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FINDING A DREAM

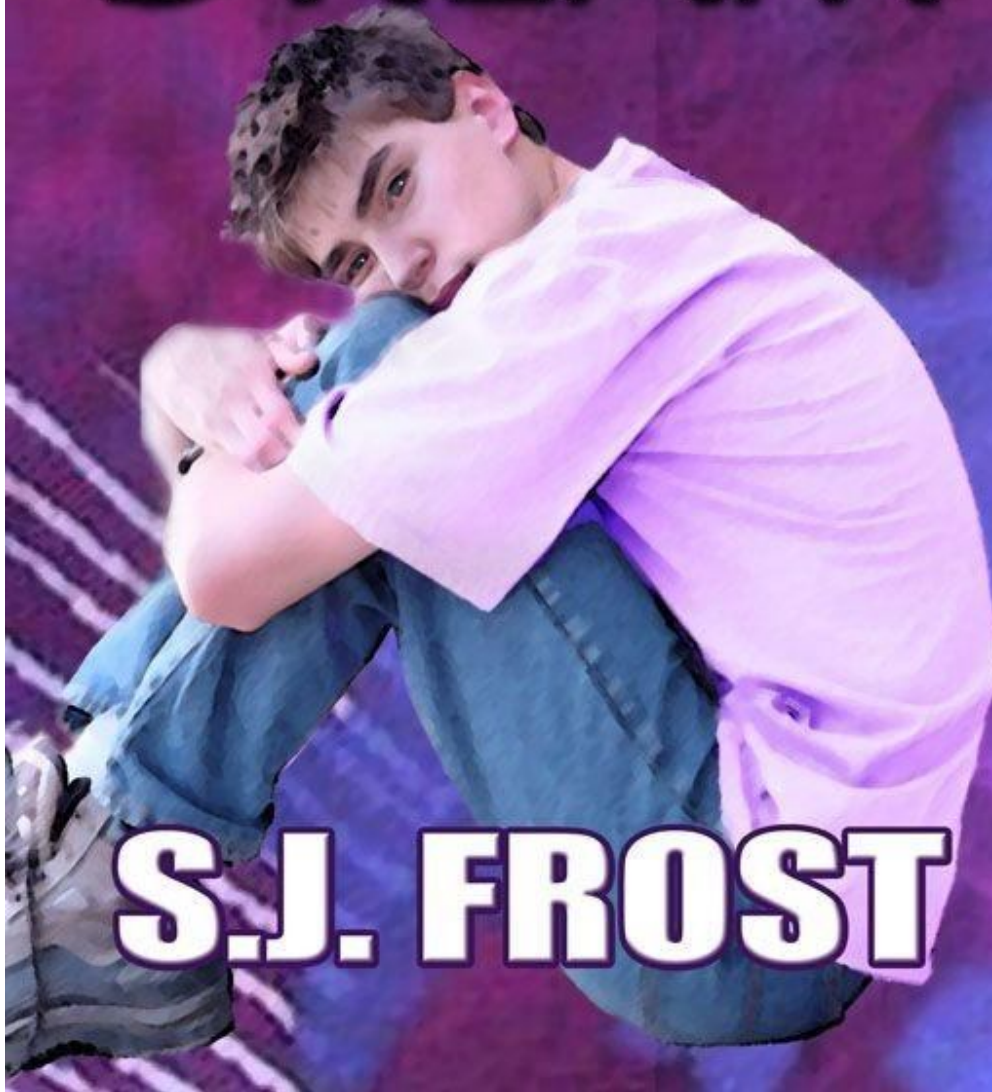


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FINDING A DREAM

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I'd like to extend my most heartfelt thank you to everyone who buys this story. I'm always grateful when anyone picks up one of my books, but with this one, I wanted to be sure my appreciation reached everyone, because you're helping me and my editor, Kris Jacen, do something very special. To aid in the fight against bullying and help provide life saving resources to LGBTQ youth, she and I are donating our royalties from this story to The Trevor Project. It's with the support of all who buy this book that we're able to do this, and from both of us to you, thank you, so very much, for joining with us in giving to those in need.

To learn more about The Trevor Project, please visit www.thetrevorproject.org/

CHAPTER 1

“Mom!”

Only silence replied.

Dillon exhaled his held breath in a relieved sigh. He closed the door as he stepped the rest of the way into his home. He walked through the family room, down the hall, and dropped his backpack off inside his bedroom before turning for the bathroom. Switching on the light, he gazed at his reflection in the mirror.

His nose was red with a small bit of blood crusted beneath. He turned his head from side to side, looking for other scraps or bruises. Even though his right cheek hurt from the fall, it wasn't swollen or showing any outward marks. Thankfully.

Dillon grabbed a washcloth and wet it, dabbing gently under his nose. When he finished, he stared at his image in the mirror. Why did this happen to him? Did he look that different from everyone else? How could they even tell anything about him from how he looked on the outside? Could they all read his mind? Did they know his private thoughts and desires?

Maybe it was because he wasn't as tall or as muscular as some of the guys at school, but he wasn't the only guy not built for football or basketball. Why didn't those guys get ripped on as much as him? With his thick, dark brown hair, brown eyes, and soft features, he didn't think he stood out more than anyone else. But it wasn't just his looks. It was what existed in his heart, his mind, his soul. They could all sense he was...*different*. No matter how he tried to hide it, they knew and they hated him for it.

Dillon lowered his gaze. He couldn't change how he looked. He couldn't change the things he felt. It wasn't as if he hadn't tried on both. He was who he was, and according to Logan and his gang, he was a faggot, a queer, a homo, and things he couldn't bear to repeat even in his own mind. How Logan and his friends said the hateful words as if they were nothing, he'd never understand.

In time, the sting from a slap, the pain from a punch, faded until they could no longer be physically felt. But once a word was spoken, it could exist forever in someone's mind. Didn't Logan and his gang understand the hurt those words caused? Of course they did. That's why they used them. Logan wanted to see the pain on Dillon's face, the tears in his eyes, at being called those names.

Dillon turned out of the bathroom and went to his bedroom. He tore his shirt over his head and held it up. Blood stained the front and one sleeve from the bloody nose he'd gotten when Logan pushed him at the foot of the main stairwell. He'd hit his nose and cheek on a step and all of his books went flying. And of course, Logan did it when everyone was getting ready to go home and the hall was packed.

He could still hear the raucous laughter from those who'd seen echoing in his mind. No one, not one person, had bothered to help him or ask if he was okay.

It was another thing he didn't understand. He'd been knocked down, he was bleeding and hurt. How could no one want to help him? Was he that terrible of a person? He must be, since everyone thought it was so funny. But he didn't think he was a bad person. He always helped others if he saw they needed it, and he'd never think to do things to someone like what Logan did to him. He guessed it was just another one of the things that made him different, an

outcast, unaccepted.

Dillon pulled in a shaking breath and swallowed his rising emotion. He would *not* cry. That was the last thing he needed to do. It didn't matter if no one saw him. They couldn't see his thoughts or how he felt inside either, but it didn't stop them from knowing.

He wadded up his shirt and stuffed it under his bed. He'd take it with him on Monday and throw it in a dumpster on his way to school so his mom wouldn't see it. He grabbed a sweatshirt from his dresser, shrugging into it as he sat at his desk.

Dillon closed his eyes, waiting for his computer to fire up. Just one day. What would it be like to have one day at school and not be called a name, get pushed, tripped, have his books knocked from his hands, or some other humiliating thing happen? He had dreaded going back to school this year, but he hoped with not seeing Logan all summer, Logan would've forgotten about him. But the torment and harassment were worse. Before, Logan pretty much only called him names. Now, Logan wanted to hurt him, and he *knew* the worst was still ahead.

Dillon's throat tightened. He didn't know how much more he could take. He felt so drained, so tired. He just wanted an escape, anything that could end the hurt.

His computer chimed as it finished starting up.

Dillon opened his eyes, trying to shake off the fear and pain in his heart. He opened the internet browser to his homepage, a website dedicated to theatre and the arts around Chicago. The page flashed up on the screen, and he stopped breathing as he stared at the new picture adorning it. A pair of blue eyes looked back at him; a perfect smile glowed through the screen.

Dillon's gaze dropped to the caption under the photo, reading, *One of Chicago's première and most celebrated stage actors, Brandon Alexander, on the red carpet for the charity event to raise HIV/AIDS awareness. Accompanying him is his partner, Shunichi Miyamoto, owner of the Miyamoto Dojo in Lincoln Park.*

Dillon looked back to Brandon's image. Brandon Alexander. He'd admired him since he first saw him in *The Phantom of the Opera*. He'd never seen a professional, full scale theatre production, and it blew him away. The music, the props, the actors, and especially Brandon. His baritone voice was so powerful, carrying through the entire theatre, every word clear and precise, and so beautiful when he sang. How Brandon moved, gracefully sweeping across the stage, the black cape billowing behind him, captivated Dillon like nothing he'd ever seen.

When the play was over, he'd left in a daze, mindlessly following his mom, as it seemed he'd left his soul in the theatre. He wanted to go back again and again, and he did manage to convince his mom to take him one more time. When *Phantom* closed and *Chicago* opened with Brandon as Billy Flynn, he begged his mom to go.

He wasn't sure what to expect when he sat in his seat, waiting with anticipation for the curtain to rise. He knew *Chicago* and Brandon's role in it was entirely different from *Phantom*, and he almost felt fearful he'd be disappointed. That fear vanished the second Brandon walked on stage. The play and character might've been different, but one thing was the same—Brandon's

charisma.

Brandon drew the audience in, making them *want* to linger on his every word and movement. Once again, Dillon was left speechless by the magic of the theatre and it's most masterful actor.

Dillon gazed at Brandon on his computer screen, his black hair expertly styled, designer tuxedo cut to his body. He looked to the man at Brandon's side and whose hand was clasped in Brandon's. He had read on Brandon's website that he was gay, but this was the first time he'd seen a picture of his partner. Medium length, layered black hair, dark eyes, beautiful Japanese features; the guy was amazingly hot.

Dillon read the caption again, his mind pausing at "Miyamoto Dojo". An idea hit him, too improbable for him to believe. He clicked his cursor in the search box and typed in "Miyamoto Dojo Lincoln Park". He hit enter, the screen changed, and the first hit to come up, the website for the dojo.

His heart pounded a little faster as he opened it to the homepage with a picture of a building styled in seventeenth century Japanese architecture. Below was the dojo's mission statement, followed by in bold letters, *Always Accepting New Students*.

Dillon couldn't take his eyes from the words. Going to the dojo might let him do two things— meet Brandon and learn to defend himself. Well, he didn't know if Brandon actually went to the dojo. Just because his partner owned it, didn't mean he hung out there. Either way, how cool would it be to learn karate at the dojo owned by Brandon Alexander's partner? Even if he didn't meet Brandon, he'd definitely meet Shunichi. It said he was the head instructor there. He had to do it. All he needed to do was talk his mom into letting him take lessons.

Dillon spun around in his chair and hopped up. He felt as if just the thought of going to the dojo had lifted a great weight from him. He grabbed his cell phone and flopped down on his bed, speed dialing his best friend, Angie. He was too excited to not share his idea with someone.

CHAPTER 2

Brandon stepped out of the house to the Japanese style garden tucked between his and Shunichi's home and the dojo. When he'd gotten home, he saw the parking lot in front of the dojo was packed with cars, which told him there were lessons going on. Though, even without seeing the cars, he would've known. He knew Shun's lesson schedule as well as if he were the sensei.

He glanced at the dojo, a match to the house with its Japanese architecture. As he jogged up the steps to the wraparound wooden veranda, he peered through the sliding glass door and saw Shunichi's assistant instructor, Hiroshi Yoshida, teaching a kendo lesson in the back sparring room. He paused outside the door to slide out of his shoes, and then slipped inside, giving Hiroshi a smile in greeting without disrupting the lesson.

Brandon reached the open doorway leading to the front sparring rooms and stopped, gazing at Shunichi as he guided a student through punches. Dressed in his white karate uniform, Shun looked as beautiful as when Brandon first saw him six months ago.

It was hard to believe so much time had passed, and yet he also couldn't believe it was so short a time. It felt to him as if Shun had always been in his life, and he was grateful for that since there were parts of his life he cared to not remember. But those parts didn't matter anymore, and when he looked at Shun, the past was nothing more than a faint dream. All he could see before him was what his every day would be.

Shunichi glanced at him, smiling, and gave his student a signal to pause in the lesson. His student struck out with a quick punch. Shunichi shifted away as if it were nothing more than a lazy slap coming at him, his expression calm and relaxed. The student's arm shot forward with the strike. Shunichi grabbed it, and in a single fluid movement, put his student to the mats.

Shunichi stood over him, shaking his head in disapproval. "I told you to hold on a moment."

"I know, Sensei, but you also said you should watch your opponent for distraction and use that moment to strike."

"I meant with everyone but me. Good job paying attention, though, both on the lesson and on my alertness."

"Well, the last one was easy. You're always distracted when Brandon comes around." The young guy threw a smirk at Brandon.

Trying not to laugh, Brandon winked at him.

Shunichi gave his student a light tap on the head in reprimand. "Don't tease your sensei." He offered a hand to help him up. "Now go find a partner and practice what we were working on."

The student took Shunichi's hand. Once standing, he bowed deeply to him. Shunichi returned it, though not as low.

