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Mickie B. Ashling

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this story a chance.” —Literary Nymphs

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Loving Edits

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Dedication

This novel is dedicated to the extraordinary woman who made me feel special every day she was alive. Her fight with ALS was short but valiant. She faced it with humor and dignity, much like the character in my book. This one's for you, Ma. With all my love...

Acknowledgments

Several people were instrumental in helping me throughout this emotional journey. Jeannie, my friend and personal editor, whose dedication to making me look good, is only surpassed by her ongoing quest for the perfect sentence. Dearest Ann, my insightful friend from Norway, who knows exactly what I'm thinking before I can put words to paper. Her gentle nagging questions needed to be asked and made this a much stronger story. Lyn and Jackie, good friends and supportive readers, who've stuck by me and read every single chapter, despite all the boxes of Kleenex they consumed. Many thanks to my Basque family who answered all the questions I threw at them, despite the subject matter and the genre.

Loving Edits is my small attempt to share the story of one man facing this devastating illness. It was written with respect and the utmost regard for the daily challenges confronting anyone involved with ALS. Finally, I'd like to acknowledge my publisher, Elizabeth North, for taking chances on stories that aren't always safe but are always meaningful, and my Dreamspinner editor, Lynn West, who goes the extra mile for all the authors under her wing.

Chapter 1

MOST people disliked Sunday for the simple reason that Monday loomed ahead. For Paul, the seventh day of the week ranked high on his list of guilty pleasures. It was the one day he allowed himself to indulge his passion for reading, forgoing any sort of schedule.

A warm breeze blew in through the open French doors of his bedroom, rifling the pages of the New York Times that were laid out on his bed in neat piles. His weekly ritual consisted of a slow appraisal of each section of the paper as he got caught up on world news and local events. The editor in him couldn't help zeroing in on typos, overused words, or poorly chosen phrases. It was just a part of his personality and something he couldn't put on hold, regardless of which day of the week it was. It was distracting at times but ingrained in him and as natural as breathing. Paul took a lot of pride in his work and was always surprised whenever he found errors in other publications that were easily avoidable.

Another unexpected gust turned the neat stacks into an unorganized mess, spurring him to get up and close the doors to prevent any more disruptions. When he glanced out the panes of glass, he was struck by the beauty of the colorful display of annuals overflowing the varied pots strategically placed around his brick-covered rooftop garden. He knew the temperatures would spike toward noon, but for now, the warmth felt good against his bare chest, and so he ventured outside. If he closed his eyes, he could pretend he was in an exclusive resort instead of his twenty-room apartment overlooking Central Park. The soothing sound of the recycling waterfall in his pool added to the illusion.

Paul sat in one of the comfortable lounging chairs and let the early morning sun beat down on him. He must have dozed for a second because the next thing he was aware of was Baxter shaking him gently.

"Good morning." Paul smiled at his assistant, who stood over him with a breakfast tray. He wrapped his long fingers around the handle of the steaming mug of French roast Baxter had

prepared and took tentative sips, loving the taste of the strong brew that was always made to perfection.

“Good morning, Mr. Alcott. I’m surprised to find you out here.”

“I thought it might be nice to stop and smell the roses. Literally.” Paul grinned.

“It’s a beautiful day, sir. You should sit out here and relax for a change. Shall I go and get your paper?”

“Yes, please.”

Baxter put the coffee paraphernalia down on the table, along with a basket of croissants and the accompanying butter and assorted jams. Normally it was coffee and Danish on the run as Paul strove to get to Alcott Press by eight, but it was Sunday, after all, and the only day of the week his employer didn’t even wear a watch.

Baxter headed back toward the bedroom to retrieve the newspaper without another word. His talent for making himself invisible was one reason he’d lasted in the Alcott employ. Paul had faced the difficult decision of dismissing his deceased father’s entire household staff, claiming that he no longer needed them since he’d sold the Long Island estate. Manhattan was his city of choice, and he’d made that perfectly obvious after investing over two million dollars in renovating the family penthouse at Alcott Terrace. No more traipsing back and forth, fighting traffic and road rage. Even the use of the company helicopter had not dissuaded him from selling the property. It was a relic of times past, and he had neither the need nor the desire to retain it.

Paul had kept Baxter on as his majordomo, a position he’d claimed for the last thirty years. He was a fixture in Paul’s life and the one constant he’d had growing up. It was Baxter who had stood in for his father whenever he was out of town on business. Baxter had attended school meetings, accompanied him to doctors and dentists, held his hand and comforted him whenever he’d fallen off a skateboard or a bicycle. Baxter had taught him how to swim and drive and knot his tie. He’d been there when Paul had announced he was gay. Baxter had stood outside the library door listening to a seventeen-year-old Paul defying his father for the first time. He was the one who had taught Paul how to use a condom while lecturing him on the perils of unprotected sex. Baxter was, in essence, the mother he’d never had, and the idea of dismissing him was out of the question. Paul did change his title to assistant, since the word “majordomo”

was as obsolete as the Long Island mansion. Baxter was an intelligent and sensitive man who had chosen to serve and protect the Alcotts, yet he never took advantage of his position. And for this reason he was respected, and most definitely loved, by both father and son. The hefty sum Paul Senior had bequeathed Baxter assured him a retirement fit for a king; however, he chose to stay on, opting to work in lieu of being a gentleman of leisure. The very thought of such an existence made Baxter shudder.

Baxter was, in fact, a majordomo of the old school, and as such he was in charge of everything that touched Paul Alcott's life: his clothing, medication, transportation, food, and any other creature comforts, including the replenishment of his supply of condoms. Baxter felt a great sense of pride and satisfaction in knowing that he'd played a significant role in shaping Paul. Despite the opportunity to be a world-class playboy and hedonist, Paul had surprised everyone by turning out to be a productive, resourceful, and hard-working individual with an excellent eye for detail. Paul Senior had died in peace knowing his only child was more than capable of filling his shoes.

Conversely, Paul was spoiled rotten. There was no denying that fact, but he shrugged it off by pleading birthright. He hadn't chosen his status in life—being born into one of the wealthiest families in America—but there you had it. He wasn't about to change and dress in rags to make others happy. He worked hard and played even harder, so if he indulged in an old world perk by having Baxter waiting on him hand and foot, he felt entitled.

Paul's love for the written word and succinct speech had made him even more famous than his late father, founder of Alcott Press, one of the most esteemed publishing houses in America for over fifty years. Paul was first and foremost a book editor. Authors would cringe after receiving a manuscript from Paul Alcott Jr., looking in horror at the sea of red slashed all over their precious words, which were usually unnecessary and could be reduced by half. Now, he no longer did much editing, preferring to leave that to his staff. Only the big name authors were subjected to his nasty red pen, and lately there were fewer.

An editing software program he'd invented was a byproduct of his career choice. It was ranked highest in the nation, making him money while he slept. Paul's talent was well known by those in the business—any author lucky enough to employ him was guaranteed a bestseller.

"THERE'S a message from your old friend Michael," Baxter said, after placing the stack of papers on the table.

"Do you mean Mick Henley?" Paul's voice rose in shock.

“The very same,” Baxter replied. “I thought he lived in Spain?”

“He does. You remember Mick, don’t you?” Paul asked.

“How could I forget him, sir? He practically lived on the estate. You went to college with him and were joined at the hip until he became published. You and he were very close, as I recall.”

Paul snorted. “Your very proper way of saying we fucked a lot. Jesus Christ, Baxter, you know we were lovers for years.”

“I was in charge of your condom supply even then, Mr. Alcott. Believe me when I say I’m quite aware of who Mick Henley is.”

“Remember that time you caught us in the pool house?”

“Um... an awkward moment, sir, considering your father and his dinner guest were right behind me.”

Paul grinned as he recalled everyone’s shocked faces. “It was hot, though. It was the first time I let Mick fuck me in the—”

“Sir!”

“Sorry, Baxter,” Paul choked on a laugh. “TMI?”

Baxter’s cheeks were blood red. “I’ve already lived through that once, sir. I don’t need to revisit.”

“Ahh, but I do,” Paul said as his thoughts flew back in time. He closed his eyes and envisioned Mick rolling the condom on his cock seconds before he plowed into Paul. The memory was scorching hot.

“Mr. Alcott,” Baxter huffed, noticing Paul’s pajama pants tenting obscenely. “Are we done?”

Paul sighed and opened his eyes. “Did he say what he wanted?”

“A call back, from what I understand.”

“You don’t suppose he wants to get back together?” Paul’s question had an almost wistful tone, which didn’t really surprise Baxter. The two men had been inseparable, and no one had replaced the young author as far as he could tell.

“I have no idea, sir, but don’t get your hopes up.”

“Please. I haven’t been holding my breath for seven years. Why start now?”

“Because he’s back in town, and because you still care.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“You haven’t had anyone steady since.”

“Shh... don’t tell anyone. It’ll ruin my reputation.”

“Oh? Which one, sir? Is it the heartbreaker who tires of his liaisons quickly, or the cutting-edge publisher everyone listens to whenever a new idea flits through his head?”

“Jesus, Baxter. Is that how people see me?”

“You don’t let too many people into your circle, sir.”

Paul shrugged. “They’re not worth letting in.”

“What’s the old cliché? ’Tis better to have loved and lost...’.”

“Stop right there,” Paul said. “I don’t need a lecture on love.”

“I’m just stating the obvious.”

“Oh really? And what is that?”

“You still care for Mick.”

“Well, we’re about to find out, aren’t we? In the meantime, let’s drop it.”

“Would I ever nag you?” Baxter asked, feigning outrage.

“You do it all the time, but quite politely,” Paul teased. “I know you have my back. You always have, and I’m grateful.”

“Sir.” Baxter’s normally placid face creased into a doting smile.

Seeing his stodgy assistant so flustered touched Paul, and he got up and hugged him impulsively. “I’m off to shower,” he announced, leaving a thoughtful Baxter watching his backside.

Paul shucked his pajama pants and stood in front of the full-length mirrors which covered two walls, appraising his body ruthlessly. The slope of his chest and his taut belly reassured him that he still had the physique of a thirty-year-old, even though he was about to turn thirty-six in a few days. Age notwithstanding, he looked damn good. Keeping himself free of any body hair helped the illusion of youth as well. It was a phobia of his, started years ago when he saw his father's chest hair turning gray. He swore it would never happen to him, and the only way to avoid it was by waxing off his body hair before it was apparent. Now the very idea of furry men revolted him. It was the first thing he asked of his lovers if there was any interest after the initial encounter.

Paul continued with his perusal, zeroing in on his penis, which was long and thick and uncircumcised. Thoughts of Mick were making him hard again, and he watched himself in the mirror dispassionately. His cock filled and lengthened in direct proportion to memories of Mick swirling around in his brain. They were each other's firsts, and as such, unforgettable.

The curly black hair and deep violet eyes were impossible to forget, regardless of the order in his life. Michael Henley was a beautiful man. Black Irish, his father had called him with a little bit of disdain. Paul had had no idea what that meant when he was seventeen, but he'd looked up the term and assured Mick that his father was referring to his olive skin and dark hair. Years later Paul realized that the words had other connotations, religious and political, and not always clear, but very often unflattering; Mick's initial reaction of anger had been spot-on. The Alcott bloodline traced back to early eighteenth-century England and carried with it the many prejudices imbued into their upbringing. Paul Senior's disrespect for the entire Irish nation wasn't uncommon for his day and age.

Paul, on the other hand, had been enthralled by Mick. They met when they were seniors in high school, and their relationship lasted through college and many years after that. Mick was everything Paul wasn't. He was annoyingly lackadaisical about most things in life, running by his own personal clock, which was always broken, according to Paul. Mick never arrived on time, choosing to savor life's moments to their fullest. He had no concept of the words "deadline" or "hurry," and discipline was only something he learned when he dabbled briefly in the BDSM scene. The flipside was an intelligent, articulate, and deeply loving man who could bring Paul to sexual heights that no one else had ever been able to achieve. It was the image of Mick on his knees that made Paul come within minutes. He watched himself in the mirror, spraying ropes of spunk all over the marble floor.

He gave himself one last tug and stepped into the shower, turning on the triple-headed unit, reveling in the ultimate luxury of separate showerheads bombarding him with a stinging-hot spray. He moaned with pleasure, not so much from the massaging effects of the water as from the memories of Mick and everything they'd shared.

He wondered if he'd changed. It had been almost seven years since they'd parted ways, following a horrible scene of recrimination and anger. He'd wanted to hurt Mick, and he had, in the worst way possible. Finding Paul in bed with another man was not reason enough for Mick to leave, but learning that Paul would no longer be editing for him was the ultimate betrayal. Mick's first novel had just made the bestseller list, and the accolades and good reviews were pouring in. Readers and publishers were begging for a sequel, and Mick was stunned when Paul told him he wouldn't help him anymore.

Paul never gave him a reason that made sense. Mick probably assumed that he'd fallen out of love and was moving on, abandoning him in the process. The reality had been far more complex: Paul couldn't bring himself to tell his lover that he burned with jealousy for his writing skills. Paul was honest enough with himself to realize that his talents lay elsewhere. He could dissect a story without qualms, reducing writers into puddles of tears after his scathing edits. He was ruthless but effective, easily able to figure out why a story wasn't working, yet he couldn't do it for himself. He was a closet writer who would never see his name on the great American novel. He knew the mechanics necessary to write a book, but he was missing a key ingredient and refused to use his position in the company to publish his own novel if it was not up to par. The fact that his lover and best friend had made it was galling. Paul had the money and wherewithal to move mountains, but he couldn't write a simple story, which was what drove the wedge between the two men. Mick was never the wiser, and Paul went on to develop the software program that made him more money than he could ever spend in this lifetime.

HE FINISHED his shower and stepped onto the lush cotton mat, sidestepping the lines of come that glistened against the black marble floor. He grabbed a hand towel and cleaned up the evidence of his desire, thus avoiding any more flak from Baxter. He'd had no idea that his torch was so obvious, but then again, no one knew him quite as well as his assistant, so he supposed it was okay. God forbid people took pity on him—he could have any man he wanted. While he hadn't found anyone as perfect as Mick, it didn't mean he never would. And maybe this argument was a moot point. Mick was probably thirty pounds overweight and balding. The thought made Paul chuckle.

He walked back into his bedroom stark naked, unperturbed by Baxter's presence. His inscrutable assistant held out black silk boxers, and Paul slipped them on wordlessly.

“Where's that phone number?”

Baxter passed him the Post-it. “Give me a minute,” Paul said. “I'll buzz you when I'm dressed. Oh, Baxter?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Have them bring the car around in approximately forty minutes.”

“Are you driving or will you need a chauffeur?”

“I’m not driving.”

“Very well, sir.”

Paul looked at the number on the Post-it. It was a Manhattan number, which meant that Mick had moved back to the States, or had a local SIM card. Whatever the reason, Paul couldn’t resist calling. Curiosity was getting the best of him, and he hoped that he wouldn’t live to regret this move.

Mick answered on the second ring. “Paul. How are you, old friend?”

Paul felt his stomach drop to his knees when he heard Mick’s voice. It was that same sexy, slightly gravelly timbre that always made him feel like they were the only ones in the room. It was Mick’s secret weapon; Paul succumbed to it immediately.

“Well, well. If it isn’t the hottest writer this side of the universe,” Paul said softly. He shut his eyes and clutched the phone so hard his hand hurt; the strength of his reaction shocked him. He hadn’t realized how much he missed the man until this moment. His entire body seemed to come alive after being asleep for seven years, a self-imposed state of suspended emotion that had encased him like a protective shield. He felt it falling away from him in large chunks, crashing to the floor and awakening him as he listened to the voice of the only man he’d ever loved. He’d tried not to think about Mick for years, and he’d almost succeeded, or so he thought. The earlier conversation with Baxter made it very clear that he wasn’t fooling anyone but himself. Whatever bad feelings he may have had disappeared in the wake of Mick’s phone call.

“Paul?” Mick interrupted his thoughts.

“I’m... here,” Paul stumbled over the words, feeling blindsided.

“How’s it going, sweetheart?”

Mick’s easy use of the familiar endearment just about did him in. He made every effort to get himself under control, struggling to keep his voice devoid of emotion. “Everything’s great, Mick. Are you in town for long?”

“I’ve moved back.”

“Really? I thought you loved Spain?”

“I adore Spain and San Sebastian in particular,” Mick said quickly, “but I have some things that require my attention over here. I did keep my apartment though.”

“I see. So you’ll be going back eventually?”

“God willing.”

Paul found that statement rather odd. Mick had never been a practicing Catholic, so the easy reference to God seemed out of character. “What can I do for you?”

“I’d love to see you.”

“Say when.”

“How about today?”

“Today?” Paul voiced his surprise. “I’m not sure if I can. I do have a schedule, Mick, not that you know the meaning of the word.”

“Don’t be a priss, Paul. It’s Sunday, and I’m sure that even the great Paul Alcott has one day of rest.”

Paul wondered what was going on. “Where do you want to meet?”

“How about right here?” Mick offered. “I’ve rented an apartment in Chelsea.”

“All right. Give me the address.”

Paul scribbled on the back of the note and was getting ready to hang up when Mick said, “We can’t wait to see you.”

“We?”

“Yes, Tono and I.”

“Who the fuck is Tono?”

“My partner.”

“Oh.”

“We’ll see you around five, okay? Don’t have a big lunch because we’re making paella on the Weber. Save your appetite.”

“I’ll bring the wine,” Paul answered in a daze. He had no idea why Mick would want to see him, especially now that he had learned his lover was in tow. So much for the great make-up scene, he thought disappointedly. Pictures of Mick at different stages of undress flashed through his head like a slide show. His body reacted swiftly, but he pushed back his desire, along with whatever hope he may have had that this might just be more than a casual meeting between two old friends. Paul adjusted himself into place before pulling up the zipper on the pair of blue jeans that lay snug on his ass. The fitted gray shirt came next, followed by a liberal spray of Drakkar Noir. His navy blue cotton sweater was an afterthought, but he draped it over his shoulders on the off chance that it would get cool later on that night. He could have passed for a fashion model; his natural blond hair, always a source of pride, was cut and styled to perfection, and the accompanying blue eyes were the classic combination that turned heads. Paul’s look was enhanced by color choices that were meticulously chosen for maximum effect. He slipped sockless feet into his Gucci loafers and grabbed his wallet and keys. One last glance in the mirror satisfied him: if nothing else, Mick would be pleased to see that Paul had only improved over time.

Chapter 2

THE apartment was typical Chelsea, small and pricy, but the amenities were up and running within forty-eight hours of the lease signing. It would have taken a good week for the phone system to work in San Sebastian, let alone the cable, Internet, and other services, but this was America, where everything was readily available as long as one could pay. Mick put the phone down, relieved that the conversation with Paul had gone much better than he’d anticipated. He ran a shaky hand through his dark curls and looked up to see that Tono had been watching the whole time. He gave him a weak grin and shrugged. Tono dropped the box cutter and abandoned the packing debris; he enclosed Mick in his arms and felt the brunet lean into him.

“¿Qué pasa?”

Mick mumbled against Tono’s chest. “He’ll be here around five.”

“And?”

“I guess I was a bit affected by hearing his voice. It’s been a long time.”

Tono frowned, “You know, I’m still not convinced that this plan will work.”

“I know, majo, you’ll just have to trust me on this.”

“I can manage without him.”

“Paul is the best in the business, and he can help you.”

“Not if it will hurt you.”

“Nothing can hurt me anymore.”

“Shh,” Tono whispered. “Bésame, cariño.”

Mick raised his face and opened his lips, accepting the familiar mouth that possessed him lovingly. He reached up and encircled Tono’s neck, drawing him even closer.

Tono’s need to secure his position became urgent when faced with the prospect of finally meeting Mick’s former lover. He carried Mick to their bedroom, which had already been set up, and laid him on the mattress. Tono embraced his lover’s pliant body, murmuring endearments which were as natural to him as breathing.

Mick closed his eyes and attempted to push the memories aside. It was impossible. Paul Alcott had been a part of his life for so long; he was connected to him through years of shared experiences. There’d been a time when their thoughts were one, seamless and unclouded by confusion or bitterness. He’d met Paul when he was seventeen and had fallen in love instantly. It had taken Paul a little longer to warm up to the idea of being gay, but it had been a no-brainer after their first kiss. The passion between them had escalated quickly, coming to a peak the night of the senior prom after they’d dropped off their respective dates. The girls were having a sleepover, and Mick spent the night at Paul’s, making love until the sun rose. It was a slow exploration on both sides, an introduction into man-on-man sex that obliterated any ideas of ever going back to the straight world. Paul came out to his father a week later, and Mick announced his sexual orientation to his stunned parents as soon as he graduated and left for college.

They were as close as any two people could ever get—lovers, brothers, and partners in crime, hardly separating for holidays and almost never disagreeing about anything. They'd shared the same love for the written word and the dream of being published some day. Mick's interests were science fiction and mystery, while Paul's writing was filled with angst, leaving Mick exhausted and frustrated. He kept telling Paul to lighten up, to think romance, not Macbeth, but Paul had a clear vision of what he wanted to say, and tragedy was his thing. Surprising, considering Paul's life. The only tragic thing about him was his mother's death at childbirth, but even that was a moot point since he had a father, and he had Baxter, who doted on him.

It took Mick almost five years to finish his book and another year of editing, subjecting himself to Paul's scathing tongue and ridicule, but when they were finished, he had the bestseller he'd dreamed about. What he didn't count on was the chain of events that would destroy the most important relationship in his life, and to this day, he wasn't sure what had happened.

He'd left to go on a European tour shortly after their breakup, ending up in Spain. His destination had been Pamplona, the need to see and smell the running of the bulls his primary goal. Hemingway had been a huge literary influence, and the author's love of everything Spanish was a factor in Mick's decision. He'd been pleasantly surprised to find his book in the translated version in many of the stores, and he'd been flattered that so many people recognized him. They'd treated Mick like a celebrity, accepting him with open arms. The hospitality had lasted throughout the mad week of the Pamplona festival, and by the time he'd arrived in San Sebastian, the seaside port on the Bay of Biscay, he was hung over and ready for some downtime.

He was sampling pintxos at the bar, Vergara, when Antonio Garat, current darling of the Jai alai world, walked in with a small group of friends. Tono, as he was fondly known to all his fans, had just returned from Ocala, Florida, where he'd been under contract for five years. He was number one in the world of professional Jai alai, but once his stint was over, he'd opted to go back to San Sebastian where he had been trained. He missed his friends and family, the food, the bars, and the general ambiance of his adopted hometown. He did come back with a small fortune, a huge following, and a pretty good knowledge of the English language—a big accomplishment, since he had only been able to say please and thank you when he'd arrived in Florida years ago.

Mick had fallen hard when he'd met Tono. He was the first man he'd allowed into his life since the breakup with Paul, and they'd been together ever since that first passionate month of lust and heady romance. Aside from Tono's physical attributes, which were the embodiment of everything male, there was an artistic side to the Spaniard that Mick found very appealing. Tono wrote poetry, astonishing Mick with his first sonnet, which was well crafted and reduced him to tears. The sincerity and pureness of Tono's words leaped off the page, and his fierce brown eyes burned their way into Mick's heart. He was impossible to resist after that.

Yet, despite the love they shared, Mick couldn't help his feelings for Paul. He'd known it the minute he heard Paul's voice. He would always love Paul, but he would do his best to keep it together when he finally laid eyes on the man. Tono wouldn't be able to handle the jealousy on top of everything else. He had to make sure this wouldn't affect their relationship, or his plans would fall by the wayside.

"Cariño." Tono's voice pulled him back to the present, and the feel and weight of his lover as he slipped into him made him forget Paul for now, focusing on the words that poured out of Tono effortlessly. He was hopelessly romantic and tender, never lacking in ways to express his love. What he couldn't say in English, he more than made up for in Spanish. "Te quiero," he breathed against Mick's ear, thrusting in and out, goading his partner to catch up with his passion.

Mick clutched at Tono, crying out with pleasure as they shuddered their way to the orgasms that left every nerve ending tingling. They held each other for the longest time, reluctant to part. Mick rubbed Tono's broad back, easing the corded muscles around his neck and shoulders with a light touch. He loved the weight on him, the smell of Tono's body, and the fullness of his cock still half-hard and buried inside him. They tangled legs and snuggled in closer, winding around each other like vines. The contented sighs coming from deep within Tono's chest reassured Mick that all was right for now.

PAUL stood outside the door, debating his decision to show up. He had a bottle of red wine in one hand and a bunch of colorful wildflowers in the other. He'd given in to a moment of sentimental weakness, and now he wondered what the hell he was doing. He turned to leave when the door was yanked open by a fractious brunet with a scowl on his face. "¿Sí?"

"Um, I'm Paul Alcott."

Tono glared and scrutinized him from the top of his shinning head down his designer-clad body.

Paul was unfazed. He was just as curious about the man who'd replaced him in Mick's life. He inspected him like he would any rival, noting the chestnut colored hair that curled around his neckline. His upper body was hidden behind a loose T-shirt, but the finely formed muscles of his arms were a clear indication of what was underneath. Paul sized up the man who had stolen Mick's heart. He was striking, no doubt about it. The fiery eyes were bad enough, but it was the mouth made for sucking that sent Paul's mind straight to the gutter. He was shocked by his

body's quick response to this stranger, despite the obvious antagonism. He brought his hand down, casually covering the evidence of his growing interest with the flowers.

Finally, the Spaniard blinked and rewarded Paul with a tentative smile. "I'm Tono Garat," he announced in a heavily accented voice.

"Nice to meet you." Paul nodded. "Is Mick around?"

"Yes, of course. Come in, please."

Tono turned, and Paul zeroed in on the rounded ass covered in tight white shorts. The lack of any telltale garter lines was a clear indication that Tono was naked under those shorts, and Paul couldn't help but notice.

"Paul!" Mick called out, moving forward swiftly and hugging Paul to his chest. "God, it's been too long."

"I know," Paul smiled, falling under Mick's spell easily. It had always been so good between them, and despite the years and the distance, the sentiment remained the same. "You're still as gorgeous as ever," he teased.

"Oh, stop. You always were good for my ego."

"The years have been good to you, my friend," Paul continued, taking in every part of Mick. He did look great, trim and fit, clean-shaven. His hair was a little longer than Paul remembered, but the dark curls framed Mick's tanned face, making the unforgettable eyes practically leap out at him.

"You don't look half-bad either." Mick's voice shifted, and the words came out like a soft caress. He toyed with a lock of Paul's silky hair, curling it around his finger. "When did you let your hair grow?"

“After my father died; no more memos about looking professional.” Paul grinned as he recalled Paul Senior’s edicts.

“Shall I take the wine?” Tono interrupted, clearly uncomfortable. He knew all about Paul and Mick’s history, but seeing the chemistry was a different matter entirely. He felt the first twinge of jealousy but pushed it down quickly.

“Sure,” Paul replied, handing Tono the bottle.

“Would you like a glass of sangria? I made a pitcher,” Tono asked, never taking his eyes off Paul’s face.

“That sounds good. I’m assuming it’s authentic.”

“I made it from scratch,” Tono said indignantly.

“Come,” Mick stepped in, diffusing the situation. He took Paul by the arm and led him out to the tiny patio that had a wrought iron table for four and several wooden planters filled with assorted vegetables growing abundantly. The tomatoes were ripe and hanging from branches held up with green sticks. The Weber grill was off to one side—a tribute to summer and warm evenings.

“This is really nice, Mick. I had no idea this was out here.”

“Not too many people do. I guess the owners built this area to try and simulate a garden, so I benefit. It’s what attracted me to this unit in the first place.”

Paul sat down and stretched out, loving the sight of Mick after so long. “So what have you been up to?”

“Living La Vida Loca,” Mick smiled. “Doing some writing, Paul, but mostly enjoying my life.”

“Sounds great. Are you still working on your sequel?”

“That, as well as something new.”

“Oh?”

“I’m helping Tono with his book.”

“You’re a writer?” Paul was surprised for some reason.

“I’m not,” Tono replied, placing a large wine glass with bits of floating fruit and ice in front of Paul. “I’m a professional Jai alai player, but I’ve written a romance, loosely based on my relationship with Mick.”

“A romance?” Paul scoffed. His look was a combination of surprise and ridicule. “Why?” He turned to Mick for the answer.

“Because I’m dying.”

Chapter 3

PAUL didn’t know how long he stared or when he closed his mouth, which had literally dropped to the floor.

“You’re joking, right?”

“I wish I were, Paul.”

“But... you look great,” he protested, “not like a dying man at all!”

Mick's smile was as sad as his tone of voice. "This isn't one of those diseases."

Paul stood abruptly, but not before picking up his glass of sangria and draining it. "If this is some kind of sick joke, Mick, I'm really not amused."

"Hey," Mick pulled at Paul's hand. "Sit... let's talk."

Paul sat back down and glared at Mick. "Start talking, or I'm leaving."

"Have you ever heard of Lou Gehrig's disease?"

"I've heard of Lou Gehrig," Paul replied. "He's that baseball player who said he was the luckiest man in the world, and then he retired."

"He retired because he was sick, Paul. He died a year later."

"Mick, you know I hate baseball."

"I know you do, but the reason I bring it up is because I have the same disease: ALS. After the ballplayer died, people started calling it Lou Gehrig's disease."

"What the fuck is it?"

"ALS is a neurological disorder that affects certain muscles. Eventually these muscles stop functioning, ultimately causing death."

Tono drew his chair closer to Mick's and put his arm around his shoulders while Mick talked.

Paul listened as his former lover explained his disease dispassionately. He was more beautiful than ever, which made the words coming out of his mouth so difficult to understand. His ink-black hair was shiny and abundant, his skin tone perfect. Surely he must be mistaken. “I think I’d better go, Mick.”

“Please don’t go, Paul.”

“Why did you ask me to come here?”

“So we could catch up—shoot the shit. Tell me what you’ve been up to in the last seven years,” Mick replied easily.

“All good reasons before you laid this bomb on me. Are you for real, or is this your dramatic way of getting me to help edit your manuscript?”

Mick’s laugh was genuine, although Tono glared at Paul accusingly.

“He is not exaggerating! How could you even think that, jimbécil!” Tono accused.

Mick put his hand on Tono’s knee and squeezed, shaking his head silently.

Paul observed the two men. “Okay, I’m listening. What is it you want from me?”

“I want you to edit my love story,” Tono said, straight to the point.

“No way,” Paul answered immediately.

“Please, listen for a minute,” Mick said. “Tono wanted to write our story, Paul. I tried to dissuade him,” Mick continued, smiling at Tono, who reached for his hand and brought it up to his lips. It was an effortless display of affection that Mick seemed to fully appreciate, which irritated Paul

for some reason. “I told Tono that no one would care to read about our life, but he insists that it’s something he needs to do for himself.”

“Why don’t you just keep a journal?” Paul asked, finally acknowledging Tono’s presence.

“Because, I want to tell the world about our love.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Paul replied, rolling his eyes in disbelief. “You can’t be serious?”

“Look, Pol,” Tono said evenly, “I can write. Maybe not as good as you or Mick, but I can put words together. I need to do this for my sanity.” Tono’s sentence ended in a whisper. His complexion was ruddy with the effort of holding back the tears that shone brightly in his eyes, turning them the color of warm toffee.

“Christ, Mick, are you really dying?” Paul grabbed the pitcher of sangria, poured himself another glass, and downed it in two swallows.

“Yes, Paul. Scout’s honor,” Mick said, making a cross over his heart.

“How soon is this going to happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, approximately how much time do we have? Are you dying tomorrow or ten years from now?”

Mick shook his head, laughing despite the drama of the moment. “Does your entire world run on a schedule?”

“Mine does. I know you have no concept of the word, and in typical fashion, even your death has its own timetable.” Paul’s statement was harsh in an attempt to offset the tears that filled his eyes suddenly. He turned to Tono and said, “Can I have some real liquor?”

“I have Scotch.”

“That’ll work.” Paul followed Tono into the kitchen and stood behind him as he rooted around in one of the boxes looking for the booze.

Tono exclaimed something that sounded Spanish when he felt the bottle of Chivas; he pulled it out and poured two fingers’ worth into a paper cup. “Sorry, I don’t know where the other glasses are.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Paul said, sucking up the booze. “Hit me again.” He handed Tono the cup.

Tono raised his eyebrows and shook his head, but he poured another round and watched Paul swallow. “You will get drunk if you don’t eat first.”

“I can’t think of food right now,” Paul stated, handing the cup back with a shaky hand. “You have no idea how far back Mick and I go.”

“I know you still love him.” Tono’s eyes were sympathetic. The jealousy had evaporated after seeing Paul’s reaction to Mick’s news. “It’s something we now share, so don’t tell me I don’t understand, okay?”

“Christ! I’ve got to go.”

Tono reached out and held Paul’s arm. “He needs you, Pol. He needs both of us.”

“Stop calling me Pol. It’s Pawwwl,” he slurred the words, clearly on his way to a major drunk.

“Sorry,” Tono replied, rolling his R’s.

“You can’t even speak English!” Paul accused. “How the hell do you think you’ll be able to write a story?”

“I write with passion from my heart. Entiendes?”

“Shit!”

“You will help me,” Tono said. “We will write it together. Cooperar, sabes?”

“It’s collaboration, you fool, and no! I will not write it with you.”

“Tono,” Mick called from outside. “What’s going on?”

“Nada, cariño.” He turned to Paul and said, “I’m going now. Don’t you upset him.”

“Upset him? What about me? I’m fucking upset as hell.”

“You. Don’t. Count.” Tono punctuated each word with a thump on Paul’s chest. He turned to join Mick, giving Paul a perfect view of his ass once again. How Paul could think of sex at a time like this was beyond him, but think of it he did, and the idea of impaling that fine Spanish ass leaped to the forefront of his brain. He poured more Scotch into the paper cup, noting with some satisfaction that his hand was no longer shaking. He gulped down the booze, barely tasting it, and went out the sliding door to join them.

THE paella was amazing. It had that gorgeous yellow-orange color and was littered with shellfish, chicken, and colorful red and green peppers. It was one of his favorite dishes, and obviously Mick remembered, or they wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble. “Who cooked?” Paul asked, stuffing another forkful into his mouth.

“I did,” Tono replied.

“Wow. You’re a man of many talents. Part Renaissance, part Cro-Magnon.”

“¿Qué dice?” Tono questioned Mick.

“It’s nothing, majo. I think Paul’s had a few too many drinks.”

Tono nodded. “Let’s put him in bed.”

“Yeah,” Paul leered at the pair. “Let’s go to bed.”

Paul had an instant flashback of the two of them sharing a trick on one of their many vacations. They’d always enjoyed playing, and hot, horny waiters were their specialty. By the time Paul and Mick were done with the flavor of the night, they were assured first class treatment for the rest of their stay.

“Do you still play?” Paul looked at Mick with pure lust in his eyes.

Tono made a move to smack the grin off Paul’s face, but Mick held him down. He pursed his lips and shook his head, silently admonishing his lover to cool it. He stood and moved over to where Paul was sitting and lifted Paul’s chin with his forefinger. He bent down and kissed Paul, lingering a few moments, despite the protesting whimper from Tono in the background. “If you weren’t too shitfaced to remember, we could have had a little party.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“Sweetheart, you passed drunk a long time ago.”

“Can you still get it up, Mick?”

Mick took Paul's hand and pressed it to his groin, which responded quite nicely to Paul's touch. "What do you think?"

"Shit. Mick, I want you. I want both of you."

Chapter 4

THE paella was decimated, the pitcher of sangria empty, and the three men were still outside having after-dinner drinks. None of them smoked cigarettes, but Mick did like his occasional weed, so he pulled out a stick and lit it, inhaling deeply before he passed it to Tono. The Spaniard took a hit and handed the high-grade marijuana to Paul, who took it nonchalantly. He was still drunk, despite all the food, but he took the weed anyhow, hoping it would push him into oblivion. He was thinking of Mick's devastating news and couldn't wrap his head around the fact that his former lover was so sick. He didn't look ill—in fact, he looked more attractive than ever.

Paul took a deep breath, relaxing as the powerful vapors saturated his lungs. He didn't want to think about death or dying. They were in their thirties, for God's sake—they weren't old men. Surely Mick was mistaken. He was given a diagnosis by doctors from another country who didn't know what the fuck they were talking about. Tomorrow, he would call in the best and have them perform a battery of tests on Mick. He wasn't going to accept anyone's opinion but a qualified physician from New York City. Meanwhile, he was going to sit, enjoy his cognac, and admire the two brunets who stared back at him. Christ, they were a pair! He couldn't figure out which one he wanted first, and they obviously knew he was attracted; Mick's warm smile was an open invitation.

The urgency of the attraction had not waned as the evening progressed. Thirty minutes had gone by and Paul was still attracted. "Tell me about Jai alai," he asked Tono, in an attempt to take his mind off his cock.

"What would you like to know?"

Paul tried very hard not to stare, but he couldn't break away from the Spaniard's intense gaze. His face was thick with the shadow of a beard that made him look dangerous. His lower lip was full, and he chewed on it—a habit Paul had noticed earlier. He wanted to kiss him, to taste the drops of Courvoisier that dotted his upper lip; he wanted to sample the flavor that had so

captured Mick for the last six-plus years. Instead, he trained his steel blue eyes on Tono and said, "Is it played with a ball?"

"Yes, in a fronton."

"What is that?"

"It's a court consisting of three very high walls."

"Like a handball or racquetball court?"

"Similar, yes, but we don't use our hands to catch the ball, or a racquet. We use a cesta."

"A cesta?" Paul was clueless about most sports, having never enjoyed them. Track was the only thing he could tolerate when he was in school, and even that failed to hold his attention for longer than necessary.

"It's a long wicker basket shaped like a banana," Tono explained. "It's strapped to a Jai alai player's hand, and we use it like a mitt to hurl the ball across the court. Once the ball bounces off the wall, another player has to catch it and hurl it right back, without juggling the ball or hanging on to it in any way. If the other player fails to catch the ball or drops it to the floor, he loses, and another player takes his place. The last guy standing wins."

"Like a round robin?"

"I think so," Tono replied, looking at Mick for guidance.

"Yes." Mick nodded.

"What's the ball made of?" Paul asked.

“Metal strands wrapped in goatskin; it could kill you if it hit you in the head,” Tono added.

“Christ, it sounds awful.”

“No more awful or dangerous than your American football. It’s exciting and fast; you have to have extremely quick reflexes and strength to play it well. Most young men in my part of the world grow up playing the sport.”

“Is it Spain’s national sport?”

“Not Spain.” Tono bristled. “Euskadi, the Basque Country.”

“Isn’t that part of Spain?” Paul asked facetiously.

“The Basques have their own tradition and language. Don’t you know anything about us?”

“A smattering of knowledge only. I’m sorry.”

“I thought you were so smart,” Tono challenged.

“Who says I’m not?” Paul countered.

Mick stepped in quickly. “The Basque people are a distinct ethnic group, and they are fiercely independent. They consider themselves to be culturally and linguistically different from any of their surrounding neighbors.”

“Tono is Spanish, isn’t he?”

“A Basque is first and foremost a Basque,” Mick replied. “Whether they are citizens of Spain or France is secondary to how they identify themselves.”

“I knew they were rebels. I just didn’t realize they were elitists as well.” Paul smirked.

“Paul,” Mick said reproachfully.

“Sorry. Go on, please.” Paul smiled, not unaware that Tono bristled with anger.

“When you’re in Basque Country, you’ll know it,” Mick continued. “Their language, for one thing—I’ve never heard anything like it.”

“Don’t they speak Spanish?” Paul asked.

“They speak Euskara as well as Spanish or French, depending on which side of the border they live on,” Mick replied.

“Is it hard to learn?”

