

Karma Eastwick

... "I can't believe you'd stay with someone like Niki just because she's a decent cocksucker," I said. "You and I both know you could definitely find a nicer chick who would happily do that job. Hell, even a guy might be preferable to—" The moment the words flew off my tongue, I wanted to reel them back into my big, fat mouth.

"Oh? A guy, huh?" Now a mischievous glint lit Reed's eyes. "There's an interesting possibility. Hey, Mars, are you hoping to arrange yet another type of audition today?"

"Excuse me?"

"I've heard that guys suck cock better than any woman, and since you're a guy, and gay...well, you'd know for a fact. Is it true?"

"Ah...yeah...from my experience, it's true."

"Fascinating, fascinating." For an instant, his gaze locked on my face, or more specifically, on my lips. "I wonder...you may have a valid point about Niki and finding someone else. Know of anyone in particular who may be interested? And keep in mind, I'm Cock King, so it won't be an easy task. I'd need an expert, you know?"

The hairs on my arms snapped to attention. Was my current lust for him that obvious? Or had he realized in all these months how much I ached for him? I felt a bit wobbly, and my cheeks sizzled in embarrassment. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"What do you think I'm saying?"

"That you...you want me to...?"

He shrugged nonchalantly, then raised the beer bottle to his lips. For an instant, the tip of his tongue slipped once, twice, three times inside the tiny opening before he tilted the bottle and began to chug the beer. I couldn't tear my gaze from his bobbing Adam's apple. My heart began a wild gallop, while my cock, never completely dormant in his company, started to twitch in need...

ALSO BY KARMA EASTWICK

Art For Art's Sake

BY KARMA EASTWICK

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AN IMITATION OF LIFE AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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CHAPTER 1

"Well? How do I look?"

With keys still jangling in my hand, I took one step into the living room of my apartment and my beat-up Adidas squeaked to a halt on the hardwood floor. There, in the middle of the room before the battered leather sofa, stood a naked warrior. Or rather, naked except for a loincloth sheltering his most private area.

It took me a moment to shake off my fright, but when I looked closer at the rich brown, shoulder-length hair, the lean and muscular torso, and the long, beefy legs of the Tarzan-like character, I finally recognized them as belonging to my roommate. I eventually detected the familiar features of the handsome face I had come to admire, now hidden beneath hideous swirls of brightly hued greasepaint, and gasped relief.

"Fucking hell, Reed! What are you doing?"

"Huh? Too much makeup?"

"Too much for what? Giving me a heart attack? If so, I think you accomplished that just fine."

His hearty chuckle further confirmed his identity. "Mars, Mars, Mars, you're such a wuss."

"And you're such a dickhead."

"Is that all you've got?" Another round of laughter filled the air. "I've been called much worse."

"I'll bet."

I shut the apartment door behind me, tossed my keys beside unopened bills cluttering a nearby table, and took a few more steps into the room. Despite recovering from both my daily jog and my recent shock, my heart continued to race. It usually did whenever I had the good fortune of glimpsing Reed's bare flesh, like now. Damn, what a beautiful physique he had, one designed for sex, and one that kept me up most nights amid lecherous fantasies. I had recently ended a short stint as Rapunzel's Prince in a production of Sondheim's *Into The Woods*, where I'd crooned the song "Agony" five nights a week and on Saturday matinees. Little had I realized I'd soon be facing a daily agony in my personal life. And thus, I thought, eyeing Reed's current nudity, my daily torment would begin.

Several months earlier, I had met Reed Keeting backstage on the opening night of a play in which a mutual friend had starred. Reed overheard me telling our friend about my sudden need for a new place to live, and seeing as how we were both involved in the theater and seemed to have a lot in common, Reed offered his TriBeCa apartment's second bedroom to me. Desperate as I was to find a place, I almost rejected his overture outright, since I wasn't

certain I'd be able to manage my share of the rent. In the past few decades, the district had been converted from old meatpacking warehouses to spacious apartments, respected art galleries, and high-end restaurants, and in New York City, trendy areas weren't cheap by any stretch of the imagination. But Reed explained that his well-to-do parents actually paid a large chunk of the astronomical rent, so my monthly half of expenses would be outrageously cheap, even cheaper than I'd paid for my share of an apartment in Greenwich Village.

Well, how could any struggling actor reject an offer like that?

Still, before agreeing, I had disclosed my sexual orientation to him, giving him a chance to take back his proposition. Many straight guys felt uncomfortable being around a gay man, let alone living with one. Although I always acted discreetly, never flaunted my sexuality or dragged too many lovers home—indeed, many people didn't even realize I was gay—a small tidbit like that could actually become a bombshell to some straight folks, and I didn't want that to happen. Thankfully, Reed hadn't changed his mind, so I moved in the follow day.

But upon meeting him, had I realized just how splendid a body he possessed, I might have thought better about living here, thus saving myself the mental anguish of not being able to taste every inch of him. To lessen the pain, I kept telling myself that most people would have killed to snag this spacious two-bedroom, skylight-enhanced TriBeCa abode with its absurdly inexpensive rental price, and since I was one of them, to hell with my carnal misery.

Agony, beyond power of speech, when the one thing you want, is the only thing out of your reach...

As the Sondheim tune—my recently adopted theme song—

started playing in my head, I casually eyed Reed from head to toe and wondered whether his body truly was out of my reach...

I loved the delicate brown hairs covering his chest and muscleridged belly. The dusky nipples designed for sucking. The hairy, muscular legs and sexy feet. And the bulge that even now protruded almost lewdly behind the skimpy loincloth...

I knew my own protrusion would soon become evident through my running shorts if I didn't tear away my gaze. Nevertheless, I couldn't help momentarily fantasizing about pushing him back onto the sofa, ripping off that loincloth with my teeth, and going to town on his dick until he filled my mouth with his hot load. I wouldn't even give a damn about all that grotesque greasepaint he wore, as long as I could finally consume his cock and fulfill my deepest desires.

Agony, beyond power of speech...

More blood rushed to my groin, and the painful tightness of my jock strap gave me ample warning to abandon the daydream and return to reality.

... When the one thing you want, is the only thing out of your reach ...

Reluctantly, I spun toward the kitchen and stepped to the refrigerator, where I grabbed an ice-cold beer. Damn it, I needed to get laid...and badly! It had been too many weeks since I'd last touched a man with my hands or tongue. Too many agonizing weeks of not savoring a man's cock and balls in my mouth or clenching my ass muscles around a stiff pecker. I wondered if a trip to the gym was in order, not for a round of exercise after my recent jog, but for a hunt for warm and willing man-flesh. Or maybe that new bar in SoHo would offer better pickings. Or perhaps I should dig into my little black book—yes, I had one of

those—for the number of that cute lighting director I'd met the previous month at that little theater on 7th Ave. The guy had offered to suck me off in the balcony after hours. Damn, what was his name again? Kevin? Keith? Keifer? If I'd had the time that day he propositioned me I would have happily—

"Hey, you never answered my question," said Reed, interrupting my silent and racy lament. "How do I look?"

"You planning to go out on the street like that?" I called over my shoulder.

"In this city? Probably wouldn't shock a living soul if I did. No, I'm just trying things on for size to see how I'll look tomorrow night."

"So what are you supposed to be anyway? George of the fucking jungle turned rogue warrior?"

"Kind of," he replied with a snicker. "At least for the next week or two. I can't imagine the show lasting longer than that."

I twisted off the bottle cap and chugged down half the beer. It hit my empty stomach with a fizzing jolt, but did little to cool the fires of my libido. Once his words finally sank in, I continued to talk over my shoulder, since my boner had yet to deflate. "Oh, so you're not just playing 'dress up' or 'scare the crap out of the roommate'? Are you saying you've snagged a role?"

"Over at the Quintero."

"On West 42nd? Good for you!"

"Don't get too excited for me. I'm only a last-minute replacement for one of the extras who came down with the flu yesterday. Probably just opening night jitters."

"What's the name of the show?"

A lengthy pause. "Jungle Fever, or Jungle Love, or...hell, beats the shit out of me. I'm basically nothing more than background

scenery. I don't have any lines, so I could give a damn."

"You're always such a stickler for detail," I joked. "Seriously, it's another credit on the ol' résumé, you know."

"Oh, yeah, now *that's* a credit that will really go far in getting me a lead...'Jungle Warrior #8' in a play that will probably close before the damned week is out. All another credit on the résumé will get me is another bill I don't need. When's the last time you updated yours? Have you seen the prices these days for updating and reprinting headshots? It's outrageous."

"In this economy, I'll bet. Even we actors are suffering."

"Damned bills!"

I smiled. Many people would think it odd that someone like Reed Keeting-of the Park Avenue Keetings, no less-would constantly bitch about money, but I knew the truth behind his griping. Certainly Reed's parents helped with the rent, but that was as far as their largesse extended. They felt Reed's chosen career was beneath his upbringing, and his desire to be involved in "all that theatrical nonsense" would eventually subside. They didn't want him to get "too cushy," and hoped he'd eventually forfeit his dreams and return to the family business of high finance. I always contended they'd probably take away the rent money also were it not for the fact that it would blemish their reputation to have their actor-son living on the street and calling a Maytag box homesweet-home. Although Reed constantly whined about his lack of cash, his determination to make a successful career for himself always won out. He took any acting job without complaint, no matter how small the role. I doubted he would ever surrender his dreams, would probably starve himself first, and I'm sure his parents had never counted on that inbred tenacity.

"Speaking of suffering," said Reed, his large bare feet slapping

against the burnished floor behind me, "I overheard the producers saying they also need a replacement for 'Jungle Warrior #10.' Interested?"

After finishing off my beer in several gulps, I finally turned toward him. Once again, I struggled to recognize his features beneath the colorful goop on his face. "With all the starving actors in this town? They most certainly filled the position a nanosecond after you overheard them talking. But thanks for thinking of me anyway."

"No need to thank me. We actors have to stick together."

Stick together? I sighed in renewed yearning. If only Reed meant those words in the literal sense. Oh, yes, I could picture it now, my legs clamped around his waist as he buried his rod inside me, our torsos glued together from the sweat of our vigorous lovemaking.

I attempted to erase sexual thoughts from my mind, but in his presence, I always found it an uphill battle. "I appreciate your incessant *esprit de corps*. But no, I wouldn't be right for the part."

"Are you kidding? All a 'jungle warrior' actually needs is a toned bod, and let me tell you, roomie, with the way you work out..." He gestured toward the bench press, treadmill, and dumbbells governing one corner of the living room, then laid a palm against my midsection while his free hand gripped my right bicep. He whistled appreciatively. "Damn it, buddy, you've got a great one."

Taken by itself, the compliment both startled and thrilled me, and had my mind reeling. Had Reed actually checked out my body? On numerous occasions, I had suspected as much. Lord knows I'd studied him endlessly yet surreptitiously during his own countless sessions with the exercise gear, but I'd never caught him

ogling me outright.

But now, having him confirm my suspicions while also giving my belly and arm an almost intimate caress? Holy shit!

After all these months, I thought I'd gotten used to Reed's "touchy-feeliness." His gregarious personality fostered scads of handshakes, shoulder squeezes, and bear hugs when it came to his friends, regardless of gender. But the sensation of his hands upon me now had me rocketing toward Gay Nirvana, leaving me completely flummoxed, full of questions, yet speechless. It wouldn't be the first time I'd encountered a straight macho-man with repressed homosexual proclivities. How well I knew that. But could Reed be one of those guys?

I pondered the notion—and certainly not for the first time since moving in either—but like always, I ultimately decided it was probably only wishful thinking on my part.

Thankfully, Reed didn't seem to notice my rattled condition. Instead, a dazzling, stark-white smile sliced through his palette of facial hues, and he playfully thumped my shoulders with his beefy fists. "Oh, yeah, and a 'jungle warrior' also needs hair. Since you keep yours rather short, you'd obviously need a wig. But we can easily get one of those for you."

"It-it's not the hair." Unable to curb the instinct, I glanced downward to his groin, then looked up almost immediately when the sight of his package once again had me craving a manic romp with him, this time right here on the kitchen floor. Love on the linoleum, with so many intriguing utensils in close proximity...

"So if it ain't the hair, bud, then what is it?"

Unable to gather my words, I whipped around and tossed my empty bottle into the trashcan. I dug into the fridge again, grabbed and opened a second beer, then took a mouthful, all the while

cautioning myself to calm down.

"Hey, is the great Mars Manchester too fine an actor for a bit part as Jungle Warrior #10?"

I shook my head. "You know I'd love to land a solid lead role, but beggars can't be choosers. Anything to keep acting. But no, that's not the reason. And as I said, with so many actors out of work, I doubt—"

"But with the cast coming down with the flu, there's a likely chance a part is still available, or will soon be. It's this stupid costume, isn't it?"

Man, did Reed hit the nail squarely on the head. With me wearing only a scrap of material over my groin and being on the same stage with him, let alone in the same room, I'd have a woody as a constant companion and never be able to hide my unquenchable urge to jump his bones.

Rather than admit the truth, I thought fast and gave him a response full of the typical macho straight-man bravado I'd heard him bluster on so many occasions. "If you call *that* a costume. I doubt one of those teeny-tiny loincloths could hold back the monster meat I'm packing, and before you can say 'indecent exposure,' I'd be the reason the play would shut down."

His garishly red lips twisted into a smirk. "I can't believe you had the stones to say that, buddy boy, especially since you know damned well *I'm* the Cock King in all of New York City. I've got the biggest dick this side of the Hudson. Longer and wider than the Holland Tunnel."

"Is that so?"

"Just ask any of the broads on Broadway—or Off-Broadway, for that matter."

"Yeah, yeah, you've been spouting that crap ever since I

moved in."

"That's 'cause it's the truth, my friend. The plain truth."

"Really? You've never presented the actual evidence of your *supposed* super-sized schlong. And I never believe rumors, especially from those chorus-line bimbos you're so fond of fucking. *And* rumors you've undoubtedly spread about yourself. So either put up this gargantuan log already, or shut up, big guy. Or perhaps that should be 'Tiny Tim'?"

Why I offered that lewd challenge to him, I had no clear idea. Probably because I felt a bit daring now that the subject of "cock" was on the proverbial table. Or maybe because the beer I'd guzzled had started to loosen my tongue. But most likely because learning he had actually checked out *my* body, along with recollections of his hands on me only moments earlier, gave me an extra shot of courage to explore the possibilities.

And damned if Reed didn't possess a wickedly naughty twinkle in his dark eyes, one that clearly indicated he was considering my dare of whipping out his dick for a session of show-and-tell. I could picture it clearly, us facing each other and staring down at our boners stretched out side by side, or one throbbing atop the other, as we squeezed them together while comparing length and girth. My own cock twitched wildly at the notion.

Ever since I'd moved in with Reed, he'd seemed perpetually horny, and through the weeks, I'd seen many bulges outlined in his pants. I had yet to catch a glimpse of the actual bulge-maker, however, and fantasizing about its size, shape, and design had kept me up innumerable nights whacking my own eight-inch monkey and imagining him letting me measure every inch of his tool with my tongue. But now, would he actually show it to me? And what would be my response? Would I laugh it off, then use the memory

as additional jack-off material in the privacy of my bedroom? Would I pull out my own dick and do a comparison as I'd just imagined? Or would I fall to my knees and take his rod into my mouth, clutch his bubble butt and yank him forward, making him fuck my throat as I'd always craved? Unwittingly, my gaze drifted over his exquisite chest, following the dusty trail of hair down to his belly button, then ever downward toward the lump in his loincloth while the melody of "Agony" once again filled my head—

"What's going on in here?"

The jarring female voice, crammed with accusation and no small amount of jealousy, seemed to blast through the air like a gunshot. In this high-ceilinged loft, with its sparse furnishings and lack of carpeting, loud voices usually produced an echo effect. But in this case, the strident voice trumpeted and reverberated through my brain due to the awkwardness I felt at being discovered practically drooling over this sexy man before me.

And of course, the voice belonged to Reed's latest girlfriend, Niki—one "K," not two, as she was always so fond of pointing out to anyone who gave a shit, which most people, including myself, did not. She was one of the chorus-line bimbos I had mentioned only seconds earlier. A bleached-blonde annoyance who I assumed loathed me even more than I loathed her. And she had good reason, considering my lustful thoughts about her lover.

"Hello, Niki," I said, doing my damnedest to sound pleasant and hoping my face wasn't as red as it felt. "I didn't realize you were here." *Yet again, God damn it*, I wanted to add, but held my tongue.

"Obviously," she said, entering the kitchen. Her icy-cold smile might have had the power to create frost were it not for the ninety-

degree heat wave blanketing the city, which had our air conditioning units cranking at full force with marginal success. She wore only one of Reed's dress shirts, and regardless of my presence, she hadn't bothered to secure the top buttons, so her boobs looked a breath away from tumbling out. "What are you talking about?"

"Not much," I said, perhaps too hastily.

"I'll bet." She glanced at my groin, which I had already strategically hidden behind the beer bottle in my hand. "Yes, I'll just bet."

I suppressed a grunt. When Reed first dragged her home weeks earlier and introduced us, I sensed immediately there would be trouble.

She had blinked several times upon learning my name. "Mars? Is that for real? Your parents named you after a planet?"

"No," I had corrected, "after the Roman god of war. My dad was into mythology."

"You mean astrology, don't you?"

"The word you're looking for is 'astronomy,' but no—I mean *myth*ology. I already said, this has nothing to do with planets. They were named after ancient gods, too, you know."

"Of course I know," she barked, while the flaring red cheeks exposed her as a liar. More blinking. "You must have had hell growing up with a silly name like that."

"Hey, I had it easy. My sister is named Bellona."

"Why would your parents name her after lunch meat?"

"Not 'Bologna,' but Bellona, after the Roman *goddess* of war. We call her Belle for short. I suppose I should count my blessings they didn't go the Greek route, or I would have ended up as Ares. Although I bet Belle would have preferred Athena instead." I

smirked. "Parents...crazy, huh?"

"No, not crazy...your parents are just plain stupid." With that, she swaggered away with a scowl on her face and her nose in the air and I had barely spoken two words to her ever since. Don't get me wrong, I love women in general. What I don't love are humorless and rude ignoramuses, no matter the gender.

Now, Reed seemed not to notice the tension in the room between his girlfriend and myself. "Sorry, Niki, did our talking wake you?"

"No, I was just watching today's episode of *Destiny's Storm*," she said, possessively wrapping one arm around his waist and pressing her free hand on his delicious six-pack. "And wishing you were watching with me."

Reed laughed. "Oh? Did I miss anything exciting?"

"Hardly. The show's gotten so boring lately. I *wish* something exciting would happen already."

"You and your soap operas. If I'm not careful, you'll get me hooked soon enough." He hugged her and gave the top of her head a quick kiss, right on the seam of her dark brown roots.

When she cuddled against him, her squinty blue eyes shot daggers in my direction. And I realized quite clearly she was offering me a dare of her own, challenging me to a duel to the death with the sexy Reed Keeting as the grand prize.

But I wasn't about to play her childish game, regardless of the hot trophy on offer. My friendship with Reed meant more to me than that. Besides, I figured she would be gone soon enough. Since I'd moved into the apartment, she was about the fourth or fifth in the string of girlfriends he'd brought home. Unfortunately, she had also lasted the longest, which irked me to no end.

"Come on, lover," said Niki, snatching one of Reed's arms.

"Show me some jungle love."

Another grin cut though Reed's tribal makeup. "Talk to you later, Mars. Looks like duty calls."

With a smile of pure, undiluted triumph, Niki sent me another glare, then tugged Reed down the hallway toward his bedroom.

"Oh, hey, speaking of calls, I almost forgot," he said over his shoulder. "I answered your phone just before you got home. Your agent called."

"Shit! Did Olive say if it was a part? Why did you keep babbling about getting me a role as a jungle warrior when I might have other work?"

"I got distracted and—"

The remainder came out muffled as his bedroom door slammed shut. Niki's doing, most likely, putting a barricade between Reed and myself. *Bitch!*

But that bitch had every right to be worried since, given the opportunity, I would have sucked off her boyfriend in a New York minute.

Still sputtering curses, I stomped into my bedroom only to discover an empty phone cradle on my nightstand. I started to head toward Reed's bedroom, but one of Niki's annoying high-pitched squeals spilled out from under the closed door and stopped me dead in my tracks. Then, remembering where Reed was standing when I came home, I headed to the coffee table in the living room. I set down my perspiring beer bottle on last week's *TV Guide*, then finally located my wireless phone wedged between crumbled copies of *Times* and *Variety*, various playbills, and empty boxers of Chinese takeout. I punched in the familiar number and waited only two rings.

"The Olive Pershing Agency."

"Hey, Yolanda. Is she there? This is Mars Manchester."

"Hang on, babe," said the long-time receptionist. "She's been waiting for your call. I think she's got somethin' lined up for you."

"Really? You wouldn't shit a starving actor, would you?"

"Not on your life, sweetie. You guys usually have no sense of humor this early in the day. Hold on."

As I waited, a flurry of wanton female giggles poured through the bedroom door at the end of the hallway. With my free hand, I palmed my groin and mentally traded places with the bleached-blonde bimbo, imagining my roommate kissing *me*, touching *me*, and filling *me* with his cock. Oh, God, if only...

Agony, beyond power of speech, when the one thing you want, is the only thing out of your reach...

CHAPTER 2

In my teen years, I experienced two unforgettable life-changing "moments."

The first happened during puberty when it dawned on me that I possessed an unwavering sexual attraction to other boys. In truth, the revelation that I was gay didn't even come as a tremendous shock. It was just something that "was," and I quickly came to accept the fact that for the remainder of my life some ignorant fools might look upon me as being "different" and "less worthy," and that my sexual orientation was *their* problem, not mine. My parents, with their liberal thinking and endless capacity for love and understanding, receive full credit for my non-traumatic "coming out," and for that alone, I will always adore them.

And the second crucial moment in my life happened during my

junior year in high school when I played the role of Perchik in a production of Fiddler On The Roof. This may sound egotistical, but the instant I stepped onto the stage during that first rehearsal, I recognized that I possessed better than average talent for not only singing, but acting as well. As the days progressed, the certainty within me grew even stronger. Oh sure, my parents, teachers, and peers praised my following performances, but their words did nothing to bring me to my conclusion. It was my gut that spoke to me the loudest, and with absolute assurance, and even at that relatively young age, I knew—I just knew—that should I pursue acting as a profession and work my butt off, I had a solid chance at a long and successful career. In retrospect, it seems somewhat eerie, but much of the process came almost too easy for me in regards to not only memorizing lines, but also truly understanding the characters I portrayed in various shows. I found it nearly effortless to dig deep into my "mental library" and locate just the right amount of emotional nuance needed for each scene, and I also knew when my performances were either spot on or sorely lacking. I swiftly came to ascertain my strengths and weaknesses, and at every opportunity, I concentrated on perfecting the latter.

After only two years of college, I decided to quit school altogether and concentrate on acting full time. With supportive and encouraging parents behind me, I moved out of my childhood home in Connecticut to the Big Apple. I soon got enrolled in The Stella Adler Studio, studied night and day in dozens of workshops to learn my chosen craft, and hit the streets in search of the almighty agent.

That's when I met Olive Pershing. The sixty-six-year-old gal, with her henna-rinsed coiffure and alert blue eyes—can anyone say "Lucille Ball"?—had been in the business for something like four

decades, and she seemed to know just about everyone of note in the entertainment industry, both East *and* West Coast. When she took me on as her client nearly five years ago, many of my actor friends had displayed amazement bordering on envy. I later learned that Olive had a reputation as a nit-picker when it came to her roster of talent, and getting her to represent you was considered nothing less than a remarkable achievement. Certainly I thought myself fortunate, but Olive's acceptance of me also confirmed that my gut hadn't lied all those years ago, that I did indeed have talent.

Throughout the years, Olive had secured me plenty of auditions for stage roles. Of course, I started by doing bit parts, from one- or two-liner walk-ons to being in the chorus of various musical extravaganzas on and Off-Broadway. Each month I auditioned for countless producers, had my fair share of rotten luck tossed in with the good, had more than one play in which I appeared get labeled as a "stinker" by critics and close after opening night, and generally paid my dues accordingly.

Then eventually the hard work started to pay off. I began landing better roles, from Rapunzel's Prince in *Into The Woods* to Anthony in a Broadway revival of *Sweeney Todd*, and I came a hair's breadth away from snagging the role of Bert in *Mary Poppins*. So damned close! But in this business, like any other, close doesn't count, plus it doesn't pay the bills, and after several days of sulking, I chalked it up to another disappointment and moved on.

At first, when it came to my career, I had focused solely on musical theater with some drama tossed in for good measure. Only recently had Olive talked me into broadening my horizons, saying that she had received queries about me when it came to other mediums. She also mentioned the potential salaries involved, so I

decided to go for it.

In the past few months, I had completed small supporting roles in two films, played a street musician in several scenes for television's *Ugly Betty*, and did some voiceover work for an ad agency. I also landed several television commercials, my most famous—or infamous, depending on how I took the razzing from my friends and family—being that of a half-naked man in a spot for shaving cream. No lines, but plenty of nationwide exposure in the form of bare skin. Oh, well, as I told Reed earlier, beggars couldn't be choosers, and modeling was as good a gig as any.

Along the way, of course, I'd done numerous auditions that went nowhere, but at least I kept myself busy and got enough work to not only pay the rent each month but to also pay off my credit card balances while maintaining a small balance in a checking account. And all thanks to Olive Pershing, who seemed to work tirelessly 24/7 to help me keep a relatively steady income.

Now, as I continued to hold the line for her, listening to a truly awful Muzak version of a Burt Bacharach tune, I wondered what Olive had for me this time. Hopefully it would be a job that involved more than a mere few days work, and something that actually had some "teeth" to it. Don't get me wrong—it was fairly easy money to stand around with a face partially smeared with shaving cream and wearing nothing but a towel, but "challenging" it certainly was not. I wanted *acting* work, a solid role, to keep my creative juices flowing, so I mentally crossed my fingers she had something decent and started to hum along with "What The World Needs Now Is Love" that played into my ear.

Just as I was about to actually start singing along with the chorus, the line clicked, silencing the Muzak. "Hello, my sweetness. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Hi, Olive. How have you been?"

"Apart from my usual aching back, and the pain in the ass that is my worthless daughter-in-law, I suppose I'll survive the week. How are you holding up in this heat wave?"

I pried the damp tank top from my torso and blew a stream of air downward to rustle my chest hair. "Not melting just yet."

"Glad to hear it, because I need you. Clear your schedule for tomorrow morning. Can you be at Riverside and West 71st by 9:00?" She rattled off the exact address, but I already knew the studio complex due to several auditions I'd had in the past.

"A TV role?" I asked.

"And if you play your cards right, you've got this part in the bag."

"Oh? For what?"

"A soap. They want you to do a reading."

I ran my free hand over my face. "A cold reading? You know how much I hate those."

"But you actually have a proverbial foot in the door for this one. Do you remember that casting director you met several months ago, Jillian Shinbark?"

"Do I? Her name is unforgettable. But I also remember I didn't get that role on *Tomorrow's Edge*. Did the other actor they hire fall flat on his face?"

"Forget *Tomorrow's Edge*. That's 'Yesterday's News.' Jillian's just gotten herself hired as the casting goddess at another soap. But more vital than you remembering *her*, my sweetness, is that she remembers *you*."

"You're kidding?"

"When it comes to my babies, I may schmooze, I may console, and I may bitch up a storm every other Tuesday, but I never kid."

Olive thought of herself as the ultimate stage mom, and viewed all of her actors, young and old, as offspring. "No, Mars, she asked for you specifically. But of course, how could anyone forget that handsome kisser of yours—or your bare behind?"

I suppressed a groan. "Enough, already, when it comes to that shaving cream ad. And I wasn't bare-assed naked, I'll beg you to recall."

"Close enough to get considerable attention. My phone hasn't stopped ringing off the hook with people requesting your talents. Then again, many of them are requesting you to do unique things, only *without* a towel this time, and becoming a high-priced madam was never one of my career goals."

"Very funny. I thought you said you never kid?"

"I make exceptions for my favorite children, and don't get smart. Now, can you meet Jillian tomorrow? She thinks you'll be perfect for this role."

"Which is?"

"A brand new character the writers on her show are developing."

"Developing? So this just isn't an under-five role, it's something more substantial?"

"With your talent, would I waste your time sending you out for a one- or two-shot appearance on a soap with only a few lines? No, this role has day-player, or recurring status. They have a hot story in mind, one that—and I quote Jillian—'will break down taboos and change the face of daytime television as we know it.'"

"Breaking taboos?" I plopped down on the sofa and kicked off my sneakers. After I tore off my socks and tossed them into the corner, I planted my feet on the coffee table. "Okay, now I'm intrigued."

"Yes, I thought that might do it." When she paused, I detected a combination sigh-hesitation. It was the same sort of sigh-hesitation I'd heard just before she inquired whether I'd perform half-naked on camera, which eventually lead to that infamous shaving cream ad.

"Okay, Olive, what is it now? The character is half-man, half-unicorn? The character is a crazy loon who dresses as a giant banana, or, God forbid, wears only a towel? The character is—"

"Is gay."

My gut clenched. Sure, I was an openly gay man in my private life, but when it came to my career, I wasn't stupid enough to advertise it. The ugly truth of the matter was that an actor risked getting jobs because of his or her orientation. In my case, being often cast in romantic lead roles, I've always done my level best not to flaunt my sexuality. I knew it was one thing to spend the majority of a career on Broadway-for some reason, gay stage actors didn't have to worry as much, if at all, about being typecast. We were somehow a "special breed" when it came to that particular quadrant of the entertainment world. But it was quite another matter for gay actors to pursue leading roles, especially romantic leads, on television and in movies when homophobia still hung over the industry like a dirty, stinking cloud of shame. Even in this day and age, many casting directors were loath to put gay men in romantic leads, which meant most gay actors still hid their sexuality, either never coming out to the public, or coming out only after they'd gained a solid reputation for their work.

Therefore, although I knew the day would eventually come, and I'd discussed the possibility with Olive on numerous occasions, I still didn't know how I felt about it. Should I even risk auditioning for this role? And if I landed it, would I openly admit

my sexuality to the public if anyone asked, or would I let the rumors fly, which usually happened when any actor portrayed a gay character? I suppose it came down to a matter of bravery, and I wasn't certain I had enough of that particular trait to do it. I had to tread very carefully, since one wrong career choice could typecast an actor for life, and then roles would become limited. Certainly I could always refocus my career on the stage, but now that I'd had a pleasant taste of television and film, I didn't want to shut the door on potential opportunities.

"Mars? Are you still there? I didn't mean to take you by surprise. Do you want to think about it? Given the way you feel, I could call Jillian and reschedule for later this week, allowing you extra time to decide if this is something you wish to pursue."

I appreciated Olive's sensitivity and concern. Before answering, however, I chugged down the remainder of my now-tepid beer. My mind raced with questions, and I couldn't decide which one to ask first.

But then a horrifying thought hit me. I bolted upright, slammed the empty beer bottle onto the coffee table, and cleared my throat. "A gay character...wait a second. Does Jillian *think* I'm gay? I mean, does she remember me as being too effeminate or—"

"Far from it. Indeed, ironically enough, Jillian's only concern is that you may be *too* macho for the role. Her words, not mine. Isn't that a kick in the head?"

"You're kidding?"

"Mars, sweetheart, you know—"

"Oh, right, you never kid. Then what did she say about me? If I don't come off as being gay, why did I come to mind for this part? Was there something I did, or said? Some characteristic of mine that made her think 'queer'—"

"Relax, love, relax. Your façade is intact. Here's what she had to say..." Papers rustled on her end of the line. "And I quote, 'He's got a great look, the proverbial tall, dark, and handsome type, with the most hypnotic and intense green eyes I've ever seen.' I told you those eyes were your best feature, Mars, wasted all these years on the stage when only a camera could do them justice."

"Yeah, yeah, Olive...what else?"

"Jillian said they're searching for someone who's in his mid to late twenties, has an impressive physique, and can 'wow' the show's female fans. In other words, my sweetness," interjected Olive, a sardonic quirk to her voice, "they'll likely want you to appear in your undies on occasion—or perhaps in a towel—to make all the viewers hot and bothered." She laughed. "Jillian also said, and I'm quoting again, 'But just as important, he needs to be able to portray rugged as well as sensitive, and he'll need to handle a wide range of emotions for this difficult role.' They've been testing actors for weeks with no success. So as I mentioned, when she called this morning, she specifically asked for you—by name. She may not have cast you over at *Tomorrow's Edge*, but you certainly left a lasting impression on her, from your 'look' to your acting chops."

"For a role like this, wouldn't they rather go with an experienced soap-actor?"

"I actually wondered that myself. But no, they want a fresh face, someone new to daytime. Should I go on, or are you still in a blind panic about your manliness or lack thereof?"

"Again, very funny. But sure, tell me more."

"As I said, it's a day-player role with a guaranteed twelve-week stint, but there's a possibility of getting elevated to contract-player status should the character prove popular with the fans. They want

to cast before the end of the month since the story needs to hit the air before November sweeps. Although I don't know their current ratings off the cuff, I do know the numbers have been in the tank for a while and they're looking to do something to regain the show's top spot on the heap before they get cancelled altogether. I suppose 'desperation' to these daytime folk means doing something different and controversial. So, what do you say?"

"I'm...I'm still not sure..."

"That's because you're your own worst critic. Always have been. And you're also a worrywart like my third ex-husband, God rest his miserable soul. Yes, you have legitimate concerns about your image, Mars, and I do understand. But we've known from the start that this may happen one day."

"I was just thinking that myself."

"And the times are changing..."

"Not fast enough, thanks to the eight long years of repressive, puritanical, moralistic crap that came out of Washington. I'm surprised Bush and Cheney"—up until that instant, I hadn't realized how much those names bore the same sing-song quality as Howdy Doody—"didn't make it a law to brand all of us queers with a big 'Q' on our foreheads."

"But they didn't, and with Mutt and Jeff thankfully out of power, strides are once again being made. Just ask any of the gay couples getting hitched in Vermont or New Hampshire these days. So get off your soapbox, no pun intended." She sighed. "Now, be that as it may, I hope you know that I have faith in your abilities to handle this role, but I'll represent you in the manner that makes you the most comfortable. You won't be doing me any favors by going to the audition, and I'll happily abide by your wishes and tell Jillian whatever you decide. I just don't want you to regret turning

down the opportunity. It is a soap, after all, steady work for at least a while, and it will put you in front of millions and add another impressive credit to your already lengthy résumé. Yet the decision is completely up to you. So? What's the verdict?"

