“Have you considered stage gay?”

The look Cadence Alexander shot his manager could have eviscerated a man. He wasn’t sure if it was Abel Foster’s lack of self-preservation or the notion that his client needed him therefore wouldn’t kill him that allowed him to continue on the same topic. Cade wondered how true the supposition was tonight. He was pissed off enough that he might be willing to break in a new manager.

“Hell, Cade. Other musicians have made it work for them,” he protested half-heartedly. It seemed Abel *did* know Cade well enough to tell from that single look that the notion was all but off the table.

“Name one that has that wasn’t an emo band or already openly gay.”

“My Chemical Romance is *not* an emo band,” Abel blustered weakly.

Cade arched a brow. “It's not a bad thing, and that’s certainly where their origins lie. Abel, I don’t hide who and what I am, but that’s no reason to sell out and bank on it. Besides,” he all but growled, “which of my band mates did you have in mind? *Seth*?”

“I was actually thinking more along the lines of Sam. He’s adorable and just beams out that sensitive Southern-boy charm.”

“Is he even gay or willing to play that game? These are questions you need to ask yourself, Abel, before you think up some half-baked scheme.”

“I wouldn’t have to if you weren’t so damn resistant, Cade! Honestly, is one little scandal too much work for Demon Merchant?”

Cade was offended by the words, but they were both frustrated, so he cut the older man some slack. It would be easier to argue with Abel if he didn’t sound so damn tired, and Cade was weary of quarrelling with him. They’d been dealing with this matter for days, bouncing ideas off each other. But the normal exercise had steadily grown more hostile as it became clear to them both that there was not an easy solution to be found. It helped *nothing* that he label had given them a deadline: a single month. A the rater they were going, they were going to spend it all arguing and have nothing to show for it.

Cade sighed, feeling his shoulders sag under the strain of long nights spent in the same argument that had yet to yield a workable solution. Well, that and the bare-bones sleep he was getting with this issue and writing new music. The label couldn’t have dropped this bomb on them at a worse time, and he figured they knew it: they had just expected to be able to pressure him into their ideas. However, Cade had never been one to take the easy way out. “I’m sorry, Abel,” he told him, knowing that it wasn't just eating at him, it was stressing Abel out, too. “Can we just… push this on the back-burner for now? With the new record and all…” his voice trailed off, going soft. “Maybe I’m just not meant to do this anymore.”

Abel shook his head, blonde hair splaying in a way that Cade might have found attractive –if Abel wasn’t two parts mother hen, three parts deal brokering badass. “You can’t get the music out of your blood or out from under your skin, Cade. You would wither and die if you couldn’t keep doing this. And so would your Sammy.”

He wondered when Sammy became ‘his’ in Abel’s mind. It was natural to think of him as his best friend –Phae and Sam had been a part of who he was since college. Cade would even consent to their being three parts of the same idiot. But singling out Sammy, when the relationship also extended to Phae was odd to be sure. Even if he *did* have that sort of desire for Sam, that didn’t make Cade willing to brave Phae’s wrath to do anything about it. Phae had made it quite clear he would feed Cade his *cojones* if he so much as looked at Sam sideways. Besides, Cade was smart enough to know a relationship with someone as dear to him as Sam was a bad life choice. He wasn't good at romantic entanglements: someone always ended up angry and hurt and wasn't *that* a good way to sour anything they had.

Still, he felt the need to disagree. “Sammy’s not mine,” he protested.

“He’s close enough,” Abel replied cryptically, laughter dancing in his effervescent blue eyes. A light-bulb seemed to go on over his head. “Say, what about nudes?”

“Nothing scandalous about that, unless there’s an actual sex act or an implication of less-than-straight orientation,” Cade returned cheekily, wondering where in the hell he was headed with *that* idea. Surely somewhere dark, scary, and horrible.

“No, not a single nude. The whole band, with instruments, nude. Does that make a statement?”

Cade shook his head and tried to head Abel off before he shared this particular half-baked idea with anyone else. Like *anyone* wanted to see Seth naked. He shuddered at the thought –he’d had that misfortune while they were touring the first time. Enough that *he* had been forced to behold such horrors: he refused to subject others to it as well! “What statement are you *trying* to make with that idea? ‘I can gag Cade with six words’?”

While Abel sputtered and attempted to reply, Cade drew a deep breath. He wasn’t trying to make this harder, honest! The whole situation made him mad as hell, though he had no business taking it out on Abel. “Well, you’re not talking full nudes, so it’s probably not scandal-worthy –just rumor fodder. Besides, some other band has probably thought up that one.”

Abel heaved a sigh. “Must you be so difficult?”

“Hey, it’s not me being difficult,” he shot back. “It’s the label guys. *They* want a scandal, but we don’t *need* one to be successful. We’ve proven that quite effectively.”

He thrust his fingers through his hair, further ruffling the messy strands. “I know, damn it. I just don’t want them to make things harder for you because you didn’t do as they asked.”

Cade remained thoughtfully silent. He didn’t have to like it, but Abel made a good point. Sure, Demon Merchant made plenty of money for the company and added even more prestige to an already prominent label with their talent for winning awards, but they could make things difficult for everyone in the band should they become dissatisfied. Even if the band left the label, the company would be hard at work dissuading others from picking them up.

Lots of everyday people chased fame as hard as they could. But it wasn’t that hard to get famous, anymore. Maintaining it over the long haul while making choices that pissed off the people who supported you, paid you, or both, however, quickly became an exercise in futility. Hell, maintaining it while on *good* terms with those people was hard enough! There was an eternal struggle to keep the momentum going, lest the act fade into obscurity and become one of those has-been one-hit-wonders that are eventually simply forgotten and become basic musical trivia for bored suburban housewives.

Frankly, Cade was baffled by the stipulation (or, rather, *demand*) the record company had put before releasing their next album. He wasn’t sure what surprised him more: that they wanted this scandal or that they hadn’t made this… *recommendation* earlier. Demon Merchant had been a money making machine for the last eight years or so, especially since their three records had hit platinum within months of dropping. Their songs and albums had won awards and still remained fan-favorites. Sales had yet to drop off for their third album, but they tried to stay ahead of things and had begun working on the new songs their album would require over a month ago.

Three albums in, however, and the band didn’t have enough *scandal* attached to their name. Cade sort of understood the expectation that a band named Demon Merchant should have some sort of negative aspect. However, aside from taking advantage of a few hundred groupies along the way and over the years, no one could say anything bad about them. Cade liked that, that the people he worked with and lived with for months off end were at heart good people and didn’t abuse the power and fame their work had brought them. The record label, however, seemed to take issue with it.

“I know,” Cade replied simply, softly. “I know you’re just looking out for us, Abel. And it means *so much*, but it doesn’t fix it and we still need to find a solution.”

“Well, we have to decide on some course of action. What do you do normally when you get stuck in a song?”

“I hand it to Sammy and he straightens out my words. Why?”

Abel sighed, and the weariness in his face made him seem older. “Well, we’re both stuck on this. Perhaps we should take it to Samuel.”

Samuel Dean Martin loved the work and the bustle of preparing material for a new album. There was something inherently beautiful about piecing together a new song, three threads of thought twining into oneness so sweet that it had to be recorded and playing that piece until all of the muscles ached at the delicious agony and it finally fit together perfectly. It was like exercising one’s soul, he’d told Cade once.

Cadence Alexander, one of his best friends since college and one of his faithful writing partners, had shrugged and smirked at him. “Then let’s give it a workout this time.”

In all honesty, that exchange pretty much summed up his entire relationship with Cade, if one dwelled on it. Sam was the quieter one –sensitive and calm. Cade was the brash, loud one with a quick smile and even faster wit. Raphael, the other third of their trio, was the middle ground because he could go either way depending on what was going on or what the subject matter was.

The three men had been practically inseparable since they had met in a collegiate music composition course. What drew them together was anyone’s guess: Cade was a fast-talking city boy, Sam a soft-spoken Southern boy, and Phae the monosyllabic boy from the rez who was used to not fitting in. Yet they all loved music –no, they *more* than loved music. Music was their sacred bliss, their ambrosia, their drugless high. Music was their lives and their loves and creating it was not a choice for them any more so than breathing was.

It completely explained why the three men had gone on to graduate with their degrees in music –Phael and Sam with honors, Cade barely gathering enough credits to graduate the same semester as his two friends. They imagined it might have had something to do with the amount of nights Cade had spent trolling for his next lover while the other two were studying hard. Yet they all went on to spend their lives writing and performing: Sam and Cade as the heart of their band Demon Merchant and Phae as a solo act. As they saw it, they never had a choice when it came to vocation. The music that seeped into every aspect of their lives had taken away that choice, not that either one minded that at all.

Sam sighed softly, and the sound seemed to summon his pampered over-sized housecat Misaki. She kneaded him with her paws a few times before settling into his lap.

“Hi there, sweet Misa-me,” he murmured, absently stoking the cat’s spine as thoughts wandered again. Her loud, pleasured purr became the back-beat to the melody his heart laid out and the lyrics his mind swirled in circles.

And of course his mind settled on Cade. For all of Sam's fascination with the other man, it was startling just how *oblivious* Cade remained to it. Everyone *else* knew, and sweet heavens, he was never very subtle about it. Lynne and Abel liked to tease him about it and push him to face Cade with it. The needling was well-earned on his part, since it had taken his pushing of both parties to get the well-suited couple together. But that was different: their attraction had been a mutual one, unlike the one-sided obsession that had dogged him since he'd met Cade. Abel Foster and Lynnette Mathis *belonged* together and were better for it. As for Sam and Cade, well they were probably better off as friends, anyway. Neither of them seemed to have what it took to keep a relationship going, and Sam wasn't willing to risk the friendship that had saved him from darker times over a desire a quick tumble would put to bed. No, all that Sam wanted was for the silly infatuation to *fizzle out*, already.

It helped *nothing* that Phae was the absolute worst about the relationship that wasn't there. His annoying tendency to make blatant statements in relation to it stirred up homicidal tendencies Sam rarely knew he had even as he'd sputter and stumble over his words. In all truth, sometimes he was grateful for the sheer oblivion Cade wore as a shield, because it saved Phae's life often enough. It helped maintain their friendship and partnership, without which Sam would be adrift. Yet without Cade's recognition, the attraction or crush or *whatever* it was just lingered in the background, unacknowledged and ignored. And it had been lingering in the space between them for close to a decade, now! It alternately tortured and relieved Sam that for such a smart man Cade could be horrifically dense when the mood struck.

When Sam was honest with himself, he could admit that there was a long list of things that had drawn him to Cade. Intelligence had definitely been high on the list; his ability to ignore anything that had anything to do with other's emotions had not been. And of course Sam found him beautiful, despite or maybe because Cade’s face would always be more striking than handsome. His nose was too sharp in spite of the fact it had been broken more than once in brawls with his brothers Key and Song, his lips were almost too full for his face (though Sam had probably written an ode to the way the hoop that pierced his lower lip caressed and enhanced its fullness), but he had lovely eyes in an unusual shade of dark green with tiny flecks of amber to capture one’s interest. Cade kept his chestnut hair short but a little overgrown: short enough one could count each of the four piercings in each ear and see the hints of the barbell that pierced his eyebrow but still plenty long to knot one's fingers in, and Sam’s fingers often itched to do just that.

Yet of all the things that moved him when it came to Cade, his voice was the trump card. When Cade surrendered himself to the music, all of himself, and let it wash away all of the bad and become everything good... ah, Sam could not recall anything more beautiful, but then he was willing to admit his bias. And when the music called for it and Cade let his voice drop to that deep, resonant and husky purr, nothing swimming around in Sam's always-active mind could survive. All he could think of was bittersweet harsh desperate kisses and sweat clinging sweetly to flushed hot skin, and at that point straightening out his tangled thoughts or doing anything more than letting that voice wash over him like a tidal wave was beyond his control. Molten warmth would dance through him, shimmying in his belly like hyperactive fireflies and honing in on some particularly interested parts of his anatomy, and leaving Sam trying desperately to exercise some control over his unruly body. There was no question that he adored Cade's voice, but he certainly abhorred some of the situations it left him in.

A heavy sigh burst past Sam’s lips, starting the large cat who had completely nested in his lap. She gave his thighs a taste of her claws to demonstrate her unease.

Sam was going to have to let go of the stupid torch he was carrying for Cadence Alexander. He was the only one who cared about it, really, and all it was doing was making him miserable. Cade was one of his best friends. Why did he think he needed more than that? It was a certainly more than most anyone else got from him.

Of course, his sister Esther had been encouraging him to either let it go or chase after him for more than five years. Esther had been right all along, but it was still difficult for Sam to make that call. Giving it up meant he had wasted a good ten years of his life being unable to love anyone else with all of his heart. As for chasing after him... well, Sam still wasn't willing to risk what they had for what they *could* have and even if he was, he'd still have the devil of a time convincing Cade to do the same. Let alone, he knew who would be left heartbroken and holding the bag in the end: Sam. There were risks he was willing to take, but not when he was sure of the outcome. *That* wasn't a risk: it was a self-fulfilling prophecy of heartbreak.

Now it was time to unbreak his own heart and let it all go. If only Sam knew how. Then again, if he knew how, he would have done it *years* ago.

"It's time to let go, isn't it."

He addressed the statement to open air, but Misaki *merowed* in agreement. It was sad that even his *cat* knew it was time to move on before he got hurt. Well, hurt even more. God knew every day was pain since he worked with the man he was hung up on.

“Let’s go again,” Cade intoned, his face blank as he stared at the sheet music for their newest song. Something felt... off about it, and damned if he couldn't seem to put his finger on what *exactly* was wrong with it, but it definitely needed *something*. Maybe it just needed less attitude or less faux seduction or a little more work... Ah, hell, maybe it just needed scrapped. If he was lucky, Sammy or Lynne would know exactly what the issue was.