Mick laughed. “Virtually impossible, especially if you’re my age.”

“It’s no more difficult than English,” Tono huffed. “I’ve managed to teach Mick enough for him to understand when people ask him basic questions.”

“Majo, you’re too generous with your praise.” Mick reached for Tono’s hand and meshed fingers with him. “I get by, Paul,” Mick turned his attention back to his guest. “Basque is ridiculously hard to learn. I did a lot of research on the language when I first arrived in San Sebastian. It’s been spoken continuously in and around its territorial location longer than any other European language. There are rumors and conjectures on the origin, some based on reality, others on myth. One of the most colorful ones I’ve heard is that Basques come from the lost city of Atlantis, and their language is as mysterious as that underwater world.”

Paul laughed. "Sounds magical. Next you'll be telling me that they raise unicorns in the Pyrenees."

"They do have these amazing goats," Mick joked. "Biggest horns ever."

"Really," Paul said with a gleam in his eye.

"I said horns, Paul." Mick reply was flirting. "You haven't changed one bit."

Paul stood and stretched. "I've changed, Mick. I'm older and wiser, but that part of my personality is the same. You never answered my question earlier. Do you guys play?"

"It depends on how drunk we are." Tono gazed at Paul.

"Right now I'm very drunk. Are you?"

"Come." Tono stood, surprising Paul. He'd thought that Mick would make the first move.

He turned to his friend and raised an eyebrow. "You okay with this?"

"I'm right behind you, buddy."

"No kidding," Paul mumbled, seconds before Tono seized him and kissed him roughly. He practically went up in flames as his body reacted to the Spaniard's aggression. Tono's kisses were hot, primal, and fiercely erotic. He could feel himself getting harder as Tono's forceful tongue swept every corner of his mouth. Tono released him abruptly, and he would have fallen if Mick hadn't caught him from behind. Mick turned him and kissed him next. His kisses were gentler but just as exciting, sending Paul back in time instantly to the early years of their relationship. He was unable to hold his feelings back, and he clutched at Mick, drawing him

closer. “God, I’ve missed you,” Paul said, shocking himself with the admission. He didn’t realize the truth of his statement until the words tumbled out of him in a hot, breathy whisper.

“Come with me.” Mick tugged at him, latching on to Tono with one hand but never letting go of Paul. They moved toward the bedroom awkwardly, three men kissing and touching, never wanting to lose the connection in case one of them would start to think rationally. Right now it was all about feeling. Tomorrow they could dissect the whys and wherefores.

They fell on the bed in a heap, wrestling with clothes and limbs, licking and caressing every square inch of available flesh. Paul’s senses of touch and smell were magnified by the combination of the booze and the pot. He felt as if he were being assaulted by two gorgeous angels determined to give him a night of pleasure he would never forget.

Tono had stripped off most of his clothes and knelt at the foot of the bed, incinerating Paul with his eyes. The Spaniard’s torso was magnificent, a study in sculpted strength, covered with a light layer of golden brown hair. “Open up,” Tono demanded, just before parting Paul’s legs and swallowing him to the root.

“Oh God,” Paul groaned, grasping Tono’s hair and losing himself in the heat. Mick covered his face with tender kisses, ending at Paul’s mouth, while Tono practically fed off him.

“Mick,” Paul sighed, not sure if this was really happening, but if it was a dream, he wanted it to go on forever. His cock felt like it would explode if he didn’t shoot in the next few minutes. Tono was relentless, pushing back Paul’s foreskin and teasing his slit before sucking his cock as far down his throat as possible. Paul’s entire body was tingling, and the urge to come was powerful and immediate.

“Please.” Paul’s muffled cry sounded needy even to his own ears. He tilted his hips and spread his legs, wanton and unashamed of his needs as he rutted back and forth against the Spaniard. Mick straddled him and pushed his cock at Paul, rubbing it back and forth across Paul’s lips so he could taste the drops of pre-come that were coating the bulbous head.

“Missed this,” Paul mumbled. “Missed you,” he said again, licking up each drop of clear fluid, making wet, smacking noises as he savored his former lover’s taste. “Give it to me,” he begged, opening his mouth to accept Mick’s engorged cock.

Paul was too close and barely able to hold back. He felt himself shooting in a gush, filling Tono's mouth as he swallowed him down effortlessly. Tono pulled away and reached for Mick, tonguing the puckered, pink skin that quivered in anticipation, and when he'd moistened the area sufficiently, he positioned his cock, even as Mick continued to fuck Paul in the mouth. Tono breached him forcefully, pausing to give Mick a few seconds to adjust before he stepped up his movements. Mick gasped and hooked his right hand around Tono's waist to bring him even closer, urging him to fuck him harder and deeper in a voice gone ragged with desire.

Paul was still coming down from his high, but Mick's voice and the thought of what Tono was doing while he had Mick down his throat was making him hard again. Mick pushed in and out of Paul's mouth in tandem with Tono's thrusting, while Paul just sucked harder. He allowed Mick to control the movements while he took his own cock in hand and began to snap his hips violently in an effort to catch up with the other two. Soon the room was filled with the sounds of three men grunting and huffing out strangled breaths as they chased the triple orgasms that began as a slow burn that flamed into an inferno of sensation, igniting their bodies from the inside out. They were hot and sweaty and reeked of sex and need. The explosion of semen from three different sources happened almost at the same time, causing each one to cry out in a different way. They collapsed in a tangle of limbs; boneless, gasping, and panting in exhaustion.

"Jesus," Mick moaned.

"Welcome home, babe," Paul whispered, cradling Mick against his chest.

Tono pulled Mick away suddenly, cocooning him within his strong arms and legs in a primitive display of possession.

"Mio," he growled, narrowing his eyes and waiting to see how Paul would react, but the blond had fallen asleep with a smile on his face.

Mick pressed closer, caressing Tono's face. "Soy tuyo, majo."

"¿Siempre?"

"Always."

Chapter 5

TONO awoke to the sound of Mick's voice crying out in pain. He sat up abruptly, disoriented from the newness of the location and the copious amounts of booze that had been ingested the night before. Memories came rushing at him, primarily those of Paul going down on Mick. He turned to look at the other side of the bed and was relieved to see that it was empty. The only one beside him was his lover, who was curled up in pain and grabbing his left leg, which seemed to be the source of the discomfort.

"Shh," Tono crooned, rubbing Mick's limb, trying to stretch it out so he could massage it effectively. "I'm here, cariño."

"Majo," Mick whispered, "is Paul gone?"

"Yes." Tono could tell that Mick was exhausted from trying to hold it in. His head was bathed in sweat; the dark curls clung to his forehead, which was scrunched up and lined in agony.

"When did it start?"

"About an hour ago," Mick replied, "but I didn't want to subject Paul to any of this."

"You should have woken me up," Tono admonished. He'd seen this happen many times in the last few months and knew exactly what to do. The muscles in Mick's legs were taking on a life of their own. They jumped and hopped about, twitching uncontrollably—a result of dying motor neurons, according to the doctors. His left leg was starting to spasm, and Tono began the deep massage technique he'd learned from his sports therapist, hoping it would ease the cramping. He rubbed and kneaded the skin lovingly, torn up by the sight of his handsome man in the throes of something he couldn't control. He soothed Mick with words of love while he massaged with strong hands, ignoring the tears that rolled down his own cheeks. Fortunately, Mick had his eyes closed, so he remained oblivious to everything but his own pain. Eventually the twitching stopped, the cramping eased off, and Mick fell asleep, clutching Tono's T-shirt.

Tono disengaged him gently and left the room, knowing that sleep would elude him for a while. He made a stop in the hall bathroom before going out to the living room and throwing himself on the brown leather recliner.

He stood again and went into the tiny kitchen, pulled out the bottle of aspirin, and tossed a couple down his throat. Using his hand like a cup, he let the tap water overflow while he gulped up enough to push the pills down. He decided to wash his face as well, splashing water liberally, making little puddles on the counter. His face was thick with day-old scruff, and he rubbed at it.

There was a window over the sink which looked out over nothing but brick steps. Their apartment was in the basement, and the only reason they'd taken it was because there were only four steps down. The unit itself was level and easy to navigate, if and when it got to that point. It was a far cry from the spacious apartment in San Sebastian with the magnificent harbor view. He missed being able to sit out on their balcony for a drink or a chat, watching the boats and enjoying the gorgeous sunset.

When Mick first broached his plans to come to New York for medical treatment, he'd insisted on paying for everything regarding their move and their stay. He felt guilty that Tono had taken an indefinite leave of absence to nurse him, depriving himself of a steady income that was easily in the six-figure range. Tono told him to shut up and let him decide what he was going to do with his career and his life. He'd been playing Jai alai for over ten years, and even though he still had a few good years left, he had lost interest as soon as he found out that Mick was sick.

It had started around Christmas when Mick kept falling down. At first they'd thought he might have Parkinson's or MS, or perhaps a brain tumor, all of which would have been preferable to the final diagnosis of ALS, a virtual death sentence. Tono was in denial for months, pretending it was a mistake until Mick finally broke down one day and begged him to leave if he couldn't accept the truth. He stayed away for twenty-four hours, drunk out of his mind for most of them. He cried and punched holes in the wall, screamed and cursed at God, but eventually, he decided that he'd rather spend whatever time was left nursing Mick than be without him. He could grieve for an entire lifetime once he was gone.

The only thing that kept him grounded and sane was his desire to record their story in book form. He knew it would be difficult because Spanish was his primary language, but he refused to write in anything but English, challenging himself to give it his best for the sake of his lover. Mick was American, after all, and who the hell would want to read a Spanish soap opera? He would make this love story good enough to rival anything he'd ever read. He owed it to Mick and to himself. How Paul factored into the equation was still unclear, and he had not been prepared for the instant attraction. He'd been sure that he'd hate Paul on sight, and he did, but there was a part of

him—the hormonal think-with-your-cock part—that found the man sexy, worldly, knowledgeable, and disgustingly sweet when he looked at Mick. There was no denying the love that emanated from those steel blue eyes, and the thought of Mick touching Paul intimately made him want to kill the man, but he acknowledged that they had a long history—a formidable hurdle and difficult to overcome.

He hoped that Paul would agree to help him, especially after tonight's little orgy. That had been unexpected, but certainly it hadn't been the first time he and Mick had invited anyone into their bed. Their relationship had been monogamous from the start, but Mick had introduced him to the idea of three-ways. Initially, he'd been shocked, but when he realized it was simply sex and another tool to enhance their relationship, he'd warmed up to the idea. He'd agreed to be open to encounters of the third kind, if and when both of them were in the mood. The fact of the matter was they didn't need it all the time. They were enough for each other, except on rare occasions when one of them had an itch that needed scratching. Apparently, tonight had been one of those nights.

He pulled out his laptop and fired it up, intent on recording what had just happened. He kept a journal, apart from the novel, so everything stayed fresh in his head. It was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate on writing when he was so caught up in Mick and his illness. The rough draft of his novel was complete, but he needed Paul's editing skills before moving forward with it. He knew that this was where Paul's expertise would be invaluable. He'd help him unravel his thoughts, which were disjointed and unorganized. Tono realized that he was taking on a difficult task. He'd never written a novel before, and this one was too personal for him to tackle by himself. Having Paul in his back pocket could be a huge benefit, according to Mick, if he agreed.

PAUL heard Baxter's voice but couldn't open his eyes. The conga line in his head was making the simple task of blinking difficult. He heard the discreet cough, smelled the coffee, and knew it was time to get up, even though he'd only been asleep for a few hours. He pushed himself into an upright position and held out his hand, grateful for the tall mug Baxter handed him.

"Rough night?"

"You have no idea," he mumbled, sipping the steaming hot liquid cautiously.

Baxter made a noise which sounded like a harrumph, shaking his head in disapproval. "And today is Monday, sir. You have a board meeting to attend in exactly two hours."

“I’m aware,” Paul groaned. “Don’t give me a hard time, Baxter. I’ve had enough drama for twenty-four hours.”

“Oh?”

“Mick is dying.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Paul looked up at the older man who was practically a father to him. His eyes were crinkled with concern. “He’s got that disease the baseball player had. Lou Whatever-his-name-was.”

“You don’t mean Lou Gehrig, do you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You know about it?” Paul was surprised. He’d never heard of ALS until Mick had mentioned it.

“I’m afraid so. I had a cousin who had it.”

“Is your cousin still around?”

“No.”

“How long before he died?”

“Two or three years, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Jesus.” Paul raked his hair and stood. “It’s deadly, isn’t it?”

“I believe it’s fatal, sir.”

“So I’ve heard. However, I’m not sure it’s what Mick has. He looks perfectly fine, and all his parts work.”

“Really?”

Paul’s eyebrows went up quickly. “Not sharing, Baxter.”

“You already did, Paul.”

“Fucker.” Paul got out of bed and leaned into Baxter, instinctively groping for the support that had always been there in the past. He felt strong arms encircling him. “He’s dying,” Paul choked out.

Baxter didn’t say anything because he knew there was nothing to say. If Mick had ALS, the prognosis was a foregone conclusion, so he held Paul quietly, trying to comfort him with some of his strength. He would need it to get through this trauma in one piece. Baxter knew it wouldn’t be easy; he’d nursed Paul through many drunken bouts after the breakup. Paul never confessed why he’d abandoned Mick, but he was obviously still in love with him almost seven years later. “Have you thought about getting a second opinion?”

“Yes, but it’s going to take time to set something up. Meanwhile, I have to accept this at face value.”

“It would probably be in your best interest to keep a distance.”

“Can’t do that, Baxter, but thanks for the support.” Paul staggered to the bathroom and stepped into the shower, turning on the water full blast. The force of the triple spray knocked some of the sleep away, and the steaming hot water seemed to evaporate some of the tension and worry that lingered despite the hangover. Paul kept replaying last night’s conversation, trying to decide if it was all a dream or not. How anyone so sick could look so good was a mystery. Mick looked incredible, and his performance in bed was not that of a dying man. Surely he’d been misdiagnosed. The first order of business was to line up several specialists to get this entire situation under control. He was not going to let some Spanish fuckwad tell him that his friend and first love wasn’t going to be around for much longer. Mick was his age, for Christ’s sake. No one died in their thirties except by accident or a random act of violence. It was the twenty-first century, and there was a cure for everything. Paul had every intention of fixing the problem.

He picked up the bottle of shampoo and began to scrub at his thick hair, energized by the thought of doing something positive. By the time he’d shaved and dressed in his three-piece navy blue Armani suit, he was filled with a new resolve. Determined to get to the bottom of this mysterious illness, he dialed his office from the car and asked to be connected to his secretary, Linda.

“Mr. Alcott’s office.” Linda’s voice came on the line, professional and crisp. He imagined her in her Ann Taylor suit with her dark blonde hair pulled back in her habitual ponytail. He was sure that her designer glasses matched her outfit; she always dressed with thoughtful precision, but he was also certain that she was gnawing on her pencil, an annoying habit he had yet to break.

“Linda.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Call Johns Hopkins. Find out who’s their top neurologist and make an appointment for me.”

“Are you okay?” Linda asked quickly, the concern easily apparent in her voice.

“I’m fine,” Paul sighed. “I’m consulting for a friend.”

“I’ll get right on it, sir.”

Paul disconnected, moving on to his next problem. His life was all about dealing with each crisis as it came up. New book releases, movie deals, cover art, apprehensive and/or egotistical authors all fell into the things-to-do category. Since his father's death, he'd become publisher and chief editor, so his appointment book was always full. Fortunately, he wouldn't have to deal with the human variety of emotions today. His schedule, apart from the board meeting, was more about technical decisions. He knew there were no manuscripts waiting for him. He'd completed the last of his editing projects a few days ago and had yet to hear from the author who'd probably gone on a weeklong bender after seeing the abundant red slashes on his precious novel. It was always interesting to take calls from hysterical writers after they received his first edits. Did they actually think they'd get it right the first time?

The glass and steel building that housed Alcott Press had been around for a while, so it wasn't one of the tallest buildings in Manhattan; however, Paul's penthouse office was strategically placed, and he had an almost unfettered view of the city and its surrounding areas.

Linda was already waiting for him, coffee mug in one hand, datebook in the other. She reminded him of that girl in the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*. He supposed he could be just as difficult as that bitch, Miranda, but he was definitely better-looking, and younger, and way hotter. He smirked. If Linda could read his mind, she'd realize that he wasn't the conservative publisher he pretended to be during his business hours. She'd been his secretary for only six months, so she didn't know him yet. He had offered his father's sixty-year-old, fire-breathing dragon of a secretary a retirement deal she couldn't pass up, ridding the company of her hulking presence. He was determined to surround himself with younger people. He was slowly taking Alcott Press into the twenty-first century, and a large part was hiring bright, young minds who were savvy in the new world of e-publishing. Paul Senior had shied away from it, preferring to stick with the traditional methods. His contention, "a book isn't a book unless you're able to hold it in your hand and turn the pages," virtually put a stop to any of Paul's attempts to modernize. His death had given Paul the freedom he needed to open up a new division of Alcott Press, but with it came the accompanying responsibilities and headaches.

"Any luck with the doctor?" He threw his briefcase on the sofa beside the door, placed his jacket on the coat stand in the bathroom, and walked to the center of the room where his desk sat on a pedestal, a leftover arrangement from his father's days at the helm. Paul Senior had considered himself a king in the world of publishing, and raising his desk— giving him the added advantage of looking down on his employees and competition— was part of the imperial illusion. Paul took the coffee mug from Linda, placed it on the heating pad beside the phone, and made himself comfortable in his ergonomically correct, black leather chair.

"I'm afraid the doctor can't see you for another six weeks."

“Bullshit! Bribe someone, do whatever it takes, Linda, but get me an appointment. Tomorrow!”

“Sir,” Linda sputtered, “I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“Don’t you like your job?”

“I love my job.”

“Part of your job is being resourceful. I don’t take no for an answer, Linda. Understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Alcott.”

He waved her away and looked down at the papers on his desk, dismissing her effectively. Six weeks, my ass. He was going to see that man tomorrow if he had to force his way into the office himself. Money was power, and he had that to spare. He was not above using all the might of the Alcott fortune to get what he wanted. He was going to find a solution to this problem. “Impossible” and “never” were two words he’d deleted from his vocabulary. He had no intention of letting Mick go without a fight. Paul wasn’t sure if he meant the disease or Tono, but both problems needed resolving.

Chapter 6

TONO paced in Paul’s reception area, waiting to be admitted. He’d shown up without an appointment, sure that he could get in, but Paul had kept him cooling his heels for over an hour, and Tono was seething. He wanted to bash the door in but knew that it would be the end of any sort of relationship if he did, so he paced and cursed under his breath, grateful that no one understood Euskara. Linda watched apprehensively, not too sure that the gentleman in white wouldn’t force his way into the inner sanctum, also known as Paul Alcott’s office.

Finally, Paul opened the door and nodded for Tono to enter.

“It’s about time,” Tono bristled, striding into the office.

“You can’t just show up here. I’m a busy man.”

“This is important!”

“Everything in my world is important, Tono. Just because we have something in common doesn’t mean you can waltz in here whenever you’re in the mood. You need an appointment like everyone else.”

“¡Coño! I would think that Mick would be a priority.”

“He is, and I’ve already spent a lot of time this morning trying to line up a doctor.”

Tono looked puzzled. “He already has a doctor.”

“I mean, my doctor. I want a second opinion.”

“Bah! You are in denial like I was. Believe me, Pol. This is not a mistake.”

“It’s Pawwl.”

“And my name is TOH-NO, not TAHNO. It’s short for Antonio!”

“Christ!” Paul rolled his eyes and turned his back on him. He walked toward his desk and stepped onto the platform, fully expecting Tono to follow suit. Paul sat and waited in silence. He rested his elbows on his desk and leaned forward, clasping his hands in front of his face. The Spaniard’s walk was as light and graceful as a ballet dancer’s. He never took his eyes off Paul, silently challenging him to be the first to look away.

Paul studied him, slowly appraising each aspect of the man. His most arresting feature was his jaw line, which was strong and square, but it was softened slightly by the deep dimple on his chin. Tono's amber eyes were heavy-lidded and hinted at his sensuous side. He wore a cream-colored shirt, unbuttoned halfway, giving Paul a clear picture of golden brown chest hair that covered finely-rounded muscles. The image of Tono hanging onto Mick's ass seconds before entering him appeared quickly, causing all kinds of mischief in his nether regions. He hadn't expected this reaction, even though they'd shared a few intimate moments the other night. Tono wasn't really his type. He was much too hairy, for one thing, and way too cocky. The man's confidence grated on Paul's last nerve. He preferred dealing with men who were not quite as self-assured. He liked them a little softer around the edges, grateful to be in his presence. Tono was seasoned and tough. As an athlete in a fast and dangerous sport, he knew exactly what he wanted, and giving orders didn't seem to be a problem with him. Yet, despite all that, Paul couldn't help the physical attraction and the accompanying guilt. He had no business even going there.

"What do you want, Tono?"

"Your help."

"I don't write novels, nor do I do much editing anymore. I let my people handle it. You should hire someone to help you or buy my software. You'd be amazed how easy it is once you learn how to use it."

"No."

Paul huffed out a laugh. "I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree. I don't care what you mean to Mick. You are nothing to me."

"You're an asshole, sabs?"

"Maybe I am, but I'm a successful asshole, and I don't have time to clean up your mediocre novel."

"You haven't even read it. How dare you presume it's shit?"

“Hey, your words, not mine.”

“Read one chapter,” Tono insisted, reaching out and touching Paul’s arm. “Read it and tell me if it’s mierda.”

“Did Mick send you here?”

“No. Mick is at home, resting.”

“How is he, really? Is this sickness as bad as he makes it sound?”

Tono nodded and turned away, but not before Paul saw the glint of moisture in his eyes. Christ.

Tono continued to stare out the window for a few minutes, and Paul didn’t interrupt. The man was obviously struggling to keep himself in check, and when he finally swiveled around to speak, he was in firm control of his emotions. His eyes were dry, and the look he gave Paul was determined. “I don’t give a fuck what you think of me. But you need to know that Mick is counting on you for some reason. He really thinks you are a nice man and will help. I told him he was crazy, but he finds some redeeming qualities in you that I have yet to see.”

“Your accent sucks, Tono, but your command of the English language is quite good.”

“Eres un cabron.”

Paul smirked. “Isn’t that what they call a goat? Or is it a cuckold? In any case, Tono, it hardly applies,” Paul said, condescendingly. “I’ll read one fucking chapter. Only for Mick’s sake, mind you.”

“Thank you,” Tono said, “and cabron, just so you know, does mean goat, but it can also be used to describe a man whose partner puts the horns on him. Regardless of the literal translation, Pol, it’s an insult, and one you deserve!”

“It’s Pawwl,” the blond answered, unperturbed by Tono’s obvious anger. “Have a messenger deliver the manuscript.”

“No. You come and get it. Mick wants to see you again.”

“So we can have a repeat of the other night?” Paul smirked.

Tono frowned, and a rosy flush bathed his face as he tried to keep from lashing out. He stood abruptly and turned to leave but paused midway. “By the way,” Tono said, turning back to face Paul. “Just because your desk is up on a stage doesn’t make you a king. Like I said before, Pol. You don’t count.”

What the fuck? Paul was dumbstruck for once. He watched Tono walk out the door. He wasn’t going to put up with that arrogant bastard, no matter how hot the fucker was or how much he loved Mick. He could take his piece-of-shit novel and shove it up his Spanish ass.

MICK was on his way home from Whole Foods on Seventh Avenue when he fell. He had a small roller bag filled with groceries, and it toppled over, spilling onto the sidewalk. Apples and oranges rolled around, bright colors against the gray and grime of the concrete. Mick waited for the thumping in his heart to stabilize. He knew this was going to happen more and more often. He’d been warned, but he chose to ignore the doctor’s words, believing that it wouldn’t be this soon. It had only been six months since the diagnosis, and so far he felt the same, most of the time. The only reminders of what was to come were incidents like this and the daily cramping and twitching of the muscles under his skin. Fasciculation was the medical term for the bizarre phenomena that felt like a million Mexican jumping beans buried in his leg muscles. It crept him out more often than not. He’d taken to smacking himself in the leg with a rolled up magazine whenever the twitching would start, hoping to knock some sense into nerve endings that were short circuiting. The doctors said it would pass eventually, but by then he’d be paralyzed, so he didn’t know whether he wanted to rush that or not. He preferred to endure the discomfort rather than face the alternative.

He tried to get up on his own but his legs weren't cooperating with his brain's command. It was getting more and more difficult to bounce back from the falls. Pedestrians walked around him without pausing to help. Fortunately, a beat cop walked by and helped him up, the navy blue uniform of the NYPD a welcome sight.

"Are you alright, sir?"

"Yes," Mick answered. "I just stumbled."

"Would you like me to hail a cab?"

"That would be great," Mick acknowledged, although he supposed the cabbie would probably bitch that he was only going to be driving a few blocks. He'd give him a large tip, and maybe he'd carry the groceries down the stairs to the apartment.

The driver turned out to be a surprise. Mick expected someone rude and unfeeling, but he was delighted by the pleasant manner of the old man who turned out to be an Armenian and grateful to be living in America. He was sympathetic when Mick told him he had something similar to multiple sclerosis. Mick had discovered months ago that most people couldn't or didn't want to deal with illness, particularly one that was terminal. So he'd become quite adept at lying, being the natural storyteller that he was. He embellished on the truth, telling them what they wanted to hear, thus giving them the opportunity to help, without the added guilt of their own good health. Helping out a dying person was always much scarier and a lot less rewarding. The sad faces and slow headshakes were too much to deal with; pretending his illness wasn't fatal was far easier.

By the time Tono got home, Mick had fully recovered from his fall, so he never mentioned it. A good thing, since his partner wasn't all that happy.

"Hola." Tono nuzzled him on the neck, embracing him from behind. "Did you buy anything good to barbeque?"

"Steaks."

“Excellent. How about the avocado?”

“I bought everything on your list including Jamon Serrano, which cost an arm and a leg.”

“It’s only money, cariño. We have plenty to spare.”

“You have.”

“We. No arguing, okay?” Tono frowned. “I’ve already had enough for one day.”

“Who’d you argue with?”

“Pol. He’s a jerk!”

“He’s not, really. You have to know him to understand him.”

“What’s to understand? He’s insulting, and I don’t need his shit. I’m sure I can find someone else to help me.”

Mick was quiet while he washed the lettuce and began to tear it into smaller pieces for the salad. He sliced tomatoes and cucumbers efficiently, happy that so far, his hands had not been affected by the ALS. He lived in terror of that moment, knowing he’d never be able to use his keyboard or prepare a meal, but he shook off the thought and continued with his slicing, all the while thinking about Paul and Tono.

He wasn’t sure why he was insisting on Paul’s help with the editing. Was it just an excuse to get him back in his life? He could give Tono the help he needed, so why subject him to Paul’s forked tongue? Even he had difficulties getting past some of the acid remarks, and he’d loved him for years. Why risk the chance of the two men who meant everything to him coming to blows?

Or was that the whole point? Did he need them both to get through this? He wasn't quite clear on what he was trying to achieve; he just knew that he wanted them both around, and this was the only way he could do it. Having Paul in his arms the other night was like coming home. The relief was immense. His presence gave him the strength he needed to cope with his situation and with Tono's emotions. He loved Tono passionately, but Paul was an intrinsic part of him. Not a day ever went by without some thought of Paul. Seeing him again after all these years only proved that time and distance had not broken their bond.

He dropped what he was doing, wiped his hands on the kitchen towel, and moved toward Tono, who embraced him silently. "Promise me you'll keep an open mind."

"Only if he's respectful."

"I'm sure you can both manage to be civilized, at least while you're working on the novel."

"We'll see. Really, cariño, having your past and present lovers in one room isn't a good idea," Tono teased, finally cracking a smile.

"I know, majo, but I have faith in both of you."

"You're still a dreamer, despite everything."

"I've made a career peddling my dreams."

"And you do it so well. Are you going to let Pol edit the sequel, now that it's done?"

"Let's take one step at a time. I'd rather he help you with your book."

"I have all the time in the world," Tono reminded Mick gently.

"No. We'll have Paul look at your manuscript and forget mine for now."

“Okay. Bésame.”

Chapter 7

PAUL stood and reached for his jacket, which hung on the oak coat rack in the doctor’s office. He was pissed at Tono for backing him into a corner, at Mick for coming back into his life and making him sick with worry, and last but not least at the doctor who was looking at him placidly. Paul hated most doctors anyhow, so this wasn’t unusual. He felt that they were all fucking idiots who didn’t know what the hell they were doing half the time. The proof, of course, was in the fact that they’d let a perfectly healthy twenty-seven-year-old die of eclampsia, an easily preventable condition. His mother’s death at the hands of a famous Fifth Avenue obstetrician was still talked about in medical communities.

Paul had forced his way into this specialty office, claiming an emergency and a referral from a close friend of the doctor’s. The neurologist saw through him as soon as he sat down, but he forgave Paul when he found out who he was and why he was there. However, he insisted that he couldn’t possibly take on a new patient as his schedule was booked for months.

“Look, Dr. Jordan. I’m not above paying you to get bumped ahead in your line.”

The doctor raised his eyebrows. “You can’t be serious.”

“As a heart attack,” Paul snapped. “I’ll pay you whatever you want.”

“Mr. Alcott, this is highly irregular and unethical as well. I suggest you have your friend call, and we’ll try to get him in through normal channels.”

“Dr. Jordan, you don’t understand. My friend has just been diagnosed with ALS by some quack in Spain. I think that time is an important factor here, and if it’s a misdiagnosis, he’s obviously got some other illness we should be dealing with. What good would waiting six months accomplish if we were to find out he’s got a different disease that could be addressed now?”

“Diagnosing ALS is not a simple matter, Mr. Alcott. Its symptoms mimic many other diseases, and it’s more a process of elimination before arriving at the sad conclusion. If your friend does indeed have ALS, there is nothing I can do for him. If it’s a brain tumor or any other neurological disease, there might be hope.”

“And you want to postpone this?” Paul raised his voice. “You want us to wait six months until your schedule frees up? Dr. Jordan, with all due respect, this is bullshit! I will do whatever it takes, but Mick Henley moves up your waiting list immediately.”

“Mick Henley, the writer?”

“The one and only.”

“I’m a big fan of his.”

“So we have a deal? You’ll bump someone?”

“I will see Mr. Henley without bumping anyone. I’ll come in on my day off.”

Paul raised an eyebrow. “I’m impressed. I suppose you’ll want double your rate.”

“Mr. Alcott, one more word out of you and I’ll walk away from this. It’s not always about money.”

“Really.” Paul’s voice dripped sarcasm. “I’ll be sure and remember that when I’m presented with your bill. When can I bring Mick in to see you?”

“Thursday, at eleven o’clock.”

“This week?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” Paul swung his jacket over his shoulder and walked out.

HE SPEED DIALED Mick from his car and apologized for running late. He’d promised Tono that he’d pick up his manuscript tonight, but the drive across town was turning out to be worse than he thought it would be.

“What? Your clock broken?” Mick teased, throwing back Paul’s constant refrain whenever he’d shown up late.

“Fuck off. You know how much this irritates me.”

“Sweetheart, you really need to lighten up. You’re far too rigid for someone so young, and so hot, I might add. You look great, Paul,” Mick flirted lightly, referring to the other night.

“Thank you,” Paul purred, secretly flattered by Mick’s attention. “Did you expect me to be bald and fat?”

“I wasn’t expecting you to look exactly the way you did seven years ago. What’s your secret?”

“It’s not clean living, that’s for sure. I still drink like a fish on occasion, and my visits to the gym are sporadic. I guess I just have good genes.”

“Must be nice.” Mick’s reply was subdued.

“Hey, come on, none of that, okay? How are you feeling today?”

“I’m fine,” Mick answered quickly.

“You’re not in any pain?”

“No. There isn’t that much pain, Paul. It’s more mental than anything else. Knowing that my body will start shutting down bit by bit is what keeps me awake most nights, not so much the physical discomfort. I can deal with that part.”

“How are you coping with the mental stress?”

“Tono.”

“Whatever, Mick.”

“Paul, he’s been incredible, and I know that I would have killed myself months ago if I didn’t have him in my life.”

“And now you have me too.” Paul’s answer was muted. He wished that the circumstances of their reunion had been different. Age and distance had tempered the ill feelings, and all that remained was his desire to make Mick happy. If he could turn back the clock, at whatever price, he would. Knowing that someone else was providing the comfort that rightfully should have been his responsibility filled him with regret. Mick was the love of his life; the opportunity to hold him at night and ease some of his fears was something he’d lost because of childish anger and jealousy. He hated the thought of Tono taking his place. He hated to hear Mick say the words that someone meant more to him than he did.

“Paul?”

“I’m here. Listen, do you want me to stop and get anything?”

“No, we’re barbequing steaks. Why don’t you join us?”

“Won’t he mind?”

“Not if I ask him.”

“Then I will. By the way, I made a doctor’s appointment for you.”

“Why? I already have a doctor.”

“Mick, this is one of New York’s top neurologists. I would feel better if he examined you and told me in his own words that you have this thing.”

“ALS.”

“Right. Anyway, the appointment is for Thursday—day after tomorrow.”

“Sweetheart, you don’t need to do this. He’s not going to tell us anything different, and I’ve already had the work-up done. My insurance won’t cover any more.”

“Money is no object.”

“It is to me. I haven’t sold anything in years, Paul. There isn’t much left, even with the residuals of the movie deal.”

“Mick, shut your hole. I will take care of it, please, just let me.”

“Or what?”

“Or I won’t help your boyfriend.”

“Paul, that’s blackmail.”

“So what. Let me do this, or Tono’s on his own.”

“Jesus, Pauly.”

Mick’s use of his childhood nickname threw him back in time so quickly, he felt like he’d been uprooted and dumped into 1999, the year they were at the book release party, drunk out of their minds. Mick was calling him Pauly, trying to shove a Melba toast heaped with caviar down his throat. It had been the last time they were truly happy.

“Don’t call me that!”

“Sorry, sweetheart, it just slipped out. Let’s talk about this when you get here.”

“I’m not arguing in front of Tono. He’s a pain in my ass.”

“I can’t talk anymore. I’ll see you in a few, okay?”

“Sure.” Paul disconnected and pulled his tie off, dumping it on the seat. He glanced out the window and saw a deli up ahead with a flower display on the sidewalk, so he rapped on the privacy glass and asked the driver to stop. He decided to buy another bunch of wildflowers, the kind Mick loved. He didn’t give a shit what Tono would make of the gesture. Mick had been his lover long before Tono was ever a thought, and if he could put up with the Spaniard’s presence, then Tono would have to deal with him as well.

TONO had a beer in his hand and gulped it down in two long pulls, knowing he would need to fortify himself before Paul’s arrival. Their parting this morning hadn’t been on the best of terms, and he acknowledged that they couldn’t keep acting like enraged bulls every time they were in the same room. Eventually, it would blow up, and the one who would be hurt was Mick.

“Is he on his way?”

“Yes.”

“I hope he takes the manuscript home to read in private. I’m not in the mood for his crap.”

“Majo, you’ll have to get used to it if you want his help.”

“Why does he have to be so insulting?”

“I don’t think he does it on purpose. He’s a perfectionist and expects no less from his clients. The carnage along the way is part of his style. I’ve seen writers reduced to blithering idiots because of Paul, but when their books are published, it’s all forgotten.”

“I don’t see the need to be so disrespectful of someone else’s dream.”

“He’s not. He’s making damn sure he gets you to a point where your dream will actually come true.”

The doorbell buzzed at that moment, and Mick pulled open the door. Paul waved the wildflowers at him and grinned. “Honey, I’m home.”

Mick couldn’t help but smile, even though Tono’s disgusted grunt was heard clear across the room.

Chapter 8

THE barbeque had been pleasant so far. The men had their fill of good steaks and baked potatoes with cold beers to wash everything down. The night air was warm and a little muggy, but the sky was filled with bright stars that twinkled down on them. Mick imagined lying on a cotton blanket on the warm sands of La Concha, the beach that surrounded the bay in San Sebastian. His

fantasy was interrupted by the persistent hopping and twitching in his left leg, reminding him once again that San Sebastian and his idyllic life were no longer a reality. He kneaded the muscles absently, hoping it would pass quickly and not escalate into the full-blown cramping that would require a pain pill and Tono's skilled hands.

“¿Qué piensas?”

“I was thinking about San Sebastian and the beach.”

“You miss it?” Paul interrupted.

“Yes. It's a beautiful part of the world. I hope we can go back some day.”

“Of course we will,” Tono nodded, “as soon as we can travel, we will.”

“How do you figure?” Paul asked. “Aren't you here for the duration?”

“I came for medical treatment, Paul; however, if there isn't much they can do, then I'd just as soon die in my own bed.”

Paul jumped up. “You're not going to fucking die, okay? I don't want to hear that shit!”

“Sweetheart, please,” Mick said, gently pulling on Paul's hand. “Sit down.”

Tono shoved his manuscript at Paul. Hearing Mick slip and call Paul sweetheart made him want to break something, preferably Paul's face. Instead, he took a huge breath and prayed that Paul wouldn't give him any lip. He was itching for a fight, and this would be the perfect excuse to hurt him without a twinge of regret. “Read this and shut up.”

Paul raised his eyebrows and stared at the Spaniard for the longest time. He saw flashes of emotion warring in the limpid brown eyes. There was anger and jealousy and most of all frustration, which Paul could easily understand. Neither man wanted to be a third wheel.

Paul took the thick sheaf of papers from Tono and the glass of wine Mick handed him and proceeded to read. It was primitive, and errors abounded, distracting him. He looked up and said, "Don't you have spell check?"

Tono's cheeks turned dark pink with anger and shame. He snatched the manuscript out of Paul's hand and stood, towering over him. "You know that English is not my first language. I start out writing in Spanish and translate it as I go along. Sometimes it doesn't always turn out right."

"No wonder it's reading funny. You can't do that, Tono! Now, lose the drama and hand over the manuscript," Paul deadpanned.

"¡Cabron!"

"I believe we've already established that," Paul nodded. "Hand it over."

Tono gave him the manuscript reluctantly.

Paul read and sipped wine, flipping pages little by little. He could feel Tono's eyes burning into him, and he sensed the waves of anxiety emanating from Mick, but he wasn't going to let anything intrude on his thoughts as he read. He wanted to give both men as honest an evaluation as possible. This was why they'd come to him in the first place.

After reading for several more minutes, he decided that he'd had enough.

"I can't help you," he said.

"Paul!"

“I’m sorry, Mick,” Paul apologized, raising his hands in the universal sign of giving up. “It’s grossly sentimental and reads like a Harlequin romance.”

“It’s a love story,” Tono said indignantly. “Of course it’s sentimental.”

“There’s love and there’s sap, Tono.” Paul’s words cut like a knife. “We’re gay men, not fucking sixteen-year-old schoolgirls. I will not put my name anywhere near this manuscript. Christ, I’d be laughed out of the business.”

“Can you fix it?” Tono asked with much difficulty. He was struggling with his pride, but he managed to keep his emotions in check, even though his skin was mottled and his hands shook when he retrieved the manuscript. Tono’s pain was oozing out of every pore, but he persisted, which raised him in Paul’s estimation.

“I can fix it, but we have to start from scratch. Junk this entire thing.”

“No!”

“Tono, if Paul thinks you can salvage this, then let’s listen, okay?” Mick turned to Paul. “Tell us what we need to do.”

“There is no us. Isn’t this his book?”

“I can help.”

“It’s either you or me, Mick. Too many cooks, and all that shit—”

“I see.”

“Do you? Because if I take this on, and I say if, with a great deal of hesitation, I want complete control.”

“That’s up to Tono,” Mick replied, looking at his partner. “Tono?”