I couldn't help remembering what had happened earlier, my ribald challenge to Reed about whipping out his penis and proving his claim of being Cock King. Certainly I'd had the bravery to do that, but now, concerning this matter of greater importance, did I have the balls for this crucial challenge, an audition that could affect my entire career?

I scanned the apartment's brick walls, dotted with colorful posters from legendary Broadway musicals, each featuring the original cast, including *Man Of La Mancha*, *Carousel*, *A Little Night Music*, and *Fiddler On The Roof*, of course, the one that had started it all for me. My parents had painstakingly hunted them down, had them framed, and presented them to me several birthdays ago. The posters represented the constant support and encouragement my parents had given me through the years, and now they also helped me make my decision.

"Okay, I'll be there."

"Splendid. I knew you'd do it."

"You did, huh?"

"Certainly. You may be cautious, Mars, sometimes to a fault, but you usually know a good opportunity when you see it. All right, my sweetness, I'll tell Jillian you'll be there at nine sharp. Let me know what happens. So until I talk to you tomorrow, break a leg and—"

"Hey, wait a second. Before I audition, I'd love to research the show or at least see an episode or two, but you never told me the name of it."

"I didn't? Silly me. Are you familiar with *Destiny's Storm*?"

As if on cue, another bout of female giggles punched through Reed's closed bedroom door, severing the steady drone of the air-conditioning unit in one of the living room windows.

Once again, my gut clenched, and I groaned. "Not really, but I know someone who is."

CHAPTER 3

Being force-fed a salad of worms, spiders, and leeches...walking barefoot on a field of razorblades, knives, and broken glass...having one's testicles tied to a bowling ball before it's hurled off the top of the Empire State Building...

To me, none of these situations constituted a "good time." Yet all of them brightened in comparison to being in the same room with Niki Wiggins and listening to the Bronx-born chorus girl babble on and on about *Destiny's Storm*. Not that I wasn't interested in hearing a "fan's viewpoint" when it came to the soap opera, but the voice of this particular fan—whose nasally whine would have made Fran "The Nanny" Drescher stuff cotton into her own ears—started annoying the shit out of me after only a few minutes. If only Reed and I had sprung for Internet access, I'd have

been able to do my own research and I wouldn't have had to endure Niki-hell. But with less than twenty-four hours before my audition, I was desperate, and desperate times called for desperate measures.

After my phone call with Olive, I'd wracked my brain and realized just how little I knew about a television show that had been on the air for more than four full decades. Most of my knowledge was rather elementary, based on conversations I'd overheard in bars or coffee houses, or during my college days from cafeterias or dorm rooms, even what I pieced together from the covers of Soap Opera Digest and similar periodicals that graced newsstands or convenience store shelves. Basically, like all daytime soap operas, the show boasted a large ensemble cast, and through the years, several true stars had emerged. Samantha Steers, a veteran actress who had been with the show since its debut, played the role of Autumn Knight—the character's moniker had also become a household "name" in and of itself-and the daytime diva had won several Emmys for her work. When growing up, I also remember when I couldn't go a day without hearing someone mention the names "Tempest and Troy," one of daytime's most popular "super-couples." And several of the show's former cast members had gone on to become mega-stars in movies or prime time television. But other than that, I knew next to nothing about the trials and tribulations of the characters on *Destiny's Storm*. That's when I knew I was trapped into seeking Niki's help.

It had been difficult enough gathering the nerve to knock on Reed's bedroom door, then even more difficult a moment later when he answered, his privates covered only by the loincloth, which he held in his hand. Niki looked so damned comfortable lounging in Reed's bed, her bleached-blonde hair tousled to match

the sheets. Her smile of obvious appeasement had me choking down envy.

"If you're—err—done for the moment," I had said, "I'd like to talk to you. Do you mind?"

"Sure, man," said Reed.

"Ah, well, it's not you I need. It's actually Niki."

The way Reed's eyebrows lurched upward in shock might have been comical were it not for all the surreal make-up still covering his face. He shook his head several times, almost as if he hoped the action would somehow clear the confusion as to why I wanted to speak with someone well on her way to becoming my arch nemesis. Maybe he hadn't been so oblivious to the animosity that existed between his girlfriend and myself after all.

"Do you mind, Niki?" I asked. "It's kind of important."

"Kind of? How important really?"

"Okay, very important."

"On a scale of one to ten, how important?"

"Toward the top."

"Toward the top, eight? Toward the top, nine? I want an exact number of importance before I decide."

I clenched my teeth, yet employed all of my acting skills to keep my temper in check. "Let's say it's a ten."

"And what exactly do you want? What constipates this ten?"

"You mean 'constitutes'?"

"Isn't that what I said?"

"No, you"—more teeth clenching—"please. I just need to talk. It won't take too long, I promise."

"Good, because I'm hungry. Talk about what?"

"I have questions about a television show."

"Which show?"

"Destiny's Storm."

"A soap opera. You? Why?"

"Because I need to do some research."

"What kind of research?"

Fucking bitch! She reveled in her game of "let's make the actor beg," and it killed me. If what I needed hadn't been so timesensitive, I would have snatched her bony little wrist, dragged her off the bed, stretched her across my knee, and spanked her ass until it turned a blistering red. I think she knew it, and oddly, I sensed she would have liked it. "Just general research, is all."

"Since when are you interested in soaps?" asked Reed, his free hand digging into a dresser drawer and plucking out a pair of bikini briefs.

"That's what I'd like to know," spouted Niki. "I've seen you, Mars...you roll your eyes every time I talk about my soaps. Now all of a sudden you want to know about them?"

"Not all of them, just one of them."

"But why?"

I swallowed even more of my mounting anger. "If you must know, it's about an audition."

"That's what Olive had for you?" exclaimed Reed. "Fantastic!" He spun around so fast, he dropped both the underwear and his loincloth.

Catching an actual glimpse of his cock might have been heaven had it not been for the awkwardness of the moment. Nevertheless, the momentary flash I saw of his man-meat sent a ripple of pleasure through me. His perpetual boasting hadn't been all hot air after all. Indeed, his piece appeared quite hefty—uncut, thick, and lengthy, even in its flaccid state. And oh-so-fucking-perfect for my salivating mouth. But as much as I ached to ogle him further, to

whip out my own cock and do a comparison as I'd envisioned during our conversation in the kitchen, I summoned the decency to glance toward the ceiling as he stooped to pick up his clothing. Yet I certainly knew what memories would run over and over in my brain later that night in my bedroom. Jack-Off Central for hours on end...

"An under-five?" asked Reed.

I shook my head and smiled. "Day-player."

"Fucking aces!"

"So," I continued, redirecting my attention to the bed, "I wouldn't be asking if it wasn't important, Niki. I know the show's been around longer than any of us have been alive, that Samantha Steers has starred in it since the beginning, but that's about it. I don't need much—just enough to clue me in on what's happening these days. About the current stories, what characters have been featured these past few months, and so forth."

"I see. And?"

"And nothing. That's it. Can you help me?"

"Can I, or will I? I can, yes...but will I...? Two different questions."

"Please..."

"And what's it worth to you?"

"My gratitude, of course."

"Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

She said nothing for a moment, just smirked and lifted one of her thin eyebrows. Another challenge. In order to stop my hands from wringing her scrawny neck, I crossed my arms over my chest and buried my fists into my pits.

"Hmm," she continued, her face twisting in mock

contemplation. "I'm not sure, Mars. Somehow your gratitude doesn't seem to be good enough."

"Of course it's good enough," countered Reed, who had pulled on his underwear and stared down at her. His voice maintained a light, jovial air. "Isn't it, sweetheart?"

Niki gave him a hasty look, and her expression instantly changed. Luckily for me, she seemed to care more about making Reed happy than in making me miserable. "Yeah, sure, I was *only* teasing him." One of those annoying cats-screeching-in-the-alleyway giggles spilled from her mouth.

"Great. Well, why don't you help Mars, and in the meantime, I'll take a quick shower and wash this gunk off my face." He bent forward and gave her a peck on the forehead. "Okay, sugar?"

"Sure thing, lover boy."

"Thanks, sweetie."

"My pleasure, sexy."

I wanted to barf.

Before I could turn away, the girl shamelessly slid out from under the covers, doing absolutely nothing to hide her nudity. She grabbed Reed's shirt from the bedside chair, then started to pull it on even as I spun around and hastened to the kitchen, grabbed my third beer, and chugged it down.

And thus began my thirty minutes in hell.

Now, as Niki continued prattling on about what sounded like inane and illogical plotlines, and how much she detested most of them, it seemed clear to me that the show *did* need something special, a story that could shock the struggling soap back to life. From what Niki claimed—and it seemed plausible, considering what Olive had told me about the ratings—the currently featured characters and stories centered around the fictional Midwestern

town of Mount Pleasant had bored many longtime fans to tears. And worse, had coerced even more to turn off their televisions altogether. Not good. It seemed only natural that a writing staff might try something controversial such as introducing a gay character in order to generate renewed interest in the aged soap.

Thankfully, just as Niki finally seemed to be wrapping up her dithering monologue, Reed appeared in the living room to save me the burden of being alone with her for another minute. Barefoot, but dressed in jeans and a plain white pullover shirt that clearly highlighted every groove in his six-pack abs, he had combed his long damp hair back off his forehead, and tribal make-up no longer hid his face from view. As always, while taking in his handsome features, I breathed a sigh of appreciation.

"It's about time," whined Niki, stealing the words from my own mouth. She rushed into Reed's arms. Accosted him, was more like it. "I'm starving. Absolutely starving. Put on some shoes and take me to lunch. Please? Pretty please? Jesus, Louises, I thought you'd *never* get out of the shower or that Mars would *never* finish pestering me with his silly questions."

I gasped true outrage. "Me...? Pestering...? Silly...? All I asked is that you tell me a bit about *Destiny's Storm*, but the next thing I know, I can't get a word in edgewise, let alone a question, because of the non-stop epic saga that followed."

"Did you hear that, Reed? You're my witness. Earlier he said he'd be grateful for my help. But that sure doesn't sound like gratitude to me. Does it sound like gratitude to you?"

"Niki, I don't—" started Reed.

"Nope, it's not gratitude. That's how he acts, Reed. He's always so demanding, trying to monopolitimize my time—"

"The word is 'monopolize," I said. "And I certainly didn't

plan to do that."

"Why did you correct me? I said the word right. But you always do that. You always correct me as if I've said something wrong. Sometimes you're so mean. Do you hear how he talks to me, Reed? I should have been having fun with you in the shower, but instead I got stuck with this ingrate who makes fun of me every chance he gets. No, correcting me is not being grateful, Mars Mansfield. That doesn't sound at all like gratitude—"

"It's Manchester."

"Huh?"

"My name. You got that wrong, too."

Niki tossed me a nervy sneer that basically said, "whatever, and go fuck yourself," and also looked as if she would explode in fury at the drop of a hat. Then she turned back to Reed, all sweetness and light yet again. A split personality maybe? Shit, one was bad enough. Nope, just bad acting on her part, trying to play me against my roommate. "So, will you take me out to lunch? *Pleeese*, baby? Come on, put on your shoes and let's go, sweetie, and—"

"I don't think we have time," interrupted Reed, eyeing his wristwatch. "It's nearly one o'clock, and didn't you tell me that you—"

The girl screeched like a banshee on crack. "What?" She whacked Reed's shoulder. "Nearly one? Why didn't you tell me, damn it? Great, just fucking great! Now I'll be late for my stupid appointment. Now I won't have time to eat. Now I won't have time to take a shower. Now I won't have time to make myself up properly. And if I don't get this job, it's all Mars's fault! Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Like a petulant child, she shrieked additional curses and stomped down the hallway, her straw-colored hair trailing behind

her like a witch's broom. Punctuating the tantrum, Reed's bedroom door banged shut. Less than a minute later, before either my roommate or I could utter a syllable, she stormed back into the hall and plowed toward the front door, her yellow blouse unbuttoned, her blue jeans unzipped, carrying her high-heeled sandals and a mammoth purse than clanked and jangled with every step. She said nothing to either of us, just gave me a glare aimed to slaughter before barreling out of the apartment.

After a speechless moment, I turned around. Reed's gaping jaw mirrored my own as well as the open front door. "What's her damned problem?" I asked, hastily closing the door and securing the deadbolt for fear she'd return.

He shrugged and issued a frustrated sigh. "It's a waitress job or something. She's been out of work for weeks and—"

"No jobs in the chorus line?"

"She kind of had a—well—let's just say 'an incident' with her last director and now—"

"In other words, she was a bitch to him and now no one else in the theater wants to hire her, huh?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Figures. Well, as far as today goes, I swear, man, I didn't bombard her with questions or mean to make her late. And I certainly didn't intend to set her off like that."

"I know, I know. She's just—a bit—high-strung."

"High-strung? She should be." I pointed toward the skylights. "And I'll be happy to supply both the noose *and* the rafter!"

He smirked. "You really don't like her much, do you?"

"You think? Gee, Reed, what gave you that impression?"

"Listen, buddy, I appreciate you being patient with her... pleasant, even...especially when I can see how difficult it is for

you."

"She doesn't make it easy, that's for sure. And I'm certain her last director will say the same. But in all fairness, she hates me just as much. We're just like oil and water. So don't let it worry you. Forget I said anything."

"See, that's what I can't quite figure out, why she doesn't like you. I mean, we've gotten along great since you moved in. All my friends like you, everyone in the theater admires you. Shit, even my parents have voiced their approval of you, and that's not easy with *Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller*, you know. But with Niki, I don't get it. At first I thought she resented you for living here. She's already dropped a few hints about her moving in."

"Oh, please tell me you didn't—"

"Don't worry. That will never happen, and I already told her so. I'm not committed to her, and I certainly don't love her. But other than that one possibility, I can't imagine why you two don't get along."

"You can't? Really?"

"I haven't a clue in the world why she gives you such a hard time."

"Because she sees me as—" I barely stopped myself from adding "a rival."

"What were you going to say?"

"Nothing, nothing." To avoid further speculation, I rushed toward the kitchen and talked over my shoulder. "You're probably right. She likely resents me for being your roommate and wants to glom onto you, and this cheap apartment. How about a beer?" I returned to the living room a moment later, carrying two bottles. I handed him one. "Not to start an argument, Reed, but I've wondered something about Niki and I've just gotta know."

"Know what?" he asked, flinging aside the bottle top and taking a swig.

"What in the world do you see in her anyway?"

He stared at me for so long, with his face devoid of all expression, that I wondered if I'd made him angry. Finally, his eyes twinkled with something akin to lechery. "The truth?"

"Always."

"Because she sucks a mean cock."

"Is that all?"

"That's a lot."

"But is it enough to put up with—with—" Once again I held my tongue. Sure, Reed had a tendency to be a little slow when it came to sizing up other people, but even *he* couldn't be blind when it came to Niki's incessant neediness, her frequent tantrums and irksome snobbishness, and her lack of intelligence when it came to the English language. And he certainly wasn't deaf, so her nasally voice must have grated on his eardrums from time to time. Therefore, I decided not to launch into a litany of her less-thanstellar qualities. "I mean, come on, man, you could do so much better."

"I could?" He raised an eyebrow before once again bringing the beer bottle to his lips and taking a sip.

"Don't you ever look in the mirror? Chicks are practically lining up at our door for a chance to be with you."

"Huh? What?" With dramatic effect only an actor could provide, he presented an aura of stark terror, stalked to the front door, and placed one eye against the security peephole. He gasped in feigned relief. "Nope, nope, can't see anyone out in the hall."

"Knock it off. And you know what I mean."

"Do I?"

"Don't play stupid. You're a good-looking guy, a 'catch,' and you know it. So I can't believe you'd stay with someone like Niki just because she's a decent cocksucker."

"Every dude in the world craves good head."

"Of course, but you and I both know you could definitely find a nicer chick who would happily do that job. Hell, even a guy might be preferable to—" The moment the words flew off my tongue, I wanted to reel them back into my big, fat mouth.

"Oh? A guy, huh?" Now a mischievous glint lit his eyes. "There's an interesting possibility. Hey, Mars, are you hoping to arrange yet another type of audition today?"

"Excuse me?"

"I've heard that guys suck cock better than any woman, and since you're a guy, and gay...well, you'd know for a fact. Is it true?"

"Ah...yeah...from my experience, it's true."

"Fascinating, fascinating." For an instant, his gaze locked on my face, or more specifically, on my lips. "I wonder...you may have a valid point about Niki and finding someone else. Know of anyone in particular who may be interested? And keep in mind, I'm Cock King, so it won't be an easy task. I'd need an expert, you know?"

The hairs on my arms snapped to attention. Was my current lust for him that obvious? Or had he realized in all these months how much I ached for him? I felt a bit wobbly, and my cheeks sizzled in embarrassment. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"What do you think I'm saying?"

"That you...you want me to...?"

He shrugged nonchalantly, then raised the beer bottle to his

lips. For an instant, the tip of his tongue slipped once, twice, three times inside the tiny opening before he tilted the bottle and began to chug the beer. I couldn't tear my gaze from his bobbing Adam's apple. My heart began a wild gallop, while my cock, never completely dormant in his company, started to twitch in need.

It felt an eternity before he lowered the bottle and gave me a smile that appeared almost sheepish. "Oh, the look on your face is priceless, Mars. I didn't mean to freak you out or imply anything. I'm just kidding, of course." A dusting of crimson invaded his cheeks.

"Of course..." A part of me felt vast relief at not being called into service for the horny cocksucker I was, while another part couldn't help but experience colossal disappointment. And an eerie feeling of déjà vu rushed through me, while memories of a man from my past flashed through my head...

Warren.

Suddenly feeling lightheaded, off balance, I hastily set aside my unopened beer. I strolled toward the bathroom, deciding on a casual comment to end the unnerving conversation. "Hope you didn't use up all the hot water or I may just end up having a hissy fit like your girlfriend."

"Wouldn't a cold shower do you better?" he called.

More déjà vu. "Don't flatter yourself."

Reed's familiar laughter echoed through the adjacent living room, yet it sounded different somehow—almost tentative, uncertain, forced—while additional memories caught me off guard.

Panting, I closed the bathroom door behind me and leaned back against the wood. With no time to spare, I buried my right hand in my running shorts and jock strap, gripping and stroking my

blossoming erection and eyeing the towels Reed had recently used to dry his superb body.

For some reason, I couldn't shake the notion that his jest hadn't really been a jest at all, that he actually wanted me to fall to my knees and "audition" for Niki's job. A job I would have been only too thrilled to land.

But I'd faced a similar situation before. Indeed, the conversation I'd just had with Reed almost exactly repeated one I'd had less than a year earlier in my previous apartment in Greenwich Village. With Warren. And look how badly that had ended.

No, I told myself, no way in hell. I couldn't go through something like that ever again, and I certainly couldn't go through finding another place to live. Hell, I'd unpacked my last box only a few weeks ago and I liked living here...with Reed...with the sexy man just outside the bathroom door.

I tore off my clothes, stepped into the shower, and turned on the hot water full blast. Amid the steamy spray, I lost myself in fantasy, remembering the image of Reed's cock, imagining us on the couch, under the skylights, lazily at first, then spirited and wild with animalistic passion, sucking and fucking away the afternoon.

First I'd prepare him with my mouth, getting him all slick and dripping with need. Then I'd straddle his waist, with him gripping my ass cheeks and lowering me onto his solid prick. He'd fill me to the brink, possess me in both body and mind, then start bucking his hips. I'd clutch his broad shoulders, jam my tongue down his throat, and "giddy-up" that sexy cowpoke for hours on end. And finally, he'd order me back onto my knees to finish him off. After giving his bulging and drooling cock-head several hungry swipes with my tongue, he'd finally fill my mouth with his seed,

demanding I swallow every luscious drop. As if I'd need any coaxing...

That did it. Pressing my ass against the tile wall and bowing my head under the cascading water, I jacked my throbbing boner to a rousing, leg-shaking climax. I blasted into my free hand, imagining the pooling semen as Reed's. While licking the cream from my fingers, I continued to ponder the legitimacy of his offer. And how I yearned to take him up on that offer.

Oh, fuck, how I yearned...

Yet I also prayed the unnerving sensation of déjà vu would not return and that history would not repeat itself.

CHAPTER 4

When it came to bagging a straight guy, I likened the tricky process to a game of five card stud, since it had about the same high odds as drawing to fill an inside straight. Or since I preferred bottoming, I guess that should be for the "straight" to fill me. Pun aside, either case required a gamble, sometimes huge, with no guarantee of a successful outcome.

But what exactly were the odds when it came to something happening between Reed and myself?

At this point, I had no way of knowing for certain, other than the odds were likely not in my favor. The problem was, assuming for a moment his jest hadn't been a jest at all, I could look at his words in two completely opposite ways. Was Reed, knowing my sexual orientation, only probing my desires when it came to

sucking his cock, or was he actually revealing some of his own desires, a subtle way of telling me he truly wanted me to make a move on him?

I couldn't shake the notion that the latter might be true. Was my gaydar actually working properly, or on the fritz and in serious need of adjustment?

Regardless, given my current confusion, it was with a mixture of disappointment and relief that when I exited the bathroom I found myself alone in the apartment. A note taped on my bedroom door bore an explanation in Reed's familiar scrawl...

Mars,

I decided to head over to the 'rents to pay my monthly "duty call" before my mother has a freaking cow. Plus it'll give me a chance to see the looks on their faces when I tell them about my Jungle Warrior #8 role.

How proud they'll be—not! Too bad I took off the makeup. Haha. Of course I'll give them the obligatory invitation for tomorrow night's performance at the Quintero, but I'll bet you twenty they'll try to shit me with the ol' "we have a business dinner" excuse again. They'll think they're so clever and I won't see through their flimsy lies, right? As if they'd ever once lower themselves to attend a performance of anything I'm doing, so I don't understand why they even bother fibbing—or why I even bother inviting them in the first place. I wonder what that says about me. Hey, where's

Dr. Freud when you need a good head-shrinker?

Anyway, sorry about what I said earlier. I truly was only teasing, and I definitely didn't mean to insult you. You know how sometimes I can be a real ass. I guess I can take after my father more than I'm willing to admit. But again, I'm sorry, man.

When I get home tonight, if you're still awake, you'll tell me all about your soap audition tomorrow, okay? I'm dying to know what Olive line up for you.

Later, bud, Reed

Taking his words at face value, I smiled. So maybe he *had* been only joking. Then my smile faded away when another possible explanation hit me. Or maybe, just maybe, he had hastily left for his parent's house on Park Avenue in order to put some distance between us.

Could it be?

I flung off my towel and stepped to my dresser for fresh underwear. I pulled on a pair of boxer briefs, then plopped backward onto my bed, stared at the whitewashed ceiling high above, and allowed my mind to compare Reed and Warren both professionally and personally.

When it came to their chosen careers, both men possessed drive and ambition, yet that's where the similarities ended. Reed was an actor like myself, of course, while Warren worked as a marketing research analyst and couldn't have cared less about the theater

world or anything associated with the arts. Reed loved the creative process his work provided; he enjoyed portraying a wide variety of characters and exploring the human experience from various perspectives. Whereas Warren, who contended that numbers never lied, loved pouring over survey reports day after day, unable to look at the results from any other angle than from what the numbers indicated.

And when it came to their habits and personalities, wide chasms of differences existed. For one, Reed barely touched alcohol, apart from the occasional beer, and shunned all types of drugs. Warren, on the other hand, had turned imbibing into an art form, and he could dump more white powder onto mirrors in a single month than Mother Nature could blanket New York City with blizzards in an entire winter. Reed favored casual attire or lounging around the apartment half-naked, which reflected his easygoing demeanor and uninhibited nature, while Warren's closets bulged with perfectly laundered and pressed business suits, pricey neckties, and squadrons of polished imported Italian shoes, which pretty much summed up his overall "stuffed shirt" manner. Yes, the two men were like night and day...

Apart from several important areas, that is.

Both men were single, sexy, and straight—or supposedly so, regarding the latter.

I had once heard it stated that many straight men were only a six-pack away from being gay. I had tested that amusing theory more than once, and had come to realize it wasn't completely unfounded. The theory made sense on various levels. According to studies, guys had sexual thoughts every few minutes, and in general, they loved having their dicks fondled and sucked. When it came to many horny men, especially those who've indulged in

beverages that stripped away inhibitions, if a female wasn't around to do the job, then the hands and mouth of another man were usually better than none at all.

Warren hadn't been picky when it came to gender, that's for certain. And hell, it hadn't even taken a full six-pack to start things rolling. By that point, we'd been rooming together for several months. One night he'd come home from a long day at the office, tossed back a few beers, and we'd had a conversation almost identical to the one I'd shared today with Reed about "blowjobs." In Warren's tipsy state, he had suggested some mutual satisfaction between us, and in my enamored state, I had jumped at the opportunity to seduce him, eagerly welcoming him into my bed. Before the dawn, he and I had become lovers, which we remained for several more months until things got weird. Too weird. And way too ugly and heartbreaking to the point that I had to move out of our apartment in the Village at a moment's notice.

Now here I was with an eerily similar situation on my hands, only this time with a roommate almost completely opposite in style and temperament. With a roommate whom I suspected would be a much more passionate, giving, and proficient lover than Warren could ever be. And with a roommate who could ultimately, and oh so easily, steal my heart.

Once again that Sondheim song started playing in my head, and my gut clenched in agony. Damn it, I thought, running my hands over my unshaven face. The stubble grated against my palms, mimicking my jagged emotions. Mixed signals were always a bitch to decipher, and the ones Reed had given me today played havoc with my brain, not to mention another vital part of my anatomy.

So what was the likelihood that Reed shared Warren's hidden desires? Yes, Reed had accepted me as his roommate without so

much as batting an eyelash regarding my sexuality, and yes, we'd gotten along so well these past few months, it felt almost as if we'd known each other for years. Decades. But as much as I wanted to believe his instant acceptance of me and our enjoyment of each other's company could develop into something more, I had no clear-cut indication it would. Sure, he admitted today that he'd actually checked out my body and had touched me when he said it. That was more than Warren had ever done before the night we'd become lovers. Plus, Reed may have accepted the dare of showing me his cock had Niki, with her crappy timing, not interrupted us. And with Reed's supposed "blowjob jest" also now in play, with the way he looked at me with a lustful twinkle in his eyes firmly etched into my head, the mixed signals had turned horribly muddy.

Did my roommate truly yearn for a romp with another male? Specifically, me? And how many beers, if any, would it take for that to happen? Would he be completely averse to the idea, mortified beyond belief if I actually made a play for him? Would he perhaps consider the possibility, allowing for some experimentation? Or would he rip off my clothes with mutual enthusiasm and ply my body with hungry kisses and manic caresses, welcoming a full-scale, no-holds-barred session of steamy male-male action? Or was I simply reading more into his words and his manner due to my wishful thinking, just wasting my time and working myself into an emotional lather over nothing?

Fuck! If I only knew Reed's actual feelings, then I might be able to get a handle on my own. But since my roommate had left for the remainder of the day, I couldn't even question him to gain better insight or additional clues.

I could, however, concentrate on a more pressing issue—namely, tomorrow's audition. Yes, yes, I needed to forget about

Reed for the moment, forget about my personal situation and focus instead on my professional one.

I gave myself a mental pep talk to shape up, then climbed off the bed. I headed into the kitchen to make myself a late lunch. As I waited for the microwave to ding, I debated whether to head out and locate an Internet café where I might be able to research Destiny's Storm, or perhaps even catch a few episodes online.

Halfway through my hot and spicy pepperoni calzone, I suddenly thought of my gal-pal Cordelia Mazzaricchi, who used the professional name Delia Maze because she contended her given moniker sounded like a bad Italian meal. Although the experienced actress was now firmly ensconced in the theater and hadn't starred in *Destiny's Storm*, she had spent several years on another soap—either Hearts Under Siege or The Promise Of Dawn, I couldn't recall which one—about a decade earlier and long before I'd met her. She could probably offer advice on what I might expect at my reading the following day, and if I landed the role, lend insight regarding how soaps worked in general. I had attempted to contact her months ago, just before my audition for Tomorrow's Edge, but at the time she had been out of town starring in a touring company of *The King And I* and I'd been unable to seek her wisdom. After I lost the part, it didn't seem worth discussing the matter with her, so on the subsequent occasions when I'd seen her. I'd never mentioned it. But now that another opportunity to land a soap had presented itself, I wanted to take advantage of her close proximity. If she was home, that is, or even in town. The lady had a dizzying social and professional life, and catching her between fancy luncheons, brunches, and soirees, or theatrical engagements, spa treatments, and face-lifts could pose a real challenge.

Therefore, after I washed dishes and settled into the living room, imagine my surprise when she picked up her phone on the first ring.

"I don't believe it," I said into the mouthpiece. "You're actually home? Or have you redirected your calls to a cell phone these days?"

"I've told you how much I hate those nasty little fuckers," she declared. "They give you brain cancer, you know?"

"Actually, I didn't know, but I guess I'm lucky I can't afford one."

"Oh, poor dear Mars, always the put-upon actor. No, I'm here all day, making lists."

"About what this time? Potential lovers or potential roles?"

"Nothing as spectacular as either one. I'm just deciding what I need to take on the road with me for several weeks."

"Another play?"

"Mame. Can you believe it?"

"The lead?"

"Fuck you. I'm not that old. No, I'm playing Vera Charles. It's a much better part, you know?"

"Hmm...wasn't Vera about Mame's age?"

"To quote my character—'I'm thrilled by the style and wit of each jest that you make. It's bracing to me.' And fuck you double, you little shit. And speaking of fucking, how are you, darling? Getting plenty of ass because that delicious television ad practically showed your boom-boom to the entire world?"

I groaned. "Not you, too? I called for advice, not a round of grief."

"Boy, did you call the wrong number."

A girlish giggle poured through the earpiece. An instant later, I

heard a metallic click, and knew the chain-smoking, forty-something actress had flared a cigarette from the engraved gold-plated lighter she carried with her everywhere. A gift from one of her many lovers, or so she claimed, although I sincerely doubted anyone would ever know the whole truth of its origin. Regardless, even now I could picture Delia in her well-appointed apartment off Central Park West, lazing on her plush burgundy sofa before a dormant white-marble fireplace, her shapely figure swathed in an opulent satin robe and an old-fashioned cigarette holder jutting out from between her perfectly manicured fingers. Delia, I'd always contended, had been born in the wrong era. If she'd come into this world half a century earlier, and worked and resided on the opposite coast, the actress would have been right at home amid the Garbos, the Loys, and the Bacalls of Hollywood's Golden Age.

"Oh, Mars, how could I not tease you about your shapely bottom, those cheeks so scrumptious even Mr. Whipple wouldn't be able to resist squeezing the Charmin'? The shaving cream ad has become quite popular, you know? So risqué and so mouthwatering. Especially when it comes to horny broads like me. Thankfully, the networks play it constantly. I'm amazed and grateful the censors haven't demanded its banning."

"Ha-ha. I'm glad you've gotten such a kick out of it. That's the only reason I took that job, you understand, just to give you more ammunition to tease me. A special present for your—what will it be soon?—your sixtieth birthday?"

"Don't be so droll, you sexy devil. It's beneath you. Besides, you know I'm only thirty-nine."

"Yes, it's been at least a few decades now, right?"

"I wouldn't be so quick to toss out the insults, Mars. Not when I'm in possession of a gift that keeps on giving in the form of that

shaving cream spot. I managed to actually record a DVD of it."

"You didn't?"

"I did. And do you know how I use it?"

"Oh, God, I'd only be guessing. And if you mention anything about battery-operated devices, I'm hanging up on you."

"Nothing so crass. No, darling, during dinner parties, I slide the DVD into the player and set it on PAUSE, then I tell the guests I personally know the stud wearing the shaving cream and little else. We quiver and swoon over those bulging arm muscles and that furry chest, of course, and speculate as to the size of your wanker beneath that skimpy towel. If you pause the commercial at just the right instant, you can actually see its outline, you know? Impressive, darling. Quite impressive. I'm surprised you're actually able to walk properly."

"Are you almost done now?"

"Almost"—she paused to take a drag from her cigarette—"but not quite. My friends are all so extremely impressed and oh-so-envious that I actually know you. Certainly, I allow them to think in the Biblical sense,' and why not? By the way, those who aren't thinking of me as a lustful Mrs. Robinson with you as my well-hung gigolo are just dying to meet you. I've weeded out the broads, of course. Boris expressed a manic interest, along with Frederick. Or was it Pierre? No, I think it was Freddie. Yes, he's the one who drooled and made a mess of my carpet. I could kill him for that. Oh, but I suppose it truly doesn't matter which of my male guests wanted you the most as I hear they all have equally gigantic peckers, which should please you to no end. Or rather, please you at *both* ends, hmm? I wonder if Boris and Freddie would work as a tag team..."

"Why the hell am I friends with you?"

"Shit if I know. Probably because I'm the only one in this town who doesn't want to screw your brains out, and you need the occasional rest."

"You're so not funny."

"Speaking of not funny, have you heard so much as a grumpity-grunt from the Village Neanderthal?"

"Warren doesn't know my new address, and I want to keep it that way."

"Glad to hear it. The last thing you need is for him showing up on your doorstep and pleading with you for another chance. The cretin. It would be just like him, too, you know? And after what he did to you? Well, you know how much I detested that goddamned son of a—"

"I know, I know..." With my brain already filled with unwanted memories of my ex-boyfriend, I changed the subject before Delia could launch into a string of Warren's all-too-familiar faults. "Listen, I need to get some advice."

"I told you, I have Boris and Freddie all lined up for you. Just say the word and—"

"What are you, my pimp?"

"Hmm. I wonder if there would be money in that line of work. No, darling, I'm just a friend who wants to see you happy with a man who actually deserves you. Unlike that pin-headed, good-fornothing troll who—"

"Please, forget about Warren, and I don't need dating advice," I said, although I was tempted to share my feelings with her about Reed and what had happened. But, since I didn't know what had *truly* happened between us, I decided to hold that particular hand close to the vest. "Let's talk acting. I have a reading tomorrow—one that Olive claims is promising."

"You've got one of the best agents in town, darling. She'd know."

"But I wanted to get some tips from you."

"About acting? My dear Mars, you can act circles around me. And if you ever tell anyone I said that, I will personally chop off your nuts and feed them to you for breakfast."

"No, I need advice on a specific role."

"Don't tell me you've *also* landed a role as Vera Charles in a rival touring company of *Mame*? And in drag?"

"Get serious. No, it's a soap. Destiny's Storm."

"Heavens to Harry, is that even still on television?"

