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Fine and Ice

By

A.J. Llewellyn and Stephani Hecht

Dedication

AJ: To Herve for always being my inspiration Stephani: Ronnie, you always have a spot at my dinner table.

Chapter One

Mickey squeezed the ice-cold water bottle over his head one more time and Cristiano gasped. It cleared the fog from his brain and he was certain steam was rising from the cage on his head. He felt like screaming as the bell rang for the fourth round.

He hated the Wild Card Gym more than any other. They cheated you of your seconds out between rounds. They gave you thirty seconds of rest instead of sixty. Cristiano's daddy had always taught him you should train as you fight.

He blinked when the shot came at his left jaw. Concentrate, he told himself. He approved though of only four hard rounds of sparring, to keep the fighters fresh. Cristiano, however, wasn't feeling so fresh. He felt absolutely worked over and he had a whole three minutes to go.

"Use your jab, touch him to the body," Mickey muttered and Cristiano moved back to the center of the ring for more punishment, ignoring the pain in his arms as he lifted his gloved hands and circled his agile opponent.

Cristiano fought to ignore everything, fought to tune out everything except that voice. His ear was tuned to Mickey's voice, but it had been so long...too long. *A hundred bucks a day*, he reminded himself. The crowd cramming the ropes screamed in support of his opponent who drew his strength from it and from the horrible *bachata* music his corner kept playing.

They knew most of the guys hated it...same damned music loop for three hours now. He eyed the strong, wiry Cuban in front of him, admiring his incredibly quick hands and found himself mesmerized by the unusual brush stroke pattern of his punches. He blinked as the cold water seeped through his head cage and into his eyes, bringing his own salty sweat with it, almost blinding him.

Pow! He took a hard hook to the liver and felt winded. Pain, he knew would settle in later, once the adrenaline left him. Man, his arms and head felt heavy and he was hot. He'd forgotten all the pressure that came with a fight. He moved quicker on his feet now, as that vicious, menacing little left came looking for him again, full of bad intentions.

"Jab! Jab!" Mickey screamed and he did. He started getting his punches off, the Cuban smiling at him as he connected. Man, he had some huevos on him. The Cuban's wide grin revealed the gigantic mouth guard protecting his *Pepsodent* smile. Cristiano had known guys like Miguel Angel Marquez as he'd been growing up. The real fighters, the real warriors enjoyed getting hit. They got off on it.

Two months Marquez had been in California, having defected from the world championship training camp in Mexico. He was the current world amateur champion for the third year in a row in the welterweight division. He had defied his own government, which frowned on professional sports. His escape, his audacity, made him a celebrity in the US. He was poised to make millions as a professional boxer. To Cristiano, he was an asshole.

Cristiano found his rhythm now, all the skills he'd learned fighting southpaws suddenly returning to him. He got the Cuban right in the eye, just as the bell rang. Incensed, Miguel Angel Marquez came right up to him, spitting out his mouth guard.

He shouted in rapid-fire Spanish, a dialect Cristiano didn't recognize, but he knew their session was over. He knew the Cuban darling was pissed he'd been caught. Yeah, they were mad. The whole corner huddled around Mickey whose arms gesticulated wildly and for a moment, Cristiano felt defeated. He'd just blown his chance to make some good money. He knew they were pissed, not because he could have hurt him and wrecked the upcoming television fight, but because he'd moved right through the superstar's defenses and shellacked him.

Cristiano took off his headgear and shrugged. "Sorry."

The Cuban took in the cut over Cristiano's right eye and the blood seemed to appease him

His smile was back and they touched gloves in a gesture of friendship. "*Por nada*, it's nothing." Miguel Angel, who went by Angel and everybody made sure to pronounce it the Latin way, *Ahn-hell*, sauntered to his corner.

Cristiano stumbled through the ropes and wondered how he would convince his mother he'd given up boxing and was concentrating on his studies. He'd gone back to college and in truth, loved it. He was studying criminal justice and he never wanted to go back to the sweet science, but a hundred bucks a day to spar Angel Marquez had been too hard to refuse.

Mickey was in raptures as he came over to unwrap Cristiano's gloved hands and winched the mouthpiece out of his jaw.

"You did great, amigo. You showed him."

Cristiano laughed. "Yeah, he sure got mad, didn't he?" He glanced over at the Cuban who was now working the crazy ball and for a moment, their glances met. Something in Cristiano, a frisson of some powerful emotion he did not recognize, reacted strongly and he glanced away, feeling like he could no longer breathe. He was surprised when Mickey touched his face.

"Your eye isn't bad at all. Just a nick in the brow...looks worse than it is. Get cleaned up and I'll put something on it...we'll make sure he doesn't bang you in the face for a couple days. They want you back again tomorrow. Your arms okay?"

"My arms are fine." He was stunned the Cuban wanted to keep working with him and for the first time since he'd walked into the gym, realized why Angel Marquez was a champion. He was willing to work hard for his dreams. He was willing to work with a guy who'd hurt him. It took a real man to be willing to learn from his mistakes.

Cristiano showered quickly, refusing to glance at the moldy ceiling and grimy walls. He kept the water very hot, figuring it should kill some of the bacteria. He threw on his underpants, sweats and T-shirt and was examining the cut over his eye in the mirror when Angel Marquez and his trainer, Lenny Castillo, came into the dressing room.

Marquez lifted off the plastic poncho he was wearing and sweat came off it in rivers. He said something to Lenny that Cristiano couldn't hear and the trainer nodded, coming over to him. His fingers went right to Cristiano's injured eye and he rifled through a small black bag.

"This is adrenaline, mixed with Thrombin Topical," Lenny said. "It is the best coagulant there is. It will make you heal much faster."

Cristiano was genuinely touched by the concern for a mere sparring partner, as Lenny dropped the mixture with a clean cotton bud onto his eyebrow. With Marquez watching closely, Lenny smoothed some antibacterial cream across it.

"Give him the tube," Angel said in Spanish. He was so close, Cristiano could smell his breath. Cinnamon gum. His sweat smelled clean and Cristiano knew the guy looked after himself. The Cuban stripped down from his boxing shorts, removed his groin guard and was left in his black bicycle shorts. Beneath that was a black jockstrap. Glancing toward Cristiano to see if he was watching, he took that off, too.

It was hard for Cristiano to avert his eyes. He'd seen a lot of great gym bodies, but Angel Marquez was something else. He was a superb athlete. His skin was the color of dark caramel. Hardly a blemish on him. His black hair was cropped short, nothing fancy. He was handsome enough to already have scored some Spanish-language TV commercials and a boxing Game Boy. He also had about the biggest cock Cristiano had ever seen and he understood a little more why so many women flocked to the gym to see him.

Cristiano, who'd always enjoyed female attention, felt pale and ordinary beside the exoticlooking superstar. He accepted the five twenties Lenny handed him and after both men wished him *buenos dias*, he found Mickey waiting by the ring for him.

"What's on your eye?"

Cristiano was about to answer, but realized Mickey's attention had moved to the twenties in his hand. He peeled off one of the notes and handed it to him.

"This is for setting it up for me. I know it's not much, but buy yourself some gas."

He caught Angel Marquez coming out of the dressing room, with his shoes in his hands, his gaze flickering between Cristiano and Mickey.

"Not much? It's great, man. It was my pleasure." Mickey squeezed his shoulder. "I wish you'd come back. There's nobody else like you. No other Mexican kids walk away at the top of the game. Not like you."

Cristiano turned and left and would have nodded a farewell to Angel, except that the celebrated boxer had vanished. Outside, he gulped the fresh air, well as fresh as smoggy Hollywood allowed and wriggled his old Ford pick-up truck out of the tight spot between the pimp trucks crammed outside the Spanishlanguage Laundromat and the shady tattoo parlor. He pointed the truck south on Vine Street.

His arms felt okay. Some ice, a little *Tylenol*, he'd be good to go. He headed east on Santa Monica Boulevard, catching the Hollywood Freeway to east Los Angeles and drove home. He stopped at the grocery store on the corner, bought some ice, a quart of milk, some tablets and back in the truck, swallowed four to stave off the pounding headache that had settled in for an unwelcome visit.

He kept thinking about Angel Marquez's smile. He had a gold tooth. For some reason since he'd first seen it, it pissed him off. Everything about Marquez had pissed him off. He folded the eleven dollars left from a twenty for his purchases and put it in his wallet, merging with the traffic crawling toward Montebello.

Outside his family home, he saw the driveway was empty and hesitated before parking around the corner. He sauntered back, leaving his purchases and his workout gear in the truck. He hugged the fence as he walked down the driveway to the back door. His mother stood at the kitchen window and her eyes brightened when she saw him.

"Tiano." She still called him by his childhood nickname, her only nod to her maternal instincts. The thought popped into his head, absurdly that Angel Marquez had called him Tiano, too, when they met. Marquez had come over, shaken hands. He had to admit the guy had talent and a bit of class, and yeah, he had that certain something, that star quality.

How had he known his friends and family called him Tiano? He pushed the thought away and turned to his mother.

"Where is he?"

His mother sighed. "He's at a dog fight down the road." Cristiano felt all his fury mounting inside him. A dogfight. He abhorred these illegal, cruel matches, hated the way his stepfather sometimes hit his mother and stole money from her. More than anything, he hated that she always put him first, always put him before her children.

"Here is sixty dollars." He lifted the lid of a cooking pot, inhaling the scent of chicken stew. "Don't tell him you have it. Hide it."

"Where did you get it?" Her gaze moved to his eye, but she didn't say anything. She stuck the money where she always hid it, in her bra. She retrieved a tiny bowl that insulted his size and emotions. She ladled soup into it, an eye on the clock. He realized she'd picked a bowl her husband would never miss.

"I heard the new dog in the fight is a stray and probably won't last long. It's not trained to fight. So he will be back soon. I can't let you stay." She seemed angry, but he knew it was her way of speeding him up.

The front door banged and his mother looked like she would die of fright. Cristiano took the bowl and a plastic spoon and left without a word. She closed the back door on him and he found himself shut out of his own home once again. The first time she'd thrown him out, he was fourteen years old. He was twenty-two now and still hated it. He wondered sometimes about his twin brother, Horatio, who'd just disappeared one day. He tried not to listen to the inner voice that whispered *he is dead*.

He slipped along the spider web-infested fence, trying to ignore the trash in the yard. He so badly wanted to kick his stepfather's ass out of their lives. He wedged himself behind the garage where he ate his soup standing up. He could hear shouting from the kitchen and wanted to run inside and protect her. He knew his stepfather had lost his bet on the dogfight. He found himself smiling. The stray must have won. A desperate, hurt dog, like a desperate, hurt man is a dangerous one. When no beating sounds emerged, he realized the short fight meant the bastard was sober and wouldn't be smacking her around tonight...unless she didn't offer up her body for solace.

Cristiano left his bowl on the ground, knowing

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she would come out later and collect it. He hurdled the rickety back fence and walked down the street toward his car. He had the strange sensation of being watched, but when he turned, there were only ghosts of memories behind him.

Angling the truck away from the curb, he felt a searing pain through his head. Man, he'd forgotten about the bad headaches. He shook another couple of pills into his mouth, swallowed some milk and pulled into the community college parking lot. He checked the dashboard clock. Fifteen minutes. He grabbed the ice bag and held it to his aching head, then pressed it to his arms. He gave into the familiar beat of pain and picked up his bag, walking to his first evening class. He popped his iPod earphones to his ears, but his were merely for show. He had no iPod. He wanted to be one of them, one of the other students.

In the lecture hall, he spied his favorite companion, Lori Hall, who waved to him. She was a beautiful, big-breasted, curly-haired blonde who wore tie-dyed everything and had an enormous, engaging smile. She moved her backpack and he slid into the hard plastic seat beside her. He could smell Dove soap. Lori always smelled so clean and fresh. It was one of the things he liked most about her.

He couldn't get comfortable. Every bone and

muscle in his body ached, but he kept a poker face. Tonight he would pick up a couple of burritos and maybe watch some TV.

Lori passed him a piece of zucchini bread in a red paper napkin. She always baked and brought him something. He hesitated before swallowing the slice in two bites. Dieting for a fight had become a habit and the sheer pain he felt had sent the message of training to his brain, but he wasn't training. It wasn't his fight, thank God.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" Lori asked. Her pen had a slinky top with a red flower face dangling from it. It had rolling eyeballs on and he decided this was how he felt, dizzy and dingy.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Bread's nice. Not so sweet this time."

"I've been experimenting. I put a bit more flax seed in it, too."

Holy heck, flax seed gave him gas. He crumpled the napkin and put it in his pocket.

They'd had a brief thing and thankfully, she'd returned to her long-term boyfriend. Sex with Lori had been nice, but she wasn't into him. Not at all. She was grateful Cristiano hadn't blabbed and he was grateful she wasn't like some of the girls he'd met. She was strong and self-reliant. She'd been hurt and taken revenge, but she hadn't thrown it in her boyfriend's face.

She seemed to want to make it up to Cristiano

with slices of bread and cake, home-picked fruit. He had never told her he wasn't interested in her. He was just grateful for the friendship and to have a levelheaded study buddy.

Their instructor, Colton James, faced them all as a screen lowered behind him.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, tonight we have something special. We have a very special guest with us. A man some of you might know, but probably don't. He is, according to his attorneys, the greatest fighter ever to come out of Cuba. He defected to the US two months ago and declared himself a political refugee. His name is Angel Marquez."

"He's cute," Lori stage-whispered and half the women in the room sat up straighter. Angel Marquez gazed up at the audience of students and his eyes fixed on Cristiano.

"My question, the question we are going to discuss in the coming weeks is this. Is he in danger if he returns home or is he just another illegal immigrant?"

Angel had a man with him who was introduced as his attorney.

"Do you know him?" Lori asked him. "He keeps staring at you."

Cristiano shrugged as Angel allowed himself to be fitted with a lapel mike. The hall went dark as a short documentary came on about the fighter's life. He was stunned to see that Angel had been fighting since he was five years old. At the age of eight, he won his first contest and received a bicycle. He traded it in for a live pig to feed his family. This kind of sacrifice from a small child, this rise over poverty had the students spellbound.

As the documentary came to an end, the lights came on and Angel was smiling at him. There was a vibe to the smile...an erotic promise that made Cristiano's cock leap. He blinked...man he was imagining things. He fidgeted during the entire question and answer session as Angel charmed everyone with both his toughness and his strong faith in God.

Angel seemed to understand English better than he spoke it. His attorney asked him questions, which Angel answered in Spanish and the attorney would repeat to the audience in English.

"He keeps staring at you," Lori whispered again.

There was something in Angel that tore at him. He recognized in him a kindred spirit...an almost twin of the tortured soul.

"Is there anything you miss about Cuba?" somebody asked Angel.

He understood the question and said in heavily accented English, "My mother."

At the end of the session, Cristiano sauntered down the hall, feeling empty and emptied. He wished he could go home, sleep in his nice clean bed. It had been years since he felt safe. He walked into the men's room and was at the urinal when the fighter and his lawyer came in.

"Hola, Cristiano," Angel said. The heat emanating from him turned Cristiano's thoughts to mush. How could he be having such jumbled sexual thoughts about another man?

"Hola." Man, why did his voice sound squeaky?

The lawyer's cell phone rang and he left the restroom for a moment. As he paced the hallway outside talking, Angel's hand reached over and closed around Cristiano's cock. Cristiano was so shocked he couldn't move. The attorney busted in again and Angel quickly removed his hand. He thrust a piece of paper into Cristiano's back pocket when the attorney wasn't looking.

Cristiano waited until the two men were gone before opening it. It was a phone number. He almost crushed it on the spot, but something stopped him. He wasn't gay. He wasn't.

Then why wouldn't his cock go soft?

He wasn't even sure Angel was gay. There were always women with him and surrounding him. Cristiano took his remaining two classes for the night and didn't hear a word. He walked back to his truck. He downed four more pills, finished the milk and put his aching head to the steering wheel. He had been living in his truck...well, one vehicle or another since he was a teenager. When his mom first threw him out because his stepfather didn't want him there, he stayed with a couple of friends, whose parents finally also evicted him when it became clear his mom wasn't going to let him come back home.

One of his friends gave him an old Dodge Dart. He hadn't even been legally allowed to drive. He had taken a long time to forgive his mother because he had to move the car every day and night and constantly feared the police persecuting him. He'd taken up boxing to defend himself on the streets.

Now, he had a small guesthouse in east LA, but he didn't feel like going there. He thought about the stray dog winning the fight and some instinct...some urge to win rose in his throat. He reached into the glove compartment and pulled out his cell phone. He pressed the numbers and was devastated when the phone just rang and rang. He ended the call and seconds later, his phone rang.