“Are you *trying* to kill me?” Seth Williams grumbled. Seth may have been with them since the very beginning, but that didn’t keep Cade from wanting to throttle the lanky bassist on occasion. The cranky brunette had a way of getting under Cade's skin without even trying and Cade had learned to ignore it as best he could. The urge to choke the man still snuck up on him sometimes, though.

Sammy was silent, bent low over his keyboard and studying the sheet music like he too sensed something was off about the piece. He looked so pensive and studious, which was not abnormal at all. The only thing Sam was more serious about than his music was his friends, and he was even more serious because it was *their* music. And Sammy Dean *never* complained about the demands and hard work, not even when they had been barely more than kids, and it didn't look like he was going to start now.

Cade chose, in light of Sammy’s quiet acquiescence, to treat Seth’s grumblings as if they were rhetorical. He held up his hand for a brief four count, and Lynne took the signal to pound out the first few beats. As the song swelled around them, Cade crooned out the first lines as if he were singing to a lover. And finally, he felt the music within him and about him, as though his very heartbeat were a part of it, like he was one of the most essential parts of the music. Perhaps, he mused, his foul mood had more to do with the dissonance he felt than he'd first suspected.

Seth was always the first to complain when they were learning and feeling out a new piece. Cade imagined it had a lot to do with the fact the bassist did not participate in composition. Whether he felt he had little talent in that area or simple chose not to intrude on the process was nt something Cade was privy to, but his issues with new songs likely stemmed from the fact he had no stepping stones alone the way, no premature stages to build on, no instinct or familiarity. The rest of the group –Cade, Sammy, and Lynne-- worked together side by side to bring their music together, shaping the pieces like a sculpture with clay. O Cade's amazement, though he brought the lyrics to the table most frequently, it always seemed that Sammy go the first and best handle on a piece.

However, that was a good thing: Sammy always helped the others (but most especially Cade) get and keep the song together. His whiskey-warm baritone filled the songs with depth, character, interest, as he smoothed the songs out and made them more reachable and attainable to Cade. Sammy Dean often made the songs better than Cade ever dreamed possible. He wondered if he'd ever taken the time to thank him for that.

The song ended perfectly and Cade gave a silent nod. Everyone disembarked from their practice room to find a bit of respite, whether in food or drink or conversation. Well, everyone except Sammy who left his keyboard only to approach Cade.

“Are you alright, Cade? You seem a bit tightly wound today,” h noted, his voice silken with his Southern drawl. “And not only because ‘Bet Me’ wasn’t quite right yet.”

Cade heaved a sigh. May the heavens preserve him and save him from his best friends –especially Sammy, since he seemed to know him a little too well after all this time. of course, Phae would have called him out on it as well –he was just currently too busy with his own music to hang out through their practice. “Sammy Dean, why do you have to be so perceptive?”

“Because I care. So talk to me.”

Cade shifted his weight from left to right and back again. “I’m just starting to wonder if this is all really worth it.”

“What, the lights and the glamour and the screaming fans?” Sammy chuckled softly. “Or is it the music?”

He huffed a breath. “Oh, please. You, Phae, and I can get high on music *anywhere*. And sure, the stage has its own high, but there’s so damn much…”

“Pressure,” Sammy finished softly. “I was wondering. How is Phae coping, anyway? I didn’t get a chance to talk to him last time.”

“Phae is still our Phae, just a little more unnaturally quiet and holding too damn much fear inside him.” Cade sighed again. Raphael Bluefeather was the third part of their trio, the third musketeer as it were. While Cade and Sam chosen to pursue music together, Phae had chosen to go it alone. And while he loved Phae like a brother, he still didn’t quite understand that choice: it seemed at odds with Phae himself.

“But not buckling yet, thank God. There’s something else eating at you,” Sammy prodded gently, bringing the conversation full circle.

“It’s… I’m getting a little pressure to be cliché front-man front-page news.” If anyone knew how much that admission cost him, it was Sam. Cade always tried to shoulder the burden of responsibility for the band –after all, he was one of the founding members and he was the one who had pushed them to pursue a record deal and make an album. Sam and the others would probably have been just as happy to continue as a barroom act. Still, Sammy had a way of getting him to talk when he didn’t want to. It which have been a bad thing if Sammy didn’t also give excellent advice.

“As in, hot actresses for every day of the week?” he asked, eyebrows raised. “I get that any publicity can be good publicity, but why? Demon Merchant is doing great! Our last single charted high and fast, and we won awards for ‘Sell Your Soul’.”

“The label thinks we are too squeaky-clean, I guess? For a band named Demon Merchant, we don’t have any real scandals to our name and they aren’t sure that’s a good thing.”

“So we don’t abuse our fame or our fans. That’s a *bad* thing now?” Sammy asked, stunned.

Cade could have kissed him then and there for his response; he’d asked the same exact question himself when they’d brought it up. “I know, right? Why can’t music be the way it used to be?”

“Did you happen to tell them that you wouldn’t chase *actresses*, anyway?”

He chuckled. “Ah, Sammy, you know I could charm the panties off of any actress I chose.”

“Not that you’d have any interest. Cade, we’ve known each other since college. Don’t pretend you could fake straight --or bi. You were out before it was fashionable. Hell, you were so out I could tell before I sat down with you two weirdoes that first day.”

Sam stuck his tongue out at him and Cade had a sudden and bizarre urge to suckle the tip. *What in the hell!?!?* he wondered, completely shocked by his own train of thought, but shoving it aside for pondering later. Much, *much* later.

“No offense, but you couldn't make them believe it, Cade. And you shouldn't have to hurt yourself that way trying because we don’t have a scandal to our name.”

He hadn't really thought about it that way. He had always simply been himself, no stigma, not parents disowning him, no hatred from his siblings. There had never been a need to hide that part of himself –not that he was a stereotypical gay male complete with the limp flippy hand and a gaggle of fag-hags. Cade was what he was, he liked what he liked, and he’d never much cared what people had to say on the matter. Sammy Dean had one hell of a point: even if he *wanted* to chase skirts, he’d have a hell of a time convincing the world that an out-and-proud gay man suddenly decided to see what he’d been missing.

Still, even though the idea was a gonner, he still had enough to tease Sam with. “Well, *you* could be a skirt-chaser,” he teased back, knowing without a doubt that Sammy would blush.

Never one to disappoint, Sam's face was vibrantly lit with the blush cresting his cheeks. Cade was amazed at how adorable he found it. “You *know* I’m not wired for that sort of thing. I have a tendency to put my heart on the line first, then look for deceptions. Besides, I have about as much interest in ladies as you do: they're lovely creatures, great to talk to, but *entirely* not my cup of tea.”

Sam did his best to keep his cool on the matter. After all, it had been one of the skills he had cultivated as a young man. Still, the notion that *he* chase skirts would be laughable –if it hadn’t been Cade who suggested it, anyway.

*Shit. You smother out your massive crush on the man and he suddenly gets the notion you're straight. Good Lord, I can't win!* And he *knew* Cade was teasing, *knew* that his friend knew exactly what gender Sam liked, but the teasing hit all sorts of bad spots for him at the moment.

There has been many reasons Sam had left Georgia as fast as he could, and most of them had a lot to do with traditional Southern values. He’d always liked men, but he realized that it wasn’t "normal" or well accepted by the people around him. So he’d made the decision to hide behind a lovely girl. Nevermind that he'd also had a boyfriend –things like that were done in secret dark places and never spoken of.

The largest part of his undoing had been in his careful disguising of himself. He hadn't been able to take the person he'd wanted to his senior prom, not if he wanted to avoid a lynching and being disowned by his God-fearing parents (not necessarily in that order). So he’d taken that perfect girlfriend. Only apparently, he had even *her* fooled, which had led to her attempt of seduction and Sam backpedaling so fast he trampled their relationship.

In that time of his life, he’d let his fear cripple him and keep him from living –and loving– as he needed to. And Sam refused to go back to that half-life: he’d die first.

When he had first left home, he hadn’t been sure he’d be able to open up to anyone, but he had found a pair of kindred spirits in Raphael Bluefeather and Cadence Alexander.

In certain ways, Phae and Sam were much too alike, and that included their experiences with their sexualities. But Cade… In some ways, Cade was the one who taught Sam how to live his life and be whoever he was without any shame and without caring what anyone else might think on the matter. He was the person who had been able to give him the space to grow and come into the sort of person he wanted to be, *needed* to be. Cade and Phae had never judged Sam when he was nervously trying to come into his own in a world where he didn’t have to hide anymore. Yet it had been Cade that Sam could actually *talk* to about things, whether important or trivial.

He wondered what that really meant, in terms of his attraction to Cade, as well. Was he drawn to the other man simply because Cade was there for him when he needed someone to let him grow? Phae had always been there to *help* him grow, but Cade had helped *instigate* his need to do so. Sam had envied how comfortable the other man seemed in his own skin and how supportive his family was of him being who he was. It had made him strive to bring out the things he loved most about himself, the things he wanted to be most defined by. It had also made him cling all the tighter to the family he still had, his sister and her family and his friends, as well as the rest of the Alexanders, since Cade's parents had all but adopted him.

He hadn't at all expected to be so well accepted after he brought forward all of the parts of himself he had hidden. That didn't mean he hadn't thought those parts appealing, just that his own parents had been unable to accept him as he was. Parents were supposed to love their children no matter what, not disown them when they finally gathered the courage to admit the truth about themselves. When Margot and John Alexander had embraced him like the sixth child they hadn't had, however, he had decided the problem lie in his parents, not with him. Anyone who would choose their "moral high ground" over both of their children were just screwed up.

Cade startled him out of his musings by surprising him, something he wasn't sure his friend could still do after all these years. “Shit… Sammy Dean, I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m well aware that there are hundreds of men who thank the deities of their choice every day for the fact you like men. I’m just… dealing with this stupid thing still.”

Sam waved his hand in dismissal. “I know; I’m just hearing with my feelings again.”

Cade sighed. “Stop that, Sam. I hurt you by not thinking about what was coming out of my mouth. I didn’t mean to and I am sorry.”

His best friends abhorred Sam's dismissal his own emotions –even Cade, who had no idea the extent of the problems in his life that had sprung from it. So Sam did what he did best: use another tactic and dismiss it all the same. “Well, maybe I should give ladies a shot. I've *got* to have better luck there than I’ve had with men in the last six months. Hell, in the past six *years*.”

Cade snorted at that. “Oh, please. You hate high drama as an art form, and any woman willing to step into this life would be a true artist.”

“Oh, I can deal with drama if they put out and knew when to close their damn mouths,” Sam volleyed back.

His friend winced. “What was that guy’s name, anyway?”

“Tyson.”

“He was an ass. An ass who didn’t know what he had in you.”

“Yeah, well, he also didn’t wanna put out. And I can’t even look for a partner without remembering and it’s starting to piss me off,” Sam groused.

“…Hold on a minute," Cade said, holding up a hand. Sam could practically see him going over the conversation and adding things up. "*Please* tell me you haven’t been celibate because of that asshole. I mean, a month or two, I see, but *six*?!”

And *that* was where his avoidance tactics came back to bite him on the ass. There were a few things about his personal life he liked to keep to himself, but there didn’t seem to be any way around it now. “I haven’t had a partner in over a year, Cade,” he confessed, praying ardently that the powers that be would have mercy and allow the earth to swallow him whole.

“And I thought my dry spells were bad,” Cade mused, apparently stunned by the revelation. “That’s a hell of a long time, Sammy Dean. One *hell* of a long time.”

And of course Sam shrugged, like it was all no big deal –even though it *was* a big deal. He really just didn’t want to talk about it, especially not with the man he had desired but been unable to touch all of that time. Pretty much the entire time they had been friends, if Sam were honest with himself, which he preferred not to be at the moment. Talking about being without sex for a year was fine. Talking about it with *Cade*? That way led to straight-jackets and sedation.

“Oh, don’t act like it’s nothing, Sammy. I go without for a week and can barely think straight, but you… You’re unbelievable,” Cade muttered. “That practically makes you a virgin again!”

*That* particular comment earned Cade a well-deserved single-finger salute, which only made him laugh.

Sam cleared his throat. “All I was *trying* to say, Cade, was that if you want a fuckin’ scandal you could take a lover that suits *your* preferences and fuck them all if they don’t like it,” Sam groused, ready for Cade to just *drop it* already. It wasn’t even that he *wanted* the man he had been covertly desiring to take a lover: he just *really* didn’t want to talk about sex with him. So let him stew on that one for a few moments. Sam figured that talking about sex with Cade would also lead to a nice white coat that made him hug himself --oh, and possibly being too turned on to breathe.

Cade blinked owlishly for a few moments. “Sammy Dean,” he said finally, “has anyone ever told you that you are a genius?”

Sam would have laughed, had Cade not leaned in and pressed a hard brief kiss to his open mouth. But Cade did just that, then promptly sauntered off.

It helped Sam's libido not one iota that Cade's ass looked *lucious* in his well-worn jeans.

“Well, hell,” he muttered, touching his lips absently as he wondered if Cade’s new notion of physical affection in their friendship was going to leave him with a permanent erection or just kill him outright.

If anyone –let alone *Sammy–* had asked Cade why he'd kissed Sam, he'd be hard-pressed to give a decent answer. He wanted to blame Sammy's casual genius and impeccable ability to translate anything into something that Cade could understand, embrace, and adore. However that seemed too much like blaming the victim for his tastes. Yet even more troubling to Cade than his own lack of impulse control was the new thing that had shown up the moment their lips touched: a tender flickering spark of desire.