"Supposedly, and I'm scheduled to read in the morning. The thing is, I know absolutely nothing about how these shows operate. Would you please give me some pointers from your time on *Hearts Under Siege?*"

"It was *The Promise Of Dawn*, for three grueling years. Nevertheless, I'll be happy to tell you whatever I can. But after I do, then you must promise to chat about my favorite subject, okay? Pretty please?"

"Men?" I replied with a smirk.

"Of course, my darling." Another clicking noise; another cigarette being lit across town in Delia's apartment. "Queers aren't the only ones who crave cock, you know?"

CHAPTER 5

When I exited my apartment building the following morning, freshly showered and shaved, I grinned in self-assurance. Although I've never been an overly superstitious actor like some of my colleagues, never worried about whistling in a dressing room, never fretted over someone wishing me "good luck" instead of "break a leg" before a performance, I couldn't help viewing the weather as a favorable omen for my audition.

How could I not? When I'd first met Jillian Shinbark, then casting for the soap *Tomorrow's Edge*, that day had opened with a deluge of Biblical proportions. I'll never forget how lightning had forked through the heavens almost continuously, while thunder rattled the cement beneath my feet. Rain spat out of the western sky at a forty-five-degree angle, drenching pedestrians, out-turning

umbrellas, and slowing traffic to a snail's crawl from the West Side Highway all the way to the Henry Hudson Parkway. Hailing a taxi had been a nightmare alone. Needless to say, that day I had not arrived on time for the audition, and since I always prided myself on being prompt, my mood had soured considerably even before I entered the studio, shivering and gritting my teeth, with rainwater streaming down my face and my clothing completely soaked. Still, despite my misery, I'd summoned all of my acting skills for the reading. I'd sensed that Jillian Shinbark liked my performance, yet when I didn't get the role, I deduced the hellish weather had played a large part in my misfortune.

But today, the oppressive heat wave had broken, and morning had dawned clear and promising, with a yellow sun smiling out of the east and legions of stark-white fluffy clouds skimming across a heaven of robust blue. This time I'd phoned ahead for a taxi, so as I waited for its arrival, I pulled a deep breath and absorbed the atmosphere, invigorating myself for the day ahead.

In Connecticut on a morning like this, landscaping trucks would whir down slumbering suburban streets, bringing with them a swarm of lazily buzzing lawnmowers. The perfume from resplendent azaleas, daffodils, and roses would embrace tree-shaded walkways, while breeze-rustled laundry on zigzagging clotheslines would enliven backyards with the scent of detergent and fabric softener.

But here in the Big Apple, I felt in a completely different universe, one designed to pump adrenaline through the veins and blast away any remnants of sleep. Car horns blared, street venders hawked, and babbling pedestrians scampered along the sidewalk with cell phones plastered to their ears. And even at this early hour, battling for dominance of the air, pizzerias, sushi restaurants, and

kosher delis surged with a suffocating smorgasbord of ethnic scents. Before auditions of any sort, I never ate, since my stomach had a tendency to knot in nervousness, but the heavenly aromas invading my nostrils now had me reconsidering my habit. I sat on my apartment building's small stoop, employing my willpower to resist. Instead of thinking about food, I concentrated on the stimulating sunlight as it rebounded off the lofty peaks of the financial district buildings several blocks to the south, and thought about what lay ahead for me that morning.

After my phone call with Delia the previous day, which lasted for hours and provided a wealth of advice regarding the frantic production schedule of daytime soap operas and what I might expect, I felt much more confident regarding the audition and had nary a care in the world. Except when it came to Reed. He hadn't returned to the apartment last night as promised. He did, however, phone so I wouldn't worry, saying he'd be spending the night at his parent's place. Although he sounded a bit weary, thanks to "Mom and Pop Moneybags," he whispered into the phone, he also sounded pleasant enough. But although he hadn't mentioned our conversation, which I hadn't expected anyway, I still couldn't abandon the feeling that something between us had changed. Whether for the better or for the worse, I didn't know, and my instincts offered no help.

Thankfully, before I had a chance to dwell on the issue and work myself into a possible emotional tizzy, a yellow cab screeched to a halt before my building and delivered me back to the "here and now."

My good fortune continued for the next forty minutes, and the bumper-to-bumper traffic I had expected never came to fruition. I made it to the enormous studio complex with nearly twenty

minutes to spare.

After signing in at the front desk, the attendant made a phone call, then a secretary arrived and escorted me through a maze of hallways, past squadrons of cameras and microphone stands and clothing racks, darkened sets of realistic-looking living rooms and bedrooms and kitchens, and finally into a conference room, where seats for more than a dozen people surrounded a gigantic conference table. On the walls, framed 8 x 10s of actors and actresses—presumably the stars of *Destiny's Storm*, since I recognized the visage of Samantha Steers, the show's legendary diva, among them—greeted me with Ultra-Bright smiles and eye twinkles, but no "live" person awaited my arrival. I had also half-expected to see a throng of other actors pacing the room in nervous anticipation, vying for the same part; their absence further confirmed Olive's claim that the show had arranged this special audition for me.

After the secretary offered me a cup of coffee, tea, or a soft drink, which I declined in quick succession, she asked me to have a seat and wait.

I didn't even get a chance to settle down before the door burst open and in breezed a bespectacled, somewhat plump woman wearing casual business attire. Oddly reminiscent of those belonging to Lily Munster, white-gray streaks at the woman's otherwise jet-black hairline triggered my memory regarding her identity.

Smiling, Jillian Shinbark extended her hand toward me. "Ah, there are those striking green eyes I remembered so distinctly. Still as magnetic as ever. How are you, Mr. Manchester? So good to see you again, and thanks for coming in at such short notice."

I shook her hand and grinned in return. To an actor, when a

casting director commented favorably on one of your features, it was usually a positive sign that you had indeed left a lasting impression on him or her. "My pleasure, and please, call me Mars."

She gestured me into a chair, then sat beside me. Before speaking, she dropped a single sheet of paper, face down, on the table. "How much did Olive tell you about the character we're casting?"

"Not much, frankly. Just that a gay character is being developed for the show and that the role promises to have some wide dimension, some teeth to it."

"Indeed. When I was working at that other place"—I presumed she meant *Tomorrow's Edge*—"I could tell that morning we met that you were able to handle deep emotion. That's what we need for this particular role. As Olive may have mentioned to you, we've had weeks of casting, but we haven't quite found our perfect Wave."

"Excuse me? Your perfect what?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. That's the working name of the character—Wave Benson."

Wave Benson...I rolled the name over and over in my head. Yes, I could live with that for however many weeks I might be asked to portray the same character.

"You see, Mars, no one we've auditioned quite captured the test scene in the way we had envisioned. Although I generally don't audition as many actors when casting a day-player role, this is a vital character in an important storyline and I need to find just the right person. As Olive might have mentioned to you, if the fans react positively, it might become a contract-player role. So to make a long story short, your name popped into my head the other day—

and I remembered those stunning eyes. With all your stage experience, your looks, your acting abilities, I thought you might be a likely candidate."

"I appreciate you telling me that, more than you can imagine."

"Would you stand up for me, please?"

"Ah, yeah, sure..."

I did as she requested while she gave my body a bold onceover, asking me to spin completely around, then turn from side to side, even to flex my arms for her. It certainly wasn't the first time I felt like a piece of prime beef standing on an auction block, but I understood that in this business, casting directors, producers, and other industry big shots needed to fit the right "body type" to the character. And when it came to casting for daytime soaps, I expected the hunt for attractive guys took a high priority, perhaps even higher than acting skills. Thankfully, Jillian's growing smile reinforced my confidence that my "look" passed the muster, perhaps even surpassed it, not to mention her expression gave my ego an upward kick. I silently praised my choice of clothing for the audition—tight jeans, cowboy boots, and a plain white buttondown shirt that advertised my painstakingly developed torso and arm muscles without being ostentatious.

"Would you mind taking off your shirt for me?"

Even before she'd asked the question, I had anticipated the request, and within seconds, I had stripped to the waist.

Another broad smile, along with a blush on her cheeks, clearly indicated her approval. She sprang to her feet. "Would you give me just a moment? I need to get a few people in here to meet you. Meanwhile, why don't you take a gander at the page"—she tapped the test script with a sharp red fingernail—"and then I'll have you begin. Again, I'm sorry this has to be a cold reading, but as I

mentioned, we needed to get you in here ASAP and—"

"Not a problem. I don't mind in the least." Of course, I lied. I detested cold readings, but I didn't mind them nearly so much when I knew my looks had already worked in my favor. Sometimes when auditioning, appearance was the worst hurdle to pass, especially when casting directors eyed you with disapproval even before you opened your mouth. So, with one challenge fought and won, I happily sat down with the page and poured over the words as she rushed from the conference room.

For the most part, the brief scene—a monologue, actually—had to do with explaining to an unspecified person what being gay meant from a basic human perspective. The feelings of alienation and facing the prejudice sometimes associated with being openly homosexual in modern society, the notion that the government's idea of "equal rights for all" somehow didn't apply to you, and the despair one might feel at loving someone from a distance and being unable to share those emotions—I had experience with everything on the page, especially the latter. Especially as recently as yesterday. The writer covered a lot of emotional ground in just a few paragraphs, and the more I absorbed the words, the more I wanted—truly ached—to land this role, despite my misgivings at playing a gay character.

Before I had an opportunity to read through the dialogue a second time, the door opened again. Jillian returned, this time with a cadre of people in tow. I put down the page and stood, returning the various handshakes offered me.

In a spirited voice, Jillian rattled off introductions, but in truth I caught none of the individual names of her associates, and gleaned only parts of their titles. One man was a "who-knows-what supervisor," another an "executive whatnot," and one women who

raised her eyebrows upon seeing my bare torso bore the title of a "co-whatever-producer." A few other people straggled in, but their names and titles also got lost somewhere in my brain. Damn it, I suddenly hoped there wouldn't be a quiz at the end of the audition process.

The lady with the uplifted eyebrows wondered aloud where she had seen me before. I hadn't thought to bring a headshot and résumé today, considering I had already met Jillian Shinbark, and I hadn't expected to face other individuals for this audition. Now, I cursed myself for being an idiot.

Jillian, however, pulled my headshot and résumé out of a folder she held in her arms. It pleased me that not only did she save my ass from potential embarrassment, but that she'd actually kept the résumé I'd given her all those months ago when auditioning for the rival soap. It further confirmed that my skills had impressed her enough for her to hang onto my information.

But after reading my list of credits from the back of my 8 x 10, the other woman shook her head. "No, no. Although it seems you've done some extensive work in the theater, Mars, which is quite impressive, it's something else...somewhere else I've seen you." Then her alert brown eyes sparkled with knowledge, and her bright red lips curled upward in a foxy grin. "Did you by any chance do any television commercials?"

I groaned inwardly. Shit, here we go again. "I've done a few recently, yes."

"For shaving cream perhaps?"

Reluctantly, I nodded. But how I managed to keep my face from burning hot, I'll never know.

The woman rested back in her chair, looking extremely pleased with her sleuthing skills. And, thank goodness, she also looked

more than pleased with me in general, if the way her gaze took a sudden detour of my chest bore any clues. For the second time since my arrival, I could almost hear an auctioneer's voice in my head—

Get your prime beef here, folks. What do I hear for this fine hunk of meat?

Oh yes, that damned commercial was truly both a blessing and a curse. Would I ever live it down? Oh, who cares, I mused, as long as the "blessing" part of it proved more powerful and it helped me land this role.

"Have you had a chance to read the monologue?" asked Jillian once everyone had settled into chairs around the table.

"Ah, well, sure. But only once."

"Once is enough. Do you have any questions?"

"Tons." I gave what I prayed was my most charming smile. "But I think I understood the basics of what's happening with the character."

"Splendid. Okay then, Mars. Why don't you stand at the head of the table and skim through the dialogue a few more times, then begin reading aloud whenever you feel you're ready."

"Will do."

When it came to auditions, I had long ago learned to tune out an audience, whatever its size. Without that lesson mastered, I would probably be a bundle of nerves right about now, especially standing half-naked before nearly a dozen strangers while they waited with hungry or jaded eyes for some acting brilliance on my part. After I shut out the presence of my impromptu panel of judges, I turned my full attention to the character's soliloquy. From the rear pocket of my jeans, I plucked out a red pen, one of the essential tools an actor can bring to an audition. I jotted notes on

the page next to several sentences and between the lines—

Up the frustration level here...

Add sarcastic overtones...

Stress these words...

Slow pace here...

Deliver this in a whisper with the hint of tears...

—until I felt as ready as I would ever be without taking the material home to study it before a mirror, as was my habit.

Then with a deep breath, I stood upright with the page in my hand and faced the small audience. I mentally crossed my fingers, plunged into my bank of emotions, and prayed I had selected the perfect ones to showcase and bring Wave Benson to life before those hungry and jaded sets of eyes.

CHAPTER 6

When I returned to the apartment around midday, I could barely contain my excitement. Of course, my cab driver would have been the first recipient of my good news, had he actually spoken more than a word or two of broken English. But because he didn't, I raced into the building and felt just about ready to explode.

In my energetic state, I sprinted up the four flights of stairs in lieu of using the elevator, all the while awestruck at the miracle of what a difference a single day made. Yesterday I had awakened with no new acting prospects on the horizon and zero expectations regarding anything even remotely resembling a love life; and now, just a little more than twenty-four hours later, I had secured the former. And regarding the latter? Funny, but in my optimistic

mood, I also couldn't stop myself from believing that perhaps, if I played my cards right regarding the situation with Reed, even *that* would have a favorable outcome. Hell, I felt so good, even my internal fears regarding being typecast for portraying a gay character had lessened, since the role of Wave Benson seemed too damned rich to pass up, if the two scenes I'd read offered a decent representation of the character and the story being written for him.

When I entered my apartment, however, my optimism pulled back to neutral when I saw Reed on the couch with the ever-present Niki at his side. Unlike my roommate, she didn't look at all happy to see me. Nothing new there. But today, her hostility seemed heightened. Nevertheless, despite her presence and sour face, I focused my attention on Reed and let loose with a triumphant "Hurrah" while punching the air with my fists.

"You got the part?" he asked, leaping up, his bare feet thumping the floor.

"I got it!"

"Fucking Aces!" Hurtling over the coffee table like the manic jungle warrior he was scheduled to portray later that evening, Reed landed inches before me. He gave me a joyous smile that both blinded my eyes and melted my heart, then took me into his arms and hugged me to his muscular body. I hugged him back, eagerly. He smelled so damned enticing; the faint aroma of soap and aftershave wedded with his natural musk, filling my senses. After the nature of our conversation the previous day, and his absence last evening, I relished the embrace in ways Reed may not have even considered, yet I fought the desire to press our groins together and snuggle in his strong arms.

Niki, however, did have an inkling as to what my roommate's affection meant to me—a strong inkling, I decided, if the furious

crimson dotting her cheeks gave any clear indication. She sprang up and rushed to our side, boldly prying one of Reed's arms off of me. But the moment she released him, he hugged me again. Typically, Reed seemed not to notice his girlfriend's rancor, or the way she huffed and puffed her outrage at our side.

"Just like that?" he asked.

"Yep, just like that. Olive said I had a good shot with this particular casting director. And she was correct."

"But you had to read, right?"

"Of course, and I knew things looked promising when they handed me a second scene, called in another actor from the show to play against me, and set up an actual screen test right then and there."

"No fucking way!"

"Yes fucking way. Then they asked me to start next week and told me they'd messenger Olive the contracts. Did she call yet, by the way?"

Reed shook his head. "But tell me everything, man. What's the name of your character? Do you know what they have planned for a story? Is it a full-out contract role? Is the salary what you expected? And when—?"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down, Swifty Sam, and let me catch my breath first."

Even though I yearned for additional closeness with him, I stepped out of his arms. His boyish excitement stirred my libido, and it took every last ounce of willpower to stop myself from ripping the taut "I Heart Broadway" T-shirt from his torso and raining kisses down on his bare flesh.

But I needed to put some space between us for another reason—Niki. Not that I gave a damn about her feelings, but

seeing as how she hadn't been able to completely tear us apart, she continued to silently fume. Already her pretty face had twisted into a grotesque parody of itself, and the last thing I wanted was to push her over the edge like I had unexpectedly done yesterday. No one was going to take the wind out of my sails today, not even her.

Reed chuckled. "Oh sure, sorry, man. Besides, we need to run down to the corner store and get some champagne to celebrate. My treat."

"Your treat?" I asked, only half-faking astonishment. I'd once joked that Reed "pinched pennies to the point that he squished the shit out of poor Abe Lincoln," and he'd heartily agreed with me. But I also knew his generous heart battled with that skinflint tendency; the "starving actor living in New York City" syndrome had done its damage. "If you're buying, then I do feel like celebrating."

Reed laughed again, then spun toward Niki. "How about it? Isn't this great news?"

She said nothing, just looked toward the floor. With her arms crossed, flattening her breasts beneath a lavender halter top, she clutched her biceps so fiercely, white skin replaced the pink around her gnarled fingers.

"Niki?"

"He's going to be on my favorite soap? They actually hired him?"

"Why wouldn't they?" Once again, Reed reached toward me. He clamped his fingers around one of my shoulders and gave it a jubilant squeeze, like a proud father praising one of his offspring. "I've told you countless times, this man is a damned terrific actor. I've learned so much from him already."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. What's the matter?"

"I don't like what he's been trying to teach you."

"What was that?"

"Oh...I...nothing. Whatever..."

"No, not 'whatever," said Reed. "Mars is a damned fine actor and now he's got himself a soap. An actual soap. That's pretty spectacular, I'd say."

Once again, Reed went to hug me, but Niki moved too fast for him, taking up battle positions between us.

"Well, I wouldn't say it's spectacular," she proclaimed, her voice lifting toward the skylights. "The last thing I need is seeing even *more* of him every goddamned day."

Regardless of my elation, I could hold my tongue no longer. "Maybe you wouldn't have to see me that often if you weren't here every morning, noon, and night."

That was all it took to pop the cork on her fury. She spun around so fast, her blonde ponytail whipped Reed across the face. She stormed forward, planting herself in front of me. "Fuck you, asshole, just fuck you!" The force of her malediction sprinkled my cheeks with spittle.

"Niki!" Reed looked totally aghast.

I held up a hand to halt his protests. "Let her speak, Reed. Or shriek, for that matter. Or curse me until she's blue in the face. She can't say a thing that will piss me off today."

The girl took another step toward me. "That's right, give him even more orders. I'm getting sick of you telling Reed what to do, what to say, what to think. You just can't help yourself, can you? *Can* you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't play stupid, Mars. Don't play as stupid as your stupid,

stupid, stupid name. Or maybe you are just plain stupid."

I had the crazy urge to counter with "I know you are, but what am I?" but I didn't want to lower myself to the level of a preschooler. "Will you ever speak in a manner I can understand?"

"There you go again, making fun of the way I talk. You're always so mean to me. Always making me look like a fool in front of Reed. And you just can't stop yourself regarding that either, can you? You won't be happy until you ruin everything!"

"Good God, I'm not making fun of you, and for pity's sake, quit screaming. I'm just saying that you're making no sense—even less than usual. You'll have to forgive me, but I speak English, not Bimbo."

Okay, I realized that one crossed way over the line into the kiddy-comeback zone, and part of me regretted saying it. But what the heck? I was having a great day and I thought she deserved at least one verbal slam for cursing at me for no good reason and attempting to pop my balloon. Thankfully the comment seemed to whiz right over her head.

"And don't you think you're getting a bit too territorial, Niki? About Reed, about this apartment, about everything? I mean, you've been Reed's girlfriend for—gee, how long has it been now?—about fifteen minutes, give or take?"

"It's been seven weeks, three days and—"

"Yeah, but who's counting, right?"

"You won't be happy until you infilgrate every part of my life, will you?"

Infilgrate? As much as my tongue tingled with the urge to correct her, I reluctantly let that one pass by, only because her accusation had me thoroughly confused.

"Why would I want to do that? And again, what the hell are

you talking about?"

"You and your evil plot to destroy my happiness—our happiness."

"My evil plot? What is this, some sort of D movie? What plot?"
"To get between me and Reed in every single way, asshole."

My roommate rushed forward and grabbed her shoulders with his beefy hands. "Niki, please don't. Now is *not* the time."

The astonished expression had left Reed's face in favor of another. Mortification, perhaps? Guilt? Contrition? I couldn't tell for certain, but the sudden switch intrigued me, as did his words.

Shaking off his hold, Niki ignored his appeal and continued directing all of her wrath at me. "It's bad enough you never leave us alone in the apartment. You say I'm always here? Well, you're the one who's always here, day and night, night and day, never giving us space and—"

"Hey, lady, last I looked, my name was on the lease, and yours wasn't."

"—And now not only are you taking over my favorite soap—"

"I somehow doubt the producers will let that happen."

"—But you also want to jump into bed with me!"

Her suggestion brought actual bile to my throat. "What?"

"You put Reed up to it, didn't you? You put him up to it! Just another part of your plan. Just another way for you to influence him and sway him and turn him into—"

"That's enough, Niki," said my roommate, his face blanching. Once again, he grasped her shoulders, then spun her around to face him. "You promised you'd let that drop."

"Why are you defending him? Don't you see what he's trying to do? Don't you see what—"

Before the girl could finish her sentence, the telephone on the

coffee table warbled like an anxious referee calling an end to a slugfest. I let out an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Oh, thank God, saved by the bell, so to speak. Sorry, Niki, hold that last thought, no matter how illogical, inane, or insipid it may be."

She gasped. "Do you hear him, Reed? Why would you think I'd even consider doing what you asked?"

Although her last statement further aroused my curiosity, I tuned out the rest of her ranting and grabbed the receiver before the phone could ring a third time. "Hello?"

"Is this Mars Manchester, star of stage, screen, and the yummy shaving cream commercial?"

I rolled my eyes. "Very funny, Yolanda."

She giggled. "Olive wants to speak to you. Congratulations, Mars. I hear you've snagged a plum role on my favorite soap and—and—hey, do you have a wild animal at your place or something? Who or what is making that hideous screeching noise?"

"Hang on." I covered the phone's mouthpiece with my hand and turned around. "Niki, do you mind? Phone call being received over here."

Drowning out my meager protests, curses that would have made a trucker blush exploded off Niki's tongue faster than a string of bottle rockets on the fourth of July. The sound ricocheted through the cavernous living room and redoubled into a cacophony. The girl, red-faced, feral-eyed, with spittle gathered at the corners of her animated mouth, seemed to be having a temper tantrum that could rival my four-year-old nephew's any old day of the week.

My heart went out to my roommate, this time in commiseration. No one should've had to put up with such a

barrage of abuse as Niki currently doled out on him, especially when I was her intended target, but Reed stood firm, acting as a shield between his girlfriend and myself.

Suddenly, he took her by the upper arms and steered her toward his bedroom at the end of the hallway. I could have kissed him for his quick-thinking efforts, strength, and bravery, but then again, I could have kissed the sexy creature for the simple act of breathing.

Only after his bedroom door slammed shut, muffling Niki's fury by a fraction, did I lift my hand off the phone's mouthpiece. "Sorry for that, Yolanda. We have a bit of a...a situation here."

"Oh, dear. Is there anything I can do?"

"Not unless you have a straight-jacket and a truckload of Thorazine at your disposal."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. You said Olive needed to talk to me?"

"Yeah, let me put her on. Congrats again, Mars."

Thankfully, this time no Burt Bacharach Musack came through the earpiece, and somehow the furor in Reed's bedroom had died down. Whatever my roommate had done or said to make that happen earned him another mental kiss from me. Although...had he murdered her? I smirked. Ah, what did it matter? I would have given him an *extra* tasty reward for doing that also.

The line clicked a second later. "Hello, my sweetness. I hear you wowed them with your good looks, splendid bod, and honed acting skills, as I knew you would."

"Hi, Olive. I do believe I did, yes. Did they send the paperwork?"

"Not only did I receive it, but I now need only your signature and we'll be all set. The messenger is on his way to your apartment right now. Expect him within the hour, allowing for traffic, of

course."

"Of course."

I took a moment to tell my agent a general overview of what had happened at the audition, but when I heard the rabble from the bedroom suddenly increase—Reed hadn't throttled Niki after all, damn it—I promised to call Olive at another time.

I hung up the phone, and not a moment too soon. Reed's door swooshed open with such force, it banged against his bedroom wall. Niki barreled toward the living room, Reed racing after her and trying to seize one of her flailing arms. She swatted him aside like he was nothing more than a pesky mosquito.

"You fucker!"

I chuckled. "Isn't that how you began congratulating me a while ago? I appreciated it then almost as much as I do now."

"Oh, shut up, you...nasty...you nasty..."

"What?"

"Faggot! You nasty goddamned faggot!"

"Ouch, sweetheart, not the word that all of us fags dread? Not the deadly 'F' word? Please, no..." Overdramatically, I gripped my chest as if she'd just lanced my heart, then burst out laughing. "Oh, how original. That really slaughtered me. As if I haven't heard that word hurled at me before from wittier and even wiser individuals who should know better."

Niki's mouth twitched. I could almost see the wheels in her brain spinning as she hunted for another more lethal insult, which made me laugh even harder when I pictured those wheels being turned by scampering hamsters.

Reed's reaction to Niki's comment, however, erased that image and brought me to immediate silence.

I don't think I've even seen my roommate's face adopt that

particular expression; even jungle warrior makeup couldn't have made him appear as menacing as he did at that moment. I had seen Reed put up with a lot of crap from this woman, but his easy-going nature usually insured he would tolerate anything she dished out with either a shrug or a smile.

But not now.

Something inside of him had obviously snapped, and I suddenly wondered if my amusing notion a moment earlier regarding Niki's murder hadn't been more of a prophecy than wishful thinking.

CHAPTER 7

"Niki..." Reed's entire body trembled with rage. "Apologize to Mars."

"But I—"

"Now."

"Planet Boy is the one who should apologize to me and—"

"I said apologize. Now, goddamn it!"

She lifted her chin in childish defiance. "No way in fucking hell. That goddamned faggot doesn't deserve it."

He nodded once, twice, then a third time, as if mentally counting to keep himself under control. Then, without warning, he hastened into his bedroom and returned to the living room a moment later, with Niki's jangling purse and high-heeled sandals in his hands. He whipped them to the floor at her feet, then pointed

toward the door. "Leave."

"Huh?" Niki's blue eyes instantly teared up and her heavily made-up lashes fluttered wildly like spiders on steroid withdrawal. "Reed, you can't be serious about this? We never finished our private conversation and—"

"So help me God, Niki, don't make haul you out of here over my shoulder, because I will."

"I can't believe this. First you had the gall to call me over here and ask me that sick question before he got home, then you take *his* side against me, and now you're actually telling me to—"

His bare feet thudded a determined path to the front door. He yanked it open. "Out! Now!"

"But I—"

A marriage of disgust, loathing, and fury shot from his dark eyes, effectively slaying her protest. Niki jumped as if physically slapped, then reacted by launching into a collection of her faux personas—her wounded kitten impersonation, her outraged lover act, her no-one-understands-me routine—switching back and forth between them at jackrabbit speed. But not once did she display even a smidgen of regret for her slurs, as I doubted she would. She tried touching him, kissing him, and wooing him, then swatting his shoulders, arms, and chest while stomping her feet. Yet through the various and sickening performances, the tears, the screeches, and the whimpers, Reed remained soundly apathetic.

"Don't you see what he's doing?" she asked for what must have been the thousandth time in the weeks since they'd been dating. "Don't you see? It's that faggot. That motherfucking fag! It's always been him. He's made me act this way, sweetie, can't you see that? He's pushed me to this point. He's wanted this to happen and purposely goaded me into this fight."

My gut momentarily clenched. She had made similar accusations so many times before, I had come to ignore them. But did she make a valid point now? Had I, on some subconscious level in my moment of joy, started the argument today? Had I purposely sabotaged their relationship because I wanted Reed all to myself?

After recalling what had happened, what had been said, since I returned home this afternoon, I didn't think so. If anything, she's the one who'd pushed me to the point of counterattacking. And in all of these weeks, I had done my level best to maintain my temper with her, to not complain to Reed too often, although her attitude made the going difficult, like today. Certainly I loathed everything about her, and now I prepared myself to do the happy-dance once she left the apartment, but I refused to take the blame for her actions. Despite my yearning for Reed, I had gotten along with the various lovers who had come before Niki, not to mention all of his other friends, so I once again dismissed her comments as the rantings of a lunatic. Nevertheless, I prayed with all of my might that Niki's ramblings would not sway my roommate to believe her claims.

Her desperate pleas continued to escalate. "You have to see the truth, Reed. He wants me gone and he's the one who planned this all along. He's the one who's destroying us. That nasty queer! That filthy homo! That—"

Finally, Reed broke his lengthy silence, his voice deep, steady, and almost sinister. "No, Niki, you have destroyed us. You and you alone." He pointed to the hallway once again. "I refuse to tolerate such disrespect in my home—in Mars's home. I've put up with your rude comments to him long enough, and this time you and your disgusting mouth have crossed way over the line. If Mars

won't toss you out on your bigoted ass, I will. You've had a chance to apologize, but refused to do so. You've shown your true colors today, babe, and I detest what I see. So hit the road before I do something I'll regret."

I couldn't believe it, considering the morning's events, but my day had actually gotten better.

Without a word, only an intermittent groan and a few half-hearted whimpers, the girl bent down to collect her things, then darted out of the apartment. With a sigh of relief, I couldn't help thinking the storm had fully passed. But just as Reed started to close the door behind her, Niki issued a final blast of verbal thunder. "You motherfucking faggots! Rot in hell!"

"Ouch, another zinger." I smirked and shook my head in amazement. "You know what I can *not* understand for the life of me? Why bigots always toss in the word 'motherfucking' along with the word 'faggot' or 'homo' or whatever. Doesn't someone being a 'motherfucker' contradict the whole 'faggot angle'?" I chuckled without humor, then plopped down on the sofa.

After Reed dead-bolted the door, he stood stock-still. I tore off my cowboy boots, then sat back and attempted to gauge his mood. His blank face gave no clue, however, as to what he might be feeling right about now, having just kicked out his girlfriend over her hateful words toward me. Regardless, my heart surged with renewed affection. *Ah, my sexy white knight, coming to my rescue*. Although I certainly hadn't needed his intervention, I appreciated the gallant gesture all the same.

"Wanna beer?" he suddenly asked over his shoulder, tromping into the kitchen.

"Ah, yeah, sure," I called, deciding I'd rather have a beer instead of the aforementioned champagne to celebrate anyway.

Reed returned a few moments later, handing me a cold bottle after twisting off the cap for me. He lowered his own bottle and clinked it against mine. "To my brilliantly talented roommate. Here's to your forthcoming success on daytime TV. Now, tell me everything about the part, buddy."

I gave him a brief overview of the character, although I knew little about the fictitious Wave Benson. "Supposedly he's a stranger who comes to town, yet in true soap-opera fashion, he probably has a mysterious connection with one or more of the established characters."

"Yeah, maybe he's a son someone gave up for adoption decades ago or someone who got killed off years ago and is now back from the dead, with a new identity and a new face, right?"

I smiled. "You never know with these shows. But what I do know for certain is the character is gay."

"You're kidding? Right up your alley...ah, no pun intended, of course. Anyway, you'll do fine."

"I do have some reservations, however." I summarized my fears about being stereotyped.

Reed's response didn't surprise me in the least, considering his history in the theater. "Hell, who cares if anyone thinks you're gay? I'd take the part in a heartbeat. Anything to remain an actor. And anything to keep from hearing my parents say 'I told you so' and give them another opening to try and coerce me back into the family business."

"So you wouldn't mind getting the door slammed in your face when auditioning, having casting directors and producers automatically dismissing you for romantic leads all because they assume you're gay and the audience won't accept you in a particular role?"

"If you have the acting chops and can pull off any type of role, that won't happen. Not nowadays. Things have changed in the industry."

"Not enough."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a worrywart?"

"Olive did, as a matter of fact, just yesterday."

"And she would know." He leaned over me like a teacher offering sage advice to a student. "If she says you have nothing to fret over, then listen to her and don't be your own worst enemy. And I meant what I said to Niki earlier about you being a damned fine actor. No matter how many times I've seen you on the stage, you never fail to impress me. Never! I wish I had a tenth of your skills. So take the damned part, screw the critics and any narrow-minded assholes who might judge you for taking the role or typecast you for it, and laugh at them all the way to the bank—and probably all the way to the stage when you win your first goddamned daytime Emmy."

"Ah, from your mouth..."

He reached down and playfully whacked one side of my head. "So get over it, already, and show 'em what you got."

"Thanks for saying all of that. I guess I just needed to hear it from someone other than Olive. Another actor. Especially an actor like you, who's as macho as John Wayne, Hugh Jackman, and Harrison Ford all rolled into one."

Reed stood upright and suddenly spun away from me, then paced the room several times, expressionless but obviously deep in thought. Finally, he broke the silence, his voice somewhat distant, hesitant. "So…so tell me more about this character you're playing."

"That's really all I know so far."

"Then tell me...tell me about the casting director and the other people you met today or—"

"Are you sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I mean, wouldn't you prefer to talk about what happened here a while ago instead? With Niki?"

"What's there to say?" He stopped pacing, then sat next to me and planted his bare feet atop a mountain of magazines piled on the coffee table. "You were right about her all this time."

I nudged his ribs with my elbow. "You know, I didn't want to be right, and I'm so sorry that happened. As I told you yesterday, you truly deserve only the best, man. You *really* do."

"Yeah," he said with a sigh and a resigned smile. "I know I do, and I'm not sorry the whole thing happened. The break-up, I mean, not the argument. She really showed a side of herself today that I hadn't seen before...or maybe one that I didn't *want* to see before. Anyway, it's over now and I can move on, and not have to deal with her and her many, many moods. The woman's kinda flaky, you know?"

"I hear ya." We sat in silence for a while, sipping our beers. Before too long, however, my curiosity got the better of me. "So, are you willing to tell me what that was all about?"

"What? Niki's mood of the day? Well, for one, she lost that waitress job yesterday...and to a guy. Although she didn't come right out and say it, but from what she implied I'm assuming he was gay. That's likely part of the reason why she pounced on you with such a vengeance."

"There's more? But actually, no, I wasn't asking what caused her latest hissy fit. I meant whether you wanted to tell me what she was talking about earlier—something about a question you'd asked

her before I arrived. Something you didn't want her to bring up during the fight. Is that the other reason she's furious?"

