

# CUTTING CORDS Mickie B. Ashling



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eBook edition available eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-092-5 This book is dedicated to three special people:

To the young man who inspired this story and who continues to conquer his personal demons on a daily basis.

To Jeannie G, my dedicated and tireless editor, friend, and Wailing Wall. Thank you for everything.

To my publisher, Elizabeth North, for taking a chance on me and giving me a voice.

THE line of people snaked across the entire length of the lobby, curving around twice before ending at the security checkpoint. It was a typical scene at San Francisco International Airport, packed with travelers from all over the world trying to get in and out as quickly as possible. I watched dispassionately as a family of Filipinos gathered to say good-bye to some relative who was laden down with boxes of who-knows-what. There must have been at least ten people standing around the old man, crying and carrying on like he was going to his death, instead of a plane ride.

My dad jabbed me with his elbow and admonished, "Stop staring."

I turned away, annoyed that he'd caught me doing my favorite thing: people watching. I've always enjoyed it—the artist in me picking apart every detail of a person or incident, keeping them tucked away in my brain somewhere for future reference.

"Are you sure you've got everything?" Dad asked, trying to pull my backpack away from me to check the contents. I yanked it back roughly, angered by this invasion of my privacy. I don't know why I was surprised, but every time it happened, it pissed me off. "Stop it!" I glared, daring him to say anything. I hated it when he treated me like I

was a fucking ten-year-old instead of someone who had just turned twenty-three. Everyone around was watching to see how my father would react, but they lost interest when he did nothing except look at me.

"I've got it under control, Dad," I reiterated, in a whisper this time, putting my mouth close to his ear. "Stop freaking out!"

He didn't look the least bit apologetic. He just stood there, all six foot four of him, arms akimbo and puffed out like a Thanksgiving turkey. "I just don't want you forgetting anything."

"Dad, I haven't forgotten anything. Besides, I'm going to New York, not another country."

"You're getting in late, Sloan. You don't want to have to stop at a store in the middle of the night."

I sighed, exasperated by his concern, but I answered patiently. "It'll be ten o'clock when I get there. I'm pretty sure that I'll find a store if I need one."

He grabbed me and gave me one of his bone-crushing hugs, practically squeezing the air out of my lungs. My head barely grazed his chin, and I felt like I was trapped in the arms of a polar bear, his size always a formidable thing. Although I was rapidly approaching his height, he bested me by at least one hundred and twenty pounds, making me feel even scrawnier than normal. I wondered again if I'd ever get to be as big as him. I'd been hearing how I was going to start to fill out ever since I was a kid, but all I did was get taller and taller, not wider.

"Now, you call me as soon as the plane lands, you understand?" he said, in a voice surprisingly gruff with emotion. I would have thought he'd be glad to get rid of me. Out of sight, out of mind, I assumed, but I guess you couldn't take away the parenting gene.

"I promise, Dad. I'll be okay."

"This is it, Sloan." He pulled away and looked at me with eyes that were uncharacteristically moist. "No more second chances, kid. The Big Apple will either make you a man or break you."

I rolled my eyes internally, thinking it would take much more than New York City to make me the kind of man he was hoping for, but I opened my mouth and said, "It's going to be fine, Dad. I wish you'd stop worrying."

"Can't help it, son. You're my boy and I'll always worry. That's my job."

One he was very good at, I might add. He'd taken worrying to a whole new dimension.

The line started moving a little faster, probably because they'd added another person, and I was fast approaching the area where we had to open up our bags, take off our shoes and jackets, and walk through the metal detector. I could feel my heart banging against my chest and my pulse beating like a conga in my head. I was terrified suddenly, sure that they'd find my stash and embarrass me and my father. I could see the headlines already: Joe Driscoll's son stopped at the airport with two grams of *Northern Lights*.

Being a former San Francisco Giant had its advantages, but it wouldn't save his son's ass, if I were arrested. Dad had already used up all his favors in the last few years. The SFPD and I had become very well acquainted, and although they'd never formally arrested me, in deference to my father's Hall of Fame status, they knew me on a first-name basis. They could make my life, and my father's, a living hell, if they chose to.

This was the reason I was being exiled to New York City. Not because I'd been accepted at Pratt Institute. I could have gone to the San Francisco Art Institute for a lot less money. The reason was to get me away from here, from everything familiar, to give me a fresh start. It was Ken Fujiwara, Dad's best friend from his baseball days, who had planted the seed in my father's head. Ken had a son who lived in New York City, and this played right into Dad's hands. They'd made arrangements for me to go and live with Cole without even asking me.

As usual, my life had been mapped out, planned, signed, sealed, and delivered without my input or consent.

It was my turn at security, and the guards told Dad he'd have to go through the detectors as well, if he planned on staying with me until I boarded. I tried to dissuade him, but he was having none of it. He wanted to see me walk down the ramp and board that fucking plane to make sure I got my scrawny ass out of town. I took off my jacket and threw it on the moving belt, along with my backpack and my Nikes. I still had several layers of clothing on; an undershirt, a colored T-shirt, a light flannel in a faded blue color. The usual layered look I preferred, giving the illusion of a normal torso, when in reality, I had the build of a twelve-year-old.

"Hey, Joe." The guard who was attending to me recognized my dad, which was good in a way. It distracted him and he waved me through. "This your kid?"

"Yeah, Sloan's my oldest. He's off to the Big Apple to become a famous graphic artist."

"That's pretty cool," the guard replied, signaling me to pick up my bags and stuff. "Are you going with him?"

"No," Dad answered, walking up to the metal detector, pausing to get the okay to pass through. He was waved on and he stopped to bullshit with the guard while I tied my shoes and gathered my belongings. "He's off on his own."

"Well, good luck to you, son," the guard said, rewarding me with a huge smile. "You guys are free to go."

Thank you, thank you. We walked away and headed toward the food court to kill a few more minutes. Dad bought me a latte, shaking his head in disapproval when I asked for an extra shot of espresso. I poured in at least three tablespoons of sugar and took a sip, sighing in relief that I'd made it through this far without any incidents. Now I just had to get rid of Dad and I'd be home free.

IN NEW YORK CITY, Cole Fujiwara was about to go off on a man who demanded nothing but respect from his children. But Cole wasn't going to let that deter him from speaking his mind. He was still angry that his father had made plans with his best friend before consulting him, telling Cole after the fact that he was about to gain a roommate. Did he honestly think I'd be okay with this?

"Dad, would you please reconsider? I don't want Sloan to come live here. I have enough problems of my own. I don't need to take on anything else."

"Why are you assuming he'll be a problem?" Ken asked. "Joe has assured me that the kid has cleaned up his act and wants to make a fresh start."

"And you believe him?"

"Why shouldn't I? I'm surprised by your attitude, son. I didn't think you were so heartless."

"I'm not heartless, Father," Cole protested. "I'm just being practical."

"You used to play with this kid. You were best friends!"

"I haven't seen Sloan since he was eight years old," Cole countered. "I was eleven, for Christ's sake—hardly his best friend!"

"Calm down, Cole. You'll give yourself an asthma attack."

"Dad, you know the timing of this sucks. I'm dealing with all my own shit."

"I know," Ken said, in a voice filled with sadness. "I thought that maybe you guys could help each other out."

"Please tell me that he doesn't know, or have you already primed him?" Cole spat out bitterly.

Ken sighed heavily into the phone. "I haven't said a word to anyone, Cole. Not even Joe knows. You asked me not to discuss it, and I've respected your wishes."

"Thank you. Eventually people will find out, but until they do, I want things to be normal."

"Maybe Sloan can help you around the apartment. Do some of the chores?"

"Is that what the plan is? Make Sloan my seeing-eye roommate?" "Cole, stop it."

Cole swiped angry tears away. They were an automatic reaction to his father's interference. Despair was warping the man's judgment, his need to help so painfully obvious, but Cole had insisted on being independent. He had to learn how to cope with it, to become a disabled person and survive without anyone's help. It was hard enough to deal with the reality that he was going blind, but he was determined to be self-sufficient and not become a burden to anyone. He'd been preparing for the inevitable for six months, learning to live alone and manage. Now, he was being thrown another curveball, expected to welcome Sloan with open arms when he had no idea who or what he was dealing with.

Each morning Cole woke up thinking this was all a nightmare that would go away. But sadly, it wasn't going anywhere, and the shadows got worse every day. It was that day he was preparing for: the day he'd wake up and see nothing.

THE doors of the plane were shut; the engines revved and ready to go. I leaned back and plugged in my earphones, increasing the volume so that I could hear nothing but Queen blaring out *Bohemian Rhapsody*. I loved their music, even if it was considered old school by many of my peers. I loved their drama and their style, much to my father's horror. One summer I even made the attempt to dress and talk like Freddie Mercury. It wasn't that hard, since we had the same body type, not one ounce of fat anywhere. My little game was met with outraged disapproval, so that persona went back into the closet of my brain, along with all the other shocking thoughts that resided there.

The plane finally took off, almost in sync with Freddie's falsetto blaring in my ears. I removed my earplugs and unfastened the seat belt when the captain turned off the sign. It was time to go to the rest room and take care of business.

The light in the tiny bathroom cast a yellowish shade on my normally pale face. I stared at the mirror, trying to see if I looked any different since my haircut, and my father's attempts to make me look respectable. Everything appeared the same; my hair was still a boring brown, my eyes an unremarkable shade of gray. My mouth was a bit too full and too girly for Dad's taste, but there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. I wondered how long it would take for my hair to grow out again. I hated the feel of the cold air against my neck, although my tattoo was now clearly visible, the Queen logo a testament to my devotion.

I started to strip, undoing the belt buckle and pushing down my jeans, past the scars on my thighs that showed in bright relief against the expanse of white skin. They were an angry hue of pink, which was normal for me and almost a non-issue. I stepped out of my pants and left them balled up in the corner. Next off were the tighty-whities and the sandwich bag with my stash. It had been held in its hiding place near my crotch, nestled nicely in between my boxers and the boring white underwear. I dumped the briefs into the wastebasket and pulled my jeans back up.

I opened the bag and inhaled the pungent aroma of the high-grade weed, wishing I had the guts to light up, but I knew that all kinds of hell would break loose if I did. So I popped a Xanax instead, knowing it was a poor substitute but certainly better than nothing.

I spent the rest of the flight in a hazy fog. Thanks to my age and the money in my pocket, I was able to buy a few drinks to add to my drug-induced high. That, plus the reassuring sound of Freddie serenading me, calmed me down. I passed on the food, shaking my head at the flight attendant, asking for more peanuts instead. I could hear my father admonishing me, telling me to eat and not skip meals or I'd stay scrawny, but I wasn't buying into that plan anymore. No

amount of food had ever worked to give me the kind of body I craved, so any time I was on my own, I ate whatever the fuck I wanted.

I knew I was in New York as soon as the cabbie pulled up to the curb and looked me over without leaving his seat. "You want a ride, buddy?"

He was an Indian, turbaned head and all, doing the whole headshake thing and expecting me to haul my gear into the cab on my own. I hefted the duffel with all my worldly possessions and placed it in the open trunk. "Can I smoke in here?" I asked, as soon as we got going.

"Sure, buddy."

I pulled out a joint I'd rolled in the airport restroom and lit up, inhaling deeply, letting the smoke fill my lungs. The cabbie lifted an eyebrow as soon as he smelled the weed. "You want to share some of that?" he asked, hoping I'd say yes.

"Knock yourself out," I replied, passing the joint through the opening in the glass.

He took a huge hit, nodding his head in appreciation. "Good stuff, buddy."

"Yeah, it better be, for what it cost."

"Where are we going?" he asked, finally realizing I hadn't given him an address.

"Chelsea."

"Okay, buddy."

It was almost eleven by the time we stopped in front of Cole's building, and after I handed over my money, I waited to see if Mohammed would help me with my bag. Stupid thought. The man just sat there and shook his head. "Good luck, buddy."

Fucking asshole.

I dragged my shit out of the cab and waited for the doorman to let me in. Apparently he'd gotten word of my arrival, and he actually helped me place my bag in the elevator and told me the apartment was on the tenth floor. When I got there, I stabbed at the doorbell for a good five minutes before I saw a light go on and heard footsteps coming toward the door. It was pulled open and a guy stood there, pissed off as all hell.

"Will you ease off the fucking bell already?"

"Hey, I didn't know if you were asleep or what."

"Well, I'm wide awake now."

"Oh. Sorry about that. I'm looking for Cole Fujiwara."

"You found him," he replied warily. "Sloan?"

"The one and only."

"Wow. You've grown. When'd you get so tall?"

And when the fuck did you get so hot?

"Probably when you lost all the weight," I replied out loud, taking a really good look at him. He was nothing like I remembered. The fat kid with thick glasses who teased me and told me I threw like a girl was gone. In his place was a Johnny Depp look-alike with bone-straight black hair that fell over his forehead. The glasses were gone as well, probably replaced by contacts, but those dark blue eyes were the same, courtesy of his Irish mother, and a little disconcerting in his obviously Eurasian face.

"So, are we going to stand here all night?" I asked, needing to move away from this guy. I was doing the whole staring thing again, and I was afraid he'd say something.

"Oh, sorry. Come in," Cole said, turning and walking down the hall. I picked up my bags and followed. The place was immaculate, nothing like I expected.

"Wow, you have a housekeeper?"

"No, why?"

"Everything is just so neat."

"I like order, and I'll expect you to maintain this apartment the way I like it," Cole said, pushing a lock of hair out of his eye. "You hungry?"

"Not really. Can I light up?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"I don't smoke. Do you mind?"

"Yeah, I mind! This is my place now, and I should be able to smoke whenever I feel like it."

"It's not your house!" Cole spat out. "It's mine, and if you want to stay with me, you'll follow my rules."

"Rules," I groaned. "I thought I'd just escaped from rules."

"Look, Sloan. There are just a few things I need from you," Cole said, changing the tone of his voice. "I really can't be around cigarette smoke."

I stared at him, taking a good look at his face now that we were in better light. The artist in me picked out each feature, lingering over his nose, which was straight and narrow, his ridiculously high cheekbones, and finally his mouth, which looked soft and tempting. He probably tasted great as well, since he was a nonsmoker. I tore my eyes away and said, "What about weed? That's medicinal."

Surprisingly, he said, "I'll let you smoke weed, but only in your room with the door closed and the window open. Understood?"

"Sure. Thanks."

"Well, it's late," Cole said softly. "Let me show you your room and then I'm going back to bed."

I let him lead the way, giving me the perfect opportunity to check out his body. He was about five-eleven and beefier around the arms and shoulders than me. The rest of him was perfect. His broad back tapered into a slim waist, and his silk boxers clung to his rounded ass. His long legs were tanned, well shaped, and muscular. A sudden vision of those same legs wrapped around my hips stirred my imagination. My cock twitched, confirming the unexpected and powerful attraction.

"You still playing ball?" I asked, hoping my voice didn't betray my feelings.

"No," he replied, without turning around. "I gave it up."

"I heard you were pretty good at it. In fact, my dad said you might be following in daddy's footsteps."

"Nah, no way," Cole said, with a little hitch in his voice.

We stopped in front of a door, and he pushed it open and said, "This is your room. We share a bathroom, so don't be a slob. I can't be wiping up after you all day."

"God, Cole. Have you always been this anal?"

"Yup," he replied. "Deal with it."

He spun around and opened a door on the other side of the hallway entering his room without even turning on the light. "See you in the morning," he called out and disappeared.

I was a little taken aback by his sudden departure, but I shrugged it off and began to unpack. It had been a long fucking day and I was ready to unwind. I opened the window and noted that a fresh breeze came in easily. My room was facing in the right direction, which meant I could air it out after too many cigarettes. I'd be damned if Cole was going to tell me what I could or couldn't smoke. Fuck that shit! This was my space now, and I'd do whatever the hell I wanted.

7

COLE lay in bed, going over the last hour. Things had gone as well as he could hope, considering the fact that he and Sloan hadn't seen each other in fifteen years.

He had waited up as long as he could but had ended up falling asleep on the couch with his contacts in, hoping he'd be able to see Sloan when he arrived. Cole deluded himself into thinking that the little bit he did see was thanks to the lenses, when in reality they did nothing. His eyesight was going rapidly. All that was left was his central vision, and that was fuzzy. It was like looking at the world through a broken camera lens; it used to drive him crazy in the early days, but now, each little glimpse was a treasure he clung to. What little he saw of Sloan seemed familiar in some strange way. He was a very tall man with piercing gray eyes that commanded his attention, just like they had as a child. Cole remembered those eyes as soon as he opened the door and saw the tall form looming there. Sloan used to stare at him for the longest time, which made him uncomfortable even then. It felt almost as if Sloan could see deep inside him, past the layers of his many personas. So much so that Cole had started to tease him, telling him that he threw the baseball just like a girl, which would make Sloan cry and run away.

Cole had no idea why he'd done that. There was just something about Sloan that hit a nerve. Some kind of weird connection they had, and he'd forgotten all about it until tonight when he looked into his eyes again. He also noticed that Sloan's energy was supercharged. Almost as if he was on drugs, or maybe this was just his natural state and Cole wasn't used to it.

He'd begun to notice people's energy a lot more, shortly after he was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa. That was years ago, and the ability to read people had increased with his diminishing eyesight.

It had all begun when he was in his teens. He started having trouble with his night vision, but never mentioned it to anyone because he didn't want to lose his chance to drive. Eventually, night driving became a problem, and soon after that, he started to lose his peripheral vision. This was just around the time when he was coming into his own as a pitcher in the minor leagues. He was destined to follow in his father's footsteps because he had inherited the arm, the determination, and the stamina. But somewhere in that wonderful gene pool lay the altered gene that carried the disease. No one could explain why he got it. No one in their family had it, but the doctors said that it was an inherited thing, passed down through the generations, and somewhere in Japan or in Ireland, on his mother's side, there was a person in his bloodline that had passed this onto him. When the specialists told Ken that his son would eventually go blind he had almost killed himself, he'd been so devastated.

Cole had gone into denial—a typical reaction, he had come to find out. For several months he continued to struggle with his baseball career, pretending he didn't have issues with depth perception. He'd laugh it off when he missed a ball because he couldn't see it coming, until finally, reality had smacked him in the face: he had hit another ball player in the head with his ninety-mile-an-hour fastball. He'd dropped to his knees on the mound and buried his face in his hands so his teammates couldn't see the tears, but he decided then and there to quit. He walked off the field and never looked back.

He threw an arm over his eyes and kicked off the bedsheets. He wondered how long it would be before Sloan figured it out. He really didn't want to deal with the solicitous hovering or the forced kindness. He had enough of that from his parents and Juliana. He was much more content putting up with Sloan's snarky remarks and defiant attitude. It made him feel normal, and right now, feeling normal was a good thing.

IT MUST have been around two in the morning when I finally realized I was starving. The weed had opened up the floodgates of my hunger, and the fact that I hadn't eaten since I left California made the growling in my stomach difficult to ignore.

I got up and decided to go to the kitchen and see what I could find. The apartment was as quiet as a tomb; the only sound I could hear was the thumping of my heart, which sounded pretty fucking loud to my mind. The weed was magnifying everything, including my paranoia. The fear that Cole would wake up and throw me out was pretty real, since he didn't seem too happy to have me around. Trust my father and Ken to assume this was all okay. If I had my own place, and looked like Cole, I'd be pissed as well. Whatever made the old fucks think that Cole would accept me with open arms?

I wondered if he had a girlfriend. Probably more than one, I supposed, with a face and body that screamed hotness! Okay, so I noticed. I admit it. Who the fuck wouldn't?

My interest in men wasn't some new thing. It had started a zillion years ago, right around the time I'd discovered Queen. Another thing that Freddie and I had in common, although I certainly hoped to do better than him and not die of HIV-related diseases. If my father only knew how Freddie's history had affected the way I dealt with safe sex, he'd endorse Queen. I was the poster boy for condoms, always carrying a spare in my pocket in case the need arose, which was really wishful thinking on my part.

I wish I could say that sex was a huge part of my life, but it wasn't. I suppose it all had to do with my body image, but I was sorely lacking in the experience department. I'd had a few encounters that stood out clearly in my head. The first one was when I had just turned sixteen, and some pervert, who must have been in his late twenties, picked me up when I was rollerblading in Golden Gate Park. He'd blown me in one of the stalls in the public restroom. It was the first time anyone had done that, and I was so shocked I didn't realize that he'd expect me to reciprocate. I freaked and ran off, listening to him cursing at me as I rollerbladed down the road.

My next relationship was with Andy, a geeky kid I knew in high school who stalked me despite what I looked like. It was all about blowing each other and learning which parts went where, but I would never take off all my clothes in front of him. I was afraid he'd find me too skinny and I couldn't handle the thought of the school dweeb making fun of me.

There was only one part of my body I was proud of, but unfortunately I couldn't walk around with my nine-inch dick on display. When Andy kept pushing about the clothes, I shoved down my pants, gave him my virginity, and left him soon after.

The third encounter was with a woman. I had convinced myself into thinking that if I were straight, all my troubles would disappear. My parents were mildly hysterical when I told them I'd begun dating Emily. They were so glad I'd come to my senses, they even bought me a car so I could have some privacy. I removed all my posters of Queen and put them in my closet to reaffirm my intentions to go straight.

And I suppose that if I had really made an effort, I could have dealt with Emily's presence in my life. She was a nice girl and very supportive of my career in graphic arts. We seemed to share that same dry sense of humor and a tendency toward sarcasm and self-deprecation, probably because she wasn't very pretty. She was quite ordinary physically but had a great mind, which is what convinced me that I could get past the notion that she didn't have a cock. Wrong.

Our one attempt at fucking was an experience I try never to think about. She refused to take off her blouse, ashamed because she had no boobs, and I didn't want her to see my xylophone rib cage and skinny ass, so we did it with all our clothes on. It was over much too quickly, and although the few minutes of relief were reasonably good, the pain and heartache that followed weren't worth it. Emily and I agreed to remain friends and not fuck buddies. It was much more doable and a lot less embarrassing.

After that, I'd take sex wherever I could find it, but it was always hurried and lacking in emotion. So I turned to chat rooms, prowling them aggressively, having sex with multiple men who all thought I had the body of Adonis. It was satisfying for as long as it took to get off. The rest was too painful to discuss.

It was dark in the kitchen, and I switched on the light before going to the refrigerator and pulling the door open. It was fully stocked, but none of it was junk food. There were two gallons of juice and some yogurt cups. I didn't recognize a lot of small packages that had writing in Japanese, but I was heartened to know that, despite being anal retentive about his surroundings and cigarette smoke, Cole had a normal appetite. There was a small box of pizza that caught my eye and I grabbed it, hoping it wasn't too old. It looked and smelled okay, so I threw a slice in the microwave, grabbed a bottle of Bud, and sat down to eat. I inhaled the food and drink, satisfied enough so that sleep might come at last.

I was walking down the hallway to go to my room when I heard groaning coming from behind Cole's bedroom door. I pressed my ear to the wood, wondering what was going on. The groaning continued, and it seemed to be escalating instead of dissipating, so I turned the doorknob and slowly stuck my head in through the opening. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust, but all I could see was Cole lying on the bed, naked. His eyes were closed, so I assumed he was asleep and dreaming of something horrible. I walked in and paused for a minute, staring down at his body. He was beautiful in every way and my breath caught in my throat, the urge to touch so powerful it was making me careless.

His cock was thick and pushing up toward his stomach. He was circumcised, a fact that seemed to catch my attention for some reason. I would have given up every single DVD I owned to be able to suck on him. Instead, I sat on the edge of the bed and shook his shoulder, "Cole, wake up."

He opened his eyes almost immediately. "Who... wha?"

"It's me, Sloan. You were dreaming."

"What the fuck are you doing in my room?"

"You were groaning, man, I thought you were hurt."

"Get the fuck out of here," he growled, pushing me off the bed. He grabbed hold of the bed sheet and covered himself. "Don't ever come in here uninvited, do you understand?"

"Hey! Fuck off, okay? I was just trying to help."

"Get out, Sloan!"

I spun around and rushed out of his room. I slammed the door behind me, listening to the sound reverberating in the quiet of the night, and the click when I locked my bedroom door seemed even louder. I threw myself on the bed and pulled my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms around my legs to stop the trembling that had already started. I could feel the urge coming over me and I was doing my best to hold it at bay, but eventually, it was too strong to ignore. My need to hurt myself was the biggest demon in my life, the one thing I had yet to conquer, and once again, I stopped thinking rationally and moved off into some dream state.

I straightened out my legs and pulled my pants down, lifting my hips to get them off easily. I dug my nails into my thighs, and began to scratch the letter S onto my skin with the jagged edges. I didn't stop until I saw the pink turn to red and the blood seeping through, all the while saying the same thing over and over in my head as the tears poured down my face in torrents. S is for sick, S is for stupid, S is for Sloan ....

7

COLE scooped more food into his mouth, savoring the taste of the chicken and onion he'd added to the scrambled eggs he'd made himself for breakfast. He ate slowly, enjoying the different flavors as they blended with the rice.

He'd become quite the chef—no small feat, since he couldn't boil water a few years ago. But he'd insisted on learning how to cook, adding it to the list of things he needed to accomplish to become self-sufficient. Now, he could not only boil rice, he'd become quite skilled at preparing his meals, thanks to his mother's tutelage. They'd spent many hours in the kitchen going over the finer points of traditional Japanese cuisine. Her contention was that he could always get burgers or pizza anywhere, but a fine *donburi* or *tempura* were hard to come by; so she'd taught him everything, just as her Japanese mother-in-law had taught her when she and Ken were newly married.

He used the chopsticks expertly, pausing as he lifted them to his mouth when he heard noises coming from Sloan's bedroom. He supposed he'd have to have a discussion with him over last night's incident, and now was as good a time as any. Sloan seemed to have no qualms about invading an otherwise private space, so he was going to have to set him straight. He needed to understand that there would be

very clear boundaries between them, or he'd have to pack his bag and get the hell out, their fathers notwithstanding.

Sloan stumbled into the kitchen, making a straight line toward the refrigerator. He mumbled a greeting of some sort and yanked open the door, cussing up a blue streak when he realized there was not one can of Coke inside.

"Don't you drink soda?" He slammed the door shut and turned to Cole, who continued to eat.

"No."

"What about coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee, but I have tea if you'd like some."

"Shit!" Sloan muttered, throwing himself on a chair. "What the hell are you eating?"

"I'm having my breakfast."

Sloan leaned over to get a good look at Cole's meal and recoiled, disgusted. "What the hell is that anyway? It smells funny."

Cole put the bowl and his chopsticks down, trying to maintain some sort of civility. So far Sloan was doing everything possible to get on his nerves. "I'm having a *donburi*, a rice bowl, if you must know. It's got chicken mixed in with scrambled eggs and a light sauce to enhance the flavor. It's a combination of soy, sugar and ginger, like teriyaki sauce."

"Haven't you ever heard of Pop-Tarts?"

Cole laughed despite his annoyance. "I prefer to have something a little more nutritious."

"Man, I've got to go grocery shopping. You don't have shit in this place."

"I've got plenty of shit."

"Yeah, but it's all this weirdo Japanese stuff," Sloan accused.

"It's what I prefer," Cole replied, directing his gaze at the figure in front of him. It was like looking through a straw, his circle of vision was so tiny. He couldn't make out all of Sloan's features, but he could feel his body language, and it was definitely agitated.

"Do you even own a coffee pot?" Sloan was outraged that there was no caffeine in sight.

"Sloan, you're welcome to buy whatever you want, but I need to be here when you put things away. I have a system."

"No kidding," Sloan grumbled; he'd noticed last night how everything was lined up as neatly as possible. "You really are anal, you know that?"

"I prefer to call it organized."

"Why are you having rice for breakfast?" Sloan asked, changing the subject. "That's not normal."

"I have my heavier meals in the morning and at lunch. I got used to eating this way when I was playing baseball."

"It's weird."

"No weirder than having mountains of bacon, hash browns, and three eggs sunny-side up. I just prefer rice as my carbohydrate and lean meat as a side."

"Whatever, dude."

"Would you like a bowl?"

"Hell no! What I want is a latte with a triple shot of espresso. Is there a Starbucks close by?"

"Around the corner," Cole replied, resuming his meal. He took another mouthful of food and began to chew slowly, waiting for Sloan to leave. Unfortunately, he didn't.

"I'm sorry about last night," Sloan spat out, not sounding sorry at all. "I didn't mean to startle you, but you were making all these noises, like you were in pain or something, so I had to find out what was going on."

"I don't like people walking in on me when I'm fast asleep."

"Like I said, dude. Noises."

"Let's get a few things straight, okay?" Cole stated, putting his bowl and chopsticks down once more. "You and I will have to work out some rules, so we're not in each other's business."

"Hey, I have no desire to be in your business."

"And I don't care what you do, either, but I do care when you walk into my room unannounced. What if I had company?"

"You didn't, okay?" Sloan answered quickly. "Do you have a girlfriend? Should I be expecting some girl to show up here?"

"I'm seeing someone, yes."

"What's her name?"

"Her name is Juliana, but she doesn't have a key to the apartment, so she's not going to just 'show up'," Cole said, making quotation marks in the air. "I prefer to *invite* people into my life. I don't like anyone to assume anything."

"Gads, have you always been this rigid?"

"Who's rigid?"

Sloan snorted, "Whatever, dude."

"Getting back to my bedroom," Cole started up again.

"I've got it, Cole," Sloan stopped him in mid-sentence. "It won't happen again." He stood up quickly and almost knocked over the chair. "I've got to get some coffee in me or I'll be sick."

"Do you have plans for today?" Cole asked, trying to smooth things over.

"I didn't, but that's changed. I'm going to the store to buy some real food. Then I think I'll explore the neighborhood, get used to my surroundings. Tomorrow is Monday and I've got to be at Pratt around ten in the morning, so I'd like to walk around campus later on."

"You do realize that Pratt is only a few blocks from here. You can practically fall into your classroom," Cole said.

"Fuck, yeah. That means I won't have to rush in the morning."

"What time is your first class?"

"I'm certain it's around nine or so, but I need to look at my schedule again. What about you? Do you work or go to school?"

"I'm getting my master's online, but I do attend a few classes on campus each week," Cole replied, skipping all the details. Fortunately, Sloan was too caught up in his quest for caffeine to ask for more information.

"Do you need anything from the store?" Sloan asked as an afterthought, "and don't ask me to buy any weirdo shit like seaweed or dried eel."

Cole shook his head, smiling at the remark. "I'm good, Sloan. Thanks"

I SPUN around and headed toward the bathroom to wash my face, brush my teeth, and get the hell away from him. I had the shakes pretty bad, probably from the lack of coffee or the aftereffects of last night's incident. Each time I gave in to my need to hurt myself, I paid for it the next day. The physical pain was bad enough, but the mental torture of knowing I'd lost control was even worse.

The shrinks had prescribed antidepressants, telling me that the pills would help me to cope with my feelings and keep them at bay. I knew they were wrong. I'd been doing this to myself for years, and no happy pill was going to make me stop.

I pushed down my sweats and stared at my thighs, looking at them almost dispassionately to see what kind of damage I'd caused. The angry S marks were a dull red, some of them crusting over where I'd broken skin. My legs were a study in the levels of torture I'd inflicted on myself through the years. Scar over scar had formed, almost to the point of becoming some intricate pattern from hell, a personalized tattoo that screamed, *help me*. I grabbed the antiseptic spray and doused myself with it, enduring the sting and hoping I wouldn't get an infection. At least I hadn't used a knife or blade last night, simply because they weren't handy. I'd have to stock up on those as well.

I pulled my sweats back up, opting to stay in the loose pants, so I could be pain free for at least an hour. I grabbed my wallet and cell phone and headed out.

The Starbucks was literally a stone's throw away, praise God. I'd never been so happy to smell coffee in my life. After ordering my latte, with the extra jolts of espresso, I moved over to a table by the window and sat down to savor every last drop of the morning pick-me-up.

The joint was packed, quite normal for a Starbucks at nine in the morning. What was more interesting to me was the number of gay men who were strolling in and out. My morning was starting to get better by the minute. Maybe I'd finally move from virtual sex to the real thing. I wondered, though, why Cole had chosen this location. He could have picked any part of Manhattan, but Fifteenth Street in Chelsea was on the border of the gayest part of town.

My cell phone beeped at me, and the number on caller ID was my dad's.

"Hey," I answered, knowing he'd be pissed 'cause I didn't call him last night as promised.

"I see you got there safe and sound."

"Sorry I didn't call."

"Well, I figured you were in good shape. I didn't read about any mad terrorists hijacking your plane."

"Not this time, Dad. Sorry to disappoint."

"Is everything okay?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, I don't really know much about Cole, other than what Ken has told me. The boy is somewhat of a mystery."

"He's pretty anal."

"I don't mean that part. I'm talking about why no one will tell me why he quit playing baseball," Joe replied. "He was quite good at it, almost as good as Junior."

I rolled my eyes and said, "No, really? You mean someone can actually come close?"

"Stop it, Sloan."

"I've got to go, Dad. Talk to you later." I disconnected before he could say another word. I had no desire to listen to him apologize for mentioning my brother.

Junior Driscoll, my younger brother, was my dad's pride and joy. He was a pitcher for the San Francisco Giants and proudly walking in our father's footsteps. He was everything I wasn't, and the biggest thorn in my side.

We were eighteen months apart, but from the very beginning, he'd stolen the spotlight. He was better-looking for one thing. He had my father's body structure, and by the time we were in our early teens, he'd passed me in the height and weight departments. It didn't matter that I was ten times smarter, or that he had trouble passing a simple math class without my help. What mattered was that he could hit the ball out of the park and pitch till the cows came home.

He was also straight and a ladies' man. Like I said, everything I wasn't.

COLE put the phone down and waited for the cab to show up. The doorman said he would call him as soon as he could flag one down. He hoped that Sloan would be back by then. He'd forgotten to give him the keys to the apartment: a major sticking point, since he had a meeting with his counselor at Lighthouse International in about an hour. He

couldn't be late for that, and Sloan would just have to wait if he didn't catch him before leaving.

His weekly meetings were a great source of comfort to him. It was the one place he could be honest and not pretend that life was normal. Lighthouse International had all the help available to anyone who was suffering vision loss or who was already visually impaired. They had the finest doctors and counselors and every resource one could possibly want to help people cope.

His counselor was also a psychiatrist, trained to work with the handicapped, but more importantly, good-natured and wise. Dr. John Butterman wasn't condescending, nor was he overly optimistic, dishing out false hope. He was direct and grounded, but supportive and understanding of everything that Cole was going through. He was also legally blind and well able to relate.

Cole's phone rang, seconds before he heard the knock. He had the phone to his ear as he made his way to the entrance, listening to the doorman announcing the arrival of his cab. He yanked the door open and was relieved to see Sloan's outline, standing there with an armful of something.

"Thank goodness," Cole exclaimed.

"Why?"

"I've got to go out for a while, and I realized that you didn't have a key."

"Yeah, no kidding. That would have so sucked if you were gone, since I bought two gallons of ice cream."

"Jesus, Sloan. Didn't you buy anything healthy?"

"Ice cream is dairy," Sloan spat out. "That's healthy."

Cole shook his head. "I've got to go. I'll see you in a few hours."

"What about the key?"

"We'll take care of it later."

"Okay. Should I put all my things away?"

"Yeah. I'll probably change everything around when I get back, but it can wait."

"Why don't I just put away the perishables, and we'll do the rest when you get home."

"Fine," Cole muttered, already making his way out the door. He counted the ten steps down the hallway to the elevator. He stepped in and pressed the down button, which was on the lower left of the display panel. When the elevator stopped, he counted the five steps that took him out the door and then eight more to the curb where the taxi waited for him. He got into the cab, looking like any other sighted man.

1

I PUT away the ice cream and decided to take advantage of Cole's absence by exploring the apartment. I knew he'd have a fit if he found out I was snooping, but I was a naturally inquisitive person, and I wanted a little more information about my mysterious roommate.

The living room didn't really tell me much other than the fact that he must have made money, because his entertainment center was huge and the sound system and TV were first-class. There was a computer on one side of the wall with shelves over it, filled with books and assorted binders. I assumed he had Internet, so that I could access the web off my laptop, but I'd probably need a password to hop on, and that would have to wait till he got home. Meantime, I decided to check my e-mail, hoping he hadn't locked his PC or at least had a guest entry.

I sat in front of the screen and turned on the monitor. When the image came up, I saw that it was a picture of Cole in a baseball uniform, looking straight at the camera. He had a slight smile on his face, and those deep blue eyes just stared right at me, making my blood boil and my cock swell instantly. There was no denying my attraction. The man was hot as fuck.

The picture must have been taken a few years ago 'cause he looked younger, and his hair was much shorter than its current length. I

wondered why I had never followed his career. Probably because Dad and Junior talked about baseball nonstop, and I'd learned to tune it all out. They may have mentioned Cole but I couldn't remember. If he were still playing I'd attend his games, just to watch him walk out on the mound in that uniform that looked like it was spray-painted on him. His arms and shoulders bulged in all the right places. My thoughts went back to last night, and the image of his cock resting against his stomach made me groan out loud.