Tono shrugged, threw the manuscript down on the table, and walked into the house, leaving Paul staring at his backside. “Well, I guess that answers the question.” Paul sneered.

“No. Give him time, Paul. He’s not used to so much criticism, and from you of all people. It’s hard to be second best.”

“What are you talking about, second best? He’s number one in your book, isn’t he?”

“He was,” Mick replied, incinerating Paul with the violet eyes that looked black in the dim light, “until I saw you again. He knows you were my first and my longest relationship. He can’t ignore that or make the connection disappear. We had something special, Paul, and he can feel it.”

“Mick—”

“Don’t move, Paul. Don’t even touch me. He’ll go nuts if he sees you.”

“Are you scared of him?”

“No! I love him and don’t want to see him hurt.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look, I don’t understand this either. I love Tono passionately. He’s been my world for the last six-and-a-half years, yet seeing you again, and being with you the other night, has made me realize that there’s a part of me that has never stopped loving you.”

“Fuck. I want to kiss you so badly I’m shaking.”

“I know, Paul. The chemistry between us is still there, isn’t it? But I won’t jeopardize what Tono and I have. He means too much to me.”

“I thought you said you loved me?”

“Paul, I guess I’ll always love you. You’re in my blood, but Tono is my soul mate.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means he’s my emotional equal. You, on the other hand, are everything I’ve always wanted in a man, but you’re unattainable.”

“Mick, I’ve always been there for you.”

“Not when I needed you the most.”

“It wasn’t like that, Mick. I’m sorry about what happened.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“Not now, okay? Maybe we can discuss it sometime in the future.”

“My future is rather limited.”

“Shut up! I can’t take that kind of negativity.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but it is what it is.”

“I’ve got to go, Mick. This conversation is way too Zen for me.”

Mick reached out and held Paul’s hand. “Please, stay.”

“I can’t. Let me know what Tono decides.”

Paul stood and made his way into the house where Tono sat in front of the computer. Tono appraised him silently, frowning when Paul nodded at him and walked out.

PAUL leaned back in the leather seat of the Bentley and ran both hands through his hair, ready to pull it out in tufts. He was still shaking and wound up tight from his conversation with Mick. In his fantasies throughout the years, he’d imagined a million reunion scenes, but none had ever come close to the reality of this situation. He would have given anything to storm back into the small apartment and make love to Mick, but that wasn’t even a remote possibility. He was lucky that Tono was cool about what had happened the other night, but he was pretty sure that he’d rip Paul to pieces if he tried to initiate another scene on his own.

Apart from the unbearable sexual tension between them, there was the underlying fear. Paul couldn’t wrap his head around any of the dire predictions of what was to come until he heard it from Dr. Jordan’s mouth. The clincher, of course, was Mick’s statement that he still loved him, followed by his accusation of Paul’s betrayal. It blew his mind; he’d had no idea that Mick still cared.

“Take me to the club,” he ordered, confident that his driver would know exactly where he wanted to go. He needed some mindless entertainment, and his regular habitat was the perfect venue for what he wanted right now—a random fuck. No need for anything deeper. Tomorrow would bring all the issues back to the forefront, but tonight he planned on shelving his worries and getting laid.

The club was its usual loud and boisterous self. He headed straight to the bar and nodded his thanks as Nick, the regular bartender, handed him his drink of choice: Chivas on ice. He inhaled

the first one and slid the glass back down the mahogany top, watching as Nick expertly caught it. He refilled, added ice, and brought drink number two close to Paul's hand. "Thanks, buddy. Start a tab, will you?"

"Done, Mr. Alcott."

"Is there anyone worth sweating over tonight?"

Nick grinned. "Depends on what you're looking for."

"Hot and horny will do for starters, Nick."

"The guy over at the far end of the bar seems pretty hot, if you're into ink."

"Right now, anything looks good." Paul put his empty glass down and sauntered over to the brunet. He was leaning over the counter in a cutoff shirt that showed off chiseled arms decorated with an intricate pattern of tattoos, cascading colors down the hard planes like sleeves.

"Hey." The hottie flashed a grin.

"Hey, yourself," Paul replied, wishing it were Mick smiling so invitingly.

Chapter 9

IT WAS Thursday, and the three men were sitting in Dr. Jordan's office waiting to hear his verdict.

Mick had signed consent forms the day after Paul informed him of this appointment, which allowed Dr. Jordan complete access to his records. The neurologist had been able to view every test that had been administered from the onset of Mick's first symptoms. Now they were about to hear what he had to say.

“Mr. Henley,” Dr. Jordan began, “I wish I had better news.”

“I was pretty sure that you weren’t going to tell me anything new,” Mick replied calmly. “I’m here for Paul’s sake. I know what’s in store for me.”

“Do you, Mr. Alcott?” Dr. Jordan turned to address Paul. “Would you like a recap of the disease?”

“I don’t know much about it,” Paul admitted. He’d been sure Dr. Jordan would repudiate the Spanish doctors’ diagnoses, so his pronouncement was devastating. Paul was bitterly disappointed, and he wanted to rail at the unfairness of it all but held it together for Mick’s sake.

“ALS is short for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a neurological disease affecting the motor neurons in the brain and spinal cord, which results in the loss of control of an individual’s voluntary muscles. As motor neurons die, the muscles weaken and atrophy.”

“Which muscles are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the muscles that control the hands, arms, legs, and eventually the diaphragm, tongue, and throat. As the disease progresses, patients lose the use of their limbs and neck muscles, gradually becoming paralyzed. Speech or swallowing may be lost or become increasingly difficult.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“It’s an unforgiving disease, Mr. Alcott. On the other hand, ALS does not affect a person’s ability to see, smell, taste, hear, or recognize touch. Patients usually maintain control of eye muscles, bladder, bowel, and sexual functions; although, in the later stages of the disease, patients need help getting to and from the bathroom. Most ALS sufferers retain complete control of their mind, so they are aware of their body’s deterioration. This can cause anxiety and depression, which, to my mind, is the worst part of the disease. To be fully functional mentally and watch your body die can be terrifying.”

Paul jumped up from his seat. "Please, stop!"

Mick reached out and took Paul's hand. "Sweetheart, sit down. I've heard this all before."

Tono wasn't faring any better. He'd been told what to expect, but hearing it again in such a dispassionate way was making him physically ill. He was pale when he stood, and there were tiny beads of sweat dotting his forehead. He kissed Mick on the cheek. "I'll be outside, cariño," he whispered in a husky voice.

Mick nodded.

The men were silent until the door closed, and then Dr. Jordan asked, "Mr. Henley, excuse me for intruding, but is that gentleman your partner?"

"Yes."

"He should know what to expect."

"He does," Mick said sadly, "he just doesn't want to hear it over and over."

"I see."

"I do have a question, Dr. Jordan," Mick asked. "I've done quite a bit of research on ALS, and there have been cases where people live much longer than the predicted three to five years. Can you explain it?" Mick leaned forward, hoping to hear some good news. "What about Stephen Hawking, for instance? That man has had ALS for over thirty-five years."

"It's true. He's one of the longest recorded cases, and clear proof that ALS does not affect the intellect or sexual function. Hawking has fathered three children after his diagnosis and won several awards in his chosen field of physics, but he is an exception to the rule. There have been

instances where the progression halts after a certain point or slows down considerably. It usually happens in younger men, such as you. Mr. Hawking was in his twenties when he was first diagnosed. Again, this is not considered the normal pattern for this disease, Mr. Henley. You mustn't get your hopes up."

"Without hope, what else do I have, Dr. Jordan?" Mick asked. "Maybe I'll be one of the lucky ones."

"Yes, he's right," Paul interjected. "Why not hope for the best?"

"Because it's not realistic," the neurologist replied. "To expect to be in the five percentile is like hoping you'll win the lotto—a nice thought, but a fantasy nonetheless."

"How do you figure?" Mick's voice rose in anger. "I know I need to make plans for the worst, but what's wrong with clinging to a tiny bit of hope? I resent your attitude, doctor."

"I apologize, Mr. Henley. I'm a physician, and I deal in facts. Half of the people with ALS die within three to five years. About twenty percent live beyond five years, and ten percent live for ten years or more. The probability of your case having any similarity to Stephen Hawking is one in a million. I certainly don't have a crystal ball, and as such cannot predict what your disease will or will not do. But I feel that you should be prepared."

"For the worst!" Paul accused. "You want him to just give up."

"No, I don't, but I don't want to give him false hope either. When was the first time you felt weakness in your legs?" Dr. Jordan asked, turning his attention away from Paul and back to Mick.

"December."

"That was six months ago. How many times have you fallen since?"

“Many.”

“Do you feel your legs getting weaker?”

“Every day.” Mick’s reply was accompanied by a look that Paul had never seen before. The fear had leached the color from his skin, making him look haunted and desperate. His purple eyes shimmered, and he picked at the crease in his pants in a nervous gesture. Paul rose automatically and knelt by his side.

“It’ll be okay, Mick. We’ll get through this.”

Mick nodded, brushing away a rogue tear.

“Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. Alcott, but what is your relationship to Mr. Henley?”

“He’s my best friend,” Paul said gently, cupping Mick’s face, “and the only man I’ve ever loved.” The last part was a whisper, strictly for Mick’s ears.

“Is your partner aware of this relationship?” Dr. Jordan asked.

“Sort of,” Mick tore his eyes away from Paul. “Tono knows we have a history.”

“And he’s okay with Mr. Alcott being a part of your life? I know it’s none of my business, but the last thing you need is undue stress.”

Paul stood and looked at the doctor. “Call me Paul, will you? I think we’re beyond a getting-to-know-you phase, so we may as well be on a first name basis here. I don’t care what Mick’s partner thinks of me; I have every intention of sticking around, unless Mick, himself, asks me to leave, and even then, I may ignore him.”

“Won’t this cause problems, Mr. Henley?”

“We’re working things out, doctor,” Mick sighed. “Paul and Tono have a business relationship of sorts.”

“Look,” Paul interjected. “This is all rather sudden, and we’re trying to address the issues as they arise. We haven’t worked out the logistics yet.”

“I understand.” Dr. Jordan nodded. “Do you have family that will be inquiring about your health or making any decisions for you?”

“No,” Mick replied. “Both my parents have passed away.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. They lived very full lives.”

“Do you have a power of attorney in place, Mr. Henley? Who will be addressing your medical issues when you are no longer able to use your hands? Have you thought about a DNR?”

“Whoa! Hold on, Dr. Jordan,” Mick said, sitting up straight. “I really don’t think I’m even close to that point yet.”

“I don’t think you understand what’s going to happen, Mr. Henley. Once the paralysis sets in, the progression moves rather quickly. The biggest concern among ALS sufferers is breathing. When your diaphragm loses the ability to expand and contract on its own, we have to think about an alternative. Life can be prolonged by the use of a ventilator, but infection or other complications may ensue.”

“Not now, Dr. Jordan,” Mick protested. “I can’t deal with any of that today, or tomorrow for that matter.” He ran a hand through his dark curls and looked to Paul for help.

“Mr. Henley,” Dr. Jordan persisted, “it will make it easier on the people around you if your wishes are clearly laid out. This way, the decisions are yours and made before the emergencies arise.”

“That’s enough for today,” Paul snapped. “We’ll discuss this amongst ourselves and keep you apprised. Any legal documents will be prepared and signed, don’t worry,” Paul said. He wrapped his arms around Mick and helped him up. “You good to go?”

Mick nodded. “I’m fine.”

“If you want me to manage this case, I will need certain documents in place,” Dr. Jordan continued, used to being put off by patients or family members in denial. “I want to make sure we have definite guidelines that cannot be misinterpreted.”

“Dr. Jordan,” Paul replied, in his determined voice, recognized by his employees as the final word, “we will discuss this and get back to you.”

“Fine. Make an appointment for two weeks from now. That should give you enough time to deal with this.”

Chapter 10

TONO slammed the bathroom door shut, locked it, and heaved into the toilet. The bile came up in choking spasms, making his eyes water and his knees give out. He sank to the floor and embraced the porcelain, resting his forehead against the cold rim, hoping the screaming in his head would stop. His fear dripped out of every pore, along with his sweat as it fell in loud plops into the water.

Dr. Jordan’s frigid pronouncement was a shocking reminder of what was to come. He hadn’t expected this kind of reaction; after all, he’d heard this many months ago. But Mick’s symptoms had not escalated, lulling him into a sense of complacency, which was destroyed as soon as the doctor opened his mouth.

Hearing Mick call Paul “sweetheart” again didn’t help. He wanted to pick up the blond and forcefully eject him from the room, but a scene would only hurt Mick, and that was the last thing he wanted. Paul had no right to be involved. He gave up that right years ago when he cheated on Mick and abandoned him at the height of his career. Mick had recounted the sordid details when they’d first met. Tono had had misgivings when Mick first broached the idea of having Paul edit his novel, and now more than ever, he knew he’d been right to worry. Paul had slipped back into Mick’s life with surprising speed. If Tono had only known how deep and powerful their connection had been, he would have protested much more vehemently.

But that was months ago, and the opportunity had passed. The pisser in all of this was the unexpected physical attraction he felt for Paul. He’d been around long enough to know when feelings were reciprocated, and the sexual energy between them was undeniable, although hard to understand. Paul was blond and blue-eyed—characteristics Tono found unattractive. He was also cold, egotistical, and ruthless, but when he gazed at Mick, he softened, and Tono caught a glimpse of another man hiding behind that professional façade. He supposed it was this man Mick had fallen for years ago, and the same one he seemed to have trouble letting go.

He headed to the sink and splashed water on his face, enjoying the refreshing feel of the cool liquid. He knew it would take a few more minutes for his body to recover, and he decided to stay in the restroom until that happened. He’d have to face Mick without fear, to be the strong and comforting presence he required, but in truth, he was overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness, compounded by the loss of everything familiar.

Tono was an athlete and accustomed to a life that was regimented and predictable. His daily routine had included morning exercise before lunch at two, and then he was off to the fronton at four until closing, around midnight. After that, it was drinks and dinner with Mick or friends and then bed. Since going on hiatus, he’d neglected the gym, and everything seemed off-kilter. Being in America didn’t help either. Although he’d lived here for five years, it had never been home. The apartment they’d rented in Chelsea was too small, the view nonexistent. He missed their spacious home overlooking the harbor.

In fact, Tono missed everything about San Sebastian. He longed for the camaraderie of an environment where everyone knew him on a first name basis. He could walk into any establishment and be greeted warmly, “Tono, ¿qué tal?” It was an inquiry requiring no answer, and it was reassuring to know that people were interested in his life. Here, he felt inconsequential, like a worm that could easily be stepped on and forgotten. Paul treated him with disdain, tolerating his presence for the sake of Mick, making his feelings painfully obvious.

Yet, to voice a complaint, or even think it, felt selfish. He'd wrestled with his fears months ago, and he thought he'd come to terms with them, but that was in the past; their current situation was nothing he'd expected. Watching his lover deteriorate each day was not going to be easy, especially so far from home and with Paul's constant presence.

Tono supposed that if he were sick, he'd also want to be surrounded by all that was familiar. Mick had said repeatedly that he loved Spain and wanted to live there forever, but the reality was that he'd come home to die. Tono swiped away the tears that sprung forth with this realization. He couldn't afford to show Paul this side of his personality. Somehow, Paul would use it against him. It was better to remain a mystery; the strange foreigner—the bastard who'd captured Mick's heart.

THE drive home was more depressing than the ride to the doctor's office. Each man was lost in his own thoughts, and they were in Chelsea before they realized it. Mick stumbled twice on his way to the front door, so Tono picked him up in his arms and carried him across the threshold. Paul followed mutely, too shocked by everything he'd heard to take offense at Tono's proprietary attitude.

Mick began to cry softly against Tono's neck, and they sat on the sofa while Tono cradled him, rocking gently, an instinctive move in the hopes it would comfort. His heart was shattering into a million pieces and his resolve to remain cool and stoic in Paul's presence was destroyed as soon as he heard Mick weeping. His eyes overflowed, and he buried his face in the abundant dark curls and wept as well. He didn't hear the door slam shut or look up when the Bentley peeled away from the curb. All he could think of was comforting Mick, and they held each other until the room grew dark.

“CARIÑO, let me turn on the lights and start dinner. Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“You have to eat, Mick. You can't afford to get weak.”

“Maybe dying of hunger is a better alternative.”

“Stop talking this way. You have many years left, so we need to nourish your body while we can.”

“Tono, it’s hopeless. You didn’t hear the doctor. He said I shouldn’t count on miracles because there are none for this fucking disease.”

“Shh—cariño. Please don’t talk like this.”

“Why not? I’m tired of being brave.”

“You don’t have to be brave for me, but you can’t give up hope. That’s all we have left.”

“Aren’t hope and courage tied together?”

Tono cupped Mick’s face and kissed his mouth, moving on to his cheeks, and finally the curly lashes spiked with tears. The supreme irony of it was that Mick had never looked more beautiful. The violet hue of his eyes, always so arresting, seemed to glow with an iridescent light, making this even more painful.

“It’s okay to be frightened, cariño.” Tono sighed and drew him closer. He tried to alleviate Mick’s fear by giving him permission to stop putting up a brave front for everyone’s sake. “You wouldn’t be human if you weren’t afraid, but I’ll be right here by your side to give you the strength you need.”

“Majo—”

“Losing hope is giving up, Mick, and I won’t let you,” Tono persisted. “We can’t just accept an outcome because of a doctor’s verdict. They’re human and have been wrong.”

“But... he said I was being unrealistic.”

“Bullshit! He’s saying that ’cause he’s got nothing else to say. Maybe you’ll be one of the lucky ones like that Hawking guy. Why not hope for the best, rather than expecting the worst?”

“I’d like to think I have more time.”

“You have much to look forward to—book signings and possible movie deals. I know this is in the future, but it’s within the time frame, if you don’t neglect yourself. You need to eat to stay as strong as possible.”

“Majo, I can do the right things, but eventually, my muscles will atrophy and die.”

“We have at least three more years, cariño. Lots of time.”

“But not all those years will be good ones, Tono. My doctor wants us to sign papers. To decide who will be in charge of my medical decisions and how I want things handled when I can no longer breathe.” Mick’s breath sobbed in his throat, and he threw himself at Tono again, breaking down once more. This time, the sounds of his grief were loud and angry.

Tono held him and waited for this wave to pass. He’d been told that one of the manifestations of ALS was excessive laughing or crying, but this was the first time he’d seen Mick truly distraught. Maybe it had to do with what the doctor had said, or maybe this was a part of his disease and something he should get used to. Regardless of which it was, it would take him a while to become immune to this kind of despair. Tono did the only thing he could think of; he carried him to bed.

He laid Mick on the mattress and began to remove his clothes, stopping to kiss every square inch of flesh as it was revealed. Tono licked his way down the finely shaped limbs that had yet to show any signs of deterioration. The only sign of the disease were the twitching muscles hopping about as Tono moved down each leg. Mick began to respond as Tono knew he would. He was a sensuous man, and their sex life had always been satisfying. The only plus in this entire nightmare was the fact that Mick would be able to feel his touch and maintain an erection despite everything else going on. He peeled off Mick’s socks and caressed his feet, licking at the soft arches and massaging each toe one by one, making Mick writhe and moan. Tono had a thing for feet, and he knew that Mick loved a good foot massage—a treat they always gave each other. He would have sucked on each toe if he’d had a washcloth handy, but it could wait for another time. Right now he was more interested in providing comfort, not servicing his own kink.

Mick's cock responded valiantly, a barometer for his state of mind, and Tono curled his fingers around the engorged shaft. He had every intention of chasing away Mick's melancholy mood with multiple orgasms. Tono swamped the silky organ, loving the taste as it leaked into his mouth. His tongue poked in and out of Mick's slit, twirling around the smooth head.

"Tono." Mick's sigh of pleasure quickly replaced the anguished cries as Tono sucked on the sensitive veins and ridges underneath the long shaft. He nuzzled Mick's sac, playing with it lovingly, burying his scratchy face against the tender skin of Mick's inner thighs. He heard Mick gasp when he breached him with his tongue and felt him pulling on his hair and canting his hips, rutting fiercely against his face.

"Majo, please." Mick's voice was hoarse. "Let me."

He moved and straddled Tono, pushing down on his chest and latching on to his nipples with a greedy mouth. "I want to possess you."

Tono quickly realized that Mick needed to be in control. There would come a time, in the not too distant future, when Mick would only be able to let Tono make love to him, but right now, he was not only able to take the lead, he was demanding it.

Mick reached for the lube they always kept by the bed and slathered a generous amount on his cock, wiping the excess in and around Tono, readying him. He clutched Tono's hips forcefully and pushed, pausing briefly when Tono exhaled with a loud grunt, adjusting to the stretch.

Mick's scorching hot breath seared Tono's face. He was a man on a mission, determined to take Tono to sexual heights that surpassed all others. Every move resonated with love, touching Tono to the core. He moved Tono's legs up on his shoulders so he could burrow in as deep as possible, and he began to snap his hips aggressively against Tono's thrusting.

Mick's determination pierced Tono through the heart. He knew this could be one of the last times Mick would be able to assume control of this intimate act, which was so much more than sex. It was love and commitment and a desire to give more than receive. The warmth filled Tono as Mick came in a shudder of release, pushing Tono's orgasm to the forefront as he spilled all over his stomach and Mick's chest.

“Never leave me, cariño.”

“Till death, Tono.”

Chapter 11

PAUL drove away from the Chelsea neighborhood and headed uptown. He was shaken by the scene he'd just witnessed. Up until now it had been conjecture and theory. Seeing Mick break down had almost destroyed him.

He endured the traffic and gridlock, gripping the steering wheel with white-knuckled hands, intent on keeping it together until he reached the privacy of his home. Public displays of emotion were inherently repugnant to him and a sign of weakness according to Paul Senior; it was a mantra he'd drilled into his son for years. Paul Junior was famous for his ability to keep it together under fire, yet tonight he felt his self-control crumbling inside of him.

The last time he'd felt such raw emotion was when he and Mick had broken up. It had taken him months to regain his sense of self—months of drunken one night stands to forget that he'd destroyed the only relationship that had ever meant anything to him. It had been years before he could think about Mick without the accompanying feelings of guilt and remorse, and now those same feelings were coming back to haunt him—even more overwhelming as he realized that his window of opportunity to make amends had narrowed down to a few years.

The worst part of this was that he was still in love with Mick while Mick had moved on. Sure, Mick said he loved Paul, but it was obvious that he was in love with Tono, and there was no way Paul could compete or intrude. It wouldn't be right, nor would it be fair. The most he could hope for was the opportunity to help with their literary pursuits and to provide the best medical support money could buy. He would have to throw all his energy into that goal to keep sane. But it was easier said than done. For the first time in years, he wanted to cry, to rage against this twist of fate, and to lose it in a hideous display of emotion.

Paul needed to talk to someone who would offer a sympathetic ear, if nothing else, but the truth of the matter was there was no one. After he and Mick broke up, he'd closed himself off, never allowing another man into his heart. The realization that he had no one to share this horrible

moment with struck a nerve, and he headed toward the only source of comfort he had left. Baxter would know what to do. He'd know what to say to make this better.

When he got to the Terraces, he parked in front of the building and tossed his keys at the doorman; he'd take care of putting the Bentley away in the underground spot. He entered the elevator for his penthouse residence and leaned against the mirrored wall as it moved up to his apartment. The doors slid open, and he stepped onto the burnished hardwood floor, covered with the finest Persian carpets from exotic places such as Isfahan, Qom, and Kashan. The silence and security of his home enveloped him, and he relaxed visibly as he made his way into the kitchen area, seeking out Baxter.

"You're home early," Baxter commented upon seeing him.

Paul nodded, took off his jacket, and draped it on one of the chairs at the kitchen table. "Would you please get me a drink?"

Baxter picked up on his mood immediately and headed toward the fully stocked bar in the living room to get the Scotch. When he returned to the kitchen, Paul was standing by a window with his forehead pressed against the glass. He accepted the drink gratefully and took a few sips of the amber liquid before he spoke.

"I don't think I can do this, Baxter."

"Do what, sir?"

"I can't watch him die. I can't do it," Paul repeated emphatically. He was haunted by the memory of Mick in Tono's arms.

"Paul," Baxter said gently, reaching for the glass and drawing his employer into his embrace. Paul began to cry as soon as he felt the familiar arms surrounding him. His sorrow upon hearing the devastating news from Dr. Jordan was finally allowed to surface, and he grieved for the man he loved. Paul's hope that he and Mick would reunite some day was destroyed by the magnitude of the doctor's verdict and the knowledge that someone else would be by Mick's side, not him. His dreams for a future with Mick seemed insignificant considering the uphill battle Mick would be waging against this insidious disease. His feelings of regret for time wasted, and opportunities

lost, made it that much harder to bear. Baxter held him until he pulled away. “Is the diagnosis confirmed then?”

“Yes. He’s got ALS.”

“I’m so terribly sorry.”

“So am I,” Paul said, a little embarrassed by his loss of control. He plucked a handful of paper towels off the stainless steel roller, sopped up his wet cheeks, and retrieved the glass of Scotch, draining it in one gulp. “I think I’ll need another, Baxter.”

Baxter took the glass from Paul’s outstretched hand and left the kitchen. When he returned, Paul was sitting at the kitchen table.

“Would you like to talk about it?” Baxter asked as he handed over the Scotch.

“What can I say? I’ve never been so frustrated in my life. I can’t believe that there’s nothing they can do about this disease. How the hell is that possible?”

Baxter shrugged, “I’m not sure. I don’t know much about ALS, other than it’s fatal.”

“It’s a fucking disease from hell that can reduce a beautiful, loving man in his prime to a mere shadow of his former self. I don’t see how I can watch Mick turn into that shadow.”

“Has he asked you for help?”

“He’s asking in a roundabout way,” Paul said. “I’m supposed to help his current lover finish his book.”

“What kind of book?”

“What does it matter?”

“I don’t understand why he would ask you. Surely there are others he could turn to.”

“I think this disease has addled his brain.”

“Are you serious?”

Paul slammed the heavy leaded crystal glass down on the table. “I don’t know what the fuck he wants from me, Baxter!”

“Maybe he just needs to be around you. You and Mick have a long history. It’s possible that he’s reaching out to you without saying the words.”

“He’s got the Spaniard who really loves him, by the way. There’s no denying it. I couldn’t possibly compete.”

“Why does it have to be a competition?”

“I won’t be second best, Baxter.”

“Paul, with all due respect, this isn’t a contest. We’re talking about making a man’s dying days as comfortable as possible.”

“Why me? I haven’t seen him for seven years.”

“Who else but you? It seems perfectly logical to me.”

“I need a refill, please.” Paul handed over the glass. This time Baxter brought the bottle of Chivas to the table and left it, along with a small bucket of ice. He poured a liberal amount for Paul and waited patiently as he took several more sips. “Why does this move seem so logical to you?” Paul asked.

“You and Mick were partners for what, twelve years?”

“Something like that,” Paul said, heaving a tremendous sigh. “I can’t believe this is happening, Baxter. I’ve had an ache in my gut since Mick got back.”

“You still love him,” Baxter said, as if that explained it all.

Paul shrugged and took another sip. “It doesn’t matter what I feel. He’s in a good relationship, and I would only ruin it for him if I were to act on my feelings.”

“He obviously still has feelings for you, or he wouldn’t have come to you for help.”

“His lover is very possessive.”

“Yet, he’s allowed you into their lives. He and Mick must have some understanding of your role in this, wouldn’t you say?”

“I don’t know what to think. All I know is that I’ve been asked to edit his manuscript, and it’s killing me because I’ve read one chapter and it’s crap, Baxter!” Paul shifted in the chair and looked up at the ceiling while he kneaded the back of his neck with his free hand. “Mick will never forgive me if I don’t do this, and I would never forgive myself. I hurt him badly once before, Baxter, and I can’t do it again.”

“Why did you? You were very much in love with him. What happened?”

Paul stood quickly, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Very well.” Baxter nodded, silenced by Paul’s statement. He stood to go when Paul reached for him and said, “Please stay. I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, sir. I had no business asking you that question.”

“I just can’t talk about that part of my life, Baxter. It’s not something I’m proud of.”

“Then we’ll drop it.”

“Should I help them?”

“That’s not for me to decide. It’s your decision entirely.”

“I know, Baxter. I’m asking for your expert opinion.”

“I’m hardly a literary expert.”

“No. But you’re an expert on Paul Alcott.”

Baxter’s surprise was painted all over his face. “I’m not sure what you want to hear, Paul. I can only say that you have strong feelings for Mick, and it might be harder to walk away than to stay.”

“You think so?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know if I’m strong enough to deal with his sickness, or sit idly by and let them make all the decisions. You know what a control freak I am.”

“You can make yourself heard without taking over.”

“When you figure out how to do that, be sure and send me a memo.” Paul snorted. “You know that isn’t going to happen.”

“I think you should concentrate on the writing and leave the rest to Mick and his partner.”

“I suppose.”

“What kind of story is it?”

Paul raised his eyebrows. “It’s a fucking love story. Sickeningly sweet and riddled with clichés.”

“You can turn it around.”

“I don’t know if I want to be associated with anything like that.”

“You have a brand new GLBT department. There’s always room for one more gay romance.”

“But not one with my name on it.”

“I know you can write, sir. Why haven’t you ever written your own novel?”

“Never thought about it, Baxter.” Paul stood abruptly. “I’m going to bed. Thank you for listening to my tale of woe.”

“I’m always here to listen, Paul. Would you like me to bring you a tray with a light dinner and maybe a fresh glass and more ice?”

“That would be great,” Paul said, and turned to head toward his bedroom suite.

When Paul got to his room, he toed off his shoes and lay down on the king-sized bed. He was a little woozy from the Scotch he’d ingested on an empty stomach, but it was numbness he craved, and it felt good right now. He’d been blindsided by the raw emotion. He couldn’t afford to let this overwhelm him since he was no longer Mick’s partner. What he could do was fall back on what he knew best—editing. He would offer his professional advice and support with Tono’s story, regardless of his personal feelings. If nothing else, they could use the manuscript to wallpaper their awful apartment.

As for the other, well, he’d deal with the medical issues as they arose. His first order of business would be getting the paperwork in place. He made a mental note to have his legal department research whatever was necessary for a medical power of attorney and a living will. Baxter was insane to think he’d relinquish control for even one minute. If it was help Mick wanted, he’d get it in spades.

Chapter 12

IT HAD been one week since the appointment with Dr. Jordan. Seven days, and Mick was starting to panic because the episodes of weakness were becoming more and more frequent. He’d fallen several times over the last forty-eight hours. Twice he’d done so in Tono’s presence, which had led to tears of frustration on both their parts, but the other incidents had been private. Each time it came as a big surprise. Even though he knew this was inevitable, the sudden loss of power in limbs that had supported him all his life was terrifying. He’d pause after each fall, willing his body to carry on as if nothing had happened. It was becoming increasingly harder to deny that it took much longer for his legs to respond to his brain. They felt like two tree stumps, unresponsive and leaden, despite the pills he’d swallowed religiously. The Rilutek was supposed to be the wonder drug that would hold off the more devastating symptoms of ALS, but it seemed to be losing its effectiveness. He was now seven months into his disease and on the verge of becoming a paraplegic.

The only plus this week was a more subdued Paul who had agreed to meet with Tono to try and make some sense of the novel he’d written. Paul had been over twice after work, spending a

good hour with the manuscript in one hand and his infamous red pen in the other. He'd leave without saying anything nasty, but the river of red on each page was a testament to what he thought of the piece. Mick had looked over the comments and had to acknowledge that Paul was right on every count, something Tono had yet to come to terms with. He'd peck away at his laptop, attempting to improve a phrase, but in reality, he was floundering. Tono had never failed at anything he'd embarked on, and it was difficult to watch him deal with this new insecurity. Whenever Mick would broach the subject and offer to help, Tono would turn him down.

Tonight had been a complete surprise and very pleasant. It had started with a great dinner at Eleven Madison Park, followed by complementary theater tickets to Billy Elliot, a sensory delight that entertained him immensely. He loved dancing and Elton John, and to have the combination in one venue was a treat he hadn't expected. Paul knew how he felt about the British singer and composer and had handed him the tickets last week, nonchalantly, as if they weren't a big deal; in reality, he'd probably called in several favors to get the prime orchestra seats on such short notice. Tono didn't like Elton John but was more than willing to accompany him and share the special evening. It had been a long time since they'd done anything spontaneous, and although accepting any sort of gift from Paul was difficult, Tono did admit that it was very generous, especially since Paul was excluded.

The culmination of the evening was Tono's surprise—a horse-drawn carriage ride around Central Park after the play. The hour spent in his embrace, enjoying the warm summer night in such a romantic setting, was a memory he would always cherish and file away for future reference. They'd made love when they got home and fallen asleep in each other's arms.

MICK was running through the thick, green maze that Paul Sr. had built on the grounds of the Alcott estate. He laughed when Paul tugged at his shirt and ripped it off, begging him to stop. They teased each other with knowing looks and playful hands, well aware of the effect on their bodies. They were hot and sweaty from the chase, and Mick's heartbeat was no longer silent, making whooshing noises that got louder and louder in his head. Paul tackled Mick and he fell, grappling the ground to try to get away. His arms flailed as he clutched at the grass while Paul hung on to him, making escape impossible. Mick felt like he was dragging boxes filled with leaded weights; attempting to move forward became more and more difficult. He clawed at the earth, watching the tendons on his arms stick out in relief against his tanned skin, yet despite his effort, he couldn't move his lower body. His legs felt like they were attached to anvils, and when he looked behind him, Paul was no longer there. The solid earth was turning soft and mushy, causing him to sink into the ground. He felt something sucking him down, and the harder he fought, the lower he sank; soon he was waist-deep in gelatinous muck. He tried to hoist himself over the edge of what was turning out to be a pool of sorts, but something kept pulling him down, something cold and clammy against his legs, tugging on them relentlessly. He grunted in frustration, plucking at the vegetation, hoping to free himself, but nothing was happening. He cried out in panic and awoke to Tono's gentle voice soothing him. "Cariño, wake up. You're dreaming."

Mick struggled in Tono's arms, clinging to him in desperation as he tried to escape his dream. He couldn't seem to catch his breath. His heart was beating so hard it was practically moving his body. "Tono, what's happening to me?"

"You're dreaming, cariño."

Mick was terrified by this helpless feeling. Even Tono's strong arms and warm body did nothing to snap him out of this nightmare. His senses were heightened, yet each time he shifted to try and sit up, his lower extremities refused to cooperate. His legs felt like they were encased in concrete.

"I can't move my legs." Mick's shocked voice reverberated in the room as the reality of the situation slammed home. "I can't move!"

"Shh... relax, cariño. You're still in your dream. Take deep breaths," Tono said calmly, rubbing Mick's back with strong hands. He could feel Mick's naked body trembling against his, and he could almost hear Mick's heart thundering against his rib cage. They clung to each other, hoping this feeling would pass.

"Tono," Mick whispered after several minutes.

"What?"

"I really can't move my legs. This isn't a dream."

"No!" Tono protested, mentally unprepared for this progression. He disentangled their limbs and laid Mick flat on his back, massaging each of Mick's legs forcefully. "Can you feel my hands?"

"Yes," Mick said, fighting to hold back the tears, but they began to flow anyway. "I feel everything, Tono. I just can't move."

Tono squeezed harder, hoping to force the muscles back to life, but the finely-formed legs, covered with a light layer of dark hair, were unresponsive. Mick was weeping and clutching at the bed sheet, pulling it over himself as if it could hide him from the reality of the situation. Tono pulled the sheet away from Mick's face and stared into the magnetic eyes that were wild with terror. He caressed his face and showered him with soft kisses, whispering endearments in Spanish, attempting to soothe and console. Mick had turned into a cold statue underneath him. Tono's eyes were shining, and he gnawed on his lower lip to keep from breaking down. "What can I do, cariño?"

"Kill me."

"Don't say that."

"I want to die."

"Please, amor." His face contorted with grief.

"Go away," Mick said, turning to look in the opposite direction. "Leave me alone."

Tono left the bed reluctantly and pulled up his shorts. He headed out to the living room, where he picked up the phone and dialed Paul's private number, which Mick had tacked on the wall. The phone rang many times before the sleep-heavy voice answered. "This is Paul."

"Pol, it's Tono."

"What happened?" Paul's quick response was reassuring.

"You must come now. Mick cannot walk."

THE drive was relatively swift, given the hour. Not too many New Yorkers were up and about at six in the morning on a Saturday, which was a relief. Paul wasn't in the right frame of mind to deal with gridlock of any sort. He was in full panic mode but resolute and determined to handle

whatever it was that awaited him. He was shocked that Tono had called for help, but he was grateful for the chance to be there for Mick in his hour of need. He parked the car a few blocks from the apartment and all but sprinted down the sidewalk, banging loudly on the door when he arrived.

Tono yanked it open and stood there in a pair of shorts and nothing else. "Come in."

"What's going on?"

"He can't move his legs," Tono answered, his face grim. "He's talking suicide."

"Fuck that!" Paul walked past him and went straight to the bedroom. Mick was still in bed but leaning up against the headboard, bare-chested. His lower body was covered with a thin sheet, and he looked at Paul with heavy eyes. "Why are you here?"

"Tono asked me to come."

"You can't help, Paul," Mick said. "Go away."

"I'm not going anywhere." Paul sat on the edge of the bed and held Mick's hand, squeezing him hard.

"I don't want you here."

"I'm sorry, but I have no intention of leaving." Paul was firm, so Mick faced the other way.

"Mick, look at me."

Mick turned, hoping Paul had changed his mind, but he remained steadfast and reached for Mick instead, drawing him closer. He practically melted into Paul's embrace as soon as he felt the strong arms surrounding him. "Make this disappear, sweetheart."

“I wish I could,” Paul said gently. “You have no idea how much I want to make this all better.”

“I want you and Tono to help me kill myself, or find someone who’ll do it for me.”

Paul was deeply shaken by Mick’s request, delivered in an unemotional voice. His friend had never been suicidal; in fact, he’d been rabidly against Dr. Jack Kevorkian’s methods when he’d first made headlines in the early nineties. The seriousness of the request led Paul to believe that Mick had been thinking about this for quite some time but had never said it out loud. Was this the real reason he’d come back to America—to get Paul to help him find the means to end his life? If that were so, then he was out of luck; Paul would move heaven and earth to try and save Mick. He would never agree to this, no matter how much he loved him. Paul steadied himself, willing his heart to stop fluttering and his anxieties to recede. He needed to reassure his friend, not freak him out even more by being needy and emotional. “I’m afraid that’s not up for discussion, Mick. We’ll deal with each medical crisis, one day at a time. When did this start?”

“I woke up from a dream, and I couldn’t move my legs. I was fine last night. Tono and I had a wonderful dinner, and Billy Elliot was amazing. I could walk, and even climb stairs, although I did trip a few times. Now I can’t move my legs at all.”

“Maybe it’s a temporary thing that will pass. Try to remain positive and we’ll figure this out.”

“There’s only one thing to figure out: how you and Tono are going to help me commit suicide.”

Paul snapped, allowing his feelings to bubble up to the surface. “Shut up! I don’t want to hear another word about assisted dying.”

“Why not?” Mick cried out, pleading his case in a voice turned desperate. “I have every right to decide when and how I’m going to die.”

“No, you don’t! You’re going to fight this, and goddamn you if you think I’m going to let you give up. Tono!”

“Yes, Pol?” the Spaniard answered quickly, moving away from his spot near the bedroom door.

“Help me get Mick up and dressed. We’re going to go outside, sit down in the patio, have some coffee, and discuss our next move like civilized human beings. You’re not a fucking animal, Mick, and euthanasia is not an option!”