Reed glanced toward the kitchen, but not before I noticed his cheeks flaring a rich magenta. "I wonder if I should make myself something to eat before the show tonight. I usually get the jitters on opening night, though. I guess it might not be such a bright idea."

"Something light to tide you over. Maybe some dry toast or—"

"Oh, yeah, speaking of toast," he said, turning back toward me, "here's to your soap opera. Much success, my friend." Once again, he clanked our beer bottles together.

"Not that I don't love toasting to my rosy future as America's next daytime mega-star, but we already did that a while ago."

"We did?" His forehead momentarily creased, then another blush darkened his cheeks. He uttered a nervous laugh. "Oh, yeah, we did. Sorry. The whole incident today with Niki has left me a bit...rattled."

"I'd expect nothing less after that bloody battle."

"Well, no, it wasn't exactly the fight itself that has me...like this..."

"Like what? What exactly happened before I got home?" I knew I probably shouldn't press the issue, and felt like the neighborhood yenta seeking gossip. But I couldn't help thinking that what had occurred between Reed and Niki somehow concerned me and had either triggered or at least contributed to her ultra-sour mood this afternoon.

"Ah, it wasn't anything important. Forget about it."

"Talking about it might help put things in perspective for you, or at least make you feel better to get it off your chest, whatever it is that's bugging you." When he continued to hesitate, I nudged his

side again, gently this time. "You know you can tell me anything, man. I'm here for you. As you always say, we actors have to stick together, no matter what. I believe that also. But besides that, you're my friend—if not my best friend, if the truth be told. I care about you, more than you probably realize, and Lord knows I'd never judge you."

He smirked. "I suppose you, of all people, never would judge me."

"So what is it?"

"Oh, it was just something I asked her...something I'd thought about for a long time. Something a bit weird, you know?"

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

He looked at the beer bottle in his hand—studied it intently, actually, like an entomologist might examine a heretofore-unknown species of insect that had suddenly alighted on his wrist. It took him a long time before he spoke again. "You...you fantasize about things, right? I'm mean, you're a guy, and we guys do that on occasion, don't we?"

"Still not sure what you mean, man, sorry," I said, although my gut seemed to have a suspicion. Its pinched state told me I'd soon be hearing a disclosure from Reed that I'd wanted to hear for quite some time. Especially since yesterday's conversation between us. I held my breath and anxiously awaited his reply.

"I mean, we guys fantasize about...doing things..."

"Things?"

"Sexual things." Reed gulped down most of his remaining beer, then settled the bottle back into his lap. He shrugged nonchalantly. "I just made an offhand suggestion to Niki earlier about perhaps, maybe, trying out something a bit...different from the norm."

"That's only natural," I said. "Spicing things up in the bedroom

is a good way of keeping things interesting. But she didn't go for it, huh?"

"Hell, she reacted as if I'd asked to fuck her while bungeejumping off the Brooklyn Bridge at the height of rush hour."

"Something really kinky, was it?"

"She called it 'sick,' but it's not...or at least, not from my perspective. Just something I've been wanting to try for some time."

"So she wouldn't even consider it?"

"It totally freaked her out. You see, Mars, when you came home, we were actually on the verge of breaking up over it. So that's why what eventually happened this afternoon doesn't faze me too much, or at least not in the way you would probably expect. I mean, the break-up was going to happen whether you were here or not. I realized today that I couldn't find happiness with her. I guess I've known that for quite some time but never wanted to face it. Anyway, I had sat her down on the sofa to tell her it was over, and that's when you walked in. You had nothing to do with it."

I admit, a part of me had worried that he might eventually turn on me. That once the shock of his sudden break-up with Niki wore off and any loneliness he might experience started to weigh on him, he would somehow blame me for the fight that severed their relationship. But now, his words offered considerable relief.

"So what could you have possibly asked of her that made her nuts?"

"I'd wondered whether to...whether she would be willing to..."

"Come on, just say it. Remember, no judging over here."

"If she would be open to the idea of you...joining us in bed."

Once again, my gut had proven itself as the ultimate prophet.

Reed's confession made it twitch anew, and it also made my cock tingle with excitement. Oh, not that the thought of sharing a bed with Miss Flouncy Bouncy—or any other woman, for that matter—had aroused my desires, but the notion that Reed had even considered doing something sexual with Niki and with me in the same bed just about had jets of lust bursting through my veins.

"You mean, me in a ménage with the two of you? But I'm gay, so I certainly wouldn't be of any use to Niki in that department. The only person I'd be able to satisfy, who I would *want* to satisfy, would be...you."

He turned and looked me square in the eye. "Yeah, I know."

Those three simple words roused me to a full-fledged boner, one that stabbed at my zipper and demanded immediate escape from its confines. Could this day get any fucking better? My mouth suddenly watered at the notion of plucking that beer bottle out of Reed's hands, slowly freeing his dick from his jeans, and showing him exactly how proficient a cocksucker I could be for him. To actually feast on his flesh? To imbibe on a mouthful of his cum? Damn it, a celebration like that would beat the shit out of champagne or beer any old day.

I lowered my voice. "Thanks for telling me the truth. I must say, I'm extremely flattered."

"So anyway, the ménage is apparently out of the question, huh?" He chuckled bashfully. "Hey, Mars, just out of curiosity, would you have said yes, had Niki agreed and I'd offered the invitation?"

"Definitely not." I could see the sudden disappointment, the rejection, in his eyes, so I hastened to add an amendment. "Not for a threesome with Niki or with any other woman involved. Now, on the other hand, if you were to offer an invitation for a *twosome*

instead..."

"Are you saying you really would...?"

"In a heartbeat."

Now, the rejection in his eyes completely vanished, replaced with the salacious yet nervous sparkles that had so entranced me yesterday.

Oh, yeah, right here on the couch, buddy boy, right now! I'll happily make you forget all about Niki!

Damn, I felt the tiger inside me preparing to pounce, but I had to leash my desire more than ever right now. I didn't want to scare him or freak *him* out, especially since I wasn't sure what he expected, or just how emotionally prepared he was should something actually happen between us. In my experience with "curious" straight guys, their mouths sometimes said things that their hearts didn't always mean, and once the playtime ended, then the guilt and regret could set in to destroy friendships. Plus, after my disastrous relationship with Warren, I knew I probably shouldn't risk participating in what might end up becoming another royal mess that would leave me homeless. Still, with this beautiful man speaking words I had only dreamed of him uttering, I had to explore the possibilities.

"Can I ask you something, Reed?"

He nodded reluctantly.

"Have you ever done anything with a guy before?"

I had expected a lot of things, but not the slight smile—a nostalgic smile, no less—that tugged at the corners of his mouth and clearly answered my question. To be completely honest, this shocked me only a bit. That touchy-feeliness of his had aroused my suspicions before, and all the mixed signals he had thrown out at me, especially since yesterday, had me nearly convinced that he

had experimented with some guy at least once in his life. Now, his grin indicated that it had been more than a pleasant experience.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "It was so long ago, and only a few times. But nothing much really happened."

"I know blowjobs didn't."

His boyish blush made it so difficult to keep my hands to myself. "How do you know that?"

"Yesterday, our talk...you wondered if a guy could give better head than a girl, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah. It was just some...some touching."

"A guy jacked you off?"

Another nod. "Several different guys, actually, and I did them, too."

More agreeable and auspicious revelations. "No kidding?" I took a sip of my beer and turned on the couch to face him, my shin sidling up against his muscular thigh and my toes brushing against the underside of his knee. He didn't inch away from the contact, which further elated me. "And you've suddenly got the urge to do it again? Or to try more? Is that it?"

"I've thought about those incidents more and more through the years, but then recently, with you living here...and me hearing..."

"Hearing what?"

"I have another confession to make. Please don't be mad."

"Tell me."

"Remember that guy who stayed here overnight just after you moved in? The 'hotel guy,' I called him, since I could never remember his name?"

"Hyatt?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

Hyatt Putnam had been a friend of mine for several years. The handsome hunk was a part-time actor, part-time tattoo artist. Between serious relationships on both our parts, he played the role of my occasional "suck buddy." After my break-up with Warren, I had sought out Hyatt's companionship one horny evening and had brought him back to the apartment for a night of fun. "Are you saying Hyatt made a move on you or—"

"No, nothing like that. But I heard you guys. In fact"—more blushing on Reed's part—"I actually stood outside your bedroom door and listened. Please know, I wasn't eavesdropping, I swear to God. But, damn it, you guys were loud and I couldn't ignore it."

Now it became my turn to blush. Both Hyatt and myself were what I called "groaners," and I recalled hushing him several times that night, reminding him that I had a new "straight roommate" who I didn't want to make uncomfortable and cause him to rethink our living situation. Yet I hadn't realized our sex sounds had carried through the walls after all. "Shit, Reed, I'm so sorry about keeping you up."

"Oh, please, don't apologize. I didn't *want* to sleep. In fact, I'm the one who...who..."

"Who what?"

"Hell, I couldn't help myself from listening and...and, damn it, you guys seemed to be having such a good time, I started picturing what was happening in your bedroom, what you were doing to him, what he was doing to you, and I stood outside your door and..."

"What?"

"I whacked off."

Holy fuck! All at once, memories of the night in question came rushing back to me in pornographic Technicolor. I remembered,

just after finishing a particularly hot suck-session with Hyatt, I'd left him in order to visit the bathroom. But when I'd opened my bedroom door and entered the murky hallway, I had nearly tripped over Reed. Wearing only his underwear, my roommate had been on his hands and knees, wiping up the floor with a paper towel. He'd claimed he had spilled some of his drink on the hardwood, yet I'd thought it odd at the time that he wasn't carrying any glass or bottle. Now I suddenly realized what type of liquid he had actually spilled, and it made me hornier than ever.

Before I could say anything, Reed continued. "And ever since that night, well, I've been wondering about things, you know? Imagining me...and you...together like that. Especially since yesterday."

His confession had robbed me of breath. I filled my starving lungs with air, then set aside my beer. "Again, I can't begin to tell you how flattered I am."

"So much for your macho man actor, right? Do you think John Wayne, Hugh Jackman, and Harrison Ford would have done something like that outside your bedroom? Made that type of confession? Imagined the things I've imagined happening?"

"Maybe not those particular guys, but other macho man actors? Definitely. And I'm glad you told me. Besides, what you said only enhances your image in my eyes. Having the bravery to admit something like that just makes you even more macho." Throwing caution to the wind, I lifted one of my hands to Reed's handsome face, allowing my fingertips to play over his cheek and jaw while my thumb brushed over his smooth and moist lower lip. "And so goddamned sexy I can barely think straight."

"No pun intended, right?" he whispered.

"Oh, yeah, no pun intended."

With his gaze fixated on my own mouth, Reed leaned his face into my hand, outwardly relishing the caress as much as I relished giving it. My cock surged with renewed vigor, making it difficult for me to move closer to him, but I did it since my tongue demanded to savor his lips and would tolerate no further delay. I rested my forehead against Reed's, and our exhales met between our faces in shallow bursts of desire.

"Are you sure about this?" I whispered.

"Definitely," he replied, tilting his head just as our noses touched, preparing to meet my lips with his.

That's when the buzzing started, frantic and persistent. And it took me a moment to realize its source—the intercom box beside the door.

Reed pulled away from me, looking as if an angry and disapproving wasp had stung him. He jumped to his feet and headed for the door, while I cursed to the high heavens.

Reed flicked the intercom switch. "Yeah?"

"Perfect Timing Delivery," answered a metallic-sounding voice. "I have an envelope from the Pershing Agency for a Mark Manchester."

Shit. How ironic—the name of the service should have been Rotten Timing Delivery. In my sexually aroused state, I had completely forgotten about the paperwork Olive had said would arrive.

"It's *Mars* Manchester," said Reed into the speaker, "and come on up. Top floor." He pressed the button to the building's security entrance, then turned to me, looking even more flummoxed, ruffled, and disappointed than I felt.

For the next fifteen minutes, I couldn't help thinking the luck gods had declared, "enough good fortune for one day," and had

issued their edict at my doorstep, literally, in the form of a guy named Burke. The twig of a messenger, in his shit-brown uniform, couldn't have been more than nineteen. And he couldn't have asked more questions about my life as an actor, life with the Pershing Agency, and life in general had he starred as a gameshow host for "Let's Quiz The Sexually Frustrated Actor About All Things Trivial." His instructions, which Olive had given him, were to return with the documents before the work day ended, which meant I had to read through the forms and sign them before I could send him on his way. But Burke didn't seem to realize that the more he interrupted my train of thought with his mundane questions, the longer it would take for me to finish so he could buzz across town to successfully conclude his assignment. And the longer it would take for me to resume my conversation with Reed.

Unfortunately, my streak of bad luck continued. Reed started pacing the room and eyeing his wristwatch. He finally shook his head. "Damn, I'm running late. I need to jump in the shower and get out of here in the next half hour or I'll miss hair and make-up."

"Hey, man," said Burke, "are you an actor, too? Got a show tonight? Where? What's the name of it? What part did you get? Did I mention I want to be on the stage one day? Do you have an agent also? Do you think you can keep me in mind if you hear about anyone needing an extra or—"

Reed left the room without a word, and I couldn't blame him. Burke The Babbler, missing the none-too-subtle hint, simply redirected his questions at me. By the time I'd signed all the papers and called Olive in Burke's presence—another one of her typical directives—and finally sent him on his merry, jabbering way, I knew it was too late for anything to happen between me and my roommate. He had already finished showering and dressing, and

with his long hair still wet and his shoelaces undone, he halted at the door before leaving.

"I guess we can continue our talk at another time, huh?" He took a hesitant step toward me, then stopped. His dark eyes brimmed with unspoken questions.

Gee, awkward much? "Yeah, I guess. We'll talk tomorrow or something, huh?"

"Okay, yeah."

"Hey, break a leg tonight, okay?"

"Okay, man, I'll do that." His lips pursed, and his forehead crinkled. I imagined him attempting to form a sentence that wouldn't sound cobbled together with emotional leftovers from our earlier talk. If he only knew my tongue was desperately trying to do the same thing, with no success. Damn that messenger! Finally, Reed shook his head and offered a bashful smile. "Anyway, we'll talk..."

With that, he left the apartment to my utter frustration. I finished off my warm beer, then decided to take a shower. A hot one! One that would undoubtedly induce me to masturbate long into the evening while thinking of the sexy Reed Keeting.

CHAPTER 8

The passionate kiss should have had an effect on me other than inducing extreme nausea.

Unfortunately, it didn't.

And forget about the "passion." A shame, really, since the guy was damned attractive. His strong features and perfectly groomed hair, his winsome smile and satisfactory build, had heads turning from the moment he strutted onto the set. Too bad he looked like a guy more comfortable in an Armani suit than in the ripped jeans, T-shirt, and leather jacket he'd worn for the audition. And as far as his acting skills? Sadly, the dialogue stumbled rather than glided off his tongue, he remained stone-faced during the highly emotional scene, and his disdainful disposition—that this gig was somehow beneath a thespian of his self-decreed magnitude—

completely turned me off.

But the kiss that had my stomach churning became, literally, the *pièce de résistance* in my negative impression of him. Not only did his dry, flaky lips make it feel like I was pressing my lips to stucco, but when his mouth finally broke away from mine, I somehow managed to restrain myself from speaking one thought: *Hey, moron, ever hear of a revolutionary invention called a Tic Tac?*

The fact that he'd done nothing to obliterate his revolting and suffocating breath before arriving today displayed a complete lack of professional courtesy. I mean, really—the guy had supposedly read the scene beforehand, had obviously seen the "stage business" in the script concerning the kiss, so unless his IQ hovered just above zero, he had no excuse. I couldn't help thinking he'd decided normal etiquette didn't apply when it came to kissing another man.

Needless to say, the lack of chemistry between us marred the entire screen test, and upon the scene's completion, I could tell immediately that Jillian Shinbark felt the same way. Her rather brusque, "Thank you, we'll be in touch with your agent," made me want to leap for joy. The last thing I wanted was to play dramatic scenes against an actor I found professionally incapable and personally repugnant.

Afterward, I stepped to Jillian's side and shook my head in such an exaggerated fashion as to make her laugh.

"What, no good, Mars?" she teased, sliding her glasses halfway down the bridge of her nose and peering at me over the black rims. "At least he managed to mask his dislike at kissing a man better than the last one we tested. But he didn't float my boat, and I could certainly tell he didn't float yours either, huh?" She pulled off her

glasses altogether, then gave me a wink-wink and a nudge-nudge like the classic Monty Python skit.

"Float it? His torpedo breath sank the ship before it even launched, thank you very much. Did he gargle with garlic and onion juice? I almost wondered if V-8 made a new flavor combo for dullards."

She playfully patted my arm in commiseration. "Oh, you poor dear."

"How many has this been now?" I asked, running a hand over my bewhiskered jaw. The show's producers had asked me to maintain a slightly unshaven look, telling me it gave my character a "smoldering, dangerous edge." And per Olive's prediction, they'd also arranged for me to make at least one appearance every few episodes without a shirt. But I didn't mind the itchy stubble or flashing some skin for the cameras since the big bosses were the ones who signed my paychecks. "About the fifth or sixth actor? Any more lined up?"

"More like the tenth candidate, and no, the well has run dry. I thought finding *you* was difficult, but this is proving just as frustrating. Out of more than two hundred actors who've read for this role, only ten showed enough promise to warrant a screen test, and each of them has dreadfully fizzled. Fizzled, fizzled, fizzled." She spat the word as a curse.

This wasn't the first time she'd complained to me about the casting dilemma. Although I'd been available on set to play opposite only half of the men who'd tested in the past few weeks, I somehow wondered if the problem was me. Now, I said as much.

"Not even close, Mars. You somehow understood Wave Benson from day one. These other actors, however, just don't seem to grasp how to realistically portray the new character of Linc

Abernathy. Either they play him too effeminate or too over-the-top macho, they're prima donnas, or they just don't have the right appearance. This last guy had a great 'soap face,' but with his Wall Street haircut and perky white smile, I thought he looked rather uncomfortable and downright goofy in the leather jacket."

"I was thinking the exact same thing. If he went into a biker bar, he'd get his ass whooped."

"And not in a good way, I'm sure." She laughed. "Thankfully you have the perfect 'sexy boy-next-door' look we envisioned for Wave, not to mention the actual skills required to pull off a gay character and make him believable. You're confident in your talent without being arrogant. But these other guys? No, not even close."

I smiled, but said nothing. To the people here at the studio, I was just a normal, everyday straight guy, and I hadn't "come out" to change their perception of me. Certainly I'd never been one to flaunt my sexual preference, plus I didn't believe it was anyone's business, not to mention I still hadn't quite gotten over my dread of the whole "typecasting" possibility. But I had discovered another reason to keep quiet—Jillian and the show's producers looked upon me as an even better actor, thinking a straight man was so realistically portraying a gay one, that I suppose my ego induced me to keep mum. Wrong of me, perhaps, but I wasn't really lying, wasn't going out of my way to hide my orientation, just not voluntarily offering up the information to anyone.

Jillian flung some of the Lily Munster-streaked hair off her shoulder and uttered a debilitated sigh. "I wonder if we'll ever find the perfect candidate for this crucial role. After all, how can Wave begin a love affair with a new character next week without anyone to play opposite him? This is too important a plotline for the show, and if I don't cast the right actor soon, I swear, I'll be forced to

hunt those biker bars you mentioned for a guy who fits the part, and I'm way too delicate a flower to go through that." She giggled without humor. "And even if I discover some sexy creature off the street who looks good in leather and sitting atop a motorcycle, I'm way too old to wait until he learns how to act."

"Don't worry, Jill, you'll find our Linc, I'm sure. Hang tight."

"Nevertheless, I'd better warn the writers. They may need to do some quick re-writes to stall the beginning of Wave's love story. I don't want to pick just any guy to play Linc, then have to recast the role later, then be forced to rush the storyline in order to make the November sweeps. We need to grab more viewers, and hold them at least long enough to get them hooked. Darn it, I wish Mr. Garlic-And-Onions had worked out."

A short time later, I retired to my dressing room. The co-star with whom I shared the comfortable, yet unadorned and softly lit area wasn't on call that day, so I decided to kick off my shoes, stretch out on the sofa, and take a nap while waiting for my scenes to tape later that afternoon.

But despite my exhaustion, I couldn't sleep. Even though I'd memorized nearly thirty pages of dialogue for the upcoming taping, including additional material from the replacement script sides the writers had given me that morning, I decided to mentally rehearse everything a final time. "Practice makes perfect" had always been my acting motto, and when it came to my character of Wave Benson, whom I truly liked, I wanted to make him shine. I reached behind me and grabbed the script sides off the dressing table, then settled back against a pillow.

For an actor, life on a soap opera offered a special opportunity, one unparalleled within the entertainment industry. When playing a character for a single stint, such as in a movie, or for a weekly

role, such as in a prime-time television series, there were a limited number of occasions to explore the nuances of your character's life and background, and all of the dialogue and actions were pretty much set in stone. Yet a soap proved the perfect vehicle, one less stringent, for an actor to develop a character over time, and on nearly a daily basis, with their back-story becoming richer and allowing for emotional growth over the course of months or even vears. Additionally, working on a soap gave an actor greater freedom to create his own character, and I often found myself giving a lot of my own personality to Wave Benson, including being able to ad-lib the occasional line or two without anyone flipping out. In truth, I couldn't have asked for a more challenging and fulfilling assignment. Or a bigger breath of fresh air. The majority of my work had been on the stage, and although I'd had some difficult roles, portraying the same character night after night, without deviations from the lines, could become rather boring after a short period of time. But life on a soap, I'd discovered, was anything but boring.

And in a personal way, it had also proven quite eerie...

It is often said that art is an imitation of life, and for the first time in my career, I couldn't help but agree.

Eerie number one? As the plot went, my Wave Benson character had come to the fictional town of Mount Pleasant after a love affair had ended in utter disaster and he'd been forced to find a new place to live.

And eerie number two? The scene being used for the screen test I'd done earlier today called for the new character of sexually confused Lincoln "Linc" Abernathy admitting to having desires for Wave Benson, and at the end of the dialogue, the two men shared their first kiss.

I'm not sure what inspired the show's writers to create the particular scene, but since I'd lived through a nearly identical replica of it just days before starting work on *Destiny's Storm*, I jokingly wondered whether the writers had bugged my TriBeCa abode on the afternoon when Reed and I had talked. Indeed, some of the written dialogue actually mirrored—verbatim—what my roommate had said to me before we nearly kissed.

Ah, yes, and there lay the key difference from art being a *true* imitation of my life. The word "nearly"...

Damn it, I thought, resting today's script sides on my chest and closing my eyes. Even now after all these weeks, I still ached to kiss Reed, longed to resume that important conversation where we'd left off. But hell, we'd barely seen each other since that day, and when we had, it was usually only in passing.

These last four weeks had been a whirlwind of professional activity for the both of us, with all of our off-hours spent sleeping, and on completely *opposite* schedules. If we found a brief moment to catch up on life, it was usually on Sunday afternoons, prior to him running out to his parent's house, or me either memorizing the latest script sides for Monday morning calls or taking care of my own family obligations. This consisted mostly of visiting my parents in Connecticut three weekends in a row and allowing my mother to drag me to numerous social events where she bragged about her son, the newest star of *Destiny's Storm*—and all this before my initial scenes had even aired. But I had indulged her, which was the least I could do after all she'd done for me, "like giving birth," she always reminded me whenever I started to complain. God love her.

Regardless, when it came to Reed and I spending time together, our work schedules always intervened. Unlike my roommate's

prediction regarding his show—Jungle Juice, I learned, being the musical's actual name—it had turned into a sleeper hit. "A monster hit," to quote the critic from the *Times*. Reed now performed five nights a week and on Saturday matinees. Not only that, but after a few weeks, his skills had earned him a promotion, and Jungle Warrior #8 became Jungle Chieftain. It still wasn't a starring role, but at least he had lines and appeared as a featured singer and dancer in several energetic musical numbers, leaving him completely drained. I managed to attend several performances, then stopped going. Seeing him nearly naked on stage and being unable to touch his muscular and perspiring body at home the way I yearned to do just made me even more miserable.

As for me, I now toiled at the set, usually working from 7:00 A.M. to long into the evening hours while also allowing for at least an hour commute to and from the studio. As an actor with a dayplayer role, I received a decent amount of work, and more than the norm. I had expected some weeks to have nothing to do at all, but the writers kept my storyline at the forefront. The grueling taping schedule alone would have killed many actors, and nearly every day I had to memorize anywhere from twenty to sixty pages of dialogue, then rehearse each scene with my fellow actors and learn my blocking prior to the taping—or rather, two tapings for each scene. Plus, also for the show, I somehow managed to squeeze extra activities into my days or evenings-doing interviews for entertainment periodicals or magazines devoted entirely to soap operas, taking publicity photos, and attending wardrobe fittings. And on my days off, I even made appearances with other cast members at several high-profile charity functions or fan events at malls or theaters in the tri-state area.

Needless to say, despite my own exhaustion, I missed Reed

dreadfully. I couldn't recall a single day where I hadn't jacked off at least once, whether in the shower or in my lonely bed, thinking of him. I strongly sensed he felt the same way, and after his confession to me about what he'd done that night in the hallway outside my room, I wondered if he also whacked off while fantasizing about me before drifting off to sleep. But at the moment, with both of us running ourselves ragged with our careers, there was nothing we could do to rectify the situation, whether sitting down for a long, serious discussion or forsaking discussion in lieu of some hot and heavy lovemaking.

Several good things, however, did come about because of our hectic schedules. With both of us now earning steady paychecks, money was no longer a worry. But more importantly, at least for me, Reed's social life seemed to have hit a major snag. The string of one-night-stands I had expected to see after his breakup with Niki, even despite what had almost happened between us, hadn't occurred. As far as I knew, he hadn't been with any woman in all these weeks, and for a perpetually horny guy like Reed, that said a lot, either about his fatigue or about his desire to explore his homosexual nature. Of course, I couldn't help wishing for the latter. But I'd never know for certain until we could find time to actually talk for more than a few fleeting moments. If only we could somehow get on the same schedule and—

I bolted upright as a wild thought struck me.

Crazy? For some reason, I didn't think so. Indeed, the more I thought of the possibilities, the more it seemed a brilliant idea and I wondered if I could pull it off. Or actually, I wondered whether *Reed* could pull it off, or if he would even want to try. But once again, the more I considered the idea, thought of Reed's personality, his talent, his ambition and lack of arrogance, I

became absolutely certain he not only *could* do it, but *would*, if given the opportunity.

And maybe, just maybe, my plan would not only solve the show's dilemma, but also my personal one.

With no time to spare, I leapt up and dashed out of my dressing room, racing through the maze of hallways in my stockinged feet. A few minutes later, I poked my head into the office of the show's casting director and prayed to God I wasn't overstepping my bounds.

"Did you find anyone for the part in the last hour?" I asked from Jillian's doorway.

She looked up from piles of headshots and résumés cluttering her desk, and appeared even more frazzled and desperate than when I'd left her earlier on the set. "You tell me, Mars. Is this the face of a guy you'd want to kiss and be able to look at with googoo eyes on a daily basis?"

She held up an 8 x 10 glossy of a fine looking actor, although one a bit older and not quite as sexy as I had personally imagined for my character's intended love interest. When I lifted my eyebrow and offered a half-hearted smile, she flung the photo onto the floor, where it landed amongst a host of other discards.

"That's it, I quit. I will never work on another soap as long as I live!"

I laughed. "I've heard you say that every day for weeks."

"Yes, and every day I've meant it."

"And what would you do if I said I have a possible solution to your problem—to *our* problem?"

"I'd immediately jump over this desk and give *you* a great big kiss. But so help me, Mars, if you're getting my hopes up for nothing, I'll personally ask the writers to kill off Wave Benson by

pushing him off a cliff. Your first *and* last air dates will quickly ride hand in hand into the soap opera sunset."

"Ouch! But before you do anything so drastic and painful to my character, call The Upton Agency and ask them to fax over the résumé of a particular actor I know."

"And this guy has the right look and personality for the part? He's a hard worker with actual talent? He's no prima donna?"

"Let me answer by saying you'll want to start puckering up, because you'll be owing *me* that huge kiss you promised. Meanwhile, I'll find a breath mint for myself. I'm nothing if not professional and always courteous with my co-workers."

CHAPTER 9

"We shouldn't. Not here. Not now. Not like this," I whispered, the fear of discovery both tightening my belly and pumping blood to my cock in a simultaneous flood of raw emotions and lewd desires.

"Shut up and kiss me, damn it. Just kiss me."

The hot, moist lips closed over my own, and the urgent, demanding tongue filled my mouth to silence any further protests. Hands of a horny beast gripped my bare ass cheeks before venturing upward, the fingers digging trenches into my backside from my waist to my shoulder blades. When his mouth finally broke from mine, a string of saliva bridged the short gap between our lips. He bathed my face, neck, and chest in torrid exhales. Exhales so inexplicably hot against my skin I thought it would

blister. Then I recalled the studio lights, blazing like dozens of disapproving suns from above, adding heat to the mix.

"No, not here," I repeated.

"Then where? I need it now. I need it badly."

I wrapped my fingers around his hard, throbbing cock. Although the pre-cum oozing down his shaft made it difficult to secure a firm grip, I somehow managed to lead him across the studio to another set, this one a dimly lit, three-walled facsimile of an elegant bedroom.

"Here?" he asked, his voice guttural and gruff, advertising his unwavering need to rut. "In the actual bedroom of Autumn Knight, the show's legendary character? Can we finally do it now?"

I plopped down on the mattress, the floral bedspread cool and dry against my perspiring and recently clawed backside. "Yeah," I replied, toeing his boner and jacking my own throbbing meat. "Right here. Right now."

Before I could say anything more, he took hold of my ankles and thrust my legs to the sides. Instantly, the fat crown of his dick probed my puckered hole. And all at once, he entered me, his natural lubricant greasing the way. I grunted from a mixture of pain and pleasure, the walls of my rectum clenching and quivering around his lengthy pole as he plunged ever downward, filling more of me than I had ever been filled before. I wrapped my legs around his body, and my heels pounded his firm buttocks, punctuating each of his well-aimed thrusts.

"Fuck me, damn it, fuck me!" The command seemed to pour directly from my loins instead of my throat, filling the air with echoes and proclaiming my lust to the empty television studio. "Give me that fucking cock I've wanted for so goddamned long!"

"Oh, yeah, I'll give it to you, all right. I'll give you the

pounding you deserve."

I ran my hands over my lover's sweaty chest and belly, wondering why I detected no crinkly hair as I had expected to find. An abrupt and overpowering aroma filled my nostrils. I opened my eyes and viewed the handsome yet blank face of Mr. Garlic-And-Onions, completely nude except for the out-of-place black leather jacket. Perspiration had plastered the Wall Street hair-do to his head and he fucked me with all the listless vigor and emotionless grace of an automaton designed for pleasure and set on ultra-high. A Stepford Fag!

"Oh, yeah, Mars, I'll fuck you all night long if you'll let me. When we kissed, I could tell you wanted it. I could tell you wanted the bang of your life. And I'm just the guy to give it to you."

"But I—"

Over his shoulder, another face suddenly appeared. As the actor pounded into me, my mind shrieked a tardy warning. All right, that's it, one of the security guards has discovered us in the throes of animalistic sexcapades. I guess I'll start hunting for a new job in the morning, or whenever I can walk again after this energetic fuck.

But the security guard hadn't arrived after all. When the intruder, also "soap-star" handsome and completely naked, scrambled onto the mattress beside my head, I realized it was a different actor, one with whom I'd played against during a different screen test. Before I could say anything, he shoved his cock into my mouth. The taste of his dick and pre-cum delighted my tongue. Damn, it had been way too long since last I'd savored cock. I sucked and sucked like never before, drew as much juice from his shaft as I could, yet I was still unable to satisfy my pent-up craving.

"Stick out your tongue in this direction, Mars."

Gasping at the sound of a new voice, I abandoned the succulent cock and turned my head toward the other side of the bed. All at once, another actor appeared, one I had kissed days earlier during yet another screen test. His fingers encircled the plump, rock-hard phallus at his groin, shiny and dripping with natural lube. He masturbated faster and faster, so fast his hand became a blur. "I'll give you what you want, Mars. I'll feed you my load, you fucking slut." He erupted, ivory streams of jizz shooting toward my face. "Catch it, whore, catch it!"

And I did, my tongue, teeth, and lips eventually dripping with his salty cream. He jabbed his still-spitting cock into my mouth. I swallowed as fast as possible, but couldn't seem to contain the copious load. His spunk trickled from the sides of my mouth and down my chin, then cascaded onto my chest. "Drain me dry, actor man—Planet Boy—then I'll feed you another load, and another, and another, and—"

"No, let me," said the actor on the other side of my head. "He needs to finish me off next. He wants my jizz, don't you, Mars?"

I looked around, and now saw several additional actors standing beside the bed, forming a line of well-hung and horny stallions, all preparing to take turns on me. As much as I ached to feel all of those magnificent cocks in my ass, or hungered to savor every drop they promised to deliver into my mouth, I felt overwhelmed. Something didn't seem quite right. They somehow lacked the perfection necessary to satisfy me. And how could I service all of these randy but less-than-worthy men and *not* get caught in the process? How could I *not* get fired for such a horrifying and shameful display?

"No," I moaned, though no one seemed to hear me. I protested

again, louder this time, yet to no avail.

All of the men started barking encouragement to Mr. Garlic-And-Onions, goading him to fuck me harder and harder as he continued to drive into me. My own dick slapped up and down against my muscled belly. Beads of pre-cum had matted the hair around my navel, and I felt about ready to explode.

That's when the studs suddenly turned their full attention to my groin.

"Let me suck him off!"

"No, let me!"

"Back off, bitches, I want it, I want it. Let me finish him off."

Oh, fucking hell, please, please, someone just do it already! Make me come! Make me come!

"Every single drop is mine, damn it," proclaimed another voice. A familiar and welcome voice. A more powerful tenor that immediately silenced the other pleas. "He wants *me* to have it. *Only* me!"

Instantly, Mr. Garlic-And-Onions withdrew from my ass, his disappointed face disappearing somewhere beyond the horizon of my spread legs. Then seconds later, another figure moved forward to take his place on the bed, and another steely shaft filled my empty hole, entering me slowly, delicately, lovingly, so as to cause absolutely no pain, but unsullied and everlasting pleasure.

I stared up into Reed's beautiful and smiling face. His manly scent, a comforting, spicy fragrance to which I had grown accustomed, filled my senses and hardened my cock even more. "Isn't that right, Mars? You want only me to taste your cum. And you want me to fill you with mine, isn't that right?"