Before he could say anything, Angel spoke. "Hola."

Man, his cock was rigid in his pants again. *"Hola*, Angel." Man, it was a turn on just saying his name! "You speak Spanish?" Angel asked.

"*Si*." He was about to tell him to speak slowly and he would understand him, but Angel seemed to know. In careful Spanish, Angel gave him an address. It was an apartment hotel on Martel, right near the gym. Cristiano said he didn't think he could make it, even as he started the truck to drive there.

Angel told him to park in the building and, when he arrived at the huge complex, the attendant at the guard shack seemed to be waiting for him. He opened the massive iron gate, handing him a paper pass for his dashboard and a photocopy of the map to the grounds, his designated spot circled in pen.

"Park in number two twenty-two, behind the Prius."

Two months the Cuban boxer had been here and he already had a Prius. Cristiano realized with a jolt the last time he'd been in somebody else's bed was with Lori and that was months and months ago. Did he want to be here? Did he want to do this?

The building was long and well tended with trees, a pool and he was surprised when he arrived, to find Angel's well-decorated apartment full of guys. There must have been eight of them, some he recognized from the gym. Lenny, the trainer was there. He immediately checked on the eye and dotted more cream on it, even though he'd already given Cristiano practically a whole tube.

A couple of other fighters were there and everyone was friendly and welcoming. He felt foolish now, thinking Angel was gay. Then he remembered the way the Cuban had grabbed his cock.

Maybe it was a Cuban form of hazing? He greeted everyone and saw they'd ordered big bags of Cuban food from Versailles. Angel handed him a Styrofoam box with chicken breasts smothered in onions and garlic, a mountain of plantains, rice and black beans beside it. He couldn't speak, he was suddenly so hungry.

"Comer, eat," Angel said, handing him silverware and a gigantic glass he filled with iced water. He sat at the coffee table, squeezed in between two other guys, bent his head and ate, the way poor boxers ate, until all his food was gone. He realized everyone at the table was doing the same thing, their attention was on a TV fight. He glanced over at the screen. It was an oldie, but goodie. Hearns versus Hagler. It was an unusual choice for a Latin boxer. They usually went for other Latin boxers.

"My favorite," Cristiano told the others, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin.

"Mine, too," Angel said from across the table

and his gaze burned against Cristiano's face.

"Man," one of the guys said. "I was so excited when I heard you were coming in to spar with Angel."

Cristiano felt his cheeks reddening. He knew who the boxer was now. An older Manuel Cortez, a gang banger who was always in and out of prison.

"I saw you fight, the night you replaced your brother in the Blue and Gold tournament. What happened to your brother anyway?"

My stepfather cracked his skull open. "He couldn't make it." Cristiano shrugged. "I was glad to win for him."

Cortez laughed. "Win? Man, you shocked everybody. You came in wearing borrowed boots, borrowed shorts, a store-bought mouthpiece—"

"You did?" Angel leaned forward, excited to hear this.

Cristiano laughed. It was his most beautiful memory. "Yeah, I bought a mouth guard at the drugstore and Mickey, my trainer, he soaked it in coffee so we could make it fit my mouth. And the champion..." he shrugged again.

"You knocked his ass out in two rounds!"

The others all cheered him and he was aware of Angel's appraising stare as the others left one by one until the only other remaining guy was a young Mexican fighter who clearly doted on Angel's star status. He left at midnight, only after Angel said he was tired and needed to go to bed. The young fighter glanced petulantly at Cristiano.

"What about him?"

"He's my sparring partner," Angel said in Spanish. "We will run together in the morning. He is coming to the gym with me."

The kid, who knew it was no use, left the apartment and Angel turned to him. Cristiano was both nervous and thankful for their final moment alone. They stood, staring at one another for a moment.

"No one can know," Angel said in English.

"No. Not from me." He was terrified now. Scared he would never get to touch him, scared he would long for it forever once he tried it and then Angel was over to him. They kissed hungrily and he tried not to think about this man caressing his mouth with his tongue like no woman had ever embraced him...tried not to think about how he'd crossed the border into California in the trunk of somebody's car.

The kiss went on. He tasted the same food on Angel's tongue that was on his. The Cuban dropped to his knees and moaned as he unbuttoned Cristiano's jeans, liberating his cock from his underpants. He held Cristiano's pride in his hands, then kissed it, looking up at Cristiano with a predatory gleam in his eye, that gold tooth glinting at him.

Cristiano felt like he'd just jumped off a cliff and was free-falling. Could he save himself or did he want to fall?

Chapter Two

The celebrated Cuban champion took Cristiano's cock in his mouth and sucked. His hands...man, Cristiano had to hold onto something. This guy sucked him like a fucking vacuum.

He was a noisy cock sucker, but Cristiano realized he sucked the way he ate, with sheer hunger. He felt like a girl, wanting to know when Angel had last had a man. The noise was bringing some strange emotions with it...an almost actual, religion to the experience. It felt as though his cock was being torn from his body and yet the feelings in his balls now firmly in the fighter's grip were sensations of such acute desire he thought he was going to faint.

Cristiano didn't care what Angel did to him. He wanted to come. His hands flew to the wall as the Cuban superstar bobbed up and down on his cock, groaning as Cristiano unleashed his pent-up passion straight down the champion's throat.

Angel took him by the hand, a huge bulge in his jeans. He did not take them off, but did take off his T-Shirt. He stripped Cristiano, admiring his body and placed him on the turned-down bed, sucking his cock again. He took his time and when Cristiano started to come, Angel came off his cock and pinched the base to stop him from his bliss.

Three times this happened. The cock sucking went on for an hour and Cristiano felt exhausted by the incredible passion between them. Between sucking sessions, they kissed and he thought his lips would be chapped forever, then felt bereft when Angel moved away from him. He lingered in a haze of unspoken longing. He peaked, crested, never came over the rise and his heart stammered in his chest.

"You ready, Papi?" Angel asked, moving in for a fresh round. Cristiano didn't think he could take any more build-up of pressure, but this time, the Cuban champion allowed him to come and the orgasm he experienced was so intense, he screamed as he shot. He felt Angel gently squeezing his balls in his hands and his ass came off the bed.

He opened his mouth, one hand articulating a point that never emerged. He passed out from pure pleasure. When he woke up it was morning and Angel was asleep beside him in his black boxer briefs, his arm slung across Cristiano's body.

His head cleared. He still had a headache. Cristiano remembered the intense cock sucking and his head turned in Angel's direction. The fighter's hand tightened across his belly, drawing him to him in a possessive way. Angel was hard and Cristiano was now petrified that the mindblowing orgasms he'd received would need to be repaid, with his ass.

Angel kissed him and laughed. "You had fun?"

"Oh, yeah." Cristiano laughed. *Fun? It was more than that.* He suddenly felt a tremor or terror. What was he doing? He was with *a guy*!

Angel grunted, his covered cock rubbing against Cristiano's ass. Cristiano liked the sensation of the other man's hard cock against his skin and yearned for skin-on-skin contact. Separated only by the stretch fabric of Angel's boxer briefs, it was still a separation. Angel kissed him and rubbed against him, but manfully resisted any sexual release.

"Why?" Cristiano asked him point-blank.

"I enjoy depriving myself."

Cristiano held his head as they kissed, feeling shy, but gripped by lust again. For a brief moment, Angel crawled between his legs, his body covering Cristiano's. The two hard cocks rubbed at each other and Cristiano looked deeply into the battle-scarred face above him. He was beset by the urge to lift his knees and beg the champ to fuck him, but he didn't...he couldn't.

"How...why did you get the gold tooth?" he asked Angel, whose eyes suddenly turned black. He'd broken the spell and he hadn't meant to. He felt bleak as the fighter rolled away from him, his hard leaking cock moving further and further away from him.

"Run with me," Angel said as he pulled on plastic sweats. Man, he didn't have an ounce of body fat and yet he wanted maximum sweat. Cristiano pulled on his sweats and followed him out of the apartment. It was six o'clock in the morning and he wanted to be back in bed with the mercurial boxer, who seemed to read his thoughts and shook his head, laughing at him. They both zipped up their track suit jackets, pulling the hoods up over their heads and they ran down the hallway, taking the stairs down and was surprised when they ran around the complex, taking welltended paths that were already being used by other health enthusiasts. He thought they'd be taking to the streets. Still, they ran for a couple of miles, keeping easy pace with one another.

Back in the apartment, he felt no guilt or uneasiness with Angel. He just felt acutely aware of him and knew Angel watched him, too.

"Last night," Cristiano said in Spanish, "was for

me, incredible."

Angel gave him a dazzling smile. "For me, too. For me, it is..." he lapsed into Spanish. "I enjoy making a man come. Men are so sexy."

"You fuck women, too?"

Angel shrugged. "Not so much." He came over and kissed him. "Let's eat."

They rummaged the fridge and ate scrambled egg whites and sliced tomatoes. They sipped hot black coffee out of one cup because it was all Angel had that was clean and Cristiano's cock stayed hard throughout. They took a shower together and then Angel wanted to rest. He flopped on the sofa naked, holding his hand out to Cristiano.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world and his soul breathed relief when he felt the hard cock beneath his flat belly.

He breathed heavily as the champ passed a hand across his eyes and reached for the remote.

"Fuck me," Cristiano whispered in English.

Angel went berserk, rolling on top of him. In a frenzy of lips and tongues, he got between Cristiano's open thighs, his hard cock rubbing...pulsing against Cristiano's ass. Cristiano wanted to ask for a condom, wanted to ask for a reprieve. He had never felt the kind of sensations he felt when that cock head rubbed against his sensitive ass hole. And then Angel pulled away. "No," he said. "No." He got up, his cock erect and leaking and Cristiano, feeling dazed, touched his own dick, wondering what went wrong. He followed Angel to the bedroom and found him sitting on the bed, staring at the floor.

"You have a girlfriend?" Angel asked him.

"No. You?"

Angel shook his head slowly. He was a magnificent specimen, his haunted eyes clearing now.

"You have a boyfriend?" Angel asked him.

"Yes, you."

The Cuban smiled and Cristiano found himself charmed by the gold tooth now.

"How did it happen?"

"My mother." He sighed. "Remember when I said I won the bicycle and I traded it for a pig?"

"Yes, of course." It startled him to realize he'd heard the story last night. It seemed like a thousand years ago.

"I really, really wanted the bike. So I took it for a ride first and I fell off and chipped my tooth. My mother...she punched me in the mouth for breaking the tooth and the rest of it broke off."

Cristiano was speechless.

"I got the gold tooth so she would never forget she killed my tooth. She killed my childhood."

His eyes went black again and Cristiano felt the chill between them. He knew it was over between

them. He knew too much about this man now. This man he'd begun to love.

They dressed for the gym and walked to their own cars.

Angel put his hand on Cristiano's chest and smiled when he felt Cristiano's heart racing at his touch.

"Wait one hour before you come. I don't want people to see us arriving together."

"Sure, no problem." He smiled, but he felt a wreck inside. He decided to head home though he lived in east Los Angeles and would have maybe ten minutes before he headed west to the gym again. Right now, he needed warmth, he needed the feeling he belonged somewhere. *Home*. He blinked against the pain of knowing he really didn't have one.

He cranked up the engine, the bags of ice having melted overnight, leaving a pool water on the floor. He sighed. All the pain he'd felt the night before had returned now that he wasn't on a lust high. The Hollywood freeway traffic was light. He took the Vermont exit and drove to his home off Third Street. This was technically Koreatown and he still couldn't believe he was living here. He'd rented a converted garage from a former lightweight boxing champion, Hector Lucado. Hector was what you would call punch drunk and was on his fourth marriage to a woman he had pinched from the parish minister who'd taken him in and given him a roof over his head. The minister had saved the homeless former champion and admittedly, the guy did use Hector a little by promoting him as an example of God's good work, but geez running off with his wife was just bizarre.

Mi-Sook was Korean and spoke little English. What English she did speak was often said in anger and Cristiano was starting to think the minister might not have gotten the short end of the stick after all. Mi-Sook was mean. She once told Cristiano her name in Korean meant pretty, but she wasn't.

He paid five hundred dollars a month to rent out the guesthouse that had once been a garage and still smelled of oil and gasoline. It was a large, single room that he and Hector had refurbished. He had a bed, bookshelves, clothes rack and small kitchen. They'd carpeted it gray because Hector bought it cheap at a carpet factory and the room was painted white with industrial lights in the ceiling. It was everything Cristiano needed, except for the fighting next door.

Hector suffered terrible, blinding headaches caused by the holes in his brain from too many punches. He frequently forgot who and where he was, but renewed interest in him had brought an unexpected bounty in the way of checks from well meaning fans. A couple of boxing organizations had started paying his bills and Hector, who adored Cristiano, offered him the guesthouse at two hundred dollars a month. It had steadily climbed to five hundred under Mi-sook's control. She'd gone from adoring concubine to swindler within seconds after the marriage. She took control of everything, including every aspect of Hector's life. His brain injury was being treated by yet another well-meaning boxing organization that gave Hector walking-around money, which of course Mi-Sook took from him each time.

Hector was forty-eight, but looked twenty years older. His wife was ten years older, but looked thirty. She looked young, but her meanness shone through. She was, in Cristiano's estimation, a piece of work. He unlatched the gate and stomped through the overgrown grass to his little home. The main house was quiet. He could hear the TV and paused. It was a Korean language station. Poor Hector was probably in bed.

Cristiano unlocked his door and flipped on the lights. It was dark in here, even during the day because he had one window. The whole place was illegal as hell, but it was his. A note had been shoved under the door. A bill. Of course. She wanted a hundred dollars for the electricity. He sighed and threw himself on the bed.

Mi-Sook had a nerve charging him so much for

electricity. Seconds after he lay down, the screaming started in the main house. He couldn't stand it. She was screaming at Hector again. As he passed by the house, Cristiano could hear Hector crying as his wife berated him.

"You stupid! You good for nothing bastard!" she screamed.

Cristiano ran for the truck. Getting beat up for a living...no, he wasn't going to keep doing it much longer, but he needed the money, he always needed money.

All morning, Angel was cold to him. Cold but not cruel. He was hard on him during training and put a lot of pressure on him in the ring. For four hard rounds, Cristiano wanted to cry, remembering the way they'd been together. His emotions felt raw, conflicted. He had never allowed himself to love a girl, but still, in spite of everything, loved his mother. The mother who killed his childhood, just as Angel's mother had killed his.

He took his money at the end of the session and left the gym.

"Great session," everyone said, patting his back. This was punishment, he knew for all the girls he'd left, that he'd refused to love. Angel barely looked at him when he said goodbye. Cristiano gripped the steering wheel of his truck. His thumbnail scraped at a ding in the wheel's cover. He would resume his life. He would focus on college. He needed to study. He drove home, stopping for ice, milk and another bottle of *Tylenol*. The drug didn't work so well for him. *Motrin* worked better, but was not good for boxing. It made you bleed more.

He dosed up on pills, wondering when the ache for the Cuban would go away. He stopped by his mother's house and was walking down the empty driveway when he heard her screaming.

Cristiano ran to the back, where he heard the fearsome beating taking place. He kicked and punched at the kitchen door until it gave way. His mother's face was bloated and bleeding. Cristiano saw his twin brother, Horatio, over his mother's shoulder. His stepfather was punching him in the head. His joy at seeing his brother again gave way to tremendous rage.

He lunged at his stepfather as his mother screamed at him to stop. The fight between Cristiano and his stepfather moved to the backyard. His stepfather, who'd once been a kick boxer, lunged at him with his feet and fists all at the same time.

The fight went on with his mother's screams distracting him. He became aware of another presence then and saw Angel stepping into the action. His stepfather stopped when he saw the Cuban champion, recognition flooding his face.

"Leave him alone." Angel tried to put Cristiano behind him. "You touch him again, I'll kill you."

"Stay out of this. He's crazy," Cristiano warned.

"Yeah, so am I." Angel circled Cristiano's stepfather who leered and kicked at Angel's head, the unexpected maneuver knocking the champion to his knees. Cristiano stepped in and punched his stepfather as Angel staggered to his feet. Together they beat the older man down and Angel spat on him as he lay unconscious on the grass.

"Oh, my God...your arm," Cristiano said.

Angel's left arm dangled from his shoulder like a broken Marionette's string.

Seconds out...pain would hit the champion, the man, and Cristiano wept when he realized Angel would have to forfeit his big TV fight. He'd injured his best arm, his perfect jab. What if he could never fight again? Cristiano called for an ambulance and rode with him, stunned when Angel turned his head toward him, smiling.