Sure, Cade had *known* that Sammy was an attractive man, but he had not *aware* of it. He'd known it in the same way that he knew that a painting on the wall of a museum was lovely. It existed there, untouchable, pleasing to the eye and beautiful, but yet not something he recognized as sublime in the very heart of his soul. One kiss seemed to make all the difference in his perception, however, and he was suddenly much more aware of Sam's masculine beauty than he had ever been since the day they'd met.

Sammy Dean Martin was a slender, slight man with chin-length waves of chocolate brown hair that he had a bashful tendency to hide his face and his expressive hazel eyes behind. When the band practiced, that luxurious hair was pulled back in a stumpy que but the strands would often escape, summoning an itch in Cade's fingers to tuck the stray hair behind Sam's ear (which, Cade supposed, should probably have been a hint that he was attracted to his friend). Of course, the little stud that lurked above the right corner of Sam’s mouth was also producing some salacious interest, now that he thought about it. And there was something entrancing about watching Sam's hands dance on a keyboard; he'd look up with a wide smile that was so much more open and pure than any of his smiles were.

Ink on Sam's ivory skin was always stark and lovely, even years old tattoos, and Cade had often found himself captivated by the two solid black characters on the other man's wrists. He'd been there the day Sam got them, two oddly similar traditional Chinese characters to signify "courage" and "truth". Phae had been the one to question the choice and Sam had simply said, "Meeting the two of you gave me the courage I needed to be true to myself --to *become* my true self."

It was by some strange stroke of fate that they found each other the first day of the semester: severe Raphael, laid-back Cadence, and quiet Samuel. He didn’t recall who had spoken first, if it had been Phae or himself. Who had spoken and what they had said was immaterial anyway: what really mattered was that it had sparked an instant electric friendship between the three of them that had grown and survived far past that course.

They had been thick as thieves since day one, and it was rare that one would ever be found apart from the others. They had been bound up tightly by their love of music and their *need* for it. They had spent so little time getting to know each other before their souls chose for them and brought them together that they had often found themselves finding out important things... well, a little later. It was more than a month before Sammy had really talked about his family (or the family he had left). It had been at least another month after that before they found out that they had a little more than music in common: they also happened to have a common sexuality.

Cade had been the one to suggest jokingly that they consider a threesome.

Phae had appeared absolutely horrified by the notion. “No way in *hell*. You guys are like the brothers I never knew I wanted.” He'd cocked a wry brow at Cade. “But, you know, if you and Sammy wanna go at it, it’s your lives.”

Sam had invented new shades of red to blush and stuttered unintelligibly until Phae pressed a quieting finger to his lips.

“Come now, Sammy; you know that I wouldn’t throw you to the sharks.” Phae’s voice had been a low, soothing murmur. “Besides, Cade would have to improve his dating habits before he could even be allowed a chance.” And Phae’s dark almond-slanted eyes had been harsh and piercing as he gazed at Cade, like he could see hollow emptiness where Cade's soul should have been and he was determined that it *never* touch Sam.

Even in that moment, Cade had known that even if the rest of it was smoke, Phae would never allow him a chance with Sammy unless he cleaned up his act.

Heaven knew, Cade had barely been scratching the surface of his love-‘em-and-leave-‘em reputation in college. If he turned a serious eye toward a relationship with Sam now (and it would have to be a relationship; Sam really wasn't wired to do the casual sex thing), Phae would probably cut off the parts of Cade’s anatomy he appeared to be thinking with, purée them, and make him drink them down. And that was the *nicest* likely consequence he'd face.

Even early on, Phae had been very protective of Sam. From what they had shared later, it might have had something to do with their shared pain. Cade thought it was also more than likely connected to the strange symbiotic relationship the trio shared. Sam confided in Phae, Phae told Cade his issues, and Cade would talk with Sammy about his problems, after much probing. There were things about Cade only Sammy knew and it was likely Phae knew things about Sam that no one else was privy to. Surprisingly, that thought stirred longing and bitterness and something almost like jealousy low in Cade's stomach for some reason, and Cade didn’t like it one bit.

Sighing, he pushed aside the memories and focused on Sammy's advice.

*"You could take a lover that suits* your *preferences and fuck them all if they don’t like it."*

The words seemed to dance in his mind, as though declaring themselves the perfect solution to the problem. Sam's advice always showed merit. Most of the time, Cade relied on the hints of attraction to select his partners, but that often fizzled out almost as quickly as it began. So for the first time in years, he thought it through: what attributes would suit him best in a partner? How would he describe his ideal lover?

Well of course he'd have to love music. Cade literally lived it, loved it, breathed it. And while he loved his family and his bandmates were family, as well, there was something special about how he related to Phae and Sam. It was deeper than friendship but not quite 'in love'. No matter who he was with, he'd never give up that relationship, so it would have to be something that was understood between them that the friendship would never be a threat. He'd have to be... well, he'd have to be beautiful to Cade –not just on the outside, but on the inside where it mattered most. And the heavens knew, his life was a jumbled mess from time to time; his ideal lover would have to be able to make sense of the chaos and help Cade through it.

It was odd how the notion stuck in his mind, even hours after it was posed. His list grew some, but every single new attribute he added pointed to one man: Samuel Dean Martin. If he had to follow the label's time-frame for their scandal and take a lover that fit his preferences, the only one he knew that would suit was Sam. He hardly thought the other man had meant it that way, but the more he went over it, the truer it seemed to grow and the more he could almost convince himself that Sammy was the perfect man for him.

*Oh, you fool,* he chastised himself. *You just* think *you want things your should never have.*

First and foremost, Cade knew that a man like Sammy deserved more happiness than he could fathom and a happily ever after to beat all others. Just as he knew that, he knew he had no business with a man like Sam, not when he couldn't give his all or even all of his heart. Ultimately, he had no business with a man like Sam because all he would do was hurt him.

Still, when Cade finally went to sleep, he dreamed of learning the taste of Sam's skin and the shape of his lips and the texture of his hair and the rhythm of his heart-beat. And in his dreams, they were *perfect* for each other.

Try as he might, Sam could not forget that stupid kiss. Cursing his focused nature wasn't particularly helping, per say, though the occasional muttered curse was surprisingly therapeutic. No, when his brain latched onto something, it sunk its teeth into in like a pit bull and pulled back like a tug-of-war champion. It was helpful when it came to a rough part in a song, because his brain played back the broken record until it was mended. It wasn't so helpful in this situation, though, because it wasn't something he could correct like he could correct lyrics.

Sam understood enough about himself to classify himself as an overthinker. Little things would happen to him and he'd spend days or even weeks twisting scenarios, changing hows and whys and reactions and reasons in his head until he either conceded defeat or forced it out of his brain. Being as he wasn't much for defeat, admitting it was a last resort. That left distraction.

No matter how hard he tried, pushed, and cajoled, however it would not fade away. First he'd tried his favorite films, tv shows, and books but the fantasy that usually helped him escape from reality had not even succeeded in holding his attention. Next he'd tried his music, his instruments: practicing the new pieces they were still learning, running through their old songs, songs he knew by heart; and even trying to compose. Yet all that seemed to come out of every instrument, from his keyboard to his guitars to his ukulele, was a rich sultry sound he had difficulty stringing words to.

He'd tried napping, eating, singing... any thing and every thing that usually could possess his mind or at least his body, but nothing seemed to do any good. And it wasn't like he'd tried once and then given up: it had been a solid *four days* of nothing but trying to distract his mind and emotions from a simple physical moment, the mere brushing of lips, that could not possibly be possessing Cade the way it was possessing Sam.

Finally on day five, he called Phae and invited him over, because obviously there was something going on deep within him, some sort of battle between his heart and his head. And Sam knew he was in trouble, so he called for his close friend and confident.

They were stretched out on the sofa, Sam's feet by Phae's head and his feet dangling over the end of the couch by Sam's head. Together, they were ignoring whatever program BBC America happened to be airing. Judging by the time, he imagined it was one of the Star Trek series, but he wasn't paying much attention beyond the tight fit of their leotards –he couldn't bring his mind to focus on much beyond the colors.

Propping his shoulders on the arm of the couch, he looked over at Phae, gazing thoughtfully upon the exotic tilt to warm dark eyes and prominent nose and full lips and thick heavy dark hair that were so very familiar. Phae stared back, expectant and supportive.

It was a hell of a time to realize he couldn't bring himself to talk about the kiss. Not with Phae. It would be hard to explain the way it was tearing him apart, standing so close to Cade, being his support, and having a heart full of nothing but him while he flitted from lover to lover. It would be even more difficult because Phae was their best friend, who had an obnoxious tendency to meddle and shove them together. He feared if he told Phae of the kiss, he and Cade would be married by morning with no choice in the matter and way too damn much left unspoken between them.

So Sam grasped for something sufficient to tell Phae, something that would lead the conversation and prevent Phae from delving into the heart of the matter. Sam opened his mouth and blurted, "I kind of told Cade to take a lover."

Phae's brows seemed to graze his hairline. "*You* did?"

The question was meant to lead. Now all he had to do was edit out the label's role –and the kiss that occurred later. "We, uh... we somehow got on the topic of how long it's been since I had sex."

"Ah, good Lord, it's been around fourteen months for you, right? Heh, and Cade gets so damn antsy he can't sit still after a *week*." A knowing smirk stretched across Phae's generous lips and danced in his eyes.

"Right on both counts. So he sort of suggested that practically made me a virgin again. Since I didn't want to talk about it –and since I don't think straight jackets are the fashion statement I want to make this year– I candidly suggested that perhaps he should take a lover."

"You didn't want to talk about your sex life with Cade?" Phae asked, his tone lilting and teasing.

"No: I don't particularly want to talk about the *lack* of sex in my life with that sexy ass," Sam grumbled. "It would either lead to a restraining order or me in restraints."

A flash of white teeth lit up Phae's face. "I don't know: Cade might surprise you."

"By what, refusing to press charges when I molest him?" Sam asked, arching a single eyebrow.

"Or *enjoying* it when you molest him. Or participating."

Sam's jaw worked for a moment at empty air, as he found himself wondering how Phae could *still* manage to shock him with the things he said. "I-I doubt it will come to that," he finally sputtered out. "I've managed to keep my hands to myself this long."

"So much the pity, or you might already have him in your bed," Phae intoned.

"*You're* the one who warned him off in the beginning! I could have fucked him and gotten him out of my system, already!"

Phae smirked at him. "Ah, be honest, Sammy, at least with yourself: you have *always* wanted more that a roll in the hay from him."

"Fuck, Phae: at this point, a roll in the hay would at least Band-Aid the problem instead of leaving me swimming in a god-damn *ocean* of pent-up lust."

His friend's expression turned tender. "Sam, you aren't built that way. Some people can be satisfied by sex for sex's sake: you are not one of them. And even you can't train yourself to be satisfied with that, despite the variety of things you've trained in and out of yourself. If you are physically close, you long for and need emotional closeness with them as well." Phae stroked Sam's knee almost absently, and Sam vaguely wondered which one of them he was actually trying to comfort.

"I'm not saying I'm built that way; I'm saying if he fucked me and left, at least I'd have some sort of damn *closure* rather than a life of dangling myself from a hook and hungering for what little attention he gives me." Sam sat up, wanting to fill his arms with Phae's strong form and bury his face in Phae's neck. "I'm so damn tired of living off the scraps of affection that fall from his table, Phae."

Well, he'd taken the indirect route by omitting certain truths, but they'd ended up in the same destination all the same. That stupid kiss was stirring things inside him, things he had buried deep when he realized he might never have the man he'd longed after for ages.

Phae sat up and repositioned so that he could wrap his arms tightly around Sam, holding him close to his heart. He couldn't help but respond in kind, wrapping his own arms around Phae's broad shoulders and hiding his face against his strong chest.

"Oh, Sam," he breathed. "You just don't talk about this, about how much this hurts you. I knew, knew that it hurt you but I had no *idea* how much."

Sam could feel Phae's words rumble through his chest, and he wanted to bury his face even deeper. He resisted the urge barely, choosing instead to let himself be heard on a topic he often refused to speak of. "Phae, it hurts more and more each day. I'm terrified of the day the dam breaks and I begin to hate him for it all."

Phae just held on to him tighter. "We won't let that day ever come, Sammy. We won't."

Cade knew he'd been rather preoccupied with all the things going on between the label and the band, yet somehow, Sam managed to slip into his mind just as often. It was a strangely amusing sort of paradox, to say the least. It was especially amusing since his bandmates would be the first to say that Cade had an almost alarming ability to maintain complete oblivion through impossible situations. Sam's sister Esther told him it was an "illegal level of oblivion" more than once, and there were others inclined to agree with her.

He hadn't been able to keep from returning over and over again to Sammy's suggested solution. Hell, Sam was brilliant and gave terrific advice. For some reason Cade was certain a real, *proper* answer to the dilemma lurked somewhere in his advice. Yet finding a lover who would suit the preferences he'd notes within the deadline, as so lovingly given by their gracious label... well, to call it difficult would be a *colossal* understatement.

Cade wandered the studio complex aimlessly, trying to just *think* because there was something so obvious that he was completely missing. His feet took him to his favorite places on autopilot: the soundproofed studio where he met up with Lynne and Sam to perfect a piece they were composing, the soundstage where the band bled and sweat and played until a song was truly the best effort they could make, the small alcove where he would hole up with the piano to brainstorm or just hide away from the things he didn't quite know how to deal with yet. That was why it was so strange that he ended up in a place that was much more often frequented by Sammy than anyone else: the small hall with large picture windows boasting an exquisite view of the city skyline.