As Shunichi went to make rounds to the other students practicing the punches against each other, he narrowed his eyes and pointed at Brandon, as if warning him to behave. Brandon held up both hands in his best attempt at appearing innocent. From Shunichi laughing, he knew it wasn't one of his most convincing performances.

Brandon glanced around the dojo, his gaze meeting a teen's who was sitting by the large picture window in front. The dojo got a lot of visitors from

prospective students, not to mention friends and family members of current students, so he figured the young guy must be one of the three.

He looked back to Shunichi, watching him instruct two girls, and then glanced back to the teen visitor. The guy was still looking at him. If he was a prospective student, or friend or family member of a current student, why was the guy so focused on him and not what was happening on the mats?

Shunichi calling everyone to attention brought Brandon's focus back to him.

After praising his students for doing well in the lesson, Shunichi dismissed the class. He walked toward Brandon, grinning and shaking his head. His arms went around Brandon's neck when he stopped in front of him, their bodies close together. "One of these days I'm going to get laid out with how distracted I get anytime you walk in the room."

Brandon embraced him around the waist. "So should I stop coming in while you're doing lessons?"

"Never. In fact, you should be around me constantly until I learn to control my thoughts about you, and since I don't see myself ever mastering them, you're just going to be stuck at my side forever."

"That works for me." Brandon leaned forward, placing a chaste, but sensual kiss on Shunichi's lips. "You've been in my thoughts all morning, too. But they've been dirty, dirty thoughts."

Shunichi shifted closer still to Brandon. "And you're going to tell me all about them, right?"

"Actually, I was planning on showing you a couple of them on your lunch break. I already ran down to the deli and got some sandwiches, so all you have to do is eat real quick, get naked, on your back, put your legs up on my shoulders, and you'll see one of the things I've been thinking about."

Shunichi moved to kiss him. "I'm going to really enjoy getting a look into your mind."

Brandon met him in another soft kiss. He opened his eyes as he drew back. Beyond Shunichi, the young guy was still sitting by the window and doing a poor job in not being obvious about watching them. "But it looks like before we can act out my thoughts, someone's waiting to talk to you."

Shunichi didn't need to look to know who Brandon was talking about. "That's Dillon. He's been here since I opened this morning. He said he's thinking of taking lessons. I talked to him a couple times, asked him if he had any questions and got him a bottle of water, but he's really quiet and a little on the shy side."

"Maybe you should let him know the lessons are done for the next hour so he can go get something to eat."

Shunichi nodded and turned, heading across the dojo toward Dillon. Brandon followed, doing his best to not blatantly stare at Shunichi's firm ass.

"Hey, Dillon," Shunichi said. "What do you think of this place so far?"

Dillon cleared his throat, his gaze moving from Shunichi to Brandon, and back to Shunichi. "It's incredible. Everyone here is so nice to each other. Some of the students even came up and talked to me."

"I'm glad to hear some of the others have already welcomed you. One of the key philosophies here is to treat all people with respect, kindness, and dignity."

Dillon's eyes flicked once again to Brandon before looking at Shunichi. "That's really cool."

Noticing Dillon's interest in Brandon, Shunichi rested a hand on Brandon's

back. "I'm sorry, I got so wrapped up in wanting to hear your thoughts on things here, I forgot to introduce you. This is my partner, Brandon Alexander." He glanced at Brandon while gesturing to Dillon. "And this is Dillon Davis, a prospective student."

Brandon offered his hand to Dillon. "It's nice to meet you, Dillon. But I'm not one of the people you really have to know. I don't do anything around here except mow the lawn and pester him." He gave Shunichi a nudge with his elbow.

Dillon stood up, a quiet, nervous laugh coming from him as he slowly took Brandon's hand, his eyes focused on him in a star-struck gaze. "It's amazing to meet you, Mr. Alexander."

Shunichi nudged Brandon in return. "I have a feeling Dillon already knows who you are."

Dillon's eyes darted to Shunichi, then back to Brandon. He lowered his gaze, his cheeks colored with a blush. "Um...yeah, I do. I saw you twice in *The Phantom of the Opera*, and I went to see you in *Chicago* about a month ago. You're...you're incredible."

As Dillon's cheeks burned redder with his last statement, Brandon gave him a soft smile. "Thank you very much. It's always nice to meet someone who's enjoyed my work. That's the whole reason I do it."

Dillon looked up with a tentative grin.

Shunichi put his arm around Brandon's waist. "And I also have a feeling you're the reason Dillon picked this dojo."

Dillon nodded, his gaze dropping once again. "Yeah. I saw a picture of you guys on a website at a charity event and it said you ran this place. I'm sorry."

Shunichi gave Dillon a light pat on the shoulder. "Why are you apologizing? There's nothing wrong with that, so long as you really do want to take lessons."

Dillon snapped his head up. "I do! Really bad!"

Brandon caught the desperation in Dillon's voice. "Well, you certainly won't find a better sensei anywhere else. But, can I ask why you want to take lessons?"

"I want to learn to defend myself."

Concern fell over Brandon's expression. "Why do you want to know how to defend yourself? Are you okay? Is someone trying to hurt you?"

Dillon stared at Brandon. Emotion rose in him, and he wasn't sure he could speak without it escaping. No one had ever asked him that before. Sure, his mom asked him all the time how he was and about school, but he couldn't tell her what was happening to him. Angie knew, but even though she was an awesome friend, she didn't really understand what he was going through. He needed someone who truly cared, but who could also help him.

Dillon dropped down on the chair. His elbows on his knees, he lowered his head, burying his fingers in his hair. "There's this guy at school, Logan. Him and his friends give me crap everyday. He calls me a fag, and so many other names. He yells them for everyone around to hear. But he also pushes me in the halls, knocks my books out of my hands." He jerked his head up, pointing to his nose. "Yesterday he hit me from behind and I fell on the main stairwell. I hit my nose and it was bleeding all over! And everyone just laughed! No one helped me! No one *ever* helps me!"

With Dillon's voice growing louder and more frantic, Brandon and Shunichi

broke apart to each take a seat on either side of him. Brandon laid a hand on Dillon's back, feeling the quick breaths he took as if he'd just run a great distance. Shunichi rested his hand on Dillon's shoulder.

His voice soft, Brandon said, "How long has it been going on?"

"Since last year."

Shunichi gave Dillon's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "How old are you? What year are you in school?"

"I'm sixteen. My birthday is in a couple months. And I'm a junior."

"What year is this Logan kid?" Brandon asked.

"He's a senior. It wasn't so bad when I was a freshman. No one knew me. But last year I tried out for track and that's how I met him. I'm not the most athletic, but I'm pretty fast and I thought it'd be fun to be part of a team. Logan was on Varsity and when he saw me, it was like I became an instant target. It's been hell ever since." Dillon's voice lowered to a whisper. "I don't understand why he does this to me. I never thought I was a bad person until all this started."

"Hey, don't say that," Brandon said. "None of what's happening to you makes you a bad person. What he's doing says more about what kind of person he is than it does about who you are."

"But everyone else laughs when he rips on me. That has to say something about me."

Brandon shook his head. "No, it doesn't. It says what kind of people they are, too. The world is filled with followers. People don't want to challenge someone who they think is stronger because it could make them the next target. So instead, they stand in the background and laugh to keep off the bully's radar, which makes them even worse since they won't stand up for themselves or anyone else. And as for that Logan punk, if he was really someone who was secure and felt good about himself, he wouldn't need to put down others to make himself look big."

"It's just, I hate going to school because of him. Everyday, I know he's going to do something. It's like he spends his whole day stalking me, and I spend mine trying to get away."

Shunichi asked, "Have you told anybody at your school about what he's doing? A teacher, the councilor, the principal?"

"I tried talking to the councilor last year. She said to become better friends with him. I told her we were never friends to begin with and she gave me this cheery little smile and said that's where I went wrong, as if it was all my fault."

Shunichi made a grumble of disapproval in his throat over the councilor's words. "Okay, so the school isn't much help. What about your family?"

"It's just me and my mom, and I can't tell her."

Shunichi gave him a confused look. "Why not?"

Dillon shook his head, his voice hushed. "It's too embarrassing. I want my mom to be proud of me, not ashamed of me. My parents got divorced three years ago and my dad lives out in California. I never see him and hardly talk to him. My mom is a nurse and works crazy hours to keep us going. She doesn't need more crap on her because of me."

Brandon ducked his head down, trying to catch Dillon's gaze. "Dillon, there's no reason to feel ashamed of what's happening to you. You didn't ask for this, and most of all, you don't deserve it. I'm sure your mom would want to know."

Dillon sat silent, his mouth set in a stubborn line.

“What about other people you can talk to?” Shunichi asked. “Do you have friends?”

“There are a couple people I sit with at lunch, and Angie. She’s my best friend.”

Brandon noticed how Dillon’s face and voice brightened at the mention of Angie. “Does she know what Logan’s doing to you?”

“Yeah. And she’s stood up to him more than once defending me. He doesn’t take her seriously, though, and she’s kind of an outcast too because she’s a little on the Goth side. A lot of people think she’s freaky because of how she dresses. But that’s another reason why I’m here. I don’t want to be an outcast. I just want to feel like I’m part of something.”

Shunichi gave him a smile. “You’ll definitely get that here. You saw how welcoming everyone was. Once you start taking lessons, you’ll make friends faster than you can remember everyone’s name.”

“I hope so.” Dillon looked at Brandon, embarrassment coloring his cheeks again. “I’m sorry. I feel so lame dumping all this on you guys. You don’t even know me.”

Brandon gave him a playful push on the shoulder. “Hey, after names are given, everything else is building a friendship, and you never have to apologize for sharing things with your friends, right?”

A bright smile glowed over Dillon’s features. “Right.” He looked toward the back sparring room as a couple people filed out. “I guess I should probably go, too. I’m starving.” He stood up, looking toward Shunichi. “When can I start taking lessons?”

“Whenever you want. Take a look over the sheet I gave you with the times for the beginners classes and see what will work best for you. Once you settle on that, we’ll get you enrolled.”

“Thank you.” Dillon turned to Brandon. “And thank you too, Mr. Alexander.”

Brandon rolled his eyes, pretending to be exasperated. “Now what did I just say? We’re friends, and friends don’t call each other mister. So you’ll call me...”

Dillon laughed. “Brandon.”

“You got it.” Brandon held out his hand, palm up. Dillon slapped his hand down on it. As he went to slide his hand back, Brandon locked their fingers together and gave Dillon’s hand a shake. He released Dillon’s hand and made a fist. Dillon bumped his fist against it, laughing harder at the high five/handshake combo.

Brandon watched Dillon leave, he and Shunichi waving to him as he walked out the door. He looked forward, shaking his head. “Poor kid. He’s so desperate for someone to talk to.”

Shunichi slid into Dillon’s vacated chair to sit closer to Brandon. “I know. I’m just glad he came in here. Maybe we can help make things a little better for him.”

“Yeah,” Brandon said softly.

Shunichi wrapped his arm around him and rested his head on Brandon’s. “Let’s go to the house and have lunch. You need to eat before you go to the theatre.”

“And you need to eat before your next class comes in.”

Shunichi put his lips to Brandon’s cheek, kissing it as well as letting him feel

his smile. "You're so good at taking care of me and all my needs."

Brandon caught the innuendo in Shunichi's voice and chuckled. "You better not get going on that. We don't have time to act out my thoughts now." He dipped his head to nuzzle Shunichi's neck, placing a soft bite there. "But when I get home tonight, we're going to act out every thought I've had this morning, so no teasing until then."

"I'm just trying to get you smiling again."

Looking into his eyes, Brandon brushed Shunichi's cheek with the backs of his fingers. "You always do that, just by being close to me."

He leaned forward, delivering a gentle kiss to Shunichi, then stood and held out his hands. Shunichi took them and rose to his feet, keeping one in his hand as they walked toward the back of the dojo.

Brandon gazed at the garden, the bright flowers having faded when the last of fall gave way to early winter. Tones of brown and gray colored it, dotted with the occasional spot of green from small evergreen shrubs. It seemed a perfect match to his mood with how his thoughts felt weighted by all Dillon had told them. He just hoped Dillon would return to the dojo so they could continue to help him.

CHAPTER 3

Dillon walked at Angie's side through the halls, smiling at everyone whether they smiled back or not. Ever since visiting the dojo on Saturday and meeting Brandon, his spirits had felt lighter than he could ever remember. This was what it was to feel happiness. It'd been so long since he'd truly felt it, the kind of happiness where it radiated through him, he'd forgotten what it was like. Now he hoped to never lose the feeling again, and if he kept going to the dojo, he knew he wouldn't. Even the dread of coming to school couldn't touch it.

"You're in such a good mood today," Angie said.

Dillon glanced to his side at her, dressed in her usual all black fair. Her skirt went down to her knees, which were covered with a pair of black and white striped stockings rising out from her shin-high black leather boots. Her blouse, trimmed in lace, swooped low in a broad neck. Streaks of black, blue, and purple raced through her blonde hair. Dark makeup gave her eyes a smoky look.

He was actually surprised she wasn't more popular. So what if her clothes looked strange to some people? If they could see past that, they'd find a really pretty girl who would do anything for her friends. It was sad how people could rule a person out as good or bad from how they looked.

Dillon glowed with a smile. "I *am* in a good mood. I'm going to the dojo after school today to get enrolled."