"We showed him, huh?"

"God...Angel, I'm so sorry," Cristiano rasped.

"Por nada," Angel said, but his skin was chilly and white. Cristiano tried to kiss him, but Angel yanked his face away. He closed his eyes and Cristiano wished with all his heart that Angel had not followed him. He blew out a breath. He was alive, that was the most important thing.

When they arrived at the hospital, Angel gazed up at him. His eyes seemed full of pain, but he was also, Cristiano knew, resolute.

"I never want to see you again," he said. "You stay away from me."

Cristiano opened his mouth to argue, but Angel put his good hand to his lips. *"We* never happened. *This*, never happened. Adios, amigo."

He wanted to ignore him, to go inside with him, but a few of the guys he'd met at Angel's apartment showed up and urged him to leave. News had obviously traveled fast. He walked back to his mother's house. Somebody had slashed all his truck's tires. He slumped to the sidewalk and heard the blast of a car horn. He glanced up, surprised to see his brother, Horatio, behind the wheel of a fancy yellow sports car. It took him a few seconds to process that it was a brand new Mustang. Where did he get the money for a car like this?

He rose on shaky feet. "Where did you get this?"

Horatio blinked. His face was all banged up from the fight, but he was smiling.

"I came back for you, Tiano. Come on, there's a big hockey match on at Staples Center."

"But I know nothing about hockey."

"It's great. I'll explain it all to you. Come on, I

got good tickets. Their star player is back on deck...Alex Hunter."

On the complete lack of recognition from his brother, Horatio shook his head.

"Man, everyone's heard of Alex Hunter."

Cristiano didn't want to go anywhere. He'd just been dumped by the hottest boxer in the world, hot on the heels of discovering he was probably gay, and unfortunately, probably in love with the guy.

He wanted to go home, but his tires were all cut up and he had no money to fix them. He was going home to nothing. More screaming. More cruelty. He'd be going home to pain.

"Okay," he said. "Fuck it. Let's go."

Chapter Three

He'd found a black garbage bag tossed in a far corner where a colony of feral cats lived. He'd approached it in tears, ripping the top open only to see golden fur. Somebody had killed a dog and dumped it.

"I never meant to abandon you," Horatio said, swerving into traffic. It had been easier for Horatio when their mom met the man who would become her husband. He perceived Horatio as being the weaker, more pliant son and got along well with him. It was Cristiano he wanted out of the house and she had complied.

"It wasn't easy, but I was afraid of him."

Cristiano was furious now. His brother was zigzagging. He realized his brother was fully loaded. A blue tooth glinted from his right ear. An iPod was plugged into the dash and the conversation Horatio was having boomed out of the surroundsound speakers.

"So I'll let Alex know you're coming," the voice said from the speakers. "How many guests?"

"Just one."

"Some hot chick, I bet," the voice chuckled.

"Actually, no. It's my brother."

There was a pause. Cristiano thought the line must have dropped out.

"I didn't know you had a brother."

"Yeah, well, you do now. See you in a few." Horatio pushed a button on the dashboard and music took over the conversation.

"That was the marketing manager for the Red Cobras. I work exclusively for Alex. I'm lining up a lot of TV promotion with him, there's even some talk of a reality show. Maybe even a movie."

Horatio's sly look in his direction indicated he expected his brother to be impressed. Cristiano wasn't impressed. His brother had abandoned him and was doing well for himself.

"Why'd you come back?" he asked.

"I'm getting married. To a model. Can you believe it? Me! Her name is Belinda and she was on that TV show, you know where they pick the next top model? She was runner up. I'm planning a whole campaign for her with Alex. I wanted to invite Ma to the wedding."

"Congratulations," Cristiano mumbled. Suddenly his aching bones and muscles felt heavier and more painful than ever. He felt like he was standing on a railway platform, waving goodbye as everybody else left the station on a train, one of those new high-speed super trains. He felt like he was a million years old.

"How about you, you dating anybody?"

Cristiano clicked his tongue and leaned forward to change the music. It was that damned bachata that Angel Marquez favored. He remembered the feeling of being in the man's arms and a gasp escaped from his lips.

"A-ha! It must be serious."

"What is?" Cristiano was mystified.

"This girl you've got. You sound like a man in love."

"Oh geez...look, you are so far off the mark. You know what, just let me out here. I'll walk back home."

"I can't let you out here." Horatio looked horrified. "We are in the worst part of downtown, we're stuck between five intersections." He glanced at the traffic lights. "And we're on green."

Horatio floored the accelerator and they were off. He was still the same lousy driver. He drove

too damned fast for his own good, but Cristiano had to admit his brother had huevos. He drove like he had nerves of steel.

Within seconds, he was cutting in and out of lanes, narrowly missing several accidents and they approached the Grand Avenue exit clocking ninety-two miles an hour. Cristiano tried not to panic. His brother veered down the exit and crawled to thirty as the turnout dumped them out onto Grand. Cristiano gazed up at Staples Center, which looked dazzling with its blue and red lights and banner for the Los Angeles team, the Blue Jays and the Red Cobras.

"That's Alex." They paused at a red light, Horatio jabbing his finger toward a huge pennant flying outside the massive entertainment complex. Cristiano saw a dark-haired man with intense brown eyes in full hockey regalia.

"He's just come back from a bad injury," Horatio said. "He's your kinda guy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cristiano snapped.

"Well, you know, you're both comeback kids. He's the team's starting goalie, but his injury was pretty severe. He hasn't played in seven months."

"What kind of injury did he have?" Cristiano was genuinely interested.

"He broke both his legs in a car accident. And a couple of ribs."

"Oh, man."

"Yeah, but he's a strong guy. Will of iron, that one. Say, I heard you've been sparring Angel Marquez. I'm trying to line up some ad work for him. I'm thinking Spanish language TV. Unavision. I'm thinking Spanish language cell phone company...think you can introduce me to him?"

"No!" Cristiano was taken aback. Where was the meek, sweet brother whose beatings he took for him?

He suddenly understood the reason for his surprise visit to his mom. Somehow, Horatio had heard about the sparring and assumed Cristiano was back home, or at least, that their mom would know where to find him. His wedding to the model was just an excuse.

They pulled into the massive parking lot. Cristiano saw the sign saying twenty dollars and he felt faint. He could live on twenty dollars for a whole week. His brother was squandering it on parking! He got out of the passenger seat, feeling very uncomfortable about walking with his brother who suddenly stopped.

"I want you to know, I left because I knew he would kill me. I...I...guess I never knew how bad it was for you until it got bad for me. I didn't have the ability to defend myself." Horatio's eyes reddened. "I always hoped you'd beat the fucking crap outta him one day."

"Yeah, well, I just did, but not enough to kill him."

Horatio shrugged. "Maybe not, but you saved my life, Tiano....once again."

They paused at a glass booth, where a security guard checked Horatio's identification. Cristiano saw the array of credit cards. Man, a black Amex card. He didn't know a single person who had one of those.

The guard gave them each a card credential on a chain that they put around their necks, and a wristband that gave them access to the dressing rooms.

They went through five different security checkpoints. "Man, this is like being at a world championship boxing match."

"It is sort of like that, this is a huge game because these two teams are serious rivals," Horatio told him as they took seats right near the ice. The frigid air woke all of Cristiano's senses. He was excited now. He'd never been to a hockey match before.

"You'll have to explain it all to me," he told his brother.

"Sure thing. And after, I want you to meet Alex."

"Why?"

"Why?" Horatio looked stunned. "He's a

superstar, that's why. He's a bit of a...jerk, but basically a nice guy."

Cristiano cocked a brow. "A nice jerk?"

"No, no, not like that. He's a perfectionist. He expects a lot of himself and everyone else around him."

* * * *

All hockey players were superstitious and Alex wasn't one to buck the trend. Ever since he had been playing for his high school team, his pregame ritual had remained the same. He would get dressed in everything, save for his leg pads. Then he would put in his earbuds and crank on hard rock. Finally, he would find a quiet corner in the locker room, lay down on the floor, prop his feet up on the bench and find his zone.

It hadn't always been easy to keep up his habit either. Not only was there always someone who wanted to get chatty, but often the floors of the locker rooms were so dirty that not even a bum would want to rest his head there. Luckily for him, his home arena had a very clean floor and since the rest of his team knew his habit, they stayed away from his special corner.

Most of the time.

Alex was just getting into his favorite AC/DC song when he was jabbed in the ribs with the

blade of a stick. Grunting more in surprise than in pain, he turned his head just enough to glare at the offender. When he saw it was the team captain, Jason, Alex went from miffed to full out aggravated.

With his blond-haired, blue eyed, I-own-the world-looks, he was everything Alex hated in other guys. Even over the regular stench of wet equipment and old sweat, the strong smell of Jason's cologne was enough to make one's eyes water.

"God, what in the hell are you wearing?" Alex wrinkled his nose as he pulled out the earbuds. While he would have normally ignored anyone who dared to venture into his corner, he knew from past experience that didn't work with this idiot.

"It's the new cologne they're marketing under my name." Jason flashed his white even-toothed grin. "You like it?"

"Nope." Alex gave an aggravated sigh as he lowered his legs so he could sit up. "Is that why you came over here? To see if I thought you smelled *purdy*?"

"I wanted to see where your head was." Jason took a seat and made himself way too comfortable in Alex's opinion.

"Last I checked it was on my shoulders, great place for it or else it would be a bitch to keep my helmet on."

"You're such a dick." Jason pressed his lips together in an angry line as he shook his head.

"We all have to excel at something," Alex replied in a dry voice. "You're the pro at kissing up to the media and whoring yourself out for an extra buck, I stand out in the dickery department."

"If I'm the media whore, then why is it that your pictures are plastering the arena? Better yet, who is the one that was just named one of People's Most Beautiful?" Jason raised one brow, as condescending as ever. "Face it, Alex, you're just as greedy and hungry as we all are. We're just more honest about it."

That comment stung because it had more than its fair share of truth to it. Damn if he was going to admit it though. Alex had his reasons for doing what he did, but Jason was the last person in the world he was going to confide in.

"My head is where it's always been, in the game and ready to go," Alex grunted, getting the topic back on track. "Why the personal pep talk?"

"Because this is the first game we've had against the Cougars since you got back and they still have Derik on their team."

"So?" Alex kept his tone the perfect example of nonchalant even though his heart was hammering and his nerves were all jacked up. It was amazing how hearing one name could do that. "*So?*" Jason echoed incredulously. "That guy is your arch nemesis. The entire time you were injured and recovering, he made it his personal hobby to smear you in the press. I just need to know you're going to be okay facing him while you're both in net."

"If I say yes, can we forget you said *arch nemesis*?" Alex stood and stretched his arms.

"Why do I even bother with you?"

"Honestly, it makes you sound like a comic book character when you talk like that."

"Damn it, I'm trying to be serious," Jason snapped, his cheeks getting red with anger. It shouldn't have pleased Alex so much to know that he'd finally pushed the captain's buttons. Teach him to come into someone's corner and ruin their zen.

"I appreciate your concern," Alex replied in his best fuck-off voice, "but you have nothing to worry about. It's another game and he's just another faceless body on the ice."

"Alex – " Jason started, but he cut him off.

"I said I have it handled. Don't worry."

Chapter Four

O kay, he didn't have it handled. Time to worry. Taking a swig out of his water bottle, Alex eyed the scoreboard and tried to keep the despair off his face. They were down by six goals. As if that didn't suck bad enough, three of them were major clunkers. Goals that he should have never let in.

He kept waiting for coach to pull him, but so far all he'd done was lean over the bench to yell down the ice at him. Alex didn't even waste time to get offended because he knew he deserved it. Hell if this kept up, he would be tempted to skate over to the bench and beg for mercy.

Tossing the water bottle back on top of the net, he put his glove back on and worked hard at keeping his expression blank. He had no doubt the cameras were zooming in on him so the commentators could yap about how the goalie was stinking it up. The other team was still celebrating their last goal as Jason skated by. "Shake it off," the captain ordered, but his tone wasn't angry like it should have been.

When Alex just nodded, Jason came closer. Looping his fingers through the cage of Alex's goalie mask, Jason pulled him forward so their helmets were touching. Even though he didn't want to, Alex found himself trapped in the other man's gaze. There wasn't pity or anger there, but a cold stone resolve that Alex found strangely comforting.

"I know you hate these guys, we all do. When Derik ripped on you he may has well of been ripping on the entire team because we took it personal. But we all need to get our asses back in this game. Even if we don't win, I want you to not let in one more damn goal. That's how you'll stick it to these pricks," Jason snarled. "Understand?"

"Yes." Alex tried to nod, but Jason still had a grip on his cage.

"Not. One. More. Goal," Jason enunciated each word for affect.

"Got it."

As Jason skated away, some of the desperation left Alex. Just the knowledge that his captain was backing him up, made him feel like he wasn't facing the major cluster fuck alone.

For the next ten minutes of play, Alex was back

on his game. There were several shots on goal and a couple of breakaways and he stoned them every time. Granted his team didn't score and there was no way in hell they were going to get this game back, but he still felt a little lighter each time he denied them number seven.

His heart jumped when he saw another breakaway. A two on one and it was the Cougar's best shooter. Skating out past the crease, Alex challenged him. The player skated forward and Alex skated back, crouched in a goalie position. The shooter deeked to the left, but Alex wasn't fooled so when the shot came from the right, he was ready.

The puck hit him in the chest and he curled his body around it. The sound of the whistle rang out right before the player slammed into Alex. The momentum carried them back into the net. Over the sharp pain in his legs, he could feel the net give as the weight of their bodies knocked it free.

It was a cheap move. Charging the goalie after the play had been stopped, but somehow Alex wasn't surprised. When games got this one sided, things tended to get out of hand. Finally, they stopped skidding across the ice and he lay there for a moment, waiting for the birdies to go away.

The one sure-fire way to piss off a team was to attack their goalie and the Red Cobras were not an exception. Jason pulled the player away and by the time Alex had staggered to his feet, the two opposing forwards already had the gloves off and were going at it.

Before the refs could even think about stopping that fight, several had broke out as other players started to take each other on. Since goalies generally didn't get involved, Alex leaned against the net and tried to stay out of the way. The crowd was roaring in approval and by now the refs were pretty much stepping back and letting the players brawl. Over the chaos, a sharp whistle got his attention. Alex looked up and cursed under his breath.

It was Derik and the fucker was skating out to center ice. He had lost his gloves and helmet and he was beckoning with one hand, challenging Alex to a fight. Great, just great, this was the perfect ending to this POS day. There was no way he could skate away and not fight either. Not unless he wanted to look like a pussy.

So Alex did what any other self-respecting hockey player would. He dropped his gloves, ripped his helmet off and charged. Things were a little awkward, thanks to his heavy leg pads, but he managed to move pretty fast when he wanted, too.

As soon as Alex got close enough, Derik grabbed him by the front of jersey with one hand and clocked his jaw with the other. Pain exploded in his skull as his head snapped to the side. Shaking it off, Alex tried to get off his own punch, but he barely managed to graze the other goalie.

"You don't know how long I waited for this." Derik smirked as he pulled his fist back.

Alex grabbed onto Derik's jersey, more out of instinct than from any battle plan. The move knocked both of them off balance, sending them to the cold, hard ice. Of course, given how his day was going, Alex ended up on the bottom.

Derik pinned him down and started to deliver blow after blow. Sweat made his brown hair slick and his gray eyes were stormy with a hatred Alex didn't understand. What had he ever done to make the other goalie hate him so much? The skin on his bottom lip broke open and Alex could feel the warmth of his blood pouring out. Next was the bridge above his right eye.

I'm getting my ass kicked on national TV and it's by my arch nemesis. Perfect. The only thing that could make this better will be when I get to watch the humiliation played out again and again on all the sport show highlight reels.

The refs came in and pulled Derik off him. Not wanting to show any more weakness then he already had, Alex staggered back up and shot off what he hoped was a cocky smile.

"I heard that you weren't selected for the All-Star team," Alex goaded as he spit out a mouthful of blood. "Too bad I would have loved to have seen you there. We could have gone out for beers or something."

"Fuck you," Derik snarled as he struggled against the ref, pulling him away.

"Not on your best day or my worst," Alex snapped back as he started to skate off the ice. Now coach would have no choice to pull him. The hockey league tended to frown upon their players bleeding on the ice. Besides, judging by the amount of blood coming from the cut above his eye, he would be needing some stitches. If after they were done patching him up, coach wanted him back in the net, then so be it.

