

## A Note of Stress

By A.R. Moler

He sat at the keyboard while roadies and other crew set up the rest of the stage equipment. Quinn Edwards, latest darling of the rock music world, played a driving, dissonant classical piece. Blond hair swept back from his high forehead, his face was lean and angular. He had a propensity for a wide, toothy, predatory smile when amused, but it certainly wasn't there now. Long blue jean clad legs stretched under the keyboard; his expression was solemn and focused.

"Quinn, dude, what the hell are you playing?" asked Carl, head of the road crew.

"Bartok."

"Um, okay. Oh hey, Trent was looking for you. He said he hired you a replacement PA, since Thomas is going to be gone for weeks," said Carl.

"I'll go look for him in a few minutes. Is he in the building?"

"No, I think he's back in the bus."

"I need Ron to go out with me." Ron was one of Quinn's bodyguards. So what if it made him look like some paranoid freaking prima donna? After being kidnapped last year by a couple of money hungry psychos who had mistaken him for the son of a billionaire, Quinn was justifiably paranoid.

"I'll tell him," Carl said.

Quinn returned to playing. Jesus God he had a love-hate relationship with his career. He loved music, wrote half his own songs, made obscene amounts of money and played to sold out twenty thousand seat venues. Up until the kidnapping, there had been a lot more love and a lot less hate of his high profile job. Just one thought of the month and a half he'd spent in that hell hole... and it took several deep breaths to quell the surge of nausea.

He played for another ten minutes before he decided he really ought to go find Trent. Quinn jumped down off the stage. Ron was quietly sitting in the front row waiting for him. Two hundred and eighty pounds of solid muscle, the Latino bodyguard had become a comfortably familiar figure in Quinn's entourage, along with his twin brother Don.

"Where're we going?" Ron asked, standing up.

"Just out to the bus, I need to talk to Trent."

"Okay."

Ron strode along beside Quinn in silence. The man wasn't exactly the strong silent type, but neither was he much of a chatterbox.

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“Quinn, I want you to meet your new PA,” said Trent Rouse as Quinn climbed up into the bus. The manager was a chunky dark haired man in his forties who always struck Quinn as just a little frazzled, but he did a steady reliable job handling the marketing and contractual facets of Quinn’s career. They were friends after a fashion, but never close, and things had become progressively more strained over the past year.

Beside Trent stood a slender man with brown hair, wearing a blue dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of dark gray slacks. He was very fair, the sort of skin that probably needed SPF 50 if he spent any time in the sun and he was a good four to five inches shorter than Quinn.

“This is Josh Malone,” said Trent. “He came highly recommended.”

“Nice to meet you Mr. Edwards,” Josh said, holding out his hand.

Quinn shook Josh’s hand and took in the intense blue gaze. At least the guy gave the impression of being competent. He was easy on the eye too.

Trent continued. “I was just telling him about Tim, your usual PA, breaking his leg in the car accident. Last I heard it was going to be a minimum of eight weeks until he was back, but possibly longer, maybe until the end of the tour.”

“The email he shot me implied longer. He said something about the doc wanting to make sure the screws and all were going to stay in place or something along that line,” said Quinn. Looking at Josh, he said, “I appreciate you being able to do this on really short notice. Here I am smack in the middle of the tour and I think I’ve spent the past five days just about tearing my hair out trying to deal with the usual stuff as well as the mountain of scheduling details. Trent’s been trying to lend a hand but ...”

“If I could clone myself or be in two places at the same time, I could handle it,” Trent replied with a laugh. “I’ll leave you two to figure out exactly how you want to work this; I have a meeting I need to be at in half an hour.” Trent slapped Quinn on the shoulder and headed out of the bus.

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It took a good thirty minutes for Josh to enter all the information Quinn gave him into his PDA. They sat at the small table inside the bus hashing through details, and scheduling. The tasks Josh was expected to do ranged from helping to arrange interviews and publicity photo ops down to such mundane things as picking up Quinn’s laundry from the cleaners. Josh was blissfully grateful that the singer didn’t seem to have any obviously flaky demands like all his coffee had to be organically grown Kona from Hawaii or his hotel rooms could only face the west. He’d had a few of *those types* of jobs in the past.

There were a couple of hours before the concert tonight. Josh Malone looked up from the PDA laying in front of him. “Are you eating before the gig or after?” He anticipated being sent out for food.

“After,” said Quinn.

“You sure? You’ve still got two hours until it starts.”

“I’ll eat later. I do need you to get me three or four bottles of Gatorade though. Any flavor but blue. If the stage is hot, I sweat a lot.”

“Blue isn’t a flavor,” said Josh dead-panned.

“You know what I mean.” Quinn gave him a wry grin. “I want to have a quick walk around the stage set-up before they start letting in any of the audience. Can you go tell Ron I’m about ready to head back over there?”

“Sure.” Okay, this was where the weirdness factor set in. It was probably only about one hundred yards over to the auditorium. Then again, Josh was aware of the whole kidnapping thing that had happened to Quinn. Maybe the guy had every right to be paranoid.

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The guy had talent, Josh decided. He had walked back to the soundboard, flashing his badge to security. From here he had a clear view of Quinn on stage. The man knew how to play the crowd, he had charisma and there went another pair of women’s panties flying up onto the stage. Quinn blew a kiss to the donor of the underwear. It wasn’t like Josh hadn’t heard Quinn on the radio, but live in concert was a whole new level. He was beginning to comprehend the whole screaming fan-girl thing just a little, and he wondered if Quinn had intentions of picking some lucky groupie to bed tonight. He wouldn’t mind being that lucky groupie himself. Josh allowed himself a tiny sigh. Yeah, there were some rumors floating around that Quinn had interests other than hot nubile and photogenic women, but Josh wasn’t sure how much stock to put in those speculations. The man did seem to have a different woman on his arm or in his lap at each strategic high profile event he went to, but Josh wasn’t sure what exactly that translated to.

Suck it up, do your job, Josh told himself and headed in the direction of backstage. When the concert was over, he expected to get instructions for calling the limo and or coordinating security for certain beautiful people to worship up close and personal.

It didn’t go anything like he expected.

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Dripping sweat and treading in the direction of a wired sort of exhaustion, Quinn sank onto a sofa in the exterior part of the dressing room, black t-shirt clinging wetly to his body. He’d exchanged the usual high fives and back slaps with his band and they were all milling around, changing shirts and discussing a hot new club they’d heard about. Quinn caught sight of his new PA coming toward him.

“Are you heading off to this club the band is rattling on about soon?” asked Josh.

“No.”

“Okay I’ll hold off on calling for the limo for a little while.”

“I’m going back to the hotel. Tell Ron and Don. There’s liable to be a whole boatload of rabid fans at the back door.” He saw the raised eyebrow from Josh. Obviously he’d surprised the PA. Tough, there was no way he was subjecting himself to the crowded claustrophobic potential

danger of a club if he could avoid it. The flicker of memory that triggered spiked his heart rate and cramped his stomach. “Listen, if you want to go party with the band, I am totally okay with that. Don’t feel as if you’re obligated to live in my hip pocket.”

“It’s been a really long day. I’d just as soon not deal with the club scene. I’ll go tell the bodyguards you’re leaving in ... fifteen minutes?” said Josh.

“That’d be fine.”

Quinn was desperately glad for the hulking physical presence of Ron and Don when he went out the stage door. At least a hundred screaming women were out there begging for autographs; the idea of having to plow through them on his own made his skin crawl. It took a number of minutes to make it to the safety of the limo. Josh climbed in behind him and the door was firmly shut by Don.

“Is it likely to be like that at the hotel too?” Josh asked, sitting back into the seat facing Quinn.

“Hopefully not,” Quinn replied. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, trying not to think too hard about the night of his abduction. He’d played a concert and let his buddy, Chase Buckingham, con him into going out partying. Chase was the rich and Quinn was the famous of the pair. They bore a resemblance to each other also, tall, blond, lanky. There had been paparazzi and press and Quinn had ducked into a hallway at the club for a moment’s peace. A blow to the side of his head and a cloth with a sickly sweet smell pressed over his face had been his final memory of that night.