"Cool! Then your mom must have said the cost wasn't too much."

"Yeah, she said she's glad to see me getting involved with something like this. Do you want to come with me? Maybe Brandon will be there again."

"Hell yeah, I'll go. He's hot."

"And gay."

"Doesn't mean I can't look. Maybe I should take lessons. His partner is damn hot, too. I wonder how hands on he gets when he's teaching."

Dillon laughed and rounded a corner. His bright mood wavered as he saw Logan and his gang lurking across from his locker. Logan stood taller than all his friends. Blond hair, blue eyes, chiseled features, muscular build, Logan blended all the qualities he didn't, and never would, possess. Just looking at Logan made him feel inferior.

Logan and his companions glanced at him. Malicious grins broke over their features as they whispered amongst each other. Dillon dropped his gaze and quickened his strides toward his locker. The faster he could change books, the less chance of Logan doing something to him.

He flicked his eyes up as he reached his locker and froze. Hanging on it was a picture of two naked men having sex doggy style. That was bad enough, but what horrified him was the picture had been altered to put his head and face on the man receiving and the principal's on the other.

Uproarious laughter broke out around him.

Dillon tore the picture from his locker. Beside him, he heard Angie yell out, "Why don't guys shut the fuck up!"

A deep male voice replied, "Go fuck your broomstick, witch bitch."

Dillon cringed at Logan's voice. Why? Why did this have to happen when for the first time in so long he was happy? Why did Logan have to take that from him? Is that what his entire life would be, having every moment of happiness

ripped away and replaced by humiliation?

Another feeling rose in him, one that was so often buried beneath the fear; anger. Dillon spun around, glaring at Logan standing a few feet away. "You know what I think is funny? Imagining you surfing gay porn sites to find the right picture. I can see you sitting at your computer thinking, 'Oh, this one's too big, this one's too small, but this one is *just* right.'"

Some of Logan's friends burst out laughing. Dillon stared at them, stunned. Is that all it took to be popular and liked? To have the best slam against someone else?

"Dude, he's right," one of Logan's friends said. "That's frickin' nasty, even for a joke. Did you get a hard-on looking for the right picture?"

Logan turned on his gang, shoving his friend hard. "Shut the fuck up before I fuck you up." He advanced on Dillon. "And you, you little bitch, you think you're so fucking funny?"

Dillon tipped his head back to meet Logan's gaze. This time, he wouldn't back down. He had something to look forward to now, the dojo. He wouldn't let Logan take that from him.

"You know what, Logan? You need to get a life." He held up the picture. "Is this what you did all weekend? Or maybe you met someone on one of the porn sites and that's how you spent your nights."

Dillon didn't see the hit come, only felt the pain of it as Logan's fist smashed into his left eye. His head snapped back, slamming into his locker. Stunned, dazed, the next thing he knew he was on the floor, his shoulder hitting hard as if he'd been thrown. Shouts were all around him, chants of "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

A kick to his stomach blasted the wind out of him. A flurry of feet stomped dangerously close to his head, Logan's tennis shoes and Angie's boots, and he knew she was trying to fight Logan back.

The chanting stopped as yells from teachers sounded over them. Someone knelt in front of him, laying their hands on him. Dillon looked up to the face of Mr. Travers, the principal. Somehow, that made it even worse.

Dillon knocked Mr. Travers's hands off him and struggled to sit up. "Leave me alone."

Mr. Travers snatched Dillon's upper arm and hauled him to his feet. "If you're good enough to show attitude, you're good enough to come down to my office."

Dillon walked at Mr. Travers's side, following the assistant principal and one of the gym teachers, who were escorting Logan and Angie. They took Logan into the principal's office first, leaving him and Angie to wait outside.

Angie rested her hand on his arm. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he snapped. He didn't mean to be short with her, but he also couldn't help but feel a little angry toward her. How much of a wuss had he looked like lying on the floor with her fighting for him? It just added to his humiliation.

"God, Dillon, your eye, it's already swelling up."

Dillon gingerly fingered around his eye. The softest touch brought pain, and he could already feel it getting puffy. He let out a small groan, his brief moment of anger at her forgotten as he looked at her. "What am I going to tell my mom?"

"The truth. She needs to know about this. They're probably going to call her,

anyway.”

“They can’t! I don’t want her to know!”

“It’s not like she’s going to get mad at you for what he did.”

Dillon gazed at her, not having the strength to argue. He noticed her left cheek was bright red. “What happened to your cheek?”

“Fuckface slapped me.”

Dillon’s eyes widened. “What kind of asshole hits a girl? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s mostly just stinging now.” She grinned at him. “Besides, after he hit me, I bit him on the arm.”

Dillon couldn’t help but smile at the mental image of Angie biting Logan. But his respite from the hurt and embarrassment broke as the office door opened. Logan stormed out, turning his eyes on Dillon.

His voice a whisper only Dillon and Angie could catch, Logan said, “You’re dead.”

“Dillon,” Mr. Travers said, gesturing for him to come in.

Dillon continued to stare after Logan, then slowly rose and stepped into the office, the assistant principal closing the door behind him. He took a seat in a chair across from Mr. Travers’s desk, folding his arms tightly against his chest.

Mr. Travers cleared his throat as he began. “According to Logan, this whole mess erupted because you were using gay slurs to insult him.”

Dillon snapped forward in the chair. “He’s lying! I might’ve said some things, but it was all because of the picture he put on my locker! Did you see that?”

“Yes, I did.” Mr. Travers shifted in his chair. He looked down at his desk, out the window, anywhere but at Dillon. “And quite honestly, I’m not sure what to say about it. If you’re...homosexual, that’s fine. But to have *feelings* for an adult is not appropriate.”

Dillon’s mouth dropped open with a stuttering gasp. “That’s not even...I don’t have any kind of feelings for you!”

“Well, Dillon, inspiration from the picture had to come from somewhere. And maybe you told someone you thought you could trust about how you felt and it got around. I would advise in the future, it would be best to keep all feelings of this nature to yourself. Really, they’re inappropriate in of themselves, not even considering having them directed toward an adult.”

Dillon shook his head, in disbelief at what was happening. “You’re taking it all wrong! Logan made that picture to humiliate me! I mean, seriously, what would be more embarrassing than having sex with you?”

He regretted the words as soon as he said them. One second, Mr. Travers was sickened at the idea of him being gay, and now he looked pissed that it’d be gross to have sex with him. “I didn’t mean you specifically. I meant the principal, in general. No one at any school wants to have sex with the principal.” Dillon winced, feeling as though he’d made his statement worse by adding to it.

Mr. Travers leaned over his desk toward Dillon. “Let’s get one thing straight. If this wasn’t your first time of doing anything wrong, you’d be suspended immediately. Even with that, I’m half tempted to suspend you, anyway. But instead, I’m trying to be understanding, so I’m just giving you five days of detention.”

“Why am I getting detention? I didn’t do anything!”

Mr. Travers let out a snort. “It looked to me like you were doing plenty and

you were the one who instigated him with your words. Really, Dillon, to say what you did to him, it's expected he would want to stand up for himself."

Dillon choked out a shock cough. "You can't be serious. No matter what I said, I'm the one with the black eye and who was getting kicked on the floor. He attacked me! And what I said isn't anything compared to the things he says to me. Ever since last year, he's done nothing but come after me!"

"If he was such a problem, then you should've come to us sooner. Since you didn't, that tells me you haven't been all that troubled by him. I've never heard of Logan stepping out of line. He's a fine athlete and his grades are respectable. But if he does anything else, let us know."

Dillon gaped at him. That was it? For all the hurt and degradation he'd gone through, he'd have to wait for more until someone would help him? And judging by how this went, no one would help him then either.

"You can go now," Mr. Travers said, his gaze on some papers he shuffled around on his desk. "Stop at the nurse's office on your way back to class and get some ice for your eye."

Dillon stood and walked from the office, his head down. He saw Angie giving him a questioning look, but didn't have the energy to say anything to her before she was ushered into the office.

He dragged through the halls, now empty with everyone in class. That was it. This was his life. It would never get better. What did it matter if he took karate lessons? He'd only be at the dojo once, maybe twice a week for one or two hours. But he was in school everyday, all day, and from what Logan had threatened, the worse hadn't even hit him yet.

For the second time, he tried to get help, and once again, he was brushed off. It was what everyone did to him. People only paid attention to him when they were making fun of him. It would never change. Angie told him it'd be better once they were out of high school, or when Logan graduated. But there were so many people who followed Logan, even with him gone someone else would take his place. And what if it didn't get better after high school? What if he was just as much of a reject in college, in life altogether?

He couldn't even see a future beyond the next step he took as he walked. If he tried, the only visions that came to him were hurt, and worst of all, loneliness. He didn't want a future like that. It wouldn't be a life, it'd be misery. And with nothing but misery lying before him, what was the point in even walking another step?

Dillon turned into the restroom, ducked into one of the stalls, and locked the door behind him. Resting his back on it, he slid down until he sat on the floor, not caring if it was dirty. He tucked his knees up and placed his elbows on them. He lowered his head, covering it with his arms.

A hard sob shook him. This would be his life, forever. No one would ever accept him. No one would ever want him. He never had many friends to begin with, but each year, more drifted away until now the only person he could truly call a friend was Angie. After they graduated, she'd probably go off to a different college, and then he really would be alone.

He couldn't face that, if he even made it to graduating without Logan killing him. The only thing that could make everything better would be if it all ended.

Dillon's mind lingered on the thought. If it all ended. No more hurt. No more humiliation. No more fear. Just...nothingness.

A tendril of fear snaked through him. He shook the thought away. He couldn't do that. His mom would be devastated. He was all she had. But, just how good to her was a son who everyone hated? When she found out what happened to him, his embarrassment would become hers. Maybe it would be better for her...

No. No, he had to stop thinking like this. So today was bad, and maybe everyday looking ahead didn't shine all that brightly either, but there were still good things in his life. He could go to the dojo again, see Brandon. Maybe Brandon could help him. He'd been so nice before. And Brandon was gay, too. He could've gone through something similar when he was young.

A self-deprecating laugh went through his mind. Yeah, right. As if anyone had ever harassed Brandon. Brandon was everything anyone could ever want to be. He was attractive, talented, intelligent. People would overlook Brandon being gay because of those things. But not him. He was as opposite from Brandon as possible.

It was like people hated him on sight. And how could his life get better when everyone felt that way about him? It couldn't, and it never would. Going to the dojo wouldn't help. Seeing Brandon wouldn't help. Nothing, no one, could help him.

Emotion tightened his throat. His forehead on his knees, he tried to keep his cries soft and muffled. He just wanted for it all to stop, for it all to end.

CHAPTER 4

Shunichi stepped out of the house to the night covered garden and saw Brandon sitting on the steps, gazing into the darkness. Icy wind ripped the warmth from him, and he was surprised Brandon wasn't wearing a coat. But Brandon had been quiet since he'd gotten home from the theatre, seeming lost in his thoughts.

Shunichi sat behind him, his legs on either side of him, and wrapped Brandon in his arms. He rested his chin on Brandon's shoulder. "You're worrying about Dillon, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Brandon said, his voice soft. "I'm just wondering why he never came back. The week is almost over. I keep hearing the hurt in his voice and seeing it in his face. It makes me wonder how anyone who's a part of his life, his mother and teachers, can't see how he's hurting."

"I think he hides it really well. He said himself he's too embarrassed to tell his mom. And when he did try to go to someone in his school, they blew him off. So on top of being embarrassed, that probably made him feel like no one would listen or care."

Brandon shook his head. "I just don't understand. It doesn't take that much to listen to someone, to lend a little support, to show some care. Just the smallest thing, asking if someone is okay, can go so far. It might not seem like much, but to the person you're asking, it can mean the world."

"I know that, you know that, but a lot of people get too wrapped up in their lives to see it."

"Well the lives of others are just as important, if not more so, than anything other people have going on. What the hell is the point of life without sharing it with others?" Brandon sighed. "Maybe I'm letting this get to me more than I should."

"No, you're not. You're being the compassionate man I fell in love with the instant we met." Shunichi smiled against Brandon's neck. "And you're being a good big brother. You were really great with him, you know."

Brandon laughed softly. "Well, I have been a big brother to a high-maintenance prima donna my whole life. It's been good training."

"Have you talked to Jesse about Dillon?"

Brandon shook his head. "No, I haven't. He hasn't had a lot of time to talk this week. Whenever I've called him, he's either getting ready to rehearse, preparing for the stage, running to a photo shoot or interview. Or he's taking Evan's pants off, which he's always doing, so I don't feel bad when I call and interrupt that."

Shunichi laughed softly. "With how late it is, maybe you could catch him after a show and before he gets Evan's pants off. You better hurry, though. You know he works quick when it comes to the last one." He squeezed him tighter. "But let's go in. It's freezing out here."

Brandon stood up and grinned at him. "Well, I'll just have to work a little harder to make sure you're warm when we go to bed."

Shunichi opened the door and walked inside. "I'm glad we're thinking the same thing since it was my plan to *make* you work hard tonight."

Brandon laughed as he grabbed his cell phone and sat on the couch, speed dialing Jesse's phone. "At least I know what's expected of me. But I was kind

of planning on putting you to work, too.”

Through the phone came a tenor voice, musical even when speaking. “You know, I really don’t need to hear you dirty talking your man.”