"Yes, oh yes, Reed, that's right. You're right. Get rid of these other actors. You're the *only* one who's right...perfect...just

perfect...just what I'm looking for...you and me...we need to stick together..."

He gifted me with a smile that rocketed my heart into the heavens. My entire body surged with unrelenting passion, and I fully came to realize, right then and there, as the man who proclaimed himself as Cock King languidly massaged my insides with his hefty tool and his strong hands petted my torso, thighs, and buttocks, that the emotion I felt so deeply, so completely, had an actual name...

It was love. Pure, unadulterated love.

"Let me love you, too," he whispered, lying atop me and molding our bodies together.

His ravenous and ardent kisses robbed me of breath. When my tongue invaded his mouth, everyone surrounding the bed instantly vanished into thin air. I closed my eyes and surrendered to this sexy creature, enwrapping his sinewy, furry body with my arms and legs and bucking beneath him, while the friction of his belly against my tingling shaft spurred me toward release. When he moaned, and I felt the warmth of his seed finally flood my insides, my own cock responded, spewing hot semen between us, sticking our bellies together. Sticking us together. Sticking us together for all eternity...

* * *

"Sticking us together, Reed...us...us sticking together..."

"Mars, Mars? Wake up, man." Fingers closed around one of my shoulders and shook me. "Yes, it's me, buddy, wake up. Wake up..."

"Huh? What?" My eyelids came open and I found Reed sitting

on my mattress next to me. His long hair, mussed from slumber, hung in his forehead and around his neck, and I also couldn't help but notice the luscious hair covering his bare torso. "What did you say?"

He chuckled. "Wow, that must have been some fuckin' dream."

"A fuckin' what?" Oh my God, he had hit the target, I decided, when recollections of the wickedly wild "fucking dream" rushed through my brain. And as I moved to sit up, I realized that a sticky, warm by-product of that dream had temporarily glued the bed sheet to my belly. "A dream? Oh, yeah, sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't. What were you dreaming about anyway? Something that had to do with me, I know."

"Why? D-did I say anything specific?"

"You were mumbling something about actors...about getting rid of all the other actors. Then saying how I was right, perfect for something, and that we actors needed to stick together."

"Oh, oh, yeah...it was about work and...hey, did you get a call from your agent yesterday?"

"He phoned just before I went into hair and make-up. That's why I couldn't sleep. I've been on pins and needles to talk to you. I got home a little while ago, and almost woke you purposely. Then I decided against it. But the moment I got into bed, I started tossing and turning. When I heard you mumbling, I thought you were on the phone or something and got up to check."

I looked toward my closed drapes, detecting only blackness through the chinks in the material. "What time is it anyway?"

"Time for you to get your ass out of bed and fill me in on what the hell is going on. Tomorrow—I mean, *today*—is Saturday, and you don't have to work, do you?"

"No, but you do."

"A matinee, as always. But fuck it, this is more important." He climbed to his feet and padded toward the door. My gaze instantly swept over his muscular back, beefy thighs, and the firm bubble butt clearly outlined beneath a pair of tight white underwear with the Macho brand logo on the waistband. Too fucking appropriate for Reed, I decided. "Now, come on, get up."

More memories of the dream came rushing back to me. They needled me to say something filthy and flirtatious such as, "Crawl into my bed and let me show *you* how to get something *else* up," but I stopped myself.

"Want some coffee?" he asked.

"Ah, yeah, give me a second and I'll be right out."

He turned at the door and gave me a rather foxy look. When his glance traveled from my face, over my chest, then toward where the bed sheet covered my belly—the *damp* bed sheet and my *sticky* belly—a sexy dimple cut into his cheek as he grinned. I couldn't tell, however, whether he realized how my dream had actually ended—perhaps "climaxed" would have been a better word—or if he was just admiring the view of my naked body, or whether he had read my mind and was considering my offer to join me in sport.

Damn, either way, his expression made me shiver with renewed desire and gave me hope that he might still be willing to explore his feelings one day. And I wanted that day to come soon before I wasted another night only *dreaming* of fucking him.

Once he left, I grabbed the underwear I'd removed before going to bed, then hurriedly cleaned myself off with them and tossed them into the hamper. After slipping on a nearby pair of jogging shorts, I stumbled into the kitchen just as the microwave dinged.

Reed pulled two steaming mugs from the appliance, then set them on the kitchen table. He plopped down in a chair, thrust out his long legs, and gestured me to the seat next to him. "Just what the heck is going on over at your soap?"

"Your agent faxed over the info they requested, that's what."

"But why? I assume *you* had something to do with the request, but what's this all about?"

"It's about what you always say, about how we actors should stick together. So expect another phone call from Lester, before Monday."

"Mars...what have you done?"

"How would you feel about playing a biker type of dude? One who's gay, by the way?"

Reed slammed down his coffee mug so hard, some of the liquid splashed to form tiny brown puddles on the table. Ignoring them, he sat up straight. "Are you shitting me? Is this a real, honest-to-goodness shot at landing an actual soap role or just wishful thinking on your part?"

I sipped from my coffee, but it burned my tongue, so I set aside my mug. Besides, I needed no additional caffeine. Being in Reed's presence, especially after all these weeks of waving to each other in passing or communicating mostly in hastily scribbled notes, had already given me a buzz. And seeing as how he currently sat beside me and wore nothing but his Macho underwear, had me buzzier than a hive of bees. "To be honest, it's both. But listen up, and listen good, because I think you've got a great shot at this."

I proceeded to tell him about all the weeks and weeks Jillian had spent searching for an actor to play opposite me, including all the various screen tests that went nowhere. "Jillian and the show's producers are getting a bit anxious, especially since my storyline is

about to start airing and they need to begin filming scenes with the new character of Linc almost immediately."

"I'll bet."

"But then today, I started thinking about the type of dude the writers are looking for. Manly, handsome, with longish hair. A guy who looks comfortable in jeans and a T-shirt and a leather jacket, and who wouldn't be too out of place sitting atop a motorcycle. And of course, he needs acting talent. That's when I thought of you. You'd be perfect for the part. Perfect!"

"And he's gay also, right?"

"This is where things could get a bit...tricky..."

"Meaning...?"

"The role of Linc is being written as my...my love interest on the show."

To my extreme relief, Reed showed not a single sign of loathing. Indeed, after viewing the enlivened twinkle in his eyes, I would describe him as being "intrigued." Yes, definitely intrigued. I could tell, as he absorbed and pondered the information, the benefits of us actually working on the same schedule, being together more often to explore whatever relationship we might develop, appealed to him now as much as it did to me when I'd originally come up with the idea.

He folded his hands on the table and leaned forward, his brow creasing in concern. "So let me ask, do you think I can do this?"

"No question about that. You have the acting chops, I'm certain of it. But the real question is, do you even *want* to do it?"

He gave me one of those "uh-duh" expressions that made me laugh. God he was so fucking cute, I could barely stand it. I wondered what he would do if I leaned over and kissed that sexy mouth of his while simultaneously sliding my hand across his thigh

to his bulging groin.

"And your casting director—"

"Jillian."

"She wants me to come in and read?"

"She tried phoning Lester late this afternoon, but he'd already left for the day. That's why I said, expect a call from your agent before Monday. And you—we—have another thing in our favor."

"What's that?"

"Chemistry. Something I found completely lacking between myself and the other actors who came close to getting the part. But you and I? They'll be no stopping us. We've gotten along great since living together, right? And can you imagine being able to live with a co-star and rehearse each scene to perfection in your off hours?"

"We'd slay them!"

"You took the words right out of my mouth. That's what I mean...chemistry."

He shook his head in amazement. "Wow, you really are looking out for me."

"You'd do the same for me any ol' day. And to give you an even higher leg-up on whatever competition might appear in the next few days, I actually brought home a copy of the test scene. We can rehearse it this weekend, if you have the time."

"If? Fucking aces, I'll *find* the time, damn it. Sunday, okay? Who needs yet another weekend of defending my profession over Sunday dinner to tight-ass Republicans otherwise known as Mumsie and Popsie? Oh, yeah, I'll find the time all right. And I'd do just about anything to stop these nightly 'jungle dances,' which have left me..." Even before he could utter the word, he suppressed a yawn.

"Exhausted, I know. But if this works out, we'll be exhausted together, and performing some highly dramatic material in the process. My initial scenes won't be airing until sometime in the next few weeks, so you obviously haven't seen my work on the show. Let me tell you, it's some juicy emotional stuff, the type of work we actors love. So what do you say?"

"You don't have to sell me"—another yawn contorted his mouth—"sell me on the idea. I'm in."

"Good, now get some much-needed sleep, roomie. You have a matinee tomorrow."

"And maybe, if good fortune shines down from above, my last matinee." He got up from the table and lumbered toward the hallway. But he paused and turned around to look at me. His face, though obviously weary, brightened when his gaze met mine. "Thanks, Mars. Thanks a lot. I can't wait to see the material and get a chance to work with you on Sunday. These past few months, we've occasionally read lines together to help out the other guy, but this, the chance to actually work together, is so different. As I said, I can't wait."

Knowing how the test scene concluded, I smiled in anticipation of our first kiss. "Neither can I."

"If you're willing, of course, maybe we can rehearse throughout the day and get the scene as close to perfection as possible. Doing it as many times as necessary for me to ace the audition."

My smile broadened. "That's my plan exactly."

I watched him meander toward his bedroom, paying special attention to the way his leg and back muscles flexed. And especially to the way his taut underwear hugged his sturdy butt cheeks. My dick got hard immediately, and I slipped my hand

inside my jogging shorts to relieve the strain.

Sunday sure couldn't come fast enough for me.

Or could it?

Suddenly, a pang of uncertainty twisted my stomach, and I gave myself a firm warning. Don't get too carried away in fantasies. After all, given Reed's "straight status," and despite his recent confession to experimenting with other men and admitting his curiosity regarding being with me, I had no guarantees that my plan would actually work. Only weeks earlier he had been with Niki, and countless broads beforehand, so how was I to know for certain what he felt about women? Or what if Sunday's rehearsal ended the way I'd hoped, and then Jillian rejected him as a candidate for the role as my love interest? Then we'd be in exactly the same place we were in right now, working on opposite schedules and too exhausted to even spend time together to fully develop a relationship. Could Reed and I survive getting intimate then not being together? Would any relationship between us end in disaster like it did with Warren? Would I soon have to find a new place to live and face losing one of the best friends I'd ever had?

Straight men, damn them, were so fucking unpredictable!

Uttering an additional curse under my breath, I got up from my chair. I dumped out the unfinished coffee, then grabbed a rag and wiped off the table. Afterward, while I stood at the sink, rinsing the rag under the tap water, a nasty combination of tiredness, self-doubt, and sexual frustration induced me to groan. And the uncertainty within me blossomed. Too bad I couldn't wring out my soul as easily as I could twist the rag in my hands. Too bad I couldn't watch my flood of worries and concerns disappear down the drain. Too bad I couldn't—

Stop it, just stop it!

Easier said than done. I stumbled back to my bedroom, but not before eyeing Reed's closed door at the end of the hallway and feeling the familiar ache in my gut. An ache that just about tore me to shreds. If I slipped into his room and crawled into his bed, would he reject me or welcome me with open arms? Could he ever feel about me the way I felt about him?

Agony, beyond power of speech, when the one thing you want, is the only thing out of your reach...

There came that damned song again, playing in my head to mock me and make me question the situation. Was Reed truly accessible as I prayed, or completely out of my reach? Had my short time on *Destiny's Storm* influenced me to develop intricate and angsty soap-style plotlines in my brain? Was I living in a world of my own mixed-up fantasy, erecting barriers where none had previously existed, allowing grains of easily solved dilemmas to grow and fester into mountains too dense and lofty to conquer?

Or was I simply going nuts?

CHAPTER 10

"You're nuts!"

The words hit me like a one-two punch to the jaw. "So much for a reality check," I muttered.

That Saturday morning, once I had fully awakened, I'd borrowed a friend's car and had driven into Connecticut. Unlike previous weekends this past month, I didn't go to visit my folks for a day of being my mother's prized show horse, but headed toward Greenwich instead, to the Grand Horizon Theatre, one of the oldest playhouses in the state. Though originally built in the late 1800s, the three-story structure had recently been refurbished to its former lush elegance and now presented musicals and dramas, some new, some classic, throughout the year.

Today I had no interest in the play, however, but in the

opinions of my dear friend, whom I'd tracked down. A friend who could, hopefully, help me face reality.

An hour before the curtain rose for the matinee, I stood in a stuffy dressing room and finished reciting the tale of my relationship with Reed, omitting none of the twists and turns and recent developments, and including my plans for the following day. To my utter confusion, however, my audience of one did not so much as applaud.

Preparing for her latest gig as a nineteenth-century milkmaid, Cordelia Mazzaricchi—or rather, Delia Maze—plopped down at her make-up table, her crinoline-stiffened gown crunching under her shapely ass. I'd hoped she'd commend me for thinking things through, would perhaps congratulate me for sticking to my guns and not blindly jumping into another potentially disastrous relationship. Or perhaps I hoped she might at least offer some sound advice regarding how to proceed cautiously when it came to Reed. Instead, with mouth agape, she stared at me for several long moments until she repeated those two simple words—

"You're nuts!"

"Nuts?"

"Indeed, nuts, like flying-over-the-cuckoo's-nest nuts."

"Thanks for clarifying, Delia. Ah-duh, and here all this time I thought you were talking about the two round things that made a scrotum so damned appealing to queers like me."

"Joke all you want, funny boy, but I mean it. You must be certifiable." Snatching some blush, she turned to the makeup mirror wreathed in glaring light bulbs and started applying crimson to her pale cheeks. "You know what your problem is, Mars?"

"I'm sure you'll enlighten me."

"Your problem is not knowing the difference between a bad

thing versus a good thing."

"And you know the difference?"

"Now, a bad thing is your ex-lover, Warren—all hot and hung and decent in the sack, yes, but a self-centered dunderhead who probably still lifts the tank lid prior to flushing to see if the Tidy Bowl man really lives inside."

"You always hated Warren."

"'Hate' is too kind a word. I loathed him, and with valid reason. I know a bad thing when I see one. Now a good thing?—this Reece you mentioned—"

"Reed," I corrected with an accompanying sigh. "And you haven't even met him."

"But I've heard enough. And it sounds like he actually has a genuine brain in his noggin. Hell, Mars, Warren's shoe size surpassed his IQ, and the only way he'd open a book is if it promised pop-up pictures or a hidden flask of whiskey inside. But this new guy obviously knows how to read, and he's in the same profession, so understands the lifestyle. According to you, he's had a good upbringing, and can carry on conversations using words with more than one syllable, and without making Warren's weird Neanderthal grunting noises when doing so."

"Warren didn't grunt."

"Warren's type *always* grunts, darling, since their vocabulary is so limited. Plus you said this new guy was...hmm, now let me remember. Oh yes, you described him as, 'handsome on a stick, a smoldering shish kabob of sexy,' did you not?"

"Shit, I hope I didn't really use those exact words."

Without turning from the mirror, Delia sent an exasperated glare at my reflection. "You did, and don't change the subject in the middle of my life lesson. You might actually learn something,

you know?"

"Like...?"

"Like this—hot and hung and decent in the sack with no brain is Warren, and that equals 'bad.' B-a-d. Bad. But handsome and sexy *plus* brains is your new guy, Red—"

"Reed."

"—and that equals 'good.' Now repeat after me...good. G-o-o-d. Good. But your problem is you obviously still don't know the difference. Bad and good are all jumbled up in your warped mind."

"They're not jumbled. I do know the difference."

"Really? I think not, or otherwise you would have already jumped his sexy shish kabob or skewered him with your own love pole."

"You're also forgetting one important thing...Reed is straight."

"But you also told me about his confession, which means he's not a full-fledged one on the gaydar scale, but at least hovering around a five, meaning he could go either way. Unless I've gotten it backward. Which is a ten, straight or gay? Regardless, it doesn't matter since he's somewhere in the middle either way you look at it."

"So it's wrong that I've gone slowly?"

"You should have nailed him on the couch when you had the chance and left that messenger waiting on the doorstep. Or you should have dragged him into your bed last night after your sexy dream and fucked his brains out."

"But there is such a thing as caution."

"Caution is commendable if done for the right reasons. But in this case, you invented an extra problem where it didn't exist. If he was another Cro-Magnon type like Warren, then by all means, run for the hills before your real brain took a holiday and your dick did

the thinking. Just like you did with Warren. But this new guy obviously isn't Warren. You said you connect, really connect with him, so much so that even that 'almost-kiss' just about tore your socks off."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. When you talked about what happened, I saw your eyes quite clearly, and they said it all. But do you comprehend the difference between these two men? No. In some cockamamie way—pun intended, I might add—you see them in a similar light. You instantly constructed a wall around yourself, protected yourself, convinced yourself that it might not work, that you'll spoil your living situation. I know, after the Warren disaster, you preferred going out and looking for 'one-night wieners' to play with, but you may have found Mr. Right in your own damned apartment. And you know what I think?"

"My anticipation runneth over," I said through clenched teeth.

"I think you're scared shitless." She kept applying blush to her face, her fingers circling faster and faster over her cheekbones as her words kept pouring forth. "Shitless. You know he's someone special, yet you're terrified of giving your heart to someone who might actually cherish it. After the tilt-o-whirl with Warren failed, you've convinced yourself you aren't ready for another ride at the circus. You've decided that since Warren played straight until he met you, that chances of discovering another straight guy who has the hots for you is impossible. You've decided that your roommate may not be ready either, that he may just want to experiment and nothing more. For some crazy reason, some fear or phobia, you're taking a good thing and making it bad, and once you start sabotaging the good things...well...you just never know when to quit."

"Never know when to quit? Look who's talking."

"What's that supposed to mean?

"It means you've used way too much blush. Shit, you look like a kabuki version of Baby Jane."

"Don't fuck with me, Blanche," she retorted in a commendable Betty Davis imitation. Nevertheless, she snatched a handful of tissues and started removing some of the excess crimson from her face. "And Baby Jane was another cuckoo, certifiable for certain. Just like you. So I guess it really does take one to know one."

"Piss off."

"No, you piss off. I swear, for a guy who can be so straight acting, so damned macho himself, you are sometimes the biggest bitch I know. Do you enjoy wallowing in your misery, your loneliness, your perpetual horniness? Still enjoy hearing that Sondheim ditty playing in your head throughout the day?"

"Why do I even confide in you about anything I'm thinking? You've got a memory like a goddamned elephant."

"Better an elephant's memory than its ass. But you confide in me because you know I'll tell you the truth and not just what you want to hear. And now, the truth is you're once again creating problems for yourself. You're a worrywart, Mr. Shaving Cream Ad. You prefer wallowing and bitching, prefer to die a thousand deaths rather than take a chance and embrace what seems to be a promising start to a new relationship. You poor, poor, poor little thing. Shall I tell everyone where to send the sympathy cards?"

"Shut up."

"I just don't understand you. Here, most people want nothing more than to find an attractive, intelligent person to love, and who loves them in return, and you're actually running from the possibility that it might happen, always flipping good things and

bad things and creating chaos in the little universe you've fashioned for yourself. And speaking of the universe, if men are from Mars—how ironic in your case—and women are from Venus, where the hell did guys like you come from? The planet Pluto? Yes, your parents should have named you Pluto instead."

"Pluto's not a planet," I barked, more than annoyed at her attitude.

"Oh really?" asked Delia, her voice ripe with sarcasm. She took the harsh-blonde wig from the mannequin head on her dressing table and settled it over her black, nylon-flattened hair. "Try telling that to Mrs. Mueller, my grammar school teacher. Did she make us add that ninth Styrofoam ball to our science mobile project just for the fuck of it?"

"No, she was just wrong. Things have changed since those days oh-so-long ago."

"I'm not that old, shit-head. And what's changed?"

"Pluto's no longer a planet."

With the wig on her head still askew, she blinked rapidly in a marriage of confusion and alarm, looking even more like Betty Davis playing a deranged Baby Jane Hudson. "What the hell happened to Pluto? Where did it go?"

"Nothing happened to it. It's still there."

"A-ha! So I actually paid attention in school. Then it is a planet, numbskull. The ninth one. And don't toy with me when I'm about to go on stage."

I stomped a path around her cramped quarters, growing more frustrated and suddenly feeling claustrophobic. "There is no ninth one. I told you, Pluto is no longer a planet. It got downgraded."

"Downgraded to what?"

"They call it a dwarf planet now, I think."

"Who is 'they'?"

"Astronomers...the men in the moon...I don't know."

"And what the hell is a dwarf planet?"

"A Dunkin' Munchkin' looking for a really big fucking planet where oceans are made of coffee and mountains are made of chocolate! How the bloody fuck do I know?"

Her heavily made-up eyes narrowed in defiance. "Are you screwing with me?"

"Oh, for pity's sake. What is it these past few weeks with women talking to me about planets? No, I'm telling you the truth, but I don't know any more than that, so quit asking me questions about Pluto."

"Well, who does know?"

"The gods of NASA, that's fucking who! Want me to grab a phone book so you can call them and find out? How did we get on this stupid subject anyway?"

"Because you, regardless of your name, my insane friend, are from Pluto, you and the rest of the aliens who don't believe in love, who turn things upside down and inside out and half-assed backwards and screw with actresses backstage when they should be rehearsing their lines. And all because of your worries and fears and phobias. Or maybe you're from Neptune. Say, is that still a planet, Mr. Science? Or was Mrs. Mueller wrong about that also?"

"I'm still willing to get that NASA number from the phone book..."

"Don't bother," she said, sniffing her annoyance and adjusting her wig. "Besides, I was wrong anyway. Neither Pluto nor Neptune applies to you. Instead, you're from Uranus! Yes, that's it. And you, my friend, *are* an anus. The king anus!"

"Har-har-hardy-har-har," I countered, giving my best Jackie

Gleason impersonation, but failing miserably in comparison to her previous Betty Davis parody. "And besides, in my case that should probably be a 'queen' instead."

"Funny, you never act like a queen...or at least not much, anyway, until you get your jock strap in a knot over something stupid or fly into one of these silly hissy fits. Regardless, king or queen or the court jester, you're insane. Nuts. Cuckoo. All of the above, especially if you let a guy like Reggie slip through your fingers just because of one nasty chapter in your life."

"For the last time, his name is Reed, and what you so casually refer to as a 'nasty chapter' was more like a 'horrific nightmare.' You didn't live through it."

"Perhaps not, sugar, but I've had my share of losers, more than you could count, and Warren was nothing compared to the majority of them." She spun from the mirror and leveled me with a black-eyed gaze. Damn, even with all the pancake make-up and blush and mascara, her face still had the power to stun. The blunt wisdom spearing out of her eyes held me in awe. And her harsh expression had the potential to level a city block with its intensity. "Quit feeling sorry for yourself, Mars Manchester. So you gave your heart to the wrong man once."

"A liar. A drunk and a thief who—"

"Big deal! You got out early, didn't invest more than a handful of months with him. You're lucky. Some people end up marrying those jerks and get tangled up in hell for years. We've all been there and have our own tales of woe. Do you have any idea what I wouldn't give to meet a guy like you've described? This Reed person?"

"You finally got his name right. Congratulations."

"Don't mock. I hate it when you mock. Do you have any idea

how I'd kill for a guy like that? Instead, all I ever get are hams"—she turned to an adjoining wall and dramatically shrieked—"insufferably bad actors, pompous cretins. The kind who think they can step all over my lines every night!"

"So that means the attraction between you and this new guy is...?"

"Oh, yes, we're through. It's over." Delia spun toward the wall again—"Over!" Then she turned back to me and spoke in her normal voice. "The passing attraction has morphed into full-fledged nausea. And let me tell you, I cannot wait to stab him to death in the third act this evening."

"Should I check the prop table to make certain you didn't substitute the fake blade for a real one?"

She smiled sweetly, instantly all innocence and sunshine. "Don't bother, I'll slay him where it counts...by telling the press his supposedly huge cock is truly no longer than a string bean, and he has his own pair of Dunkin' Munchkins dangling between his legs."

That cooled my smoldering temper, and I laughed. "You wouldn't dare."

"I've already placed a call to the entertainment editor at the *Post*. She owes me a favor. Yes, Jerome Littlefield will soon rue the day he selected *that* moniker as his stage name!"

"And you said I was the biggest bitch in town."

"No, I said you could sometimes be the biggest bitch I know. But now we're talking about me."

Just then, a double-rap on the dressing room door launched Delia out of her seat. She started to shoo me away with perfectly manicured fingers. "Now, off with you. I need a cigarette so badly, I could scream, and you're just making me more nervous with your

fidgeting and whining. I have a play to do and I must get into character."

"You mean the character of a nineteenth-century milkmaid, a mistress-turned-murderess with an acerbic tongue, evil smile, and killer tits?"

"Yes, that one. Big stretch from my real self, right?" She winked shamelessly and waggled her torso, making her hefty breasts jiggle in the tight bodice. "Nevertheless, I am a consummate actress, you know?"

"I'll say. And thanks—I think—for the pep-talk."

She popped three air-kisses in my direction with her ruby red lips, then again gestured me toward the door. "We'll talk more later. I'll be dying to know what happens tomorrow with your private 'rehearsal.' And I'll want all the juicy details, *if* you don't chicken out, of course."

"We'll see."

"Yes, we *will* see, so wipe that smirk off your face. I want to know everything, from his dick size to the weight of his balls. And of course, I'll be wishing you luck. But for now, off with you, you mangy rapscallion, before I pillory you to the entire community and force you to wear this fucking hoop skirt. I swear, how did women survive wearing these every day? Anyway, goodbye for now, my love. And think about what I told you. Please?"

"Yes, ma'am. And break a leg."

"Thanks...or maybe I'll just break Jerome's instead, you know?"

"Either way, I'll be applauding."

CHAPTER 11

Hello. My name is Mars and I'm a neurotic.

I imagined a dozen or so other individuals, similar chickenshits like me, sitting in a circle and uniting in a chorus of, "Hello, Mars," before the meeting of the ARO—Avoiding-Relationships-Oholics—could begin.

Yes, I admit it, I was acting like an irrational fool. Delia, bless her, was indeed correct in everything she'd said. Despite my hots for Reed, I was scared shitless to take that last step, and I'd created way too many baseless emotional roadblocks for myself on the highway to happiness. I had somehow lumped Reed and Warren together in the same category, generalizing them solely on the basis of their history with women, and my dread of failure with another "straight man" had once again created an eleventh-hour

crisis, preventing me from seeing both men, truly seeing them, beyond that point. The problem itself, as Delia so bluntly scolded, was all in my head. Mixed signals had become a thing of the past, and now Reed had given me numerous signs to proceed, albeit with a bit of caution, but proceed nonetheless when it came to us hooking up. And considering his personality, so completely different from Warren's, who had a special kind of "sick and twisted" in his soul, I had no firm reason to assume that an exact same outcome would occur should I press forward. Wasn't it true that the first step in solving a problem, beating an addiction—in my case, agony of my own making—was to admit you had one? Well, damn it, now I admitted it. Maybe I wasn't cured, but at least I knew what I was dealing with. And maybe now that Sondheim song would quit playing in my head.

By the time I awoke on Sunday morning, I felt more optimistic than I had in a long while. The quick junket to Connecticut had done its service, in spades, and the uninterrupted sleep of eight, soothing hours hadn't hurt either. But even better, the scent of bacon, eggs, and hot coffee filtered into my bedroom, indicating that my roommate was already awake, obviously eager to proceed with our private rehearsal. My heart fluttered in excitement, while my morning wood did a little jump and twitch beneath the sheets, urging me to get up, shower, and join him.

Standing barefoot in the kitchen before the stove, his long dark hair pulled back into a queue at the nape of his neck, Reed looked as sexy as ever. Especially when he gave me one of his most devastating smiles.

"My agent called yesterday, confirming the Monday morning audition."

"Terrific. Then you're all set."

"Almost...now it's just a matter of actually rehearsing." He pointed to the frying pans that hissed and sizzled before him. "Want some?"

Of course, I was thinking about wanting something else entirely. He wore form-fitting Levi's and a black muscle T-shirt that proclaimed in gigantic red letters, "I'm A Lover, Not A Fighter...So Kiss Me, Damn It." Another clear sign to "proceed" with my plan if ever I'd seen one. But yes, I reminded myself, to proceed with caution since all I wanted was to jump him right in the kitchen, which I'm sure would have been construed as a bit too pushy.

"Save me some," I replied, hastily heading into the bathroom.

A cold, calming shower temporarily tamed the raging stallion within me. Ten minutes later, dressed in exercise shorts and a plain white T-shirt, I joined him in the kitchen.

Before I could speak, he gestured me to a chair, then opened the stove and pulled out a plate that he'd kept warm for me. Two eggs over easy, just the way I liked them, and half a dozen slices of crisp bacon, all done to perfection. The instant he set the plate on the table, the toaster popped up with two darkened slices of bread, almost as if Reed had clicked his fingers and demanded them to appear. A second later, he settled a mug of steaming coffee before me. The man was nothing if not conscientious and thoughtful, two traits Warren had sorely lacked.

"Welcome to Reed's Diner, where the food is as cheap as the cook." He laughed at his own joke, then dropped into a chair opposite me with his own full coffee mug in hand. "So how are your folks?"

I gobbled down a forkful of eggs and lifted an eyebrow in query.

"Yesterday? Connecticut?"

"Oh, no, I didn't visit my parents. I went to Greenwich to see my friend Delia in some weird-ass historical drama."

"Was she any good?"

"Delia's always good, but yesterday her performance bordered on excellent. Of course, for the better portion of the second and third acts, she had to portray a woman scorned and murderous, and in her mood—considering her recently ended fling with her costar—she had a major advantage."

Reed smiled. "Ah, a fling that did not end well, I gather. She took out her revenge on him, did she?"

"Before a captivated audience. I've never seen fight scenes so realistic. It was wonderful. The actor didn't know what hit him and will likely think better about shagging any future leading ladies."

"I can't wait to meet this broad. She sounds like a riot."

"She's something else, that's for sure. And a damned good friend." I looked up in time to view the good-natured twinkle in his eyes just above the rim of his coffee mug as he sipped. "Almost as good as you."

Whether coincidental or intentional, I didn't know for certain at first, but he momentarily rested his bare feet on top of mine. He smiled, but didn't apologize, making it clear he would be more than open for whatever happened today during rehearsal...or beyond.

To further confirm his eagerness, he set down his half-empty mug. "So, where's this infamous scene you mentioned yesterday morning? While you're finishing up, maybe I could look it over and make some notes."

"Be my guest. It's the folded group of papers on my nightstand."

Reed got up and returned in a flash. He reclaimed his seat, then set the pages on the kitchen table. Once again, I felt some of his toes brush against one of my ankles before he scooted his chair forward and bent over to read the scene. I stifled the urge to lift my own feet to his crotch. I was no slouch at playing footsy, but figured I'd save that fun for, hopefully, a later and more appropriate time.

With bated breath, I finished my breakfast and waited to see his reaction to the scene once he got to the climax, where the stage business regarding the kiss appeared just before the camera fade out. And when his reaction finally arrived, my heart thumped in delight. No hint of repulsion, no detectable reluctance like I'd seen on the faces of various actors who had tested for the part. Instead, Reed's lips twisted into the dimpled smile I had grown to love, and the intrigue in his eyes from the previous morning returned full force.

"So we actually kiss on screen, huh? And not just a quick peck on the lips, but 'a kiss full of passion,' as it says here? That will sure whip up some controversy among the daytime television viewers."

"That's what they're hoping to achieve, a reason for people to tune into the show and boost the ratings."

"Probably through the roof." He whistled in amazement. "I hope so, for your sake."

"For our sake, you mean."

"Ah, but I haven't gotten the part yet."

"You will. By tomorrow night, you and I will be co-stars of *Destiny's Storm.*"

"Oh yeah? How can you be so sure?"

"Because I have faith in your abilities in wowing Jillian.

Because your good looks fit the character. Because we'll practice until you're completely confident with the scene. And because of that one other key ingredient I mentioned the last time we talked..." I smiled back at him. "Chemistry."

"Oh, yes," he said, one of his eyebrows lurching upward almost lasciviously, "there's definitely that. Are you ready to get started?"

My stomach did another lively twist. I felt as giddy as a virginal girl on prom night who knows she's about to get felt up by the high-school stud in the back of the limo. "Let me brush my teeth first, okay?"

He laughed. "Okay, Romeo, you go do that with my blessing."

When I returned a short time later, my tongue still tingling from the minty Listerine mouthwash I'd used, I found Reed in the living room. With pen in hand, he jotted some notes on the pages while sitting on the couch beneath the skylights. From almost directly above, the sun poured down a blaze of amber, acting as a solitary spotlight for our first rehearsal.

"How are you coming along?" I asked. "Any questions so far?" He looked up at me, and his quizzical expression turned almost comical. "Why does some of this material sound so familiar? The more I read it, the more I feel like...like..."

"It's déjà vu?"

"Yeah. That's it. The dialogue is similar, I mean *really* similar, to the conversation we had last month. Is this art imitating life, or vice versa?"

"Eerie, ain't it? I've thought much the same thing several times since joining the soap. It's like the writers have hooked up a conduit directly from my brain to their computer keyboards. As far as Wave Benson, I'd worried these folks wouldn't know how to write for a gay character, putting goofy words in my mouth that

would have the editors of the *Advocate* penning off a string of protest letters complaining about the lack of realism. But the show's writers seem to have done their homework, or they've experienced these heavy emotions themselves, for all I know. Regardless, they have my character down pat."

"No kidding. And as far as the character of Linc goes, it's like they...they know my heart."

His words supplied a tingle that swept up and down my spine, and the resulting friction pooled warmth into my crotch. In response, my cock stirred, but I refocused my concentration elsewhere...for the moment. "May I see your notes?"

"Yeah, sure." He handed me the pages as I sat beside him on the couch.

Screen tests can be a real bitch, not only for the actors being tested, but for the actors playing opposite them. When I worked with the men who tested for the role of Linc, the tricky part for me was anticipating the individual acting choices of my fellow thespians and matching my performance to fit theirs. Without some sort of direction, you could give a scene to five different actors and end up with five singular performances, the same way as if you gave the exact same story outline to five different writers where you'd end up with five completely unique tales. No two actors approached a scene in the exact same fashion, and this was where chemistry became indispensable. Actors who possessed it listened to each other, anticipated where the other was going at all times, and built an emotional rhythm that enhanced both performances instead of having one crippling the other.