It was there that he happened upon both of his songwriting partners, Lynne standing to one side of the hall while Sammy gazed out at the night sky. He almost wondered if Sam even knew she was there. He was about to speak up, step further into the room, when Sam turned with a heavy exhale and looked at Lynne.

"What's bothering you so, Lynne?" He inquired, voice musical with concern and heavy measures of his Southern upbringing.

She leaned casually against the pillar, but the way her fingers snagged and tugged the lower of her shirt was a dead giveaway that she was nowhere near as relaxed as she wished to appear. "I love Cade. You know I do, Sam, or I would have killed him by now," she added sardonically, huffing out a breath and tossing her straight ruby hair over her shoulder absently.

Sam incline his head slowly, as though to acknowledge her words and encourage her to continue with gentle supportive silence. Cade recognized the maneuver: it was often how Sam wheedled things out of him.

Lynne looked up, her eyes tracing Sammy’s face before falling to the floor as she asked her question. “Does it ever bother you –the way he is impossible unaware of somethings and hyperaware of others?"

Sam laughed outright. "Lynnette, I've known him since college. If that bothered me, he wouldn't still be one of my very best friends."

"He's so marvelously attentive to the details of our business, our music, but... you've been out of sorts for about a week and he hasn't even noticed it. And don't think he's noticed that he's the only one who calls you 'Sammy', like you're a small child. Doesn't that *bother* you?"

The bottom dropped out of Cade’s stomach. He was pretty sure he heard it sizzle on it’s way to Hell, in point of fact. Maybe he was obtuse, because he'd never even considered that 'Sammy' would be a boy's name as opposed to a man's name. Sure, it was more than a mite thoughtless of him, but then again, he relied on Sam to *tell him* if he was out of line. Usually, even if he didn't open his mouth his expressions were easy enough to read if he were paying attention.

Sam's deep chuckle breathed warmth into him again. “Lynne, I was born and bred in the South. Do you really think he’s the only person out there who still calls me 'Sammy'?”

Hands on her hips and a serious tilt to her full lips, she pressed a little more, having obviously learned from Phae's multitude of visits during here tenure in Demon Merchant. “That’s not an answer, love: that’s just avoiding the question. *Does* it bother you?”

Sam's sigh was so heavy Cade could feel it settling around his shoulders, but his next words lifted the weight and then some. “No, alright? If it were anyone else, it might bug the hell out of me, but it's Cade..." He broke off there, thrusting restless fingers through his loose hair, leaving him looking deliciously tousled. "When Cade calls me 'Sammy' or 'Sammy Dean', all I hear is pure affection –no condescension or sensor. Trust me, Lynne, that makes all the difference in the world.” Then he laughed, and Cade waned to bottle the sound, just to have something so full of joy and mirth and such a lovely part of *Sam*. "Besides, Phae calls me 'Sammy', too –mostly when it's something I need to pay attention to."

Lynne's grin was sheepish. "I guess I forgot about Phae?"

There was that laugh again. "How did you forget six and a half feet of solid man, long straight hair, and feline eyes that can broil you in heat of frost you into the next ice age? His fans are enslaved by that rugged shape as much as they are by that scuffed leather voice." Then he smiled, a beam of genuine emotion and warmth radiating from him.

She laughed. "You sound like a proud parent."

He shook his head. "Nope, his parents are much more proud than that, but I definitely brag like a loving brother." He nudged into her space, bumping her hip gently with his own. "Are we good, hon?" He asked, voice soft.

She shrugged. "Of course we are, Samuel. Why wouldn't we be?"

Sam just smiled and shook his head, his expression tender as he wrapped his arms around her and tugged her to him. "No reason, Lynne. No reason at all."

Cade backed out of the room as quietly as he could, heart thundering in his chest as his mind raced over the exchange he had witnessed. Sammy had once told him that subtext was everything, but watching then had left him feeling like he was improvising a scene with no notion of what the script contained. Safely tucked away in his quiet alcove and bent over the scuffed upright piano, Cade left his fingers wander across the monochromatic keys while his mind wandered much further than that,

Fr as long as he'd known Sammy, Cade knew here would be fathomless depths f the other man he would never be able to fully understand. Sam was laced tightly into a need to keep things the ay they were. Phae had once intimated that it was a deeper need that drove it, one created by the hurts he'd endured. Cade figured it actually had a lot to do with a need for control. He wondered how different their lives would be if Sam could give up his need to control whatever he could.

He wondered if Sam would take a chance on *them* if he didn't feel like his relationships were something he had to control.

And then he wondered why he was so worried about having a chance when he couldn't even bring himself to *approach* the other man about the attraction simmering like a storm in his veins.

Cade shook his head, trying to clear it. What in the hell was he *doing*? He had a deadline to meet and a solution to find or they could kiss their careers and everything else they had worked so hard for goodbye. He could chase Sam if he wanted to *after* he had saved Demon Merchant.

Or maybe this attraction would fizzle out before it was all taken care of. If it did, it would probably be for the best for them both. Cade wasn't exactly counting on it, because he didn't just believe in Murphy's Law: he *lived* it. He had a feeling deep in his bones that this was going to turn into something a little stronger than *attraction*, and that terrified him.

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Raphael waited until Sammy had retreated before he turned his attention to Cade. It was several minutes before either man spoke.

“What is it?” Cade asked, sick of getting the silent treatment from his best friend.

In return, Raphael eyed him slowly. “What, exactly, have you done to Sammy Dean?”

Cade stared back, barely even comprehending the question. “What do you mean?”

Raphael shrugged. “Sam usually greets me and asks how I’m doing, which he failed to do today. He also tends to strike up at least one conversation with you while I’m here. He’s done neither; in fact, I’d almost say he was *avoiding* you, Cade. Sammy’s not the type to just do that, so what did you do?”

Cade felt every bit of warmth slowly drain from his face as the weight of the words sunk into him. He’d only noticed it in passing, had felt Sammy’s withdrawal, but had chalked it up to stress and songwriting and trying to put together their new album whole cloth. Never mind that Sammy had never pulled away in the past: this album had more riding on it and more in stress, besides. But for the first time, Cade allowed himself to take it in as honestly as he could, and he knew that it had to have another reason –one that had happened around a week ago, judging by the amount of time his friend had chosen to even be *near* him in that last week. He wasn’t even sure what he felt, just sad and worried and a little betrayed plus a dash of bonus emotions to keep things interesting as it fluttered in his stomach. He couldn’t believe that Sammy hadn’t talked to him about it at least. Instead, he’d chosen to avoid it.

“I… I don’t even know, Phael,” Cade murmured softly, suddenly finding something quite interesting in the pattern of tiles on the floor.

Raphael frowned, reaching out and cupping Cade’s shoulder with his larger hand. “That’s odd. Sam is *quiet*, not non-confrontational. He makes himself clear when something bothers him, because he knows it can’t be corrected otherwise.”

Cade did his best to tamp down all of the emotions swirling through him and just *think* for once. What in the seven hells could he have done to Sammy that he wouldn’t even feel comfortable *confronting* him about it?

When he finally thought of a possibility, it hurried out his mouth to make itself known to Raphael, as well. “I kissed him, Phae. Didn’t even think about it at all, I just kissed him right on the mouth for being brilliant and knowing just the right things to say.

Raphael blinked at him. “Why should that upset him? Samuel has had an obvious thing for you for *years*, Cade.”

“He… *what*?” Cade sputtered, suddenly not sure he had any idea how to handle something this screwed up.

“Oh. *That’s* why Sam is upset,” Raphael murmured. “Shit, Cade: I thought you knew. Sam has never been subtle about it. Well, now we know what has him upset, I guess. Now what are you going to do to make it right, Cade?”

Raphael's grin nearly split his swarthy face with a flash of perfect white teeth. "It's about damned time, man. It only took you most of a decade."

"Excuse me?" Cade inquired through clenched teeth. "I was given the impression that you didn't want me anywhere near him as more than a friend."

Phae sighed, forcing his fingers through his thick inky hair. "Cade, I didn't want you to fuck him and leave. You and Sammy... well, everyone but you could always see that you two would be perfect for each other. You just needed time to see him as something different from your... conquests."

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Cade had frankly developed a habit of not even bothering to knock before entering Sammy’s apartment. Sammy was a deep thinker and felt things on the same level, but he also tended to spend quite a bit of time lost in his head. Which was only a bad thing when one got soaked on the way over to his apartment with take out and he didn’t hear the knock –or the buzzer. Even as private as Sammy was, he had given Cade a key after one too many incidents of not hearing him at the door. So Cade had made frequent practice of invading the younger man’s space and sneaking up on him. As he closed the door behind himself, Cade wondered if Sammy was even home. After all, it had been a full week of his avoidances and though only recently drawing the necessary conclusions about the matter, Cade intended to put a stop to it.

Sammy was his dear friend, one Cade was almost afraid to lose, so it seemed best to clear the air and see where each other stood.

When Cade began to hear strange noises coming from deeper in the apartment, he paused. The rush of heavy breaths and soft noises were out of place in Sammy’s sanctuary, but then, he could be having a nightmare. Sam was rather close-mouthed about why he had left Georgia, but he tended to have bad dreams Cade had long figured were related. He progressed slowly through the living room and eased into the hall. Cade wasn’t sure exactly what it was that made his gut clench and prompted him to proceed with caution, but he was never one to ignore his instincts.

If he had thought chastely kissing Sammy had sent a bolt of lust right through him, he wasn’t even sure how to classify the thunderstorm of tingling desire that rocked him at the sight laid out on Sammy’s bed. Sammy was perched in the middle of the queen-sized bed, skinny jeans hiding half the koi fish tattooed on his right ankle and seeming to tangle in the red thread tattoo that wrapped delicately around his left. His legs parted, knees bowed, he erotically displayed the pale feather tattoo that crested his hip bone and the proud jut of his engorged cock. From this angle, it took a moment for Cade to realize that Sammy had pierced his bellybutton, the sleek silver barbell playing peek-a-boo as Sammy’s hips shifted restlessly. The nimble fingers of one hand encircled his cock, moving over the tender flesh with sure, eager strokes as his other hand rolled a pebbled mauve nipple. Sammy’s expressive eyes were hidden behind closed lids and his head was tossed back as he seemed to drink in his own pleasure, soft moans and the slick sound of his lubed hand caressing his cock punctuating the stillness of the room.

Cade swallowed hard, knowing that it would do nothing to ease the sudden dryness in his throat. His damned hormones wanted what lay beyond the threshold of that cracked bedroom door, wanted it fiercely and deeply with hunger Cade couldn’t recall feeling in the last few years. Or maybe ever.

*There is something so wrong with me,* he thought to himself as his own cock thickened to full arousal. This was one of his best friends, and here he was, playing voyeur to the man he’d intended to confront. But his eyes drank in everything from the flush of pleasure and exertion cresting Sammy’s cheeks to the way his hand crept slowly downward until he could tease the puckered hole, stroking the tender, nerve-filled clench of muscle just as surely and familiarly as his other hand worked his cock over. The flick of his wrists showed Cade glimpses of the familiar kanji that were etched in the skin on each wrist.

Cade wasn’t really sure how long he stood there at the slightly open door, watching the bold erotic display of a man bent on self-pleasure. It could have been hours or mere minutes as his self-control and good sense battled with the bone-deep *need* evoked by the sight, the need to join Sammy and help him find the completion he was so desperately seeking. When Sammy came with a cry, his own hand coated with his semen, Cade bit his lip so hard it bled to hold in his own needy moan. Damned if watching Sammy nibble on his full lower lip and bask in his hard-earned afterglow wasn’t about the sexiest thing he had ever beheld. As it was, he’d be hard-pressed to come up with anything that even held a candle to the sight.

But all of the pleasure faded much too quickly as Sammy came back to himself. His green-gold eyes fluttered open and he viewed his own pleasure with a heaping measure of disgust in his gaze. “Damn it, Sammy,” he spoke aloud, as if keeping the personal chastisement in his head would allow him to gloss over it. “It was just a kiss. A gods-damned *chaste* kiss, at that. When are you going to let it go?”

Cade felt each word like a well-placed fist to the stomach. *Oh, gods… Oh, please don’t tell me I watch him get off to the memory of the one and only kiss we’ve shared.*

As Cade watched, too distracted to follow his own thought, Sammy methodically cleaned up the mess he’d made of himself and eased his boxer-briefs back over his lean hips before kicking the skinny jeans the rest of the way off. Then Sammy curled into himself, bare knees rising to almost touch his chest.

Was there anything good to note in such a posture? Cade would say not, especially since his friend seemed so damn tired and defeated in that pose. What’s more, the pose seemed to be intimately familiar to Sammy, and Cade couldn’t help but be saddened by the notion that his friend had been this hurt and tired and defeated before. Though mere moments before, all he had wanted was to possess and stir the passion that he knew abounded in the man, now all he wanted to do was to comfort him and hold him until it was all better or until Sammy found the strength to face it all again. Yet he could do neither, not without having to explain his presence and admit to the things he had seen and heard. And at this point, the only thing that could do was hurt Sammy even more.

A tiny *merow* sounded by Cade’s ankle and all he could think was, *Sweet mother of Shiva, I’m caught red-handed!* Misaki –Misa, to the regular guests she allowed in her domain– was a white and tan long-haired poof ball of a cat with a tendency to needle him with her claws. She was Sammy’s darling and an unholy terror to his thighs or feet or arms or hands, because Misa liked to say ‘hello’ with little nips (that had much more in common with bites) or by kneading her victim with her claws.

Bending down slowly, he scooped the cranky puff ball into his arms. Misa shifted against him and he stroked her spine, trying to keep her from latching her claws into his shirt or skin. Cade usually couldn’t even get Misa to purr when he bribed her, but he’d be damned if she didn’t begin to purr quite loudly.