“Mr. Edwards? Hey Quinn!” called Josh’s voice.

Quinn opened his eyes. They had pulled up outside the hotel.

“We’re back to the hotel,” said Josh.

Everyone climbed out and walked through the lobby where a handful of photographers flash-blinded them as Ron and Don escorted Quinn and Josh to the elevator. It took a few minutes to get to the top floor.

“I’m going to take a shower, order some room service and try to wind down,” said Quinn as they rode upward.

Josh smiled. “That’s sounds like a plan.”

“If you’d like to swing by in half an hour, I’ll supply the beer.” He noticed that Josh seemed to hesitate. “Babysitting me is not part of your job. I just thought maybe you’d like a beer.”

“I can do that.”

The elevator opened and Quinn walked toward his suite. “See you in a few.” Once inside, he ordered some pasta, beer and chips to be sent up, and took a shower. Ron or Don had evidently let room service in, because a cart was waiting in the living room of the suite when he came out. He grabbed a chair and sat down. Pasta had seemed like a nice bland option when he ordered it but after a couple of mouthfuls ... he felt sick. Too many hours of a nearly empty stomach hadn’t

done anything to help the vicious cycle. Damn, damn, damn, when was he going to make it past this? He took a swig of a beer, and forced himself to eat another bite. That would have to do for now.

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When Josh glanced at his watch it'd been about thirty five minutes. Ron and Don sat in chairs on either side of the door to Quinn's suite.

Ron tilted his head. "He said you were coming."

Josh knocked on the door, and a minute or two passed before it opened. Quinn was wearing a fresh pair of jeans and ...nothing else. Josh's mouth went dry at the sight of all that lean ropy muscle. Belatedly he noticed the T-shirt in Quinn's hand.

"Come on in," said Quinn. "I was just about to look for something on TV. Grab a beer." He pulled the white V-neck T-shirt on.

The room service cart held a plate with a domed metal cover, a bucket of ice containing five beer bottles of mixed variety and a big bowl of tortilla chips with a side of salsa. Josh grabbed a beer and opened it.

"Got a preference?" asked Quinn, flicking through channels with the remote.

"No golf."

Quinn grinned a little. "Why?"

"I'd rather watch paint dry." Josh settled on the opposite end of the sofa.

"How 'bout Speed, that runaway bus thing?" Quinn propped his feet up on the coffee table.

"That's fine."

"So what's the latest word on the interview I have to do Thursday?"

"I'm still waiting to hear back from the TV station on the exact where and when. The implication is that they want you to chat with Heather Jones for a while over lunch so they can generate an article for the website then do a three to five minute on camera piece for airing." Josh took a sip of his beer.

"Okay. Are they expecting me to do the whole hair and makeup thing before the filmed part?"

"I don't know. Like I said I'm still waiting for most of the details. You've got two days. There's plenty of time to figure it out." Josh said. He thought Quinn looked sort of uptight about the upcoming interview.

They watched the movie for a while, before Quinn got up for another beer. He brought back the chips and set them on the coffee table, popping one in his mouth. He sat back down on the sofa and Josh noted it was a good two feet closer than before. Was that intentional or incidental?

Quinn appeared to nod off a couple of times as the rest of the movie played out. By the time it was finished, his head was tipped back and his eyes closed. Josh allowed himself to admire the man's relaxed features: the long straight prominent nose, the warm pink of his mouth framed by the beginnings of beard stubble. Should he wake Quinn and goad him to go to bed? Or was that going to annoy the man? Sleeping badly in an uncomfortable position wouldn't lend to a good performance tomorrow night.

Josh reached over and shook Quinn gently. "You ought to go to bed."

Quinn opened his eyes with a sleepy blink. "Is it over?"

"Yeah, the movie's done. You really ought to shuffle off to bed. You've got another concert tomorrow." Josh stood up.

Quinn squinted up at him and rubbed his hands down over his face. He hauled himself to his feet, and then laid a hand on Josh's shoulder. "Thanks for keeping me company." His thumb brushed along the side of Josh's neck in a touch that might have been a caress then Quinn let his hand fall and walked off toward the bedroom. "See you in the morning."

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Stripping down to his briefs, Quinn crawled into the King sized hotel bed. He would have preferred a warm body to curl up with, specifically the one that just left. It had been quite a while since he'd done something as simple as drink beer and watch a movie with someone. Josh Malone had made no demands, hadn't schmoozed or flattered Quinn. The man had treated Quinn like a colleague or a friend. Real friends were something in painfully short supply in Quinn's life. The guys in the band probably came the closest to fulfilling that slot. Maybe the real problem was he didn't just want a friend, he wanted a lover. Trent aimed him at every available hot body model and actress around, and Quinn periodically showed up at gala events and premieres with one. He liked a few of them. He'd even bedded a couple, more because being totally celibate was miserably frustrating than because he had more than token emotions for them. Most of the time, he'd rather have a guy in his bed, but Trent kept telling him it would destroy his career. That had been an ongoing argument up until the kidnapping. Since then, there'd been nobody at all.

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The routine of the tour involved Quinn and the band and anyone else on the crew having brunch at noon in the dining room of whatever hotel they were staying. Josh kept an eye on Quinn while he ate breakfast. Quinn wandered between band members and roadies, talking, asking questions about the bus and the gear. The entourage was set to leave in another hour.

Something struck Josh as odd, and it took him a while to put his finger on it. He saw Quinn drink a cup of coffee and a glass of orange juice, except for half a bagel, he never saw Quinn eat anything else. The man couldn't possibly be hung over from a beer and a half, could he? Last night most of the tortilla chips had been eaten by Josh himself. Quinn had only eaten a couple. Drugs? That didn't really track either. Quinn had seemed lucid and reasonably put together the whole previous day. Josh tucked the information away in his head. Maybe it was nothing.

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Why did hotels always seem to serve sausage with breakfast? The smell alone triggered the nausea within Quinn. He'd never figured out why sausage biscuits were one of the few items the kidnapers tended to feed him? At best guess there was some fast food joint near where he was held.

Quinn sipped the coffee in his hand, hoping the scent of the liquid would mask the sausage smell.

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*Get a dozen. I'll go through them in a couple of days.* This was the reason Josh was standing in the aisle of a pharmacy at 1 pm grabbing bottles of Myoplex off the shelf, before the tour bus left. Every star Josh had worked for over the past few years had their quirks, it came with the territory, and truthfully Quinn behaved considerably more normal than most. Did the man have some sort of twisted negative body image? Josh had encountered his fair share of anorexic models who counted lettuce leaves and such. He paid for the bottles and headed back. The last of the gear and luggage was being loaded.

Josh found Quinn already on the bus. Quinn's long legs were propped up on an opposing seat and a keyboard lay across his lap. Headphones were plugged into one side of the keyboard and a cord ran to a laptop on the other side.

Quinn pulled his headphones down. "Are they cold?" he asked gesturing at the bag of protein shakes.

"Only half of them."

"I'll take one."

Josh handed him one and put the rest in the small refrigerator in the back of the bus.

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Why couldn't he get that part of the melody to sound the way he wanted it to? Quinn stared out the bus window instead of at the keyboard in his lap. They'd been on the road more than three hours and that should mean the next city was getting close. His stomach protested its emptiness and Quinn considered the bag of apples he had seen in the micro-kitchen area. Sometimes fruit was a doable option, in a small quantity sometimes it was light enough not to trigger the raging nausea. There was nothing going on right now, just travel, low stress, no expectations.

He got up and went to the back, cutting an apple in thin slices that he dropped into a plastic cup. Hopefully he could nibble on them slowly and his stomach wouldn't object.

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Tonight was a bigger venue and several thousand more people, Josh was impressed by the sheer energy and intensity Quinn had on stage. The aftermath was similar to the night before however, with Quinn forgoing the party scene in favor of simply returning to the hotel. This time Josh

anticipated the decisions a little better and smoothly notified security to be ready to escort Quinn away.

This hotel was bigger than the previous one and Josh had been mildly surprised earlier in the day when he found out Quinn's suite had a baby grand piano in it. Quinn's offer tonight was a little different too.

