to Nick’s head and ruffled his hair, making him look like what one could only describe as a banshee. Brian cackled gleefully.

“Whoa,” Kevin said, speaking from the chair he was slouching in. “And I thought you looked scary when you woke up in the mornings.”

Nick looked back and forth at all of them, betraying his youth with a pouty lip. “Feeling the love. I am feeling the love in this room. What did I ever do to y’all?”

The other four groaned in unison, grinning at him. Brian seized a pillow off of his hotel bed and attacked his best friend. Nick let out a screech and tried to defend himself, but wound up flat on the bed, begging for mercy while Brian stood above him with a look of triumph displayed proudly on his face.

“Okay! You win!” Nick yelled. Satisfied, Brian let him up, but as Nick stood he gave him one more thwack for good measure.

“I have to agree with him on something. We don’t have anything worth eating on us and I am just as hungry as he is,” Howie said, his eyes sparkling.

“How can y’all be hungry at 3 in the morning? You should be exhausted. Go to bed, all of you. That’s where I’m going.” Kevin got up reluctantly from his chair and stretched.

“You are getting too damn old, Train,” A.J. said, clucking disapprovingly.

“I know where you live and I see where you sleep,” Kevin said threateningly, wagging his finger at him.

“You’re too slow to catch me, old man.”

Like lightning, Kevin sprang at him, and A.J. escaped his assault by the hairs in his goatee. He actually stopped and checked to make sure Kevin hadn’t gotten any of them. “Okay, so I was wrong about that,” he said, laughing nervously. Kevin gloated shamelessly. It was Nick’s turn to laugh. Kevin narrowed his eyes at him.

“You’re next, punk,” he told him. “Go to bed.”

“I’m not a kid anymore. I’ll go to bed whenever the hell I want! We put on a good show tonight and I’m still not off that high.”

“I like to have a good time as much of you, but we were out all night last night, and we have to leave at the butt crack of dawn tomorrow. And let me just say that if we are late leaving for Orlando tomorrow, I am not going to be happy. Y’all do what you want, I’m going to bed.” He headed for the door, and called over his shoulder as he left, “Remember... don’t be late! I want to have as much time at home as possible. It’ll be summer before we have our next break.”

As soon as he was gone, Brian and A.J. exchanged glances.

“Food?” A.J. asked.

“Food,” Brian replied.

“Where we gonna get it?” Nick asked. “Like I said, the ven...”

“The vending machines suck,” Howie finished. “We heard you the first time.”

“There’s a gas station on the corner with an all-night food mart. A.J. and I will go pick some stuff up,” Brian said.

“You gonna get a bodyguard?” Howie asked.

“Hell no. Why would we wake someone up? Besides, who is going to be running around trying to mob us at 3 am?”

“Stranger things have happened,” Howie pointed out.

A.J. waved him off. “You worry too much, D. We’ll be back in a few.”

Brian grabbed his arm before he could walk out the door. “Do you have your wallet?”

“Why do I need my wallet?”

“Because we always end up paying for you. Get it.”

A.J. looked wounded. “You can’t be serious.”

“Do it,” Brian ordered. A.J. made a face, but complied with his wishes.

“Okay, now we can go.”

Out of habit, Brian grabbed a non-descript hat. A.J. did the same and put on a light jacket to hide his tattooed arms. They could never be too careful.

Chapter 3

Thankfully, no one even glanced up as Brian and A.J. entered the store. Brian was actually surprised that there were people there. He noticed an older man, a woman picking up some milk, and a younger girl, college age perhaps, who looked like she was fighting a cold. She was the only one he paid attention to, because it was likely that if anybody recognized them, it would be her. He scolded himself quietly; it's not like one girl could create a mob scene at this hour of the morning. He and A.J. headed over to the junk food.

"We have to find the perfect balance between sweet and salty," A.J. said seriously, and Brian agreed. It was the same way with all of them: junk food was an art. It was not to be taken lightly. Brian went over to look at sodas, and A.J. crouched down to get a good look at what was available on the bottom shelf of one of the aisle ways. Flips! He thought excitedly. Perfect.

He did not see the door open. He did hear the bullet.

The sound whipped through the air, shattering the quiet of the night. Instinctively, he threw himself flat on the floor. It was cold, hard, and filthy, but that was not his primary concern. What the hell? He thought frantically.

Brian had lifted a six-pack of Pepsi out of one of the freezers when the pop of the bullet made his blood run cold. He jumped and dropped the soda, which hit the floor with a crash. The cashier screamed.

"Everybody get down and stay there. Nobody fucking move, or you won't move again. Do you get me?"

All the color drained from Brian's face as he realized what was happening. This has to be a dream, he told himself. It's just a dream. You've watched too many movies. That's all it is. He blinked a few times, and to his dismay, nothing changed.

Shit. Shit. This is not good. Why the hell does it have to be tonight? Why did they have to pick tonight? Damn it, Kevin is going to be pissed. This just might make me miss our departure time. He wanted to smack himself at that last thought. Why on earth was that important? He forced himself back to reality, and tried to get a grip of what was going on. He realized that he couldn't see A.J. Oh my God, he thought, panic welling up inside of him like a volcano getting ready to blow. The gun. It went off. Where is A.J.?

"Who got shot?" he shrieked, icy fear wrapping itself like a vise around his heart. "Who got shot?"

He froze as the gunman pointed his weapon straight at his heart.

"It'll be you if you don't shut up."

His heart racing, and his whole body trembling, he focused his gaze on the assailant.

Make that assailants.

There were two men standing there, dressed in dark ragged clothes, and ski masks. Both were carrying guns. They looked to be in their young twenties. Probably younger than me, Brian thought. He sucked in a sharp breath. Where was A.J.? Where the hell was he?

A.J. thought furiously. He had heard Brian start to freak, but he didn't want to risk standing up. There was a chance that the crooks didn't know he was there, and he couldn't lose that advantage. If only Brian doesn't give it away, he thought anxiously. He had to do something, and it had to be fast. He could hear the panic rising in his friend's voice. Suddenly, his eyes went wide, and his hand flew to his back pocket. Yes! He thought triumphantly. He fumbled around and pulled out a cell phone. He pulled up Howie's number from the memory and pressed send. He laid the phone out on the floor close to his side.

"Everybody just stay still." The second of the two men was yelling and brandishing his weapon. "All we want is the money, but if you so much as blink you will get a bullet in your face!"

Brian shuddered. This man was not one to be messed with, not because he was strong or menacing, but because he was a lunatic. There was no predicting what he might do. The first still had his attention on the cashier.

"Empty the drawer. And don't even think about pushing that little red button." The woman nodded, obviously scared out of her wits.

A.J. could hear Howie pick up on the other end. He did not dare say a word to him, for fear of giving himself away.

"Hello?" came the faint voice over the line. "Hello? Who is this?"

Look at the caller ID, dumbass, A.J. thought. He heard a click.

Damn it!

He pressed send again.

"Hey man, I just want my beer." Brian's jaw dropped as he stared at the middle-aged man who was speaking.

"You stay the fuck quiet."

"I want my fucking beer!"

“You want beer?” the second screamed. “I’ll give you some fucking beer! Or even better! Have some fucking lead!” Before Brian knew what was happening, the drunk was flung back against the glass, shattering it into a thousand pieces. Blood squirted out of the new holes in his flesh, and he crumpled down to the floor. Brian gasped in horror as some of the blood sprayed across his shirt.

“No!” he shrieked. He backpedaled frantically and hit the wall, and wound up sitting down hard on the floor.

A.J. was still lying where he had been since the first shot was fired. All of the sudden Brian lurched into view, and the only thing that A.J. could see was that his shirt was stained red. He threw his fist into his mouth to keep from screaming. Brian’s been shot, his mind shouted at him. Brian’s been shot!

Chapter 4

Brian sat breathing heavily on the floor, the whites of his eyes seeming to blot out everything else. He looked down at his shirt, and touched the sticky substance that covered it slowly with his hand. He brought his now-red fingertips up in front of his face, and tried to come to terms with the fact that he was covered in a dead man's blood. He turned his head slowly to the side, as if he was in a dream, and spotted A.J. sprawled on the floor. His horror turned to relief, and he made as if to call to him.

It took A.J. a moment to realize that Brian wasn't dead. That moment almost cost him dearly. He threw up a hand to Brian, signaling him to be quiet. Their eyes met, and both could see the terror that had latched its claws into them. Brian closed his mouth and nodded shakily. A.J. pointed to the phone. Brian nodded again, understanding.

Howie hung up the phone, irritated.

"Who was it?" Nick asked lazily.

"Some prank," Howie answered. Neither thought to check the ID.

"Where the hell are they, anyway? What could be taking so long?"

Before Howie could answer, the phone rang again. Howie answered, and at first heard nothing, just as before. He thought he could make out some yelling, but that was all. Disgusted, he moved his finger up to the "end" button. He paused half way when a loud bang caused him to jump.

"What the hell?" Howie said, looking confused. All of the sudden, he heard a voice that was unmistakably Brian's. Howie's voice drained of color, and he almost dropped the phone.

"What is it?" Nick cried, alarmed.

Without saying a word, Howie flipped the phone over and read the caller ID.

"Holy shit, it's A.J.'s number.

"So? Is he pranking you or something?" When Nick saw how white Howie had become, the smile fled his face in an instant.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"I don't know," Howie said hoarsely, "But I think Brian just got shot."

The two criminals had started screaming at each other.

“What the hell did you do that for? Now we’ll be wanted for murder!”

“He was begging for it, man! Begging for it!”

“You little shit! We are fucked! Do you hear me? Fucked!”

“Just get the money and let’s go!”

Before the other could reply, a stack of cans that had been upset in the fracas finally lost their balance and fell- right on top of A.J. He threw his arms protectively over his head, but it didn’t help much. He bit his lip until it bled, but he was unable to stop the yelp that escaped his lips.

Both men stopped cold at the new sound. The first, the more level-headed one, signaled to the second.

“Go! See who that was.”

A.J. cursed himself silently. It was over. He could just pray that Howie had gotten the message.

“Where the hell did you come from?”

A.J. flinched as the cold steel from the barrel of the shotgun was pressed hard into his temple. He grunted and got to his feet. Brian moaned in despair.

“How long have you been here?”

“Since you decided to have this little shindig,” A.J. muttered. He tried to hide the phone, which was still lying on the floor, but he was too late. The crook spotted it, and started cussing like a sailor. He kicked it with all his might against the wall.

“What is it?” The first man roared.

“He’s got a fucking cell phone. And he’s used it.”

“Son of a bitch!” he swore.

“Should I kill him?”

A.J. closed his eyes and pressed his lips together to form a thin line as he the gun was cocked against his head. He swallowed nervously and clenched his fists, sweat forming at the top of his brow.

Brian fought down the panic that was trying its best to engulf him. It was taking every ounce of strength he had to keep from lunging towards A.J. He couldn't die. He couldn't die. Not here, not like this. He made eye contact with A.J., and tried to project to him whatever strength he had. A.J. gave a small reassuring nod. Brian resisted the crazy urge to laugh. Despite the situation they were in, A.J. was able to play it so cool that Brian actually believed for a moment that he would be all right.

"I have a better idea," The first thief said, his voice sickeningly sweet. He raised his gun, and panned the room. He leveled it at his selected target, and fired.

Nick jumped as if he'd been slapped. "What do you mean?" he demanded. "They just went to get food!"

Howie pressed the phone closer to his ear, straining to hear what was going on. He could make out voices, but heavy breathing close to the speaker obscured them.

"Nick," Howie said urgently. Go get help!"

Nick nodded fearfully, and ran towards the door. The first thought to enter his mind when Howie said the word "help" was not 911, or the police. It was Kevin. Kevin was always the one he went to when he was in a jam (or Brian, but it just so happened that Brian was the source of the emergency this time). He skidded to a stop in front of Kevin's door, grabbing onto the doorknob to keep from falling. He began to beat on the door, hollering his name. At the same time, his senses came back to him, and he reached for his cell phone. He dialed 911 as he waited for Kevin, and began pounding again as he waited for an answer.

"Damn it Kevin! Answer the door!"

The operator picked up, and Nick frantically tried to tell her what happened. As he was struggling to get some kind of story out, a bleary-eyed Kevin answered the door. He took one look at the stuttering young man in front of him and became wide-awake. He caught the words 'Brian,' 'corner mart,' and 'shot.' It was all he needed. He seized the phone from Nick, and gave their location without blinking an eye.

"Get here now." He hung up the phone, and then grabbed Nick by the shoulders, an urgent look in his eye.

"What happened?"

In the back of his head, Nick marveled at Kevin's ability to handle a crisis. He knew exactly what to do, even when he didn't have the slightest idea what was going on.

To say Kevin was shocked at what he found outside his door was a gross understatement. He had never seen Nick so scared in the many years he had known him. Whatever was wrong, it was bad.

Nick began to stutter again, but finally managed to get the story out the best he could.

“Howie is in there now. A.J.’s phone is on, but he’s not talking.” Kevin’s blood ran cold. He grabbed Nick by the wrist and dragged him back to Brian’s room, where Howie stood, still on the phone. As they burst in the door, Howie began to tremble, and the phone fell from his grasp. Kevin would never forget the look of pure horror that enveloped his face.

“Oh shit,” Howie whispered.

“What is it?” Kevin said, a feeling of dread washing over him like poison.

“The line went dead.”

Chapter 5

Lila screamed and jerked sideways, but she was too late. Blazing fire shot through her side and knocked her to the floor. The wind rushed out of her lungs as she impacted, and she felt the panic clawing its way through every cell in her body. The pain was so great, that at first it didn't register. Then she noticed a red stain slowly spreading over the white tile beside her.

Lila had never been the screaming type. She had yet to make a noise since the stick up had occurred, but she screamed now. It was a terrible noise, one that she was positive she was incapable of making. In fact, it took her a moment to realize that she in fact was the culprit who was producing that hideous sound. That truth frightened her almost as much as the fact she had been shot.

This time, it took Brian a moment to realize that A.J. was not dead. When the shot sounded, he squeezed his eyes shut, praying he would not have to open them to the sight of his friend's body. He knew if A.J. died in front of him it would mean his own demise as well. A.J. was like a brother to him, and Brian knew that losing him like this was not something he could live with. It wasn't until the feminine scream ripped through his eardrums that he opened his eyes, and saw A.J. still standing in front of him, his eyes closed and his body shaking ever so slightly. Seeing A.J. so unnerved made the situation that much worse. A.J. never showed fear. He had probably also never come so close to losing his life.

Brian's scanned the room frantically, looking for the recipient of the bullet originally intended for A.J. He spotted the young girl he'd noticed earlier down on the floor, trying to staunch the flow of blood from her side. Without thinking, Brian vaulted over the scattered cans and debris and flew to her side.

Brian, don't be a fool! A.J. wanted to yell. He was petrified for the safety of his friend. This was not a situation that they could afford to toy with, one mistake and they would all end up dead. His heart is always bigger than his damn head. But his actions distracted the gunman, and A.J. seized his chance. He batted the barrel away from his head and bolted towards Brian. Chaos ensued.

"Everybody stop where you are!" the ringleader shouted hoarsely.

A.J. froze where he stood, glaring disgustedly at his assailant. Brian had already reached the girl's side, and was trying to see how badly she was injured.

"Look, man," A.J. spat coldly. "The police are gonna show up here in a matter of minutes. You have one body, and a wounded girl who's going to die if she doesn't get treated. Do you really think you are going to be able to walk away from here?"

The second man started to curse.

“If you run you won’t get far. Let us all go, and at least they can’t add ‘hostages’ to your list of offenses.”

“Oh, no,” the leader said in a voice that made A.J.’s skin crawl. “You got us into this mess. Now you have to live with the consequences.” He pointed to A.J., the cashier, and the middle-aged woman. “You, you, and you. Help me barricade these windows.”

“Shit,” A.J. muttered.

This was bad. Really bad. What would he do if he found out he was holding two famous people? He might kill the rest and just hold him and Brian for some kind of ransom to get himself and his co-conspirator to safety. A.J. prayed no one would realize who they were.

“You!” thief number one barked, pointing at Brian. “Make sure she stays alive.”