I hit escape before I gave in to my desire and sprayed my spunk all over the screen. That would have Cole imploding big-time. I smirked, imagining the look on his face if he knew I was lusting after him.

All thoughts of sex stopped when I was confronted with the outrageous font size that leaped up on the screen. It was five times larger than I was used to, and I was a little taken aback. What the fuck? It made me dizzy; the writing was so huge compared to the way I had my laptop set, on the smallest font. I'd have to ask Cole why he had it this way. It was nuts, and I ended up closing out and pushing away from the screen. I could have easily changed the settings, but I didn't want to mess with his stuff.

I went down the hallway to his bedroom, pushing the door open and walking right in without one twinge of guilt. I threw myself on his bed and buried my face in one of the pillows, inhaling his scent. It was subtle, but I made out a little bit of spice with a touch of musk, which only made my dick swell up again. I gave in this time and tore my sweatpants off, releasing my distended cock, rubbing my thumb over the head that was already wet. I imagined Cole hovering over me, his dark hair falling like silk over my face. I envisioned him panting as his hips thrust in and out of my ass. I could almost feel the sting of his cock pushing in and pegging me right in the prostate, causing me to come all over myself in a wave of blessed release. I made sure I missed the sheets, or I'd never hear the end of it.

When my heart rate finally slowed back down to a normal rhythm, I stood and entered the bathroom to clean up. I wiped off with

a washcloth that I had run under the cool water, and when I was done, I went back into the bedroom.

There were several books beside his bed. Most of them had to do with Japanese history, but one of them looked to be a regular novel and I picked it up. *Shogun*. I'd have to ask Cole about this as well. Maybe he'd let me read the book, so I could learn more about the Japanese culture, which seemed to be such a huge part of his life. He was only half-Japanese, but he was acting like he was one-hundred-percent Asian. I opened up *Shogun* and again was confronted with big print. I mean, fucking huge, first grader, baby block print! I put the book down quickly, afraid to hold it in my hands. I was creeped out for some reason. Something was very wrong here, and I was determined to get to the bottom of this as soon as I could.

DR. BUTTERMAN'S office was small but functional. Everything was within reach, but more importantly for a sight-impaired person, easy to find. The colors were brighter, and the writing on his books and magazines was larger. The king-sized computer monitor was designed specifically for the vision impaired. It utilized a software program highly recommended by Lighthouse International and was the same one that Cole had on his PC at home.

Cole looked up when the door pushed open and the doctor walked in

"Good morning, Cole."

"John," Cole acknowledged with a slight nod. Dr. Butterman insisted that his patients call him by his first name.

"How's it going?" John asked, hefting his large body into the black leather chair.

"Fine."

"Did you come on the bus or by subway?"

Cole was silent, afraid to answer the question.

Dr. Butterman sighed and pushed away from his desk. "Cole...."

"Look, I'm not ready yet," Cole said. His tone was heated, bracing for a fight. "I haven't gotten all the steps down."

"And you never will if you don't bite the bullet and just do it."

"I will, okay?" Cole replied, backing down a bit. "Give me some time"

"Cole, we've been talking about this for months. You've got to stop pretending that it's not happening."

"Oh, believe me, doc, I know it's fucking happening!"

"Then you need to make the decision to stop acting as if you're sighted and start acting like a blind man," Dr. Butterman said gently. He hated to push, but Cole was a stubborn one.

"I'm not blind yet!"

"No, you're not," Dr. Butterman acknowledged, but he continued, "you may not be for years, or you may wake up tomorrow and be completely blind. Then what'll you do?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

"Son, we've gone over this many times, yet you continue to fight this every step of the way. You need to make a decision about whether you will use a cane or a guide dog if you expect to be self-sufficient and not burn up all your money on limousines and a car service."

"I have money."

"Yes, you do. But it won't last forever."

"Look, John. My family has money, and I'm sure that I'll always have enough to take private transport to wherever I need to go."

"What if you find yourself in a situation where you can't get a car? Then what will you do?"

"That scenario is highly unlikely."

"Cole, why are you even here? Why come to see me every week, when you insist on pushing away all our resources? Who are you fooling?"

"I'm not tapping a cane in front of me," Cole replied in a voice gruff with emotion. The sentence was punctuated with a sob as his voice cracked, and then he continued. "I'd rather die first."

"Cole, there's no shame in being blind."

"There is for me, John. I'm *Yonsei*, a fourth generation Japanese-American who was destined to bring great pride to my family. All I've brought so far is heartache and shame."

"Through no fault of your own, Cole."

"I'm an only son, John. I was supposed to follow in my father's footsteps, yet I had to give up his dream because of this disease. Now, I'm being pressured into marrying, into having a family, to carry on the Fujiwara name. All I can think of is that I have this gene in me, this flaw that will pass on to my child or grandchild, and I can't do it."

"Is that the only thing stopping you from marrying? Hmm?"

"I don't want to discuss this anymore." Cole stood abruptly, ready to escape.

"Your choice, Cole," John said, trying to calm him down by remaining calm himself. "I'm here to help you, not to judge in any way. Surely you know that?"

"I said drop it!"

"Very well." John reached out for Cole's hand and was relieved when he felt the warm hand pressing in on his. "Come back here and sit down, Cole."

Cole flopped down on the chair, taking back his hand abruptly. "Why?"

"Isn't all this stress about your dad and not you?"

"A lot of it is, yes."

"What about Cole? What do *you* want to do for the rest of your life?"

"Huh! How about seeing one foot in front of me?"

"Beyond that, Cole. I know you're getting your master's in Asian studies. Are you planning to teach?"

"I've thought about it; however, I'm not sure I'd be comfortable in front of a class when I can't see anyone."

"What does it matter so long as they can see you?"

"And what are they going to see? A pathetic blind man fumbling his way around his desk?"

"You know what? This pity party of yours is getting really old."

"Tough shit, John! I haven't had years to deal with this yet. It's all new to me, so I'm entitled to feel sorry for myself."

"Well, when you decide to stop feeling sorry for yourself and start dealing with reality, come back and see me," John said, standing up and getting ready to leave. He knew he was being unprofessional and should continue to be patient and cater to Cole's fragile ego, but it had been over six months, and he was making no progress whatsoever. Maybe it was time for some tough love. The sad thing was that this wasn't all about being blind. The man had other issues he was dancing around, which were just as critical.

John had seen it all in this place and had learned how to work with different types of people. Men or women, rich or poor; they were no different. When the curtain fell and darkness surrounded them, the fear and the dread were universal.

I HEARD the keys in the locks, and I straightened up from my reclining position on the sofa. I must have dozed off after all my mood swings, definitely lethargic from that orgasm on Cole's bed.

He walked in and looked terribly unhappy. His brows were furrowed and the beautiful eyes looked troubled.

"Hey," I called out, waiting to see what kind of reply I'd get.

He sort of grunted, nodded his head, and went into the kitchen.

I followed quickly, anxious to help with my groceries but wary of this sudden shift in temper. He'd been fine when he left a few hours ago. Now he looked like a stick of dynamite, waiting for the spark to set him off.

"So, what'd you buy?" he asked, trying to appear interested but clearly bored.

"I bought some peanut butter and jelly, some tomato soup, chips and salsa, oh, and some tuna for protein," I added with a smile, hoping he'd smile back.

He looked at me like I was some sort of bug. "That's it?"

"Yeah, that's it. You were expecting filet mignon?"

"Fuck off, Sloan."

"What is your fucking problem, Cole? You're acting like you haven't taken a shit in days. Are you constipated or what?"

"I am not constipated, nor do I have a problem," Cole said, every word more frigid than the next. "I'm just sick of being told how I should feel, what I should do, and where the fuck I should go next."

"Who's telling you this?" I asked, taken aback by the vehemence.

"Does it matter?" he screamed, completely out of control.

"Whoa, dude, chill out, okay? You want some ganja?"

"Fuck, yeah!"

"Okay, come on... my bedroom, now."

5

I WAS flying high... man... so, so high....

"Cole, buddy," I nudged him with my shoulder. "Want a rip?"

He took it from my hand and inhaled deeply, coughing a little. For one brief moment I had a pang of guilt, remembering Cole's asthma, but it was quickly forgotten as I watched him lie down on the floor and stretch out. His stomach was concave under his belt, emphasizing the bulge in his jeans, reminding me of what was underneath. I focused on his chest instead, wondering if he was hairy or not.

"You have cobwebs," he said.

"What?" I tore my eyes away from him and looked up at the ceiling.

"Can't you see them?"

"No."

"What's the matter, Sloan?" Cole asked, starting to giggle, "Are you blind or something?" The giggle erupted into a loud laugh that was contagious, and soon we were both cracking up, filling the room with the sound of our laughter.

I got up, walked over to the corner, and tried to get as close to the ceiling as possible. Not too hard given my height, but I still couldn't see anything. I turned back to him and said, "No cobwebs, Cole. I think you're hallucinating."

"Must be," he said, smirking, "'cause I see a lot of cobwebs!" He curled up into a ball and broke out in another round of laughter.

"Cobwebs?" Focus, Sloan... he was starting to lose me.

"Get down here," Cole stuttered, hiccupping for a breath.

I got down on the floor and stretched out beside him. He was silent for a while, but then he grabbed my hand and clutched it tightly.

"What do you see from here?" he asked.

"The ceiling," I replied, a little freaked by what was happening. Was this some sort of a test?

"No cobwebs?"

"Dude, you're so buzzed."

"No. That's not it." He turned on his side and looked at me, so I rolled over as well and stared at him, wondering what this was all about. He closed his eyes and frowned slightly, "Are your eyes still gray?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind." His smile was tentative, sad almost, but he was moving on to the next topic. "Thank you for doing this with me," he said. "I needed this."

"Hey, you can come in here anytime you want."

"Sloan?"

"What?"

I rolled over on my stomach and lifted my upper torso, resting my weight on my elbows. Cole was watching me the whole time, and I gazed down at his face, focusing on his eyes instead of his mouth, which was far too tempting. They were a dark blue; indigo was the

perfect word, like the ocean at Half Moon Bay right after a winter storm. They were striated with brown and black around the iris. But that wasn't what held my attention. There were tears in his eyes, and I didn't understand what was happening. He seemed fine one minute ago and now he wasn't.

"Cole, what is it?"

"Nothing," he said, even as a tear overflowed and rolled down his cheek. "Sloan...." He said my name in a whisper, barely able to get it out, all the while looking at me with eyes that seemed tortured suddenly. "Would you kiss me?"

"What?"

"Please?"

"But you aren't...."

"Just fucking *kiss me*," he growled, grabbing my head forcefully and bringing his mouth up to meet mine. He attacked me with a bruising kiss, the likes of which I'd never experienced. He was hungry and aggressive and I moaned loudly as the heat licked at my groin with a gathering force. Cole was devouring me, making needy, begging sounds that only increased my desire. He held my face between his hands and pulled me even closer, exploring and sweeping the inside of my lips with his inquisitive tongue. I kissed back, meeting him with an equal amount of passion, loving his taste, the feel of him so right. He moaned when I rolled on top of him and pressed my groin against his. I could feel his erection, hard against mine, and we began to grind and rub, all the while kissing each other like there was no tomorrow. I was sure this was a dream courtesy of *Northern Lights*, the finest marijuana you could buy, but I didn't care. I was going to ride this fantasy as far and as high as it would take me.

"Make me feel, Sloan," his voice came out strangled, his words slamming me in the gut, "please, make me feel something."

Shit, shit....

I had no idea what was going through his head or why. I only knew that he wanted me, and I would be a liar if I said I didn't want him back. He was the most beautiful thing I'd laid eyes on in my short and fucked-up life, and I was determined to make him feel, just like he asked me to.

I fumbled with his belt and tugged at his zipper with a trembling hand until I wound my way into his boxers and wrapped my warm fingers around that rock-hard cock I'd been dreaming about.

"So fucking thick," I sighed into his mouth, listening to his heart rate speed up as he let me minister to him. I was lost in sensation, loving the feel of him in my hand, smooth as silk and pulsating with need. "Cole," I begged, "let me suck you off."

"Yes." He pushed me down and tilted his hips up. "Please."

I released him from the prison of his pants and wrapped my lips around the plump head that seeped clear liquid. He tasted like the sweetest honey, with a dash of spice and the musky smell I remembered from lying on his pillow earlier today. This was so much better than my imagination; I released him and buried my face in his crotch, loving the feel of the soft patch of hair surrounding his prick.

I was determined to give him a blowjob he'd never forget. I had no idea what tomorrow would bring, but right now, he was giving himself to me, and I'd take any part of him that I could get.

I licked up and down his shaft, tracing the veins and ridges with my tongue, bathing him with wet heat. I nibbled and sucked, making noises I wasn't even aware of, but it didn't really matter, as his noises were just as loud, and just as needy. He started to rut against me, fucking my mouth and groaning louder and louder with each thrust. I felt his fingers raking through my hair, pulling at each strand with the force of his need. Much too quickly, I felt his balls tighten up, and he cried out as he came in hot spurts, all the while thrusting and panting, trying to catch a breath. I came spontaneously without even touching myself. His sounds alone were enough to get me off, and I shuddered through it, feeling the wet stain blossom around my groin, ruining my jeans for the night.

"Oh God." I lay there with my head on his crotch, feeling his pulse beating rapidly. I turned and slipped him back into my mouth. His cock was still half erect and slick with a combination of my saliva and his spunk. I finished him off, licking and cleaning him with slow sweeps of my tongue, loving his taste and his smell.

"Sloan," he sighed, pulling me up to him and wrapping his arms around my waist. "Stay."

I fell asleep on top of him.

When I woke up I was alone. I sat up, a little stiff from sleeping on the hard floor, and looked around, but Cole was nowhere in sight. I staggered into the bathroom and yanked off my jeans, which were stiff with dried cum, a visual reminder of what had happened a few hours ago. Everything seemed like a dream, but the reality of it was right here, in my blue jeans. Back in my room, I threw the pants in the hamper that Cole had provided for me, and I pulled on a pair of sweats, anxious to find my roommate and see if he was okay. I wasn't sure what to expect, but a part of me was filled with trepidation.

COLE had showered and changed an hour before Sloan stirred. He pushed himself into his normal morning routine, doing everything to take his mind off what just happened. He still couldn't believe he'd given into feelings he'd harbored for years and successfully buried under layers of duty.

He blamed it all on the weed and Sloan—who was a big queer and would probably fuck his own brother if given half a chance. He'd have to figure out a way to get rid of him. Sloan's presence would only remind him on a daily basis that he had one more altered gene running through his body that was ruining his life, although this was something he could control. He'd managed to harness this need for twenty-six years, and he didn't see why now should be any different.

His hand was shaking as he poured one cup of rice into the automatic rice maker, followed by two cups of water. He plugged it in

and turned it on, moving like a robot through the kitchen that he had memorized. He decided to have some tuna with his rice once it was done, and he moved over to the cabinet where he kept the packets of prepared fish. He pulled out the one that he knew would be a little on the spicy side because it was to the right, while the blander flavor was to the left.

At about that time, Sloan stumbled in. Cole braced himself for whatever was about to happen, knowing that it would be unpleasant but necessary. He didn't need a roommate or a friend or even an admirer, if he wanted to put Sloan in some sort of category. What he needed was to be left alone to live his life and do what he was destined to do. Marry Juliana, teach, and become active in the Japanese-American community. He was going to have a child someday, hopefully a boy who wouldn't inherit the damaged gene. He'd teach him how to play baseball, like his father and grandfather, and see his life plan to fruition despite being derailed by his loss of sight. Sloan and his kind had no place in his world, a fact that he was all too aware of.

Sloan came up from behind and put his hand on his neck and bent down to kiss him on the cheek. "You okay?"

He spun around and pushed him away, disgusted by his proximity and touch. "Get the fuck away from me!"

"Cole...."

"Get away, Sloan!" Cole repeated, louder this time and with a look on his face that spoke volumes. "Last night was a mistake, okay? Don't think I'm a fucking queer!"

"I don't think anything, Cole," Sloan replied in a whisper. "If you want to forget about it, we will."

"Yeah, we'll not only forget about it, we're going to find you a new place to live!"

"You can't do that."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because your father and mine will want to know what happened."

"I don't give a rat's ass what they think."

"Oh, yes, you do," Sloan countered, his voice rising as his anger began to surge. "What are you going to say, Cole? You kicked me out 'cause I sucked you off and you loved it?"

Cole stepped forward and slapped Sloan on the face. "Fuck you!"

Sloan hauled one off himself, hitting Cole square on the chin, knocking him back a few steps. "Don't ever raise your hand to me again. You hear me, you *motherfucker*?!"

"Leave me alone!" Cole yelled out, turning quickly so Sloan wouldn't see the tears that were threatening to spill over. A moot point, really, because if he had turned, he would have seen tears streaming down Sloan's face as well

CAN anybody find me somebody to love...?

Freddie Mercury was singing to me while I sat on the bathroom floor, overdosed on Xanax and caffeine: a bad, bad combination. Each morning I get up I die a little. Can barely stand on my feet, take a look in the mirror and cry.... Somebody, somebody, can anybody find me, somebody to love... find me somebody to love.

The blade was sharper because it was new. The cuts were clean and the blood oozed in bright contrast to my pale skin. Find me somebody to love, find me somebody to love, slash, cut, slash, slash—blood seeped out of me in rivulets, down my legs and onto the bathroom tile—red against white, splashes of color that would have been pleasing to the eye if it weren't so macabre, and all the while Freddie blared in my ears, courtesy of my iPhone. I just gotta get out of this prison cell, someday I'm gonna be free. Find me somebody to love, find me somebody to love, find me find me....

I looked at my legs as if they belonged to someone else. The song had ended and there were probably ten gashes on each leg. They were shallow, the logical part of my mind acknowledged that. No emergency room for me tonight, just a lot of pain.

I crawled over to the toilet and flipped the lid open, throwing up the tons of coffee I'd ingested after running out of the house earlier today. That and the two Xanax I'd taken to counteract the shakes had started me on my downward spiral to this inevitable conclusion. I was shaking again, from the shock of what I'd done to myself, and the fresh wound that festered deep inside, thanks to Cole's hateful words. He may as well have plunged a dagger into my heart. That would have hurt less.

I knew he'd deny the attraction and blame it all on the weed. I just knew that it would be impossible for him to be gay, for one, and attracted to me, for another. The man was a fucking breeder in need of a blowjob, and I was handy. What I didn't understand was the rest of it. The anger that exploded out of him wasn't all about me. That was years in the making, and I wish I knew where it was coming from. Surely he couldn't have been serious about throwing me out? Where would I go? My dad would have a meltdown and bring me back to San Francisco, something I didn't want.

I thought I'd be happy here, make a fresh start at Pratt, try and meet new people, maybe even find somebody to love... what a fucking joke! Here I was, forty-eight hours into my New York adventure and already cutting and crying, neither of which I'd planned on bringing along as baggage.

I got up and made my way to the shower, but not before I got a fresh washcloth and cleaned up all the blood. The last thing I needed was for Cole to find out about my cutting: the word that no one in my family could say out loud. This need I had to punish and hurt myself was a living, breathing demon inside of me that continued to torment on a daily basis. I could never let my guard down because it'd be there in a flash, just pouncing on my one moment of weakness, whispering nasty thoughts in my ear. Cut yourself, scratch your skin till the blood washes the hurt away and your soul is spared.

COLE was in front of his computer, surfing the net and killing time until his parents showed up. They usually came once a week, and tonight was their night. He hadn't even prepared a meal, relying on the fact that his mother would bring something. She always did, so why should now be any different?

He supposed that they would even go all-out and bring more food since he now had a roommate. A roommate he'd hurt because he'd given into the moment.

Sloan couldn't stay. The thought of having him around on a daily basis was unbearable. He would be a constant reminder of his need, a need he'd buried deep inside himself. Cole allowed himself to think about the incident for a minute and was shocked at how quickly his body had responded.

His recollection of the encounter with Sloan was overshadowed by a deep shame, but underneath it was the memory of the indescribable pleasure he'd felt, wrapped up in Sloan's arms. But he pushed the memories away, as quickly as they appeared. He could not afford, nor did he want, to give in to this most disgraceful secret. He was Cole Fujiwara, for God's sake, a man's man. He wasn't gay or even bisexual. This was a random incident that should have never happened.

His girlfriend of three years could attest to that fact. They had sex on a regular basis, although lately, it had become boring and predictable. Juliana was mothering him and that was putting a damper on his sexual interest.

He used to think she was the perfect partner for him. Even his parents, who'd set up the first meeting, because she was a daughter of a friend, thought she'd be the right choice. Her background was similar to his, only in her case it was her mother who was Japanese and her father Caucasian.

She was a beautiful girl, but lately, much too accommodating for his taste. She'd never once challenged him on anything, and after a while, the novelty of her beauty had worn off. Maybe that's why he

couldn't make the ultimate commitment and marry her. Aside from all the other issues he was dealing with, the thought of spending a lifetime with someone who just went along with everything he said was incredibly boring. He liked a challenge, enjoyed a good mental fight. With her, he knew his life would be bland, predictable, and comfortable—most assuredly—but without a single moment of passion.

And passion was something he needed to feel at the moment. Everything else that gave him pleasure had been taken away by this disease—this crippling, invading disease that was ruining his life. He had to recapture the joy of living, to start feeling again, or he knew that he'd never move forward. John Butterman was right in that respect.

He heard the door of the bathroom open finally. Sloan had been in there for the longest time, and he'd been holding the urge to pee, refusing to knock on the door or have any kind of contact with Sloan until he had no choice.

He walked into the bathroom and was immediately assaulted by the smell. It smelled of vomit and cigarette smoke, but underneath that was the smell of blood, something he'd come to recognize from his days of playing baseball. That odor was unmistakable: a sharp, metallic tang overlaid with the human smell of sweat and fear, a common thing in a locker room full of men playing a physical sport. Not so common in a bathroom in the middle of Manhattan.

He looked around, hoping he'd see something, but of course he couldn't see two feet in front of him. All he had left was his central vision and that was miniscule. He looked down on the floor expecting to see some color at least, but saw nothing except the white tile.

He pushed the small window open; grateful for the cool air that blew into the room. He reached for the can of air freshener underneath the sink and sprayed it liberally. Finally, he moved over to the toilet, peed, and flushed it, hoping that Sloan had cleaned it up after he'd hurled into it. Obviously he'd been sick, but Cole wasn't about to run his fingers over the rim of the toilet to make sure it was presentable. Not without gloves.

Cole walked out of the bathroom, hoping the smell would dissipate by the time his parents arrived. He had no desire to answer any questions that involved Sloan. He also had to make sure they kept their information about him and his blindness to themselves. The very last thing he needed was for Sloan to find out. He much preferred to deal with his hostility and anger, than to be pampered and coddled like some porcelain figurine.

THE trembling in my limbs was subsiding, and I felt that it would be safe to put on my clothes without having the blood leach through the denim. The cuts were starting to clot and the bleeding had all but stopped. I was so pissed that I'd given in and done this to myself. It had been several months since my last cutting incident, and I thought I had this way under control, but this was twice now in the last forty-eight hours that I'd hurt myself. I'd have to go back on antidepressants if this kept up. Hopefully, once I started school, I'd be too busy to do this anymore. I snorted out what could have passed for a laugh, but the idea of me controlling this demon was ludicrous. It was as realistic as the Cubs winning the World Series; pipe dreams if nothing else.

I heard the buzz of the doorbell and wondered who was there. It was around six-thirty in the evening on a Sunday night. Family time for most, so I assumed that Cole's parents had come by to check out the new roommate. I walked over to the dresser on one side of the room and stared at my reflection to see if I looked any different.

My appearance had not changed, despite my abuse. The face that stared back at me was calm, and if I had been in a better frame of mind, I'd have admitted that I wasn't half-bad in the looks department. I'd been told many times that I should model. My bone structure was supposed to be perfect for photos. They said that my gray eyes were arresting and dominated my face, a fact I found rather surprising since they looked damned ordinary to me. They were nothing like the deep blue eyes that attracted me to Cole. And my body, well, a better clothes hanger you couldn't find. I was model-thin, to put it nicely. The body

they thought was so perfect for photographs was the bane of my existence and the reason I was a cutter.

I turned away, but not before running a brush through my hair and then shaking it out like a dog after a bath. It was still damp and tendrils clung to my face. I sprayed myself with a bit of Calvin Klein to try and cover the stink of the day while putting on a happy face for the sake of our visitors, whoever they might be.

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"WOULD you like another helping, Sloan?" Eileen Fujiwara asked.

"No, thanks," he said, shaking his head.

Eileen was a little disappointed that he seemed so unenthusiastic about the lasagna; in fact, Sloan looked as if he might be sick. He was quite pale, and there were tiny beads of sweat dotting his forehead. She could tell he wasn't a big eater, and his attempts to clear off his plate were more about pushing the food around than actually eating.

"How's your dad doing?" Ken asked, trying to make small talk. He didn't really know what to say to this kid who hadn't said much since they'd sat down to eat. Cole wasn't helping matters, either. He was silent and grumpy.

"My dad is fine. So is Junior," Sloan replied, fighting the urge to run to the bathroom and lean over the toilet.

"Tell us about your career choice," Ken urged, trying again and hoping this might get him to open up a little. "I never met anyone who went to Pratt. Isn't that where all the artsy types go?"

"I'm a graphic artist, Mr. Fujiwara." Sloan's reply was rather cold, almost as if he'd taken offense to the artist statement.

"I understand you're here on a partial scholarship. You must be very good at what you do."

"I won a few awards, so that got me the scholarship," Sloan said, thawing a little.

Apparently, Cole knew nothing about his chosen career either, and he appeared interested in the conversation suddenly. "What do graphic artists do?" he asked, addressing Sloan for the first time that evening.

"There are many areas of work that are available to someone in this field."

"Such as?"

"Animation, for one. Disney has a scout hanging around the school waiting to entice the good candidates, from what I understand."

"Cole, do you want more?" Eileen interrupted, reaching for his plate.

"I'm fine, Mother. Please, don't get up."

She got up nonetheless and took his plate, spooning more lasagna into the center, adding some green beans and another slice of garlic bread. "Here you go, dear."

Cole sighed heavily and resumed eating, irritated by his mother's solicitous behavior. He'd clearly said no to more food, yet she had ignored him. It wasn't the first time tonight she'd gone out of her way to make sure Cole was comfortable, which only made his mood worse.

"Have you had a chance to explore the city yet, Sloan?" Eileen asked, seemingly oblivious to her son's ire.

"No."

"Mother, he's only been here for two days," Cole snapped.

"Oh, that's true. Maybe you can take one of those bus tours with him, dear. You know the kind I mean?"

"I don't think so," Cole replied. "I have plans tomorrow."

"Well, maybe another time," she suggested.

"It's fine, Mrs. Fujiwara," Sloan answered, trying not to make waves. "I can do it on my own."

"Please, call me Eileen."

"Yes, let's dispense with all this formality. You call me Ken, okay, son?"

Sloan nodded and shoveled lasagna into his mouth. Cole could tell that Sloan was starting to calm down; his body language had improved markedly since the Fujiwaras had walked through the door an hour ago. Sloan had been vibrating then, emitting this hostile aura, but now that the evening was progressing and Cole hadn't said anything to his parents about booting him out, he seemed to relax a little.

Clearly, there was no way Cole could ask him to leave without causing problems for both of them. He'd just have to learn how to live with Sloan and try to get past this. What had happened was a druginduced encounter, something Sloan had instigated, and Cole wasn't going to dwell on it anymore. He'd made his position very clear.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Sloan?" Eileen asked.

Cole turned to Sloan and practically held his breath. If he could have seen Sloan's eyes, he would have noted the stricken look; however, Sloan was too far away for Cole to see him that clearly. He just waited for the reply that would send his parents into outer space.

"No, I don't have a girlfriend."

"Well, I'm pretty sure you'll meet someone here. You're a very good-looking young man."

"No, I'm not," Sloan disagreed.

"Oh, you're being very modest, Sloan. You have nice features and your eyes are stunning. They're just like your mother's."

"Did you know my mother well?" Sloan sounded surprised.

"We were thrown together a lot while your father and Ken were playing baseball. I was saddened to hear about her passing. Was it quick?"

"It took about a year from the time they diagnosed the cancer until her death," Sloan answered softly.

"I'm sorry, dear. It must have been very difficult for you."

"Can we change the subject, please?"

"Yes, Mother. Let's move on," Cole interjected. "Have you and Dad finalized your summer plans?"

"Oh, we couldn't possibly leave you, Cole. Not now."

"Why the hell not?" Cole was being rude, but no one said anything.

"Come on, son," Ken interjected. "You know why."

"There's no reason for you to postpone your vacation! I'm sure my sisters will be upset if they have to stay in the city instead of going off to Hawaii," Cole's attitude was cold and left little room for argument.

"We'll see," Eileen replied, preferring to change the subject now herself. She stood to retrieve some of the plates that were no longer in use and made her way into the kitchen.

I WATCHED this whole exchange with interest, trying to read between the lines. Cole looked like he was ready to explode, he was so angry. Again, I wondered where the anger was coming from. His parents seemed very nice and super-solicitous of his needs. In fact, the man was damned spoiled if you asked me. I don't recall my mother waiting on me hand and foot like Eileen did for him. It was kind of weird in a way; she almost treated him like he was a child, practically cutting up his food for him. He didn't ask for anything, but she did it automatically, anticipating all his needs. No wonder he was the way he

was. Everyone kowtowed to him, but I wasn't about to fall into that category. The last thing I would ever do is be his little bitch; he could fucking fend for himself.

They stuck around for a few hours and finally left at eleven o'clock. I was glad to see them go. My legs were killing me and I wanted to take my jeans off because they were rubbing against the wounds. Cole and I barely said two words to each other. I heard him go to the bathroom and I waited my turn, knowing he wouldn't be very long. He was done and out in about ten minutes, and I heard him go to his bedroom and lock the door. Fucker... did he think I was going to rush in there and rape him?

I decided to ignore Cole from now on. Treat him like a roommate and nothing more. If he ever got his head out of his ass far enough to treat me with some respect, I might consider speaking to him again. In the meantime, he'd have to settle for monosyllables.

THE next morning, after Sloan left for school, Cole sat in front of his desk and contemplated his next move. He could continue to procrastinate and keep hoping that his eyesight would remain at its present level, or he could start making attempts to act like a man who was visually impaired and learn everything he could from Dr. Butterman and the Lighthouse. The first order of business would be to make an appointment. He needed to apologize to John for his behavior the other day and work out some sort of game plan, as well as get advice on how to handle things here at home.

Many months ago, when he'd first met the doctor and was subjected to a battery of psychological tests, he'd been asked point-blank if he'd ever had a same-sex encounter. Cole remembered his outrage at the time. He'd tossed his pencil at the doctor and walked out of the room. The anger and humiliation had continued all the way into the next week, but eventually, he made his way back to John's office, never mentioning his outburst again. It seemed to be a pattern with

them, the probing and the pulling away before he could face a situation. He had gotten quite adept at skirting around the more important issues in his life, always falling back on duty and responsibility, afraid to start the ripple that could turn into a huge tsunami.

Cole considered his attraction to other men to be a phase from his youth, a carryover from the brief encounters he had experienced while attending the all-male boarding school his father had insisted on. Ken was concerned that Cole was growing up in a household filled with women. It was one of his regrets that he and Eileen never had another son, although the three beautiful daughters that came with each attempt were precious and much loved; however, they were all female, and would not offer his oldest child the male companionship Ken had hoped for. His schedule with the San Francisco Giants put him on the road constantly, and he was rarely home for longer than three days in a row during baseball season.

So he and Eileen had made the decision to send Cole to a prominent school for boys in Marin County, assured that he would be surrounded by everything male. And it all worked according to plan... except for the groping in the dark when lights went out. The camaraderie between young men in close quarters always included contests. Who had the biggest dick or who could burp the loudest? Jerking off in a circle of friends was a pretty common occurrence. What was not so common or acknowledged was when two guys hooked up in earnest. These clandestine encounters were never mentioned in the bright light of day.

Cole's experiences at the hands of an upperclassman had frightened him, but they were exciting and erotic as well. He'd received several hand jobs through the years and one time had allowed a guy to suck him off. He never reciprocated the favor, as this would have been an acknowledgement of homosexuality. Better to receive and pass off the rest as the other guy's problem and not his.

But last night had brought back all the memories he'd buried years ago, and they far exceeded anything he ever experienced in school. He'd never felt so alive, and it was this feeling that terrified him, causing him to lash out at Sloan rather than talk about it. Cole kept trying to push it into his subconscious, but every time he envisioned Sloan going down on him, he was achingly aroused.

THE next day was spent exploring Pratt. I completed all my paperwork, met with a few of my teachers, and hooked up with the school drug dealer, scoring two more grams of weed and ten Xanax, all within four hours. It was quite a productive morning and I was feeling pretty good. The shame and trauma of yesterday was starting to fade.

I headed back to the apartment, letting myself in with the key that Cole had left for me this morning, along with a note saying he'd be gone all day. It was a relief to be alone, to be able to turn up the volume on my iPod and let Freddie's music lull me into a happy place.

A call from Emily pulled me back to reality and I picked up, glad to be talking to her after not seeing or hearing from her in about a month. She was also on the east coast, but Boston University was her choice. She was getting a degree in Fine Arts with a major in theater design.

"Hey, you." Her voice reverberated, sounding quite happy. "How's my best friend?"

"Fucking fabulous."

"Oh, no," she said, knowing me so well, "what happened?"

"Nothing."

"Don't 'nothing' me, Sloan. I know every inflection of your voice."

I snorted into the phone, "Well, if you must know, I seem to have found myself in a situation."

"Already? Christ, Sloan. Didn't you just get there?"

"And your point is?"

"What could have possibly happened in forty-eight hours?"

"How much time do you have?"

"Just tell me."

So I did. Tell her, that is, every gory detail, starting with my first night. The only thing I left out was the cutting. That wasn't something I was willing to share with her or anyone else.

"And did he say anything to his parents?"

"Not a word"

"Then he won't, so stop stressing over this. Sounds like you've hooked up with a big closet queen."

"It's hardly a hookup, Em. More like a falling-down-the-holeand-chasing-the-white-rabbit incident. Complete with the hookahsmoking caterpillar."

"That must have been some party."

"No kidding...."

"You want me to come and visit?"

"I'd love to see you! When?"

"How's next weekend? Can I crash at your place?"

"Sure... not a problem."

"He won't mind?"

"It's my room and my bed. Why would he?"

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THE New York subway system could be frightening for the uninitiated and absolutely terrifying for someone with any sort of disability. The underground caverns of Grand Central and its honeycomb tunneling system was a true challenge, even at the best of times.

Cole's experience with trains was minimal. By the time he'd arrived in New York, his eyesight was seriously undermined, so he'd only ridden the train a few times, opting for cabs after the first few dizzying experiences he'd had. That was many months ago, and his eyesight had gotten worse since then. He didn't think he'd ever be able to go down the steps that lead to the uptown train to Dr. Butterman's office. The Lighthouse was located at 59<sup>th</sup> and Lexington on the upper east side of town and was a hike from where he lived. The cab fare was outrageous, not to mention the miles of gridlock.

Cole was late for his appointment and spent the first five minutes of it complaining about the traffic.

"You could be here in half the time if you took the subway."

"I can't," Cole blustered, already defensive before they even got started

"Why not? I do it all the time and I'm legally blind."

"I find it overwhelming, if you must know the truth. I've always considered myself to be a tough guy, John, but the few times I've been down there I was out-and-out scared."

"Scared of what, Cole? Getting lost? Riding on the wrong train?"

"How about getting pushed onto the track or worse yet, just stepping off the platform all on my own? What if that happens, John?"

"Well, that's certainly a real possibility, but if you have a cane or a dog, the chances of that happening are lessened."

"I will never use a cane. That's out of the question."

"I don't understand the reasoning behind your statement. I use one and I'm not embarrassed by it."

"You're old, John."

"Oh. So it's all about appearances?"

Cole shrugged. "You'd never know I had a problem with my vision just by looking at me," he said softly. "Put a cane in my hand and people will change. I don't care how you rationalize this, but people treat disabled people differently, and a blind man is a walking target."

"That's the most cynical thing I've heard in a long time," John replied, shaking his head sadly. "Have you always been this jaded or is this a new thing?"

"I don't think it's cynical. I'm being honest and this is how I see it, pardon the pun," Cole replied with a touch of sarcasm.

"You're wrong, but I'm not going to argue about this. How about a dog? Do you consider that pathetic as well?"

"I don't know. My family never owned a dog, for some reason."

"Did anyone have allergies? I suppose we'd have to take that into consideration."

"I have asthma, but I don't know if it's dog related, John. What if I do? Is one breed better than the next for such things?"

"Yes. Some dogs have less dander than others, and even their hair can make a difference."

"I suppose I could get tested."

"Sure you can."

"But guide dogs have that harness and shit, right? People would still know"

"Cole, the issue here is *you*, not other people. You have to accept what is happening to you and get comfortable in your skin. Once you do that, others will follow suit."

"I know you're right, John. I'm sorry about being such an ass... especially the other day."

Cole saw John shake his head and brush off the apology with a wave of his hand. He was reassured when he felt John's warm hand groping for his across the desk and he held onto him for a few minutes without saying much.