“Right, and this is coming from the guy who put me on hold the last time we talked to tell *his* man one orgasm that morning wasn’t going to cut it for him.”

“Well it wasn’t. We didn’t have a concert that night, so Ev and I could spend the whole day in bed. He was getting ready to run down to the hotel gym and I had to stop him somehow. Why should he waste all that energy pumping iron when he could be pumping something else?”

On the other end, Brandon heard a rich baritone chuckling and knew it was Evan. “All right, you got me on that one. What are you guys doing now?”

“Heading back to the hotel from a show.”

“How’re the crowds in Vegas?”

“Awesome! I think we’re having our best concerts on the whole tour here.”

Brandon shook his head, as if Jesse could see him. “You say that about every city you go to.”

“Yeah well, I can’t help it I’m loved everywhere I go.”

Brandon rolled his eyes, making Shunichi chuckle.

Jesse spoke again. “You just rolled your eyes at me, didn’t you?”

“It was so obvious you could tell over the phone, huh?”

“I heard Shun laugh, so I took a wild guess. And whenever I say things like that, you always roll your eyes.”

“And yet you still say them.”

“Maybe I say them to *make* you roll your eyes.”

“You know, I really think Evan deserves a medal for marrying your bratty ass.”

“He gets something better than a medal. He gets blowjobs.”

Brandon burst out laughing. Talking to Jesse, doing their usual playful banter, made him realize how much he missed his brother. He wished he could see Jesse, even for just a little while to talk to him in person. But the *No Fear World Tour* still had several months to go, and even though Evan had arranged for the band to have plenty of breaks, lately a lot of that time got taken away by other publicity Jesse had to do.

“I’m sure he’s a lot happier with those than a medal,” Brandon said through his laughter. “I’m glad the concerts are going good, though.”

“Yeah. So what’s going on? Is everything okay? You don’t usually call this late.”

“Actually, something happened last weekend and I haven’t gotten a chance to tell you about it, but I’d like to hear your thoughts on it.” Brandon launched into telling Jesse about Dillon, relaying all Dillon had said and his impressions of how Dillon spoke and acted. “I’m really worried about him. He seemed so excited about taking lessons, but now it’s Thursday and he hasn’t been back. I think he’ll come back eventually, and I know the lessons will help him, but I’m not sure they’ll be enough.”

His voice more serious than before, Jesse said, “It’s great if taking karate can make things easier for him out of school, but it’d be good to see if there’s a way to make them better for him in school, too. Of course, coming to the dojo regularly and having support there might make school easier to bear for him.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Both Brandon and Jesse sat quiet on the phone for a few moments, each in their own thoughts.

Jesse broke the silence first. "Hey, you said he came to the dojo because he's a fan of yours. I wonder if his school has a theatre program like ours did."

Brandon sat up straighter, his mind jumping on the idea. "That'd be perfect! If he got involved in theatre, he might make more friends at school and have more people watching his back. And here I thought it'd be a shot in the dark calling you for advice."

Jesse laughed. "Thanks! But listen, we're pulling up to the hotel and the place is bursting with fans, so I've got to run. I won't be able to hear you after I get out of the limo. You want me to call you back when I get up to our room?"

"No, I'll talk to you tomorrow. Get some rest."

"I will. You, too. After you finish dirty talking your man, that is."

Brandon chuckled as he said "Later" and hung up the phone.

Shunichi rested his arm across the top of the couch, brushing his fingers along the back of Brandon's neck. "Sounds like Jesse had an idea."

"He said we should talk to Dillon about getting involved in theatre at his school."

Shunichi stared at him for a long moment. "We should've thought of that."

"Yeah, we should've. I think we were too close to everything and in shock with all he told us, so we couldn't see the obvious. Now let's hope he comes back to start lessons."

"I think he will." Shunichi leaned close and gave him a bump with his shoulder. "He's not going to miss out on coming to the dojo where his new friend hangs."

"I hope so." Brandon turned on the couch to face him. He cupped Shunichi's chin and looked into his eyes. "This whole thing with him has made me think a lot on things from my past, my father, people who hurt me, the loneliness I felt at times thinking I'd never find someone special. I always feel grateful to have you in my life, but right now, I'm feeling even more so."

Shunichi placed one hand on Brandon's thigh. "I feel the same. You said a moment ago, what's the point of life without sharing it with others. I was hitting that point before I met you. Even though I had friends and family, I wanted to find my true other half. When you walked into the dojo that day, I knew you had to be the one. And now, so long as I can always share my life with you, I'll always be happy." He rested his forehead on Brandon's. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Shun."

Brandon angled his head to find Shunichi's lips and eased his tongue into Shunichi's mouth. He slid his hand along Shun's jaw to the back of his head, Shunichi's soft black hair tickling between his fingers. Brandon's cock hardened in his jeans. He reached to adjust it, but Shun moved faster, pulling the button loose, dragging the zipper down, and freeing it from his jeans and boxer-briefs.

When the warmth of Shunichi's hand enclosed the center of the shaft, Brandon groaned low in his throat. He broke the kiss, his hands going under Shunichi's shirt and lifting it over his head. He gazed at Shunichi's torso of lean muscle built from years of practicing martial arts. The power, the speed, and the strength Shun had in those muscle amazed him, but what amazed him more was

Shun's gentleness, how he never held back on showing kindness to anyone. Shun was, in every way, the man of his dreams.

Shunichi turned and slid onto his lap, deepening the kiss as he straddled him. He grabbed Brandon's shirt, raised it off and tossed it, falling back to his lips at the same instant. He took Brandon's face in both hands, his tongue thrusting over Brandon's again and again. In the softest of caresses, he let his fingertips travel down Brandon's cheeks to his throat.

As his fingers moved over the smooth chest, the muscled pectorals, and further down to the cut lines of Brandon's abdomen, more passion entered Shunichi's kiss. The beauty of Brandon's body, the perfection of it, still left him with a sense of amazement that Brandon was his.

Brandon moved his hands around to Shunichi's ass, gripping the firm cheeks and tugging him closer. He rocked his hips up, rubbing his exposed cock on him.

Shunichi wiggled a hand down to take hold of it. As he massaged the moist slit with his thumb, he ended their kiss, though his lips stayed on Brandon's. "Should we move to the bedroom?"

"I think that'd be good." Brandon grinned against Shunichi's lips. "We'll need the bed, since you're going to make me work so hard."

Shunichi chuckled and slid off him. "That's right."

Brandon stood and decided since his jeans were already open, he'd strip them the rest of the way off along with his boxer-briefs. He moved behind Shunichi as he walked toward the hall to the master bedroom. His hands on Shunichi's hips, he placed soft kisses on Shunichi's shoulders and neck. As they entered the bedroom, he stopped and tightened his hands to make him halt.

Brandon wrapped him in a strong embrace, wanting to take a moment to hold him. He felt Shunichi lean back, resting against his chest. Shunichi laid a hand over the top of his, and stretched back with the other, burying his fingers in Brandon's hair.

Nuzzling Shunichi's hair, Brandon loosened his embrace to rub across Shunichi's abdomen. He felt the cords of muscle along the inside of Shun's hips and followed them down, dipping into his loose cotton pants. His fingertips instantly met Shunichi's cock, fully filled, the foreskin already retracted to reveal the wet slit.

Brandon traced a light circle just below the cock head, tickling the foreskin. A louder groan rumbled from Shunichi's throat. He reached with his other arm, clasping his hands behind Brandon's neck and leaving his body stretched and open. Brandon took Shunichi's cock in one hand, his balls in the other. As he stroked up and down the shaft, he gave the sac gentle squeezes and pulls.

A wanton moan escaped Shunichi. Brandon, knowing it as a sign Shun wanted more, gave him a light bump with his hips, and Shunichi took the final steps to the bed. Brandon moved his hands from Shunichi's pants and tugged them off his hips, letting them slide down his legs to the floor. A gentle touch to Shunichi's back got him to bend over the bed, pushing his ass into Brandon's groin.

Brandon gazed down as his cock nestled between the firm cheeks. He placed his hands on both sides of Shunichi's ass and pushed the cheeks together while he slowly thrust between them.

The bottom of Brandon's shaft rubbing over his hole felt like a tease to

Shunichi, and he knew that's what Brandon wanted. Brandon was a master at preparing him, not just in body, but in spirit and emotion as well. When Brandon topped, he never wanted their lovemaking to end. And when Brandon bottomed, he felt the same way, wanting to be forever inside him. Gentle and soft, or rough and frantic, when they brought their bodies together, he was always taken to the heights of love and pleasure.

Shunichi reached back, placing a hand on Brandon's hip. Brandon thrust a few more times along his crack, then stopped to get the lube. He eased one finger, slick and wet, into Shunichi's hole. Leaning forward, Brandon showered tender kisses across Shunichi's shoulders. He brought his kisses higher to Shunichi's neck, using his lips and teeth to gently tease the sensitive skin. As he went lower, licking down the center of Shunichi's back, he pressed a second finger into him.

Shunichi's breath left him in a combined sigh and moan. His body felt so aroused, but also warm and relaxed under Brandon's gentle care. Brandon's fingers curved, applying light pressure to Shunichi's gland and making pleasure hum through him. His lips parted as he moaned Brandon's name.

Brandon slowly pulled his fingers out of him. He kissed Shunichi behind his ear, whispering, "Climb the rest of the way up on the bed and lie on your back."

Shunichi nodded, but rather than move, turned his head toward him. Brandon touched their lips together, taking Shunichi's tongue deep into his mouth. As the kiss ended, Shunichi kept his head turned toward him, wanting to feel Brandon's warm breath on his lips for a moment longer before crawling the rest of the way onto the bed.

Shunichi lay on his back in the center. When he was settled, Brandon moved between his legs, running his hands along Shun's inner thighs. Shunichi's eyes closed at the touch, and as Brandon's hands moved higher, he drew his legs back for him. Brandon shifted closer, touching his cock's tip to Shunichi's hole. A soft groan left Shunichi at just that small contact. The sound warmed Brandon further with desire, and he pressed into him.

Fully buried in Shunichi's heat, Brandon leaned his body over him, lowering his head to kiss him. Shunichi lifted up to meet him, his mouth opening for Brandon's tongue. He eased down to lie flat once again, Brandon following him with the kiss and resting more of his weight on top of him.

He brushed Shunichi's hair from his forehead, placing soft kisses there and trailing them down Shun's cheek. He reached his jaw, and Shunichi tipped his head back, giving Brandon his throat. Brandon floated his lips over it. He felt Shun's throat vibrate with a groan, then Shun's hands rubbing down his sides to his ass. Shunichi took hold, pulling him in even more.

Brandon pressed into him as deeply as he could and held it. He gazed down at him, Shunichi's breathing already quicker than usual, his eyes closed, but his face holding an expression of ecstasy. It was as if simply joining their bodies was enough for Shun's pleasure.

Holding himself up on one arm, Brandon's stroked Shunichi's cheek. Shun's eyes opened. As Brandon looked into them, it was so much more than lust he saw shining in them. It was love, true and unhindered. This was the kind of love and affection he'd always dreamed for. Shunichi lifted a hand, touching it softly to Brandon's cheek, and Brandon knew Shun saw the same thing in his eyes.

Shunichi's arms wrapped around him in an embrace that was both strong and

gentle. Brandon bowed his head and started moving his hips in slow thrusts. This wasn't a night to rush toward climax, but one to cherish each other. He would do all he could to let Shun feel through his body how much he loved him, and he made a silent promise to himself and Shunichi, he would work everyday to show Shun how grateful he was to him for making his dream come true.

CHAPTER 5

Brandon reclined in one of the chairs by the dojo's front window, watching Shunichi instruct his lesson. The front door opened, and he glanced toward it. A teen stepped inside, dressed all in black, her blonde hair dyed with streaks of blue, purple, and black. She looked toward him and lifted her hand in a wave as if she knew him. Confused, Brandon started to raise his hand to wave back, then it hit him. Dillon had mentioned his best friend was a Goth girl. This had to be her, and if she was here without him, something was definitely wrong.

Brandon stood to greet her as she neared him. "Hey. Are you Dillon's friend?" She nodded. "Yeah, I'm Angie. How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess from him saying his best friend was a girl who dressed Goth."

"I guess that's the best way to describe me. And I already know you're Brandon. I've never seen you perform, but I recognize you from the pictures he's shown me."

"Well, we'll have to get you to a show sometime." He gave her a curious look. "Shouldn't you be in school right now?"

"Yeah, I'm ditching. I thought it was more important to come here and talk to you."

Brandon took a breath, already feeling he knew the answer to the question he was about to ask. "Is everything okay with Dillon?"

As Angie's expression became a mix of worry and sadness, he had his answer.

She shook her head and sat down. "He hasn't stopped in here at all this week, has he?"

Brandon sat beside her. "No, not since last Saturday. What's going on?"

"Something really bad happened at school on Monday." She told everything Logan had done to Dillon. "He didn't come to school all week. He kept telling his mom he was sick. She took him to the doctor this morning, and she was so pissed when he came out with nothing wrong with him, she took him right to school. We don't have classes together in the afternoon, so after lunch, I cut to come here."

"But he hasn't been himself since Monday. He doesn't answer hardly any of my texts, and I have to call him ten times to get him to pick up the phone. And that's not like him. His phone is always glued to his hand, and I swear he answers texts faster than I can send them. I've been going over to his house everyday after school, but he hardly talks or looks at me. And I've tried to get him to come here, but he won't."