“I need a first aid kit,” Brian said, his features contorted with hatred for his captor. The crook turned his head toward the cashier, never lowering his gun.

“First aid kit,” he ordered.

Wordlessly, she reached under the counter and removed a small black box with a red cross painted across the top. He snatched it and threw it over to Brian.

“There’s band aids and some other stuff over there,” she said, almost inaudibly, pointing towards one of the aisles. Brian nodded at her, trying to look reassuring.

A.J. and the others went to work dragging the shelves over to the windows, listening all the while for the sirens that they desperately hoped would come.

Chapter 6

At first, Lila did not even notice the form that suddenly appeared beside her. She was too busy trying to stop her own blood from dumping out of her. She gritted her teeth together, hard, trying to force the pain away. If only that stinging, that red-hot spear being continually driven into her flesh, would go away, it would make things so much easier.

She felt a hand fall lightly on her shoulder, and she scrambled frantically to escape it, fear overtaking her thoughts and replacing them with one objective: get away. She shrieked again. Damn, she thought hazily. Bec would never believe I could scream like that. She moved with surprising speed from flat on the floor to backed up against the wall. The grip the stranger had on her shoulder tightened, and his other hand snaked around her back and grabbed her upper arm.

Her resistance shocked Brian. She was strong. He could feel her well-muscled forearm strain under his hold as she tried to pull herself away from him. With the adrenaline that he knew was rushing through her body, he quickly became aware that she would succeed in throwing him off if he didn't act quickly.

"It's ok!" he said soothingly. His heart was thudding in his chest so loudly that he was almost positive she could hear it. "I'm not gonna hurt you, I want to help you. I'm not one of them."

Her struggling quieted, and she looked over at him for the first time. His striking blue eyes found hers and held her gaze. Those kind eyes, full of worry and fear, for her sake. She could swear she'd seen those eyes somewhere before. They were so familiar... She reluctantly tore her gaze away from them and examined his face. That strong jaw line, and the sandy blond hair that framed his face with slight curls, she knew she had seen them before. She gasped as recognition hit her like an electric shock.

Brian groaned inwardly. She knew who he was. Before she could react, he covered her mouth with his hand, shaking his head very slowly. She understood immediately, and nodded. He removed his hand with a sigh of relief.

"I'm going to help you." He reached for the first aid kit that had been thrown at him, and opened it up.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't thank me until we get out of here." He wiped the sweat off of his forehead with the back of his hand.

"I need to pull up your shirt a little to get at the wound," he said uncomfortably. "Not much. But I don't want to surprise you."

She nodded. "I don't care. I can't afford to be modest when I'm laying in my own blood."

He forced a laugh. "I guess not." He peeled up her shirt, trying to ignore her wince as it stuck to the wound. The bullet had penetrated her left side. It could have been worse, but any fool could see that if she didn't get to a doctor within a few hours she would probably die. One could only lose so much blood. I just have to get the bleeding under control, he thought to himself. Yeah, no big deal. No problem. Brian wished for the thousandth time that Kevin were there.

"How bad is it?" she asked him after a moment.

"I don't think you're going to lose any vital organs or anything," he said with a crooked smile. "But you are losing a lot of blood. We have to stop the bleeding."

He looked up. "I need some water bottles and towels!" he hollered to thief number two, who was trying to keep an eye on them and the others at the same time. He opened his mouth to tell him off, but his partner glared at him.

"Give him what he needs."

Angrily, he chucked a six-pack of Evian water at him and several rolls of paper towels.

"Cloth, if there is any," Brian said darkly. He shielded his face with his arm as a volley of towels from some unknown source came flying at him. Brian unscrewed the top to one of the bottles.

"I'm going to dump this on the injury to try and clean it off a little. It's not refrigerated, so it shouldn't be too cold."

"Go for it," she rasped.

He proceeded to pour out the contents of the bottle over her side. She had to bite her lip to keep from crying out.

"Sorry," he said hastily.

She just shook her head. "It's not your fault."

He took one of the cloths and pressed it firmly against her side.

"How do you feel?" he asked her, smoothing her hair back away from her face. He was startled at the heat in her forehead. She felt like she was on fire.

"Like I've been shot," she said with a chuckle that turned into a groan.

"Easy," he said with a smile. "I guess it was a stupid question."

“I’m sick,” she told him, seeing his expression when he touched her forehead. “I have the flu or something. I came here to get medicine for it.”

He nodded in understanding. “Lousy timing, huh?” He studied her face for a moment.

She was pretty. Not gorgeous, but definitely pretty. Her blue eyes looked strained with the agony she felt, but he was sure that under normal circumstances they were one of the first things that one would notice about her. She had the build of an athlete. He wasn’t sure what kind, but she was definitely stronger than the average girl. He caught sight of her calf muscles, and was impressed. Whatever it was that she did, she did it a lot. It wasn’t easy to get that kind of muscle tone. He snapped himself out of his daze and realized that he didn’t even know her name.

“Well, you know who I am, so why don’t you tell me who you are?”

“I guess that’s fair,” she said with a weak smile. “My name is Lila. Lila Kikter.”

Before he could reply, the sound of sirens filled his ears.

Chapter 7

Kevin, Howie and Nick waited anxiously for the squad car that was sent to pick them up and take them to the scene. It's not like it was a long walk, you could almost see it from the hotel, but the police wanted to take no chances. Kevin agreed to this, despite Nick and Howie's heated objections. They did not want to wait.

As soon as the squad car pulled up, two cops got out and headed over to them.

"I'm Lt. Daniels, and this is Captain Tate. We're here to escort you over to the crime scene,"

Kevin extended his hand. "Kevin Richardson." He pointed to the other two. "That's Howie Dorough and Nick Carter. Can you tell us what is going on?"

"We've sent a small force over to assess the situation, and more are on the way," Daniels explained. "From what we can tell, two unidentified men tried to rob the store and wound up taking the customers hostage."

"Any casualties?" Kevin asked hoarsely, trying not to let his voice break. If he did so, Nick and probably Howie could kiss their composure goodbye.

"We're still not sure exactly how many people are in the store, but it is more than just your friends."

"Are there any casualties?" Kevin asked, his voice rising.

"We believe there is one, possibly two."

Nick's eyes flew wide open, and he tried to make a run for it. Kevin made a grab for him, pinning his arms by his sides. Nick may have been taller, but Kevin could still hold him if he needed to. His actions threw them both off balance, and they crashed down on to the concrete.

"Get off me!" Nick yelled. "Kevin, get the fuck off me! I have to get to them. They could be hurt!"

"Damn it Nick, hold still! You can't help them, and neither can I. Let the police do their job!" To see and hear Kevin this angry was usually more than enough to knock sense into any of them, but Nick continued to struggle. All his mind's eye could see were horrifying images of what could be happening to Brian and A.J.

"Nick! You haul off and do something this stupid and you will get them killed!"

This time Kevin's words hit home, and the younger man stopped thrashing. Cautiously, Kevin let him up. Nick winced as pain shot up and down his leg, centered on his knee.

He glanced down and saw a red stain showing through his jeans where he had banged it when he fell. He looked over at Kevin, who was nursing scraped knuckles.

“Sorry, Train,” Nick said shakily. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“Are you going to be able to control yourself?” Tate demanded. “Cause if you can’t you are going to have to stay here. We can’t risk you putting the hostages in any greater danger than they are right now.”

“Yes,” Nick said sulkily, brushing himself off. “I’ll be fine.”

“We’ll keep an eye on him,” Howie murmured, looking shell-shocked.

“Right,” Tate muttered. “Come on.”

A.J. sucked in a breath as the sound of police sirens greeted his ears. He was somewhat surprised that they were being so bold in announcing their presence, but he figured the element of surprise was not exactly an advantage in this situation anyway. Unless they freak and get a little trigger happy, he thought nervously.

The “barrier” they had been ordered to put up was in place, and A.J. was forced to admit that it would do its job. It would be hard for anyone to get a look at what was going on inside. That’s going to suck for us if they decide to come blasting through here. He pushed the thought out of his head. That was not something that he wanted to think about.

“Everybody, move to the back of the store, behind that shelf there,” the ringleader ordered. He and thief number two bickered for a moment. They were definitely amateurs, their squabbling proved that they were absolutely winging this. They had no idea what to do. That could work in their favor, but it could also get them all killed. Despite this observation, A.J. could see that the “leader” was crafty, and a quick thinker. This worried him.

He reluctantly obeyed, along with the cashier and the other woman. He looked over for Brian, and saw the torn look on his face. He didn’t want to move his “charge.” He could see the fury threatening to overflow from thief number two, and quickly came to the rescue.

“B-Rok, let me help you with her. We’ll do it really gently, so we don’t hurt her anymore, ok?” His eyes were pleading, and Brian could read what he was saying almost better than if he had said it.

Come on, man. I know you’re stubborn, but don’t let your hard head get us in any deeper than we already are.

A.J. turned his head to where thief number 2 was glaring at them. “That ok with you? Can I help him with the young lady y’all shot?”

Brian cringed at his insolent tone. He’d better know what he’s doing. He waited to see what the thug’s reaction would be, and to his surprise, all he got was a violent thrust of the gun, signaling A.J. to get on with it.

Brian slid one arm behind Lila’s back, and brought the other one down to her knees, preparing to lift her up. She tensed, preparing for the new pain he was about to introduce.

“I’m not going to move you until he gets over here to help us. We’re going to try to make this as easy as possible, ok?”

She nodded tightly. “Is ‘he’ who I think he is?”

“Yeah.”

“Unreal.” She closed her eyes, sudden exhaustion making it difficult to keep her eyes open.

“Hey. Hey there,” Brian reached his hand up and cupped her chin, shaking her head a little. “Lila? Stay with me now, you hear?”

Her eyes fluttered open again, and she focused in on him. Was her mind playing tricks on her, or was that a halo over his head? She blinked, and the image vanished. Snap out of it, she told herself. Just because you are being rescued by a Backstreet Boy. No, make that two Backstreet Boys. A.J.’s face was suddenly looking down on her from overhead. He looked just like his pictures, except for the plain old baseball cap. If I didn’t hurt so damn much, I might consider this the most amazing thing that has ever happened to me.

A.J. noticed the way she was looking at him, and glanced quickly over at Brian, who nodded in confirmation. He smiled at her uncertainly, and she smiled wearily back. “Let’s get you moved to the back,” Brian said gently. With A.J.’s help, they scooped her up and made their way slowly over to the others.

A.J. had to give her credit, she was tough. He could tell how much she hurt, but she was determined not to show it. She never made a sound. They set her down gently on the floor in the back. A.J. glanced down at his shirt, and was shocked at the red stain that had manifested itself there. She was hurt worse than he thought.

“Maybe we should lay her down,” A.J. said, his voice betraying the nervousness he felt. Brian had his focus on her, trying to make sure the move hadn’t caused her too much pain. He could sense the alarm in A.J.’s voice, and gave him his full attention.

“What is it?” he asked. A.J. pointed to his shirt, and Brian’s forehead wrinkled in a deep frown.

“I’ve done my best to get the bleeding to slow down. I’ll just have to try harder.”

“We have to get her to a doctor, and fast.”

Chapter 8

Kevin stared disbelieving at the scene in front of him. This couldn't be real. About four squad cars littered the parking lot, lights flashing. Several of the officers that had arrived in them were crouched behind the vehicles, using them as a shield, with their weapons aimed at the store. Others milled around in the back, trying to get a handle on the situation.

Brian and A.J. are in there, he thought bleakly. The question was, were they alive? One of the cops was on a bullhorn, speaking calmly to the crooks inside.

"We have you surrounded. There is no way out. Please release your hostages and surrender yourselves peacefully!"

Yeah, right. Nick thought to himself. Haven't these guys ever watched movies? This never works.

Howie was clutching his phone for dear life, praying for it to ring again. He stared fixedly at the building in front of him, as if he concentrated hard enough, he could make A.J. and Brian walk through it. Kevin noticed how contorted his face was, and could see his knuckles were white from gripping the phone. He walked over to him, placing his hand down on his shoulder. Howie didn't seem to notice him.

"You're going to break that if you don't loosen up, you know," he said, the corners of his mouth turned up in a slight smile. Howie looked quickly up at him, and then down to the phone in his hands. He immediately loosened his grip.

"Sorry, man." Howie said, exhaling a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

"Nothing to be sorry for."

"Do you think they are all right?"

Kevin raised a shaggy eyebrow. "This is A.J. we're talking about. Do you honestly think he'd let himself get shot? Or Brian for that matter?"

Howie forced his breath out through his nose in a slight chuckle. "You have a point. Then again, his smart mouth could have started all of this in the first place."

"If that's true, maybe when this is all over he'll think twice before he shoots it off again."

"That would make our lives a little easier," Howie admitted, trying to hide his smile.

"Just relax, D.," Kevin said, patting his friend on the back. "They'll be ok."

"Yeah right. Can you honestly tell me that you're not wound tighter than a drum?"

“Nope.”

“Well, as long as I’m not the only one.”

Nick wandered over to them, and Kevin recognized that angry crease in his forehead. Nick was pissed.

“What the hell is taking them so long? Why can’t they figure out what the deal is?”

Kevin pointed to the hood of a car. “Sit,” he ordered.

Nick stared at him as if he’d grown two more heads.

“Do it.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then I’ll kick your ass.”

“Do I have to keep reminding you that I’m bigger than you now?”

“I’ll still kick your ass.”

The two squared off, Nick’s blue eyes hard and glaring, while Kevin’s green ones were calm and steady. For a minute, neither said a word, until Kevin broke the silence.

“Wanna play Rock, Paper, Scissors?”

This time, it was Nick and Howie’s turn to stare, open-mouthed. What really threw them was there was that he gave them no sign that he was kidding.

“I think he snapped,” Howie said, petrified. Nick nodded in agreement.

“I have not,” Kevin said, irritated.

“Then where the hell did that come from?” Nick exclaimed.

“It took your mind off of Brian and A.J. didn’t it? You didn’t haul off and do something stupid did you?” He lounged against the back of the car, getting amusement out of the dumbfounded expression on Nick’s face. “That’s what I thought. The more we work ourselves into a frenzy, and get all wiggled out, the more chance we have of getting in the way and screwing things up for them.”

The two of them digested this for a moment.

“Kevin?” Howie asked.

“Yes?”

Nick finished his thought. “What would we ever do without you?”

Kevin feigned a smile. Deep down, he was more troubled than the other two put together. If only I could take my own advice, he thought miserably. The only reason he could remain so calm was the fact that the other two needed him to so badly.

Howie caught the flicker of worry that crossed his face, but chose not to bring it up. He knew Kevin was as concerned as he and Nick were, but if this was the way he could deal with it, than so be it.

Chapter 9

Both Brian and A.J. froze when they heard the voice over the bullhorn deliver its message. Their two captors immediately began to squabble among themselves yet again. A.J. ducked as the second man waved his gun in his direction.

“Damn it, he needs to be more careful,” he hissed.

“Yeah, don’t end up like me, because trust me, this sucks,” Lila spoke up weakly from her spot on the floor. A.J. bit his lip as he turned his attention to her.

“I’ll bet it does. Just hang in there; we’ll get you out if here. Trust me.”

The police were still yelling through the bullhorn, and the two crooks still didn’t seem to know quite what to do.

“There’s no way we’re going to get out of this if we can’t find some way to communicate with them out there,” Brian pointed out quietly.

“I know it.” A.J. paused for a moment, deep in thought. Before Brian could stop him, he had risen to his feet.

“Call them,” A.J. said. Two guns were immediately leveled at his chest. A.J. did not so much as flinch. Instead, he pointed to his cell phone, which was partially visible under one of the shelves.

“They want to talk to you, and the only way any of this is going to be resolved is if you let them. I know I want to get out of here just as much as you do.”

“Right, they talk to us, and we get arrested,” thief number 2 spat.

“If you don’t, it’s only a matter of time before they bust their way in here and we all die,” A.J. pointed out.

They glared at each other for a moment, and Brian waited for the shot that he was sure was coming. It didn’t. Instead, he heard the sound of someone scrambling for the fallen phone. A.J. sank back down to the floor, shaking.