“Misa-me?” he heard Sammy call out sleepily.

Ah, hell. The cat shifted restlessly upon hearing him call to her. Sammy’s cat loved him to death and would actually come to him when he called her (not that she would do that for anyone else). And Misaki wanted her human. Now.

“C’mere, pretty Misaki. I can’t sleep without you,” he murmured.

Oh, double fuck. Cade stepped back as quietly as he could and set the cat down, her over-long nails clicking against the hard-wood. She looked up at him before rubbing herself in a tight figure eight around his ankles and flitting through the slightly opened door. With Misa, one had to figure the leg rub was either ‘I tolerate you because my human likes you’ or ‘You were convenient’.

He backed away and retreated down the hall as Sammy crooned to his cat in that tired, rough whiskey voice. *Fuck*, Sammy’s voice could turn him inside out when it was like that!

Now, however, he was faced with a problem. Getting to the living room was going to be a piece of cake, really, but how in the hell was he going to get out of the apartment without Sammy noticing?

Briefly, he considered praying for an act of God, but then, his relationship with Him was a little sketchy at best. Either way he looked at it, he was damn sure Sammy would hear the front door open –well unless Cade felt like hanging around until he fell into the deep dream-sleep. Cade felt that would elevate him to new levels of creeperdom, so he was pretty much fucking screwed.

But he had to get out of here before Sammy realized. It wasn’t like he could just ask him to understand why he couldn’t keep himself from watching as he’d sought his own pleasure. It didn’t even make sense to Cade; how in the hell was it supposed to make sense to *Sam*?

~

At the sound of his front door opening and closing, Sam sat up bolt straight on the bed, startling his cat, as well.

“Sammy?” Cade called out. “Are you home?”

His face flushed hot and bright, he scurried clumsily out of his bed to throw on thin athletic pants. As he stumbled into them, almost falling to the floor in his haste, he wondered why Cade had to decide to visit *now* of all times. “Yeah; give me a minute, alright?”

“Where’s your little princess hiding? It’s been a moment since Misa has graced me with her presence,” he added, laughing lightly.

Misaki stirred again and stared up at Sam, her pale green gaze blank as if to ask *Why is that human here?* Yet almost as if she felt summoned, she stretched languidly and rose before flouncing off toward the living room. Sam frowned at that: the only human Misa allowed to *summon* her was him. “Apparently, she’s missed you, too,” he returned wryly, wondering if he needed to pull a shirt on before counting the notion as pure nonsense and padding down the hall barefoot.

Cade looked up as he entered the living room, the soft smile he wore when he cuddled Sam’s cat still on his lips even though Misa had shed white fur all over his black t-shirt. Sam wasn’t sure how to take the slight widening of his eyes and the flaring of his nostrils as he took in Sam’s approach. But there was no mistaking the hardness pressing against the fly of Cade’s fitted jeans.

Sam swallowed hard, his eyes tracing up to take in the sight of his precious companion cradled loosely in the arms Sam had often wanted wrapped around him. He was in an impressively weird spot. Sam could ignore the responses he’d noted in Cade, or he could address the large rainbow-striped elephant standing in the room with them. Sam’s resistance was only because the discussion could ruin the friendship that had lasted over half a decade. It wasn’t as though Sam allowed himself to be one who avoided conflict; he had let go of and pushed past that failing in his personality when he’d moved up north.

“So. Do you want to talk about why you’ve been avoiding me?” Cade asked, his tongue sliding out to lathe his bleeding lip.

Something in Sam clenched tightly at the sight, even as he nibbled at this own lower lip for a moment. “No, not particularly, but I suppose I can,” he consented slowly, carefully. So *that* was why he’d come over. Sam absently wondered who had clued him in: Cade’s tunnel-vision when recording a new record was notorious among their bandmates and the studio folk that had their own hands in the mix. Sam had figured he would have a few more days to get a hold of himself and then seamlessly reintegrate back into the intimacy of their relationship without Cade really even noticing.

*Bad luck, chummy,* he mused wryly.

Cade lifted a brow. “It’s not like you to avoid conflict, Sammy Dean.”

Sam snorted at that. “It’s not exactly a conflict, which means I can avoid it all I like.”

Cade’s down-cast face had Sam rethinking his snide comment almost as soon as it left his lips.

“Cade. Hey. It’s just something silly. Things would have gotten back to normal soon, anyway. It’s just… me. It’s a problem on my end.”

“…Does it have anything to do with Phae telling me you’ve had a thing for me for a while now?” Cade asked softly.

He blanched, feeling all of the color and warmth fade from his face. “I… Sort of? What he meant… I’ve kinda had an almost crush on you,” Sam confessed, wishing he could laugh about it. Wishing that it wasn’t almost painful to discuss. “But that… it would have faded out sooner or later. It was that kiss, Cade. Casually as it was given, I…”

Finally frustrated with his inability to say what he meant to say aloud, Sam stepped forward and pressed a chaste kiss to Cade’s lips, a dissonant echo of the one Cade had given him a week before. But the same tingling spread from their pressed lips to the base of his spine and his hands trembled like a junkie too long without a fix.

“Do you feel it, too, Cade? That arch of electricity and sparks that has taunted every nerve ending on my body and rendered my brain all but useless?” Sam asked softly, easing a single step backward just to put a little space between them. Any space was good space at this point. Space meant Sam was less likely to walk into those arms and beg for something more than chaste kisses.

Cade was silent, but that slow nod said it all.

“*That* is the problem. If it’s a crush, I can smoother it out and work around it. But it’s not anymore: there’s chemistry, a certain level of compatibility, and it scrambles my brains and makes it difficult to even be around you, at times. You didn’t make me mad or offend me: you gave my stupid crush a dumb bit of hope that makes it think we could work. Time has taught me that relationships muddy the waters –and that they eventually end. So I’m just trying to get a handle on myself so I don’t ruin our friendship or the way we work together. Does that make sense?”

“So… you’re avoiding me because you *liked* my kiss?”

“Yeah, I liked it –way too damn much if we want to stay friends. There is only so much that even I can take. And why *did* you kiss me, anyway? I mean, I’ve never seen you just… casually kiss Raphael. So why?” While Sam’s inquiry was born of his *need* to know, he certainly didn’t mind that it turned the tables on Cade some.

~

Cade took a deep breath. “That one’s on me, I guess. Around you, my impulse control gets shot to shit. I think I kissed you because you were brilliant enough to see through the issue that had been baffling Abel and me since it was laid at our feet.” One large hand thrust through his tousled brown hair. “I don’t have a real reason to give you, good or not. I just… I can’t seem to *not*. Like I’ll do things I’ve never done before in my life, things I never thought about doing even, because it’s *you*. It’s *you*, Samuel Dean Martin, and I know you as well as you’ve let anyone know you in the last six years, and I love that I’m the one who gets to see so much of the things you tend to bury. And I love that I can tell you anything and that you probably know me just as well.”

“Oh, sure, blame the victim, why don’t you?” Sammy commented, his tone wry but his expression soft and so very open for once. It softened the intelligence that usually shone in his eyes, and eased the practiced smile into a softer faint smile that was more genuine that most ever got to see. Cade wondered what was suddenly tormenting him about this man who liked to hide within, who put on a practiced mask for fans and label executives alike. Perhaps it was that he got to see the softer, more open side of him.

And it was that openness that had Cade smiling and shaking his head, trying to find the right words in his jumbled thoughts. “It… it’s not that: I just want you to understand. It’s watching you walk into practice and noticing the green of your shirt brings out the green in your eyes and getting so distracted by it that I mess up. Or watching you run your fingers through your hair and spending ten minutes trying to remember what the character on your wrist means. Or feeling like someone punched me in the stomach when someone suggests my nicknames for you might bother you. Or walking into your apartment unannounced and ending up watching you through the cracked bedroom door.”

Sam’s face progressed quickly to chalk-white. “Watch… watching me do what, exactly?”

Cade at least had the grace to blush, though he didn’t answer.

That was apparently answer enough: Sammy’s hands rose to cover his rapidly flushing face. “Oh my god. Oh. My. God. Cade! What in the *hell*?!”

“It wasn’t something I set out to do, something that I set out to see, but damned if I couldn’t look away, Sammy Dean.” And that was the honest, earnest truth, ripping its way out of his throat. It even came out as raw as he felt.

Those hazel-green eyes peeked from between parted fingers. “Gods above, Cade, why didn’t you *speak* or clear your throat or something?”

His tongue felt thick in his mouth, heavy with all of the things he *could* say to the other man. How could he, though? Was there a way to quantify into words all of the things he felt as he watched Sammy work himself to climax? Were there even words? As a songwriter, Cade had never felt quite so stranded in the language that acted as his playground!

“You were… it was so beautiful to me, Sammy, and so very erotic,” he admitted finally. “How on earth could I say something? My tongue was tied in more knots than a sailor’s rope!” His tongue darted out to taste the raw flesh of his lower lip –the wound he had created trying to reign in some of his self control around Sammy. “I’m not saying this right,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

Sammy’s hands fell away from his face, curiosity blooming in that oh, so potent gaze. “Then explain it to me, Cadence. Make me understand.”

Something inside of Cade melted and pooled its warmth low in his belly when Sammy used his first name. Few people knew it and even fewer people used it. When Sam was angry and hurt, he could have flung it out but instead, he used it in effort to coax Cade into helping him understand where Cade’s head was at. That said so much more to him that *Sammy* would have, even. So because he had melted something Cade hadn’t realized had frozen in him, he took a deep breath and tried to find the right words for Sam.

“Sammy, you are beautiful.” When Sam looked to be ready to interrupt things before they even began, Cade shot him a glare. “No, don’t give me that look. You *are* beautiful to anyone with eyes, save maybe you. As your friend, though, I must confess a certain level of blindness to the fact at times, but you are beautiful and you have always been. Yet you are also so very self-contained. You don’t express your passions –in fact you seem to smother them out when anyone else is around you, except when it comes to music. Only then do you let yourself fly on the wings of those passions. So believe me when I say, seeing you in the throes of passion –even passion wrought by your own hand– it’s like gilding the lily and yet so much more. It’s difficult to make something so wholly beautiful more so, but think of it, if you will, as a beautiful doll. Surely, the doll is lovely and perfect, but it does not more or think or breathe. How much more beautiful is it, then, when life is breathed into it?” Cade swallowed hard, feeling his adam’s apple bob in his throat as he tried to think about his words. “Does that make any sense?”

“…Yeah. Yeah, I think it does, Cade.” Sammy looked a bit blown away, but as Cade stared into his eyes, he could almost see the comprehension dawning there, more beautiful than any sunrise he’d ever seen.

He could have kissed him, but for once, he tamped down the urge. For once, he would use his restraint. God knew, the lack had gotten him in enough trouble already. How was this going to affect his friendship with Sammy?

“Can you… give me a little time to think on this? Please?”

How could he possibly say no? “Of course, Sam. Whatever you need.”

~

A full week had passed since the conversation with Cade in Sam’s apartment. He still wanted Cade, still found himself craving the touch of his friend, but it was different than before. Sam hadn’t asked Cade to return his key: it seemed counter-productive when he still wanted Cade as much as ever. Their issues notwithstanding, they had a history of falling back into their casual relationship when they recovered their momentum.

Instead of taking the time to deal with the things that had happened and the things that were said, Sam had submerged himself in music as scorching as his desire for Cade. He couldn’t allow Cade to take his casually made suggestion, not when he knew there was something between them hot enough to set a room on fire. So they needed something new, something different enough to catch the imaginations of the gossip mongers. Sam was pretty sure he’d succeeded in writing it.

The sheet music was rough as hell, honestly –little notes and lyrics crossed out and rewritten– but his hand trembled as he held it. That sheet music was his peace offering, was all he had between having to have that awkward conversation with Cade. But on the other hand, it was a rough intimate piece of himself that he didn’t feel ready to share yet. The thing was, he really didn’t have much of a choice in the matter, not if he wanted to lay out the song as their scandal.

The sheet music in his hand would have given him enough reason to be anxious, but it was also the first time he was seeking Cade out in a week’s time. Of course they had spent time together: the band practiced every day and they wrote together. Each time they had a buffer between them –one formed by people they trusted.

But Sam didn’t back away from a challenge –not even when it was sexy-as-sin Cade Alexander.

So he took a deep breath and walked into the lounge where Cade could normally be found during his down time. It was a comfortable and intimate room and the familiar space usually calmed his nerves. No such luck today.

Cade looked up from the scattered paperwork on the coffee table and took Sam in with that Irish green gaze. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Sam all but choked on the word. “Can I show you something?”

“Sure,” Cade responded, shoulders shifting in a shrug. God help him, Sam shouldn’t have found that motion sexy but he damned sure did.

Sam could barely breathe as he handed Cade the rough draft of the song. Even as long as he had been writing songs for Demon Merchant, he was still much too nervous about using his own words. Twisting Cade’s until they fit was no issue. But this song was entirely *Sam* and if it made the album cut –if “Scandalous” was even considered for it– it would be the first song of Sam’s to be a part of Demon Merchant.

Cade gingerly took the sheets and studied them, his eyes passing over so fast he had to be only reading the lyrics. Blinking, he stared at Sam as if unsure where the words had come from. “What is this?” he finally asked, his voice a quiet rasp that made Sam shiver.

“This song could be our scandal,” Sam returned, finally pushing past the anxiety swimming in his stomach. “It’s a lust song. If we gave them the notion I had someone in mind as I wrote, tongues will wag as they all speculate. I can be our scandal, Cade.”