She lifted her head, tears in her eyes as she met Brandon's gaze. Her voice trembled as she spoke. "I don't know what to do. I'm so afraid he's going to get mad at me if I talk to his mom, or really to anyone about him, but I'm not just worried about him, I'm scared for him. It's like...it's like he's shutting down. He's closing himself off from everything he used to enjoy and care about. It's like he doesn't have hope anymore. He needs help and I don't know how to help him."

Brandon sat silent for several moments, absorbing all Angie had told him. "What happened when his mom found out about the fight?"

"She still doesn't know. He erased the message off his home's answering machine and off her cell phone before she could hear them. Then he told her he got hit in the eye with a baseball in gym. He thinks she's going to be ashamed

of him for Logan ripping on him all the time. I keep telling him that's stupid, but he won't listen."

"No, it's not stupid. I think he's just afraid of letting her down and that's why he doesn't want her to know." Brandon glanced to Shunichi as he called an end to the lesson and came toward them.

Shunichi smiled at Angie. "And you must be Angie."

Angie returned his smile. "Wow, everyone here already knows me. Maybe I should take lessons, too."

"You would be more than welcome to," Shunichi said. "How's Dillon?"

Brandon looked up at him. "Not good." He recapped everything, Angie adding in details as he went. Shunichi stood with his arms folded across his chest, listening.

Angie spoke again as Brandon finished. "Like I said to Brandon, I don't know where to turn, but I thought maybe you guys could help him somehow. He was *so* happy after he came here. I seriously haven't seen him in that good of a mood ever."

"We'd love to help in any way we can," Shunichi said. "But I'm not sure how if he won't come here."

"Can't you guys go see him at his house?" Angie asked.

"Yeah, we could, but I'd want his mom to be there."

"But he's not ready for her to know yet."

Brandon jumped into the conversation. "I think it's time for all this dancing around his mom to stop. She needs to know."

Angie lowered her head, staring at the floor.

Brandon looked to Shunichi, who gave a slight shake of his head, indicating he was just as lost for an answer. Brandon took a deep breath, exhaling a heavy sigh. "I guess we can talk to him first."

Angie snapped her head up, smiling at him.

"But as soon as we're done talking to him, he's going right to his mom," Brandon added.

"Okay," Angie said, standing up. "If we leave now, we should be able to catch him as he's walking home."

His gaze on Shunichi, Brandon said, "You've got a class coming in, don't you?"

"Yeah, but Hiro doesn't. Since it's a beginners class, I'll get him to sub for me."

Brandon looked to Angie. "I'll bring my car around."

"Okay, I'll meet you guys out front." She glanced from him to Shunichi. "Thanks for doing this."

Shunichi waved a hand at her words. "It's nothing."

Brandon followed him as he went to the back sparring room and asked Hiroshi to take on his next lesson. With the class covered, they stepped outside, going toward the house.

Brandon let out a sigh and looked at him. "What exactly are we going to say to him?"

"I have no idea, but I'm sure we'll think of something once we start talking. It's not like you haven't gone through your share of bigotry for being gay."

"Yeah," Brandon said softly.

As they entered the house, Brandon turned for the kitchen to grab his car keys,

Shunichi for their bedroom to change. Brandon hardly got two paces out of the kitchen before Shunichi was coming down the hall again, pulling a shirt over his head as he walked.

“That was fast,” Brandon said, tugging on his shoes by the front door.

“For some reason, I have this feeling like every second counts right now.”

Brandon nodded. “So do I.”

They went out to the silver Mercedes SUV, Brandon jumping behind the wheel with Shunichi taking the passenger seat. Brandon guided the vehicle down the driveway from the house in back, to the parking lot in front of the dojo. Angie opened one of the backdoors and climbed in, relaying directions.

Brandon swung out of the drive, trying to keep himself from speeding. He knew his emotions were likely overreacting. Though Shun feeling the same urgency concerned him. Shun was always so calm, it wasn't like him to rush with anything. Even now glancing over at him, he could see the worry on Shun's face, his usual carefree demeanor gone.

Brandon let the SUV tick ten miles per hour over the speed limit. Regardless of what they were both feeling, he hoped when they found Dillon, he would be okay.

CHAPTER 6

Dillon walked out of the school, glancing over his shoulder. He couldn't believe he'd made it through the day without running into Logan. He saw him in the halls, but if Logan saw *him*, he didn't show any sign. And they were in detention together, but Logan was seated at the other end of the room and didn't look at him the entire time.

It wasn't enough to make him believe Logan was going to stop harassing him, though. Logan was probably just trying to play things quiet with how they both had gotten in trouble for the fight, which made things even worse. Before, he could at least anticipate getting bullied everyday. Now he didn't know when it would happen.

Dillon turned on the sidewalk, heading for home. At least detention wasn't as bad as he expected. It wasn't any different than study hall and he got all his homework finished. Not much of a punishment, really.

Still, he was relieved to be going home. He didn't want to be around anyone, even people who ignored him. And for once, he was glad Angie had gone home early so he didn't have to try and keep up with her. He didn't have the energy, and there was nothing in his life worth talking about, anyway. All he wanted was to go home, lie in bed, and sleep until he was forced to get up again.

Voices made Dillon glance up. He stopped midstride. Logan and his gang of five were seated on and hanging around a bus bench. To get home, he'd have to walk by them. He could cross the street, but they still might see him. Or he could backtrack and go the long way around the block. Deciding that'd be best, he spun around, starting back the way he'd come.

"Hey, bitch! Where do you think you're going?"

Dillon's squeezed his eyes shut. He knew he'd been asking too much for Logan not to see him. Should he turn around, or keep walking? If he turned around, it was guaranteed Logan would come at him. If he kept walking, maybe Logan would leave him alone.

Dillon lowered his head, keeping his gaze on the sidewalk as he quickened his strides. Within seconds, he heard footsteps closing in on him. A hard shove sent him stumbling forward. He caught himself, trying to turn around at the same moment. A slap to the back of his head startled him. He twisted toward where he thought the hit came from and met Logan's eyes.

Logan stepped up to him. "Because of you, I'm not allowed to play in the basketball game tonight. Coach said I need to take the time to think about how I treat others, which is bullshit because you're the one who was talking shit on Monday."

Dillon pulled in a breath, hoping to find his voice and it'd be steady as he replied. "Only because you put that picture on my locker. And you talk shit to me everyday!"

Logan bellowed in Dillon's face. "Because you deserve it, fucking homo!"

Logan slammed him on the chest with both hands. Dillon reeled back. Unable to catch himself, he fell to the sidewalk, wincing on impact.

A car horn blared.

Dillon snapped out of his pain, looking toward the sound. A silver SUV raced up and screeched to a halt. The driver's door flung open. Dillon's breath caught at seeing who jumped out.

“What the hell is going on?” Brandon shouted. He stormed toward them so fast, Logan staggered back several paces from Dillon in surprise. Brandon stretched a hand down to Dillon. Dillon barely grabbed it before he was hauled to his feet. Brandon tugged Dillon behind him as he faced Logan. “I’m guessing you’re Logan.”

Having recovered from his surprise, Logan advanced a step, holding his arms out to the sides as if inviting a fight. “So what if I am?”

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen. What’s it to you?”

Brandon started toward him. “Good, then I can kick your ass legally.”

Shunichi rushed to Brandon’s side, placing one hand on Brandon’s shoulder, another on his chest. He hushed his voice to where only Brandon and Dillon could hear. “Trying to stop a bully by becoming one isn’t the way to do it.”

Brandon looked at him. “There’s a difference between being a bully and protecting someone. Bullies act without provocation. Someone who’s protecting always has a reason for what they’re doing.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that, but you still shouldn’t kick his ass.”

Logan laughed and turned to his friends. “Forget this. He acted like he was something, but he can’t do shit since his wife won’t give him his balls.”

Shunichi took his hands off Brandon. “Do whatever you want.”

Brandon threw him a quick smile, then put his attention on Logan. “What the hell is your problem? You think putting down others makes you look like a better person?”

“Man, I ain’t got shit to say to you. You’re just another fag like him.” Logan pointed at Dillon.

Dillon cringed inside. He didn’t want to see this. He couldn’t take it if Logan degraded Brandon the way he did him. Brandon didn’t deserve it. He watched as Brandon moved toward Logan with confidence in his posture, no hesitation in his steps.

Brandon stopped a couple feet from Logan. “You’re right, I am. And I’m damn proud to be one.”

Dillon gasped at Brandon’s words. Brandon had taken Logan’s words and owned them. Even Logan looked lost for a response. Dillon glanced from Brandon to Logan. They were nearly the same height, Brandon slightly taller, and yet Brandon’s presence was so much stronger than Logan’s. Maybe it was because Brandon was older, but it seemed more than that. To him, it was as if Logan was nothing more than a shadow to Brandon’s brilliant light.

Brandon shook his head at Logan. “You know, I’ve dealt with a lot of people like you in my life. I know what kind of person you are. You’re insecure, you’re self-conscious, and you’re hateful because of those things. You see someone else living their life how they want to, and you can’t stand it because you can’t do it yourself.”

Logan moved a step closer to him. “You don’t know shit about me. If you did, you’d know how stupid what you just said is. I’m on the Varsity track team. I’m a starter on Varsity basketball. I have good grades and a hot girlfriend. I got it all!”

“Really? Then why do you feel like you have to take away from other people? Someone’s who’s truly confident and happy with who they are doesn’t concern themselves with others unless it’s to help them. They don’t feel the need to put

someone down. Why would they? Doing that doesn't do anything to benefit them. But you must get a benefit out of it. Whether it makes you feel tough, or cool, or better than him, making his life hell makes your life feel better. If you were happy with who you are, you wouldn't feel that way."

Silence followed Brandon's words.

Dillon felt a smile spreading over his lips. What Brandon said, every word, made sense to him.

Brandon smirked at Logan. "But you know what else? You and I have something in common."

Logan let out a loud snort. "What the fuck could I have in common with *you*?" He spit the last word out as if the very thought of being similar to Brandon in any way disgusted him.

Brandon's smirk broadened. He flung his arms out to the sides with flourish. "We're both actors."

Logan stared at him, looking as though he doubted Brandon's sanity. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Brandon paced around Logan, making Logan turn in a circle to keep him in sight. "You and I both play different roles for people to make them happy and to fulfill what's expected of us. But there is a very key difference between our acting." He halted and faced him. "My acting stops when I walk off stage. The moment I go behind the curtain, I leave my character behind and I'm once again...me. But you, you never stop playing your part, because you're constantly trying to be what everyone wants you to be." He waved his hand toward Logan's friends.

Logan leaned closer to him, his eyes narrowing. "You're full of shit. I'm the same in front of everybody."

Brandon took his turn to lean forward. "Would you put Dillon down in front of your parents?"

Logan answered with a quiet glare.

"That's what I thought," Brandon said. "So maybe you really don't know who you are with all your changing faces."

Logan shifted back slightly from Brandon. "Whatever. You still don't know what you're talking about. But I know what he is and what you are is just fucking wrong."

"Yeah? Says who?"

"Everybody."

"That's strange because if it's everybody, you'd think I would've been lynched by now. But funny enough, I'm still standing here. And even stranger, thousands of people come to my plays and throw roses at me instead of bigoted slurs. That's a whole lot of everybodies who seem perfectly fine with *what* I am." Brandon put his hands on his hips. "So, what else you got? That can't be it, can it?"

Logan glanced to the side. "I ain't got nothing else to say to you."

"Fine, but now I've got something to say to you." Brandon moved forward, closing the distance between them to inches. He met Logan's eyes in an unblinking glare, his voice deepened to a growling tone. "Your shit stops now. When you walk away from him today, let it be for good. There's no reason for you to be concerned with what he does in his life, and I can guarantee you, he's not going to be concerned with yours. End your crap and move on."

Dillon saw Logan struggling to hold the stare with Brandon, as if he wanted to look away or back up from him.

Silence followed Brandon's last word.

Logan blinked, averting his gaze to the side, his body following the same movement as he went to stand by his friends. "Whatever."

Brandon turned to join Shunichi, Dillon, and Angie. He put his hand on Dillon's shoulder, guiding him toward the SUV. "Come on. We'll take you home."

Dillon climbed in back with Angie, smiling at her as he buckled his seatbelt. "It looks like you were behind this."

"Well, I thought you could use some cheering up, and who better to do it than him." She nodded to Brandon as he got in the driver's seat.

Brandon turned in the seat to see Dillon. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks for your help."

Brandon faced forward, swinging the SUV from the curb. "No need to thank me."

Shunichi stretched one arm across their seats to brush his fingers through the back of Brandon's hair. "I'm just glad you handled it without fighting."

"But you said I could kick his ass if I wanted."

"Yeah, but really, I have better things to spend our money on than bailing you out of jail."

Brandon laughed. "Thanks for being so concerned about my wellbeing."

Shunichi gave him a playful grin. "Well, that's only because I was certain your wellbeing would be fine if you did fight with him. I'm your sensei too, after all."

"And I *am* such a dedicated student." Brandon glanced in the rearview mirror at Dillon. "What's your address again?"

Dillon pointed ahead to a modest sized brick home. "That's my house right there."

Brandon pulled into the drive and switched off the SUV.

Dillon hopped out, looking at Brandon as he climbed out also. "Do you guys want to come in?"