"I haven't had access to a real piano in a few weeks. I'm in a Stravinsky mood; can I get you to turn pages for me?" Quinn asked.

Josh was slightly dubious. "I can't read music."

"That's fine. I'll nod, you turn the page, nothing to it."

So after Quinn had grabbed a quick shower, Josh found himself sitting almost hip to hip beside Quinn on the piano bench, while Quinn played Tango for Piano, then Tarantella and finally a sonata.

"You're amazingly good. Why don't you play with a symphony?" Josh asked.

"How many classical pianists do you know that pull down a million five in a year?"

"Oh, yeah, you have a point, but if you can play this, why don't you play the songs you write, instead of just doing the vocal? I saw you messing around with your keyboard and the computer hookup for most of the day."

"Trent thinks me behind a keyboard is too old school for today's market," Quinn said slowly.

"That sounds like you disagree."

"Trent's been good for my career, and I've been letting him make a lot of decisions for a whole decade now..." Quinn's expression was not a happy one.

"I can hear the unspoken but."

"I'm not so sure what's good for my career and what's good for me is the same thing anymore." Quinn laid a hand on Josh's thigh.

Josh's breath caught a little at the touch.

"If I read you wrong, feel free to tell me to keep my hands to myself. This doesn't fall in the other duties as assigned category," Quinn said softly.

"You're not wrong," Josh replied, because who in their right mind would say no to Quinn Edwards. On the other hand, was sleeping with the boss an epically bad choice? Up to now Josh had always managed to keep his job and his personal life completely separate. He also wasn't sure exactly what Quinn wanted, the man seemed far too intense for casual hookup sex.

Quinn curled a hand lightly against Josh's neck and rubbed a thumb slowly along the line of Josh's jaw. Tilting his head, Quinn moved in for a kiss. Josh's lips parted at the slow pressure

from Quinn's mouth. The kiss deepened, stealing his sanity. Finally Quinn broke the kiss, breathing rough and uneven.

"Hell, you don't do anything halfway do you," said Josh.

For just an instant, there was that wide wolfish smile then it was gone. "I have a bed, a really big one in fact."

"Okay." That was a truly lame response, but damn... the man had melted half of Josh's brain cells, and the rest of them were contemplating joining all the blood rushing to his cock. He let Quinn take his hand and lead him to the master bedroom of the suite.

Quinn flung the coverlet back and stretched out on the bed. Josh crawled up beside him. They spent a long time kissing and touching before the clothes got tossed on the floor. If Josh had thought Quinn was hot without his shirt, seeing him naked was amazing. That long lean body, narrow hips and muscled thighs, his prick flushed, hard and leaking and those talented fingers were currently wrapped around Josh's own cock, stroking him. Quinn's mouth was busy leaving a trail of kisses and soft bites across Josh's chest.

"C-close," Josh mumbled, rational thought pretty much gone, and then he was thrusting into Quinn's grip as the climax crashed through him.

Quinn must have been right near the edge too, because he ground himself against the front of Josh's thigh in barely coordinated thrusts that abruptly turned into sharp short bucks as warmth splattered Josh's skin.

They lay draped together for a while, catching their breath before Quinn grabbed his shirt off the floor and mopped up the majority of the mess.

Josh wondered if he was about to be requested to leave discretely. Instead Quinn turned off the light, and pulled Josh close, wrapping an arm and a leg around him.

"I haven't... had anybody in my bed since... my abduction," Quinn whispered.

Josh suddenly felt as if a huge chunk of trust had been offered and he didn't want to do anything to endanger Quinn. "What about Ron and Don? They'll know I didn't leave."

"They are paid very well both to protect me and keep their mouths shut."

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Having Josh in his arms was the closest thing to contentment that Quinn had known in a long time. He wished he understood why he felt this compelling attraction, especially since it felt like only half of it was physical. He wouldn't go so far as to call it love at first sight, because he doubted the existence of anything so fairytale, but there was something. Maybe it was temporary and shallow, whatever this was going on between them, but he'd take what he could get because the entire rest of his life felt like it was on the edge of becoming totally glued.

Here in the warm sleepy darkness, he let his hands roam over Josh's body. The man had some nice muscle tone without being ripped, a dusting of chest hair and a very nicely curved ass.

There was enough height difference that laying chest to chest, the top of Josh's head tucked nicely against Quinn's cheekbone.

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If Josh thought Quinn looked relaxed asleep on the sofa, waking up next to him gave a whole new perspective. Quinn slept in a careless sprawl, one arm flung across Josh's body. In the dim light seeping under the hotel's black out curtains, Quinn looked vulnerable. Josh wished he knew more about the kidnapping. All he knew was the bare bones released to the media; he suspected there was a great deal more to it. Had there been torture? Abuse? His musing was interrupted by a sleepy yawn from Quinn.

"Wha'time zit?" asked Quinn.

"Six fifteen."

"I'm not getting up yet." Quinn snuggled up close,

"Certain parts are up." Josh noted, feeling the stiffness of Quinn's morning erection pressing against his hip.

That drew a low sexy chuckle from Quinn. "Do you top or bottom?"

"Mostly bottom."

"I'll keep that in mind. Any chance I could get you to add lube and condoms to the shopping list when we get to Tulsa this evening?"

"Are you planning ahead?" Josh asked.

"I'm trying to."

Josh smiled. Even if this wasn't ever going anywhere long term, he was pleased by the idea that this might be more than a one night stand. "I could help you with that problem," he teased, grazing fingertips across the tip of Quinn's hard cock.

"Mmm yes."

Josh curled his fingers around the warm length of Quinn's prick and stroked him firmly. Quinn made a low sound of pleasure and nipped at Josh's shoulder. Josh rolled up on his side and lined up his own aching prick against Quinn's so he could get them both off. It was a delicious friction, slicked a bit by drips of pre-come, both pricks rubbing against each other. He felt the pulse of his partner's cock as Quinn gasped, come spurting up between them. Josh followed moments later.

Soft kisses were placed along the side of Josh's face and Quinn's beard stubble rasped against his own.

"We're gonna stick to the sheets," whispered Josh.

"Don't care," muttered Quinn, hugging Josh to him. "Not my sheets."

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Interviews were a stressor. Quinn grinned at the reporter across the table of the restaurant and wondered if she could tell how much he didn't want to be there, or if it even mattered. Heather Jones was dark-haired and curvy. She probably looked great on camera.

"You obviously sing but do you play? It seems to me you did earlier in your career," she asked.

"Yes. I play piano and I'm not awful on a guitar."

"The fans don't ever see you play either of those. Any reason why?"

"I guess maybe it's a focus thing. If I'm belting out a tune for the crowd, I don't want to be distracted by what my hands are doing." *Lie, lie*, he told himself.

"Do you think your kidnapping experience has contributed to your fame?"

"Probably, publicity is publicity even when it's not the kind you'd like." Quinn's hand clenched around the coffee cup. Any hunger he'd had was instantly swamped by the wave of nausea. He wished fervently that people would forget that part of his life and move on.

"Yeah I guess that does ring true. Was your food bad?" she asked, gesturing at the half eaten sandwich.

"No, I'd just eaten a batch of junk food a couple of hours ago. I wasn't hungry."

The interview was finally over and he gave Heather a wicked grin and perfunctory kiss before he left. Don was waiting near the door to the restaurant. Josh was supposed to have arranged for the limo to pick him up at three. It was already quarter 'til. Quinn scanned the area for a bathroom. Sour bile was clawing at the back of his throat.

In the bathroom of the hotel restaurant, Quinn splashed some water on his face, hoping vainly to stall off the inevitable. He should have known better and only ordered coffee. Memory snips clawed at his thoughts. *Partying with Craig, being hounded by the paparazzi, grabbed, drugged, weeks in a small dingy room. They didn't torture him, they wanted ransom. In the beginning there had been relatively regular meals. After a couple of weeks he had tried to escape. It failed, and they'd beaten him bloody and unconscious. The food restriction had started then. There was plenty of water available from the sink in the narrow dingy bathroom, but food became infrequent. They wanted him weak.*

Nope. Nope. His body wasn't going to tolerate it. Moments later he was hanging over the toilet, puking. Eventually the whole thing dwindled to dry heaves and Quinn stumbled back to the sink to rinse out his mouth. He glanced at his watch. Ten past three, Josh was going to think he had gotten lost. He leaned on the sink, breathing slowly, trying to quell the shaking of his muscles.

