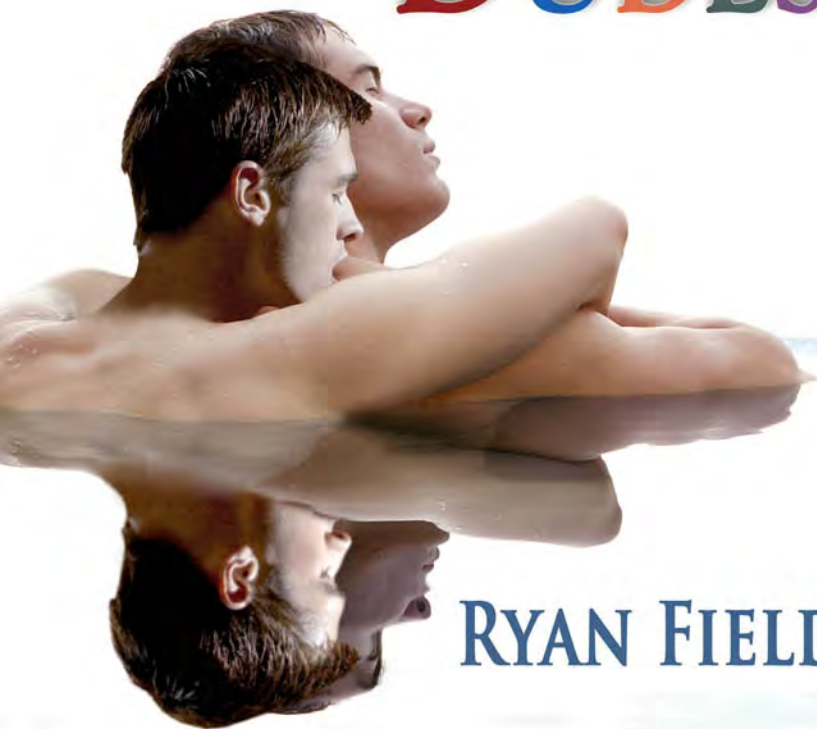


# VALLEY OF THE DUDES



RYAN FIELD

raVinous  
*romance*™

*Valley of the Dudes*

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication

**Ryan Field**

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication  
[www.ravenousromance.com](http://www.ravenousromance.com)

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

## Chapter One

Rush Goodwin had lived his entire life in a small New England town. He'd been an only child, living with his widowed mother and her spinster sister, always dreaming of the day he would begin a new life in New York.

He kept his wavy brown hair at a medium length and wore a thin, well-manicured layer of facial hair that looked more like five o'clock shadow than an actual beard. He didn't have a heavy beard, but he trimmed what he did have daily to achieve an intentionally scruffy look. In the right light, his brown hair took on a reddish tint that grew more pronounced in the summertime. When he wasn't working, he often wore knitted caps on his head all year long.

He could get away with a lot: he had a handsome face, with a strong square chin, full lips, and deep brown almond-shaped eyes. Though he wasn't extremely athletic, he had the tight, sculpted body of a young baseball player. When he walked into a crowded room, both men and women looked in his direction.

He didn't want to move to New York because small town life was bad. Rush had been very fortunate. His mother and his aunt rarely discussed the fact that he was gay, but they'd accepted his lifestyle quietly, without any arguments or complaints. They greeted his boyfriend, Harold, with smiles and invited him to dinner on Sundays. When Rush went away on long weekend trips with Harold, they didn't roll their eyes and look in the other direction.

But Rush was eager to experience more in life than what he'd always known. He craved these new experiences with such fortitude, there were nights he couldn't sleep.

So one cold snowy day, about eight months after he'd received his law degree and passed his bar exams, he told his mother and his aunt that he was moving to New York. It was a Friday evening. They had just finished dinner and Rush was waiting for Harold to pick him up. Rush sat down on a footstool in front of his mother's favorite wing chair and leaned forward. He told her he'd applied for a job with an entertainment law firm, gone on a series of interviews, and they'd offered him the job in New York. He even knew where he could sublet a small apartment; all he had to do was sign the lease. Rush said he hadn't mentioned his plans earlier because he wasn't sure whether or not he'd get the job. He'd just found out it was all definite that morning.

His mother stopped knitting and stared at his aunt. She lowered the knitting needles to her lap and raised her eyebrows. His aunt stared at him with large blue eyes. She was sitting in another wing chair beside a blazing fire, reading a novel she'd already read a dozen times. His mother pressed her lips together and turned her head to look at Rush. "Are you absolutely certain about this?" she asked. "You already have a stable position here in Connecticut with an excellent law firm. This sounds awfully impulsive."

Rush nodded and reached for her hands. "I'm sure. This is something I've always wanted to do. The only thing I'm worried about is leaving you both here alone."

Rush had always been the man of the family. His father had been killed in an automobile accident when Rush had been only twelve years old. Since then, Rush had been the one who'd dealt with the plumbers, the electricians, and the auto mechanics. The house where he'd grown up was one of those big old brick colonials, with white trim and

no shutters. There were white dormers on the third floor and two wide chimneys on either ends of the house. It had been in his mother's family for more than two hundred years. Supposedly, the basement had been used as a shelter during the Underground Railroad days.

His mother took a deep breath and sighed. "We'll be fine," she said, nodding at her sister. "But moving to a place like New York is a big decision."

He smiled. "I know it is. This wasn't an impulsive decision. I promise. I've been thinking about it for a long time."

"I see," she said. "When do you leave?"

He squeezed her hands and hesitated for a moment. Her face was still tight and expressionless. "In a couple of weeks," he said. "I'm worried about you, though." He'd been the one who'd checked the tires on the cars and made sure the lawnmower blades were sharp. Without him around, he wasn't sure if they could survive.

"Ah well," she said, taking a quick breath, allowing her face to soften. "We'll be just fine." Then she tilted her head to the left and asked, "What about Harold?"

Rush knew his mother was wondering about whether or not he and Harold were moving to New York together, as a couple. Rush had been with Harold since he was a freshman in college and he'd never dated anyone else. "I haven't told Harold about this yet."

Part of the reason he wanted to move to New York was Harold. But he didn't mention this to his mother or his aunt.

His mother frowned and gave his aunt a look. She said, "I suggest you tell him as soon as possible."

“We’re going to the movies tonight,” Rush said. “I was planning to tell him afterwards.” He released his mother’s hands and stood up. He squared his shoulders and asked, “So you’re okay with this?”

His mother shrugged and lifted the knitting needles. As she poked the tip of one needle into a loop of red yarn, she smiled and said, “If this is what you want to do, I’m fine with it. And you’re not moving to the end of the world. You’re only moving to New York. We’ll be just fine here in Connecticut.”

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, while Rush and Harold were leaving the movie theater, Rush told Harold about his plans to move to New York. The theater had been empty and the few people that had been there were bundled up and trotting toward their cars to get out of the cold. Rush’s voice was low and soft and he spoke without a hint of concern. He made his announcement while they were crossing the snowy parking lot to Harold’s car. Harold was still talking about the movie.

Harold stopped walking; he faced Rush and furrowed his eyebrows. “You’re doing what?” he asked. He lifted his head and his strong, patrician chin jutted out.

Rush took a deep breath and stared down at his shoes. In the years they had been together, Harold had always been the one who took control, in a very passive-aggressive way. He’d practically planned every moment of their lives, and Rush had let him do it. “I’m moving to New York in a couple of weeks,” Rush repeated. “I have a new job with an entertainment law firm that represents celebrities and I’ll probably sublet an apartment in Chelsea.”

“Have I done something wrong?” Harold asked. His hands were still in his pockets and he looked directly into Rush’s eyes. But he was reacting like a scorned employer when his best worker quits, not like a jilted lover. He had a tendency to think everything that happened between them revolved around him.

“It’s not about you, Harold,” Rush said. “It’s me. I’m restless. And you know I’ve always talked about moving to New York.”

There had been many times he’d mentioned how much he wanted to leave New England and move to New York. But Harold was a dentist, and he worked in his father’s established dental practice in New Haven. Whenever Rush suggested that Harold could start his own practice in New York, Harold acted as if he’d lost his mind. There was no way Harold was giving up a successful position to start all over again in New York City. He told Rush they could visit New York any time Rush wanted. But they weren’t moving there full time.

“I know you’ve mentioned it,” Harold said. “But I never thought you were serious about it. After all, we can go to New York whenever we want. We’re not living in Kansas.”

This was part of the problem. Harold liked being a small-town boy, and he never seemed to take Rush’s ambition seriously. But Rush didn’t want to argue. “Don’t be mad, Harold. This isn’t about you. It’s about me. I need to do this. If I don’t, I think I’ll suffocate here. There are times I wake up in the morning to face another day and I honestly don’t think I can breathe.”



Harold removed his hands from his pockets and took a step forward. He put his arm around Rush and said, "Let's get in the car." Then he lowered his head and nibbled on Rush's earlobe. "I know how to make you feel better."

This was another part of the problem. Harold was extremely good looking. He stood over six feet tall, he had the defined, muscular body of a professional athlete from competing in triathlons, and he had droopy steel-blue eyes. His hair was sandy blond and his face looked as if it had been chiseled out of stone. Though Rush and Harold were two very different people who wanted very different things in life, there was a sexual connection between them that went beyond all sense of reason.

Rush pulled away from Harold and said, "I think we should both just go home and talk about this tomorrow. My mind is made up. I'm moving to New York. I have to do this."

He wasn't officially breaking up with Harold that night. And he wasn't moving to New York to meet new men. His restlessness went much deeper than that. But he wasn't sure that having sex with Harold that night was a good idea.

Harold raised an eyebrow and smiled, then reached for the back of Rush's head, in the middle of the snow-covered parking lot, and kissed him on the mouth. When he finally removed his tongue from Rush's mouth, he said, "Let's get into the car. We haven't fooled around inside the car in a long time."

Rush was ready to take another step back. But when Harold reached down and placed his strong hand on the small of his back, he leaned into the left side of Harold's strong body and followed him to the car. The best part about being with conservative,

dependable Harold was that they were both adamantly monogamous, there was no need for condoms, and it was safe and familiar.

When they reached the car and Harold clicked the locks, Harold opened the back door instead of the front door and practically shoved Rush into the back seat. Harold drove a large black Yukon; the back seat was spacious and all the windows were tinted with dark film. If anyone had been walking around in the empty parking lot, they wouldn't have been able to see anything happening in the back seat.

Harold followed him into the back seat and pulled off his coat. He leaned forward and switched on the engine to get the car warm. When he sat back, he grabbed Rush's coat, unzipped it, and pulled it off his body. Rush's pants were already tight and his erection pointed up so far it reached the waistband. Even if having sex with Harold that night was a mistake, things had already gone too far to end it.

While they removed their clothes, they kissed and groped each other. Rush had trouble catching his breath; he closed his eyes and moaned when Harold squeezed his chest. Harold was a weightlifter, and there were rough calluses on the palms of his hands from years of holding barbells. The car warmed up fast and the tinted windows glazed over with fog. Their clothes fell in a rumpled pile.

When they were both naked, Rush reached between Harold's strapping thighs and grabbed his erection. He wrapped his warm hand around the shaft and jerked it up and down a few times.

Harold took a deep breath and pressed his palm on the top of Rush's head and forced him down to the floor. Rush went down to his knees without resistance, then opened his mouth, yanked Harold's erection to his face, and wrapped his lips around the

head. Harold's body jerked backwards and his hips bucked forward. He rested his head on the back of the black leather seat and spread his legs. While Rush's lips went all the way down to Harold's pubic hair, Harold placed his other palm on Rush's head and guided his face between his legs.

Rush's cheekbones indented and he took a deep breath through his nose to inhale the sweet masculine aroma between Harold's athletic legs. His lips puffed out and rubbed against Harold's wiry pubic hairs. He remained this way for a few minutes, with Harold's erection filling his mouth, pressing his tongue to the bottom of Harold's shaft and sucking as hard as he could.

When he finally lifted his chin, slowly, Harold's shaft slid out of his mouth until just his lips were wrapped around the head. He held this position for a moment without moving, then started moving his head up and down. Harold placed his palms over Rush's ears and guided his head with care. "We're so good together," Harold whispered. "I *love* the way you do this. And I really *love* when you suck on the tip."

While Rush was sucking, it occurred to him that they'd never actually said the words, "I love you," to each other. Harold often told Rush that he loved the way Rush gave head, or that he loved the way Rush knew how to tighten and clamp down during anal sex. Harold usually paid him compliments and told him he loved the way he looked. In return, Rush did the same. But they'd never actually looked into each other's eyes and said the words, "I love you."

Fifteen minutes later, Rush was leaning over the back seat and his legs were spread wide. Harold was still inside Rush's body and they'd both just had outrageous climaxes. While Harold was pulling his erection out of Rush, he tapped Rush's ass and

said, “I *love* the way you tightened up this time right before I came. It felt like a clamp around my dick.” Then he pulled his penis out of Rush’s body and smacked it against Rush’s smooth bottom.

Rush lifted his head and he turned back to face Harold. “But are you *in* love with me?”

“Huh?” Harold said. He was already reaching down to the floor for a box of tissues so he could wipe his shrinking penis. They always used a generous amount of lubricant and Harold hated how the greasy, messy lube felt on his penis when the sex was over.

“I’m curious, is all,” Rush said. “You said you love the way I tightened up this time and clamped down on your dick. You said you love the way I give head. But are you *in* love with me?”

Harold wiped his penis dry and said, “I love everything you do.” Then he handed a few clean tissues to Rush.

Rush reached for the tissues and shook his head. Harold hadn’t answered his question. The sex they’d just shared had been good and he didn’t want to ruin it, but he had to know the answer. “I love everything you do, too, Harold. But I’m not sure I’m *in* love with you, Harold. Are you *in* love with me?”

Harold smiled and reached down for his pants. Without looking Rush in the eye, he shoved his right leg into his pants and said, “I already told you. I love everything about you.”

Rush lowered his head and frowned. He didn’t ask Harold again, because he knew Harold wasn’t going to give him the answer he desperately needed to hear.

## Chapter Two

On Monday morning, Rush gave two weeks' written notice that he was leaving his position at the law firm in Connecticut and moving to New York. On Tuesday, he signed a lease to sublet an apartment in Chelsea and faxed it to the landlord. And two weeks after that, on a cold Sunday morning in Connecticut, Harold, his mother, and his aunt drove him to the train station to see him off. He'd asked his mother to sell his car. In New York, a car would only be a problem.

His mother and aunt packed some homemade food and a family photo that had been framed in pewter, so he wouldn't go hungry and he wouldn't forget where he came from. This was the first time he'd ever been away from New England for more than a week. Before he boarded the train, they hugged him as hard as they could and wiped tears from their eyes, smiling and wishing him well the entire time.

Harold just stood there watching, a few feet behind Rush's mother and aunt. His hands were in his pockets, his legs were spread apart, and he was smiling with his lips pressed together. After Rush hugged his mother and aunt, Harold extended his right arm and shook Rush's hand. "Have a good trip," he said, in a low, solemn voice. He didn't throw his arms around Rush and he didn't shed a single tear.

Rush smiled; it was so businesslike and formal. "Thank you, Harold." He knew Harold was not happy with his decision. Harold hated disruption and he hated it when his normal routine was altered. They had argued for two weeks about Rush moving to New York and there wasn't much left to say. Harold did not hide the fact that he thought Rush was making a huge mistake. When Rush had told him he needed time to figure out who

he was, Harold had just frowned and shook his head instead of grabbing Rush and begging him to stay.

“I wish you luck,” Harold said, putting his hands back into his pockets. His voice went even lower and there was a sharpness to it that Rush hadn’t heard since the time Harold’s car had been stolen.

“I know you do,” Rush said. He also knew something else. Though they hadn’t officially broken up, and Harold thought he’d come running back to Connecticut within a month, Rush knew this was the end of their relationship.

Then Rush picked up his luggage, boarded the train, and sat down in a window seat. As the train pulled out of the station, Rush took a deep breath and sighed. He waved to his family and Harold until he couldn’t see them anymore, then stared out the window until the quiet, snow-covered New England countryside faded and skyscrapers started to appear.

When Rush reached Manhattan, he took a taxi to his new apartment in Chelsea. He had never actually seen the apartment, but it wasn’t much different from what he’d expected. It was a typical New York studio, on the fourth floor of a newly renovated building that had a doorman. The walls were white and the floors were parquet. Basically, it was one square room with a small bathroom, a wall of closet space, and a kitchenette concealed behind louvered folding doors. The only window in the apartment was up front. It faced busy Tenth Avenue and he could hear the honking traffic swish by. In one corner, there was a full-size bed and a small glass nightstand. In the opposite corner to the right of the window was a small flat-screen TV fastened to the wall. Altogether the entire

apartment couldn't have been more than five hundred square feet, about half the size of his old bedroom back in New England.

Rush placed his suitcases on the floor next to the bed and scanned the room with his hands on his hips. When he looked at the kitchenette, he smiled at the small two-burner built-in cook top. There wasn't even an oven—just the cook top and the tiniest refrigerator he'd ever seen. But he wasn't worried about whether or not he'd get used to living in such a small, meager place. He hadn't moved to New York to set up his dream home and he wasn't much of a cook. He'd moved to New York so he could meet new people and have new, exciting experiences. The only time he planned to spend in this apartment was when he was sleeping.

On Monday morning, Rush went for a long run before work. Then he showered, trimmed his thin beard, and put on a brand-new light gray business suit. He wanted to be extra early his first day, to give a good impression.

When he crossed into the reception area of his new law firm, there was a full-figured middle-aged woman sitting behind the desk. It was the same woman he'd seen during his interviews, but he wasn't sure if she'd remember him. She'd been busy with phone calls each time he'd been there. This morning, she seemed just as busy. She'd just hung up the telephone and was writing something on a notepad. When Rush looked down, smiled, and said, "Good morning. I'm Rush Goodwin and this is my first day."

The woman looked up at him and raised her eyebrows. Her puffy hair was deep red, she was wearing a bright green dress, and she had reading glasses on the end of her nose. She put down the pen and stood up from the desk. She extended her hand and said,

“I’m Esther. It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Goodwin. Mr. Hasslet is on a conference call right now with an important client. I’ll let him know you’re here as soon as he’s finished.”

Rush smiled and thanked her. Mr. Hasslet was the senior partner and the man in charge. Hasslet, Hasslet & Sharp wasn’t the largest law firm in New York, but it had an excellent international reputation as a boutique firm. It specialized in the field of entertainment law, and the clients it represented were some of the most famous celebrities in the world. The senior Mr. Hasslet had started the firm with his brother, and together they had built it into a thriving business. Mr. Hasslet’s brother had passed away five years earlier and Mr. Hasslet, who had to be in his late seventies, refused to retire. When he’d interviewed Rush and asked about Rush’s prior experience, Rush told him the truth. Rush’s limited experience as a lawyer in New England had been in criminal defense, but he’d always been interested in entertainment law. When Rush told Mr. Hasslet he was willing and eager to start at the bottom and learn everything he could about entertainment law, Mr. Hasslet seemed to like the fact that he could mold Rush into the lawyer he wanted him to be. If Rush had already had experience in entertainment law, Mr. Hasslet probably wouldn’t have hired him.

Esther crossed from behind the desk and said, “I’ll take you around and show you the office while we’re waiting. It’s still early, though, and no one’s here yet.” She had a deep, no-nonsense, husky voice. If she wasn’t a smoker, she probably had been at one time.

Rush smiled. “I’d like that,” he said.

While Mr. Hasslet was on his conference call, Esther gave Rush the grand tour of the entire office. She walked with heavy steps and greeted people as if she were the



senior partner instead of Mr. Hasslet. She made a point of making Rush understand that she knew everything going on at all times. Rush met a few of the office workers, one intern, and a computer tech guy. When Esther approached these people, they stopped whatever they were doing to concentrate only on what she wanted. Evidently, Esther was both respected and feared by everyone.

Esther showed him the office doors of the other junior lawyers, but she didn't go inside. When they reached the smallest office at the end of a long narrow hallway, she stood in the doorway and extended her arm. "This is where you'll be working, for now." She lifted an eyebrow, as if goading him toward a negative response.

Rush stepped into a small windowless room. The walls were beige, the miniature metal desk was shoved up against a wall, and there was a metal bookcase to the right of the desk. It looked like a sample—a scaled-down version of an office instead of a real office. But he smiled and said, "This is very nice. I'm looking forward to working here."

Esther gave him a look and lowered her eyebrows. "Let's go back and see if Mr. Hasslet is ready to see you."

On the way back to the reception area, Esther stopped in front of an office and pointed. The name on the door read, "Lance Sharp." She smiled and said, "This is Mr. Sharp's office. I know he's not in yet because there isn't a line outside his door waiting to get him coffee." Then she pressed her fingertips to her lips and snickered.

Rush tilted his head to the side. "Why would there be a line outside his door?"

Esther lifted an eyebrow. "You'll see for yourself soon enough. Trust me." Then she led Rush back to the reception area to see if Mr. Hasslet was free to see him.

Five minutes later, Esther led Rush into Mr. Hasslet's office and said, "Bart, this is the new guy you just hired. He's starting today." Then she left Rush standing in front of Mr. Hasslet's desk and returned to the reception area.

Mr. Hasslet looked up from his desk, leaned forward, and squinted. He was short and stocky and bald, with thick black eyeglasses and a chunky red nose. The top of his head was shiny; the sides were slicked back with long strands of white hair. He picked up a brown envelope from the desk and said, "Good morning, Mr. Goodwin. Here's your first assignment."

"Good morning, Mr. Hasslet," Rush said eagerly. Then he reached for the envelope and took it from the old man's hand without even asking what it was.

"You are to deliver this to Radcliff Benson at the Rainbow Theater," Mr. Hasslet said. "Take the stage door and go to the rehearsal studios, where they are getting ready to open the new show, *Hope to the Heavens*. I want all the documents signed and brought back to me immediately. Can you handle that?"

Rush raised his eyebrows and squared his shoulders. "Yes, Mr. Hasslet," he said. "I'll leave right now and be back within the hour." He couldn't believe he'd only been working there an hour and already he was being given an important assignment and meeting a famous entertainer.

Mr. Hasslet looked down at his desk without formally dismissing him, but Rush took the envelope and walked back to the reception area. On his way out of the reception area, he held the envelope up and said to Esther, "Mr. Hasslet wants me to deliver this right now to Radcliff Benson. I'll be back within the hour." He was so excited that he had to concentrate hard so he wouldn't walk into a wall.

Esther laughed and said, “Good luck. You’re going to need it, kid.” Then she lowered her head to her desk and said, “Mr. Hasslet, that’s just wrong.”

\* \* \* \*

Rush took a taxi to the Rainbow Theater, then walked back to the stage door entrance. He approached a man at the door and said, “I’m here to deliver this to Mr. Benson. My boss needs his signatures. It’s very important that I get them right now.” He was on a mission and no one was going to stop him.

The guy at the door pointed to the left and said, “He’s in his dressing room. It’s the end of the hall and his name is on the door.” Then the guy laughed and said, “I hope you’re wearing a bulletproof vest.”