Leaving the ice, Alex walked to the locker room, not once looking back at the bench. Too ashamed and embarrassed to meet his teammates' eyes.

It was a few hours and one ass chewing later that Alex was finally leaving the locker room. He groaned when he saw who was waiting for him.

"Shit, Horatio, I am so not in the mood right now. Can't this wait for another time?"

"Great." Horatio threw up his hands in disgust. "You have an interview with one of the biggest sports magazines in the morning and your face looks like hell."

"Two words for you, jackass. Photo and Shop.

You should be real familiar with it. It's what they use to get rid of the cellulite from your girlfriend's ass when she does all those bikini shots." Normally Alex wouldn't take a cheap shot on a female, but Horatio's tart was a real viper.

There was a snort, like someone was trying to hold back a laugh and Alex looked over Horatio's shoulder to see who it was. The effects of his crappy day seemed to disappear. Leaning against the wall was the sexiest man he'd ever seen.

Dressed in a pair of jeans, scruffy tennis shoes and tee that had obviously seen better days, the guy still managed to be more attractive than someone wearing an Armani. He had deep brown eyes that one could get lost in and his hair was cut short to his skull. There was hard, street-smart vibe coming from him, like he could take care of anyone who came his way. Normally that kind of thing didn't attract Alex, but for some reason now, it made him hard as a rock.

"Who's your friend?" Alex asked casually as he continued to size the strange man up, the way his body was hard and tight, without an ounce of fat. How his skin contrasted so nicely with the white of his shirt.

"This is my brother, Cristiano," Horatio said with a dismissive wave of his hand, like he was of no importance. "We really need to talk about how we're going to handle that interview." "My name's Alex." He turned his body toward Cristiano, totally dissing Horatio. It would do the bastard some good to know how it felt to be ignored. Where Alex came from, family didn't treat each other like crap. Cristiano smiled, his even white teeth flashing. Alex's gut tightened as a strange warmth came over his body. Never before had something as simple as a smile made him so damn happy.

"I already know who you are." He waved at one of the huge posters. Alex felt a warm flush come over his cheeks. Cristiano probably thought he was just another promo-whore jock looking to stroke his ego.

"Right, I guess you do." Alex chuckled slightly, hoping to cover his embarrassment. "I don't suppose you happened to see the game?"

"Yeah, I never got to watch hockey before. It was interesting." Cristiano shoved his hands in his front pockets. Alex noticed for the first time that he was sporting a black eye of his own. Interesting, although Alex highly doubted Cristiano had the honor of getting his humiliation on National TV.

"Usually there's not so much..." Alex trailed off as he resisted the urge to self-consciously touch his cut lip.

"Fighting," Cristiano finished for him and they both laughed.

"I was going to say scoring, but we can go with fighting." He moved in closer so his back was completely to Horatio now. "I'm sorry this had to be your first game. I usually don't suck so much."

Way to brag on yourself there, buddy. He's really going to think you're a self-centered jerk now. Why don't you start wearing your own stinky cologne and join Jason in Me, Me, Me Land?

"What I meant is I usually don't end the game on my face, bleeding all over the ice," Alex blundered, trying and failing to recover.

Great, real smooth there, slick.

"You telegraphed your punches," Cristiano replied, seeming not to notice how Alex was struggling.

"Huh?" he cocked his head to the side.

"My brother is a boxer," Horatio cut in loudly, obviously wanting to take control back of the conversation.

"Really?" Alex directed his question to Cristiano. "I sure could have used you out there today."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, let's get back to business." Horatio tugged on Alex's arm. "We have a ton of stuff to go over and you've haven't been answering all the messages I left you."

"I already told you I'm not doing the reality show," Alex snapped. There was no way in hell he was about to let the whole world know his business.

"Are you crazy?" Horatio squawked. "Do you have any idea how much money they're offering you?"

"Is there a piece of me that you aren't willing to sell off to the highest bidder?" Moving back a step, he turned so he could direct his fury onto Horatio. "I can't even jack off in the shower for fear that you're going to be there with a little cup to capture my come so you could sell my boys on Craigslist or something."

"Remind me again why I put up with your attitude?" Horatio shook his head in disgust.

"Because I make you a shit load of money," Alex returned with more than a little bitterness. Just once he would like someone to want to be around him for something other than their own personal gain. Even his own goddamn brothers expected favors.

"Just promise me you'll think about the reality show?" Horatio pleaded. "The producers are going to be at the party tomorrow and they would love to talk to you."

"They can talk all they want, I won't do their damn show and I sure as hell won't be at that damn party." Alex knew he was being a jerk, but if he showed even one hint that he was softening, Horatio would go in for the kill.

Then his gaze shifted back over to Cristiano,

who was watching the whole exchange in silence. Alex smiled as an idea came to him. One that was so devious you would have though Horatio had cooked it up.

"I'll go, but only if you promise me Cristiano is going to come." Alex knew he was treading on thin ice, but he was willing to do almost anything to have the opportunity to get to know the sexy man better.

Horatio's eyes narrowed, making Alex wonder how much he knew. His gaze shifted from Alex to his brother before he returned his stare back. Something flared in his eyes, one would almost say it was a rush of protectiveness. Which was ludicrous. The only one Horatio cared about was Horatio.

"It's just to make it up to him for having to sit through such a cluster fuck of a game," Alex said roughly, afraid that he'd revealed too much.

"I don't know," Cristiano said in a soft voice. Alex's stomach dropped in disappointment.

"It's just a small get together," Alex rushed, tying hard not to sound as desperate as he felt. "A few people and some drinks, that's all."

Cristiano exchanged looks with Horatio before shrugging. "I guess I could. It's not like I have a ton other invites for tomorrow night."

"Great." Alex fought to keep the triumphant smile off his face.

"You mind giving Alex and me a sec?" Horatio asked.

"Sure, I'll go wait in the car. It was really nice meeting you, Alex." Giving a small wave, Cristiano left.

* * * *

Out in nearly empty parking lot, Cristiano felt the anger in his heart and grieved the brother he no longer knew. "It's like his soul's been invaded," he said aloud. He realized he didn't have keys to his brother's snazzy new Mustang and leaned against it, checking his cell phone for messages under a halogen lamppost. It was too much to hope that Angel might have left a message.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket. For the last few years, he'd thought Horatio was dead. He wanted to bring cadaver dogs to the house and check the backyard, but the truth was there was no telltale mound of freshly dug earth. He had checked vacant lots. Every time a dead man turned up in east LA, Cristiano showed up, certain it would be his brother's body. Each time he went through the seesawing emotions of whether it was Horatio or not. He'd befriended a woman at the coroner's office who kept his number on file and twice called him for hair samples to match DNA evidence taken from corpses ranging from skeletons to recently buried young men too far gone to be recognized by photographic comparison.

She couldn't keep his DNA samples on file, but she pitied him. She was a nice woman who cared for the families of victims. One time she called him and they'd located the skeletal remains of a buried man whose finger bones started protruding from the red desert earth out in Indio. Cristiano had been tense as he gave her another blood sample, a few more hairs.

He'd driven to the spot where the body had been found and he cried. He'd sat behind the wheel in the middle of nowhere, thinking his brother had been left alone out here. What happened to Ma? Why did she let a stranger abuse her and her children?

Strangers...a small smile came to his lips when he thought of Alex. Yeah, the guy liked him, he was certain of it. Twice in two days, major athletes had come onto him. Who did he like more? His heart fell on Alex. *How weird*, he thought, *we are worlds apart*.

Checking his watch, he wondered what was keeping his brother. For so long he'd thought his brother was dead. In a way, he was. This man, this money-mad wannabe was not the brother he knew. He wondered if it might have been better if Horatio had just stayed dead. * * * *

Alex waited out Horatio's tirade. *You finished?* He wanted to ask. Instead, he let Horatio harangue him and watched with mild amusement as the most aggressive sports marketing guy he'd ever met finished listing all the things he'd done for him. He watched Horatio's eyes turn glassy with fury, but didn't tune into a word until he realized Horatio had dovetailed his tirade into an attack on Cristiano.

"...yeah and as for my brother, what in the hell was that?" he demanded, his teeth clenched together.

"What?" Alex tried to sound as innocent as possible.

"You were flirting with him."

"I was not," Alex denied. God, had he really been that transparent?

"Yeah, you were. I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but I've worked too hard on building your reputation up for you to throw it away on some two-bit punk. Besides, he isn't gay. He's just a dumbass."

You wanna lay book on that? Don't, because I think you'll lose.

"How can you talk about your brother that way?" Alex didn't even bother to hide his disgust.

Just when he thought Horatio couldn't have stooped any lower, the jackass shocked him once again. No matter how angry Alex's brothers may make him at times, he would never disrespect them like that.

"How I treat my family is none of your business." Horatio's gaze was hard and unforgiving. "All you have to worry about is skating and making sure your ass shows up where I tell it to." He reached out and flicked a piece of lint off his arm. "Unless of course you would like me to leak to the press what really happened the night of that accident. They would have a field day with that. All the rumors that Derik swirled around would look like a damned child's book compared to the truth."

"Sorry." Alex choked on the apology it was so bitter tasting. The familiar feeling of being trapped in by his past fuck-up made his chest feel tight. Was he ever going to be done paying for it? Not if Horatio had his way. Alex had never hated anyone more and, what was worse, the dickhead was calling all the shots.

"Now, tomorrow when you talk to those producers, you're going to be nice, aren't you?" Horatio reached out and fixed the collar of Alex's shirt.

"Yes." Alex worked hard at looking humble while he was really thinking, *Eat shit, you self-*

serving prick. How about I take those producers and shove them up your ass?

"See, it's not so hard to agree with me." Horatio smirked and for the second time that day, Alex wanted to deck someone. "Now, make sure you remember what I said about my brother."

"It's not what you think. I was just trying to be nice."

"Bullshit," Horatio spat. "You were sizing him up like he was something on the lunch menu. I'm only going to tell you once. Leave him alone."

There was an angry pause as the two men faced off. It was on the tip of his tongue to deny his attraction to Cristiano, but Horatio would see right through him. It didn't help matters that Horatio was one of the few people who knew Alex was bi either. Finally, Alex gave a nod, "I promise, I won't talk to him ever again."

Even as he made that promise, Alex wondered if he had the strength to keep it.

* * * *

Cristiano was getting worried. The same patrol car had circled the downtown block three times and the cops in front had their gazes fixed firmly on him. It was tough being Hispanic in Los Angeles. Cops always assumed you were a gang banger, a car thief and probably also an illegal immigrant. He was relieved to see his brother come charging toward him and point a small black gizmo at his car. The locks clicked, the headlights came on and the cops realized this wasn't a robbery in progress and took off.

Horatio didn't even notice. "Get in," he seethed. "What's wrong?" Cristiano asked.

"He thinks you're gay. Why else would he invite you tomorrow night?"

"Because he's nice?"

"Nice?"

Horatio's icy tone would normally have hurt him, but now Cristiano found himself smiling.

"He's not nice! He's a jerk! You know how long it took me to get friendly with him? You meet him one time and tell him you never watched a hockey game in your whole life and he's creamin' his shorts!" He paused. "What's so funny? He thinks you're a maricón. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Not particularly. I don't know the guy. I don't really care what he thinks."

Horatio stopped yelling. Cristiano stared out the window, keeping a blank look on his face.

Apparently deciding that Cristiano was telling the truth, Horatio started the engine and they peeled away.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Take me back to Ma's."

"The hacienda? You gotta be kidding."

"Not the house, exactly. My truck is parked near it."

"Shit. You still sleeping in your vehicle?"

"Yeah." Cristiano didn't care what his brother thought of that. He had a bad feeling about his brother having any clue he was staying with the former boxing champ, Hector Lucado. No matter how brain dead Hector was, he knew his brother would try to get the broken-down legend on some goofy TV show like *Dancing With the Stars*.

"So what happened to you staying with that dingy fighter, Hector?"

Cristiano glanced at him. "You know about Hector?"

Horatio reddened. "I kept tabs on you. I'm not a total asshole. So are you still there or what?"

"Yeah, I'm still there."

"You didn't want me to see the joint?"

"No, not really."

"Oh, man, look I'm not that big of a snob."

Cristiano was surprised that his brother sounded so hurt. His brother had also misunderstood the reasons why he didn't want him to see where he lived. For just a moment, he glimpsed the old Horatio, the Horatio he loved and he was seriously happy.

"I was so proud of you that you got the money together and you found a place. I dropped by once, you know." Cristiano blinked. "You did?"

"Yeah. Hector was home alone, drooling. He was watching *I Love Lucy* and he was eating breakfast cereal with a fork until I got him a spoon. His wife was out shopping. He said he had a headache and I got his pills from the top of the fridge. Poor guy's really lost the plot, hasn't he? He got real happy when he swallowed his pills. He kept telling me how there's no sport like boxing and then he told me Jesus loved me."

Cristiano laughed in spite of himself. This was Hector, when he wasn't screaming from his debilitating, frightening headaches or when he wasn't arguing with his wife. He felt honored...humbled that Horatio came looking for him.

"He gave me a card and it turned out to be a business card for a Vegas stripper. He had autographed it." Horatio grinned. "Hey, you know when he snuffs it, it might be worth something on Ebay."

They pulled up outside Hector's house and Cristiano felt a heaviness he hadn't felt in a long time. It was stupid, really stupid to feel bad about missing a party. It wasn't the party. It was Alex. Unless he went to the party, he'd never see Alex again.

"Lookit, I'm sorry I acted like an ass. I'm thinking you should come to the party tomorrow night. It'll do you good to be around some normal people who don't drool and who don't get plastered on Oxycptin."

Cristiano laughed. "In my world, that cuts out just about everybody I know."

Horatio left the engine running and got out of the car. Cristiano got out as well and was surprised to see his brother opening his trunk.

"Look, this is a suit I only wore once and took to the cleaners. I just picked it up today. You wear it tomorrow night, okay? I'll pick you up at eight."

Cristiano could tell it was a good suit without even being able to really see it through the plastic and with the bad night light. He accepted it, although he hated any kind of charity, because he wanted to look good for Alex.

"Thanks," he said, his fingers closing around the suit hanger.

"Sleep well, Tiano." Horatio jumped back into the car and drove away without a second glance.

He managed to get as far as Hector and Mi-Sook's back door and relaxed. The house was in darkness. As he got close to his little guest house, the back door opened. He walked quickly so he didn't need to cop an earful.

"You home late." Mi-Sook stood there in a seethrough nightgown and he averted his gaze from the angry-looking nut brown nipples peering over the lacy top. He knew she was disappointed he was alone. Mi-Sook always looked for trouble and seemed to want to catch Cristiano in the act of doing *something*.

"Yeah." He clutched the coat hanger tighter, smiling at the memory of Alex's laugh. He wanted to kiss him. Badly. "'Night, Mi-Sook," he called out in a gentle tone and shut his door on her and the rest of the world.

Inside, he switched on the lights, which illuminated not the overhead ones, but two floor lamps placed on either side of the bed. He locked the door and took the dry cleaners bag to the bed where the light was best and examined the suit. Man, it was so flashy. It wasn't his style at all, but then he'd never actually owned a suit. Maybe they were all like this. He drew the plastic covering over the suit again and hung it on his clothes rack next to his college clothing, between the buttondown jeans and the Abercrombie and Fitch shirts, he was so lucky to find at Out of the Closet for two dollars a piece. He wondered briefly if Alex would like them.

Man, you're acting like a girl, he told himself and hit the shower. The ache in his arms and shoulders dulled under the warm spray. He popped a couple Tylenol, cleaned his teeth and went to bed. He held the pillow beside him in his arms, imagining it was Alex. Alex. Man, he would feel a whole lot better than this.

* * * *

Alex slid the key card into the door and walked into the room at Motel Six. Due to another cluster fuck for the evening, their entire team had spent the last hour and a half finding out their bookings at a nice hotel in Hollywood had been booked for the wrong night. They were now scattered across downtown LA in three different motels. Oh well, it was one night only. He flipped on the light. No furry things scurried, which was encouraging. Geez. One time he'd checked into a motel room and found a mouse sitting in the middle of the bed. The room was exactly as the constant radio ads stated. Nothing fancy. Except they didn't, as the ads promised, leave the lights on for you.

He thought about Cristiano and wondered what he was doing now. He checked the time. It was just after eleven. He was a boxer. Those guys got up early and did road work, didn't they?

His body ached. He was supposed to meet the guys for a French Dip at *Philippe the Original*, one of his great LA discoveries. He loved *Philippe's*, which had been making French Dip sandwiches for over eighty years and lay claim to creating the concept. Maybe he'd feel better after a shower. The room phone rang.