Quinn walked out of the bathroom and headed for the lobby of the hotel. He spied Josh leaning against a pillar, arms crossed. Don was two steps away looking slightly dubious.

"Hey, did the interview run late?" Josh asked.

"No. I just got distracted."

“Are you okay?” Josh eyeballed him with a strange expression.

“Yeah, why?”

“You look kind of . . . well . . . pasty white.”

“I’m fine,” Quinn answered stiffly.

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Josh didn’t buy Quinn’s brush off for a moment, but he wasn’t sure what to do. Spending one night in Quinn’s bed was not enough for him to make very many presumptions on how far he could push the man for answers. He settled for climbing into the limo with Quinn and began listing off all the details for the night’s concert that had already been taken care of.

The tour bus was parked outside the arena and Quinn headed for it when they pulled up.

“The band is already inside and sound checks are underway,” said Josh, walking beside Quinn. Don silently ambled along two steps behind.

“Okay.”

“The camera crew is showing up in about ninety minutes to tape the clip they’ll air.”

“Fine.” Quinn climbed up into the bus, went to his usual seat and picked up his portable keyboard. He sat down with it in his lap and started to put the attached headphones on.

“Are you going to go over to the dressing room so the makeup people can do their magic before the camera crew gets here?” Josh knew he was pressing. He could tell Quinn was wound way too tight about something. He just had no idea what. Don was outside standing guard. Quinn and Josh were alone on the bus.

Dropping to one knee, Josh put a hand on Quinn’s arm. “What went wrong?” he asked softly.

Quinn closed his eyes and shook his head slightly, but gave no answer. Instead he put the keyboard back where it had been, sitting on its end against the window. He gestured for Josh to stand up. When Josh complied, Quinn pulled Josh down into his lap, spreading his legs so Josh’s butt landed between Quinn’s thighs. Josh’s legs dangled awkwardly over the arm of the seat. Both of Quinn’s arms wound around Josh’s body and Quinn buried his face against Josh’s collarbone.

Josh was surprised and uncertain. After a moment he twisted enough to put an arm around Quinn’s shoulders. With the other hand, he stroked Quinn’s hair. “Talk to me,” Josh prompted.

“No.”

Josh was frustrated by the one word answers. “Quinn, I want to help but you have to give me a clue.”

“I need . . .” Quinn’s voice trailed off.

“Come on, it’s okay, tell me.”

Quinn shook his head, and Josh got no more information from him.

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At least the TV clip focused on the new album, the tour and Quinn’s plans to get back in the recording studio in the spring. Quinn pasted on a grin and sang one of the hits from the album for the cameras, knowing full well they would only keep thirty to sixty seconds for actual airing. Singing with the band was the easy part.

After the TV crew departed, he went back to the dressing room and sent Josh back to the bus for a couple of the protein shakes. As he was drinking them and listening to the chatter of the band, Trent arrived.

“Channel Five is very pleased with the footage. It’ll get aired on the eleven o’clock news.” Trent flopped down in a chair near Quinn. “So how is Josh working out?”

“Fabulous. He’s on the ball and really decent at keeping up with details.”

“Excellent. Since there’s no concert tomorrow night I’ve made arrangements for us to have dinner with one of the execs who books the pavilion outside the DC beltway. It holds 25,000 and I think you have a good chance of selling it out.”

“When?” Quinn asked.

“We could tack it on the end of this part of the tour.”

“No. I’ve got exactly two nights out of thirty with no concert. My voice is already getting a little rougher than I’d like.” Quinn protested. He knew the clip that had just been filmed reinforced that fact.

“Butts in seats pay the bills.”

“It doesn’t if I sound like crap.” Quinn had had this conversation with Trent before. The man pushed hard. It wasn’t that Quinn wasn’t grateful for the success but he felt like he was running on the edge of empty. The damn stress thing with his stomach was making it just that much harder. There were dark moments when he wondered if he was dying of some sort of stomach cancer. Would that be better than being some weak painfully sensitive *artiste*?

“Just think about it please,” Trent said.

“The answer will still be no. “

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The concert went off well, and Quinn stuck to his routine of letting the band do whatever they wanted in terms of partying, with a brief warning that they still had to leave by two pm tomorrow to get to the next city. Quinn also made another offer to let Josh go hang with the band if he wanted. Josh declined and Quinn was close to blissfully happy that he did.

Ron and Don escorted the two of them out the stage door, running a gauntlet of screaming fans to head toward the vehicle. One woman grabbed a hold of Quinn's sleeve with steely fingers. Quinn flinched and tried to pull away, irrational fear spiking through him. She was persistent. It took both Don and Ron to pry her away and get Quinn shoved into the back seat of the limo.

He was shaking hard enough to chatter his teeth as Josh was pushed into the back seat also, closely followed by Don. His brother Ron slid into the front seat.

"Blow the horn and start rolling," Don instructed the driver. "Fucking psychos..." he muttered.

*I will not have a meltdown like some freaking prima donna*, Quinn swore internally. His fists were clenched and hugged under his arms as he fought to stop trembling. He felt Josh's hand on the back of his neck, gently working at the taut muscles there.

"Just try to relax. You're safe," said Josh.

"Boss, there's no way we're letting somebody drag you off," added Don. "I was tempted to break her fucking fingers, but figured you didn't need the law suit."

Quinn gave a snort of bitter laughter, his tension easing some. "It might have been worth it."

The bodyguards took Quinn into the hotel through a back entrance to insure no repeats of the earlier event. Josh followed him straight into the suite.

"Want me to order beer? Or something a little stiffer?" Josh asked.

"Beer's fine, Sammy Adams if they have it. I'm kind of a light weight when it comes to drinking." Quinn stood in the center of the living room, running his fingers through sweat damp hair, having totally lost his train of thought.

"The shower's in that direction." Josh pointed toward the master suite.

"Oh... yeah... fuck, what would I do without you?" Quinn pulled Josh into a brief kiss, glad of Josh's presence when he felt so rattled.

A hot shower began to settle Quinn back into his routine. By the time he was dried off and had put on a pair of jeans, he felt almost normal, or rather as close to normal as he was ever likely to get in the middle of a tour these days.

In the outer room, Josh had flipped on the TV and appeared to be channel surfing. "No piano in this hotel," he commented.

"That's okay, I got my fix last night. Besides...I'm kind of hoping you went shopping at some point today."

Josh gave him a mischievous little smile. "I did."

Quinn cracked the cap on one of the beer bottles and took a long swig. "Good man." He sprawled into the corner of the sofa and spread his legs. He crooked a finger at Josh and Josh scooted over to sit in the vee of Quinn's legs, leaning back against Quinn's chest. "Any football on?"

“I think there might be a west coast game still playing.” Josh thumbed through channels until he found the game.

“I mostly just want some background noise,” Quinn said softly in Josh’s ear.

“I’m... uh... not much of a screamer,” Josh said.

Quinn laughed. “I guess that’s good to know.” He took another deep drink of his beer, the buzz already beginning. He hadn’t anything other than two bottles of Gatorade on stage, since the whole “thing” that afternoon.

He nuzzled against the side of Josh’s neck, brushing light kisses and nibbles on his skin. His hands wandered over Josh’s chest, petting and exploring, eventually pulling Josh’s shirt off. In the light from the end table lamp, he could see the pale skin of Josh’s chest flushing slightly with arousal. Mmm, not to mention the nice prominent bulge under his fly. Quinn skated his palm across that, and Josh groaned in pleasure.

“If you tell me that you left the fruits of your shopping trip in your room down the hall, I’m going to be unhappy,” Quinn whispered, nipping at Josh’s earlobe.