Rush blinked; that was easier than he’d expected it to be. He’d imagined that celebrities like Radcliff Benson had security and people watching over them all the time. And Rush had no idea what the guy was talking about when he mentioned a bulletproof vest. Why on Earth would he need a bulletproof vest? He couldn’t wait to meet the famous Broadway star, Radcliff Benson. He’d been a fan of Radcliff Benson all his life.

On the way back to Radcliff Benson’s dressing room, Rush passed by a rehearsal hall. There was a group of dancers standing near a piano. They were listening to an attractive young guy rehearse a song from Radcliff Benson’s new play. The play was a revival of an old-time classic, like most Broadway shows. The singer had dark wavy hair, a handsome face, and a voice so smooth and clear the entire room stopped to listen. Rush peered into the room for a second, then continued walking back to Radcliff Benson’s dressing room. He wanted to wait until the young guy was finished singing, but he

wanted to get the papers signed and return them to the office as quickly as he could so he'd make a good first impression on Mr. Hasslet.

But when Rush reached the dressing room, Radcliff Benson was shouting at who appeared to be his manager while the talented young man in the rehearsal studio continued to sing. Radcliff's back faced the doorway and his arms flew back and forth. When the talented young singer in the rehearsal hall hit a perfect high note, Radcliff picked up a bottle of cologne and threw it across the dressing room. Radcliff's manager ducked and it sailed over his head and shattered against the wall, leaving a dark stain and fractured glass all over the floor.

Radcliff turned around and leaned against his dressing room table. He glared at Rush and shouted, "What the fuck do you want? Why are you staring at me like an idiot?"

Rush blinked and said, "I'm a new attorney with Hasslet, Hasslet & Sharp. My boss sent me here to get a few signatures from you." His voice was low and easy, but his knees wobbled. Radcliff was in his mid-forties now, and still as attractive as he'd always been. His jet black hair was as thick and shiny as when he'd worked on his first soap opera. His body was as tight and thin as when he'd been the star of a successful sitcom back in the '80s. The only thing that was different was his expression. His lips were pressed together and his dark eyes pierced Rush with absolute hatred.

Radcliff hesitated for a moment, then asked Rush, "What do you think of that guy singing right now?"

Rush shrugged his shoulders and told the truth. “He’s fantastic. I think this will be the best song in the show.”

Radcliff lifted a cocktail glass and took a hard swallow. He looked at his manager and sneered. He pointed at Rush and shouted, “You tell that fat fuck Bart Hasslet that I’m not signing anything until he gets rid of that showy little queen who is singing right now. I want the little cocksucker gone by the end of the day.” He pointed to his chest and shouted, “This is my fucking show and *I’ll* sing the best songs, not some little nobody.”

Radcliff’s manager shook his head. “This isn’t going to look good. How is Hasslet going to get rid of him?”

“I don’t give a flying fuck,” Radcliff said. “That’s not my problem. I’m the star.”

Rush smiled. “But Mr. Hasslet said the papers were very important, Mr. Benson.” Rush wanted this to go smoothly; he figured there might be a chance to reason with Radcliff.

Radcliff clenched his teeth and reached for a small blow dryer on the dressing room table. He picked up the blow dryer and threw it in Rush’s direction.

Rush ducked just in time. The dryer hit the wall behind him and split in half.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Radcliff shouted. “And don’t fucking come back until the changes are made.” Though it was only nine in the morning, his voice was slurred and fuzzy. As Rush turned to leave, Radcliff reached for a bottle of vodka, filled his cocktail glass, and drank almost half with a few swallows.

### Chapter Three

At the end of his first full day in his new position, Rush returned to his apartment building with a stack of files that had to be re-organized and placed in electronic files. He smiled and nodded at his new doorman, crossing through the lobby toward the elevator. He could have left the files at the office and done them in the morning, but he wanted to make a good impression by taking work home, especially since he hadn't been able to get signatures from Benson.

When he reached the elevator, he was surprised to see a familiar face staring at the doors—the same attractive young guy Rush had heard singing at the Rainbow Theater earlier that day. The guy was staring down at his brown boots, with his hands in his pockets, rocking on the balls of his feet. He was wearing tight, low-rise jeans and a shiny black leather jacket. His face was tight and his lips were pressed together; he wasn't even aware Rush was there.

Rush stepped up behind him and cleared his throat. When the guy didn't turn around to look at him, he cleared his throat again and said, "I hope you don't mind my saying so, but I heard you singing this morning and you were very good. I work for Hasslet, Hasslet & Sharp, and I was delivering contracts this morning to Radcliff Benson."

The guy lifted his head and turned to face Rush. A shock of dark brown hair fell across his forehead and he smiled. "Thank you," he said in a smooth, deep voice. "Too bad no one is ever going to hear me sing that song on Broadway. I got fired today, thanks to that mean old queen, Radcliff Benson. Your boss and my agent, Bart Hasslet, was the

one who got me fired, promising me he'd make up it to me with my next job. But I can't tell you how much I wanted that job. I was perfect for that song."

Rush tilted his head and frowned. No one had mentioned to him that the guy had been fired. But he remembered what Radcliff Benson had said that morning. Evidently, Radcliff had had the young singer fired today, just after Rush had returned to the office and handed Bart Hasslet the unsigned contracts. Rush knew he wasn't responsible for the guy getting fired, but he felt strangely associated with the situation because he'd been there.

He wanted to explain. "Maybe I shouldn't be this honest," Rush said. "But I was there this morning when you were rehearsing and Radcliff had a temper tantrum. Actually, it was extremely pathetic to watch a man his age make such a fool of himself. He's very jealous of your talent. He almost knocked my eye out with a blow dryer and I was only delivering contracts to him."

The guy ran his palm through his dark hair and frowned. "Radcliff Benson is nothing more than a washed-up old has-been. I'll show him. One of these days I'll pay him back for this. I swear I will." He clenched his fists and shook them up and down.

The elevator door opened and they stepped inside. Rush smiled and asked, "Do you live here, in this building?"

"I'm on the third floor," the guy mumbled, as he pressed the number three button and the doors closed.

"I'm on the fourth," Rush said, hitting number four. "I just moved in on Sunday. It's nice to meet you. My name is Rush Goodwin." Then he extended his arm to shake the guy's hand.

"I'm Cody Atkins," he said, shaking Rush's hand. "Are you an agent with Hasslet, Hasslet & Sharp?"

"No yet," Rush said. "I just started as a junior lawyer. I'm afraid I have a long way to go and a lot to learn before I get any clients of my own. You're a client?"

Cody frowned and rubbed his jaw. "I think I'm still a client. But I'm not sure after today. Radcliff Benson and Bart Hasslet really put the screws to me. I didn't deserve to be treated that way. If it hadn't been for Lance Sharp, I would be looking for another agency right now. Lance spent the entire afternoon calming me down."

The elevator stopped on the third floor and the door opened. Rush pressed the hold button to keep the doors from closing and said, "I haven't met Lance Sharp yet. I was told he was out of the office all day working with a client."

Cody laughed and shook his head. "Lance *was* out all day, and he was dealing with me. He knew what Radcliff was doing and he wanted to smooth things over with me, to make sure I wouldn't leave the agency."

"Did he smooth things over?" Rush asked. Cody seemed quirky and high-strung, but there was an innocent quality about him Rush liked.

Cody shrugged his shoulders and said, "We'll see. He got me a singing gig tonight in a nightclub working with another one of his clients, Joey Delaney. Joey Delaney and I are old friends." He stepped toward the elevator door, then stopped. He turned and said, "Why don't you come down to the club with me tonight and watch the show? My boyfriend, Roy, will be there. And Lance said he'd be there tonight, but you never know with Lance. He tends to get distracted by his many boyfriends. He has a stable of broken hearts. If Lance doesn't show up, if you don't mind, you can sit with my



boyfriend, Roy. He hates sitting alone in these places. C'mon. You'll have fun. We can all go out afterwards and party."

Rush smiled and shrugged his shoulders. This was exactly the type of new experience Rush had been hoping to have in New York. If he'd still been with Harold in New England, he would have been home watching his mother and his aunt knit socks and read old novels. "I'd love to see the show. And of course I don't mind sitting with Roy. What time?"

"Meet me down in the lobby at seven," Cody said. "I'll be the one biting my nails and holding my stomach. I tend to freak out before a performance."

Then Cody stepped out of the elevator and Rush removed his finger from the hold button. "I'll see you then," he said.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Rush stepped into the elevator. His light, scruffy beard was trimmed to perfection, and he was freshly showered. Unlike other young gay men his age, he tended to dress more conservatively. He'd thought about changing his image, but when he bought something trendy it always wound up in the back of his closet. He felt comfortable and secure in classic outfits—partly because he didn't want to make any fashion mistakes and partly because he wanted to be taken seriously as a young lawyer. He didn't want to look like every other gay man in New York, with a turned-up wave above his forehead. On that night, he wore a black suit jacket, simple faded jeans, and a white dress shirt open at the collar. His shoes were black Prada quarter boots, and the only piece of jewelry he wore was a Louis Vuitton watch. He'd bought the watch

secondhand from a former co-worker at his old law firm. He wouldn't have been able to afford it otherwise.

Cody was already waiting for him in the lobby. He was pacing back and forth, with his hands in his pockets, staring down at the brown tiled floor. Rush took a quick breath when he looked down at his watch and saw he was five minutes early. He was eager to make new friends in New York and he didn't want to irritate Cody by being late.

When Cody saw him get off the elevator, he removed his hands from his pockets and asked, "Do I look okay? I'm never sure how to dress for a show like this."

Rush smiled and nodded. "You look great." Cody was wearing a trendy black denim sport jacket with an attached hood, a white mock turtleneck sweater, and cream colored low-rise jeans. Rush noticed the jeans were tight, and there was a huge bulge in Cody's crotch. He looked down and said, "I like the jeans a lot." Then he pointed to Cody's crotch and rolled his eyes, wishing that he had the courage to dress like that.

Cody looked down at himself and laughed. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "They are going to be listening to my voice tonight, but they are also going to be staring between my legs. I'm wearing a cock ring to enhance things a bit."

Rush's eyebrows went up and he said, "Ah well, I see." Though he'd never worn a cock ring, he knew what they were. Men either used them to prolong their erections or to push their genitals forward so they could enhance their packages. Rush would never have left the house wearing tight pants and a cock ring like that, but he thought it looked cute, if not dangerous, on Cody. "Stop worrying about how you look, man," Rush said. "The minute you start singing no one will be paying attention to anything but your voice."

Cody's boyfriend, Roy Kling, was already waiting for them in the nightclub.

Cody introduced them, then ran backstage to get ready for his performance. They crossed to a small table in front of the stage and sat down. Rush noticed that Roy kept fidgeting with his keys and looking around the room as if he was waiting for someone else to arrive. When he sat on the chair, he didn't sit all the way back. He smiled at Rush, but his right leg was jumping up and down.

Rush smiled back and said, "I heard Cody sing this morning in rehearsal. He's very talented." He figured he'd start talking first, assuming Roy was preoccupied.

Roy nodded. "I just hope that tonight is a success, because what happened to him this morning wasn't fair. It kills me to see him get hurt that way. He was so devastated he was talking about giving up show business and going to school for nursing."

"Are you in show business?" Rush asked. He detected a certain apprehensiveness in Roy's tone, as if he wasn't sure he liked his lover singing in a nightclub. Roy didn't look like he was in show business. He was wearing a gray business suit, a white shirt and a yellow tie. And his shoes were black oxfords with wingtips. Although he was an attractive young man in his thirties, he wasn't nearly as sexy or as hip as Cody. His pale blond hair was thinning, his nose had a bump, and his face was round with very little bone structure. He had a nice body, from what Rush could see, but he was by no means athletic.

"No," Roy said, with force in his voice. "Absolutely not. I'm a teacher. I'm strictly behind the scenes." He sat back and squared his shoulders in defense, as if Rush had said something wrong.

Rush smiled. "I'm not a performer either," he said. "I'm a lawyer and I work with Cody's agents. I just met Cody today. It turns out we live in the same building."

When Roy heard Rush wasn't a performer, he sat back and took a quick breath. "Sorry if I seem a little nervous tonight," he said. "But after getting fired the way he did this morning, it's very important that this performance is a huge success. Cody doesn't know this, but there are a couple of record producers here tonight. Lance told me, and then he told me not to tell Cody so he wouldn't be too nervous."

"I have a feeling that Cody will be a huge smash tonight," Rush said. "When I first heard him sing this morning, I stopped dead in my tracks."

As Rush said this, the lights dimmed and music started to play. Roy lifted his drink and took a hard swallow, then raised his glass and smiled at Rush.

The first singer was Joey Delaney. He was tall and lanky, with short brown hair, deep blue eyes, and full round lips. When he started to sing, Roy leaned across the table and said, "On the far right wall, next to the stage door entrance, there are two people sitting at a small table. The blond guy is Joey's boyfriend, Anderson Sheppard. The thin woman is Joey's sister, Harriet Delaney. Harriet is Joey's manager, and she's not fond of his boyfriend, Anderson."

While Joey sang, Rush slowly turned to see the two people. The blond guy was so attractive he looked like porn star material. The thin woman had medium-length hair, parted on the side, with thick chunks of blond. The blond guy watched Joey sing with true adoration. He leaned forward and smiled as if Joey were the only man in the room. The woman sat up straight, with pinched lips, and watched Joey's performance with a critical eye. Rush whispered to Roy, "They guy is gorgeous. But the sister looks uptight."

Roy laughed. “She was born with a broomstick up her ass. Trust me, that is one tough bitch. Cody isn’t very fond of her.”

When Joey was finished performing, Cody stepped out on the stage. The minute he opened his mouth to sing the audience went silent. And it wasn’t just because Cody had a smooth voice with perfect pitch. He was calm and at home on stage, as if he was singing to one person instead of hundreds. He knew when to smile, he knew how to move his arms and legs without appearing awkward, and he knew just how to make his eyes sparkle beneath the lights. He had an unusual style that was hard to pigeonhole. He slipped between cool-rocker and slick-swing artist without trying too hard. When he did a slow ballad, he did it with a style of his own that couldn’t have been duplicated by anyone else. His biggest gift, aside from his looks and his voice, was that he knew how to claim a song and make it his very own.

At the end of the show, Joey and Cody did one number together. The song was a slow, easy version of an old Sonny and Cher hit single. Though they both had different voices and different qualities, they blended well together. Joey was more on the wholesome, boy-next-door side, and Cody had that rugged rock-star quality. Fans would want to cuddle with Joey, and they’d want Cody to throw them down and ravish them on the floor. Cody knew how to exaggerate certain words and sounds in a new, trendy way. When he sang the word, “don’t,” it sounded like “jia-ownt.” And Joey, with his well-trained voice, knew how to articulate each lyric to perfection. When they were finished singing, the audience stood to applaud them both, with loud cheers and whistles.

Rush watched Roy stand to applaud. He smiled so wide, and with such satisfaction, the dimples in his puffy cheeks appeared. While they were clapping and Joey

and Cody were taking bows, a tall swarthy man with short sandy hair crossed over to their table. He put his arm on Roy's shoulder and murmured something into Roy's ear. Rush just stood there staring at the man. Rush had never seen a better-looking human specimen in his life. This guy had the sharp chiseled features of a male runway model, the strong square chin of a true aristocrat, and the sleek, sturdy body of an athlete. His hands were large and his fingers were thick. His skin had a slight tan and his eyes were pale green.

When the applause died down and Joey and Cody walked off stage, Rush was still standing, staring at the man next to Roy. The man leaned toward Rush and smiled. He extended his right hand and said, "I'm Lance Sharp. Are you a friend of Cody's?" While he smiled, he looked directly into Rush's eyes.

Rush's heart began to beat faster; his palms became damp. But he clenched one fist behind his back and reached out with the other to shake Lance's hand. Trying to be as cool and expressionless as he could, he smiled and said, "I just met Cody. We live in the same building. I think you're my new boss. It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Sharp. I'm Rush Goodwin."

Roy wasn't paying attention to them. He was staring backstage, looking for a glimpse of Cody. Lance smiled and tilted his head to the side. "You're the new guy at the office? It's nice to meet you, Rush. I heard all about you from Esther. She told me what Bart did to you this morning. He shouldn't have sent you to Radcliff's dressing room that way. It wasn't nice. You should have been prepared."

Rush smiled and shrugged, trying hard not to stare directly at Lance's magnificent lips. It was hard not to grab Lance's head, pull it toward his face, and kiss him. Rush had

a feeling that everything about this man tasted wonderful. “I’m okay,” he said, joking, “I ducked just in time. The blow dryer flew right over my head.” Then he shrugged again and laughed.

“How do you think the show went?” Lance asked.

“I loved it, Mr. Sharp,” Rush said. “I heard Cody sing this morning while I was delivering the contract to Radcliff, and I thought he was wonderful then. But on stage tonight, he blew me away.”

“Please,” he said, “call me Lance.”

Rush blinked and smiled. “Are you sure? We just met, and you’re my boss.”

Lance moved closer to him and placed his palm on the small of Rush’s back. He leaned into his ear, in a seductive way, and whispered, “I insist.”

When Lance’s warm, sweet breath touched the tip of Rush’s earlobe, he lowered his eyelids and smiled. On the outside, his hands were steady and his voice was level. But on the inside, with Lance’s hand on his back, his entire body was ready to explode in a way he’d never experienced. Suddenly, there had never been another man in Rush’s life. Harold didn’t exist. If there ever was such a thing as love at first sight, meeting Lance Sharp that night confirmed all of Rush’s expectations of what it felt like.

## Chapter Four

After the show, they all went to a small, dark bar a few blocks from the nightclub and sat down at a round booth with red leather seats. It was one of those long, narrow New York bars where people walked with care so they wouldn't bump into each other. Cody and Roy sat together. Joey Delaney and his handsome blond lover, Anderson, sat next to them. Lance Sharp took control of everything and guided each one of them toward their seats.

Rush watched every move Lance made. He even noticed that when Lance smiled, the right side of his face went higher than the left.

When the last man was seated, Lance smiled at Rush and said, "You can sit here, right next to me." Then he placed his palm on Rush's back and gently pushed him forward.

Cody gave Rush a look. But Rush ignored him, maintaining a blank expression.

Then Lance ordered a round of drinks for everyone, and when the drinks arrived he stood up to make a toast. "I have an announcement to make," he said, holding a martini glass up high. "I didn't say anything to anyone but Roy, but there were a few producers from a record company in the audience tonight and they loved the show. They want to offer Cody a contract, and they want to fly Joey out to Los Angeles to audition for a new TV series that involves music they think he's perfect for." He raised his glass higher and said, "To Cody and Joey, may all their future endeavors be prosperous."



Cody's eyes widened. He looked at Roy and said, "You knew about the producers and you never said anything." Then he said to Lance, "And this is why you kept insisting I do the show tonight."

Roy smiled. "I didn't want to freak you out. Lance and I both decided it was better to let you and Joey perform naturally, without knowing how much was involved in that one performance."

Lance said to Cody, "I wanted you to have fun, without being stressed. And it's not every day that two clients of mine have this kind of an opportunity on the same night."

Cody tilted his head and said, "This is all for real. You're not joking about it. There really were record producers there tonight and they really liked us."

Lance nodded; his expression hardened. "It's for real. I'm an agent. It's my job. I'd never joke about something like this."

Cody raised his eyebrows and gave Joey a look. He smiled and exposed his upper gums. He jumped up from his seat and shouted, "They liked us, Joey. They really liked us!" Then he threw his arms around Roy, kissed him, and said, "I wonder what Radcliff Benson will have to say when he hears about this. I got a record deal on the same day he had me fired from a Broadway show for being better than he was."

"Don't even mention Radcliff's name," Roy said, hugging his lover. "He's insignificant now. The best thing that ever happened to you was getting fired from that show."

"I'll say," Cody shouted, taking a long, hard swallow of vodka. "I'll pay that old queen back some day. I swear I will."

Anderson, Joey's porn-star-material boyfriend, lifted his glass and said, "Joey, this is wonderful. We're going to Hollywood." Then he put his arms around Joey's wide shoulders and kissed him on the mouth. When he spoke, his soft, breathy voice trailed off at the end of sentences as if he were in the middle of a sex scene.

Joey rubbed his eyes and laughed. "I'm in shock. All these years, working so hard, and it happens this fast. Wait until I tell my sister, Harriet. She should have come out with us." Unlike Cody, Joey didn't jump up and shout. He seemed reserved, shying away from attention. "What kind of TV show do they want me to do?" he asked Lance.

"I'll explain the details later," Lance said. "But trust me. You're perfect for this. It's all about the music."

Rush smiled and lifted his glass, "Congratulations, guys. This is wonderful news. I hope I get a chance to work with both of you as clients in the future."

Lance sat down in his seat and put his arm across the back of Rush's chair, as if he were claiming his territory. He looked into Rush's eyes and said, "You'll definitely be working with them. I have a feeling you're going to be around for a long time."

\* \* \* \*

When it was time to leave, Joey and Anderson shared a taxi with Cody and Roy. They sat three in the back, and Anderson put his arm around Joey's shoulders and sat down on his lap. They were slightly drunk, still in shock about the news, and talking about the future with stars in their eyes. Joey had his hand on Anderson's ass and Anderson was smiling. When Cody asked if Rush wanted them to make room for him, Lance stepped forward and said, "We'll take another taxi. I'll make sure Rush gets home safely."

Cody smiled at Rush and said, "I see." He seemed to know that Lance wanted to be alone with Rush, and he was teasing Rush about it.

Rush straightened his back and said, "Maybe I should just go with them. Tomorrow is a working day and I have to get up early." It was almost one o'clock in the morning and he had to be up by seven.

Lance didn't respond. He said goodnight to Cody and the others, shut the taxi door, and said, "You're not working a regular nine-to-five job anymore. Tonight was business. The rules are different now. Welcome to show business."

Rush smiled and gave him a coy look. "But I didn't know it was business. I thought I was just going out with a friend to see a nightclub act and have fun."

The taxi pulled away from the curb and Lance put his palm on Rush's back. "That's just a silly technicality," he said. "I should know. I'm your boss. I promise you won't get into trouble if you're a few minutes late in the morning."

The weather was warmer than usual for that time of year, so Lance suggested they walk through SoHo for a while. Rush agreed; he wanted to get to know Lance better. Though they'd only just met, he felt as if he'd met him before.

They walked slowly, lingering in front of expensive shops and tony boutiques. When they passed a men's clothing store with a trendy name, Rush looked into the front window and stared at a mannequin wearing tight leather pants with a two-inch zipper. He smiled and said, "Now that I'm in New York, I'm thinking about changing my image a little. I'm always so conservative. I'd like to have a few pairs of pants like that. I dress like I'm still in small New England town."

Lance lifted his eyebrows and said, “Absolutely not. Don’t change a thing about yourself. Your simple, easy look is what’s most appealing about you. You don’t need outrageous, trendy clothes. Things like that are for average men who can’t get attention any other way. All you need is a white T-shirt and a pair of old jeans to look wonderful.”

Rush stared into the window and smiled. No one had ever paid him a nicer compliment, and no one had ever spoken to him with a silkier voice. He could see Lance’s reflection in the glass. Lance was staring at the back of his neck, biting his bottom lip. Rush wanted to lean back and rest against his strong chest. He assumed there must have been a ten-year age difference between them. But he didn’t want to ask, because age didn’t really matter to him.