“Serves you right,” Brian whispered. “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

“Trying to save our asses, because obviously they don’t know how.”

“What number should I call?” Thief Number 2 asked his partner.

“How the hell should I know?”

A.J. sighed. “See?” he muttered to Brian. He called back out to the thieves. “Press redial. You’ll get someone that I am 90% sure is out there right now.”

“Howie?” Brian mouthed at him. A.J. nodded in confirmation.

“Don’t do anything yet,” Thief Number 1 said menacingly.

“Why not?”

“I want them to sweat it out a little more.”

Brian bristled at this. He couldn’t understand how a human being could be so twisted and cruel. He was holding a girl in his arms watching her bleed to death, and they wanted to play games. Something in him snapped, and he finally found the courage to speak out.

“This girl can’t wait forever!” he hollered. “She needs to get help!”

“Take care of it,” he threatened.

“I’m not a doctor,” Brian said, his voice flat and cold. Even A.J. was taken aback by the hatred in his eyes. It was enough to intimidate anyone, which was why his heart sank down to his knees when he heard the reply.

“Than I hope for your sake that you are a quick learner, because I’m holding you responsible if she dies.”

Marie wasn’t sure what woke her up, but she found herself wide-awake staring at the ceiling. Something wasn’t right. She took a moment to clear her head and concentrate on what could possibly be wrong. She glanced at the clock and noticed it was about quarter to four. What could possibly wake me up at four in the morning? She wondered. Maybe it was Lila coming back, she reasoned, vaguely remembering her conversation with her roommate earlier. She propped herself up on her elbows and glanced over at the bed that Lila had been sleeping in. She came face to face with Becca’s feet, but she did not see Lila. She frowned. Hadn’t she just said she was going to that corner store? That had been forty-five minutes ago. She swung her feet over the edge of the bed and glanced around the room. What could be taking her so long?

She got up and cracked open the door, peaking out into the hallway. It was empty. She noticed that one of the keys was missing, so she knew that Lila wasn’t locked out. She closed the door again and crept over to where Ellie and Julie were sleeping. She knew better than to try to wake up Becca. She shook Ellie’s arm, and was relieved when her eyes opened sleepily.

“Marie? What is it?” she mumbled.

“I can’t find Lila.”

Ellie was suddenly more awake. Marie had never seen someone who was as sweet and caring as Ellie was. The mere mention of the possibility that something might be wrong with one of her friends got her full attention, no matter what.

“What do you mean?”

“She went out around three to that 24 hour store by the gas station to get some flu stuff. She’s not back yet.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost four.”

Ellie sat up, concerned. “Should we go look for her?”

“I think we’d better.”

Ellie nodded and got out of bed. “Should we get Becca and Julie up?”

Marie paused, and shook her head after thinking for a moment. “Let’s not stir everybody up until we know there is a problem.”

“Okay. Leave a note though.”

Marie scribbled a quick note on the hotel stationery and left it on the nightstand where both of the sleeping girls were likely to see it if they should wake up. After throwing on some clothes, they snuck out the door.

“I hope nothing’s wrong,” Ellie said worriedly.

“Probably not. I’m sure she’s fine. You know how she can be. She tends to wander lost in her own little world.”

“Yeah, I’m sure nothing’s happened,” Ellie said, trying to sound convincing. But there was a gnawing feeling at the pit of her stomach that wouldn’t go away.

“Still, I’ll feel better once we’ve found her.”

They pushed open the hotel doors and exited into the night.

Chapter 10

Brian applied another towel to Lila's side, and bound it the best he could. Her breathing was more ragged now, and she had started sweating a little. He reached over and poked A.J., and pointed to her.

"I think she's going into shock," he said in a low voice so she wouldn't hear.

A.J. took a look at her face, and sighed. "You're awfully pale, hun. Don't go passing out on us, got it?"

"I'll do my best, but you're not exactly Mr. Tan yourself, white boy."

A.J. was startled at her remark, and Brian laughed quietly, surprised by her wit when he was sure she would be more than happy to conk out.

"She's right, you know," Brian said with grin, trying to keep the mood light.

"I'll remember that," A.J. informed him.

Lila noticed Brian move a bloodied towel out of the way, and choked back a sob.

"It's really bad, isn't it?" she whispered.

The mixture of fear and strength in her eyes confused him. She looked terrified and not terrified at the same time. It was strange, and he didn't know what to make of it. There was definitely more to her than met the eye.

"Don't worry about it. We'll get you taken care of long before it's too late, I promise," Brian assured her. He patted her hand.

She pushed back a little of the pain she was feeling and cleared her head. She couldn't kid herself. There was no guarantee that she would get out of this. Her voice became quiet and serious, losing all of the playfulness she had tried to maintain to pretend it was all going to be all right. She had always been a firm believer that everything would always work out in the end, but it looked like her theory was about to be proved wrong, and there were things she had to take care of.

"I need you to do something for me."

Brian was taken aback at the sudden change in her. A.J. saw it too, and raised an eyebrow. A little of the haze that surrounded her was gone, and her eyes were clear and focused. For some reason, it alarmed him.

"Don't go there, chica. You're going to be fine," A.J. told her

“You don’t understand, you have to listen to me. You don’t have to pretend, I’m not stupid. This does not look good for me, and I have to tell you or someone else this before it’s too late. It’s too important.”

The urgency in her voice called to Brian, and the clarity she spoke with convinced him that this was truly a matter of life and death for her, in every sense of the phrase.

“Okay, take it easy,” he said gently. “Tell me what I need to do. But I still say I won’t have to do it.”

“This may sound strange to you, but believe me when I say that it critical that you do this if you can’t keep that promise.”

“Consider it done.”

“In my purse, you’ll find a piece of paper with an address on it for Twin Branch Farm.” Brian dug through her purse curiously. What could she possibly be asking him to do? He glanced quickly up at A.J., who’s face spouted a question mark.

“Got it,” he said after a moment.

“Good. If something happens to me, you have to contact them. There’s a number on there too.”

Brian nodded. “Yes, I see it. What do you want me to tell them?”

“I have a feeling they’ll know what happened,” she said with a small smile. “My parents will talk to them, I’m sure. That’s where you come in.”

“I don’t understand.”

She inhaled a deep breath, as if she was trying with all of her strength to hold on to her control. Brian knew she couldn’t do it much longer. Whatever this “task” was, it was very important to her, and it was taking all of her courage to talk about it.

“I have a horse there. He’s going to try and get her, and you cannot let that happen. You can’t let them sell her.”

It took all of his concentration to stifle the laugh he felt coming and to keep the skeptical look he knew was lurking behind his face to keep from expressing itself. A horse? She was edging her way closer and closer to death’s door, and she was worried about a horse?

He heard her sigh with frustration.

“I told you that you wouldn’t understand,” she said angrily.

“No, no, no. I’m just a little confused.”

“She cannot be sold. Do not let them sell her. He’ll find some way to get her, I know it.”

“Who?”

His question seemed to agitate her, and the expression that passed quickly across her features was one that made him recoil. Whoever “he” was, it was not a friendly subject.

“Shhhh,” he quieted her. “It’s ok. If it is so important to you, of course I’ll do it.” He wanted to kick himself for letting her get so upset.

“There are only three people I trust her to, and she has to go to one of them. Directly to one of them, whether they pay for her or not. I don’t care. She cannot be sold to anyone else.”

“Tell me who, and I’ll see to it... if it comes to that, even though it won’t” He still didn’t understand why this of all things was causing her so much stress.

She gave him three names, and he scribbled them onto the paper. She seemed to relax immediately, and her strength fled her. The clarity that had found her eyes and allowed her to be so forceful wandered away, and was replaced by the cloud of pain that had inhabited them before. She could not suppress the small moan that escaped her. Brian jerked to attention at the sound. He maneuvered himself so that he was sitting behind her, and gently moved her head so that it rested in his lap.

“Better? That has to more comfortable than the floor.”

“Mmmm,” she mumbled. “What girl wouldn’t be comfortable lying in Brian Littrell’s lap?”

A.J. chuckled a little. Normally that statement would have made Brian want to roll his eyes, but for some reason the tone she said it in made him smile. She wasn’t one of the totally star-struck admirers he’d had in the past. Of course, he thought, that could have something to do with the fact that she has a bullet wound in her side.

Brian himself was unsure of the sudden change in her. She had gone from intensely serious, to what he could only describe as desperate and hate-filled, to making wisecracks. He wondered what could have possibly inspired her reaction a moment ago.

“How long have you been a fan?” A.J. asked her. He could tell she wanted to fall asleep, and was determined to keep her talking.

“I was nuts over y’all a couple of years ago. I did the posters thing, I had them all over my room, I went through all that stuff.” She smiled at the memory. “I was known as the Backstreet Freak in my dorm my freshman year at college.”

“And now?” he asked, looking wounded by the fact she had expressed her interest the past tense.

Lila noticed this, and was greatly amused by it. “I still buy all your music, and listen to you all the time, don’t worry,” she said with a tight smile. “I just grew out of the obsession thing.” She shivered violently. Brian immediately checked her bandage, and to his dismay, saw the red seeping through everywhere. Bandage number two was almost ready to be changed. A.J.’s face turned to stone, and he turned to their captors, who were watching them closely from several feet away.

“Why don’t you cut the bullshit and make that call?” he growled. “It’s been almost 15 minutes since they got here. She doesn’t have all day!”

Thief Number 2 lunged towards him, startling all of them to death. A.J. tried to scramble out of the way, realizing too late that he had pushed him too far. The criminal grabbed him by the front of his t-shirt, and slammed him against the wall. A.J.’s head crashed into it, and stars exploded in front of his vision. It took all of Brian’s self control to keep from dumping Lila off his lap and leaping to his friend’s defense.

“Now you listen and you listen good,” he breathed hideously, his nose inches away from A.J.’s. For added measure, he shoved the barrel of his pistol into the side of his temple, and gave a sick smile of satisfaction when he flinched. “We are running this show, and if you want to come out of it alive, you will sit down, shut up, and do exactly what we tell you. Got it?”

A.J. swallowed nervously, for a brief moment surrendering the hatred that was etched on his face allowing fear to replace it. He nodded. The gun was removed from his head and he was shoved to the floor.

“A.J.!” Brian cried. He was sure that his heart had stopped for a moment, as he sat helpless to come to the aid of his friend. Lila could feel his body tense underneath her, and she forced herself away from him, giving him the freedom of movement he sought. She planted herself against the wall, refusing to give in to the burning that threatened to engulf her midsection. She watched wide-eyed as Brian leapt to his feet and raced to A.J.’s side.

A.J. slowly and painfully picked himself up off the floor. Brian reached him in a flash, and extended his arm, which his dazed friend accepted gratefully. He hauled him to his feet, his blue eyes ablaze with concern, fear, and irritation.

“Are you ok?”

“Peachy,” A.J. muttered, still looking shaken.

“Well, despite the fact that you are a moronic fool for doing that, at least you accomplished something.”

A.J. looked confused.

“Look, he’s using your phone.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank God.”

“Now we just have to hope that Howie actually got the idea,” Brian said with a sigh.

“Well, it could be worse.”

“How’s that?” he asked skeptically.

“I could have called Nick.”

“I’m going to tell him you said that,” Brian warned.

“I’ll deny it.”

Secretly they were praying that they got the chance.

Chapter 11

Howie almost had a heart attack when his phone rang. He let out a small yelp, and scrambled to keep from dropping it. Kevin and Nick leapt to their feet in alarm. Howie fumbled with the phone for a moment, trying to get a look at the caller ID

“Answer it, dumbass!” Nick shouted.

“Give him a second. He’s trying to see what number comes up,” Kevin reprimanded. Nick muttered something under his breath and kicked a rock. It did nothing to vent his anger. An officer standing near them heard the commotion, and walked quickly over to them.

“What is it?”

“We think whoever is inside there might be calling on this phone.”

“It’s A.J.’s number,” Howie said, his breath catching in his throat.

“Than answer it!” Nick cried, resisting the urge to strangle him.

Howie did.

“Hello?”

“We’re not giving up the hostages, so you might as well quit trying.”

Howie’s face went white. The cop reached over and grabbed it away from him before he could answer. He was annoyed, but thankful, because he wasn’t sure if he could have spoken to him if he tried.

“Who is this?” he demanded.

“That’s not important. What is important is that I am holding five people hostage in here, and unless we get what we want they are all going to wind up dead.”

“Ok, lets stay calm here. Our priority here is the safety of the hostages. Are all of them all right? Do any of them need medical attention?”

“It doesn’t matter. No one’s getting it, because no one is coming in here.”

“What is it you want?”

“Sixty grand and a way out of the country. Add ten thousand for every person I have to kill because you couldn’t get your shit together.”

“That’s a tall order.”

“Take it or leave it.”

“What happens if we leave it?”

“Well, you may be able to take us out, but I can promise you that there will be five others laid out right behind us. And I don’t think you want that. Face it, we don’t have many options here, so if we go out, we’re going to take as many people as we can with us, understand?”

“Can you identify the hostages?”

“Two men, three women.”

“Do any of them need medical attention?” the officer repeated.

“One. But forget trying to send someone in. That’s against the rules.”

“Who is injured?”

Howie, Nick, and Kevin froze at this question.

“Can I talk to one of the hostages?”

“No.”

“You’re asking us for an awful lot. It would be a nice gesture if we could talk to one of the hostages. Perhaps the owner of the phone?”

“Let me talk to him,” Howie said urgently. The officer waved him away sharply.

“I want to talk to him damnit! It’s my fucking phone you’re using.”

“Can we speak to a hostage?” he repeated. “A token of goodwill on your part? It might make it easier to meet your demands if you are willing to cooperate.”

“Fine.”

“Give me the damn phone,” Howie hissed.

The cop shit him a killer look, but handed him the phone. “Find out as much information as you can, understand?”

“Yes,” Howie growled, snatching the phone away from him.

“Hello?” he said anxiously. “A.J.?”

“Howie?” a familiar voice came over the line.

“Oh thank God.” Howie felt like crying, he was so happy to hear his friend’s voice. “Are y’all ok? What’s going on in there?”

“Easy D. Brian and I are ok.” Howie sighed in relief. A.J. sounded as if he were a thousand miles away, rather than just a few feet.

“We’ve got problems though. A girl in here got shot, and she needs help. Brian’s under orders to keep her alive, but right now it doesn’t look too good.”

A.J. did a masterful job of keeping the tremor out of his voice, but Howie had known him for too long. He could tell when his friend was scared, and right now he was terrified.

“What does it look like in there?”

“They’re keeping us all...” He was cut off suddenly, and Howie could hear a scuffle going on over possession of the phone.

“No!” Howie yelled. “A.J., are you there?”

The cop seized the phone, wrestling it out of Howie’s panicked hands.

“A.J.!”

Kevin reacted swiftly, stepping in between the two of them. He clamped his hands down onto Howie’s shoulder, pushing him away from the others.

“Howie!” he bellowed, shaking him. He put his face directly his. “It’s going to be ok. They are going to be all right!”

Howie stared up at him for a moment, and then shoved Kevin’s arms away.

“Damn it,” he swore. He walked a few feet away, resting his elbow in one hand while putting the other up to his face. Kevin started towards him, but then thought better of it. Howie was ok. He was not happy, but he was ok.

Nick stared back and forth between them and the cop.

“Will somebody please tell me what the hell is going on!” he yelled finally.

Chapter 12

Marie and Ellie approached the scene in complete shock.

There were police cars, flashing lights, barricades, and people all over the place. News crews had started to arrive, and were being warded off by other policemen. Marie screamed.

“Oh my God!”

Ellie had a similar reaction.

“Shit!” she screeched. “What the hell is going on? What’s happened? Marie, what the hell is going on?” She grabbed Marie’s hand and dragged her over to the nearest person.

“I’m sorry miss, we have a situation here,” he said in a pompous, official sounding tone. “You are going to have to keep clear.” He put his hands out in front of him with his palms facing out, in some strange attempt to ward them off. Marie would have none of it.

“Fuck no I’m not keeping clear! What the hell is going on?” she exploded.

“Our friend might be in there,” Ellie said tightly. The cop eyed them for a moment, and then decided their reaction couldn’t be anything other than genuine.