“Nope, I tossed the bag under the wet bar in the corner this afternoon.”

“Yee-hah. How ‘bout you go grab them and meet me in the bedroom?”

“I can do that.” Josh stood up and headed toward the wet bar.

Quinn was tossing his jeans in the direction of the dresser when Josh came into the bedroom with a pair of items in his hand. Quinn took them from him and laid them within easy reach on the bed. He hooked a finger in the belt loop of Josh’s slacks. “These have to go.” He popped the button and eased down the fly. As his knuckles grazed the fabric of Josh’s briefs, he could feel the dampness already there. He removed both slacks and briefs in one go.

He pushed Josh down onto the bed and stretched out beside him. Drawing Josh tight against his body, he began to kiss his lover, a long languid exploration of that delicious mouth with his tongue as Quinn’s hand roamed over warm skin. Oh God, he needed this. He needed everything from the trust he was finding he could place in Josh to just quietly be there when he was upset to the primal attraction of wanting to be buried balls deep in the slender beautiful body.

Quinn groped for the lube, having to resort to two hands to open the brand new tube, and gently pushed a couple of fingers between Josh’s ass cheeks. He rubbed carefully for a moment before inserting a fingertip.

“Quinn, I’m not a virgin and I’m not breakable,” Josh murmured.

“Sorry, I just... I want this to be good for you too.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll bitch if I’m uncomfortable. I may like to bottom but I do have a spine.”

Quinn laughed. “Good.” He let himself worry a little less about being gentle, and worked Josh open until his lover was moaning and rocking down against Quinn’s fingers. It was another moment of needing two hands for the condom. He hooked an arm under one of Josh’s knees and

knelt close enough to thrust in as he watched Josh's face. Hell, Josh was beautiful, dark hair completely messy, intense blue eyes, lush lips reddened by kissing. Josh's cock bobbed hard and leaking against his belly. Quinn curled his fingers around that hot hard length, trying to stroke his lover in time with his thrusts. Fuck, for a musician his timing sucked, but Josh didn't seem to care, making small sounds of pleasure.

Josh's hand closed around Quinn's, picking up the pace. He made a sharp gasp and come spurted in thick jets up his belly. The pulsing squeeze of muscles sent Quinn over his own edge and he rode the wave of pleasure until he was completely spent. He collapsed, winded, to the bed, half on top of Josh, who didn't seem to mind.

Josh placed a long sloppy kiss on Quinn's mouth. "Amazingly good," he mumbled.

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After the events of the previous day, Josh was pleased to note that Quinn was almost relaxed over the morning breakfast buffet. Really good sex did wonders for nearly anyone's mood. The schedule allowed the bus to leave later than usual, as there was no concert that night, only a drive long enough that it would be broken into two parts.

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The hotel corridor was quiet as Quinn walked toward his suite, only Ron strode along beside him. Dinner with Trent and the executive director of the pavilion had been miserable.

"Are you done for the evening?" asked Ron as they reached the door.

"Yeah. See you in the morning."

Quinn shut the door to his suite and stood motionless for several seconds, gulping against the raging nausea. He should have known better. Eating most of a meal while Trent coaxed and wheedled for him to agree to add another night to the tour was a nerve-racking ordeal. Quinn gave up and bolted for the bathroom.

Ten seconds later he was doubled over, one hand braced on the wall, puking his guts out. It went on interminably, driving him to his knees. Eventually it let up enough for him to catch his breath. He sat on the tile floor, forehead against the cool porcelain lip of the toilet as he shivered miserably, his body betraying him in every way possible. Why couldn't he control this? Every fucking time the tension in his life peaked, his stomach rebelled violently, revisiting the months after the kidnapping when he struggled so hard to regain the weight and muscle tone he had lost during captivity.

Tears burned in his eyes. Fuck, fuck, fuck, he wished for comfort, somebody to hold him or get him a glass of water to rinse the sour taste from his mouth. He felt like some pathetic, sick little kid. Oh hell, again... It was mostly dry heaves this time but it left him sweaty, cold and shaking. For just a moment he let himself wish Josh was there.

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Breakfast was at noon per usual and Josh watched Quinn come into the dining room reserved for the breakfast buffet. The band and crew were already digging in. Josh knew that Quinn had gone to dinner last night with Trent and some big wig. Having no idea when the meeting would be over, Quinn had somewhat apologetically told Josh, they couldn't see each other after hours last night. This morning Quinn looked rough, eyes bloodshot, unshaven, face haggard. If Quinn had been a more stereotypical rock star, Josh would have speculated the man got rip roaring hammered last night.

Josh sat down at the table where Quinn was nursing a cup of coffee. "Should I be getting you hair of the dog?"

Quinn gave him a bleary squint. "No. Just maybe some Tylenol. I didn't sleep well, I have a headache."

"How'd the dinner go last night?"

"Not well. Trent is ... not a happy camper. I told him if he wanted me to play that pavilion in DC it would have to be on the second part of the tour, because my voice can only take just so many nights in a row."

"You do sound a little rough this morning. Maybe tea and honey would be better than coffee?" Josh offered. He would have preferred to hug Quinn tight and tuck him into a bed for some sleep, but tea was the best he could do at the moment.

"Maybe."

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An hour's sleep on the bus helped a little. Quinn still felt horribly queasy and only the need to coddle his vocal cords convinced him to drink the hot tea Josh brought him. Mostly he tried to marshal his strength for the night's concert.

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Josh pulled a bottle of Gatorade out of the mini-fridge and set it on the coffee table. Judging from the diminishing crowd noise out in the field house, Quinn was done and would be coming back to the dressing room any minute. The band came in first, laughing and joking and stripping off sweat soaked T-shirts. Quinn was the last through the door. He was every bit as sweaty as his band, but his skin tone was nearly grey.

When Quinn came in, he put out a hand to brace himself against the wall and stood there looking somewhat blankly at the floor. Josh walked toward him and was almost to him, when Quinn's eyes rolled back and he toppled sideways. He fell to the floor like a broken puppet.

"Quinn!" yelled Andy, the drummer, starting toward his fallen colleague. Josh pushed the other man out of the way and dropped to his knees beside Quinn. He pressed a couple of fingers to Quinn's throat, and found a fast weak pulse. Had Quinn gotten too dehydrated? A couple cups of tea were about all the man had drunk all day.

After a few moments of deathly stillness, Quinn made a small groan and groped toward his head.

Josh caught his hand. "Lie still, you passed out."

Andy seconded the order by putting his hand on Quinn's shoulder and keeping Quinn from sitting up. "Jeeesus fuck, are you okay?" asked Andy as other band members crowded around Quinn.

"Should we call an ambulance?" asked Rudy.

"No, 'm fine," mumbled Quinn, trying to push Josh and Andy's hands away.

"No ambulance. Not yet anyway. Andy, help me get him up and we'll lay him down on the sofa in the other room," ordered Josh.

The two men hauled Quinn to his feet and walked his unsteady form to the next room. They laid him on the sofa and Josh put a restraining hand on Quinn's chest. "You are going to lie perfectly still for at least five minutes while I make up my mind whether you need that ambulance."

Quinn closed his eyes and nodded.

Josh shooed Andy out of the room and told the band that they should continue with whatever cleanup and breakdown chores they needed to do. Everyone was aware that Quinn passing out could turn into a publicity nightmare. Josh grabbed the Gatorade bottle, coming back into the inner room, he locked the door and sat on the floor beside the sofa.

"I want a straight answer from you. What the hell is going on? You have looked like absolute shit all day. You haven't eaten anything. Hell, you hardly ever eat anything, not solid food anyway. I need to know what's going on," Josh said.

"It's complicated," Quinn whispered, barely meeting Josh's eyes.

"No it's not. You're hitting bottom Quinn, and I can't figure out why. Did you go out drinking with Trent last night? Is this some weird sort of guy anorexia?"

"No."

"Talk to me Quinn," Josh pleaded.

"It's a leftover." Tears brimmed in Quinn's eyes and he looked away.

"A leftover from what?"

"The kidnapping."

"You're losing me," said Josh.