Mick snorted out a harsh sound. His face twisted and the bitter tears began to flow again. “Just let me fucking die already! I don’t want you or Tono to see me turn into a vegetable.”

“Oh God,” Paul exclaimed, pulling Mick roughly against his chest. “Please, babe, shut the fuck up. I can’t stand to hear you talk like this.”

Tono knelt down beside the bed and held Mick’s hand. “Cariño, listen. I would rather have you in a wheelchair than not at all. You can’t give up. You have so much to do yet.”

“Tono, majó,” Mick begged, “let me go.”

“No, I can’t.” Tono leaned into Mick and kissed him on the mouth. “I’m too selfish to let you go.”

He continued to kiss Mick, and he pulled Paul into their circle with his free hand, bringing him closer. “Pol, help me show him how much we love and need him.”

Paul’s respect for his rival rose exponentially as he saw firsthand how much Tono truly loved Mick. He was more than willing to share him, if that’s what it would take to calm him down. Paul removed his shirt and unzipped his pants, pushing down his silk boxers, while Tono stripped off his white shorts. They got into bed, with Mick sandwiched in between them.

“Mick, babe, look at me,” Paul said softly, adding the endearment that made it more poignant. “I can’t let you go, now that I have you back in my life. I’ll take you any way I can get you.”

“Paul, that’s not fair. I’m going to be useless to you, a potted fern.”

“Bullshit,” Paul said, kissing Mick hard, forcing his mouth open, possessing him with his aggressive tongue. “You will always be desired— walking or standing, lying down or sitting on a fucking log. I’m crazy about you,” Paul said, showering hot kisses all over Mick’s face.

“Cariño, you know I love you with all my heart. I don’t care about wheelchairs. You are still the same person, mi hombre.”

“Majo,” Mick whispered, tearing his mouth away from Paul and kissing Tono deeply. He wiped the stray tear that fell down Tono’s cheek and kissed him again.

Paul littered Mick’s torso with warm kisses, lingering over the light brown circles that began to pucker in response. He bit each one gently, rolling the hard nub against his teeth, pleased to hear Mick’s cry of pleasure despite the traumatic events that were unfolding. Paul had read over and over that sex was the great panacea, and he planned on using it tonight to ward off this dark and desperate moment. Tono understood his motives, and he focused on Mick’s mouth, determined to show him how much he was wanted, regardless of his inability to move his legs.

When Paul had bathed each nipple, he moved back up to Mick’s head, kissing his neck and sucking up marks, while his hand traveled down Mick’s tight abdomen only to meet up with Tono’s hand at Mick’s groin. They were determined to partner in bringing Mick the ultimate pleasure. They joined hands around his cock and began to work it, bringing it to life with the mutual desire to take Mick to a much better place. They poured every ounce of feeling into this one act, striving to prove that Mick’s body was still more than capable of living. This one moment would make or break Mick’s outlook for an uncertain future; both Paul and Tono were well aware that it would be a deal breaker. They tag teamed him, loving him with hands and mouths, making sure that Mick knew just how much they cared. Soon the room was filled with sounds of sex, replacing the heartbreaking sobbing that had been present earlier. Mick moaned when Tono kissed him, and he sighed when Paul pressed warm, wet lips all over his chest and neck while whispering I love you. He came without a sound, overflowing the tops of their hands as they continued to milk him. Mick drew Paul’s head away from his chest, raking his fingers through the luxuriant blond hair, and he twisted his mouth away from Tono’s to latch onto Paul, kissing him fiercely. Tono’s arms snaked over them both and pulled the three of them together in a vice-like grip. “I love you, majo,” Mick sighed, closing his eyes and finally relaxing under their combined touch. “I love you both so much.”

MICK dozed, physically spent from all the emotion. Paul reached across his chest to mesh fingers with Tono, silently acknowledging his gratitude for allowing him to be a part of this. He knew what it must have cost the Spaniard to call out to him in this moment of need, and he was humbled by his generosity. He wasn't sure he would have acted in the same manner if their roles were reversed.

Tono's gaze was impenetrable, but he never took his eyes off Paul. He lifted Paul's hand to his mouth and pressed warm lips against his wrist, unleashing a million butterflies in his stomach. Paul's breath caught in his throat and desire surged through him. He burned under the fervid scrutiny as Tono's eyes traveled from his face down his body. When they settled on his cock, it was rosy red, swollen, and leaking fluid in readiness; Paul whimpered without even realizing it. Tono inclined his head toward the door, indicating that they should take this out to the living room. Paul frowned, aware of what would happen if he gave in, but Tono countered by flattening his tongue against Paul's palm and licking it. Paul was lost after that; he couldn't deny the powerful inducement luring him outside.

The bedroom door was barely latched before they came together in a fierce crashing of bodies, desperate for release. Paul moaned when Tono slipped his aggressive tongue into his mouth. The Spaniard stepped closer, taking handfuls of Paul's ass while thrusting himself against Paul's leaking cock, meshing fluids.

"Why are we doing this?" Tono's confusion sounded almost pitiful as they rutted against each other like dogs coupling in the summer heat.

"Fuck if I know," Paul growled. "We're animals."

"I know it," Tono said, pushing his groin against Paul's. "Stop me, Pol," Tono grunted, bringing Paul even closer. He picked him up, and Paul wound his legs around Tono's waist, smashing his rigid cock against Tono's stomach.

"God, forgive me, but I can't," Paul sighed, crushing Tono's mouth with wet kisses.

Tono forced him away for a second as he wrestled for control. His immediate need to fuck Paul was tempered by his love for Mick, and these two emotions warred in his brain as he decided what to do.

“Don’t think, Tono! Mick will understand.”

Tono’s mouth twisted and he cried out in frustration, afraid to move forward because it was all kinds of wrong, yet unwilling to break away for a second, or he would come to his senses; he wanted this man.

Finally, Paul slid off the Spaniard and made the decision for him. He got down on his knees and pressed his face against Tono’s groin. He hefted Tono’s thick cock in one hand and began to lick at it, running his tongue up and down the silky shaft, bathing the tender skin until he heard Tono moaning, “Suck me, Pol.”

Tono’s words spilled out like a harsh command. Paul didn’t recognize his sex voice, but he accommodated him quickly by taking his rigid shaft down his throat in one quick move. Tono began to thrust as Paul made wet, slurping sounds, servicing Tono with abandon.

“Joder.” Tono babbled a continuing stream of Spanish words Paul didn’t understand. He shot in steaming spurts, and Paul swallowed around him, increasing the tension around his pulsating shaft. Tono’s knees buckled, and Paul moved aside and let him down gently, laying him on his back. He straddled Tono’s face. Paul felt needy and shamefully wanton, and he cried out, “Please, Tono, open up.” Tono lifted his head and took Paul’s engorged cock into his mouth, pausing for a second to adjust to its thickness. Paul shut his eyes and allowed the warmth to envelop him. He came immediately, much too soon, but the waves of pleasure lasted several minutes, and he held on to Tono’s head as he continued to suck on him.

Paul sighed, weak from the sweet release that was draining out of him, reducing him to a puddle of melting body parts. He stopped thinking about what they were doing; he stopped worrying about right and wrong. All he wanted was to forget the situation they were faced with, to remember that Mick had given him his blessing by initiating sex with Tono several weeks ago. He’d pretty much come out and said it was okay, so Paul closed his eyes and let himself go with it, enjoying the feel of the talented mouth working him.

When there was nothing more to extract, Tono pulled away and stood abruptly, distancing himself from Paul. “¡Coño!”

“Is that a good or a bad cuss word?” Paul breathed, lying boneless on the floor.

Tono snorted. “It’s bad.”

“What does it translate to in English?”

“You don’t want to know,” Tono said gruffly.

“Why not?”

“It means cunt.”

“Fuck!”

Tono turned to Paul. “Don’t sweat it. It’s just a form of expression in Spain, rarely used in the right context.”

“You really have a good command of English, you know?”

“Yes. But my accent sucks, I got it.”

“Hey, it is what it is.” Paul rolled over and leaned up on one elbow. “Thank you for calling me.”

“I love him, Pol. I’ll do anything to make this easy for him, and if I have to put up with you, I will.”

“Thanks a lot, you bastard. It works both ways.”

“I know. But you and I have to work this out, without involving Mick. When we are with him, we are in complete agreement. ¿Entiendes?”

“Only if we do everything I say.”

“We’ll see,” Tono huffed, “but this thing we just did. It ends now.”

“Sure,” Paul said, “this was a fluke.”

“We get together if Mick is present, and if he wants it.”

“That goes without saying.”

Tono’s words contradicted the passion radiating from his eyes. Paul knew they’d started something that was beyond their control, but he was determined to respect Tono’s wishes and Mick’s dignity in every way possible. He couldn’t afford to antagonize Tono, or he’d shut him out of Mick’s life without any question.

“Tono.” Mick’s voice came from the other side of the door, and both men scrambled to get up.

“Put some fucking clothes on,” Paul spat.

“They’re inside.”

“Shit! So are mine.”

Tono went into the bathroom and came out with two towels. He threw one at Paul and tied the other around his waist before they went back into the bedroom.

Mick was lying in bed and turned toward them when they walked in. “Hey.” He smiled, relieved to see his two lovers side by side. “Come sit with me for a minute. I want to talk.”

“Do you need to use the bathroom first?” Paul asked.

“Yes. Help me up, will you?”

Paul and Tono took an arm and pulled Mick up into a sitting position. He found that he was able to sit on his own, and he reached down with his hands and moved his legs, letting them rest on the floor for a minute. He tried to get up, but his body wasn't cooperating. His leg muscles couldn't hold his weight, so he allowed Paul and Tono to lift him and half drag, half carry him to the bathroom. They bumped into furniture and got stuck in the doorway until they turned sideways. “We're going to have to talk about a bigger bathroom,” Paul deadpanned. “This one wasn't made for a three-way.”

Mick laughed despite the undignified moment, but it was a refreshing sound, considering the high emotion of the past two hours. He finished his business and they carried him over to the sink so he could brush his teeth and wash his face. When he was done, he allowed Tono to pick him up and carry him back into the room.

“Do you want to stay here?” Tono asked, sweeping the dark curls out of Mick's face. “It's a nice morning, and we could have coffee outside.”

“That sounds really good.” Mick smiled. “Could you help me with my shorts?”

Paul picked up his own boxers, pants, and shirt while Tono dressed Mick. The Spaniard slipped into his role of caregiver easily, dressing Mick with gentle care. A part of Paul's anxiety for his best friend was eased when he observed the loving manner in which Tono handled this new challenge. He dressed Mick slowly, interspersing each step with kisses and words of encouragement. The aggressive competitor disappeared, and Paul wondered what it would feel like to be on the receiving end of such tenderness. Their encounter, although sizzling hot, had been nothing like this. It was lust, pure and simple—devoid of any feeling.

Tono's towel slipped onto the floor as he was helping Mick, and Paul soaked up the sight of his magnificent back as it tapered into his slim waist. His hard buttocks curved onto long and sturdy legs, well-defined from years of training. He really had a great body, despite the layer of soft hair that was easily visible from where Paul stood. He was itching to put Tono under his expert touch

with a good stainless steel razor, but he was pretty sure that Tono would never allow it. It was a nice fantasy though, and one he planned to revisit.

Tono threw on his shorts, picked Mick up in his arms effortlessly, and proceeded out to the patio with Paul trailing behind. Once again, Paul found himself staring at Tono's backside, imagining what it would feel like to slip his hands under the garter of the white athletic shorts, knowing there was only warm skin waiting for him. He snuffed out the thought immediately.

Tono parked Mick on one of the wrought iron chairs before going back into the kitchen to start the coffee.

"Are you comfortable?" Paul asked, sitting down across the table from him.

"I'm fine, now that the shock has passed. Do you suppose I'll stay like this for a while before I lose control of my hands?"

"I have no idea," Paul admitted, "but whatever happens, we'll deal with it together."

"I'm sorry you had to witness my meltdown."

"Mick," Paul said gently, "I love you. I want to help as much as I can."

Mick smiled just as Tono joined them with a tray filled with coffee mugs and English muffins, toasted and buttered.

"Thank you," Mick said as he reached for his mug. "I think we need to talk about my new challenges."

"I think that the first order of business is finding you and Tono a new place to stay."

"What's wrong with this place?" Mick asked.

“It’s too small, for one thing. The bathroom is not equipped for a wheelchair or any sort of disability,” Paul stated. “I doubt that your landlord will be willing to pour any money into refurbishing it. I have an idea.”

“What’s that?” Tono asked.

“You know my family owns Alcott Terrace. Why don’t I see if there are any vacant units? I can have them set it up so that you have the best state of the art equipment in the bathroom, as well as throughout the apartment.”

“Paul, I can’t accept that. It would be too much.”

“Mick, it’s mine to give. I want you to see this as my contribution to your cause.”

“And what cause is that?” Mick’s brow furrowed.

“Staying alive, and productive, and reasonably happy,” Paul replied. “I want you around for a long time, and having the best of everything will only ensure that.”

Mick turned to Tono who’d been watching their exchange. He nodded his head. “Pol’s right. You need more than this apartment, cariño. We can’t stay here.”

“Look,” Paul interrupted. “It makes sense. This way I’m a few floors away, and even the editing will be easier on all of us if I don’t have to cross town to get to Tono and vice versa.”

“So you’re serious about helping him?” Mick asked.

“We’re working on it, Mick. I’ve just started, but yeah, I’ll do it. I’d like to read your sequel as well. Is it complete?”

“Yes,” Mick answered quickly. “Why are you being so agreeable?”

“I do have some redeeming qualities, you know,” Paul teased.

“You’re finally going to get the opportunity to write that tragedy, aren’t you?”

“Shut up, Mick. I’m editing, and this is not going to be a tragedy; besides, I owe you one.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Paul, but I will gladly accept your help when it comes to our books. The apartment, I’m not sure. I’d like to see the figures before I decide.”

“Didn’t I tell you this was a gift? It’s just money, Mick; let me spend it on you.”

“I will buy the apartment,” Tono interjected in a loud and decisive voice. “I will only move on that condition.”

Mick and Paul turned to Tono, who sipped his coffee calmly after laying down the law.

“Excuse me?” Paul asked. “No one asked for your money.”

“This is where you and I will have a problem, Pol. You don’t make decisions for me.”

“I’m not,” Paul blustered. “I thought you wanted the best for Mick?”

“I do, but I also want you to understand one thing. Mick is my partner, not yours. You don’t get to decide anything without my approval.”

“Gentlemen, please,” Mick spoke softly, reaching for their hands. “I can’t deal with any more stress. I know your patience is wearing thin, and I am grateful to have you both see me through

this, but we're going to have to establish some ground rules. I don't want to spend the rest of my life being a referee."

Paul stood abruptly. "You won't have to, Mick. Tono and I will work it out. In the meantime, I'll have my lawyers get in touch. You need to finalize your paperwork, the trust, and power of attorney, like Dr. Jordan suggested. Then I'll have the property manager contact you, Tono. Is that okay with you?"

"That's fine." Tono nodded. "Thank you."

Chapter 14

PAUL drove away from the Chelsea apartment no calmer than when he'd arrived. His temper was boiling over, and if Mick hadn't been so sick, or if the events of the last few hours hadn't been so traumatic, he would have had a verbal tussle with Tono just to get it out of his system.

How dare he remind him that he was Mick's partner? Paul was all too aware that he was the intruder, the proverbial third wheel. Admittedly, watching Mick in crisis and wanting to help caused him to lapse for a brief moment. He was acting like Mick's partner, and not just his friend and business associate. A momentary slip, but one Tono picked up on immediately.

His second mistake was assuming that Tono would go along with his plans because they'd had great sex. Obviously not! They'd used each other to get off, an act that was more a mutual masturbation than any form of lovemaking. It was the much-needed release they were seeking to numb the pain of watching the man they both loved take another step into his personal hell. However, their actions had planted some sort of seed in Paul's arid emotional garden, something Tono didn't realize, which made their association harder to manage.

And then there was Mick, caught between the two of them. It was going to be hard enough to stay positive and upbeat with the daily challenges he faced, so being witness to this constant battle of wills was pointless and unnecessary. It was Paul's responsibility, or one he'd assumed, to ensure that Mick was as comfortable and stress-free as possible. He would have to find some middle ground in dealing with Tono. The Spaniard wasn't going to allow Paul to walk over him, and in truth, he didn't want to anymore. What he wanted was a partnership of sorts, some way to make this bearable for everyone, especially Mick.

He dialed his home, hoping Baxter would pick up. “Alcott residence.” Paul sighed with relief as Baxter’s well-modulated voice sounded in his ear, reassuring him that some things hadn’t changed.

“Baxter, do you have the number for the property manager of the Terraces?”

“I’m sure we do. Hold on for one moment.” Paul waited no more than fifteen seconds, and Baxter was back on the phone giving him the number. “Thank you.” He hung up and punched in the numbers.

Paul began to speak as soon as someone answered. He was pleased to find out that there were actually two apartments available for sale, and he requested that someone meet him in approximately one hour. He wanted to take a shower before he started his day, seeing as how he’d run out of his apartment earlier without so much as brushing his teeth. He reeked of sex—a combination of Mick and Tono—a pungent reminder of what had happened an hour ago. He had to admit that it had been deeply satisfying on many levels. Talking Mick off the ledge and joining forces with Tono gave him hope that there might be some sort of resolution, though it was bittersweet. Success, in shoving thoughts of suicide away for the moment, was worth every bit of aggravation he’d endured in the Spaniard’s presence.

His next call was to Linda. He had her home number programmed into his mobile phone, but he’d never used it before; however, this was an emergency as far as he was concerned.

“Mr. Alcott!” Linda’s voice rose in surprise. “Is there anything you need?”

“I’m sorry to bother you at home, Linda, but I need a big favor.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I need some help finding out what it would take to equip an apartment for a paraplegic—as soon as possible.”

“Sir, it’s Saturday, and most places are closed.”

“Didn’t we already have a discussion on no and impossible and resourcefulness?” Paul pointed out. He was doing his best to control his temper, but he was close to his breaking point.

“I’ll get right on it, sir. Where is the apartment located?”

“At Alcott Terrace, Linda, where the fuck else?” Paul snapped, then immediately felt horrible for losing his temper. The poor girl had nothing to do with the terrible events that were unfolding, and he was taking out his anger and frustration on her.

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, Linda. I’m sorry I barked at you.” He hung up as he approached the garage. He waited impatiently, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel while the massive roller doors opened; he proceeded down the ramp into the sub-basement level to his designated parking spot. The elevator directly in front of it was an express that hurled him up to his penthouse without stopping on any other floor.

Baxter had coffee waiting, anticipating Paul’s needs as usual, and Paul snatched the mug on his way to the bathroom, swallowing the contents in three large gulps, risking second-degree burns. He stripped quickly and showered, soaping his body and lingering for a few minutes over his cock as he thought about Tono and his technique. He felt himself stir as visions of the Spaniard shrouded him like the mist created by the steaming hot water. He imagined the athlete on his knees nuzzling his cock. His erection was insistent, swelling and growing stiff with the image of Tono squeezing his ass forcefully. He noted the dark bruises on his thighs where the Spaniard had gripped him earlier, and it aroused him further. He groaned out his relief as he came in shuddering waves all over the shower wall.

He spread his legs and planted both hands against the wall, bending his head so that the triple showerheads massaged him, releasing the tension that he’d been carrying around for the last few hours. His heart rate had jumped from his orgasm, but it slowed to a normal rhythm as the water continued to pour down his body in heavy sheets. Finally, he roused himself and turned off the water, reached for the fluffy, extra large Turkish Cotton towel, and wrapped it around his waist. He stood over the sink, getting ready to shave and brush his teeth. He wiped the steam off the mirror and stared at himself.

His appearance hadn't changed, but he knew that his mindset had shifted completely. He was no longer taking life and living for granted. Not now, when Mick's life had been cut short and was as delicate as a newly planted seedling. He was going to enjoy each moment with Mick, and Tono, since he was part of the package. He vowed to do the best he could for both men, to further their literary careers, and to make Mick as comfortable and as independent as possible. He would give him the best equipment money could buy, hoping that by doing so, all thoughts of suicide and death would disappear.

MICK sat on Tono's lap as the water beat down on them. They were experimenting with different ways to get him clean, and this seemed to be the best solution for now. The apartment bathroom was not made for communal showers, so it was cramped and difficult to maneuver.

"Boy, Paul wasn't kidding when he said this wasn't made for a three-way," Mick joked as Tono knocked his elbow against the wall and cussed in Euskara.

"Really, this is stupid. I can't wait to move," Tono grumbled.

"Majo, look at me."

"¿Qué pasa?"

"Thank you for letting Paul into my life again."

Tono shrugged and was silent for a minute. Finally, he spoke. "I won't lie and say that I'm one hundred percent okay. It bothers me to hear you call him sweetheart. I hated to hear you say that you loved him. I thought that was over, Mick."

"It is over, Tono. Our old relationship died a long time ago, but my feelings for Paul are deep-rooted and will never go away. I can't help that. Loving him isn't something I can control, but I'm not in love with him, if you know what I mean."

"Explain it to me," Tono said gently while he carried Mick out of the shower stall and made their way back into the bedroom. He laid him down on the towel he'd brought along and began to dry

every part of him methodically. “Tell me what you mean when you say you love him, but you don’t.”

“Paul is my youth, majo. When I’m with him, I can almost forget my present because he reminds me so much of my past; a life filled with hope for what lay ahead. He was instrumental in making my dream come true. I can’t forget that, even though the end of our relationship was muddled by betrayal. I love him like family, Tono. He’s a part of who I am, and that will never change. Isn’t there anyone in your life that you love in a way that’s meaningful but different from the way you love me?”

Tono nodded. “My friend Paco and I were lovers when we were young, but it’s so different with you.”

“It’s different, but you do love him, right? If he needed your help, you’d be right there.”

“I would never say no to him.”

“Exactly. That’s how I feel about Paul.”

“But, I don’t want to have sex with Paco,” Tono said sharply. “You enjoy sleeping with Pol.”

Mick had to really think about his answer, to make sure he explained himself so that Tono’s feelings were spared. “Physically, I’m still attracted to Paul. He’s a beautiful man—I know you find him attractive as well.”

“He’s sexy,” Tono said, begrudgingly.

“And you and I have allowed others into our bed in the past.”

“But we never had feelings for the others. It was pure sex.”

“Admittedly, it’s a little different with Paul.”

“It’s a lot different!” Tono said heatedly. “Tell me that it means nothing.”

“It’s comforting, majo... that’s all,” Mick said softly. “It makes me feel good to know he still wants me, despite what’s going on.”

“Cariño, I’m sorry.” Tono’s voice was filled with remorse. “Let’s not talk about Pol anymore.”

Mick nodded but was overcome with his feelings. He couldn’t stop the tears that rolled down his cheeks or help the heaviness in his heart as he thought about his situation—having both men in his life was critical to his mental health. He had no idea how to explain this to Tono or Paul without alienating both of them. Fortunately, Tono had an immediate solution in hand, and Mick’s breathing stuttered and stopped as his lover began to kiss him, murmuring endearments in Spanish, making the emotion that much more intense.

“I love you, Tono,” Mick sighed, relieved that thoughts of Paul were forgotten. Tono repositioned him, moving Mick so they were chest-to-chest, grinding and sliding matching erections, slippery with need. The temperature in the room soared as their body heat ratcheted up several notches. Mick lost himself in the passion, forgetting for one brief moment what was happening to his body until Tono said, “Fuck me.”

Mick froze, unable to move his legs. Tono realized his mistake immediately, and he deftly moved Mick into a sitting position with Mick’s knees on either side of his hips. He slathered his cock with lube, wiping the residue in and around his lover’s asshole, which quivered with his touch. He lifted Mick with powerful arms and slowly impaled him on his cock. “Oh my God,” Mick breathed. “Oh. My. God!”

Tono cupped Mick’s face and drew him down to his mouth. They were drowning in each other, too lost in their love and passion to care how they were making this work. It didn’t matter who was doing what. The most important thing was that they were sharing this intimate moment; something precious and powerful keeping them grounded and connected in every way possible.

“Te quiero,” Tono whispered, rolling them over once more so he was now on top. He gazed into Mick’s eyes, which radiated love and trust, banishing thoughts of Paul. The jealousy would

probably linger, but the certainty that he was loved by this beautiful man in his arms was more than enough to sustain him. Although Mick's movements were not quite as vigorous, it was doing the job; Tono came in a warm gush, while Mick's come splashed against Tono's stomach and neck. He laid his head down on Mick's chest, oblivious to the sticky mess in between them, and listened to their combined heartbeats thumping steadily.

"Don't pull out, majo. I want to feel you inside me for as long as I can."

"I'm not going anywhere, cariño. I'm here to stay."

Chapter 15

THE two available apartments were almost identical, except one had an extra room and a better view of Central Park. Its price tag reflected this bonus, but Tono didn't flinch when the figure was mentioned.

He pushed Mick's wheelchair throughout the bigger apartment as they followed Paul, who had opted to accompany the property manager while Mick and Tono toured the premises. Linda had come through with flying colors, moving up in Paul's estimation by providing several items that Mick would need now that his legs could no longer support him.

The wheelchair was state-of-the-art, not that it mattered since none of the three men had any idea what was good or bad in wheelchair technology. They were learning things on the fly, dealing with Mick's needs as they arose. It was an entire new world they were embarking on, and one filled with physical challenges requiring much planning. There were a few emotional moments when Mick insisted on crutches to get by instead of the wheelchair, but he found out that any sort of mobility would be impossible without it. He could lift himself to a standing position and hang on to exercise bars, but Mick expecting to get from place to place with the help of crutches was unrealistic. It would overexert his arms, which were working fine for now but didn't need the extra strain that would be caused by dragging his lower half around.

"I think we've seen enough," Tono remarked, standing by the floor to ceiling windows that overlooked Central Park. "This is beautiful, don't you agree, cariño?"

"Very nice, but can we afford it?"

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” Mick asked, always concerned with the bottom line.

“It’s not a problem.” Tono bent down and kissed Mick on the cheek. “Don’t worry about money, cariño. We have it.”

Paul watched the exchange and hoped that they would take the apartment without any arm-twisting. He was more than happy to give it to them, since he did own it, but saved that gesture as a last resort; he didn’t want to insult either man. Fortunately, it wasn’t necessary.

“How soon can we move in?” Tono asked.

Paul looked at the manager of Alcott Terrace and nodded with satisfaction when the man said, “Five to seven days should give us enough time to get the paperwork completed.”

“What about the rest of it?” Paul asked. “The contractor needs to get in here to refurbish the bathroom and bedroom. We want it compliant with Mr. Henley’s physical requirements.”

“Once the money exchanges hands and the papers are signed, the apartment will be available for remodeling. You can do anything you want to it, sir.”

“Then let’s do it,” Tono said. “I will call my manager in Spain and have the money transferred immediately.”

“Good. Now, let’s go upstairs and have our celebration dinner. Baxter has something special planned.”

“Baxter is still around?” Mick asked in surprise.

“Sure. He hasn’t changed,” Paul said. “A permanent fixture in my life.”

“Who’s Baxter?” Tono asked.

“My assistant. He’s been with the family for a zillion years.”

BAXTER had indeed prepared the finest dinner, with the help of the catering department of the Four Seasons Restaurant. Cooking wasn’t his forte, but planning a meal was within his realm of expertise. The table had been set out on the terrace to take advantage of the warm summer night. With a backdrop of blooming bougainvilleas and hydrangeas in assorted clay pots and trellises of pink and purple clematis leaning on a brick wall, they were mentally and visually transported to the south of France, easily able to forget they were on a rooftop garden in Manhattan.

Baxter placed an iced goblet of frozen margarita in front of each man and a tray of assorted appetizers in the center of the large round table.

“Thank you,” Mick said, rewarding Baxter with his generous smile. “I’m so glad to see that you haven’t changed much through the years.”

“I doubt that’s true, sir, but I appreciate the sentiment,” Baxter huffed, embarrassed by the attention.

“Nonsense, Baxter, and please call me Mick.”

“As you wish.”

“This is an amazing setup,” Tono remarked. “Do you ever use the pool?”

Paul turned away from Mick’s gaze and focused on Tono. He found himself drawn to the limpid eyes that were remarkably mellow tonight. The fierce and antagonistic rivalry between them was squelched for now, replaced by a softer and more gracious attitude. Paul had no idea what had occurred to turn the Spaniard around, but he wasn’t about to question his good fortune. He was

going to enjoy this side of Tono and focus on the man's physical attributes, which continued to entice him, despite the blatant masculinity. The chest hair still bothered him, and his fantasies of shaving Tono leaped to the forefront of his brain.

"Not as often as I should," Paul replied, running his tongue over his upper lip, licking up the salt that had transferred from the goblet. He felt a stirring in his groin as his eyes were riveted to the sight of Tono's tongue flicking at the salt dotting his own lips, unleashing a mental image of that same tongue running circles around his cock. It had been several days since their encounter, but the memories continued to taunt him.

"Actually, Mick should avail of the pool," Paul stated, forcing himself to banish lascivious thoughts, when in actuality, he wanted nothing more than to yank Tono against his chest. He wanted to press his mouth on the soft pillows of flesh, taste the salt, and suck on Tono's full lower lip, which he was gnawing on nervously. Paul wondered if the Spaniard was feeling this attraction as well.

"I guess that will depend on my therapist," Mick said, "but I do like to swim. I wonder how that will work, now that I can't move my legs."

"Have you hired anyone yet?" Paul inquired, tearing his eyes away from Tono.

"No. Tono is interviewing people," Mick replied.

"Would you like me to help?"

"I have it under control," Tono said confidently.

"Okay," Paul nodded, backing down immediately. He had to bite his tongue from speaking his mind, but he was determined to curtail his need to take charge of the situation. He was more than cognizant of Tono's role in Mick's life and had no desire to rock the very fragile boat supporting them in this confusing time. Eventually, he presumed that things would settle into a routine, and the struggle for dominance in this dynamic—between the three of them—would die down, but right now it was at its height. Paul was aware of the sudden tension radiating from the Spaniard. He obviously had issues with Paul's presence but was far too intelligent to lay down the law and banish him from Mick's life.

“We should set up a schedule for our editing,” Paul said, attempting to resume the earlier tone of the conversation. He sipped at his drink, vowing to stay sober tonight. He’d been overindulging since Mick’s return, and he needed to have his wits about him when dealing with Tono.

“What did you have in mind?” Tono asked.

“A schedule, for one thing.”

Mick laughed. “Of course! Tono, didn’t I tell you he was a time whore?”

“Christ, Mick. Just because you have no concept of the word doesn’t make me a time whore,” Paul spat out, annoyed by the insult. “By the way, there is no such word.”

“There is now.” Mick smiled.

“What kind of schedule?” Tono asked. “We have to work around Mick’s therapy and daily needs.”

“Indeed,” Paul replied. “Are you planning on having full-time help?”

“Absolutely not! I will take care of him,” Tono said indignantly.

“That’s fine for now,” Baxter interrupted, surprising the group. He’d just returned with a tray full of appetizers when he overheard the last bit of the conversation. “What about down the road, sir, when Mick can no longer use his hands, or breathe on his own?”

“That’s enough,” Paul said sharply. “Those are issues that can be dealt with at another time.”

“No, it’s okay, Baxter,” Mick said. “Tono has agreed to call in reinforcements when we get to that point. For now, it’s still manageable.”

“Is this in writing, sir?”

“Baxter!” Paul glared at the man. “Drop it.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Alcott. These things need to be addressed.”

“They will be, but not tonight!”

“Why are you asking so many questions?” Tono said angrily. “This is none of your business.”

“Baxter is more than my assistant, Tono,” Paul explained. “He’s practically a member of my family and has known Mick far longer than you have. I think his questions are legitimate, except his timing sucks.” Paul frowned.

“You’re right, sir. My apologies.” Baxter nodded at Tono and turned to leave when Mick put his hand out and stopped him.

“Don’t go, Baxter. It’s okay, really.”

“I’m sorry, Mick.” Baxter’s voice sounded full of remorse. “I should have never intruded.”

“You’ve only stated the obvious,” Mick replied.

“It’s easy for me to speak my mind since I’m not really involved. I do appreciate the struggle and the decisions you are facing,” Baxter said gently.

“Thank you for your concern,” Mick said kindly. “You can intrude anytime. We need someone to set us on the straight and narrow, Baxter. I know I have to make painful decisions and I keep putting it off, but I promise that I will address everything in the next few weeks.”

“All in good time,” Paul interjected.

“Yes, sir,” Baxter answered, even if the statement was not addressed to him. “Shall I serve dinner?”

“Yes, please,” Mick said, reassuring Baxter with his smile.

Chapter 16

DINNER was a culinary delight consisting of four dishes. The appetizer was tuna carpaccio and shaved fennel garnished with blood orange and bird chilis. This was followed by a small bowl of cool gazpacho. The main course was turbot, kabocha pumpkin risotto and crabmeat, with baby spinach on the side. By the time Baxter plated the chocolate-caramel marquise, a decadent mousse-like cake drizzled with pistachio sauce, everyone was groaning and holding onto their bellies.

“Jesus Christ,” Mick grunted. “I can’t be eating like this all the time, or I’ll get fat and flabby.”

“Work it off,” Paul teased. “Sex will knock off a few pounds.”

“Not when you’re a perpetual bottom,” Mick replied.

“Shit... I’m sorry, Mick.” Paul’s remorse was easily apparent in the normally unflappable blond. His cheeks were tinged a rosy red that had nothing to do with the wine he held in his hand.

“Shut up,” Mick flared, cuffing Paul. “Let’s get one thing straight, okay? Don’t be treating me like I’m made of glass, or I’ll roll this fucking wheelchair off the roof. Do you understand?”

Paul nodded and smirked. "Got it, babe."

"Good. And that goes for you too," Mick turned to Tono. "I'm still the same person I was two weeks ago. Just because my legs don't move doesn't mean I'm different. Nothing else has changed, and I expect to be treated in exactly the same way. Remember what Dr. Jordan said: my mind will never turn to mush, just my stupid body. If I catch either one of you being condescending or treating me like I'm fucking brain dead, you'll have one crazy black Irishman to deal with. Understood?"

Paul and Tono were surprised by this sudden outburst. Mick's anger had come on suddenly, but it was a seething presence that couldn't be ignored. His eyes sparkled as he glared at the two men.

"Sí." Tono nodded.

Paul nodded too. "Okay, Mick. Sorry for being an ass."

"It's okay, sweetheart." Mick smiled quickly, forcing the anger away. "Now, go ahead and tell me I'm a fat pig for wanting seconds."

"You can't be serious? Where the hell are you putting this food?" Paul looked astounded.

"There's always room for chocolate, and this stuff is amazing."

"It's from the Four Seasons, Mick. Baxter only deals with the best."

"Thank you very much, Baxter. Now please hand me another piece."

Baxter grinned and put another plate in front of Mick. The awkward moment they'd experienced earlier in the evening had passed, and everyone was having a good time, except for this latest

outburst. He presumed those would become more frequent while the ground rules were being established. He didn't envy either one of Mick's friends right now. It would take patience and a lot of restraint to treat him in a normal fashion as he was requesting. It was early on in the disease and still very manageable. He wondered if the attitude would be the same three years down the road, if Mick lasted that long.

"Are you interested in a brandy or any other liqueur, sir?" Tono was the only unknown in this puzzle, and Baxter approached with caution. He appeared to be nice enough, and he certainly doted on Mick, which was the most important thing.

"I'll have a Courvoisier if you have it."

"Of course. Mick, would you like the same?" He didn't bother asking Paul, since he was well aware of his favored brandy.

"Yes, please."

"I'll be right back with your drinks."

After Baxter returned and placed a snifter in front of each man, he cleared the table and left them for the evening.

"Tell me about him," Tono said, inclining his head in the direction of Baxter's exit. "Is he really a member of the family? How come he acts like a servant?"

"It's complicated," Paul said. "He started out as our butler/majordomo, but Baxter's role in our lives has evolved through the years."

"In what way?" Tono's curiosity was piqued.

"He became my father figure when mine wasn't around. Baxter has seen me through all my firsts."

“And some of mine,” Mick jumped in. “I remember Paul and I trying to roll condoms on the biggest zucchini that Baxter brought in from the vegetable garden. It makes me chuckle to this day.”

Tono smiled. “He did that for you?”

“Oh yeah, and he replenished the condom supply on a regular basis.”

“Is he gay?”

Paul shrugged. “I received a lot of positive reinforcement from Baxter when I came out. My father had a meltdown and didn’t speak to me for weeks. It was several months before he could even say the word ‘homosexual’ in my presence. Baxter took it all in stride, though, so yeah, maybe he is. I’ve never asked him.”

“In all these years?” Tono was shocked. “What kind of close relationship is that?”

“Pretty one-sided, huh?” Paul looked terribly ashamed for never delving into Baxter’s personal life.

“¡Por Dios, hombre!”

“Oh, stop being judgmental,” Paul sneered.

“I’m only saying that if I cared about someone the way you obviously care about Baxter, then I would want to know a little bit more about him.”

“Point taken,” Paul acknowledged.

“Let’s go swimming,” Mick announced, always the peacemaker. “I need to work off my caloric intake, and I’m curious to see what I can do in the water.”

“Now?” Paul asked.

“Why not? Do we need to be on a schedule for that as well?” Mick’s grin was pure mischief.

“Fuck off, Henley.”

“Come on. Somebody help me get my clothes off.”

Tono stood, walked over to Mick, and pulled off his T-shirt. He lifted him and managed to unzip his pants, pulling them down while Mick helped by encircling Tono’s powerful neck and sort of hanging there as he was stripped. When only his boxers remained, Mick said, “Take them off.”

“You’re going to swim naked so the entire city can see you?”

“Unless they’re in an airplane, I doubt that anyone will see me. Come on, Tono. Don’t be a prude.”

“A prude?” Tono was outraged. “Estás loco.”

“In my coco. Now, come on, majo,” Mick cajoled. “Strip!”

Paul watched the entire exchange in amusement, delighted to see Tono bested by Mick. The Jai alai player was always in charge, so it was nice to see him whipped for a change.

“Yeah, big guy. Show us what you got,” Paul challenged, eager to see Tono completely nude. Up until now it had been bits and pieces of him; taking in the complete package would be a pleasure.

“You want a show?” Tono’s eyes darkened with lust. “I’ll give you a fucking show.”

“Really?” Paul licked his lips suggestively.

“Just do me a favor and don’t let me drown while you two go at it,” Mick commented, still hanging on to Tono.

“Who said anything about us going at it?” Tono protested. He pulled off Mick’s boxers, cradled him in his arms, and walked over to the pool where he plunked Mick down on the wooden deck with his feet dangling above the water. “You okay, cariño?”

“Yes, stop worrying.” Mick nodded. “I can sit fine and enjoy my eye candy at the same time.”

“You are so naughty; I may have to spank you later.”

“Ohh... we haven’t done that in a while.” Mick reached up and kissed Tono on the mouth. “You know I can feel everything, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know.” Tono smiled, tapping lightly at Mick’s erection, which bounced in front of him. He pulled off his black shirt and stepped out of his light beige gabardine pants quickly.

Paul had to bite his lip to prevent a groan from escaping, but that didn’t stop the rush of blood as his cock swelled and pressed stiffly against his pants. He feasted his eyes on the magnificent body on display. What the fuck? This was the second time that Tono had no underwear. “You have issues with undergarments?” he asked nonchalantly.

Tono smirked. “They make my balls itch.”

Jesus! I can scratch them for you. “You need to invest in a higher thread count,” Paul commented. He felt like he had a wad of cotton in his mouth, and speaking coherently was becoming nearly impossible, so he peeled off his clothes, never taking his eyes off Tono, who was visibly aroused. “Or you can let me shave you,” Paul said in a throaty whisper.