On the next block, they passed a small bookstore and Rush smiled at the window. There was a book on display all by itself, with two attractive young men wearing white suits on the cover. The men were standing before an altar, staring into each other’s eyes, exchanging wedding vows. There were two intertwined gold wedding bands at the top of the book cover. The title of the book was *The Glass Ceiling*. Rush sighed and said, “I’m not very political and I’ve never been an activist about anything, but it’s nice to see books like that in the front windows of bookshops, on display for the entire world to see. I think I’m going to come back and buy that book this week.”

Lance placed his palm on Rush’s back and said, “I’m not political either, but it is nice to see. Guys like us have come a long way.”

“Have you ever thought about getting married?” Rush asked. His voice was soft and light. He wasn’t probing for information. It was just a general question.

“I’m afraid not,” Lance said. “I’m like being single. I’m very happy with my life, and I know what I want. I don’t see myself ever settling down with one man like those guys on the cover of that book.”

Rush smiled. “You’re lucky. I wish I could be as certain about my life as you are about yours. I don’t have the slightest clue what I want or where I want to be.”

Lance lowered his hand and rested it on Rush’s hip. He pulled Rush into his side and asked, “Is there someone else back in New England?”

Rush smiled and stepped away from the window. He started walking again. “There was someone up until recently. But for some reason I can’t begin to explain, it just didn’t feel right. It should have. But it didn’t.”

Lance walked up to his side and said, “I know we’ve only just met. But I can’t say I’m disappointed to hear that.”

When they reached the next block, Lance pointed to a renovated warehouse. “There’s where I live,” he said. “I have this huge loft with an oversized fireplace in the master bedroom.”

Rush laughed and said, “You’re a sneak. You’ve been leading us toward your place since we left the bar. I thought you were walking me *home*.”

Lance smiled. “I was, to *my* home.” Then he put his arm around Rush and whispered, “Come on, let’s go inside. I’ve never met anyone who makes me feel the way you do. And I swear that’s not just a lame line. I know it sounds like one, but it’s not, seriously. If you knew me, you’d know I’d never take a new employee home with me this way, especially the first night I met him. But you’re different. I knew that the moment I saw you sitting at the table in the nightclub. I have a good eye—it’s part of my job.”

Normally, Rush would never go home with a man he'd just met. It wasn't in his character. He preferred getting to know someone first; romance and compatibility were the most important things to him in any relationship, and sex came second. And it didn't have to be romance with shooting stars and explosive fireworks. He didn't need expensive jewelry or designer clothes. It only had to be something simple, like checking the tires on his car, or knowing what his favorite color was, or remembering the foods he liked to eat.

But Rush couldn't deny there was something different about Lance. So when Lance started walking toward the warehouse where he lived, Rush allowed him to lead the way. They crossed the street in silence; Lance's arm was around his waist the entire time. Rush focused on remaining calm, but he could feel his heart thumping in his ears. By the time they reached the old-fashioned freight elevator inside the warehouse, Rush's full erection was bursting in his pants.

Lance pushed a button to get to the top floor. Rush glanced between Lance's legs to see if he was just as excited. When Lance lifted his arm and his jacket rode up, Rush saw that the front of his pants was extended and the head of his erection was pointing up toward the waistband.

Rush took a bold step forward and reached down between Lance's legs. He'd never in his life done anything with this much audacity to a virtual stranger. He pressed his palm into Lance's crotch and said, "It looks like you've just pitched a tent in your pants." After he said that, he was sorry. It was just as lame as what Lance had said to him.

But Lance didn't seem to notice. While Rush fondled his erection and the elevator jerked upward, Lance turned toward Rush and looked into his eyes. He stared for a

moment without speaking, then reached for the control panel on the elevator and pressed the stop button. The elevator came to a sudden halt between the second and third floors. It jerked up and down fast and Rush fell into Lance's arms. While his cheek was pressed to Lance's chest, Rush said, "Someone might catch us. This could be dangerous."

"I don't care," Lance whispered, running his hands down the back of Rush's pants. He was breathing so fast he had difficulty speaking. "I want you now. Right here. I don't want to wait." Then he reached down with both hands, unfastened Rush's pants, and pulled them down to his knees. When his hands went up again and he grabbed Rush's ass, he moaned and said, "You're body is so hard and yet your skin is so soft."

They could have fooled around just like that for a few minutes, with Rush's pants down around his knees and Lance grabbing his ass. But Rush had moved to New York so he could experience new things, and he wanted this to be something neither one of them would ever forget. Rush had never had sex in an elevator, especially not a freight elevator with a metal gate and a see-through grated floor. So he took a few steps back and pulled off his shoes and socks. Then he slipped out of his pants and removed his jacket and shirt. The grated floor was cold against his bare feet. Lance unzipped his own pants and pulled out his erection, staring at Rush's naked body, wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue.

When Rush smiled, Lance lunged forward and held Rush in his arms. It happened so fast Lance's erection poked Rush in the groin. But Rush didn't complain and he didn't step back. Lance was breathing too heavily and he was holding him too tightly. Lance grabbed Rush's ass and bit his neck at the same time. Rush spread his legs wider while Lance's hot tongue went up his neck, across the side of his face, and landed inside his

mouth. Rush closed his eyes and leaned back. He clutched Lance's shoulders for support, with Lance's lips pressed to his lips and Lance's tongue deep inside his mouth.

A few seconds later, Lance stopped kissing him and whispered, "I have a condom in my pocket. It's pre-lubed." His chest was heaving, his fingers were probing Rush's anus, and he spoke as if it were a matter of life and death.

Rush arched his back and lifted his leg. This was ridiculous. But he didn't want to stop. He pressed his knee into Lance's hard body and said, "Put it on."

Lance didn't bother to remove his clothes. He pulled a condom out of his wallet and tore it open with his teeth. While he put the condom on, Rush stood in the middle of the elevator, leaned forward, and grabbed the metal gate. The gate was cold; the elevator smelled musty; he had to stand on his tiptoes because the grated floor irritated the bottoms of his feet. When he spread his legs and arched his back, he felt Lance's strong hand on his left hip. With his right hand, Lance probed his opening a few times and prepared to mount him. Rush felt the head of Lance's erection enter his body; he closed his eyes and bit his lip hard when Lance plunged all the way in with one fast thrust.

For a brief second, Rush felt so much pain he couldn't catch his breath. He almost choked on his own saliva. But a second after that, his muscles relaxed and the only sensation he felt was subtle pain slipping into absolute pleasure. The man of his dreams was standing behind him, holding his hips with sturdy hands, bucking into his body so hard the entire elevator rocked back and forth. The metal clanked and squeaked; their deep breaths and controlled gasps echoed through the cold brick walls that surrounded the open elevator. It was a good thing that Lance hadn't removed his clothes, too. If Lance had been naked, there would have been loud slaps against Rush's body.



They both knew this wouldn't take long. To drag it out with foreplay would have ruined the entire spontaneous experience. Lance whispered, "I'm close." He bucked his pelvis faster and pressed hard on Rush's hips.

Rush reached down and took his own erection, holding the metal door with the other. "Me too," he said. He was still on his tiptoes, maintaining his balance with his legs. He couldn't catch his breath. While he jerked his penis, he tossed his head back and closed his eyes.

They climaxed together, stood still for a moment, then Lance pulled out and helped Rush stand up straight. Lance placed his palm flat on Rush's hard stomach and turned him around. "I've never done anything like this in my own elevator," Lance said. "It was wonderful." Then he wrapped his arms around Rush's body and kissed him on the lips. He laughed and said, "You surprised me."

Rush put his arms around Lance's shoulders and smiled. "I surprised myself this time." Then he pressed his lips to Lance's and gently slipped his tongue into Lance's mouth.

While they were kissing, someone shouted, "Is everything okay up there?" It was a deep hollow voice, coming from below.

"It's fine, Chuck," Lance shouted. "I stopped the elevator on purpose. I'll get it moving in a minute. Nothing to worry about."

Rush's eyes opened wide. He'd almost forgotten he was standing naked in a public elevator, on the tips of his toes, in a strange man's arms. And the man still had a condom attached to his shrinking penis. "Who is that?"

Lance smiled and kissed his forehead. "It's the super who does the night shift. He's probably wondering why the elevator isn't working. Don't worry, you're safe. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I promise."

## Chapter Five

After Lance Sharp made the announcement about getting a major record contract for Cody and the TV show for Joey, no one's life was ever the same again. Rush, Cody, and Anderson became fast friends. Anderson hadn't had a good friend in a long time, and now he had two. The only problem was there wasn't as much time to see each other as often as they would have liked. Cody and Roy were working hard to prepare for a new album and an international concert tour. And Rush was busy with Lance, learning entertainment law and working his way up the ladder at firm.

Though Anderson had been a successful model, making most of his income by shamelessly flaunting his perfect muscular body in expensive male underwear catalogues, his only real ambition in life was to be with the man he loved. Anderson longed for a quiet, secure life that didn't involve spotlights and cameras. He didn't want to go into acting and get a contract for a TV series, he didn't care about getting his face on the cover of magazines, and he wasn't interested in being on anyone's A-list. The only thing he wanted to do in life was to take care of Joey, and if possible, adopt a few children that he and Joey could raise together.

But there were a few problems. With Joey working hard on his new TV series, Joey didn't have much time to concentrate on anything but work. Even though they were moving to Hollywood so Joey wouldn't have to commute back and forth to New York, Anderson knew adopting a child would have to be put on hold until their lives settled down. Then there was Joey's sister, Harriet. She was fifteen years older than Joey and she'd devoted her entire life to him. She'd raised him after their mother had died, then

she'd helped him build his career as a performer. From the first day that Anderson met Harriet, she'd made it known without hesitating that she was in control of Joey's career and that Joey's career came first in his life. She even told Anderson once, with a sneaky smile and a puff of cigarette smoke, "You'll always be second fiddle, sweetheart," hoping to scare him away.

But that didn't happen. Joey was the love of his life, and no one was going to push him away, especially not Joey's unmarried, abrasive sister. After that, whenever he thought about Harriet or mentioned her to his friends, he sometimes referred to her sarcastically as "Harriet Lane," the aggressive sister of the only "bachelor" United States president, James Buchanan, who ran the White House during Buchanan's administration. According to Anderson, Harriet Lane was also the most boring woman who ever walked the face of the Earth.

Whenever Anderson was around, Harriet's face tightened and she chain smoked. She would acknowledge him for Joey's sake, then she'd start talking to Joey about his career as if Anderson wasn't even in the room. Anderson tried to get closer to her. After all, they both had Joey's best interests in mind. He bought her little gifts he thought she'd like and he went out of his way to hug her thin, hard body each time he saw her. But the warmest response he ever received from her was a forced half smile followed by absolute dismissal. The only thing Anderson could do was let time take its natural course. He figured that once she finally trusted him and saw he wasn't interested in doing anything but loving and caring for Joey, she'd learn to accept him in Joey's life. Anderson was hoping that if he remained quiet, and showed her he had good intentions, she'd see he was the best thing for Joey.

When it came to having patience and remaining quiet, Anderson had had a great deal of practice. His own pit bull of a mother, who lived in New Jersey, had been even more controlling than Harriet. His mother had once been a debutante from a famous family who had grown up with old money. But after a serious reversal of fortune due to bad investments and a few bad marriages, she wound up penniless in her middle age, not knowing how to survive like the rest of the world. Anderson didn't see her often; she lived like a hermit. After his first big modeling job, at nineteen years old, Anderson moved to New York and he made every excuse possible to avoid seeing her. But that didn't stop his mother from calling. And whenever she phoned, she always managed to twist his stomach into such a tight knot he couldn't eat for two days.

One evening, right before he and Joey and Harriet were leaving for Hollywood, the phone rang in the studio apartment that Joey and Anderson shared. The apartment had been Anderson's, but Joey had moved in six months earlier—against Harriet's wishes. Anderson clenched his teeth and squinted. He knew it was his mother calling. He hadn't heard from her in a while, and she knew he was leaving for Hollywood. Joey was out with Harriet, doing his last performance at a nightclub, and Anderson was packing their suitcases because they had an early flight out the next morning.

He let the phone ring seven times, hoping she'd give up. On the eighth ring, he crossed the room and picked up the receiver. His mother's voice pounded through the wires and he rolled his eyes. She wanted to know if he was doing his regular workout routine. She said it was important because he wasn't getting any younger and he had to focus on his career and making money while there was still time. She wasn't happy about

the fact that he was leaving New York and following Joey to Hollywood. She thought Joey was using him and that their relationship would never last.

While she spoke, Anderson looked at himself in the mirror. He was naked except for white boxer briefs. He rarely wore clothes in the apartment, because Joey liked watching him walk around naked. He spread his legs apart and flexed his muscles. He adjusted a large bulge in his briefs and shoved his hips forward. He'd always been lucky. He knew how to watch his weight and he never gained a pound, and all it took was a couple of strong workouts each week to maintain his body.

When he made his huge, square pectoral muscles jump, he assured his mother he was still working out regularly and that his body was just as good as it had ever been. He promised her he would start to concentrate more seriously on his own career and focus on getting more modeling assignments. He couldn't tell her that all he cared about was having a family and raising his own children. She would have started screaming into the phone, shouting that he had to get serious and stop living in a world of fantasy. She would have told him he wasn't getting any younger and he didn't have any brains so he'd better use his body while he still could.

He didn't want to hear her voice at all. As it was, her normal tone of voice usually made his ears ring.

So while his mother ranted endlessly about how he was nothing but a lazy, good-for-nothing fool, he frowned and remained quiet, taking her abuse. He told her exactly what she wanted to hear; it was easier that way. He promised he'd focus on his own career and that he'd start going to auditions again. And at the end of their conversation, he looked up at the ceiling and rolled his eyes. He knew what was coming. Before his

mother said goodbye and hung up, she always asked him to send her money. He sent her a regular amount every month; he'd been doing this since he'd moved to New York. But she always wanted more. He'd been sending her money for years and it never seemed to be enough to keep her satisfied.

When Joey walked into the apartment, Anderson was still talking to his mother. By that time, he was hanging over the side of a chair and the phone was six inches from his ear. Anderson smiled at Joey and told his mother he'd put a check in the mail and that he'd call her from Hollywood. Then he hung up the phone while she was still talking, and crossed the room so he could greet Joey properly. His entire life revolved around Joey walking through that door, and he never took it for granted.

Joey smiled and removed his jacket. He looked Anderson's body up and down and said, "Every guy should be lucky enough to come home to someone like you after a hard day at work."

Anderson put his arms around Joey's shoulders and whispered, "I'm the lucky one. I don't know many other gay guys who have a real man like you." Then he fell into Joey's arms and kissed him on the lips. "You are *all* man, Joey Delaney."

Anderson knew Joey liked having his male ego stroked this way. But Anderson meant every word. There were times, while Joey was sleeping, when he would sit and stare at Joey's dark wavy hair and his rugged black Irish features. Though Joey wasn't male model material, and by no means as attractive as Anderson, he was the man of Anderson's dreams. Joey wasn't bulging with muscle; he had the long lanky body of a swimmer and the unanimated personality of a straight man. He didn't shave his legs or color his hair. The only time his pubic hair was trimmed was when Anderson did it for

him. Joey couldn't have cared less about the drapes, the carpets, or the furniture. He even liked to drink beer and watch baseball in his boxer shorts. Joey Delaney broke every gay stereotype that had ever been invented. And Anderson couldn't do enough to please him.

The lines of distinction regarding the dynamics of their relationship were clear and concise. Anderson was always the one who went down on his knees or lifted his legs in the air. Joey was always the alpha male in charge. So while they were still kissing, Anderson reached down and grabbed Joey's belt buckle. He slowly walked backwards, toward the bed, pulling Joey's belt. When they reached to foot of the bed, Anderson stopped kissing and removed his boxer briefs so he'd be completely naked. Then he climbed up on the foot of the bed, rested on his knees, and unfastened Joey's pants.

When Joey's pants dropped to his ankles, Anderson reached into the fly of Joey's boxer shorts and pulled out his erection. Joey had never been circumcised, and Anderson never grew tired of sliding Joey's foreskin back with his lips. He held Joey's erection in his palm and wet his lips. Before he opened his mouth, he looked up at Joey and said, "I hope you're not too tired. I know you worked hard tonight." They had been a completely monogamous couple for over a year by then. They'd both been tested for HIV and both had been negative. There was no need for a condom, and this was one of the things that Anderson liked most about being with a long-term partner.

Joey stepped forward and removed his shirt. He tossed the shirt on the floor and said, "I'm never too tired for *this*."

Anderson smiled, staring at Joey's eight-inch erection. Most of the fun for Anderson was pleasing Joey. He lowered his head and aligned it with Joey's crotch. Then he opened his mouth and pressed his lips on the tip of Joey's penis. He braced his palms



on the mattress for support and moved forward. When he felt Joey's soft foreskin slide back, the tip of his tongue touched the tip of Joey's penis. Joey bucked his hips forward until the head of his penis hit the back of Anderson's throat.

Anderson had always been a natural at giving head; it was a rare gift. He knew how to make them weak in the knees and beg for mercy without trying too hard. His face never hurt, his tongue never got tired, and he never gagged. He knew how to suck hard for a long time, and how to release pressure at the just right moment to prolong a spectacular climax. Anderson could go down on a man for a minute, or he could go down on a man for three hours without complaining once.

When Joey's penis was inside his mouth, everything in his world seemed to fall into place. All the fears he'd ever known—his obnoxious, irritating mother, and cold, bitchy Harriet—didn't matter anymore. He couldn't have cared less about his modeling career or working his body out at the gym. The only thing he cared about making Joey feel wonderful, and he was pleasing himself at the same time.

Anderson remained at the foot of the bed for a long time, slowly bringing Joey to the brink. When finally he tasted drops of pre-come and he knew Joey was edging, he stopped sucking and said, "Take off all your clothes and get up on the bed. All you have to do is lie there and close your eyes."

Joey's eyes glazed and his lips twitched. He pulled off his shoes and kicked his pants across the room. He yanked off his boxer shorts and climbed onto the bed. Three seconds later, he was flat on his back, with his hairy legs spread wide and his erection sticking up at a ninety-degree angle.

Anderson went to the foot of the bed between Joey's legs. He rested his cheek on Joey's hairy right leg and slowly went forward until his lips were pressed against Joey's testicles. He stuck out his tongue and licked both, then his tongue slid up Joey's shaft until his lips were next to the head.

Joey closed his eyes and moaned. He threw his arms back over his head and pointed his toes forward.

Anderson took Joey's erection all the way to the back of his throat and started sucking again. While he sucked, he jerked his own penis. Anderson knew it wouldn't take long this time. Joey was ready, and all Anderson had to do was create just enough pressure to make Joey go off.

A few minutes later, Joey stretched out his legs and wiggled his feet. His mouth opened wide and he grunted a few times. When he climaxed and his penis exploded inside Anderson's mouth, the upper half of his body jerked forward and he shouted, "Ah...ah...ah," with sudden, irregular jerks.

Anderson came a second later, with the tip of Joey's erection against the back of his throat. He came on Joey's leg while he gulped and swallowed, taking every last drop of Joey he could salvage. When he knew Joey was completely drained and he felt Joey's penis begin to shrink, Joey's penis slipped from his mouth, he turned his head, and he licked Joey's leg clean.

Joey sat up and watched him. He caressed the top of Anderson's head and said, "You amaze me all the time. I think this was the best blow job you've ever given me. I thought my balls were going to pop up into my stomach."

Anderson looked up at him and smiled. “You say that after every blow job I give you.” His handsome face was red from bending over, his soft blond hair was messy, and his lips were swollen from sucking. “You stay right where you are. I’ll go into the bathroom and get a warm soapy rag.” He knew Joey liked it when he sponged his entire body down after sex. It put Joey right to sleep.

But before he left, he went up and kissed Joey on the lips. “I love you so much,” he said. “We’re going to have such good times in Hollywood.”

“I love you, too,” Joey said. His voice deepened and he caressed Anderson’s ass. “You make it all worth while.”

Anderson frowned. “I only wish Harriet felt the same way,” he said. “I try so hard with her and I can never win.”

“Don’t worry about her,” Joey assured him. “She’ll come around eventually. She just needs to get to know you better, is all.” Then he slapped Anderson’s ass and said, “And it doesn’t really matter what she thinks. She may be in charge of my career, but she’s not in charge of my personal life or the fact that I’m madly in love with you.”

Anderson smiled and climbed off the bed. He walked slowly; he knew Joey was watching his ass as he crossed the room.

Harriet had already known him for more than one year. He wondered how much longer it would take before she trusted him.

## Chapter Six

Harriet Delaney had always been a woman with a mission. In her case, the mission was managing every aspect of her younger brother's life. She'd raised Joey from a baby, and she'd sacrificed for him just as if she'd been his own mother. She believed the reason she was still single in her middle age was because Joey's needs had always come first.

But she had no regrets. Show business made her heart beat faster; she slept well after nurturing Joey's talents. She'd been lucky, too. If Joey had been a straight man she would have had to deal with his girlfriends instead of his boyfriends. And with Joey's good looks, there would have been long lines of attractive, cunning women trying to snatch him away from her and ruin his career. She learned quickly that gay men weren't much different than straight men. They didn't try to stab her in the back when she wasn't looking and they believed everything she said. She'd always been able to handle Joey's boyfriends with little effort. Anderson was unusual, though, in the sense that he had been around much longer than the others. But he was so simple minded, he posed no threats.

Harriet didn't fly out to Hollywood with Joey and Anderson. She flew out two days later. She told them she wanted to close up her apartment and tie up a few loose ends in New York. Harriet owned her Brooklyn apartment, and she wasn't subletting it to anyone until she knew for certain that Joey's TV series was a hit. Besides, there were a few important contracts that needed to be signed in Bart Hasslet's office. These were the contracts that finalized the deal that had been made for Joey's new TV series. The contracts could have been sent to Hollywood. But Harriet said she preferred to look them

over in Bart Hasslet's office and sign them in person, with Bart in the room. As Joey's manager, she knew how to read contracts better than most lawyers or agents. And there was always something that needed to be changed.

On the day Harriet left New York, a half hour before she went to Bart Hasslet's office to sign the contracts, she made one phone call. It was a phone call to a doctor. One of the most important calls she'd made for Joey in a long time. Her stomach had been turning all morning. She'd barely been able to finish her coffee. But she couldn't avoid it any longer.

When the nurse connected the call and the doctor was on the line, Harriet lit a cigarette and said, "I'm going to need the name of a good doctor who can help me in Hollywood." She took a long drag from the cigarette and exhaled a stream of smoke through her nostrils. Her voice was low, as if she were tired, but steady.

The doctor asked her how Joey was and she said, "He's fine right now. But we both know I can't take any chances. I'm going to need someone I can depend upon on the West Coast. I should have called sooner, but I was putting it off until the last minute. Joey always seems so normal. It's hard to face."

She waited silently for a moment, taking long drags from her cigarette, twirling a long chunk of hair next to her face. When the doctor returned to the phone, she wrote down the name of a West Coast doctor and said, "Thank you. I'll be in touch." Then she hung up the phone and stamped out her cigarette. She pressed her lips together and stared at the ashtray, hoping Joey would have more time than his father had had. She just wanted to see Joey's new TV show become a success. She wanted to see Joey become a huge star. He'd worked so hard to get this far. All she wanted for Joey was the very best.