"When I was being held... they didn't want me dead, because they wanted ransom money. But they didn't want me to have any strength to fight back either. They ... food was infrequent."

"Keep going."

"I lost thirty-seven pounds in six weeks." Quinn's voice was a bitter whisper.

“Uh... that’s pretty bad. But now... You’re not a skeleton. Now granted you are kind of thin, but you have decent muscle mass. I should know I’ve seen it up close and personal,” Josh said, putting a gentle hand down Quinn’s chest.

“I ... When... I gained back most of the weight I lost, but now when things get crazy in my life... Last night, at dinner, I ate with Trent. Actually ate. I spent almost the entire night puking my guts out. When the stress hits, if I eat solid food I barf. I try to compensate. All those protein shakes and stuff, I try to make sure I get at least a thousand calories, more if I can but last night I was so fucking sick. Today... lord today is not much better. The tea you gave me was truly the only thing I think I could have handled, even that...there were moments when I thought it was going to come back up.”

Josh rubbed a hand down Quinn’s arm. It was obvious the man was in complete misery both physically and emotionally, and it just about broke Josh’s heart. He wanted to offer Quinn any comfort the man was willing to accept. Josh stood and held out his hand to Quinn to help him sit up. Quinn was still pretty damn pale. Josh sat in the corner of the sofa and pulled Quinn back so he lay half curled across Josh’s lap, head on Josh’s chest.

“We are going to sit here and you are going to drink at least some of that Gatorade. If you get sick, I am taking you to the hospital so they can put an IV in your arm. I care about you and I am not going to let you put yourself in danger. Do you understand?”

Quinn nodded, and Josh wondered if Quinn was going to burst into tears, he looked so on edge.

“But first I’m going to tell the guys in the band that we think you have a bad case of food poisoning and you’ve been hiding it. I will cancel tomorrow’s interview...” Josh pressed a finger to Quinn’s lips when the man looked like he was about to object. “No. Everybody gets sick occasionally, and it’s the most plausible cover story. And if you aren’t better, I will call Trent and tell him he needs to cancel tomorrow’s concert.”

Quinn looks utterly miserable, but he whispered, “Okay.”

Josh placed a soft kiss on Quinn’s mouth before he left to talk to the rest of the band.

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When Josh came back a few minutes later, Quinn had cracked the Gatorade seal and taken a few sips. His body was so desperate for the liquid, the raging nausea didn’t flare like he expected.

Josh sat down beside him again. “The guys are about to head out into the paparazzi mob. If people start asking, they’ll pass along the food poisoning story. Ron and Don are going to hang out and drink coffee or something until you’re ready to go, then they’ll escort us back to the hotel.”

“It’d be easier if I had a cocaine habit,” muttered Quinn.

“Nah, just trendier.” Josh put his arms around Quinn and held him.

Such simple care nearly broke what little control Quinn had left. He rested his forehead on Josh’s shoulder, and blinked back tears.

“I wish you’d told me earlier. Even if you’d told me some lie about a delicate stomach or mythical food allergies, I’d have tried to come up with a way to help you cope better. You know you need somebody professional to help.”

Annoyance and guilt flashed jointly through Quinn. “It’d be a publicity disaster. Male rock stars aren’t allowed to have eating disorders. And I still have nine days left on this leg of the tour. If Trent was pissed before, he’ll absolutely blow a freaking gasket if this gets out.”

Josh gripped Quinn’s jaw in his hand. “If cancelling one concert keeps you out of the hospital, I think maybe he can just suck it up and deal with it. We need a game plan, some ideas on how to help you make it through the next week and a half. Then we’ll find some discrete psychologist to help with this long term.”

“I saw... they made me see a shrink once in the hospital right after ... I got rescued.” It was an embarrassing admission.

“Which probably only helped with the short term immediate aftermath. How long has it been since they found you?”

“Ten months.”

“And when did this vomiting thing start?”

“In the hospital. They said it was temporary and gave me some kind of anti-nausea drug. I spent a couple of months putzing around my house, vegging, playing the piano, and did some song writing. I was okay then, more or less. As soon as Trent pushed me back into the studio, it started again. God, I am so fucking useless!” Quinn felt so ashamed of his weakness.

Josh pulled Quinn up tighter in his arms and kissed him. “No, you’re sick. What was done to you caused this, and we need to find a way to deal with it.”

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Josh thought Quinn still looked weak and wobbly as Ron and Don escorted them out to the limo. It was slightly different than usual. Instead of trying to simply assure they blocked rampant fans from access to Quinn, one held onto each of Quinn’s arms to prevent him from falling. Extra security people had been borrowed from the field house to provide a kind of rolling road block around Quinn and his bodyguards. Josh walked along a couple of steps behind.

While they drove back to the hotel, Josh began calling and emailing the pertinent people to cancel the interview scheduled for early afternoon tomorrow. He suspected Quinn was going to need every available moment of rest to have any hope of doing tomorrow night’s concert.

There were only a few avid fans at the hotel and it didn’t prove too difficult to make it up to the suite with minimal interference.

“Are you going to be okay to take a shower?” asked Josh. Quinn had sat down on the bed to take off his shoes. Josh thought he looked about ready to pass out again. He walked over to stand in front of Quinn. “Give me an honest answer. I don’t want you fainting in the bathroom. There’re too many sharp hard surfaces to get hurt on.”

“I don’t know,” said Quinn, looking embarrassed.

“How ‘bout some company then?”

That drew a lop-sided smile from Quinn.

Under the warm water of the shower, Josh cast a critical eye over the length of Quinn’s body. How much damage was Quinn doing to himself trying to manage his PTSD problem alone? It was a PTSD problem in Josh’s mind, because it seemed to be a direct result of the kidnapping. Why the hell had nobody else ever noticed? Josh had known Quinn for less than a week, and even if he hadn’t been sleeping with the man, he’d have eventually put two and two together in some fashion.

Quinn had always been lanky, Josh remembered glancing through a batch of publicity photos when he was applying for the job as Quinn’s PA. At six feet tall, he estimated that the man probably weighed one eighty or one ninety before the whole kidnapping incident. If Quinn had lost close to forty pounds while being held captive, that would have put him down near terminal cancer patient thinness.

Josh couldn’t quite count ribs on his lover, but the angles of his collar bones and hips were probably sharper than they should be. That worried Josh. He picked up the bottle of shower gel and began to soap Quinn’s body.

“I passed out. I didn’t break anything. I think I can manage,” said Quinn.

Josh looked up into Quinn’s eyes. “The less energy you expend this evening, the more likely you’ll be okay for tomorrow night.” He was trying to appeal to Quinn’s sense of logic.

Quinn looked at him for a long moment then nodded.

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Quinn had pulled on a pair of sleep pants after the shower and walked out toward the living room of the suite. He had promised to try and drink some tea that Josh had ordered from room service.

Out in the other room, he found the cart... and Trent.

“What the hell is going on?” Trent demanded. “I got a call from channel eleven, saying you’d canceled the interview tomorrow, something about illness. I couldn’t get hold of you, or Josh and I ended up talking to Andy who said you passed out after the concert.”

Quinn sat heavily on the edge of the sofa. He did *not* want to have this conversation with Trent, not tonight when he already felt so ill.

“I did. I’ve ... been really sick,” Quinn replied.

“Did you...” Josh began, walking out of the bedroom, naked except for the towel around his waist. The PA froze when he saw Trent. Josh turned on his heel and went back into the bedroom.

“Oh for crying out loud!” Trent shouted. “Does this have something to do with fucking some guy? I thought we agreed two years ago that that had to never happen again!”

“Who I sleep with is my own business!” shouted Quinn, standing up.

“No, it’s my business too, because if this gets out, your whole damn career will detonate. Oh shit, are you HIV positive?”

“Fuck you Trent! No I’m not HIV positive. I have ... the stress from this tour is making me puke my guts out so bad I passed out. I can’t do the damn interview tomorrow. I’m not even sure I can do the concert.”

“The concert represents nine thousand tickets. You *will* be on stage tomorrow night.”

“And if I pass out on stage, what then?”