“Come with me.” He led them over to a small group of people who were gathered at the far edge of the commotion. There were three younger looking men and two cops, and they were having a heated discussion.

“Excuse me sir,” the officer said, clearing his throat. “These young ladies claim to know one of the hostages.” Both of the policemen standing there turned and gave the two girls their full attention. Marie spoke up hesitantly.

“My roommate left to go pick up some cold medicine about an hour ago and she never came back. We came to look for her.”

Howie glanced up at the new voice, and upon seeing them, swallowed hard. He had no doubt the girl they were referring to was the one who had been injured.

“Her name is Lila,” Ellie spoke up. Does anyone know if she is all right?”

The police exchanged glances.

“We do have a hostage situation here. We don’t have as many details as we’d like, but we know that five people are trapped inside with two thieves who failed in a robbery attempt. There is one injury, and we know that someone is dead.”

“No!” Marie shrieked. Howie took the opportunity to step in.

“I think your friend is alive.”

Marie and Ellie turned their heads to him, hope leaping into their faces.

“They let me speak to a friend of mine who is in there too, and he said that he and my other friend were watching over a girl who... who had been shot.” Ellie gasped. “If that’s her,” Howie continued quickly, “She’s hurt, but she’s not dead.” He was careful to avoid any mention of who his “friends” were. Marie looked close to tears.

“Oh no,” Ellie moaned. “Please tell me this isn’t happening.”

“Relax, miss,” one of the cops said, resting a hand on her shoulder. “We’re doing everything we can. We’ll get your friend out.”

Marie wavered for a moment, and reached out for something to steady her. She found nothing, and almost fell. Kevin reacted the fastest, and caught her before she hit the ground. He steadied her, and she shook her head a little to clear her thoughts.

“Are you all right?” he asked, concerned.

“She’s my roommate. Please, God, let her be ok.”

“We know how you feel,” he said quietly. “We have two friends stuck in there.”

Marie nodded, glancing up in his direction. There was something familiar about his face, but she was too distracted to think about who he reminded her of. One of the officers guided them over to one of the cars, and opened a door to let Marie sit down on the seat. She leaned against the doorframe, her legs dangling outside the vehicle, trying to comprehend what was happening. Ellie stood beside her, leaning against the car.

“We have to tell Becca and Julie what’s going on,” she said after awhile.

“I know.”

Marie’s thoughts churned around inside of her. Lila had been shot. Lila was in trouble. At least she knew someone was looking after her. Who were those guys, anyway? Her thoughts returned to the man who had caught her. Why did he seem so familiar? Suddenly it hit her.

“Ellie?”

“Yeah?”

“If Lila is the one who got shot, I’ll bet she’s the happiest girl on earth right now.”

Ellie stared in disbelief. “What the hell do you mean by that?”

“You know those three guys over there? The ones who said they have two friends in that store?”

“Yeah.”

“Those are the fucking Backstreet Boys.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I swear. You remember that Kevin fetish that I had Freshman year?”

“Do I ever,” Ellie muttered dryly.

“Kevin was the one who caught me.”

“This is not the time to joke about this,” she warned.

“I’m not joking,” Marie said seriously. “I am absolutely not joking. You remember her complaining that we didn’t get tickets for their show tonight? They’re here. That is them. I’ve lived with her for three years, and unfortunately I know what they look like.”

“If this wasn’t so serious, I’d be laughing my ass off right now,” Ellie said with a sigh.

“Me too. I hope she’s all right...”

Chapter 13

A.J. gasped at the impact of his captor's foot in his stomach. He instantly released his grip on the phone as the air fled his lungs, leaving him struggling to draw in a breath. He dropped to one knee and doubled over, placing one hand on the floor to brace himself and clutching his midsection with the other.

Brian had been standing a few feet away over by Lila anxiously waiting to hear what Howie had had to say when the incident happened. He raced over to A.J., but was stopped by Thief Number 2, who stepped directly in his path, gun pointed. Brian skidded to a stop before him, but not before the barrel of the gun was jammed into his belly. He froze and held his breath, eyes flicking back and forth between the man and the gun. He wasn't sure at that point which one was more dangerous.

"You mind your own business. I believe you already have a job, and it is not to watch him."

Brian said nothing, and dared not express his outrage. A.J. had done plenty of that already, and it hadn't gotten him much.

"I said go."

Brian backed away slowly, never turning his attention away from him. He reached his hand back behind him, searching for the wall that Lila was propped up against. Only when he felt his fingers brush against the cool smooth texture of it did he risk tearing his gaze away. Lila was staring up at him, petrified. He lowered himself to the floor, checking her bandage. He said nothing, afraid whatever words he might try and speak would erupt in an angry torrent, and he didn't want that.

Control yourself, Littrell. Look after the girl. A.J. can take care of himself.

"How are you doing?" he finally asked Lila, forcing himself to take his thoughts off of A.J. and his other band mates who were undoubtedly waiting outside.

"I'm ready to tango. How about you?" Her remark made him smile.

"You're just full of sarcasm, aren't you?"

"Comes from the people I spend my time with."

He sobered. "Do you think they know what's going on?"

"Not likely. Marie and Bec can sleep like the dead."

"Are those the friends you're here with?"

“Two of them. Roommate and best friend.” She inhaled sharply as a spasm of pain shook her. Brian jumped at the sound.

“Damn it, I wish I had some pain meds other than ibuprofen or Tylenol.”

“Can’t dwell on what we don’t have,” she said through clenched teeth. “Shit, I’m so cold.”

“Hun, you’re sweating.” The concern that touched his voice rose several notches. She did not look good at all.

“I’m so cold,” she repeated, and he saw that her body was quivering. Her breathing seemed shallower as well.

Brian swore under his breath. Just then, A.J. stumbled over to them, and sat down painfully.

“Bone, give me your jacket.”

“I’m ok, Brian, thank you for asking.”

“Give me the damn jacket.”

A.J. took one look at Lila and shrugged out of the jacket, handing it to Brian. He gathered it up and wrapped Lila in it, drawing her into his arms to try and warm her up. She didn’t even seem to notice.

“Lila?” A.J. said, kneeling in front of her. “Lila?” A glassy look had appeared in her eyes, filling him with alarm.

“Lila! Stay with us. You are not allowed to leave, you got that? What I say goes, and I say you don’t go.”

“Awww, that... that makes me feel all... warm... and mushy... inside,” she stuttered. She seemed to snap out of it a little, but she was still shivering.

“Well, you know how big of a flirt I can be,” A.J. said. The light tone he tried to use did not go at all well with the expression on his face.

“I’m going to die,” she said dully. “I’m really going to die.”

“Stop that!” Brian said angrily. “Don’t give up on us now, do you hear? It would look really bad if I failed to save the damsel in distress.”

“It’s ok. Really. I have plenty of people up above who will look after me.” Her voice sounded strong and sure of itself, and Brian was sure she was convinced that she believed her words, but he could see in her eyes that dying was absolutely the last thing in the world that she wanted.

“Well, I hope you’ll reconsider, because without you here to tell people otherwise, A.J. here will take all the credit for trying to be the hero.”

She tried to laugh, but it came out more like a harsh grating noise. “Can’t let that happen, can I?”

A.J. relaxed a little, and leaned back against the wall. She wasn’t exactly ready to go out dancing, but she was still with them.

“Definitely not.”

“Who... who did they call out there?”

“They called Howie’s cell phone,” A.J. replied, tracing patterns in the floor with his finger.

“And you got to talk to him?”

“Yeah. Not as long as I wanted to, though.”

“What did he say?” Brian asked quietly.

“Wanted to know if we were ok, and all that stuff.” He glanced at Lila. “I told him about you, so if you have friends or anything out there, I’m sure he’ll tell them that you are alive.”

“Did he sound ok?” Brian asked.

“This is D we’re talking about.”

“He was freaked, then, wasn’t he,” he said with a frustrated sigh.

“Yeah, he was a little worried.”

“Did he say anything about Nick and Kev?”

“No. We didn’t get the chance.” To Brian’s amazement, A.J. seemed to be fighting back tears. He reached out and put his hand on his friend’s shoulder, shaking it ever so slightly. A.J. turned in surprise, but upon seeing Brian’s knowing look, he smiled gratefully.

“Thanks, Rok.”

They were unaware that their captors were conversing with each other about the situation. It wasn’t until they heard one of them speaking into the phone again that they paid attention. They did not like what they heard.

Chapter 14

“Do you have our money yet?”

Lt. Stevens grimaced at the cruel voice.

“You haven’t given us much time to get it together.”

“We’re tired of waiting. We want it now.”

“We’re working on it, but we don’t have anything for you yet.”

“You have another thirty minutes.”

“And then what?” Stevens asked, a feeling of dread making itself at home in his gut.

“According to our deal, we get \$10,000 per hostage. We give you a half an hour a hostage. We expect at least \$10,000 every half an hour. So you have two and a half hours to get all of the money. If we don’t get our \$10,000...” he laughed a sinister laugh. “Well, you see, my friend here and I have come up with this little lottery system. We’ve assigned a number to each of our five hostages. When that 30 minutes is up, we draw a number, and BANG. No more hostage. And you have another \$10,000 added to your tab.”

Stevens held the phone away from him, and cursed silently. The group of officers surrounding him looked grim. Once he composed himself, he put the phone back up to his ear.

“We’ll do the best we can to get the money together.”

“I hope so, because you are down to 24 minutes.”

Nick saw from afar that something was happening, and he didn’t think it was good. Without a word to the others, he marched his way over the group. Kevin looked up and saw him leaving, and reached over and gave Howie a light smack. Howie jerked his head up, spotted Nick’s retreating backside, and stood up to follow.

Kevin jogged up beside him. “What’s going on, Kaos?”

Nick continued looking straight ahead. “Something’s up, and I want to know what it is.” Howie followed his gaze to where a small group of police officers were gathered. They looked upset. The three of them caught the tail end of the argument.

“...move in soon, we’re running out of time.”

“That’s a big risk, we haven’t been able to figure out what things look like inside.”

“We can’t give in to their demands. There’s no way they’ll just take the money and split, they have to know we’d have them cornered in a heartbeat.”

“If we don’t pay them, I believe he will carry out his threats. We can’t allow that.”

“We’re running out of time and choices. There’s twelve minutes left on the clock.”

“Twelve minutes until what?” Nick asked suspiciously. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to hear the answer. Lt. Daniels took the three of them off to the side.

“Our bad guys in there want \$50,000. They want the first \$10,000 in another 10 minutes, or they are going to shoot a hostage.”

Nick flipped. “They’re going to what?” he screeched. Daniels almost shrank away from him, Nick was a good three inches taller, and in his state Daniels wasn’t all that sure it was a good thing for him to be standing so close.

“What hostage? Did they say who?”

He looked uncomfortable. “You aren’t going to like this.”

“Is it Brian?” he cried in horror. “Oh, God. Oh, God...”

“We don’t know who it’s going to be.” He explained quickly about the “lottery system.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Kevin demanded.

“We’re working on that,” he said, not quite meeting his intense gaze.

“You’re not going to pay them?!” Howie exclaimed.

Nick was furious, and Kevin could see he was on the verge of flying off the handle, so he stepped between the two of them before he could carry out whatever malicious act he had in mind. He whipped out his checkbook.

“I’ll write the check right here, right now. All \$60,000.”

Daniels was dumbfounded.

“I’m serious. All that matters is getting them out of there, and if those bastards want money, than that’s what they’ll get.”

“We have no way to know if they will release them,” he said quietly. “Even if we give in to their demands.”

“We have to try!” Now Kevin was on the verge of losing his temper. “I won’t let you put the lives of my friends in danger because you won’t comply with the demands that I am more than willing to meet!”

Daniels gave him a hard look, and then nodded. “Write a check for \$10,000. We’ll take it to them, but they might not accept it. It depends on how smart they are.”

Kevin took no notice of the last part of his statement.

“I’ll write it and I’ll take it,” he said grimly. Nick and Howie looked at him in surprise.

“You, Train? Why you?” Howie asked.

“My money, my friends, my job.” His jaw line was set; there would be no changing his mind. Nick had seen that look too many times before and knew not to challenge it.

“That’s not a good idea,” Daniels said flatly.

Kevin never took his gaze away from him as he pulled his cell phone out of his back pocket, flipped it open, and called up A.J.’s number. Before Daniel’s could stop him, he hit the send button.

Everyone looked up in surprise when the phone in Thief Number 1’s hand began to ring. For a moment, they couldn’t decide whether or not to answer it. After a glance at his watch, he pressed a button, and lifted the phone up to his ear.

“Do you have the money?”

“Yes, I have it,” a voice said.

“Who is this? You aren’t the one who I spoke to earlier.”

“I’m the one who’s paying you. Do you want it or not?”

“Yes. I want it.”

“Good. When should I bring it to you? And are you going to release a hostage?”

He considered this for a moment.

“I will release one, this time, just for goodwill. No one else leaves until I have all of the money.”

“Can we choose which hostage?” Three heads snapped to attention at this question. Daniels made as if to grab the phone away, but Kevin dodged him.

“Nope. I won’t deviate from my lottery. Too bad. Bring the cash to the front door, My friend here will meet you there. Don’t try anything funny, because the hostage will be right there with him, and if anyone makes a move I don’t like, bye bye hostage. Got it?”

“Cash?” Kevin said, his face turning white. I have a check for you...”

“Sorry, no good. We want cash, in unmarked bills. Do you really think we can get away with cashing a check?” He laughed. It was a cruel sound that made Kevin’s blood freeze in his veins.

“Give me another few minutes, we’ll get to a bank and be right back.” The urgency and desperation in his voice was completely unmasked, and sweat poured off his brow. He’d lost all control of the situation, a fact that almost made him snap.

“Sorry. Time’s up.”

Chapter 15

The criminal snapped the phone shut, and looked around at the hostages, who faces betrayed one universal expression: pure and total fear.

“Let’s see who’s lucky number comes up.” He scattered five pieces of paper over the floor in front of him, and stirred them around with his hand.

Brian and A.J. sat together with Lila between them. Neither said a word, but both were preparing for the worst. A.J. risked a glance over at Brian. His face looked tight, and he busied himself by examining Lila’s bullet wound yet again. Anything to distract him from what was about to happen. Anything.

Images of Howie, Nick, and Kevin flooded through A.J.’s mind as he wondered if he would ever see them again. He wondered if that brief moment on the phone with Howie had been the last he’d ever see or hear from him. The thought was too much to bear, even though it was he who would be the dead one. He couldn’t imagine how the three outside felt. He looked back to the scene in front of him, and knew that if he ever got out of this he would never again be able to watch a lottery draw on TV. Right now, the lucky winner would get to leave this place in a coffin.

They had all been given their “numbers” a short time ago. A.J. was 4, Brian was 2 and Lila was 5. He shuddered. I did not want to die this way, he thought. Not in here, like this, on my knees.

In a moment that seemed to last for an eternity, their captor reached down and picked up a piece of folded paper, and began to unfold it.

“No!” Kevin howled as the phone went dead. “No! They can’t do this!” His body began to tremble so badly, that Howie wasn’t sure if he was going to remain on his feet. He started to react, but Nick beat him to it. He leapt forward and ran to him.

“Kevin!” Nick yelled. Kevin stepped forward; looking as if he were going to bolt, but Nick caught him by the arm and whirled him around.

“Kevin it’s going to be all right.” He wrapped his arms around the older man in a hug, but in a move that took him by surprise, Kevin shoved him backwards with all of his might. He hit the ground with a loud thud, and sat there for a moment, stunned. Was this really Kevin standing in front of him? He raised his head up to him in fear. Tears came to his eyes, and threatened to spill over. Howie looked horrified, and knelt beside him, placing an arm around his shoulders.

Kevin stared down at Nick, shocked at what he had just done. His eyes softened, and regret and sorrow washed over him when he saw the hurt in his friend’s eyes. He crouched down beside him.

“I’m sorry Nicky,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean to do that. I’m sorry.”

The words were barley out of his mouth before a loud crack shattered the silence. Everyone jumped, and Howie felt as if a huge bucket of ice water had been thrown in his face. Kevin felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach. He couldn’t breath.