"Is your mom going to be home soon?" Brandon asked.

"In about half an hour."

"Then we'll wait here. I don't want to freak her out coming home and finding two strange men in her house." Brandon nodded toward the porch. "We'll sit up there while we wait so we can talk."

Dillon led the way to the porch and took a seat on a chair. Angie sat in another beside him, Brandon and Shunichi took a bench swing.

Brandon focused his gaze on Dillon. "So how have you been this week? Really and honestly."

Dillon stared at him for a moment. He glanced to Angie, but her expression told him he wasn't going to get any help from her, and since she had brought Brandon and Shunichi to him, she probably already told them everything that had happened. He bowed his head. His voice left him in a ragged whisper.

"Not good. After what happened on Monday, I couldn't bring myself to go to school again. So many people saw that picture and Logan beating on me. No one but Angie tried to help me or stand up for me. But that embarrassed the hell out of me, too." He threw a quick glance at her. "Sorry. I know you were trying

to help, and deep down I'm glad you did, but it just added to me looking like a wuss."

Angie laid her hand over his. "I'm sorry. But I couldn't just stand there and watch you get hurt."

"And her helping you didn't make you look like a *wuss*, as you said," Shunichi added. "To anyone who saw, it would've looked like one friend trying to protect another."

"I guess," Dillon mumbled.

Brandon spoke again. "After the fight, Angie said you had to talk to the principal, but you didn't tell her what he said to you. I'm actually confused why you were even given detention when you hadn't done anything wrong. What happened with him?"

A rough, humorless laugh left Dillon. "He thinks I have a crush on him because of the picture. He said inspiration for it must've come from somewhere."

Brandon paused for a brief moment. "Is he hot?"

Shunichi snapped his head toward him, giving him a firm nudge with his elbow.

Brandon turned to him. "What? My biology teacher in high school was crazy hot. I had a huge crush on him. I even thought about failing the class so I could take it again, and actually, I almost did since I never paid attention to what he was saying. Whenever he was up at the chalkboard, I'd do nothing but sit there and stare at his—"

Shunichi interrupted with chuckling. "You're getting to a point soon, right?"

Brandon heard Dillon laughing and put his attention back on him, grinning. "Yeah. I was just trying to say if he's hot, it might not be so embarrassing."

"But he's not," Dillon said through his laughter. "And I said that to him, sort of. I told him Logan made the picture because nothing would be more embarrassing than having sex with the principal."

"Is that why he gave you detention?" Brandon asked.

Dillon shook his head, his laughter slowing and ending with a sigh. "No, I really think it was because of the fight, or because he hates me, too. But he said I had been provoking Logan and I needed to keep my *feelings* to myself." He told what happened with Mr. Travers, and as he finished, the hurt, the hopelessness he'd felt all week settled over him again. "So you see? It doesn't matter. The one person who should've wanted to help me, wouldn't. And that's how it always is, and how it'll always be no matter what I do. He put the blame on me, made me feel it's all my fault because I'm...I'm...gay."

His voice soft, Shunichi said, "Is this the first time you've said you're gay to anyone?"

Dillon nodded.

Angie slid her chair closer to Dillon's and took his hand again. "It's even the first time he's said it around me. I knew, and he knew I knew, so we've just left it at that." She gave his hand a squeeze, speaking to him. "We could talk about guys we thought were hot, but you've never actually said you were gay."

Dillon held her hand tighter. "For some reason, it felt easier talking about things like that, but really saying it feels so much harder."

"You're not alone on that," Brandon said. "A lot of the gay men I know have struggled with accepting it, and in turn, themselves. We grow up in a society

where we're constantly being told it's wrong, it's abnormal, it's sinful. Pick whichever poison you want, they all make you believe the feelings you have are something to be ashamed of. But they're the wrong ones. There's no other way to say it. It may be simple and blunt, but the truth often is.

"I know it's hard, because you feel like you don't fit in with the majority, as if you're on the outskirts of society. But there are so many people who don't look at it that way, who will stand at your side and defend your right to love who you want. Right now, I'm sure you feel surrounded by hate because of what Logan's done to you and it's hard to see a world beyond that. But there is one, and it's waiting for you to come out and shine as the good person you are."

Dillon kept gazing at the ground, silent. After a few long moments, he shook his head. "I just...I just can't see anything in my life getting better. It's easy for you to say all these things. Look at you. You're famous, you're talented, and...and hot. Everyone loves you. No one tries to hurt you like they do me."

"That's not true," Brandon said. "A lot of people have hurt me over the years, even my own father."

Dillon slowly lifted his head to look at him. "Your dad?"

Brandon nodded. "I haven't talked to him in five years, not since he threw Jesse out of the house and I had to go there to pick him up."

Dillon's eyes widened. "He threw your brother out?"

"Just as he had done to me a few years before. When I was growing up, we would fight constantly, sometimes with him getting physical. It wasn't until I was in college that I finally came out to him and my mom, and that completely severed our relationship. I was still living at home while going to school and only had a part-time job, but it didn't stop him from kicking me out and cutting off all money to me.

"I was able to stay with friends while I looked for fulltime work, bouncing from one to another, not wanting to impose on any of them for too long. And in that time, I found out who my real friends were, since I had a couple who expected sex in exchange for helping me, which I'm not proud to say I gave, but I was only nineteen and was lost for what to do. All I wanted was a roof over my head.

"I got two jobs, both waiting tables and one was fulltime at the Hard Rock Café, so that gave me some good tips. But I was trying to save enough to get an apartment, and that's not easy when you start out deadass broke. I ended up meeting a guy in a club who was quite a few years older than me and after a night together, he said I could stay with him.

"The first week with him was okay, but then he started wanting me to do things I wasn't comfortable with. But again, I went along with some of it, though this time it was more because I thought he genuinely cared for me. Of course he didn't, but I couldn't see that, and honestly, that's a problem I've had with a lot of men all the way up until I met Shun." Brandon reached for Shunichi's hand. Shunichi took it in both of his.

Brandon cleared his throat as he continued. "When the guy started wanting me to do other things I was *really* uncomfortable with, I left him. Since I had a little more money saved up, I stayed at a cheap motel until I got my first apartment. After all I'd gone through, I was a little gun shy about dating men and started seeing an actress I met doing community theatre, because I still hadn't given up on my dream of becoming an actor, no matter dirt poor I was."

Dillon blinked and startled back. "Wait. You dated a girl?"

Brandon smiled at him. "I've dated a few of them. All through high school, actually. Well, excluding messing around with the captain of the wrestling team, but that's a story for another time and when you're eighteen."

Dillon burst out laughing.

"But yeah," Brandon continued, "in my heart I knew what I wanted, but I refused to let myself fully believe it. Maybe because of how things had been with my father. Even before I understood what it meant to be gay and long before I told him, he'd call me all the names Logan's called you whenever I did anything he thought wasn't *masculine*."

"So, after everything that'd happened with the one guy, I thought maybe it would be easier to be with a woman again. It wasn't. It was harder. After a month with her, I knew I couldn't deny who I was any longer. If I was ever going to know what it was to be happy, I needed to accept and embrace all that I was."

Dillon mulled over what Brandon had told him. He'd thought Brandon must've lived a charmed life from the moment he was born, never having anyone hurt him or not like him, but it'd been far from the truth. Brandon's own father rejected him, and Brandon himself had struggled for so long in just accepting himself. He didn't know how his mom and dad would take it when he told them he was gay, but at least now he knew if the worst happened and they turned their backs on him, he wouldn't be alone.

Dillon met Brandon's gaze. "I guess since you hid it from everyone, you probably didn't get harassed in school."

"No, I did. Not too bad since people didn't know for sure, but after I started taking dance lessons, some of the guys would call me names, especially when they found out I was in ballet."

"Your dad let you take ballet?"

"He didn't know. My mom hid it from him and told him she was taking me to extra karate lessons because I'd already been practicing it for a few years. But after a while, he said it was costing too much and I'd have to drop my lessons down again, which meant I had to choose between karate and dancing. Since I already dreamed of becoming a stage actor, I thought the dance lessons would help me the most to achieve that, and so, I gave up karate."

"He eventually did find out I was taking dance lessons, but not ballet." Brandon shook his head slightly. "I told him I was taking tap, and he reacted bad enough to that. He would've killed me if he found out I was in ballet. I ended up quitting ballet and taking tap lessons for real, along with swing and other dances like tango, waltzes, Latin, hip hop. But him finding out about my taking dance was really the beginning of the end for our relationship."

Dillon nodded slowly. "What about your brother? Were things as bad for him with your dad?"

"Things didn't usually get as...violent, between them. Mainly because I'd intervene to help him, and that put the heat on me, but also I think our dad just gave up on him early on. He'd ignore him unless Jesse absolutely had to be paid attention to."

"It wasn't easy on Jess when he was little. He would try so hard to get our dad's attention, bringing him toys and books, wanting him to play with him or read him a story, watch cartoons with him, anything. But our dad would always

push him aside and tell him to go play, read, or watch TV in another room. Whenever I saw it happen, I'd try to do the things Jess wanted our dad to do with him, and even though we'd have fun together, I knew he was hurting deep down. It did get to a point, though, where he stopped going to our dad for attention and would come right to me. And by the time he hit his teens, he ignored our dad as much as our dad ignored him.

"But he didn't really get picked on in school." Brandon laughed softly. "Probably because he already had a rock star attitude. And he was singing in a band he'd formed with Kenny, so he was pretty popular because of that. But he didn't have an easy time accepting he was gay either. He dated a couple girls too, and when I say dated, I really mean he just slept with them, because dating implies more than one date, which he never did.

"He kissed his first boy when he was seventeen and had a little freak out afterward, but once he got over it, there was no stopping him." Brandon laughed again. "Actually, now that I'm talking about it, he really didn't have *that* hard of a time accepting he was gay. When he turned eighteen, I'd take him to clubs with me, and I couldn't get a drink down without having to chase after him to make sure he didn't get himself into trouble with some loser." He became more serious and gave Dillon a stern look. "So considering that, I'm not sure he's the best example to follow."

Dillon spoke with a teasing tone. "I don't know. Things seemed to have worked out okay for him."

Brandon sighed and turned to Shunichi. "Remind me to call Jess later and tell him what a bad influence he is."

Dillon chuckled. "I'm kidding. I could never be like him, anyway."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that," Brandon said. "It would be better if you wanted to be you. Imitating him, or anyone else, wouldn't make you happy."

Shunichi looked to Dillon. "I agree. But Jesse can be a good influence regarding one thing, and so can Brandon. They both had a dream and they went after them. We just have to find what your dream is. Whether it's something you want to do for a career, a college you want to go to, or even visiting a certain place in the world, big or small, there has to be something you want for yourself."

Dillon stared at him, lost for a response at first. He shook his head slightly. "I don't know what I want for myself. I can't see that far ahead."

"You don't have to look too far ahead," Shunichi said. "And if you can't see anything you want in your future, try looking back to your past. There must be something in your past you enjoyed once."

Brandon nodded in agreement with Shunichi. "Like theatre. The whole reason you came to the dojo was because you liked my plays."

Dillon felt as if his mind, his entire body, perked up at the mention of theatre. "Yeah. Seeing your plays were some of the best moments of my life. Watching you act, watching all the actors and actresses for that matter, and the sets, and the props, I was amazed by everything."

Brandon flashed a bright smile. "Well then, there you go. Does your school have a theatre program?"

"Yeah. But I can't. I mean, there's no way I could do it."

Brandon gave him a curious look. "Why not?"

"I could never get up on stage. I don't know the first thing about acting. And I couldn't handle everyone watching me."

"But that's the beauty of acting, it's not really you everyone's seeing. It's your role, your character. You can be anyone or anything when you're on stage. And there's not an actor in the world who knows what they're doing the first time they walk on a stage or movie set. You just fumble your way through and hope the director sees talent hidden in you. Hell, I still fumble my way through."

"I doubt that."

"No, it's true. Each new role brings different challenges. But nothing says you even have to go out for a lead role. You could start off with a small one. Or, if you don't feel you're ready for that, you could work backstage. You could be a stagehand, build sets and props. Those jobs are just as important to a production as the actors, and it lets you be even more hands on in creating the magic for the stage."

As Brandon spoke, Dillon swore he could feel his heart growing lighter with the idea of working in theatre. "Being a stagehand would be really cool." A smile, larger than he'd had in days, shone over his features. "That's an awesome idea!"

"Well, I can't really take credit for it. I should've thought of it, but Jesse was the one who said I should talk to you about getting involved in theatre."

Dillon's mouth dropped open. "The lead singer of Conquest knows about me?"

"I hope you don't mind I mentioned some things to him."

"Hell no! That's freakin' awesome! He's the coolest person ever!"

Brandon turned to Shunichi with an unenthused expression. "Why doesn't anyone ever think I'm as cool as him?"

Shunichi laughed softly. "I happen to think you're way cooler."

Dillon leaned forward and slapped Brandon on the knee to get his attention. "You're cool, too. But come on, he's a rock star!" Dillon's smile and voice softened. "And he's really lucky to have you for a brother."

"Okay, you have to promise me right now when you meet him, you'll say those exact words to him."

Dillon laughed. "I promise." He glanced to the side as his mom's car pulled into the driveway. His laughter stopped, squelched by instant anxiety.