"Hey," said his teammate Scott who had taken

the room next door. "Is your room as sexy as mine?"

Alex laughed. "Mine's so much sexier. I have a lovely visual of a homeless man peeing in an alleyway right outside my window."

"I'm jealous. You up for that French Dip?"

"What the fuck, why not?" He dropped his bags and walked out of the room, leaving the light on for himself.

The staff at *Philippe the Original* waited on them, eliminating their usual counter service style since they were staying open late, especially for the team. The guys happily posed for photos and signed autographs. Alex even woke the cook's wife, singing happy birthday down his cell phone to her at the guy's request. He was happy the place was as tacky and linoleum-ridden as he remembered, the beef dip still outstanding. He chugged on a soda and tried to imagine Cristiano with the guys here.

He stared at the sandwich for a moment. He didn't need to share any of this with Cristiano. He'd always kept his private life private.

Private. He wondered about Cristiano's secrets even as he laughed and talked, taking the goodnatured ribbing for his unscripted performance on the ice tonight.

Back in his room all too quickly, he turned on

more lights and closed the blinds one more time. Nope, they still didn't quite meet in the middle. He lay on his bed and put his hands under his head. He stared at the ceiling.

When he crashed his car, when the speeding driver clipped him and took off, he'd been unable to control the car because of the black ice on the road. Every night, the haunting memories came back to him. And every night, he tried to push them from his mind. He hated the night. The dreams came then. It was harder to deal with what happened when it was dark.

Oh no, it's happening again. His heart thumped, his breathing came in shallow gusts. He tried to think of only light. Of the way Cristiano had smiled at him. That was like sunshine, like deeper breaths. He felt he calmness returning. He tried concentrating on nothing but his breath and the light, but all he saw was Cristiano's face.

Chapter Five

Alex woke him with kisses. Nobody had ever had this effect on him. It was an amazing feeling of warmth spreading through him, concentrated in his cock and at his throat. He had not expected the erotic thrill of another man nuzzling his neck so that he could feel the early morning buzz on his skin. His cock hardened and he returned the other man's kisses.

"You have the most beautiful body I've ever seen," Alex whispered against his mouth. "I want you."

"I want you, too," Cristiano murmured, unable to open his eyes yet. Early morning lust competed with sleep. He felt drugged, seduced by love and passion.

Alex's voice grew husky. "I want to give you a blowjob. I want to suck you so bad. Will you let me?"

"Sure," he said and his eyes opened. This, he

wanted to watch. Unfortunately he was alone, the bedding all askew.

Shit! It was a fucking dream! He tossed his pillow aside in frustration, his morning erection leaking fluid onto his thigh. He wondered if he'd get lucky tonight.

A thundering at his door got his heart beating madly.

"What is it?" he called out.

"Please, Cristiano." It was Mi-Sook.

"Just a minute."

He threw on sweats and a T-shirt and threw open the door. She wore a robe over that ridiculous nightgown and he relaxed a little bit.

Sometimes Mi-Sook did seem human. Right now, by the shock and pain in her eyes, he knew that Hector had disappeared again. He didn't even bother with socks, he just shrugged his feet into his tennis shoes.

He picked up his cell phone and checked for an emergency call. They had instructed Hector long ago to call Cristiano anytime, anywhere. In spite of his mental handicap, he was somehow always able to remember Cristiano's number. He tried to keep his phone on at all times for this reason, but meeting Alex had knocked out his usual sense and he'd left the phone turned off when he went to bed.

Nothing. No messages. "How long has he been

gone?"

"About ten minutes."

"Did you see him leave?"

"No." She bit her lip and genuine tears flew down her cheeks. "He in living room. He say he need bathroom and poof! He gone."

Cristiano nodded. She'd probably denied him meds and Hector either lashed out in fury sometimes or the fugue state overcame him and he would wander off.

He didn't challenge her account of the events. He switched batteries on his cell phone and walked out of the driveway. Out on the street, things were quiet.

He sauntered up to Third Street and the city was teeming with traffic and noise. He checked Hector's usual haunts. The payphone on the corner where he would hold the receiver to his ear and yell at the dial tone. He looked inside *Mi Familia Bakery*.

"We haven't seen him," the girl inside said.

Outside, he spotted the newspaper stands. Alex Hunter was on the front page of all the papers, except *La Opinion*, because hockey was not a big sport for the Hispanic community.

Alex was mid-brawl in the photos and he wished he had a couple of quarters on him to buy the papers, but right now, he had a job to do. He continued the hunt and found Hector a few minutes later in his pajamas, sitting at the bus stop on the corner of Western. His eyes were blank and Cristiano knew he was on the verge of a very bad headache. He had no cash on him to buy the guy a bun to absorb the medicine he would need as soon as they got home.

"Hector?"

The former champion looked up at him, bewildered. "I'm lost."

"I know you are." He pressed the number for Hector's house. "I found him. Get some food and meds ready. We're on our way."

Morning workers stared at them, somebody swiping Hector's seat the second Cristiano removed him from it.

"I'm lost," Hector said as Cristiano led him away.

"No, honey, we're going home." Cristiano was strong, but he wanted to get Hector home quick, before the violence erupted in his brain and he would be forced to restrain him on the street. It had happened too many times to count.

"Don't tell Peg," Hector said.

This was something Hector always said when he had one of these episodes. He had no idea who Peg was. It certainly wasn't Mi-Sook.

He got the boxer home as the headache took hold and the older man started screaming. It was pitiful. There was no violence, just the pain wracking the man's body and mind. Mi-Sook came running out of the house with the pills and a cup of water, the liquid sloshing everywhere as she forced it down her husband's gaping mouth.

Cristiano was aware of somebody watching and was horrified to see it was his brother, Horatio.

"Is he okay?" Horatio asked.

"No, he's not okay," Cristiano said between gritted teeth.

Mi-Sook ran to the kitchen again and brought out a slice of bread. Horatio looked pale, watching Hector's excitement over the food. His hand shook so Cristiano had to hold it for him as the old fighter gnawed at the bread.

The medicine finally worked its magic on him and Cristiano led him inside to his bedroom.

"There go my plans to get him on *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here,*" he heard Horatio saying.

Cristiano had a long day ahead of him. He called his trainer Mickey who told him that Angel Marquez was out of commission for a few days.

"Do you know why?" he asked.

"I heard he got into a street fight. Can you believe it? A big champ like that?"

Cristiano couldn't say anything. Angel clearly hadn't spread the word and if he said something to Mickey, there would be too many questions about what Angel was doing in Cristiano's backyard.

"My truck tires got slashed," he said and Mickey sighed.

"Who was it? Your stepdad?"

"Probably."

"Where is it?"

"At Ma's."

"I'll meet you there."

One of the benefits of knowing Mickey was that he and his brother owned a tire place. He would be owing Mickey money again, but he needed the truck.

He didn't want to leave Hector alone, but Mi-Sook said she would call if they needed him. Horatio was still hanging around and he asked him for a ride to their mother's house.

"What happened to him?" Horatio asked.

"Boxing happened to him."

"Tiano, he's in bad shape."

"Yeah. I noticed."

He got into the yellow Mustang and closed his eyes. All he could see was Alex smiling, wanting to give him a blowjob.

"Can't anyone do anything?"

"There's not much you can do when you're broke and the little money you get is eaten up by your wife." "Shit. So he's really not going to be able to do a TV show?"

Cristiano turned his face away, blanking out the world.

"What happened to your truck? Who did this to you?" Horatio asked and Cristiano was astonished to realize he'd been asleep. "Was it him?"

Horatio jerked his thumb toward the family house.

Everybody asked him the same thing this morning. "Probably."

"Because you defended me."

"No. He doesn't need an excuse."

"You got money to fix it?"

I have fourteen dollars to my name after rent and the light bill. "Yeah, no problem."

"Belinda and I will see you at eight." Horatio was gone before he could say goodbye.

Mickey pulled up in his tow truck and he felt something was going right this day. Finally. He pulled the truck in front of Cristiano's and cranked down the crane, pulling out dollies and came over to check the tires.

"Hey. Nice rubber ribbons you got on your rims there." Mickey squatted in front of the first one. "I got an offer for you."

"An offer?"

Mickey loaded up the truck and when the noise subsided, said, "My brother has a job you

know...a little side job as a chauffeur." His voice dropped and he looked around. "It's driving around a high-class call girl. He can't do it right now because his wife's family is in town. Motherin-law is like the friggin' love police. Constantly spying on him. Manny says we'll give you free tires and an oil treatment if you drive her around today and tomorrow. He'll split the money she gives you."

"I got a...thing tonight."

"She only works during the day. Come back to the garage with me. Get the car. He'll give you the schedule."

Cristiano figured he had nothing to lose, but was surprised to learn that Manuel, the staunch Catholic tire mechanic was working for a ho'. He realized everybody lowered their standards a little when food and family counted.

Back at the garage, Manuel handed him a piece of paper. It was an address on Sepulveda Boulevard.

"Here's the cell phone Cherish likes to call you on. She knows you're working for me today. She's cool."

He scanned the sheet and saw that he'd be busy until around five o'clock. Even with traffic, he should be home by six-thirty at the latest to get ready for the party.

"Oh, here are the keys." Manuel pointed to a

gleaming beige Saturn. "Here's a credit card for gas. Don't even think of buying anything else on her dime like ice cream or candy. She's sharp as a hawk and she will know. She makes you fill out mileage every time you make a stop with her."

What a pain in the ass.

Manuel must have read the words on his face because he said, "She tips good, amigo. You can keep your tips. Okay? And hey—" He made a gesture of a zip across his lips.

He nodded. Understood.

* * * *

Alex and his team made the switch across town and he immediately relaxed as he walked through his suite at the Sunset Marquis in West Hollywood. It was a great suite with bells, whistles and yeah, even the lights were on. His therapist had insisted on talking to him when he was out of town. He sat on the bed and sighed and made the call he should have made yesterday. "Hey, Michael."

"Alex. You didn't call me last night."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry."

"I'm assuming this is a good sign?"

Alex laughed. "I think so. I met somebody...well...I *think* I met somebody."

"That sounds promising. Tell me about him."

No, it's private. "Not much to tell you right now. I'm seeing him tonight."

"That's good. How did you sleep?"

Alex felt the rush of fear shimmer through him. "I slept." He paused and Michael waited on the other end of the line. "I slept with the lights on, but I turned them off before dawn. That's progress, right?"

"That's great, Alex. You sound good."

"I feel good." For a moment, he felt weird, truly weird for the small balloon of hope in his chest helping to conquer his demons. Only Alex, his spinal surgeon and his therapist knew that since the accident that almost killed him and left him for dead in a dark, snowy embankment for thirty-six hours had filled him with terror. He not only had to survive and beat the physical obstacles, but now had a new terror of the dark.

"What I want you to remember is that it was a one-off experience, Alex. I hope you have a wonderful time tonight, but um...I saw your game last night. Get some boxing lessons, okay?"

Ha, ha, Alex thought and busied himself getting some pool time before he had to get ready for the party.

* * * *

Cristiano pulled into the guard gate of the resort-

like apartment complex on the corner of Sepulveda and Magnolia and wondered if he was dreaming. The guard gave him a Xeroxed map with a felt-tip pen line indicating the path he should take. Cherish lived in a very attractive, Spanish-style townhouse. It was all wood and sparkly glass. He waited outside for a moment and checked the dashboard clock.

He was right on time, twelve noon. He relaxed when the front door opened and a willowy young woman stepped out. She had long legs that made him think of a colt and long, straight blonde hair chopped with precision at her shoulders. Her dress was ridiculous. It popped below her thighs, but was a filmy blue thing. He could see her undergarments beneath it. He was certain she was wearing a slip. Not a dress. It hadn't been asked of him, but he stepped out and opened the rear door passenger side. She wore dark sunglasses but her teeth gleamed radiant, good health.

"You must be Chris."

Christ, he hated being called Chris, but many of his friends used it. He smiled and closed the door as her feet, dangerously encased in the highest black heels he had ever seen, disappeared inside the sleek sedan.

He pulled out onto the resort's roadway again and marveled at how nice it was to drive a vehicle where everything worked and he didn't have to keep panicked eyes on the gas, temperature and oil gages.

Their first stop was *The Four Seasons* on Doheny Drive in Beverly Hills. He dropped her at the entrance and she stopped doing her interminable texting, long enough to give him a finger wave.

"I'll be back in forty-five minutes," she said.

He nodded and waited in the car around the corner on Burton Way. He pulled back into the hotel driveway exactly forty-three minutes later and she came out, reapplying lipstick with one hand, texting on her Crackberry—as he liked to call them—with the other. She did not acknowledge him.

"His come tasted like cow piss," she said into her cell phone as they drove off. "Why do you give me all the politicians?"

For the next few hours, he took Cherish every place she wanted, only once catching her sending an intrusive digit under her wig for a discreet itch.

At the end of the day, she handed him a wad of cash. She tipped him a hundred dollars.

"See you tomorrow, Chris."

He sat in the front seat, speechless. This was the easiest hundred bucks he'd ever earned. To think what he had to go through in sparring, it made him want to scream. By the time he'd returned to the garage, split his earnings with Manny, except for the tip, he was two hundred and fifty bucks richer. And he had tomorrow to look forward to.

At least he did, until he went home, showered and changed and walked out front to meet his brother and Belinda.

The woman sitting in front turned to him and he recognized her immediately. Even without the wig.

She was Cherish.

* * * *

"Congratulations, you made all the highlight reels for the sports shows today," a soft feminine voice said.

Alex looked up from the soda he'd been nursing for the past hour inside the increasingly busy bar, 1200. He smiled at the woman in front of him. Since she was one of the true friends he had, he didn't even take offense to her snarky comment. He knew she didn't say it to be mean, but rather to help him make light of the situation.

"Don't look now," he whispered, "but I see Rod Stewart over there in the corner. I hear he's been working at the recording studios downstairs and he might sing a little later."

"I only have eyes for you," she said, batting her eyelids.

He laughed. "Val, you look as beautiful as always." It was true, too, with her long raven hair

pulled up in a twist and a red dress so tight it should have been illegal, she was the envy of all the other females in the room. So beautiful she could have passed as a model, she certainly didn't look like the sports reporter she was.

"And you look like you got beat with an ugly stick," she countered as she grabbed him by the chin and twisted his face one way and then the other so she could get a better look at his injuries. "Damn, don't they teach you boys how to duck?"

"Guess not," he chuckled. "Or if they did I was absent that day."

"What am I going to do with you?" She sighed as she dropped her hand.

"I guess you'll just have to dump me for some forward," he teased.

"No go, I'm a sucker for a goalie. I think it's so cute how you all waddle around when you try to walk with your leg pads on."

"We don't waddle," Alex protested with a grin. He loved her quick wit.

"You do. I swear it looks like one of those penguin cartoons."

Movement at the door caught his attention and his heart thudded when he saw Cristiano walk in with Horatio. The boxer had traded in his worn jeans for a black silk suit. The cloth molded to his muscular curves like a lover's touch and Alex felt his cock stir in response. Yeah, like he was going to have any luck keeping his promise at this rate. Licking his lips, he wondered how it would be to take Cristiano someplace private so he could learn every intimate detail of his body, inch by inch.

"Down boy," Val cautioned in a low voice. "You're looking at him like you're about ready to go in for the attack." Since Alex confided in her about his hopeless attraction to the boxer, she knew the inner battle he was having.

* * * *

Cristiano traded glances with Alex as soon as they entered the crowded bar and he noticed the very attractive, dark-haired woman he was with. Great. Alex had a girlfriend. He felt deeply depressed. It had been awful driving across town to Hollywood, wondering what to say as his brother blabbed like a fool about his wedding plans with Belinda.

Belinda had sat beside Horatio, cool as a cup of crushed ice. For a moment, he thought he might possibly be mistaken, but he recognized her hands and those long legs. She was a different person than Cherish. She was blonde, but her hair was longer and the color of creamed honey. He'd never seen anything like it. She still had on a short dress, but she didn't telegraph *fuck me* in her outfit. She crossed her legs and he caught a glimpse of her feet through the space between the two front seats. Dang! She was wearing the same shoes!

She wasn't texting like a maniac. That was the other difference. They'd rolled up to the entrance of the Marquis off Sunset and it was all money and suits. So much for Alex's assertions that this was casual.

The valet driver came and took possession of the car and out of force of habit, he opened the door for Belinda. There was a dangerous expression on her face.

"That's the valet's job," his brother said across the Mustang's roof.