A half hour later, when Harriet arrived at Bart Hasslet's office, Cody and Roy were there. They were sitting on a sofa next to Bart's desk. Though Harriet didn't know Cody well—she didn't socialize with Joey or his annoying friends—he seemed more animated than the other brief times she'd met him with Joey. Cody was sitting on the edge of the sofa, staring at Bart, jerking his right leg up and down. Roy kept rubbing Cody's shoulder and saying, "Calm down. You'll get to rehearsal on time. We have to sign these papers. It won't take long."

Cody pointed to Harriet and said, "Why do I have to be here? Joey didn't have to be here. You could have signed the papers for me. *She* is signing his contracts for him."

Harriet smiled at Cody. But it wasn't a warm smile; Harriet hated being referred to as "she." Cody had talent, but he wasn't always very practical. She said in an even voice, "Joey couldn't be here, dear. They wanted him in Hollywood yesterday. He didn't have a choice. And as his manager, I have power of attorney." Then she crossed the room to another sofa under a window, as far from Cody as she could get, and sat down to wait for Bart to arrive. Harriet thought Cody and Roy were both too high strung and she'd often wished her brother had had better taste in friends.

When Bart Hasslet walked into the office, Lance Sharp and Rush Goodwin followed him. Bart sat down behind his huge desk and Lance remained standing. Rush sat down on a small chair in front of Bart's desk so he could take notes. Harriet said hello to Bart and Lance, then smiled and nodded at Rush. Whenever she saw Rush, she wanted to throw her arms around him and hug him as tightly as she could. She thought everything about Rush Goodwin was perfect, and there had been many times she'd wished Rush had been her brother's boyfriend instead of that brainless Anderson. Rush was smart,

handsome, and reserved. He was the perfect gay man. There was nothing trashy or sleazy about him. Unlike Anderson, Rush was someone she would have welcomed into Joey's life with open arms. Harriet thought Anderson was trashy: he always looked as if he'd just stepped out of a male stripper club.

While Lance handed out the contracts, Cody asked for a glass of water. He pulled a small container of pills from his coat pocket and said, "I have to take three of these every day for a month." It sounded as if he was bragging.

Rush Goodwin lowered his notepad to his lap and looked at the pill bottle. Then he smiled at Cody and said, "What are they?"

Cody shrugged his shoulders. "Just diet pills."

Harriet was reading the contract. She looked up and raised one eyebrow. From what she could see, it looked as if high-strung Cody had already taken too many of those pills that morning.

"But you're not fat," Rush said. "Why on Earth would you need diet pills?"

Lance handed Cody a glass of water. Cody popped two pills into his mouth, swallowed them, and said, "I have to be extra thin for the photo shoot I'm doing next week. The photos of me have to be absolutely perfect. I want everything I do from now on to be perfect." He smiled and shook the bottle of pills in front of his face. "And these babies give me all the energy I need for the strenuous rehearsals I've been doing."

Harriet watched Rush give Lance a look. Rush was about to say something to Cody, but then Esther, the office manager, crossed into the office to where Rush was sitting. She leaned forward and said, "There's a call for you, Rush. It's your aunt in

Connecticut.” There was a weird smile on Esther’s face and her palms were pressed together as if she were praying.

Rush smiled and said, “Tell her I’ll call her back as soon as this meeting is over. It’s won’t take long. We’re only signing contracts.”

Harriet knew Esther wasn’t a calm, quiet woman. She’d always thought Esther was a bitch. She was loud and pushy and obnoxious. As far as Harriet was concerned, she was one of those employees who had too much freedom and too much to say. But this time Esther leaned forward and frowned. And in a soft, gentle voice, she said, “I think you’d better take this one, Rush. It sounds urgent.”

Rush tilted his head and stared at Esther for a moment, then stood up from the chair and followed her out to the reception area.

Harriet lit a cigarette, watching Lance Sharp run to the rescue. These gay men were always so dramatic. The slightest disruption twisted their dicks and sent them in to a tailspin. Harriet simply would have excused herself from the office and dealt with the matter quietly. But Lance furrowed his eyebrows and crossed to the doorway, rubbing his jaw and squeezing his chin. Bart’s office was large. Even with the door open, no one could hear what was being said in the reception area. But when Rush shouted, “No,” Lance dropped the contracts on the floor and jogged into the reception area to see what had happened.

Harriet shrugged her shoulders and took another drag from her cigarette. Harriet had a flight to catch and she wasn’t there to waste time on Rush Goodwin’s personal problems. She lifted a contract, pointed to Bart Hasslet with a cigarette, and cleared her



throat. She said, “I don’t know about this one clause, Bart. I think I’d like to have it removed from the contract. I’m not sure if it’s in Joey’s best interest.”

## Chapter Seven

By the time the paramedics had arrived, Rush's mother had already been gone for fifteen minutes. Rush's mother and his aunt had been sitting in the breakfast room, reading the morning paper like they normally did, when his mother clutched her chest and fell forward on the kitchen table. His aunt had called 911 immediately, but the doctors said she'd suffered such a massive heart attack, nothing could have saved her.

Rush dropped everything and went to New England. He took a taxi from the train station, because his aunt didn't drive. Bart Hasslet gave him two weeks off to take care of his mother's funeral and settle things with his aunt.

Two days after his mother died there was a small funeral with graveside services. Rush and his aunt were the only family members. He came from a small family. Except for a distant cousin in Florida who could not attend the funeral, Rush and his aunt were the only ones left. The women from his mother's knitting circle and a few neighbors attended the funeral. Harold, Rush's old boyfriend, was there, too. He showed up in a navy blue suit and stood next to Rush during the entire service.

When it was over, Harold walked him back to the limousine and said, "If you need anything, let me know." Then he reached for Rush's hand, squeezed it, and added, "I mean that."

Rush smiled and shook his hand. Though he was still in shock, it was nice to know Harold didn't hold any hard feelings against him for moving to New York. "I'm glad you came today, Harold. Thank you." He'd told everyone he knew in New York not to come to the funeral, especially Lance Sharp. Rush wanted to go through this alone. For

some reason he didn't fully understand, he wanted to keep his New York life and his New England life separated.

Harold smiled and let go of his hand. As he stepped back, he said, "I'm around if you need anything."

Rush nodded and said, "Thank you."

The day after the funeral, Rush's aunt announced that she was going to visit her cousin in Florida that weekend, and she would stay down there indefinitely. She spoke with a stiff upper lip, but there were tears streaming down her face. "I'm not ready to be alone in this big old house," she said. "I am coming back. But I want to get away for the time being. This was just too much of a shock for me. I'm the older one. I should have gone first."

Rush hugged her as hard as he could, wiping a few tears from his eyes. In only a week's time, she seemed to have aged years. "Why don't you come to New York and stay with me for a while?"

She shook her head back and forth. "New York isn't for me," she said. "I'd be more comfortable in Florida with my cousin. But thank you for asking. You're a good boy."

She was gone by that weekend. Rush booked a flight and drove her to the airport.

On Saturday morning, while Rush was still in bed, his cell phone rang. When he picked it up off the nightstand, he saw it was only seven in the morning. He rubbed his eyes and said, "Hello?" The drapes were drawn and his room was still dark. He wouldn't have been able to read the caller ID.

“Are you awake yet?” Lance Sharp shouted. “Because I’m at the train station and I need someone to pick me up.”

Rush bolted forward. “You’re *where*?”

“I’m here, in Connecticut,” he said. “Are you coming to get me or should I call a taxi?”

Rush smiled and sighed. Hearing Lance’s voice, after a week of absolute hell, made every muscle in his body relax. “I’ll be right there,” Rush said. “I have to get dressed first.”

When he hung up, he jumped out of bed and grabbed a pair of jeans and a white turtleneck. Though his reddish brown hair was short, it was sticking up on top and pressed down on the sides, so he covered his head with a knitted cap. Then he washed his face with cold water and brushed his teeth.

Fifteen minutes later, he pulled up to the platform in his mother’s old Jeep Wagoneer. It was olive green with a white top and wooden side panels. The car was more than twenty-five years old and it still ran like it had just been driven off the showroom floor. Rush’s mother had only owned a few cars in her lifetime. She’d come from old New England stock, where they believed in holding on to their money and driving their cars until they couldn’t be driven anymore. The car before the Jeep had been a Chrysler station wagon from the 1950s.

Lance was standing near the steps, wearing a black leather jacket, dark sunglasses, and a pair of expensive jeans. His thick gold watch sparkled and his shoes shone. Even though Rush knew this was Lance’s idea of a weekend outfit, it looked as if Lance taken a wrong turn in New York and wound up in the middle of nowhere.

Rush honked the horn a couple of times. When Lance saw him, he picked up a black leather bag and jogged down the steps. He passed by two teenage girls and smiled. They stared at him for a moment with wide, adoring eyes, smiled back, then ran down the platform giggling and poking each other in the ribs.

Lance opened the back door and threw his bag on the seat. Then he went up front and sat in the passenger seat. Before the car door was even shut, he leaned over and kissed Rush on the lips. It wasn't just a peck either. He put his arms all the way around Rush and kissed him and inserted his tongue. It wasn't a long kiss. "You look hot like that," he said. "I like the knitted cap look. It makes you look dangerous."

Though the train station was empty because it was Saturday morning, there were still a few people around. Rush looked back and forth; his hands were still locked behind Lance's neck. There were three rough-looking teenage boys with skateboards staring into the Jeep, watching Lance and Rush make out in broad daylight. Their eyes were wide and their mouths were hanging open. Rush pushed Lance back and said, "We're not in New York anymore. We can't do things like this in public." Then he lowered his voice on purpose, punched his chest a few times, and said, "We have to act like real men."

Lance lowered his eyebrows and gave Rush a look. "What did I do? It was a kiss. I didn't put my hands down your pants." He turned to the right and saw the teenage boys staring at the car. When he smiled at them and waved, they grabbed their skateboards and ran to the other side of the train station. "I only kissed you," Lance said. "What's wrong with these people? If you were a woman and I kissed you like that in public, no one would give it a second thought."

Rush smiled. Lance had always lived in New York. When he traveled, he went to places like Paris, London, and Hollywood. He knew as much about small-town life in America as Rush knew about auto mechanics. “But I’m not a woman, and this is what it’s like in small towns. Men don’t kiss other men like that in public,” he said. “They don’t even kiss each other on the cheek. Usually, they just shake hands and call each other ‘buddy.’”

Lance shook his head. “How on Earth do other gay men live in places like this?”

Rush put the car in gear and backed out of the parking space. “It’s not all bad,” he said. “It’s like everything else in life—you focus on the good, and learn to live with the bad.”

After that, Rush drove back to the family home and parked up front so they wouldn’t have to walk all the way around from the garage. When Lance saw where Rush had grown up, his jaw dropped and he said, “This place is looks like it’s part of the English countryside. The property is wonderful. The house is classic and there’s so much space. It must have been a wonderful place to grow up.”

Rush smiled and shrugged his shoulders, then reached into the back seat for Lance’s suitcase. “It’s home,” he said. “The house has been in my family for generations. It’s part of me. No matter where I go or what I do, this will probably always be home.”

Lance stared at the front door and rubbed his jaw. “I can see why.”

On the way inside, Rush started to tell Lance the history of the house, and how it had been part of the Underground Railroad. But by time they reached the second-floor hall and Rush pointed to his bedroom door, Lance’s arms were around Rush’s waist and his jaw was buried in Rush’s neck. Lance placed one hand on the small of Rush’s back

and the other behind Rush's head. While he sank his teeth into Rush's neck, he whispered, "You look so hot in this hat. I wanted to do this to you in the car at the train station."

Rush arched his back and sucked in his waist so Lance could put his hand down his pants. "But we weren't alone. You would have shocked those poor guys."

Lance bit his neck hard. "But we're all alone now."

Rush closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around Lance's shoulders. His heart started to race and he couldn't catch his breath. Ever since the first time they'd been together in the elevator, the sex between them had been passionate and abrupt, as if they'd never see each other again and it was their last fuck. They always ravaged each other, fighting for air, until Lance had Rush pinned to his back and his legs were up over Lance's shoulders.

It wasn't any different this time. Without removing his hands from Rush's body, Lance pulled him into the bedroom and threw him down on his childhood bed. Lance bit his bottom lip and pulled off Rush's shoes and socks; he yanked Rush's pants and underwear off at the same time and threw them across the room. When Rush sat up and tried to remove his coat and sweater, Lance pushed his arms back and pulled off the coat and sweater himself. When Rush was completely naked, lying in the middle of the bed with an erection resting on his stomach, Lance removed all his clothes.

Then Lance climbed up on the bed; his heavy erection bounced up and down with awkward jerks. He grabbed the backs of Rush's thighs with his large hands and shoved Rush forward until his head was between the pillows and pressed against the headboard. Rush closed his eyes and lifted his legs higher. He bent them at the knee and spread them as wide as they would go so Lance could enter him without any trouble. He clutched the

sheets with both fists because he knew what was coming next. He took a deep breath and braced every muscle in his body.

Though Lance was a gentle, refined man in almost every aspect of his life, in bed he was the complete opposite. Rush had learned this the first time they'd been together. Lance always pushed and shoved hard with his strong hands, his defined muscles flexed and jerked, and there were usually beads of perspiration dripping down the sides of his face before he even entered Rush's body. While he was making love, he lost track of all his senses. Lance made love with the same desperate passion that most men have while they watch sports on TV—his fists flying, his voice rumbling, and his heart racing.

While Rush waited for him to enter, Lance covered his erection with a lubricated condom and moved forward. When he was between Rush's legs, he inserted the tip of his penis and slipped inside Rush's body as hard as he could with one deep, powerful thrust. Rush's head fell back and his fists clenched the sheets. There was always that moment of initial pain that caused his teeth to clench. Lance moved forward without hesitating, banging into the backs of Rush's thighs. He placed his palms beside Rush's shoulders to brace his body, then shoved his tongue deep into Rush's mouth.

Rush arched his back and let go of the sheets. He loved kissing and fucking at the same time. And when the kissing started, it only took a moment for the pain to subside. While Lance continued to fuck and kiss at the same time, Rush grabbed Lance's hard biceps and squeezed them gently with the tips of his fingers. The polar differences between them in bed were what Rush had always loved the most about making love to Lance. Rush had never experienced this kind of passion with Harold or any of his other lovers. Lance was articulate but determined. He was both graceful and brutal. And the



more aggressive Lance became, the more Rush submitted to Lance's unyielding power. While Lance pounded and hammered, Rush melted into the sheets, wishing it would never end.

They didn't change positions that morning. Lance was too eager to get what he wanted, and Rush was just as anxious to please him. Ten minutes later, Lance stopped kissing him. His body went up, he grunted a few times, and then he filled the condom. When Lance came, he bucked his hips so hard the covers fell off the bed. When Rush came, a second after Lance, his climax was so intense he shot over his torso and his own come landed on his lips. He hadn't planned this. But he shouldn't have been surprised. Rush hadn't climaxed since the last time he'd been with Lance in New York.

Lance wiped a drop of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. His face was red and his chest was still heaving. He looked down at Rush and smiled. "You made a mess all over your face. That was very powerful. I felt your entire body tighten."

Rush lowered his legs and wrapped them around Lance's waist. Lance was still inside his body and he didn't want him to pull out too soon. The sensations that Rush experienced after sex with Lance, while Lance was still deep inside, were almost as good as the feelings he experienced during the actual sex. Rush's entire body relaxed, with gentle, post-orgasmic feelings going off between his legs. He ran his hands up and down Lance's biceps a few times, then he smiled and said. "I didn't realize how much I missed you. I'm glad you came up today." He hadn't wiped his lips yet. A few drops slipped into his mouth, so he licked his lips clean.

Lance pushed his penis in deeper and moved his head forward. When Rush's lips were clean and all the come was gone, he kissed him gently and said, "I missed you, too.

I'm glad you're not upset that I came up here without letting you know first. I was worried."

Rush tightened his legs around Lance's body and said, "Actually, I was hoping you would. I just didn't want to sound too needy. It's been hard this week, but I didn't want to bother you." There had been times, especially during his mother's service, that he'd wished he'd been able to fall into Lance's strong arms and just sob.

Lance looked into his eyes and smiled. "I'm here for you now. And I would have been here for you if you'd wanted me earlier this week. Don't ever hesitate to tell me what you want. I mean that."

## Chapter Eight

On Saturday night, Rush and Lance went to the talent show at the local high school gymnasium. Rush hesitated about going, but he'd promised his aunt he'd do her this favor before she'd left for Florida. The talent show was being held to raise money for college scholarships, and the knitting circle his mother and aunt belonged to was sponsoring the event. There was a bake sale afterwards, which meant that Rush had to bring two cakes: one on behalf of his aunt, and one on behalf of his late mother. His aunt had left explicit instructions on the kinds of cakes she wanted him to bring: two white coconut layer cakes. She told him in a stern voice that people depended on those cakes.

Rush felt awkward about asking Lance to go to a small-town talent show. Lance was an internationally known entertainment attorney and talent agent. So Rush figured he'd just make the cakes, deliver them on behalf of his mother and his aunt, and then he and Lance would spend a quiet evening together roasting chestnuts in front of the fire.

But when Lance saw him making the cakes, he sat down at the kitchen table and asked, "What are you doing? I had no idea you knew how to cook."

Rush measured out two cups of sugar and poured them into a bowl with room-temperature butter. He thought Lance was still up in his bed napping. After they'd had sex that morning, they'd both gone back to bed. Rush smiled and said, "I don't really know how to cook. I know how to bake. There's a difference."

Lance folded his arms across his chest and said, "I didn't know there was a difference."

“There’s a huge difference,” Rush said, switching on the mixing machine. “Some people can do both, but mostly you’re either a great baker or a great cook. I’m neither, but I know how to bake.”

Lance noticed four layer cake pans on the counter. “Why are you baking all this right now?”

Rush smiled and told him about the talent show and the bake sale. He assured Lance that he wasn’t going to ask him to go. He’d just drop the cakes off, make an appearance for the sake of his aunt, then come right back home.

Lance rubbed his jaw and frowned. “Are you embarrassed to be seen with me?”

Rush dropped a wooden spoon and said, “Of course not. I’m *proud* to be seen with you. I just didn’t think *you’d* be interested in going to a small-town talent show. You’re a huge agent from New York. I don’t want to bore you to death with something like this.”

“There’s something about me you don’t know,” Lance said. “First, I’m not a snob. I’d love to go. Second, I’m also an amateur musician and singer. I’ve written a few of my own songs, and trust me, I am an amateur. So I won’t be judging anyone else.”

Rush smiled and shook his head. He had no idea that Lance was a musician. Evidently, there was a lot about Lance Sharp he still didn’t know. “Well then, we’ll go. I’m sure the women in the knitting circle will love you.”

\* \* \* \*

At seven o’clock, they arrived at the high school gymnasium with two fresh coconut layer cakes on cardboard rounds covered with pink cellophane. Though Rush hadn’t baked anything in a long time, he was proud of what he’d accomplished that

afternoon. The cakes looked very professional. He was also still proud of the five-star blow job he'd given Lance in the kitchen. After Rush frosted the cakes and put them into the refrigerator to set, he took the remaining white frosting to the kitchen table and kneeled down between Lance's legs. Before Lance even knew what was happening, his pants were down around his ankles and Rush was spreading frosting between his legs. He spread the frosting all over Lance's growing erection with an inverted spatula, and then he sprinkled flakes of coconut all over the frosting. When Lance's dick was completely covered with white fluff, it resembled one of those coconut-covered jelly rolls in bakery windows. Rush squeezed Lance's testicles with his right hand and gently began to suck the frosting off. He started at the tip of Lance's dick and worked his way down the shaft. By the time he was finished, all the frosting was gone, there were drops of soft white cream rolling down his chin, and Lance's legs were trembling.

They set the cake down on a folding table covered with a pink paper tablecloth and Rush introduced Lance to the women in the knitting circle. Lance smiled and flirted with them while they blushed and batted their eyelids. The talent show wasn't half bad either. It turned out to be a karaoke show, and some of the local singers had decent voices. One older guy sang a great version of *Fly Me to the Moon*. At the end of the show, when the announcer asked if anyone else would like to perform a karaoke song, Lance stood up and raised his hand. They were sitting in the back row. As Lance stepped out of the aisle and crossed toward the stage, Rush pressed his palm to his throat and stared in amazement. He watched Lance choose a song. And when the music began to play and Lance started singing a slow, romantic version of his song, Rush sat back in his seat and smiled. Lance had a deep, smooth voice. His pitch was excellent and he didn't miss a

lyric or a note. By the time he was finished singing, the entire room was standing and applauding him.

On the way home, the weather changed. The wind had increased and the heavy old car rocked back and forth. But Rush was a good driver and he knew the roads well. He laughed and said, "I had no idea you were that good. You could have been a performer instead of an entertainment attorney." He wasn't just saying it because Lance was his lover and he wanted to boost his ego. He meant every word.

Lance shrugged. "I'm okay," he said. "But I don't have what it takes to make million-dollar records. I know who I am. I'm much better at what I do. But I do enjoy writing music. One of these days I just might try to get one of my own songs published. I'd love to see Cody record it."

Rush nodded. He watched a heavy branch snap from a tree and fly across the road. He was about to say something about Cody and Roy, but he gripped the wheel, hit the brakes, and the car swerved to the right. Before he came to a full stop, there was a thump on the front bumper.

They were both wearing seatbelts. Lance fumbled with his belt and asked, "What happened?" He'd been looking at Rush and he hadn't been paying attention to the road.

Rush took a quick breath and unfastened his seatbelt. He frowned and said, "I think I just hit a baby deer. It darted out in front of me. I didn't even see it coming."

They both got out of the car and crossed to the front end, terrified about what they might find. The wind was so strong by then it blew Lance's hair back and Rush had to hold the front end of the car. Branches were flying and small shrubs were bending sideways. But they saw nothing on the road. Rush looked at Lance and shrugged his

shoulders. “I know I saw a tiny baby deer cross the road. It wasn’t a branch. It’s just darted in front of me. I’m sure I hit it.”

Lance scratched the back of his head and frowned. “Maybe it ran back into the woods. There’s nothing here.” His hands were deep in his pockets and he shook his head. Even if the fawn had been nearby in the woods, they wouldn’t have been able to see anything in the dark.

It sounded plausible. His mother had once hit a large deer and it had disappeared into the woods, never to be seen again. Rush hadn’t been driving fast. Maybe he’d tapped the baby deer and it wasn’t hurt at all. He took a deep breath and sighed, hoping the little deer hadn’t been harmed. But when he turned to see if there was any damage to the Jeep, he pointed and shouted, “Look.”

Lance turned fast; the wind blew his hair forward. His eyes bugged and his jaw fell. He saw that Rush had hit the baby deer, and somehow it had become wedged between the headlights, in the front grille. The deer was on its side, with its legs dangling forward. Its back was stuck in the broken grill and it couldn’t move one way or the other. There wasn’t any blood, but there was a bruise on one of its hind legs. “I can’t believe what I’m seeing,” Lance said.