Finally John said, "I'm here to help you in any way I can, Cole. If it means talking about your innermost thoughts or something as mundane as slicing cucumbers, I'll listen. I'm not your enemy, son."

"I know." The words brought unexpected tears to Cole's eyes and the enormity of what he was trying to face on his own finally hit home. "I have to learn how to accept help."

"Yes. I think you've hit the nail on the head. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, nor is utilizing all the tools that are available to us. A dog would be a wonderful companion, Cole. He would bring you many hours of enjoyment, while providing you with that extra level of security about being in open spaces when you can only see a few feet in front of you. They are quite amazing."

"So I've heard."

"It's the truth. Would you like me to do a little investigating about different breeds?"

"That would be great." Cole sighed in resignation. "John?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think I should marry Juliana? Have kids?"

"I can't answer that, Cole. You have to decide if she's what you want."

"I thought she was."

"But?"

"Nothing," Cole whispered. He couldn't say it out loud. He could not bring himself to admit that one night with Sloan had affected him so deeply, he was actually thinking of breaking it off with Juliana.

"You'll talk to me when the time is right," John said positively, quite aware that Cole was going through more than one personal crisis. "Meanwhile, we'll work on trying to get you comfortable with taking public transportation. Let's make that our short-term goal, shall we?"

"Okay."

"How about right now? Why don't we take the subway back down to Chelsea? I'll ride with you so you won't have to do it by yourself."

"Would you do that?"

"Absolutely."

"That would be great, John. Thanks."

AFTER I hung up with Emily, I realized that I hadn't eaten all day and I was starving. I made my way to the kitchen and opened up the pantry door, hoping I'd find something other than tuna or tomato soap. I don't know what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't this.

Every can was lined up in straight rows like soldiers on parade, alphabetized from what I could tell, with labels facing front and center. The soup, the vegetables and fruit, and last but not least, the tuna and sardines. Boxes were also alphabetized and lined up horizontally rather

than vertically. I felt as if I'd fallen through Alice's hole again, but I was sober this time and smack in the middle of obsessive-compulsive hell

What the fuck! Organized, he said? The man was a bona fide freak. I spun around and went back into my room, grabbed my wallet and keys, and headed out. I was pretty sure that I'd seen a pizza parlor on my way to school earlier today, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I came across it just as I turned the corner. Gino's Pizza was a dive, but it smelled like heaven right now. The best part was, they sold pizza by the slice, a rarity in California, but one good thing about New York that I loved already. I asked for a slice of cheese with extra pepperoni and sat down at the counter facing the window. It was the perfect spot for a people-watcher like me. The walk-by traffic was entertaining as hell. We were practically on top of the subway entrance; in fact, the railing of the stairs was clearly visible from where I sat.

I was about to bite into my slice when I saw Cole coming up the stairs with an impressive-looking older man who had a cane in his hand. He had a full head of snowy white hair with some leftover dark strands peppered throughout. He was talking to Cole, who was nodding and laughing at something he'd said. I had no idea who he was, but obviously Cole knew him quite well. They talked for a few more minutes and then embraced and parted ways. The stranger turned to go back down the stairs, tapping his cane in front of him. It finally dawned on me that he was blind. I wondered who he was and why Cole was with him.

I watched Cole walk away. The fucker was beautiful in his skintight jeans and leather jacket. I would have given anything to be the one who brought that smile to his face. Instead I sat there, checking out his ass and wondering how I would ever get him out of my mind. No matter how hard I tried to convince myself that I hated him, I knew that only the opposite was true. All I could think about were his lips, his tongue as it fought for dominance in my mouth, the salty-sweet taste of his spunk when he came in a warm gush. I moaned without even realizing it and my cock pressed tightly against my jeans, echoing my misery.

JULIANA stood when Cole approached. She was wearing a bright blue shirt, one of the bold colors she'd taken to wearing months ago when Cole had finally confessed what was happening with him. She did it so that he could spot her immediately, hoping to save him any embarrassment. She was surprised that he'd insisted on joining her at the restaurant rather than letting her swing by his apartment in a cab as usual. He kissed her on the cheek and pulled out her chair.

"You smell good," he said, smiling. "Have you ordered yet?"

"No," she replied, "I thought I'd wait to see what you wanted first."

He frowned when he heard that and said, "I meant for you."

"Oh. I guess I wanted to see how hungry you were before I decided."

Cole sighed and shook his head, a little exasperated, "Juliana, why should my hunger have anything to do with your decision?"

"It doesn't," she stuttered. "I just didn't know if we were going to have a long meal or a quick bite."

Christ. "I'll have a Cobb salad," Cole said without even looking at the menu. He took a sip of water and waited for the waiter to come and take their order. Juliana asked for a salad as well, and when that was over with, he announced, "I've decided to make some changes."

"Like what?" she asked, leaning forward with interest.

"I'm going to make an effort to take the subway more often and maybe even look into getting a guide dog."

Juliana gasped and said, "No."

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"I don't want you to take the subway, Cole. It's dangerous."

"Juliana, don't be ridiculous. People do it every day."

"I'd feel better if you took a cab or let me drive you."

"I don't want to depend on you." Cole was blunt but he felt that it was necessary since she wasn't listening to him. He tempered it by saying, "I appreciate your concern, Juliana, but I need to learn how to get around on my own. Even John agrees."

"John doesn't love you," Juliana protested.

"If you really loved me, you'd want me to be independent and fend for myself." Cole hoped she'd understand this time, even though they'd had similar conversations in the past.

"I want to take care of you, Cole. I can be there whenever you need help."

"That's not what I want!" he said quickly, smothering his anger. "Can't you please be more open-minded about this?"

He heard her stifle a sob and although he couldn't see her clearly, he knew that she was crying. He sighed loudly and said, "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Why do you keep pushing me away, Cole? All I want to do is love you and take care of you."

"I know." He wished he'd never even mentioned the word subway. She just didn't get it, and that was the big problem. She wanted to spend the rest of her life treating him like an invalid rather than a man.

"Are you free this afternoon?" Juliana was a buyer for Bloomingdale's and usually made her own hours.

"Yes."

"Do you want to go to the apartment for a bit?" *In another words, shall we go and fuck and try and forget this entire conversation?* 

"Okay."

They ate their salads in silence. Cole was afraid to say something he'd regret, and Juliana was silent as well, probably happy that the argument was over. His earlier resolve and energy seemed to fizzle as the meal progressed. After they were done and the check paid, they walked out of the restaurant and hailed a cab for the trip to the apartment. Inside, they held hands but didn't say much.

The apartment was quiet when they let themselves in. Cole was relieved Sloan wasn't home yet. He didn't feel like tiptoeing around in his own space. He turned to Juliana and kissed her on the mouth, wrapping his arms around her waist. She responded immediately, sighing softly as she leaned into him. "I love you so much, Cole."

"I know you do, sweetheart. I love you too," he replied automatically.

They went into Cole's bedroom and slowly peeled off their clothes. He wasn't aroused, but he was working on it. He tried to concentrate on Juliana first, littering her body with slow kisses, spending quality time worshiping her breasts. He suckled and licked at her nipples, pleased when they puckered quickly. She moaned softly as he continued to tease her with his warm tongue. He reached down and tugged at himself, irritated because his cock seemed to have its own agenda and Juliana wasn't part of it.

She began to sense a problem, so she pushed him away from her breasts. She took him in her mouth instead, hoping to get him hard. He shut his eyes and waited for her to do her thing, but his body refused to cooperate. Finally, in an act of desperation, he thought about the last time he'd had someone sucking on him, and that brought an instant response. He moaned, imagining Sloan licking his cock. He was rockhard in a minute, and he quickly grabbed a condom from the nightstand. Pushing Juliana aside gently, he rolled the latex on his now distended organ, and he turned and pinned her down, seconds before shoving into her.

"Cole," she moaned.

"Sweetheart," he huffed, undulating against her softness. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her legs around his hips, and let him do all the work. To Cole, it was as exciting as masturbation. The only thing that kept him hard was the thought of Sloan and his magic tongue doing wicked things to him. He squeezed his eyes shut, making every effort to prolong the session long enough for Juliana to climax. He could tell she was close, and he breathed a sigh of relief when he felt her clutch at him, seconds before her body shuddered and pulsed. He came immediately afterward, grunting his way to an unsatisfactory finish. The sexual release should have put him in a better mood but it didn't. A part of him wasn't engaged in the encounter at all. He rolled off, disgusted with himself and the entire situation. His mood had turned dark again.

"Cole?" Juliana intruded in his thoughts.

"Yeah?"

"Are we ever going to get married?"

"Eventually."

"We've been putting it off, and I'd really like to get settled and make a home for you."

He sat up abruptly and said, "I've got to pee."

He headed to the bathroom and locked the door behind him, leaning against it to try and calm down. He couldn't believe how erratic his emotions were today: one minute, euphoric because he'd made a decision to be more accepting of his situation; the next, filled with doubts because of Juliana's concerns. He was happy when he and John had ridden the subway, comfortable with it all. A few hours with Juliana had changed his mind-set again. It was driving him nuts.

He moved over to the sink and stared at the mirror. If he looked straight ahead, he could still see himself. His peripheral vision was completely gone, nothing left of it but darkness, yet the little that he could see revealed the same face he'd looked at for years. The same jet-black hair and piercing blue eyes, framed by winged eyebrows. There was one new element he noticed; a frown line had started to develop between his brows. Not surprising, considering all that was going on. He reached out to touch the mirror, to try and relate to the man in front of him. Who was that?

The ballplayer was gone, the secure and confident looker who attracted both sexes had disappeared, and the honor student and meticulous historian seemed to be on hiatus somewhere. His entire persona was lost in this world of darkness. He was flopping around like a caught fish, letting the RP take over his life instead of the other way around.

It was all so wrong, and John had been trying to tell him that for months. He needed to get himself back if he ever wanted to move forward

I WAS standing outside our apartment building, bullshitting with Etienne, fellow student, part-time model, and full-time drug user. He'd hooked me up yesterday, and we'd established a tentative rapport.

"So, Tin," I teased, shortening his pretentious French name, "how'd you get into the modeling business?"

"Someone took a fancy to me and sent my photos to the Ford agency. It was quite a shock when they called."

"I'll bet. Did you have to sleep with that someone to seal the deal?"

"Don't be crass."

"I'm not; I just tell it like it is."

"You should model as well, Sloan; you've certainly got the right body for it."

"You mean all these bones are good for something?"

"Do you have any idea of the lengths models will go to, to achieve the right body weight? You're one of the lucky ones who will never know a bulimic moment in your life."

"Good thing, 'cause barfing isn't my favorite thing."

Etienne raised an eyebrow and tossed his blond hair. "Why don't you come with me to my next photo shoot and see if it's something that would appeal to you?"

"Let me think about it, okay? Do you want to come upstairs?"

"Do you live by yourself?" the blond asked, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply. He was around six feet tall and striking in an androgynous sort of way. Sloan could understand how they'd want him in the modeling world. He definitely turned heads. Not his, but he was sure that there were many out there who would be interested in him.

"Nope."

"Ohhh." Etienne bent his head toward Sloan and whispered wickedly, "A lover?"

"No, just a roommate."

"Is he hot?"

"He's off-limits, Tin. Don't even go there."

Etienne kissed him suddenly on the lips and said, "Well, I'm sure you and I can always find something to amuse each other, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"Not today, my friend. I've got things to do."

"I'll take a rain check. Maybe over the weekend?"

"Maybe. We'll talk again tomorrow."

"Okay." He grabbed me and air-kissed both sides of my face before loping off in the direction of Pratt. I watched him and wished that I was as secure about my body as he seemed to be.

I went into my building, nodded at the doorman, and got in the elevator. My thoughts were still on Etienne's comment about me having the perfect body type. It was ludicrous, considering I'd hated my body since I was six years old.

I suffered over the fact that Junior passed me in height and weight around the time I was in eighth grade. I resented all the vitamins and special food supplements my dad insisted that I take to increase my body mass. I despised comments like "you'll grow into your feet," or, "who's older, you or Junior?".

The bottom line was that I had a huge complex about my body, always seeing it as flawed. I was too thin and too tall, in my opinion. I never wore shorts or sleeveless shirts because my arms and legs reminded me of a stickman in a cartoon. I envied body builders. I even made the concerted effort one summer to eat almost six thousand calories a day to see if it would make a difference, but by the end of the summer, I'd only gained five pounds, and most of it was concentrated on my prick. That was one part of me that I would have shown off proudly. However, it wasn't what my dad was hoping to see after spending all that money on protein shakes and B12 shots. He wanted me to play baseball almost as badly as I did. I was a decent pitcher and a better than average catcher, but I didn't have the physical stamina to move upward in that world. I would have given anything to live up to my father's expectations; instead, I never did.

I started hurting myself because it made me feel better for a little while. The pain I inflicted on my skin masked my sorrow whenever I heard him brag about Junior's latest accomplishment. I got into trouble at school to become the center of his attention for a few hours, until his mind was once more preoccupied with my brother and his career in sports. I started hanging around the risk-takers and jumped head first into the wonderful world of drugs, getting caught repeatedly. I'd been kicked out of numerous schools, despite my excellent grades, because I couldn't follow the rules, thus increasing my father's wrath. The only thing that would calm me and keep me grounded was when I scratched my skin until it bled. Eventually, I moved on to sharper objects. As the pain grew worse, so did the cutting.

Psychiatrists were called in as soon as my parents discovered my penchant for self-mutilation. The kicker, of course, was when I announced I was gay. That almost blew my father's head off.

I'd been in therapy forever and on antidepressants for almost as long. It was only in the last two years that I had found some semblance of peace with my interest in computers and graphic design. I had achieved some success in school and gained assurance in my ability outside the world of baseball

Yet, on a personal level, my opinion of my body hadn't changed. It was still an object of shame for me, and no amount of therapy would change that. It didn't help that I'd never had a lover long enough to give me more confidence. Etienne's idea that I would want to strut my stuff in front of a camera was laughable. I'd eat rat poison before that ever happened.

I let myself into the apartment and walked into the kitchen, only to find it occupied by Cole and a beautiful Eurasian. *The girlfriend*, I thought, not surprised at all by her beauty. It was fitting that he had someone that gorgeous. Seeing them together made my stomach churn, and all thoughts of ever having any kind of relationship with Cole were curtailed as soon as I met Juliana. There was no way on God's green earth that I could compete with that.

10

COLE was doing research for his class in ancient Japanese history. He was working with the special computer program he'd purchased from Lighthouse International. Someday he'd have to switch to the voice-assisted program, but for now he was still able to manage. His online courses gave him much more freedom to do things at his own pace, which helped to keep him on track. He was about four months away from getting his master's degree in Asian studies. After that, he could teach wherever he wanted.

Today's assignment was contrasting and comparing the practice of *shudo* among the warrior class in Japan to the ancient Greek practice of pederasty. Both societies viewed the tradition of an older, more experienced man taking on a younger male apprentice as normal and highly beneficial for both parties. Training was not limited to, but did include, sexual favors between the older warrior and the young samurai. It was not uncommon for these relationships to last years, until the boys became of age.

Cole was taking notes and musing that in this day and age, both practices would be considered pedophilia by some and child abuse by others, whereas in ancient times, it was normal and highly esteemed. Same-sex love was commonplace and more about sexual pleasure and

behavior rather than identity. He paused for a minute and pondered the subject of homosexuality, history, and inevitably, his slipup with Sloan the other night.

Granted, he had been high on weed, which could explain his actions. On the other hand, would it explain all the other times he'd thought about sex with another man? His experiences at boarding school had frightened him because he worried that all his father's fears about him turning out gay would come true. He'd heard Ken rant to his mother about the perils of living in San Francisco and his concern that Cole would be unduly influenced by the females in the family, or the media, or the openness of homosexuality in general. Cole found it amusing whenever Ken would fly into a rage upon finding a Barbie in his room or anything pink lying around. It was ironic that the very environment he thought would keep Cole safe and focused on his hetero leanings became his introduction into man-on-man sex.

John Butterman had urged Cole to listen to his other senses, to learn how to see in other ways. His sense of touch and hearing had increased as his sight disappeared, but with it had come an amplified awareness of bodies and his reaction to them. There was something about Sloan that attracted him, far more than what Juliana had to offer. He didn't understand it, and by its very nature, rebelled against it, but deep in the inner workings of his brain, he acknowledged that there might be some truth to his father's fears.

He pushed his cursor toward the word *shudo* and clicked. It took him to a page with graphic drawings from ancient Japanese archives of warriors having sex with their young students. He sucked in a quick breath, not expecting to see this, and looked up to where Sloan was reading on the sofa to see if he'd heard him. Sloan continued to read, oblivious to what was going on. Cole was drawn once more to the pictures in front of him and felt himself getting aroused. His breathing grew shallow while his cock filled, and he squirmed in his seat, trying hard to control his reactions. One picture showed a young boy performing fellatio on a man dressed in full military attire. His kimono was lifted, showing his legs spread out, a look of sheer ecstasy on his face. Another drawing was of a young boy leaning over some sort of

bench, preparing to be impaled by a man with an oversized cock who loomed on top of him.

Cole could feel his heartbeat pulsing in his groin as he continued to react to the pictures. He reached over to pick up the glass of water he had nearby, and his hand shook a little, causing the glass to slip and fall on his keyboard with a crash.

"Motherfucker!"

"What happened?" Sloan asked from his side of the room. He stood quickly and moved to where Cole was sitting and groping around for something to wipe up the mess.

"I dropped my fucking glass and now everything's wet," Cole said in a slightly hysterical tone. "I think I ruined my keyboard."

"Scoot over," Sloan ordered. "Let me take a look."

"Why?"

"'Cause I know computers, that's why."

"Oh."

Sloan quickly unplugged the keyboard and turned it over, letting the liquid and glass fall on the floor. "Do you have a hand-held vacuum?"

"I think so."

"Go and get it," Sloan said patiently.

Cole made his way to the kitchen closet where he kept all the cleaning supplies, and he rooted around for the Dustbuster. He found it quickly enough and brought it out to Sloan, along with a handful of paper towels. He handed everything over, acutely aware of Sloan's hands brushing his, his body close by. Sloan proceeded to clean up the mess, taking care with the keyboard, picking out tiny shards of glass. He reached for the can of compressed air that was on the desk and blew out any remaining moisture.

Sloan looked at the computer, which had frozen with pictures of men in sexual positions, and he turned to Cole and grinned. "What is this? Japanese porn?"

"No! If you must know, it's part of my assignment."

"Really? What are you studying?"

"Would you get your mind back on your task and get that fucking picture off my screen?" Cole spat out.

"For one thing, your screen is frozen, and until I hook this keyboard back up, there's not a whole lot I can do other than enjoy the size of that cock."

"You're disgusting."

"You're a hypocrite, Cole, but that's neither here nor there. Why the fuck is everything about your system supersized? Are you too lazy to wear glasses? Is that it?"

"Yeah. Exactly!"

"I would get a headache if I had to stare at writing this huge all day. You should really reconsider and just wear the damn glasses; but oh yeah, I remember, they made you look like a geek."

"Fuck you, Sloan."

"You wish."

Cole was shaking, he was so pissed. He would have given anything to haul one off at Sloan, but took a huge breath instead. "Look, would you just get it fixed. Did I ruin it?"

"No. I've blown out most of the water and it should work fine," Sloan replied, getting serious again. He wiped off the desk and plugged in the keyboard, letting his fingers fly across the keys and tap in commands so that eventually the system rebooted itself and all was well.

"There you go." Sloan turned to Cole. "You're all set."

"Thank you," Cole said, grateful for the help.

"You're welcome." Sloan stood to make room for Cole but brushed against him inadvertently. "Sorry," he apologized.

Cole could smell Sloan, he was so close. He could feel the tension in his body as it pressed up to him, knew without seeing that Sloan was reacting to his proximity, and he felt the blood rush to his cheeks. The room had become unbearably warm.

COLE'S cheeks were suffused with color, turning his light tan complexion into a study in crimson. His eyes were dilated and his lips were rosy, swollen, and moist; far too enticing for me to resist. I'd vowed to keep my distance and not let him affect me, but that was easier said than done. I would have given my left nut to taste that mouth again; instead, I backed away from him.

I went back to the sofa, picked up the book I was reading, and headed toward my bedroom. I didn't want to be around him in case I did something really dumb like jump his bones. Why the fuck did I have this thing for him? I was drawn to him like flies to shit. It was pathetic.

I felt my boner pressing hard against my thigh, making the simple act of walking ungraceful and difficult. Fortunately, Cole had turned back to his computer screen and didn't see me leave the room. I shut and locked my bedroom door and threw myself on the bed, turning on the iPod, which was sitting in its dock. The sound of my favorite band came through loud and clear, thanks to the amazing speakers—made in Japan, no doubt. My world had shifted to everything Japanese suddenly, and I moaned loudly, pressing my hand on my groin, willing my cock to behave. This was an impossible task with Cole on my mind front and center.

Physically, he was everything I was looking for in a guy. His body wasn't some nebulous thing I had imagined. I could still taste him, and I knew what was under his tight pants and T-shirt. I could feel the silky smoothness of his cock as I twirled my tongue around the

plump head, lapping up the drops of moisture that oozed just for me. I reached for my zipper and pulled down, quickly releasing my boner. I was rigid, pulsing with need, and I came after a few tugs, I was that close. The spunk flowed over my hands even as I lay there imagining myself coming all over Cole's face, and I had to stifle my scream. I could hear him sighing into my ear, urging me on while making those tiny grunting sounds that signaled his pleasure. I turned over and pressed my face into the pillow while I humped the mattress, finishing off the fantasy as I pretended I was rubbing against Cole's fine ass.

I must have dozed and awoke to the sound of my phone ringing incessantly. I didn't recognize the number but answered anyway.

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"Hello?"
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"Hey, Sloan. It's Etienne."

"Hey, Tin. What's up?"

"I'm going off to a photo shoot. Do you want to come?"

"Where?"

"I'm not sure. Some place downtown. I'm meeting the photographer at the agency and going from there."

"Okay, but meet me at the Starbucks near my apartment. I need a double shot to get going."

"No problem."

I got up and noted the state of my undress. My cock was hanging outside my pants, the dried spunk a reminder of my earlier indulgence. I vowed to get laid in the next day or so. Hopefully, Tin or one of his friends could help take my mind off the untouchable man in the other room.

THE photo session ended up in Grand Central of all places. They were modeling Gucci luggage, using the trains as backdrop. Etienne was dressed in a three-piece suit, complete with a topcoat and fedora and surrounded by suitcases. I had to admit that he looked damn good. The photographer was a slave driver with bitchy tendencies who knew exactly what he wanted, demanding complete dedication from everyone on his staff. It was hard work, and my respect for models rose significantly. It took a lot of effort on everyone's part to achieve that oh-so-casually-beautiful look that graced the front pages of *Vogue* and *Elle*.

After two hours of torture I was firmly convinced I could never model. For one thing, I wasn't vain enough, and for another, I couldn't stand the people on the sidelines, gawking. Etienne, however, reveled in the spotlight. He was born to perform. I couldn't understand why he even went to Pratt, until he told me that his father had insisted. I sympathized completely.

It was almost six in the evening by the time they wrapped up. I was ready for some food and possibly a private party. After this morning, I was desperate to take on anyone so long as they didn't look like Cole. I had to get his taste out of my mouth, and the best way to do

that was to partake at someone else's table. I was hoping Tin would introduce me to one of his modeling buddies, because I liked having him as a friend and didn't want to muddy our relationship with a round of meaningless sex.

"Okay, Mr. Beautiful. Let's get the fuck out of here." I grabbed his hand and headed for the exit.

"Wait, Sloan!" Etienne held back. "What did you think? Is this something you might possibly do?"

"Hell no!"

"Max thinks you have the perfect face for photos."

"Thanks a fucking lot but I'm not interested. Who's Max?"

"The photographer, silly."

"Oh. That's nice." I turned to see Max watching our exchange. He gave me the raised eyebrow, expecting me to jump at the offer. I shrugged my shoulders and mouthed, *sorry*.

His mouth dropped open, apparently shocked by my response. I guess no one in their right mind would refuse a chance like this, but I really wasn't interested. I started walking away and he caught up to me, tapping me on the shoulder. "Are you for real?"

"Of course I'm for real," I replied, surprised that he even cared to ask.

"How could you possibly say no to me?"

I laughed and shook my head. "Just 'cause I'm gay doesn't mean I have to strike a pose," I said, doing my best imitation of Madonna.

He grinned and asked, "What's your name?"

"Sloan Driscoll. Why?"

"I like you."

"Do you?" I stopped and really looked at him. Now that the shoot was over, he seemed quite normal, shedding the bitchy persona easily. I was disarmed by his grin, and of course, hearing him say he liked me

was always a good icebreaker. The fact that he had a nice body, which he showed off in the wife beater and tight jeans, certainly helped his cause, not to mention the full beard cut really, really short. He reminded me of Freddie Mercury toward the end of his career, just before he started to look bad.

"You like Queen?" I asked suddenly.

He laughed. "Why, do I remind you of Freddie?"

I smiled. "You've heard that, huh?"

He nodded. "I adore Queen."

"Cool," I said, ridiculously pleased for some reason.

"Listen," Max said, stepping forward and touching my arm, "do you want to grab a beer or something?"

"Or something," I answered, encouraged by his gentle touch.

COLE had spent the better part of his afternoon ensconced with Dr. Butterman. John had done his research on guide dogs as Cole had requested. He had several brochures on his desk in large print and in Braille

"How does this work, John? Do they bring the dog to me all trained?"

"No. In the case of Seeing Eye dogs, you have to go to Morristown, New Jersey, and spend time training on their campus. They won't release a dog unless they are confident that you are just as well trained as your pet. You have to learn how to work together, care for the animal, give him the right signals, and become comfortable with each other. It's a marriage of sorts and very rewarding when it works."

"That's a big commitment, John. I'd have to wait until I graduate before I can take time off to do that."

"That's not far off, is it?"

"No. About four more months."

"That will give you time to apply and make plans. It's like bringing a new baby into the house, Cole. Everything has to be just right."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Things are a little different now that I have a roommate."

"I didn't know you had a roommate; when did that happen?"

Cole told him all about Sloan, leaving out the one part he really should have talked about. He just couldn't bring himself to say the words

"I'm sure that Sloan will be willing to help with the dog. They're pretty hard to resist."

"We'll see," Cole replied. "What time is it?"

"It's almost five o'clock. Were you going to take the subway back?"

"I hadn't planned on it."

"Why don't you? We did fine the other day," John said kindly, trying not to push.

"You were with me, John. I don't think I'm ready to do this on my own yet."

"Shall I go with you one more time? I don't mind."

"That's up to you."

"Let's go, Cole." John stood and grabbed his cane, pulling Cole along by the hand. They headed to the elevator and made their way out of the building.

"Remember how I told you that you have to see with your other senses?" he asked, speaking softly as they headed toward the stairs that would lead them down to the subway.

"Yes."

"Your hearing will tell you which side of the street the cars are coming from, where the other fast footsteps are in relation to your own. You should move when the crowd moves. Count steps in the beginning, but soon you won't need to. Your body will tell you when you get to the end of a stairwell, especially after you've ridden the subway for a while. You'll feel the crowd moving in and out of the doors, and you'll literally go with the flow."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It's not easy, but eventually, you stop thinking and just do it. Your guide dog will be a tremendous help when you're out in public. He'll become your eyes."

"What about something unexpected?"

"Your hearing should alert you to unexpected noises such as construction or emergency vehicles. The dog will stop and not allow you to move forward. He'll be much better for you than this cane is for me"

"Why don't you have a dog, John?"

"I have macular degeneration, Cole. It's age related, and although I'm legally blind, my vision is still better than yours. I can get by with the cane."

"I still have some vision."

"I know, son, but you have to prepare for the worst."

"Is it really going to happen?"

"You will go blind, Cole. It's not a question of if; it's a question of when."

"I've heard cases where people have coasted for years with tunnel vision like mine."

"It's true, but you can't count on it."

Cole sighed deeply, leaning into Dr. Butterman. "I feel so alone sometimes."

"I'm sorry, son. Isn't your family any consolation? Your girl?"

"John, I'm so confused."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

By then the train was pulling into their stop and they both stood. Cole shook his head and said, "Another time, okay?"

"Whenever you're ready, Cole."

"John, why don't you go back uptown? I think I can manage from here."

"Are you sure? It's no trouble at all."

"I'm positive. I'll see you in a few days, okay?"

"Okay, Cole." John embraced him. "Take it easy, son."

"Thank you."

They stepped off the train and John turned left, to cross over to the other side, while Cole turned right, following the crowd. He stepped on the escalator without a problem, and when he got to the first level, he did a hard right, knowing there was another long flight of stairs he needed to climb to the top floor. He managed them easily, not tripping at all, and he was a little giddy with his success. He forgot to pay attention to his surroundings. He didn't listen to the noises around him as John had taught him on more than one occasion. He didn't hear the running feet, nor did he pay attention to the whistle, so when he was hit from behind, he was completely surprised. Someone had run into Cole, shoving him violently in the back so that he landed on his knees before he fell forward and scraped his face along the concrete. His breath was knocked out of him, but the worst part of it all was the humiliation of lying there while people walked or ran around him. No one bothered to stop and see if he was hurt. Not one gesture of kindness or concern, and he lay there, listening to his heart beating wildly and wondering how he ever thought he'd be able to do this.

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TIN and I parted ways because I insisted on going home to change before meeting him and Max at the bar on 14<sup>th</sup> Street. I'd decided to grab a quick shower and put on something nice. I'd been in the same clothes all day and I smelled like shit. If there was any hope of getting laid, I'd have to earn it. Max was a photographer, after all, and used to dealing with beautiful people.

The subway was crowded. Everyone was trying to get home at the same time. There was a small group of people gathered around a body sprawled in the walkway, just before the stairs, and a few cops were close by talking to witnesses and writing down information. I was about to go around the crowd when I happened to look down, and I saw Cole on the ground. He was moaning and holding his head, attempting to sit up.

I knelt instinctively, took his hand, and pulled him up gently. "Cole, are you okay?"

He opened his eyes and looked at my face, trying to focus. He seemed to have trouble seeing me, because he was squinting and blinking his eyes repeatedly. "Sloan?"

"Yeah, it's me. What happened?"

"I'm not sure. I think someone pushed me."

"Here, let me help you up. Can you stand?"

He sat up and put his hands up to his face. His hair fell in a black sheet across his forehead, and there was a slight gash on his right cheek where he must have scraped it. His hands were trembling slightly, and I could tell he was about ready to lose it. His lips quivered and he gnawed on them, doing his best not to break down. There was something terribly tragic about this scene, and it touched the part of me that wanted to comfort and nurture at the same time. I moved to put my arms around him, disregarding my earlier vow to stay away. I held him tightly against my body, whispering words of comfort and little by little, I felt the trembling ease up.

"Can you walk?" I asked in a voice that only he could hear.

"I think so."

"Let's see, okay?"

I pulled him up slowly, waiting to see if he could stand on his own. He wavered a little, but eventually righted himself. His cheeks were pink with the exertion, but he looked determined to get the hell out of there. He waved the cops away, telling them he was fine.

"Sloan, take me home."

"Let's go."

I picked up his backpack and hefted it over my left shoulder. I put my right arm around him and held him close. "Can you walk okay?"

"Yes. Let's fucking go."

We walked down the dank hallway and climbed the stairs out to street level. It was dark, probably close to seven o'clock when we finally got to the apartment building. I nodded at the doorman and pushed Cole into the elevator. When we got inside our apartment, I put down the backpack and led Cole toward the bathroom. He didn't resist at all, following meekly like a child. I made him sit on the toilet seat before I took a washcloth and rinsed it out with hot water. I began to

clean his face, wiping away the blood as well as the grime that had stuck to him when he slid on the concrete floor.

I was as gentle as possible, but he must have been in pain because he started to cry. Big tears rolled down his cheeks, and I stopped what I was doing, wondering how the warm washcloth could possibly be causing this.

"Cole, am I hurting you?"

He shook his head and put his arms around my waist and began to sob, making horrible, despairing sounds that filled the small room with his anguish. I had never heard anything like it, and it tore at my gut. I wanted to scream and punch a hole in the wall, anything to make this stop. Instead, I pulled him up and pressed his entire length against me. I held him for what seemed like hours but in reality was only a few minutes. He continued to weep, and I decided to move him to his room, so he could lie down to try and sleep.

"Cole, do you have any pills that can calm you down? Xanax or Valium?"

"No." He swiped his face with the back of his hand, hoping this would stop the tears but they continued to flow. I left him for a minute and went to my room to get a pill from my secret stash.

He took the pill without question, swallowing it with a sip of water from the glass I'd brought with it. I knelt down and started to untie his shoes, urging him to lie down and rest.

"Sloan?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't leave me"

"I won't." I stood and went to get my phone so I could text Tin to let him know that I wouldn't be joining him. I hoped that Max would understand and give me another chance.

When I got back to the room, I saw that Cole was already stretched out on the bed, lying on top of the comforter with all his clothes on. One arm was draped over his face, covering his eyes, while the other was stretched out, reaching for my hand. I took it and felt myself being pulled down on the bed. I toed off my shoes quickly and I lay beside him, surprised when he turned toward me and pressed his body up against mine.

He was still crying. His tears were tearing me apart, and I lifted his face with my hand and did the unforgivable. I kissed him. He moaned into my mouth and kissed me back. At first they were tender kisses, made to comfort, but they quickly shifted into something else. Trying to restrain myself was unbearable, and even if I wanted to pull away, it would have been impossible. Cole had me firmly in his grip. His mouth was ravaging mine, the hungry sounds that were coming from deep within him goading me on.

He threw his leg over my hips and rubbed his cock against me. He was hard and I groaned when I felt him. Encouraged, he pressed closer, grabbing my ass and pulling me tightly against his erection as we rutted against each other.

"Sloan," he whispered desperately, making me almost come in my pants.

"Cole." I attempted to stop, pushing away for a second and looking at his face. His eyes were closed, his lashes spiked with tears. "Please, don't stop," he begged, and I was powerless to resist.

I started to remove his clothes, unbuttoning his pants, tugging at his shirt. He helped as soon as he realized what I was doing. He lifted his hips off the bed, allowing me to slide the pants down his legs, followed shortly by his boxers. His cock was thick and heavy, nestled amidst a thatch of dark hair. The crown was plump and rosy red, seeping drops of moisture from its slit. I whimpered, wanting him fiercely. I had to taste him again, needed to feel that silky softness against my tongue, relish the muskiness that was uniquely his. I took him in my mouth and sighed. He clutched my head with both hands, pulling at my hair as I began to suck on him.

This time he wouldn't let me finish him off. Just as he was about to climax, he pushed my head away and pulled me up his torso. He rolled us over, bracing himself on either side of my head, kissing me

deeply. It seemed as if he wanted this to go on forever, holding me at arm's length, refusing to come until he was good and ready.

"I want you," he growled, in a voice heavy with passion.

I fumbled with my pants, moved by his words. He stared intently, squinting his eyes like he was in the sun, but they never left mine. The deep blue seemed to be lit up, burning with a fire that came from some unknown place inside him.

"I want you," he growled once more, impatient with my inept fumbling. He moved away from me and rested on his heels, on legs that were spread apart with his cock lying thick in between. He gasped when he saw me at my hardest.

"Mother of God," he whispered reverently. Just the reaction I was hoping for. He moved back to me, reaching out and wrapping his hand around my shaft. The strangled sound that came out of me was the release of a pent-up breath. I wanted him to touch me, to put his mouth on my cock, and I actually screamed when he did. My fantasy exploded in my brain, far surpassed by the reality of the deed.

I was too caught up in my pleasure to really think about the implications of what was happening. Cole was tentative at first but quickly found his stride as I writhed and panted with each stroke of his tongue. He was surprisingly good at this for a newbie, taking me deeper with each second that passed. I tried not to fuck his mouth, restraining myself out of courtesy, but he was like a man possessed, needing every bit of me. I was impressed that he could handle me, since my last partner kept telling me I was too big for him to enjoy.

It was too intense, too fast, and I pulled out just in time, preferring not to come down his throat. I honestly didn't think he could handle it. Cole pumped my cock as I overflowed in his hand, and he surprised me by bending down and licking up the residue from my cock and my balls, humming his pleasure. I was touched by his gesture, never expecting it.

"I want to fuck you," he said, moving back up my body and lying on top of me. He said this matter-of-factly, like he was asking for a grilled cheese sandwich. I had no idea if he'd ever fucked a guy before, and my experience was minimal at best. But I hoped that we'd figure this out and fumble our way to the finish line.

"Do you have a condom?"

He reached over and pulled at the drawer on the nightstand and waved a packet in his hand. I grabbed it and saw that it was the lubricated kind, thank God. I didn't think he'd have any kind of lube and I really didn't feel like getting all torn up. I handed him the foil packet and watched him tear at it with his teeth, rolling the condom on with practiced hands. I watched and wondered where this was all heading, but there was something about him tonight that stopped me from protesting. He seemed intent on experiencing everything with me, as if he were trying to prove something to himself, or exorcise demons that had been haunting him for a long time.