Now, in reviewing Reed's scribbles, it immediately struck me that, without any sort of direction or coaching on my part, he had made choices for the scene that matched my own vision of it. He

seemed to instinctively "get it," knowing exactly where to pull back and pause, or knowing when to push forward, using the natural ebb and flow of the dialogue to his advantage in order to milk the most drama from the material. I automatically smiled.

"What did I do? What should I change?" He edged closer to me in order to reread the pages in my hand, and giving me an opportunity to savor his musky scent at the same time. "You've got a silly smile on your face that tells me I've made a blunder somewhere. Show me. Tell me."

"On the contrary, I'm smiling because I'm amazed at how well you understand your character, and the scene in general. In my opinion, your approach is perfect, so unlike the other actors who've auditioned, who didn't seem to have a clue."

"I told you, it's like the writers took the words directly from me. I can relate to Linc...his confusion and the temptation he faces...his need to...to do something about it before it drives him mad..."

As Reed said those words, his gaze drifted over my face, finally settling on my lips. Just when I thought he would abandon the full scene in favor of skipping directly to the climax, just when my mouth watered for a taste of his, he inched away from me and seemed to pull himself together.

"Why don't we run through the dialogue a few times, okay? Maybe we should stand over here where there's more room."

When he got up from the couch and moved around the coffee table, I noted how the bulge behind his zipper appeared bulkier than usual. Realizing that he'd started to get a hard-on while being so close to me was akin to hearing I'd won a twenty-million-dollar sweepstakes. "Okay," I said, "let's do it."

"Oh, hey, won't you need a copy?"

"All those failed screen tests have etched the scene into memory." I got up and stood before him in the center of the room. "You've got the opening line, so start whenever you're ready."

And he did. Not even halfway into the first read-through, I knew beyond a doubt that he would ace his audition tomorrow. Yes, he understood Linc as well as I understood Wave, and the chemistry between us seemed to charge the room with electricity. There were occasions when he broke from character in order to ask my opinion regarding line-delivery or motivation, but for the most part, the scene flowed with a mesmerizing brilliance that would have thrilled Jillian to no end.

Although not in the same manner as it thrilled me, I'm sure.

As the scene progressed and "Linc Abernathy" stepped closer toward me, as the light in his eyes strengthened and my own character of Wave Benson fought to maintain decorum, I also battled to curb my own escalating lust. If my cock could talk, it probably would have demanded I make up my mind instead of giving it false signals. To quit teasing it by making it bulk up, then deflate, bulk up, then deflate. I wish I could have accommodated it, but instead of giving one-hundred percent to the scene, my mind kept drifting to what I wanted to do to Linc, or rather, to Reed—interchangeable men, as far as I was concerned at the moment—and the look on his face as he inched forward in preparation for the scene's climactic moment.

"Ever since that night," he said in character, "that long, painful night just after I moved to Mount Pleasant and found myself in turmoil here at the motel, with you lending support and talking through the evening, I can't seem to...to stop imagining...

"Imagining what, Linc?" I asked. "Tell me, please."

"I've never been so comfortable with another individual. Never

felt so drawn to anyone. And now I can't help wondering what it would be like to...to...hold you...and more..."

"I'm flattered, more than you'll ever know."

He threw up his arms and issued a laugh full of sarcasm, frustration, and hopelessness. "So as you can see, I'm not the uncaring macho cretin everyone in this damned town thinks I am. I have a heart...I have needs just like everyone else...completely contradictory to the image they've painted of me. But what would they say if they knew the whole truth about my actions, about my secret desires? What would they say?"

"I can't answer for any of the people in this town, but only for myself."

"And your opinion is actually the only one that truly matters to me. I should have known that you wouldn't cast stones. I should have realized that you would understand better than anyone just how much I ache..."

Per the script's stage business, I brought my hand to his face and caressed his cheek. I also wiped away the moisture pooling just below Reed's left eye, a tear he had produced to utter perfection. He leaned into my hand and physically shivered—not in the stage directions, but another commendable choice on his part. None of the actors who had tested for the role had shown such internal despair in their portrayal of the character, which further confirmed that I had been correct in suggesting him for the show.

I brought my face close to his. "Your confession does nothing except enhance your image in my eyes. The courage you've shown today makes you all the more macho to me, and even more attractive, if that were even possible."

He gripped my hand and dragged it from his face, pressing it on his chest, over his heart. "I want so badly...so badly to..."

"To what, Linc?"

I focused my attention on his lips, coming ever closer to my face, until he stopped just inches away from me. "Wave, I can't stop myself any longer. I can't."

"Then do it. Do it," I demanded in a whisper.

He gave me a final look directly in the eyes, then drew me into his arms. His hard body molded to mine and it took every ounce of willpower not to melt.

I couldn't tell for certain whether Linc kissed Wave, or Reed kissed me. All I know is that when our mouths finally came together, I was no longer acting. And when the demanding tongue entered my mouth, and I felt the growing hardness behind his zipper pressing against my own swelling cock, I realized that Reed wasn't acting either.

CHAPTER 12

Jillian Shinbark, the cameramen, or any other stage personnel at *Destiny's Storm* who might have borne witness to the "passionate kiss" if it happened during a screen test or the actual taping of the scene instead of in our living room, would have likely been horrified. The director would have undoubtedly shrieked, "Cut," long ago, before demanding a hose be brought forth to pry apart the two horny actors. Thankfully, Reed and I were indeed in our living room, far away from the set and prying eyes. The moment belonged only to him and me, and we took full advantage of the privacy.

I don't recall ever being kissed so vigorously or feeling so completely desired by another man. His tongue tasted sweeter than I had ever dreamed it would, his muscles heftier and more solid

beneath my exploring hands. He hadn't shaved that morning, so his slight whiskers brushed against my own, prickly friction upon prickly friction, driving me wild. My head hummed with passion, brought on by his manly scent, making me dizzy, and with my legs suddenly feeling wobbly, I wondered if I would be able to maintain my balance should he ever let me go.

I had decided to take my cues from Reed, and to my pleasant surprise, he initiated the preliminaries with an enthusiasm I found refreshing and stimulating. Considering his inexperience with men, I had assumed I might face bashfulness, even reluctance. I had thought I might be the one directing the action of our little scene, gingerly testing his boundaries with kisses or caresses or gropes and backing off when I sensed any unwillingness or discomfiture from him. But I'd obviously underestimated his fervent need to satisfy his curiosity, and his eagerness staggered me.

He yanked my T-shirt up and over my head, then ran his hands across my torso, tracing the ridges of my chest and belly, toying with the hair in the center of my breastbone, and teasing my nipples into hard points with his fingertips. Then eventually, his tongue made a comparable journey.

"All those hours you've spent on the bench press and treadmill have paid off in spades," he whispered, then kissed my lips. "And your mouth, damn it, I've never kissed anyone with stubble before."

"And...?"

"And I like it." He kissed me again. "No, I love it." More kisses, one after the other, building in fervor. "I know I haven't told you this, Mars, but I was glad when the show asked you to keep the unshaven look. Damn, it turns me on."

"I can see"—his tongue dove into my mouth for a quick

foray-"see that."

When he refocused his attention on my body, his face bore the aspect of impatient wonder; he reminded me of an adventurer who'd stumbled upon a beautiful land he felt deserving of a thorough exploration. He kissed my neck and shoulders, nibbled along my jaw, then descended to my chest. When he started to suck my nipples again, he ran his hands over my bare back, kneading my muscles before venturing downward. His fingers instantly dove beneath the waistband of my exercise shorts. I wore a jock strap that exposed my ass cheeks, and he clawed at my mounds, his nails no doubt leaving crimson trails on the flesh.

And the rock-solid hardness of his groin had me yearning to savor more of him. Tossing aside all of my plans for tempered prudence, I followed his hungry lead. Within seconds, his own discarded T-shirt plummeted to the floor on top of mine, and I could finally sample the bare flesh that had tempted me all these many months.

While kissing his mouth again, I freed his shoulder-length hair from its ponytail, then ran my fingers through the thick, silken tresses, the way I'd always dreamed. I lowered my head, then took a turn on his nipples as well. Before my mouth left his chest, every blade of soft wispy hair had come into contact with my tongue and shimmered with saliva in the sunlight.

I reached between us and fondled his crotch, explored him from base to tip and shivered when I discovered I had also underestimated his length and girth. I looked into his smoldering dark eyes. "Are you ready for more?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"I want to taste every inch of you...to suck your cock...now..."

"I was praying you'd say that." His Adam's apple bobbed. "Where? Which bedroom?"

"Mine. Definitely."

"Any particular reason?"

"It's closer.

"Good enough reason for me."

He grabbed one of my hands and led the way. When we reached my bed, however, I took control and playfully pushed his shoulders. Chuckling, he fell backward onto the mattress, then crawled toward the headboard, where he propped himself up on a mountain of pillows.

"Now what?"

"Now," I replied, joining him on the bed and tugging at the button of his jeans, "I perform an audition for you, a naughty one that you suggested last month."

"Oh, yeah, and I've been looking forward to this type of audition to see if your claim holds true."

"Claim?"

"That men suck cock better than women."

"Not a claim, my sexy friend, but a point of fact." With that, I tugged down his zipper, then grabbed handfuls of his waistband. "Lift your ass so I can get to the prize and prove it to you once and for all."

"Gladly."

I peeled the jeans from his body, leaving only a sheer pair of underwear—the Macho brand again, this time in black—shielding his cock from view. Its fat and lengthy outline, however, thrilled me, as well as the shiny damp spot that had formed where the bulge tapered off. I started to kneel on the mattress again, but he stopped me by pressing one of his feet against my belly.

"First get naked, Mars. God damn it, I want to see your cock."

Before he even finished the sentence, I'd slid the exercise shorts from my body and kicked them across the room. I stood upright and removed the jock strap, also damp with pre-cum. My erection sprang outward like a horny jack-in-the-box—or cock-in-the-jock, I guess—bobbing and oozing in excitement.

"Nice, very nice," said Reed, his voice a rumble of lust.

He groped his own dick, squeezing the underwear around the bulge and sliding his fingers back and forth. The sight hypnotized me, so much so that I jumped in shock when I felt something touch my dick.

I looked down to see him running the toes of his right foot over my shaft, then under my sensitive low-hangers, then back upward again. I admit, I'd always had a thing for Reed's large, sexy feet, so the sight had my pecker throbbing with fresh surges of blood. I watched as he captured a drop of my pre-cum with his big toe. I grabbed his ankle and licked the juice from his digit, then sucked it and the four others in turn before lowering his foot back to my crotch. I pressed my cock against the smooth sole, slowly humping it.

"Shit," he said, watching my antics in fascination, "I've never had anyone suck my toes before, let alone fuck my foot. And I've never seen a cock with foreskin up close before either, other than my own."

"Those guys you jacked off were cut, huh?"

"Yeah. And not nearly as big as you, either."

"Big?" I shrugged. "I suppose, compared to the average. But am I anywhere near a match for the sausage you're packing?"

Reed snickered. "Not sure. You tell me if those rumors are true."

He thumbed down the waistband of his underwear, finally releasing his tool. I gasped. The damned thing stretched well past his belly button and had me drooling with desire.

I bucked a few more times against his foot, then swept it aside and climbed onto the mattress between his long, hairy legs. I crawled forward like a panther hunting prey to get a better view of his meat. How well I recalled the day I'd caught only a glimpse of his flaccid penis. I remembered thinking it would likely be huge when fully erect, and his boasts of having the biggest dick this side of the Hudson might not be so unfounded after all. But damn it, the guy hadn't come close to giving it justice.

"What is that, about a perfect ten, or more?"

He laughed. "Not sure. I've never measured it."

Had I not been so horny for a taste of it, I might have leapt off the bed and rummaged through my dresser drawers for a ruler or a measuring tape. Or my old camera. I made myself a mental note to do just that before the day was out. Knowing Delia, she would indeed pester me for the information, although I'm sure she wouldn't believe the results of my exam without seeing the impressive cock with her own eyes.

"Okay," I whispered, doing nothing to hide my awe, "I definitely bow to the master. You are indeed the Cock King."

"And I guess that will make you—what?—my Cock Queen?"

"An appropriate nickname for a gay man," I joked.

He laughed again. "But no, you're definitely no failure in the dick department yourself, buddy boy. That's one hefty slab of beef. We'll have to think up a better nickname for you."

"It's a deal. But until we do, why not just call me your cocksucking whore."

"Huh?"

The panther pounced. My hands yanked the underwear off of him before my outstretched tongue forged an extended path from his plump balls all the way to the tip of his dick. I lapped up a copious pool of pre-cum that had formed on his ridged belly. I groaned my rapture. It had been way too long since I tasted anything so fucking sweet.

I reversed the journey, kissing and nibbling and licking my way back to his balls. I drew a deep breath and savored his musk while I rested my cheek against his veiny shaft, basked in its heat, and delighted in his racing pulse. I cupped his balls with one hand, using my fingertips to tickle the damp and furry path to his anus, and tasted my way back to his cock-head. The crown, a few shades lighter than his foreskin, had poked outward and offered up another tantalizing drop of crystal clear juice, which I greedily slurped up. He brushed a hand over my head, offering encouragement that I didn't need.

"Let me ask you a question, big guy," I said, flicking my tongue over the crown.

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Anyone ever deep-throat this monster?"

"You mean Niki? Not even close."

"No, I mean anyone."

"Hardly. Are you game to try?"

By way of reply, I took his cock-head between my lips and started to suck. His gasp and ensuing groans voiced his satisfaction, and I made it my mission to keep those sounds coming fast and furiously. After abandoning his nuts, I wrapped my hand around the shaft—a gap of at least half an inch separated my thumb from my fingers—and opened my mouth as wide as possible. Thankfully, since coming out of the closet, I had amassed

quite a risqué résumé when it came to the number of times I'd performed this particular act, and although I'd never sucked a cock this big, I now put all of my cumulative experience to good use and plunged downward. Again and again, I missed my mark, never quite getting more than three-quarters of his shaft into my mouth, but I'd never been one to surrender to a delicious task like this. I shifted my body on the mattress and attempted deep-throating from various angles. When I faced toward his feet, I managed to get more of him into my mouth, thanks to a slight upward curve in his shaft, and his crown disappeared into my throat.

"Oh, fuck, yeah! God damn, Mars, you are good at this."

My brain countered with a quick "told you so" before I resumed my pleasure.

Although I still couldn't quite consume all of him, I managed to get the majority of his shaft into my mouth, far enough down as to be able to extend my tongue and bury it into his thick pubic hair. More grunts and moans poured from his mouth, almost as many as the drops of pre-cum leaking from his throbbing dick to aid my efforts.

As I increased my rhythm, he reached between my legs to fondle my balls and stroke my cock. I fought the temptation to climb on top of him and put us in a sixty-nine position, burying my own dick in his mouth, but since I wasn't certain whether he was ready to taste cock for the first time, I decided to concentrate on servicing him.

For the next few minutes, my efforts proved valiant and rewarding, and all at once, he warned me of his impending release. Knowing what most men liked to see when getting sucked off, I stopped deep-throating Reed, then went back to my original position of facing him. I jacked him hard and swift, flicking my

tongue over the area where the foreskin joined the cock-head, and watched his reaction. His dark gaze stayed glued on my mouth, and within seconds, he blasted.

The first stream of jizz rocketed high into the air and landed on him, forming a squiggly white streak that extended from one of his nipples all the way onto his neck. I tried to contain the rest of his semen in my mouth, but easier said than done. His flood nearly choked me in its abundance, and I had to swallow much of the salty warmth instead of being able to savor it. I purposely allowed several streams to spill from the corners of my mouth to run down his shaft and over my fingers, giving him another visual treat.

The way his hips bucked beneath me, the way his eyes widened, then squeezed shut in ecstasy while his grunts and whimpers filled the air, all applauded my performance. For a long while, I languidly licked my fingers clean of his juice or continued to suck droplets from him, marveling in the way his erection showed no signs of completely flagging. Finally, when he seemed to gain some stability, I smirked up at him.

"And the verdict?" I asked, then tongued up some of the seed from his chest.

"Y-you weren't kidding. I've never had such a great blowjob. Okay, I guess it's my turn to bow to the master."

"That's a great compliment coming from you."

"Fuck, man, I can't believe you're eating my jizz. Niki would've never let me come in her mouth."

"In case you haven't noticed, handsome"—I licked up more of his cream, this time off his neck—"I'm not Niki."

"No, you certainly aren't...thank the heavens."

To my surprise, Reed grabbed my face and kissed me with renewed passion, thrusting his tongue deep into my mouth. With

that singular action, he had also proven to me that he wasn't Warren either, who would've never thought to kiss me after I swallowed his load. No, this sexy creature was not even close to being Warren, and now I thanked the heavens myself for that wonderful fact.

He eventually broke the kiss and rolled me onto my back. "Now, what are we going to do about you?" He lowered a hand to my groin and fondled my erection, using his thumb to smear precum over the exposed head. "What will drive you absolutely wild?"

"How about fucking me with that gigantic dick? I notice it's still ready for some heavy action."

He arched an eyebrow. "Are you sure? I mean, I've never done that...never butt-fucked anyone."

"Oh, yeah, I'm more than sure."

"Got a stash of condoms somewhere in here?"

I laughed. "To ask that of a gay man is like asking a kid if he has a stash of candy hidden in his room." I pointed to the top drawer of my nightstand. "You'll find everything you need in there."

He knelt on the bed and reached for the drawer, while I played with his shaft. I was glad he had already climaxed once, since his erection, though still generally hard, had a spongier feel to it now, which I knew would make it easier for me when he filled my ass. I shivered in anticipation.

Reed came away from his mission with a condom and a tube of lubricant, then sat back on his heels.

I plucked the condom from him, then knelt on the mattress facing his crotch. "I'll take care of this end if you'll take care of mine, so to speak."

"Whatever you say. You're the teacher and I'm just your willing pupil."

As he opened the tube and poured some of the liquid onto his fingers, I bent forward and flicked my tongue over his cock-head a few times before sheathing it, using my lips to roll the rubber down his shaft. Meanwhile, he reached across the length of my back and lubed my hole, finger-fucking me slowly and gently and making me so horny I nearly shot my load several times when my sensitive dick came in contact with the bedspread.

I turned around and flopped onto my back, lifting my ass and spreading my legs. For a moment, his gaze clawed over me while he greased up his cock with more lubricant. He positioned himself between my legs, letting his tool lie atop mine. Shit, what a beautiful picture those two dicks made.

"You're sure you're ready for this?"

"Hell, yeah, I've been ready for this since the day I met you."

He grabbed his dick, poised the head at my opening, then looked me in the eyes. The affection I saw in his gaze had my heart clenching. "Funny...me, too."

He entered my ass, pushing in only the crown of his dick, then stopping, giving my muscles a chance to adjust to his girth. With Warren, it was usually a "wham-bam-thank-you-Sam" type of fuck, him barreling into me with his full eight inches, and with very little warning or with minimal preparation, if any. That I could usually handle with few problems, and through the years I had given up my ass in a similar fashion to other select lovers who thought more of their own pleasure than my comfort. Had Reed taken that approach with his hefty tool right now, though, he would've likely split me apart.

But I somehow knew he wouldn't. His personality—so gentle,

so caring, so considerate—just didn't allow for that type of precipitous conduct. Even now, as he fed me only another inch of his cock and slowly worked it in and out of me, I could clearly view the concern in his expression, especially when I gasped, and I appreciated it.

I also loved the way his dick felt inside my hole. My muscles molded around him, squeezed him, welcomed every additional inch he added to his languid thrusts. Eventually, he filled me with everything he owned, and I grunted and tingled in wanton bliss.

When his tempo began to increase, so did the movement of his hands and his mouth. I clamped my legs around his waist when he bent forward, kissing my chest or sucking my nipples, while his fingers roamed my sides or legs, my thighs or buttocks, anywhere he could reach. With every kiss, with every caress, with every stroke of my dick, he made it abundantly clear that this was more than experimentation on his part, that he wasn't just fucking me, but making love. And I could tell on every occasion when our mouths met and our tongues embraced that it wouldn't be the last time we made love either.

Indeed, I got the definite impression that this was a man who had already made up his mind not only about us, but about his orientation. This was a man who had deep-seated feelings for me, perhaps as rich and profound as the ones I possessed for him, who had already dedicated himself to the prospect of us building a future together.

My heart surged with unbridled love, even long before the friction of his cock against my prostate propelled me to the brink of release.

I soon realized the chemistry we shared in acting also extended to the bedroom, and without any instruction, he took my cock in

hand at the perfect moment. No sooner did he start to masturbate me again, I exploded. I bucked and writhed on the mattress, while cum spattered my chest and belly, wave upon wave of seed, coating me in warmth.

After Reed milked the last drops from me, he spread the semen over my torso, massaging it into my flesh before resting a wet palm over my thundering heart.

"Oh, God," he groaned, his tenderness giving way to animal lust. Like a runaway locomotive, his cock pistoned in and out of me. The rhythmic splat, splat, splat of his thighs banging against my buttocks resounded through the carpetless bedroom like a chorus of shotgun blasts. Obviously the sight of me shooting my load had also triggered a reaction in his groin. His entire body, now shiny with perspiration, twitched and trembled with renewed force.

"Reed, Reed, up here...come in my mouth."

He blinked several times. "You sure?"

"I insist! Do it!"

He yanked his rod out of me, then tugged off the condom while hastily straddling my chest. I could feel his buttocks and the backs of his thighs coming into contact with my sticky flesh. I reached around and gripped his slippery ass cheeks, then used several fingers to tickle his anus while he brought his cock toward my open mouth.

I quickly lost count of the number of times he fired, too consumed with savoring the jizz that covered my tongue. Before long, my cheeks, nose, lips, and chin dripped with his offering, and I took his cock in one of my hands, rubbing it over my face to capture even more of his essence, and licked him clean again and again until his shaft finally went soft.

He let out a loud, "Phew," then chuckled lecherously. "Oh,

man, you like it messy, huh? You're a dirty boy, Mars, aren't you? That was so *incredibly* hot."

I grinned up at him. "Reed, you have to understand, I'm a gay man with a dilemma...I love watching cum shoot out of a man's cock, but I also love him filling my mouth with his jizz. So I compromise and allow for both fetishes. So yeah, I love it messy...the messier the better. To me, sex just isn't satisfying without tasting my lover's spunk and having some delicious clean-up work afterward."

He laughed. "Hey, maybe we should call you the Cum King."

"I could actually live with that." I fingered up some more dampness from my chin and slid it into my mouth. "Especially when it applies to your cum."

"Too bad you may not be able to hold that title for long, though," he said, climbing off my torso, then stretching out beside me.

"Oh? Why not?" I asked as he took me into his arms.

In reply, he licked some of his leftover jizz from my cheek and swallowed it. "Because I have a feeling I'm going to enjoy this sort of play almost as much as you do."

With that, he kissed me, his tongue delving into my mouth as if to prove his claim.

CHAPTER 13

How long Reed and I remained in bed, making out amid bouts of heavy petting like lecherous teenagers, or giggling stupidly at absolutely nothing in particular while rolling around on the mattress and ending up in entangled positions like deranged contortionists, I had no clear idea. For me, time had long ago ceased to exist. Now, I lived simply for the moment, with each second devoted entirely to enjoying the warmth of Reed's hard body while feasting on every manly inch of him. From his armpits, to beneath his balls, to every one of his toes, no part of him avoided my tongue's scrutiny.

In one of the more lucid moments, I couldn't help pondering how differently things might have turned out had I stayed with Warren instead of hightailing it out of the apartment we'd shared.

Where would I be at this moment had I allowed him just one more chance after that "final straw"? Would I be languishing in bed right now, with him, my head consumed with so much lust I could barely speak, my mouth emitting so much laughter I could hardly breathe?

Doubtful. If anything, I would be completely miserable.

But had my time with Warren never happened at all, if that horrible breakup hadn't occurred the night that it did, then I wouldn't be here right now with Reed, appreciating him for his fine character, his humor, his body and lovemaking abilities, his everything. So in an odd roundabout way, I guess Warren had unwittingly done me a huge favor. Because of his antics, I had gotten out of the relationship only to find this sexy creature now sharing my bed. Yes, thank you Warren, I thought, curling one of my legs between Reed's and raining kisses down upon his chest. Indeed, I couldn't ever recall having such a joyous time, with my soul free of burdens and my love for my current roommate practically bursting my heart. I had never felt so liberated, and when Reed rolled me over again and came to rest on top of me, I told him so.

"I have to admit, Mars," he confessed, my chest pillowing his head. "Since meeting you, my life has also never been the same. The best decision I ever made was asking you to move in with me. I'd never acted so impetuously. I mean, you were a complete stranger to me, but there was something about you, something that drew me to you that night backstage at the play...I don't know. I just acted on impulse, and I'm so glad I did."

Reed started another round of kisses, then hugged me to him. *Oh, fuck, I could definitely get used to this.*

He eyed me for a long time, using one of his index fingers to

trace my lower lip, which felt delightfully bruised from all the action it had encountered today. "You know, you never did tell me what happened, why you'd moved out of your place in the Village so suddenly. In fact, I recall you mentioning your ex's name only once or twice, and then usually followed by the words, 'that son of a bitch.' I'd almost wondered if he was of Russian decent and 'Thatsonnavabitch' was his actual last name and I'd somehow misconstrued."

I laughed.

He said nothing for a long time, his silence so prolonged I might have thought he had fallen asleep if not for the way his fingers now drew lazy circles around one of my nipples. "Hey, Mars...am I anything like him?"

I instantly recognized a tone in his voice, an uneasy jealousy. With any new lover I might have found possessiveness annoying, a signal to slam on the brakes and reevaluate the relationship before things went too far too fast. But with the way I felt about Reed, and considering the length of time I'd known him, that hesitation, that faint insecurity in his voice, only endeared him to me even more. "Good God, no. Oh sure, he was attractive and sexy—although you have him beat by a mile in both departments—but that's as far as the similarities between you go. Or rather, most of them..."

He propped himself up on an elbow. "Tell me. What else?"

"He is...or was...straight."

"I see." Another extended pause. "Does it bother you I've been with women?"

"Did it bother you when I brought home my friend Hyatt that one night?"

"Actually, it did."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"I was desperate to come into your room and join you, remember? So much so that I jacked off in the damned hallway. So yeah, it bothered me. Big time. More than I wanted to admit. But I couldn't stop imagining him fucking you when all the while I wanted to be the one doing it."

I smiled and patted his cheek. "Just for your information, Hyatt and I don't fuck—we're both bottoms. We get together only when neither of us is in a serious relationship, and then it's only to jack or suck each other off." I smirked. "Feel any better now?"

"A bit. And now I also feel like an idiot. A total ass. Who am I to get jealous? After all, I've been with women right under your nose and you never complained."

"And I was so fucking jealous of them I would have gladly kicked each of those bitches out of here if given the chance."

"Seriously? So it did bother you. I'm sorry."

"Hey, the only thing you should be sorry about is dragging Niki Wiggins home that first time to torture us both. What the hell you saw in that goofy broad is still beyond me. Apart from the great blowjobs, that is, but I can at least understand that. Men have needs."

"Confession time. The whole truth?"

"Please."

"The blowjobs weren't all that great. In fact, the only thing great about her was that she was a...a great distraction. At least at first."

"What do you mean?"

"Her needy personality, her continual demands and mile-aminute chattering, kept my mind off of *you*. Or at least, that's what I had hoped. But that certainly didn't work out too well, did it?" He bent down and kissed the nipple with which he'd been toying.

"When her babble and never-ending distractions still couldn't stop my fantasies, I knew I had it bad for you. But once I started imagining it was *you* giving me head instead of her, that it was *you* I was screwing and not her, that's when I realized I had to face the truth about myself. Either that or resign myself to playing 'pretend' for the rest of my life, probably dumping her in order to find yet a needier and chattier woman who might do a better job of keeping my mind otherwise occupied."

"Needier and chattier than Niki? I don't know if such a woman exists." I sighed. "I admit, though, Niki's not as dumb as she looks. She knew the truth about what I was thinking. Hell, I'm sure she knew it the first time she saw me drooling in your direction. She may not have mastered the English language, but she certainly knew a rival for your affection when she saw one, and she did her best to keep us apart as much as possible."

He nodded and brushed long strands of hair off his forehead. "I know you're right, although I didn't realize it until that day we broke up just why she hated you with such a passion. That's when it finally dawned on me...she was jealous. I guess that makes me a total yutz when it comes to figuring out women, huh? Anyway, that request of mine, to invite you into our bed, acted like a slap to her face. I feel crappy about hurting her, but I couldn't continue denying to her, to you, to myself, what I was feeling. I wanted you in bed. No matter how many women I brought home, no matter how long I kept Niki around to drive me batty all for the sake of denying my attraction to you, I couldn't stop it." He ran a hand down my chest and over my belly, grazing my six-pack. "And I still can't, although now..."

"Now what?"

"Now I don't want to."

That confession earned him another series of long, hot, smothering kisses from me.

Afterward, he smiled ruefully. "Sorry it took me so long to figure it out. To figure *me* out."

"Don't apologize. Many men never figure it out."

"As I told you, it had been years since I did anything with a guy. Although I couldn't stop thinking about those times, I tried to put those feelings out of my head, thinking they'd eventually disappear. And they almost did, at least on the surface. I'd already resigned myself to the fact that I'd spend the rest of my life not quite happy and I told myself, if I stuck with it long enough, I'd learn to love being with women. But then, into my life entered a guy with the odd name of Mars Manchester, and the dam I spent years building immediately crumbled and all hell rushed out." He gave me a playful punch to the shoulder. "Thanks a lot, buddy boy! Did you create the same kind of havoc in Warren's life, too?"

"Warren creates his own havoc." I couldn't halt the bitterness from creeping into my voice.

"I'll ask again, what happened between you guys, anyway?"

I stared at the ceiling for a moment, then took a long breath. "Short summary of a long ugly story...the drinking was bad enough, but the cocaine habit became too much to bear. And it made him do some nasty things."

"How nasty?"

"Over the course of a few weeks, I caught him stealing money from my wallet. Then suddenly, much of his property disappeared, including most of the furniture. A week before I left, in his neverending quest to score more cocaine, I overheard him on the phone, trying to convince some rich society dame to be his 'sugar mama,' saying that he was really straight and I was 'just some faggot' who

was living with him until I could find my own place. I tried to talk him into getting help, but he wouldn't listen. Then finally, on our last night living together, he arranged for..."

Reed stroked my chest. "Please tell me."

"I came home and found another man in the apartment."

"He cheated on you?"

"I might have been able to forgive that, but no. He'd actually told this guy—his *dealer*—to come over, promising the sleazy lowlife that I would fuck him in exchange for cocaine. He actually tried to pimp me out. When I refused, and the dealer left in a fury, promising never to supply Warren with any more 'credit,' he went crazy. Busted up the apartment first, then punched me."

Reed lurched upward into a sitting position, his face a study in fury. "I've never been a violent guy, but that makes me want to head into the Village, find him, and beat the living shit out of him."

"Too late."

"What do you mean?" Dimples creased his cheeks. "Are you saying that...?"

"I can *almost* tolerate a lot of shitty things from people—drug use, alcohol abuse, dissing me—but being assaulted is something I will *not* tolerate. Oh, yeah, Warren took a pounding in retaliation. Certainly maybe not as fierce as he deserved, but enough to teach him to never take a sucker punch at me again."

"Good for you, man!" said Reed. "Good for you!" He took one of my hands and gently kissed the knuckles, offering tender comfort to bruises that had faded months ago. Damn it, this big macho man with the furry chest, pretty face, and gigantic pecker was indeed as cute as a cuddly bear! My heart did a pitter-patter, the same as it had done numerous times since our lips merged for the first time that day. "No wonder you got the hell out of there."

"And imagine my good fortune in meeting you immediately afterward."

"Was it fate?"

"Undoubtedly." I grabbed him by the back of the neck, then yanked him down to me and bathed his face in kisses. "But I appreciate you wanting to kick his ass for me."

"Hey, no one fucks with the people I love..." His mouth clamped shut, while his cheeks turned a vivid scarlet.

"You what?"

"N-nothing. I mean I...oh, shit, okay, I admit it. I love you." He let out an exhale that seemed to have weighed a ton. "Yes, I admit it. I'm a guy only hours out of the closet who's immediately confessing his love for you—are you ready to run for the hills yet?"

My heart skipped several beats while I attempted to wrap my mind around his words, to debate whether I was dreaming. For the second time since moving in with Reed, I experienced a joy so profound I couldn't even speak. The first time was the day when I got the job on *Destiny's Storm* and, just when I'd thought my day couldn't get any better, he'd kicked Niki out of his life and made his initial confession to me. And now, this. This!

"I know, I know," he said, "it surprised even me when I realized it. And do you know when it first happened? When that four-letter word first popped into my mind?"

I shook my head, still unable to find my voice through a throat clogged with emotion.

"When I scared the shit out of you that day you walked in and found me wearing all that jungle warrior make-up. The look on your face was so priceless. It made me want to laugh so hard, and at that precise moment, I suddenly realized how much I wanted to

kiss you. I about died inside thinking I couldn't grab you right then and there and make love to you. I knew I wanted to be with you—only you—and that I had to do something about it. I couldn't stop myself from flirting that day, although a bit awkwardly. But I'm sure you either didn't notice or don't remember—"

"Oh, I noticed, and I remember quite well. In fact, that's when I started to truly wonder if maybe, perhaps one day, I had a chance with you also."

"Really?"

"I also remember you getting ready to whip out your dick when I challenged you, and that twinkle in your eye, the one you have right now, pretty much gave me a clue that you wanted to do it."

Reed shook his head in regret. "And then Niki came into the kitchen and interrupted our chat."

"If she hadn't been there that day, would you have done it?"

"I don't know if I would've found the courage."

"I'm just glad you found the courage today. And no, I'm not about to run for the hills for one very important reason. I love you, too."

The elation on his face made my heart pump faster, and stirred my cock. I pulled him close.

"I think I've loved you from the moment we met, although after what happened with Warren, I couldn't come to terms with that fact until just recently. I needed time to heal, and to think. And to find the courage myself to take another leap. Everyone claims I'm a worrywart, including being afraid of relationships because of the disaster with Warren, and if the truth be told, only this morning did I finally reach that same conclusion. Oh yeah, I love you, Reed. Probably more than you can ever imagine."

"Fucking aces!" He kissed me, long and hard, while one of his

hands roamed downward over my torso again, sending chills along my spine. When he came to my belly, he discovered my erection. He immediately began to stroke me, his grip loving and respectful. My shaft slid back and forth through his fist with ease, thanks to a generous amount of pre-cum already issuing from me.