Cade blinked owlishly for long seconds before acknowledging Sam’s words with a nod and turning a serious perusal to the music in his hands. Silent and thoughtful, he tilted his head as though straining to hear the music backing the lyrics. The silence left Sam all too antsy, even knowing what Cade was doing. He would never dismiss the work out of hand: he was weighing it, feeling it out in his head. Sam hoped to highest heaven and lowest hell that he didn’t find it lacking.

When he finally spoke the words he chose surprised Sam. “Will you sing it? I’m sure I could, but these are your words. If you want to be our sacrifice to scandal, it will be more earnest from your lips.”

That hadn’t been how Sam had planned this. He’d wanted Cade to sing the piece, to melt each and every person in the audience and inflame them with his barrowed words. Sam was barely comfortable *showing* the song the Cade, and he knew that he’d be given an honest opinion from him.

“I… I’m not sure I can, Cade.” It wasn’t physical –Cade surely understood that, considering they had been friends since college. Cade was the one who sang: Sam backed him with piano and vocals, but Cade’s voice was at the forefront and the principal. Sam wasn’t the man who needed the audience; he was just in the background and along for the ride.

“Ah, Sammy,” Cade intoned softly, ruffling Sam’s loose hair briefly. “I bet you could stun them all with your voice and ignite them with these lyrics. Let’s put this in front of the others and practice it tomorrow, see if we can pull it all together. Still, I think *you* need to sing this –but I’m with you all the way, Sammy Dean. Just like always.”

“I’ll try, Cade.” But he wouldn’t promise anything, not until the others had their say on the matter.

~

If he’d known the result of his request last night would leave Sammy trembling as he reached for the microphone, Cade wasn’t so sure he would have made it. Then again, he might have at that. Cade found himself torn from wanting –no, make that *needing*– to hear Sammy take the lead and sing this because he knew no one could do the song the justice it deserved so well as the man who had penned it. It was only an added bonus that having Sam voice the lust of the song would be the purest, simplest was to make it the scandal he desired it to be.

It was that other part of himself –the one that knew the terror Sam was facing at the moment– that was throwing a wrench in the works. Or maybe it was just Sam’s tangible fear and visible tremors. Cade knew exactly what his friend was facing –hell, he’d trembled the same way before performing for their first audience. Yet it bothered him as he looked out now. The only people in the audience were Abel and Raphael, and Seth and Lynne were beside them on the stage; why was Sammy so afraid to sing in front of the family and friends they encircled themselves with?

Since no one else was doing a damn thing about it, Cade stepped forward. He wrapped his arm around Sammy’s slender waist and drew him beside him. He couldn’t resist dropping a kiss on the shimmering dark-chocolate strands of Sam’s hair. “Breathe, Sammy,” he instructed, gratified to hear Sam’s swift intake of breath. “I know you can do this. Look around: we’re your friends, your chosen family, and we’re all here for you and right beside you. Just close your eyes and let it out, Sammy Dean. I’m so proud that you’re willing to try this and I know you can do it.” Cade risked another kiss, this one on the smooth skin of Sammy’s brow, before retreating a single step.

Sammy’s trembling increased for a moment before he nodded slowly, letting his eyelids shutter closed over his beautifully expressive eyes. Cade nodded to Lynne to start the song, wanting it to begin before whatever nerve Sammy had scrapped up slipped away from him.

Cade slipped his guitar’s strap over his shoulder so he could join in just after Seth. Once more he found himself almost amazed by the sultry tone of the song. It was probably the best soundtrack for the lusty words Sammy had written. He wondered why Sammy’s songs hadn’t been a part of the band’s repertoire before this. But even as that thought formed, he knew the answer. He’d seen just how nervous Sammy was just handing him the piece for his perusal. How much more so, then, would he been on the earlier albums, before he learned to trust the honesty of Cade’s opinion?

After the first words left Sammy’s mouth, Cade had to work to keep playing in rhythm with the others. An ache seemed to grow in his belly, a need for more than the words and more than the music. Sammy’s eyelids flickered open slowly, as he reached the short refrain to the piece and Cade knew instantly that the ache was directly proportional. It was unfamiliar, yet intimately common: Sam was stirring the heat in his blood and the lust in his belly. Yet it was different, somehow. Like it was something *more* than it had been before, something deeper.

Cade wouldn’t let himself ponder that thought –not when there was music to be made to keep his friend laying out sultry lengths of lyrics that seemed to have a direct line to his hardening cock. And especially not when he needed to nurture the confidence on one of his dearest friends. Right now, *Sammy* had to be more important than things he was stirring up in Cade, because lust came and went but his friend had stood beside him for years. It was Cade’s turn to be there for Sam.

So he kept up, stepping forward again so perhaps Sammy wouldn’t feel so damn alone in center stage. Evidently having heard the scuff of his footstep, Sammy glanced over and shot him a smile –one turned so much sultrier by the words pouring from his full lips. Cade had to smile back –he couldn’t help it, not ever. Sam’s smile *always* inspired reciprocation in Cade.

But whatever gods that watched over musicians had to know that Sammy needed the boost of Cade’s smile, because Sammy put forth more power behind the last stanza of his song. The way he issued the last phrase stole all the breath from Cade’s lungs and twisted the ache in his belly into something almost physical.

When the music slowed and ended, a hopeful Sammy looked out at all of them and waited. Abel was the first to respond, rising to his feet and applauding. Lynne joined in quickly enough, and even Seth clapped for the song. Cade could have applauded like the others, with the others, but instead, he returned his instrument to its place and walked right over to Sammy. He could see the tremors had returned, but he wrapped his arms around his friend anyway.

Clutching him tightly, Sam asked, “So how was it?”

“You were fantastic. Absolutely fantastic.”

~

Sam trembled all over, his hands barely seeming to function as he dug into his pocket for his pack of cigarettes. He figured if Cade even had an inkling, he's kill him over the damn things, but Sam only smoked to calm his nerves. So, it was Cade's damn fault he was smoking, anyway.

Placing the cigarette between his lips proved to be the easy part. When he tried to light it, he fumbled and dropped the lighter twice before he was successful. Slowly, he drew in a lung full of smoke as he eased down the wall.

His back stung from the rough treatment, but he didn't care. Hell, it felt good, considering it was something other than the cold clammy trembling that had convened shortly after he had uttered the last word of the song. He exhaled on a shaky breath and a plume of smoke, only to draw in another lung full of the stinging smoke. It was his wish that he could exhale his anxieties and nervousness just as easily as a breath of mint-scented tobacco smoke, but it didn't work that way. The way to get rid of anxiety was still very much a mystery, though he did have a great deal of experience in that area.

The half-smoked cigarette was ground into the asphalt as his mind wandered to other things. Sam was the prisoner of the fact Cade had asked him to sing the song he'd penned. He personally thought Cade's voice was better suited to the piece, but Sam couldn't deny the way the words had thrummed through him. True, he had written the lyrics, but he hadn't thought he really meant them.

He'd just wanted to write something *different*, something different enough from their usual fair to capture people's imaginations. And lust had seemed the perfect topic, considering the... *thing* that shimmered and steamed up the space between him and his friend. But when he sang those words –oh, they *ached* and echoed through him in a way that nothing else ever had. Perhaps it was the stanza about kisses that drew Cade to mind, but however it happened, however it started, Sam ended up feeling naked and bared to the bone.

He never meant to put so much of himself into it, and Sam was frightened to discover how much hid inside those lyrics and that sultry tune. Perhaps he had thought using Cade as his mouthpiece would bring him distance. Yet it was Cade who had left Sam feeling so raw in that practice, like his flesh was torn open and the others were looking inside.

Never mind that they all were more than pleased with his performance and forget the furnace level *heat* that had been smoldering in Cade's eyes.

Sam and Cade had built Demon Merchant around themselves, taking care to chose the talents that would make theirs shine and would shine on their own. *How careless we were,* Sam thought to himself. This talent hadn't been taken into account at the inception of the group. Cade may not have noticed, but Sam could feel the subtle shifts and displacement in the family they had built around music. Even if they didn't feel any different about him, Sam felt different enough about it that he wasn't sure he would ever be able to fit back into the niche he'd carved out for himself.

And Sam hated it –the loneliness eating away in his stomach, the shifting parts in their functioning unit. So he could write a song. So he could sing it and make them believe it. They were by far not his favorite of his talents, and he *preferred* that place in the second row, just off center for the balance. If he'd wanted to sing, he would have come to Cade years ago. He knew he had a decent voice; he didn't have a *show-stopping* voice like Cade had, though. So he supported their bread and butter –that sexy as shit voice and those dark lyrics– and he stayed in the background. That was how he liked it.

The door beside him opened, startling him out of his musings.

"Sam, hey."

Sam looked up into the dark brown eyes of Raphael Bluefeather and swallowed hard. "Hey," he choked out.

Phae wrinkled his nose. "You smell like smoke. That's rather rare."

The observation took him off guard. "Uh... huh?"

The dark-haired man chuckled, settling down beside Sam on the pavement. "Cade hasn't figured it out yet, that you smoke when you're anxious. It's a bad habit for a singer to take up."

Sam shrugged. "It's a bad habit for anyone to take up."

Phae sighed and reached out, taking one of Sam's hands in both of his, and giving it a gentle squeeze and then releasing it. "Your song is evocative and lovely... Well, *lusty*. But your voice was a much better fit for it than Cade's would have been. You know that, right?"

A sigh pulled through him and he figured he may as well make himself comfortable. Phae knew when he was losing himself just by looking at his face, and it was going to take some talking to, he imagined. "I *wanted* him to sing it, Phae; I *wrote* it for him to sing."

"And he loves your voice, Sam. He wanted you to have a bit of his lime-light."

Sam really wasn't sure if he should share their current issue with the label, or not. On one hand, Cade had implicated that Sam would be better placed as their scandal by singing the song. On the other, Sam could still feel the heat that had blazed in Cade's gaze. Maybe they were both wrong: maybe Cade wanted Sam to sing it because he *needed* to hear Sam sing it.

Sam sighed. "I wanted things to stay the way they were. But it's all so different now," he admitted, shaking and wondering which part –his business or his personal life– he had wanted to stay the same. Because it was looking like neither would ever be the same.

Raphael's hand, warm and calloused and large, cupped Sam's shoulder. "You try so hard to be overlooked, Sammy. You hide yourself away, like you're afraid of who you are or who people will think you are. Can you please tell me for once just who or what you're hiding from? Because I know you want to take this chance with Cade, and to do that, you will have to let it go."

The tremors only grew worse, but Sam took comfort in his friend's touch and words. "I... I can't seem to stop, Phae. I like how things are, how things look to the world. My sister's son... Gabriel... if he knew I was gay, would he hate me as much as my parents? I can't just... *come out* to the world like that. Everyone who is important to me, they all know who and what I am, really. And Gabriel is too young to understand what that means in the scheme of things. Most of my family turned their backs on me because I was different and it might kill me if my nephew did." This time, his shuddering breath turned into a sob. "I'm comfortable hiding behind the status quo. I don't want that change, Phae. What do I do?"

For the second time in so many hours, one of his dear friends pressed a kiss to his forehead. Raphael's lips were warm and soft and the kiss offered more comfort to Sam than he would have ever imagined possible. "Oh, Sammy. You believe in change. You wrote a song unlike any other for Demon Merchant. You left home when you graduated high school and never looked back. I watched you school your own personality, until all the traits you called 'weak' disappeared. This isn't about changing for Cade. This is about changing for you and about being honest with yourself and the world. You may never be comfortable with how you feel singing on your own, but you are wonderful at it, truly. And you may never be comfortable with the world knowing your gay –but think about those kids out there, terrified of how their friends will take it when they come out, knowing their family will hate them. Think about how much of an inspiration your strength will be to people who know where you come from because they're living in the same situation." Phae pressed another kiss to Sam's brow. "Besides, most of the world figures you're gay, anyway. Your two best friends are out and proud. It's guilt by association, baby."

Sam had to laugh at that.

Phae gently wiped away the tear that had slipped past Sam's control. "Embrace yourself, Sammy. It's time to stop hiding."

~

"Why wasn't I a part of writing such a song?" Lynne askd. If Cade had to name the emotions he heard in her voice, he would have come up with things like 'offended' and 'hurt'. And that wasn't how it should be. That song had never been about leaving anyone out.

"Lynne, Sammy wrote the song all on his own. Then he brought it to me, seeking... something, maybe approval?" Cade shrugged, feeling a little bad that he was lying by omission. He just didn't see the need to burden her with the reason why, not when the solution *was* the subject at hand. "To me, it became much more important to nurture his confidence than to ask what had driven him to write such a thing alone."

Lynne's face went blank and her eyes flared wide. "*Sammy* wrote that piece of lust set to music?"

Cade inclined his head. "His words, his music. He was so nervous to use either, let alone his voice. He actually asked me to sing it."

"You told him no?"

"No, I asked *him* to sing it instead. His words, his music.It will mean so much more to him, to *everybody*, that way. And even more than that, I bet you he will be flying the first time he performs it and hears an audiences' roar of approval. I think he needs that right now." Cade shrugged, feeling a little sheepish. "But I only asked him to do it, Lynne. If he doesn't think he can do it, I'll be right there with him."

Lenne smiled but seemed so far away. "Sam's our best-kept secret, isn't he? We right our songs about selling your soul and demons and deals, and then he has to go and writer one born of heat and lust. And, good God, the way he sounded when he sang it, like an angel falling from heaven to embrace the lusts of the flesh..." She shivered at her words. "So perfect. So what the song needs."

Cade had to agree with her, on both counts, but Sammy's voice hadn't summoned the awe she obviously felt in him. He felt awareness and arousal thrumming under his skin, like a guitar string strung just a little too tight. He was certain: nothing, absolutely nothing, could have made him more aware of Sammy as a *man* (particularly one he was interested in) than his voice and his song. Each word had felt like a honeyed caress on overheated flesh. Just listening to Sammy sing the provocative song had Cade feeling like he was clinging to the edge of his sanity by threads as lust threatened to shove him over the edge.