Cole pushed, angling his hips as he bypassed the tight rings that were impeding his way. When he finally felt my body suck up his cock he kissed me, muffling the dual screams that remained in our throats. He paused to catch a breath, but I could tell that he was blown away by this new sensation when he looked at me in wonder.

"I had no idea it would be like this," he spoke, like an explorer who had just found a new country. He began to move again, pushing in and out, all the while sighing and making these little grunting noises I was starting to recognize as a prelude to his orgasm.

I began to move against him, easily matching his stride and soon we thrust against each other like we'd been doing this for years.

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"Feel good?" he asked, closing his eyes and pausing.
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes, yes... don't stop, Cole. Don't."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What do you feel?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Amazing."

<sup>&</sup>quot;How?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Don't ask, Cole. Just move."

"Like this?" he asked, grazing my prostate.

"Yes," I moaned, "just like that." He repeated his movement, pegging me again, causing me to cry out and clutch at his arms.

He looked completely blitzed out. I watched his face the entire time, caught up in his beauty as he let himself fly away. He must have been a little high on the Xanax I'd given him. I could tell that he was in another place altogether, some great place my body was sending him. Every thrust and groan took us to one more level of pleasure, seemingly without end. I wanted to remember every second, in case this never happened again.

I felt myself on the brink when Cole whispered, "Come with me."

I gasped and cried out, feeling my warm spunk blossoming all over Cole's neck and chest just as he came in a quiet trembling of his limbs.

"Sloan," he sighed, resting his head against my neck. "Good."

Good wasn't quite the word I would have used. I was thinking more along the lines of *unbelievable* or *out-of-this-fucking-world*.

He was heavy on my chest, but I didn't push him off, enjoying the feel of him pressing against me. After a few minutes, I heard a soft snoring and I realized he'd fallen asleep. I had managed to chase away his tears and allowed him to forget whatever it was that was hurting so badly. It was an incredible feeling to know I had that kind of power. I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

13

IT WAS morning, and with it came the guilt, the fear, and all the feelings associated with dark secrets. Cole rolled over, half expecting to feel Sloan, but relieved that he was gone. His presence would have meant dealing with hard reality. It was easier to lie in bed and just daydream.

He felt his morning boner pressing hard against the mattress, and his thoughts shifted to everything that happened last night. He groaned when he remembered what it felt like, sinking into Sloan's body. The pleasure he'd received at the hands of his roommate was more intense than the many sessions of lovemaking he and Juliana had shared over the last few years. It was exciting and erotic and made him feel alive yet this same pleasure could destroy everything. His father would throw himself off a bridge if he found out Cole was gay on top of everything else. The shame he would bring to his family would be unbearable. Yet, a huge part of him wanted this so badly. He had never felt as desired as he did last night. He didn't understand it, because he knew that Juliana loved him; but her love was tainted by the illusion of who she thought he should be. She was in love with his past, the baseball player, the heir to the Fujiwara name, and everything that came with it. She'd never seen any weakness on his part and made sure that she never did. By anticipating all his needs, he never floundered in her presence. She

refused to acknowledge he'd changed and was now a different man. He'd never be the Cole she had fallen in love with three years ago.

Sloan's feelings, on the other hand, were pure and honest. There was no agenda he had to deal with, no illusions of a happy-ever-after. It was all about now and sexual satisfaction at its finest. He didn't have to sugarcoat it with pretty words of love because Sloan didn't want to marry him and have babies. He wanted to fuck and suck and feel, which was all Cole could give or handle right now. Gay men were all about sex anyhow. Isn't that what the books and the media said? They didn't have the same feelings other people had. No need to have a family or ties that held them down. It was liberating in some ways, and he acknowledged it would be nice to be able to be like that, even for a short period of time.

But was it really like that? He thought about Sloan and the way he'd behaved at the scene of his accident last night. He remembered how protective he'd been, and the kind and caring side that had surfaced once they were home alone in the bathroom. He remembered how he'd held him as he cried. Cole never detected one iota of pity or disgust; he'd felt safe. And that had carried over to the bedroom. Never once did he get the sense that Sloan wasn't engaged or was all about himself. Not the actions of a man who only had sex on his brain. Sloan was generous and giving in his lovemaking, more like a man who had feelings for him, which was an impossible thought. Men didn't love other men. They weren't made that way.

Relationships between men were more about sharing experiences and learning. History could attest to that. If this kind of relationship was good enough for the Greeks and Romans and even Japanese warriors, why shouldn't it be good enough for him and Sloan? He was sure that Sloan could use his guidance. He had issues with drugs, from what he'd gleaned in the last few days, and he could help him with that. Get him clean, teach him how to eat right and respect his body.

He could have it all, just like they did in ancient times: a family, children, and great sex at the same time. No one would have to know.

He didn't have to walk beside Sloan at a Pride parade. He wasn't gay, Cole scoffed. If anything he was bisexual—a huge difference.

His hand wandered over his chest and stomach. The crusty remnants of Sloan's climax served as a fresh reminder of their sensual evening, drawing a soft moan as he felt himself already hard. He was already halfway there just from the physical act of waking up, but thinking of Sloan and the way he moved underneath him made him grow harder still. What was it about Sloan that opened up this window into a world he'd left behind years ago? He couldn't figure out what the attraction was. Sloan wasn't built like a bodybuilder, from the little he could see and feel. He was all sinew and muscle and parts of him even felt rough and scaly, almost as if he were malnourished. He could definitely use some mentoring in the food department. But his mouth was spectacular and could do wicked things to him. He touched him in ways that made him feel alive, and when he looked closely enough to see into the gunmetal-gray eyes, he felt that Sloan had answers no one else had. It was irrational and unrealistic, but there was a connection on some primal level.

I WALKED into the room and saw him sitting on the bed. He looked up when he heard me and grinned. It was a huge relief because I'd expected another scene like the last one. In fact, I was bracing myself for a fight or a round of self-recrimination, at least, and so this smile was a refreshing sight.

"Hey," he said softly. "Come here."

I had on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt I'd thrown on quickly after leaving his bed earlier. I was uncomfortable walking around naked, and I didn't want him to see the scars on my legs. He hadn't mentioned them so far, even though I was pretty sure he'd felt them; however, one look at the marks would tell him I had all kinds of issues, which I didn't feel like getting into right now. We'd have enough to discuss without throwing my cutting into the mix.

I moved over to him and stood in between his legs. He pulled me close and wrapped his arms around my waist, pressing his face to my body and holding me tight. I was a little shocked but delighted nonetheless. Cole was an enigma I was just beginning to explore. I bent down and kissed his lips, loving the way he opened up for me. He slipped his tongue into my mouth and outlined my lips gently, making my stomach flop and my cock swell. I sighed and responded with my own tongue, meeting his easily while I ran both hands through his smooth black hair, loving the feel of it.

Everything about him was a huge turn-on, so I voiced no objections when he pulled me onto the bed with him. I lay prone on his naked body, feeling his erection pressing against mine. "Take off your pants," he commanded in a husky voice that made my cock twitch.

I shoved my sweats down and kicked them away. We began to grind against each other, all the while kissing and making incoherent noises. I could feel his need as our fluids mingled, allowing us to slide back and forth easily. He held my ass and squeezed, pressing me hard against him. It was fast and frantic, this desire that roared through us, like a blast of air ripping through a wind tunnel. We were desperate to come, rubbing and humping like teenagers on our first date.

"Sloan," he growled as he came in hot spurts, triggering my own orgasm, which I released all over him. The room was redolent with our smell, the pungent odor of musk and male arousal enveloping us. Little by little our bodies began to relax, the thudding of combined heartbeats loud in my ears.

"Good morning," I said, boneless and out of breath.

He chuckled. "No kidding."

"Did you sleep well?" I asked him, knowing what he'd answer. He hadn't stirred all night.

"Yes. Thank you."

"No need to thank me. I enjoyed every minute of it."

"Even the pitiful crying jag?"

"Hey," I said, kissing him quickly, "none of that, okay?"

He wrapped his arms around me and sighed, "What am I going to do with you?"

"You don't have to do anything."

"Good."

"What do you mean 'good'?" The change in his tone prompted my question.

"Well, I wasn't planning on running out and buying you a ring."

I pulled away from him and frowned. "I never expected that."

"I know. It's all about fucking with your kind, isn't it?"

"My kind?" The words came out slowly as my hackles started to rise.

"Yeah, you gays. It's all about sex, isn't it?"

"Us gays?" I sneered a little. "I seem to recall you sucking on my cock, or was that just a dream?"

"Just because we had sex doesn't mean I'm gay, Sloan."

"Oh, right. How silly of me to make that assumption."

"Stop being an ass. You know I'm not gay, I'm practically engaged, for God's sake, and I have every intention of marrying Juliana."

"Whoa." I pushed away from him and groped for my pants, sliding them up my legs before standing in plain sight. "You can keep on lying to me and to yourself, but you really shouldn't lie to her."

"Who's lying? Did you actually think I'd break it off with her for you?"

"Fuck no!"

"So what's this all about?"

"I don't know, Cole. You tell me." I stared at him. He was a stranger again, the stern and judgmental man I'd met the other night. Gone was the tender lover I'd just come all over.

"I don't see why it has to be anything formal. Why do we have to give this a title or a category?"

"This?" I was now thoroughly confused.

"Yeah, us... you and me. Why can't we just have sex when we're in the mood and not make a big deal out of it?"

"Cole?"

"Really, Sloan, two men having sex doesn't necessarily mean a lifetime commitment. I mean, the ancients did it for hundreds of years without classifying it as gay or straight. It's just another form of sexual release."

I was looking at him and wondering what part of "gay" he didn't get. The man made no sense. "So, what exactly are you saying?"

"What I'm saying is that there's no reason why we can't continue to have great sex and still go on with our lives as we know it. I can continue to see Juliana and eventually marry her. You just do your thing."

"And what's that thing?"

"Be gay. Fuck around but wear a condom. Be safe and don't bring home any diseases."

"And you're okay with me fucking other guys, and you, whenever you're in the mood to have a man-on-man encounter?" I was starting to shake, I was so angry; I wanted to punch him.

"Why are you flipping out? It's not like we love each other or anything," Cole snorted.

"Right!" I headed for the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. My hands were balled into fists. Cole had just destroyed one of the most amazing nights of my life with his twisted theory. What the hell was he thinking? He was bent, like a three-dollar bill, and he had the nerve and fucking audacity to call this a sexual release? Fuck that!

I sat on the toilet and pushed off my pants. My legs were starting to heal, the cuts scabbing over nicely. I touched them like a drug addict reaching for heroin and ripped them off with my nails. The pain was intense and flowed through me, masking everything else. The blood appeared right on cue, bright red and pulsing with my heartbeat.

14

"COLE, it was one incident. You need to try again," John spoke gently from his side of the desk. He'd been sympathetic and a little concerned when Cole first told him about the accident, but now he was being insistent again. "You've got to get back on the horse, son."

"No! I refuse." Cole had taken a cab to the Lighthouse, unwilling to venture into the subway again. He should have never mentioned anything to John because he wasn't in the mood to hear this pep talk.

"It was a fluke, Cole. This would have never happened if you had a dog."

"How do you figure?"

"He would have pushed you out of the way."

"You don't know that for a fact."

"I'm not one hundred percent positive, but I'm sure he would have given you a little indication if something was wrong."

"Well, I'll have to think about it."

"I'll go with you again, and this time I'll walk you home. Maybe we can have dinner?"

"My roommate has plans," Cole said, remembering that Sloan had mentioned Emily would be in town and staying over. "I'm not so sure we'd have the kitchen to ourselves."

"Then we can walk over to a neighborhood café or something. I'm not fussy."

"No, but you're pushy."

"Cole," John said, his voice becoming more impatient, "someone's got to push you."

"I guess."

"How are things going with Sloan?" he asked, changing the subject suddenly.

Cole was unprepared for the question and his voice reflected his discomfort. "Fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"What do you mean? I'm perfectly fine."

"Aren't you two getting along?"

Cole wanted to laugh and say they were getting along far too well, but he wasn't prepared to talk about it. Especially since Sloan had retreated from him after listening to Cole's speech on mentoring and wanting to have it all. Sloan had accused him of dishonesty and hadn't touched him since. He'd been formal and distant and Cole was starting to lose it; however, he wasn't about to make the first move.

"Cole?"

"Yeah?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"What question?" Cole's thoughts were still on Sloan and the chill that had settled in their apartment.

"Have you told your roommate about your eyesight?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Why?"

"I don't want him to hover over me."

"I'm pretty sure he won't, from what you've told me about him. The kid doesn't sound like Florence Nightingale."

"He's not a kid!"

"Oh. Well, the man doesn't sound like the most caring person in the world. I'm sure his behavior toward you will not change."

Cole thought about how gentle Sloan was with the washcloth after his fall in the subway. He thought about how easily he'd slipped into the role of caretaker, and he wanted to disagree with John's assessment of Sloan, but it would have opened up the discussion to a topic he wasn't willing to share at this time.

"Let's not talk about Sloan anymore, okay?"

"Whatever you say, Cole. Shall we get going?"

"Already?"

"Yeah. I'm hungry, aren't you?"

"Sure, I could eat."

EMILY was exactly what I needed to take my mind off Cole and his bullshit. I'd been in a miserable funk ever since the morning after we had sex. Listening to him talk about the fucking Greeks and their boy toys was surreal. He didn't get why I was so upset. I couldn't very well tell him that I had expected more from him. I wasn't looking for a declaration of love, but an acknowledgement that there was something special happening between us would have been nice.

But, no, Cole went on and on about the bloody history of Japanese warriors and their samurai twinks. He was in denial at the highest level, and I wasn't about to help him change his mind or get a grip on reality. That wasn't my job. He'd have to figure this out on his own, but in the meantime, I wasn't going to make myself available to him. If he wanted to get his dick sucked, he could ask his bloody

girlfriend to do it for him. I had every intention of moving on and finally hooking up with Max. Amazingly, he still wanted to see me, even after I'd stood him up the other night.

Emily had arrived with a duffel bag full of clothes and was bursting with questions about my life since I moved. It had been a long time since we'd last seen each other and so we spent the first hour just catching up. She'd changed her hairstyle, opting for a shorter, easier look, from what I could tell, and had ditched her glasses.

"You must be getting laid," I accused.

"Moi?"

"You look happy, Em."

She laughed, looking prettier than ever before. "I just started seeing someone."

"Where did you meet?"

"Dan is also into theater. We met in a class."

"Good for you."

"It's the beginning, Sloan, so it's fresh and exciting. We'll see how it goes." She leaned into me and gave me a hug. "How is your love life?"

"It's a work in progress," I replied, wondering whether I should say anything, but since I had already told her about that one night when Cole and I were high on weed, I decided to spill my guts, and so I told her what happened a few nights ago.

"I'm sorry, Sloan. He really sounds like he's got a lot of issues with his sexuality."

"He's just odd, Emily. He can be nice one minute and a piece of shit the next. I'm having a hard time reading him."

"Why not drop him? I don't want you wasting your time on a lost cause"

"I've already decided to do just that, except whenever I see him, I have this terrible urge to jump his bones. He does things to my body I can't control"

"God. You really do like him, don't you?"

"I don't think I'd call it that. It's more like a fatal attraction thing. I know he's not good for me, yet I keep thinking about him. It's dumb and I should move on "

"Haven't you met anyone at school?"

"I've met a few people. Tin models on the side, and he invited us to watch another one of his photo shoots. I thought you might like to see it"

"Tin?"

"He's got some fancy French name that I shortened for expediency. Etienne or some shit like that."

Emily laughed. "You haven't changed at all."

"You'd be disappointed if I became a pillar of society."

"No, *you'd* be," Emily retorted. "We can't all be Freddie Mercury, Sloan. Some of us have to be in the audience."

"I'm not good at that. I like to make things happen."

"I know. So, where are we meeting this guy?"

I stood and pulled her up. "Come on. We're meeting uptown at the Carnegie Deli."

"I'm not hungry."

"Don't matter. That's where the photo shoot will be."

"At a deli?"

"Stop with the third degree and just follow me."

"Okay."

We left the apartment and walked a couple of blocks to the stairs that would lead us down to the subway. Cole was standing there with that older guy again, the blind one with the cane. Now I was really curious about him, since this was twice I'd seen them together.

"Hey, Cole," I greeted him. He looked startled when he heard my voice, even a little guilty, if that's possible. Almost like he wished I'd never seen him.

"Sloan," he said, nodding.

"This is Emily," I said, waiting for him to say something about his companion.

"Nice to meet you." Cole's reply was wooden and unfriendly.

"You too," Emily said, stretching out a hand and waiting a few moments until Cole finally took it and greeted her formally.

"John," Cole said, turning to the older man. "This is my roommate Sloan Driscoll and his friend Emily."

"John Butterman," he said, reaching out, clasping my hand, and shaking it forcefully. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Oh? Good stuff, I hope."

He grinned and nodded, "What else?"

He seemed like a nice enough man. I was dying to know who he was and why he was with Cole. "Are you guys in a class together?" I threw that out, hoping I'd get some answers.

"You could say that," he replied.

"Where?"

"We've got to go," Cole interrupted. "Ready, John?"

He took John's arm and they walked up the stairs, leaving me and Emily watching their backsides.

"That's Cole? You didn't tell me he had a problem with his eyes."

"What?" I looked at her like she'd just grown another head.

15 ×

WE WERE finally on the train heading uptown when I turned to Emily and asked, "What was that about Cole's eyes?"

"I don't think he can see as well as you or me. Does he wear contacts?"

"He used to wear thick glasses when he was a kid, so I'm assuming he wears contacts; I just haven't seen any of the paraphernalia in the bathroom."

"Huh... that's weird."

"Why weird?"

"Because," Emily replied, looking very confused, "if he wore contacts, you'd see the bottles of cleaning solution. Trust me; I have one entire shelf devoted to that stuff. Didn't you notice the way he groped for my hand when I had it stretched out for the handshake?"

"No." I looked at her like she was nuts. "I wasn't paying attention."

"And who is that blind man?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"You don't know very much about him, do you?"

"I know that he moans when he's about to come, and he makes these cute little grunting noises while he's fucking me. I also know he's cut and dresses to the right. What else would you like to know?"

Emily looked at me in surprise, her lips forming a big O just before she covered her mouth and started to giggle. "You're terrible!"

"Sorry," I apologized, never taking the smile off my face.

"You're a piece of work, Sloan."

"I know. Do you think Cole's hot?"

"Oh, yeah. Major hottie."

I was grinning at her like a loon. "He's gorgeous."

"I think you should forget about him, though. He's got issues."

"Don't we all?"

"Come on, Sloan," Emily said, suddenly serious. "I'm not getting good feelings about him."

"Why?"

"I have no idea. I just sense trouble."

"You're reading too much into this, Em; besides, I've moved on. You've got to meet this guy I'm about to introduce you to. He looks just like Freddie Mercury."

"Ewww."

"What? Freddie was awesome."

"He had a great voice, but I wouldn't call him cute."

"You're just saying that 'cause you're a girl."

"No. I acknowledged that Cole is hot, didn't I?"

"You'd have to be dead not to notice his hotness."

"You really find him irresistible, don't you?"

"Don't want to discuss him anymore."

"No, you'd rather just fantasize about him in private."

"It's not a fantasy, Em. I can have sex with him whenever I want."

"I know you can, but you'll be pouring salt on an open wound."

I cringed when she said that. If she only knew that she was talking literally and not metaphorically, she'd flip.

"Hey! I've been making an effort to turn my life around."

"I know, Sloan, and I'm impressed. I never thought you'd make it on your own, let alone get a scholarship."

"Yes, I have hidden talents you know nothing about."

"And I really don't want to hear about them," Emily said with an eye roll.

"You're no fun at all. Come on, this is our stop."

I dragged her by the hand and exited the train, winding my way out of the subway labyrinth up toward 57<sup>th</sup> Street. I had never been to the Carnegie Deli, so I had no idea what to expect. The place was filled to capacity and I saw Tin sitting at a table with Max. He waved to catch my eye.

"Hey." I acknowledged everyone with a nod. "This is Emily. Em, this is Max and my friend, Tin."

The guys stood and pulled out a chair for her. I grabbed my own. "So, what are you doing here?"

"Taking pictures of food," Max replied.

There was a plate in front of him with something that could pass for a sandwich. Two pieces of bread heaped with slices and slices of red meat. It was grotesque and made me want to hurl. The ironic part about my quest for the perfect body was that I was naturally inclined toward lean meats and salads. My only indulgence on the fat and carbohydrate scale was pizza.

"What the hell are you eating?" I asked, really disturbed by the sight of that red stuff.

"This is the pastrami sandwich that made this place famous."

"Are you going to eat the whole thing?" The horror on my face must have been pretty obvious because Max burst out laughing. "Don't tell me you're a vegan?" he asked.

"No, but that sandwich would make me consider it. Do you have any idea how many cows died to cover that platter?"

"Enough."

"Why are you taking pictures of this, Max? I thought you only did people."

"I do whatever they pay me to do."

"Is anyone going to model anything today? I thought it would be fun for Emily to see an actual photo shoot."

"Come to my studio after we finish our food. I have to do a shoot for Abercrombie."

"Shit! With all the hot guys?"

"Yup."

"We're coming," I announced, nodding at Emily. "Right?"

She blinked at me. "For sure."

I ordered a chicken salad for myself and a Reuben for Emily. Max insisted that she have something Jewish to commemorate her visit, and we asked for the child portion in the hopes that it would be more manageable.

"Why are you so quiet?" I asked Tin. He hadn't said much since we sat down.

"I'm nervous."

"About what?"

"He's part of the shoot later on and he's freaking out over it," Max replied with a mouthful of pastrami.

"Why? You're just as hot as anyone else out there."

"You think so?" Tin asked, uncrossing his legs and coming to life suddenly. "You don't think I'll get lost in the sea of gorgeous men?"

"Oh, please. Take a Xanax and you'll be fine." I took a forkful of chicken salad and put it back down.

"What's wrong with it?" Max asked, apparently watching my every move.

"Too much mayo."

"You sure are fussy," he said, shaking his head. "No wonder you're so thin."

"Fuck you, Max."

"Hey! I'm surrounded by people with body image problems. Yours aren't anything special."

"Who said I have a problem?" I was starting to get really ticked off. How dare he put me in a category with his bulimic and anorexic models?

"Don't you? Then why won't you let me photograph you? You have a face that was made for the camera, yet you resist me. Why?"

"'Cause I'm not a narcissist, that's why! I don't need to see my face on the cover of GQ to feel special."

"I could make you a star," Max declared, confident in his talent and his power.

"Oh yeah? And what do I have to gain?"

"I can give you the world, Sloan, whatever your fucking heart desires"

I was taken aback by that statement. When was the last time anyone had ever offered me the world? I know that no one in my family ever had; the fucking legal system was ready to take my world away if I had any more incidents with drugs, and the one man I thought might change my world wasn't making any offers. Other than clandestine forays into his bed, Cole had offered nothing. He wanted to make me his personal whore, and I wasn't willing to do it. When that realization hit home, I made up my mind.

"I'll let you take some headshots to start."

Max threw down his napkin and stood up. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah," I said, laughing at him and amazed that he was carrying on so. "What the fuck, man? I ain't all that great."

"Wait till you see what I can do. Come on, let's go."

Emily looked as shocked as I felt, but we all stood and followed Max to the register. He paid for everything with a credit card and left a twenty-dollar tip.

We piled into a cab and drove off to Max's studio in Tribeca.

It was a hotbed of activity by the time we got there. Max's assistant was running back and forth, talking on the phone attached to her ear via a Bluetooth. There were three young men who I assumed were also assistant photographers of some kind, setting up lights and rolls of white paper on every surface. All of that would have been impressive enough, but what really made my head spin off its axis were the four models who were hanging out, waiting for direction.

Tin was right to be nervous, although I'd never tell him. Each guy was more beautiful than the next, and they must have been spray-painted with tanning solution, because they looked like they'd just come from a week in the Bahamas. They were platinum blonds with muscles that rippled as they moved. It took every ounce of willpower not to jump up and lunge at any one of them and beg to be allowed to lick them from head to toe.

"You can watch from over there, Sloan," Max said, pointing to a small sitting area that had a loveseat and two oversized easy chairs. There was a coffee table with stacks of magazines and a coffee machine with cups and the other condiments necessary to produce a cup of brew—a staple in the modeling industry, I'd come to find out. "I'll get to you as soon as I'm done with these guys."

16

COLE spent his Saturday practicing how to be blind. He was well aware his limited sight could last for years at this level, but he had to face the reality that tomorrow everything might change.

He started by putting on a sleeping mask, one that Juliana had left the last time she'd slept at the apartment. She hated the morning sun and always wore a mask to bed. Sloan and Emily were gone, so Cole figured it would be the perfect time to do it.

Learn to rely on your other senses. He kept hearing John's words as if they would make it all better and act like the magic wand he needed. The sense of touch is a lifesaver. He thought about Sloan as he put the mask in place, making sure that all light was blocked.

His hands had told him a lot about his roommate. He knew from touching his face that he was a good-looking man. His lips were well formed, his skin clear, his hair full and abundant. He had very long eyelashes that tickled Cole when he pressed his face close or nuzzled his neck. His sense of smell told him that Sloan was inherently a clean person and that he had good teeth, because his breath was always fresh. His touch confirmed the fact that Sloan was more lean than fat, and he might possibly have some patches of dry skin on his legs and arms that

needed to be addressed. His touch also told him when Sloan was aroused, his organ a magnificent barometer of his desire.

He groaned suddenly, feeling himself getting hard. The thought of Sloan's cock sliding in and out of his mouth was pure torture, because he couldn't assuage the hunger. He wasn't big on masturbation, always finding it a poor excuse for the real thing; however, in this case, he had a feeling he'd be doing it a lot more. He thought about the last time they'd had sex. He wished he had mirrors in his room. He wished he could see the mirror and watch Sloan fuck him. with abandon. He had to rely on his hearing to know when Sloan was enjoying himself. He would have much rather seen it with his eyes, but his vision could only handle a little bit at a time. A slight turn of his head left or right put him in a true blind spot where he saw nothing. If Sloan was not exactly in front of his face, Cole didn't see him. Still, the little bit he did see was better than nothing. He could still appreciate Sloan's beauty before everything disappeared from sight. Juliana's smile was also something he could still see, although she wasn't smiling much lately.

He loved Juliana; there was no doubt about it. But he was no longer in love with her. Something had changed between them, something that had nothing to do with Sloan.

Juliana wasn't willing to adapt to his new situation. Her stubbornness in clinging to his past and her inability to admit that things were not the same had made him lose respect for her. He needed a partner who was up for the challenge that living with a disabled person would present. He didn't think she could handle it. He wondered if things would still be the same if he'd never been diagnosed with RP. Would he still love her in the same way? He'd never know for sure, but what he did know was he no longer wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

How would he explain it to his father without causing him more grief? Everything that had happened to him in the last three years had disappointed Ken. He looked forward to this marriage and the possibility of a male grandchild the way other men looked forward to

winning the lottery. Ken felt it was his last hope of ever seeing a Fujiwara back on the pitcher's mound.

Cole stood outside Sloan's bedroom door. He fumbled with the handle, feeling his way around until he opened it and walked in. He knew where everything was placed because he'd been the one to paint and decorate the room when he'd first moved in and could see better. He knew the bed was pushed off to the right to make more space in the middle. It was great until you had to change the bed sheets, and then it was a pain to move the bed back and forth. He sat on the bed for a minute and picked up a pillow, pressing it to his face. The smell was all he needed to take him straight to the subject he'd been avoiding.

He was in lust with Sloan in a major way. All he could think about was the first time he'd entered his tight body. He had no idea it would be so good. His previous experiences with men had only involved blowjobs, never penetration of any sort. Now that he'd enjoyed a formerly forbidden pleasure, it was extremely difficult to get it out of his mind. But he'd been cut off, summarily rejected with a toss of Sloan's beautiful head.

You need to get your head out of your ass, before you can get back in mine.

Those were Sloan's exact words. Cole tried to explain how it could work, but Sloan wanted nothing to do with it. He now talked about moving. The only thing preventing him from doing so was that the truth would undoubtedly come out once their fathers started questioning them.

He tossed the pillow aside with a sigh and left the room. He didn't need any more reminders of Sloan. He was a constant ache in his gut that no amount of antacid could eliminate.

He went to the kitchen and decided to make a meal. Sloan had mentioned that he and Emily would be back around five, so he could prepare something and have it ready for them. He wasn't sure what Emily liked, but he had to cook what he was comfortable with, so he decided to make *kamameshi*, a simple rice dish with bits of vegetable and ground chicken, slow cooked in an iron pot. It would stay warm for

hours and would provide a lot of nutrition since he could pick and choose his vegetables.

Cole decided on mushrooms and sweet peas, along with diced onions and carrots. He had all the ingredients, so he took out the cutting board and went to the refrigerator and opened it. He still had the sleeping mask on, so he had to feel his way around. Cole pulled the crisper out and patted the packages, looking for the little box with the plastic wrap that contained the mushrooms he'd bought the other day. He found it easily, and the carrots and onion as well. He shut that drawer and pulled out the one on top that contained the meat. He knew there were two packages, one with ground beef and the other with ground chicken. He'd specifically asked the butcher to wrap the meat in paper and the chicken in plastic so he could differentiate between the two. He grabbed the chicken, feeling quite smug about his foresight.

The next ingredient was the rice, so he moved to the center cupboard where he kept several different varieties. Some people liked potatoes and others were into bread and pasta. Cole was a rice person. He had it every day regardless of the meal. He reached for the square container holding the sticky Japanese variety he preferred. The Basmati was stored in a glass jar, and the regular long grain was in a box; easily distinguishable, one from the other.

So far, everything was going smoothly, and he was reasonably encouraged with his efforts. He still had not removed the mask. The difficult part would be the slicing and dicing. His mother had shown him how to slice using the professional method, with fingers curled so the side of the knife grazed his knuckles as he chopped. He'd gotten very good at it, but that's when he could see what he was doing. Today would be a true test. He started with the easiest vegetable, the carrots. He grabbed the peeler from one of the drawers, removing the skin and dumping it into the garbage can. He sliced off both ends easily and proceeded to chop the carrots into small medallions. The mushrooms were simple since all he had to do was take them out of the box and rinse under cold water. The peas were in the freezer bag so it was just a question of opening the bag and pouring the contents into the pot. He'd left the onion for last, sure it would be a disaster. Amazingly, it wasn't.

He peeled and chopped like a pro, happy that all five fingers were still intact.

After sautéing the chicken in the iron pot, he threw in the vegetables and let them cook for a while before he added the vegetable broth and the rice. Now everything would simmer for about thirty minutes. It smelled delicious and he smiled as he wiped off the counters and rinsed the cutting board and knife under running water. He hadn't felt this good about an accomplishment in years.

He decided to continue his practice day by dumping the garbage in the trash chute out in the hallway and making a quick trip to the bakery down the street for some small pastries they could have for dessert. Maybe some cream puffs or brownies would be nice to top off the meal. He removed the mask before leaving the house. He figured he could continue to keep his eyes closed, and so long as he wore sunglasses, no one would be the wiser.

I WAS having a cigarette and a cup of coffee, surrounded by the debris of the afternoon photo shoot. The tiny sitting area was a mess, thanks to the models and their entourage. They sucked up the brew like deprived camels in the desert, but never bothered to clean up after themselves. There were sugar and creamer wrappers everywhere, along with empty coffee cups and overflowing ashtrays.

"That was not fun," I remarked to Emily, just in case she had any doubt as to how I felt.

She shrugged. "A lot of people get off on that," she said. "Why don't you?"

"I suppose it's because I don't think I'm anything special. I don't understand what Max means when he says my face was meant to be photographed."

"He knows his business, Sloan. I'm sure he sees something the rest of us don't."

"Well, we're going to see the proofs in a minute and you can judge for yourself."

Tin walked over to the sofa, flopped down, and put his head on my shoulder. "God, I'm so tired."

"It's fucking hard work, standing around like a statue," I quipped.

"You know it's true."

"Yeah, I do. Did you score with any of the hotties?"

He pushed away and looked me in the eye. "Could you tell?"

"I saw you leave with one of them."

"We went to the restroom for a little bit of action."

"Is random sex part of this world?"

"It's part of mine." Tin's face lit up with a naughty smile. He leaned over and whispered, "Has Max made a move yet?"

"Is he going to?"

"You can count on it, my man."

"Does he do all his models?"

"The ones he finds attractive. No one ever says no to him."

"Really?"

"Yes, but don't consider that some sort of challenge, Sloan. It means nothing to the man and blowing him will not guarantee you a cover."

"Well, I'm not looking to be on a cover, so why would I even bother?"

"Because you find me irresistible," Max interjected. He was standing behind the sofa and had heard the last part of Tin's remark. I looked up at him and grinned. "Oops."

He smiled back. "Come on, gorgeous, I want to show you the proofs."

I disentangled myself from Tin, who had wrapped himself around me, and called out to Emily to join us. She put her coffee cup down, got up from the easy chair, and followed us to another room. This must have been the area where the magic happened. There was a counter lined with computers and I moved up to the first one, surprised to see my face staring out at me.

"That's pretty good," I whispered, impressed that Max was able to turn me into such an alluring model. He had insisted on some eye makeup and the tiniest bit of blush. My lips were plump with gloss, making them look enticing and kissable. I didn't recognize myself. The guy in the photo was hot and I would have bought anything he had to sell. My eyes dominated the picture. They looked languid and sexy, very *come hither*.

"Wow."

"I told you I would make you a star," Max whispered in my ear as he stood right behind me. I could feel his cock pressing against my ass and goose bumps erupted all over my skin. "I'm sending this straight to Klas. You won't even need an agent. They can deal with me directly."

"For what?"

"They're looking for a face for a new men's line. I knew you'd be perfect for the part."

"I don't know if I can make any commitments like that. I have school, you know?"

"I know. We'll work around your schedule."

"What if I say no?"

"Are you crazy?" Tin interjected. "You would make millions!"

"Yeah, Sloan," Emily seconded, "let him send it. You'll never get another opportunity like this."

"Listen to your friend, darling." Max was speaking in my ear again, doing funny things to my stomach. "She knows what she's talking about." I took his hand and moved to the other side of the room so no one would hear

"What's the catch?" I asked.

"No catch, my beauty. If you'd like to show your gratitude at a private party, I won't object."

"When?"

"How about now?"

"I've got to go, Max. Emily and I had plans for tonight."

Max looked at me for a long time and then smiled. "Most of my models come willingly, Sloan, but blowing me is not a condition to your success. Although, I must admit that I'm disappointed. Do you not find me attractive?"

"I... yes... of course, but...." I was stuttering and stammering like a twelve-year-old caught with his dick in his hand. The fact that Max wanted me made me even more nervous.

Max kissed me. It was a chaste kiss, considering the size of the erection that pressed hard against my thigh. "You call me when you're ready to party, Sloan. Meantime, your portfolio goes out by special messenger tomorrow, and we'll see what they have to say."

"Okay." I was still in shock at the suddenness of this aggressive move on his part. No one had ever pursued me or wanted me this badly. It was a heady experience. 17

"THIS is really good, Cole," Emily remarked, taking another mouthful of the *kamameshi*.

Cole's smile widened, apparently pleased as hell with the compliment. "I'm glad you like it."

He'd made a really nice meal and had even bought éclairs for dessert. I was enjoying it, which said a lot for his efforts. Picky eater was my middle name, and I could recount all the tales of woe my mother and I had endured as she tried to shove food down my throat. I wasn't a big rice eater either, but this dish was tasty and didn't have the fatty meat that I found repugnant. It was light but filling.

I wondered where Cole was going with this. Was he trying to make amends for being a sanctimonious prick or just being nice? He seemed happy this evening and he looked great in his dark blue T-shirt and black jeans. He must have just showered, because his hair fell in a shiny black curtain over part of his face. He'd push it back with his long fingers once in a while, but it was silky soft and would always slide back down his forehead.

"Do you have plans for the evening?" he asked, looking right at me. We'd been avoiding any sort of conversation since our argument, but I answered, trying to be civil for Emily's sake. No need to subject her to our shit. "We're meeting Max and Tin at a club."

"Oh."

"Why don't you join us, Cole?" Emily interjected. "It'll be fun."

"I don't dance."

"Who cares?" I asked. "Come and listen to the music and have a drink with us. You haven't been out once since I moved in."

"Oh, come on, Cole," Emily pleaded, "I need someone to stand with me while Sloan and his friends cavort on the dance floor."

"Don't you like dancing?" Cole asked her.

"Not really. I'm sort of a klutz."

"That makes two of us." Cole laughed.

I didn't know this, of course. How could I? There was so much about Cole I didn't know. What I did know was watching him converse with Emily and sit around the table with us was a pleasure I didn't realize I was missing. Most of my contact with him was exchanging angry words or dealing with daily chores. This was the first time I'd been with him when he was relaxed and happy.

"You must have had a good day today," I said.

He looked surprised, but smiled. "I did. Today was full of little victories."

I found that statement to be rather odd, but I let it pass. "So what do you say, Cole? You think you can tolerate a few hours of techno sounds?"

He shrugged, but Emily kept nodding like a bobble-head doll.

"Please, Cole?"

He gave in to her. "Sure."