Rush sighed and shook his head. “I can’t either. But I also know my mother had that grill temporarily fixed and it wasn’t very sturdy. She’d hit something a few years ago and smashed the grill. She told them to fix it as cheaply as possible.” Then he raised an eyebrow and said, “I was mad at her for not spending the money to replace the grill. But now I have a feeling that this broken old grill probably just saved this little fawn’s life.” He closed his eyes for a moment, thankful he hadn’t been going too fast.

When Rush stepped toward the car, the fawn lifted its head and wiggled its ears. Rush didn't know much about deer, but this fawn looked as if it were a newborn. It wasn't much bigger than a large puppy. The poor thing tried to move its legs back and forth; it tried to free itself from the grill. But nothing happened. As Rush moved forward, the deer stopped moving, panicked, and stared at Rush with large brown eyes. "Don't worry, baby," Rush said. "You're okay. Nothing is going to happen to you. We'll get you out of this."

Rush looked at Lance and shook his head. "I've seen deer cross this road all my life. I know people who have hit them and I've had many close calls myself. But I've never seen anything like this. The poor thing is trapped."

When Lance stepped forward, the deer wiggled its legs again. "But it looks like it's in good shape. What should we do?" Lance was from the city. This was a novelty to him.

Rush had known Lance long enough by now to know all of his facial expressions. He knew when Lance was anxious by the way the right side of his lips twitched. He knew when he was unhappy by the way he furrowed his eyebrows. He thought he'd seen all of Lance's expressions. But he hadn't. Lance's lips were pressed together, his eyes were bulging, and a thick vein in his forehead popped out. Rush had never noticed the vein.

Rush shrugged his shoulders and said, "I think we should secure it to the grill with bungee cords and drive to the animal hospital. There's one that's open twenty-four hours in the next town. I went there once with my aunt's cat in the middle of the night."

"Will it be okay, stuck there like that?" Rush asked. "It must be awful." His body jerked and he made a face.



“I think he’ll be okay,” Rush said. “The animal hospital isn’t far. Besides, we can’t try to free it right now. It’s in a state of panic. It would just run into the woods and I think a vet should look at the bruise on its leg. It looks like it’s lost its mother.” He crossed to the back of the Jeep and said, “I’ll get the bungee cords.”

Securing the deer to the grill wasn’t simple, especially not with the wind howling around them. Each time the wind blew and a branch cracked, the poor fawn jumped. They didn’t want to frighten the poor thing to death and they didn’t want to harm it in case there were internal injuries. Rush held the baby deer’s legs gently, whispering calm, soothing affirmations. Lance hooked the bungee cords to the grill, trying not to move the fawn or touch its bruised leg.

When the cords were secure, they got back into the car and drove very slowly to the twenty-four-hour animal hospital. The ten-minute drive took more than a half hour. Rush leaned forward, hunched over the steering wheel, and drove with his forearms. With each bump and crack in the road, he squeezed the steering wheel and looked over the hood to make sure the deer hadn’t fallen out of the grill. Neither he nor Lance spoke. Lance just stared at the hood and gripped the door handle.

At the hospital, the vet and his assistant tranquilized the fawn so they could remove it safely from the car. When the fawn was relaxed enough to be removed, Rush had to bend the grill back with heavy pliers so the deer wouldn’t suffer any injuries. From what he could see, the only injury was on its rear leg.

Before the vet did anything else, he asked, “Do you mind if I take a picture of this with my cell phone? No one is going to believe it.”

Lance and Rush shrugged. “It’s fine with us,” Rush said.

After they took the photo and removed the fawn carefully from the car, the vet and the assistant carried the deer into the animal hospital. While they were walking inside, Rush noticed something unusual about the deer. There were large white patches on its back and a few on its stomach. He pressed his palm to his chest and asked the vet, “What’s wrong with him? Why are there white patches? Did I hurt him?”

The vet looked down at the fawn and said, “Well, I’ll be damned. He’s not only unusual for getting stuck in a grill, but he’s also a calico deer. I’ve never actually seen one, but I’ve read about them. They’re very rare.”

They carried the fawn to the back of the hospital and Rush and Lance went into the waiting room. Lance sat down on a plastic orange chair and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. Rush remained standing, pacing back and forth in the waiting room, silently praying that the innocent young fawn would be okay. He stared down at the floor, with his fists clenched in his pockets. He’d never injured or killed anything in his life. He’d never even run over a squirrel.

An hour later, the vet finally stepped into the waiting room. He was a portly man in his early fifties with salt-and-pepper hair, dark circles beneath his eyes, and a thick, dark brown mustache. Rush jogged toward him and asked, “How’s he, or she, doing?”

The vet smiled and said, “Everything is fine. It’s a he. There’s a bruise on his rear leg, but nothing seems to be broken. I didn’t see any other bruises. He was a lucky little guy tonight. And for the life of me I can’t understand how he wound up in the grill. I’ve never seen anything like it before, and I thought I’d seen it all around here with deer. I once saw a deer trapped in a sun roof. But I’ve never seen a fawn trapped in a grill.”

Rush shrugged and took a deep breath. “I’m just glad he’s alive and that he’s going to be okay.” He knew the vet was trying to be polite, but he didn’t feel like talking anymore.

Lance crossed toward them. He squared his broad shoulders and asked, “What happens to him now?” His voice was deep and professional; he was taking control again.

“I reported the accident to the police,” the vet said. “And he’ll probably be transported to a zoo or a shelter until his wound has healed. If we let him go free now, he’d never survive on his own with that damaged leg.”

Rush shook the vet’s hand and thanked him a dozen times. When he asked the vet what the cost was, the vet refused to take any money. He just smiled and said, “I’m just glad you had the decency to bring him here instead of just letting him go. Not many people would have done that.”

Before they left the animal hospital, the vet assured Rush he’d keep him posted about the fawn’s condition and where he’d be sent to recover. On the way to the car, Lance insisted on driving. It was well past midnight and Rush hadn’t napped as long as Lance had napped. Lance said he been watching Rush. He’d seen him yawn a few times and he said he wasn’t tired at all. Lance was used to keeping late hours and he only needed about four or five hours of sleep each night, so Rush didn’t argue. He handed him the keys to the Jeep and thanked him.

By the time they reached the house, only twenty minutes away, Rush was sound asleep in the passenger seat. The seat wasn’t even reclined. His body leaned against the door and his head against the window. He knew the car had stopped moving. He felt Lance remove the seatbelt and he heard him get out of the car. But Rush didn’t want to

move. His arms were heavy and his legs were sore from pacing for so long. He could have slept in the car all night.

Lance walked around and opened the passenger door gently, holding Rush's shoulder so Rush wouldn't fall out of the car. When the door was open, Lance put one arm around Rush's shoulders and the other under Rush's legs. With one quick heave, he lifted Rush up from the seat, carried him out of the car, and kicked the door shut with his foot.

Rush's body jerked and he put his arms around Lance's shoulders. "You don't have to carry me," Rush said. "I'm too heavy." He didn't want Lance to hurt himself.

Lance continued walking. He smiled and said, "You're as light as a feather."

But by the time they reached the front door, Lance's face was red and his hands were slipping. Rush kissed him on the cheek and said, "Put me down now. I don't want you to hurt yourself. I have plans for you tonight." Then he licked his neck and said, "Give me a couple of minutes upstairs alone."

When Lance put him down, Rush went into the house and jogged up the stairs to his bedroom. He removed his clothes, pulled the bed covers down, and climbed up on the bed naked. He went down in the middle of the bed face first and shoved a pillow under his stomach. When he heard Lance coming up the steps, he parted his legs and closed his eyes. Though he was pretending to do this for Lance's sake, this was Rush's favorite position in bed. Being in love with Lance made it even better.

Lance entered the room and looked at Rush lying naked across the bed. He didn't say a word. Rush heard his breathing increase. He heard his shoes hit the floor, his belt buckle jingle, and his zipper go down. He even heard him rip open the condom wrapper.

Rush looked back, opened one eye so Lance wouldn't see him looking, and watched him cover his magnificent dick. He had to yank the condom back and pull it into position; it was so tight he couldn't pull it all the way back. Two thick inches of the shaft remained uncovered.

When it was covered, Lance crossed to the bed and climbed on top of Rush's back. He fumbled for a few seconds, looking for Rush's opening, and said, "I was hoping this is what I'd find when I came up here." Then he entered Rush's body, with force, and grunted a few times.

Rush knew Lance's face had turned red; he suspected he was biting his bottom lip. So he threw his arms forward and moaned softly, and spread his legs wider to welcome him. Lance went into his body fast—just a quick insertion and a hard plunge. The impact made Rush wince for a second. Accommodating a man like Lance Sharp took practice. But when Lance was on top of him this way, in spite of the pain, he truly felt as if they were both one complete being. Lance's body was rougher and sturdier than Rush's; he looked like a classic DILF in a porn film. Lance had a thin layer of dark hair on his chest and stomach. Yet the contrast between rough and smooth created a feeling of surprise that made Rush's heart thump inside his chest. He felt it each time Lance took complete control of his body. And the deeper Lance went, the more he felt it.

When Lance started bucking his hips, Rush took a deep, ragged breath and closed his eyes. Lance didn't wear strong aftershave or cologne, but he did have a distinct masculine aroma of his own. It reminded Rush of worn leather in an expensive car, sprinkled with the unusual combination of nutmeg and black peppercorns. Rush had always been sensitive to the smell of a man. There had been times with Harold, after

Harold had been working out at the gym, when the sour smells hadn't pleased him. He always made Harold shower before they had sex. But this never happened with Lance. His smell wasn't spicy or sweet, and it wasn't too strong or overpowering. Sometimes Rush had to inhale deeply just to get a whiff of him. But when he did, a feeling of absolute protection enveloped his entire being. In Lance's arms, nothing bad could ever happen to him again.

Lance bucked harder, and he banged into Rush with loud slaps. The headboard on Rush's childhood bed rocked and the mattress bounced. As a teenager masturbating in that same bed, he'd never dreamed the love of his life would actually make love to him there one day. The deeper Lance went, the more Rush wanted. Rush bent his legs at the knee and his feet rose. He moaned and took fast, desperate breaths. Lance repositioned his body, placing all his strength on his arms, as if he were doing strenuous push-ups on top of Rush.

They remained in this position until Lance shouted, "I'm coming." His body jerked and his legs trembled. A drop of perspiration fell from his forehead and landed on Rush's back.

After Lance came, he gave Rush three hard pounds. When his cock was deep inside Rush's body as it could possibly get, Rush reached down between his legs and grabbed his own cock. He jerked it a few times, arched his back higher, and came on the sheet beneath his stomach.

Lance fell on top of his body and whispered, "I love you so much. I've never felt like this with anyone before."

Rush smiled and tightened the lips of his hole. He clamped down hard on Lance's dick. These were the words he'd been waiting to hear all of his life. He didn't want to make it complicated, so he just whispered, "I love you, too."

## Chapter Nine

On Monday morning, Rush and Lance woke up on the living room floor in front of the fireplace. The fire had burned out, but the embers were still glowing in red and orange. The night before, they'd roasted chestnuts over an open fire, made love on an antique Oriental carpet, and fallen asleep in each other's arms. Now they were lying in a spoon position, covered with a thick white comforter. They were both naked and Lance's erection rubbed against Rush's lower back.

Rush smiled and backed into Lance. He arched his back, wiggled his hips up and down a few times, and said, "I hope you have another condom down here. Let's do it on our sides this time. We haven't done that in a while."

Lance grunted and pushed his hips forward. "On the table next to the wing chair," he said. "I brought a few condoms with me last night."

They were lying in front of the wing chair and the table wasn't far away. While Rush reached out from under the comforter for the condom, the telephone rang.

Lance grabbed his ass and said, "Don't get it. Let it ring." Then he slipped his fingers between Rush's ass cheeks and probed his anus with two fingers.

"But it could be important," Rush said. There was something about the way Lance used his fingers that made Rush's eyes roll back. "I have to see who it is. It could be my aunt in Florida." His mother's huge old telephone didn't have caller ID. It was on the table next to the condoms. He reached for it while Lance was still probing his hole, and said, "Hello?"



“Have you seen *The New York Times* this morning?” Cody shouted into the phone.  
“I almost fell over.”

Rush shook his head and rubbed his eyes. “No. We just woke up.” He looked at Lance and shrugged his shoulders. “Lance and I are in the kitchen right now just having coffee.” No need for Cody to know they were naked, and that Lance’s fingers were inside his body.

“Well,” Cody said, “You’ve got to see the paper. There’s a photo of both you and Lance standing in front of a car that has a fucking deer stuck in the grill.”

“You’re kidding,” Rush said. Cody’s voice sounded too urgent. His sentences ran together and he didn’t even fully pronounce some words. Rush wondered if he’d been taking stimulants. Roy had mentioned Cody was taking “things” to maintain his energy level.

“There’s a whole article about how you and Lance saved the deer on Saturday night,” Cody said.

Rush sat up and pulled the covers back. By that time Lance had removed his hand from between Rush’s legs and he was lying there holding his erect penis in the palm of his hand. “Here,” Rush said, “Say hello to Lance while I go out front and get the paper. I’ve got to see this.” Then he handed the phone to Lance and said, “We’re in the *Times* this morning. I’m going outside to get it.” His mother had always subscribed to *The New York Times*. She’d been a firm believer in reading newspapers.

Lance took the phone and covered the bottom half with his palm. “Can’t it wait until later?” He looked between his legs and pointed to his erection with the phone. “I’m really horny right now, and I don’t feel like talking on the phone.”

Rush kissed him on the cheek and said, "It will only take a minute. I'll be right back. I'll just put on your longer coat, step out the door, and get the paper." Then he stood up and left Lance with the phone in one hand and a cock in the other.

When he returned, he was holding the newspaper, wearing nothing but Lance's dark, three-quarter-length winter coat. He removed the coat and tossed it over the arm of the wing chair. Then he sat down next to Lance again and opened the paper.

Lance said goodbye to Cody and handed the phone back to Rush.

Rush asked, "What page?"

"Four," Cody said. "It's right below an article about construction work on Fifth Avenue."

While Rush turned to page four, Lance got up on his knees and rubbed his erection against the side of Rush's face. When Rush looked up at him, Lance smiled and nodded at his penis. Then he smacked it gently on Rush's lips.

"What was that sound?" Cody asked. "Did you drop the phone?"

"No," Rush said, trying hard to ignore the erection poking the side of his face.

"There must be something wrong with the connection."

"Do you see the article?" Cody asked.

Rush looked down and saw their photo in the middle of the page. "Yes, I'm looking at it right now." It was the photo the vet had taken with his cell phone. Lance and Cody were standing in front of the Jeep, and the little fawn was still trapped in the grill. The headline read, "Two New York Attorneys Save Deer." He tried to read the article explaining the freak accident, how they'd saved the fawn, and where the fawn was

recuperating now. But Lance had other ideas, and he didn't seem at all interested in the photo or the article.

When Rush opened his mouth to speak into the phone again, Lance shoved his dick right into Rush's mouth without any warning. For a moment, Rush closed his eyes and sucked on the head. Lance was horny that morning. He already had pre-come and he tasted great. So Rush sucked as much as he could, then pulled his head back. When Lance's dick popped out of his Rush's mouth, there was a loud release of suction.

Cody heard the noise and shouted, "What was that? Are you still there? I heard another weird noise." He was speaking even faster now. Rush heard his heavy breaths.

Rush licked his lips and smiled at Lance. "I'm still here," he said.

"What was that noise?" Cody asked.

"I'm sitting at the kitchen table," Rush said. "I was drinking orange juice and I almost spilled it." Then he pointed at Lance and mouthed, "Be good." Deep down, Rush was the conservative type, with a New England upbringing he'd never be able to lose. Sex was private; what happened between lovers was not discussed openly. And if Cody even had the slightest idea that Rush was sucking Lance off while talking to Cody on the phone, Rush would never have been able to look Cody in the eye again.

"It didn't sound to me like you were drinking orange juice," Cody said.

Rush started to say, "Ah well..." But when he opened his mouth and said, "Ah," Lance shoved his dick into his mouth again.

Rush closed his mouth and sighed, sucking more pre-come from Lance's cock. He wanted to push him away immediately, but Lance tasted so good he figured a few more sucks couldn't hurt.

Cody continued talking. “Are you there? What happened? Did I lose you? I’m on my cell phone. I might have lost the call.”

A few sucks after that, Rush pulled back again, making the suction noise. “I’m still here,” he said, with the taste of Lance still on his tongue. Lance was standing over him, slowly milking his penis within a half inch from his lips.

“I heard that noise again,” Cody said. “Were you drinking orange juice again?”

Lance rubbed a drop of pre-come on Rush’s bottom lip and smiled. Rush looked into Lance’s eyes and said to Cody, “I think it’s the connection. I can barely hear you now. I’m hearing all kinds of weird noises, too.” The only thing he wanted to do was put Lance back into his mouth. “I’ll call you day after tomorrow when I get back to the city. Thanks for calling about the article.”

“Okay,” Cody said, “I have to get moving anyway. I’m already late for rehearsal.”

When Rush switched off the phone, he reached for Lance’s dick and said, “That wasn’t nice. I’d just die if Cody ever found out I was blowing you while I was on the phone with him.” He wrapped his fingers around the shaft and pressed his thumb just below the bottom of the head.

Lance put his hands on his hips and threw his pelvis forward. “Well, you’re not on the phone anymore.” He stared down at his erection. “What are you going to do about this?”

Rush smiled. He got up on his knees and kneeled between Lance’s slightly hairy legs. He wet his lips and said, “I’ll show you what I’m going to do.” Then he wrapped his lips around the head of Lance’s dick and slowly took it to the back of his mouth.

\* \* \* \*

After Rush gave Lance a blow job that caused Lance's legs to wobble with such intensity he almost went down to his knees, they both went upstairs and took a long, hot shower together. Lance pushed him against the shower wall, soaped his right hand, and shoved two fingers inside Rush's body. Lance said he wanted to thank him for the blow job. Rush didn't put up a fight.

By noon, they were downstairs in the kitchen and Rush was pouring coffee for Lance. Lance was taking the afternoon train back to New York, and there wasn't much time for anything but coffee. Rush wanted to make omelets for brunch, but Lance said he'd grab something at the train station from a machine.

When Rush sat down at the table, he smiled and said, "When I'm back in New York this week, I'll make you a real dinner in my apartment. Or we can do it in your loft if you'd rather."

Lance took a sip of coffee and smiled. Then he reached across the table and took Rush's hand. He looked into Rush's eyes and said, "I wanted to tell you this earlier, but we were having such a good time this weekend, I figured I'd wait until now."

Rush was still smiling. "Tell me what?" When he saw the serious expression on Lance's face, his stomach tightened. It felt as if someone had tied a string around his waist and they were pulling both ends as hard as they could.

"I won't be in New York when you get back," Lance said, "The firm is relocating me temporarily to the Hollywood office. Bart thinks that because so many of my clients are now on the West Coast, I'm better off there. But I'll be back and forth to New York a lot."

Rush pulled his hand back fast. “I see.” He stood up from the table and crossed to the kitchen window. When he looked outside, he bit his bottom lip and forced his eyes to remain dry. This was the last thing he’d expected to hear. He’d thought they were moving forward in their relationship.

While he stared outside, Lance remained quiet. The only sounds in the room were the hum and whiz inside the old refrigerator.

Lance finally stood up and went to the window. He stood behind Rush, wrapped his arms around Rush’s waist, and said, “This only means we won’t see each other as often. It doesn’t change the way we feel about each other.” He kissed the back of Rush’s neck. “I’m sorry. I should have told you this earlier and we could have talked about it.”

Rush pressed his lips together. He took a deep breath through his nose, still looking outside. He watched a squirrel jump from one branch to the other on his mother’s favorite oak tree. Supposedly, the oak tree was even older than the house. The poor stupid squirrel didn’t seem to know what it was doing or where it was going. It just darted back and forth, jumping for the sake of jumping.

Lance kissed him again. “Are you okay?”

Rush smiled. His expression was blank and his voice was calm and even. “I thought we were in love with each other. I thought the next step was for us to make plans to live together as a couple. I guess I was wrong. I must have missed something.”

Lance pressed his hands against Rush’s waist and pulled him into his body. “We are in love with each other. You haven’t missed anything. But you also know I’m not the type to settle down with anyone. I never lied about that. I told you this the first night we met.”

Rush broke free from his arms and walked to the other side of the kitchen. He turned to face Lance. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “I just thought things had changed.” He felt ready to crumble into a thousand little pieces. His legs were weak and his head was spinning. But he didn’t want Lance to see how physically upset he was. So he squared his shoulders and said, “It’s okay, Lance. I’m fine. I guess I just wasn’t looking at us with a realistic perspective.”

“So we’re okay,” Lance said. “We’re still going to continue as we have when I come back to New York and you come out to Hollywood. You’re going to love Hollywood.”

Lance frowned. The next words that came from his mouth, he knew, would be some of the most difficult words he’d ever have to speak. But he didn’t want to be like the squirrel outside the window; he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life jumping from one branch to the other for no reason at all. “I think it’s best if we end this right now,” he said. “You know how much I love you. I didn’t plan on falling in love with you. It just happened. And I might not know exactly what I want in life, but I do know I can’t continue to see you, knowing at the same time there will never be hope for a real relationship. Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t move to New York to find a full-time partner. It was the last thing on my mind. I wanted to find *myself* first. But then I met you and everything changed. For the first time in my life, I could picture growing old with someone. And I can’t pretend to be happy about the fact that you’re moving to Hollywood now, and that if we remain the way we are, we’ll be nothing more than just fuck buddies when you come back to New York. I want more than that.”

“It doesn’t have to end,” Lance said. “I’m still in love with you. I just don’t want a traditional relationship. I’m being honest.” He lifted his arms and spread them apart.

Rush smiled. He knew Lance was being honest with him; he couldn’t get angry. “I understand. I’m not playing any games. I’m being honest with you, too. And I think it’s best if we end this right now, on good terms.” Then he looked directly into Lance’s eyes and said, “I mean this. I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Lance said. “But I understand.” He crossed to where Rush was standing and kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll get my bag upstairs.”

When he heard Lance’s footsteps disappear to the second floor, he reached for the back of a kitchen chair and squeezed it as hard as he could. He sniffed and wiped a few tears from his eyes. It wasn’t going to be easy getting over Lance Sharp, but at least he wouldn’t have to see him on a daily basis anymore. Part of him felt like running into the hall, up the stairs, and begging Lance to forget everything he’d just said. Rush didn’t want to lose the only man he’d ever loved. He couldn’t imagine what life without Lance would be like. The lump in his throat would not go away.

But a stronger part of him, the little voice in the back of his head that knew the difference between right and wrong, would not allow his feet to move from the kitchen floor.



## Chapter Ten

When Cody's first hit song went platinum, Cody and Roy moved to Hollywood. Cody bought a brand-new red Jaguar convertible, then bought a home in the Hollywood Hills that had belonged to Radcliff Benson. Radcliff had been having tax problems. The tabloids were reporting that he owed millions of dollars to the government. Cody couldn't wait to take advantage of Radcliff's misfortune. The house was located on one of those winding canyon roads way up on the hills, with breathtaking views. The architecture was Spanish, with turrets, arched doorways, and red tiles on the roof. The gated grounds were manicured to perfection, with abundant handmade containers overflowing with rare, exotic plants. There was access to the swimming pool from almost every room in the house. Cody paid more than ten million dollars, which was more than he could afford at the time. But he couldn't resist, because he knew it was Radcliff Benson's favorite home.