"It's going to be okay, Dillon," Brandon said quietly. "We'll stay with you while you talk to her, if you want."

Dillon managed a small nod.

His mom climbed out of the car, her movements hesitant as she gazed at the strangers on the porch.

Dillon stood. He walked down the steps, stopping a couple feet away from her. "Mom, you remember how I went to that dojo last weekend? That's the head instructor, who's going to be my sensei, Shunichi Miyamoto. And the guy with him, well, you've already seen him before. That's Brandon Alexander, the actor."

Dillon's mother's eyes went round. She covered her mouth with one hand. "It is? It really is?"

"Yeah. And, um, well, he's Shunichi's partner. As in, his boyfriend kind of partner."

Her eyes slowly turned from the men on the porch to Dillon.

Dillon wrapped his arms around himself, his gaze lowered. "The reason they're here is to help me."

Confusion creased his mother's forehead. "Help you how? Are you in trouble?"

"No. I mean, yeah." He closed his eyes tight. "I don't know how to say it. I've...I've been getting bullied at school. Really bad." He opened his eyes. Tears began filling them. "I don't do anything to cause it. People, this one guy in particular, just hate me. Because I'm..." he swallowed hard, his voice retreating from him for a moment. "I'm...gay." The last of his control broke. His tears fell free. "Please don't hate me, Mom. Please don't be ashamed of me."

His mother's purse fell to the ground as she flung her arms around him, cradling him to her. "Oh, honey, I could never hate you. I'll always love you for everything you are."

Dillon held onto her, letting all his pain finally release through his tears.

Watching from the porch, Brandon squeezed Shunichi's hand. Shunichi glanced at him. They shared a smile, and Brandon put an arm around Shunichi, holding him closer as he looked to Dillon wrapped in his mother's arms.

CHAPTER 7

Shunichi's hand in his, Brandon stopped on the steps outside the high school. "Todd said he'd meet us here. I don't see him yet, do you?"

Shunichi shook his head as he scanned the crowd going into the school and through the glass doors at the people already inside. "Not yet." He brought his gaze to Brandon. "How crazy is it that I'm super nervous for Dillon right now?"

"Hopefully not too crazy, because I'll be mental right along with you. He's got a big job with this play. The sets they built are really intricate, and he's got to get them changed out with the other stagehands for each act. And judging by the crowd, he wasn't kidding when he said the winter play is the most popular for his school."

"Yeah, I'm going to be on the edge of my seat the whole time." Shunichi let out a soft laugh. "As if that's something I'm not used to from watching you on stage."

Brandon grinned and gave him a light kiss on the lips. In the past few weeks since Dillon came out to his mother, they'd seen him quite a bit. He started taking lessons at the dojo twice a week, and whenever Dillon was there, he laughed and smiled easily, though he still had timid moments. Shunichi worked hard to make him feel comfortable and part of the group, and it paid off in Dillon gaining friendships with some of the other students in his class.

The weekend after everything happened, Brandon took Dillon, his mother, and Angie to the theatre, showing them the backstage, introducing them to other actors and stagehands, then let them sit in his private box with Shunichi for the play. The whole time there, Dillon never stopped glowing. Brandon could see it in him, the love for the theatre, and he thought there was a good chance Dillon's future might lie in the performing arts.

Taking him to the theatre gave Dillon the final spark of confidence he needed to approach the theatre teacher at his school about becoming a stagehand. Even though they were already in the process of getting ready for the winter play, she welcomed him and Angie to join them. A beautiful result came from it. Dillon made more friends. He now was part of a group sharing a common interest and it kept him feeling safer while at school.

Dillon also realized not everyone in his school knew what had been happening to him. When he told a couple people in the theatre group what Logan was doing to him, they were shocked and angered. They hadn't heard about the fight, they hadn't seen the picture, and they didn't know about him getting pushed down on the main stairwell. Dillon had always thought the entire school knew and everyone followed Logan. Now he knew it was mainly Logan's cronies, and he'd been so trapped in their circle of hate, he hadn't been able to see the bigger world beyond it.

Dillon told Brandon that Logan hadn't bothered him since the confrontation, but Dillon's mother had also gone to the school, demanded a meeting with the principal and Logan's parents' information. From what Dillon said, his mother had become quite the lioness, and it brought comfort to him knowing Dillon now knew his mother would stand at his side.

Brandon caught sight of someone heading toward them. He smiled and waved at his friend and fellow actor, Todd, who couldn't be missed in a crowd, standing a couple inches over six feet with a lean, muscular build. As always,

every strand of Todd's black hair was in place with styled spikes, and the bright green color of his eyes stood out from a distance.

A teen walked at Todd's side, and Brandon recognized him as Reese, Todd's nephew. Reese carried himself with the same confidence as his uncle, not surprising since Reese was turning out to be as talented of an actor, always landing the lead in his school's plays and having already acted in two professional productions. Adding to Reese's confidence was he had his uncle's good looks, complete with ever present charming smile. Brandon also knew Reese had come out to his family the year before.

As Todd neared, he opened his arms for a hug.

Brandon stepped forward to meet him. "Thanks for coming."

"As if this is something you have to thank me for. Besides, Reese has been excited about it all week." As Brandon released him, Todd went to Shunichi, wrapping him in an embrace. "And sorry, Brandon, but I take any excuse I can to see your man."

Shunichi turned a teasing grin on Brandon. "Looks like I have an admirer."

Brandon laughed softly. "I think you have more than one. And he can admire you all he wants so long as I'm the one who gets to go to bed with you every night."

Shunichi moved away from Todd to slip his arm around Brandon's waist. "I wouldn't have it any other way, except keeping you there for longer in the mornings and having you there once in a while in the afternoon." He glanced at Reese. "Whoops. I shouldn't be talking like this with young ears around."

Reese jabbed his thumb toward his uncle. "You *have* hung out with him, right? He could make a hooker blush."

A smirk curved Todd's lips. "I do what I can."

Reese rolled his eyes at him, then looked to Brandon. "I'm really excited to meet your friend, Dillon. It's always cool to hook up with someone else in theatre."

"And I know he's going to enjoy meeting you, too."

Todd glanced to the crowd filing into the auditorium. "Should we head in?"

"In a minute," Brandon said. "I want to wait for my brother to get here."

Todd snapped his head toward Brandon. "Your brother? I thought he was on tour."

"He is, but I asked him for a big favor. He didn't have a show tonight, so he flew all the way back to come to the play and meet Dillon."

Reese's eyes widened. "Are you serious? Jesse Alexander is really coming?"

Brandon glanced toward the road and a line of headlights turning into the driveway for the school. "Actually, he's here."

A stream of black cars coasted toward them, an SUV in front of a limo, two more SUVs following behind, with more cars after those. They drew to a halt, and it was a race between the security personnel in the SUVs and the paparazzi in the other cars to who surrounded the limo first, with the security barely winning. As a guard reached to open the limo door, Brandon took Shunichi's hand and started forward.

Jesse slid out of the limo and turned, stretching his hand toward the open door. Evan placed his hand in Jesse's, climbing from the limo to stand at his side. Brandon smiled at them; both were in their rock star finest—Jesse dressed in black leather pants, Evan in brown, and each wearing matching leather coats.

The sharp angles of Jesse's black hair framed his face, his indigo eyes shone with his smile. Brandon looked to Evan, his dark chestnut hair streaked in gold and copper highlights, but it was the striking blue of his eyes that captured his attention.

Hand in hand, Jesse and Evan stood at each other's side, smiling for the cameras that flashed with enough brilliance to light the space around them like day. Brandon couldn't, and wouldn't, deny his brother was a beautiful man, but when Evan was at his side, Jesse seemed even more so from the happiness radiating around him. To see them together was to see the proof of true love.

Brandon managed to get through the paparazzi, pulling Shunichi with him. His eyes met Jesse's.

Jesse's free hand shot up, waving to him. "Brandon!"

The security let Brandon and Shunichi into the inner circle. Jesse flung his arms around him. Brandon embraced him tight, whispering into Jesse's ear, "It's so good to see you. Thanks for doing this."

Jesse laughed softly. "Hey, it was a good excuse to come home and see you, even if it's only for a night."

Brandon gave him a smile as he released him, turning to greet Evan and let Shunichi hug Jesse.

Evan wrapped him in a strong embrace. "It seems like it's been forever since we saw you guys."

"I was thinking the same thing. I've been missing you both."

Evan pulled back from the hug, keeping his hands on Brandon's upper arms. "We've missed you, too. It's not easy on Jess being away from you for so much."

Brandon glanced to the side at Jesse, who was laughing as he spoke with Shunichi. "Yeah, but he's okay. So long as he has you with him, he always will be." He brought his gaze back to Evan. "You both look great. I'm surprised you're not dragging after the flight."

"When we got home, we spent the rest of the afternoon in bed." Evan grinned at him. "Napping."

Brandon gave him a smile speaking to how he knew better. "Right. Napping."

"Well, napping did happen after. Or maybe it'd be better to say it happened in between." Evan nodded toward Jesse as he stretched a hand out for him. "Looks like we're on."

They moved to stand closer to him, and Jesse wrapped one arm around Evan, the other around Brandon. Shunichi went to Brandon's other side, and Brandon put his other arm around him, all smiling for the cameras. Brandon noticed the crowd that had moments before been making their way into the auditorium was now rushing back out to see them.

One of the paparazzi shouted, "Jesse! Why are you here? What's brought you to this school?"

Jesse lifted his voice to carry. "I'm here to see the play. I've heard a very talented stagehand, Dillon Davis, helped put it all together. After hearing about his skills with the sets, I wanted to see his handiwork in person."

Brandon felt his smile grow larger. Jesse rocked, in so many ways.

More questions followed.

Jesse lifted his hand off Brandon's shoulder, waving it at the paparazzi for them to stop. "Listen, guys. I'm glad you all came out, but really, if you want to

take pictures and pay attention to anyone, you should focus on the crew and cast of the play. This is their night and they're the ones who deserve it." He started forward, the security moving with him. "And now I'm heading in before all the good seats are taken and you guys get shots of my frozen ass falling off."

Brandon laughed with the rest of the crowd, then dropped his voice for only Jesse, Evan, and Shunichi to hear. "You've gotten soft hanging out in the warm weather."

Jesse slid in front of Evan and embraced him around the waist. He gave him a kiss, and turned a mischievous smirk on his brother. "I'll have you know, warm or cold weather has no effect on my *hardness*."

Brandon rolled his eyes.

Jesse pointed at him. "See? I made you to roll your eyes."

Evan snickered, looking at Brandon. "I think you're the one who deserves a medal more than me since I get the reward that you don't."

Shunichi moved to Brandon's side and put his arm around him. "Don't worry. I'll give him one."

"A medal or a blowjob?" Jesse asked.

Shunichi turned his gaze to Brandon as he spoke to Jesse. "That's for him to find out."

Brandon saw in Shunichi's eyes which one he'd get and leaned forward, kissing him with smiling lips. He moved to walk into the school, security guards clearing a path, and saw Todd and Reese on the steps. He stopped and motioned for security to let them through.

"Thanks," Todd said. "I was starting to think we'd lost you for the evening."

"Yeah, things tend to get a little chaotic when he shows up." Brandon gestured to Jesse. "But let me introduce you guys."

As he finished introductions, commotion outside security caught his attention. Beyond the guards, he saw a heavyset man pushing through the crowd. The guy's face was red from either the cold or annoyance, and considering he recognized the guy as the school's principal from the picture Dillon showed him, he guessed it was more the latter.

Brandon leaned into Jesse's side and flicked his head toward the guy. "See that guy trying to bully his way through the crowd? That's the principal, Mr. Travers."

"The asshole who told Dillon he needed to keep his *feelings* to himself and put the blame on him for the fight?"

Brandon nodded and saw Jesse whispering to Evan.

Mr. Travers reached the line of security. He bellowed over the crowd, "What's all this disruption?" His head bobbed up and down in an attempt to see around the security, and he must have succeeded since Brandon saw him stop all movement, his eyes on Jesse.

Brandon glanced to his side. Jesse stood with one arm around Evan, his other hand on his hip, and his expression holding all attitude. A grin crept across Brandon's lips. He knew that look well and what usually came from it.

Jesse motioned to the guards. "Let him through, guys. I think he has something he wants to say to us."

The guards obliged Mr. Travers to pass through. He stepped toward Jesse and Evan, his earlier annoyance replaced by a broad smile. "Well, what a fine surprise this is. I'm very familiar with both of your work. With how popular

your music is, I couldn't be a principal here and not know it."

Jesse let out a huff. "Maybe you shouldn't be a principal at all."

The crowd quieted, seeming to sense the rising tension. Brandon saw even the paparazzi standing as still as they were able, the cameras raised to catch a money making break.

Mr. Travers's smile dropped as an affronted look took its place. "Excuse me?"

"No, I don't think I can." Jesse walked toward him. "If you know who we are, then you also know we're gay. So I'm finding your welcome a little surprising, and more than a little fake."

His face flushing again, Mr. Travers said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"No? Then I'll put it really clear for you."

"Jess." Evan stepped forward to Jesse's side. A light touch of his hand to Jesse's arm turned Jesse toward him. Evan lifted his hand to Jesse's cheek, cupping it as he leaned toward him. Jesse's eyes closed, his lips parted to welcome Evan's tongue into his mouth.