Cristiano smiled. "Just taking care of my future sister-in-law," Cristiano said and helped her out of the car.

He felt even more nervous now that he felt a frisson of something from Alex. He was a boxer. He was trained to read signals. No, the darkhaired woman was not his girlfriend. His gaze was on Cristiano and he had a sudden, volcanic image of being in bed with Alex.

"Would you like a drink, sir?" a bartender asked him.

"I'll have mineral water, thanks." *My brother's gonna marry a ho'*. He stared across unashamedly at Alex and liked what he saw. He liked it *a lot*.

* * * *

"I think I'm in trouble," Alex admitted to Val as he continued to stare at Cristiano. At that moment nothing could have made him look away. It was as if his entire world was centered on the man.

"I know you are." She pointed her finger at him. "Do you know if he's even attracted to you?"

"No." Alex sighed as he drained the rest of his drink.

"Do you want me to go ask him for you?" Val batted her eyelashes in false innocence.

"God, no."

"Are you sure? I could write him a note if you would prefer. Just like the ones we used to pass in grade school. *Do you like Alex? Circle one. Yes? No? Maybe?*"

"Remind me again why I hang out with you?" Alex pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

"Because I always let you take the last piece of pizza."

"Ah, and here I thought it was because you always picked up the beer tab."

"I only wish you were that cheap." She laughed as she grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray. Running her finger around the rim, she looked over at Cristiano and of course

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Alex had to follow her gaze. He frowned when he noticed that Horatio had left the poor guy to fend for himself. Cristiano looked about as comfortable as a Rock of Love Girl at a Republican convention. He was tucked into a corner of the room, his hands in the pockets of his pants as he nervously rocked on the balls of his feet. The corners of Alex's mouth twitched in amusement when he saw that Cristiano had paired his outfit with a pair of black tennis shoes. He was so different than the usual bores that Alex usually had to mingle with when he came to parties like this. It was so refreshing.

"So what did you say he did for a living again?" Val asked as she took of sip of her drink, leaving behind a smudge of lipstick on her glass.

"He's supposed to be a boxer," Alex replied absently as he continued to stare at Cristiano like a starved man would a steak.

"Maybe he could give you lessons," Val teased with a tart smile as she reached out to finger up his cut lip.

"You're just so funny," Alex drawled, still not taking his gaze off Cristiano.

"Which is really why you hang out with me," she retorted. They both watched as Cristiano ducked out onto the balcony.

"You know it's really dark out there," Val said suggestively. "Someone should check on him. You know, just to make sure he doesn't trip or something."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea." He darted a glance over at Horatio who was kissing up to some ad executives.

"Go." She gave him a little shove. "I'll make sure Horatio is too distracted to notice." When he still hesitated, she gave an impatient *shooing* motion with her hands. "I mean it, scat. Go have a good time for once."

"Thanks, Val." He gave her a peck on the cheek. "I owe you."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, if I ever called in all those favors you did owe me, you would have to serve as my own personal cabana boy." She wrinkled her nose at him, suddenly looking like a mischievous teen girl instead of the hardass reporter she was. "You can pay me back with details. I want every juicy bit."

"Why don't you just invest in some good porn like the rest of us?" he teased.

"Because it's so much more fun to live vicariously through you. Hate to break it to you, too, buddy, you've been lacking in that area lately and that's made me very sad. Now go out there and give me a reason to live." She flashed a wicked smile as she waggled her finely arched brows.

Moving through the crowd, Alex walked to the

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doors of the balcony. The entire way there, he halfexpected Horatio to call him back. Luckily though, the jerk was too busy stroking his ego to pay anyone any mind for now. Once he reached the glass doors, Alex took a deep breath before he pushed the handle down and opened them.

The cool night air felt good compared to the stuffiness from inside and he breathed in deep, hoping the freshness would steady his nerves. Shit, he hadn't been this nervous since his last playoff game. But he'd never been a coward before and he sure as hell wasn't going to start now. After giving one more guilty look over his shoulder, Alex stepped out and let the doors click shut behind him

Cristiano was leaning over the railing, staring at the spectacular view of the city below. He turned and looked at Alex. If he was surprised at his sudden appearance, he didn't show it. He flashed a grin that made Alex's body come to life. Transfixed on the man's full lips, all he could think about was what he wanted to do with that mouth.

"This is nice," Cristiano looked back over the city lights. "Is this anything like your place?"

"Nah," Alex scoffed lightly. "It's way too clean to be mine. I'm such a slob, my last three cleaning ladies have quit in protest."

"That bad, huh?" Cristiano chuckled.

"During the season, I'm not there that much, so I figure why bother." Alex shrugged. There was a long awkward pause.

"So what are you doing out here?" Cristiano asked, breaking the heavy silence. "Shouldn't you be in there having fun with everyone else?"

"Nobody in there interest me." Alex ducked his head, realizing how revealing his words were.

"You seemed really interested in that brunette I saw you with."

"Val?" Alex shook his head as he walked across balcony so he was standing just inches from Cristiano. They were far enough in the shadows so he didn't have to worry about anyone from inside seeing them. "She's just a friend."

"Really?" Cristiano asked. They were standing really close now, but neither one of them moved away. Alex could feel the heat of the man's body, smell his spicy, warm scent.

"Val's not my type." Alex turned his head and their faces were so close that all he would have to do was lean forward a bit and he would be able to kiss him. He found himself licking his lips as he wondered what the other man would taste like. How it would be to hold him in his arms.

"What is your type?" Cristiano asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Alex didn't answer him with words. Instead, he let his gaze travel the length of Cristiano's body.

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He did it nice and slow so that, even in the darkness, there would be no mistaking his intent. Meanwhile his heart was hammering in chest. This was the real test. Either the man would get pissed at him and walk away or he would stay. Then maybe they could take things further. He held his breath as he waited for his reaction.

Then he saw it. The little flare of passion in Cristiano's eyes that let him know the man was far from insulted and more than a little intrigued. It was all he could not to break out in a happy dance. Alex moved in even closer and another thrill went through him when Cristiano made no attempt to back away.

"Why did you come out here?" Cristiano asked.

Suddenly one of Val's smartass comments came back to Alex. *Maybe he could give you lessons*. He ducked his head to hide his triumphant grin. What a perfect way to spend more time together. Not even Horatio could object – much.

"I want to hire you to give me boxing lessons," he blurted. Inside, he was giving a silent prayer that Cristiano would accept. Judging by the scruffy way he was dressed earlier, he could use the income and better yet, they would have to be in close contact with each other for weeks if not months.

"Why would you want that?" Cristiano wrinkled his brow in confusion.

"You saw me last night." A warm flush burned across Alex's cheeks. "I'm hopeless when it comes to my fists. We have another game against the Cougars next month and I would love to able to give some payback."

"So you want to make that jerk bleed?" Cristiano chuckled.

"You bet. I would love for him to know how it feels to have his humiliation plastered all over the news."

"I'll have to admit, I wouldn't mind seeing that myself. He seemed real arrogant to me."

"So does that mean you'll do it?" Alex fought to keep the excitement from his voice.

"I guess." Cristiano gave a nonchalant shrug. "But if you don't mind me asking, why me?"

"Horatio told me one time that his brother was the best fighter there was." That was true, although Alex didn't add it was the only time he'd talked about his family.

"I'm okay." Now it was Cristiano who blushed. "When do you want to start?"

"A couple of days. I have to fly out in the morning for an away game." That was the only reason why Alex hadn't used some liquid encouragement before he'd come. He never drank the night before a game. Pulling out his business card, he handed it to Cristiano. Their fingers brushed together and Alex sucked in a breath as his cock twitched in response. Damn, if simply touching hands sent him off like this how would it be if other body parts were caressed?

"Sounds good." Cristiano cleared his throat. "I'll call you Tuesday and we can set something up."

"That's not the only reason I came out here." Alex swallowed hard and steeled himself for his next move. Leaning forward, he pressed his lips against Cristiano's mouth. He could both feel and hear the man gasp in surprise and for a second, he worried that he'd pushed too far too soon. Then he felt the Cristiano's lips part in acceptance as he plowed his hands through Alex's hair and brought him in even closer so he could deepen the kiss.

A wave of need hit Alex so hard it almost staggered him. Never before had any kiss affected him this way. It was as if every caress, nip and lick brought him closer to the edge. Growling against Cristiano's lips, he wrapped his arms around the man's waist and hauled him against his hard cock. Alex wanted him to know how bad his need was. Pulling back, he grabbed Cristiano to the farthest corner of the balcony. Not only was it even more dark there, but it also had a lounge chair there.

"Lie down for me," he urged as he leaned in to lightly nip on Cristiano's bottom lip. "I don't want to just kiss you there, I want to taste you everywhere." "Huh?" Cristiano's eye were glazed with passion and he was panting.

"I want to give you a blowjob." Alex let his hand drift down to the man's erection. Even through his pants, he could feel that his boxer's cock was huge. His mouth watered in anticipation. "I want to suck you so bad. Will you let me?"

Cristiano looked at him as if he was in shock.

"Alex!" a voice jerked him back from the land of sensual secrets. Talk about a cock block.

"What the fuck?" Horatio came out onto the balcony. "I told you to stay away from my brother. I told you not to waste your time on him. I-"

"Fuck you, Horatio." Cristiano turned into instant predator and Alex was surprised to see Horatio turn chalk white. "You ignorant ass. We just made a deal on some boxing lessons. What's your problem?"

Horatio balked, but Alex could see the dollar signs popping up in his eyes again.

"Oh, okay, fair enough. Hey, I guess I should get a finder's fee, right?"

"No finder's fee. I'm giving them to him for free."

Cristiano seemed to get as much of a thrill out of Horatio's shock as Alex himself did.

"For free? What, are you nuts?"

"Nah. Not nuts. I just hate to see a guy taking a beating who doesn't have the skills to defend

himself."

The expression on Horatio's face was priceless. He seemed to be about to say something, but changed his mind. He lifted up his hand and let it fall in a what's-the-use gesture and went back inside.

"Lemme guess," Alex said when they were alone again. "He used to get picked on and you stepped in."

Cristiano didn't smile. His eyes looked hunted, his soul trampled. Something in Alex wanted to fly to his rescue.

"Something like that," the boxer said.

"School bullies?"

"A little closer to home."

"Shit. I didn't know ... "

"It's nothing...no big thing. Say, what time are you leaving tomorrow?"

"We're leaving first thing in the morning."

"What are you doing after this?"

Alex smiled. "I hope I'm going to be waiting for you to come and tuck me into my bed. I'm upstairs. Room four-twenty."

Cristiano didn't say anything.

"Just say the word and I'll be waiting."

"Yes," Cristiano said. "Leave the light on for me."

Chapter Six

Swant to give you a blowjob. I want to suck you so bad. Will you let me? Those had been Alex's words in his dream and then again right here in the hotel...and yet, there'd been an odd look on Alex's face when Cristiano made the crack about leaving the light on for him. It had been hard, shaking his brother off and escaping him and Belinda. She'd worked the bar all night and it was all he could do not to say something to his brother.

Was she lining up fresh clients? He had no clue and right now didn't care. He was about to meet with the man who'd haunted his dreams and upon waking, was like a persistent but very pleasant bug in his eyes.

As was his habit, he took the fire stairs and walked to Alex's room. He was excited and nervous, but felt no indecision at all as he knocked.

Alex opened the door. Cristiano was thrilled to see him. He was still wearing his well-cut pants and shirt and looked even hotter and sexier than before. How? It had only been about a half hour since they parted. He couldn't help but look past the man's shoulder into a sumptuous splendor he'd never known in his own life.

"Wow," he said, stepping forward, taking in the marble countertops, the luxurious carpet. His fingers touched the rice-paper lamps. "This is beautiful. It's huge."

"It's a junior suite," Alex said, shutting the door.

"No junior I ever met ever had digs like this." Cristiano grinned. "You got a lot of lights going in here."

Alex seemed to suck in breath. "Yeah. I like a lot of lights."

"Yeah? I'm more a soft light guy myself. I like the darkness. In the darkness, I can dream." He glanced at Alex, suddenly feeling foolish.

"I envy you. I really do." Before Cristiano could ask him why, Alex crossed to the fridge. "What would you like to drink?"

"Mineral water would be great, thanks." He waited a beat. "Why would you envy me?"

Alex pulled out a ritzy looking bottle of water. "I'm afraid of the dark."

Cristiano nodded, completely unfazed.

"That doesn't surprise you?" Alex asked, pulling two cut-crystal highball glasses from the shelf on the wet bar.

Cristiano shook his head. "Thanks," he said, taking the glass. He stared at the crackling ice swirling in it. Dang, even the glasses were damned classy. "I have fears, too."

"Yeah?" Alex asked, taking a healthy swig of his own drink. "Like what?"

"Elevators."

"Elevators?"

"Elevators. So I understand your fear of the dark. I mean, look at what you do. You're in an extreme sport. You're not afraid to do that. How long have you been afraid of the dark?"

Alex sat down at the small table in the room, then stood again, running his hand through his hair. "You don't know how weird it is to be talking about this."

Cristiano didn't move a muscle. He just stood and listened.

"I had a bad car accident. I was alone, in a lot of pain and no way to get help for thirty-six hours."

"Alex, I'm so sorry." Cristiano wanted to cover the space between them and hold him. "But don't you see? We both have the exact same fear."

"I'm not afraid of elevators."

"Darkness is *your* elevator. We both fear things, situations we can't control. I can't control what happens in an elevator. You can't control what happens when your car loses control and you

can't get help. I'm afraid of those things more than any man I ever faced in the ring. In the ring, I feel I can handle anything."

He put his glass down. "Come here. Give me your best shot."

"I don't want to hurt you," Alex protested.

"Then don't." He reached out his hand to Alex at the same moment the hockey player came to him, their lips colliding, in a long, passionate embrace. Their kiss went on so long and they both got so worked up, so hot and sweaty, they started to peel off clothes.

"I love your body," Alex said.

Cristiano never took his gaze from Alex's face as he dimmed a couple of lights.

"I love yours, too," he said. "I've been wanting to touch your skin for two days." He stepped back into Alex's arms again and kissed him. He took Alex's shirt off and recognized it as Abercrombie and Fitch. He was impressed. Man, they were both naked, but still on fire.

They began touching each other, avid, sensual little explorations. Cristiano touched Alex's chest and felt a thrill at its warmth. It was surprisingly soft. Being a boxer, he had a few bumps and bruises. His ribs on the left always hurt and Alex seemed to find the exact spot where it was almost unbearable.

"Does that hurt?" Alex asked, gazing into his

eyes.

"Yes." It hurt like hell to admit it. "I never tell anyone. You admit you have pain other guys hit you there."

Alex's eyes grew soft. It was the only thing about him that was soft. His cock, big and beautiful, was hard. They moved to the bed, but really it was to get more comfortable. Cristiano was so anxious for Alex to fuck him, he almost couldn't believe it. He felt Alex's hot breath on him as he bent his head to kiss and lick the hurt rib.

"Your secret is safe with me," Alex said into his mouth, swabbing his lips with his tongue. Cristiano went crazy when Alex got off the bed, but calmed when his soon-to-be lover brought back the bottle of mineral water they had started. Alex took a sip and the condensation dripped onto Cristiano's chest. Alex licked it off. They took turns sipping from the bottle. The bubbles made Cristiano feel shy, but still deeply aroused.

Alex put the bottle on the nightstand and his cold tongue licked from Cristiano's belly button down his left thigh and then detoured into his inner thigh.

Cristiano opened his legs slightly, but Alex shouldered his way between his parted thighs and Cristiano looked up at him, seeing the pleasure in Alex's eyes as his tongue worked on Cristiano's thighs and moved to his cock. He suppressed a shriek, watching Alex sucking him with total passion. Nobody ever sucked him this way. The few women he'd been with were not very good at it. Angel...Angel had been good at it, but it was not passion, it was control that drove his desire. He enjoyed having control over another human being, man or woman.

No, it wasn't like this with Angel, or anybody else. This was like fire and ice. Cristiano felt temperature changes whenever Alex's tongue moved to a new part of his body. He sought out the parts that made him tremble. He got off on the way Cristiano shouted out as his tongue touched Cristiano's ass hole. He couldn't believe how good that felt. Alex took his time, ignoring Cristiano's incoherent mumblings

He wanted to suck Alex's cock, but Alex was too far gone. His leaking cock humped Cristiano's thigh. Cristiano begged him for it. Alex ran to the bathroom and came back with a condom packet. He slipped the latex ring to his cock head and expertly slid it over the shaft, before nudging Cristiano's legs apart again.