A terrible sound erupted from Nick, some sort of shriek that almost didn’t sound human. He clenched his fists, and held his arms and hands in front of his face, as if he were trying to shield himself from reality. He continued to scream.

Kevin finally managed to get some air into his chest. “Oh, God no,” he choked out. Hot tears squirted from his eyes and covered his cheeks. The three friends huddled together, their arms surrounding each other like a protective covering that would keep them from learning the truth. They didn’t want to know the truth.

From farther away, another scream pierced the early morning. Marie stood there, wringing her hands as Ellie tried to comfort her. Ellie herself was red-eyed and puffy, and the only thing that kept her together was the thought that it might not have been Lila.

As this was happening, Becca and Julie arrived on the scene. Ellie had called them earlier, and although it had taken three phone calls to get one of them to answer the phone, Julie had finally responded. She promised they would both be there immediately. Becca walked quickly towards the commotion, but Marie’s scream made her halt. She stared dumbly at what was in front of her. It took a minute to fully register. Lila. Lila was in there. Lila, her best friend.

Julie broke into a run when she saw Ellie, and Becca followed in a daze. It took several minutes to get Marie to quiet. When she did, she sat down on the concrete, a bleak expression possessing her features. Ellie sat down behind her, her arms surrounding Marie in a hug. She looked up to see Becca staring in shock at everything. She quietly explained what had just happened. Becca never said a word, she simply stared straight ahead, looking at nothing.

Howie’s phone rang in Lt. Daniels’ hand moments later. Kevin, Nick, and Howie still sat together on the concrete, grief-stricken. He answered it with a trembling hand.

“Now you’re up to \$60,000.”

Chapter 16

A.J. sat up slowly. His heart was beating so quickly he thought it would leap out of his chest. When the gun was fired, he had thrown himself across Brian and Lila. He hadn't been entirely sure who the bullet was intended for. Both guns had been drawn and pointed, one at the three of them, one at the other two seated a little further down the wall. In his panic, A.J. had been unable to figure who was the designated executor, and his reaction was instinctive.

In the moment before the reality of what had just happened, Brian gazed in wonderment at his friend. A.J. had volunteered to sacrifice his own life to save his. In the middle of the chaos and fear that surrounded them all, Brian suddenly felt more loved than he ever had in his life. He had always known that what the five of them had was special, something that not everyone was lucky enough to find. He knew that all of them shared the same belief that any of them would do anything to help each other, but thankfully none of them had had to make good on that unspoken vow, until now. Sure, when Brian had gone through surgery, he had known just how much the four of them loved him. But all they could do was be here for him. It had been enough, and they had all gotten through it, but this was different. A.J. had just tried to take a bullet for him.

The moment passed, and the panic took over. Brian grabbed his shoulder as he tried to sit up.

"Are you ok?" he asked urgently. He too needed a moment to figure out that neither of them was hurt.

"Yeah," he said after a moment. He turned to face Brian. "Are you?"

Brian nodded. They both looked over and saw the other woman who had been shopping lying lifeless on the linoleum. One of the thieves was in the process of dragging her out of sight. It wasn't that much better, she had left a big mess on the floor. She had been shot in the head. It was the second person Brian had seen killed that day. He didn't know how much more he could take. He shut his eyes and looked away from the hideous sight. When he opened them, he found himself looking down at Lila, who lay limp in his arms.

Terror overtook him.

"No! No, no no..." He shook her, and got no response. "No!" he cried again. "A.J., help me!"

They wasted no time in resting her flat on the floor. A.J. took her pulse. He shook his head tersely. Brian swore.

"CPR," A.J. murmured. "She needs CPR."

Brian didn't hesitate. He straddled her waist, placed one hand over the other and used the palm of his hand to press on her chest. A.J. tilted her head back to clear her airway.

One, two, three, four, five, Brian counted silently as he thrust upwards with his palms. He pinched her nose and breathed into her mouth. Still nothing. He repeated the process, growing more frantic with each try. A.J. swallowed with difficulty. He said a quick prayer. No one else needed to die today.

After several more attempts, Brian almost gave up, but some inner force drove him to continue. The two criminals noticed the problem and had moved over in their direction.

"Remember, she dies you die."

A.J. wanted to kill him right there. "You kill him you lose out on more money," he said angrily. They relaxed their hold on their guns ever so slightly. He was fairly sure they saw the sense in his claim, but he had no doubt his friend would suffer if Lila died. The thought made him bristle with a newfound source of hatred.

Brian was working furiously, and A.J. knew that it had nothing to do with the fear of losing his own life, despite the threat. A minute passed, and he began to give up hope.

"Brian," A.J. said brokenly. "Brian. Enough."

"No."

The determination in his voice surprised him. The look on Brian's face plainly said that he was going to save this girl's life if he had to grab onto her spirit and force it back into her body with his bare hands.

Brian leaned back from her mouth and prepared to continue chest compressions. All of the sudden, her still form gasped. A.J.'s heart did a somersault.

Lila sputtered for breath, and A.J. propped her up a little.

"Thank God," Brian exhaled. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Wh-what happened?"

"Say hello to your savior," A.J. said, a joyful smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Brian here just brought you back to life."

She stared at him, her blue eyes wide in disbelief.

"Don't make me do it again," he warned. She smiled weakly. Their two captors backed off a bit, and Brian checked the wound on her side again.

"Who died?" she asked him quietly.

He refused to look at her. “The other woman who was shopping in here.”

“I want to get out of here,” she said softly.

“So do I. Believe me, so do I.”

Chapter 17

Nick was shocked to see the tears in Kevin's eyes. Had he ever seen him cry? He forgot for a moment about what was happening around him and focused on his older friend. Kevin looked absolutely lost. He was always their rock, their calm in the middle of the storm, and now he reminded Nick of a small child.

Kevin noticed that Nick was looking at him, and turned quickly away, ashamed that the younger man caught him in tears. Nick reached out with his hand and touched his arm. Their eyes connected, and the love and understanding that Nick felt in that moment seemed to give him strength. Kevin took that strength offered him and reached into the depths of his soul, searching for the control that defined him. He grasped onto it, and pulled it back to the surface. He managed a tiny smile, his face full of thanks.

It was Howie who asked the question.

"Who was it?" They didn't even recognize his voice. It sounded dry and hollow, and full of defeat.

For a moment, Daniels just stared at him. Then he turned to Stevens and nodded. Stevens raised Howie's phone and dialed the number. Painful seconds went by before a voice answered.

"Do you have my money?"

"We need to know who died."

"Do you have my money?"

"We're still working on that."

"Then why should I tell you?"

"For the sake of the loved ones waiting outside," Stevens spat.

The criminal became furious. He lunged across the room towards Brian, who was tending to Lila. He grabbed him by the arm, and without even allowing him to stand up, dragged him across the floor. Brian let out a yell, and A.J. stumbled to his feet in a mad attempt to stop him. Thief number 2 was too quick for him. He shoved the gun to his forehead, slamming him back against the wall. Lila shrieked.

Once he had Brian over where he wanted, he kneed him hard in the stomach, knocking the breath out of him. He brought his hand down cruelly over his shoulder blades, knocking him flat.

Brian gasped in pain. It took all of A.J.'s self control to keep still. He was fuming with anger, and the helplessness of his position was killing him.

“You tell them that if they don’t pay up, I will do more than shoot you dead.”

Brian glared up at him, his sides heaving.

“Go to hell.”

“Tell them!” He shoved the phone into Brian’s ear. Brian said nothing. His tormentor kicked him savagely in the ribs, and he cried out in agony.

“Damn it Brian, do it!” A.J. cried. Lila began to sob.

He couldn’t stand this. Even as he said it, he knew why Brian didn’t answer. A.J. would have done the same thing. He was too proud. At the same time, he couldn’t handle watching his friend be beaten.

“I want to talk to Kevin,” Brian rasped, as the crook prepared to deliver another blow.

“What?” he bellowed.

“Put Kevin on, and I’ll talk. Only to Kevin. You can beat me to death if you want.”

The punch came swift and hard, this time to his head. He rolled over, stunned, and lay there unmoving for several moments. A lump rose in A.J.’s throat, and his nails dug into his palms, drawing blood.

“Put Kevin on the fucking phone,” he hissed into the mouthpiece.

Stevens raised an eyebrow. He had heard the commotion over the line, and knew things were going wrong, but he was unprepared for this.

“Do it!”

He handed the phone to Kevin, who stared at it wide-eyed. He took it with a shaking hand, and spoke.

“Hello?” Upon hearing the new voice, the thief once again thrust the phone down to Brian, who still hadn’t moved.

A.J. was relieved when he reacted, moving his head to accommodate the phone.

“Kevin?” he whispered.

Kevin’s heart almost broke at the sound of Brian’s weak voice.

“Hey cuz,” he said softly. “How are you? They treating you ok?”

“Just fine,” he murmured. Kevin could tell he was in pain.

“Is A.J. still with you?”

“Yes. So is Lila. They shot a woman.”

Brian heard the click of the gun being cocked near his head.

“Tell him.”

Brian squeezed his eyes shut, praying for the strength he needed and fighting back the hatred that was ready to consume him.

“They’re telling me to tell you that if you don’t come up with the money, they are going to do more than just kill us.”

A small noise escaped Kevin’s lips.

“We’re going to get you out of there, don’t you worry. I promise, do you hear me?” The sound of Kevin’s voice reassured him more than anyone except A.J. could ever know. He hated the thought of upsetting his cousin, as he was sure he was, but he just had to hear one of their voices. Knowing that the other three were out there, waiting for him, trying to rescue them was something he desperately needed.

“I hear you. Tell Nick and Howie I said hi.”

The foot impacted his back, and the phone flew out of his hands and clattered to the floor. His assailant scooped it up.

“There. You have 18 minutes. Get it done, or I’ll make good on my threat.”

Kevin threw the phone forcefully to the ground, and turned away. He placed one palm flat on the trunk of a squad car and covered his eyes with the other, bent over in grief.

“Oh God,” Howie whimpered. “One of them is dead. One of them is dead. Oh God...”

“No,” Kevin croaked. “They’re both ok.”

Howie’s knees almost gave out he was so relieved. Nick steadied him, and they both went over to Kevin, followed closely by Stevens and Daniels.

“What happened?” Nick asked quietly.

“They put Brian on the phone. I... I think they were beating him.”

Howie moaned softly. Kevin repeated the message Brian had delivered, not without difficulty.

“Please stop them. Please get them out alive.”

Daniels met his pleading gaze and gave a solemn answer.

“We will do everything within our power.”

“And if that’s not good enough?”

“Just pray that it is.”

Chapter 18

“Was it Lila?” The small group looked up in surprise. It was the first time Becca had spoken since she had arrived there.

“Was it Lila?” she repeated. She did not cry, she did not lose control. She seemed devoid of emotion, and her eyes were flat and expressionless. Ellie didn’t quite understand it. She did not know Becca well, but she knew that the friendship she had with Lila was very powerful, much like the one she herself had with Julie. The difference was, if Julie was the one in Lila’s position, Ellie would have been even more hysterical than she was now. She supposed that this was just the way Becca dealt with his kind of situation.

“I don’t know,” Marie said. She was sitting on the ground with her arms wrapped around her knees, her voice was hoarse and her eyes were red from crying.

“You shouldn’t sit on the concrete,” Becca said absently. “The cold will go straight through your butt and you’ll catch cold.”

“Becca?” Ellie said softly. “It’s not cold out. It’s 70 degrees.”

“Oh.” She was still staring off into nothing. It was almost as if she wasn’t completely connected with reality. She turned her head slowly at the approach of a young man. She raised her eyes to look at him, and suddenly she seemed to be actually looking at something. She didn’t say another word; she just stared. She had been just as in to the boy band craze as Lila had earlier in her life, and she knew exactly who she was looking at. He came to a stop before them, looking miserable.

“Do you know?” Ellie asked him, afraid to hear the answer.

“Yeah. Lila’s ok.”

All of them let out a sigh of relief, except for Becca, who continued to stare.

“So are our friends.”

“Thank goodness.”

“What happens now?” Marie asked in the same voice as before.

“My friend over there is going to get the cash to pay them off, and hopefully they will hold to their word and release the ones that are left in there.”

“You don’t have to be so elusive. We know who you are,” Marie said.

Howie’s eyes went wide at this. Had the situation been any different, Marie would have laughed.

“We do?” Julie asked, confused.

“Yes,” Becca said suddenly, snapping out of her daze. “We do. Oh Mylanta. You are Howie. I can’t believe this. My best friend is in the hands of murderers, and I am talking to Howie of the Backstreet Boys. Lila is going to kill me when she gets out of there.”

“No she won’t,” Marie said dryly. “Who do you think is in there with her?”

“Don’t even tell me.”

“Yes.”

“Holy shit.”

At first Howie was offended that they carried on like this when they were in the middle of a crisis, but he had caught a glimpse of that blank expression on Becca’s face, and decided that he liked what he saw there now better than what he had seen a moment ago. He had a feeling she was not one to show much in the way of sentimentality or fear, and whatever she could do to keep her sanity was fine by him. He wasn’t sure how he knew this, but he was certain he was right. It was a little like Kevin wanting to play rock, paper, scissors. He knew what she was going through.

“Please don’t breathe a word about who we are to anyone. The police are fighting the press of with everything they’ve got to keep them out of here and keep them finding out just who is involved. The worse thing that could happen is that those assholes in there find out exactly who they’ve got in there. There’s no telling what they might do then.”

“Are you implying that the lives of a couple of Backstreet Boys are more important than my best friend?” Becca demanded hotly.

“Not at all!” Howie exclaimed. The sweet innocent in his eyes was easy to see. It was enough to make Becca see that he really hadn’t meant it the way it sounded, which was saying a lot. She did not take kindly to people who thought they were superior to others.

“All I meant was that if they realize how much money Brian and A.J. have, things could take a turn for the worse.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve never had to deal with a friend in a hostage situation,” Becca said softly.

“Me neither,” Howie said, looking at the ground.

“What if they don’t release them?” Julie asked, interrupting them.

Marie and Becca exchanged nervous glances, and Howie refused to meet her gaze.

“What are they planning to do?” she asked, more persistent this time.

“If things don’t go well with the next exchange, they want to move in and use force.”

“If things don’t go well?” Becca cried, for the first time showing her true emotion. “That means if someone else dies! That could be Lila! We can’t risk that.” She looked furious.

Howie sighed. “Kevin is bringing them the cash. He and Nick are being escorted to a bank to get it. And then, Kevin, the damn fool, is going to make the drop.” He paused to get a grip on his emotions: anger, fear, and worry all rolled into one. “The trick is what the criminals are going to do next. I doubt they will release everyone, because that leaves them no way to escape themselves. The cops would just shoot them dead when they showed themselves.”

“Oh shit,” Ellie said. “So what are they going to do?”

“They’ve gotten the blueprints for the place. They’ve found a back entrance that they are trying to figure out how to use.”

As soon as the phone was “disconnected,” thief number one backed off of Brian, not before giving him a spiteful kick in the head, and signaled to his cohort. The gun was removed from A.J.’s face as he went over to his partner. It took all of A.J.’s restraint to keep from bolting over to Brian, who was lying limp in a ball on the floor. He had tried to protect himself from the blow, but to no avail. He began to step forward, but the click of both guns made them halt.

“Don’t bother. He’s fine where he is. You watch her,” one of them said, indicating Lila.

A.J. could feel his rage flowing through his veins like a disease. He had never despised anyone more in his entire life. He continued to stand and stare at him for a moment, but a menacing thrust with the weapon forced him to sit down. He kept his concentration on Brian, but glanced over to Lila. Her eyes were closed. A flutter of alarm tugged at him, but he could see her chest rising and falling. He could tell that it was shallow and quick, but at least she was still alive. How much longer she would stay that way, he didn’t know. He flicked his attention back and forth between the unconscious girl and his unconscious friend.

This is quite a mess you’re in here, Bone. I hope you can find your way out of it.