Tono hissed at him, shook his head, and turned to dive into the water without any warning. Mick was drenched in the giant splash and began to giggle uproariously. He was a little tipsy from the brandy but delighted to be out of the cramped apartment. Living in this building would do wonders for his state of mind; he could tell that already. He pushed off with both arms and fell into the warm water. He sank to the bottom almost immediately and panicked for a moment when his legs buckled underneath, instead of pushing against the floor of the pool as they would have if things were normal. He used his arms to push his way upward, gasping for a breath when he broke the surface. “Tono, grab me, majó.”

Tono swam to his side and caught him roughly against his chest. “Cariño, are you okay?”

Mick coughed up a lungful of water and laughed at the same time. “Wouldn’t that have been something if I’d fucking drowned?”

“What happened?” Paul said, appearing in front of them, looking panicked.

“I’m fine, sweetheart,” Mick reassured Paul with a light touch to his cheek. “Had a little scare is all.”

“Jesus, let’s get him out of the water, Tono.”

“No, no... will you guys just relax? I forgot that I can’t tread water.”

“So did we,” Paul said as the realization hit.

“Come on, cariño, we’ll do this another time,” Tono said seriously, pulling him away from Paul. Mick leaned into his chest and let Tono carry him to the edge of the pool.

“Night, sweetheart.” He waved, smiling at Paul, who remained in the water watching them go.

Paul did a few laps to calm down and avoid overreacting to the couple's swift departure. Just when he thought things were falling into place, something happened to remind him that he was the unwanted third party, the intruder. The controlling part of him rebelled at the whole concept of stepping back and allowing Tono to take charge.

He hoped it would get better in time as the Spaniard came to realize that he wasn't going anywhere. He'd meant every word he uttered in Dr. Jordan's presence. He had no intention of leaving Mick unless he was forcefully removed; an act that would start a battle among them.

As he stepped cautiously around Tono, he assumed, and rightly so, that Tono gave him a wide berth as well. Mick was the prize in the middle and the one they both loved; one wrong move could ruin the delicate balance, which would surely send Mick to his death, as if they'd pulled the trigger themselves.

Chapter 17

TONO sat on the sectional in the living room watching a replay of last year's World Cup. He was waiting for Samuel, Mick's therapist, who'd accompanied Mick up to Paul's to get him settled. Tono had reassured Mick that he would keep Samuel occupied while he and Paul spent some time going over the initial edits for Mick's sequel. Mick had finally given in and consented to let Paul read it. He was thrilled when Paul told him— in his publishing voice— that he had another hit on his hands, but it would require some editing. Not surprising, due to the length of time it had taken to put his thoughts on paper. The last year alone had been one constant interruption, so the news that some portions of the manuscript were disjointed wasn't a big shock. They'd agreed to meet two nights a week, and tonight would be their first attempt.

Tono could use the private time with Samuel to figure out the logistics of dealing with the new challenges that living with a paraplegic entailed. He had questions that he was reluctant to ask in Mick's presence, so this opportunity to pick Samuel's brain was a godsend.

The move to the new apartment had gone smoothly, all things considered. It had taken a little over a week to get the paperwork and money squared away and an additional ten days to refit the apartment to make it wheelchair friendly. The major renovation was in the master bathroom—holding bars, sitting benches, a lowered sink, a higher commode—items necessary to make Mick's life easier and more independent. Mick chafed at any sort of assistance in the bathroom, claiming that he could still manage on his own. He had major issues about doing his business with an audience. He only agreed to Tono's presence in the shower and sharing that space if the visit was for sexual reasons. Mick's need to maintain the illusion that he was the

same man was imperative so he wouldn't sink back into his depression and resume talks of suicide. Fortunately, there were two full bathrooms in the apartment, allowing both of them the privacy they deserved.

Other than his legs, most of Mick's body functioned normally for now, and they'd been very creative in their lovemaking, which was an important part of their relationship. Mick had said repeatedly that he needed to know he was still man enough to keep Tono sexually fulfilled and satisfied. They'd figured out different ways to have sex so Mick didn't feel inadequate or hampered in any way. The range of motion in his hips was still good, which contributed to his calmer state of mind. So long as his creative and sexual juices still flowed, he could accept what was happening within his body.

Tono had reluctantly agreed to hire a full-time physical therapist rather than take on the role by himself. It would require skills he didn't have to keep Mick in the best physical shape possible. Every day they learned more and more about ALS. What neither of them had realized was that physical therapy would not "bring back" any of the muscles that were already dead or dying; they couldn't be coaxed back to life. In addition, any form of exercise had to be restrained so functioning muscles would not be overworked. There was no such thing as "feeling the burn," and strenuous weightlifting was discouraged as it could possibly advance the progress of the ALS rather than hamper it. Samuel had to stress the fact that Mick's paralysis was not caused by an injury. It was systemic and progressive; no amount of bodybuilding would stop it. The important thing was to prevent disuse atrophy of the muscles that were still good and unaffected by the motor neuron degeneration.

Samuel explained that joint stiffness and pain would occur if weak limbs were not stretched properly and given adequate full range of motion. The stiffness was due to tightening of the muscles and tissues surrounding the joints. Limitation of motion could also cause inflammatory thickening, resulting in adhesive capsulitis, often referred to as "frozen shoulder." It was extremely important that Mick stand at different intervals throughout the day, aided by one of the men in his immediate circle, or the exercise bars. This would help with normal function of the intestines, bladder, and kidneys, preventing complications such as constipation and urinary tract infections, a very common occurrence in patients who were completely immobile.

Samuel was as tall as a small mahogany tree and had the same coloring. His deeply melodic Jamaican accent was pleasing to the ear, and his ripped body was the eye candy Mick needed to get his mind off what they were doing. Samuel always showed up in white stretch pants and a white tank top, guaranteed to display every chiseled plane on his body. When informed that Mick was a writer and prone to sitting in front of the computer for long periods of time, he spoke of contractures and blood clots, painting a vivid picture of worst-case scenarios, scaring the crap out of Mick and Tono. Samuel had no qualms about interrupting Mick at work and lifting him

off his chair to a standing position; the stretch would help to prevent clots from forming in the calf, or behind the knee, an all too frequent event.

Tono had no idea what a contracture was, but Samuel told him that it was a shortening of muscle or connective tissue around joints, preventing the normal range of motion. The tightening of these muscles could cause deformities or joints to become bent in a fixed position that could become resistant to stretching out to a straight position. Contractures could occur in the finger, hand, wrist, elbow, shoulder, ankle, knee, and hip joints, including flexion contractures of the neck. Weak limbs could lead to an unending cycle of complications; prevention was the key.

Pressure sores and ulcers frequently occurred in people who were immobile. Samuel explained that any surface pressing against the skin and underlying tissues would decrease circulation to the area, collapsing capillaries and interrupting the tissue's supply of oxygen and nutrients. Samuel's singsong patois made the lessons a little easier to swallow, and his sense of humor always brought a smile to Mick's face. Samuel warned the men that when a person remained in the same position for too long, the pressure obstructed the blood flow, causing tissue to break down. The first sign of this was redness, which Samuel checked for every day despite Mick's protests at being manhandled like a Ken doll. This morning's routine had been a sampling of the verbal tussle Tono was subjected to on a daily basis. He'd listened in amusement as Mick bitched.

"You can't just barge in here when you feel like it, Samuel."

"Sorry to disturb, mon." The Jamaican's deep voice was completely unapologetic as it filled the small bathroom. "I need to check for red spots because this means a pressure sore is developing."

"What the hell! You flip me around like a frigging pancake," Mick protested, uncomfortable with all the scrutiny in his nether regions.

"Better my intrusion than an ulcer, or even worse, deep tissue destruction. Did you know that the damage starts from the inside and works its way out? By the time the red spot appears, the damage in the muscle is already quite severe."

"I had no idea." Mick's tone was disgusted. "Who knew that being paralyzed was so fucking complicated?"

“Oh, come now, mon. There is paralysis and there is ALS. I have patients who are in far worse shape than you.”

“I know,” Mick said, shrugging off the momentary slip. “I need to be grateful for what I can do and not dwell on what I can’t.”

“That’s right, Mick. You can still get it up for that gorgeous man over there, so don’t worry, be happy.” Samuel chuckled, enjoying Mick and Tono’s shocked look.

“Samuel! Are you gay?”

“No, I’m not, but I know a happy man when I see one. Your partner has that happy, just fucked look on his face, which is always nice to see.”

Tono grinned and shook his head as he listened to the banter. He was leaning on the doorjamb, watching the therapist go through his motions. Tono was determined to keep Mick free of any complications if he could help it, and observing Samuel go through his inspection was one way of learning what to look for.

Mick’s face was on fire, and Samuel cuffed him lightly. “No worries, mon. Don’t be embarrassed.”

“You are something else, Samuel. Can I call you Sam?”

“I’m afraid my mother would object strenuously to the nickname. I’ve been told repeatedly that she spent nine months thinking of the perfect name for me and was not about to have it shortened for expediency.”

“And you always obey your mother?”

“I do.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to call you Samuel.”

“That’s my name, mon.”

“You sound like an ad for Bacardi Rum.”

“I make a very excellent mojito, if you’re ever in the mood.”

“Lovely. You and Tono can trade recipes. He can whip up a mean sangria.”

“That sounds good, Mick.”

“Since we’ve already broached the subject, and I’ve pretty much bared my soul, not to mention my fair ass, how long do you think I’ll be able to get it up?”

“Mick, ALS affects the voluntary muscles. You know as well as I that your joystick is the most involuntary thing in your body.”

Mick laughed. “It does seem like that.”

“Sure, and don’t we all know it,” Samuel smirked. “There have been scientific studies devoted to sexual function. If the penis were a voluntary muscle, there would be no need for Viagra. We could will it to stay perpetually hard.”

“And live on love forever. Sounds like paradise, doesn’t it?”

“Sure, it does. Now, Tono, come here and let me show you what we’re looking for,” Samuel said, reverting to his serious voice. “You see these two spots right here?” He pointed to a slight reddening on Mick’s buttocks. “This is normal, but anything more than that, you let me know.”

Tono nodded. "I will be happy to inspect him every day."

Mick smiled as Tono's gentle words washed over him. Even more important was the look in his eyes as he gazed at Mick lovingly, reassuring him that he was loved and respected, despite the indignities he'd have to endure on a regular basis.

"Are you guys done ogling my ass? I have an appointment with Paul, and you know how anal he is about time, if you'll pardon the pun." Mick grinned.

THAT was thirty minutes ago, and now Samuel was letting himself into the apartment after having deposited Mick upstairs.

"Everything all good?" Tono asked.

"He's sitting with Mr. Alcott in front of the computer. I'll go back up in half an hour to make him stand for a few minutes."

Tono nodded. "Would you like something to drink while you're waiting?"

"I have some bottled water that I placed in the refrigerator. I'll go and get that. Did you want to talk?"

"Yes. I have some questions."

When Samuel returned, Tono pointed to the sofa and said, "Sit for a minute. How is Mick doing, really? Is he as good as you say?"

Samuel took a long pull of his drink, draining half the bottle in a few gulps. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and put the bottle on the table in front of him. "You know, this is very

early in the disease, so most of his organs are still functioning well. My goal is to keep him this way as long as possible.”

“Mine too. I will do everything you tell me to do, even if it involves fighting with him.”

“The important thing is to keep him mentally stable,” Samuel said. “Most ALS patients become very depressed because they are fully aware of their body’s deterioration. Keep his mind occupied and keep on loving him, Tono. That’s half the battle right there.”

“Were you serious when you were kidding around about sex? Can we really continue as normal?”

“Absolutely. You must continue with your daily activities so long as you are able to perform them safely, and as tolerated, while avoiding overexertion. The general rule is, do as much as you can, for as long as you can, and rest when you are tired. Overexertion may aggravate breathing, and shortness of breath is a sign to stop activities and rest.”

“Samuel, you know damn well you get short of breath when you have sex.”

“I’m not talking about that, Tono. I’m talking about stuff you do in the gym. He shouldn’t be allowed to lift weights, and push-ups should be done in bed, as needed,” Samuel grinned, “if you know what I mean.”

Tono rolled his eyes. “I got it.”

“On the days that I’m not here, you need to do stretching and range-of-motion exercises to each of his joints several times a day.”

“I can do that.” Tono nodded. “Will water help?”

“You mean swimming?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a gentle form of exercise, although Mick no longer has use of his legs, which could lead to accidents in the water.”

“Oh yes. We had an incident a few days ago.”

“So you know he cannot be left on his own in the pool. He needs constant supervision.”

“Sí.”

“And knowing Mick, he’ll fight you on that, right?”

“He forgets what’s happening to him, so he does resist.”

“All normal, Tono. How long have you guys been together?”

“Six years and a few months.”

“You seem very happy.”

“We are.”

“That’s the most important thing. The heart and mind are powerful juju. It’s extremely important to maintain regular contact with people and not allow immobility or embarrassment to be a barrier to interacting with others. Mick needs this to minimize feelings of loneliness. If possible, attend sporting events or parties. Don’t isolate him.”

“I would never do that,” Tono protested.

“You’d be amazed how different people react to this disease. A lot of family members hide their patients away from the world, almost ashamed of what’s happening.”

“That won’t happen in this house. Mick is too social and loves to party.”

“That’s great. Tell me a little about that man upstairs.”

“Pol?”

“Yeah. What’s his deal?”

Chapter 18

“POL is Mick’s publisher and editor. He’s also an old friend.”

“He seems very affectionate for a friend,” Samuel said disapprovingly.

“He and Mick were lovers before we met.”

“I see. He still loves him, doesn’t he?”

Tono nodded silently.

“Doesn’t it bother you?”

“Sí,” he replied with a shrug. “It’s complicated, Samuel.”

“I guess it’s the whole gay thing I’m not getting, right?”

“What are you talking about?” Tono’s voice turned icy.

“Aren’t gay men into multiple sex partners?”

Tono was appalled that Samuel would even suggest such a thing, especially since he and Mick had recently argued about the very same topic. It felt like the Jamaican was reading his mind somehow, and he resented the intrusion.

“Are you a drug dealer, Samuel?” Tono asked pointedly.

“What the hell, mon!”

“Exactly!” Tono pounced. “Don’t turn us into a cliché, Samuel, or I’ll presume you’re a pot-smoking, drug-dealing, good-for-nothing junkie from Kingston.”

“I’m sorry,” Samuel said quickly, “I didn’t mean any disrespect.”

“Let’s get back to Mick’s medical issues,” Tono said seriously. His mood shift was as obvious as the changing colors in Central Park. It was the end of September, and although the city was still in the midst of an Indian summer, with temperatures soaring into the nineties on some days, the sights and smells of fall were right around the corner. They were already starting to sell Halloween candy, and costumes were appearing in store windows.

“What else would you like to know?” Samuel asked politely.

“Whatever you consider important.”

“You asked me about water earlier, and although you meant swimming, I’d like to talk about fluid intake.”

“It’s important?”

“Very. Right now Mick’s throat muscles and lungs are working fine. There will come a day when swallowing and breathing becomes an issue. Keeping him hydrated prevents thick secretions in the airways. It also helps to prevent or relieve constipation while it protects against urinary tract infections and kidney stones. In addition, a sufficient fluid intake prevents dehydration that can lead to increased thickening of the blood, resulting in blood clot formation.”

“Does it have to be water or will any liquid work?”

“Water is the best. At least eight glasses a day. Big ones.”

Tono nodded. “Anything else?”

“Good body alignment and regular repositioning promotes circulation, enhances lung expansion for optimal breathing and coughing, and helps with gastrointestinal function. It’s not an issue right now, but you need to prevent flexion contractures of the neck by maintaining an upright head posture.”

“How the hell do I do that?”

“You have to be vigilant and watch him. When you see him slouching forward, or with his head bent for long periods of time, distract him and get him to move.”

“I’ll try.”

“Hey, it’s a lot to take in right now; I understand. Things will become routine after a while, and you’ll do things for him automatically.”

“Can we travel?”

“Of course. Where did you want to go?”

“I’d like to spend Christmas in San Sebastian with my family.”

“I don’t see that as a problem. I certainly can’t go with you, but we have three months to teach you everything you need to know about his exercise routine.”

“I thought so too. Is it time for a repositioning?”

Samuel glanced at his watch. “Yes. Why don’t you go upstairs and do it. I’ll check on Mick’s mattress and make sure the foam overlay is here. I ordered it a few days ago. Do you know if it arrived?”

“I saw a package in the hallway, but I didn’t open it.”

“That’s probably it.”

“What’s it for?”

“It protects against pressure points, particularly the bony prominences. We need to get one for sitting as well. Maybe a gel seat cushion for the wheelchair.”

“Order whatever you need, Samuel.”

“I will.”

“Sorry about the other thing,” Tono said gruffly. “I didn’t mean to bite your head off.”

“I was out of line, mon. No worries.”

“Yeah. I’ll see you shortly.”

“YOU have outdone yourself with this sequel, Mick. I’m pretty sure the studio will want to make another movie.”

“You think so?” Mick’s face broke into a smile. High praise from Paul Alcott was rare.

“I know so. Let’s target a holiday release. What do you think? Are you up to burning the midnight oil?”

“Yes. It’ll take my mind off my body and give me something to look forward to.”

“Good. I’ll go through the manuscript in the next few days, and then it’s all yours. I’ll need it back by the end of October if we’re going to make the Christmas release.”

“You’ll have it. Paul?”

“What, babe?”

“Thank you.”

Paul reached over and took Mick’s hand in his and gave it a squeeze. “Alcott Press published your first book, Mick. This is part of my job.”

“I know, but you could have pawned me off on one of the guys in editing.”

“And lose out on a chance to redeem myself? Not likely.” Paul laughed. “I owe you, Mick.”

“You keep saying that, and I don’t know why. Your company published the first book; you have rights to the sequel. I don’t think you owe me anything; as a matter of fact, I owe you. This book should have been completed several years ago, but I fiddle-fucked around in Spain. I think I’m the one who should be apologizing.”

“It is what it is. Let’s not have a contest over who’s in debt. Let’s just get on with this.”

“That’s fine with me. Now, can we talk about Tono’s book?”

Paul sighed. “Do we have to?”

“You told me you’d help him.”

Paul raked his hair with slender fingers, wondering how to get out of this. Aside from the obvious—Tono’s book would need to be completely revamped—the thought of being associated with a romantic novel, even as editor, made his hair curl. But, more importantly, the idea of spending so much time alone with Tono disturbed him. There was a definite physical attraction, despite the obvious rivalry, and acting on it again seemed wrong. He knew that Mick and Tono were players, and he’d been invited into their bed the first time, but they’d been drunk; that incident could be written off as a one-time event. The second time Tono had been desperate for Paul’s help in supporting Mick through a highly charged and emotional moment, and that instance was also understandable and easily dismissed.

The encounter outside Mick’s presence was the most disturbing because it had been deliberate. He had no idea if Tono ever told Mick what had transpired, but memories of the Spaniard going down on him kept repeating like red onions—bad for his digestion, but oh-so-sweet. Paul knew that Tono was attracted to him as well. They were tiptoeing around each other, avoiding physical contact, like fighters in a ring, afraid that another incident between them would change everything. It was hard to explain his attraction. There were a lot of things about Tono that bothered him; his territorial attitude toward Mick, for one; his self-assured and stubborn ways, for another; and lastly, this need to write an ode to his lover, an old-fashioned tribute that was as outdated as Valentine cards. His only saving grace, and the primary reason Paul put up with any of it, was Tono’s unceasing devotion to Mick. He loved him passionately, and his constant

presence would see Mick through this devastating illness. The Spaniard's love wasn't subtle; it was very much in your face, and even though it wasn't directed at him, Paul felt like he was a part of it, and it soothed him in ways he didn't understand.

"Do I have to keep that promise? Honestly, Mick, you know as well as I that the chances of his book ever selling are not good. There are hundreds of gay romances that hit the Internet on a monthly basis. What's so special about Tono's book?"

"I don't think he cares whether it'll sell or not, Paul. He just wants to write it to have a physical token of our love and our relationship. We have no children, obviously, so when I go, there will be nothing to show for our life as a couple. He needs this book to celebrate our story. Don't you understand that?"

"On an emotional level, yes, I do. As a publisher and editor, I think it's a waste of my time."

"Paul." Mick's expressive eyes were imploring. "Do it for me if nothing else. I can't imagine what Tono must be feeling, knowing I'm going to die. I know that if our roles were reversed, I wouldn't be able to cope without some sort of reminder that once upon a time we had a beautiful relationship that transcended language and culture and tragedy."

"Christ, Mick! You're forgetting one thing. I'm in love with you as well and having my own issues dealing with this. Don't you think that writing this story might just do me in?"

"Sweetheart." Mick's eyes filled suddenly. "I'm sorry. Do you really love me that way after all this time? You were the one who let me go."

Paul stood abruptly, turning away from Mick's probing gaze. He couldn't possibly tell him that the very idea of what was to come was torture of the worst kind, and that he'd been drunk, or close to it, every night since he'd learned about the ALS.

Fortunately, Tono walked in at that moment, rescuing Paul inadvertently. He would be spared the shame of admitting why he'd abandoned Mick in the first place. There was no reason to acknowledge his weakness and lessen himself in the eyes of his former lover. Better for Mick to think he was cold and heartless instead of needy and jealous, a man so caught up in his own miserable failure he couldn't find joy in his lover's success.

“Are you ready to go?” Tono asked.

“Paul, we’re done for now, right?”

“Yes,” Paul answered, with relief. “Give me a call in the morning, Tono. We’ll work something out as far as scheduling our time together.”

Chapter 19

TONO was dreaming of Spain. In his dream Mick was healthy and dancing down the cobbled streets of Pamplona, a neighboring city they visited each year in July for the big festival, which included the Running of the Bulls. Paul was in the dream as well, and Tono had trouble separating the two of them. They kept intertwining and morphing into each other’s bodies, like celestial beings surrounded by a glowing light illuminating each man. They were beautiful, gentle, and tender with each other, and that feeling overflowed and bathed him in its joy.

He opened his eyes suddenly and blinked at the darkness. Mick had woken him with his twitching, a common occurrence even in his sleep. Tono rolled over on his side and focused on Mick’s sleeping form beside him. He didn’t look like a man who was in the grip of a deadly disease. His dark curls framed his face, and he was achingly beautiful in the dim light, just as he had been the first time Tono had laid eyes on him.

MICK had been at the bar, Vergara, with one hand wrapped around a wine glass and the other reaching for a pintxo, when he looked up as Tono walked in with a few friends. The attraction was instant and powerful; Tono had ventured forward to flirt with the dazzling man whose stunning eyes drew him like twin magnets.

When he realized that Mick wasn’t Spanish, he tripped over the English words but managed to communicate his interest. He’d been delighted to find out that Mick was the famous American author rumored to be in the area. Tono had read Mick’s bestseller because he was an avid reader, and the book had been marketed heavily in Europe. He’d enjoyed it immensely and couldn’t believe his good fortune in finding out that Mick was not only gorgeous, he was gay, and, more importantly, attracted to him as well.

He'd had the distinct pleasure of introducing the American to his first Jai alai game. Mick was quickly engaged by the ambiance of the fronton, which seethed with people in a highly charged competitive atmosphere. Bookies darted back and forth with wads of cash in their hands, collecting bets or paying the winners. The crowd knew each pelotari and shouted out words of encouragement to their favorites to spur them on, hooting when they bested their opponent or booing loudly when they dropped a ball. The players were dressed in white trousers with colored sashes around their waists instead of belts, and numbers were embroidered on their shirts to identify them. The loud thwack the ball made when it hit the concrete was an audible reminder of the strength and stamina each man needed to hurl it back and forth with lightning speed. Tono was the best-looking and the fastest man on the court. His fans were loudly supportive and screamed each time he scored. The sport was different and exciting and the enthusiasm of the audience contagious; it was an adrenalin rush Mick had never experienced before.

Tono had shown off that night, and the payoff was huge, not only financially, but in the look of wonder and respect that lit up Mick's face as soon as they got together after the game. It was the first night they had sex, a sweet joining of bodies that went beyond the ordinary mechanics. The slow exploration awakened feelings Mick had left behind with Paul, surprising them both with a love connection neither man had expected.

Mick and Tono became inseparable, finding so much more in common than sex. They shared a love of adventure, travel, history, and most surprisingly, poetry. They spent hours in bed reading poems and making love, only leaving the comfort of their room to take long walks along the Paseo de Zurriola, the path near the cliffs of San Sebastian overlooking the magnificent harbor. Although Mick had shared much with Paul, their literary tastes were very different. Tono was a romantic like him, believing in love and happy endings. He leaned toward books that had the potential for a good outcome, something Paul shied away from.

They'd traveled to small villages that dotted the coast. Fishing continued to be a large part of Basque industry, and the variety of marine life, abundant in the waters surrounding the area, had been a source of income for generations. Tono's father and uncles were fishermen, and one of them owned an anchovy canning factory. He'd given Mick the grand tour of the fetid building, insisting that fresh anchovy bested canned any day. Mick had to acknowledge that he'd never tasted anything quite as good as the tiny but very salty green fish, and he'd come to love the flavor. He watched Tono the first time, placing a spoonful of fresh, olive oil-infused tuna on a slice of French bread, topping it with three fresh anchovies garnished with a spicy green pepper. Mick had become addicted to this delicacy; in fact, he'd become quite the connoisseur when it came to pintxos, also known as tapas, the amazing finger food served in varying ways in the north of Spain. Undoubtedly, they were all over the country, but the bars receiving the highest Michelin ratings were in San Sebastian.

Tono Garat, Mick had learned, was the Michael Jordan of his sport. Young boys followed Tono around wanting an autograph and hoping to learn a thing or two by being in his shadow. Regardless of which town they had visited, Tono was a celebrity, and soon, Mick became just as well known as the gringo writer who dazzled everyone with his welcoming smile.

One of the places they had visited was Guernica, the historical town founded in the fourteenth century, a proud symbol of Basque freedom. Tono tried to explain his people and their fierce need to remain autonomous and independent of any ruling body but their own, sometimes carrying this need to the extreme. Tono manifested this same spirit, proving on many different occasions that he was his own person, never intimidated by others. Even his love for poetry was a source of pride, not shame, and he would stare down anyone who had the audacity to think any less of him because of his romantic tendencies. He didn't flaunt his sexual orientation in deference to his parents' and his fans' sensibilities but wouldn't have lied if asked pointblank. Still, he chose to remain in the closet, and the few friends that were aware of the truth didn't discuss it; he was a local celebrity, rewarded with respect and privacy.

Mick had been intent on tasting, smelling, and hearing everything that Spain had to offer. Tono had learned to love his country all over again, seeing it with fresh eyes; the sights and sounds he'd taken for granted were revisited. Every food group was explored, starting with the staple, tortilla de patata, the potato omelet found in every bar in the country, to the odd-looking, almost prehistoric percebes, the shellfish with long bodies resembling goosenecks and a foot at the bottom used to attach themselves to rocks. They were exceedingly fishy, an acquired taste both men found repugnant. The music, the flamenco dancers, the bullfights, the wine, and the museums were so much a part of their daily repertoire it was a wonder Mick had found any time to write at all. But he did, every morning for a few hours while Tono slept.

They'd spent several weeks in Barcelona, one of the gayest and oldest cities in Spain, soaking up the nightlife and sampling the local flavor by inviting a few men into their bed. At first, Tono had been shocked by Mick's playfully wild and adventurous side, but he had soon realized that it meant nothing to Mick but sex. The other men were only a form of entertainment, strictly sexual tools used to liven up their private sessions, which continued to be deeply satisfying. Neither man had a need or desire to venture out of their relationship. Their nights were filled with lovemaking that left them sated and grateful for each other's presence. Tono had never been happier—a happiness lasting over six years—until ALS robbed him of the future he'd planned on spending with the man he loved more than anything in the world.

"TONO," Mick's voice cut through his reverie, pulling him back to the present.

"¿Qué pasa?"

“Why are you awake?”

“I was just thinking about the summer we met.”

“Why?”

“I was dreaming we were in Pamplona, and when I awoke, I remembered.”

“Good times.” Mick smiled. He reached down to touch Tono’s cock, which was tenting his pajama pants. “That must have been some dream.”

“You have no idea.”

“We need to make your dream a reality,” Mick purred, leaving trails of moisture down Tono’s naked torso.

“Cariño,” Tono sighed, caught somewhere between his dream and the present. He responded so easily to this man who continued to satisfy him regardless of his situation.

“So ready for me,” Mick exclaimed, delighted by Tono’s swift reaction to his touch.

Tono pushed the elastic down his thighs and flung his pants across the room. He felt Mick nuzzling his balls, making sweet noises of contentment as he began to lick them. Tono spread his legs to give Mick better access, ever mindful of his physical restraints. It was easy to forget what was going on with Mick, since he was so adept at lovemaking, but he did require a little bit of extra help lately. Mick bit Tono’s inner thigh, following it up with soothing swipes of his tongue. He bathed the soft skin between his balls and his asshole and probed the tight puckered entrance, spurred on by Tono’s soft cries of pleasure reverberating in the silent room.

“I love you, my majo,” Mick declared huskily, seconds before he engulfed Tono’s shaft. He twirled his tongue around the silky ridges, humming his pleasure while creating powerful sensations that zinged up Tono’s spine, causing him to cry out. “I need to possess you,” he growled, pushing Mick’s head away. He got on his knees and reached over for the lube on the nightstand, never taking his eyes off Mick, who was now semi-reclining, leaning on his elbows and watching him.

“Make love to me like that first time,” Mick whispered.

Tono’s heart broke a little upon hearing those words. He slathered the lube on himself and sank into Mick, groaning out his satisfaction, appreciating the soft huff that escaped from his lover’s lips. He had no idea how much time they had left, or how much longer they would be able to be this intimate. The doctor had alluded to an indefinite period, but Tono was nothing but realistic. He would approach each encounter as a gift; another memory to file away with the many he had already. Another sentence in his journal to be added to the love story he was determined to write.

PAUL’S thoughts were on Mick as well. He sat with his attorney, going over the papers that Mick had signed two days ago. He’d given Paul full power of attorney to act as his literary agent. However, Paul and Tono were joint executors of Mick’s will and living trust. Mick stated clearly that he wanted no heroic measures performed to lengthen his life, and a DNR was already being prepared for Mick’s signature in the event that it would be needed, propelling Paul into the reality of what was to come.

Seeing it in black and white was ghastly proof that Mick was indeed dying. Whether it was tomorrow or five years from now, there was no escaping the final verdict. It made Paul sick to his stomach, and his desire to escape became paramount. He needed a few days of mindless pleasure to forget what was happening, and jetting off to some warm place where the booze flowed profusely and the men were willing to lend themselves to the task of complete amnesia sounded like a good plan. He knew that it would have to wait a few more days until he finished editing Mick’s manuscript, but after that, he would go. He needed to distance himself from both men and try to regain some peace of mind.

His attraction to Tono continued to plague him, and his daily visits with Mick were hard to get through without wanting to take charge and see to all his creature comforts. He was having a terrible time taking a backseat, yet his respect for the Spaniard grew on a daily basis. He’d found the perfect physical therapist in the form of Samuel, and he didn’t flinch when presented with the bill for the medical equipment needed to make the apartment user-friendly for Mick. Paul had no idea what kind of money Tono had socked away, but an apartment on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan came with a hefty price tag that didn’t seem to bother Tono.

Paul knew that Mick's novel would be a bestseller, and Alcott Press would have been happy to give him an advance, but Mick had declined. His decision was based on the superstitious notion that accepting money for a project that had still to be completed would jinx him; an idea Paul couldn't refute. It was another source of frustration for Paul. The fact that he couldn't help financially, which was all he had left in his arsenal aside from his editing skills, disturbed him. If money wasn't a motivating factor for either man, what did they need him for?

His intercom buzzed, and Linda's announcing that Tono was on the phone seemed almost prophetic.

"Yes," Paul picked up immediately. "Is everything alright?"

"Sí. I was calling to set up our schedule."

"What schedule?" Paul asked, forgetting for one brief moment that he'd agreed to work on Tono's story.

"The one you and I have to establish to work on my manuscript."

Christ! "What did you have in mind?"

"Samuel comes every other day for approximately two hours. It would be easier for me to spend time with you if I didn't have to worry about leaving Mick by himself."

"That sounds reasonable, but it's during the day. My agenda is usually full."

"We could do this early in the morning before your day starts."

"I suppose," Paul said, annoyed that his plan for escape was shot to hell. "When did you want to start?"

“How about tomorrow?”

“Be at my apartment at exactly seven-thirty.”

“Bien. And Pol?”

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me just yet. You may not survive tomorrow’s meeting.”

Tono laughed on his end and hung up, leaving Paul staring at the receiver.

Chapter 20

PAUL was enjoying his second cup of coffee when Baxter showed Tono into his home office the next morning. The Jai alai player was surprisingly prompt, a huge plus in his favor considering how much of his life revolved around Mick’s impromptu existence. Paul observed Tono striding purposefully across the carpet-strewn floor, dressed in soft khaki shorts and a black T-shirt stretched across his impressive torso.

“Good morning.” Paul nodded. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Please.”

Paul poured from the thermal carafe that Baxter had prepared. “Cream or sugar?”

“You don’t need to wait on me, Pol. I can take care of myself,” Tono chided.

Paul sighed and pushed the coffee mug toward Tono. “Suit yourself.”

He watched Tono, mesmerized by the simple act of adding creamer and two cubes of sugar into the large mug. Paul fixated on Tono’s hands, which were large, in keeping with the rest of him. His nails were cut short, buffed but not polished, and there were soft tufts of light brown hair just above his knuckles. He curved his long, thick fingers around the white mug and practically moaned with contentment after he took a sip. “Thank God your coffee isn’t watered down like in most places.”

“I like strong coffee,” Paul replied. “Just like my men.”

Paul wanted to bite his tongue, regretting his words instantly, because for one thing they weren’t true, and the last thing he needed was for Tono to think that he was flirting with him. He had never been attracted to alpha males, being one himself, and this attraction between him and Tono was disconcerting, to say the least. It was throwing him off his game, and retaining the upper hand was paramount to making any sort of business relationship work between them.

Tono raised his brows. “I thought you preferred the weaker variety.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Mick told me you liked to be in control all the time.”

“Are we talking about the same thing?”

Tono sipped the coffee, never taking his eyes off Paul. He looked for all intents and purposes like a jungle cat about to pounce. His normally soft brown eyes had a glint to them this morning, a touch of wildness which Paul had never seen before. And really, knowing Mick’s penchant for a varied and somewhat kinky sex life, he should have expected that Tono would have a side to him that kept Mick satisfied in and out of bed. The Spaniard was almost playing with him, and he was succeeding, judging by the growing heat in and around his groin.

“Let’s get on with this, okay?” Paul said abruptly, tearing his eyes away from Tono’s hypnotic stare. He’d had enough for now and didn’t want a repeat of that night at the Chelsea apartment. Actually, he did. He wanted nothing more than to shove his cock up the bastard’s tight ass, show him who was in charge, and make him scream with pleasure as he battered him ruthlessly. The image of Tono spread out on his desk with his ass in the air, begging him, made Paul blush, a fact that did not go unnoticed.

Tono stared at Paul and cocked his head. “Is anything wrong?”

Paul shook his head violently, shocked by his thoughts and the intensity of his reaction. Whatever was happening between them wasn’t going away. They both knew it, although Tono ignored it, or did his best to hide behind the very subtle game they were playing.

“Nothing’s wrong, Tono. Where’s the manuscript?”

Tono’s beguiling gaze shifted to the thick binder on the floor. He reached down and lifted the hefty document, dropping it on the desk. “I can’t make any sense of your scribble, Pol. There’s more red than black on this page,” Tono accused.

“That’s because it’s a piece of shit.”

“Hey!”

Paul picked up the manuscript and slammed it back down on the desk. “Let’s get one thing straight, Tono. If I’m going to be in charge, I have to speak my mind without worrying about your delicate ego.”

“Who said I was fucking delicate!” Tono shouted.

“You want to do this? Then, let’s do it right. First off, you need to change the point of view. It’s not compelling in third person. Make it first person, your voice, not some random voice from outer space. Tell me what you’re feeling, Tono, and speak to me, the reader. I need to know what

you're thinking. I don't give a damn what color the sky was the day you met Mick, or whether the sea was blue or gray. I need to know how your blood boiled when you looked into his amazing eyes. Drop the floral descriptions. This is not about teenagers in love, nor is this some fucking sonnet. I want to know how Mick made your cock stiff with need, and how his touch made you tremble. Engage me from page one or I'll throw this in the trash bin with the other manuscripts I reject on a daily basis."

"¡Por Dios!"

"Exactly! You want me, the reader, to be in your moment, to feel your pain, your love for Mick, your need, your desperation. I'm not getting any of that with what you've given me."

"I'm not sure I know how to do that."

"That's where I come in. You write the words—I'll edit."

"But, Pol, you're asking me to bare my soul and turn myself inside out."

"That's what makes a good writer, Tono. You're just another hack if you only skim the surface."

"Give me an example."

Paul reached for the manuscript and picked a random sentence. "Here," Paul stabbed at the paper. "'The radio was playing 'Momentos' when we walked into the bar and we saw a foreigner holding a drink'." Paul's steely eyes bore into Tono's, daring him to question his literary authority. "First of all, how did you know he was a foreigner? Did he have a sign on him—an American flag that said I don't belong here?"

Tono shrugged. "Because I said so?"

"Bullshit! This is not writing by numbers, Tono. Show me, don't tell me. What if you said, 'The bar was no different that night, except for the eye candy in faded Levi's making pouring motions

over his glass, trying to get someone's attention. He looked up when I walked in, burning holes into me with eyes that were a cross between purple irises and clumps of lavender. I felt the pull, despite the layers of people in between us, and I knew that tonight would change my life."

"It did," Tono said softly, looking at Paul in wonder. "I felt all of that the first time I laid eyes on Mick."

"I know! Doesn't that paint a clearer picture? The man is an obvious tourist, most likely an American because of the Levi's, and gorgeous to boot. I want to know more about him. What happened next?"

Tono nodded in understanding. "It will take me a long time to convert this entire story into first person."

"We've got all the time in the world, Tono."

"We do, but Mick doesn't. I want to finish this before he—"

"Stop right there," Paul ordered. "Mick's not going anywhere."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I just am. He's going to beat this."

"You're dreaming, Pol. I thought you were a realist. There's no beating ALS."

"Maybe I used the wrong word, Tono. Mick will manage to live with this fucking disease and continue to be productive. He'll tame it, and you and I will help him make it work."

"Your arrogance is comforting for once."

“Well, someone’s got to have balls around here.” Paul smiled cheekily.

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of cojones, my friend.”

“Don’t I know it,” Paul admitted, caught by Tono’s beguiling stare that promised all kinds of pleasure. “You are way too hot for my own good,” Paul whispered.

“I think for once I agree with you. I am attracted to you despite the fact that I don’t like you very much.”

Paul laughed. “And that’s the worst part, isn’t it? We want to tear each other’s clothes off, but we’re both in love with Mick.”

“I don’t know what you feel for him, but I know that I would rather cut off my own legs than hurt him. And sleeping with you, without his permission or his presence, would hurt him.”

“Agreed.” Paul stood abruptly. “Take your manuscript and work on Chapter 1. I’d like to see it in a few days. What sort of writing schedule do you keep?”

Tono snorted. “Mick is so right about you.”

“What do you mean?”

“He said you shit on command.”

“That’s downright nasty.”