The pain at first when Alex entered him was worse than any beating he ever took from any man, but he loved it. He clutched Alex's back and begged him not to stop even though it hurt. Alex told him to relax, to open up more and Cristiano did. For reasons he couldn't name, he trusted Alex. He was in pain, but loving it. He felt the hot, huge cock inside him and it was like nothing else he could relate it to. He knew he would follow Alex anywhere. He would do anything to keep Alex inside him.

He felt a strange sensation of wanting to release. Alex must have sensed it from his face because he smiled, kissing him again.

"It's an orgasm, more intense than fucking someone. I'm inside you and it's the most incredible connection you can have with someone," Alex said.

He could feel Alex's heart beating at the pulse in his neck. He felt Alex's cock getting bigger and harder inside him and he saw lights...dozens of blinding, exploding lights. He started to experience the most intense orgasm of his life. He laid there, the rush not stopping, feeling Alex's cock unleash its own fury deep inside him.

They slept with the lights on because neither man could bear the agony of parting from one another to reach the light switch.

* * * *

Alex left at six o'clock in the morning. He had Cristiano's number in his pocket and in his cell phone. What a sexy man. He felt lighter than he had in ages and promised Cristiano he'd call during his away games and he'd be back in a couple of days. He thought back to their conversations. There was a nobility to Cristiano he both admired and respected. He was nothing like Horatio.

Cristiano had kissed him goodbye and trotted down the street to take the train home.

"You're an unusual guy," he'd said to Cristiano, hating to see him go.

"Back at you. Travel safe, guy."

"You got lucky," Scott said when they met in the lobby to take the coach back to the airport.

Lucky? You don't know the half of it. "Lucky? Yeah. I watched TV until four."

"Anything good on?"

Yeah, a hot boxer..." No, not really, but I did catch myself getting my ass kicked all over the ice like a nine-year-old girl."

Scott laughed. "You're never gonna live it down, it's smart to live with it."

"You afraid of anything?" he suddenly asked Scott who looked taken aback.

"Afraid, what do you mean afraid?"

"You got any phobias or fears of things you can't control?"

"What, are you kidding? I scream like Jamie Lee Curtis when I see spiders. And the dentist's drill. If I walk into the dentist and hear that thing, I walk right out again."

"Why you asking?"

"Since my car accident...I'm sorta afraid of the dark."

"Really?" Scott looked at him thoughtfully. "That sucks, man. It'll get better." Scott's cell phone rang. "That'll be my kid. That's my other fear...that somebody will take him. That's the worst one of all."

Scott turned his face away so Alex wouldn't see the emotion in his face as he talked to his little boy. Scott's three-year-old was one awesome kid. He was the light in Scott's darkness...in Scott's elevator. He thought about Cristiano and realized he didn't ask him what brought on the fear. He wanted to call him right now and ask.

No, decided. I'll wait. I'm in a good place.

* * * *

Cristiano got home at seven and sauntered down the driveway. Predictably, Korean TV was playing, loudly in the front house and for the first time, he realized he had to move. He wasn't sure where or when or how, but he was done protecting everybody. He was done taking the beatings and having to keep on ticking.

He stepped into his little house. His whole body ached, but man, he felt good. It was a relief to lie on his bed. Light, he needed light. He'd been in the dark too long. He thought about driving Cherish around all day. He'd do it because the money was too good and he needed to get a good stash together if he was going to move out. Too bad it was only a two-day gig.

Sleep eluded him and he wanted to be outside. He'd outgrown his little cocoon here. He slipped out of his party clothes, showered and changed into jeans and a T-shirt and grabbed his book bag and hopped into his truck.

He'd go to *Philippe the Original* for breakfast. He didn't know why, but the place made him think of Alex. He'd order pancakes and eggs, that would sure feel good after the night he'd had. He'd look at his books, think about hitting his classes in the afternoon, once he dropped Cherish back home.

He received a text message as he was starting the truck. He checked the readout. It was Angel Marquez. The message was simple. *I miss you. Come and see me.*

Cristiano deleted it. Even if he never saw Alex again and boy did it hurt to think that, he couldn't go back to Angel. He wished him the best, but they were not meant to be. He didn't want to pursue the boxing stuff, maybe training. Yeah, he could be a good trainer. He arrived at *Philippe's* and two things changed all his plans. The place was packed, with people waiting to pounce on the first free table. And then he received a second text from Cherish. She wanted him to come pick her up right away.

He tried to keep his face neutral when he greeted her.

"I want to explain."

"Don't," he said when she got into the car.

"It's not for long. Horatio...he's a wonderful man, but he can't give me the things I crave. Once I have bought all the things I want, I can stop this anytime—"

"Please stop." He slammed the car door a little harder than he intended and jumped. He kept his emotions under control walking to the driver's side door.

"Let me explain," she said as he started the engine again.

"You can't explain. He's my brother and you cannot involve me in this."

"But – "

"No buts." He turned to her. "I'm through protecting his ass. He's dumb enough to fall for you, it's on him."

She looked shocked. "I can't believe you're talking to me like this."

He shrugged. "We both want the same thing. Money. I am happy to take your money. I need it. But I don't have to like you." She sat back. "I...can't believe you're saying these things."

"What did you want me to say? Way to go, you're a ho'?"

She was distracted by her ringing cell phone. "That's my first call. Take me to the Eastern Wind Hotel on Ventura Boulevard."

"Sure thing."

They drove in silence until they arrived. "You can wait for me in guest parking. I shouldn't be too long. I want to be able to see you though, I want you close."

"Why? Are you afraid of this guy?"

"No. He's a little...intense. He's just..." she shrugged. "I always feel spent after I've been with this one."

"You want me to come with you? Let him know you've got some muscle waiting for you?"

"Umm…"

"Come on. I'll walk you to the door. I'm a polite guy. I'll be nice."

"It's okay," she said, her smile uncertain. "Come get me if I am longer than forty-five minutes, okay? I'm right over there, room number nine."

She seemed to walk on unsteady legs and he watched her through the rearview mirror. In spite of her words, she *was* scared. He checked the clock, pulled out his books and began scanning

through his class notes.

The next time he looked up it was forty-six minutes since Cherish had left him in the car. He walked toward the hotel room and heard laughter coming from the room. He heard the voices and then she was coming out of the room and Cristiano's gaze fell on the man coming out right behind her.

It was his stepfather.

Looking back, he remembered stepping forward and slugging the guy. He remembered Cherish screaming and then he had dragged her to the car and driven her away.

"You have twenty-four hours to tell my brother everything or I will do it for you."

She had cried and he'd been unmoved. These days even his mother's tears couldn't faze him. He dropped her off at the next gig and the one after that and she had become sullen and resentful.

All the while, she kept up the incessant texting, calling her madam each time she arrived and left a call. By the time she'd made her last visit, he never wanted to see her again. He accepted the money and watched her go to the bank of elevators in her apartment building.

"Can't you see me to my apartment?" she asked him. "I'm on the twelfth floor."

"No," he said, his money safely in his pocket.

"Remember what I said. You have twenty-four hours."

"Fuck you," she snarled.

"No, thanks. I don't do ho's."

He drove off and hoped he hadn't just done something to piss his pal Manuel off. He gripped the steering wheel in shock. Where was his stepfather getting the money for a high-price call girl? Man, could anybody be trusted?

His cell phone rang. The readout said *Alex Hunter*. He pulled over quickly on Sepulveda, enraging a few drivers by blocking the lane, but he didn't care.

"Hey," he said. "Where are you?"

"Tampa, Florida. I fucking miss you, man. Get on a plane and come here. I'll arrange an eticket for you. Just tell me you'll come and be with me. I got a really nice room, the view is great."

Cristiano felt the conflict, the constriction fall from his shoulders. "I'll come."

"You will?"

Cristiano couldn't talk. He was too busy smiling.

"I'll have a ticket waiting for you at the United counter at LAX," Alex said. "I'll leave the light on for you."

Chapter Seven

Alex had never been a clock-watcher unless it Was on a scoreboard and the game was close. Today however, he keep his gaze off the alarm clock that was by his bed. Four hours. In a mere four hours he would be with Cristiano again.

It seemed like an eternity.

"Shit, I think I'm in love with him," Alex whispered as he ran a hand through his freshly showered hair. "When did that happen?"

Fear, panic, excitement, and trepidation all fought for supremacy inside him as the implication of actually caring for the man hit him. Did he dare believe that he could actually find happiness with someone? What if he ended up fucking things up like he had with Eric? Alex shook his head even as that thought danced through his head. Cristiano was nothing like Eric had been. To even compare the two did a grave injustice to Cristiano. Where Eric had been darkness, Cristiano was the light.

The irony of that wasn't lost on Alex either as the fact for the first time since the night of the accident he didn't feel guilty when he thought of Eric. It was Eric who had made the choices that had led to his death and nothing Alex said or did could have prevented it.

A loud pounding on the door jerked him out of his thoughts and he jumped. His gaze automatically went to the clock as if the four hours had magically passed and it could possibly be Cristiano at the door. Sadly not even four minutes had passed since he'd last looked. Sighing with disappointment, he went to answer it. It was probably the maid with some extra towels or something.

When he saw who really was on the other side, Alex was so shocked, he almost fell on his ass. "Derik?" He didn't even try to hide the distrusting astonishment in his voice. He tensed, halfexpecting the goalie to finish up the fight.

"We need to talk." Derik didn't look any happier to be there than Alex was over the unexpected visit.

"Why, so you can twist more words again for the next time you talk to the press? Pass." Alex started to close the door, but Derik's hand shot out and stopped him. "This is about Eric," Derik said, his eyes bright with anger.

At the name, Alex's heart dropped into his stomach. A cold sweat broke out over him as he fought to breath. So caught up in his girly panic attack, it took him several seconds to realize that Derik seemed to know about his connection to Eric. He tried to say something...a denial...an excuse...anything, but all that came out of his pie hole was a very unintelligent sounding grunt.

"I'll just take that as an invitation to come in," Derik commented dryly as he brushed past Alex and walked into the hotel room. Alex had no choice but to shut the door and turn to face the jerk. His injured eye started to throb almost as if it were remembering the close encounter it had with Derik's fist. Alex frowned when he noticed there was some bruising on Derik's right eye.

"I didn't realize I had connected with you at all during our fight." Alex pointed to the man's injury so he would know what he was talking about.

"You didn't." The corners of Derik's lips twitched like he was holding back laughter. "I got this wrestling with my dog."

"Oh." Alex soothed his ego by telling himself Derik probably had a huge vicious pit bull or something. "So you said you came here to talk about Eric." "Yeah, I did." Derik's face grew stormy, the lines of his jaws tight as he sized him up and Alex half-expected him to attack again.

"I didn't realize you really knew him."

"Please." Derik snorted. "You didn't think you were his one and only, did you? Eric had a thing for goalies and wasn't exactly the faithful type. I knew you were naïve, but I never took you for stupid."

Even though it shouldn't have, the knowledge that Eric had cheated on him hurt Alex. There was no doubt that Derik was telling the truth either. As far as Alex could tell, he had nothing to gain by lying. Still he couldn't but feel like an idiot for not realizing sooner.

"Oh my god." Derik shook his head, disbelief stamped on his face. "Val was right. You had no idea what Eric was really like."

"Val?" Alex felt as if he was in some dream and had no idea of the rules.

"Yeah, she came to see me last night. Not many things scare me, but when she's angry, even I quake."

"What in the hell did she want to talk to you about?" he asked, even though he already had a pretty good idea. Great, as if it were enough on his ego that he'd got his ass handed to him on national television, now he had some chick going and trying to handle his battles. Alex didn't know whether to laugh, cry or go jump off his ten-story balcony.

"You can lose that look on your face. She was just sticking up for her friend." Derik's lips curled in a hard smile. "I wish I had someone that cared about me that much. You're damn lucky."

"Somehow I don't think you flew down here to tell me that I made a good choice in buddies." Alex went to the mini-fridge and pulled out two mineral waters. Handing one to Derik, he tried not to give into hysterical laughter. Here he was waiting on the guy who had made it a hobby to beat on him. Either he was the most forgiving bastard in the world or the wimpiest.

"No, actually I came down here to say I'm sorry." When Alex lifted his fingers to his cut lip, Derik chuckled and shook his head. "Not for that. Maybe a little pain will teach you to fight better. What I meant was I'm sorry for all that crap I dished out about you before."

"Why did you do it?" Alex asked as he lowered his hand.

"The oldest reason in the book—jealousy. Not only were you taking my spot as the top goalie in the NHL, but you were taking my spot in my lover's heart." Derik fiddled with the lid of his bottle, refusing to meet Alex's gaze.

"I'm so sorry," Alex said and strangely, he meant it, despite his past with Derik. "I had no idea that Eric was with anyone else. If I had, I would have never started anything with him."

"You want to know the really sad thing?" Derik gave a bitter sounding chuckle. His gaze stayed on the bottle. "I did know Eric was cheating on me, but I loved him so much I looked the other way. Fool that I was, I told myself that if I remained loyal, he would eventually see the error of his ways and commit to just me."

"Don't feel too bad. I told myself the same thing, only it was about him using..." Alex trailed off, still not able to talk about that great big elephant in the middle of the room.

"Drugs," Derik finished, finally raising his head so they could look at each other.

"Yeah." Alex nodded, a burning lump in his throat.

"I think that was another reason I resented you so much. When Eric took that bad check and injured his back, he just seemed to give up and let the pain rule him. You fought back from two broken legs like some hockey version of a comic book superhero and went on to play again. You didn't become some washed up has been like he did when he let his life be ruled by Oxycotin and bitterness." There was no venom in Derik's statement, just a sad resignation that suddenly made Alex feel so much closer to the man.

"I'm no damn hero," Alex spat as the all-too-

familiar feeling of guilt slammed into him. There was a long tense silence before Derik broke it.

"Damn it, Alex, it's not your fault that Eric was too much of a coward to face life anymore and decided take all those pills that night. Hell, from the way Val tells it, you weren't even there when he did it."

No, because I was ten miles away, trapped in my car, thinking I was dying. Since there was no way in hell Alex would ever admit that he said, "Yes, it is my fault. I should have done more. Fought harder for him." Alex swallowed hard against the tears that were threatening to come. "Instead, I dumped him. Cut him out of my life and just left him alone when he needed me the most."

"Val told me everything. How Eric was starting to get violent and that he was starting to steal from you. Besides, you weren't the only one who saw he was in trouble, I was watching, too. Maybe if I hadn't been too busy blaming you, I would have had the courage to take Eric to task for what he was doing and got him the help he needed." Derik looked close to crying, too.

"Val has a big mouth," Alex said, although his words had no bite to them. He knew his friend had his best interest at heart.

"There is one thing she didn't tell me though," Derik replied shrewdly. "Something as big as an overdose death should have made the news even if Eric wasn't a pro anymore. How did you manage to keep things quiet?"

By selling my soul to the devil. Not daring to say those damning words aloud, Alex just shrugged. Unfortunately, Derik was way too smart for Alex's own good.

"When did you sign on with Horatio? It was right after Eric died, wasn't it? As I seem to recall, he represented, Eric too. In fact, the ass was really broken up about the fact that some tell-all book he had set up for Eric wasn't going to go through now. He cared more about that, then the fact that he was dead. We almost came to blows about it at Eric's funeral. So why is that prick suddenly calling all the shots in your life?"

Alex refused to answer even as he remembered the day Horatio had come to his hospital bed, a sly smile on his face. He had known that Alex would have done anything to protect Eric's reputation. Anything. Since you cost me one of my best clients, I only think it fair you take his place. Unless you want it to get out that Eric took the overdose because hockey's golden boy broke his heart.

"Horatio promised that if I did a few things for him he would cover things up so nobody ever knew that Eric had died on the bad end of a prescription bottle. I figure it was the least I could do."

"But even I know how much you hate the

spotlight. Why don't you just tell Horatio to shove it and let the chips fall where they may?"

"Because since I couldn't save Eric, the least I can do is save his memory," Alex bit out hoarsely.

"Alex, do I have to hit you some more to knock some sense into you?" Derik replied gently. "How can you save someone if they don't want it? Look, maybe I shouldn't be so hard on you because I didn't even realize this until Val and I talked. There was nothing either one of us could have done to save him. Eric didn't OD because you broke up with him. Eric OD'd because he gave up."

"Do you honestly believe that?" For the first time, Alex actually let himself feel a small sense of relief.

"Yes, I do. I also know that you need to let go of this before it drags you down, too." Derik ran his hands through his hair. "Actually, that's some advice that I need to take, too. We both need to let go."