As always, Roy was there by Cody's side, supporting him and his career in any way possible. When Roy quietly suggested they buy a smaller place that they could afford, Cody laughed in his face and said, "Stop worrying, dude. I'll own this place after my next single is released and I go on tour. We don't have to worry about money anymore. I'll never be poor again, dude. I'm gonna own this town."

Roy frowned and stared down at his shoes. He knew Cody was buying the house just to get even with Radcliff Benson. "I just don't want to see you get in over your head, is all. Why don't we look at a few smaller houses like the one Joey and Anderson bought? And when there's more money, we can move again." Joey and Anderson had purchased a

nice comfortable home in the Hollywood Hills, not far from the one Cody wanted to buy. They didn't go overboard, and they had Joey's sister, Harriet, living with them.

"I'm not just a TV star like Joey," Cody said. "I'm going to be bigger than that. I'll make more money than Joey will ever dream of making. And I want to own the house that son of a bitch, Radcliff Benson, is losing. He thought he'd ruin me by getting me fired from that show, and now I'm buying the house *he* can't afford any longer. I won't be happy until I own that tired old bastard."

Roy just shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. Cody had changed, and there was little he could do. The day after they moved to Hollywood, Cody began to call everyone "dude." It was annoying, and it made Roy want to shake Cody's shoulders until Cody realized how dumb and affected it sounded coming from him. When he over-tipped a waiter in a restaurant, he said things that made Roy's stomach tighten. Cody would hand the waiter a one-hundred-dollar bill and say, "Here you go, dude. You're cute. You deserve it," without thinking twice. Or he'd speed down the shoulder on the freeway during a traffic jam, and tell Roy, "Don't worry about it. These other dudes have to sit in traffic. They have to follow the rules. They aren't stars and they aren't going anywhere important. I have to be on time, dude."

Ironically, the one time he was stopped by a highway patrolman for doing this, Cody and Roy were on their way to a meeting with Lance Sharp and a few record producers. It wasn't an important meeting; Cody could have driven slower. The young highway patrolman looked inside the car and said, "I'm one of your biggest fans." He didn't even ask for Cody's driver's license.

Cody smiled and lowered his voice. "I'm sorry, Officer. I know I was wrong, but I'm late for a very important appointment with my agent."

Roy remained quiet in the passenger seat, hoping Cody wouldn't cause a scene when the officer handed him a citation.

But the patrolman just smiled, pointed his finger, and said, "I'm going to let you go this time. But you have to be more careful, sir."

When he called Cody "sir," Roy rolled his eyes.

"I will," Cody said. "I never drive this way, dude. But this is a really important appointment."

The patrolman smiled and pulled a pen and a piece of paper out of his pocket. "Could I please have an autograph? I'd really appreciate it."

Roy's eyes opened wide and he rubbed his jaw. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. The patrolman was actually letting Cody off in exchange for an autograph. Roy had been hoping the idiot patrolman would teach Cody a lesson by giving him a ticket.

"Certainly, Officer," Cody said. "I'm willing to do anything for my fans."

Roy wanted to laugh out loud. He knew better than anyone that Cody couldn't have cared less about his fans. In a general sense, Cody loved being adored by his fans, but in a personal level, he basically ignored them. But Roy didn't say a word. He just sat there staring down at his lap with his lips pressed together.

With each new success that came into Cody's life, he became more difficult to live with. Roy knew this was partly due to stress and partly due to the medications Cody had been taking. For breakfast, Cody popped over-the-counter diet pills and swallowed them down with his morning coffee. When Roy questioned him about this, he told Roy

that he wasn't addicted. He said he needed the extra energy to work on dance routines for his upcoming music video and he had to keep his body in perfect shape for an upcoming concert tour. Though Cody had never had a weight problem, he became obsessed with lifting weights and eating nothing but protein. He refused to even touch a carbohydrate for fear of gaining an extra pound. For lunch, he'd go to his private gym, get a steroid injection from his personal trainer to maintain his muscles, and eat a hard-boiled egg. At dinner he ate a bloody piece of filet and a small wedge of cheese. After dinner, he'd take a few more diet pills and get on his treadmill for an hour-long run.

By the time he was ready for bed, his body was twitching, his eyes were wide open, and he spoke so fast it was hard to understand what he was saying. Roy tried having sex with him, telling him it would release all his stress, but Cody didn't seem interested in having sex with Roy anymore. Instead, he'd reach into a leather knapsack he carried around all the time and pull out a bottle of pills. He called these pills *dudes*. It was a slang term for barbiturates and depressants, which a few of his gay friends used when they wanted something to help them relax. They were prescription drugs he'd received from his Hollywood doctor, who'd said they were perfectly harmless.

One night, while Roy watched Cody fumble with the pill bottle, he said, "Why don't you try sleeping without the pills tonight? I'm starting to worry about you." Roy had been with him since he'd been a struggling performer. He knew him better than anyone else in the world.

Cody glared at him. He removed a few pills from the bottle and slammed the bottle down on a table next to the bed. "Don't be such an idiot. If I don't take these fucking pills, I won't sleep. And tomorrow morning I have a photo shoot and I have to

look my fucking best. So don't give me any lectures about taking pills. Just sit back and enjoy the ride." Then he swallowed the pills with a glass of vodka and looked into the mirror. He was wearing a pair of white boxer briefs. His chest muscles popped, his abs rippled, and his arms bulged with muscle. His body had never looked better; he could have posed nude for *Playgirl*. But Cody frowned at the mirror and said, "I have to start working out more. I'm losing my tone. I want to look absolutely perfect for my concert tour."

Roy sat back on the bed and rolled his eyes. He knew there was no point in arguing with Cody when he was taking the drugs, and he was getting tired of wasting his time. By then, he was starting to wonder how much more he could take. It wasn't easy watching the person he loved most in the world destroy himself.

Then one night, after a huge party at the house in the Hollywood Hills, Roy went out to the swimming pool to see how Cody was doing. He thought all the guests had left and that they were alone in the house. Cody had been extremely animated that night, smiling too much, laughing more than usual, and singing at the piano for their guests. Roy had watched him closely. Though there had been thousands of dollars' worth of catered food, Cody hadn't eaten a single thing. He had been drinking vodka all night, and Roy had seen him go in and out of the bathroom with a group of guys a few times. Roy knew they were doing cocaine—another drug Cody insisted he wasn't addicted to.

When Roy went out to the pool area, his eyebrows went up. There were two good-looking guys lounging in the shallow end. One had thick dark hair and looked like a rough, young version of Sylvester Stallone in the first *Rocky* film. His arms were thick with muscle, and his chest rounded and popped. The other guy had a dark ethnic

complexion. His short black hair was curly and his body was just as large and muscular as the other guy's. They were sitting waist high in the water on the steps that led into the pool. They were both completely naked and their large erections were floating at the surface of the water. When the one who looked like Stallone saw Roy walk outside, he leaned to his right and shoved his tongue into the other guy's mouth.

Roy put his hands in his pockets and looked at Cody. He was sitting in a lounge chair, at the other end of the pool, sipping vodka and watching the guys in the water. He raised his glass to Roy and said, "They want to get into male porn, and they wanted to show us what they can do." His voice was slurred and incoherent. "I said it was okay."

Roy rubbed his jaw and frowned. He clenched his fists. He had no interest in watching two strange guys have sex in his swimming pool. If he'd wanted to live his life that way, having anonymous sex with strangers, he would have remained single. So he moved to where Cody was sitting and tipped his head to the side. "I think it's time they go home." Normally, he indulged Cody's whims. He'd looked in the opposite direction each time Cody had done something that had made him flinch. But this time Cody had gone too far, and Roy wanted no part of it.

The guys in the pool ignored Roy. They continued to kiss.

Cody sat up and put his drink down on the table. There was a bottle of dudes next to an empty bottle of vodka. "I'll let you know when it's time for them to go home. I'm the one who makes the money around here, and I'm the one who makes the rules. Got it? I'm going on tour in a couple of weeks and I'll be working my ass off to make the money. I deserve a little fun."

Roy closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Cody had been throwing money up in his face since they'd left New York. When they'd moved to Hollywood, Roy had been hired as a music teacher at a private school and his small salary was nowhere near Cody's. But Roy loved teaching music, and he was still in love with Cody, so he forced himself to ignore the nasty comments. He reached down, touched Cody's hand, and said, "Why don't we go into the bedroom and have our own little party, together, like we used to do? I miss you. These two guys can stay out here and do their own thing." This was the hardest part. Cody and Roy hadn't been together in months. When Roy tried to make love to him, Cody always had an excuse. He was too tired from working all day, his back was aching from dancing, he had a severe headache, or he had to work on a song for the tour.

Cody's eyes opened wide. He stood from the chair and gestured toward the two naked guys in the pool. "Seriously. You must be fucking joking. There are two studs right over there, with huge dicks, and you want to ignore them? Do you have any idea how many gay men would kill to be here right now?"

Roy clenched his fists. "Get rid of them. I'm not joking this time, Cody." His face felt flushed and he forced his voice to remain low.

Cody raised an eyebrow and said, "I'll get rid of them when I'm fucking ready to get rid of them. And if you don't want to have any fun, you can just sit there and watch them take turns on me." Then he smiled at Roy and crossed to the other side of the pool.

Roy sat down in a chair and rested his elbows on his knees. Was Cody testing him? He'd never felt so helpless in his entire life. No matter what he said or did, he knew there was nothing he could do to stop Cody anymore. He ran his fingers through his hair and cleared his throat. His heart was pounding and he felt nauseous. While he watched Cody

slowly walk to the other side of the pool, he silently prayed that Cody would change his mind and ask the guys to leave.

But Cody wasn't walking with determination. His hips were swaying and his back was arched. When he reached the edge of the pool, he removed his shirt and his shoes. Then he pulled off his socks and turned so his back was facing the guys in the pool. When he unfastened his pants, he slowly pulled them down. The two guys in the pool stopped kissing. They leaned forward and watched Cody take off his pants, staring at his ass, licking their lips.

Roy took a deep breath. He wiped a tear from his eye and placed his palm on his throat.

When Cody was naked, he spread his legs apart and stretched his arms up as far as they would go. He wiggled his ass a few times and yawned without covering his mouth. While the guys in the pool continued to stare at his naked body, he slowly turned around and stepped into the pool. His penis was semi-erect by then. He sat down between the two guys, put his arms around them, and tossed his head back. The guy who looked like Stallone reached into the water and grabbed Cody's ass. The other guy stood up and slapped his thick, dark brown erection on Cody's face.

But as Cody was about to open his mouth and take the guy's penis, Roy stood up and walked to the edge of the pool. He said without blinking, "I'm leaving." He'd had enough. Just the thought of his lover being with another man caused a pain in his chest. But actually watching his lover with two other men felt as if someone had stuck a knife into his chest and split his heart in half. There were a lot of things Roy could put up with, but this time Cody had crossed the line and there was no going back.



Cody stopped moving and pushed the guys away. “What do you mean, you’re leaving?” His voice was loud—harsh, forceful. Roy had never heard it before.

Roy refused to turn around and look at him in the arms of two other men. He stared at the sliding glass doors and said, “I’m packing my things right now and I’m leaving. I’ve had enough.” He knew if he didn’t leave now, Cody would only bring him down. As it was, he wasn’t sure if he’d ever be able to get back to anything that resembled a normal life. “I’ve been thinking about leaving for a long time,” he added.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Cody shouted. “You know where you’ve got it good. You make me laugh.”

Roy turned. An unusual sense of calm enveloped his entire body, as if he’d realized all of his past mistakes and his entire future was now perfectly clear. He looked directly into Cody’s eyes this time. He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m leaving for good. I’m not going to live like this anymore.” His voice evened out, and his fists unclenched. Suddenly, every muscle in his body relaxed. And he knew he’d finally reached the point where it wasn’t even worth arguing. After this, there was nothing left to save. The only mistake he’d made was that he should have left sooner.

“Fuck you. You’re nothing without me,” Cody shouted. “You’re just another poor dumb fag with nothing. You need *me* more than I need *you*. Don’t you forget that.”

Roy shrugged. “Goodbye, Cody.” Then he turned around and went into the house. He didn’t stop walking. He heard Cody shouting drunken pejoratives at him, but he didn’t turn around this time.

## Chapter Eleven

After Lance told Rush he was moving to Hollywood, Rush drove him to the train station. On the way, Rush held the steering wheel tightly and forced a smile. Lance was silent, rubbing his jaw and clearing his throat a lot, trying to make small talk about different sites they passed on the road. Rush just nodded and continued to smile. The train station was only five minutes from the house, but it felt more like five hours.

Inside, Rush was crumbling. His stomach turned and his lips kept trembling. But he was determined to remain strong and upbeat until Lance was out of the car. He didn't want Lance to remember him as a pathetic, rejected lover. He wanted Lance to think of him always as a strong, mature man who was wise enough to know when something was finished for good.

When Lance reached into the back seat for his suitcase and opened the car door, he hesitated for a moment, as if he was about to say something important, then he said, "Let's keep in touch."

Rush nodded, staring at the hood of the car. "We will keep in touch. I promise."

"I'll miss you," Lance said. "Can I kiss you goodbye?"

Rush smiled; he couldn't refuse Lance. "Of course you can kiss me goodbye." He turned toward Lance and leaned to the right. He put his palm on Lance's cheek, rubbed it a few times, and kissed him on the lips. He thought it would be a quick kiss goodbye; just a peck on the lips. But when Lance shoved his tongue into his mouth, he couldn't bring himself to pull back and they wound up in each other's arms, rocking back and forth.

A moment later, Rush sat back in his seat and said, "You'd better get moving. You'll miss your train." Then he motioned toward the front of the car. "And we're being watched again. I think it's one of the guys who were watching us the other day." There was a forceful-looking young guy leaning against a concrete wall in front of the car. His hands were dirty and his baggy jeans were ripped at the knee. He was holding a skateboard, staring down at his dirty sneakers. Rush had seen him watching them from the corner of his eye.

"Are you going to be okay?" Lance asked.

"I'm fine," Rush said. "He's harmless. He's probably just a horny, curious kid who has never seen two men kiss before."

Lance smiled opened the car door. He clutched his bag and said, "I'll be in touch. Take care."

Rush watched him jog up the steps to the platform. He watched him disappear around the corner. When he was no longer in sight, Rush took a deep breath and started the car. When he reached for the gear shift, the guy with the skateboard walked toward him. The skateboard was under his arm; he walked with rough, heavy steps, as if proving to the world he was a real man.

Rush raised his eyebrows and lowered the window. He looked up at the guy and said, "Can I help you?" Now that he was closer, he looked older. Rush figured he was in his early twenties.

The guy rubbed his jaw a few times, then looked Rush in the eye and said, "You want to go somewhere, buddy, and finish up what you started with that other guy?" He grabbed handful of his crotch and worked it up and down with fast strokes. His

zipper was down and Rush could see his dark pubic patch. “You wanna smoke some big pole?” His voice was smooth and even, and he was holding more than a handful of crotch.

Rush sighed. He pressed his foot to the brake pedal and put the car in reverse. He knew how these things worked in small towns. Though he’d never been this obnoxious, he’d been this guy once himself, before he’d moved to New York. Because there weren’t any actual places for gay men to meet in small towns, they typically cruised each other in parks, public restrooms, and train stations for quick thrills. Sometimes, on a hot summer night, you could get lucky at the automated car wash on the edge of town. It was all on the down low, and this guy felt safe now because he wasn’t with any of his other skateboard buddies. Rush smiled and said, “Sorry, man. Not today.” He didn’t want to reject the guy. But he wasn’t interested in anyone but Lance. Then he backed out of the parking space and wondered how he was ever going to love anyone else again.

After that, he drove to the cemetery and visited his mother’s grave. He’d lost two of the most important people in his life within a few weeks, and seeing his mother’s grave gave him comfort. A few of the flowers from the funeral were still there, but most had been taken away. His mother had been buried next to his father; they shared the same headstone. Rush made a mental note to call someone that week to have his mother’s information placed on the headstone before he went back to New York.

When he went home, he called the office and asked if he’d be able to take the rest of the week off to tie up a few loose ends regarding his mother’s estate. He’d planned on returning to New York that Wednesday, but that was when he still thought he and Lance were together as a couple. His voice was animated and he didn’t mention anything about Lance. Esther told him to take as much time as he needed, and that his job was there

waiting for him when he was ready to return. He thanked her more than once, and said he'd definitely be back to work the following Monday morning.

He spent a lot of time in bed that week thinking about Lance and wondering if he'd done anything wrong to make Lance move to Hollywood. He thought about calling Cody for advice, but he knew Cody and Roy were in the middle of moving to Hollywood, too, and he didn't want to bother them. Besides, there was nothing anyone could do.

So he spent the rest of the week sulking and dealing with his mother's estate. He hired a caretaker to check on the house while he and his aunt were gone. By Saturday night, his stomach wasn't churning anymore and he actually had an appetite.

He hadn't eaten much that week and his jeans were getting loose. So he ordered a pizza, built a fire in the living room, and sat down to check his e-mail. He hadn't looked at his laptop in more than a week and he knew his inbox had to be full. He ate two slices of pizza and read e-mails that could have been deleted. But when he reached for a third slice of pizza and saw Lance's e-mail address, he stopped moving and stared at his laptop. He sat back in the chair and thought for a moment. He hadn't expected to hear from Lance this soon. He pressed his lips together and bit the inside of his mouth, hoping that maybe Lance had changed his mind and that he was writing to say he couldn't live without him. Rush wanted to read that Lance was just as lost as he was. He wanted to know that Lance couldn't eat or sleep or concentrate. All Lance had to do was say the word, and Rush would have run back to him without thinking twice.

He bit his bottom lip and clicked "read." Then he sat back and took a deep breath.

*Dear Rush,*

*When I left you at the train station, I just felt terrible. The thought of causing you any pain or harm makes me physically sick. I didn't want to hurt you. I honestly thought you knew me and you knew I wasn't interested in having a full-time life partner. I'm happy with my life as it is, and I can't apologize for that. If I'd known you were expecting more from me, I would have set things straight. I'm sorry if I wasn't giving you the right signals. I do love you in a very special way. Please believe this.*

*You are the most unique individual I've ever known. And knowing you has made my life much richer. Whether you know it or not, it's thanks to you that I'm actually moving to Hollywood and that I'll be working on my songwriting. You've inspired me in ways I can't even count, and I'm hoping I can get a song published and have Cody turn it into a hit.*

*You're a wonderful guy, and I know that somewhere there is a man who will fall in love with you and offer you all the things I can't offer.*

*Until we meet again, take good care of yourself and don't ever change. You're perfect the way you are.*

*Love,*

*Lance*

Rush took a deep breath and closed the laptop. He tightened his lips and looked into the fire. There was a tear running down his left cheek; he didn't feel like eating anymore. Now Lance had made it clear, in writing, he'd never be ready to settle down with one partner. And Rush couldn't help the fact that he was still deeply in love with him. But Rush knew he didn't have a choice. He had to figure out a way to pull himself together and get back to his life.

So he went back to New York the following Sunday and tried to pick up where he'd left off. But without Cody, Anderson, or Lance, it wasn't the same. Nothing excited him anymore; the same city that had made his heart race now seemed like nothing more than a noisy mob of people going around in the same circles day after day. He missed his mother, too. He missed her phone calls, when he'd tell her all the things that were happening in his life. The only phone calls he looked forward to now were from his aunt.

Rush figured he'd adjust in time, but after six months he didn't feel any better. He went to work each morning with a polite smile on his face. He joked around with Esther and other people in the office and he pretended he was happy. He looked great, because he went to the gym and worked out often. But when he went home to his apartment at night, he sat in bed and stared at the TV. He didn't watch shows or movies. He'd sit there staring at the Weather Channel until he drifted off to sleep. The only comfort he found was going back to New England on weekends. His aunt had returned from Florida and he looked forward to spending time with her.

Then one warm Tuesday morning in early September, Bart Hasslet called Rush into his office to take notes. Bart was speaking to a new client that morning, a famous clothing designer, Carson Blaine, who was mostly famous for mass-producing men's exclusive designer underwear. Rush crossed into the office with a notepad and a laptop. He sat down on a small chair in front of Bart's desk and pretended he was invisible while they spoke.

Carson Blaine said, "I need someone different this time, Bart. That's why I'm here. I want a new look for this next ad campaign." Carson was a tall, thin man in his early fifties, with sexy gray hair, a deep tan, and lines on his face in all the right places.

He wore a fitted dark gray suit that morning and a crisp white dress shirt. If a young gay man was into the “daddy” scene, Carson Blaine was the perfect target.

Bart was sitting at his desk with his hands folded on his round stomach. He wasn’t that much older than Carson, but he looked like Carson’s grandfather. “I assure you, Carson,” Bart said. “I will find the perfect model. I already have a few guys in mind.” If there was one thing Bart Hasslet knew how to do well, it was kiss a client’s ass.

Carson pressed his index finger to his bottom lip and frowned. “That’s what they all say, Bart.” He paused. “I want someone just like this guy. I want sophistication and sex combined. I want a guy who looks like he’s great in bed, but goes to church every Sunday. This ad is going to be the largest ad I’ve ever placed in Times Square, and it has to be perfect, and I can’t repeat myself.”

Bart nodded. “I’ll start lining male models up right away.”

But Carson ignored him. He moved to where Rush was taking notes and placed his palm on Rush’s shoulder. “Would you please stand up and turn around, young man?”

Rush lowered his pen and gave Bart a surprised look, then pointed to his chest and said, “Me?”

“Wait a minute,” Bart said. “Rush is one of my junior lawyers here. He’s not a model.”

“I can speak for myself, Bart,” Rush snapped. He put the notepad and laptop on Bart’s desk and stood up. He turned around a few times. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “Would you like me to do anything else?”

Carson looked him up and down. His finger was still pressed to his lower lip. “What kind of underwear are you wearing right now?”



Rush tipped his head to the side. “White boxer briefs,” he said.

“Would you be willing to take off your clothes right now so I can see your entire body?” Carson asked.

“*Everything?*” Rush asked.

Carson reached into his briefcase and pulled out a skimpy white thong. He handed it to Rush and said, “I’d like to see how you look in this. This will be the actual underwear you would be wearing in the Times Square billboard. You may as well try it on for size. They have never been worn before by anyone, and you can keep them.”

Rush raised his eyebrows and looked at Bart. He felt uncomfortable about removing his clothes in front of his boss, and he wanted support.

Bart raised his hands in surrender. “This is highly unusual. But it’s fine with me. After all, Carson knows his business better than I do, and if he sees potential in you, I’m not going to stand in the way. Go for it.” He made a gesture toward his private bathroom. “You can go in there and change.”

Rush took the thong from Carson’s hand. He smiled and said, “I promise I won’t be disappointed if you don’t like what you see, Mr. Blaine. After all, I’m not a professional model.” Then he went into the bathroom to put on the thong.