"Thank goodness," Emily sighed. "Now I won't be a wallflower."

"How are we getting there?"

"We'll take a cab," I answered before standing to retrieve the dishes. "Emily and I will clean up, Cole. It's the least we can do."

"Thanks," he said gently. "I'll just go to my room and get ready."

"Okay."

As soon as he walked out the door, I whispered to Emily. "Why did you ask him to join us? I thought you didn't like him?"

"I never said I didn't like him," she said, looking surprised. "I just said you should forget about him, and you can, now that Max is breathing down your neck."

"So why ask him to come along?"

"He seems lonely, Sloan."

"He does? He's got a girlfriend."

"Why didn't he mention her, then?"

"How the hell should I know? I don't know what he's thinking half the time."

"Don't stress over this," she warned, "he can be my date for the evening."

"What should I do if Max makes a move?"

"Do him. Don't you think he's pretty hot?"

"Yeah, in a bossy, I-am-entitled sort of way."

"Well, he is rather good at what he does. Those photos of you are unbelievable"

"I guess. I'm not sure I want to model, Em."

"Why not?" She looked astonished but waited for my answer as she handed over a clean plate, so I could dry it and put it away. "Think of all the money you'd make if nothing else. You'd be financially independent, which means you could tell everyone who annoys you to fuck off."

"That's true." I was thoughtful for a moment. "My dad will go into therapy the day that happens."

"You think he'd object?"

"I don't even know what kind of money you're talking about, Emily."

"Whatever the amount is, it's more than you make now."

"I make nothing now. I live off an allowance from Dad."

"Exactly."

"Oh. Right."

"So listen to what Max has to offer. The economy sucks and if there's someone out there willing to pay good money to look at your face, grab it. Not that there's anything special about you," she teased. I threw my dishrag at her, and she splashed water at me. Soon we were giggling like school kids and making a big mess at the sink, splashing each other with soapy water.

"Hey," Cole said, walking in. "I just mopped that floor. Cool it with the water tricks."

I pulled the hose with the sprayer attachment off the sink and pointed it at Cole. "Stand right there, mister, or you're going to be sorry."

"Sorry, my ass," he grumbled.

I squeezed the nozzle and watched him jump as the cold water hit him right in the face.

"Fucker!" He lunged at me and we ended up embracing and trying to throw punches at one another. They weren't serious punches, more playful than anything else. Cole tried to yank the hose away, but I was hanging on to it, knowing I'd end up soaked if he did manage to pull it out of my hand. Emily threw her arms up in disgust and walked out of the kitchen.

"I'm going to change," she announced. "Let me know when you're ready to continue cleaning, Sloan."

Cole and I didn't even pause, hanging onto each other like participants in WrestleMania. "Give me that hose," he growled, "or I'll pull it out."

"You wouldn't dare," I hissed. He held me tighter and reached for the hose, but I put it behind my back, forcing him to press even closer. Suddenly, we were both hard as our game turned sexual. I could feel my breathing and my heart rate shift dramatically. Cole was a little bit shorter than me, his head reached my nose, and I could smell the lemon scent of his shampoo and feel the softness of his hair. He wasn't faring any better. The two spots of color high on his cheeks were dead giveaways. I'd seen them appear whenever he was emotional, either angry or horny, but every time his skin coloring took on the appearance of a nectarine, I knew he was losing it. I seemed to have a knack for knocking him off his high horse, shocking us both with this desperate need that always seemed to swirl around us whenever we got together.

I put both hands on his ass and pulled him tightly against me. I could feel the rigid outline of his cock pressing against my matching erection, and I groaned and buried my face in his hair, inhaling deeply. He whimpered and tried to push back to break the contact, but I couldn't let him go. I was too far gone, his smell and his body goading me into action. I grabbed his hand and pressed it to my groin. My erection was painfully obvious, "Feel that, Cole?" I whispered. "It's yours for the taking if you'd just acknowledge who you are."

"I know who I am," he mumbled against my neck in a tone I was achingly familiar with. He wanted me and wanted me bad. My right hand moved away from his ass, so I could feel him up through his jeans. I wanted nothing more than to slide the zipper down and release his cock so I could swallow him to the root, but I knew that wasn't going to work with Emily in the next room. I squeezed his ass instead, pulling him even closer and smashing his groin against mine. He moaned loudly, encouraging me, and I slid my foot in between his, pushing his legs apart so that my thigh was pressed up against his cock and we began to rub and grind against each other, dry humping like horny teenagers.

He cried out and began to kiss me—hungry, needy kisses that made my head spin. I felt my orgasm pushing out before I could even stop it, and suddenly, I was coming in slow waves, hot and pulsing, soaking my pants. He hung on tightly, then I felt him shudder and he sagged in my arms as his own orgasm swept through him. I held him up, feeling the wet heat blossoming in his groin, even as he keened softly in my ear. We'd both made a mess of our pants.

"Jesus Christ," he moaned.

"Cole." I wanted to tear his clothes off and fuck him right here on the kitchen floor. I was still hard, not satisfied by that quick interlude at all. "Say the words, Cole."

"What words?" He was disheveled and completely out of control but never looked more beautiful in my eyes.

"Say you're a queer, just like me."

"Fuck you," he said, pushing me away, "I'll never be like you." He spun around and left the room.

THE music wasn't as loud as he'd expected, and he was pleasantly surprised to find out that no smoking was allowed within the confines of the club, Posh. The last time Cole had been inside a dance club was before he'd left San Francisco three years ago. A lot had changed since then.

He couldn't see two feet in front of him for one thing, and as such, he felt completely out of his element. He had no idea what one did in a gay club, so he decided to stick it out with Emily since Sloan had disappeared as soon as they walked through the entrance. She was happily giving him a running commentary on everyone's attire and hotness level

"Wow. The men here are gorgeous. Too bad none of them will give me a second look," she lamented.

"Don't you have a boyfriend?" Cole asked.

"Sort of, but that doesn't mean I can't feast my eyes," she admitted

He smiled, delighted by her honesty. No wonder she and Sloan were best friends. They were leaning up against the bar and watching the dance floor. She had no idea he was sight-impaired, but it really didn't matter, since she was being his eyes and ears for the night. There were a few straight couples, according to Emily, but for the most part, the club-goers were gay men in their late thirties and early forties. *Professionals*, Emily remarked, sipping her Cosmopolitan very slowly. Cole had asked for a glass of white wine and he was nursing it, since he had no desire to get drunk. It was purely for show and partly to quell some of his anxiety.

He was still out of sorts from his encounter with Sloan, regretting his harsh words the moment they'd spilled out of his mouth. How could he be so cruel? It was obvious that he wanted the man, a no-brainer he was sexually aroused, but he refused to acknowledge that Sloan was right. He wasn't a queer. He was bisexual; he'd admit to that much. However, hearing Sloan challenge him had just pissed him off, and he'd denied what was pretty obvious. What did Sloan expect from him? He was practically engaged, for God's sake. Did he honestly think that he would just stand up and proudly declare he was gay?

He didn't know what he was anymore. All the constants and truisms in his life had been yanked out from under his feet. Sexuality was only one among the many problems he was facing. He replayed the events of the evening, trying to determine when he could have made amends. He supposed that a simple apology would have helped, but Sloan had avoided Cole after the incident in the kitchen.

They'd stayed out of each other's way until they stood side by side with Emily waiting for their cab. Sloan was quiet, barely participating in the conversation. He even sat in front with the taxi driver and looked out the window as the cab moved toward the club, which was located at West 51<sup>st</sup> in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. Max, Tin, and a few other people were meeting them there, according to Emily. She had chattered most of the way, which was a good thing, or he would have never found out about the modeling session.

"What about his school?" Cole whispered, trying to keep his voice down. He was grateful for the plastic divider between the front and back seat but wasn't too sure about the level of security.

"He can do both, Cole. Tin does it."

"Have you seen the pictures?"

"Awesome," Emily gushed, acting like Sloan's agent.

"That's great," he mused, wondering if this career choice would take off. Somehow he had a hard time imagining Joe Driscoll approving of anything that Sloan embarked on. He was mildly skeptical himself.

"So is that who we're meeting at the bar? The people from the photo shoot?"

"We're meeting Max. He's the photographer who's hot for Sloan, and Tin, the French kid from Pratt."

"Oh." Cole was disturbed by the feelings that rushed through him when he heard Emily's statement. He couldn't believe he was actually jealous. Sloan had come into his life only three weeks ago, and he was already getting territorial.

"Is Sloan attracted to him?"

"I don't know... possibly." Emily sounded stricken.

Cole realized he was intruding on a friendship, so he backed off immediately. He shrugged his shoulders and turned to face the window, mumbling, "It's his life."

After that, there wasn't much more to say. Sloan disappeared as soon as they entered the club, leaving Cole and Emily to fend for themselves.

He looked across the dance floor to see if he could spot Sloan, but it was useless. He couldn't see much in that heaving mass of bodies, and the feelings of helplessness and anger at all the obstacles he was facing were beginning to creep up again, negating the good things he'd accomplished today.

"Do you want to dance?" Emily asked, intruding on his thoughts.

"I told you I don't dance," Cole replied.

"I know, but if you don't mind my three left feet, I'll overlook yours."

He shrugged, drained his glass of wine in two swallows, and let her lead them out to the dance floor. The music helped to get him in the mood, and the wine knocked the edge off his shyness. They were playing a medley of old disco sounds, the music from the eighties and nineties he'd listened to growing up with his baby-boomer parents.

He found himself getting caught up in the rhythm, together with the crowd around him. He heard Emily yell out Sloan's name, and she sort of pushed him across the dance floor until they were side by side with Sloan and some guy with a beard. He could see the outline of his face when he looked directly at him. He seemed older, so Cole surmised that this was the famous Max that Emily had mentioned in the cab. He wanted to shove him out of the way and just grab Sloan all to himself.

Max had both arms draped around Sloan's neck, and they were doing something that resembled dancing but was more about grinding their hips together. Sloan's eyes were closed and his head was tilted up. He looked like he was high on something, but it could have just been the music getting to him. Cole was too far away to really tell. He leaned in toward Emily and asked, "Is Sloan on drugs?"

She looked over to her right and shook her head, "I don't think so. Maybe weed, but he doesn't do the heavy stuff anymore."

Cole was silent after that and thought about Sloan and the reasons Joe had sent him to New York. He'd finally come out and told Ken, who'd quickly passed on the information to Cole, so he could watch for any signs of Sloan sliding back into the world of drugs.

He'd been abusing tranquilizers and pain pills, having access to them for over two years while his mother was battling cancer. They had all sorts of pills lying around the house, and no one would have ever thought that Sloan was taking them almost as fast as his mother. The prescriptions were refilled without question, and it wasn't until Kim Driscoll finally died that Joe realized that Sloan was hooked on drugs.

His police buddies had alerted him the first time they'd picked up Sloan after getting a tip from school security. He was caught with a bag full of Xanax and Vicodin and had been detained at the station after the

school had ransacked his locker. They'd let him go with a slap on his wrist, in deference to Joe's celebrity status, but it was the start of an ongoing nightmare Joe had to deal with before Sloan suddenly decided to turn his life around. No one really knew what the catalyst was, but the kid seemed to have pulled out of it on his own. The only reason the information had been shared was because he now lived with Cole and Joe felt that he should be honest and forewarn Ken on the off chance Sloan slipped down the black hole again.

So far, Cole hadn't seen any signs other than the weed, and he didn't consider that a drug. He indulged in it himself on occasion. But he knew he'd upset Sloan with his rejection, and a part of him worried that he'd trigger some need in him to go out and get high. Hell, he was trying to get drunk as well, so why should Sloan be any different?

He felt the blood rush to his head when he saw Max lean in and start kissing Sloan. He wanted to rip his head off; instead, he turned abruptly and headed off the dance floor, leaving a surprised Emily running to catch up with him.

"Cole, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry, Emily, I just got tired of being out there."

"That's okay. Would you like to leave?"

"Actually, I would. Do you want to stay?"

"Do you mind?"

"Of course not. I'll just take a cab."

"Okay, Cole. Thanks for coming," Emily said and turned away to join Sloan and his friends. She wanted to enjoy every last drop of her visit and going back to the apartment with Cole wasn't part of her itinerary. She was leaving tomorrow and the night was still young.

Cole speed-dialed Juliana on his way home. He was restless and horny, remnants of his tussle with Sloan. Seeing him and Max on the dance floor had only brought back the longing. He decided to try and forget this need he had for Sloan's body and lose himself in Juliana's arms. That had always comforted him in the past, so he asked her to

meet him at the apartment. She acquiesced, as he knew she would, even though it was almost midnight. She was nothing but agreeable, and instead of this making him happy, he was irritated suddenly, half hoping she'd tell him to fuck off and get a life. The woman was such a doormat, and he wanted to scream and break something, he was so frustrated. Why couldn't she have more balls?

He laughed bitterly, thinking of how stupid that idea was. The only balls he was interested in were back at the club, probably being fondled by that Max person. Fucker!

I WATCHED him walk out. He'd had enough for the night and so had I. My need to be loved was clouding my judgment, causing me to find emotion when there was none. Cole was a straight guy who'd fallen into my arms out of boredom and the need to explore his darker side. The idea that he'd ever consider being a part of my world was ludicrous, and I had to come to terms with it.

Max was an easy way to forget. He was attentive and we had a chemistry going, no doubt about that. He knew which buttons to press, the one good thing about being with an experienced gay man. He would probably teach me stuff I'd never heard of, rather than me having to guide him as I did with Cole. What did it matter if I imagined Cole in my arms when I closed my eyes? Who cared that Max was my second choice? He was here and unashamed of being seen with me. In fact, he was ridiculously proud of being able to convince me to model. He treated me like his pet, showing me off to all his buddies, calling me *Beauty* when he made introductions. It was wonderful to be with someone who valued me for a change.

"Come home with me, Beauty. I want to make love to you."

Whoa. Was I ready to jump in his bed so soon after being with Cole? Hell yes, my libido assured me. Sex would be the best way to forget Cole and those piercing blue eyes of his that incinerated me

seconds before he thrust into my ass and sighed with pleasure. I groaned out loud and leaned into Max, whispering *yes* in his ear.

As we made our way out of the club, I watched as if from the sidelines. Men came up to us and held Max by the hand or the arm, trying to make small talk. He was obviously a force to be reckoned with, an important person, who chose to be with me. I let it go to my head, not really thinking of repercussions. That wasn't my style anyhow. I was all about jumping before looking, so this was normal.

We stopped at Emily's table. She was with Tin and another model, who was feeling him up. Emily was chatting animatedly with one of the assistants who'd been at the photo shoot earlier on, comparing notes on which guy was or wasn't gay. They seemed to be having a great time.

"Emily, Max and I are leaving. Do you want us to drop you off at the apartment?"

"Don't go," Tin interjected. He assured me that she was in good hands. "We'll drop her off on our way, Sloan."

"Em?"

"I'll stay."

I pulled my house keys out of my pocket and handed them to her. "Here, you're going to need these."

"Will you be back tonight?" Emily asked.

I looked at Max and he lifted an eyebrow.

"Your call, Sloan."

"No." My answer was firm and Emily didn't even bother to argue. "I'll see you sometime in the morning."

Max was all over me as soon as the doors of the cab closed behind us. I was high enough on weed to enjoy every bit of it, making a conscious effort to shove Cole out of my brain. I was going to enjoy my time with Max and not dwell on the what-ifs and should-haves. It was Max's hand on my groin, his nimble fingers working my zipper, his shocked intake of breath when he saw the size of my cock.

"Jesus Christ, kid! You should come with a disclaimer," he mumbled, seconds before bending down and attempting to take all of me in his mouth. His statement made me smile, and I leaned back against the car seat and closed my eyes, trying to forget other lips and another voice.

"WHERE did you go tonight?" Juliana asked moments after Cole had climaxed. He was still draped on her body, feeling the aftereffects of his orgasm.

"I went out dancing."

"What?" She was shocked he'd gone out without her. "Who'd you go with and why didn't you call me?" She shoved Cole off, plumped her pillows up against the headboard and leaned back, waiting for his answer.

"I'm sorry. It was a spur of the moment thing."

"You seem to be having a lot of those lately."

Cole heard the accusation but shrugged it off. He stood to go to the bathroom, dropping the condom in the wastebasket along the way. He didn't really need to go; he was just buying time, trying to avoid any sort of discussion. When he came back out, she was up and already dressed.

"I'm going, Cole."

"Why?"

"You tell me."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You don't seem happy to be with me."

"I'm fine, Juliana. I'm not in the mood to be interrogated."

"I'm interested in your life, Cole. Why do you think I'm interrogating you?"

"I don't know," Cole answered softly. "I don't know anything anymore."

She moved toward him and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing tightly against his naked body. "Don't you know how much I love you?"

"Do you? You have any idea what it's going to be like once I'm blind?"

"It will be fine, sweetheart. I'll take care of you."

He pushed her away with a sigh and went to lie down again. He covered his face with his forearm and was silent.

"Cole?"

"Yeah?"

"Please, don't be afraid. I'll be here for you."

"I'm not afraid, Juliana. I just want to do things on my own. I don't want you to nurse me for the rest of my life."

"But, Cole, there's only so much you'll be able to do. I can pick up the slack."

"Dr. Butterman seems to think differently. He says I can have a perfectly normal life if I learn certain things."

"Like what?" she asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed and putting her purse down.

"I should learn Braille, for one thing. Consider the possibility of owning a guide dog, for another. Teach, after I get my masters. Learn how to take public transportation, four. Have a vasectomy, five."

"What? Why would you want a vasectomy? I want children."

"I don't. No, let me clarify. I only want a child if I was guaranteed I wouldn't pass on this fucked-up gene."

"We can have genetic testing."

"And you'd be willing to have an abortion if the baby carried the gene?"

"If it's what you want, I guess I would."

"Juliana, I'm not telling you to go along with whatever I say. This is a life-altering decision, one that we'd both have to agree upon. Can you handle an abortion, because I don't think I can."

"Of course I can, if it's what I need to do."

"Need to do?"

"Cole, you're obviously stressing over this, and if my agreeing to an abortion will help you overcome this hurdle so we can get married, then I agree. Besides, I doubt that I'll need it."

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm very healthy. I'm sure that my child will be fine."

Cole huffed out a bitter laugh. "You're unbelievable."

"Why?"

"Haven't you heard anything I've said to you in the last year? It doesn't matter how fucking healthy you are. I'm not!" He put his arm back over his eyes, dismissing her.

"Are you angry at me?"

"No."

"What then? Why are you being so weird?"

"I'm not being weird. I'm just trying to get my life in order."

"I don't think you love me anymore," Juliana said softly. She reached out and touched Cole on the arm. "Look at me."

He moved his arm away from his eyes and turned so he was facing her, straight on. He could see her tears and felt sick to his

stomach. He had no idea why he was acting this way, treating her like an enemy rather than a woman he truly cared for. Seeing her so broken up moved him to say, "I do love you, sweetheart. It's just that we don't seem to be on the same page anymore."

She began to cry and Cole reached for her and drew her close, holding her as she continued to weep gently. "Please don't cry," he said. "We'll talk some more in the next few days, try and get this sorted, and then maybe we can get engaged. Our parents are going to want to milk this for all it's worth. Parties and planning will make everyone happy," he said, hoping against hope that it would work out.

She smiled through her tears. "Really?"

"Yeah." He nodded, feeling better already. He was going to have to move forward instead of wallowing in this sea of doubt and self-pity. "We'll get it right, okay, babe?"

"Okay. Do you want me to stay tonight?"

"Sure. That would be great," Cole answered. He waited for her to strip off her clothes again and when that was done, he moved to make room for her, taking her in his arms and holding her tightly. He wanted to make this work; he vowed to put Sloan out of his mind and to concentrate on a future with Juliana. He owed it to her and his parents.

MAX'S apartment was straight out of *Architectural Digest*. It was a loft, close to his studio, decorated in black, white, and red. One entire wall had a collage of his photographs, each one more amazing than the next, and I paced in front of them, trying to see if I could make out any familiar faces. There were movie stars, TV personalities, sports figures, and some people I didn't recognize, which wasn't surprising considering I was almost half his age. I kept moving down the length of the wall until I stopped in front of a picture that made my hair stand on end.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew Freddie?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You didn't ask."

"I asked you if you liked Queen!"

"And I said yes, didn't I?"

"You could have admitted you knew them."

"My clients are my clients, Sloan. I don't advertise, nor do I discuss who's on my wall."

"What the fuck, Max. Do you have any idea how much I love them?"

He laughed and said, "I do now. Have a drink, darling. Calm down."

He poured us both drinks from the bar that was tucked away in a corner. The glasses were heavy and probably cost more than my entire wardrobe, but Max seemed to enjoy all the finer things in life, which made me think twice about why I was here. He could have anyone in the world. Why me?

"To your future, my beautiful boy," he purred, taking sips of his drink but never removing his eyes from mine.

"Why am I here?" I asked, after I'd just swallowed half the contents of my glass.

"Because you deserve to be and because I want you."

"You could have anyone, Max. What do you see in me?"

"You have the eyes of an angel," he said in a voice guaranteed to tantalize. "Old eyes that have seen too much yet remain innocent and expressive as fuck. Conversely, they ooze lust and carnality at its finest. You could make a grown man come in minutes."

I was taken aback and at a complete loss for words. "You exaggerate," I croaked out, the best I could come up with.

"Not at all," he said, reaching for my hand and placing it on his erection. "The proof is right here."

I moved forward, drawn to him because of his words and his need, and because I was young and had a more than healthy libido. I could feel myself growing hard, the weight in between my legs pushing at my pants.

"Get on your knees," I commanded, shocking myself. I should have been the one to suck him off, but I needed to see him humbled for some reason. If I was going to settle, I wanted it to be on my terms.

His smile was wicked when he moved forward and kissed me, sweeping the inside of my mouth with his aggressive tongue. "You're a brat," he said, nibbling on my lower lip, "but I'll concede, and give you want you want for now. Next time it will be all about me."

I pushed down on his shoulders and unzipped my pants with one hand, freeing up my cock, which bobbed obscenely in front of him. There were drops of moisture dotting the plump head, and he licked at it just like he would a Popsicle. He groaned in ecstasy, making me shudder.

"So good...." I closed my eyes and let him sweep me away. Max gave me exactly what I needed. He managed to take me in deep, almost to the root, and I was impressed. Most people stopped halfway, but he seemed to get off on my size. He moaned and hummed all the while, twirling his tongue around my shaft in maddening circles. I felt him stick the tip of his tongue into my slit and fuck me gently. My knees were starting to give out on me, but I managed to lock them in place and stand tall as I reveled in the pleasure. He was licking me up and down and then taking me in deep again as his throat muscles enveloped me. I felt him snake his hands around my waist, and he began to pull me back and forth, urging me to fuck his mouth, allowing my cock to go deeper each time. The man had a zero gag reflex, much to my delight, and the harder I pushed the stronger he sucked. It was a stellar blowjob and undeniably the best I'd ever had.

"Coming, Max," I huffed as I felt my balls tighten up and the orgasm seconds away. I thought I should pull out or at least offer as a courtesy, but he was having none of that. He sucked me in twice as

hard and I exploded down his throat, practically screaming out his name as I came in hot, pulsing beats. "Max...."

He managed to mumble my name, despite the mouthful, and I sank down and pulled him away. His mouth let go of my cock with a soft pop and he transferred his attention to my face, showering me with kisses. He was sucking and nibbling on my lower lip. I could taste myself, as well as the vodka and Max's unique flavor. It was all new, and I figured I'd better get used to it since he didn't seem too eager to part with me.

I reached down and felt him straining against his pants, the wet spot clear evidence of his need. I stood and pulled him toward a room. He followed silently so I assumed I was heading in the right direction.

"Leave the lights off," I whispered as we started to shuck our clothes. He was amazingly slow and calm, considering he was that close. I was the one who was a nervous wreck, convinced that he'd argue and turn on the lights. I didn't want him to see my legs and ruin what was turning out to be a great night.

"I want to see you, darling, but it can wait," he said in that bossy sort of sexy voice. He took my hand and placed it on his cock, which was long and thick and smooth as silk. His crown was wet with the moisture that oozed out of his slit, making it nice and slippery as my thumb did small circles around him. "I must have you, Sloan. Has anyone ever penetrated you before?"

Somehow he knew I was a newbie. Despite my bravado and my attitude, he knew—which kind of sucked.

"Twice."

"When was the last time?" he asked, moving his hands all over me. The tube of lubricant had magically appeared, and he was slicking my asshole as he talked.

"Umm, several nights ago," I gasped when I felt his fingers stretching and curling inside me, turning me into a puddle of quivering flesh. My arms automatically wrapped themselves around his neck and

I pressed my face against his hot skin. "Oh God, Max," I sighed, practically passing out from the pleasure of his touch.

"And before that?" he asked, wanting an answer.

"Three years ago."

"Oh... you're practically a virgin," Max crooned, beside himself with excitement. "Come, Beauty," he said, leading me to an enormous four-poster bed. It could have easily slept four grown men and was high enough off the floor that we needed a little step stool to climb up onto the mattress. There were chains on all four posters.

"What the fuck is this?" I asked, seeing the cuffs that dangled at the end of the chains.

"This is where I take you on the ride of your life."

"Shit."

MAX helped me up on the bed, pushing me gently onto the fifteen hundred-thread-count sheets that felt like clouds against my skin. His kisses were learned, his style of lovemaking very much like his photography, precise and nearly perfect. There was a part of me that could observe this coldly, as if I were perched on one of the four posts, looking down at actors in a porn flick. The fact that I could separate and discern this did not bode well. I had hoped to forget Cole while lying in Max's arms, to erase the night of passion, and move forward with my life.

Yet, despite all my good intentions and Max's outstanding technique, it wasn't happening. My heart just wasn't in this.

"Relax, my beauty," he whispered in my ear, most likely sensing the inner conflict. I was forcing myself to keep my thoughts on Max when all I wanted was Cole's body draped over me.

Don't get me wrong, though. My senses were enjoying this new experience, no doubts there. But it was all physical, and the romantic part of me that wanted to be loved and to love back was screaming in protest. This wasn't right, because despite Cole's fear and reluctance to come out or even admit he was gay, I wanted to hear him say the

words. Deep in my heart, I knew that he cared. He had a lifetime of prejudice that I was going to have to overcome, but I was a stubborn and determined man. I wanted him, and now that I'd been given a taste of what he had to offer, I knew that I wasn't going to settle for Max, no matter how good a lover he was.

In the meantime, I planned to enjoy every bit of my interlude with this fascinating man, who was getting ready to put his tongue where no one had ever gone before. I'd read about rimming and imagined doing it or having it done to me, but I'd never been with anyone I was willing to try it with. I would have certainly wanted to do it to Cole, but the one night of sex we had was primarily about him and my desire to comfort him after the accident in the subway. I would have let him fuck me upside down if that's what he needed. There wasn't any time for leisurely exploration.

I gasped when I felt Max's warm tongue twirling around the soft skin between my balls and asshole. I could feel my cock growing and lengthening despite the earlier blowjob. That seemed like an appetizer compared to what was happening right now.

"Jesus, Max," I moaned, caught up in the heat of the moment. I spread my legs apart, wanton and eager to give myself over to the master, who was playing me expertly.

"I want to hear you scream, my beauty," he purred softly, lifting his head for a moment. "Look at me, Sloan."

I lifted up on my elbows and stared into his eyes.

"Do you want me, lover?"

I wrapped my fingers around my tumescent cock, tugging at it, and spreading the clear drops that oozed out of my slit. "Does this look like I might be having second thoughts?"

Max laughed and swatted my hand away, replacing it with his mouth and burying my cock down his throat. His nose was pressed against the soft hair that I'd left unshaven and he was moaning like a

man in pain. I pulled him away, not wanting to come in his mouth again.

"Fuck me, Max."

"I want to tie you up."

"What?" I squeaked in surprise. I'd read about this, but again never experienced it. I found myself getting terribly excited by the thought, and my cock twitched, approving of the scenario as well.

"Yes, please."

"Good boy." He moved and positioned me so I was spread eagled. He attached a soft leather cuff to my wrist and snapped it into place. "Does that feel too tight?"

"No."

He nodded and moved onto my other limbs, tethering them as well. I found myself unbearably aroused, and the idea of being completely at his mercy was intensely erotic. I suppose that I shouldn't have been surprised. I was always a go-getter and kinky sex was something I had yet to try. The fact that it was happening with a man I trusted was a huge benefit.

The room was still dark. The only lights on were the ones in the bathroom and that bit of illumination spilled into the room, enabling Max to see what he was doing. He'd respected my wishes for the anonymity of darkness, and my fears of being revealed as a cutter were held at bay for now. I knew he'd find out eventually, but I could relax and enjoy this wild ride for the moment.

"How do you feel about pain, my darling?"

The question caught me by surprise. My life was filled with pain, mostly self-inflicted. "What do you mean?"

"Have you ever felt the sting of a flogger?"

"No."

"Would you like to try it?"

"What does it look like?"

Max practically jumped off the bed and opened up a large wooden cabinet on the opposite side of the room. I was too far away to see what was in it, but he came back to bed with a short wooden stick that had pieces of leather hanging off it. There were knots at the end of each leather strip. He brushed it gently against my torso, down my stomach, and then swirled it around my groin. My cock was responding nicely to the feel of the soft leather.

"If that's a flogger, I like it."

"This is, but it's not designed to tickle, my love. It's designed to hurt."

"How?"

I watched him raise his hand and lower the flogger on my legs. My body jumped in response. It wasn't what I expected. There was a whisper of pain, but one I could certainly handle. I also didn't expect my body to practically hum with the blow. My cock was pressing hard against my stomach, wanting more.

"More"

"Fucking beautiful," Max said. His smile was radiant when he saw my reaction.

He hit me several more times, each one making me even more excited. Finally, he must have reached his own level because he tossed the flogger aside and rolled a condom on his distended member. He slicked us both with the lube he'd left on the mattress and impaled me with his cock. I screamed when his cock nudged my gland. He cried out when my muscles clutched his prick in their velvet vice. Max paused for a nanosecond, hovering over me and trying to catch a breath. "You are going to kill me, darling."

"I doubt it. Please, Max, more...."

He began to move again, pushing in and out in a steady rhythm, poking at my prostate with the tip of his cock. I was bucking and

writhing, moaning like a ghost trapped in an attic. The idea of being tied down and unable to get away was intense and hurling me over the edge. The pleasure had turned to pain and was shifting into pleasure again, driving me completely and utterly insane. I was thrashing around, close to losing my mind, until finally I exploded, shooting ropes of hot come all over Max's chest and neck even as he shuddered through his own orgasm. He collapsed on top of me, but not before he rewarded me with a deep kiss. "You're such a good boy," he sighed, pressing his face on my collarbone. "I think you've just found your true calling," he chuckled, despite the loss of breath.

"What?" I had no idea what he was talking about. All I knew was that I was done for the night. Wrung out and depleted of every drop of fluid in my body.

We lay like that for several more minutes until he pulled away reluctantly and began to unsnap the cuffs. He rubbed my wrists and ankles, making sure the blood was circulating properly before he stood and went to the bathroom. I was too strung out to move. When he came back, he had a warm washcloth and he began to clean off the come that was smeared all over me.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

"That was just a little taste of my brand of loving."

"Whoa"

"Indeed," Max replied, bending to kiss me chastely. "You are full of surprises, young man."

"I surprised myself."

"You've never explored BDSM?"

"Never."

"Would you be interested in learning more? I think you'd make an ideal submissive."

"I don't take orders well."

"You did just fine a moment ago."

"That was different. I doubt you'll find me very submissive," I told him, and I was pretty sure I knew what I was talking about. "No one has ever been able to tell me what to do."

"That's because they never offered the right enticement. I know what makes you tick, Sloan. I felt the scars on your legs."

"What?" I was shocked and embarrassed at being found out so soon. I thought I'd have more time.

"Darling, please don't fret. I work with models. There isn't a single one out there who doesn't have some sort of body-image issue. Cutters are pretty common in my world."

"No," I whispered, looking at him in horror. He'd said the word without even flinching.

"Yes, my darling boy. But you're in good hands, Sloan. I can give you controlled pain that will segue into pleasure of the highest kind. You'll never cut yourself again."

"Really?"

"You'll have to trust me on this."

"Okay."

"You'll let me take you on this journey?"

"Yes."

"Will you stay the night?"

"No. I'd like to go home and think about everything we did."

"Oh. I'm disappointed," Max said.

"I'm sorry, Max. I'm a bit overwhelmed by everything that's happened since we've met."

"I can understand, Sloan. Just remember, I'm here for you. I'm your friend and I'd love to become your Dom if you'd let me."

"My Dom?"

Max stood and crossed the room to a glass-covered bookshelf and pulled out two books. "Here. Take these home and read them. It'll explain more."

I glanced down at the black leather-bound books that had the words *Submission and Dominance* on one and *Bondage and Masochism* on the other. The writing was in blood red and looked quite formidable

"My homework?" I asked with a reluctant smile.

"Yes. Read the books and then let me know how you feel."

COLE made his way into the bathroom, desperate to take a piss. He'd lost track of time, hardly ever looking at the clock anymore, but Juliana was gone, rushing off to work even though it was a Sunday. Retail knew no weekends, and hers were usually screwed up in one form or another. Her normal days off were Wednesday and Thursday. She was fortunate that he had much more free time than she did, due to his classes being online, so he could see her in the middle of the week. As a result, Saturdays and Sundays didn't hold any significance for either of them.

He stood in front of the toilet and lifted the seat. Cole's toilet manners were impeccable, thanks to his mother's harping. Being raised in a primarily female household guaranteed that Juliana and Emily would never be subjected to a piss-covered seat. The very idea was repugnant to him. Practicing his aim was something he'd learned as a child, and he did it automatically so it didn't really matter if he could see or not, or if the lights were on or off. He just knew how.

He finished his business, flushed the toilet, put the seat back down, and went to the sink to brush his teeth. He paused as he was flossing, unsettled all of a sudden. There was that smell again. That sharp, metallic smell of blood he thought he'd smelled a few weeks

ago. He looked down to the right and saw nothing. He turned left, hoping to find what he was looking for and saw nothing either. He shrugged and continued with his flossing.

When he was done, he went back into his bedroom to get dressed, because he was going to meet John for lunch. He'd called him earlier and asked for this special meeting, hoping that John would be able to grant him this request. He had a terrible need to talk to someone who was impartial, who could see both sides of the argument. He wanted to tell him he'd asked Juliana to get married, but he wanted her to meet with John so he could enlighten her on all the aspects of dealing with a disabled man. He threw on a pair of jeans and a black shirt, grabbing his leather jacket just in case it got cold.

Emily was in the kitchen, sitting at the table and having a coffee. "Good morning," she said rather softly. "I have a massive hangover."

"I'm not surprised. I would have been disappointed if you didn't."

She giggled, but was instantly sorry as the movement made her head hurt even more. "Fuck...."

"What time does your train leave?"

"Three-thirty."

"Sloan around?"

"Yeah. He came home last night after all. I let him in after he sent me a text."

"He's lucky you were still awake."

"It was only two in the morning."

"Oh "

"I met Juliana, Cole. She's very nice."

"She is."

"She told me that you proposed, so I guess congratulations are in order."

He felt his cheeks pink up. He was embarrassed to talk to Emily about Juliana, because he had no idea what Sloan had said to her about their recent encounter.

"Um, I think she's getting ahead of herself. We talked about an engagement."

"Oh well, maybe I'm the one who misunderstood. She seemed very happy."

"Have you had anything to eat?" Cole asked, eager to change the subject.

"No."

"Would you like me to make you something? I'm going to heat up some of the *kamameshi* for myself."

"You're having that for breakfast?"

"Sure. It's a meal, isn't it?"

"I guess," Emily replied. "I think I'll pass on the food. I doubt it'll stay down."

"Okay." Cole went to the refrigerator and pulled out the container where he'd stored the leftover rice dish. He spooned some into a bowl and put it in the microwave. As soon as it was done, he brought it to the table and sat down to eat.

"Where's Sloan?" he asked in between bites.

"I'm not sure. I think he said he was going to take a shower."

"I just came from there. He wasn't in the bathroom."

"Maybe he's back in bed. Long night, you know?"

"Pfft... his choice. I'm sure no one held his mouth open while he was drinking."

"Whatever. So, maybe you and Juliana can come visit me in Boston. I'd love to be able to return the favor."

"What favor? You mean staying here?"

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"Yes. It was really nice of you."
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"Well, I appreciate it. I wanted to see Sloan, but couldn't afford the hotel, you know?"

"I get it. You're welcome to visit anytime you want."

"Thanks."

I COULD hear the droning of their voices, although I heard nothing of the content. I was still naked, shivering, and huddled under my blanket, completely freaked out over what had just happened.

I'd lost it earlier this morning when Emily told me Juliana had announced an upcoming wedding. I couldn't believe Cole had asked her to marry him when he had so many unresolved issues, primarily *me*.

How could he? He wasn't straight! The man was gay, and I'd bet my last bag of weed and my entire Queen collection on that fact. Yet, he was happily going to slink back into the closet and live the rest of his life as a straight man.