"I guess we do," Alex muttered, feeling lighter than he had in ages. Who knew that redemption would have come via way of his worst enemy? Before he could stop it, a laugh burst past his lips.

"I come all this way to spill my guts to you and you laugh?" Derik asked, one brow cocked.

"I'm sorry, I was just thinking about how disappointed Jason is going to be since I don't have an arch nemesis anymore," Alex explained.

"*Arch nemesis*? Have you guys been watching spy movies in the locker room between periods?"

"Nah, if we watched movies, then we wouldn't have time to throw darts at the Cougar team picture," Alex cracked.

"Really? We have a Cobra's picture, too, but ours is right above the urinal so we can piss on it." Derik grinned and, for the first time, Alex noticed how cute the goalie was. If he hadn't already been head over heels for Cristiano, he may have been tempted, but there was nobody that could compete with his boxer.

"Hey, what kind of dog do you have?" Alex asked as he sized up Derik's shiner again.

"A cocker spaniel." Derik's eyes sparkled with mischief so Alex wasn't sure whether he believed him or not. "You know you really should invest in some boxing lessons."

"If I had a nickel for every time I heard that the past couple days. Actually I am taking lessons," Alex admitted, a warm feeling going through him as he thought about Cristiano. "Just wait until our next game. I can't wait for a rematch with you, buddy."

"I look forward to it. I promise not to go as easy on you next time."

"This coming from the guy who got beat up by his puppy dog," Alex drawled. "Hey, you've never met Brownie. She's a mean bitch."

"Brownie?" Alex didn't even try to hold back the mocking laughter.

"Hey, lay off. I didn't saddle the poor thing with that name. My niece did. I made the mistake of letting her pick out what to call the dog."

They both laughed and once they were sober, Alex asked, "So does this mean we're okay now?"

"Yeah, we're good." Derik pinned him with a knowing glare. "There still is one thing I want to clear with you."

"What?" Alex took a drink of the water and tried not to look at the clock.

"You need to get Horatio out of your life. I know how guys like him are. He'll drain you dry and then dump you like yesterday's jockstrap when he's got all he can from you."

"Interesting analogy," Alex quipped before he took another drink.

"But true. We have to figure out a way to get that parasite off your ass."

"We?" Alex echoed.

"Yes, we because you aren't facing this alone anymore. I'm going to help you get rid of him and you know how devious us arch nemesis can be. Old Horatio is never going to know what hit him."

Chapter Eight

A limo. Alex had a fringing limo waiting for him at the airport. Cristiano almost laughed at the sheer irony of it. For once, it would be someone else driving him instead of the other way around. Once he got settled into the plush leather seats, he pulled out his cell and called Alex.

"Hey, you. Did you make it in okay?" Alex's warm, caring voice brought a smile to Cristiano's lips.

"You don't believe in doing things halfway do you?" Cristiano chuckled as he shifted uncomfortably. While the limo was nice, he would have been more comfortable in something a little less...well less.

"Sorry, I would have picked you up myself, but I don't have my car since I'm out of town. If you don't like it, I'll make sure to send something else next time," Alex rushed out, sounding concerned.

Next time? Funny how two small words could make you feel so damn good.

"It's fine," Cristiano assured as he ran a finger along the gold trim lining the interior. "I just wasn't expecting first-class treatment is all."

"Why not?" Alex asked softly. "You're worth it. Besides, it's the least I can do for my new boxing coach." There was a rumbling voice in the background, but Cristiano couldn't make out what they said.

"That's right, my boxing coach," Alex yelled to the unseen speaker. "So you better watch your ass from here on out. He's got moves that will even make Brownie shake in fear."

"Do I even want to know?" Cristiano laughed, feeling lighter than he had since he could remember. For once, he didn't have the worries of his everyday struggle weighing him down. For at least this moment, he allowed himself to focus on one thing and one thing only – Alex.

"Probably not." Alex gave a chuckle of his own. Lowering his voice, he added, "I know it's only been a few hours since we last saw each other, but I really miss you."

"Me, too," Cristiano admitted as his heart thumped in his chest.

"I know we just met each other but—" Alex broke off as if he was too afraid to finish his thought.

"I know, I feel it, too." His heart was pounding so hard it was a wonder the driver didn't hear, but it couldn't be helped. Fear coursed through his body as he worried that he may have turned Alex off by gushing. What if he thought he was just another groupie looking for a gold ticket?

As Cristiano looked again at the expensive interior of the limo, he realized just how out of his league with Alex he really was. Even though he knew a part of him was falling big time for the man, Cristiano realized it was only a matter of time before Alex realized that he really was the two-bit thug Horatio said he was.

"You still there?" Alex's voice cut into Cristiano's thoughts.

"Yes, just thinking of how I can't wait to see you," Cristiano fibbed, the happiness he was once feeling quickly drifting away.

"Good, I was beginning to think you were having second thoughts. My room is ten-nineteen, I'll be waiting." Alex disconnected the call before he could respond.

It comforted Cristiano to hear some of the same apprehension in Alex's voice. Maybe he wasn't playing games after all. Then Cristiano looked down at his worn, but clean, clothes and snorted. Highly unlikely.

Even if by some chance Alex actually did have true feelings for him, it still could never work for them. It wasn't as if he had a good track record as far as lovers were concerned. Cristiano's gut grew tight as he imagined Alex getting hurt like Angel or worse.

Still when the limo stopped, he found himself getting out and going up to the room. The entire time he made his way through the swanky lobby and then the elevator, he kept waiting for someone to toss him out since it was obvious he didn't belong. No one seemed to notice him save for a trio college aged girls and that was to wave as they giggled flirtatiously.

Once he reached the door, he knocked quickly before he lost his nerve. As soon as it opened, Cristiano forgot to breath. No matter how many times he looked at Alex, he was stilled stunned by how sexy he was. There was a smile playing on his full lips and that brought visions of what Cristiano would like to do with that mouth.

"I thought you would never get here," Alex breathed before he pulled Cristiano in for a heated kiss.

All doubts fled as soon as his lips met Alex's. Parting his mouth, Cristiano slid his tongue out so he could stroke and caress. Alex moaned in response, the heat of his body calling to Cristiano. As always, the clean, musky scent of the goalie made his cock instantly hard.

He could feel the hard outline of Alex's erection pressing against him, showing Cristiano that he wasn't the only one getting jacked up. Sliding his hand between them, he started to undo the man's pants.

"Not yet, sweetie," Alex whispered as he stilled his hands and pulled back. "I have company and unless you want to give him a show he won't ever forget, we need to save the fun for a little bit yet."

Disappointed, but never one to be a voyeur, he stepped away. "Do you want me to come back later?"

"Are you kidding me?" Alex reached out and cupped his cheek. "Now that I got you here, I don't think I'll ever be able to let you go. Come in and I'll introduce you."

Following him into the room, Cristiano stopped dead in his tracks when he saw who it was. "Isn't that the guy you got into the fight with?"

"Fight isn't really a fair word," the guy lazily drawled. He was sprawled in a chair and, judging by the empty room service cart, he'd been there a while. "It means a fair exchange of blows and what happened between Alex and me was anything but."

It took Cristiano a few seconds to realize the guy was kidding.

"Derik, this is Cristiano." Alex gestured with his hand. "Cristiano, this is Derik, who is very sad that he has to leave right now."

"Well there you've gone and blown any chance of me buying those matching *Best Friends Forever* shirts."

"No offense, but I thought you guys hated each other," Cristiano blurted before he could censor himself. Luckily, Derik laughed and didn't seem to take offense.

"We've signed a peace treaty," Alex supplied with a grin.

"You better not let my brother hear about this," Cristiano teased. "Before you know it, he'll get you two your own TV show and bill you as the next Nicole and Paris."

"He's Horatio's brother," Alex explained, before he rushed to add, "he's nothing like him though."

"You mean he actually has a soul?" Derik sized him up like he was trying to measure his worth and Cristiano tried hard not to squirm.

He didn't even bother trying to defend Horatio. After what he'd seen over the past few days, his brother deserved every insult he got. Hell, maybe Horatio had sold his soul. The brother he had known would have never disappeared without a word for all those years. It wasn't like it would have killed the guy to pick up the damn phone at least once. Just so Cristiano didn't have to watch his mother mourn for one of her sons.

"Yeah, I actually give a damn about something other than fancy cars and bank accounts," Cristiano didn't even bother to hide the bitterness in his voice.

"You're right," Derik said to Alex. "He's nothing like his brother at all. You should tell him everything."

Cristiano's stomach did a slow flip. "Tell me what?"

"I'll leave that up to Alex." Derik started for the door. "I think I may have an idea on how to help him, but it will take me a couple days to set it up."

Cristiano nodded although he was more confused than ever. "Okay, I guess."

"What are you cooking up?" Alex narrowed his eyes at the other goalie.

"Trust me?" Derik flashed a grin that was everything but innocent. "I've got it handled."

Before they could say anything in response, Derik left. Cristiano took a deep breath and asked Alex, "What did my brother do now?"

* * * *

Alex paused, hating that he was going to have to tell Cristiano that he had a blackmailing jerk for a brother. How was he even going to start? It's not like Hallmark made a card for this thing. So he sat Cristiano down and told him the truth.

The entire time, Alex waited for Cristiano to get disgusted and walk out on him, but it never happened. Instead, he continued to gaze at Alex with caring warmth in his brown eyes. When he was finally finished, Cristiano slowly shook his head.

"I knew my brother was twisted, but I had no idea," his voice trembled with anger. "How can you even stand to look at me, knowing I'm related to him?"

Alex rushed over and took his hand. "Because when I look at you, I don't see Horatio's brother. I just see someone that I love."

Alex sucked in a breath as he realized what he'd just said. Cristiano looked at him, the astonishment clear on his face.

"How can you love me?"

"I know it seems like it's too soon, but I can't help it," Alex stammered, hoping he hadn't blown it with his big mouth.

"But I'm nobody. Look at what you've done with your life." Cristiano gestured to the high-end hotel room. "Horatio is right, I'm just a thug who will drag you down."

"No, you're not," Alex replied, fiercely. "Don't you realize? You literally are the light in my darkness. I need you so much that it's almost scary."

They stared at each other, the only sound in the room their raspy breaths. Just when Alex was ready to give up all hope, Cristiano said, "God, I love you, too." Alex groaned as he captured Cristiano's lips in a passionate kiss. Even though he had already expressed his feelings out loud, he still reaffirmed them with every stroke and caress. Cristiano returned it with the same fervor. They pulled back long enough only to remove each other's clothing. Soon Alex had him where he wanted him--under him and naked.

"I love the taste of your cock," he declared just before he opened his mouth and took in Cristiano's huge erection.

Cristiano cried out in pleasure, his hands darting out to gently grab Alex by the hair. Alex felt a thrill go over him at the sound. His guy was not afraid to let him know what he liked. Cristiano said some other things in Spanish, none of which Alex understood, but it still was one of the sexiest things he'd ever heard.

Alex sucked him almost to the brink, then just as he felt Cristiano tense up, he pulled his mouth back, letting his tongue slowly glide up the underside of his cock. This time whatever Cristiano said in Spanish sounded suspiciously like a curse word and Alex couldn't help but smile.

"Fuck me, Alex," Cristiano pleaded, his body arching against the white sheets.

Alex responded by moving his tongue to the man's ass hole, slowly licking his way around the

ring. Cristiano pulled his hair, this time harder as he urged him on with whispered pleas and groans. Finally, when he could take no more, Alex gave him one more last lick before he sat up. He paused just long enough to reach over to the nightstand and grab the condom he had stashed there. Ripping it open, he slid it on before he returned to Cristiano and positioned the tip of his cock at the opening of his ass.

Slowly he pushed himself inside Cristiano's hot ass. Even though every part of him wanted to thrust in hard and fast, he held back, not wanting to hurt his lover. Inch by torturous inch, he slid his cock in. All the while, he whispered words of love to Cristiano. Finally, he was all the way in. Alex paused, letting Cristiano's body get used to his cock.

"Stop playing around and fuck me," Cristiano growled, the hard muscles in his body tightening up as he reached out and grabbed Alex's hips to urge him on.

Alex moaned as he obeyed, pulling back and thrusting in again. "I love you," he panted as he began to move in and out.

"I love you, too," Cristiano responded, his voice breathless with passion. His fingers were digging into Alex's hips so hard there were sure to be bruises, but he didn't care. All that mattered was how good it felt to be inside him. Alex moved faster as the passion built up in him. While he wished he could have drawn things out, he just didn't have the willpower to deny himself this pleasure. Just as he was reaching the brink, he heard Cristiano cry out and felt the warmth of his come between their bodies. Alex threw back his head and yelled as he found his own release.

His first coherent thought as he came back to earth was how it had never before felt so right. For the first time since the accident, Alex slept with the lights off. So happy and content in the arms of his lover, he hardly noticed.

"I don't see how Derik thinks this is ever going to work," Alex whispered to Cristiano.

The past week had been pure heaven. Every night and day had been spent with Cristiano, only separating when he had to get online to do his schoolwork, or Alex had to skate. Then Derik had to go and blow their happiness by calling them to this meeting. It was in one of the smaller conference rooms at the hotel and so far, it was just he and Alex.

"Trust him, I really think he wants to help." Cristiano took his hand and gave him a reassuring squeeze.

Alex was saved from responding when Derik and Val came in. The goalie was laughing at something she said and Alex resented how they could be so at ease while his insides were all in knots. Val came over and gave kissed him on the cheek.

"Relax, I have a feeling you're going to love the show," she urged in a saucy voice.

"Easy for you to say." Alex gave a nervous laugh. "It's not your nuts that are on the line."

"True," Val conceded, the corner of her lips twitching like she wanted to smile. "But then again, I don't have nuts now, do I?"

Alex grunted in response, too worried to joke around.

"Horatio is going to be here any second," Derik announced. "Is everyone ready?"

When they all nodded, Alex whispered to Cristiano, "Are you sure you want to do this? I'll understand if you don't. He is your brother after all."

"I've never been more sure of anything," Cristiano replied firmly.

The door to the room opened as Horatio came in. He was glancing down at his Blackberry and didn't notice the full room at first. When he finally did, it seemed to take a few seconds to register with him.

"What's this? An intervention of something?" he cracked as his gaze uncertainly traveled over the group. "No, more like an extermination. As in killing off a pest," Derik replied, his eyes stormy with rage.

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean?" Horatio snapped.

Alex stood. "It means you're fired. I'm through being your bitch."

There was a tense silence as the two glared at each. That hated sly smile spread over Horatio's lips. "Are you really sure you want to do that?"

"I've never been more sure of anything."

"You're making the biggest mistake of your life," Horatio spat.

"No, the biggest mistake was me letting you blackmail me like you have been," Alex shot back.

"Did my bleeding heart brother put you up to this?" Horatio flicked a disgusted look over at Cristiano. "Don't think he can protect you."

"Maybe he can't by himself, but together we can," Derik declared as he gestured to Val. "Why don't you show him our little surprise."

"I thought you'd never ask," Val replied in a cool voice as she handed a folder to Horatio.

They all watched as he opened it and leafed through the stack of pictures there. It was interesting to watch his face go from cocky, to shock, then despair.

"Tell me, brother," Cristiano said. "Did you know your fiancé was a whore or is this all news to you?"

"How could you do this to me?" Horatio seethed as he threw the pictures to the ground.

"How could you use Alex the way you did and all for money?" Cristiano countered. "The brother I knew and loved would never do that."

"Here's the deal," Val said as she leveled a hard stare at Horatio. "You let Alex go and never darken his doorstep again, those pictures of your future wife go bye-bye."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I go with the story and I have enough connections to make sure it's picked up by every major newspaper, too." Val gave a triumphant smile. Alex reminded himself never to get on her bad side.

"How many clients do you think you'll get then?" Derik asked with a wicked grin.

Horatio looked at his feet for several seconds before he viciously kicked the pictures. Glowering at Cristiano, he seethed, "Fine take him, he's all yours."

Without another word, he stormed out of the room. Alex let out a breath, hardly believing it was over. He was free. For the first time since the accident, his life was his again.

Letting out a whoop of joy, he embraced Cristiano and kissed him. Holding his guy tight, he knew he would never let go.

About the Authors

A. J. Llewellyn lives in California, but dreams of living in Hawaii. Frequent trips to all the islands, bags of Kona coffee in his fridge and a healthy collection of Hawaiian records keep this writer refueled. A. J. loves male/male erotica, has a passion for all animals (especially the dog, the cat and the turtle). A. J. believes that love is a song best sung out loud.

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