A few minutes later, he stepped out of Bart’s bathroom and walked to the middle of the office wearing nothing but the white thong. He’d even removed his shoes and socks. He’d seen Carson Blaine’s underwear ads, especially the large ones in Times Square, and he knew the models never wore socks. Bart closed his eyes and rubbed his jaw; clearly he’d never seen one of his employees in a thong. Rush’s ass was bare and his genitals were bulging through the skimpy fabric. But Carson looked him up and down

and said, “Could you please stand on top of the coffee table so I can get a better look?.” Then he looked at Bart and said, “I know what I’m doing. I didn’t create an empire by being an idiot.”

Rush climbed up on the coffee table. As he turned toward the office door, Esther pounded into the office with a tray of coffee. When she saw Rush standing on the coffee table practically naked, she gasped and almost dropped the tray all over Bart’s carpet. Her knees knocked together. Her eyes opened wide, her mouth fell open, and the tray she was holding shook.

Bart frowned. “Rush is auditioning for Mr. Blaine, Esther,” he said. “Mr. Blaine is seriously interested in using Rush as his next underwear model.”

Esther slowly crossed to Bart’s desk, still staring at Rush’s body, and said, “I see.” She put the tray down on Bart’s desk, staring at Rush’s smooth ass.

Bart shook his head. “That will be all, Esther.”

“Yes, Bart,” she said, backing out of the office, her eyes still on Rush’s body.

When she was gone, Bart said, “I’m sorry about Esther. But she’s never seen a naked man in the office before. And certainly not one of our junior attorneys.”

Carson laughed. “She probably hasn’t seen a naked young man in years. But don’t be sorry,” he added. “Her reaction was exactly what I wanted to see: spontaneous. She almost dropped the coffee all over the floor. And it was completely unplanned.” He moved to the coffee table and stared at Rush’s crotch. “I like the way the extra support ring lifts and pushes you forward. It makes you look very large. It’s been around for a while, but this is the first time I’m marketing something like it to the mainstream. But is

the support ring comfortable to wear? The concept for this thong is both sexy and practical. It's not hurting you or annoying you, is it?"

Rush looked down at him with a confused expression. He looked at Bart and shrugged. "I'm not sure I know what you mean, Mr. Blaine," he said.

Carson looked just as confused. "I'm talking about the built-in support ring. It's attached to the fabric, inside the jock. It's supposed to enhance the normal size of a man's genitals, but still be comfortable at the same time."

Bart Hasslet blushed and stared down at his desk.

"Ah well, that's what that is," Rush said. "I wasn't sure what it was, so I just pushed it back and put the thong on without using it. I'm sorry. I've never seen a pair of underwear with a support ring." He'd thought it was some kind of defect, or a manufacturing device that hadn't been removed yet. He felt like kicking himself for being such an idiot.

Carson glared at the mound between Rush's legs. Rush's penis, without the support ring, was vividly outlined beneath the sheer fabric. "You're not wearing the support ring?"

Rush shrugged and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know that's what it was." Then he turned in the opposite direction so his back would be toward them, facing the window, and said, "I'll put it on right now." He was eager to get this job. All his friends were becoming famous and he was still working the same dull job as a junior lawyer. This would be his one chance to be seen all over the world. He could be just as famous and rich as his friends. So he pulled out his genitals, slipped the soft white support ring over them, and packed himself back into the thong.

When he turned around again, the bulge between his legs was even larger. Carson pressed his palm to his throat and said, “You are absolutely perfect. You have the innocence, the sex appeal, and the physical attributes I’ve been hoping I’d find.” Then he turned to Bart and said, “Let’s get contracts written up and work out a deal. We start shooting the campaign next week.”

Bart shrugged his shoulders and said, “If this is what you want, Carson, I’m fine with it.” Then he asked Rush, “And you’re okay with this? There aren’t many lawyers posing in thongs.”

Rush nodded. His heart was actually racing, but he didn’t want them to know he was that excited. He loved Bart for worrying about his feelings. But Bart didn’t know this offer had come at just the right time in his life. He’d actually been thinking of moving back to New England and getting his old job back at his former law firm. “I’m fine with it, Bart,” Rush said in a slow, even voice. “I know exactly what I’m doing.”

## Chapter Twelve

Anderson continued to work on his modeling career, but with much less enthusiasm than the way he focused on his relationship with Joey. He took modeling jobs here and there, and most of the money he made he sent home to his mother in New Jersey. His mother never seemed to have enough money; her open palm was always in his face. Joey made more than enough money with his TV series to support them both, and Joey refused to take Anderson's money. Anderson worked for one small garment company in Pasadena that made men's underwear and swim trunks. The underwear was extremely sheer and exposed his entire body. Then he worked for another small underwear company with more international appeal, and modeled a new line of men's underwear with little cartoon characters printed all over the fabric. He wasn't fond of modeling almost in the nude, but it made enough money to support his mother. And, in a general sense, he was building his own platform and gaining attention. He wasn't the kind of model whom people recognized by name, but they did know his face and his body.

He kept his body in perfect shape, and he knew how to make fast money when he needed it. But the real reason he kept in shape was to please Joey. With each bench press and sit-up he did at the gym, he imagined Joey's large hands roaming all over his body. Instead of getting tired, like with most couples together for a long time, their sex life continued to thrive and grow. All Anderson had to do was touch Joey with his index finger, and Joey would be ready to mount him.

When Anderson wasn't working on his body, he was taking care of all Joey's needs. He kept the house, did the laundry, and cooked all the meals. He even massaged

Joey's feet in hot water and rubbed them dry at the end of the day. Harriet lived with them in her own private suite at the other end of the house. But she was usually busy in her office, managing Joey's career with promotional work or planning a new strategy to boost his ratings. She wasn't very domestic—she couldn't cook, she didn't know how to turn on a washing machine, and she didn't know which end of the vacuum cleaner to push—so she didn't mind that Anderson took over all the household duties.

Their lives fell into a nice, even groove. Anderson and Harriet had reached a silent agreement with which they were both happy. Harriet saw how much Joey and Anderson loved each other and she didn't get in their way. If anything, when Harriet watched the way Anderson knew how to care for Joey and keep him calm and relaxed, she stopped interfering in their lives.

There were times, though, when Anderson grew anxious and bored and lonely. Joey kept long hours shooting the TV series, and Harriet, even when she wasn't working, wasn't much company. The only conversation Harriet could carry was about Joey's career and how to keep it moving forward. Anderson had hoped that having Cody and Roy in Hollywood would make things *less* lonely. But after Roy left Cody—a shock to everyone—Cody wasn't the same person he'd been in New York. He was always working, and he was seen at all the best Hollywood parties. There was even a rumor going around that Cody was having an intense relationship with well-known Hollywood personality Grayer Crowley. Grayer was not openly gay, constantly pretending he was straight, so Cody kept away from his openly gay friends.

All of which meant Anderson had too much time on his hands. But he didn't want to complain. His goal was to keep Joey happy and contented.

The one time Anderson did confide in Cody about his loneliness, Cody sent him to his Hollywood doctor and the doctor prescribed “dudes” for Anderson (even the doctor didn’t use the real term for the drug). The doctor smiled and told him the drug was harmless, that they would keep him relaxed and he’d feel less anxious. It worked, too. Anderson took a pill in the middle of the afternoon, his most anxious time of day, while he waited for Joey to come home from work. He’d sit back in a chair, put his feet up, and smile all afternoon for no reason at all. Even his mother couldn’t upset him when he was taking dudes.

Then one evening, while Anderson was waiting for Joey to come home from the studio, he turned on the television to watch the National Music Awards. Cody had been nominated for an award that night and he didn’t want to miss it. Cody had invited them, but they couldn’t go because of Joey’s schedule. Anderson sat back on the floor against the coffee table and smiled, wrapping his arms around his knees. He’d taken a couple of dudes that afternoon and he wasn’t feeling any pain.

They had all come a long way in a short time since their struggling New York days. Joey was in the third season of a hit TV series, Cody was now an internationally known pop star, and even Rush had become a world-famous model. When Rush had first called Anderson to tell him he’d been signed as a male underwear model, Anderson cautioned him about modeling underwear. He advised Rush to be careful, because no one took male underwear models seriously.

But Anderson didn’t know Rush had been signed to model Carson Blaine’s new line of underwear, and he didn’t know Rush’s body would have the largest, most controversial ad ever placed in Times Square. Rush had never been one to brag or boast.

After that, Rush started modeling all of Carson Blaine's clothing, from underwear to jeans. He was now one of the most famous male models in the world.

When the awards show cut to a commercial, one of Rush's television advertisements came on. Anderson sat up straight and watched. He was smiling, happy for Rush's success. Rush was modeling a new line of men's jeans for Blaine. Rush had never looked better, and from the way his body filled out Blaine's jeans, it wasn't difficult to see why he was one of the most famous male models in the world. Cody leaned forward and shouted, "Harriet, come in here. You're missing everything. Carson Blaine is one of the sponsors for the awards show and Rush is on television now, wearing Blaine's new jeans."

Harriet was in the kitchen. She'd just come out of her office and was waiting for Joey to come home. They had all planned to watch the awards show that night, but Joey called to say there had been a problem at the studio and he'd be home later than usual.

When Harriet came out of the kitchen, she stopped in front of the television. She caught the tail end of Rush's commercial. Rush was standing alone, with his back to the camera, naked from the hips up—if the jeans had been any lower, his ass crack would have been showing. He was wearing a pair of Carson Blaine jeans with back pockets so low they were practically on his thighs.

Harriet pressed her lips together and smiled. "I always had a feeling that Rush Goodwin would do well. That boy is so special. There's something about him that I've always loved."

Anderson nodded in agreement. It wasn't often that Harriet said something nice about people in show business. But she'd always said good things about Rush despite



usually complaining about how vicious show business people were. “I think it’s because he’s real, Harriet,” Anderson said. “There’s nothing fake about Rush Goodwin. He has a strong sense of dignity you don’t see often.”

Anderson took a deep breath and sighed. When *he* modeled underwear, he looked trashy, like a sex-starved porn star teasing guys with his ass. But when Rush did it, he looked innocent and naïve. Rush definitely had an intrinsic gift that Anderson didn’t have.

Harriet sat down in a chair next to the coffee table and said, “Like I said, I always liked that boy.” She called all gay men “boys,” but she didn’t mean any harm.

A half hour later, Harriet frowned when Cody’s name was announced. He’d won the award for which he’d been nominated and the camera cut to where he was sitting in the audience. Anderson sat up and started clapping his hands. “Yes, go, Cody!” He turned to Harriet. “I can’t believe he actually won.”

Harriet sneered. She wasn’t as fond of Cody as she was of Rush. “I can,” she said, “because he’s a vulture.” She sat back and lit a cigarette. “The stories I’ve heard about Cody are unreal. And now he’s sleeping with Grayer Crowley. I hear they are living together up in Radcliff Benson’s old place.”

“Oh, Harriet,” Anderson said, “Cody’s not that bad. He’s just very serious about his work. He’s always been intense about work.” But that was all he said about Cody, because he’d also heard a lot of bad rumors around town, including the one about Cody sleeping with Grayer Crowley. Supposedly, Cody was either drunk or stoned all the time, and he allowed Grayer Crowley to rule his life. Grayer was a controlling closeted gay man with a hit TV reality show and a longstanding national radio show that featured the hippest, hottest music talent in the business. But Grayer wasn’t talented as an artist or a

performer. He'd achieved his success through a combination of luck and brass balls.

Grayer was considered the most ambitious behind-the-scenes man in Hollywood, and he was always looking for a way to advance himself.

Harriet and Anderson watched Cody jump out of his seat when his name was announced. He stood up, straightened his black formal, and slowly crossed to the stage to accept his music award. But when he reached the stage and they handed him the award, a tall man ran up to the stage and took the microphone from Cody's hand. He stepped in front of Cody and said, "I'd like to make this formal protest right now, on live television. There is something going on right now..."

Anderson frowned and pointed at the TV. "That's that famous rapper. I can't remember his name, but he hijacked another awards show last year. He waits for someone to win an important award, then runs up on the stage and makes some kind of an announcement about something political. It's such a shame. They should call security and have him arrested. Why on Earth would he want to ruin Cody's night like this? Cody worked hard for this award."

Harriet laughed and slapped her knees. She pointed to the TV. "I wouldn't worry about Cody," she said. "That viper knows how to take care of himself. I'm more worried about that poor bastard who just got in his way and tried to make his political speech. That snake Cody will bury the poor son of a bitch on stage."

Anderson stared at the TV screen and his jaw dropped. While the tall man was trying to steal the spotlight with his political speech, Cody reached for the tall man's shoulder, squeezed it tightly, and said, "Oh no, you don't, *dude*. This is not *your* award. It's *mine*. And you're not ruining my night. Take it over to CNN, dude, where it belongs.

This isn't a news show—it's an entertainment show." Then Cody yanked the tall man backwards, shook him around a few times, and shoved him right off the stage. He did this all with one hand, holding his music award to his chest with the other.

Harriet shouted, "Look, he won't even let go of that award! He'll take that award to bed for the next year." She was rocking back and forth, laughing so hard there were tears in her eyes.

Anderson ignored her. He watched a couple of security guys run up to the stage and pull the tall man into the wings. The audience applauded and cheered for Cody—not just because he'd won the award, but because he just stood up to someone twice his size. When Cody stepped back to the microphone to give his speech, he took a deep breath and smiled. Then he went right into his acceptance speech as if nothing had happened.

While Cody spoke, Harriet and Anderson heard a horn honk. It was Joey, home from the studio. He always honked three times when he pulled up to the house. Harriet jumped up from her chair and ran to the bar to make Joey a drink. Anderson jumped from the floor and ran out the front door. When he met Joey in the driveway in his bare feet, he put his arms around Joey's wide shoulders and kissed him on the lips. "You just missed Cody winning the National Music Award," he said. "It was great."

Joey put his hands down Anderson's pants and smiled. He squeezed his ass a few times and said, "I'm sorry I missed it. But I had a rough day today."

Anderson arched his back so Joey could put his hand farther down his pants. He wasn't wearing underwear that night, and he felt his penis growing. He kissed Joey again and said, "Come inside and have a nice quiet drink. Harriet's making you a martini. You can tell me all about your bad day, and I'll make it all better later tonight in bed." He

reached down and grabbed Joey's crotch. "You'll forget all about your troubles when I'm finished with you."

But when they went into the house, Joey took a martini from Harriet and started pacing the room. He took two long swallows and closed his eyes. "They canceled my show this afternoon."

"What do you mean, they canceled the show?" Harriet asked. She folded her arms across her chest and glared at him.

Joey took another sip from his drink. "It's what they do," he said. "The ratings aren't as good as they were and they canceled the show. There are two more episodes and then we wrap it up."

Anderson crossed the room and put his arm around Joey's waist. His heart was breaking for Joey. If Harriet hadn't been there, he would have pulled down Joey's pants and given him a blow job in the middle of the living room. He'd been reading that the ratings on Joey's show had been declining, but he'd never imagined the network would cancel the show this soon. In the beginning, Joey's show had been a huge hit; the number-one show on TV. It was a singing show about a high school music club, and Joey was the hip, young music teacher who helped his students with their lives and their music. But the storylines were weak and the show was poorly written. It wasn't believable, and the dramatic scenes were often contrived. The only thing that held the show together was Joey's singing and the music. Evidently, that hadn't been enough. There were some critics who were surprised the show had lasted even one year.

Harriet frowned. "Don't worry about it, Joey," she said. "There will be other shows. You'll do films."

Joey finished his drink in one swallow. "Yeah, right," he said. "No one is going to hire me after this debacle. You're only as good as your last project, Harriet. You know this business as well as I do."

"That's bullshit," Harriet said. "People have comebacks all the time. You'll go back to nightclubs until something else comes along. Lance Sharp knows you have talent. He'll get something else for you."

Joey took a deep breath and put his hand on the small of Anderson's back. "If I have to go back to singing in nightclubs, I'll lose my mind," he said.

Anderson gave Harriet a look. Then he snuggled into Joey's side and said, "Harriet is right. This will blow over. You're much too talented and something better will come along." He'd never seen Joey so down. He only wanted to make him feel better. "Let's go have dinner. I made something special for you tonight, in honor of Cody winning the music award."

Joey kissed the top of his head and smiled. "I'm not that hungry. My stomach is in knots. Do you mind if I skip dinner tonight?"

"Of course not," Anderson said. "We'll go into the bedroom and you can soak your feet." Then he gave Harriet a look and motioned for her to leave the room.

"I'm going back to my room," she said. "I'm reading a good book. I'll leave you boys alone and you can work this out." Harriet didn't always know when it was time to leave a room, but tonight she got the signal loud and clear. She walked over and kissed Joey on the cheek. "Everything will be okay," she said.

When she was gone, Anderson reached down and unzipped Joey's pants. He put his hand inside Joey's underwear and held his penis. He massaged it gently, stroking the

tip with his thumb. "Let's go into the bedroom," he said. "You've had enough stress for one day. You can take off all your clothes, put your feet into a warm tub of water, and I'll take care of this." He yanked Joey's dick a few times. "All you have to do is sit back and close your eyes."

He squeezed Anderson's ass and said, "I don't know what I'd do without you, baby. You're the best."

Anderson smiled. He loved it when Joey called him "baby." This defined, in one word, what made their relationship as two gay men so special. For a gay man like Anderson, this simple gesture was true gay romance in its purest form. Joey was the strong alpha male, and Anderson was the gentle submissive. They had the perfect unspoken balance, and neither one of them ever felt inferior about their respective roles. Straight men and women took these roles for granted. When a straight man called a straight woman "baby," it was casual and natural, but not necessarily romantic. Sometimes it could be downright annoying. It didn't mean the same thing as when a strong gay man like Joey called his submissive gay lover "baby." Being called "baby" made Anderson feel protected and sexy and loved; it made his heart race and his penis stiffen. Maybe he felt this way because it had always been so taboo for men to call each other "baby."

As they started to leave the room, the telephone rang. Anderson stopped and said, "You go up and take off all our clothes. I know that's my mother. She said she was going to call tonight. I'll get her off the phone fast, and I'll be right up."

Joey kissed him again and said, "Don't take too long, *baby*. You've got me all worked up now."

When he picked up the receiver and said hello, he found it *was* his mother. The first thing she did was ask him for money. She didn't even say hello or ask how he was doing. She said what he normally sent her every month wasn't enough anymore and she needed at least two hundred dollars more each month. Anderson told her he was just walking out the door and that he couldn't talk, that Joey was in the car waiting for him, that they were going out to dinner. When she asked if he had any new modeling jobs, as if she hadn't heard a word he'd said, he rolled his eyes and said, "I'll send you a check tomorrow. I have to go. Have a good night, Mother." Then he slowly hung up the phone.

### Chapter Thirteen

Rush went to the music awards ceremony with Carson Blaine, Cody, and Grayer Crowley. He had been looking forward to seeing Anderson and Joey, but Joey couldn't get away that night and Anderson never went anywhere without him. Carson and Rush went together, but they were not romantically involved and it wasn't a date. Rush had not been involved with anyone on a serious level since Lance Sharp had moved to Hollywood. Rush's relationship with Carson Blaine was strictly business—Carson was his boss. They had a mutual admiration for each other, but they weren't even close friends. Sometimes Rush thought Carson wanted more from him, but Rush always put out the right signals so Carson wouldn't get the wrong impression.

This made it simple for Cody and Grayer to be seen with Carson and Rush in public. Cody and Grayer were lovers but they didn't want anyone to know it. Even though they were secretly living together in Cody's house, and Cody was openly gay, they were rarely seen together in public. And when they were together, Grayer liked to joke about his gay friend, Cody, with silly quips and lame one-liners that always seemed to degrade Cody. Grayer would smile and say, "Look at him. I think he's *gay for me*," then laugh it off, trying to imply he wasn't gay. Poor Grayer had no idea that everyone already was on to him.

Grayer worked hard pulling off this butch charade by overcompensating in public. He spoke with a deep voice and called other guys "buddy" and "man." He talked about sports and flirted with women on purpose. He even punched guys in the shoulder. Rush didn't know what Cody saw in Grayer, but it was none of Rush's business.



The only reason Rush had decided to fly out to Hollywood for the awards show was to see Cody again. Cody had invited him personally. He'd sent two tickets for the show, first-class airfare, and a car. And Cody had promised him that Lance Sharp would not be at the event. Cody knew Rush wouldn't come if Lance was going to be there.

When Rush invited Carson Blaine to be his guest, Carson was thrilled to accept. Carson knew it would be great free publicity for a fashion designer to be seen at an awards ceremony with big-name celebrities. He knew he'd be at the same table as Cody, Rush, and Grayer Crowley. Rush could have invited anyone. He'd worked hard for Carson Blaine as a model and he wasn't obligated to Carson for anything. But the thought of dating anyone other than Lance made his stomach tighten. Being with Carson was simple and safe. There would be no sex between them, ever.

The evening turned out to be more fun than Rush had imagined. The highlight of the entire ceremony was when Cody grabbed a rapper by the shoulder and started swinging him around. At first, when the rapper tried to ruin Cody's moment with his own political agenda, Rush felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. The guy was twice Cody's size. Rush knew how much Cody had been hoping to win, but he never realized the length to which Cody would go.

When Cody grabbed the rapper with one hand and practically knocked him off the stage, Rush almost choked on his drink. He was certain Cody would wind up in the hospital. But a moment later, Cody had full control of the large guy and he literally dragged him backwards, never letting go of his award. Rush doubled over, laughing so hard his sides hurt. He knew Cody well, and he should have predicted this. No one was

going to ruin Cody's night or steal his spotlight. Not even a guy who was almost a foot taller and probably weighed a hundred pounds more than he did.

After the show, there were fans and photographers waiting outside the theater. Cody answered a few questions and signed a few autographs, but they didn't linger. They had dinner reservations at an exclusive restaurant, and Rush was so starved he felt light-headed. He hadn't eaten because he always wanted to look thin and well defined in public. On the way to the limo, Cody and Grayer smiled and waved. Rush and Carson followed them down the red carpet with huge smiles on their faces. Rush even heard a few people in the mob shout his name, too. Since he'd done the underwear ad in Times Square, almost everyone knew who he was.

When they arrived at a restaurant, they were escorted to the best table in the house and there was already an expensive bottle of champagne waiting for them. It was one of those dark restaurants with booths that had benches covered in dark brown leather. Cody was still carrying his music award, and people kept coming up to the table and congratulating him. Rush had never seen Cody smile so widely or so often. He was more animated than he'd been in years. But he thought about Roy and frowned. He didn't mention it to Cody, but he was sorry Roy wasn't there, too.

They were only in the restaurant for ten minutes when a friend of Grayer's walked up to the table and congratulated Cody on his award. Rush smiled and turned his head, then almost fell off his seat. Lance Sharp was sitting in a smaller, darker booth, with a nice-looking young blond man who was leaning into his side.

Rush's heart began to race and his lips parted. His palms started to sweat and his mouth went dry. His entire body froze and he couldn't stop staring at them. He hadn't

seen Lance since the day Lance had left his home in Connecticut. The blond man looked up at Rush, then poked Lance in the side and whispered something into his ear.

When Lance looked up, Rush was still staring at him. Lance smiled and removed his napkin from his lap. He whispered something to the blond guy and stood up from the table. He crossed to Rush's table and said, "How are you? I saw you earlier tonight leaving the theater, but it was too mobbed to say anything." Lance was still Cody's agent. He'd been at the awards ceremony, too.