Thankfully, it wasn’t long before Brian stirred. A.J. was facing his back and couldn’t see his face, but at least he was moving. He could see his friend crane his head around, not moving any other part of his body, looking for another potential assault before deciding it was safe to get up. Convinced it was clear, he placed one of his hands flat on the floor, leaning heavily on it. He looked around and let his gaze settle on A.J., who flinched when he got a good look at him. Blood ran from a cut near his mouth, and he could see the bruises already starting to form.

“Lila? Is she ok?” Brian murmured. His elbow buckled and he slammed the other hand down to keep himself from falling.

A.J. wanted to slap him. He was worried about her? That was Brian for you. Unbelievable, he thought.

He nodded back at him. Well, it wasn't entirely a lie. She was still breathing, she just wasn't conscious, and didn't look too good.

Brian pushed himself painfully up on his knees, and paused a moment to shake off the dizziness he felt. Boy, did he have one hell of a headache. He tried to get his feet underneath him, but A.J. stopped him.

“Relax a minute B-Rok. Just give yourself some time.”

Brian clearly hated the thought of allowing the abuse they had given him to stop him, but A.J. was right. He looked over to the source of his pain, and saw both criminals on the phone. Although they were speaking, both were watching their hostages closely. Brian's face hardened towards them, he pushed the pain back inside of him a little further, refusing to allow them to see it. He found his balance and rose to his feet, much to A.J.'s dismay, and walked unsteadily over to his former spot by the wall. Once he was sitting back down on the floor, he began to tend to Lila. A.J. helped him change the bandage again, and they managed to shake her into wakefulness, but it didn't look as if she would stay that way for long. Brian wasn't sure she was entirely in touch with reality as it was.

“Gorgeous, he won't find you,” she rasped out. “I won't let him. I promise I won't.”

“Lila,” A.J. said gently. “Lila, can you hear me?”

“I'll do it. Oh God, I don't want to but I'll do it. Please don't make me do it.”

“We're not making you do anything,” Brian soothed, trying to ignore the pounding in his head. What is it you don't want to do?”

“It's my fault,” she whispered. “It's all my fault.” She began to cry, her body shaking with her quiet sobs. Brian looked at A.J. with alarm.

“What is she talking about?”

“She's delirious,” A.J. said with a concerned frown. “This is not good.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” He cupped Lila's chin in his hand, and directed her gaze to his own. Her eyes were open, but she didn't seem to be looking at anything.

“Lila. Lila, it’s Brian. Do you hear me?” He shook her gently. Her eyes cleared a little, and she looked at him.

“Where am I?” she said, taking in a sharp breath.

“Still in the convenience store.”

“Still here...”

“Stay with me now, ok? You slipped away there for a minute, and we can’t have that. Focus on me. Keep your eyes on me.”

She nodded shakily. Brian wished he could do something to quell the terror that possessed her, but unfortunately, he felt it too.

A.J. glanced at his watch. It was only a matter of time before they would have to go through that damn lottery again. He couldn’t take it anymore. He had to do something.

“I don’t like that look, Bone,” Brian said weakly from beside him.

“What look?”

“That one. The look you get whenever you’re about to haul off and do something stupid.”

“You must be thinking of Nick. I don’t know what you mean, B-Rok.”

“No, this is what Nick looks like when he’s about to do something less than intelligent.” Brian demonstrated for him, and A.J. had to admit it was a good impression.

“Please don’t do something stupid.”

“What if I tell you it’s not stupid?”

“I won’t believe you.” His voice got stronger, and more determination came to his face as he objected. A.J. was glad to see it, because he would need it.

“You give me no credit. None at all.”

“Should I?”

“We’ll see.”

“Tell me. Tell me, then I’ll tell you to forget it.”

“There’s a backdoor.”

“What?”

“I saw it when we were moving the shelves and stuff. I tried to hide it so they wouldn’t see it.”

“And?”

“It’s locked from the outside, but not the inside.”

“How do you plan to get out the door without getting killed?” Brian asked skeptically.

“I don’t.”

“Oh really. Then what was it exactly you wanted to do?”

“We’ll get you and Lila out. You tell the people in blue outside what’s going on, and then they can figure out how to get me and the other chick.”

“Oh no you don’t. I am not going to leave you. They already don’t like you, and without me to keep a rope around your smart mouth you won’t get out of here alive.” Brian sounded sarcastic and patronizing, but it was nothing but a pathetic attempt to cover up his real feelings. The thought of leaving A.J. was absolutely terrifying. He would not abandon his friend. He would never have considered it in a thousand years. A.J. was like a brother, and since he was younger, he felt the need to protect him. He would not leave him alone, and that was final.

A.J. took one look at Brian’s face and knew exactly what he was thinking.

“We have to do something, Rok,” he said quietly. “She doesn’t have the time. You know that. We have to do something to help her. I’ll be ok. You know that.”

“Bullshit you’ll be ok. No, and that’s that. I have faith in Kevin, Nick, Howie, and the people outside. They won’t let us down. We’ll only fuck this up more.”

“Ordinarily I’d say you were right, but they don’t know how bad she is. How long do you really give her, huh?”

“I don’t know,” he said helplessly.

“Exactly. This is what we are going to do.”

Chapter 19

Kevin and Nick moved swiftly through the early hours of the morning to the selected bank. Special people had been called in, for the amount of money they needed could not be obtained from an ATM machine, and as it was only around 7:30 am, nothing was open.

The sun was not quite up yet, although it was beginning to show over the horizon. It was going to be a nice day. I thought that never happened, Kevin thought. I thought that when things like this happened it was supposed to be cold and rainy and dark. He glanced over at Nick, who walked briskly beside him. His jaw was set, and his face was full of tension. He looked exhausted. It's no wonder, Kevin realized. We've been up since 8:00 am yesterday morning, and that was after about 3 hours of sleep.

"This is going to take some time, you understand," one of the officers escorting them said.

"We don't have time," Nick growled. "We have 14 minutes to do this."

"It may take more."

"It can't! Do you understand me? It can't."

"Just warning you," he answered grimly.

"It'll be ok, Nicky." Kevin murmured. Nick did not answer.

Once inside the bank, they met with one of the employees called in to handle the situation. They worked out a few details, which took more time than they could afford. It was a little bit of a walk to get back to the store, and they were running out of time.

The transaction was made, and Kevin hugged the bag with \$60,000 close to his chest. He took a glance at his watch, and gasped.

"We're almost out of time. Quick, Nick, use your phone. Call them and tell them we are on the way!" He watched Nick fumble for his phone as they walked along, and then spoke up again.

"On second thought, give it to Lt. Daniels. You'd better not talk to them. Negotiating is not your forte."

Nick opened his mouth for a nasty reply, but changed his mind and surrendered the phone. This was no time to argue. Kevin rattled off the number, and they waited anxiously for someone to pick up. Kevin closed his eyes and prayed as Daniels negotiated with what he considered to be human filth. As he closed the phone, his expression looked angry.

“He gave us an extra two minutes.”

“That means we have two goddamn minutes,” Nick said coldly.

At that moment, they rounded the corner by the hotel and came face to face with a large group exiting the hotel, suitcases in hand. Nick paled when he saw them. Girls. Young. Obviously there for the concert last night. He tried to duck behind one of the cops, but it was too late.

“Oh my God!” a shriek came. “It’s Nick! It’s Nick Carter!”

Screeches could be heard from all around, and the group closed in on them, cutting them off. About four cops accompanied them, but it wasn’t enough to be able to push their way around them. Kevin began to get frantic.

“You have to let us through,” he said desperately. “We have to get through here, this is an emergency!” It took another split second for one of the girls to figure out the problem.

“Oh my God. I’ll bet some of the Backstreet Boys are the ones being held hostage! Didn’t y’all hear that on the news this morning? There are some guys holding people hostage down the street! I’ll bet it’s A.J., Howie, and Brian!” More screams and yells.”

“Are they ok?”

“What’s going on?”

“Is that true?”

“Have they caught him?”

“What’s happening in there?”

“Holy... none of them are dead are they?”

“Get out of the way!” Nick bellowed. He barreled forward, pushing his way through. Hands reached out and grabbed for him from every direction, and he wanted to scream. This couldn’t be happening! The officer escorts lunged after him but allowed him to continue shoving. Kevin’s heart was thudding in his chest so quickly he thought it would leap out. He wanted to smack Nick and hug him at the same time. He looked at his watch again, and almost cried out.

“No!” he screeched, as he was guided through the small mob of fans. “We’re too late!”

“Run!” Nick hollered over his shoulder. The small parade followed them as they rushed over to the scene. The escorts and other officers that came to help held the small crowd back, but it did nothing to stop their screeching.

“Look! Look! It’s the Backstreet Boys!”

Heads shot up all over the place. Media heads.

Brian sat tensely on the floor. Time was almost up. They had been planning to make their move, but the ring of the phone stopped them. They were able to piece together that someone was bringing the money, and now they were waiting. They couldn’t do it much longer.

His heart plummeted to his feet as thief number one scattered the numbered pieces of paper to the floor. They were too late. They should have acted. Would Kevin and the others really have let him down? The thought was crushing. With agonizing slowness, the crook reached down to select one of the papers. He unfolded it, and read what he saw.

“Number four.”

A chill raced down Brian’s spine, and he turned, horrified, over to where A.J. sat. His face was blank, and for a moment, Brian wasn’t sure he was breathing. He looked back to where thief number two had been, and saw him approaching A.J. with his gun pointed.

A.J. sprung to his feet like a cat, and bolted towards him. He was not going to go down without a fight. He ducked and rolled as the shots he was expecting whistled through the air where his head had just been. He slammed into his attacker’s legs with all the force he could manage, and knocked him flat. He would have succeeded in seizing the gun if his foot hadn’t gotten caught in a crate that used to contain soda that was lying on the floor.

Brian’s reaction was instantaneous. A.J. had not even made it to his feet when he started to move. He thanked the heavens for all the dancing he’d done; thanks to it he was limber and fast.

Not fast enough.

Wanting to crush the attack before it got out of hand, thief number one went straight for him. Brian saw him coming out of the corner of his eye, and ducked to the left to avoid him. The snap of fired bullet filled his ears, and he wrenched sideways to get out of its path. A burning sensation ripped across his back.

Oh no, he thought.

The impact caused him to stumble forward, and in the next moment he found himself flat on his back, his arms strewn out to his sides, staring up at the barrel of a gun between his eyes.

A.J. fought like a mad thing to rid his foot of the crate. It was a minor setback, but enough to let his attacker regain his senses. He vaulted back to his feet and grabbed A.J. by the shirt, hauling him up to his feet. He slammed him hard against the nearest wall, where the magazines were kept. The crook put the gun to A.J.'s temple, swearing like there was no tomorrow.

“You little shit,” he spat. “You are going pay for that one, do you hear me? We’re gonna take this slow.”

A.J. shuddered, but tried not to let it show. He suddenly noticed that the thief was no longer looking at him. He was looking right next to him. A.J. darted his eyes to the side, trying to see what he was looking at, and suppressed a groan. The criminal reached up and pulled off A.J.'s hat, and then cackled evilly.

“What have we here?”

“Shit,” A.J. seethed between his teeth. Their nightmare had just turned into pure hell.

His eyes had fallen on the latest issue of Rolling Stone, which sported a photo of the Backstreet Boys, as large as life.

Chapter 20

The press swarmed the area like flies to a carcass. Extra backup and manpower was called in, and there was still difficulty keeping the crowds from getting out of control. Aside from the media, there were fans swarming around everywhere, trying to get a glimpse of their idols. Howie, Kevin, and Nick were herded immediately into the closest building, and were locked inside. It was an absolute madhouse, all in the space of a few minutes.

“You don’t understand! I have to do this!”

“Are you kidding? No way in hell. Look around you, Mr. Richardson. Everyone knows who you are here. Those men in there probably know who they are holding now. This has just become a media circus. This is not a secure area, and anything you do could put yourself and your friends in considerable danger, especially trying to pay them off.”

“Damn it!” Howie shouted, in a rare burst of anger. He looked for something to hit, and found nothing, which only made him angrier.

“Did anyone die this time around?” Nick spoke up. Kevin stared at him in disbelief. In all the chaos, Kaos himself was the only one keeping his head and getting to the heart of the real issue. In all the confusion there was no word on whether or not there had been another casualty. Kevin and Howie fell silent immediately and waited for an answer. They didn’t have to wait long, because a moment later, Lt. Daniels entered the room to speak to them.

“We’ve gotten word from inside. Good and bad.”

“Who died?” Nick demanded, his blue eyes wide with anxiety.

“That’s the good news. No one.”

Nick breathed a sigh of relief. “And the bad news?”

“The bad news is that they know, and they want a hell of a lot more than \$60,000.”

“How much do they want?”

“A million, plus a plane trip to the destination of their choice.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No. And they plan to keep one hostage until they get out of the country.”

“What!” Howie exclaimed.

“They aren’t as dumb as we were hoping. They want a private flight to Chicago, and from there they plan to ditch the hostage and blend in with the crowd.”

“And you think they will get away with this?”

“Absolutely not, but as long as they think they will, what does it matter? They picked a private flight so whomever they take, either Brian or A.J., won’t be recognized. Once they get to Chicago, their plan is to shove their hostage out there, get him seen, and slip away when fans mob him. It’s actually a fairly smart plan.”

“But you aren’t going to let either one of them get on that plane, are you,” Kevin said. It was not a question.

“We’re going to do our best.”

“Not good enough. Do not let either of my friends in there go anywhere with them. You have to stop them. Brian is my own blood, and A.J. may as well be. You will get them out of there, safely.”

Daniels had to look away from the intense stare Kevin was pounding him with. This man was born to be in charge. God help me if either of them die, he thought.

“We will do everything humanly possible, I give you my word.”

He still wasn’t satisfied, but decided it had to be enough for now.

When Daniels had turned away, Howie touched Kevin’s arm. He swiveled around to face him.

“You do realize that our biggest problem is probably them,” he said, his face full of concern.

“What do you mean?” Kevin demanded.

“Do you really think A.J. is going to continue to take this sitting down? I’m surprised he hasn’t taken matters into his own hands yet.”

Kevin considered this. “You’re right. Brian can stay cool enough to not do anything stupid, but A.J. is probably plotting something.”

“And that could mean even more trouble.”

“Shit.”

It was all A.J. could do to keep from trembling. This was not good. He couldn't even divert his eyes away from his captor to see if Brian was all right. He'd heard the gun go off, and hadn't seen any movement from his friend since then.

"What do you want?" he whispered. He tried not to show his fear, but it was impossible.

"We want a lot of money. We want money and a way out. We get what we want, you walk away from here alive. If not, we're all dead. So pray your buddies out there think you're important enough to fork over the cash." A.J. resisted the urge to spit in his face. Thief number one turned his head to look at his cohort, who still had Brian pinned to the floor.

"Let him up."

"What if he tries something again?" he said indignantly.

"He won't. Because as soon as he does, I fire this gun. After all, we don't really need two Backstreet Boys. One is enough to get what we want."

A.J. shuddered, and finally risked a look over to where he was sure Brian lay, and sure enough, he was sprawled flat on his back, staring up at the gun that had been placed between his eyes. He was breathing heavily, and his fists were clenched so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

"You ok, Bri?" A.J. called, and almost gasped as his assailant's finger tightened on the trigger.

"I'm... I'm fine," he rasped. He was having trouble catching his breath.

Brian sat up slowly after the gun was removed. A bolt of fire ran lengthwise across his back where the bullet had grazed him, but he said not a word. He slid back against the wall where Lila still lay. He leaned heavily against the wall, panting with the exertion. He didn't know a bullet could hurt this bad. He put the back of his hand to the girl's cheek. She had passed out again, and for once, Brian was grateful. The last thing she needed was to witness all of this. He shook her, trying to wake her back up. He desperately wanted to keep her conscious. She had made it this far, and he'd be damned if she died now. Not only that, but working to keep her alive helped keep him from seeing the nightmarish image of A.J. with a gun planted in his face.

After a few anxious moments, her eyes fluttered open again. She was ghastly pale, and for the first time Brian truly feared for her life. He didn't know how much blood she had lost, but he knew she couldn't hold on much longer. He turned to face A.J., and the fear in his eyes registered quickly with his friend. He did not move, but answered Brian with his eyes. He was done waiting. It was time to act.