“Tell me you don’t go each day at the same time. You have a fixed schedule even for that, huh?” Tono smirked.

“Shut up, you big lug. Get the hell out of here and go work on your love story. By the way, what the fuck are you calling this?”

“A Love Story,” Tono replied. “What else?”

“Already in print. Think of another title.”

“You think of one,” Tono countered.

“What about Spanish Fly?”

Tono plucked Paul’s belt, wrenching him forward. He tilted his hip and began a slow grind, pleased to feel the instant reaction from his self-professed critic. He whispered lewdly, “How about Irresistible?”

“You’re a bastard of the first order.”

“And you,” Tono baited, “can’t resist me.”

Paul shoved him away. “Go.”

Chapter 21

“¡COÑO, COÑO, COÑO!”

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Mick moved his laptop off to the side and sort of rolled over to see what Tono was complaining about. They were in bed and working on their individual stories, comfortable in the silence. Tono’s morning meeting with Paul must have inspired him, because as soon as they had finished dinner and Mick’s nightly ablution was completed, Tono reached for

his laptop. Everything was going great until five minutes ago when he appeared to have lost his train of thought.

“He wants me to change this entire story to first person. That’s impossible!”

“No, it’s not,” Mick said encouragingly. “Paul knows what he’s talking about.”

“You’re always so quick to defend him,” Tono accused. He shoved his laptop off to the side and turned to Mick. He was edgy all of a sudden, almost poised for a fight.

“Only when I think he’s right,” Mick said, wondering where this was coming from. He thought they had this worked out, but apparently not.

“You make excuses for him all the time, cariño. I’m sick of it.”

“Majo... what’s this about, really?”

“I don’t know,” Tono grumbled. “I guess I’m in a bad mood.”

“You’re entitled to have those occasionally,” Mick purred. “Would a little loving help?”

“Maybe.” Tono bit his lip and grinned.

“Let me fix that problem,” Mick whispered seductively. “You want to play?”

“Sure.”

“Alone, or do you want company?”

Tono looked surprised. “What do you mean?”

“We could ask Paul to join us and make it more interesting.”

“No,” Tono said vehemently, “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why? I know you’re attracted to him.”

“No, I’m not!”

“Majo, come on, be honest about this.”

“I don’t like him.”

“That’s not what I said.” Mick rubbed his hand in circles around Tono’s chest. He took a nipple in between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed it gently, loving the moan that came out of Tono’s throat. “You want to fuck him, don’t you?”

“Mick... por Dios.”

“Tono, you don’t have to feel guilty about it.”

“Aren’t you even a little bit jealous?”

“No. The idea of the two of you having sex is hot as hell.”

“You’re not normal.”

“I’m no different than I’ve ever been. Are we changing the rules because I’m sick?”

Tono sighed and rubbed his face with his hand. “I’m confused.”

“Why, amor? You know I’ve always enjoyed three-ways, and I thought you did too.”

“Mick, we’re talking about your ex-lover, who is in love with you and would gladly murder me if he could get away with it.”

“Paul has accepted you and his role in our lives. You’re the one making this difficult.”

“¡Joder! Am I supposed to let him in and out of our bed whenever the mood strikes and then continue on as if nothing has happened? Call me old-fashioned, but I tend to have feelings for the people I fuck!”

Mick pushed himself up to a sitting position. His arms were still strong enough to allow that without the help of his legs, which were as useless as a fish’s tail out of water. “What’s going to happen down the road, Tono? Have you really thought about our future?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know we’ve talked about this before, but let’s address it again. I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to have sex, despite what Samuel and the doctors have said,” Mick said dispassionately, as if he were discussing a stranger. “You’re young, virile, and very attractive; the thought of you being in a relationship devoid of any passion worries me. I want you to be happy, majo, in and out of bed.”

“Cariño—”

“No!” Mick shrugged off Tono’s outstretched arm, “Please, this is important to me—let me finish. I don’t want you to ever resent being with me! If Paul can provide the extra loving I may not be able to give you in the future, then so be it.”

Tono’s face betrayed his shock. “Is that why you want him around?”

“Of course not—not initially,” Mick amended. “The whole physical attraction was just as much a surprise to me as it was to you. I didn’t think I’d feel anything after all these years, and I had no idea he still wanted me. If you were honest about it, you’d admit that our evening together was quite memorable.”

Tono jerked away in anger. “You’re crazy! Don’t try and fix me up with him. He’s nothing to me but a source of irritation, Mick. How dare you even think that I would settle for him, when all I want is you?”

“I realize it’s complicated, Tono. You know how I feel about him.”

“Yes, and it pisses me off!”

“It has nothing to do with my love for you.”

“Mick, I’m sorry, but I believe that when two people are in love, there’s no room for a third person. Screwing around with others for fun is one thing; this is entirely different. Feelings are involved. ”

“There’s no rule that says you can’t love two people at one time, if you love them in a different way.”

“Mick, I don’t need two lovers to make me happy, and this conversation is unbelievable!” Tono stood abruptly and grabbed his shorts, which he’d left on the chair earlier. He pulled them up and snarled, “I’m going to get a drink. Do you want anything?”

“No.” Mick’s voice shook, and he buried his face in his hands, afraid to see the disgust in Tono’s gaze. “Don’t be angry,” he murmured.

Tono’s heart gave a lurch when he saw Mick’s reaction. “Cariño, no llores.”

Mick removed his hands and stared at his partner with tears in his eyes. “I can’t control my tears, Tono. Please, don’t go.”

“I’m only going to get a drink, amor.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

Tono sat on the bed and pulled Mick into his embrace. He felt his trembling and heard him trying to stifle his sobs. It made him crazy to know that he’d caused this new pain. Tono twisted his way around to get to Mick’s mouth and kissed him passionately, tasting the salty tears that streaked down his face. “I don’t need anyone but you, cariño. I’m content. You’ve given me enough passion to last a lifetime.”

“I wish I could believe that, Tono, but it’s unrealistic. I know you need loving on a daily basis. I can provide that for now, but what about a month, or a year from today? What then?”

“You’re treating me like some sort of sex maniac. There’s much more to our relationship than sex, Mick. It’s not the reason I love you.”

“Maybe not, but it’s a big part of it. You can deny it all you want, but when sex is taken away, everything suffers, especially the intimate connection between two people. I’m just being honest, Tono, and you’re not!” Mick cried. “I’m not trying to fix you up or replace me with Paul. I’m trying to find a solution to something that will become a problem in the future. And there’s only one other man in this world I want in my life right now, aside from you.”

“Yes, that’s quite obvious.” Tono’s voice turned frigid again. “I’ll tell you what, Mick. Why don’t I leave and go back to Spain? That way, you and Paul can live happily ever after.”

This brought a new flood of tears, which tore at Tono's heart.

"Cariño... Mick, I'm sorry," Tono said.

"Tell me you didn't mean that."

"Of course I didn't."

"Why does this have to be so hard?" Mick wailed. "I just want you to be fulfilled. All your needs have been put aside for me. You've given up Jai alai, and you don't even go to the gym anymore, Tono. The last thing I want is for you to look at me one day and ask what the fuck you're doing with your life."

"I know what I'm doing with my life. I'm with the man I love and writing a book. I'm done with Jai alai. I would have quit soon anyway. This gave me a good excuse to do it."

"That's crap and you know it. You're thirty-five years old, Tono, and you're at the height of your career. Giving it up to nurse a dying lover is admirable, but it's going to get old. It would be different if you knew I'd be dead in six months or a year, but this could go on indefinitely. Watching you go stir-crazy from inactivity and lack of sex will kill me faster than anything else."

"Mick, I want you to calm down."

Mick picked up his laptop and hurled it at the wall. The cover snapped off and it fell to the floor with a thud, shocking Tono. "Tell me you have your novel backed up somewhere."

"Of course I do! I'm not a fucking idiot!"

"Why are you so angry?"

“I don’t know!” Mick screamed, grabbing a pillow and covering his face. He began to sob uncontrollably, pushing Tono away when he tried to take him in his arms. “Get the fuck away from me.”

“Shall I get Paul?” Tono sighed, expecting a positive reply, but he was relieved when Mick shook his head and mumbled, “No.”

“I’ll be in the living room if you need me. Just yell and I’ll come.”

“Go away!”

Mick continued to cry, distraught that the conversation had escalated into a fight so quickly. A lot was said in anger, but truth had a way of rising to the top, and he had blurted out his innermost thoughts without thinking. He had hoped to work out the logistics before ever attempting to convince Tono.

Time would have taken care of Paul and Tono’s attraction. Mick’s body was falling apart, but his brain was as sharp as ever, and he could feel the raw sexual energy whenever the two were around each other. He should have let things lie and wait for them to give in to their mutual need. Surprisingly, he had wanted to spare them any guilt by giving his blessing. He meant every word he’d said tonight. There was no jealousy. Maybe it had to do with the realization that he was, in fact, dying, and the thought of Tono being alone was hard to imagine. He was a loving and passionate man who thrived in a relationship, as did Paul. He knew that Paul had so much to give, yet he had not had a serious relationship since their breakup. Maybe it was too farfetched to expect Tono and Paul to care for each other; his love for both of them didn’t ensure that. But, if Tono would just accept this for what it was, a physical need being met, the rest might come more easily. Mick’s only desire was for them to find some sort of comfort together. They would need it down the road, and for once in his life, Mick was planning ahead.

Chapter 22

SAMUEL let himself in around seven-fifteen with the key they’d provided him and was surprised to find Tono showered, shaved, and pacing in the living room. Ordinarily, he and Mick would still be in bed.

“Good morning,” Tono greeted him formally. Samuel was in the process of removing his windbreaker, and he paused to respond, noting the worried look on the Spaniard’s face.

“What’s up, my brother?”

“We didn’t have a very good night. Mick’s being very emotional.”

“I wish I could say it will pass, but it won’t. Expect this more and more often,” Samuel replied. “It’s a part of the disease,” he continued, removing his jacket and hanging it up in the hall closet.

“The crying?”

“Yes. The mood swings, the feelings of despair. It will only get worse.”

“¡Coño!”

“It is what it is, mon.”

“I’ll be upstairs at Paul’s apartment if you need me,” Tono said on his way out the door. “Working,” he added, almost defensively.

Samuel raised his eyebrows and wondered what that was about. He walked into the master bedroom and found Mick in bed, sitting up amidst an array of pillows and staring out the window.

“Good morning, Mick,” Samuel said cheerfully, noting the laptop lying on the floor in two pieces. He bent down to retrieve it. “Busy night?”

Mick grunted but refused to engage. He was still mired in his misery, hurt and confused by Tono’s rejection last night. They’d slept apart in the king-sized bed, a sure sign that things were

deteriorating. It was the first time since they'd met that he'd been unable to sway Tono or arrive at some middle ground.

"Shall I get your bath ready?"

"I don't care."

"Would you like a cup of coffee first?"

"Whatever." Mick shrugged. "I'm not in a very good mood."

"I see that. Well, it's time to snap out of it."

"Easier said than done."

"I'm not making light of your situation, Mick, but your mindset can destroy you far quicker than ALS. I've had patients who've fought it all the way, losing precious time in denial or sulking and brooding. You're an intelligent man with a lot to live for. Accepting the inevitable, with as much grace as you can muster, while trying to make the most of the time you have left, is far more productive and less draining on your mental health."

Mick snorted. "That's easy for you to say from your standpoint. I don't see you singing 'Oh Happy Day' as you try wheeling yourself around."

Samuel looked at him kindly. "You think I'm being cold and heartless, but the reality is that you can continue to have a productive life through the course of this illness. You will never lose any of your cognitive skills, and that is a huge plus. Unlike Alzheimer's or other diseases like cancer where you're bombarded by chemotherapy and radiation, ALS is relatively pain-free."

"If you don't count the mental pain and anguish," Mick spat out.

“And that’s the reason why you need to crawl out of this hole; take the depression monster by the neck and ride the fucker for all it’s worth. You’ve got shit to do, mon, places to be, stories to tell. You can’t let this rule your life and destroy what little time you have left, whether it’s three or five or ten more years, Mick. You want to spend them sitting in bed, moping?”

“Hell no!”

“Spoken like a true fighter,” Samuel intoned. He carried Mick to the bathroom and positioned him so he could pee standing up, a huge mental hurdle for most people. Performing bodily functions normally was important in helping patients retain some sense of dignity and confidence. When that was done, Samuel removed Mick’s pajamas and helped him into the huge tub with the built-in Jacuzzi. He turned on the water, adjusting the temperature, and sat on the bench beside the tub, waiting for it to fill. “Why don’t we do something different today, Mick? You want to go shopping? Obviously, you’re in need of a new laptop.”

“Shopping? How?”

“What do you mean how? You’re not dead yet, kiddo. The only thing holding you up is wheels, and I’m going to provide them. Shall we go downtown, burn some plastic, and have lunch?”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course. Life needs to go on, Mick.”

“Let’s do it, Samuel. I’ve wanted to buy a new laptop anyhow, so I guess hurling it against the wall was sort of Freudian.”

“I wouldn’t make a habit of it,” Samuel chuckled. “I’m not sure Tono appreciated your little tantrum.”

“Fuck him.”

“Come on, buddy,” Samuel reproached, “the man is crazy in love with you.”

Mick’s eyes filled with tears immediately. “Is he?”

“Of course he is, without a doubt.”

“How long will I be able to keep him, Samuel? Nursing me is going to get ugly, and the last thing I want is for him to stay with me out of pity. I don’t want him to be subjected to my daily requirements, which will get more and more disgusting. How romantic is wiping your lover’s ass or clearing a breathing tube?”

“You’re projecting your own fears on him, Mick. From where I stand, Tono doesn’t have any problems caring for you. He’s asked a million questions about ALS, and never once did I get the feeling that he couldn’t take on this task. Tono may surprise you and even exceed your expectations. You shouldn’t be so grim.”

“I can’t help it, Samuel. I hate being dependent on anyone.”

“Nobody likes it, Mick, but you’re still far from the stage you’re talking about. I would try and live each day at a time and not worry about an uncertain future. How long have you guys been together?”

“A little over six years.”

“That’s longer than a lot of marriages these days. If he were going to bail, he would have done it as soon as you were diagnosed.”

“He’s giving up so much for me, Samuel. I don’t want his life to turn to hell because mine has.”

“Has it occurred to you that the only thing he wants right now is to be with you? Whatever sacrifice you think he’s making is worth it to him, and isn’t it his choice to make? I don’t think you realize how much he loves you, mon. I see it in his eyes— it’s a beautiful thing.”

“I love him so much, Samuel,” Mick said, teary-eyed. He knew he was turning into an emotional wreck on top of everything else and wanted it to stop.

“The feeling is mutual, Mick. Now, whatever the argument was about, fix it, and get on with your life. You have much to live for.”

“I do.”

“Let’s start with getting you ready. I want you to be the hottest guy I’ve ever wheeled around.”

“Why, Samuel. You aren’t considering moving over to the dark side, are you?”

Samuel’s laugh was loud and hearty. “No, thank you. I like my women far too much.”

“It’s just as well, because my dance card is full.”

“Yes, it is. I’m turning on the jets, so you can relax for a few minutes while I go and get you a big cup of coffee. Does that sound good?”

“It sounds great, Samuel. Thank you.” Mick smiled for the first time that morning.

“You’re welcome, mon.”

PAUL finished reading Tono’s revised first chapter and put the manuscript down on the table. “This reads much better.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” Paul nodded. “I’m glad we changed the point of view. I think I can work with this.”

“Good,” Tono exhaled, relieved beyond measure. He rubbed his face with both hands. “I’m tired.”

“Worked on this all night, did you?”

“Mick and I had a fight.”

“What? Why?” Paul leaned forward, concerned.

“None of your business,” Tono shot back, sorry he’d said anything.

“Okay. You brought it up, so I thought you might want to talk about it.”

“No. Well, yes, maybe.”

Paul laughed gently. “Hey.” He reached for Tono’s hand. “Whatever it is can’t be that bad.”

“I’m having a hard time dealing with some things he said. Some of Mick’s ideas are very unconventional.”

“And you’re finding this out just now? Mick’s always been full of surprises. I think that’s part of the reason I love him. I’m never bored when he’s around.”

“How can you still love him when he’s with me?”

“I’ll always love him, Tono,” Paul replied, looking him straight in the eye, almost daring him to say anything.

“You’re both a little crazy, you know that?”

“Why?”

“Because he loves you too.” Tono frowned. “He says he loves you, but he’s in love with me. I’m not sure I can deal with this,” Tono stated, getting ready to leave.

“Don’t go.” Paul reached for Tono’s hand and pulled him back. “Maybe I can explain.”

“What’s there to say? Where I come from, two people in love don’t have room for a third person.”

“He doesn’t love me that way, Tono.”

“I don’t understand it,” Tono said. “There’s a lot going on here.”

Paul stood and walked around his desk. He put both hands on Tono’s chest and looked up at the Spaniard, losing himself in the pools of soft toffee. “You don’t get the attraction you and I share either, do you?”

“No.” Tono chewed on his lower lip, resisting the temptation to crush Paul in his arms. “You’re not a nice person, Pol. I’m not sure I even like you.”

“I’m very nice,” Paul purred, standing on his toes and leaning forward to lick Tono’s mouth. “Let me show you how nice I can be.”

Tono hissed a protest but was silenced by Paul’s bruising kiss.

PAUL was drowning in the kisses that lit him up from the inside out. He could hear Tono muttering words in Spanish, obscenities no doubt, but they were wildly exciting. Paul was overwhelmed by Tono's strength, by the large hands that grabbed his ass and dragged him closer. He could feel Tono's erection through his chinos as it pressed hard against his own rigid cock, which leaped to attention the minute he felt the first touch. Tono was nibbling on the soft skin around Paul's neck, closer and closer to his ear, somehow knowing that this was one of his weak spots. The whimpers that escaped his throat confirmed it when he felt Tono's hot tongue licking at his earlobe, followed by puffs of air against the wet skin. His appreciative moaning pushed Tono into high gear because the Spanish words tumbled out of his mouth in-between the torrid kisses.

"Tono, please," Paul begged, trying to move over to the sofa on one side of the room, but Tono picked him up and covered his mouth with hungrier kisses. Paul encircled him like a koala, hanging on to the hard body that was driving him crazy. He knew this was wrong on so many levels, but he couldn't think straight once the kissing started. All he wanted was to feel that hot mouth on his cock, which was aching for release. "Suck me, God, I need you to get me off." Paul's voice cracked, which was fitting, considering he was acting like a teenager instead of a grown man in his thirties. He hadn't been this excited in years, and although he wanted to retain control, the situation was rapidly spiraling away from them and both men felt it.

Tono shoved Paul up against the wall, seemingly angry for giving in to the sudden passion that flared between them. There was no tenderness in his kisses, only a raging need to possess. Tono's aggression made this encounter even more exciting, igniting every caveman fantasy Paul had ever entertained. He tugged at Tono's shirt, which had buttons down the center, fumbling to part the soft fabric so he could run his hands over the furry chest straining against the cotton. His fingers locked up on him and he was all thumbs, graceless and bumbling, in keeping with the juvenile need that had taken over his senses. He tore at the shirt, oblivious to Tono's outrage. He could buy him ten more—twenty for that matter—but right now he needed to feel the hard mounds, to run his fingers through the golden chest hair. Paul nuzzled Tono's neck, inhaling the combination of soap and a woodsy European aftershave that was unfamiliar to Paul, overshadowed by the powerful scent of a man in heat. Pheromones had kicked in big time, and Tono exuded them from every pore, which only served to ratchet up their mutual desire. "Fuck me, Tono, God, just do it," Paul moaned, sounding desperate to his own ears. His breathing was ragged, drawing a corresponding growl from the Spaniard, who tilted his hips and began to rut against him.

Paul wanted Tono to rip his clothes off and fuck him into oblivion. He pushed away from Tono and dropped to the floor, frantically struggling with his belt and his own button and zipper. He toed off his loafers and threw his pants across the room once he removed them. He stuck his

thumbs into the elastic around his waist and pulled off his silk boxers, well aware that his cock was throbbing and fully erect. He saw Tono's eyes widen and zero in on his thick shaft.

"Coño," Tono hissed at the sight of Paul's partially nude body as Paul pulled his shirt over his own head, eliminating the issue of buttons altogether. Their eyes were locked in on each other. Paul broke away from the intense glare and focused his attention on Tono's magnificent chest covered with the soft curls, which were suddenly attractive as hell. Tono unbuttoned his pants with one hand and pushed them down his thighs, releasing his cock, which sprang forward, free of underwear.

"Motherfucker," Paul whispered, "you're going to kill me."

"Condom?" Tono's smile was wicked.

Paul did a slow perusal of the Spaniard, whose commanding presence was nothing short of spectacular. His thighs were huge and contoured perfectly, statue perfect and worthy of adoration. Tono's stomach was flat and had a soft line of hair running from his navel down to the dark thatch spread out in a riot of untamed curls, another pet peeve of Paul's that seemed insignificant right now. His eyes were drawn to the huge cock that was in keeping with everything else about the sumptuous man who vibrated with sexual power.

"Dear God," Paul moaned and sank to his knees in front of Tono. He buried his face in the prickly hair, opening his mouth when Tono nudged it with his tumescent cock. He tasted the clear fluid leaking from Tono's slit, slurping at it with the utmost pleasure, loving the man's taste on top of everything else. Tono began to fuck Paul's mouth, snapping his hips against Paul's face, encouraged by Paul's obvious ease in accepting his impressive shaft down his throat without gagging. Paul hefted Tono's balls, which were large and heavy, kneading them expertly, causing the Spaniard to cry out and thrust even harder.

Paul pulled his mouth away, breaking the sucking motion with a loud pop; he reached up, yanking his desk drawer open so forcefully it broke away from the stops and fell to the hardwood floor in a clatter. He searched for the travel size packets of lube and the condoms he had lying around in every room of his apartment, almost crying in relief when he found what he was looking for. He rolled the condom on Tono's cock while the man watched intently, moaning in appreciation of his efforts. Paul smeared Tono with a healthy dollop of lube and wiped the remainder around his own asshole as he fingered himself to get ready for the invasion. It had been a very long time since he'd bottomed, and he knew he would be paying for this moment all day, but right now, the idea of that huge cock up his ass drove intelligent thought out the

window. He turned away from Tono and got down on all fours, lifting up his butt in silent offering, knowing he looked wanton and needy. He held his breath until he felt Tono grab his hips forcefully and nudge his opening with the fat, spongy head.

“Do it, you bastard. Fuck me!”

He closed his eyes and bit his lips to keep from crying out when he felt the first thrust, only able to hold back the scream through sheer willpower. He lost the battle when Tono poked his gland, and Paul heard himself keening as the room filled with the odor of his spunk as it splashed on the floor. Tono continued to plow into him with the precision of a pneumatic drill, trancelike and mouthing off words in Spanish that Paul couldn't understand. Tono was on fire, and his passion was contagious, shocking Paul into an erection again, minutes after his initial release.

Tono's hand snaked around his right hip to curl strong fingers around his resurrected cock, shafting it in rhythm with his own thrusting. Paul could feel Tono's hot breath on his neck and his full weight on his back as he changed the angle of his movement, pulling Paul up to his chest, never losing the connection. Paul was overpowered by Tono's strength, imprisoned in the iron grip that held him smashed up against the ceaseless pounding. He'd lost all capacity for rational thought and could only think about one thing— coming again— and he did, in a sputtering mess, white heat overflowing on Tono's hand as the Spaniard exploded into the condom, filling it with hot semen, groaning out words that sounded almost prehistoric.

“God almighty,” Paul huffed out, and they collapsed on the floor. Tono felt like a bear on top of him, heaving and panting, two hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight pressing him into the hardwood floor. Paul was sure his spine was broken in several places, and he would probably never walk again, but he was smiling like the proverbial Cheshire, reveling in the pleasure that continued to zing throughout his body. He hadn't been fucked like this in years, and it was heavenly.

“I have to go,” Tono said, pulling away. He removed the condom, tied it off, and threw it in the trashcan close by. “I need to check on Mick.”

The guilt and shame washed over Tono's face, turning his cheeks blood red. Paul reached out to try and stop him but was rebuffed quickly. “No!”

“Tono, stay. Let's talk about what just happened.”

“Coño, Pol. There’s nothing to talk about. We’re animals.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Mick will understand, believe me.”

“Bullshit! You say one word to him, and I’ll kill you.”

Paul got up and started to pluck at the clothes that lay scattered throughout the room. He threw Tono’s pants at him. “Get dressed and get out of here. You’re a bigger idiot than I thought.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Tono glared while he hopped into his pants. He reached for his shirt and cursed out loud when he saw the torn fabric.

“You can’t admit that you want me. That you’re actually interested in another man.”

“I’m not interested in you,” Tono spat out. “I fucked you!”

“And you loved it,” Paul sneered. “You loved every minute of it, and it’s tearing you up inside. You think Mick cares? I guarantee you that if you were to tell him you fucked me, he’d laugh.”

“Mick loves me,” Tono said, outraged by Paul’s words. “He would be hurt if I told him we had sex.”

“No, he wouldn’t, Tono, because that’s all we had. Sex!”

“Estás loco.”

“Maybe I am crazy, but I know your lover. Apparently, I know him much better than you. Mick can tell the difference between love and sex, and you, my dear Spanish bull, can’t.”

“Fuck you, Pol. I’m out of here.”

“Go. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Don’t forget to do another chapter,” Paul said as calmly as if he were discussing the weather.

He winced when he moved to retrieve the drawer, the sting around his asshole a persistent reminder of Tono and what they’d shared. He knew he’d be feeling the aftereffects for days, but he shrugged it off. It had been worth it to get this craving out of his system. Maybe now they could settle down and finish what they’d started out to do. Both manuscripts, Mick’s sequel and Tono’s romance, were the reason he was even in this scenario.

He had reluctantly accepted the truth of Mick’s love for the impossible Spaniard. Given his health and uncertain future, Paul could deal with sharing, although he wished circumstances were different. Still, a little bit of Mick was better than nothing, but he could tell that Tono wasn’t buying into the concept. Maybe that’s what their fight was about.

The editing was the reason they’d approached him, but their relationship was shifting and getting complicated. A part of him continued to resent Tono’s presence, as surely as the Spaniard resented Paul’s sudden resurrection. However, in the last few weeks, Paul had witnessed another side of Tono—tender, caring, and passionately committed to Mick’s happiness. At heart, he was a good and kind man, deeply in love, who would do anything to alleviate Mick’s suffering. Paul couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like to be the recipient of such ardor. He was drawn to the incandescent and pure emotion that emanated from Tono. Feelings were starting to intrude on his thoughts, and they were unwelcome and obviously unreciprocated. The last thing he wanted was to cause more stress for Mick, who had more than enough on his plate. He didn’t want to subject him to a contest of wills between his current and past lover. Paul hoped he would find some time in the next few days to discuss this with Mick in private, Tono’s threat notwithstanding. He and Mick had a connection that went far deeper than anything Tono may have imagined. Paul would use this longstanding bond to get into Mick’s head and find out where he was really going with this.

TONO slammed the door of the bathroom shut and sat on the toilet seat with his clothes on. He buried his face in his hands and stifled a scream. He was so angry he wanted to break a wall, or better yet, smash his fist into Paul’s smug face.

He couldn't believe he'd given in to the physical need and fucked the man. He thought he was a better human being, a loving and faithful partner, but he was all talk. He recalled Mick's offer last night and his own outrage. He felt like the world's biggest liar when memories of what had just happened assaulted him, arousing him once more despite his anger. It had been one of the hottest encounters of his life, and he was ashamed to admit it, even to himself.

He heard a knock and Mick's voice asking to come in. Tono wanted to run and hide somewhere. He was sure that the guilt would be written all over his face and Mick would know as soon as he looked at him, but he couldn't think of a way out. He stood and unlocked the door reluctantly. Mick looked up from his wheelchair and smiled sweetly. "I just wanted to tell you that I'm going out with Samuel."

"Oh? Where are you going?"

"I need a new laptop after my diva moment last night, for which I do apologize. I'm sorry, majo."

"Cariño, don't apologize."

"I have to. I'm sorry if my ideas of sharing our love rubbed you the wrong way. I didn't realize you were so rigid in your beliefs, but I will respect your wishes."

"Mick—"

"What?" Mick looked up expectantly, hoping to be forgiven.

"I can't discuss this right now," Tono said, his face frozen into a stony mask. He wanted to die, to be swallowed up by the earth, buried and forgotten. He didn't deserve to be with Mick; he didn't deserve an apology, of all things. He was the one who should be on his knees right now, begging forgiveness.

"Tono?" Mick's eyes filled, confused by the obvious rejection.

“Cariño, let it go. I love you, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

Tono sank down on his knees and buried his face in Mick’s lap. He wanted to break down and tell him what had happened, but he couldn’t do it.

“What’s the matter, majo?”

“It’s nothing,” Tono mumbled, afraid to look Mick in the eye. “I just wanted to hold you. I hated not having you in my arms last night.”

“I know,” Mick said gently. “Never again?”

“I swear,” Tono answered, referring to his encounter with Paul. He gazed into the alluring violet eyes that overflowed with love and was humbled and ashamed once more by what had happened upstairs. “I promise never to do that again.” Tono was resolute and determined to make this up to Mick. If he had to give up his dream of writing their story, he would, just to keep his distance from Paul.

“Kiss me, majo. You want to come with us?”

“No.” Tono was glad to have the time alone. It would give him an opportunity to reflect on everything that had happened since arriving in New York. He needed to regain some of his sense of self, which had been sucked out of his body by the annoying man upstairs; the one with the frigid eyes who made his knees weak and turned his brain into a tortured mass of jumbled thoughts. Tono wanted to slap Paul across his patrician face, yet the very thought of kissing him or burying his cock into the inviting ass, which lifted for him so wantonly, made him groan out loud.

He had to find a solution to the blond enigma who’d come into his life so suddenly and had every intention of staying.

Chapter 24

MICK spent the better part of the morning at the Apple Store deciding which laptop to buy. It had been a long time since he'd been anywhere near this much technology, so he was overwhelmed with his choices. It was also his first time out in public since he'd lost his ability to walk, and he was learning firsthand how a wheelchair could change the way people perceived him.

Mick knew that he was luckier than most; he had Samuel to push him around and help him in and out of the car. What he didn't expect was the overly solicitous fawning, or worse yet, the furtive glances cast his way while people tried to figure out what was wrong with him. The hardest thing to endure was the salesman's manner of speech, enunciating every word slowly, linking his ability to walk with his capacity to think and communicate. Thankfully, Samuel's playful and easygoing manner set him straight, and soon the guy who waited on him stopped treating him like he was made of glass.

By the time they left, Mick had a brand new laptop, a printer, and several other pieces of equipment that would make his writing much easier. The voice-activated application was discussed for future use, and he was relieved to learn the technology existed, should he ever need it. For now, his arms and hands worked fine. He tried not to dwell on the reality that some day he would not be able to type. It was too soon to start thinking along those lines, and the very idea depressed him. Samuel reminded him that he had a huge advantage over many others in the same situation. He had a life partner who loved him unconditionally and had the wherewithal to give him the best of care. His career was about to take off again, thanks to the completed sequel and a possible movie deal tied into it. He had much to look forward to, and that alone was worthy of celebration.

Mick vowed to be as positive as possible, ever mindful of Tono and his own state of mind. He was worried about him, especially after last night's argument. Mick conceded that perhaps he'd misjudged Tono's capacity for tolerance with regards to Paul. In the past, he'd shared Mick with others, but it was strictly on a case-by-case basis and never went beyond the next day. Obviously, Tono wasn't the kind of man who could have two partners comfortably, and to expect him to accept Paul of all people in a relationship with them was unfair. He wasn't hardwired that way, unlike Mick, who could easily share his love between the two men in his life.

Tono's willingness to use Paul as his editor had been hard won, and to push him further, to include Paul in their inner and more intimate circle, seemed impossible at this juncture. He'd been unrealistic to expect Tono to fall for Paul's charms, which in reality were not easily

apparent. To most people, Paul appeared cold and arrogant, and he was to a large degree, but Mick knew there was so much more: the softer, generous, and giving side he kept under wraps, to start. It was this Paul he was hoping Tono would glimpse, accomplishing the transition from a partnership of two to a unit of three.

“Where would you like to have lunch?” Samuel asked, weaving his way in and out of traffic. They were riding in his minivan, and Samuel muttered expletives at the usual gridlock and the pedestrians who surged across the streets, unmindful of traffic lights. “Sometimes I wish I was back in Jamaica where the ratio of people to cars is about fifty to one. It’s a wonder that people drive in this city at all,” he murmured.

“Most people don’t, Samuel. They take public transportation.”

“Tell it to these cars,” he spat out, slamming his hand down on the horn. His normally peaceful countenance was turning murderous.

“I don’t think you should drive at all,” Mick teased. “You’re positively insane at the wheel.”

“Aww, mon,” he groaned, “I’m not the happiest man when I’m driving.”

“Remind me never to get in the car with you again.”

“Pick a restaurant so we can get out of this shit,” Samuel said.

“There’s a nice restaurant on the ground floor in the Alcott Press Building, and they have parking available. Why don’t we go there, and maybe Paul can join us?”

Samuel blinked at Mick. “You really like him, huh?”

“What’s not to like?”

“Tono isn’t too crazy about him,” Samuel said, looking at Mick knowingly. “I would tread carefully, mon. You have a good thing going with your partner, and this Paul person smells of trouble.”

“Nah... you don’t know him like I do. No one does.”

Samuel shrugged and was silent, which worked for Mick. It gave him a chance to ponder their complex situation. He’d been assailed by his love for Paul. The powerful connection was resurrected as soon as they laid eyes on each other, rising like a phoenix, a possibility he’d never considered. It was difficult to comprehend because he was deeply in love with Tono. And if he was being pulled in two directions, he could hardly expect his proud and possessive partner to open his arms to someone Mick had berated since the start of their relationship. He remembered his bitterness, anger, and unflattering description of Paul when Tono had inquired about his past love. He’d painted an ugly picture of the man, so Tono’s first impression of Paul had been nothing short of negative.

Since their arrival in New York, and the renewed acquaintance, Mick had hoped that Paul would explain what had happened the night of their breakup. Paul was much more approachable now, and his behavior had been generous and loving, yet he’d made no attempt to bring up ancient history, which made the entire incident even more difficult to understand. Mick’s thoughts went back in time, trying to find some clues to make sense of Paul’s betrayal.

IT HAD been a few weeks after the book launching, a magical time when he was riding the wave of his success. He’d been interviewed by Oprah and was flush with his accomplishments, but he was eager to get home and share everything with Paul. His enthusiasm had been shattered when he walked into their bedroom and saw Paul nailing a guy he’d picked up somewhere. Paul had looked up in mid-thrust, sneering at Mick’s shocked exclamation of outrage, with an unapologetic and almost happy-to-be-caught-in-the-act expression on his face. Mick waited for them to finish and for the guy’s hurried departure before having it out with Paul.

When Mick questioned his behavior, Paul had turned the argument around, accusing Mick of using him and the Alcott name to get published. Mick was so shocked by the statement that he had no response. That indictment was far worse than watching Paul fuck a stranger. To be misjudged so badly and labeled a user, riding on the coattails of Paul’s family and influence to achieve his literary success, was not only insulting, it was as devastating as a physical blow to his gut.

He and Paul had worked on his book for years! It wasn't a whim he'd embarked on suddenly, assuming Paul's familial ties would guarantee him a sale. Mick had struggled and worked hard to make his novel the best it could be, with Paul by his side, helping him, offering suggestions, and being a listening ear. Paul had known he was an aspiring writer since they'd first met in high school. It was one of the reasons they'd been attracted to each other, sharing notes on literature and co-chairing the editing department of the school paper. Their attraction had nothing to do with Alcott Press. It was a meeting of the minds, and an incredible body chemistry, which had not dissipated over the years; it made the denouncement that much harder to bear.

He'd packed his bags that night and was bitterly disappointed when Paul made no attempt to stop him. Paul watched him walk out the door and never tried to contact him; it was his call to Paul five months ago that reestablished a connection. The mystery of their breakup remained a big secret Paul refused to discuss, yet Mick was more than willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and open his heart again. Was it naiveté or wishful thinking to believe it would all work out? Paul was more than capable of turning on him again, and Tono had made it quite clear what he thought of this unconventional situation. It was a conundrum, made more difficult by the ever-present specter of ALS, which played a huge part in this puzzle. Mick's determination to have both men in his life could very well destroy his relationship with Tono, a nightmare he was not willing to contemplate. He loved Tono passionately, and if keeping Paul out of their bed was Tono's wish, then he would abide by it, albeit reluctantly.

CENTRAL PARK in early October couldn't have been more beautiful. The leaves were just starting to turn color, and the air was crisp with the hint of fall. Tono had decided to go for a run, to try and beat the demon out of himself: the demon called Paul Alcott who had gotten under his skin, without even trying. The memory of their earlier encounter today continued to torture him, and his body burned with desire for a man he didn't even like. Conflicting thoughts plagued him, and because they were incomprehensible, Mick's generosity and easy acceptance of his and Paul's attraction was a gift he was not willing to receive. He scoffed when he remembered Mick's words telling him that he shouldn't feel guilty about it.

Because he did feel guilty, and he thought it was wrong. He'd been raised Catholic, and even though he'd already broken several commandments by being gay, he'd accepted that part of his nature and had come to terms with it. However, having multiple partners and being part of a threesome wasn't something he could live with. It screamed of deviance, and he could only imagine what his parents would make of it.

They'd ignored his homosexuality because he was a superstar in the world of Jai alai. He'd brought home nothing but pride to a region of the country where men were men and the lines were clearly marked and drawn. His chosen sport was the epitome of all things male, and his fellow players and family ignored the obvious lack of a woman on his arm rather than admit they had a homosexual in their midst. Tono had always been a private individual, which was how

he'd managed to retain their respect and admiration. There were only a handful of close friends who knew he was gay. Publicly, he and Mick had always been discreet, and whatever rumors swirled around their relationship remained rumors in the north of Spain; the public chose to believe their superstar was as macho as his performance in the fronton.

Trying to explain Paul's presence in their lives would be difficult. His parents would never understand it, and the young men who aspired to be like him would avoid him or call him names. His sport had no room for homosexuals, much less deviants. It was a given and he'd accepted it. Of course, no one would have to know, except things like this had a tendency to get out somehow. Even the most discreet would be at the mercy of those around them. He could hardly expect this sort of arrangement to remain a secret for very long.

With the advent of Mick's disease and his own semi-retirement, the spotlight had shifted from his public life to his more private, personal one. Journalists were starting to question his need to retire. Why did he leave Spain and what was the true nature of his relationship to the American? They'd been able to ward off most of the probing, and his agent had been busy spinning a tale for the public. However, having a third man in and out of his life would not only be hard to explain, it would make any sort of damage control impossible if the true nature of their relationship were to get out. No one would understand it.

Tono stopped running. His legs were starting to cramp, and he was wheezing like a sixty-year-old, an indication that he'd neglected his body, making him even more angry and frustrated. He realized the full extent of his downfall, going from a top athlete in perfect physical and mental shape to this weak and insecure wreck. He swore that he would snap out of his slump and resume his training. He knew that there was no cure for his lover, but he wasn't going to compound their misery by letting his own body go to hell. There was a gym in their building, a high tech one, judging from everything else that Alcott Press touched. He would start to train again and take out his sexual energy on a speed bag, instead of on the blond who was more than happy to share himself with both men.

Chapter 25

"MICK, what a nice surprise!"