But that wasn't what had scared the life out of me and turned me into this shivering wreck. Nor was it the cutting I'd reached for in a desperate moment. I'd started to slash at my thighs, crying and having a meltdown over losing him... when he walked into the bathroom. I was sitting in the tub, in plain sight, and he ignored me, like I wasn't even there.

He took a piss and then went to brush his teeth while I sat watching my blood trickle down my thighs and come to rest in the white porcelain bathtub. Why the fuck didn't he say anything? Was I that invisible? Was I still drunk or high and not processing what was happening? Was this a really bad dream?

<sup>&</sup>quot;No big deal, Emily."

Maybe I was imagining all of it. My evening with Max, including all the bizarre sexual games he'd played with me. I looked over to my desk and saw the two books, the leatherbound BDSM-for-dummies that he'd asked me to read. My theory of having dreamt all of this wasn't going to fly.

So why the fuck didn't Cole see me sitting naked in the bathtub with blood running down my legs? Why didn't he turn around and call me all kinds of names? *Sick fuck* would have hurt, coming out of his mouth, but it would have been appropriate. My life was always about taking one step forward and two back.

I'd had an amazing day yesterday, riding high on the success of the photo shoot, and an even more amazing night, with a famous man groveling at my feet. Yet, I'd ended up back in the same insecure hole I'd just climbed out of. Desperately unhappy because the man I was obsessed with didn't want me. And that was the crux of the matter. Cole didn't give a shit if I lived or died. I was nothing but a means of release, a live fuck doll. He wasn't going to waste one minute of his energy on my sorry ass even if he had enjoyed plowing into it the other night.

I sat up and pulled open the drawer of my nightstand. Thankfully, the bag of Xanax was still there, and I dry swallowed two pills, knowing they'd knock me for a loop. I didn't give a shit. I had every intention of spending the rest of my day in a drugged-out haze.

Emily stuck her head in the door. "Are you decent?"

"I will be in a minute. Give me five, okay?"

"Sure thing."

She shut the door and I got out of bed reluctantly. I'd forgotten about her. She was leaving today and I had to take her to Grand Central so she could catch her train. What the fuck.... How was I going to manage that, higher than a kite?

I stumbled into the bathroom, locked the door, and stuck two fingers down my throat. The pills came up quickly; they hadn't even

dissolved yet, thank goodness. Barfing wasn't one of my favorite things, but I couldn't let Emily wander around looking for her train. I could always take more pills when I got back.

I got into the shower and turned the water on full blast. I wanted it as hot as I could stand, hoping it would wake me up and knock some sense into me. I had to clear up this mystery. Cole should have seen me in the bathtub. It was physically impossible for him to have missed it. Maybe Emily's theory about his eyesight was correct after all. The man needed some major glasses but was too goddamn vain to wear them; or perhaps I was really and truly going mad. This last theory seemed more likely.

I got out of the shower and toweled off quickly. I sprayed my thighs with the antiseptic, noting that they looked awful. I'd done some pretty serious damage. Max's theory about my never wanting to cut again was a joke. He had no idea what he was dealing with.

The loosest pants I owned were a pair of sweats I'd inherited from Junior. They had the San Francisco Giants logo on them and were big and baggy, but I needed that right now. I couldn't bear the thought of getting into denim and having it scrape my thighs. I topped them off with a T-shirt that had Freddie Mercury blaring into a microphone. I grabbed my iPhone, my earplugs, and walked into the kitchen.

Cole was at the table with Emily, and they both looked up when I walked in.

He grunted out a greeting and I responded with a nod. I stared at him, hoping I'd see some sign of recognition, something that would tell me he'd seen me, but there was no indication. Just those fucking blue eyes I was crazy about, looking sort of lost and sad. Or maybe I was imagining this as well.

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"You ready to go, Em?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Now? It's early, isn't it?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I thought we could grab some lunch first."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Oh, that sounds good. Can we go to Hard Rock Cafe?"

"I don't care."

"How about a new Queen T-shirt?" she asked, hoping it might entice me.

"Whatever."

She looked at me and shook her head slowly, knowing damn well something wasn't right in my world. She knew me better than anyone else, and my signals were pretty easy to read. Every part of me screamed, but only Emily heard it.

THERE were a million tourists at Hard Rock. The music was blaring, which did nothing for our mutual hangovers.

"This was a rotten idea, Em."

"I know," she groaned. "I feel like there's a conga line in my brain."

"Let's get the fuck out of here." I stood, grabbing her duffel with one hand and pulling her along with the other. We'd decided to bring all her stuff, so we could head to the train station right after lunch and not bother going back to the apartment. We stepped out on Broadway, looking around and trying to figure out where we could hide that was less crowded but also inexpensive.

"You want to try that pizza joint over there?" I pointed at another hole in the wall across the street. Pizza parlors in New York were deceptive as hell. They looked like dives but had amazing food most of the time.

"Anywhere so long as it's quiet," Emily mumbled.

We crossed the street, along with the throngs of people in Manhattan for the day. The restaurant was busy, but there was a small table for two in the back that we snagged, sinking into the chairs gratefully.

"Do you want to split one?"

"That's fine," she replied. "Get pepperoni."

This was another reason why Emily and I were such good friends. We both had a fondness for the flat bread with lots of grease. I went up to the counter and placed our order, took the coffee mugs, topped them off and brought them back to our table. This was not Hard Rock Cafe and no one was going to wait on us.

"Here you go."

"Thanks, Sloan."

"Welcome."

We both drank our brew and settled in to wait for the pizza.

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Uhh, yeah. Best friend here. Hello?"

I laughed but it wasn't happy. It was more a cross between a laugh and a sob, and I bit my lip before it turned into a full-fledged deluge. I blinked back tears, but she saw them and reached for my hand immediately.

"Oh, Sloan," Emily said. "Tell me."

"How can he marry her?"

"Maybe he feels obligated."

"You don't make a lifetime commitment because you're fucking obligated!" I almost jumped out of my seat I was so upset.

"Calm down or they'll call the cops on us."

"What the fuck, Em? What the hell is he thinking?"

"Sloan, are you sure you're reading the signals right? Isn't it possible you're just imagining this?"

"I could have imagined our first incident; we were both high on weed. But the second one was for real, Emily. Neither one of us had any booze or drugs in our system. He wanted me—fiercely and passionately—just as I wanted him. I did not imagine any of it, although I'm really starting to doubt my sanity."

"Why's that?"

"I think I had a psychotic moment this morning."

"Get the fuck out."

"I mean it. I was in the bathtub and he walked in, pissed, brushed his teeth, and didn't acknowledge my presence. He acted as if he were alone"

"That's really interesting. Last night, when Juliana was at the apartment, I also noticed something odd."

"What?"

"I was going to the kitchen to get a drink. He was in there with all the lights turned off. It was pitch black and the only reason I didn't turn them on was because he was butt naked."

"How could you see if it was dark?"

"There was a bit of light shining through the window. There was a moon out, last time I looked."

"So what's the big deal? It's his apartment and he should know where everything is without having to turn on a light switch."

"Have you ever made a sandwich in the dark? Have you done it with no lights on, from start to finish, including slicing a tomato?"

"Huh?"

"Exactly."

"Didn't he realize you were watching?"

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"Apparently not."
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"All kidding aside," Emily said, "if he wanted you to know, he would have told you."

"Told me what?"

"I don't have a clue."

"Did you get a chance to use his computer at all?"

"No. Why?"

"His font is five times the normal size."

"Maybe he's myopic and needs glasses."

"Why isn't he wearing them? When he was a kid, he wore glasses. I remember he looked like a fucking geek. Who knew I'd fall in love with him years later?"

Emily looked at me in shock. "Did you just say the L word?"

"I meant lust, Emily. I'm in lust with him."

"Uh huh."

"Shut up!"

"Sloan...."

"Drop it, okay? What do we do about this eye thing?"

"I don't know." Emily shrugged. "What do you want to do?"

"Follow him. See where he goes all day while I'm at school."

"Sounds good, but if he catches you, he'll have your balls."

"He won't catch me, I'm sneaky."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Emily, this is creepy."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Or it may mean nothing, Sloan. It could be a quirk of his."

<sup>&</sup>quot;No!" I was pretty sure something was wrong. "Do you think I should ask him?"

"You're a piece of work, Sloan, but let's get back to this engagement. I really think you need to stop fantasizing about him. He's obviously in love with Juliana."

"Why do you say obviously?"

"Sloan, he's been going out with her for a long time from what she said. He's also asked her to marry him, for heaven's sake. That's why."

"Not good enough."

"Why the hell not?" She was starting to fidget. She moved forward, practically in my face and said, "You need to get your head out of your ass!"

"That's exactly what I told Cole."

"What? When?"

"When he suggested that we carry on this fakakta affair."

"What affair? You never mentioned this before?"

I let out a huge sigh and proceeded to tell all, from start to finish, including all the sexual encounters.

"No wonder you're so damned confused."

"Thank you! The man is queer."

"Or bi."

"Semantics, Emily! Bottom line, he sucks cock."

"Oh, eww."

"And rather well, I might add."

"Oh, fucking double ewwww!"

I busted out with laughter. It was the first time today that I'd felt normal, and I just cracked up, looking at her face. She started to laugh as well, and soon we were both in tears.

"Oh, my God," she said, hiccupping through the words, "he will kill you if he ever finds out you've told me."

"Fuck him. He deserves to be outed."

"You don't mean that, do you?"

"Of course not," I replied with the eye roll. "I'm not that heartless."

"I know you're not," she replied, much gentler this time. "Let's eat, Sloan."

COLE met John at Del Posto restaurant on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue. He would have preferred something lighter for lunch, but John had a hankering for Italian, and since he was the one being inconvenienced, Cole felt he owed him a fine meal of his choice. And no finer Italian existed around the Chelsea area.

After perusing the menu in Braille, John settled on the insalata primavera with goat ricotta and herb blossoms as his first course. Cole opted for the same. For their second course, John chose the potato gnocchi with baccalà while Cole ordered the seared halibut with shaved vegetables.

"So, Cole," John said, settling back in his chair after the waiter took the orders. "What's so important that it couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

"I've asked Juliana to marry me."

"Congratulations, dear boy. I think we should order some wine with our lunch."

"If you'd like a glass, John, feel free to order whatever you want. I'll pass."

Cole's response was rather muted, and John picked up on it right away. "In that case, I'll pass as well. You don't seem very enthusiastic about this proposal, son."

"I guess I'm not."

John noticed that Cole was fidgeting with his utensils, and he stilled him by covering his nervous movements with his steady hand. "Why aren't you?"

"I'm not sure if she can handle my disability, John. Juliana seems almost threatened when I try to do things for myself. I think she'd prefer me helpless and dependent on her instead of self-sufficient and functional on my own."

"Those are fighting words, Cole. If that's true, why would you consider her for your wife?"

"We've been together for a long time, and since I need a wife and an heir, it may as well be her."

"All good reasons but not reason enough. Do you love her?"

"I love her, but I'm no longer in love with her."

"What's changed?"

The waiter's appearance stopped Cole from answering the question. He waited patiently as their salad plates were laid on the table. They looked almost too pretty to eat, but since neither man could really appreciate the plating technique, the test would be in the flavor. They began eating and after several bites Cole put his fork down.

"John, I'm not sure who I am anymore."

"You've had some life-altering changes, Cole, there's no doubt. However, I sense that this is more than the blindness we're discussing."

Cole was torn between wanting to be honest, or continuing to lie to himself and please everyone in his family. He knew the reason he'd asked John to lunch was not to discuss Juliana, but to discuss Sloan, and his developing feelings for him. Saying it out loud was as good as admitting he was gay or bisexual. On the other hand, he knew he'd

never find peace if he didn't face this now. John was the most impartial and least judgmental person he knew.

"Do you remember when I first started coming to see you?" Cole asked. "You made me take a battery of psychological tests, and you asked me point-blank if I'd ever had a same-sex encounter."

"I remember," John replied seriously.

"God, this is so difficult," Cole whispered, folding and unfolding his napkin.

"Cole...." John's voice was kind but firm. "Spit it out."

"I'm attracted to Sloan and I've had sex with him."

"I see."

"Do you?" Cole asked. "Because I don't see at all, and I don't mean that as some kind of sick joke. Suddenly I've gone from being straight to gay, and I'm very confused."

"Is this the first time you've ever been with another man?"

"I had some encounters in boarding school, but nothing like this."

"What did you think you were going through in school?"

"I didn't give it much thought. A lot of shit went down after the lights went out. You cram several hundred horny boys in one room, and there's bound to be some sort of mutual masturbation, so I didn't dwell on it. I thought it was part of growing up."

"I know it's a common occurrence, but someone who's straight by nature would resist the groping, preferring to relieve himself on his own. The fact that you allowed another boy or boys to touch you is significant."

"You mean I'm really gay?" Cole looked stricken.

"It means you may be bisexual. It's certainly not unheard of, and in these times there are fewer stigmas to admitting your homosexuality. Men who've hidden behind the label of bisexuality for years are starting to leave that behind and simply come out."

"My father would die."

"Your father will have to deal with it the same way he dealt with your blindness."

"I don't know if you're right, John," Cole rationalized. "I still have sex with Juliana. How could I be gay and still have sex with a woman?"

"Cole, it happens. You're programmed to respond to her."

"What do you mean?"

"It was part of your training, so you never thought anything of it, nor did you ever give yourself a chance to explore other options."

"That's true. But I can't just throw it away because I'm interested in another man."

"Are you? Do you lie in bed at night and think about him? Does the thought of making love to him keep you up in more ways than one?" John smiled a little, trying to make a joke.

Cole's fork fell out of his hands and clattered onto his plate. "Jesus... how can I respond to that?"

"The hardest part is over, Cole. Coming right out and telling me what you're feeling is the bravest thing you've done since I met you."

"What do I do?" Cole begged, hoping John had the magic solution.

"You do what's in your heart. Not what your father or Juliana or Sloan wants. You do what *you* want."

"That's irresponsible."

"Cole, you are facing an incredible hurdle with the RP. Your entire life will be one challenge after another. The last thing you need is to throw in an unhappy marriage because it's convenient or expected."

"What about children? My father wants a grandchild. How can I give him that if I decide I'm queer?"

"First of all, you don't get to decide if you're gay or not."

"Of course I do," Cole protested. "I don't have to give in to this impulse."

"Is that what you think this is? A whim that you can ignore?"

"Isn't it?"

"If that were the case, everyone would be the same. Don't you think that it's more powerful than that, Cole? The important thing is facing it and being comfortable with your decision."

"What about children?"

Their main course was brought to the table, and they paused in deference to the waiter. As soon as he left them, John said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, Cole, but didn't you tell me, on more than one occasion, that you didn't want a child if it was going to carry the RP gene?"

"That's true, but Juliana could be tested during the pregnancy. We've discussed it and our options."

"What options? Abortion? Have you ever been in a situation where you had to experience an abortion?"

"No."

"It's not the solution, Cole. We're not talking about a batch of cookies dumped into the garbage because they don't taste good. I personally find the idea of deliberately ending a life because the child is flawed terribly tragic. To knowingly set out to create a human being with the intention of disposing of it, should the genetic testing prove positive, is criminal. It's a decision you may regret for the rest of your life."

"I had no idea you were so pro-life."

"It's much more than that, Cole. You're asking for my opinion and I'm giving it."

"I understand."

"I don't think you do, son. The child you speak of doesn't even exist. You're talking of a concept, a thought on how to make this all work and please everyone. Pretty much like trying to put a square peg in a round hole. Eventually, you're going to run out of options and have to face the hard reality that some things aren't meant to be."

"I'm not sure I can."

"Have you talked to Sloan about any of this?"

"Hell, no!"

"Why not? Didn't you say you had sex with him? He's certainly entitled to hearing your thoughts on the matter, or doesn't he care?"

"I mentioned the idea of having a relationship between two men on the side, separate from the societal expectations of a traditional marriage and family, much like they had in ancient times, but it was met with anger and ridicule."

"I'm sure it was. Cole, this is the twenty-first century. What you're asking of Sloan is hypocrisy of the highest order. I can understand how he would be upset."

"I don't see why there's a problem. Why can't we have it all?"

"Because *your* all is not *his* all. He doesn't want a wife and kids. He probably just wants you."

"I don't know if that's necessarily true. He doesn't seem too eager to pursue a relationship. In fact, I believe he's starting to see someone else."

"Does the thought of that bother you?" John challenged, hoping he's get an honest answer.

Cole was embarrassed to admit to the flash of jealousy that rushed through him when he saw Sloan dancing with Max. He shrugged and remained silent. Fortunately, John was trained to pick up on silence.

"I think it does bother you."

"Maybe a little."

"Have you told Sloan about your eyes?"

"Not yet."

"Why? And don't give me that crap about him not caring, now more than ever, it doesn't hold true. I'm sure he'd be very interested to know what's going on with you."

"I don't want his pity!"

"For God's sake, Cole. Why does it have to be pity? Can't you just accept basic human kindness?"

"No! I think part of my attraction to him is because he doesn't treat me like a potted fern. We scream and fight like normal people. We don't tiptoe around each other."

"And you think that will change if you were to tell him?"

"Of course. It changed Juliana and my parents. They make me feel like an invalid, whereas Sloan makes me feel like a man."

John was silent for several seconds, concentrating on his food and enjoying the baccalà, before he could formulate a response. Finally, he put his fork down. "I think Sloan has stirred something in you that you've been ignoring for a long time. You owe it to yourself to explore this further, to see if he's what you want. It's the only way you can resolve this, Cole."

"What about Juliana and our engagement?"

John shrugged his shoulders. "Have you ever seen the movie *Runaway Bride*?"

"FAT BOTTOMED GIRLS" could be heard all the way down the hall as Cole stepped off the elevator. He stuck his key in the slot and pushed the door open, only to be blasted by even louder music. It was coming from Sloan's room, of course, and when he walked in he was immediately enveloped in a cloud of smoke.

"Jesus Christ, Sloan. I could get high just standing here."

"You want a hit?" Sloan's reply was completely unapologetic.

"Didn't we discuss a smoking rule?"

"You said it didn't apply to weed."

"I didn't think you planned on smoking an entire field at once."

"Oh, lighten up, Cole. Have a smoke so you can climb off your high horse."

"You're insufferable, Sloan."

Sloan started to giggle and took another puff. He waited to see what Cole would do, relieved when he grabbed the joint from his hand and took a huge hit, inhaling deeply.

"Where have you been?" Sloan asked.

Cole was a bit surprised. Sloan had never seemed interested in his whereabouts before.

"I had lunch with a friend."

"Emily wanted me to thank you again."

"I like her."

"Really?" Sloan's smile widened, pleased by his comment.

"Yes. She's very genuine and I think she's a good friend to you."

"She's the best"

They sat and smoked in silence, each man consumed with his thoughts. Cole made an attempt to say something but thought better of it. He wasn't up for a fight right now, and the weed was working its magic, making him mellow. Unfortunately, it was also making him horny.

"You still angry?" he asked Sloan who was standing beside the window. He'd finally opened it a crack to let out some of the smoke.

"Who said I was angry?" Sloan replied, leaning against the wall. His eyes remained fixed on the window, looking out at the scene below.

Cole got up and tapped him on the shoulder, hoping to get a good look into Sloan's eyes. He finally turned and stared at Cole. His eyes were as beautiful as ever, the flat gray reminiscent of the many doves in Washington Square. His eyelashes were outrageous, long and curly, framing the orbs that glared at him.

"You've been hostile since our conversation."

"When you asked me to be your mistress?"

"Why do you have to make it sound so ugly?"

"Because you've made it ugly, Cole! I thought we shared something special that night." Sloan's eyes welled up with tears and his lips quivered a little as he spoke. Cole reached out and cupped his face.

"Don't touch me," Sloan said, stepping back. "I know I'm your first, and you may as well have been mine, since the only other person who ever fucked me is on the West Coast. That was only one time as well, but he and I never connected. I made the mistake of thinking it was different with you, but it's really not, is it? I was an experiment, a chance to pretend you were some fucking Japanese warlord with your fuck boy!"

"No, it wasn't like that!"

"I'm not going to be the dirty secret you take out of your closet and play with occasionally. I need more, Cole."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"I don't know, but it sure as hell isn't what you offered. You want to be a family man? *Do it!* Have the wife and the kid and give it your best shot!" Sloan's tears started to roll down his cheeks and he backhanded them angrily. "You've already made your decision, Cole. I don't even know why we're discussing this. Your engagement just confirmed it, so forget about me and our little interlude. Chalk it up as your dark fantasy coming true, but that's all it will ever be, Cole. You and Juliana can laugh about it when you're on your honeymoon," Sloan said bitterly.

Cole spoke up when Sloan got ready to leave. "Where are you going?"

"Out, not that it's any of your business."

"With who?"

"What are you, the date Nazi?"

"So it's a date?"

"Cole, fuck off!"

Cole reached out and held Sloan's arm, "Please, don't go."

"Why?"

"I was hoping we could spend the evening together and talk."

"Talk?" Is that the new word for fuck?" Sloan asked facetiously. He moved toward Cole and held his crotch. "You're fucking hard because of the weed again, and you want me to stay and get you off, don't you? Well, screw you, Shogun. Go find yourself another toy."

Sloan snatched his phone off his desk, along with his keys. He took one last look at Cole and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

I HAD no idea where I was going, but I knew that if I stayed in that room for one more second, I'd have ended up kissing him, and it would be over. I'd hate myself in the morning again, even though it would probably be the most amazing makeup sex of this century. I didn't want to keep getting on and off this bus ride leading nowhere. For once I was going to avoid the pain before it started.

I checked my phone log and was relieved to see I had saved Max's phone number. I hit send, hoping he wasn't too busy to see me. There were several questions I had about BDSM, and the only one who could answer them was Max. I found the whole idea of submission repugnant, but the other stuff, whips and bondage, intrigued me. I wanted to explore that side of myself but didn't know if it was allowed without the corresponding groveling.

"Sloan?"

"Hey, Max. Is this a bad time?"

"No. Did you need anything?"

"Umm, I was wondering if we could go over some of the finer points of that stuff you gave me to read."

"So you did read it." Max's voice shifted and purred. I could actually feel the energy through the phone and was starting to get aroused.

"Yeah. I'd like to learn more."

"Would you be interested in going to the club with me tonight? I was just getting ready."

"The club?"

"Yes. You'll meet people who are into the scene. It will be much quicker than trying to explain it all. Seeing is believing, hmm?"

"I'm in blue jeans and a T-shirt, not really club material, but I don't want to go back home and change."

"Don't worry about it. Meet me in front of your apartment building in about twenty minutes. I'll be in a limo."

Shit. "Okay."

In a fucking limo? Everything about Max was first class, so I supposed this club he was taking me to would be out of this world. I walked to the nearest Starbucks to have a quick espresso, pass the time, and get my head on straight. I had to put all thoughts of Cole away and concentrate on Max. He was a much more viable option, although I had no idea what I was getting myself into. This was part of his appeal. The excitement of the unknown had always drawn me, and Max was a big question mark right now. His world was so far removed from mine; it tempted me like no other.

The honk of a horn snapped me out of my reverie. The limo was at the curb, and Max's head popped through the window as soon as the glass slid down. "Need a ride, mister?"

I laughed and moved toward the car, getting in eagerly when the driver came around and opened the door. The inside was an ostentatious display of wealth: leather seats, custom-made bar with genuine wood trim, and the silver bucket filled with ice and a champagne bottle. Max reached for it and poured the bubbly into crystal flutes. The sound coming through the speakers lent itself to the dream-like quality of this date—if you could call it that. It felt like I was being whisked away on a magic carpet ride.

"Where are we going?"

"To a private club called Wilde."

"Is it? Wild?"

"You'll have to wait and see."

"I'm in the car, aren't I?"

He moved to pull me close and he kissed me. He tasted of champagne and I closed my eyes, letting myself go with it. I was determined to forget Cole this evening, to move on and rid myself of the inexplicable hold my roommate had on me. He had made his decision and I was not going to be a part of his life, so I needed to make one of my own. I wrapped my arms around Max's neck and pressed my body against him. His hand went straight to my crotch, and he gave it a gentle squeeze. "I thought I imagined this," Max whispered, his voice thick with desire.

"Nope."

He began to tug at my zipper. I looked at the driver, panicked that Max didn't seem to care. He put his finger on my mouth and shook his head, reassuring me he knew what he was doing. I felt like such a dumbass when he hit the button on the console and a privacy glass went up between us and the front seat.

"May I?" he asked, as if I'd be stupid enough to refuse one of his world-class blowjobs.

"Please."

"Darling," he said softly, "you say that word so well."

By the time the car stopped in front of a four-story brick building, I'd been reduced to a quivering lump of flesh. Max had surpassed his previous efforts, and I watched as he washed down my come with the remnants of the champagne in his glass.

"That was a lovely appetizer, darling. Thank you," he said, smiling like a Cheshire cat and licking at the cream dotting his lower lip.

"Thank you."

"My pleasure, Beauty. Now, come—let me introduce you to Wilde."

He took my hand and we walked up the five steps. The door was opened instantly and I was transported into a Victorian world, complete with red velvet curtains, brocaded furnishings, and ornate woodwork. The walls had photos of Oscar Wilde, which explained the club's name. I'd read about him but wasn't familiar with the nuances of his life. Max would have to clue me in later.

"Good evening, Mr. Leavitte."

"George," Max said with a nod. "Who's here tonight?"

"Everyone, sir. There's a collaring about to start in room six."

"Oh? Whose?"

"Mr. Beck and his boy, Eric."

"Perfect. Sloan, you'll get a chance to see something special after all."

"Will you be having dinner, sir?"

"No, but we'll have champagne. Bring us a bucket, will you? We'll find a table and watch the festivities."

"Yes, sir."

George went one way, Max and I another. He still held me by the hand and didn't let go, even when people greeted us along the way. Everyone seemed to know him, which was sort of cool. I'd never been one of the popular kids at school, usually hanging out with the pariahs, so it was a nice change to be with a man who apparently was a star in more ways than I could ever know.

We walked into a large room with a raised platform in the middle. There was a huge wooden cross in the shape of a letter X, and beside it was a small table with what appeared to be bottles of water and pieces of black leather. It was too far away for me to see all the details. There were tables and chairs scattered around the platform, which were all occupied by men in different attire. Some were in suits while others

were dressed casually. A few were in severe leather that creaked when they moved. Most of the gentlemen were Max's age or older, and every one of them had a much younger man by their side, either standing by their chairs or kneeling on the floor.

All of the younger men were naked or practically naked, barely covered by scraps of cloth or leather in an attempt at decency. Most of them did nothing to hide their organs, which were displayed proudly.

"Who are these people?" I whispered in Max's ear, before we were seated at our table

"This is a BDSM club, Sloan. You are seeing some of the finest Dominants in the area, along with their contracted submissives."

"Why are they kneeling and not sitting at the table with their partners?"

"That's the way of this world, Sloan."

"Huh. Seems rather degrading to me."

"It's not. It's a traditional act of submission that is expected and most appreciated by their masters."

We were interrupted by a waiter, who brought us our champagne. He laid everything out with a flourish and left us alone again. Max handed me a flute, clinked my glass gently and said, "To your new and exciting career."

"Which career are you referring to, Max?"

He smiled that wicked smile again, the one that always sent a thrill up my spine, and he leaned in to kiss me. "That is for you to decide, my beauty."

A HUSH had fallen over the room as two men took center stage. The older guy had on black leather pants, jackboots, and a white shirt that looked soft and terribly expensive. Everything about him exuded class. He was holding a leash attached to the collar on a gorgeous young man who followed him with his head bowed. He was naked, but for a silver cock ring encircling his semi-erect penis.

I watched this in fascination, more interested in the sub's reaction than in the Dom's strutting. They stopped and the Dom started to talk.

"Welcome to our small celebration tonight. This is the final step in Eric's journey. He has grown over the last few months." The audience shared a laugh as the sub's erection seemed to increase with his Dom's every word. He looked over at his young man and smiled in appreciation. "I don't mean that way, although I must admit that my Eric is quite the shower. Tonight we celebrate my pet's collaring. He's earned it and it gives me pleasure to present him to you, but first, a lovely demonstration of his willingness to please me."

Eric stepped forward and Beck removed the leash and collar he'd been wearing when they walked into the room. He replaced them with leather cuffs, on his wrists as well as on his ankles, before leading him to the cross. Eric's back was turned toward us and his arms and legs

were secured to silver hooks on the four ends of the cross. He had an incredible physique, which was very much appreciated by his Dom, who caressed him with a light hand, all the while whispering in his ear.

The Dom stepped back and pulled out a riding crop. He raised his hand and hit Eric's buttocks with a forceful strike. The young man moaned and shifted position. The chains holding him rattled gently, only to be yanked by a forceful pull when the crop came down again in three successive strikes. Eric's ass had four red stripes across the rounded cheeks and his master moved to rub him with his hand. He said something to Eric, who nodded, and he proceeded to stripe his back with rapid-fire strokes. Finally, Eric's head sort of flopped back and his eyes closed. I thought he'd passed out from the grueling punishment, but he seemed to be in ecstasy, rather than in horrible pain.

"Is he unconscious?" I asked Max in alarm.

"He's in subspace, Sloan. His pain has shifted to exquisite pleasure. Look at his face. Does he seem to be suffering? And look at his cock."

My eyes were back on the sub, who did appear to be in some sort of trance while his cock remained rigid. His master moved to release the cock ring after whispering a command, and Eric began to climax immediately. The room filled with the odor of his spunk, and there was a general groaning from the audience. Suddenly, everyone was all hands and mouths, and what had been a silent observation turned into an orgy of sorts. Subs were giving blowjobs left and right.

I looked at Max and he raised an eyebrow. "Are you shocked, darling?"

"No... I'm hard as fuck."

He leaned in and gave me a deep kiss, fucking me with his tongue. "Hold that thought, my beauty. I have plans for later."

"Okay," I replied, a little breathless but determined to wait it out. My curiosity had no bounds.

After the Dom had given Eric a few minutes to regain his headspace, he released his hands and ankles from the cross and moved him to center stage. He picked up the flat, velvet-covered box that had been sitting on the table and opened it, pulling out a flexible silver chain that glinted when the light hit it. He placed the necklace around Eric's neck and kissed him gently. He then drew him into his arms and pressed him tightly against his body. Everyone started to applaud and the ceremony seemed to be over.

"So now what happens to Eric?" I asked, while Max poured me more champagne.

"They move into another phase of their relationship. He's now a contracted sub and belongs to Beck. No one can touch him; but by the same token, Beck is obligated to see to his safety and daily needs. Eric is his"

"So it's a marriage of sorts?"

"You can call it that, although it's renewable, which makes it that much better"

"Right."

"Come, my beauty. I've asked for a room."

"They have private rooms here?"

"Absolutely. Not everyone likes to perform on stage. There are some members who need strict privacy. I, personally, do not like the public forum."

"Thank God, 'cause there's no fucking way I'd strip down to nothing in front of this group."

"Sloan, your cock would make them forget what you are so ashamed of"

"Whatever, Max."

We stood and left the room, no longer stopping to chat. Max went straight to the stairs, and we climbed to the second story. It looked like any hotel, except the paintings on the wall were male erotica. Some of

them had to be antiques, each one more explicit than the next, and I would have enjoyed looking at them, but my host seemed to be in a big hurry to get me to the room. He tugged on my hand every time I'd stop.

When we finally got to our room and he'd closed the door behind us, he picked me up and carried me to the four-poster bed that took up most of the room. It looked like any other bed except for the hooks embedded in the wooden posts on four corners. It was canopied and curtained as well, giving it an old-world feel.

Max was covering my face with kisses and growling softly.

"I want you very much."

"I'm all yours, Max."

"Will you let me tie you down?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, my beauty. I'd like to experiment a little. Test your boundaries."

"How?" I was a little overwhelmed by his assault. My senses were on high alert with everything I'd seen downstairs. I was achingly hard and desperate to get off, but he seemed to have other plans.

"Let me show you rather than tell you. Would you strip down, please?"

The lights were on, although very muted. Still, I hesitated.

"Darling, I've seen most of you. At least the important parts," he added. "Trust me, I won't judge."

I closed my eyes and began to take off my clothes, peeling off the layers one by one until I lay there completely exposed. I kept my eyes shut, hoping not to see the look of desire change when he saw my naked body, but then I felt his hand caressing me, moving over my chest and stomach and bypassing my cock, which leaked with moisture, hoping to get noticed. He ignored it, which was maddening and made me moan.

"Shh, my impatient one. Let me take my time with you."

"God... not too long."

"I'm going to get up and grab some things from the bureau. Give me a second," he whispered, kissing me hungrily. "Open your eyes, Sloan, I want to see them."

I opened them and stared at his face, expecting to see derision or contempt, but I saw none of that.

"You still want me even though I'm skin and bones?"

"Sloan, my darling boy. You're beautiful."

"Really?" I didn't believe a word he said, but at least he wasn't repulsed and still wanted me, despite my lack of an obvious six-pack.

"Why the hell are you so insecure about your physique?"

"Years of programming."

"I'm going to have to work on you, get you to believe me when I say you're beautiful."

I felt my eyes fill up, touched by his kindness. It was coming from such an unexpected source, and I was caught off guard. He wiped my tears away with gentle kisses, whispering endearments that calmed me and helped me relax. When he felt I could continue, he stood and went to the mirrored cabinet, opened it, and removed some leather cuffs and an instrument that looked like a ping-pong paddle. It was covered in dark leather. I'd seen a picture of a paddle in the book he'd leant me, although I'd never felt its sting.

"Let's start with a few spankings," he said, "I think you could use this right now."

"I could?" Somehow I found that hard to believe, but so far, he'd been right on every count. "Shall I flip over?"

"Yes."

I did and he took a pillow and slid it under my groin, raising my hips slightly. He rubbed my ass with his bearded cheek. It felt wonderful and I moaned softly, which seemed to encourage him to put his warm tongue right where I wanted it. I closed my eyes and moaned

even louder, spreading wide and offering myself in the most wanton way. I wanted more of him, needed that push inside of me, but he was teasing the outside of my hole, flicking at it with his wet tongue, driving me mad with desire. "Max, please."

"Not yet, darling, first a little pain."

He sat back on his heels, lifted his hand, and brought the paddle down on the meatiest part of my butt with a *splat!* 

"Oh, my God."

He followed it with a series of successive blows, each one more forceful, and soon I was writhing against the pillow, humping it with abandon. I would have shot my load if he hadn't stopped to rub my ass, whispering words of encouragement, telling me how gorgeous I was. I didn't give a shit about that; all I wanted was release.

"Max, touch my cock."

"How do you feel?"

"Good," I practically whimpered, "too good."

"The pain isn't too much?"

"No."

"You need to let me take away the hurt, darling. Let Max help you forget all the horrible things you've ever thought of yourself. Let me be your reality."

"Yes," I acknowledged, "anything, Max. Help me."

He lifted the paddle again, throwing in a few more swats for good measure, and I was about to make a mess all over the mattress. He must have sensed it somehow because he flipped me over like a pancake and took my cock down his throat. I screamed once and exploded, shooting endless streams of come, which he swallowed gracefully. His throat muscles undulated around my cock as it throbbed with desire.

I was panting and moving my hips up and down, wanting to fuck his face for all eternity. The slight sting on my ass cheeks seemed to enhance everything, making the pleasure more intense. Finally, when he'd extracted every ounce of fluid from my body, he pulled away and turned me over again. He positioned the pillow under my hips once more and grabbed some lube from the nightstand. After smearing his fingers with a healthy dollop, he plunged them into my ass, making me scream again. "God," I yelled out, hoping the rooms were soundproofed.

He rolled a condom on quickly and rammed into me, hitting my prostate on one try. "Max." I was almost incoherent, my breath leaving my lungs in quick pants as he plowed into me, shoving his cock in as far as it would go. He squeezed my hips with strong hands and pulled me back and forth, helping me along, as I seemed quite useless suddenly and unable to help myself. I could hear his breathing, harsh and strangled, as he thrust in and out, pulling back as far as possible and then shoving in again, balls deep, until we were both trembling with want. I was hard again, my cock hanging heavy and oozing drops of come. I reached out to grab myself, only to have my hand pushed away by his. His fingers wrapped around me, squeezing and tugging in sync with the movement of his hips, and we exploded within seconds of each other, in long, excruciating waves of pleasure that stroked and soothed and sent us to heaven and back, relieving every part of me.

Max collapsed. I could hear him breathing hard, the weight of his body heavy on me. I thought he might have fallen asleep, but he was awake and began to grope for my hands, clasping them, entwining his fingers with mine. He rolled over, carrying me with him, and now I was lying on top. He wrapped his arms around me and made no attempt to push me off.

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"Sleep, my beauty."
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<sup>&</sup>quot;I can't, Max. I've got to go home."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Why?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I've got two classes tomorrow."

<sup>&</sup>quot;After they see your pictures, you won't need to go to school anymore."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You're wrong. I'd never model full-time."

Max shook his head. "You'd turn down a million-dollar contract?"

"Aren't you getting ahead of yourself?" I asked. I pushed away from him and sat up. It had been an amazing evening, but I was tired and wanted to go home to think about everything that had happened to me since I met Max. His world was so far removed from mine I couldn't fathom ever being a real part of it. Right now, it was all rather dream-like.