Brandon laughed under his breath. No matter what Jesse was doing or saying, if Evan wanted to kiss him, touch him, do anything to him, he stopped everything to put his full focus on Evan.

Evan drew back from the kiss. He stroked Jesse's cheek, smiling as he looked into his eyes, and then turned his gaze to Mr. Travers. "I would apologize for not being able to keep my feelings to myself just now, but I don't think they're anything to be sorry for."

Jesse put his arm around Evan, his gaze on Mr. Travers. "And that's why your welcome is fake. Why is it we get a free pass in your book, but you tell one of your students he needs to keep his homosexual feelings to himself and they're inappropriate?"

Mr. Travers stood silent.

Brandon let out a snort and looked to Jesse. "Looks like he doesn't have an answer."

"Or maybe he's learned exactly what kind of feelings are better kept to yourself." Jesse brought his gaze back to Mr. Travers. "You know what I think is inappropriate? A principal who picks and chooses which of his students to protect, and I have a feeling a lot of other people are going to be having the same thought. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have a play to see."

Jesse moved forward, everyone walking with him and security filtering Mr. Travers out.

Brandon draped his arm around Jesse's shoulder. "You guys handled that great."

Jesse glanced at him with a smirk. "Well, you know I never passed up a chance to mouth off at a teacher."

Brandon laughed. "Yeah, you and your issues with authority."

Jesse chuckled and gave him a playful bump with his shoulder.

Once inside the school, Brandon led the way into the auditorium, the crowd trailing behind them. He found seats for all of them near the front, and sat with Shunichi on one side, Jesse on the other. Seeming to remember their reason for being there, the crowd quieted and started taking their seats as well.

Jesse leaned toward Brandon, whispering, "This is like a flashback to when you were in school and I'd go to your plays."

“Yeah, it’s bringing back a lot of memories for me. What’s so funny is this is about the size of our school’s auditorium, and I remember how huge I thought it was back then. With the theatres I act in now, it seems so small. But it’s good training for Dillon. I’m hoping to get him a job in one of the big theatres soon to let him see more of that world. With school, he’ll only be able to work part-time on the weekends, but I think he’d still have fun with it.”

“That’ll be really cool for him.”

Brandon nodded, his gaze fixed on the curtain to rise as the auditorium lights dimmed. When it did, the masterfully crafted sets and props transported him into the world of Shakespeare’s *The Winter Tale*, and he had to admit, the actors and actresses handled the play with professional poise. Shakespeare wasn’t easy, and it could be like watching a train wreck on stage if the production was poorly done, but everyone involved on this one earned high marks from him. As he admired the sets and appreciated the acting, his nerves for Dillon settled until he was lost in the play.

The actors took their final bow to a standing ovation and left the stage. Brandon gripped Shunichi’s hand and nodded for everyone to follow him. As they reached the backstage area, the security staff kept curious onlookers back, but Brandon still saw Dillon’s mother chatting with a group of other parents. Beyond, Dillon laughed with the actors, stagehands, and Angie.

Dillon’s mother glanced in their direction. The cordial expression she wore shifted to one of more warmth and her smile softened. Brandon smiled to her in acknowledgement. She had pulled him and Shunichi aside the week following Dillon coming out to her, and tried to express her gratitude for helping Dillon as she hugged them both. He told her she’d already thanked them by being such a loving mother.

“Hey, Brandon!”

Brandon glanced from Dillon’s mother to Dillon as he rushed toward him. He saw Dillon’s strides slow as he gazed in confusion and curiosity at the security, then his eyes went to Jesse and Evan. Dillon blinked, as if trying to snap himself out of disbelief, and looked back to him.

“Hey!” Brandon said. “That was one hell of a play you put on!”

Dillon laughed, raising his hand for Brandon to hit it in the high five/handshake combo. “Thanks, but I can’t take credit for any of it.”

Brandon smiled at him. Dillon still had moments of doubt and insecurity. He might be in a better place mentally and emotionally than he used to be, but it would take time for all his wounds to heal. They were deep, and had been reopened so many times by Logan’s harassment. Months, even years could pass before Dillon would heal, and there was no promise the scars would ever fully disappear. In fact, they most likely wouldn’t.

Like a fine piece of porcelain that had broken, the piece may be glued back, but the mark would always be there. But sometimes, the repaired spot could be one of the strongest points, and he hoped it’d be that way for Dillon. If Dillon could learn to live happily and keep support around him from those who cared for him, the burden of his scars would become lighter with time.

Brandon gave Dillon a playful shove. “What are you talking about? You helped build those sets, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“And you busted butt changing out the different scenes, right?”

Dillon chuckled. "Yeah, I did."

"Then you have a lot to take credit for. Your hard work on this play just put a couple hundred people on their feet. Be proud."

Dillon's posture became straighter. "Thanks. Then you guys really liked it?"

Shunichi patted Dillon's back. "I loved it. And Brandon's right, the sets were amazing. I especially liked the palace."

Dillon's smile glowed brighter still.

"It was awesome," Jesse said. "I've been a few plays of his that could've used sets that nice." He pointed at Brandon with his thumb.

"Yeah, those could make it into a professional production," Evan added.

Dillon stared at Evan, his mouth slightly agape. Evan Arden and Jesse Alexander, they were both right in front of him, *and* they were talking to him. He knew he should say something back, but what could he say to two of the biggest rock stars ever? He searched his mind, trying to retrieve a reply and all he could get was, "Thanks."

"The sets were impressive. I've seen a lot of Shakespeare productions, but this was one of the best all around."

Dillon looked to the new speaker and the young guy at his side. His heart started to beat a little quicker as he met the other teen's green eyes.

Brandon rested a hand on Todd's shoulder while speaking to Dillon. "Sorry, I was so busy telling you how great the play was, I forgot to introduce you to everyone. This is Todd Delacroix, a friend of mine and fellow actor. He's currently starring in John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt* as Father Flynn." He threw a sidelong smirk at Todd. "And I hope you appreciate me restraining myself from joking about you playing a priest."

Todd laughed. "I would, except it's the first time you've done it since I landed the role."

"And it all comes back around to him being able to make a hooker blush," Reese said.

Brandon noticed how Dillon's gaze was locked on Reese. "And this is Reese," he moved his hand from Todd's shoulder to Reese's. "He's Todd's nephew and a talented actor himself. And I'm pretty sure you already recognize my brother, Jesse, and his husband, Evan. Guys, this is Dillon Davis, who I told you about."

Jesse offered his hand to Dillon. "It's great to finally meet you. I've already heard you got a lot of talent in karate, and now I'm glad I got to see your theatre skills at work."

Dillon felt his cheeks heating with a blush as he took Jesse's hand. "Thanks. I'm totally stunned you're here. I'm a huge fan of yours." He glanced to Evan. "Both of yours. I just can't believe you're really here."

Evan extended his hand to Dillon. "Well, you should probably get used to seeing us from time to time. You're a friend of Brandon's and Shunichi's, so that makes us your friend by default." He grinned at him. "Sorry about your luck on that."

Dillon laughed, his nervousness fading with Evan's joke. "I'm all for that kind of luck."

Reese stepped forward. "The sets really were cool. I wish we could build them that good at my school."

Dillon's attention turned fully on Reese. He couldn't believe any guy so hot would actually be talking to him. But then, he'd just talked to Jesse Alexander

and Evan Arden. Right now, it felt like anything was possible. He called up a smile for Reese. "Where do you go to school?"

As the two started talking, Brandon threw Shunichi a covert grin.

Angie dashed up, stretching an arm between bodyguards and waving to catch Dillon's attention. "Hey, everyone's getting ready to leave. We're going out for pizza to celebrate. Come on."

"Okay." Dillon turned back to Reese. He swallowed hard and took a breath to ask the question he hoped he'd get the answer he wanted to hear. "Do you want to come with us?"

"Yeah, that'd be cool."

Dillon couldn't contain his smile. "Awesome!"

Todd loudly cleared his throat, looking at Reese. "Excuse me. Don't you think you should ask your uncle if it's okay to go?"

Reese turned to him. "Do you care?"

"No, but you better call your mom and ask her."

"Then why did I have to ask you for permission if all you were going to do was tell me to call her?"

"Because I have to throw around what little authority I have."

Reese shook his head at him. "That's just sad, man." He pulled out his cell phone, and after answering a few quick questions with his mom, he hung up. "All right. I'm good to go."

"That's great, but now one other question," Todd said. "How do you plan on getting home? We came together."

Reese held up his car keys and jangled them at Todd. "No, the question is how do *you* plan on getting home? Since we came in *my* car."

"Why you little—"

Laughing, Brandon slapped Todd on the back. "We'll give you a ride."

"Thanks," Todd grumbled.

Dillon stepped toward Brandon. He lifted his arms slightly, wanting to hug him but not sure if it was okay to do. Brandon smiled at him and stepped forward, embracing him. As soon as Brandon's arms went around him, Dillon held him tight, his voice lowered to a whisper. "Thanks, for everything."

Brandon replied with a voice equally hushed. "I haven't done much. You're the one who's accomplished all these things that make you happy. Just promise me you'll keep working for more and more happiness everyday."

"I promise." Dillon drew back. He faced Shunichi, giving him a hug as well. "See you Monday, Sensei."

"You know it," Shunichi said, giving Dillon a couple pats on the back.

Dillon looked to Jesse and Evan. "I'm so glad I got to meet you guys."

"Same here," Jesse said. "We'll see you around."

Dillon nodded and turned to walk away with Reese. The security parted to let him by, but he spun back around. "Oh, by the way, Jesse, you're really lucky to have Brandon for a brother."

Jesse burst out laughing. "Did he put you up to that?"

Dillon smiled and shook his head. "No, I said it to him a while ago. He did make me promise to tell you, but I really mean it."

Jesse tossed his arm around Brandon's shoulders. "Well, I'll agree with you on that. And I'll even share him and his brotherliness with you."

"Thanks!" Dillon lifted his hand in a wave and turned around again to join his

friends, Reese at his side.

Brandon watched Dillon walk away, catching the flirtatious smile Reese gave Dillon, the subtle touch he placed on Dillon's arm, and how Dillon blushed, but didn't shy from the attention. "I hope they'll be okay."

"They'll be fine," Todd said. "Reese might be a little on the bold and cocky side, but he's a loving kid with a big heart."

Jesse bumped Brandon with his shoulder to get his attention. "Now I'm hungry for pizza since that girl mentioned it. You want to go to Uno's?"

"Yeah, that'd be good." He glanced back to Dillon, then felt Shunichi take his hand.

Shunichi gave Brandon's hand a squeeze. "He's going to be okay."

"I know. It's going to take time, but at least now he knows where to go if he feels he needs help. If only all kids had that." He turned a smile on him. "And he's also got an incredible sensei to watch out for him."

A loving smile graced Shunichi's lips. "And even more importantly, he's got a great friend to do the same."

Brandon leaned toward him, touching their lips together in a tender kiss. With his hand still in Shunichi, he turned to leave. His steps slow, he glanced over his shoulder at the same moment Dillon must have. A smile passed between them. One of Dillon's friends called to him, and he looked away. Brandon faced forward, knowing things were going to be better for Dillon now that he had found a dream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.J. Frost resides on a mini-ranch in Ohio with her husband and son, as well as a kind-hearted German Shepherd, a Collie who is the anti-Lassie, a few kooky cats, and some very special horses. She enjoys experimenting with her writing and dabbling in different genres, though it's guaranteed that no matter what she writes there will be hot erotic action appearing somewhere in the story. She's a romantic at heart, which is reflected in her writing. The majority of her work is m/m, though she's had the occasional m/f piece published too. Her short stories have been featured in several erotic and romance anthologies including, Best Gay Romance 2007 Edition, Girls on Top, and Surfer Boys, all published by Cleis Press, Ultimate Gay Erotica 2008 and Best Gay Love Stories: Summer Flings, both published by Alyson Books, and Honey Flava published by Atria Books.

You can find out more about the author and upcoming works at:
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The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

THE GAY MEN'S DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROJECT

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: <http://gmdvp.org/>

THE GAY & LESBIAN ALLIANCE AGAINST DEFAMATION/GLAAD EN ESPAÑOL

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: <http://www.glaad.org/>

GLAAD en español: <http://www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php>

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Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT). The SLDN provides free, confidential legal services to all those impacted by DADT and related discrimination. Since 1993, its inhouse legal team has responded to more than 9,000 requests for assistance. In Congress, it leads the fight to repeal DADT and replace it with a law that ensures equal treatment for every servicemember, regardless of sexual orientation. In the courts, it works to challenge the constitutionality of DADT.

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THE GLBT NATIONAL HELP CENTER

The GLBT National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The GLBT National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the GLBT community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can't talk about anywhere else. The GLBT National Help Center also helps other organizations build the infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)

On the Web: <http://www.glnh.org/>

e-mail: info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

US LOCAL GLBT COLLEGE CAMPUS ORGANIZATIONS

<http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html>

GLBT Scholarship Resources	http://tinyurl.com/6fx9v6
Syracuse University	http://lgbt.syr.edu/
Texas A&M	http://lgbt.tamu.edu/
Tulane University	http://www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm
University of Alaska	http://www.uaf.edu/agla/
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University of Colorado	http://www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/
University of Florida	http://www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/
University of Hawai'i, Mānoa	http://manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/
University of Utah	http://www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/
University of Virginia	http://www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/
Vanderbilt University	http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/