Chapter 21

“What did they do with those girls?” Howie asked suddenly.

Both Nick and Kevin turned to stare at him.

“Huh?” Kevin asked.

“Those girls, the friends of one of the hostages inside. The one Brian is taking care of.”

“Oh my God. They’re probably still outside,” Nick said. “I can’t believe we forgot about them.”

Kevin got the attention of one of the nearby officers.

“Could you go out and get those young ladies? I’ll be the press and anyone else there who figures out that they are involved are tearing them apart. Shit, I can’t believe we didn’t get them sooner.”

“Sure thing. We’ll go find them.”

“Make sure they know what’s going on,” Kevin added.

A few moments later, the four girls were escorted inside. They all looked shaken. Howie walked over to them.

“We’re sorry we didn’t have you brought in as soon as they put us in here. Did they bother you out there?”

“A little,” Ellie said.

“I thought they were going to pay them off,” Marie spoke up flatly. “Why won’t you pay them off?”

“What do you mean?” Nick asked, confused. “We are. They are taking care of it right now!”

Marie shot him a dirty look. “No, they are not. I don’t think a bunch of armed SWAT teams moving in on that building means we are paying them off.”

“What?” Kevin exploded. He whirled upon the nearest cop. “What the fuck is going on out there?” he bellowed.

“Take it easy, Mr. Richards. I will get in contact with Lt. Daniels or Lt. Stevens if you like.”

“Damn right! I want to know what the hell is going on!”

“Easy, Kev,” Nick said softly, shaken at his outburst of rage.

“I will not take it easy! That is Brian and A.J. in there! Their lives are at stake, and there is no way these bastards are going to screw it up.”

“Don’t you think they know that?” Nick shouted. “Jesus, Kevin, I’m as terrified as you are! We all know what is at risk here! They are in that building over there with fucking guns up to their heads. Don’t you think we realize the danger in the situation? I don’t know what is going on either, but we have to trust that these people will do their best to get them out of there.” Tears glistened in the corners of his eyes along with raw emotion as his fear, worry, and rage came to a head. Howie saw he was about to lose it, but wasn’t sure what to do to stop it. To his surprise, Marie took care of it.

“Wow,” she said in a voice that caught everyone’s attention. “Lila was right. You all really do care for each other. I mean really care. I never quite believed her.”

Kevin and Nick stared at her in astonishment. Grief permeated Kevin’s green eyes, while a solitary tear ran down Nick’s cheek.

“We’re as close as you can be to family without actually being family,” Howie said softly.

“I don’t want to lose them,” Nick said quietly, doing his best to harness his emotions. He let out a nervous laugh. “I’m scared shitless here.”

“We don’t want to lose Lila,” Becca said. “And we won’t. Not as long as I’m around.”

Kevin managed a tiny smile. “Then I’m glad you’re around.”

“Excuse me,” Julie interrupted. They turned to acknowledge the other girl. “We still need to figure out what is going on out there.”

“Damn it,” Kevin muttered and darted away. The others turned to follow.

“We’re going in,” Stevens informed them. “We can’t wait anymore. The situation is too fragile, we can’t risk taking any more time. We are going to move in and get them out with force.”

“Through the back?” Howie said skeptically.

“Yes. It will be tricky, I won’t lie, we only have those double doors to work with. But we will have people ready to move in the front as soon as we get the ball rolling.”

“Is this going to work?” Becca asked. She did not look optimistic.

“I have complete faith in the abilities of my men.”

“That doesn’t quite answer my question.”

“This is our best shot.”

“Why am I not encouraged?”

A.J. was finally released when they were convinced he was not going to cause them trouble. Well, released involved him being flung off of his feet and slammed into the floor. Brian cringed, but A.J. climbed back to his feet. He refused to let them win. To Brian’s surprise, A.J. did not come over and sit down by him, but instead plopped down over by the cashier, who was still seated against the other wall. Thief number two watched him suspiciously, but A.J. made a big show of comforting her and seeing if she was all right. Brian knew better. He was planning something. He fought down a rush of panic that mowed its way from his stomach to his throat. Why does he have to play the hero? he wondered, his heart threatening to fall to his feet.

“Lila?” he whispered. For a moment he got no response. Then her lips began to move, and after a moment, sound accompanied the movement.

“Why did you lie to me?” she whispered tearfully. Her eyes were fluttering, and she was shivering.

“Lila, it’s Brian. Can you hear me?”

“I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean for it to happen. Oh God, tell me this didn’t happen...”

“Lila. Lila!” He wasn’t sure if she was hallucinating or not.

“Help me,” she moaned softly.

He shook her, gently at first, and then more roughly. He took her hand and squeezed it. “I’m here. I’m going to help you, but you have to help me a little too. Look at me. Lila.” This was not good. She looked like death. Even her lips were colorless.

Suddenly, her eyes opened wide, and she grunted in pain.

“Brian,” she gasped out.

“Hey, hey,” he said, letting out a breath of relief. “I’m right here.”

“Okay...”

“Things might start happening here in a minute, but I want you to know that I’m not going to let go of you. We’re going to get out of this together. I’m going to get you out of

this. I mean that. I promise.” He wasn’t even sure if she’d heard him. Her eyes were fluttering again, and her breathing had gotten even more rapid and shallow.

A.J. came over to him then, and settled down next to him.

“We need to do this now,” Brian murmured.

“I know.”

“What do I need to do?”

“Get to that exit. Hopefully both of them will be occupied with me. Get to that back door. Get through it. That’s your job.”

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m creative.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

A.J. smiled. It was a sad smile, and the realization of what it meant hit Brian square in the chest, and he almost burst into tears. It was a smile of parting, a smile that said remember me.

“I can’t let you do this.”

“I don’t plan on dying B-Rok.”

“You’d better not.” He drew in a ragged breath. He could only pray that the agony in his back wouldn’t slow him up too much. There was no way he could let A.J. down, not when he was willing to sacrifice himself.

“You know how much you mean to me Bone, don’t you?”

A.J. looked away for a moment. He knew if he met that gaze, and looked into those deep blue eyes, he would lose it. He couldn’t do that. Not now.

“Yeah,” he croaked. “I know.” He opened his mouth to express the same, but the words stubbornly refused to form.

“You don’t need to say it,” Brian said softly. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“Thank you.” Those two words said more to him than any words any one could have put together.

Brian gathered Lila up in his arms, preparing for what the next few moments would bring.

“Ready?” A.J. asked. The tension in his voice was unmistakable.

“Ready.”

“Get away from the wall. Get out on the floor, give yourself a clear line to the door,” he murmured under his breath. “Use her as an excuse.”

“Okay.”

A.J. stood and edged away from him.

Brian struggled to push himself to his feet, an action that immediately caught the attention of both criminals. Until that moment, they had been more worried about the phone, and securing their money from the outside.

“She has to get out of here,” Brian said, allowing the desperation to leak through into his voice. “She’s going to die.”

“She’s not important.”

He sank back down, now located away from the wall. Behind him was a small opening that A.J. had told him lead to the double doors. He hoped he could get through it. As he did this, A.J.’s eyes lingered no the spot Brian had been leaning up against the wall. He stared curiously at the red stain that had manifested itself there. His eyes slowly traveled from it over to where Brian now kneeled, and horrible realization dawned on him. How had he missed the blood? He could feel the rage heat up past the boiling point. He signaled roughly across the room to the cashier, who began to wail and cry, and carry on, just as he’d told her. As he’d hoped, both thieves did an about face at her sudden outburst.

As he leapt into action, everything happened at once.

Chapter 22

A.J. was in midair when three uniformed officers burst through the backdoors that Brian was fixing to break for. The sight of them filled his vision, and he gasped. All he could see was what seemed like a never-ending wall of guns, and they were all aimed in his direction. After being terrorized for so long by his captors, his first reaction was to get as far away from them as possible. It didn't even occur to him until after he had moved that they were there to help.

Eyes wide in shock, Brian hurled himself off to the right to avoid them, dragging Lila with him. Thief number two made a grab for him, and knocked him heavily to the ground. He twisted desperately to the side, still holding Lila, trying to protect her from the brunt of the impact. He succeeded, but his hip and his head collided painfully with the floor, and he cried out as he saw stars. He still held on tightly to the girl in his arms.

A.J. slammed into the thief number one with a vengeance, bowling him over. His fury was almost getting the better of him. He tried to channel it, and use it to fuel his attack. Unfortunately, it was so intense that he almost couldn't see straight. The blood he had spotted dripping off of Brian's back had made him snap, and he was almost out of control.

The source of his hatred lost his weapon in the assault, and it skidded away from him across the floor. He hadn't been expecting the attack. Despite this advantage, A.J. was much smaller than he was, and knew he wouldn't stand a chance to fight him as soon as he regained his senses. He struggled to bury his anger for a moment to be able to think his way out of the situation. He partially succeeded, and his observant eyes spied the fallen gun several feet away.

A.J. had always been quick on his feet. He was agile and swift, and he put his skills to use. He used the fallen man as a springboard and pushed off of him as he went for the gun.

Brian was unable to struggle, and as a result, allowed his assailant to get a firmer grip on him. He also took the opportunity get a shot off at the intruders, who were taken by surprise at the chaos that greeted them. One of the officers fell, clutching his neck. Another screamed into his radio to halt the attack.

One monstrous arm encircled Brian's throat, while the other jammed the barrel of his gun against his flesh. Even now, Brian fought to keep the girl he had promised he would protect out of harm's way. He was rapidly losing his grip on the situation. The "plan" had failed, unless he could find a way free, and the only thing he could think to do was to make sure that Lila remained alive. He tried not to focus on A.J. He was in no place to help him, and he would drive himself to insanity if he worried about him. He could have to take care of himself.

The gun seemed so close. A.J. could reach it. He swore he could. He could almost get it... He howled out loud in a panicked rage as he felt a hand clamp on to his ankle. He kicked out savagely.

“No!” he screeched. With all of the adrenaline fueling his body, it took him a moment to feel the pain, but all of the sudden, there it was. The torn skin around his lower leg oozed with fresh blood. A.J. stared back at it in horror, and then found the source of his hurt. He cursed himself. How could he have been so stupid as not to assume that the man had a knife? The cut wasn’t very deep, thankfully. He knew it wouldn’t necessarily stay that way. He’d gotten off with a warning, nothing more.

His pause was just enough to give his adversary the upper hand. He threw himself over A.J., and then rolled backwards, pulling A.J. up with him, using him as a shield. A.J. yelled in protest, but dared not fight it.

The two remaining cops halted in their tracks. One knelt down by their fallen comrade. Moments later, a dark look passed his face as he stood up from the corpse.

“One step and I gut him,” the thief hissed.

A small noise escaped Brian’s lips as his eyes took in the sight before him. Still on the floor, A.J. was on his side facing him, blocking all access to the man behind him. The tip of the knife glinted from its position by A.J.’s throat as it caught a ray of sunlight streaming through a window.

“You realize every window and every entrance to this place is swarming with cops, don’t you?” one of the policemen said.

“That may be, but he’ll be dead before I am, I guarantee you that.”

“I want to know what’s happening. Goddamn it, I want to know what’s happening,” Nick muttered, pacing the floor.

“Me too,” Howie said through gritted teeth. “Have they moved in yet?”

“Just did,” Daniels reported grimly, lowering his radio.

“And?” Becca yelled.

He held up his hand signaling her to wait as he listened to the mad chatter coming through the tiny speaker. He moved away so he could listen.

“Does anyone have anything to throw?” Marie seethed. “How can he do that? Christ.”

“Settle down, he’ll tell us in a second,” Kevin murmured.

“Oh, right. You say that now. A second ago you were the one yelling and screaming and throwing a fit.” She glared at him.

“Pardon her,” Ellie said dryly.

“It’s true!” Marie yelled.

“She’s right, she’s right,” Kevin admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. I’m just being a bitch because I’m scared shitless.”

“I understand,” Kevin said, looking slightly amused.

A loud shout from the direction of Lt. Daniels caused them all to snap their heads around.

“Shit!”

“Oh, God,” Nick whispered, his face draining of color.

“What happened?” Howie cried.

“Stevens is dead. They shot hi. He’s dead.”

“Fuck!” Nick and Marie shouted at the same time.

“What about tthers?”

“We’ve got a problem.”

“No shit we’ve got a fucking problem!” Becca shrieked. “What is going on in there?”

“We’re working on it.”

“Work faster!” Kevin sp. He looked around, and saw the fear and worry implanted on each of their faces.

“I’m going out there,” he said suddenly.

“No you’re not,” Daniels replied.

“This is going to end soon, which means they are going to come out of there, whether they’re dead or alive.”

“For goodness sakes, don’t say that Kevin,” Howie murmured, looking physically ill.

“Either way, I’m going to be out there when they get out.” It was suddenly the most important thing in his life. He had to be there when they came out, and it was as simple as that. He would feel like a failure if he wasn’t. He was supposed to be there for them, offer them his support, and be their guide. It was the role he had unofficially taken on when the group was formed, and it was now his job. He was going to do his job.

“You need to stay here for your own safety,” Daniels begged.

“You can’t tell me the crowds aren’t under control, because you’ve got SWAT teams everywhere and guns going off!” He was gesturing wildly with his hands to add emphasis.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “The crowds have been pushed back.”

“Then I’m going outside.”

“And I’m coming with you,” Howie said firmly.

“Me too,” Nick added.

“We’re all going,” Ellie said.

“God almighty,” Daniels muttered under his breath. “Just promise me you’ll stay back and keep out of the way.”

Chapter 23

“You’re never going to get away with this,” one of the cops said angrily.

“Probably not. But I’m bringing as many people down with me as I can.” As he spoke, the cashier, still by the other wall, couldn’t take it anymore. With a terrified shriek, she bolted to her feet and made a run for the exit. One of the remaining cops leaped for her, but it was in vain.

Thief number two choked Brian tighter with his arm as he aimed the gun and fired. A.J. moaned as the back of her head appeared to cave in as the bullet impacted. Her scream was short lived, and she was dead before she hit the floor.

Brian gagged for breath, the grip his captor had on him had closed off his windpipe. He began to struggle for a breath.

At the same instant, one of the officers fired back at him. He had moved just enough to be able to get around Brian to shoot that he offered a target, and the opportunity was not lost.

For the third time in just a few hours, someone else’s blood poured over Brian. With a frantic yelp he pushed the wounded man away from him, and reached for Lila.

“Get out of here!” A.J. hollered. “Get out of here!”

His assailant began cursing and swearing, but did not let go of his hostage. It was all he had. He was losing, and he knew it.

Brian stumbled to his feet holding Lila in his arms. He did not know if she was still breathing, nor did he have time to find out. He headed blindly for the door.

Furious that it was going to end like this, thief number one stretched for his gun that lay close to his head. A.J. felt him move, and immediately realized what he was trying to do.

“Bastard!” A.J. yelled. He shoved his own body harder against him, hoping to prevent him from acquiring his goal. To his dismay, instead of deterring him, his movement actually allowed him to grab on to the weapon he sought. He did little to aim it, he just trusted to luck.

The scream was already loosed from A.J. when the first bullet left the gun. Almost in slow motion, he witnessed Brian look back over his shoulder, a look of doom permeating his eyes. Like a moment out of a nightmare, Brian fell forward as one of the bullets found its target in his upper arm. It spun him halfway around, and he went down hard.

“No!” A.J. screeched. “No!”

Brian scooted backwards frantically, tightening his hold on Lila with his good arm, dragging her with him, as his injured one dangled by his side. His blue eyes were wide with terror, but he kept his mind on his goal: getting to the door. He had to get to the door.

A.J. fought like a mad thing, having managed to knock the knife away from his throat. He would not let him get another shot of. He would not. The next bullet would have to go through him. Deep down he knew that it very well might.

Kevin and the others were brought to what was deemed a safe distance from the backdoors of the building. Cops stood all around it, guns ready, but had been told to back off a safe distance thanks to the fiasco that had taken place inside. One of the men inside had his radio on, and sounds from inside filtered over the speaker.