That apparently did give Trent pause. He looked angry and confused. “How the hell did you let this happen?” he spluttered.

“Let? Let? Trent I spent six weeks of my life living in a hole, starving, slowly losing my mind because a couple of greedy assholes thought I was somebody else! You barely gave me two months to recover before you started pushing me back toward the studio. I managed to pull off an entire album in less than six months and then you started setting up this tour. It hasn’t even been a year you fucker, and I’m still fighting to put my life back together. Get the hell out!” Quinn screamed.

Trent stormed out of the suite, slamming the door behind him.

Quinn stood trembling in fury. How dare that egotistical shit try to blame him! As the adrenaline of his rage drained from him, the nausea that never seemed to be far enough away surged in its place. Quinn lunged for the sink of the wet bar along the wall and vomited up the meager contents of his stomach. Retching pathetically, he clung to the edge of the counter, gasping.

A warm hand touched between his shoulder blades and an arm slid around his body, supporting him.

“I’ve got you,” said Josh softly, and rubbed his hand down Quinn’s back as he tried to catch his breath.

When Quinn finally stopped gagging, Josh turned on the water in the sink and grabbed a towel hanging off to one side. He wiped Quinn’s face and handed him a glass of water. Quinn rinsed out his mouth, spitting sour foul water into the sink.

“Sit down,” said Josh.

Quinn started to turn and go toward the sofa, but his legs buckled beneath him. Josh’s grip tightened and Quinn was eased to the floor.

“Easy, it’s okay. I’m right here,” soothed Josh, holding Quinn’s body against his own.

Quinn gave up and sobbed in Josh’s arms. His throat burned, his nose ran and tears flowed down his cheeks.

“Sshh, I’ve got you,” whispered Josh, kissing Quinn’s temple.

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There were perks to staying in an elite hotel, and an on-call hotel doctor was one of them. Josh got on the phone to the concierge, asked them to send whoever they had on staff and gave them specific information that his employer was suffering from what he thought was food poisoning and needed something to help him stop vomiting. It was only half a lie and anyway he gambled that any doctor who made middle of the night “house calls”, could probably be relied upon to keep his mouth shut for a few hours anyway.

Josh had helped Quinn to bed and placed a trash can close in case it was needed. He had convinced Quinn to drink a little of the tea room service had delivered and neither of them seemed very certain whether it would stay down.

“This is stupid,” muttered Quinn, looking positively miserable, curled under the blanket.

“It’s this or the ER, and if he thinks you’re dangerously dehydrated, I’m going to be tempted to call an ambulance. Quinn, I won’t endanger your life to preserve your reputation.”

There was a soft knock at the door and Ron showed the doctor in. He was a black man in his forties with a touch of gray at his temples.

“I’m Dr. Spearan. The concierge told me Mr. Edwards is ill and thinks he has food poisoning.”

“This way,” Josh directed him to the bedroom.

It took a few minutes for the doctor to check Quinn out. “It could be food poisoning, or it might be a very nasty GI virus. How long have you been vomiting?”

“Since last night,” Quinn said. “I thought it was a little better, and then I got sick again about an hour and a half ago. I’m supposed to leave for San Antonio tomorrow and hopefully do a concert tomorrow night. If I could stop puking, I might be able to pull it off.”

“I’ll give you a dose of phenergan to help you tonight, and a prescription to get you through the next couple of days. If it’s a virus, it could take three to five days for you to see some improvement. Eat lightly if you can, drink clear liquids like Gatorade and juice. If the Phenergan doesn’t help, you are probably going to have to go the ER for some IV fluids.”

Quinn nodded.

“I’ll keep a close eye on him,” said Josh.

Quinn took the offered tablets with a sip of water.

“It’s very probable this will make you a little groggy,” said the doctor.

“That’s fine. He was so sick last night he didn’t get much sleep,” commented Josh. After a hefty tip to the doctor, and asking for his discretion, Josh shut the door and went back to Quinn. Josh stripped his clothes back off and crawled into bed. “Any better?”

“Maybe. I think it’s also making me feel stupidly tired.”

“You need the rest.” Josh stretched out close to Quinn.

“Should I fire Trent?” Quinn put a hand on Josh’s side.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I’m qualified to make that decision.”

“I’m just thinking out loud. He’s done some good things for my career, but lately...”

Josh scooted closer, hugging Quinn to him. “Stop thinking. For now, just go to sleep.”

“Will you be here when I wake up?” Quinn asked, his words beginning to slur.

“Always.” After the word came out, Josh wondered what he’d just promised. Did he really care about Quinn enough to consider this relationship serious? Quinn curled enough to rest his head on Josh’s shoulder, and Josh cupped his fingers around Quinn’s nearly limp arm. Yes, he was falling for Quinn hard.

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Swimming up out of brain fog worthy of a serious drinking binge, Quinn blinked slowly. Josh was sitting up against the headboard, his laptop balanced on his legs. Seeing that Quinn was awake, he set the laptop down on the floor.

“Hey, how’re you doing?” Josh asked softly, pushing hair back off Quinn’s forehead.

“Okay, I guess.”

“Do you think you’re up to drinking something? Tea, coffee, juice?”

“I can’t say I’m exactly a hot tea fan, but it seems to work better than some other things,” Quinn replied.

“Okay, I’m going to order room service, breakfast for me and tea for you.” Josh picked up the room phone.

Quinn gave Josh an odd pleading look. “Can you make sure you don’t get sausage for breakfast?”

“Yeah, okay. I’m not that big a fan of it anyway. Why?”

“Bad memories.”

Josh wondered if he should press further but decided not to. He placed the order while Quinn shuffled off to take care of business in the bathroom. Quinn returned and crawled back into bed, wishing he could stay there for about a week.

“I have a couple of thoughts based on what the doctor said last night. If we discretely leak to the media that you have the stomach flu, we can justify allowing to keep your obligations down to concerts only for several days,” said Josh.

Quinn rolled the idea around his sluggish brain for a minute. “That could work. You said a couple of thoughts.”

“I think you need another dose of the Phenergan. I sent Don off to get the prescription filled an hour ago. He should be back soon.”

“If it makes me feel this zoned out, I’m not sure I could perform on stage at all,” Quinn said.

“The doctor told me he gave you a double sized dose last night, to try and make sure your dehydration didn’t get worse. I think if we do this preemptively, we can get you pretty well rehydrated and you can sleep on the bus until about two hours before the concert. There’s a full bathroom at the place in San Antonio in your dressing room. You can take a shower and get dressed there.”

“It might work,” Quinn acknowledged. “Cancelling a concert causes all sorts of contractual legal problems.”

Josh placed a soft kiss on Quinn’s mouth. “This is not a solution. This is a short term get you through the end of the tour stop gap fix. You know that don’t you?”

Quinn nodded. He wished it was a solution but he was enough of a rational adult to understand that he couldn’t continue living this way. It was tearing him apart, physically as much as mentally.

“If you want me to, I will be with you as long as it takes,” Josh whispered.

He could feel the burn of tears in his eyes. “I need you in my life,” Quinn said. He touched his fingertips to Josh’s lips. “I love you. You’re the one thing that’s holding me together.”

Josh put his arms around Quinn and held him.

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It worked after a fashion. Josh got tea, a few bites of toast and meds into Quinn. Next came a shower, some clothes and the quick pack up of Quinn’s personal items before boarding the bus. The band expressed their concern and Josh gave out the *latest version* of the diagnosis – possible stomach flu. That information served another purpose too in that the band was more than willing to let Quinn curl up in one of the back seats and sleep. If a few murmurs were passed around regarding Josh’s close attention to Quinn, Josh didn’t care. He and Quinn had briefly discussed that problem too, and Quinn had stated that while he wasn’t issuing a press release about how he felt about Josh, he wasn’t going to hide it any more either.

When the bus pulled into the parking lot of the next venue, the band trooped off the bus, leaving Josh and Quinn alone. Quinn was curled in a knot of arms and legs in one of the back seats, still asleep. Josh crouched down beside him and gently ran a hand through Quinn’s messy hair.

“Hey Quinn, we’re there,” Josh said softly.