Paul couldn't have been more shocked if Mick had walked in of his own volition. Part of it, of course, was because he'd just come from his morning encounter with Tono. He had no idea if the Spaniard had confessed and if that was the reason Mick was here. Paul couldn't remember anyone mentioning that Mick would be downtown today, so when Linda announced that Mick

was in the building and calling from the lobby, he was a little taken aback upon hearing Mick say, “Buy me lunch, sweetheart?”

Paul put the phone down after agreeing to meet Mick and Samuel at the restaurant on the mezzanine floor. It was a modest but excellent place to have a meal. The Char House was usually packed with businessmen in need of a quiet place to bring their clients for lunch. They were known for great steaks and burgers, and they had an extensive soup and salad bar for those with a limited amount of time to eat.

He leaned back and swiveled his chair around so he now looked out the plate glass window. The view of his city was the same, an endless vista of towering skyscrapers, which normally calmed him down because he knew he was home. But he wasn't seeing any of it today—he was too caught up in the immediacy of Mick's sudden appearance. Was he here to berate him and tell him to get out of his life? He wouldn't be surprised if that were the case, although understanding the reason behind it would be difficult. After all, Mick was the only one among the three of them who was truly comfortable with the thought of making a life with his past and present lovers. Paul wasn't that keen on sharing him, and Tono was completely against it, judging from his earlier behavior.

He had probably run downstairs, still reeking of sex, and had come clean as soon as he walked through the fucking door. Paul shook his head, hoping this wasn't the case. He didn't want to alienate Mick again, and more importantly sever his business relationship with his bestselling author over a sexual encounter that didn't mean anything. Tono was an outstanding lover, and Paul's body still tingled with the memory of this morning's amazing orgasm, but he wasn't good enough to replace Mick or destroy a longstanding relationship that had just been renewed. Paul Senior would have certainly criticized him for allowing business to mix with pleasure. It was a dumb move on his part, and one he had every intention of never repeating again.

Paul was astonished that he'd thought of his father at a time like this, but on the other hand, he wasn't. His father hadn't liked Mick very much and blamed him for Paul's homosexuality. He refused to acknowledge that it was Paul's orientation rather than Mick's influence. Just as he refused to believe that Mick wrote the bestselling novel and not Paul.

He'd accused Mick of plagiarism when Paul first brought him the manuscript to read. Paul Senior believed that it was his son's talent behind the young author, and he couldn't understand why Paul would allow Mick to put his name on the manuscript rather than admit he had written it. He had refused to listen to reason until Paul had given him clear proof that he had not written Mick's story. Paul Senior was shocked that his son and heir was second best, and the look on his face pushed Paul over the edge, making him lash out at Mick. The night he'd decided to bring

another man into his bed, to throw Mick out of his life, was the last time Paul Senior had addressed the subject of his literary dreams for his son. It made the incident with Mick pale in comparison. The very idea that he'd disappointed his father was reason enough for him to break his lover's heart.

He shoved the thoughts of his deceased father out of his head. The man was gone, but thankfully, he'd lived long enough to change his mind about Paul Junior. Paul's rise in publishing was legendary; he wasn't second best to anyone in his world. His software had earned him literary and financial acclaim, reversing his father's opinion of him as any sort of failure. His success was the balm that Paul Senior needed to make up for his son's lack of talent as a writer.

He stepped down from the pedestal his desk sat upon and made a mental note to have it replaced. It was time he remodeled his office, making it more to his own taste. There was no need to retain any of his father's idiosyncrasies since he was long gone, as was his world. It was the twenty-first century and a new era in the world of publishing. Paul had accomplished much in his thirty-six years, primarily with his software, but the addition of an e-publishing branch had elevated his company into the modern world. That and the new GBLT department had strengthened Alcott Press far more than anything else he could have done as a writer.

He nodded at Linda on the way out of his office, and he walked over to the bank of elevators that took him down to the restaurant. He spied Mick immediately, sitting at a corner table, along with his trainer, Samuel. He'd met the Jamaican one time and remembered liking him. He had the great accent, a body to die for, and seemed like a genuinely caring individual, something positive for Mick. He couldn't imagine living a life of helplessness, but if he had a choice, he would have Samuel helping him in a heartbeat.

He kissed Mick on the cheek, greeted Samuel with a handshake, and pulled out a chair in front of both men. "So, to what do I owe this honor?"

"I was in town shopping for a new laptop and thought we'd have lunch."

"Where's Tono?"

"He didn't feel like coming. I asked, but he refused."

“Boss, mon, you think I could leave Mick in your capable hands for a couple of hours? I have a client close by and need to stop in on him. I didn’t think this would be an all day affair.”

“I’m sorry, Samuel. I didn’t mean to keep you,” Mick said with an apologetic smile.

“Hey, no worries, mon. I had a good time.”

“You can go, Samuel. I’ll make sure that Mick gets home.”

“What about the wheelchair?”

“It’ll be fine,” Paul stated. “Have you decided what you want to eat?” he asked Mick, summarily dismissing Samuel.

“A cheeseburger and fries would be great,” Mick said and turned his attention back to his trainer. “Bye, Samuel. Thanks for the help with shopping.”

“I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you need a new laptop?” Paul asked. “And why isn’t Tono with you?”

Mick laughed. “Why are you so full of questions?”

Paul stared at his former love and basked in the glow of his smile. He really was an incredibly beautiful human being. “I’m just being nosy. If I had a sexy boyfriend like you, I wouldn’t let him out of my sight.”

“Ahh, but you did,” Mick reminded him.

“Ancient history, Mick. That was then, but now it’s different.”

“Changing subject,” Mick said. “My laptop met its demise last night when I had a slight meltdown.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” Mick answered. His expression changed almost instantly as a dark thought crossed his mind. “It’s personal, between me and Tono.”

“Is he giving you a hard time for any reason?” Paul asked, reaching out and holding Mick’s hand. “Tell me and I’ll go and kick his ass.”

“Yeah, right,” Mick teased. “He’s a good fifty pounds heavier than you.”

“I didn’t mean literally,” Paul sneered. “There are other ways I can take him down.”

“Oh no, you don’t. No emotional blackmail, remember?”

“Now I’m changing the subject,” Paul said, pulling his hand away and reaching for the menu. “What kind of laptop did you buy?” he asked as he reviewed his choices. He wasn’t that hungry, but he did have to eat something.

“An Apple.”

“That’s nice,” Paul said automatically, his mind clearly on his lunch. “I think I’ll have an open-face turkey on whole wheat, with a house salad on the side.” Paul handed the menu to the waiter who hovered nearby. “And my friend here will have a cheeseburger and fries.”

“What kind of dressing would you like?” the waiter asked patiently.

“Ranch.”

He took the menu from Paul’s hand and left them alone. “Now, then,” Paul said, turning his attention back to Mick. “What was the fight really about?”

“What does it matter, Paul?”

“I’m concerned about you,” Paul said gently. “I want to make sure that you’re okay.”

“I’m fine, sweetheart.”

“Mick, don’t bullshit me!” Paul snapped. “I can tell you’re upset. This whole impromptu visit had to have a reason. Is there anything I can do to make this better for you?”

Mick’s eyes filled suddenly. “I guess I’m being unrealistic, wanting it all.”

“What all? What do you want?”

He shook his head and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “Never mind. I’m sorry for being such a queen.”

“Babe... tell me, please.”

“I want both of you, Paul. I want us to be together,” Mick whispered, afraid someone else would hear him.

“Together? Do you mean what I think you mean?”

“Yes. I want all three of us in a relationship. I love you both and need you in different ways. I know you’d be okay with this, once you wrapped your head around the idea. I’m not oblivious to the attraction between you and Tono. “

Whoa. Paul sat and stared at Mick. “Attraction?”

“Don’t deny it, Paul. I can smell the need between you, and I’m more than willing to share; I want you and Tono to have sex again. He’s an amazing lover, and I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to satisfy him.”

“Wait a damn minute,” Paul said, throwing down his napkin. “You want me to service your lover to keep him around?”

Mick’s mouth quivered and his eyes filled again, making them look like jewels in a pool of water. “It’s not like that. I want you both to be happy and fulfilled, so I can stop worrying. Paul, you’re my past, but Tono could be your future, just as I am the present reality you both have to deal with.”

“Babe.” Paul calmed down upon seeing Mick’s reaction. “It’s not me you have to worry about. I’ll be fine.”

“Paul,” Mick’s voice trembled as he asked, “do you have any idea how awful this is going to get? You’ll need each other to stay sane.”

“I couldn’t possibly replace you,” Paul said honestly. “Tono couldn’t make up for my loss.”

“Maybe not, but you could comfort each other when my situation becomes unbearable. You’ll both want someone to talk to, a shoulder to cry on, and a listening ear who will sympathize without judging. You’re going to want to vent, Paul, to take out your anger or frustration at what’s happening. Let’s stop pretending this will not get ugly, because it will!”

“This is not really for me to decide, is it? I’m the third wheel, the expendable one. Tono is your partner.”

Mick looked down at his lap. He seemed afraid to look Paul in the eye, for some reason, so Paul waited in silence. Finally, Mick looked up and said, “Do you believe me when I say that I love you both?”

“Is it really possible to love two people at once?” Paul asked seriously. “I’ve never done this before, so I don’t know.”

“Does a parent love one child less than the other? The heart has an infinite capacity for love, Paul. Who made up the rule that said you can only love one person at a time?”

“I get the whole child bit, although not really, since I’m an only, as are you! I have no concept of the word ‘sharing’. Aren’t you being a little unrealistic, expecting Tono and me to share you in ways that most people would find unnatural?”

“What could be more natural than loving someone?”

“Babe, you’re asking for the moon.”

“I know,” Mick admitted, “but you’ve always promised me that.”

Paul blinked. He had promised Mick the moon, and the stars, on many occasions, and he’d failed to deliver. Apparently, he was being given another chance at it. “You know I love you, don’t you? That I’ve never stopped?”

“Are you ever going to tell me what really happened?” Mick asked. “Why you turned on me?”

“Some day.”

“Tick-tock, sweetheart.”

“Shut up, Mick. You have lots of time yet.”

“I love your confidence in my staying power. It’s one reason I want you around.”

“I’m a fighter, babe. ALS isn’t going to get me down, and I won’t let it suck you into a black hole. I will do anything in my power to keep you here.”

“My hero.” Mick reached for Paul’s hand and held it. “You have any idea how much I love you?”

“I do now,” Paul answered, ignoring the sting of his own tears. It wouldn’t do for the great Paul Alcott to turn into a blubbing mess in public, although he was close.

“Help me?” Mick asked again. “With Tono?”

Paul shook his head sadly. “I have no idea how to do that. If you want me to talk to him, I will, but seriously, Mick, you need to convince him, not me.”

“I’m working on it,” Mick said. He sighed as his meal was placed in front of him, and picked up a french fry. “Let’s eat, okay?”

Chapter 26

LUNCH was enjoyable once they got started. Both men were eager to carry on normally after the earlier discussion, which really was a bit off the wall. Mick appreciated Paul’s honesty and his listening ear, but agreed that he shouldn’t interfere with Tono’s decision. His lover would have to walk into this willingly, or it would never work.

Paul took charge after their meal. With the help of security, they transferred Mick to the Bentley and stored his wheelchair in the trunk. It felt like old times, riding up front with Paul, who insisted on driving. He assured everyone that he would be able to handle the heavy lifting once they got back to the Terraces.

A brisk wind had kicked up and paper debris was flying on the streets. Mick smiled at the comical sight of inverted umbrellas and women hanging onto skirts as he glanced out the window on their way uptown. Fall was making its appearance in a big way, and he wondered how many more seasons he would be able to enjoy.

He tried not to think about the distant future very often. It sent him into a tailspin, and he'd end up depressed and weepy, a condition so alien to his personality it frightened him and Tono whenever it made its appearance.

Mick was a happy and optimistic person. His parents had been a deeply committed couple who were very much in love and enjoyed each other's company. As a result, Mick was never subjected to the darker side of relationships or life in general. Even the day he announced his sexual orientation was relatively peaceful, despite his parents' shock and disappointment. They had counted on grandchildren and had to stifle their dreams in that regard. Since Mick was an only child, they turned their disappointment into something positive and began volunteering at the local children's hospital. This satisfied their need to have little ones in their life, and they became well known as the couple who could be called on at all hours to help out. It was during a late night ride to the hospital when they were killed after being hit by a drunk driver. Mick's only consolation after being informed of their death was knowing they'd died together, doing something they loved and enjoyed.

This abundance of love was probably the reason Mick had no qualms about sharing himself and his heart with more than one person. He knew it was uncommon—most people were not hard-wired this way. He'd felt no jealousy the first time he and Paul had picked up someone to join them for a night of sex. Paul had been a little shocked, but a few glasses of Chivas had helped to convince him that it was hot to watch Mick fucking a stranger. Paul got right on board after that, and each time they had an encounter with a third party, it was always exciting and never filled with regret or recrimination. Both men understood it was a kink and had nothing to do with their emotional tie.

Tono, on the other hand, had been raised in a region of the world that was still judgmental and staunchly Catholic. The concept of a three-way had scandalized him when it was first broached, but Mick had been able to coax Tono with a little help from his friend Jose Cuervo. By the time the fourth shot glass was downed and the limes chewed and sucked, he'd passed the point of

worrying what anyone said. When the casual hookup had not turned into a world-class debacle as he'd feared, he was a little more accepting. His privacy and anonymity had been spared, and he admitted that it was highly erotic—beyond anything he'd done before.

Getting him to accept Paul in their lives was another matter altogether. Tono was fiercely protective of Mick and their union. He resented Mick and Paul's history that he couldn't compete with; expecting him to open his arms and his mind to the idea of sharing was as realistic as the notion he would walk again.

The sound of the rolling garage door pulled Mick out of his thoughts and back into the present. They were home.

TONO frowned as soon as he saw Paul pushing Mick's wheelchair.

"Where's Samuel?"

"I let him go around lunchtime. He had other things he needed to do." Mick smiled at Tono and raised his arms in an inviting gesture. Tono bent down and kissed him on the lips.

"Did you get the new laptop?"

Mick nodded. "It's pretty fancy; I think I'm going to enjoy it."

"Just don't be throwing it against hard surfaces, and you will."

Mick stuck out his tongue playfully, a little embarrassed by the reminder of last night's meltdown. Tono smiled, which was a relief. He appeared to be in a better frame of mind since he'd last seen him. He hoped Tono would confide in him later and discuss whatever it was that had put him in the foul mood. In the meantime, he was going to enjoy a mellower partner.

"You want a beer, Pol?"

Paul nodded, raising his eyebrows in surprise. Mick was taken aback as well. The last thing he'd expected was an invitation after seeing Tono scowling when they walked in. He'd been certain that Tono would ask Paul to leave. Instead, he was actually being gracious.

"Let's watch some TV," Mick suggested. Tono enjoyed watching soccer, and thanks to their kickass cable provider, they were able to watch sports from all over the world. He was pretty sure there'd be a soccer game somewhere in the western hemisphere.

"Go ahead," Tono invited, "I'll get some snacks."

"Sounds good," Mick said. He pushed on his wheels, gliding forward effortlessly. The hardwood floors were perfect for his needs, and he objected when Paul took the handles, trying to help. "Don't, sweetheart. Let me do this on my own."

"Okay." Paul followed him instead and threw himself on the sofa as soon as they got to the living room. "I had too much lunch," he announced. "I'm actually sleepy."

"Close your eyes and take a power nap," Mick said. "I'll wake you up in thirty minutes."

BY THE time Tono came back with a bowl of chips and salsa, Paul was fast asleep on the sofa. He looked harmless in repose, a napping god whose facial features were chiseled to perfection. His nose was straight and proportioned to his face, and his lips curled up at the edges, pink and plump, a little too tempting in Tono's opinion. His blond hair fell in soft waves over his forehead, and because his eyes were closed and unable to peer at Tono with disdain, he looked innocent and inviting.

"He's pretty, huh?" Mick smiled, noticing the way Tono was looking at Paul.

Tono shrugged. "Is he sick?"

"No, just full. We had a big lunch."

“Oh? Where’d you eat?”

“Samuel and I stopped by Alcott Press, and Paul took me to lunch.”

“What about Samuel?”

“No, he had to leave before we started eating.”

“I see,” Tono grunted, unhappy again.

“Majo, don’t.”

“Don’t what? I’m not doing anything.”

“You’re being territorial.”

“Coño, Mick!”

“Come here,” Mick said, turning his chair toward Tono. “Get me out of this contraption and take me to bed. I’ve missed you.”

“Cariño, it’s only been one day.”

“One day too long.”

Tono stepped forward and lifted Mick easily out of the chair. He walked with him to their bedroom and laid him down on top of the bedspread. He began to cover Mick’s face with soft

kisses. Tono's hand glanced over the features he loved, touching Mick reverently, the way he used to touch the images of angels in church when he was a young man. He smoothed the dark curls off Mick's forehead and kissed the tanned skin which remained unlined, mocking the very idea of death and disease. Mick had never been more beautiful, and Tono's heart grew heavy, knowing that all the love he had to give wouldn't stave off the progression of his insidious disease. He pressed his mouth to succulent lips that opened for him, moving over each curve with methodical precision, an attempt to memorize and retain this moment to be recalled some day. His hands roamed over Mick's body, and he lifted his T-shirt, uncovering the taught stomach that rippled under his touch. He tugged at Mick's zipper, loving the eager gasp that escaped from Mick's mouth as he begged for more. Tono's excitement grew as Mick's body blossomed; his swollen cock peeked out from the opening in his boxers, the rosy tip moist with fluid seeping out from his slit.

"Majo, please." Mick's voice grew deeper with need as he lifted his hips in supplication, pushing up as far as he could manage and then keening softly when Tono finally engulfed his cock.

Tono's breath felt hot in his throat as the tears threatened to overflow. His love for this man was all-consuming and almost painful; it was impossible to contemplate that it would be cut short.

Mick urged him to go faster and deeper while his aggressive hands raked through Tono's hair, tugging and twining the soft curls. Tono released Mick's cock, despite the protesting cry, and he removed their shirts and pants. Finally, when the floor was littered with clothing, Tono repositioned himself so he lay on top of Mick, bracing his body with his elbows so as not to put too much weight on him. They began to trade deep kisses again while they rubbed against each other. Tono was on fire, stoking Mick like an ember, ready to ignite them both.

They heard a cough, and both looked toward the door. Paul was watching them with such a longing gaze that Tono couldn't look away. Paul's effect on him was primal; the need to possess, and be possessed, coursed through him as surely as the blood pumping through his veins. Every part of his body thirsted for Paul's touch, making him realize, once again, that he was willing to put his doubts aside. Mick tensed, no doubt waiting for Tono's vehement objection, but he sighed with relief when Tono reached out to the blond whose sleepy blue eyes widened in surprise.

"Come," Tono said, voicing his consent. He buried his face against Mick's neck, waiting to feel Paul getting on the bed. He didn't need to watch him strip; he already knew that Paul's cock, the perfect instrument of pleasure, would be straining against his stomach. Paul's chest was molded in the right places, his abs surprisingly tight for a pencil-pusher, his legs rock hard and shapely. Tono could see this without opening his eyes, and his breathing stuttered when he felt Paul's

hand caressing his ass. Tono began the slow slide down Mick's torso, ending up at his groin and savoring the musky scent as he buried his face in the crispy, black curls.

Tono slipped Mick into his mouth and began to suck on the engorged head, moaning with pleasure. He paused when he felt Paul parting his ass cheeks, and Tono growled when Paul's rigid tongue burrowed into his secret place. "Hijo de—" He pushed against Paul and spread his legs wider.

"Love me, majo," Mick's voice broke through, reminding him to finish what he was doing before Paul joined them.

Tono was losing his rhythm due to Paul's steady assault on the tender skin between his asshole and his balls. He felt Paul suckling and biting gently while Mick began to thrust in and out of his mouth. Tono gave it up to both men, allowing Mick to control his own motions while Paul continued to twirl his tongue around Tono's puckered flesh. He breached the tight muscles with his probing tongue, a delicious invasion causing Tono to cry out, signaling his compliance. Paul became more aggressive, sucking at each of Tono's balls, rolling them around his mouth while tugging at himself, trying to satisfy his own needs.

"Pol," Tono growled, "fuck me."

"Do it, sweetheart," Mick encouraged, goading Paul to pull away from the pair.

Paul fumbled his way around the nightstand, feeling for the lube and praying he'd find a condom as well. He found the lube but no condom. He howled in frustration and quickly grabbed his pants, groping for the condoms he always carried in his pocket. He rolled one on with trembling hands, smashing the tube of lubricant in the center without thinking. A blob of the shiny stuff squirted out, and he rubbed Tono's ass and his now sheathed cock with the excess, positioning himself at Tono's quivering hole.

He inched his way in carefully, assuming, and rightfully so, that Tono hardly ever bottomed, but Tono helped him by pushing against Paul, plucking at his hips with fevered hands as Paul was sucked into the tight channel. He was as deep as he could get, hitting the tiny walnut-sized gland on the first try, and he felt Tono buck underneath him. Paul clutched Tono's hips with both hands and hung on, desperate to get them both off. Tono's head bobbed up and down as he continued to service Mick, who was writhing and moaning underneath him.

Paul let go of one hip and snaked his hand around Tono's body to wrap his long fingers around Tono's cock, which swung heavily between his legs. He cried out when he felt Paul's hand, and he started to come in a steady stream, causing his muscles to clamp around Paul's cock, sending him over the edge as well. Paul filled the condom with jets of hot semen while Mick continued to sound out his pleasure. He shuddered through his orgasm as Tono swallowed around him.

Chapter 27

THEY were boneless in each other's arms, a tangle of limbs entwined one over the other. Tono's cheek rested high on Mick's thigh, nestled close to his groin. He could feel Mick's pulse beating steadily through the warm skin. Paul was draped over him like a warm blanket, sighing with contentment. Tono felt Paul stroking him gently. His touch was soothing and almost made it easy to lose the guilt that was starting to surface.

"You're beautiful," Paul whispered.

Tono turned his head and allowed Paul to kiss him full on his mouth. He was still floaty from his orgasm, so the reality that Mick was watching him kiss his former lover didn't bother him. The pleasure of being sandwiched between two gorgeous men superseded whatever qualms he'd had when they'd started this session.

"You're both beautiful," Mick exclaimed, reaching up to caress Paul's back as Paul and Tono continued to exchange kisses that were becoming more and more intense. Tono tore his mouth away from Paul's and latched onto Mick's with a deep moan serving to goad his lover into opening up for him. "Majo—"

"Te quiero, cariño," Tono murmured.

"I know," Mick exhaled.

Paul slid off Tono's back and scooted up the bed, pressing his head against Mick's neck. When Tono pulled back to catch a breath, Paul took his turn with Mick, kissing him deeply while Tono's strong hands kneaded his buttocks. Tono took handfuls of it, squeezing the taut skin,

leaving red finger marks as the tenderness morphed into blazing passion once again. Mick's kisses turned aggressive, and Paul found himself on the receiving end of a man intent on experiencing everything tonight. Mick's desire was demanding, and when he turned to Paul and said "fuck me" in that compelling voice he'd used years ago, Paul was transported back to a time when Mick was healthy and the only thing they had to worry about was keeping the condom supply replenished. Tonight he was the aggressor, covering every bit of him with torrid kisses. His hands roamed over Paul's body, ending up at his groin, where he cupped his balls and toyed with them confidently. He pulled back for a second to suck on his middle finger before he invaded Paul, who spread his legs for him without question. Mick was pleased that Paul's cock was revived, and he sought the tiny gland that would make this moment that much sweeter.

Tono felt his own passion rising again, and he moved toward the sexy twosome wanting desperately to be a part of the coupling, to intertwine and lose himself in their embrace. Every bit of resistance was gone, and all he could think of was joining in the sexual puzzle. Paul shifted his attention to him long enough to whisper in his ear. "Let me fuck Mick while you fuck me." Tono's response was instant and positive, free of restraints; the mere thought of Paul's suggestion was wildly appealing.

"Condom?" Tono hissed, fumbling for the lube.

Paul kissed him quickly and handed Tono a condom with the lube, but not before he slathered a healthy dollop on his own sheathed cock. He wiped the residue on Mick and then placed each of Mick's long legs on his shoulders, giving him easier access.

"Sweetheart," Mick sighed, pulling Paul's head down briefly so he could kiss him. "Fuck me hard, Pauly."

"Jesus, Mick," Paul faltered, and his heart thumped hard against his chest as he felt Tono grabbing his hips and positioning himself. Tono demanded entrance, and he cried out when he breached him forcefully, just as Paul stabbed into Mick, who keened loudly.

All three paused, adjusting to this new position, but soon they began to move again, working up to a steady push and pull, completely in tune with one another. Their cries and whispers escalated, in direct response to the thrusting, as they soon found their tempo. The room erupted with sounds of pleasure, and the odor of three men in full arousal permeated the tight quarters.

“Harder, sweetheart,” Mick goaded. “Don’t hold back.”

Paul slammed into Mick, balls deep and rough, acceding to his every wish. His pleasure was magnified by the dual assault, creating rippling waves of pleasure, as he possessed Mick forcefully while Tono’s rock-hard shaft claimed him. He moaned when Tono hit his gland the first time, but he cried out and began to buck when he did it again. Mick’s hands were clutching at Paul’s upper arms just as he attained his goal, and he came in a gush of hot come that sprayed Paul’s chest and neck, pushing Paul to orgasm as well.

Tono let out a strangled growl as every inch of his distended cock was crushed by Paul’s muscles squeezing around him like a sweet vice. Tono bit Paul’s shoulder, an automatic reaction to stifle the roar that would have broken sound barriers if unleashed.

“Coño, Pol,” Tono huffed, thrusting violently until every drop of hot liquid filled the head of the condom.

Mick wrapped his arms around Paul and squeezed.

“Cariño.” Tono was blissfully satisfied, and he reached down over Paul’s shoulder to fondle Mick’s cheek.

Mick tried to meet him halfway but was unable to touch him because of the way they were positioned, one on top of the other. Tono moved to accommodate everyone, and soon they were lying on their sides, spooned up against each other with Mick in the middle.

“God, that was fucking hot,” Paul sighed, trying to keep his eyes open.

Tono nodded, agreeing silently.

“Love you both so much.” Mick exhaled and fell asleep instantly.

IT WAS early evening when Mick awoke to find himself alone in the big bed. His mind went back to the scene they'd had earlier, and he was overcome with emotion. He began to cry softly, suffused with joy but a little confused by his tears. He admitted that lately they seemed to come for no reason. Maybe this was his body's new way of dealing with joy, since jumping up and down was no longer an option. He was peacefully content with what had transpired, and he fervently hoped that Tono would be okay with it as well.

The door opened and Paul walked in. He smiled when he saw that Mick was awake, and he sat on the edge of the bed, bending down to kiss him.

"Hey," he said gently, "what's with the tears?"

"Sweetheart... I'm happy, that's all. It was incredible."

"It was beautiful in every way," Paul agreed, pushing a lock of dark hair away from Mick's forehead. He kissed him again, licking away every salty tear, profoundly touched by his renewed love for Mick. He pondered their situation. So many years wasted—the realization hit him like a blow to the gut. If he had known Mick would end up this way, would he have behaved differently? Would it have altered the eventual outcome? Mick interrupted his deep thoughts with his question.

"Where's Tono?"

"He went down to the gym. I guess he needed to do a little treadmill to clear his head."

"Did he seem okay to you?"

"He didn't say much. Kind of grunted at me—you know how he gets."

Mick frowned. "I'm worried that he's feeling guilty about this."

"You're not allowed to worry about anything except putting one word in front of another."

“Always on the job.” Mick grinned.

“Hey, we’re on a tight schedule, and I want your book sitting on the shelves for Christmas.”

“It’ll get done, sweetheart. I promise,” Mick replied sincerely, easing Paul’s concerns.

“You want me to go find your partner?”

“You mean our partner?”

“I’m not sure we’re at that point, but thank you for including me.”

Mick held Paul’s hand and soaked up the sight of the blond who looked at him so lovingly. “You will always be included if I have anything to say about it.”

Paul kissed him, with a little more heat this time. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, hmm?”

“Paul, aren’t you okay with this?”

“Mick, I want you to be happy, and if two of us in your bed will do it, then yes, I’m okay with this. But, it’s not me who’s the problem, is it?”

“I think that he’s a step closer to accepting this after tonight.”

“Let’s hope you’re right. I’ll go and get him; we can have a nice dinner to celebrate. Sound good?”

“Okay. Hand me my laptop on your way out, will you?”

“Good boy.”

“Love you, Paul.”

“Love you, too, babe.”

TONO’S sweat poured off him in big drops as he pounded the speed bag. He was hoping the exercise would calm him and make the conflicting thoughts stop pinging back and forth in his head like a pinball machine. One minute he was basking in the joy of a union that felt right in every way, the next he was rebelling and horrified with what had just happened.

He’d left the apartment in a rush, unwilling to face Paul after the magic of their lovemaking began to dissipate. He couldn’t look at Mick either; he would see right through him. How could he tell his partner that he suddenly had feelings for a man he’d bad-mouthed for months? Would Mick think he’d been lying all along, protesting his radical ideas of being in a relationship with two men, when in actuality he was falling for Paul in every way? Such an admission was impossible to contemplate.

And then there was Paul. He would laugh at him and consider him an even bigger idiot for having feelings. After all, he’d been told repeatedly that what they were sharing was just sex, and he needed to see the difference. But was it? Weren’t there a few moments tonight when they were actually making love? That’s what it felt like—lovemaking, not mutual masturbation.

Tono acknowledged that he’d lost control of the situation. Everything he’d believed about right and wrong had shifted drastically in the last few weeks, and this ambivalence not only confused him, it frightened him. All that he thought true about love and relationships was being tested, and to his way of thinking, rocking his moral fiber. Giving in to this desire was admitting defeat. He wasn’t that evolved, and setting up house with two other men would turn heads. If he himself couldn’t understand it, how would anyone else? His family would implode at the mere suggestion of something so deviant. How the hell were they going to explain their situation to Samuel, for instance, or even Baxter? Wouldn’t they look at them with something akin to horror? He remembered his self-righteous tirade when Samuel had suggested such a thing, and now he wished he’d never said anything. Was his anger directed at Samuel or at himself? Maybe he’d known that they were heading in this direction, and hearing it aloud had shocked him.

And as he was beating himself up mentally, the object of his desire walked into the gym and zeroed in on him, causing his heart to flop around like a fish on one of his uncle's boats. ¡Coño! How could his body betray him so easily? Paul had the ability to turn him into a needy bottom without even trying. He felt inadequate and stupid whenever he was around, and Tono wondered if it was love making him act like a hormonal teenager.

"Hey." Paul nodded. "He's looking for you."

"I'll be right up."

"Tono...."

"Don't say anything, Pol."

"I just wanted to tell you that I appreciate—"

"Shut up," Tono barked. "I don't want your appreciation. What happened was for Mick. It had nothing to do with you. Remember what I told you months ago? You. Don't. Count!"

"You bastard!" Paul's calm façade switched to combative and hostile immediately. He spun away from Tono and left the room without another word.

Tono felt the sharp sting of tears, and he blinked them away rapidly, disgusted at himself. Despite his anger and self-loathing, he was on the verge of running after Paul to beg forgiveness for being such an ass. What they'd shared a few hours ago had been earth-shattering, for Tono, at least, and to push Paul away so coldly and tell him he didn't count was cruel, but he refused to indulge in another moment of weakness. He was determined to overcome his feelings, despite whatever it was that he felt, because he knew it would never work. They were like oil and water, and the fusion would never happen. He bit his lower lip so hard he drew blood, a righteous pain that served as a reminder of what he needed to do.

He would talk to Mick and tell him that he could use some time on his own to sort his thoughts. He was comfortable leaving Mick for a few weeks in Paul and Samuel's capable hands. He needed to distance himself, go back to Spain, and try to find the man he'd left behind. The man who knew what was right and wrong, what was acceptable, and what was bizarre. This new person he was turning into wasn't anywhere close to that individual.

Chapter 28

PAUL heard Mick before he actually saw him wheeling himself into the bedroom with Baxter trailing behind holding two mugs of coffee. The thudding on the front door had shocked him out of a sound sleep, and he sat up blinking at the sight of his distraught friend.

"What time is it?" he managed to croak out.

"Five-fifteen, sir," Baxter replied, as he handed each man their individual mug before leaving them alone.

"What's going on?"

"Paul, you need to get up," Mick stressed in a loud voice. Not only was he dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, but somehow he'd managed to get himself into his chair and up to Paul's apartment of his own volition. His hair was springing out in wild curls around his face, and his normally beautiful eyes were bloodshot, looking a little crazed, truth be told.

"Why?" Paul reached for the coffee and took a few sips to get his brain functioning. He usually got by with about six hours of sleep, but this morning he was feeling an acute shortage since sleep had eluded him after Tono's hateful words at the gym. He'd come back to his apartment rather than confront Mick and tell him his lover was an asshole. He ended up indulging in too many glasses of Scotch while staring into the comforting fire that Baxter had started for him in his study. He was surprised at his reaction to Tono's antagonistic attitude; he truly felt they'd crossed over to another level in this complex relationship, but apparently not. He'd misread the entire incident. After taking several more sips of the coffee, he felt he could face whatever news Mick had to impart.

"Where's Tono?" Paul asked, when it finally dawned on him that Mick was by himself.

“Read this.” Mick shoved a piece of paper at Paul.

Paul sighed and reached for the note.

“Please, sweetheart—hurry.”

Paul frowned, annoyed at Tono for disrupting his morning. He took another sip of the coffee and began to read.

Cariño, the note began, I’m going back to San Sebastian for a few weeks. I booked an early flight while you were asleep, and I’m taking the coward’s way out by leaving you a note instead of waking you up and telling you to your face. Please don’t be angry at me. This has nothing to do with my love for you, or maybe it has everything to do with it. I can’t seem to find any answers, especially when I’m around Paul. What you expect and what I can do are two different things, and I don’t know how to make this work. I’ll be back, amor, count on it. I just need some time on my own. Te quiero, Tono

Paul put down the paper and stared at his best friend. Wasn’t that a bitch! What the hell was he going to do with the fucking Spaniard who refused to share? “Maybe we should just let him go,” Paul said out loud. “He’s obviously struggling with our situation and needs the distance.”

“No,” Mick said emphatically. “If he goes, I’m afraid he’ll never come back.”

“Why do you say that? He says it clearly in this note.”

“Paul,” Mick stressed, “I know he’s starting to feel something for you, and it’s scaring him.”

“Mick, what’s freaking him out is the entire concept of sharing you,” Paul said bitterly. “He’s not buying into your plan.”

“I don’t think that’s it. Go after him, sweetheart. Tell him you want this as much as I do; you do, don’t you?” Mick asked, trying to get Paul to acknowledge his feelings. “Can you honestly say you don’t feel a thing for him, after everything we’ve shared?”

Paul’s first thought was a resounding no! Instead, he admitted, “I’m conflicted, Mick, but I will not chase after the bastard and beg.”

“Paul, you keep saying you owe me. If you really believe that, make this work, sweetheart. You are the key.”

“Why am I the key?”

“Because I know he’s come to mean more to you than you’re willing to admit. And I believe he feels the same way but doesn’t know how to deal with it. You care about him, Paul, and that’s how it should be; it’s what I want! Bring him back home, sweetheart, for both of us.” This last plea pushed Mick over the edge, and the tears began to flow, goading Paul into action.

“Call down to the doorman and find out if Tono took a taxi or a limo. Try and get as much info as you can, Mick. I need to get dressed,” Paul said as he headed toward the bathroom. He was in and out in less than ten minutes, a record for him. Mick was at his desk writing something down.

“What did you find out?” Paul asked, yanking open drawers and pulling on his boxers, blue jeans, and a gray sweater.

“He called for a limo. They took him to JFK, the Iberia terminal.”

“Good work, babe. I’ll have Baxter get a car and driver for me ASAP.”

“It’s done, Paul. He’s already waiting at the curb.”

“You’re the best,” Paul said, hugging Mick quickly.

The ride to JFK at five-fifty-five in the morning went as smoothly as possible. Paul had another twelve ounces of coffee and was literally vibrating in place by the time the limo pulled up to the terminal. He was out the door and running before the car stopped completely. He glanced up at the boards to see the flights and gate numbers and found that two planes were leaving for Madrid within an hour of each other. One was boarding right now, and Paul sprinted toward security, pulling out his ID and praying they wouldn't give him a hard time. Only passengers were allowed through at this point, and the fierce and unbending men were adamant. Paul cursed a blue streak but gave in and ran back to the United counter to buy a ticket to Miami just to get past the barriers.

He continued running and didn't stop until he got to Gate 6, where he watched the line of passengers boarding the flight which was taking off in approximately twenty minutes. He didn't see Tono anywhere, and of course they wouldn't tell him if he was on the list of passengers departing on this flight. He wanted to scream and pull a major tantrum, but he bit his tongue and curtailed his rage, deciding to go to Plan B—lie.

He convinced the officials at the gate that Tono had to be informed that his partner had a medical crisis and was being taken to the hospital at this very moment. Paul tapped his feet and waited impatiently when they looked through the roster and calmly informed him that Antonio Garat was not on the flight. He rolled his eyes and sprinted off to Gate 12, and that's when he saw him. He was sitting cross-legged, holding a Styrofoam cup in one hand and looking out the window at the departing flights. He was dressed in black pants, Paul noted, and a white button-down shirt with his leather jacket flung on his laptop beside him.

"Tono," Paul called out softly, not wanting to startle him.

Tono turned quickly, shocked to see Paul. "Why are you here?" He frowned as he stood and moved forward.

"To try and talk some sense into you. You can't leave. It'll kill him."

"I can't stay, Pol."

"We need to discuss this, but not here," Paul stressed. "Please, reconsider."

“My flight leaves in forty minutes. I’m not missing it.”

“Look.” Paul held Tono’s arm. “I will gladly pay for another ticket or send you back to Spain on our company jet, but we have to discuss this first.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Tono said, worrying his lower lip. “I’ve got to get away from all of this, from you!”

“That’s crap and you know it! He’s in love with you, Tono, as you are with him. I can’t believe you would walk away, especially now, when he needs you the most.”

Tono huffed out a frustrated laugh. “Why? You did it once before—walked away when he needed you. Why can’t I?”

Paul’s mouth practically dropped to the floor in shock. “Jesus Christ! That was years ago and far removed from this scenario; you have no right to bring it up.”

“You have no right to stop me from leaving, Pol.”

“It’s Pawwl,” he corrected, despite the tension.

“¡Coño!”

“Come on,” Paul cajoled, “be reasonable.”

“I am always reasonable,” Tono bristled. “You are the one who wants everything your way. Well, not with me, Mr. Pawwwl Alcott,” Tono said, mimicking Paul’s accent. “I call the shots in my life.”

“I know you do,” Paul said. He looked into the warm brown eyes, recognizing fear and anger, and something else he couldn’t quite put his finger on. “I swear I will not try and run your life.”

“You’ve been running it since we arrived,” Tono spat out. “I don’t feel like I know my place anymore. I was everything to Mick, and now I’m just part of a team. I don’t do teams, Pol. That’s why I play Jai alai.”

“Don’t turn this into a sports analogy, ’cause I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yes. All you know is how to edit and insult people.” Tono turned and went to pick up his jacket and laptop. He attempted to leave when Paul grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back.

“Don’t walk away from me, you bastard. Do you have any idea what it’s costing me to beg? Paul Alcott does not beg!”

“Pol Alcott can go fuck himself!”

Paul shoved Tono and literally pushed him toward the men’s room. They stumbled their way into the surprisingly empty space, and Paul put his hands on Tono’s chest, propelling him toward a stall. He opened it and locked it behind him.

“Now,” Paul said, with his face inches away from Tono’s. “What’s this really about?”