Kevin listened in pure horror as he heard the sounds of a struggle. It simply couldn't be true. It couldn't be happening. He reached out for something to support him, and found Nick at his side, steadying him. Nick was staring straight ahead, his jaw set. His face was void of emotion, he just focused on the double doors. It was almost as if he concentrated hard enough, he could make them open, and make Brian and A.J. walk out of them.

Howie choked out a sob as the sound of A.J. yelling to Brian cut through the static of the speaker.

"We have to do something, for the love of God," he whimpered.

"There's nothing we can do," Kevin said grimly.

"Marie?" Ellie said, her voice rising anxiously. "Marie?"

Marie was breathing in and out, rapid and shallow.

"Put your head between your knees," Julie ordered, shoving her head down. A cop came up and tried to lead her away.

"No!" she gasped out. "I'm all right. I'm all right!"

"Get them out of there, oh please get them out of there," Becca said desperately.

"Look!" Howie shouted.

Before anyone could stop him, Kevin broke into a run.

Chapter 24

By the grace of God, Brian found himself near the door. The seconds stretched out into an eternity, and it seemed like forever before he actually reached it. He threw himself through it, and breathed deeply the fresh air that surrounded him. How had he managed to get Lila out with him was beyond him. It was amazing what adrenaline could do. His wounded arm did little to help carry her, although he tried to put it to some use. As soon as his feet hit the concrete, he could no longer support himself or the weight of a second person. He fell down to his knees, fighting for breath. He couldn't think, he couldn't breathe. All that mattered was that he was no longer in that building.

He never heard Kevin yelling for him. All he knew was that all of a sudden a strong set of arms had wrapped themselves around him. Panic closed over his throat and engulfed him in a terror unlike anything he had ever known. He screamed aloud, a terrible sound that shook Kevin to the very core, and tried to push him away. All he wanted was to be out of danger. He held Lila tighter to him, for his instincts told him he had to protect her no matter what the cost. He didn't know what made him so desperate to save her, but it was something he could not ignore.

Kevin couldn't believe the sight that greeted his eyes. Brian looked like the walking dead. He was covered in blood, absolutely covered. He was white with fear, and his deep blue eyes seemed to bulge out of his head, filled with wild desperation, blotting out the rest of his face.

"Brian!" Kevin cried, trying to bring him back to reality. He had never seen anyone this afraid in his entire life. "Oh, God, Brian it's me. It's Kevin. Brian, answer me, oh God, please. Not this. Brian!"

Brian looked up into his cousin's eyes, and registered what was happening. He leaned hard into the embrace Kevin offered, unable to return it with his own arms.

"Kevin, it's really you. Thank God, thank God..."

Nick rushed breathlessly up beside them, and joined the hug. Tears streamed down his face at the joy of seeing his best friend.

"Brian," he said, his voice breaking. "Brian." It was all he could say, no other words would form on his lips.

"Nicky," Brian whispered, closing his eyes and reveling in the sudden security that surrounded him. It didn't last long.

Howie also appeared beside them, shedding tears of joy and relief. Becca and Marie followed close behind, but their excitement was short lived.

"Lila!" Marie screeched. "Lila!"

Becca fought through the mass of arms that surrounded Brian and got to her best friend. Brian shrugged free of the embrace, as much as it killed him to do so.

“She needs help. She’s dying. We need help, right now. Please help her!” The urgency in his voice was strong and powerful. He scooped her up again and crawled to his feet. As he did so, a crowd of policemen surrounded him, and one took Lila from him.

“You have to help her. She can’t die. I promised her I wouldn’t let her die.”

Marie darted off after the man who carried her, with Ellie and Lila hot on her heels. Becca lingered for a moment, staring at Brian, who did a double take. She looked so much like Lila it was frightening. They had to be sisters. The expression of gratitude in her eyes beat through his, and he nodded at her.

“Thank you,” was all she said, and then took off for her friend.

“You need to see the paramedics,” one of the officers told him.

“No fucking shit!” Nick said angrily. “Christ, Brian, you’re bleeding from all over.” His eyes fell on the fresh blood that flowed freely from his arm. “Oh God, you’ve been shot,” his voice trailed off, and his eyes were wide with concern. He and Kevin slid their arms around him to support him.

“Brian, are you ok?” Howie asked. “What did they do to you?”

“A.J.,” he said brokenly, staring back at the exit from which he’d come. The surrounding cops exchanged glances.

“I have to get A.J. He’s still in there. I can’t leave him.”

“They’re trying to get him,” Howie tried to soothe him. “They’ll get him. We need to get you to an ambulance.”

“No!” he shrieked. He ripped away from his friends and made a run back for the building.

“Brian, no!” Kevin cried out after him.

Brian never heard him. Every fiber in his being told him he had to reach A.J. He had to get him out, he had to help him. He couldn’t leave him alone like that, he couldn’t. He would never be able to live with himself if A.J. died because he’d left him alone to save himself.

A.J. almost cried with relief when Brian disappeared from his vision. He couldn’t dwell on it long, however. He was caught fighting a knife and a gun, and he didn’t like the odds. A mad rage had enveloped him as visions of Brian whipping around as the bullet

he had let escape tore through his flesh refused to subside. Just because he had run to the door didn't mean he was still alive. He didn't know the true extent of the injury that had been inflicted upon him.

He was going to kill the bastard who'd shot Brian. He just needed to get the gun away from him. His own strength surprised him: he was not a big man, but furious drive and determination powered him on.

The cops inside with him fought to get a target, but with the two struggling the way they were, they couldn't get a clear shot. Either of them was likely to hit A.J if they tried.

The struggle ensued, both fighting for their lives. A.J. had managed to get an arm free from his vise-like grip, and he used it to his full advantage. He swung it wildly, blocking the arm with the knife. By twisting cleverly, he managed to get access to the knife hand, and he knocked it away. He kicked out with his foot, and he got a satisfactory grunt in response. In return, A.J. received a heavy blow to the shoulder blades. It was enough. A.J. went down hard, gasping for breath, but if anything, his rage doubled. He was like a wounded animal, one that wouldn't go quietly to death's door. His tormentor slammed the gun barrel into his back, digging it painfully into his flesh. He heard the shuffle of the officers, who now had a clear shot.

"He'll be dead before the bullet hits me, I swear to you."

"Let him go."

"I don't think so."

"A.J.!" A new voice, one full of torment and horror echoed in their ears. A.J. looked in time to see Brian, who was no longer able to support himself, collapse down to the floor. Immediately he began dragging himself back to his feet, determined to do something to help his friend.

His entrance, horrific as it was, provided the distraction A.J. needed. With a howl that reached inhuman proportions, he flung his head and body up, praying that the thief's finger wasn't on the trigger. As he did this, he jabbed his elbow cruelly into the gut of his assailant. He somehow managed to shove the man off, and planted his hands on the floor as he rocked his body forward and leapt to his feet. God bless all the dancing, he thought.

Free now, his eyes frantically searched the room for the gun that had also been dropped during the struggle. Spying it a few feet away, he ducked and rolled to it, and quick as a cat, he pounded on the crook. He planted a foot harshly against his stomach, and leaned hard. He leveled the gun so it was lined up with his forehead.

"You son of a bitch." The words were sharp as knives, and dripped with hate. He cocked the lever.

“AJ, don’t!” Brian cried.

“Why the hell not,” he said coldly.

“He’s not worth it. Let the police handle him.”

“He tried to kill you.” He spat the words out angrily.

“I know,” Brian said softly. He could see the terrible battle A.J. was fighting with himself. He also knew that the only reason he was so hell bent on pulling the trigger was because of him. He couldn’t let A.J. ruin his life for that.

“If you kill him, it will be everywhere. You know what that will do. It could ruin you.”

“What happens to me doesn’t matter,” he said flatly. “He tried to kill you.”

“But he didn’t. I’m still here. And what happens to you does matter. It matters to me, it matters to Nick, it matters to Kevin, and it matters to Howie. They’re waiting outside for us. They’re waiting for us to walk out of here.”

“Are they?” There was a hint of a quiver in his voice, and Brian exploited it.

“Yes. You know they are. They’re about to come unglued out there. Don’t put them through the pain of watching your name, your reputation, and yourself get trashed like this. All you have to do is put the gun down.”

The officers watched nervously. There wasn’t much they could do interfere until he dropped the gun.

They marveled at the serenity and strength in the voice that was coming from a man who had just been shot and beaten to the point that he couldn’t stand alone. The rest of him looked ready to go at any second, but the soothing peace that resonated from his voice was spellbinding.

“Why did you come back,” A.J. whispered. “You got away. That’s what we planned. Why did you come back?”

Brian choked back tears. He couldn’t take much more of this.

“I came back for you. I couldn’t leave you here. I would never have left you here.”

A.J. said nothing for a moment, and then slowly turned his head to face his friend. Tears glistened in his eyes, and one fell gently down his cheek. As he did this, his victim seized the opportunity. He lurched forward, knocking A.J. off balance, who pitched forward, and lost his balance. As he was falling, one of the officers took his chance. He fired his weapon, praying that he did not hit the very one he was trying to protect.

Chapter 25

Brian's agonized cries could be heard all the way outside. Nick jerked roughly away from the cop who had restrained him when Brian had rushed back in. He took off full flight, determined to get in there.

"Nick! Come back here!" Howie yelled in a panic.

Nick paid him no heed. He ran on, reaching the door within a few seconds. He threw caution to the wind, and burst through the doors, terrified of what he might find, but at the same time desperate to know.

"Brian?" his harsh voice echoed throughout the area as he stumbled through the opening. Two pairs of hands grabbed him roughly and yanked him backwards. He fought them.

"Brian!" he shouted again. It took him a moment to focus, and the sight that greeted him made him sag into the grip of the men holding him. Tears of relief and joy flowed freely down his face.

Brian was seated in the middle of the floor, with A.J. against him in a tight embrace. Behind him lay another corpse. The bullet had not only hit him, it had been fatal. The drama was over.

Heavy sobs racked A.J.'s shaking body, and Brian tried to stifle his own tears as he held on to the younger man with all of his strength. He looked up to see Nick, and his anguished features softened.

Realizing that he was not a threat, the cops let Nick go. He pitched forward, but managed to stay on his feet, and skidded to the ground beside his friend.

Brian sighed in relief. The extra pair of arms was exactly what A.J. needed. They sat together for a moment, and then Brian noticed the paramedics that were flooding the room. Before they reached him, Howie and Kevin darted into the room. Howie grabbed on to A.J. and refused to let him go.

"Are you all right?"

A.J. nodded weakly. Now that he had calmed himself, the inevitable exhaustion had begun to set in.

"We're going to get you out of here and to a hospital, ok?"

"Brian first. Brian's hurt."

"I know. They're taking care of him. They're taking care of both of you. It's going to be all right. Got that?"

He permitted a tiny smile. “I got it.”

Brian settled gratefully on to the stretcher. The blood loss and the overwhelming exhaustion that flooded him could no longer be ignored. He gave into it. The last thing he heard before he passed out was Kevin’s soothing voice.

“You’re going to be all right cuz. We’ll meet you at the hospital. Everything’s going to be all right now.”

“We’ve got him on fluids, and we’ve bandaged the wounds. He’s resting comfortably now.”

“So he’s all right?” Nick asked. The urgency in his voice made the doctor smile.

“Yes. He just needs lots of rest. I’d like to keep him for a night or two for observation, but physically he’s fine.”

“Physically?” Kevin asked suspiciously. “What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said. Physically he’s going to be just fine. I do recommend that you have him and Mr. McLean see a psychiatrist. They went through a hell of an ordeal, and it would be beneficial for them to receive some counseling. There’s no telling what effects a trauma like this might have.”

The three of them exchanged glances.

“I see,” Kevin said slowly. “What about A.J.?”

“He is also resting comfortably. I’m going to keep him overnight, but he can be released in the morning.”

All three of them breathed a general sigh of relief.

“I hate to ask this,” Howie said uncomfortably, “But we really have to know. When can we get back on tour?”

“Well, I’d say that the sooner they get back to their normal lives the better. Dancing for Brian may be difficult, the wound across his back where the bullet grazed him is going to make him very uncomfortable. I’d say that within a week, unless their mental condition says otherwise, there is no reason why they can’t get back on stage.”

“That means we skip about three shows,” Kevin said with a frown. “We can make those up. But we’ll only allow them up there if they can handle it.”

“I think they will. With the three of you to guide them, I’m sure they will be just fine.”

Epilogue

The next morning, after forcing down some breakfast, Brian pressed the nurse call button on the side of his bed. A few moments later, a nurse poked her head in.

“Need something?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“What’s up?” She was friendly, and had her mothering concern made Brian smile.

“If you don’t mind, I need to get some information about what happened to another one of the victims. They took her out in an ambulance, but I don’t know where she is or if she made it. Could you find out for me? I really need to know.”

“Sure. Name?”

“Lila. Lila...” he racked his brain to remember her last name. “Kikter,” he said finally. “It’s Lila Kikter. This is very important to me.”

“I’ll look into it right away, and see what I can find.” She disappeared, and Brian settled back against the pillows. He couldn’t get her out of his head. Had she made it? Had he succeeded? Was he able to keep his promise? He prayed he would not have to make the phone call she had requested of him.

About a half an hour later, she reappeared carrying a piece of paper.

“Good news for you.”

He sat up a little straighter.

“She’s at Mercy hospital, about twenty minutes from here. She’s been upgraded from critical, and they told me she is supposed to make it.

He felt a lump form in his throat. “That’s wonderful,” he croaked. “I’m so glad.”

“Yeah. She was lucky. She’d lost a lot of blood. If she had gotten there any later, they would have lost her.”

He thanked her again, and settled down to rest. It wasn’t long before he woke up. He found Nick sitting by his bedside. He had never seen his best friend so serious in his entire life.

“Nick, you look like someone just told you that all Nintendos have been outlawed.”

He cracked a small smile. “Funny. Very funny Frick.”

“I try. If I wasn’t so groggy I know I could come up with something better.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Absolutely hunky dory. Never better.”

“Seriously, man. I’m worried about you!”

Brian sobered. “I know. I’m trying not to think about it. I don’t want to remember it.”

“I can’t even imagine what it was like,” he said softly. “It was bad enough for us waiting outside.”

“It was bad. He could have killed any of us at any time. There were six of us in there, and only three of us came out. A.J. and I could have easily been one of the three hostages that didn’t. That’s what gets me the most.” He shook his head, and shuddered at the horrific memories. “I saw four people die today. Do you know how horrible that is?”

“I’m sorry,” Nick said softly. He placed a comforting hand on Brian’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

“The one man, Christ, Nick, his blood was everywhere. It was all over me.”

“It’s ok now. You’re ok now.”

Brian nodded, closing his eyes.

“Are you going to be ok?” Nick asked, trying to disguise how upset he was. He wanted to reassure himself that Brian was still emotionally intact. The doctor’s words about his mental condition had scared him more than he had let on to the others.

Brian smiled at him. He could see the nervousness in Nick, and it touched him.

“I think so,” he said honestly, and with conviction. “After all, I’ve got you and the others to get me through, don’t I?”

“Damn right,” Nick declared. “You couldn’t get rid of me if you tried.”

“Oh really? Sounds like a challenge to me,” he said with a mischievous grin.

“Don’t even,” Nick warned, smiling back at him. “You know I can take you.”

“Bullshit!” Brian said with a burst of laughter. “When’s the last time you beat me in basketball? Huh? When!”

“Ouch,” Nick said with a grin. “That one hurts.”

“Burn baby burn,” Brian said, making a face at him.

Nick laughed, and finally began to believe that things really would be all right.

A media circus ensued after the event. Reporters swarmed around them, and they received phone calls right and left from people wanting statements and wanting interviews. Kevin made sure their reps handled things, and told him they would agree to an interview at the end of the week.

The concerts they missed were rescheduled at the end of the tour, and as soon as Brian was released, they were flown home for a few days off. Touring resumed in a week, just as the doctor had told them. Brian and A.J. met with a counselor several times, and seemed to be handling their ordeal very well. A.J. seemed very on edge for several days afterward, and his first few concerts back were not among his best, but he slowly slipped back into his groove.

Much to Brian’s dismay, he was unable to get to the other hospital to look in on Lila. He had not heard anything more about her. He wondered if he ever would.

The End