"I'd like you to start thinking seriously about what you're going to do when I present you with a contract from Klas. I know what I'm talking about, Sloan. They will want to sign you, so you may as well get ready."

"Max, I'm flattered, really. You have no idea how much. I just don't understand why they'd want me."

Max shook his head, annoyed suddenly. "Get up!"

I did, letting him lead me to the mirrored bureau. "Look at yourself, Sloan. Take a good, long look. What do you see?" he asked.

"I see a skinny bag of bones," I replied sullenly, upset that he'd make me stand there completely naked. I saw the scars on my thighs, some still fresh, and I looked away quickly, ashamed.

"I don't see that, and neither will anyone in the industry. You're lean, yes, but so is everyone else in this corner of the world. Fat isn't in high demand around here. You're actually normal compared to some of our other models, and you have one extra thing that no one else has."

"I'm not posing in the nude if you're talking about my prick." I had no intention of exposing myself in public, no matter how much money they offered, and I wanted to clear that up right away.

"No, darling, I'm not talking about your cock, although I will admit that it's one of the more beautiful ones around."

"What then? What's this special thing you refer to?"

"No ego, my beauty. You are refreshingly humble for someone as good-looking as you."

"Oh, for God's sake, Max. You keep telling me that, but I don't see it."

"Is this why you cut, darling? You really think you're ugly?"

"No," I said automatically. Hearing him say it out loud made it that much more pathetic. I felt like a fool, and I didn't want to compound it by admitting I not only felt ugly, I felt unloved, and unwanted. I was such a loser.

"I'm going to have to work on you, darling, teach you how to love yourself."

"Good luck with that," I replied facetiously.

He took my hand and led me back to bed. "Come and sit for a few more minutes, then I'll let you go. I want to discuss the scene we just had."

"What scene? I thought we just fucked."

"How many people have spanked you before getting off?"

"No one, but I'm not exactly experienced, Max."

"The spanking enhanced the sex, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"For a few minutes, you forgot everything but the pleasure you were receiving at my hands."

"And your point is?"

"The more pain you can take physically, the more intense your pleasure will be."

"I don't know about that. I inflict enough pain on myself, Max. I don't need you to help me along."

"Are you at least willing to let me show you how this works?"

"I have to think about so many things, Max. My brain is leaking with information. I need time to process."

"I suppose it's better than a flat refusal."

"Let me sleep on this, okay?"

"Okay, darling, but I'm very persistent."

"I'm starting to learn that, more and more."

Max smiled and whispered, "I want you, Sloan. I want you in my bed, in my studio, and under my lash. I will have you, eventually."

I had no idea how to respond. I'd never been the object of anyone's desire, and I wasn't sure if this was a good thing or not. I just knew that for one split second I actually felt significant.

COLE was sitting in the living room with the lights off. It must have been around two in the morning by his calculations. It had been hours since Sloan stormed off to parts unknown, and he'd thrown himself on the couch to wait it out. He didn't have a clue as to what he was going to say when Sloan finally came home; he just knew he wanted to be awake. Juliana had begged him to visit her and stay the night, but he couldn't deal with her right now. He was filled with thoughts of Sloan and his conversation with John.

He knew he was at a crossroads. A wrong turn would guarantee him a lifetime of misery, but he was damned if he knew what it was he wanted. Everything had seemed pretty clear until Sloan walked into his life. The man was the most annoying thing on the planet, but he was drawn to him, inexplicably. He even made him forget he was going blind for a few minutes, so focused was he on his sexuality and this sudden attraction that kept getting stronger rather than weaker.

Cole ran a hand through his hair and twisted around on the sofa, trying to ignore the erection pressing against his pants, a permanent state whenever he thought about Sloan. He had no idea that sex with another man could be so good. He was embarrassed to even admit it to himself. He acknowledged the hypocrisy of his actions, saying one

thing and doing another. His offer to have an affair, separate from his straight life, was insulting and Sloan had seen right through him. He was wrong and Sloan was right to call him out. He was surprised that he hadn't hit him again. He would have if the roles had been reversed.

Sloan was the most complex person he'd ever met. One minute an impulsive pothead, the next an intelligent, introspective, and caring human being. He was rash and disrespectful, but also honest to a fault and extremely talented, from what Cole had seen after snooping around in his briefcase. He'd dug into his portfolio, just to get an idea of his body of work, and had been blown away by the little he did see. There was no doubt in his mind that Sloan was brilliant and could match him wit for wit, keeping up with anything he'd throw at him. On the other hand, he was young and didn't give a shit what people thought of him. He had no qualms about his homosexuality, absolutely sure of who he was and what he wanted. Cole envied this side of Sloan, and he wished he had a fraction of his self-confidence.

If Sloan would consent to having marathon sex, maybe he'd get him out of his system once and for all, and this entire idea of being gay or not gay would be resolved. He'd get sick of the man and go back to the life he'd always known. The risk, of course, would be that he wouldn't want his old life ever again, but it was a risk he was willing to take.

He heard the keys jiggling in the lock, and he sat up abruptly, running his hands through his hair again, pushing it out of the way. Sloan walked in and stopped when he saw him sitting on the couch.

"You waiting up for me, mom?"

"Fuck off! I fell asleep on the sofa."

"If you were my mommy, now would be a good time to ask me how my evening went."

"Blow me, Sloan."

"You wish."

Cole jumped off the sofa and headed for the kitchen. He didn't bother turning on the lights.

"Hey, vampire boy," Sloan yelled out, "what's up with you and the lights?"

"Turn 'em on, I don't give a shit."

Sloan followed him into the kitchen and leaned up against the doorjamb. "Seriously, Cole, why aren't the lights on?"

"I'm trying to save money."

Sloan snorted and said, "Right."

Cole looked at Sloan and only saw his shadow because he was too far away. He didn't see the frown on his forehead or the look of concern that had crept into his eyes. "I know this place inside and out, Sloan. I don't feel the need to turn on the lights," he replied, mustering as much dignity as possible. Sloan had this way of making him feel like a blithering idiot without even trying.

"Suit yourself, brother. I'm going to bed."

"Why? Are you exhausted from your hot date?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I am completely fucked out, if you must know."

"You're a whore," Cole hissed, burning with a jealousy that flashed suddenly.

"I'm the whore?" Sloan laughed derisively. "I'm not the one who wants to jump from my bed to Juliana's and back to mine again." He walked up to Cole and grabbed him, holding him tight against his body. He kissed him possessively, running his tongue along Cole's lips, drawing the groan out of Cole that he was trying to stifle. Sloan reached down and felt the erection pressing hard against Cole's jeans. "Who's the fucking whore now?" He pushed him away roughly and spun around.

Cole was left in the middle of the room, breathing so hard and fast he was starting to hyperventilate. His rage leaked out of every pore,

turning him into a man he didn't recognize. Despite the anger, he was fiercely aroused, and he wanted to storm after Sloan and rip his clothes off. Instead, he went into his room, locked the door, and began to jerk off, tugging at himself almost violently. He kept seeing Sloan's face, the smell and taste of him fresh and tempting. He wanted to shove his cock up that tight ass. Emotions that ranged from anger to extreme desire fought for control over his body, reducing him to a whimpering wreck, and soon the tears poured down his face. He fell on his knees while he ejaculated all over the carpet, leaving him more dissatisfied than ever. He folded into himself and began to weep, disgusted with his actions but more certain than ever that he wanted Sloan.

The next morning they faced each other over the breakfast table without speaking. Cole had woken early, so he had time to prepare. He'd made a pot of coffee, going out of his way the day before to get a new machine to brew the espresso Sloan favored. He even gave in and bought muffins, heavy with sugar and nitrates, to please his roommate who had no idea what good nutrition meant. Sloan would have probably been just as happy with a package of Ho-Hos, but Cole couldn't bring himself to buy them, so he opted for the cranberry muffins instead, rationalizing the little bits of fruit would provide some sort of nutritional benefit.

"I'm sorry about last night," Sloan murmured. "I shouldn't have done that."

"I had no right to call you a whore," Cole replied softly.

"No, you didn't."

"I realize that," Cole said stiffly. "I'm nothing to you."

"That's not true," Sloan interrupted quickly. "Your choices have drawn the lines."

"They are choices I've yet to resolve."

"Is that true?" Sloan asked, sounding hopeful.

"Let's just say that everything I've held true, no longer is."

"Meaning what?"

Cole stood. "I'm not sure what I mean, Sloan, but believe me, you'll be the first to find out after I do."

He walked out of the kitchen and tripped over Sloan's backpack, which he'd left in the middle of the hallway. Cole had not expected that and he didn't see it, as it was off to the right, below him, and certainly not within his range of sight. He landed on his chest, shocked at the suddenness of the fall, and he heard Sloan's chair push back quickly. Sloan was at his side in a minute, reaching to help him up.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Cole replied, shaking his head. "I don't know why I didn't see your stuff, I'm such a klutz."

"I'm sorry, Cole. I should have put it somewhere else."

"Don't worry about it," Cole replied, trying desperately not to break into tears again. He was getting to be as emotional as his sisters on their worst PMS days. Soon he'd have to buy a bottle of Midol. "Have a nice day, okay?" he said, hoping Sloan wouldn't notice how shaken up he was.

However, Sloan did notice, and when Cole finished his breakfast and walked out the door of the apartment, he didn't see Sloan following him. He had no idea Sloan got into a cab, following closely behind. He gave the driver the address for Lighthouse International and leaned back against the seat. A part of him was happy they'd had a conversation that didn't involve screams and emotions. If nothing else, he could take care of Sloan, feed him, and see to his creature comforts. Maybe that would help pave the way for something more meaningful in the future. For now, he'd settle for twenty-four drama-free hours.

I HAD no idea why Cole was taking a cab or where the fuck he was headed, but I was lucky to find this one in a town where cabs were always at a premium.

"Follow that cab." It sounded so Bogart and mysterious, but damned if I knew what the hell was going on. Cole was definitely hiding something, and I was determined to find out what it was. I knew I was a slob and unorganized, but my backpack had been in plain sight. How could he have not seen it and fallen so badly?

"Do you mind if I smoke?" I asked the Indian who was driving.

"No problem, buddy. You want to share?"

"You smoke weed?"

He broke out in a grin and nodded his head eagerly. "Here, have a couple hits," I said, rationing him, "I don't want to lose that cab up front, and you will if you get too fucked up."

"Thank you, buddy."

Anything for the sake of international relations, I mused. Where the hell were we going? After miles of gridlock and an endless procession of red lights, we stopped in front of a building on the Upper East Side. The sign read *Lighthouse International*, which meant nothing to me.

I waited to see which entrance Cole took and I followed quickly, worried that I'd lose him once he got inside. He stood in front of a bank of elevators, and it must have been my lucky day because the security guard seemed to know him really well. They struck up a conversation, and although I only caught bits and pieces of it, I distinctly heard the name of Dr. Butterman, whom I assumed was the reason Cole was here. That set my mind to rest, and I waited till he stepped into the elevator before I approached the security desk

"Is there a Dr. Butterman in this building?"

"Yup, fourth floor," the guard replied without even looking up. So much for the great security.

"What kind of doctor is he?" I continued.

He finally looked at me and said, "Are you kidding?"

"Uh, no. Why?"

"Son, you're at Lighthouse International. The only kind of doctor you'll find here is an eye doctor."

"Oh. Thanks." I felt so dumb.

I hung around the lobby forever; having no intention of going to the doctor's office until Cole was gone. I didn't think he'd be longer than an hour, so I found a good spot where they had a couple of sofas. I sat down with my earphones plugged into my iPhone and let the music carry me away. It helped to pass the time and take my mind off the reason I was here.

After about forty-five minutes, I spotted him leaving the building. He got into a cab again, which I found very curious. For someone who professed to be saving a buck by not turning on the lights, he was spending a fortune on transportation. Why the hell didn't he take the subway?

I stood up and entered an elevator, hitting the button that would take me to the fourth floor. I was discouraged when I saw how many doors I'd have to check out before I found Dr. Butterman, but eventually I stood in front of his office and knocked, relieved when I heard someone say, "Come in."

I walked in and stared at the man I'd seen with Cole on more than one occasion. "It's you!"

"It's me?" John Butterman looked surprised by my statement. I couldn't believe I failed to recognize his name, although I clearly remembered being out of it the day Emily and I had met him.

"I'm sorry, doctor. I didn't mean to be rude."

"That's all right. May I help you?"

"My name is Sloan Driscoll. I'm Cole Fujiwara's roommate."

"I believe we've already met."

"Yes, we have. I was wondering if we could talk."

"How did you find me?"

"I followed Cole."

"Without his knowledge?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't tell you anything about Cole, Mr. Driscoll. There are HIPAA laws I need to follow."

"But I want to know what's wrong with him."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"So there *is* something wrong," I said, pouncing on his reply. "Tell me."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Please, doc. I need to know."

He must have heard the distress in my voice, because he asked, "Why?"

"I care about him... a-a lot," I stammered, trying not to out Cole.

"And does he care about you?"

Shit! "I believe so."

"I'm in a very awkward position, Sloan. I'd like to help you, but the law is clear."

"I understand, doctor. Can you at least tell me what your specialty is?"

"I'm a psychiatrist trained to work with patients who are sight impaired. My job is to provide them with the tools they'll need to resume a normal life despite the inability to see."

"What do you mean by inability to see?" I was stupefied by his answer. Was he talking about Cole or someone else?

"Patients see me when they start to lose their sight. I prepare them for the inevitable blindness that will come as a result of their disease."

"No!" I stood and began to back away from him. "You can't mean Cole?"

"You asked me what I do, Sloan. We are not talking about Cole or his disease. Is that clear?"

"Uh, yeah," I answered, sounding like a total retard. He must think I'm the dumbest guy in the world. "What would cause a person to go blind like that?" I asked, hoping he'd continue on with this charade. We both knew we were talking about Cole and I was grateful he was bending the rules, but I just couldn't wrap my head around anything he was saying.

"Have you ever heard of retinitis pigmentosa?"

"No "

"Retinitis pigmentosa, better known as RP, is a rare, inherited disease in which the light-sensitive retina of the eye degenerates slowly and progressively. Eventually, blindness results."

"I don't understand."

"The retina is the innermost layer of tissue that lines the eye. It contains layers of light-receiving cells called photoreceptors that are connected to the brain through the optic nerve. If you think of the eye as a camera receiving images, the retina is the film on which the images are recorded."

"Can't you buy new film? Or transplant it?"

"I'm afraid not. There are two types of photoreceptors, Sloan, cone cells and rod cells. Cone cells are in the center of the retina and are responsible for central vision and color. Rod cells are required for peripheral and night vision. Both cone and rod cells convert light into electrical impulses that travel through several type of nerve cells to the optic nerve, which then sends the signal to the brain, where seeing actually occurs. With RP, photoreceptor cells begin to degenerate and eventually stop functioning."

"But there has to be a cure!" I could feel myself starting to spiral, the reality of his words finally sinking in.

"There is no cure, Sloan. I'm so sorry to have to tell you."

I was horrified. I didn't know what I was expecting to hear today, but I know it wasn't this. I felt like I was hallucinating on some bad weed. My beautiful Cole, the man whose incredible blue eyes I so worshiped, was going blind. I started to cry, unable to help the tears that leaked out of my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. I propped my arms on the desk, laid my head down, and began to sob. I was heartbroken for Cole. No wonder he was so defensive and confused. All I could think of doing was running home and cradling him in my arms. I had to apologize for being an asshole and making him so miserable. I needed to help him get through this, and if fucking me would do it, then he could have me. Who gave a shit that I'd be

destroyed in the process? I wasn't the one going blind. My issues were mental and could be fixed. His weren't fixable.

I must have cried for a good ten minutes until I felt Dr. Butterman by my side. He lifted me off the chair and wrapped his arms around me, which made me cry even harder. I was bawling like an infant.

"Sloan, son, you have to control yourself."

"How long before he goes blind?" I wailed against his chest.

"I don't know, Sloan. It could be tomorrow or ten years from now. Everyone's different."

I pushed back, puzzled, "Can't you be more specific?"

"No," he said, shaking his head sadly.

"Doc, I... love him."

"I know you do."

"How do you know?"

"It's pretty obvious, son."

"Has he said anything to you about me?"

"We're not talking about Cole, remember?"

"Oh God. Please, Dr. Butterman. Just tell me he cares."

"More than he's willing to admit."

I stopped crying for one second and hugged him tighter, and then I started up again. Finally, when there were no tears left, I extricated myself from the doctor's arms, pulled a tissue from the box he had on the table, and blew my nose. I sat down and said, "Tell me how I can help him."

"We are talking about patients with RP, is that not right?" Dr. Butterman asked, and God bless him for that.

"Yes, absolutely."

"They need to feel normal, Sloan, productive and useful. The last thing any disabled person wants is to be a burden or treated like a child and infantilized because they can't do certain things."

"How do I do that? I want to help in any way I can."

"You help by allowing him to bump into things, to fall, and make mistakes. It's the only way he can become self-sufficient and retain his dignity. Most people are proud and hate to accept help. When you compound familial and societal pressures, you have a tremendous burden to overcome."

"His father."

"In general," Dr. Butterman reiterated, reminding me of the delicate position he was in.

"Yes, in general. Do you think one should continue to act normally, the way they've been acting in the past?"

"Of course!"

"But what if that isn't good enough? I've been acting like a fucking jerk!"

"I don't know who or what you are talking about, Sloan."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Butterman. I want to help so much." I started to cry again, I couldn't help it. I was overwhelmed by sadness. Cole's entire life would never be the same. This is why he quit baseball, not because he wasn't good enough. Dear God... I yanked more tissue out of the box and blew my nose again, trying to get myself together. "I believe I told you I love this person who has RP?"

"Yes." Dr. Butterman sighed, knowing he was breaking several rules.

"And because I do, you must realize how hard it is to see him fail or flounder."

"And yet, it's because you love him that you must!"

"I must?"

"You must treat him as a sighted man when you can. Yell at him when he pisses you off, but praise him when he has a small victory. Your role in his life will be critical, and I'm not sure you can handle it, Sloan. You seem very emotional."

"What the fuck, doc!" I was outraged by his accusation. "You've just made this the worst day of my life, second only to the day my mother died. Did you expect me to sit here and be stoic? I don't think so."

"I think there's a huge part of Cole that needs your normalcy; in fact, he craves it, so the more you treat him like an invalid, the more he'll retreat. Do you understand?"

"Loud and fucking clear, doc."

"I think I've said more than enough, Sloan. This meeting is over."

I wanted to slap myself upside my head. The last thing I needed was to antagonize this man who'd broken all kinds of rules to help me figure this out.

"Dr. Butterman, please forgive me," I begged, holding on to his arm. "I never censor what comes out of my mouth. I *do* love my roommate, even though it's hopeless and one-sided. He's never admitted that he cares about me, let alone that he's bisexual. The possibility of Cole and I becoming life partners is slim to none, but I plan to treat him like anyone else for as long as he wants me around. He'll be married soon and his wife can take over."

"Don't be so sure of that."

"What?"

Dr. Butterman shook his head and said, "You are going to get me into all kinds of trouble."

"Just answer one question, Dr. Butterman. Is there hope for me and him?"

"Yes."

I threw my arms around his neck and held on as if he was a lifesaver. When I stepped back, I looked into his eyes and asked, "Are you completely blind?"

"Not one hundred percent. I'm legally blind, but I can see some."

"Is that they way it is for Cole right now?"

"Cole who?"

"Thank you," I whispered, "for everything."

"Drop by whenever you'd like a tour, Sloan."

"Yes, I will. Thank you!" I knew I was babbling, but I couldn't help it. Nervous energy was running riot through my body. I needed some weed, some downtime, and a whole lot of smarts to figure this out.

## "GUIDE DOGS OF AMERICA. How may I help you?"

Cole introduced himself and started the initial process of acquiring a guide dog. He'd opted for GDA because of the many endorsements he'd read on their Web site, as well as recommendations from the people at Lighthouse. One important factor was that they accepted applicants who were not completely blind. They had certain criteria for range of vision, and Cole seemed to fit within their parameters. Right now he was still considered legally blind. Someday he'd be completely blind, but that day had yet to come.

He was told the process could take anywhere from three to six months, depending on how fast the paperwork requirements were fulfilled. The most important thing he learned was that he had to be an independent traveler, well able to take public modes of transportation on his own. This included subways and buses, in addition to escalators and elevators.

Part of the application process would involve a home interview, as well as personal references and medical reports to determine the extent of his eye problems. After all the paperwork was complete and he was approved, Cole would be required to fly to Los Angeles and

take a bus to the town of Slymar, which was located in the San Fernando Valley. That was where the training would take place.

He would be assigned a personal trainer, along with his own guide dog, but he would have to remain there for twenty-eight days. When he asked how they determined the type of dog he would receive, he was told they took several factors into consideration, such as lifestyle, personality, and environment. Also important was his size and strength, the pace of his walk, and his energy level.

The most amazing thing of all was that these dogs were free. They were donated to the right candidates, rather than sold. It was a revelation to Cole that a society like this even existed. Because GDA was a charity-based organization, they were fastidious in their selection. Their primary concern was making sure the dog and the owner were a good match and would be able to work well together. It was very rare that a dog and owner were not a good fit, but it did happen, so the twenty-eight day training out in California was a critical time for both dog and master. Cole asked about dog breeds and was informed that seventy percent of their guide dogs were Labrador Retrievers. The remaining thirty percent were divided between Golden Retrievers and German Shepherds.

It all sounded very daunting, but the lady on the phone was wonderfully supportive, and by the time Cole hung up, he was convinced he was doing the right thing.

The first order of business was to get tested—to find out whether his asthma would be aggravated by a dog. The second important thing was to ditch the taxis and get used to the subway. He knew he would be terrified the first few times, certain he'd have another mishap, but he was determined to become independent. In a sense, the thought of the guide dog was comforting and inspirational. He knew they'd have to rely on each other, and if the dog was able to go through months of training before meeting him, he felt it was only fair he train as well.

It was exciting to have something to look forward to instead of brooding over what he'd lost. His meltdown last night had triggered a new resolve in him. He almost felt like his old self today, interested in a future suddenly rather than coasting and waiting for events to unfurl. His interest in Sloan was a guiding force, and he wasn't going to hide from it anymore. He planned to explore it as honestly as possible, and if he lost Juliana in the process, then he would try to accept the fact that they weren't meant to be together.

It was easier said than done, especially when his family was pushing for the wedding and already talking up the plans for the big day. Juliana and his mother were meeting for lunch next week to begin choosing different venues for the parties they would be hosting leading up to the wedding. He had yet to buy an engagement ring, but he had no doubt in his mind that his parents had already decided where and what he would get.

He was in the kitchen when he heard the front door open and Sloan strolled in.

"Hey," he said, acknowledging Sloan's presence with a nod. "Are you hungry?"

"I could eat," Sloan replied. "What are you offering?" He seemed rather subdued, and Cole moved closer to try and get a better look, but Sloan turned away.

"I made a chicken and broccoli casserole."

"My mother used to make that." Sloan sounded surprised. "Yeah, I'll have some."

Sloan washed his hands while Cole got the food. He spooned a hefty portion onto a plate and placed it on the table, along with a glass of milk. Sloan slid into the seat and commented, "I'm not a milk drinker, Cole."

"Don't you like the taste?"

"Not really."

"It's good for you," Cole said, trying to convince him.

"So are Brussels sprouts, but I hate them. I don't usually do what's good for me."

"I noticed," Cole replied disapprovingly. "Would you rather have a soda?"

"I'll drink the milk, since you've already poured it, but next time, ask me first, okay?"

"Okay," Cole answered, secretly pleased. He wanted to take care of Sloan, and feeding him properly would be a good start. His attitude seemed much better this evening.

"Wow, this is really good, Cole. It's almost the same recipe as my mother's."

"Well, I learned it from my mom who may have gotten the recipe from yours. Who knows?"

Sloan ate quickly, washing it down with the dreaded milk. "That was good. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Are you going out tonight?" Cole asked, trying to make it sound as casual as possible.

"I have no plans, why?"

"I thought we could watch a movie, maybe have some popcorn and hang out."

Cole couldn't see the shocked look on Sloan's face, but he heard the intonation of his voice. "You want to hang out with me?"

"Yeah, is that okay?" He pushed away the lock of hair that had fallen over his eyes. "I need a haircut," he mumbled, almost to himself. "I think I'll get it cut really short."

"Don't do that," Sloan said gently, running his fingers through Cole's silky hair. "I love it just the way it is."

"Do you?" Cole was ridiculously pleased.

"I do."

"What else do you like about me?" Cole asked, unable to squelch that question.

"I love your mouth and can easily lose myself in your eyes," Sloan replied, his voice shifting down.

"Sloan?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry about the crap I've been giving you."

"What crap?" Sloan asked, now holding Cole's hand.

"My lame attempts to have it all. I know it's not possible. I need to take a stand, one way or the other."

"When did you have this epiphany?" Sloan asked, moving a little closer.

"Last night, after you called me a whore."

"Cole," Sloan whispered his name and stood quickly, wrapping his arms around him. He began to kiss his neck, sucking up marks along the way, murmuring endearments that Cole couldn't make out but sounded so good. He closed his eyes and let himself go with it. This was how he imagined it would be without the fighting. This was the Sloan he craved when he lay in bed at night by himself.

"I want you," Sloan said, in a voice that was suddenly shaky.

"Take me"

"Yeah?" Sloan acted surprised. "Do you know what I mean?"

"You want to fuck me?"

"God, yes," Sloan admitted, pressing against Cole's thigh. Cole could feel Sloan's excitement, which only served to heighten his, and the blood rushed to his groin. He was light-headed with desire, practically fainting with the thought of what was coming next. "Take me," Cole begged again, wanting this more than anything else.

They left the kitchen, hand-in-hand, and entered Cole's bedroom. Sloan moved Cole toward the bed and began to remove his clothes, sliding his shirt off and dropping it on the floor. His pants were next and Sloan slipped his hands under the waistband and tugged, pulling them off easily.

Cole felt the blood rushing through his veins, every beat of his heart confirming his need for Sloan. He cried out when Sloan began to lick the dark nipples that puckered in response. He heard needy, purring noises coming from his throat, a feat that only Sloan had been able to accomplish. His touch was a balm that his torn-up psyche sucked up eagerly, like a spray of water in the dead of summer, unexpected but fully appreciated. He'd never felt so cherished and desired.

Cole felt Sloan kissing a trail of wet marks that symbolized his possession. Sloan had removed his own clothes a while back, and Cole felt Sloan's erection pushing against his hot skin, further proof of his desire.

He stopped breathing in shocked surprise when he realized where Sloan was headed. He felt Sloan parting his legs, his mouth and tongue all over him. Cole's breathing resumed with a gasp when Sloan paid homage to a part of him that had never been touched before. The thought of what Sloan was doing to him was repugnant and forbidden, but it was the most erotic thing he'd ever experienced in his life. His body was reacting to the pleasure despite his fear and trepidation. He moaned with each twirl of Sloan's tongue as it teased and licked at the skin around his asshole. He spread his legs even wider, lifting his hips to give Sloan further access. He was acting like the whore Sloan had accused him of being, but loving every minute of it.

Sloan pulled away for a second, rooting around in the drawer, "Cole, do you have lube?"

"It's way in the back," Cole replied, hardly able to contain his excitement. His cock pressed heavily against his stomach and he was desperate to get off, but he also wanted Sloan to possess him, so he waited patiently as his roommate fumbled with the condom and the lube

Finally, Sloan was ready and he whispered, "You sure?" "Yes"

Cole watched eagerly as Sloan slicked himself. He cried out when Sloan inserted two slippery fingers into him, stretching him gently.

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"Patience, Cole. I don't want to hurt you."
"Please, you won't hurt me."
"Trust me."
"I want this"
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Cole felt Sloan position himself, and he held his breath in anticipation of the push that turned out to be much more intense than he'd bargained for. The combination of Sloan's size and his virgin canal was overwhelming, but he took a deep breath and willed himself to relax, all the while receiving the hot kisses Sloan rained over his face.

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"God, you're tight," Sloan huffed.
"You're fucking huge," Cole gasped.
"Sorry."
"Don't be, just go slow."
"Okay."
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When Cole's body finally made the adjustment, Sloan resumed his movements, thrusting in and out gently. His rhythm began to pick up in direct proportion to Cole's accelerated breaths and soon Cole felt him pumping in and out with abandon. Sloan's hair fell forward in an unruly mop, tickling Cole's face while his breath escaped in tiny puffs. Cole wrapped his legs around Sloan's slim hips and almost lost it when he felt Sloan's cock nudge his prostate. It was another first and yanked the scream right out of his throat.

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"Jesus, Sloan, you're killing me."
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Good... Cole, you feel so good."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I need to come," Cole moaned, feeling his balls drawing up, one second from an orgasm.

<sup>&</sup>quot;We'll come together."

And they did, pushed over the edge of control in a glorious shuddering of nerve endings. It was, by all counts, Cole's finest orgasm ever.

I LAY in bed, unable to stop the tears from leaking out of my eyes. Fortunately, Cole had gone to the bathroom, so he would never see how emotional I was. I wanted to tell him I loved him, but I knew he wasn't ready to hear it. The steps he took tonight were monstrous enough; he didn't need to be burdened by my romantic notions.

But there was no denying my feelings anymore. I couldn't rationalize this or make it go away. I was in love with him and regardless of who he chose or which lifestyle he ultimately picked, I knew he would be a part of me forever. I didn't know how to reconcile my newfound knowledge of his eye impairment. I hoped he would tell me willingly and not leave it the big secret he was trying to keep away from me, but it was his decision to make. All I could do was wait it out and help him, whenever I had a chance, without it being too obvious.

It was ironic that it never occurred to me to share my own secret. I didn't think he'd be interested or care enough to deal with my cutting issues. It would be an additional burden, which I would never impose on him. It was best to keep it to myself and leave him as stress-free as possible.

Dr. Butterman had admonished me to act normal. My normal wasn't really the norm, so instead, I decided to act abnormal. I was going to go out of my way to be the nicest, most solicitous roommate a guy could ever have. The rest was up to fate.

And on the heels of that decision, fate knocked on our door via two phone calls, one after the other. Juliana was on her way, and so was Max. Cole and I scrambled to get ready.

MAX was acting like a kid with a new toy. He had pictures of me hung all over the studio, and even though it was late, he'd insisted on driving over there so I could see them. He still hadn't heard from Klas regarding an offer, but he was very confident they would want me to sign on as the next face for their men's line. I was very skeptical, puzzled by the hype. I'd never look in a mirror and see the beauty Max was raving about, but I was grateful for the attention and the eventual money, if it panned out.

Right now my head was so far removed from photos and contracts I could barely keep up with Max's chatter. My mind was on Cole and the stricken look on his face when he learned Juliana was dropping by the apartment.

"I can't see her right now," he'd protested, still glowing after our session.

- "You have to, Cole. It would look weird if you didn't."
- "I want to stay in bed with you for the rest of the night."
- "I know you do and so would I, but we're sort of stuck."
- "Are you planning on having sex with Max?"

"How can you ask that after what we just shared?"

Cole shrugged his shoulders and looked away. "I'm feeling very possessive suddenly."

"I'm flattered, but you have issues to deal with as well. You may end up in bed with her, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it."

"Sloan." He stopped me, just as I was leaving to change.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for tonight, I'll never forget this."

"I hope you won't have to, Cole. I plan on having many memorable nights with you," I said in parting.

But that was earlier, and now I sat here with Max, stewing in my old insecurities. I was sure that Cole would come to his senses and tell me it was another one-shot. He was probably in bed right now, fucking Juliana

"Hey." Max interrupted my train of thought. "What's going on in that gorgeous head?"

"Not much." I'm sure I sounded awful because Max took notice.

"Why so grim?" he asked. "You should be ecstatic over these photos and the upcoming contract."

"It's not real, Max. I can't get excited about something until it happens."

"When are you going to learn to trust me? Have I steered you wrong at any time?"

"No, I can't say that you have. You've been pretty honest with me."

"Exactly, and I expect the same from you. Now, what's troubling you?"

"Nothing. I just have a lot on my mind."

"I know that's a crock of shit, Sloan, but I won't press. You'll tell me when you're ready."

I nodded, grateful for the reprieve. He really was a great guy, and I could have easily fallen for him if I weren't so crazy about Cole. Max was a better option, come to think of it. He was rich and famous, possessed mad skills in bed and had a deviant side to him that piqued my curiosity; however, I wasn't in love with him, and probably never would be.

This brought me to another worry I had easily overlooked. What would Max do if I told him I didn't want a relationship with him, other than the one here at the studio? Would he get pissed and cancel my contract? Tell the entire modeling world I was a cutter and an insecure piece of shit? I had no idea what kind of ex-lover Max would be, and the sad thing was that if I chose Cole and dumped Max, I would probably end up alone. The thought that Cole would walk away from Juliana and his commitments was inconceivable. I was willing to bet all the money I would potentially make that Cole would abandon our relationship, if you could even call it that.

"I know just the thing to take your mind off your troubles," Max said, invading my thoughts again.

"What's that?"

"I think a session with my flogger might do the trick."

"What?"

"Don't you remember how good you felt after the spanking?"

"Um, yeah, but I wasn't planning on having a scene tonight."

"Why not? You're preoccupied with something and I can fix it."

"I don't know, Max, I'm not up to the idea."

He leaned in and kissed me, rubbing my groin and then pulling away with a smirk. "Tell that to your cock. It appears to be in complete disagreement with your mouth."

"Bastard," I huffed, annoyed by my body's betrayal.

He laughed, delighted by his effect on me. "Come, Beauty. We're off to my place."

I followed reluctantly, more embarrassed by my words to Cole earlier this evening than what I was about to do. I'd told Cole that I had no wish to go to bed with another man, and here I was, following willingly. It made his situation with Juliana much more understandable. Sometimes we just needed to do what we needed to do.

Max's apartment was exactly the way I remembered it. His bedroom was bypassed this time and we headed to another room I had never seen before. He called it his playroom and proudly showed off his instruments of torture. I felt like I'd walked in to the Marquis de Sade's headquarters.

"What the fuck is this?" I asked, holding up some clips that looked like they would hurt like hell.

"Nipple clamps, my pretty."

"Oh God. Don't talk like that, Max. It's creepy."

"Why? Is my Count Dracula accent bothering you?" he grinned.

"Yes, especially in a room such as this."

I continued to walk around the room, picking up whips and discarding them. There were piles of *toys* everywhere. I spent some time perusing them while Max looked on in amusement. He seemed to be waiting to see what would interest me, so I was careful to pick things that I didn't think would leave me in too much pain. There were some pieces that looked like they'd feel good, such as the feather boas and soft strips of leather attached to wooden handles, but there were also nasty-looking things that reminded me of the Inquisition and torture chambers. There was a table with hooks on all four corners, and a leather apparatus hanging from the ceiling. I supposed it was the infamous sling I'd read about but never used. I picked up a black leather glove that had metal spikes sticking out of it and I dropped it quickly. My eye was drawn to a steel basket that looked like something a baseball catcher would use to protect his crotch. "What's this, Max?"

"It's a cock harness, Sloan. It prevents you from coming."

I was appalled. "That's barbaric."

"It enhances the pleasure, Sloan."

"I find that hard to believe."

He shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall, ever so patient as I continued to tour the place.

"What is this?" I pointed to a block of wood that resembled a telephone pole in the middle of the room. It had a big O ring on top of it—the better to hang someone with, I presumed.

"It's an old-fashioned whipping pole."

"Whipping?" I squeaked, already cringing at the thought.

"You're not very adventurous for someone who likes to cut," Max commented

I spun around and glared him. "I don't cut because I like it!"

"Oh, right. You cut because you need to." Max's reply was scathing, which made me even angrier.

"I thought you understood, Max!" I raised my voice, really upset. He wasn't very nice at the moment and I could feel his bite.

"I do understand, Sloan, apparently more than you."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means you're kidding yourself if you think you're not into pain. You crave it the way other people crave drugs."

"That's not true!" I insisted, shocked by his remark.

"You don't want it to be true. You'd rather believe that you cut because of your insecurities, not because you're a little pain slut."

"No!"

"Let me prove it to you."

"How?"

"I'd like you to experience a session at the whipping post. If you're not hard and ready to have the most amazing orgasm of your life by the time we're done, I'll never bring this up again."

"What do you get out of this?" I'd read about the dynamic between Dominant and submissive, I just didn't get the concept.

"I get off on your surrender and seeing you taken to sexual heights you've never experienced before."

"What if I say no?"

"Then we turn around and leave this room. This has to be consensual, Sloan. I would never force you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable. Plus, we have to discuss a safe word. We haven't done that yet."

"What's that?"

"It's a word you choose before the start of a session. Something you don't often say, but it will stop me instantly. Use of that word will end the session if that's what you require. It's like a life net for you."

"What's wrong with stop?"

Max smiled. "Around here, stop usually means go."

"So, should I pick a word?"

"Yes."

"How about red?"

"That's a pretty common safe word."

"And if I do turn out to be the pain slut you so delicately allude to, then what?"

"Then we need to discuss your options."

"What kind of options does someone like me have?"