Damned if he could actually quantify the true reason he'd asked Sam to sing the song. The other reasons he'd offered up –oh, he had tried to convince himself that they were true, that his request had been all for Sam. But after hearing Sam sing it, feeling the words and his lush voice was over him wave after wave, he just couldn't lie to himself anymore.

Sammy's song was temptation but his voice was a shove toward the end of his ability to reason. Cade had only been fighting this attraction for such a short time (well, fighting it anything more than subconsciously). Yet he already found himself on the verge of throwing in the towel and seeing just where a relationship with Sam could go. He had no idea quite when or how Sammy had managed to engage all of his senses and overwhelm the voice that whispered in his ear that all relationships end.

For the first time a decade, Cade wanted a relationship –and he wanted that relationship to be with Sammy Dean.

If only he had any *idea* what to do about it.

~

Sam wasn’t sure when he’d made his decision, exactly, but he had. He would sing the song as Cade had asked. By no means did that mean that his concerns had been laid to rest; it simply meant that he’d proceed as if they had been.

Since he knew he couldn’t spend the next week curled up in the fetal position on his bed, he decided to bypass his bedroom and settle down in the comfy chair in his home studio instead. Carefully, he dug his cell phone from his pocket. With a few flicks of his finger, he pulled up his sister’s contact information. He took a moment to stare at the photo assigned to it, an impromptu portrait of her family –Esther with her arms around her son Gabriel and her husband Jaymes with his arm around her shoulders, bright smiles all around. Young Gabe seemed to glow under the light of his parent’s adoration, secure in their love in a way Sam couldn’t help but envy a little.

He had to call her, because Esther had never judged him or hated him for who he was. She’d never borne their parents’ prejudices toward him: in fact, she and Jaymes had taken on voluntary exile because she simply loved him.

He’d let Cade and even Phae, who knew all his secrets, believe that he had left home and never looked back. It was mostly true, in a way. After a certain point, relaying the details to the two men who were so much more than his friends became far too painful for him. So Sam settled for a few lies of omission. The truth of the matter was this: he was dead to his parents, and the only family he had remaining was Esther’s.

The summer of his nineteenth year had proved long and arduous for him. As fall rolled toward him faster and faster, he lost patience with the charade he’d maintained since he’d known what it was to want. He was in the midst of moving things into his dorm room when he finally decided enough was enough. He was loading the last of his things into his car when he came out to his parents. They, ah, didn’t take it well.

It was an ugly scene that sprung from prejudice and hate. His mother had told him he would rot in Hell, then turned away and sobbed as though he had died. His father, a man who had never raised his voice toward his children, bellowed insults and slurs until Sam’s ears rang.

It was probably divine intervention that sent Esther and Jaymes out for a surprise visit. It had certainly surprised their parents when Esther had glowered at them silently and tugged Sam to her. Jay, a large but naturally quiet man, had inquired as to what was going on. Sam’s father, red-faced and raging, continued yelling a few more vulgar slurs.

Jay had stared back, his face carefully void of emotion, and uttered a single word. “So?”

And it was that one word that set Samuel Dean Martin free.

He was distressed to find himself imprisoned again by things he couldn’t or wouldn’t say, yet it wasn’t the same. What he feared now was two-fold: first that his nephew might hate him if he knew, which was a stupid baseless fear considering the unconditional love Sam had received from the boy’s parents; and second, that his sexuality would reflect on or bring harm to Gabriel. The boy would be starting junior high in the fall and pre-teens weren’t exactly known for tact or acceptance. He feared the boy would be teased over it or asked some of the same vulgar questions Sam’s father had flung out as accusations.

Sam had no fear left in him for himself or the backlash that might swallow him; he only cared about the child, an innocent who might suffer simply because Sam just wasn't attracted to women.

He took a series of deep, steadying breaths. Then he dialed the number before he could talk himself out of it.

It only rang twice before his sister answered breathlessly, "Keyes Asylum. Which lunatic do you wish to speak with?"

Sam couldn't help but laugh. "The boss, of course."

Esther's laugh answered his, full and deep and melodic. "How are you, baby brother?"

"Ah, Star," he returned smiling. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"For you, Sammy, I always have time. Jay can watch Gabe for a while, anyway. It's good for them." He heard her move away from the jubilant noises, probably just drifting down the hall from the family room as she tended to. "What's happening?"

He sighed. "It's sorta... personal, Star. And you might want to sit down." Sam wanted to laugh at himself. He was being fucking ridiculous, but he wasn't sure what all would spill past his lips, so it was best that she be at least a little prepared for the possibility.

"Sam, what's going on?" she asked on a sigh, as she took a seat.

"Oh, Star. Our label is being difficult: they've demanded a scandal from Cade."

"You're not pretending to be involved with him, are you?" she interjected, almost commanding in her desire that it not be the case.

"No. No! I, uh... I wrote a song for it, to *be* it, and Cade wants me to sing it, but there's this friction between us because he kissed me and then there was some other shit..."

"Wait, Cade *kissed* you?! Go, Sammy!" Star cheered.

"...That's what you picked out of that? Really?"

She released half a chuckle. "I heard you. You wrote a song; Cade wants you to sing it. Does this have anything to do with him kissing you?"

It was his turn to sigh. "That came first, actually. You've met him: I had to twist his arm to get him to tell me what was going on. And then he let all this spill out, and basically the conversation ended with him kissing me because I was brilliant. So I kept my distance a bit, because..."

"Because you've loved him for years, yes. Then what happened?"

He let that slide because there was still more to tell. "He, uh, invaded my apartment and my privacy. So I asked for some time and he agreed, so we didn't speak for about a week. And all the while, I'm writing this song and it's a bit dirty. So I present it to Cade, tell him it can be out scandal. But he asks me to sing it."

"And you have a lovely voice, so I completely understand." He could hear the smile in her voice. "Go on."

He swallowed hard. "So we go through it at practice. It was the look in his eyes when I finished singing, Star... God, it was like he finally understood what lust was, and all of his attention was 100-percent focused... on me. So I slipped out because I was trying to process it all and Phae followed. And he tells me that if I want Cade, I'll have to let go of things and make changes again."

He obviously paused too long for her comfort. "Yes?" she prodded gently.

"Star, does... does Gabe know I'm gay?"

"Yes, of course he does. And he loves you just the same," she added, a touch of cheekiness in her tone.

There seemed to be a boulder lodged in his throat. "Is he... Will he be teased if it becomes a public *fact* rather than supposition?"

That seemed to give her a bit of pause. "Sam, the world pretty much knows, anyway. I mean, your two best friends don't even know where to *find* the closets they came out of."

He laughed. "Phae, ah, mentioned that."

"I think Gabe was teased a bit at first, but he stood his ground. He told them about how brave you had to be, leaving home and never being welcome back again. And he told then if they couldn't see the courage in that, they needed to contemplate it more."

Sam was pretty sure he'd stopped breathing all together. His nephew thought he was courageous? Him, Sam the Cowardly Lion? Gabe's ability to see the best in him was flooring and humbling all at once.

"Does that help answer your question?"

He laughed, half-choked by tears burning at his eyes. "Yeah."

"Are you finally going to go after that oblivious lead singer of yours?" she asked.

"Oh, I think he'll come to me," Sam quipped.

"It's about damn time he woke up and smelled the hottie! Seriously, the level of oblivion he maintains is illegal in most countries." She fell silent for a moment.

"Star?" he inquired, curiosity stirred by the obviously thoughtful pause.

"Sammy, just follow your heart. If it leads to Cadence Alexander, so be it. Go after what you want, what you need, and fuck them all if they don't like it. Alright?"

He smiled despite the tears on his cheeks. "Yeah, I think it will be."

She laughed. "Of course it will be. You deserve it after all the things you've put up with."

~

Cade was deep in his cups, carefully keeping his face averted to keep from being recognized by a fan or fame-seeker or paparazzi. The lead singer of a popular band getting sloshed would be front-page tabloid news and they had already decided what their scandal would be: he didn't need to detract from it by being splashed on every tabloid in the US.

Sean's tended to be fairly quiet and the bouncer kept people like paparazzi from straggling in after local celebrities. Cade had never been as grateful for that courtesy as he was tonight, because he intended to drown his troubles in alcohol deep enough that the bartender would have to call him a cab to get him back to the penthouse apartment that felt more like a shrine to his success than his haven from the world.

People had flowed around him, brushing him like a stream rushing and washing against the pebbles of the river bed, and for once in his life, he hadn't even felt the need to keep track of the current.

"What is a handsome rock star like yourself doing all alone in a place like this?"

It wasn't the first time someone had spoken to him since he'd been at the bar. Perhaps it was how much he'd had to drink or maybe it was that little lilt of accent tinging the man's words, but Cade found his attention drifting from the Jamison that had been keeping his company since he'd left practice that evening.

The man on the barstool beside him looked to be the epitome of urbane, from his tailored suit to the casual way he leaned against the bar. His dark chocolate hair was trimmed close on the sides, leaving enough for a thick ponytail on top, though it was carefully styled. Cade was struck by the urge to tangle his fingers in the carefully styled hair just to muss it and watch the surprise bloom in those deep sapphire eyes. God, the man had eyes like a bottomless pool.

Still, he thought the man deserved an answer --an honest one. "I am here doing what most folks do in a bar: drowning my troubles."

The man laughed softly at that. "You've not been working too hard at that, considering that's only your -what, third?- glass. Be kind to your liver, Cade Alexander, and try talking to a stranger about those problems of yours."

"...Why don't we start with your name, since you obviously know mine."

"Peter Jensen, at your service. You can call me Pete. I've been in town for business and came in here to wind down, only to end up spending my evening watching your attempt to pickle your internal organs." He perched on the barstool and leaned a little closer to Cade --close enough he could scent the hint of peppermint and alcohol on his breath. "It seems I'm just a sucker for a man who needs to talk."

If there was any innuendo to be found, Cade was obviously too soused to notice it. Gently, he covered Pete's hand with his own. "I'm not sure talking will help. I guess I can give it a go." Besides, talking to Pete about it was a much better idea than trying his usual confidant since his problems all evolved from their relationship, anyway.

"It might help. I won't promise miracles, but sometimes a fresh perspective on matters helps you to see everything clearer."

"If you say so. But I'm really not even sure where to start."

"What's weighing you down right now?"

"I... I think I've fallen in love with one of my best friends, which is a novel problem for me. My usual issue in relationships past was that I couldn't give my whole heart. Now, I wouldn't blame Sammy if he didn't want it." Cade's confession came out soft, in short stunted bursts of hesitance and humility.

"Have you offered it to him, or are you so certain he won't want to take a chance on things that you haven't tried?" The sweet lilting tone of Pete's voice did little to soften the words. "You said he's your friend --a precious one, from the sound of it. Shouldn't he of all people know that there's definitely something special about you, too?"

Cade inhaled deeply, absently beginning to spin the half-empty tumbler in front of him. "Sammy... Well, he's been infatuated with me a long time and I never realized it. I'm just wondering if his feelings might have soured, given all that time and no reciprocation from me..."

Pete laughed aloud at that. "I'd bet not. I just met you, Cade, and I can tell you there is something inherently magnetic about you. I mean, I don't make a habit of approaching strangers in a bar, even if they are famous for making some amazing music. Your friend probably did his best to hide his feelings from you, especially since it's been such a long time. But while lust is the loveliest flower in the garden of life, it withers and dies just as quickly as it blooms. If you're careful and you tend it, however, it can bloom over and over again --as love. Perhaps it's the right time for you to offer him your heart."

It was Cade's turn to laugh, albeit a bit weaker and whole lot more rueful than Pete's. "Maybe, maybe not. The timing sucks, though. I've already pushed Sammy to do something he's not very comfortable with --something he will excel at, mind you. He's all kinds of freaked out and anxious, so I have no business adding to it right now. He's always had a great stage presence, but come to find out he's got some of the worst stage fright I've ever seen. I'm just not sure what that declaration would do to him on top of that."

"You don't have to declare yourself immediately, Cade, but don't hold it all inside. The best thing you can do right now it show him you love him by encouraging and supporting him. The telling him can wait for another day --it's more important that he feel in, anyway. Wait until the current situation blows over some." Pete offered him a warm smile. "One should never deny their heart, Cade."

Cade lifted the tumbler he had been fiddling with and tossed back the rest of the contents, taking a moment to enjoy the tingling burn in the back of his throat before setting the glass back on the bar with a gentle thunk. "If you say so. I've had too much trouble in relationships because my whole heart wasn't in it. I'm at a loss for how to act when it's all in."

"I'd bet a piece of your heart had always been in Sam's keeping. It's funny how much that can throw a relationship off, that little sliver of a heart that isn't yours to give."

"I'm just not sure Sam can make that step toward me. He gets so caught up in the normality of things that when the balance shifts, as it always does, he is tossed about like a wave on the sea." Cade shook his head. "He got comfortable with his infatuation; I'm not so sure he'll be able to allow that to become love."

"And he's already off balance... Did anyone speak with him after the balance shifted?"

Cade tried to think, suddenly muddled by the whiskey that hadn't seemed to be helping five minutes ago. "I... I think I saw our friend Phae disappear after him... He wasn't even supposed to make it today, but I pushed him. Thank god I did."

"Good," Pete responded, nodding slightly. "The thing is, being in love is wonderful, but that's not the end of your journey: it's only the beginning. You two are going to have to learn to talk to each other --especially about things like this. And you guys will have differences, but you'll have each other and you can face them together. When you love, that person becomes more important than yourself."