Tono growled at Paul, and they stared at each other like two longhorns meeting in a bullring for the first time. If they could snort and stamp their hooves, now would have been a good time to do it. Instead, they huffed and puffed, sending off signals that soon switched from anger to desire, a common occurrence whenever they were within close proximity. “Why don’t we be honest, Tono, and admit what’s happening here,” Paul said as he lowered his voice and stepped closer. He could smell the desire releasing from every Spanish pore. “You want me as much as I want you, and you can’t deal with it.”

“You are the bastard,” Tono whispered, seconds before he kissed Paul. They lit up the tiny space with their heat, and soon it was another contest of wills as they rubbed and smashed into each other, bruising their lips with scorching kisses.

“I love you, you fucking stupid son of a bitch,” Paul said, clinging to Tono’s neck.

Tono picked him up easily and held him in an iron vice as Paul wrapped his legs around Tono’s waist, never breaking the lip-lock. “Say the words, Tono,” Paul hissed, “tell me you want me.”

“Pol,” Tono moaned as he struggled with his decision, “I do.”

“What,” Paul pushed, holding Tono’s face between his two hands, pinning him down with steely blue eyes that needed an honest answer. “What do you want, big guy?”

“You,” Tono hissed. “I want you.”

Tono clutched at Paul’s ass and jerked him forward, grinding his cock against Paul’s matching boner, and they began to hump wildly, practically coming in their pants. “Tono, we’ve got to get out of here or we’ll be arrested. It would be a fucking scandal of the first order.”

“Where can we go?”

“There’s a hotel close by. Let’s get a room.”

“I’ll miss my flight,” Tono said desperately.

“Who gives a fuck!”

“I don’t,” Tono said, putting Paul down. He cupped his face and kissed him gently. Hearing Paul tell him that he loved him changed everything. “I don’t want to leave yet; I just want to tear off your clothes.”

“I hear you.”

“Come on,” Tono said, turning and opening the door. They made their way out of the restroom and walked down the corridors, past security, and headed for the hotel. Tono forgot about his flight and the urgent need to escape, only thinking about it when he was asked for his ID and flight number at the hotel check-in. “Shit! I have to go back.”

“Why?” Paul’s voice rose in alarm.

“Never mind,” Tono said, changing his mind when he saw the panicked look on Paul’s face. He clearly wanted him to stay, and this convinced him that he was making the right decision. Paul reached for Tono’s hand after they registered and headed toward the elevators.

The door had no sooner shut when Paul was enveloped in a warm embrace. “Tono,” Paul breathed softly, listening to the man’s heart thundering against his chest. He was trembling and seemed almost frightened, a far cry from the antagonistic and fierce rival he’d been dealing with for months. “It’s okay,” he reassured him, running his arms up and down Tono’s back, soothing him as if he were a wild stallion about to bolt.

“Pol.” The word came out anguished. “Is this right?”

“Yes,” Paul soothed the man he held in his arms. “This is what Mick wants. He knows what we’re feeling, and he’s more than okay with it.”

“Did you mean what you said in the men’s room?”

“That I love you?”

Tono nodded, almost holding his breath.

Paul pulled off his sweater. He looked at Tono for the longest time and watched the play of emotions on Tono's face as he waited for his answer. His eyes were no longer fierce or sparking with anger. There was something vulnerable that touched Paul deeply. "I love you, you big ox. Despite my very best intentions not to care, I find that I care for you very much."

"How can you love me when you also love Mick?"

"The same way he loves us both. I guess I'm lucky that way."

"I can't say the words," Tono stumbled. "I'm afraid that if I say—"

"What? That if you say you care about me and I actually do count, you'll turn into a pillar of salt?" Paul said softly.

"That I'm betraying Mick."

"Oh, Tono," Paul whispered. He pressed his forehead against Tono's and said, "Mick has wanted this from the beginning."

"He wants me to care for you? To say I love you?"

"You don't have to say anything, Tono. Just let us both love you."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid—"

“Don’t, my beautiful man, don’t be afraid. Wallow in this feeling, because it doesn’t happen that often.”

“Wallow?”

Paul smiled. “Enjoy it, relish the moment, like a pig rolls around in mud and loves it.”

“English is so strange.”

“So speaks the man from Atlantis,” Paul teased. “English is a bitch; I agree. Say whatever you need to say in Spanish.”

“Te quiero.”

“You love me?” Paul’s stunned look said it all.

Tono embraced him and buried his face in Paul’s neck. “Sí... te quiero, Pol Alcott.”

Chapter 29

PAUL shut his eyes and let Tono take charge after that. He was finally getting what he’d been yearning for—the Spaniard’s loving side. Everything changed in those few moments when they admitted their feelings. The antagonism was replaced with soulful kisses leaving him breathless and wanting. Tono’s guttural words, in a language that sounded like a mishmash of Gaelic and Chinese, made everything more surreal and dreamlike. Paul sighed with pleasure as they rocked against each other slowly. The frantic pace of their earlier sessions was nothing compared to this studied tenderness.

Tono pulled his mouth away from Paul’s for one second, lifted off his shirt, and began to undo Paul’s pants. “Do you have a condom?” he asked, moving a little more quickly as the urgency began to build.

“Shit!” Paul cursed.

“No importa,” Tono muttered as thoughts of penetration were put aside for now. He tore off his own clothes, and soon they were naked and hard, grinding against each other insistently. Paul tilted his hips and began rolling and twisting, trying to get closer to Tono’s cock, which was straining against his stomach. He went a little crazy when Tono reached down and wrapped his large hand around their organs, sliding it up and down in a steady rhythm, aided by the pre-come that leaked to combine their fluids in a slippery mess. He let go for one second and cupped Paul’s scrotum, kneading the hard sac that seemed ready to explode. Tono caressed the tender skin beneath and slipped a finger into the puckered opening, which quivered with his touch. He was rewarded with a low moan as Paul spread his legs.

“Oh God,” Paul’s voice encouraged Tono to press in further. “Yes, Tono, please don’t stop!”

Tono’s restraint broke when he heard Paul begging, and he kissed him forcefully, seeking out Paul’s tongue. It twined around his as they fought for dominance, never breaking away, even when Tono’s expert hand grabbed both their cocks again and began to tug. Paul started to pump into Tono’s tight fist, helping him along while panting and issuing commands to go faster and harder and tighter. Finally, it all culminated in an explosion of wet heat that flowed in a steady stream over Tono’s fingers. Paul’s come sounds were muffled by Tono’s mouth when he continued kissing him possessively.

“God,” Paul gasped, after Tono finally broke the kiss. He curled around Tono and tried to get even closer, loving the feel of the massive body blanketing him.

“Thank you,” he whispered against Tono’s neck.

Tono relaxed into Paul’s embrace.

They must have dozed for a few minutes, but they were startled awake when Paul remembered. “We have to call Mick; he’s probably frantic.”

“Call him,” Tono agreed. He reached for his cell phone, which was lying on the floor in the crumpled heap, and handed it to Paul.

Mick picked up on the second ring. “Tono?” he exclaimed.

“No, babe. It’s me.”

“You must have found him since you’re using his phone.”

“Um, yeah, found him.” Paul’s gravelly voice painted the only picture Mick needed.

“Yeah?” Mick sounded like he was smiling, obviously delighted by Paul’s response. “Where are you?”

“In bed, with a gorgeous Spaniard wrapped around me.”

“Thank God,” Mick sighed. “Tell him I love him.”

“Tell him yourself,” Paul said, handing the phone to Tono.

“Cariño,” Tono purred.

Paul watched Tono’s face relax as he listened to Mick reassure him. The tension appeared to drop off Tono’s shoulders while Mick talked. Paul had no idea what was being said, but whatever it was made Tono smile. He reached up and caressed Tono’s cheek and almost shot again when Tono held his hand, turned it over, and began to suck on his wrist. Paul groaned and shut his eyes, only opening them when he felt the phone pressed up to his ear.

“Paul?”

“Yeah, babe.”

“Tell me what he’s doing now.”

“Jesus, Mick... you’re not joining in.”

Mick chuckled. “Yes, I am. I’m already halfway there imagining the two of you.”

“You’re a depraved voyeur.”

“And proud of it.” Mick’s voice was thick with desire. “Come on, sweetheart, I want to hear you scream. Tell him to suck on your balls.”

“Christ, babe,” Paul groaned and pushed on Tono’s shoulders. “Tono, move down, yeah, oh God, right there, big guy.”

“Is he teasing your hole with his tongue? Make him fuck your slit before he takes you down his throat. Pant for me, sweetheart, I want to hear you.”

“Ah... fuck,” Paul cried out and practically levitated as Mick’s sultry voice added to the excitement. Tono’s busy mouth was doing untold damage to Paul’s nether regions, and his head all but shattered when Tono shifted his attention to his resurrected cock, which was already straining and rosy pink. “Jesus, please,” Paul begged, “suck it.”

Tono not only took it deep down his throat, he inserted his saliva-slick fingers into Paul’s tight ass at the same time, moving them around until he found the small treasure that finally brought the scream he’d been hoping for. The one that set off Mick as well, and both men came in a duet of sweet come sounds acting like a trigger for Tono, who got off, and the smell of spunk filled the small hotel room.

Mick was sitting in his living room with the phone held tightly in one hand and his cock in the other. The relief upon hearing Paul’s voice was enormous. He didn’t realize how frightened he

was by the prospect of losing Tono until he heard the warm voice calling him cariño. His next reaction was almost primal, and the idea of having sex with both his men set off the chain reaction that ended up with an impressive orgasm leaving him boneless and damp.

“Paul... sweetheart, let me talk to him.”

“Absolutely,” Paul gasped, still winding down from the incredible high. He passed the phone to Tono with a shaky hand.

“Majo?”

“¿Sí?”

“I love you.”

“¿Y el rubio?”

“También. I love you both, Tono. Can you understand it?”

“I... think so,” Tono faltered.

“You love him, don’t you?”

Tono hesitated. “Not the way I love you.”

“I do understand,” Mick said softly. “Come home to me, majo. I want you both in my arms.”

“Ahora mismo.” He disconnected and tossed the phone aside. He tugged at Paul and waited for the man to settle himself against his chest. “We have to go, Pol. Mick needs us.”

“All right.”

Tono looked down at Paul’s uplifted face and kissed him gently. “Let’s go, but first, tell me how we’re going to survive this?” Tono’s question was almost a plea for help, now that the immediacy of the situation had passed and reality was settling in again.

“We’ll have to be careful, but we’ll make it work. The most important part is that you’re comfortable with the whole idea. Are you?”

Tono nodded, “I’m getting there.”

Paul’s relief was palpable. “We mean a lot to each other, Tono, just as you and I love him with all our hearts. It’s symbiotic.”

“I can’t have the whole world finding out I’m in love with two men.”

“Are you?” Paul asked, wanting to hear the words again.

Tono caressed Paul’s face. “You know I am.”

“I do count?” Paul smiled, reminding Tono of his constant refrain.

Tono’s cheeks flamed, but he nodded.

“Say it in Spanish.”

“Te quiero.”

“It sounds so sexy.”

“I could say pass the salt in Spanish and you would find it sexy,” Tono teased, sucking on Paul’s lower lip. He bit it gently, and Paul was hard again.

“Let me make love to you,” Paul whispered, making his way down Tono’s body. “I had a vision of you with no hair,” he said, stopping at Tono’s nipples to play with each one, twirling them around with his tongue until they came to hard peaks. “Now, your furry chest is very appealing.” Paul grinned and rubbed his face against the soft hair that had bothered him so much. It was so shallow and inconsequential; Tono could have been a woolly mammoth, and he would still love every part of him. Tono’s large hands clutched his head like a vice as he opened his mouth and took the Spaniard down his throat. He felt the strong fingers squeezing while the smooth organ slid in deeper just as Tono began to thrust. “You, okay?” Tono stuttered, ever mindful of Paul’s comfort.

Paul nodded and sucked even harder, sending Tono off on his erotic journey. He put all his experience behind this blowjob, determined to give Tono as much pleasure as he’d received in the last hour, and he was rewarded when he heard the man growl, seconds before he came, shooting hot jets of spunk down Paul’s throat. Paul swallowed every bit of him and loved it.

Tono pulled him up his body and kissed him deeply, sweeping his tongue around Paul’s mouth, surely tasting himself.

“I love you, Tono.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I’ve never been this satisfied, and we haven’t even fucked.” Paul laughed. “Now I know why Mick is so nuts about you.”

“It works three ways. Didn’t you just tell me that?”

“Did I? I don’t remember.”

“Were you just talking to hear yourself, or buying time so I wouldn’t leave the room?”

Paul leaned into Tono. “I was so fucking scared you were leaving, I would have said anything to keep you here.”

“Can you stop calling me a bastard?” Tono frowned, remembering past arguments.

“Ahh, fuck. I’m sorry, handsome. I always say the wrong things, don’t I?”

“You need to edit your mouth sometimes.”

Paul laughed. “Clearly, I do.”

“Can I ask you a question before we go?”

“It depends on the question.”

“Why’d you leave him? I know you love him very much, so why, Pol?”

Paul pushed away and debated on whether or not to tell the truth. He could lie and preserve some of his dignity, and his public persona, but Tono had opened his heart with such generosity of spirit that Paul didn’t see how he could live with himself if he didn’t tell the truth. He owed Tono that much, and Mick as well.

“I’m going to tell you, but I don’t want you to say anything to Mick because I want to tell him myself.”

“Okay.”

“My father was a perfectionist, Tono. He was a difficult man who only acknowledged my presence when I excelled.”

“I’m sorry,” Tono said kindly.

Paul shrugged. “Hey, that’s the hand I was dealt. I think there was a tiny part of him that resented me for killing my mother.”

“What?”

Paul waved away his concerns. “She died in childbirth.”

“You had nothing to do with that. It was her fate.”

“A very Buddhist thing to say, but my father was a Presbyterian. We digress. The only time my father knew I was around was when I did something really good in school, or as I got older, at work.”

“Go on,” Tono said, encouraging Paul, who seemed reluctant to proceed. “Spit it out.”

“When Mick finished his novel, I presented it to my father, and after reading it, he said that Mick couldn’t have possibly written it. It was too good, and he thought I’d written the story and put Mick’s name on the manuscript.”

“¡Jodido! Didn’t he like Mick?”

“As well as he could like anyone who was my lover. He wasn’t too keen on the whole gay thing.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah, so I gave him my own manuscript. A story I’d been working on for years. I gave it to him to prove that Mick and I had completely different writing styles, hoping it would stop him from accusing Mick of plagiarism, and maybe get him interested in publishing my work. He sent my manuscript back by messenger, with a note. He didn’t even have the decency to bring it to me in person.”

“What did the note say?”

Paul’s eyes flooded suddenly. “The note said, ‘You were wise to keep this to yourself. Stick to editing.’”

“I’m sorry, Pol,” Tono said, wiping the tear that rolled down Paul’s cheek.

Paul shook his head and held Tono’s hand. “I was devastated and took it out on Mick. The envy consumed me. The truth is I hated his ability to evoke emotion, to write a story that made people laugh, and cry, and turn the page with enthusiasm; this lack of talent diminished me in my father’s mind. When Mick’s book made the bestseller list, I lost it. I’m not perfect, Tono, far from it, but I’m used to being number one, and suddenly I wasn’t. In a fit of spite, I pushed away the love of my life because I wasn’t as good as he was.”

Tono reached for Paul, who melted into him. They held each other for several minutes, and Paul felt relieved. Telling Tono was a huge step forward, cathartic in many ways, and the healing would be complete when he confessed everything in Mick’s presence.

“Pol, what you did was understandable, given the circumstances. Mick will forgive you in a minute. I know I have.”

“I hope you’re right. I would hate to lose him now after all we’ve been through. I’d hate to lose either one of you.”

“You won’t. I can guarantee it.”

“You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“Amen to that. Shall we go, handsome?”

“Yes. First, we need to figure out where my suitcase has gone.”

“It’s probably on its way to Spain by now.”

“Sí... que coño.”

Paul laughed. “We’ll get it back tomorrow. Don’t stress.”

“I won’t. Pol?”

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For coming after me and setting me straight.”

Paul’s answer was in the form of a kiss. “You’ve let me into your relationship, which is beyond special. I can’t imagine what it has cost you, but I will always be grateful for your generosity.”

“I love you, Pol, almost as much as I love Mick. I have no idea how this happened, and it still scares me; but I know that I’d rather be terrified than alone.”

“Mick and I are crazy about you, Tono. That’s all you need to dwell on right now; the rest we’ll work out.”

“Okay.” Tono’s smile lit up his face, and Paul couldn’t help but respond.

“God, you’re fucking beautiful.”

“And you, Pol Alcott, are very sexy,” Tono purred. “Kiss me first, and then we’ll go.”

Paul parted his lips without hesitation.

Chapter 30

Spain, three years later

THE private plane touched down at Donostia-San Sebastian Airport. No one paid particular attention to the two passengers who disembarked. It was the week of the San Sebastian Film Festival, after all, and celebrities from all over the world would be plying the beaches and the quaint streets of old town while attending the awards ceremony that happened every year in September. It was the Spanish version of the Cannes Film Festival, and it was just as well attended.

Paul walked briskly with Baxter trailing behind him. He was eager to get to the front of the building, knowing that Tono and Mick would be waiting to pick him up. Paul had been commuting from New York to San Sebastian all summer, but this visit would be for an entire month, since he no longer had anything pressing back at work. He was more than ready for a well-deserved vacation and some quiet time with his two partners.

“Hey, handsome.” Paul smiled as soon as he saw Tono leaning against the black Mercedes. He was wearing a white, soft-collared T-shirt with a green crocodile above the left pocket. His favorite khaki shorts and brown espadrilles completed the picture of a man enjoying the warm summer day. Paul wanted to hurl himself at his gorgeous Spaniard but showed the usual restraint necessary in public.

Tono pushed his sunglasses above his forehead and grinned. “Hola, rubio.” The look of pure joy that lit up his face left no doubt he was glad to see him. He reached for Paul’s briefcase and opened the passenger door, letting Paul in before he jogged over to his side. As soon as the doors closed and the security windows shielded them from sight, they were in each other’s arms. “God, I’ve missed you,” Paul exclaimed, circling Tono’s neck and pulling him close.

Tono’s reply was muffled by the blistering kiss. Finally, they broke away and he breathed. “I’ve missed you too.”

“Where’s Mick?”

“Preparing lunch,” Tono remarked. “He’s been talking about your return nonstop.”

“Why?”

“The press has been hounding him for interviews, and he wants you around for most of them. He’s very excited about the award.”

“He should be. It’s a big accomplishment and well-deserved.”

“For both of you,” Tono reminded him. “You did co-write the screenplay.”

“Blah! I did it for fun because I’ve never done it before. Besides, you know that a screenplay is only as good as the original novel. Mick wrote an amazing sequel. I knew it would be a hit.”

“It’s too bad your father didn’t live to see this day—watching you receive an award for writing, rather than editing.”

Paul reached for Tono’s hand, which rested loosely on the gearshift, and squeezed it. “I’m sure that if there’s any kind of justice, he’ll know I’m not such a hack.”

“Por Dios, Pol. You were never a hack. He didn’t give you a chance.”

“Let’s not talk about this anymore.” Paul kissed him quickly. “Get the door, love, Baxter’s here.”

Tono popped open the trunk as soon as he saw Baxter approaching with the luggage. Once the bags were stowed, and everyone strapped in and settled, they headed home.

“How’s Mick doing?” Paul asked.

Tono frowned. “I think he’s hiding something.”

“Like what?” Paul pounced.

“I don’t know, Pol. He’s moving a little slower, his voice is always hoarse, and he seems breathless. I don’t know if he’s just tired from partying so much, or if it’s the ALS.”

“Well, no more partying for him. He’s back to his old routine after tonight’s ceremony.”

“Sí. I told him he’s overdoing it, but he gave me the look, you know?”

Paul huffed. “I don’t care what he says. We’re shutting him down.”

Tono drove expertly through the curving countryside that was still green and lush. Fall had not arrived in San Sebastian, and the sun shone brilliantly on the hills surrounding the airport. The scenery was quite pastoral, with grazing animals and a few farmhouses scattered about. A far cry from the concrete world Paul called home. After about fifteen minutes, they reached the outskirts of the city. The streets were filled with residents and tourists, and Tono navigated his way gingerly to their side of town. Their apartment building was on the Calle Zubieta, but the lucky people whose homes fronted the water simply referred to it as being on La Concha, the name of the picturesque beach littered with sunbathers at this time of the day. Tono had purchased the three-bedroom flat many years ago, at the height of his career. Since his retirement, and inflation, buying something of this caliber would have been prohibitive. But they'd lucked out and had this beautiful place they could call home whenever they were in Spain.

He drove into the underground parking, sliding the Mercedes into their designated spot. Baxter was out of the car as soon as it stopped and eager for Tono to pop the trunk so he could retrieve the luggage.

Paul noted his impatience. "You seem to be in a big hurry to get upstairs, Baxter."

Baxter's face pinked up. "Just want to get settled, sir."

They watched the man get into the elevator, and Paul turned to Tono. "What was that all about?"

"I think Baxter is interested in more than just getting settled," Tono smirked, resting his arm on Paul's shoulder as they strolled toward the elevator.

"Do tell." Paul's curiosity was piqued.

"Our neighbor, Angela, has been asking about his return. I think she has a thing for your assistant."

"How old is she?"

Tono shrugged. "Old."

“That’s helpful.”

Tono laughed. “I don’t know,” he apologized. “She’s probably in her fifties.”

“Really. I guess that answers your question, Tono.”

“What question?” Tono looked confused.

“The one you asked me years ago; whether Baxter is gay or not.”

“Oh.”

“Indeed,” Paul remarked.

TONO pushed the front door open, and Mick was waiting in the foyer. He raised his arms in welcome as soon as he saw them.

“Sweetheart, I’m so glad you’re back.”

“Hey, babe.” Paul bent at the waist and kissed Mick. He cupped his face and stared at him. He looked weary, and there were new lines around his eyes that he hadn’t noticed before. “You look tired.”

“I am tired, sweetheart. I need a vacation from my vacation.”

“You’ll get one after tonight. No more partying for you, mister.”

“Oh, you’re no fun at all,” Mick grumbled. “Have you seen all the reviews of the movie?”

Paul nodded. “Congratulations, babe—we’ve got a major hit on our hands.”

“Thanks to you,” Mick acknowledged.

“Whatever.” Paul waved away the compliment. “What’s for lunch?”

“Lots of good stuff,” Mick answered as he turned his chair deftly and wheeled his way across the hardwood floor into the kitchen area. “I have your favorites, including the chorizo de Pamplona, which is hell on your cholesterol.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Mick. You and Baxter act like nagging wives.”

“Well, I am, sort of,” Mick said. “Someone’s got to watch over you since you don’t seem to care.”

“Oh really. Look who’s talking. You should be in bed right now, taking a nap. Tonight will be a huge event, and we’ll be lucky if we get to bed before dawn.”

“I was waiting for you,” Mick rationalized. “You guys make napping so much more fun.”

“Well, I can tell your parts are still working just fine,” Paul’s eyebrows went up. “Hold that thought, babe. We can have each other for dessert.”

“You bet,” Mick purred, then looked at Tono pointedly. “No chorizo for you.”

Paul grinned, enjoying the power play.

Tono snorted and inclined his head. “He thinks he’s my wife too.”

“What a pain in the ass,” Paul said, cuffing Mick lightly. “I’m having chorizo whether you like it or not.”

“Well, maybe a few slices, but no more this week.”

Lunch turned out to be quite the spread. Delicacies of the region abounded in small portions—cheeses, olives, salamis, two kinds of ham, and the infamous chorizo were laid out on the round table set up on the balcony overlooking the harbor. There were chunks of freshly baked bread as well and a mixed green salad with avocado and baby shrimp drizzled with vinaigrette. Paul finally pushed away from the table and patted his stomach. “Okay. I’m done.”

“Are you sure? You could probably squeeze in one more bite,” Mick deadpanned. “Really block those arteries once and for all.”

“Don’t be so self-righteous.” Paul cupped Mick’s face lovingly. “I know you worry about our health, babe, but we’re big boys now. If we want to clog up our heart valves with rich food, we should be allowed to do it.”

“You’re both clueless.” Mick pouted.

Paul kissed his full lips and lingered briefly. “I’m afraid if we have sex right now, I’ll get appendicitis,” Paul joked.

“Idiot! That only pertains to swimming,” Tono lobbed back.

“You guys are both stupid,” Mick threw out. “The only thing that will happen if you have sex after a meal is cavities.”

Baxter chuckled as he cleared off the table.

“Have you lost your mind?” Paul asked Mick.

Mick had the good sense to stammer through his lame joke. “That’s if you don’t brush first,” he amended with a shameful grin.

“Silly,” Paul teased, noticing again how tired Mick appeared. There was something new going on that he wasn’t sharing. “You okay, babe?”

“I’m fine, sweetheart, just tired.”

“I worry about you.” Paul’s voice deepened.

“I know. Can we please go to bed now? I’m sleepy.”

“I’m tired too,” Paul said softly, shelving his concerns for now. “Tono?”

“¡Vámonos!” He stood and moved to grab hold of Mick’s wheelchair. Their bedroom was on the east side of the house, so it was dark and cool at this time of the day. The morning sun had already passed over their window, and with the wooden shades lowered, it could have been midnight if one didn’t know the actual time. It was a Spanish tradition that Paul loved—siestas in a darkened room. They’d shared many in this bed, and he prayed that they would share many more in the future.

He and Tono had come to appreciate every single day that Mick survived. Time had become a precious gift, and when they passed the three-year mark without much more deterioration, everyone heaved a sigh of relief. It almost felt like Dr. Jordan’s dire predictions were exaggerated. Nonetheless, they remained ever vigilant, watching for any new signs of the disease.

Tono’s concerns earlier today were legitimate, and Paul noticed the difficulty Mick had removing his shirt. He had trouble lifting it over his head, so Paul helped him along, pulling up

the shirt and sliding off his blue jeans as Tono held him up to facilitate the move. Lastly, the boxers came off, and they put him gently in the middle of the wide bed.

“Are you comfortable?” Paul asked, pulling Mick a little closer. They were in their favorite position with Mick in the center. He had an arm and a leg draped over Tono, and he seemed quite content. Paul’s arms circled Mick’s waist.

“I’m fine,” Mick whispered. “Pauly?”

“What, babe?” Paul’s voice rose with concern when he heard Mick use that name.

“When I die, I want to be cremated and have my ashes scattered over La Concha.”

Tono flipped over immediately and he gazed at Paul over Mick’s head with eyes that were swimming suddenly. He was biting his lip, and Paul could tell that Tono was about to lose it. “Hey, let’s not talk about it today. We have plenty of time.”

“Promise me,” Mick persisted. “I want you and Tono to have a small party at the bar, and when everyone is good and drunk, make a small caravan toward the beach and scatter me all over the place.”

“¡Calla!” Tono pleaded, kissing Mick to shut him up. He wouldn’t stop kissing him until Mick began to respond. Paul joined in, starting at Mick’s neck and moving down his back, smearing him with wet kisses that trailed down his torso. He was trying not to think about Mick’s request or the fact that his breathing seemed to falter and his diaphragm heaved dramatically with each breath drawn and exhaled. Paul concentrated on arousing Mick, giving him as much pleasure as possible under the circumstances. He snaked his hand around Mick’s waist and down to rest it on his cock. He was relieved to feel it slowly coming to life, and he rubbed his thumb over the bulbous head that was growing moist with his need. He tugged at the silky organ a few times, and when it pulsed in his hand, he whispered Tono’s name. Tono knew what Paul wanted without asking, and he transferred his attention from Mick’s mouth to his cock. Mick moaned, and Paul took that moment to break away from the pair and slick himself with the lube they kept on each side of the bed.

He'd discarded the use of condoms three years ago as soon as he'd become an official part of the relationship and testing had been completed to everyone's satisfaction.

He positioned Mick so that he was more accessible, never pulling him away from Tono, who continued to suck on him, oblivious to everything else. Tono's eyes were closed, and he had a blissful look on his face as he serviced his love. Paul nudged Mick's hole and pushed in gently.

"Love you," Mick panted, "love you both so much."

Paul felt Mick's body tighten around him, and he tilted forward, pushing in a little deeper. He held on to Mick's hip with one hand to get better leverage and find the right angle he needed. Soon, they were thrusting and jerking in unison. Tono's head bobbed rhythmically while Paul's hips snapped back and forth. He shifted slightly, and this time he nudged the small gland that made Mick cry out loudly, acting as the switch that sent spasms of pleasure rocketing up and down his spine. Paul felt his balls draw up seconds before he shot in a continuous stream, pumping madly into Mick as the sound of his cries filled the room. Tono swallowed the salty-sweet taste that was Mick, all the while shafting his own cock, which began to pulse quickly, shooting streams of warm sperm all over Mick's legs. The air was redolent with the odor of sex and the sounds of their satisfaction. They lay entwined, dozing on and off, until one of them finally moved, and everyone stretched, settling back into their favorite spooning positions.

MICK felt Paul's soft breath fluttering against his neck as he snored gently, satiated from the good sex. Tono slept as well; the steady rise and fall of his chest reassuring Mick that he too was replete and at peace. He kissed Tono's back while burrowing closer to Paul's stomach, snugly cocooned between his two men.

Tono's transition from a jealous and possessive lover to a giving partner to the two of them had been the greatest gift Mick had ever received. It made each day a joy, and he'd been able to pour his time and energy into his work with no thought of tomorrow and what was to come. Knowing that the two people he loved more than life also loved each other was the final piece in their human puzzle—critical in giving him the mental stability he needed to face his uncertain future.

Once they'd worked out the logistics to Tono's satisfaction, everything fell into place so easily. Paul retained his apartment, of course, and the only one who knew that he seldom slept in his bed at night was Baxter; he would have chosen death before divulging anything. He was as fiercely loyal to Mick and Tono as he was to Paul, now that they were virtually married in every way.

Mick was relieved when Tono gave up his idea of a novel, as was Paul. Tono's need to chronicle each event in their life was satisfied with the journal he kept, so he shifted his energy into writing poetry instead. He'd compiled quite a collection through the years, written in Spanish, and most of them were gifts to Mick, marking special occasions. Lately, he'd written some for Paul, presenting them shyly on birthdays and anniversaries. Paul signed Tono as an author, seeking the best Spanish-speaking editor around to help with his work.

Tonight would be a celebration for them, especially for Paul, who'd overcome his reservations and consented to co-author the screenplay. Mick felt sick when first told about Paul Senior and his cruelty toward Paul all those years ago. It explained so much and yet nothing at all. To think that a few words written without forethought would have such an impact on two lives was unbelievable, but the opportunity to right some wrongs had presented itself in the form of the screenplay, and he'd jumped on it. It had taken a lot of persuasion on his part to change Paul's mind, but in the end he'd agreed, and the finished product had far exceeded their expectations.

Mick closed his eyes and willed himself to rest. There would be enough time to ponder his immediate future in the days to come. He knew what lay ahead because all the signs were apparent, even though he chose to ignore them and remain silent. Tonight would be a night to remember, and maybe a short nap was all he needed to aid his failing body, give it one last burst of energy before conceding that he was moving on to another level.

Chapter 31

THE spotlights lit up the sky near the auditorium, El Kursaal, the current venue for the San Sebastian Film Festival. Onlookers lined the streets hoping to catch glimpses of their favorite movie stars as the limousines inched up to the entrance, unloading beautiful people in designer clothing. Cameras flashed, and starlets posed, eager for their five minutes of fame.

Mick, Paul, and Tono arrived early and were given access to the rear entrance, due to Mick's disability status. It made navigation easier and gave them the privacy they needed. Best Screenplay would be one of the first awarded, so rather than sit in the auditorium, they'd opted to wait in the wings offstage so that Paul could push the wheelchair forward when their names were called. They'd already been informed by the committee that their screenplay had won, a foregone conclusion, confirmed by the final figures.

The theater buzzed with excitement, and Paul rested his hand on Mick's neck as they looked out at the crowd. There were a few familiar faces; certainly the stars of the movie were recognizable,

and they waved at the two men standing beside the handsome writer in the wheelchair. All three were dressed in tuxedos, making them even more attractive than usual.

Finally, the lights dimmed and the host for the evening stepped out onstage to begin the ceremonies. Tono took advantage of the darkness and bent down to kiss Mick on the cheek, squeezing his arm gently. “Cariño,” he whispered, “te quiero.”

“I love you too, majo.”

“Are you feeling okay?” Paul asked as soon as he saw Tono crouching beside

Mick.

“I’m fine, sweetheart,” Mick said. Paul nodded but never took his hand off Mick’s neck, letting it rest there possessively.

“The award for Best Screenplay goes to Mick Henley and co-author Paul Alcott for the movie Running Proud.”

The applause was deafening as Paul wheeled Mick onstage while Tono watched from his spot on the side. Paul accepted his award, which was shaped like a small shell, a tribute to La Concha, San Sebastian’s most famous beach. The hostess in the black strapless gown handed Mick his own award. Paul stepped up to the podium. “Thank you for this honor, but really, I’m just along for the ride.” Paul waited a second as the audience applauded unexpectedly. “Running Proud is the creation of a very special man; one whom I have been fortunate to call my friend for over twenty-two years. Mick and I met when we were in high school, and as they say, the rest is history. I have been privileged and honored to be a part of his world for all this time, and as his publisher and editor, I have shared in his success; he’s made me quite a bit of money,” Paul joked. “Writing a screenplay with Mick was a pleasure, and a learning experience I will always cherish. It’s a dream come true for me, and the continuing dream for my friend over here. So without further ado, I give you Mick Henley.”

Paul exchanged the small statue that Mick was clutching with both hands for the cordless microphone and stepped back. Mick beamed at him with pride, and Paul impulsively bent down and whispered, “I love you, babe,” just before he went to join Tono in the wings.

“I just want to take a minute to thank a few people,” Mick began, “and I promise to keep this short, since my editor is watching and waiting to pounce on any useless words.”

The audience laughed appreciatively.

“Tonight is a gift in more ways than one,” Mick said. “I’m here against all odds with my best friend and co-author, whose steady influence in my life and my writing has brought me this far. I want to thank you for giving us this award. I hope that you enjoy the movie, which is showing in different theaters throughout the city.”

The audience began to clap and it went on for a few minutes, giving Mick time to catch his breath. When they quieted down, he continued.

“Most of you know that I’ve been battling ALS for some time now, and I’ve decided to donate a large portion of the proceeds from this movie and my novel to the ALS Foundation for research.” Mick paused to inhale a somewhat ragged breath. When he began to speak again, he was almost whispering.

“When I first heard about Lou Gehrig and read his farewell speech delivered at Yankee Stadium, I couldn’t understand how he could say that he was the luckiest man in the world. I had recently been diagnosed, and I thought I was going to die within a few months. Now I know what he was talking about, because I feel the same way.

“I’ve been blessed,” Mick smiled, “with an interesting and rewarding life that’s satisfied me in every way. I’ve achieved every one of my goals in thirty-nine years, and for that I’m grateful. I have no regrets, which is all one can hope for given our allotted time on this earth. I’ve loved and been loved by extraordinary people. How could I not consider myself lucky? I am, by far, the luckiest man here.”

Mick looked away from the audience for a minute and turned his head to look at Tono and Paul, who smiled encouragingly. Tono grabbed Paul’s hand and clutched at it, chewing on his lower lip and fighting the tears that Mick couldn’t see from where he sat. Mick turned back to the audience and whispered into the microphone, “Thank you for this award. It’s very much appreciated.”

Paul wheeled Mick offstage to the sound of a thundering applause that continued long after they had left the building on their way to the car. They were going to stop at the bar, Vergara, and have a few drinks with the friends who'd become a part of their inner circle while in San Sebastian. Many of them were former Jai alai players, had known Tono for years, and knew that he and Mick were gay. Since his official retirement, Tono's need to keep his relationship with Mick relatively discreet was no longer necessary, and the comfort level they'd achieved with the people at the bar precluded any need for subterfuge. There were others in their group: Americans and Europeans living or vacationing in San Sebastian on a regular basis who knew they were partners and were familiar with Paul's presence as Mick's friend and publisher.

The bar erupted with raucous cries of congratulations when the three entered. They'd left their jackets in the car and rolled up their sleeves, ready to get down and party. Mick was wheeled to a table and presented with a small shot glass of tequila, his favorite drink. There were limes on a plate surrounded by sea salt, and he reached for the glass—but dropped it. The owner of the bar replaced it quickly with another, reassuring Mick who, apologized profusely. “¡Qué va, Mick, no se preocupe!”

Mick extended his hand again and it shook; it seemed to be weighed down by a thousand bricks, but this time it worked. He wrapped his fingers around the small glass, swallowed the contents in one gulp, and bit into a lime dipped in salt. He relished the taste and the warmth that slid down his throat, heating his insides, which had gone cold suddenly.

“I want to make a toast,” he said, straining to make himself heard over the noise. Tono gestured for everyone to quiet down. He and Paul stood side by side, gazing at Mick with pride and love.

“You'll have to excuse me if I get maudlin,” Mick said gently, “but being here, with all of you, is very special to me.” Everyone in the room was silent as they waited for Mick to continue. “Tonight was a great honor for me, and Paul, but what made it so special was the fact that it was here, in San Sebastian, a place I've called home for the last nine years. You've opened your hearts to me—the gringo who walked into this bar a long time ago and fell in love with one of your own.” Mick gazed at Tono, who quickly smiled at him. “I'm still in love, by the way, in case you're wondering,” Mick looked at both men pointedly and smiled, though his eyes were bright with tears.

Paul and Tono stepped forward in alarm, but Mick waved them back weakly. He blinked several times, but a few tears managed to escape and roll down his cheeks slowly. “I'm in love, and happy, and I wanted you to share in my good fortune. So, here's to more of the same! Drinks are

on me, my friends. To the future,” Mick said, raising his trembling hand slightly in another toast, “whatever it may bring so long as it’s here, surrounded by all of you.”

He turned toward the two men who meant everything to him. Paul raised his glass in a silent toast while Tono just stood there, chewing on his lower lip, as usual, and doing his best not to break down in front of everyone.

Mick mouthed the words “I love you” and attempted to bring his glass up to his mouth but stopped when he realized it wasn’t happening. Tono moved quickly, took the shot glass from Mick’s hand, and brought it up to his own lips. He tilted his head and allowed the liquid into his mouth, then bent down and kissed Mick, sharing the tequila with his lover. His face grimaced in agony as he fought back the stinging hot tears threatening to blind him.

“Majo,” Mick whispered. “It’s okay.”

Paul was at their side in a second, and he knelt down and placed his hand on Mick’s knee. “I’m here, babe.” The words came out strangled as his tears poured down his cheeks, unmindful of the audience.

Mick’s unforgettable orchid eyes shone brilliantly, and for that one second, the old, fun-loving, vibrant man peeked through. “You always were, sweetheart. I never doubted it for a minute.”

About the Author

MICKIE B. ASHLING began writing stories about men who love men around the time she discovered *Queer as Folk* in 2002. The characters on that show intrigued her, and groundbreaking writers such as Patricia Nell Warren inspired her. She began to write the kind of stories that she enjoyed reading, spurred on by her muse, who really has this thing for hunky men getting it on.

Mickie has lived in the Philippines, Spain, the Middle East, and San Francisco but currently resides in a quiet suburb outside Chicago. She’s a respectable office manager by day and a proud mother of four grown men who continue to wonder where this interest in gay romance has come from. They shake their heads and scratch their chins but ultimately leave her alone. They know better than to mess with Mama’s choices. Mickie’s first love is writing, but traveling is a close

second. Her dream is to be able to quit her day job soon so she can devote all her time and energy doing what she loves best.

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