Reed pulled his lips from mine and glanced toward my crotch. The sight of him jacking me seemed to fascinate him. "So," he said, his voice a mere whisper, "what's it like to suck a dick anyway?"

"Do you think words can describe it accurately? There's only one way to know for certain. If you have the courage, that is."

He glanced at me, then offered an almost bashful grin that made him look as sexy as hell. "You know something, Mars? When you're right, you're right."

"You don't have to do this, if you're not ready, you know."

"Oh, yeah," he said, facing my dick, "I definitely know."

With that, he scooted down the mattress and took the top half of my cock into his mouth, clamping his lips around the hard flesh. More shivers chased my spine, coercing a groan from me. Hesitantly at first, then with more vigor, Reed's tongue dug under my foreskin, sketched circles around the ridge of the crown below, and flicked over the pee-slit. He started to suck, while consuming more and more of my shaft. Apart from several "teeth scares," he caught on rather quickly and seemed to enjoy himself; his escalating enthusiasm and moans said as much. At one point, he plunged downward in an attempt to deep-throat me, but he didn't make it too far before he gagged.

He released me and coughed several times, then gave me an apologetic look. "Is this what you might call 'method acting'?"

"No," I replied, stroking his luxurious hair and leaning forward

to kiss his lips, "this is what I would call a blowjob."

Reed laughed. "Yeah, I guess you're right once more."

He held my erection on an angle and ran his lips across its full length, back and forth, over and over again, like a bluesman scaling a lewd harmonica. His facial stubble made my nerve endings resound in chills. Then he took me into his mouth, this time with an air of confidence and even more eagerness. I draped one of my arms over my forehead, while I used my free hand to brush his hair or knead his muscular shoulders. Sighing, I closed my eyes. Damn, the guy was a natural, and with my horniness fully engendered, with his words of love still making mincemeat of my heart, I knew it wouldn't be long until he brought me to the edge.

With determination, his hand stroked my shaft, while his tongue swiped crazy circles around my cock-head. His sucking sounds filled the air, becoming a steady drone, the buoyant melody of sex. My mind raced with euphoric memories, of his cock filling my hole, of his tasty cum spilling down my throat, of voracious kisses and caresses from the man I loved, who loved *me*, making me feel more alive than ever before.

"Reed...Reed...you better pull back, man."

He released me. When he peered back at my face, his eyes bore the aspect of fiery lust. "You're close?"

"Oh, fuck...damned close."

A stubborn smile twisted his lips before he turned back to my groin. His tongue bathed my crown again, no doubt lapping up some of my pre-cum.

"Reed, you don't have to-"

"But I want to. I want to taste every drop, not only for the experience itself, but specifically because it's yours. I want to experience *everything* that is you, Mars. Everything!" With his

declaration still ringing in my ears, he started sucking me again, quickly whipping me into an almighty frenzy.

Almost instantly, semen gushed out of my dick, straight into his hot mouth. He didn't gag or choke as I thought he might, but slurped it down and spent several minutes milking me for more and cleaning off my withering erection. When he eventually faced me, my seed shiny on his lips and chin, his triumphant expression spoke volumes.

I gasped for breath. "Well?"

He smacked his lips and gave me a shit-eating—correction—a cum-eating grin. "Tastes almost like mine. Although I think mine's a bit nuttier, but then again, I'm no connoisseur like you. I'll need to do another comparison. Or many more."

"You enjoyed that, did you?" I asked, unable to keep from laughing. "Now who's a dirty boy, Reed? Now who likes it sloppy?"

"I told you before, you may not be the Cum King for too long around these parts, partner." He said those words in a fair John Wayne "get out of Dodge" impersonation, one that probably would have had the ultra-macho actor turning in his grave, considering the topic at hand.

Reed lay by my side and kissed my lips, his invading tongue providing a sampling of my bittersweet jizz for us to share. I hugged him close and groaned my satisfaction. Finally, he pulled away from me. "Okay, but I've got to know one thing, and only the master can tell me the answer?"

"I assume you're referring to me once again?"

"Indeed." He wiggled his chin from side to side, then up and down. "How can I keep my jaw from getting so sore?"

I chuckled. "Practice, my sexy friend."

"Like you always say about acting, huh? Practice makes perfect."

"Exactly. And speaking of which, we might want to think about getting out of bed, taking a shower, and going over the scene again for your audition. We want to make sure your performance is flawless tomorrow."

"And I get to give you another hot kiss at the end, of course."

"Absolutely. But we better work on some restraint in order to make it through the scene more than a single time."

"Okay sure, let's get up and start. But we also better bring the condoms and lube with us anyway."

"Any particular reason why?" I asked coyly.

"Because after we run through the scene a final time, and I can kiss you *without* restraint, we may not make it back to the bedroom." He lowered his head and took my soft cock into his mouth, giving it a few loving sucks. "Like you said, practice make perfect, and I can't wait to practice all of *this* some more. We'll do those comparisons I mentioned. All through the night, if necessary. You got any problems with that, hot shot?"

I trembled at the prospect. "I've never been one to argue with a perfect plan."

CHAPTER 14

"So what do you say, Mars? It's supposed to be a rain-free weekend, in the upper seventies, probably the last gasp of summer...a few days of relaxing in the sun, perhaps a dip in the pool, some excellent food and exotic drinks?"

I settled the day's script sides on my lap and eyed the half-naked, devilishly handsome actor who'd been my "dressing roommate" since I'd started the show. Danny Zion, with his head of tousled blond hair, gray-blue eyes, and leading-man features, gave off a sexy aura that had the power to rival that of a stud half his forty-six years. This was—aside from his considerable acting skills—the main reason he remained one of the show's most popular characters for the past decade, at least in my estimation. I should look so attractive at his age. As he pulled on the blue

pinstriped, button-down business shirt the wardrobe department had delivered a few minutes earlier, I couldn't help but notice the way his upper arms, chest, and belly showed added muscle definition. Apparently he had taken the pointers I'd given him several weeks earlier regarding some exercises he could add to his daily workout regime.

"What day did you have in mind, Danny?"

"Either day, or the entire weekend, if you want. You could even come up Friday night and stay through. There's plenty of room." He finished buttoning the shirt and grabbed the red power tie from the dressing table. "Or are you visiting your folks again?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'm waiting for my mom to issue her weekly proclamation."

"She still dragging you around like a prized show pony?"

"Yeah, especially since my scenes started airing. She can't get enough of taking me to malls or restaurants near our home where she can watch people recognize me and ask for my autograph. It's embarrassing, I tell you, the way she insists I remove my sunglasses, then continually and none-too-subtly drops the name *Destiny's Storm* within earshot of people she knows, and has the audacity to call me 'Wave' as often as possible...well, it drives me bats, but it makes her beam."

He chuckled. "She's proud. Let her have her fun."

"I know. I know."

"And your father? How does he react to it all?"

"At home, Dad just shakes his head and rolls his eyes at Mom's exuberance—winking at me on the sly, of course—saying in his comedic fashion that he can't understand what all the fuss is about, seeing as how I'm so damned homely and nerdy. This, as you can imagine, sends my mother into a royal tizzy—Dad's plan all along.

He can't stop teasing her, but does nothing to curb her mania either. And by the way, he watches the show religiously now, at the S&L on his lunch hour. He has all the secretaries, tellers, and even some of his executive buddies hooked. I can picture it, bank business screeching to a halt at precisely one o'clock each weekday afternoon so the employees of Avalon Savings And Loan can gather around a twelve-inch TV in the break room to watch a soap opera."

"High finance at its best. Wonder what they'll do if the network ever changes our timeslot."

"Bite your tongue, Danny! Anyway, I don't know what dastardly plans my mother has concocted for me this weekend. Can I let you know later today?"

"Sure thing."

Danny donned a tan Bottega Veneta jacket, then sat beside me on the couch to tie the laces of his ostrich-toed Barker Black shoes. When he finished, he looked every bit the fictional character of the ruthless, backstabbing Blade Warburton, the corporate mogul every fan of the show loved to hate. Within the past few weeks, Blade had married the character of—after much practice, I finally had the full name memorized—Monique Knight Conrad Conrad Hastings LeMasters Warburton, a daughter of the show's longtime character Autumn Knight. And, as Reed had once predicted my character's heretofore-unknown happen, would likely grandmother by way of Dexter Knight, one of her estranged sons, who never knew I existed until I showed up on his doorstep. Which made Danny's character, if I'd figured things out correctly, my step-uncle.

Ah, soap operas. You gotta love them. Anyway, as convoluted and intricate as the show's plot and family history could be, I

appreciated having my character related to the most popular ones, since that upped Wave Benson's chances for longevity.

"And if you can make it this weekend," continued Danny, "feel free to bring along a date. There are a few dozen friends who'll be popping in and out, so Sheila and I would love to have you join us. Two of the kids—the girls—will even be there, and they're dying to meet you."

In his real life, the actor had been married—only once—for more than twenty years to his high school sweetheart, herself a successful playwright, and had three children in college. Danny was a soft-spoken, laid-back family man, the complete antithesis of the character he portrayed, who had, in the course of ten years on the show, become a skirt-chasing serial cheater and divorcee, had been in prison several times for both embezzlement and corporate espionage, had been tried and acquitted of at least one murder, had swiped numerous companies out from under the feet of several other characters, had goaded another to commit suicide, and generally made the fictional town of Mount Pleasant anything but pleasant. Although Danny and I had appeared in only a few scenes together so far, the new "family connection," plus his character's forthcoming involvement in my own storyline, gave me hope that I'd be working with an actor of his caliber more often. Regardless, the man had earned four very deserving daytime Emmy nominations, and the previous year, he'd actually walked away with the shiny trophy.

"But I'd better prepare you now," said Danny, adjusting his tie and checking his appearance in the full-length mirror. "My girls have a *huge* crush on you, so if you can join us, expect lots of giggling and flirtatious chatter. Another good reason to consider bringing a date to use as a buffer. But I warn you—hands off of my

girls, Casanova. They're both still under twenty-one."

I chuckled. "Okay, warning received loud and clear. I'll let you know what happens in the 'Mom Department," I said, dropping the subject. Danny, like everyone else connected with the show, still knew nothing of my true sexual orientation, and that I'd have absolutely no interest in bagging his daughters or anyone else's. "So what is your character doing today?"

He shook his head in fake shame and tsked. "According to my script sides, I'll be laying the groundwork when it comes to destroying yet another innocent life with a blackmail scheme, all in an evil bid to take over the universe—or maybe just for jollies. What else?"

"Ha! Damned if I know. I thought maybe you were still on your honeymoon or getting ready to dump your newest wife in favor of another."

Danny groaned. "I hope this marriage lasts longer than the previous one. Six wives in ten years are quite enough, thank you. If you could ask King Henry the Eighth, I'm sure he'd vouch for that. Blade Warburton is way too exhausted."

Just as Danny picked up his worn and battered script sides before heading off to the set to tape his scenes for the day, a knock shook the door.

Danny opened it. "Ah, and here's my latest blackmail victim now. Nothing personal, my young friend."

A familiar laugh came from the hallway. "Hi, guys. I just wanted to drop by and say hello."

My heart did its usual thunderous thump when Reed poked his handsome face into the dressing room.

"You busy, bud?" he asked me.

By way of welcome, Danny patted Reed on the shoulder. "I

was just leaving, guys. Evil calls, and I'm on duty." He barked laughter that would have had Snydley Whiplash scrambling for safety. "Break a leg today, men. And let me know about this weekend, Mars. Talk to you later."

Danny exited the dressing room, closing the door behind him. The instant the latch clicked, I got off the couch, threw my arms around my lover, and gave him a blistering, tongue-dueling kiss that would have definitely led to something much more delicious were we sequestered in the privacy of our TriBeCa loft.

"What did he mean about the weekend?" asked Reed as he kissed a path across my cheek to my earlobe. "You didn't get roped into making another public appearance or anything, did you?"

"No, he invited me to his home in White Plains for a weekend party, *and* he said I could bring a date." I pulled back and smirked. "Care to go with me and shock the shit out of everyone?"

Reed winced, giving me what I liked to call his "ouch" face, as if something had just pricked his finger. "What excuse did you give him?"

"I told him the truth—that I planned to stay home the entire weekend and suck and fuck my roommate until our cocks fell off from overuse." I kissed the grin off his face. "No, of course, I used the folks' excuse. Again. Damn, I'm really getting tired of lying to everyone around here, when all I really want to do is claim you as my lover to the entire world."

"Hey, it's not really a full-out lie. It could still happen. After all, when we were there a few weekends ago, your mom said she wanted us back soon."

"You mean the weekend you charmed the skirt off of her?"

"What can I say? Moms have always liked me. Can I help it if

I'm too fucking gorgeous to resist?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you're too gorgeous to resist fucking." I chuckled and hugged him to me.

He sighed. "But I know what you mean about the excuses and the lies. I still don't have the balls to tell my parents about my character on the show, let alone that I'm gay and in love with you. Still, we made an agreement that this was how we wanted things, at least for the time being, remember?"

"Yeah, but it's getting hard nonetheless."

"Indeed, 'hard' *is* the right word." Reed playfully stabbed my crotch with his several times, giving me a benevolent feel of his blossoming erection. He growled into my ear. "What I wouldn't give to throw you down on that sofa and get my fill of that beautiful tight ass of yours."

"Don't tempt me. I've been horny for your cock all day, even after you nailed me so thoroughly in the shower this morning. I just can't get enough of a good thing, I suppose." I reluctantly pulled out of his arms, resisting further temptation. "But we agreed on that, also—none of our 'special fun' at the office either."

He offered up a groan, only half-phony I could tell, considering the way his dick had formed a distinct mini-mountain behind his zipper. "That's the one thing I hate about working together...I can't jump your bones whenever the mood strikes."

"Which is pretty much twenty-four/seven."

Reed nodded. "Pretty much, yeah."

As expected, my wonderfully sexy roommate-turned-lover had secured the day-player role as Linc Abernathy five weeks earlier. That same afternoon, he immediately gave notice on *Jungle Juice*, then started taping his first scenes on the soap about a week afterward.

Eventually, once the writers established the character of Linc, and Reed and I began sharing scenes that would lead to our fictional love affair, our work schedules started to meld. That suited me just fine; working together by day, rehearsing together by night, and screwing together into the wee hours, or just about any free moment we found available.

Like a fish took to water, Reed had taken to "gay life"—mouth to cock, cock to ass, and in every conceivable position—despite our public façade. I couldn't remember a time when my sex life had been so fulfilling. Not a day had gone by where we hadn't indulged in each other's bodies. We were firmly in the honeymoon phase of our relationship, and thankfully I saw no sign of it flagging. And certainly not on my end. I loved him so damned much I could barely restrain myself from touching him, kissing him, or holding him against me whenever we spent time together. And Reed, always a demonstrative type of guy, also couldn't seem to keep his hands or mouth off of me. Or keep his pecker in his pants. Again, no complaints on my end.

But working together did have its drawbacks, as Reed's current unappeased boner confirmed. Feeling a bit wicked, I stepped forward and wrapped my fingers around his bulge, knowing a few gropes would drive him more than a bit crazy. "Whoa, cowboy, keep the stallion corralled until we get home tonight. Then I'll happily put it through its paces."

"You're such a fucking tease." He smacked away my hand and laughed.

"But you love it. Plus, you know there's a method to my madness."

"Too true."

Of course, Reed had also remained in the closet when it came

to our co-workers, and as far as we knew, no one had an inkling regarding our actual relationship. Certainly people realized we were friends—we wouldn't have been able to hide that fact even if we'd tried—but they had no idea we actually lived together. Thankfully we'd always had two separate phone lines at the apartment, and since all of our contracts went through our individual agents, no one had caught on to our living arrangement.

As a result, Jillian Shinbark and the show's producers couldn't get over the chemistry Reed and I shared. They often commented on the fact that we came in with our lines perfectly memorized, almost as if we rehearsed throughout the night—which we did, of course—then melted the cameras with our sizzling performances. I had to agree; Reed and I didn't so much work together, but *created* together. And sometimes we even played together in the sense that our performances, although rehearsed down to the last detail, felt spontaneous during the actual tapings, almost as if we ad-libbed the dialogue and stage business, which seemed to come straight from our own hearts. We had grown to trust each other not only as individuals and secret lovers, but actors, and the show's "powers that be" noticed the magic, as Jillian often referred to it.

So although Reed and I made it a rule to never have actual sex at the studio, we both instigated clandestine kisses, covert fondling, and other light foreplay whenever possible, giving us that extra boost of sexual tension to enhance our portrayal of two love-sick soap characters. And today, with us preparing to tape the "motel scenes," which would lead to that yummy screen-test scene and our first kiss, scheduled to tape the following day, the need for additional sexual tension proved extra vital.

It also proved increasingly frustrating on my part. As the workday progressed, I fought to keep my own erections at bay.

Thankfully our scenes wrapped up without a hitch later that afternoon, allowing Reed and I to rush home at a reasonable hour and finally do something about the tension we had generated.

When we stepped into the apartment, Reed immediately tossed his keys onto the coffee table and gripped the waistband of my jeans.

"You, my friend," he said, tugging down my zipper and kicking off his shoes simultaneously, "are about to get the blowjob of a lifetime."

"How is it that you always read my mind?"

"It's that spooky chemistry again, I suppose."

I started to kiss him, but pulled back from his hungry lips and roaming hands. "Oh, man, sorry, I need to check my email before I forget. My mom promised to let us know about this weekend, and I'd rather she not phone and interrupt our fun yet again. Once I answer her, then I'm all yours, babe. Meanwhile, do you want to check out our answering machines?"

"Screw the messages. I'd rather just check you out."

I laughed. "Whatever whips your chains, Cock King."

I stepped across the room to the little office space we had set up. With two steady paychecks now coming in, Reed and I had started to indulge ourselves with upgraded necessities and extras. Reed had purchased another couch, a plush area rug, and several chairs for the living room, as well as a mammoth Bowflex Power Pro, which he'd set up in the corner beside my old bench press and treadmill. He had presented the extravagant gift to me on my recent birthday.

"Although it's more a gift for me than it is for you," he had admitted at the time.

"Oh? How do you figure?" I had asked.

"Because when you're working out with it, I get to watch."

Of course, his words had led to some down and dirty birthday action, with us christening the exercise equipment in various and creative ways, all of which I'm certain the manufacturer had never intended. Now, every time I so much as glanced at the Bowflex, I got an erection.

Nevertheless, I had also splurged, and with good reason. After my initial scenes started airing, the fan mail began coming in, along with street recognition—the kind my mother lived for—and Wave Benson and my portrayal of him started to receive praise in diverse periodicals such as Out and the Advocate, People and TV Guide, and both Soap Opera Digest and Soap Opera Weekly. I'd done several magazine covers also-no surprise my mother had them framed—and from all the information garnered from focus groups, online surveys, and television polls, a slew of new viewers had started tuning into the show. Of course, some objectionable mail and commentary from hate-mongers and bigots also came with the territory, as I'd expected, but the positive feedback outweighed the bad by a wide margin. The writers had successfully achieved their goal—to create a controversial character and generate renewed interest in the aged soap. This led to the show elevating me to contract-player status, for a two-year stint and a salary increase, which I gratefully accepted, and which in turn led to my recent purchases.

My first big splurge? Of course, what television actors could do without a brand new television set? Therefore, I'd lugged home a fifty-inch, widescreen, plasma HDTV for the living room, which we'd mounted on the wall between the framed posters of *Fiddler On the Roof* and *A Little Night Music*.

But the second order of business turned out to be a computer

and all the various accouterment, along with Internet service, thus ushering Reed and I into the current century. Not that we'd desperately craved the machine, or needed access to an array of porn on the 'Net, thank God, but the show's publicity department thought it might be a worthwhile purchase for me, considering how I'd started a lot of buzz on the web. When I saw that my infamous shaving cream ad had surfaced on YouTube, and that stills from the commercial, as well as screen-grabs of the show from scenes in which I'd appeared shirtless, began popping up regularly on various websites devoted to "bare male celebrities," I finally realized what the publicity department meant by "buzz." Plus, they'd hired someone to actually set up an official website for me, where I occasionally blogged for my "growing legion of fans." Most aspects of computers and the 'Net still seemed like Latin to me, but I was learning.

Now, I turned on the equipment, settled down in the office swivel chair, and waited for my email program to pop up. Reed had dogged me across the room, yanking off his shirt and socks and leaving a trail on the floor with his discards, anxiously making sure something even *better* popped up as well.

He got down on his knees and fished my dick out of my jeans. When the email program chimed from the speakers, it also acted as the starting bell for the promised blowjob. The warmth and dampness of Reed's mouth on my growing erection had me quickly seeing double and unable to concentrate. I couldn't find any royal email decrees from my mother, so I started to turn away from the screen. But then I half-noticed one of those little red exclamation points next to an email. It was from the studio, a girl named Sandy, who worked tirelessly in the show's publicity department.

With one hand gripping the back of Reed's head, I somehow managed to use my other hand to open the email and read the message. "Hey...hey, man, the word is out about you. About Linc Abernathy."

He stopped sucking me long enough to ask, "Huh?"

"The publicity department just sent me this link—no pun intended—to a website. I'll bet they sent the same message to your email address as well." I clicked on the link and, within seconds, called up a website devoted to soap operas. I blinked several times and smiled. "Holy *fuck*, do you look sexy!"

Reed came up for air. "You too, lover boy. Now quit talking and feed me a load, damn it."

"No, I mean, here—on the computer—on the screen. Look!"

"Oh?" Still jacking me, he brought his face closer to the monitor. His eyes rounded in pride. "Fucking aces!"

The website featured a large photo of my gorgeous lover, barefoot, shirtless, wearing ripped blue jeans, and sitting atop a motorcycle with his long dark hair blowing in the wind. Above the photo, a gigantic headline proclaimed, "New Gay Character Set To Add Even More Fuel To *Storm* Controversy."

I scrolled down the screen to another picture, this one of he and I together standing beside the motorcycle—we'd had the photo shoot several weeks earlier—with both of us bare-chested and one of his arms draped casually over my shoulder. I skimmed the smaller text and read aloud. "The sizzling heat of the summer will likely remain through the winter months to melt your television screens, thanks to a daring gay love story, set to hit the airwaves in time for November sweeps."

An accompanying article gave details about Reed and I as actors, then talked about the characters of Wave and Linc. Then

the page listed a few show "spoilers," which, I'd learned weeks ago, had nothing to do with "rotten reviews" —to my relief—but were teasers regarding what fans could expect to see in upcoming weeks.

At the bottom of the page, dozens of reader comments had been added, both addressing the article and giving personal opinions about the photos of Reed and I. Generally, the show's fans offered up some munificent praise and wonderful encouragement regarding the storyline, while several people also added some embarrassing remarks about what they'd like to do with either Reed or myself in their bedrooms, no matter the sexual orientation of our characters. I shook my head in disbelief—being so new to the 'Net, I still couldn't believe how many people would shamelessly post their most intimate fantasies for strangers to read. And I couldn't even begin to imagine what raunchier comments would appear once Reed's character debuted and the viewers witnessed the sparks flying between us.

"So the word about you joining the show and the upcoming story is officially out," I said.

"I think my first scenes air next week, if I'm not mistaken. Those folks in publicity know what they're doing, it seems."

"Yeah, you're right. Ready for the ride to success?"

He refocused his attention on my cock, bending down to lap up a bead of pre-cum that had emerged from the slit. "Oh, I'm ready for something, that's for sure."

He went back to sucking me, stripping me, then tugging off the rest of his clothing, until we were completely naked. My interest in the computer and emails had long since faded, and I sat back in my chair and languidly fucked his throat while watching him jack his own cock. Reed had gotten pretty adept at deep-throating me, so I

happily allowed him to display his newfound skill. Just as he brought me close to the brink, he pulled off me and stood.

His monster meat—just shy of ten full inches; I had found that measuring tape many weeks ago and had passed along my findings to an envious Delia—bobbed inches from my face, the crown and foreskin shimmering with his own juice. I stuck out my tongue to taste it, but he reached down to grab one of my hands.

"Not here. Let's have some real fun."

He led me to the nearest couch and gestured me to lie down, then stretched out on top of me in a sixty-nine position. When he lowered his crotch, I took his dick into my mouth, greedily sucking the pre-cum from him, savoring the taste I had craved for hours. He resumed giving me head also, and with the escalating speed in which we administered to each other, it seemed we had agreed to an unspoken contest regarding who could make the other blast first. By the way my aching testicles contracted toward my body after only a few minutes, I predicted he would be the winner. Hands down! Still, I clutched his bubble butt with both hands, taking his fat length deep into my throat again and again—he hadn't been the only one practicing technique these past weeks. I bucked my hips upward to match his own rhythm, hoping to claim his load at the same time he swallowed mine.

But fate had something else in store for us.

A loud banging shook the apartment door, making us both jump in surprise. My mind raced. Had our gasps and groans and hungry sucking noises been so loud as to stream through the old building's ventilation system, or maybe through the floorboards, giving some of our nearest neighbors a lewd earful?

Whatever the reason, I could have killed whomever had interrupted us, and a feeling of déjà vu rushed through me. I

couldn't help wondering whether that Perfect Timing Delivery messenger guy who had destroyed that important conversation months ago had returned with more documents for me to sign while babbling me to death. But then again, the security buzzer hadn't gone off, so another tenant seemed the most logical identity of our intruder.

Mumbling a few vile curses, Reed pulled his dick from my mouth and scrambled off the couch. He headed to the door, and after putting on the security chain and looking through the peephole, his entire body stiffened.

"Who is it?" I whispered. "The landlord?"

He looked back at me and shook his head in annoyance. "You'll never believe it." He spun back to the door and tugged it open a few inches. "Well? What do *you* want?"

"What? Not so much as a 'good to see you' after all this time? Oh, but you're naked, aren't you? Doing the nasty with Planet Boy? I should have known he'd turn you into a full-fedged faggot."

Full-fedged? Even had the screechy timber of the voice not clawed along my spine with a more savage effect than nails on a chalkboard, the mispronounced word alone would have confirmed our intruder's identity.

Niki!

CHAPTER 15

"I'll repeat," said Reed, "what do you want?"

"Maybe if you had checked your phone messages and called me back, you wouldn't have to ask. Are you avoiding me? I left you hundreds and hundreds of messages today and—"

"Don't exaggerate. Besides, my phone habits, who I do and do *not* call, are none of your business." Reed turned his head toward me and rolled his eyes. "Remind me to change my phone number tomorrow."

"I heard that! I heard that! Then you are avoiding my calls."

"How did you get into this building, Niki?"

"Remember those happy days a few months ago when we were dating? When you were fucking me? Or have you forgotten that you used to like girls? Well, thank goodness your neighbor

downstairs, that sweet old Mrs. Dearborn, *did* remember me, and she thought I was *still* your girlfriend. She let me in. She apparently didn't realize your preference *changed* from pussy to dick!"

"Will you keep your voice down?"

"Aren't you going to let me in?"

"Why should I? What the hell do you want?"

"If you had only returned my calls..."

"Tell me now."

"Okay, I might as well let all the neighbors hear what I have to say, too." She paused and lifted her voice. "Hey, everybody! Hello? Everyone in this goddamned building, I have some interesting news for you!"

Reed fumbled with the security latch, finally yanking the chain free. He opened the door and snatched one of Niki's wrists, then whisked her into the room and slammed the door behind her.

Wearing a sheer red halter top that left little to the imagination, a pair of black jeans, and red sandals with four-inch stiletto heels, Niki tugged her arm out of Reed's punishing grip, then took a lethal swing at him with her clanking purse. He ducked just in time.

The sight of her alone infuriated me, not to mention the ruckus she had created in the hallway and her unsuccessful attempt at assault. But what really burned me, what really had me battling to keep my temper in check, was that she had interrupted our lovemaking at all. For what craziness? God only knew. Regardless, I sat up on the couch and coughed to make my presence known. And I did nothing whatsoever to hide my nakedness from her. Or my boner. I had won Reed's affection, and an evil part of me wanted her to know it in no uncertain terms. A juvenile reaction,

definitely, but being madly in love and angry with a pesky ex barging in could make a person do some recklessly childish things, and I'd be damned before I'd apologize for it.

When Niki's gaze zeroed in on my crotch, her brightly painted lips contorted in fury. Beneath one of her heavily mascara'd eyes, a tic made her pale cheek quiver. She spun back toward Reed. "So you guys really *are* fags! I knew it. I just *knew* it! That queer changed you. Converted you. He talked you into this sick, disgusting lifestyle. Or he forced you to—"

"Mars did nothing of the sort." Displaying his better manners, Reed stomped across the room to retrieve his underwear beside the computer desk, then tugged them on before facing her again. I, on the other hand, allowed my descent into bad judgment to continue and took great pleasure when she glanced at me a second time, focusing on my cock, the one her former boyfriend had just sucked. "And for your information, Niki," continued Reed, "no one forced anyone to do anything. What Mars and I feel for each other is *not* sick or disgusting, and it's *not* a lifestyle, but who we are. He did *not* change me, and how dare you barge in here—uninvited—only to fling insults and cast aspersions regarding what we do in the privacy of our own home? Antiquated bigotry and spiteful dogmatism will not be tolerated in this apartment, especially from you."

"And now you're even talking like him, talking down to me in words you think I can't understand. Did you just call me a dog?"

Reed puffed out his chest and drew a deep breath. "I won't ask you again—get to the reason why you interrupted us before I kick your ass out the door."

"Only when he puts—puts—puts that away!" She pointed at my cock.

"Why should he?" asked Reed, giving me a devilish smirk. "I like looking at his dick. Nope, correction, I *love* looking at it. And how we dress or not dress in our own home is, again, none of your business."

"Then I won't tell you why I came tonight. I'll just head out into the hallway again, pound on every door in this fucking building, and tell all your neighbors why I'm here. Then I'll go to the building next door and continue down the block. Then you and your pansy boyfriend will be so damned sorry. You'll wish you had been nicer and listened to me. You'll wish you had—"

Shit! What next? Will she threaten to hold her breath? I'd had quite enough of her nonsense. After forcing myself back to maturity, I also realized that to get rid of her as fast as possible and stop this madness, I apparently had to do as she insisted.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. What are you...five?" I got up from the couch, then followed Reed's earlier example by snatching my discarded underwear and stepping into them. I gave Niki a lethal glare. "Happy now? Okay, spit it out already before it's me who throws you out of here. But I'm warning you, I won't be as generous as Reed. I'll forsake the hallway altogether and hurl you out the window if you don't tell us why you're here."

Her lips curved upward in smug triumph. For a long moment, she said nothing, just pivoted back and forth on her spiked heels and eyed the living room, her wicked smile growing substantially. "Wow, new furniture, new TV, new computer, new exercise crap...you fags are making out like bandits, I see. The struggling actors are no longer struggling."

"And your point?" I countered.

"Do you know how hard it is to find a job? Do you realize that I haven't worked in a chorus line for months?"

"Whose fault is that?" asked Reed, crossing his arms over his chest. "Certainly not mine. If I recall correctly, you so thoroughly pissed off your last director he had you blackballed from several theaters, and you did the same to half of the choreographers, musical directors, and playwrights in this town. Everyone refuses to work with you. Perhaps you'd better look into a mirror if you want to discover whose fault it really is. Either change your attitude and apologize to the people you ticked off, or forget the chorus line and get another job."

"With the economy in the crapper, it's impossible. And then I started thinking...the government has been giving away these things called simulus packages, and I figured I could use a simulus package of my own."

"A stimulus package, " I said, exasperated, "stimulus, with a 'T,' is—"

"Quit making fun of the way I talk. I said the word right, but you always have to make fun of me. Always have to make me look stupid."

You do a splendid job of that all on your own, sweetheart. I bit my tongue to stop myself from voicing the thought. "Get to the damned point already. What do you want?"

"You wanna know, you stuck up asshole? I'll tell you. I figured, maybe I don't have to find a job just yet. Nope, maybe I don't have to worry at all. Especially considering that I lost a decent job, all thanks to you." She aimed an index finger, its red nail chipped and jagged, directly at me.

My jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

"Don't look so innocent, Planet Boy! Remember that day I was so nice to you, wasting all my time answering your stupid questions about *Destiny's Storm*? You made me late for that job

interview. By the time I got to the restaurant, they'd already hired someone else. Some faggot! Damn all you queers. So yeah, you owe me, big time."

"Is that so?"

"You wouldn't have gotten that job on the soap were it not for me. And it doesn't seem fair that you got successful while I can barely keep a roof over my head." Again, she glanced around the room, outwardly admiring our new purchases. "Yeah, you homos are sure sittin' pretty, all thanks to me. Oh, and by the way, Planet Boy, you suck on *Destiny's Storm*. I mean, you really, really suck. Your stupid character has ruined the show. I can't believe your ugly face is splashed all over TV and the Internet almost as if you have any talent. I'll bet even the other fruit-loops are laughing at your performances. As if you have any actual fans who can stomach you. I sure can't. That issue of *Soap Opera Digest* with you on the cover made me wanna barf. I nearly died."

"And yet, here you stand," I said, "spreading sunshine around."

"So imagine my...my shock when I visited my favorite website today and saw...saw pictures of you and Reed, together! First you lured my boyfriend into your bed, made him dump me, and now you've actually gotten the show to hire him as your fag lover. Gross! So, for stealing my boyfriend and making me lose a chance at a decent job, yes, you owe me, especially since you wouldn't have gotten that soap job without my help. Let's talk turkey. I think monthly payments of about ten thousand bucks should cover my expenses...for now."

"And why would we even think to pay you money?" asked Reed. When he took a step toward her, I noticed a slight tremor in his biceps.

"Why? Because then I won't tell everyone what I know, that's

why."

"Oh, and what do you know? That Mars and I are on a soap opera, supposedly thanks to you? Never mind the fact that we both had to audition for the roles and prove our talent. You think just because you spent a few minutes talking to him about a television show entitles you to money?"

"Oh, but I can read, you know. I saw what they said on that website. I saw what's been written about the Mars Bar in all those magazines these past few weeks. You guys are perticipating a fraud."

"We're doing a what?" I laughed. "Is the word you're desperately seeking 'perpetrating'? And even if that's the word you're mangling, what do you mean?"

"Fuck you and your ten-dollar words. Now, fork up the actual cash—the big cash—or I'll go right to *Soap Opera Digest* and all those other magazines that actually think you're such great actors, two straight men playing gay ones. Yeah, right. Little do they know you're really cocksuckers!"

"Cocksuckers"—I leaned forward and winked at her—"like you?"

Her face turned beet red. "Oh...oh...screw both of you!"