Cade smiled at the thought, because Sam had always been that important to him. "You know," he told Pete conversationally, "I think you were right: talking it out did help. I wish I could tell you how much."

Pete's smile broadened. "Just love him. I'll know."

~

Sam honestly couldn't even remember who had demanded a trial run before a new album was fully recorded, but he definitely wanted to strangle them now. It had probably been Cade or Abel who had suggested it originally and Sam had no problems with the notion at the time. It did seem to be a case of 'that was then, this is now', however, considering the amount of shaking a swearing he was doing now --neither of which he did particularly well.

Lynne folded him carefully into her arms, like he was so fragile he might shatter. The soft press of her modest bosom and her steady embrace were a source of tender comfort he so desperately needed. Her voice was soft on his ear as she whispered reassuring nonsense to him, and that she sought to provide him such comfort and reassurance made him want to cling all the tighter to her. But he couldn't do that. If he rested on the comfort and strength of his friend, he wouldn't be able to push himself to do something so alien to him, something he needed to do if only to prove his own commitment to his song --and to Cade.

So he let the embrace end as simple as it had begun, washing out on the tide of the goodness that welled up inside Lynne herself. Oh, sometimes she liked to pretend she was callous and unfeeling, but she was one of the only people who could talk him down from an anxiety flare-up and she took the time to do it. He kissed her cheek and dodged out the side door to linger in the cool inky darkness of the night.

It was the alley that ran behind the barroom venue, so it reeked of alcohol and stale cigarette smoke, but Sam felt that he fit right in as he lit up a cigarette. Damned but if his song and Cade's personal growth prodding wasn't upping his nicotine intake. Not that either of them were intended to do so: they both jus racheted up his stress levels so that the quiet alley and the clouds of smoke were his only escapes.

He exhaled a blue-gray curl of mentholated smoke as the door opened and he found himself face to face with a rather startled Cade. He gave a vague passing thought to crushing out the cigarette, but the damn things were expensive and he'd barely just lit it, let alone taken a drag! So he blew the thought away on an exhale and let his eyes wander the man who stood before him.

"Those things will kill your voice in the long run, Sammy Dean." Though the words were inherently a chastisement, they were issued more as an observation.

Sam took a thoughtful drag, wondering if he was meant to respond to the statement. Everyone seemed so damned concerned about his voice! What if his hands were smashed in some wild accident? When push came to shove, he valued one talent above the other. More than that, he valued the hard work he'd put in to shape and grow that talent. The other... well, he was simply born with a decent voice. Screaming in the throes of ecstasy could damage a voice, but they didn't warn lead singers off of sex.

"Lynen told me you slipped out this way."

So much for hoping he'd gone unnoticed. "Did you need to see me for any particular reason, then?" He inquired, tossing the cigarette to the ground where it quickly fill under the sole of this shoe. Habitually, he opened the tin of breath mints he carried with his cigarettes and tossed one in his mouth, suckling thoughtful at the spearmint disc.

"I wanted to see if you were alright, actually, Sammy. You've sort of... drawn away from most of the group and I just wondered if this was too much pressure for you." Cade's voice was smooth in it's solemnity –not angry or disappointed that Sam may have a problem with things. No one had ever reacted to any weakness of his this way in his life, and he wasn't quite sure what to do with it.

He shrugged. "It's kind of heavy for me, but it's bearable right now. Phae... he reminded me of some of the things that were happening in my life around the time we all met, and the point he made was more than valid. It's just... I knew where the end of the journey was then. With this, I'm just not how and where I fit in Demon Merchant's dynamic any more."

Sam wasn't so sure on the details of how it happened, exactly, but mere moments later he found himself wrapped in Cade's surprisingly strong arms, his nose buried against Cade's neck while his breath ghosted against Sam's ear. "Sammy, no matter what, you will always be a necessary part of Demon Merchant. After all, we created and shape this band around us, around what would make our talents shine and who's talents we could make shine. They don't feel any differently about you now –though I bet there were stunned by that sultry song of yours and the way your voice sounds when you sing it. My point is, even if things shift a little, you will always be a part of the heart of Demon Merchant, and we fit together well enough that we will make it through this better and stronger than ever."

Sam wasn't sure which made the bottom drop out of his stomach: the sure way Cade held him or his words of reassurance. Yet already Sam could feel some of his tension and some of his fears melting aways under Cade's attentions, though he was puzzled as to whether it was because it was Cade or because Cade could see to the heart of his insecurity. And this was the way he finally ended up in Cade's arms, but damned if it didn't have a profound sense of rightness.

Cade's warm lips brushed his earlobe and he stiffened as shivers sensation worked their way own his spine like tiny spiders of pleasure. What was worse to Sam was that Cade absolutely knew it: he laughed softly, a current of sensual undertone woven through it that Sam had never heard in his voice before. Then a long chaste kiss brushed along the length of his jawline and Sam felt his knees become gelatin.

Of all those things, it was Cade's tender kiss to his lips that about destroyed him. Gentle and oh so soft, a mere brush of lips in fact, yet Sam felt it in the marrow of his bones and the depths of his soul.

"You will do a marvelous job tonight, Sammy Dean. And I'll be right up there with you if you need me –right next to you."

~

In general, a set was a set was a set to a seasoned musician, as Cade would tell anyone. But for tonight, something was working its way through him, so the set list had been an agony to decide on. They had finally settled on two crowd-pleasing favorites, two new songs, their trademark "Demon Merchant", and the bone-melting piece Sammy had penned to be their scandal. He wasn't even on stage yet and Cade was sweating bullets the way he had before their very first show.

It actually had nothing to do with the new pieces and everything to do with the over-anxious Sammy Dean. Poor Sam was so freaked out by singing the song and everything it entailed that his abundance of nervousness was washing out onto Cade and he wasn't fond of the sensation. It had him second-guessing things about tonight that were all but chiseled in stone.

Spending a little time alone with Sam and trying to ease his fears and doubts a bit had made things worse on Cade. He was worried about his friend, no bones about it. Even more than that, he was worried Sam would flee the stage like some teenage girl or something worse. Catastrophizing was not Cade's forte or even an art he practiced, but this situation had him about to his wits end.

Now, when they played "Scandalous", Sammy was meant to be a little off-center but the furthest forward, strumming the chords gently on his acoustic. Cade was placed a few feet off, banked off to the other side to pick out the melody line and supply vocal harmonies, while Set was further to the left than Sam, cradling his bass and adding depth to the song. And of course, Lynne was in the back row, about center and right in front of her drums.

Cade knew where the placement had come from –the slightest modification of the one they usually stuck to– but the closer they got to the performance, the more he hated it. Sammy was so damn anxious, so very nervous that he would fail at something he had never really wanted to do, and to push him up away from the group so much seemed more and more like a bad choice. Knowing Sammy, he'd take it as some sort of way that the band was pulling away from him. Right now, his friend was beyond rational thinking and straight up responding to how things felt rather than how they were intended. Cade's gut was tying itself in knots while he stewed on it.

He knew that Seth would follow his lead if he changed the placement slightly, that if he changed things Seth would find a way to enhance the subtle difference. That meant the only one he really needed to mentioned it to was Sammy himself. He shook himself as everyone started to gather backstage. *Just fucking go for it,* he told himself. *Fuck everything else: Sammy is what matters.*

The full band came together, forming a snaky little half-circle about their manager. It amused Cade tonight to notice that they always formed an odd sort of fermata every time before they went on to play. He was surprised he hadn't noticed it before.

"Is everybody ready, then?" Abel asked. "No one need to run off the stage? 'Cause you all know I'll just send you back out."

They all chorused in with groans and nods and 'yes, we knows'. Abel, like a bizarre yet benevolent god, seemed appeased by those offerings.

"Alright, then. Just making sure we're all on the same page. Have fun tonight and do your best."

"Like we don't always give 110-percent," Lynne shot back with a smile. "We're gonna make 'em all go out and preorder our new album as soon as they can!"

"Good. Remember who you play for: yourselves because you love it and your fans because they love your music. Who cares what the critics think?"

"Critics can go to hell," Seth groused.

The conversation faded and fizzled, only to be replaced by back-slaps and high-fives and 'good lucks' before their semi-circle became a snake to file out onto the stage and take their places among their instruments. The time had come for the eternal wait for the curtain to rise.

Anticipation danced in Cade's stomach like butterflies freed from a net. He loved music: writing it, singing it, breathing it on each inhale and out on every exhale, but he loved nothing as much as performing it for an audience. A live show was like a large-scale conversation, an interaction between the performer and the fans, and Cade needed that more than anything right now.

With all of the things in his life that were going absolutely sideways right now, he needed the peace, contentment, and joy that he would find on stage tonight. And may whatever gods that listened to the desperate pleas of musicians bless Sammy Dean with the same contentment and peace tonight.

~

Sam was pretty sure that Cade's faded blue jeans had more holes than fabric, holes that dotted up the sides of his ankles, splits at the knees, and holes making their way up his thighs. They hugged those thighs and shaped his ass like a lover's hands. If Sam were honest, he sort of wished he could be those jeans at the moment. Cade's shirt was a faded charcoal V-necked tee that at one point had been graced by some slogan. Now faded to a much lighter shade, the stretched out shirt hung on his lean frame, the v deep past his sternum and offering a tantalizing peak at sun-tanned flesh and a swirl of dark ink and a dusting of chest hair.

It wasn't the first time Sam had found himself staring at Cade and marveling at the sensuality his friend embodied to sell their music. Sure, most fans could agree that Cade's voice was sleek and deep and that their music was tailored to that voice. The deep, clear purr that sang of selling one's soul almost made the fans want to. Yet Demon Merchant wouldn't have fans and groupies numbering more than a hundred thousand if Cade didn't prowl across the stage in holey jeans that looked about ready to give up on him each night and shirts that had aged just as badly. Cade sold his body with his voice. In a sense, being a musician had a lot in common with being a prostitute, except people paid musicians to show up rather than leave after.

Sam wondered for the first time if his own wardrobe choices could be seen in the same light. Sure, he was always quite comfortable in skinny jeans in the cooler spectrum of the rainbow and half-buttoned dress shirts. It was also true that he choose his clothes with a conscious eye on fit and a general disdain for brand names. Yet it could also be said that it all still came down to showing off the lean, trim shape of his body and teasing hints of skin and ink. In his own way, he concluded, Sam was prostituting himself for their music as well. And if he'd taken specific care in choosing tonight's outfit --Kelly green skinny jeans and a brown button-down with stripes of gold-- well, that was vanity as well. Sam only wanted to be seen as the same sort of sex-symbol Cade portrayed, at least for a single song. Perhaps it wasn't as bad as selling on sex, but he still felt a bit of shame as though they were.

He was jolted out of his muddled thinking by screams and shouts from the onlookers watching the curtain inch higher. When the MC introduced Demon Merchant, Sam's thoughts were firmly entrench in his job, his love, his life: their music. And that meant coaxing the opening notes to "Sell Your Soul" from his keyboard with eager, earnest fingers. They would loop the first few measures of it ad infinitum --or until Cade was done teasing and speaking to the crowd.

Cade carefully picked out the beginning of the melody line before gradually transitioning to strumming chords because it required less of his attention. "How sweet to see so many sinners in one room tonight."

The crowd roared, so excited by and enamored with the notion of being with their band and being a part of something special.

"It's always a beautiful thing to me to see how many people come out to see us and hear some of the new pieces we've been working on."

The fans screamed out again, eager and hungry for the new songs they would hear and even still ravenous for the old favorites. The old songs were memories made and dreams of days long gone and loves lost; the new songs embodied their new dreams and new experiences, new memories to make, and new loves and new tomorrows. It also meant they'd learn new things about the band they fawned over, because it was impossible to write a song without the writer giving a part of themselves away.

Sam leaned into his own microphone, smiling broadly at the crowd. "But don't you worry, sinners: we still have some of your old favorites in store for you tonight. Though, I do hope you like our new songs --after all, that new album is well-underway." He could have been deafened by the excited affirmative response, and his grin only grew. "Well, we've got some great things in store tonight. Right, Cade?"

Cade beamed at him. "Of course we do. We even have something that's a little different from our usual that we hope you'll all love."

Not that Sam doubted that this crowd, this audience, would be more than eager to hear his song. Excitement began to pool low in his belly, replacing the bone-deep anxiety that had been making him miserable for most of a week. The energy and excitement emanating in the room was so very contagious and Sam had never been more grateful for it.

He felt Cade's eyes on him but saw the flash of his grin. "Well, let's start this night out right with one of our first singles. I know this one is a favorite," Cade intoned.

In a unison only achievable after spending years together playing music, they all brought the song back to it's beginning. They were blasted with the shouts and screams that evidenced the anticipation that was so thick in the room that he could almost feel it on his skin.

With so much excitement and earnest anticipation, how could they even think to deny them?

~

Cade never could believe quite how fast a six song set could fly by. On a concert tour, the sets were longer and could sometimes go on and on. In local venues close to home, they kept the sets shorter and, therefore, the costs lower for the fans --especially on the trial runs, because the band often got the most out of the experience, anyway.

They had played their old pieces, the ones that got the most airplay --songs like "Sell Your Soul" and "Demon Deal" and, of course, "Demon Merchant"-- and the crowd had screamed and sang along and dance in time to the words and rhythms. Yet the fans had reveled most in their new songs --they had sampled "Bet Me" and "Sinner, Sinner" for them tonight. The sea of people had a cohesive oneness as they kept time with their hands and feet, many singing along at the choruses the second or third time through.

So here they were, shifting gears and preparing for the last song of their set. Sammy hadn't even stepped forward from his keyboard, and Cade could see Seth and Lynne trying to take a moment or two of blissful rest so they could come back strong and finish out the night with their scandal.