Quinn blinked and slowly unfolded himself in a jerky uncoordinated stretch. “San’tonio?” he mumbled.

“Yeah. Don’t worry we have some time. There’s nobody here on the bus but us.” Josh retrieved one of the protein shakes from the back and brought it to Quinn. Quinn sipped a little of it. “Better?” Josh asked.

“Some.”

“You still look close to wiped out. I have a question. It’s because I care, and I’m trying not to worry too much.”

“Okay,” Quinn responded slowly.

“What other problems, if any, is this causing? Weight loss, exhaustion and?”

Quinn stared at the ceiling, not meeting Josh’s gaze. “Sore throat and aching stomach muscles if I puke often.” He took a deep breath. “It’s more complicated than just vomiting. It’s the nausea too and me trying to find ways around the horrible feeling that I’m going to puke. Truthfully, I spend more time and effort trying to avoid vomiting than I do hanging over the toilet usually. This,” he hoisted the plastic bottle, “Is my half assed version of a solution.” Quinn took another sip.

Josh sat on the arm of the seat and rubbed Quinn’s shoulder. “As long as it works, along with the Phenergan, maybe we’ll make it through the last week of the tour.”

Watching Quinn on stage that night, Josh knew it wasn’t Quinn’s best performance, and still he was amazed that Quinn managed to put forth as much energy and effort as he did.

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Six more nights to go. Quinn was checking the stage set up doing a little mental calculation on how many hours until the concert. He was feeling a little better than the day before but he was still running pretty close to empty. If he could squeeze in a nap, maybe he’d feel more with it for the night’s performance.

He heard footsteps approaching him and turned expecting to see Carl or one of the other roadies. It was Trent.

“We need to talk,” said Trent.

“So talk.”

“How ‘bout the dressing room? I’d like a little privacy.”

Quinn cast a glance around the nearly empty auditorium. There might have been a total of half a dozen members of the road crew finishing setup chores in far corners of the space. “We can talk right here.”

“Quinn...”

“It’s here or not at all.” Quinn crossed his arms.

“Okay... I think you’re making bad choices.”

“Are we talking about my performance or who I’m sleeping with?” Quinn’s stomach immediately tied itself into a hard sour knot.

“I’ve been managing you for a decade and you’ve come from garage band one gig a week in a no name bar all the way to clearing over a million and a half dollars last year.” Trent emphasized the magnitude of the money figure with his hands. His voice echoed slightly in the huge empty space.

“And you still act like I’m nineteen and clueless. Trent, every time I tell you I want to make changes you shoot me down. I’m tired of it.” Quinn heard a distant clanking sound as a spotlight was being maneuvered into place.

“Screwing some guy who works for you is not a change, it’s career suicide! The public is not going to tolerate you obliterating their fantasy. The female population wants their dream of being your girlfriend and men want to believe you’re an average Joe. Get rid of Josh now before this all explodes.” Trent’s voice was hard and loud. He walked close to Quinn.

“No.”

“Quinn, you *will* step away.”

“No! Fuck you Trent, Josh is the only thing keeping me from slitting my wrists! I need him. I care about him. When this tour ends, you’re gone. You can be the one to get the fuck out of my life, because I am done with you!” Quinn shouted at him and stepped back.

Trent looked like he was going to have an aneurysm, face dark with rage. He stalked off the stage and left.

Quinn sank onto the big guitar amp behind him, legs shaking. He felt like he was going to puke any second. He gulped against the nausea and tried to breathe evenly. After a minute he noticed that someone else had approached him. It was Carl.

“You okay Quinn?” the head roadie asked.

“I’m not sure... Sorry you had to hear that.” Quinn was aware spreading dirty laundry around was bad for business.

“It’s okay. Hey, I know I’m just one of the crew, but we’ve all ... well, we know you’ve been having a rough time. If you need somebody at your back on this, I think most all of us will stand with you.”

“Thanks.”

“And uh, no offense, but you look like absolute shit. Can I do anything to help?” Carl looked concerned.

“Can you find Josh and tell him to come up here?”

“Yeah sure.” Carl jogged off in the direction of the backstage area.

Quinn shakily slid off the edge of the stage and made it to the side wall of the auditorium before he lunged to vomit in a big metal trashcan. He was still bent over it when he felt warm supportive hands gripping his body.

“You done?” Josh asked gently.

“Uh-huh...” groaned Quinn, feeling like he was absolutely drenched in cold sweat.

Josh helped him stand upright and pulled Quinn’s arm over his shoulders. “Carl said you had some kind of a blow up with Trent.” He began walking Quinn very slowly in the direction of the dressing rooms.

“Fired him.”

“Good.” Josh said no more. He took Quinn to one the bathrooms, brought him a bottle of water along with a toothbrush and toothpaste. He stood inches away as Quinn brushed his teeth and sipped a little of the water.

When that was done, he guided Quinn to the smallest, inner most room of the backstage area that had a sofa. He carefully pushed Quinn down onto the sofa and locked the door. He sat down beside Quinn and wrapped both arms around him. “I love you,” he whispered. “Anything you need, I’m here for you.”

Quinn nodded and let himself slump into the comfortable embrace.

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Bright sunshine slanted through the window of the farmhouse den, casting a slight shadow on the untidy stack of hand written sheet music on the grand piano. Quinn played the second line of the melody again, trying to work out the exact flow he wanted.

Josh padded barefoot into the room, carrying a plate with a sandwich on it. “You should have lunch. You’ve been at that for a couple of hours already.”

“Okay, two minutes.” Quinn picked up his pencil and corrected several of the notes of the sheet in front of him. Two months of counseling, completely away from the demands of the studio and the road gave Quinn the time and support to come to better terms with the aftermath of the kidnapping. In the seclusion of a rented farmhouse on the far outskirts of Chicago allowed him to learn better coping skills for the stress his career imposed and it allowed him the time to fall in love with Josh all that much deeper. “That’ll do for the moment. It’s better than halfway done,” he said.

“I like it. I think it’ll sell.”

“I want to premiere it at the opening concert for the second half of the tour in a couple of weeks.” Quinn stood up and walked over to Josh. He broke a piece off the sandwich and stuffed it in his mouth. “Let’s eat out on the porch.” There were still moments when eating normally took more focus than it should, but having Josh close and being able to talk about it helped.

They ate lunch outside, feet propped on the railing.

“How much flack did you get from Roger for wanting at least one night off between every concert? I only heard about half that phone call,” said Josh, referring to Quinn’s new manager.

“He acknowledged that it does drive up the travel expenses for more hotel nights and such but he said he thought he could understand the benefit of having me happier and healthier. Trent would have ...” Quinn trailed off, not really wanting to think hard on the acrimonious break between him and his former manager.

Josh reached out and took Quinn’s hand. “That’s in the past. Let it be.”

Quinn squeezed Josh’s fingers, and took his feet down from the railing. “Come here.” He beckoned for Josh to sit in his lap. The big rocking chair creaked slightly with their combined weight as Josh settled. They shared a long slow kiss. “You’re part of my future,” Quinn whispered.

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Four songs into the concert, Quinn leaned toward the microphone to talk. “I’m working on the beginnings of a new album and I recently finished what I hope will be the signature piece on it. I’d like to introduce you to the person who inspired the song.” He crooked a finger toward Josh, who was standing in the wings. They’d talked about this, in depth, and Quinn had decided he didn’t care how the public took it, he was tired of pretending.

Josh definitely looked a little antsy as he walked out on stage and the crowd quieted a little. Quinn took hold of Josh’s hand and pulled him tight. One hand cupped behind Josh’s head, one hand wrapped around his body, he dipped his head for a kiss, lifting Josh almost on his toes. It was a deliciously long kiss, full of every emotion Quinn felt for the man in his arms.

The crowd went silent for a long moment, and then came a roar of approval. Quinn could feel Josh’s pulse racing. “Love you,” Quinn half shouted. He guided Josh toward the piano and pushed him down onto the seat before settling beside him.

Quinn began to play. “*Rumpled sheets and sunlight on your skin, knowing you’re beside me when I wake...*”