"The possibilities for what you need are endless, my darling. I can introduce you to every instrument of pain imaginable."

"Fuck, Max. How perverted is this?"

"It's not perverted at all. One man's pain is another's pleasure."

"Christ"

"Take off your clothes, Sloan."

"I haven't said I'd do it"

"You haven't," Max said, grabbing my crotch and squeezing hard, "but this erection says it all."

I began to strip, still not convinced that this was what I wanted. I knew why I cut myself, and it had nothing to do with pleasure. The thought of voluntarily submitting to torture seemed rather extreme, even for me, but I was willing to try anything once. If Max could see this side of me, then maybe I was just fooling myself into thinking I didn't need it.

"How does the pain shift to pleasure?" I asked while Max moved toward me, now that I had stripped down to my boxers.

"Off with this," he ordered, the shift in his voice easily apparent. I was supposed to be aroused by this sort of behavior and mode of speech, according to the book, but I was annoyed at being ordered around. Not a good sign. I stripped off the underwear and stood silently as Max walked around me, like a panther circling a victim. Unfortunately, my cock seemed to enjoy all the attention, as it was rising to the occasion quite rapidly.

"I think I'll put a cock ring on you, Sloan. I don't want you coming too soon."

"Okay."

"I'd like you to address me as Sir when we're in this environment."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me!"

"Yes... Sir."

His smile said it all. Hearing that word out of my mouth seemed to increase his interest, as evidenced by the tenting of cloth near his crotch. He wrapped his hand around my distended cock, which made me groan in appreciation. It was involuntary and had nothing to do with him or the environment, but he kissed me, excited by my reaction.

"You really are quite lovely," he purred, the rumble coming from deep in his chest. "I'm almost tempted to suck you to knock the edge off."

"Please do," I replied, hoping he'd give in to temptation.

"You'd like that wouldn't you, my beauty?"

"Yes." I was starting to rut against his hand.

He pulled away, disregarding my groan of protest, and he reached for a leather cuff of sorts and wrapped it around my cock. I was imprisoned quite effectively. "That should keep you out of mischief for a while," he said.

I was about to protest, but I realized that this is how it would begin. This act of restraining my cock was the start of what I assumed would be his attempt to dominate me and prevent me from having an orgasm without his okay.

He moved me toward the whipping pole and tethered my arms to the leather restraints that were attached to the O ring. He rubbed my ass and my back, speaking in a soft voice, lulling me into what I assumed would be a compliant state. "Are you ready for this, my darling boy?"

I nodded.

"Say it, darling. I need to hear the words."

"Yes, Sir."

"And you'll remember to use the safe word any time you want me to stop."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Sir... yes, Sir."

"We begin then." He picked up a short stick, wrapped in dark brown leather with three strips of suede hanging from it. It had knots on the end, which would probably sting after a certain point. I was apprehensive suddenly, and I felt my heart rate starting to speed up. What the fuck was I thinking? I was completely at his mercy, but he must have sensed my discomfort because he moved back almost immediately, touching with a gentle hand, rubbing and soothing till I settled down again.

"Don't be afraid, darling. Trust me."

I nodded quickly, just wanting to get this over with. Regardless of what he said, I knew I'd be using that word shortly. I kept saying it over and over in my head as the panic began to build. *Red... red... red.* 

30

THE sound of silence was a blessing after all the screaming that had occurred about half an hour ago. Juliana had finally stormed out, slamming doors and calling him names along the way. He couldn't believe the vile things she'd said after professing to love him for as long as she had.

Everything started to go to shit when she'd insisted on having sex with him and he'd refused. She was insulted and humiliated by his rejection, questioning the reason and accusing him of cheating.

"You must be seeing someone else," she challenged. "This explains your irrational behavior all of a sudden."

"What behavior?" Cole asked, completely nonplussed.

"This whole business of wanting to be independent when you know damn well you never will be! Why do you want to learn how to ride the subway? Are you meeting some poor working girl who's yanking your chain? Am I not woman enough for you, Cole?"

"Juliana, calm down. This has nothing to do with you or another woman. This has to do with the guide dog that I've applied for."

"What guide dog?"

Cole rolled his eyes and shook his head, exasperated by the entire conversation. "The one I've spoken about before."

"I don't remember talking about a dog."

"You don't remember because it doesn't fit in with your idea of our happily-ever-after."

"You're mean and hateful."

"You are selfish and insensitive," Cole countered.

"Why? I don't want the world to feel sorry for you. If they see you with a guide dog, they'll think you're pitiful."

"Maybe I am, Juliana, for thinking that you actually love me."

"Of course I love you. I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

"You mean you wouldn't be with a blind man if you didn't."

"You are not blind!"

"Not yet, but I will be!" Cole was screaming by now.

"I refuse to discuss it. You have to fight this, Cole. You're giving in too easily."

"This is not a cold, Juliana. This is something I cannot fight. It just is."

"I don't believe you've done everything possible to prevent this. Surely there is something that can be done to reverse this? Why can't you have some sort of transplant surgery?"

"There's no such thing, Juliana. We've had this discussion once before."

"I don't remember talking about it."

"Because you didn't get the right answers."

"It's not fair."

"Life isn't fair."

"I'm sick of hearing that! I didn't sign on for this when I fell in love with you. I was going to marry a professional ballplayer, have children, travel, just like your mother."

"So it finally comes out," Cole said, saddened by her revelation.

"I'm sorry, Cole. I didn't mean that." She had tears in her eyes, embarrassed by her slip.

"No need. At least we're doing this now while there's still time. No papers have been signed, no rings exchanged. You are free to go, Juliana."

She was shocked by his unemotional reaction, but when she finally realized her engagement had just ended, her shock quickly turned to rage. "You *do* have someone else. You wouldn't be so quick to get rid of me if you didn't have someone on the side."

"There is no other woman"

"You can't do this to me, Cole! I've invested a lot of time and energy in this relationship."

"So have I, Juliana. I'm sorry about that. We should have terminated this as soon as I found out I was going blind. I was wrong to expect you to care for a disabled person for the rest of your life."

"I don't mind but you won't let me."

"Our ideas of 'care for' are very different."

"There you go again," she threw out, "making me feel guilty."

"I'm not trying to make you feel guilty. On the contrary, I'm trying to make you feel better about this breakup. It's not a good match anymore. It hasn't been for a long time."

"Why'd you ask me to marry you? Why?" she screamed.

"Guilt, I suppose. I felt I owed you."

"You do!"

"I guess I do, but this isn't the way to pay you back. I'm really sorry."

"Fuck you, Cole! I've had it with all the bullshit."

"I'm sorry."

She left, making quite certain the entire building heard every door slam on her way out. He'd never heard Juliana talk like that, but he didn't blame her in the least. He was relieved it was over and done with.

That was an hour ago. It was now almost midnight and Sloan had not returned. Cole knew better than to expect an after-sex promise to be kept, but somehow he hoped this one would be different.

He'd given everything he had and even more. He'd done things with Sloan he'd only read about, and the reality was a thousand times better. He knew Sloan had more experience and would probably consider this just another tryst, and if that was the case, Cole would have to learn how to deal with it. Right now, he was still basking in the afterglow, despite the fight with Juliana, and despite the fact that Sloan wasn't home. He was sitting in a dark living room by himself, but he was happy for the first time in over three years.

HE'D fallen asleep and the sounds that woke him were new ones. Cole had learned to listen closer, to pick up nuances others missed, and this sound he was hearing was the soft cry of someone in extreme pain.

The house was still dark, so dawn hadn't come yet. He remembered falling asleep around midnight and he'd been alone.

He walked into his bedroom and saw nothing. The bed was still in the same condition he'd left it just before Juliana had arrived, shortly after Sloan had left. He walked into the bathroom and paused. Whatever he was hearing had come from within this room. He scanned it as best he could and saw nothing. The smell was back, though: the smell of blood.

He walked out and peeked into Sloan's room. It was empty as well, the silence deafening.

He was about to turn away when he heard the noise again, the sob that couldn't be held back, and the moan that came from the depths of hell

He walked back into the bathroom, but this time he looked down, not straight ahead, and that's when he saw him. Sloan was sitting in the tub, naked, his legs covered in blood. Cole could see only bits and pieces of it, which was just as well—the full extent of the horror in front of him would have made him gag or faint or both. He had no way of knowing that Sloan had lost it tonight and had truly done a number on his legs.

"Sloan, what happened?" he asked, kneeling on the floor beside the tub.

"Go away, Cole. Please, I can handle this."

He didn't recognize his voice. It wasn't the self-assured Sloan he was used to, the one that pushed and goaded him into doing the right thing. This was a man who seemed broken and lost.

"Were you in an accident?" Cole hoped he'd say yes; on the other hand, what kind of hospital personnel would release him in this condition?

"No," Sloan sobbed, pushing Cole away. "Just leave me, please."

"I can't leave you this way, let me help you."

"You can't help me, Cole. Nobody can." Sloan began to weep, pulling his legs up and hugging them tightly against his body. Cole wrapped his arms around the slim torso, noting how cold he was. He could feel Sloan shaking and he knew that he had to get him out of the tub, yet Sloan kept resisting.

"Sloan, please, let me care for you the way you cared for me. I want to help."

"Why? Why would you even waste a minute on me, Cole? I'm such a loser."

"Stop it! I want you to let me help you."

Sloan gave in and nodded, forgetting that Cole couldn't see, but since Cole didn't hear the verbal denial, he assumed it was okay to lift him up. He moved Sloan into the bedroom and made him lie flat on the bed, covering him with a towel. "I'm going to get some things from the bathroom, okay?"

"'Kay."

"I'm going to help you, Sloan. Will you let me?" There was no response and for a moment Cole thought that Sloan might have fainted. He shook him gently, "Sloan, dude, can you hear me?"

"Yes."

He bent down and kissed him on the lips, tasting the tears that were covering Sloan's face. "Whoever did this to you will pay," Cole said vehemently.

"I did this to me," Sloan whispered. "I'm sick."

"Should I call a doctor?"

"No!" Sloan was emphatic. "They'll lock me up and throw away the key."

"Sloan." Cole stopped his protest with a soft kiss. "Relax; I won't call anyone."

"Promise?" Sloan tugged at his arm, waiting to hear.

"I promise. It'll just be you and me, okay?"

"Thank you," Sloan replied, holding back another sob.

Cole was sick with worry, and the idea that someone or something had reduced his brash young friend into this needy wreck was twisting his gut. He needed to clean him up and assess the damage before he could figure out what had happened. "I'm going to get some supplies to sterilize the area."

"Just spray it with antiseptic. It'll heal on its own," Sloan said, choking out the words.

"Let me be the judge of that," Cole replied, the worry heavy in his voice. He would have given anything to be able to see the full extent of

the injury, but for now he'd have to feel his way. He had no idea if it was a knife that had ripped Sloan's skin; he just knew that he needed to stop the bleeding. He remembered injuries he'd sustained as a ballplayer. It usually started with horrendous pain that made you cold all over, and then the trembling would start as the body went into shock, followed by the inevitable fainting or light-headedness. Cole could tell that Sloan was close to passing out. The trembling in his body was getting worse and he was ice cold. He needed to take care of the immediate problem by getting him comfortable and in a better place before trying to understand what had happened. He walked into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet, pulling out cotton balls, antiseptic spray, and antibiotic cream. He didn't think BAND-AIDs would work, but he grabbed the box just in case.

He first dabbed at Sloan's legs with a warm washcloth, running his hand lightly over the wounds, letting his fingers see what he couldn't.

It felt like several gashes down each thigh, in the same spot he'd noticed last night when they were having sex. They were dry and crusty earlier, making him think that Sloan might have some sort of skin disease. This explained some of it.

"I'm going to spray now and it'll sting, okay?"

"Okay," Sloan whispered.

Cole sprayed liberally, wincing when he heard Sloan's sharp intake of breath. He knew this must hurt like hell, but Sloan was quiet and hardly moved. "I think I've got the worst of it, Sloan. It seems to have stopped bleeding."

"Thank you. I'll just go back to my bed so you don't have to deal with me anymore."

"You'll do no such thing! I want you right here where I can hold you."

"Why?" Sloan whimpered. "How could you possibly want me after this?"

## **Cutting Cords**

- "Shut up, Sloan. I want you, let it go at that."
- "Cole?"
- "Yeah?"
- "I'm really tired."
- "I know, dude. Did you sleep at all?"
- "No. Stay with me?"
- "Yes. I'll be here when you wake up."

31

I AWOKE to a familiar pain and an unfamiliar body snuggled up against mine. I was surprised to find myself in Cole's bed, despite his promise not to leave. I figured that when he finally came to his senses, he'd realize what a freak I was and move me out of his room and the apartment. Instead, I felt him spooning against me, his arm tight around my waist. He had slipped on sweats and a T-shirt sometime while I was asleep, but I was still naked, feeling very vulnerable.

"You awake?" he mumbled against my neck, making my skin erupt in goose bumps.

"Yeah."

"How do you feel?"

"Ashamed"

He rolled me over and looked straight into my eyes. I could tell that he could see me because his eyes turned stormy with concern. "There's nothing to be ashamed of."

"That's where you're wrong, Cole. There's plenty."

"I'm not arguing on an empty stomach," he said, shifting roles and bossing me around again. "Get up, get dressed, and come to the kitchen"

"You got it, Shogun."

"And stop calling me that!"

"Actually, I think it's kinda cool."

"Why?"

"I read the book, if you must know, after seeing it on your nightstand. I was taken by the whole mind-set of the ancient Japanese. They were honorable people, Cole. You would have made a great shogun."

Cole smiled. I could tell he was flattered by the compliment. "You continue to surprise me, Sloan. Why did you read the book?"

"I thought it might give us something to talk about."

"Thank you. It's one of my favorites. Now, get up, please," Cole asked in a much gentler tone of voice.

"Okay."

By the time I got to the kitchen, he had already made some coffee, which I noticed immediately. He'd also started a small pot of rice. Cole placed a light green porcelain platter in front of me with pieces of sashimi on one side, cooked shrimp and tuna on the other. "I wasn't sure if you ate raw fish or not," Cole said, "so I cooked yours."

"When did you do this?" I was shocked by the elaborate preparation.

"While you were sleeping."

"Wow."

"I guess you must be hungry. I don't hear any bitching about Pop-Tarts."

I laughed and reached for his hand, squeezing it really tight. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Start eating and I'll get you the rice."

"Are we always going to have breakfast like this?"

"If you'll eat it."

"I will."

"Do you eat raw fish?" Cole asked.

"I've never had any."

Cole picked up a piece with his chopsticks, dipped it in the sauce in front of him and put it close to my mouth. "Open up."

I did, expecting something fishy and slimy. Instead, the sauce tasted like ginger and soy while the fish sort of slid down my throat easily. "That was good."

"And nutritious. Have a little rice with it, so you get your carbs."

"Have you always been so nurturing?" I was curious about this side of Cole. He was an only son and spoiled rotten from what I'd seen earlier. I didn't know where this was coming from.

"I nurture the people I care about," he said quietly, almost afraid to say it out loud.

"Cole."

"You don't have to respond, Sloan. It is what it is."

"I need to talk about last night."

"Whenever you're ready, but I'd prefer that we eat first."

We finished up our meal in comfortable silence. The tension between us seemed to have evaporated, and all that was left was two guys enjoying each other's company.

As soon as we were done, I picked up our dishes, took them to the sink, and began to wash them. I put them on the drain board to drip dry. Cole didn't even bother arguing, since I'd told him the last time he'd cooked that I would clean up.

Finally, when everything had been put away, Cole pushed back his chair and followed me to the living room. He sat on the easy chair, across from the sofa where I was sitting.

"Do you mind sitting beside me?" I couldn't face the conversation this way. It would be easier if he had his arms around me.

Cole stood immediately and reclined on the sofa, positioning me in between his legs. He hefted me up against his chest and held me for a long time until I finally broke the silence and whispered the awful truth, "I'm a cutter, Cole."

"What's that?"

"I self-mutilate"

He was silent for a few minutes, and I gave him credit for not pushing me away or calling me all kinds of names. Instead, he took a few deep breaths and held me tight. Finally, he whispered in my ear, "I don't know much about it, Sloan. You'll have to educate me."

"I don't even know where to begin."

"Why don't you just blurt it out? I'll pick and choose what I find relevant."

"Do you want the psycho-babble version?"

"Sure."

"According to the books, most cutters self-mutilate to regain control over an uncontrollable life. By hurting ourselves on the outside we stop thinking about the internal pain."

"I see. Does it really help?"

"In my case I would say that it helps while I'm doing it." I snuggled in closer, comforted by Cole's nearness. "It doesn't take long for the internal struggles to come rushing back, and then I cut again. It's a horrible, vicious way of dealing with problems, but it's addictive, like alcohol or drugs. I can't seem to stop it."

"Have you ever sought a doctor's help?"

"You mean a shrink? I've seen several over the years, and although we've determined the cause, we can't control the effects."

"Have they ever put you on antidepressants?"

"Sure. I've had the best of care, Cole, but this need keeps turning up like the proverbial bad penny."

"Has it ever retreated a little bit?"

"Yes. When I feel good about myself, like when I got the scholarship to Pratt. I stopped cutting for over three months."

"What happened to trigger it again?"

"My mother died."

"Oh, Sloan, you know you have no control over death. How could cutting possibly take away the pain of someone dying?"

"It lets you focus on your own physical pain, rather than the mental one."

"Were you and your mom close?"

"Very. She got me, whereas my dad never did and still doesn't."

"My parents are sort of clueless about me as well, so don't feel like you're the only one with this problem."

"I don't. I know everyone has issues or problems they deal with on a daily basis. Some people drink, some smoke weed, others spend money like it's being printed in their garage. I happen to cut myself. I know it sounds so trite to explain it away like that, when it's a horrible, degrading way of dealing with hurt, but you become immune after a while."

"How many times have you cut yourself since you moved here?"

"Last night was the third time."

"Three times in almost three months. Is that good or average?"

"It's pretty good. I used to cut almost every day."

"Jesus Christ, Sloan. It's a wonder you have any skin on your legs."

"That's the thing. I used to do both my arms and legs. Rotate, kind of, but my parents started to comment on the long sleeves in the dead of summer, so now it's pretty much relegated to my upper thighs. No one ever sees them."

"I do."

I was silent, not wanting to remind him that I'd been naked with him two times and he hadn't noticed.

"What happened last night? I thought everything we shared would have eased whatever was troubling you enough to cut yourself."

"It was incredible, wasn't it?"

"It meant a lot to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. But what happened when you left?"

"Max."

"I knew that fucker was up to no good."

"No, Cole. It's not like that. He's been incredibly supportive, pushing me to do this photo shoot and possibly make zillions of dollars."

"What are you talking about?"

I told him about the modeling and the possible contract with Klas.

"What else is going on with you two? I know there's more."

"I've slept with him on more than one occasion."

"Did you last night?" he asked, angrier about that then the cutting.

"No."

"So what happened?"

"Have you ever heard of BDSM?"

"Hasn't everyone?"

I pushed away from him, shocked. "How come you have?"

"I'm well read," he deadpanned.

I laughed, immensely relieved by his answer. "Thank God. For a moment there I thought you were a closet Dom."

"I'm not," Cole replied, "but obviously Max is. Did he hurt you?" Cole asked, suddenly furious.

"No! It's all good, Cole. He thought that I might possibly be sub material, a pain slut, which would explain the cutting. I guess he was trying to help me figure out why I do this, but I'm not submissive nor do I crave pain."

"It wouldn't take a genius to figure that out," Cole snorted.

"That's not true. Some of the bossiest people are subs, from everything I've read. They get off on pain and submission, so I let Max tie me up and whip me last night to see if it would turn me on, but it didn't! I hated every minute of it."

"I can't believe you let him do that after what we shared."

"Please," I said, starting to feel the tears gathering again, "don't get me started."

"Fuck, Sloan! Don't you know how much you mean to me?"

I turned to face him, to see where this was coming from. He looked outraged that I had no idea what he was thinking all along, like I was supposed to be some sort of mind reader. "I didn't think I meant a goddamn thing to you, Cole. I'm your fuck buddy, aren't I? You'll marry Juliana and live happily ever after. I'll be a brief hiccup in your very straight and orderly life."

"Is that what you think?"

"Isn't it so?"

He shoved me away, got off the sofa, and moved over to the chair. He was furious, but I couldn't figure out why. I was just telling it the way I saw it.

"Get over here," he said, changing his mind about my proximity.

"Why? I don't feel like getting another lecture."

"There will be no lecture."

"What then?"

My resistance angered him even more and he stood and crossed the narrow space between us. He grabbed my T-shirt at the neck and hauled me up off the sofa. "You are, without a doubt, the most fucking aggravating person I know."

I tried to ask why, but he cut off my question by plunging his tongue down my throat. His kisses were hot, primal, and screamed possession. I'd never seen him quite this unrestrained, and it was a huge turn-on. I ached with desire, matching every one of his kisses with a fiery passion of my own. We were tearing at our clothes, ripping and biting them off impatiently, desperate to feel skin. I was surprised Cole had the presence of mind to think about a condom, because it never once crossed my mind. He could have fucked me raw right on our living room floor, and I would have let him. Cole seemed to be filled with an overpowering need to show me how much he cared by ravishing every part of my body. He barked out the order for me to stay, and practically sprinted to the bedroom to get the lube and condom. I made a mental note to start planting said items throughout the apartment for future ravishments.

By the time he came back I was leaking pre-cum all over my stomach. I needed to be fucked and I wanted it hard, so I pulled him down, spread my legs, and positioned him right where I wanted him. He thrust forward while I pushed up, slamming into him with a burning need. We fucked like it was our last day on earth, make-up sex that melted the paint off the walls.

"You're maddening," he growled, sucking up marks all over my neck.

I shocked us both by saying, "I love you," before I realized that the words had flown out of my mouth.

He paused for a split second, grunted once, and came in an explosion of heat, but not before I heard him whisper, "Me too."

32

"I BROKE our engagement," Cole said softly.

We were lying on the floor, replete from the massive surge of sexual energy, touching and kissing gently.

"I'm glad."

"Are you?" he asked. "Why?"

"Didn't you hear me say I love you?" I asked.

"Do you?" he countered.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"I think it was the first night I got here, when you threw me out of your room."

"All this time?"

"Yeah. I had my first cutting incident that night because of you."

"Jesus, Sloan. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what? That I was in love with you? You weren't exactly a free thinker then."

"You've changed me, you know that?"

"I haven't changed you, Cole. You're just growing and evolving."

"No. I started to change the first time you challenged me and called me a hypocrite. You saw right through me, Sloan."

"Maybe, but you've changed me as well. I'm more aware of my body and the horrible things I do to it."

"Why did you cut yourself after the session with Max?"

"I felt I'd lost everything. You were marrying Juliana, and Max was pissed because he didn't get the sub he wanted. There's a part of me that hoped he was right, that I *was* the pain slut he accused me of being. It would have solved my cutting issues, since Max is more than willing to dish out the pain. Unfortunately, it isn't the answer."

"What is?"

"Feeling worthy, validated, loved...."

"Sloan, you are."

"Say it again," I whispered, almost afraid to ask.

He got up on one elbow and looked down at me. His hair fell in a silky curtain, partially covering his face, but I parted it so I could see his eyes, while they could still see mine.

"I love you," Cole said, his voice shaking a little, but then becoming more forceful, and he said, "I love everything about you."

"No one has ever said that to me."

"I'll say it as often as you need to hear it, Sloan, because it's true."

"Thank you."

"Don't," he admonished, bending down and kissing me deeply. "Don't ever thank me for something I need as much as you do. You've given me back my life."

"What do you mean?"

"I need to tell you something," he said. "Something I've been hiding from you."

"I think I already know, Cole."

He squinted, looking at me intently, "What do you know?"

"I know about your eyes."

We were on the floor and he turned away with a sigh. "How long have you known?"

"Not long, Cole. I just found out."

His head whipped back at me, "Who told you?"

"Nobody. I followed you to The Lighthouse."

"You're a piece of shit."

"I know it, but I had to find out what was wrong."

"You still want me?" He put his arm on my hip and sort of rolled me over so that I was looking right at him. His deep blue eyes were swimming with tears, and he opened his mouth to say something but bit his lip instead. I blinked back my own tears, which had already been too close to the surface. My voice was trapped somewhere between a sob and a wail, tight from the effort of holding it all in and being strong for him, but I had to tell him how I felt.

"Please don't push me away."

"I can't," Cole replied, wrapping both arms around me. "I need someone who's not afraid to yell at me," he uttered, in a quiet voice that moved me even more. "I need someone to love at night, to make me feel like a man." He stopped for a minute, his voice breaking. "I need you to tell me I'm a fucking hypocrite on a daily basis."

"I can do that," I acknowledged, barely able to get the words out. "You have no idea how much I want to do this for you."

Cole nodded. "I also need someone to help me find my way in the dark."

"Cole...." I couldn't see him anymore; my tears were blinding me as I lay on his chest and broke down. I listened when his breath faltered once, and soon we were both crying.

"Sloan, I'm so scared." He sounded terrified.

"I'm here for you, Cole. Whatever obstacle you face, we'll face it together."

"Why would you waste your life on an invalid?"

"You are not a fucking invalid!" I shook him gently to get his attention. "You have to know that you're so much more."

"I'd like to think so."

"Believe me! The man I love is way more than the sum total of his eyes."

"This is why I need you," he groaned, turning his face and burrowing into my neck.

"You don't need me, Cole. You can do anything on your own, but if you'll have me, I'd like to come along for the ride."

"I'd love to have you by my side, but promise me one thing, Sloan."

"What?"

"No more cutting."

"I don't know if I can control it"

"If I can figure out how to walk around with no eyes, you better fucking well figure out how to stop cutting."

"Will you help me?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

"I was being polite for a change."

Cole laughed despite the drama of the moment. "Whenever you get the urge, you come to me. If I have to tie your hands to mine for days on end, I will."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Hey, I can be as big an asshole as you. No more cutting bullshit, understand?"

"I'll try, Cole. That's all I can promise. I'll really, really try."

"I guess that's all I can ask."

Cole and I spent the next forty-eight hours in each other's arms, with our comfort level growing as swiftly as the love we now declared freely and openly. He made good on his promise and told me how much he loved me several times a day, which only made me love him even more.

This morning I decided we were going to do something completely unexpected and fun for a change. But first I had to tell Emily what was going on. She deserved to know after texting me on a daily basis with the same old refrain, *move on*. She wasn't in, so I sent her a text, *he loves me*. I put in the little heart symbols in case she didn't get it. I could just imagine her jumping up and down and getting all girly; she was a romantic and loved a happy ending. I was leaning against Cole when I sent the message, and he kissed my cheek as he looked over my shoulder. I turned and kissed him back, saying everything with my lips.

"What did you tell her?"

"That you love me."

"I do," Cole said gently, "more and more each day."

His blistering kiss confirmed it without a doubt.

"Now, what is this exciting thing you've got planned for us?" Cole asked, reluctantly leaving my mouth.

"We're going to Central Park to throw some balls."

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" Cole asked, bemused.

"Listen, Cole. I was a pretty good catcher, and I heard you were an incredible pitcher. I think if I can manage to catch your goddamn balls, you can fucking well throw them in a straight line." "You think so?" He smiled and shook his head. "You're something else, you know that? How do you expect me to see your mitt, dummy?"

"Spray paint in a horrible luminescent orange."

"Actually, that might work. I can still see colors."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Cole said, smiling.

We got out of bed and dressed quickly. Cole swore he had his baseball gear stuffed in some bag in the hall closet, so we spent a good half hour getting it together. There was a drug store a few blocks away, and we bought a can of spray paint in a god-awful green. They didn't have orange, so green would have to work. After spraying the glove liberally, I threw it in a plastic bag so the fresh paint could dry on our way to the park.

"We're taking the subway," I announced.

"Yes," Cole agreed, happy I'd suggested it.

I let him walk ahead of me. I wanted him to feel like he was alone, so he could get more and more comfortable with the idea. He only tripped once, and that's because there was a dip in the concrete. I didn't rush to help. I just stood back and let him make the adjustment. He'd know better the next time around.

When we got to the park, we held hands while we walked around to find a good spot. There were a few makeshift pitcher mounds I could see, and I picked an area that was away from the others, just in case Cole threw a few wild ones to start.

I pulled the catcher's mitt out of the bag. It was almost dry and I figured that the worst that could happen would be some puke-green baseballs by the end of the day. I paced out the requisite sixty feet and six inches from the mound and set up my gear. I went back to the mound where Cole was waiting, stretching his arm and getting ready to throw

"I need for you to look at my mitt and tell me when you stop seeing it. You ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. You sure you want to attempt this?"

"Fuck yeah. It'll be fun. Just remember, Cole, *stay back, stay closed, and follow your front side to the hole,*" we both said at the same time, laughing and thinking of our fathers. It had been their mantra for years.

I started to back up slowly, holding the glove at his eye level. "Can you see this?"

"Yes"

I backed up several more feet, still holding up my hand. "How about here?"

"I can make out the green, vaguely."

I moved back a few feet at a time, waiting for his signal. I was about thirty feet from where I'd laid down my gear when he said *stop*. I was impressed he could make out the color of my glove at this distance, and although it was half of the requisite length, it was far enough for him to get in some good pitches.

"Okay, Cole. Let her rip."

The first pitch was wild, as was the second. I raised my glove and waved it back and forth.

"Can you see the color?" I yelled, worried I'd misjudged.

"Sort of."

"Hit to my voice, Cole. I'll catch whatever you got."

He reached into the bucket of balls we'd brought along. I wasn't sure if Cole would be able to catch my return balls, so the supply in the bucket would prevent us from having to stop every few minutes. We could tackle that problem another day. For now, I just wanted him to enjoy pitching. The next throw was wild again, but the ones that followed landed in my glove. I could feel his confidence grow as the pitches got stronger and soon I was struggling to catch the damn things.

"Time out," I yelled, running up to the mound.

"What's up?" Cole asked. His cheeks were rosy red and he looked happier than I'd ever seen him.

"Are you having fun?"

"I'm having a blast."

"Lighten up on the speed, okay? I haven't caught a ball in years."

"You got it. Sloan?" he called out as I was walking back to my spot.

"What?"

"Love you."

I beamed and trotted back to him. I threw my arms around his neck and drew him close enough so I could kiss him on the cheek and hold him tight for a minute, "I love you too, my shogun. Come on, let's play ball."



GRAND CENTRAL STATION at rush hour was as close to hell as one could imagine for someone who was sight-impaired. This morning wasn't any different, with a crowd that surged to and fro, rushing to catch trains, running up stairs, or packing the escalators. Cole was jostled a few times, but he was undaunted, holding onto Freddie's harness and moving forward steadily. Sloan had indicated they would be underneath the big clock in the main lobby, easy enough to find for someone who took this mode of transportation on a daily basis.

Cole felt many people glance his way, attracted by the Golden Retriever at his side. He and Freddie always seemed to gather a small crowd wherever they went because they made such an attractive pair. Most people were tempted to reach out and touch the dog or make small talk with Cole, since the sight of such a handsome young man with a guide dog was unusual. The fact that he was always dressed in a handmade Italian suit, meticulously laid out by Sloan each morning, helped to add to the allure of his new persona. Cole knew he looked good, and the newfound confidence of being in a healthy, happy relationship showed in his gentle smile and easygoing manner. Gone was the uptight historian who lived in a black-and-white universe. This man was much more flexible, capable of circumventing any hurdle that blocked his way.

Cole could tell they were close to the photo shoot; Freddie's long golden tail began to wag joyously at the sight of Sloan, swishing lightly against Cole's pants. When the dog stopped and came to rest at his feet, Cole surmised they had arrived. And sure enough, he felt the energy change around him as Sloan approached. Cole and his dog were embraced in turn, with a few extra moments being spent on the dog, scratching behind his ears and slipping him the small treat Sloan always carried in his pocket. If Cole had a tail, he would have wagged it as happily as Freddie, but instead, his smile widened and he got up on tiptoes and bussed Sloan's lips, careful not to smear the makeup.

"Hey," Cole whispered lovingly. He'd missed his partner at breakfast because the photo shoot had started at five, well ahead of the commuters. Max always liked to get an early start, and Sloan was nothing but compliant, eager to oblige the man who'd negotiated his two-million-dollar contract with Klas cosmetics.

Max stopped directing his assistants for a second and greeted Cole, in deference to Sloan, who'd insisted they treat his partner with the utmost respect. Max and Cole had worked out a reluctant truce between them, as soon as it was established that Sloan would be the new face for Klas, and Cole had become a permanent fixture in Sloan's bed and his life. Max was first and foremost a practical man. He would have never created a rift between himself and Sloan just because he'd opted not to partake of his brand of loving.

Sloan was a walking, talking, money machine. He'd exploded on the modeling scene as Max had predicted. The funny part was, despite all the media hype, Sloan never looked in the mirror twice. He bore the attention gracefully, but his world centered on Cole, their dog, and the life they'd built over the last ten months. He was happier than ever before, having gained a few pounds and admitting to only two cutting incidents in all the time he and Cole were together.

The first was when Cole fell again, on an escalator this time, and he had to force himself to stand back and let Cole manage on his own, even as the tears ran down Sloan's face. It upset him so much that later that night he began scratching at his thighs with his nails until Cole

walked in on him, clasped his hands, and growled, threatening to tie him up if he didn't behave.

The second incident occurred the night their fathers showed up unexpectedly. Joe Driscoll had been surprisingly supportive of the new relationship, despite the fact he'd been summoned to New York by a blistering phone call from Ken, accusing Sloan of warping Cole's mind. Joe countered by telling Ken to fuck off and face reality the way he had years ago when Sloan admitted he was gay. Joe was relieved that Sloan was finally settled and content. Ken went a little crazy, as expected.

The ensuing blow-up lasted for several hours, and it included a lot of name-calling and angry accusations, but Cole had stood firm with his arm around Sloan. He announced in no uncertain terms that he was gay, and his family would have to learn to live with it. It was a proud moment for the couple, but that night Sloan reached for the blade and was stopped after the first cut. His fear that Cole would regret his stand was washed away as efficiently as the warm water Cole applied to his wound. He reassured him that he wasn't going anywhere, and the loving attention he received in Cole's arms settled him and made him throw away the blade the next morning.

"How long can you stay?" Sloan asked.

"My class doesn't start until eleven."

"Good. We'll break in a few, and then maybe we can grab a coffee."

"Have you eaten anything at all?"

"Not since dinner."

"What have I told you?"

"No time, dude. I was crazed this morning."

"Well, fortunately, I know you far too well," Cole said. He dug into the side pocket of his briefcase and pulled out an energy bar loaded with protein. "Eat."

Sloan smiled and reached for the bar. "Thank you."

"Welcome. I have a vested interest in your health," Cole teased.

"Oh?"

"I refuse to put up with an exhausted partner at the end of the day."

"And why's that?" Sloan leaned in and whispered in Cole's ear. "Do you have an agenda for the evening?"

"Don't I always?"

"Yes, and it usually involves sex."

"I can't help it," Cole huffed. "Being unable to see only heightens touch."

Sloan laughed, "That's a really good line, Cole. When did you dream that up?"

"While I was stroking my boner in the shower this morning."

"You didn't!"

"Almost, but I decided to save myself for you."

"I'm sorry I had to run."

"No sorrier than me. I missed our morning ritual."

"You can show me how much you love me tonight," Sloan said, pressing closer as the passion rose between them.

"Cole," Max interrupted, appearing in front of Cole's face, close enough for him to see the shadow of his beard. "Do you think we could borrow Freddie for a few headshots with Sloan?"

Cole felt his dog shift position as soon as he heard his name. He placed a hand on his head, admonishing him to stay, and Freddie settled down immediately. He was in tune with Cole's every command, a smart animal that had brought so much joy into his and Sloan's life. "You'll have to ask Freddie," Cole replied.

Max knelt down in front of the Golden Retriever and said, "What do you think, you big queen? Can I take your picture?"

Freddie barked loudly, his tail swished back and forth, and he pranced around, pleased to be the center of attention again.

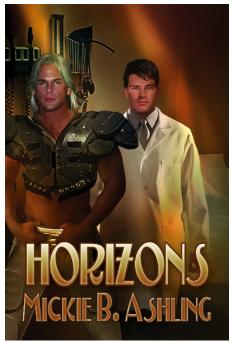
"I think he said yes," Sloan said, grinning as he watched the scenario unfold.

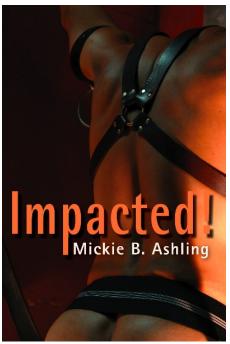
"Would Freddie ever refuse the spotlight?" Max drawled.

MICKIE B. ASHLING is the penname for a responsible office manager by day and a writer of steaming M/M erotica by night. Mickie loves men, starting with her four grown sons and her dog Charlie. She's surrounded by them at every turn, and she continues this romance with everything male by writing love stories about men who love men. Nothing can ignite her muse faster than the thought of two hunky guys getting it on. Her family despairs of this need but has quietly given up on her. She's promised them that someday she'll write a het romance, but no one who really knows her is holding their breath.

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