"Ingenious comeback."

"Be that as it may, what do you think they will pay me for my story as a spermed lover?"

"Little, I'm sure, unless you're selling your story to a porn magazine. You mean 'spurned lover'!"

"Correct me all you want, Planet Boy, but I'm the one holding the cards, and I've got the damned story. Yes, one minute I'm being wined and dined by my lover, then the next minute he dumps me so he can sleep with his faggot roommate. Then, you two

homos get hired on the same show and pretend to be straight. Fans love juicy details like that. I'm sure one of the soap magazines will pay me a ton of cash to tell my story. I've got the Madison Avenue address for *Soap Opera Digest*. I'll try them first. And if they won't buy my story, then the *Enquirer* certainly will. So don't play so goddamned superior, Mars. Not when I've got the power to ruin your career. So what's it gonna be? Either you can pay me, or they can."

For a long moment, I stood in stunned disbelief. I almost asked if this was some sort of sick and twisted soap-opera plot invading my real life, but then I suddenly realized to my horrified amusement, that it was. Indeed, on the show, Danny's character of Blade Warburton was preparing to blackmail Reed's Linc Abernathy regarding his sexual orientation, scheming to "out" him to the public if he didn't do some underhanded espionage for him. Our characters would supposedly come together to thwart his plans, and meanwhile, have that much-hyped sizzling love affair being scheduled for November sweeps. Reed must have also arrived at the same conclusion on his own. His bemused expression bore a similar aspect to the time when we'd discussed how the show sometimes parodied our private business, how it seemed eerily like déjà vu. And here it was again, blackmail, another example of art being an imitation of life. Our life, albeit without the corporate espionage subplot. But with consequences nonetheless...

And Niki upped the stakes to confirm my last thought.

"Of course, I also wonder how much money Daddy Warbucks will fork over if I showed up on his Park Avenue doorstep. Would he want me to sell my story to the highest bidder and blab Reed's secret?"

"What makes you think my parents don't already know?" asked Reed.

"Cause you talked about them enough when we were together. You told me all about how they feel when it comes to stuff that ain't considered normal and decent, and being a fag certainly ain't normal or decent."

"Neither is being an unenlightened immoral ditz, but that hasn't stopped you," I muttered.

"Whatever you just said under your breath, Mars, fuck you! And Reed, even if you'd had the guts to spill the beans to Mumsie and Popsie, I know how those Wall Street tycoons feel about image. Having a son who's a butt-fucking homo might be one thing, but having it splashed all over covers at the newsstand? How embarrassing."

Only when the shock of Niki's words wore off and I truly digested her unconscionable proposal, the situation became anything but amusing, even if being threatened with extortion by this particular woman. Niki, though ready for the loony bin over at Bellevue as far as I was concerned, could really cause some serious personal turmoil, not just for me, but for Reed. Especially for Reed. This wasn't a game, or some soap-opera plotline, and she obviously didn't care whether she hurt us or not. All she wanted was money, to hell with the pain it might cause. Here stood the epitome of a woman scorned, and this was her revenge against Reed for hurting her. And revenge against me for just being me.

"You know, Niki," said Reed through clenched teeth, "it all comes down to your word against mine—or ours. What if no one believes your story? You will probably look like nothing more than a jealous lover, or a nut case."

"Oh, I thought of that. See, and you both thought I was so

stupid...so beneath you!"

She momentarily rummaged inside her gigantic purse, then plucked out a cell phone. She hit a few buttons, then turned the phone in our direction and clicked a picture.

"There, that should do it. The two 'straight' actors, in the apartment they share, caught in their undies. Oh, and I have a few other shots as well. A photo of you faggots standing and holding hands in front of your building. One of you both at the Odeon Restaurant on West Broadway, leaning across the table and kissing. One of you guys in the back of a cab with your tongues in each other's mouths. Yuck! And Reed, I have a really interesting one of you actually groping Mars's ass while strolling into the Food Emporium across the street from the Cuny Community College. It might have been cute if it wasn't so revolting. I've been busy these past few weeks."

"You've been following us around town?" I asked, my stomach clenching with a mixture of fury, disgust, and what I'm sure is medically known as "the willies." "Stalking us? Have you no shame? Wouldn't your time have been better spent looking for a job?"

"As I said, why do I need an actual job when I have such a juicy story to tell and such lovely photographs to sell?"

For once, no words formed on my lips, even though my mind raced a mile a minute. No question about it, this woman did have the means to create trouble for me. My baser instinct goaded me to rush her, smash the camera, then really pitch her out the window and into oblivion. Of course, my moral upbringing prevented such rash action. Acting in self-defense was once thing, like retaliating against Warren after he sucker-punched me, but murder? No way in hell. Besides, although I didn't relish the notion of losing the

"straight façade" I had spent years cultivating, or running the risk of being typecast for future roles, it was hardly worthy of homicide. Besides, I could imagine flinging Niki out the window and, with my luck, she'd bounce right back up here like one of those toy punch clowns, thanks to those huge inflated tits.

Reed, however, had much more to lose. At least my family and friends knew about my homosexuality, but his parents did not. When it came to his folks, he continually joked at their unwavering puritanical stance regarding life in general, and he had certainly tolerated their constant belittling of his career, but the strained and fragile relationship he had with them worried him, and often hurt him deeply, that much I knew. During our recent weekend trip to Connecticut, he had admitted his envy of me, how he wished his relationship with his parents mirrored the same good-humored and loving relationship I had with mine. As I expected, my folks had welcomed Reed with open arms, with my mother not only cooing over his good looks, but also making mortifying remarks about "hearing wedding bells in our future." And of course, my parents hadn't batted an eyelash when Reed and I slept together in my old bedroom, which pretty much shocked the stuffing out of him. For days afterward, he had voiced his utter disbelief at their automatic acceptance of him, of us as a couple, and I don't think he'd ever gotten over it.

So when it came to his own parents, and as much as he might openly deny it, he loved them and wanted to feel that love in return. He yearned for their respect and acceptance, no matter how fleeting or unattainable that might be. Nevertheless, whatever the outcome, he had vowed to tell them the whole truth as soon as he could build up the courage, and had begun plotting the conversation down to the last detail. For the past few weeks, he'd

been seeking the best possible moment to divulge the news regarding his soap character—they were bound to find out about his role once his scenes aired anyway—and his own sexuality, but he still hadn't found a choice opportunity. He had feared, even under the best of circumstances, they might disown him, but knew he needed to take that risk and break the news as gently as possible. But what would they do if they learned about his life through rumors and tabloid articles? What would Reed do if Niki showed up on their doorstep and made matters even worse for him?

I truly had no idea how my lover planned to handle this matter with Niki, but I received my answer a moment later.

"I'm sorry, Niki," said Reed, his voice dropping to a whisper and ringing of sincerity. "I'm sorry for being less than truthful during our relationship, about what I was feeling deep inside regarding my attraction toward men. Toward Mars. I didn't mean to use you, or to hurt you. I'm sorry you got caught in the middle."

"And what?" she shrieked. "You think that will make everything better now? That a stupid apology will make me go away and forget what you did? Your words mean nothing, Reed. Too little, too late."

"I knew you were a lot of things when we dated, but an opportunistic bitch never entered my mind. Have you no integrity?"

Niki lifted her chin in pride. "I told you, I'm smart."

"Not intelligence," I interjected, "but 'integrity,' which means having a shred of decency and morals."

"Take your dictionary and shove it! As if you pansies can preach to *me* about decency and morals after what you do together. Degenerates! Now, I'm waiting for your decision. Are you gonna

cut me a check or what?"

Reed stood fully erect, and his resolute expression told me that he had formulated a plan of action. "Or what!"

"What do you mean? Don't think I won't hunt down your parents' address and march straight over there and—"

"I had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but you leave me no choice." Reed stormed forward, not to throttle Niki as I had dreaded—although I would have understood, considering I'd had a similar notion—but to grab the wireless telephone off the coffee table.

"Who are you calling?" asked Niki, a note of uncertainty cracking her voice. "I hope it's your banker."

He ignored her. After dialing the phone, he waited a moment, then spoke into the mouthpiece. "Hello, Mother. Listen, are you and Father free tonight? I'd like to come over and discuss something important with you and—" He paused. "No, it can't wait. No, I'm fine and before you ask, no, I still have my job and I don't need any money. It's something else, something about me and my television show, and most importantly, something I need to tell you about Mars and I. Will you both be home?" He waited for an answer. "Fine, I'll be over later this evening."

Not halfway through Reed's phone call, I fully comprehended his intentions, his strategy to resolve this bizarre situation. I recalled one of my lines from the "motel scene" we'd taped that afternoon, how my character told Linc Abernathy that the best way to stop a blackmailer was eliminating the power they had over him. So when Reed turned and tossed the phone in my direction, a determined twinkle in his eye, I snatched it, followed his lead, and punched in another number.

Someone picked up on the first ring. "Jillian Shinbark."

"Hi, Jill. Glad you're still working. It's Mars."

"What's happening, cookie? What do you need?"

"If you've got time tomorrow morning, may I pop into your office for a moment?" Just then, Reed came to stand beside me. Wordlessly, he took my free hand in his and gave it a hearty squeeze, one that relayed encouragement and determination, uniting us as an invincible team. I squeezed back and mouthed "I love you" to him. "Or actually, Jill, it won't just be me. I'll be bringing along Reed Keeting. I need—we need—to discuss something with you."

"Sounds important."

"It is. But it has nothing to do with the actual show at all, so don't worry about that. This is personal business...something we want to tell you. Something we're actually happy to share with you."

Throughout Reed's phone call, then my own, I noted the color slowly draining from Niki's pinched face. By the time I hung up with Jillian, the chorus girl looked as white as a sheet. Watching her foolish, uncouth plans for quick cash disintegrating before her eyes, Niki trembled in rage.

Reed gave me a passionate kiss on the lips. "I guess today's taping taught us a valuable lesson in how to deal with these types of nasty threats, huh?"

I kissed him again. "Just another example of art imitating life. Or rather, in this case, it's our life imitating the art."

Reed smiled, despite the situation, then turned to Niki. Blinking, her lips moving soundlessly, she looked not so much furious as nonplussed, comically so. She reminded me of a female Elmer Fudd who had triumphantly strutted to the rabbit trap only to find Bugs Bunny had escaped his clutches, pulling one over on

him yet again.

"Thanks, Niki," said Reed. "You've unintentionally given us the kick in the butts we needed to straighten out a few things left dangling in our personal lives, and—" His grin widened, and he snickered as a thought hit him.

"And no puns intended with the 'straight' and 'dangling,' I'm sure, right?" I asked.

Reed wrapped an arm around my waist and hugged me against him. "You've read my mind, as always. And that's why I love you to death."

Niki backed toward the door, a hand over her mouth. "I...I...think I'm gonna be sick..."

"That usually happens when virtue triumphs over evil," I said in an overly dramatic soap-actor voice. "Now, please leave...oh, and if you don't mind, send us some copies of those terrific photographs you snapped on the sly. It sure would be nice to start a picture album of our life together."

That did it. Weeping and cursing up a storm, she spun on her heels and hightailed it from the apartment.

Reed released me, then closed and latched the door behind her.

"Well," I said, "I suppose that's the end of Act One. But now for Act Two, the hard part. I guess you'd better get ready to visit your parents before it's too late. Do you want me to go with you?"

"The hard part, yeah, but it's not my folks...they'll be Act Three in tonight's drama."

"What do you mean?"

"You and I, we're Act Two...with the *hard* part." He turned toward me, the tenting in his underwear unmistakable. That, as well as the vivid fire in his dark eyes, caused my fingertips to tingle, my heart to clench, and my own cock to come alive. "Now,"

he said, "where did we leave off before we were so rudely and unforgivably interrupted?"

Before I could respond, Reed rushed toward me, slightly bent at the waist, like a quarterback vying for a touchdown. Instead of hugging me to him, he actually hefted me off the floor and draped me like a sack of potatoes over one of his strong shoulders. For a moment, I dangled there, my hands snatching handfuls of his firm butt cheeks. Hooting in glee, he gave my own ass a blood-stirring smack and stampeded toward my old bedroom, the one we now shared as a couple. I laughed my own joy and fervent arousal. I somehow knew my sexy lover would indeed score his long-delayed and much-needed touchdown.

CHAPTER 16

"Did I miss it? Did I miss it?" I cried, dashing back into the living room. Through the skylights, the sun, a golden coin in the azure-rich heavens, flooded the room with blazing warmth in defiance of November's cooler temperatures.

"Relax, Chatty Cathy, I would have yelled for you," said Reed from the old couch where I'd left him a few minutes earlier. "By the way, congratulations to your mom for setting a new world's record in the 'number of times a mother can phone a child in a single morning' category."

Laughing, I plopped down and planted my bare feet on the coffee table beside his. "What can I say? She's excited about the daytime-TV hell we're about to break loose any moment now."

"I think she's more excited than we are. Mom truly is one crazy

dame."

"If she heard you making fun of her, she might take back the love she sent you a moment ago."

Although Reed smiled in pleasure, a dark cloud momentarily erased the sparkle from his eyes. I knew thoughts of his own mother pestered him on occasion, but I had to give him credit for not allowing the situation with his folks to consume him.

On the night of Niki's extortion fiasco, he had visited his parents' Park Avenue home and confessed everything. I had not been there—he had thought it best to go alone—and he hadn't said much about their talk, but when he returned to our apartment in the wee hours of the morning, I could tell from his bloodshot eyes that more than a few tears had been shed.

Unfortunately, during the weeks that followed, the Keetings had severed communication with Reed. They probably would have also ceased contributing to the rent on our apartment had we not already stopped their largesse once we'd begun earning steady paychecks. But a recent hand-written letter from them, not condemning Reed but asking for time to sort out their feelings, offered a glimmer of hope that perhaps the Keetings weren't totally heartless after all, and that they might one day come around. Only time would tell.

Meanwhile, after learning of Reed's family troubles, my parents made it their business to act as surrogates, God bless them. During our weekend visits to Connecticut, my mother practically smothered Reed with matronly kisses and hugs while doting on him hand and foot, while my father became Reed's confidante and "beer and poker buddy," making me adore them all the more. Even my sister Belle treated him like a brother when she popped over on Sundays, and my small nephews looked upon Reed with

affectionate, almost reverential stars in their eyes. And when we weren't there, my parents and Belle called to chat with Reed almost as much as they called me. Hell, if I hadn't also loved Reed to the depths of my soul, I might have gotten an inferiority complex. Regardless, thanks to them, my lover seemed to have recovered almost completely from his funk. Just the other day, he admitted that he now felt like part of a family—a "real family," he had stated in awe—more welcomed in my parents' home then he'd ever felt welcomed in his. He had also taken to calling my parents "Mom" and "Pop," which tickled them to death.

So now, I didn't press the issue or question Reed's thoughts, but kissed him in silent understanding. He would be fine, of that I was certain, regardless of what his parents would do, especially with the Manchester family ostensibly adopting him and providing him with all the emotional support he would hopefully ever need.

A few seconds later, his mood brightened even more. From the plasma TV—or rather, from the stereo speakers that we'd purchased several weeks earlier to celebrate Reed signing his own two-year contract with the show—blasted music of which I had grown too familiar this past year. To me, the thwump-thwump-thwump of reverberating bass notes above an electronic drum machine would have sounded right at home in a Sci-Fi movie. Or better still, a Sci-Fi gay porn movie.

Reed spun toward the TV in surprise. "Oh, fuck, I love this!"

I inwardly groaned as gyrating strobe lights exposed male hands traveling sensually downward over a sinewy bare torso beaded in moisture. Fingers unraveled the bathroom towel at the lone figure's waist. A flash of a butt cheek, a glimpse of a thigh, then interspersed shots of arm muscles, ab muscles, and pectoral muscles flexing, all done through a bluish filter, sprinted across the

screen, while the sounds of heavy breathing cut through the perpetual thwump-thwump-thwump to eerily replicate the rhythm of sexual fornication. Until finally, the high-tech music reached its galvanized and throbbing crescendo and—dead silence, then zoom—a close-up of my face, the lower half covered in a thick layer of shaving cream. On screen, I smiled almost lecherously at my reflection in a mirror, ran a razor over my cheeks and chin to strip away the foam and expose the skin beneath, and the second I flung the used razor into the gleaming metallic bathroom sink where it bounced in slow-motion, the thwump-thwump-thwump started anew. Split-second flashes of pecs and abs, deltoids and biceps met the camera's fluttering eye before it finally settled on a single can of shaving cream, its fat oblong shape dripping with rivers of froth like a spent phallus.

Talk about suggestive advertising! My original claim to television fame might have been enough to make me cringe if I hadn't grown so accustomed to seeing the damned thing. What the ad had to do with the benefits of that particular brand of shaving cream I still couldn't figure out—unless using it was supposed to make you feel like you lived in a clothing-optional space-age disco or something—and the whole commercial sure seemed absurdly out of place when immediately followed by a homey spot for cinnamon oatmeal, then a light and breezy pitch for a feminine sanitary product. But despite the shaving cream ad's overly insinuative content, I wasn't surprised to see it during daytime television, during *Destiny's Storm*, especially since an actor from the very show it interrupted starred in both. The ad agency was anything but stupid.

As Reed always did whenever he caught the thirty-second spot, he applauded and hooted his merriment. "Shit! Now that *alone* has

made my day." He rested his jaw on my shoulder, his Cheshire-cat grin making me laugh.

"As if you haven't seen it enough."

"The thing is, I can *never* see it enough. All that sexy bare flesh...the glimpse of your sweet ass...and that white cream around those luscious lips of yours...hmm...can you guess what I want to do now?"

"I wonder, horn-dog. Why don't you give me a hint?"

He rested a palm on my groin and offered me a more-thanplayful squeeze, one that instantly had my dick begging to break free from the confines of my blue jeans. It would have certainly led to something a whole lot more delicious had the string of television commercials not ended and the show resumed. I glanced at the digital clock on the DVR player—our last purchase for the apartment—now recording the show for posterity.

"About seven minutes before the hour, which means it's the final block of scenes for the episode. Here we go."

He released my groin, gave me a quick peck on the cheek, then rested back on the sofa. "Ain't it grand that both of us found ourselves free from taping today, or all days?"

"Once again, it's fate..." I mumbled, grabbing one of his hands and threading our fingers together.

I rarely got a chance to actually watch *Destiny's Storm*, so it always gave me a thrill to see the final product with the editing completed and the music tracks added. I sat in riveted silence as the first scene unfolded, with Danny Zion—as Blade Warburton—delivering one of his patented loads of bullshit to some sniveling lackey in his latest scheme of taking over another company from an unsuspecting do-gooder. As ever, the man's performance, his subtle yet sly facial expressions underscoring the sinister overtones

in his voice, gave me gooseflesh and further validated the reason he'd won a Daytime Emmy the previous year. The next scene, featuring several actors with whom I had not yet worked, involved some sort of convoluted baby-switching storyline, with the lead actress realizing, to her wide-eyed horror, that the child she held in her arms wasn't hers.

And then came another scene, the one fortuitously scheduled to air today, beginning with the close-up of an actor with whom I was quite familiar. Intimately so. *Shit!* The sight of Reed's handsome, compelling, and angst-ridden face on the fifty-inch plasma screen had my cock springing back to life. Especially when the camera pulled back to reveal his bare chest. To add a romantic mood with a touch of the "forbidden," the lighting director had used cross-shadows to perfection.

"So as you can see, Wave," Linc Abernathy said, his voice crammed with heart-wrenching despair, "I'm not the uncaring macho cretin everyone in this damned town thinks I am. I have a heart...I have needs just like everyone else...completely contradictory to the image they've painted of me. But what would they say if they knew the whole truth about my actions, about my secret desires? What would they say?"

The camera cut to me, also bare-chested—as our storyline had progressed these past weeks, Reed and I had been instructed to take off our shirts more often, especially after the popularity of our characters soared and avid fans began demanding it. "I can't answer for any of the people in Mount Pleasant, but only for myself."

"And your opinion is actually the only one that truly matters to me. I should have known that *you* wouldn't cast stones. I should have realized that *you* would understand better than anyone just

how much I ache..."

Wave caressed Linc's cheek, the screen showing a close up of my fingers. Just like when Reed and I had rehearsed this scene so many weeks ago in this very room, a single tear spilled from his left eye, which I wiped away with my thumb. He leaned into my hand and trembled.

The camera shifted its focus to our profiles, our foreheads nearly touching. "Your confession does nothing except enhance your image in my eyes," said Wave Benson. "The courage you've shown today makes you all the more macho to me, even more attractive, if that were possible."

He dragged my hand from his face and pressed it over his heart. Even now I could clearly remember taping the scene, how touching the solid mass of his breastbone, how combing his chest hair with my fingers, had me battling to keep my lust at bay. Yet I also recalled the added sense of spontaneity I'd felt during the taping, since we'd "come out" to Jillian Shinbark that very morning. To our shock, the show's casting director hadn't been at all surprised. She had suspected for some time, she admitted, that our relationship had grown way past the friendship stage, especially when viewing the on-screen chemistry we shared. And even better, she didn't hold it against us that we'd shielded the truth, even going one step further and promising that if word about our personal life ever leaked to the press, she would stand behind us. So with the weight of our secrets lifted from our shoulders, Reed and I had experienced a new sense of freedom during the taping of this particular scene, and the sexual tension had indeed transferred to tape for the world to see.

On TV, a moan oozed out from between Linc's damp lips. "I want so badly...so badly to..."

"To what, Linc? To what?"

The camera zoomed in on our moist lips, while the music began to swell. "Wave, I can't stop myself any longer. I can't."

"Then do it. Just do it," I whispered.

Our mouths came together, a bit hesitantly at first, before our lips molded into a kiss so passionate, so hungry, so all-consuming, the sounds of our heavy breathing cut through the romantic melody playing in the background.

The camera slowly pulled back, revealing us standing in a dimly lit seedy motel room, clinging to each other and our kisses growing more and more manic until the fade out finally arrived.

"On the next *Destiny's Storm...*" came an announcer's voice before a handful of teaser snippets whizzed past, the last one showing Linc and Wave cuddled in bed together. "Don't worry," said Wave, stroking Linc's long hair and kissing his cheek. "We'll stop the blackmail and hurt Warburton where it counts!"

And the show ended, a rip-roaring Friday cliffhanger if ever I saw one. When the theme song started playing over the scrolling end credits, I turned off the TV and DVR with the universal remote, then took a long breath. What Reed and I had accomplished, especially in the scene that had just aired—the one that had started it all for us as a united team, professionally as well as personally, and had likely ignited another firestorm of controversy among viewers only a moment ago—made me so damned proud I could barely speak. He must have shared my thoughts, since his hand squeezed mine and he released an extended sigh.

"Damn, if I do say so myself, we're pretty fucking good." He turned his head to look at me, and the inviting twinkle in his eyes, that foxy dimple in his cheek, conveyed yet another thought we

shared—how we were also pretty good at fucking.

"Hold that thought for a moment." Instinct made me lift my free hand into the air, and using my fingers for emphasis, I counted off, "Five...four...three..."

From the bedroom, my telephone started its high-pitched warble.

"How the hell did you do that?" asked Reed, his mouth agape. "You're sometimes spooky."

"Nothing spooky about it. You stick with me long enough, you'll quickly find yourself anticipating my mother's every action, too."

He laughed. "Aren't you going to answer it?"

"Nope, let her freak out for a while. You know she truly just wants to pump us for information about next week's episodes anyway, which we can't divulge no matter how much she begs. Besides, she'll use the time wisely and work off the energy. Before the afternoon is out, she'll have called everyone in Connecticut and then along the entire Eastern seaboard to see if they watched today's show and witnessed the kiss." I ran my hand over one of his beefy thighs, hidden beneath workout pants. "While I plan to use *my* time equally as wisely and work off even *more* energy, and in a *better* fashion."

When it came to lovemaking, it took very little to rouse either Reed or myself. Typically, a well-placed caress, a heated kiss, sometimes even no more than a lusty glance or a sinful smile in the other's direction, stoked our internal fires. To me, the air around us always felt combustible, like a furnace just waiting for the slightest spark to set it ablaze, and before either of us could say so much as "let's fuck," the games were on. Although both he and I enjoyed bouts of extended foreplay—hour-long blowjobs, for example,

certainly weren't foreign to us—it had never been a prerequisite. Reed's sexual prowess continually amazed me. I had never known a lover who possessed such a high sex drive, almost as if he'd had a rechargeable Li-on battery implanted in his groin when I wasn't looking, and in all my years as a gay man, I had never felt so downright horny myself. He was all the battery I needed to get me going. Day or night, wide awake or half asleep, we seemed forever ready to indulge in our favorite recreational sport. Today proved to be no different.

Before the phone in the bedroom even stopped ringing, Reed and I had stripped off each other's T-shirts. And by the time the answering machine kicked on, I had his workout pants and underwear well past his thighs and my lips around his thickening cock-head. He held my head, fucking my throat with gentle jabs and grunting his satisfaction. I slobbered over his solid shaft, fingering the area beneath his plump balls and tickling his thighs the way he liked it. I would have gladly sucked him to completion again and again, feasting on his delicious cum throughout the entire day if that's what he wanted, but it soon became clear he had other intentions for me.

He pushed me back onto the sofa, tugged off my jeans, and freed my dick from my jock strap, which he pulled off my legs with his teeth. His hot mouth consumed my erection, sucking up the pre-cum that had started leaking from me minutes earlier. He brought me close to orgasm within a short span of time, but lover's intuition more than anything else told him when to pull back. He lapped at my nuts for a while, then nibbled a path to my anus. For months now, we had needed no lube, as Reed had developed a fondness for prepping me on his own. I lifted and spread my legs, exposing my hole for him, and his tongue and saliva-soaked

fingers plunged inside, toying with me and tormenting me until I begged him for a lengthy and thorough pummeling.

Chuckling salaciously at his achievement, he settled back on the couch and jacked himself a few times. A coating of pre-cum made his cock shimmer as he held it at the base and pointed it toward the skylights. With only a grunt of manic need pouring from my mouth, I scrambled up and straddled his waist, then reached around and guided his crown in between my groping lips. These days, we forsook condoms as well, considering how our tests had returned negative and we'd vowed to remain faithful to each other.

"I love you," whispered Reed, tongue-bathing my chest before teasing one of my nipples into an aching point.

Although my heart screamed the sentiment in reply, my vocal chords could issue no sounds apart from additional grunts and groans as I impaled myself on his rod. One fat inch after another stretched my insides until Reed's crisp pubic hair scraped against my butt cheeks. I had eventually grown accustomed to his length and girth, and although he'd fucked me at least once almost every single day since becoming lovers, I'd never grown tired of his invasions. As always, my muscles contracted, then eased around him, quivering to a rhythm all their own, and shivers stampeded along my spine. My head whirled in a sea of mind-numbing lust, especially when he started driving his tool into me from various angles. I clutched his shoulders and bucked up and down, meeting his own frantic thrusts, while his roaming hands and mouth provided me with a feeling of complete and utter possession. I could think of nothing other than pleasuring the man who had stolen my heart months ago. Even the occasional telephone ring, the toot of a car horn from the street below, or the muffled

conversations from adjoining apartments, could not distract me. As always when Reed and I made love, I zoned out, my world revolving only around him and his magnificent cock.

My erection whacked like a dripping drumstick against Reed's firm belly until he gripped and stroked it, adeptly thumbing the sensitive head and driving me wild. "You gonna come for me, babe?" he asked almost in a growl. "Huh? You gonna give me what I want?"

"Hell, yeah. Oh, fuck me. Fuck me harder!"

His cock pistoned in and out of me. Bare flesh smacked bare flesh to hammer my eardrums, our own version of the thwump-thwump-thwump soundtrack from the shaving cream spot. His tongue danced over my nipples while his hand squeezed and goaded, bringing me closer and closer and closer until I couldn't take it anymore.

I threw back my head and gasped. Semen shot from me. My body went through a series of convulsions, and it was all I could do to hang on to Reed and not topple off the couch. He bent forward to flick the tip of his tongue over my cock-head, groaning as he scooped up some of my jizz, then rested back against the sofa, his neck and chin, along with his hairy chest and belly, streaked with my seed.

The sight and taste of my cum had launched him toward release. He fucked me harder still, burying his entire length inside of me with each upward thrust. Although I never minded when he filled me with his hot load, he knew my preference, which he now shared, and just before the point of no return, he pulled out of me and jacked himself. After only several swipes of his hand, jizz erupted from his cock, crisscrossing his torso in rivers of pearly white and gifting me with a lewd feast I eagerly began to consume.

A short time later, stretched out on the couch in each other's arms, our mouths sharing the final droplets of our mutual release, he looked up toward the skylights and smiled.

"Something funny?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not funny at all. Just...just...fantastic. Here it is, mid-November, sunny, warm, with a bright blue sky and not a storm cloud in sight."

"One of destiny or otherwise?"

He laughed. "Yeah, no destiny's storm on the horizon for us. Seems the perfect time..."

"For what?"

"For something I've been meaning to ask you for a while now. Listen, neither of us is due back at the studio until Wednesday, so let's take advantage of this ultra long weekend and get out of this city."

"We are. Have you forgotten tomorrow—"

"No, no, not Connecticut. But we need to get Mom and Pop, Belle and the kids to come with us. Maybe even your wild friend Delia. We'll make a weekend of it. Farther north. We can rent a limo and pick everyone up along the way. I hope they can make it. I hope it's not too 'last minute' and they can't get away—"

"What in the dickens are you going on about?"

He rolled me onto my back, blanketing me in warmth with his hard, hairy nakedness. His dark eyes added extra fire. "Let's celebrate today's episode, Mars. Let's celebrate everything we've accomplished together. Especially, our love. Let's head into Massachusetts."

"What can we get there that we can't get here or in Connecticut?"

"A marriage license."

I'll admit, the notion hadn't even crossed my mind. At least, not seriously. Oh, sure, I had long ago decided that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with this man, my gentle and loving soul mate, but I truly had never considered getting legally hitched. And all the recent changes to marriage laws in various states had made the subject too confusing and too damned aggravating to dwell on for long. But then again, I'd never had a driving need to truly consider the possibility, especially since I'd never had a man in my life with whom I'd even wanted a commitment. Until now.

"You actually want to ...?"

"Why not? Hey, I know I didn't come alive until meeting you, Mars, and I know damned well I've never been so happy. We have a special connection, you and I—we've *always* had it—and I never want to think about being without you for the rest of my life. So what do you say? You and me, making it official, declaring our love for each other before the people who matter to us the most and making a real go of it, together?"

"And what about...?"

"What? Are you getting cynical on me? Are you becoming a worrywart yet again?"

"Just playing the devil's advocate." Smiling, I stroked his muscular back and gazed at the heavens. "You know, we've often said how our relationship eerily resembles what's happening with our characters on *Destiny's Storm*, right?"

"Of course."

"But think about it. The nature of a soap opera. You know damned well our characters won't live happily ever after. When has that *ever* happened on a soap? Hmm?"

"Who knows? Maybe we'll be the first soap couple to make it. And in real life, the odds are in our favor. Did you know that since

gay marriage has been legalized in Massachusetts, the state's overall divorce rate has dropped considerably, the lowest it's been in decades? That says something. Plus, art isn't always an imitation of life. And besides, screw what happens on *Destiny's Storm*. We'll make our own destiny. Even left to its own devices, it's done pretty well by us so far. Don't forget, fate brought us together, and that was some sizzling and smoldering destiny, if I do say so myself."

"You've really been thinking about this, huh? You've made several good points there."

"Trust me, if any storm comes our way, we'll just deal with it. United. Look how well we've done so far working as a team. Plus, you know my motto, we actors have to stick together."

"You have another good point there, hot stuff. Oh, sure, in your words, but also in something else." I reached between us and wrapped my fingers around his cock, already growing stiff against my thigh—my lover's imaginary Li-on battery fully recharged and ready for additional action.

"So what do you say? Will you marry me?" he asked, trailing kisses along my neck and to my ear, driving me absolutely mad with renewed lust.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, giving his impressive dick full access to my hole, while one amusing thought repeated in my head...

Marrying the Cock King would officially make me a queen. Whatever our destiny, I knew I could live with that.

KARMA EASTWICK

Born in New York City, Karma Eastwick (a pseudonym) grew up in the entertainment industry. Both of her parents are playwrights, her brother directs for television, and her sister currently works on the Broadway stage. Although bitten in college by the acting bug herself, Karma came to the conclusion early on that she preferred life behind the curtain, so she followed in her parents' footsteps and tried her hand at writing. She has several plays and screenplays to her credit, but discovered she truly enjoys writing novel-length genre fiction the best. During the past decade, she has had several "straight" romance and erotic romance novels published under various pen names, as well as a handful of shorter works published in the fantasy, dark fantasy, and paranormal genres. She uses the "Karma Eastwick" penname only for works that fall under the "gay erotica/man-love" category and hopes to write more of these stories for Amber Quill Press once she finalizes several other key projects.

Now in her early thirties and (reasonably) settled, Karma currently lives in Connecticut and is married to a Broadway and "Soap" actor. They have two pesky golden labs, Samantha and Rocky, who "run" the household, and a lazy and aloof cat named Drucilla who barely tolerates all of them. When not writing, Karma enjoys gardening, travel, horseback riding, and charity/fundraising work.

* * *

Don't miss Art For Art's Sake by Karma Eastwick, available at Amber Allure.com!

In the quaint, sleepy college town of Huntsville, history has an eerie way of repeating itself generation after generation...

When in-the-closet college student Matthew Rhodes arrives at the old building in the town's historical district, little does he realize his life is about to take a sudden and dramatic turn. He is certainly prepared to earn extra income by posing nude for erotica artist Skylar Novak, and definitely anxious to discover if the sexy and reclusive man has an interest in him other than one of an artistic nature. But things get complicated when Matthew meets a handsome stranger lurking outside the artist's door. A stranger who has a sudden and compelling effect on him before disappearing in the blink of an eye.

Matthew and Skylar quickly discover they share both an uncontrollable and supernatural bond with each other, leading to a red-hot and steamy affair, but they also realize they are mysteriously linked to the stranger. Is he even a man at all, or could he be an entity from another plane of existence who has lecherous designs of his own? And could his connection to Matthew and Skylar have historical significance, involving an elaborate and desperate plan that has miserably failed every generation for centuries?

Before the situation can drive him insane, Matthew is determined to open his mind to new possibilities and learn the whole truth. But in doing so, will his burgeoning love and unquenchable sexual appetite for Skylar, the man of his dreams, suffer in the process? Or will his actions secure their love for eternity?

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