Before Rush could speak, Cody pointed at Lance and lowered his eyebrows. "I thought you said you couldn't make it tonight. You could have sat with us." Then he looked at Rush and winked. For some reason Rush didn't understand, Cody was always trying to get them back together.

Rush gave Cody a look. He wanted to disappear. The last person he wanted to see that night was Lance Sharp. Cody had promised him Lance wouldn't be there. If Rush could have slipped down in his seat and gone under the table, he would have.

"I decided to go at the last minute," Lance said. "I arrived late and I had terrible seats in the back, but at least I got a chance to see you put that rapper in his place during your acceptance speech."

Carson Blaine stood up and shook Lance's hand. Rush knew he'd met him before with Bart Hasslet. "Good to see you, Lance," he said. He looked Lance up and down as if he didn't trust him.

Cody lifted a glass of champagne and laughed. "That rapper dude won't *fuck* around with me anymore," he shouted. "He can take his *fucking* politics and shove it up his ass." A few people turned and looked at their table. Cody's words were starting to slur

together, and his voice rose above everyone else in the restaurant. When he tried to take a sip of champagne, Grayer smiled and reached for his wrist so he wouldn't drink any more. He squeezed his wrist hard and gave him a mean stare.

Everyone at the table pretended not to notice Grayer's bold move. Carson Blaine sat down and looked up at the ceiling. Cody bit his bottom lip and hesitated for a moment, as if he was about to explode. He took a deep breath and clenched one fist. But then he put the glass of champagne down and pushed it into the middle of the table. He smiled and said in a low even voice, "I promised Grayer I'd be good tonight. No more champagne for me. I won't cause any trouble at all."

Lance ignored everyone else. He looked into Rush's eyes and said, "Welcome to Hollywood. It's so good to see you. I've been writing music again. I've even had a song published and Cody's agreed to sing it. I dedicated the song to you, because you inspired me to write again."

Rush felt the lump in his throat swell, and his stomach pulled. Looking into Lance's magnificent eyes brought back all the feelings he thought he'd put aside. "Ah well, that's very nice," he said. "I'm glad you're writing again." He maintained a cool tone. He hardly moved his head.

The others were talking to each other and ignoring Lance and Rush. "It's all because of you," Lance said, smiling. "I think about you often."

Rush didn't know how to reply. He squeezed his napkin and said, "I'm glad to hear you're still writing."

"I'm curious," Lance said. "Whatever happened to that baby deer?"

Rush smiled. He hadn't thought about the little calico fawn in a long time. "The

vet kept me updated,” he said. “He was eventually brought to a farm, where they helped him fully recuperate. Then he was set free. As far as I know, he’s roaming the backwoods of Connecticut, happy and healthy.”

The waiter walked up to their table and asked if they were ready to order. Lance smiled and said, “I’ll let you all get back to your dinner.” Then he leaned forward and whispered to Rush, “How long will you be here in Hollywood?”

“Only a few days,” Rush said.

“I’ll call you,” Lance said. “We can get together and talk about old times.” Then he squared his shoulders and said goodnight to everyone else. He didn’t give Rush a chance to refuse; he knew how to take control of a situation. He returned to his table and resumed talking to the blond guy.

While Carson Blaine was ordering from the menu, Cody kicked Rush under the table and said, “Wasn’t it nice to see Lance again?” Then he stuck out his tongue and smiled.

Rush took a deep breath and raised an eyebrow. He tipped his head to the side and said, “Yes, it’s always nice to see old friends.”

But on the inside, he had a sinking feeling deep in his stomach. He knew he was still in love with Lance. Though he’d learned to live without Lance, he knew he’d never stop loving him. Then he wondered how difficult it would be to get the next flight back to New York.

\* \* \* \*

When Lance said he’d call, Rush had no idea it would be that same night. After dinner, Cody and the others wanted to hit a few awards parties and Rush just wasn’t up to

it. He hadn't been able to eat much and he kept forcing back yawns. So they dropped him off at his hotel in Beverly Hills and he went up to his room to take a long hot bath. He apologized to Cody a thousand times and promised to make it up to him the next time Cody was in New York.

In the hotel room, Rush filled the sunken bathtub with hot water and bubbles, then lowered the lights and lit a candle. He was so tired he didn't even hang up his tuxedo. He just stripped down and tossed it on the bathroom floor, which wasn't like him. He usually hung his clothes up and made sure things were neat and tidy. But running into Lance had brought back all the feelings of insecurity he'd managed to conceal. The only thing he wanted to do was close his eyes and let his mind go blank.

But when he sat down in the tub and sighed, his cell phone rang. The only reason he reached down to the floor and pulled the phone out of his pants was because he was afraid it might be his aunt in Connecticut calling. She'd done well in her own since his mother had passed away, but he knew she was lonely and he knew she tended to get frightened at the slightest unusual noise. Sometimes, Rush knew, she called just to hear his voice.

He wiped his hand on a towel and opened the phone. It was too dark to check the caller ID. "Hello?" he said.

"Hey," Lance said. "I'm glad I got you. I was afraid you'd be out at a party and you wouldn't hear the phone."

Rush smiled and shook his head. "I'm actually in my hotel room right now," he said, "sitting in a tub filled with hot water and bubbles."

"No parties?" Lance asked.

Rush shrugged. "I had a headache. They went on without me."

Lance hesitated for a moment. "Actually," he said, "to be honest, I ran into Cody at a party and he said you'd gone back to the hotel. I'm down in the lobby right now. Can I come up? I promise I won't stay long. I just want to see you for a few minutes. Just as an old friend."

Rush raised his brows. "Ah well," he said, laughing, "I'm in the tub, old friend."

"Just for a minute," Lance said. "I'll keep my eyes closed the entire time."

"What happened to your good-looking date?" Rush asked.

"I told him I had a headache and wanted to go home alone."

Rush made a face and rolled his eyes. He couldn't say no. He wanted to see Lance, too. He wanted to hear his voice, look into his eyes, and watch his lips move up and down. "I guess a few minutes can't hurt," he said. "I'll unlock the door for you. Just come inside."

When he closed the phone, he jumped out of the tub, ran to the door, and unlocked it. Then he ran back to the bathroom and slipped into the tub. He knew why Lance was coming to his room, and he didn't want to play games. Lance wasn't coming to talk about the good old days. He wanted more than words, and so did Rush.

A few minutes later, there was a soft knock on the hotel room door. "Come in," Rush shouted from the tub. "I'm in the bathroom." For a moment, it occurred to him that he might have been presumptuous in assuming Lance wanted more. Maybe Lance only wanted to talk about old times. A sinking feeling passed through his stomach. Suddenly he wanted to get dressed as fast as he could.

He heard the door open, then click shut. The outer room was dimly lit; Rush watched Lance's shadow move toward him. When Lance reached the bathroom, he leaned into the door frame and rubbed his jaw, staring down at Rush in the tub. He smiled and shook his head. The only light in the bathroom came from two candles on the edge of the tub. He smiled and said, "Aren't you worried that someone else might come in here and find you like this? It could be dangerous."

Rush looked up at him and smiled. From the way Lance was leering at him, he knew he'd done the right thing by not getting dressed. Lance was still wearing his tux; his hair was perfect. Even though he'd been out all night, he looked as if he'd just stepped out of a fashion magazine. "The only danger I'm worried about tonight is you."

Lance pulled his tie, yanked it off his neck, and tossed it on the bathroom floor. He smiled and said. "Me? I'm the dangerous one? I come up here to talk over old times and find you naked in a tub filled with bubbles, smiling at me through candlelight. *You're* the dangerous one."

Rush shrugged his shoulders and flicked a few bubbles in Lance's direction. "I can always get out of the tub, put on a robe, and turn on all the lights. I'll order coffee and we can go down memory lane."

Lance removed his jacket and dropped it on the floor. He unbuttoned his white shirt and pulled the tails out of his pants. "Or I could just join you in the tub."

Rush pressed his lips together and thought for a moment. He knew that by being with Lance again he would be taking a monstrous chance with his emotions. After they broke up, the deepest pain had disappeared with time. But he still woke up each morning



with a distant, uneasy feeling, thinking about Lance. And there were still nights, when he least expected it, when he'd dream he was in Lance's strong arms.

Rush tilted his head to the side and raised an eyebrow. "If you join me in the tub, does that mean you're going to at least spend the night with me?" He knew, deep in his heart, he could not refuse Lance. He also knew, in spite of the consequences involved, if he turned Lance away that night he'd always regret it. But he was in love with Lance, and he wanted to make it clear that this was more than just a booty call for him.

Lance lunged to the edge of the tub and went down on his knees. He grabbed Rush's wet hand, pressed it to his face, and said, "I'm here for as long as you want me to be here. I haven't stopped thinking about you since the day I left you at the train station. When I first saw you in the Times Square ad, I was crossing the street and almost got hit by a car. And when I saw you tonight, I wanted to fall down on my knees and beg you to forgive me in the middle of the restaurant." He covered his face with Rush's hand, took a deep breath, and kissed his palm. "I'm more in love with you now than I've ever been."

Rush leaned forward and pressed his other hand on the back of Lance's head. He kissed his forehead and whispered, "Why don't you take off your pants and get in while the water is still warm?"

When Lance removed his pants, he pulled a condom out of his pocket and placed it on the edge of the tub. He stepped into the large tub and kneeled down between Rush's legs. He was fully erect by then. Rush lifted his legs and rested his feet on the edges of the tub, then reached into the water and wrapped his hand around Lance's penis. He jerked it back and forth a few times and said, "It's been a long time. Put on the condom."

“I’ll put it on in a few minutes,” Lance said. “But there’s something I’ve been dying to do to you since the last time I was with you. I’ve thought about it often. Close your eyes.”

Rush wasn’t sure what he was talking about. But a second later, Lance’s head was under the water and between Rush’s legs. He pressed his lips to Rush’s small, tight opening and kissed it with gentle pecks. Rush lifted his legs higher and moaned. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open. He’d been with a few other men since he’d last seen Lance, but no one had done this to him.

When Lance came up for air, Rush smiled and said, “You have stubble. You didn’t shave today.”

“I shaved last night. Is my beard too rough?” Lance asked, gasping for air. There was water dripping down his face and he had soap bubbles on top of his head.

Rush didn’t answer him. He just lifted his legs higher and pushed Lance’s head into the water again.

This time Lance didn’t just kiss and peck. He shoved his mouth between Rush’s legs so hard water splashed out of the tub. He started grinding and chewing the softest part of Rush’s body with his teeth. His heavy beard rubbed against the bottom of Rush’s ass while his tongue probed Rush’s anus. Every muscle in Rush’s body tingled with pleasure; each time Lance inserted his tongue, Rush’s toes curled. When Lance came up for air, he took a few quick breaths, then went down between Rush’s legs with more force. And Rush just lay there with his legs wide open, falling in love with Lance all over again.

By the time Lance was ready to enter Rush, he whispered, “Put your legs over my shoulders.” He’d just pulled his head out of the water for the last time and his voice was hoarse.

Rush followed Lance’s orders, and his entire body tingled and vibrated, longing for more. Lance put on the lubricated condom, then shoved two fingers inside Rush’s body to make sure Rush was ready to take him. Rush’s body jerked, and he gasped. A moment later, Lance pulled his fingers out and mounted Rush with one deep thrust. Rush rested his ankles on Lance’s shoulders and arched his feet. This time, when Lance entered him, there wasn’t even a fleeting moment of discomfort. Lance had opened him up and prepared him well.

Lance bucked his hips slowly, leaning forward so he could kiss Rush at the same time. His ankles were still on Lance’s shoulders and his knees were practically in his chin. Though Lance’s chest was heaving and his face was red, he didn’t pound or slam this time. He moved his hips with such precise tenderness the bath water barely moved. He slipped in and out of Rush’s body, with his tongue inside Rush’s mouth, so gently Rush had to concentrate hard on holding back his climax. It was building deep within his body and he wanted this moment to last forever. In this position, with Lance’s even, calculated thrusts, Lance was hitting his G-spot. Rush knew he was heading toward a massive climax without touching his own penis.

A few minutes later, Lance started bucking faster. His knees rubbed against the bottom of the tub and his balls smacked into Rush’s ass. Rush grabbed Lance’s biceps and held them for support. Water splashed from the tub and saturated their clothes on the bathroom floor. Lance was still kissing him; their tongues were locked together. When

Lance started to moan, Rush knew he was going to come soon, so he clamped down on Lance's erection with the lips of his anus to create more tension; he stopped trying to postpone his own climax. A few moments later they both came together with a long, slow climax that made the muscles in Rush's smooth thighs actually quiver.

After they came, Lance put his arms around Rush and said, "That was wonderful. I feel as if I've gone home again after being away too long. And I want to stay around this time, if it's okay with you. Being away that long made me realize how much I love you. Will you move out here for good? A lot of people commute to New York. I have a wonderful place in Malibu."

Rush smiled. This was all so sudden, yet so natural. Lance was still inside his body. He put his arms around Lance's neck and hugged him as hard as he could. "I love you, too. And as long as we're together, I'll move anywhere you want."

## Chapter Fourteen

After they canceled Joey's television show, Joey had no choice but to go back to nightclubs with his singing act. Lance Sharp signed him to some great gigs in Vegas and Reno, but it was still a step backwards in his career. Joey worked hard to smile and pretend everything was all right. His attitude was always positive and he worked hard at making his performances perfect. But Anderson knew he wasn't happy. When Joey wasn't working, he moped around the house and took long naps in the afternoon. He drank too much and took pills to go to sleep. The spark that had once been in his eyes had become dull and lifeless. The only thing that remained the same was their sex life. But now that Joey was commuting to nightclubs in Nevada, there wasn't as much time for them to be together.

Anderson and Harriet kept telling Joey to remain positive. They assured him his career would pick up and he'd get an offer to do something he loved.

But then one afternoon fate stepped into their lives and everything changed in a matter of minutes.

Anderson heard a knock on the front door in the middle of the afternoon. He'd just hung up with his mother. She'd been worried because one of her monthly checks hadn't arrived on time. Harriet was in her office at the back of the house and Joey was driving back from a three-day gig at a casino in Vegas. Anderson hadn't been expecting anyone and they rarely had visitors that time of day. So he went to the front door with raised eyebrows, hoping it wasn't someone soliciting something.

By the time he reached the door, Harriet was standing in the living room. Anderson gave her a look and shrugged his shoulders, then opened the door and saw Joey standing there with two policemen at his side.

Anderson reached for Joey's hand and said, "What's wrong? Did you have an accident?"

Joey's head was down and he stared at his shoes.

The police officer on the right said, "We found him on the side of the freeway. He was just sitting in his car in a daze. He kept saying he was lost and he didn't know how to get home."

Harriet walked up behind Anderson and said, "You take Joey inside and I'll find out what happened."

Anderson took Joey by the hand and practically dragged him into the living room. He shuffled across the carpet like a ninety-year-old man. While Harriet talked with the policemen, Anderson sat Joey down on the sofa and poured him a drink. Joey just sat there with slumped shoulders, still staring down at his shoes. When Anderson handed Joey the drink, Joey looked up at him and said, "There's something wrong. I couldn't find my way home, so I pulled the car over and just sat there, hoping I'd remember where I was going."

Anderson sat down next to him and smiled. "It's okay, sweetheart. You're fine. You've just been under a great deal of stress lately. You need some time off. Harriet will talk to Lance about getting you some time off." Anderson was smiling and putting on a good front. But inside his stomach was twisting in knots.

When the police were gone and Joey was in his bed sleeping, Harriet asked Anderson to go into the living room and sit down. Anderson had just tucked Joey into bed and he was smiling because Joey seemed much better. He didn't think there was anything to worry about; people got stressed out all the time like this. Joey would be back to normal in a week or so. He just needed some rest.

But Anderson noticed Harriet wasn't smiling. She was chain smoking and she poured herself a full glass of vodka. "Are you okay?" Anderson asked. "It's no big deal. He's just been under a lot of stress. He'll be fine." He'd known Harriet for a long time and he'd never seen such a dark, serious expression on her face.

"Sit down, Anderson," Harriet said. Her shoulders sank into her flat chest. It looked as if her body had been deflated. Even the blond chunks in her hair seemed duller now. "There's something I have to tell you. I should have told you a long time ago. But I kept hoping it wouldn't happen and that I'd never have to mention it to anyone. Joey doesn't even know about it."

Anderson frowned. He sat down on the edge of the sofa and asked. "What are you talking about?"

Harriet lit another cigarette and took a long, deep drag. She exhaled fast and said, "Joey has a congenital disease. I've known about it for years. I'm in touch with a doctor all the time. He inherited it from his father. It's very rare."

Anderson stood up and crossed to where she was standing. "What kind of disease? What are you talking about? He looks perfectly healthy to me. He's just stressed, is all."

Harriet shook her head and said, "No, Anderson. It's not stress. Joey has a rare form of Alzheimer's disease. The clinical term is Familial Alzheimer's Disease, FAD. It

can happen at any age between sixteen and sixty-five. It's genetic. His father had it and so did his grandfather. I kept hoping and praying he'd get lucky and that it wouldn't happen until he was much older."

Anderson watched Harriet. She put the cigarette down in an ashtray and started to wring her hands. He'd never seen her shed a tear, and now her eyes were filled. "But there must be some kind of treatment we can get him," he said. "There must be some medication. He's a young man."

Harriet shook her head and stared down at the floor. "There's nothing. Once it starts, it just progresses until he has to be put into a facility. When the first symptoms started to happen with Joey's father, it didn't take long before they had to put him away. I'm so sorry, Anderson. I'm so sorry. I thought it was best not to tell anyone." Harriet fell into a chair and started sobbing.

"What about you?" Anderson asked. "Do you have it?"

Harriet rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath. "We had different fathers," she said. "I'm fine."

"What do we do now?" Anderson asked. His head was pounding—he felt his heart beating in his ears.

Harriet shrugged. "We keep him comfortable, we watch him closely, and we wait." Then she stood up and walked to where Anderson was standing. She put her arms around his shoulders and fell into his body. "Don't leave," she begged. "He's going to need you now more than ever. I know I haven't been a sweetheart in the past. I've been a bitch. But I do know how much you love him."



Anderson closed his eyes and patted her back. She had been a bitch and there had been many times he'd resented her interference. But he didn't say that aloud. He sighed and said, "I'm not going anywhere. I'll do whatever it takes to make him as happy and comfortable as possible."

## Chapter Fifteen

“Have you heard about Joey?” Rush asked.

When Cody answered the phone, he was just about ready to leave his dressing room. He was shooting a new music video that day, and it was his final day on the set. “I haven’t heard anything for a while,” Cody said. “But the last time I talked to Anderson, Joey wasn’t doing well. They had to hire a full-time nurse to make sure he didn’t wander out of the house on his own.” Now, Cody pressed his palm to his chest, bracing himself for bad news. “Is there something new? What is it?” Though he was usually too busy for friends, he still kept up with Joey and Rush.

“Anderson and Harriet had to put Joey in The Harvey Milk Clinic yesterday,” Rush said. “Lance helped them. Lance is up in San Francisco right now. I figured I’d tell you so you don’t have to hear it through gossip.” Rush’s voice was soft and low. He sounded as if he hadn’t slept all night.

Cody frowned. He knew The Harvey Milk Clinic was Joey’s last resort. It was an LGBT-oriented facility not far from San Francisco, where they treated everything from addiction to dementia. There was also a hospice section, and there were a lot of patients there in the final stages of AIDS. It had been started by a small group of gay men and women who had once been strong supporters of Harvey Milk, and it had evolved into one of the most exclusive mental health clinics in the world. “I’m sorry to hear that,” Cody said, popping two pills into his mouth. He swallowed them without water. He’d taken an extra dose of dudes the night before and his eyelids were still heavy. Now he needed something to wake him up so he could perform for the music video.

“Joey started a fire and almost burned the house down,” Rush said. “Anderson told me he didn’t have a choice. Putting him into the clinic was for his own safety. Besides, Joey is totally gone. He knows no one and he can’t function. And the medical bills have been piling up. Joey didn’t have any medical insurance, so Harriet and Anderson are working hard to pay all his bills.”

Cody rolled his eyes and twirled his finger. The stimulants he’d just taken were starting to kick in. “Now there are just two of us,” he said. “It seems like just yesterday we were all three sitting together in that nightclub in New York, after Joey and I sang together.”

“I know,” Rush said. “Poor Joey. I never thought it would turn out this way for him. He’s still a young man. How cruel, to have such a rare disorder.”

There was a loud knock on the dressing room door and someone shouted, “We’re ready for you now.” Cody rolled his eyes again and looked at his hair in mirror. “Listen, Rush,” he said, speaking faster, “I’ve got to go. I’m shooting a new video, the one that’s going to feature Lance’s song, and they’re calling me. It’s the last day of shooting and the director is a real fucker. Thanks for letting me know about Joey. Keep in touch.”

“I will,” Rush said. “Bye.”

When he hung up, he stood and looked into the mirror, then lifted his middle finger toward the dressing room door. “I’ll take my good old fucking time,” he whispered. He’d applied makeup, but there were still dark shadows beneath his eyes, and his face and neck looked gaunt. He was wearing a tight black T-shirt and his collarbones protruded. The last time he’d stepped onto a scale, he was about twenty pounds lighter than he’d been six months earlier. He blamed the weight loss on his last concert tour,

which had taken him all over the world. Food hadn't interested him since then, and he practically lived on pills. The stimulants, including cigarettes, helped him function during the day, and dudes and sleeping pills got him through the night. He'd tried to get a stronger drug to sleep, but it could only be administered by a medical doctor. So he just doubled and tripled the doses of his regular prescriptions. He figured that as long as they were being prescribed by a doctor, they were safe to take. He didn't consider himself a drug addict.

He crossed to the set with a smile, hoping the pills would kick in and give him the energy he needed to shoot the video. He wanted this video to go well. The last one he'd done had received bad reviews. He was getting a bad reputation around town, and the director he was working with on this video wasn't helping his situation. The press was saying he was difficult to work with, and people were already starting to avoid him at parties. In Hollywood, he'd learned, they only loved you when you were on top.

This was a complicated, overproduced video with important dance routines that revolved around the song. The tension between Cody and the director had started on the first day of shooting, when Cody had questioned a dance move and the director had shot him down with a condescending tone. This elitist director was a perfectionist who wanted to get every single shot perfect—and he clearly was not a fan of Cody Atkins.

While they were shooting, Cody gritted his teeth and did as he was told. But the director kept stopping for one thing or another, sometimes re-taking one dance segment more than two dozen times. An hour into the shoot, Cody took two more pills, hoping to get the energy he needed to continue. After that day, he vowed he'd never work with this director again. But as the day wore on, the problems only got worse. He tried hard to

concentrate on his moves, but he kept stumbling over his own feet. He actually tripped over a male dancer and fell face first on the set. And each time he made a mistake, the director made him do it over until it was perfect. It felt like punishment.

After one simple mistake that Cody thought could have been overlooked, the director shouted, "Cut." He glared at Cody and said, "We'll do this one hundred times until we get it right, buddy."

Cody clenched his fists. He glared back at him, and blood rushed to his temples. He squared his shoulders and shouted, "Who the fuck do you think you're calling buddy? Don't you fucking talk to me like that, you big dumb fuck. I've been taking your shit since the beginning of this video, and I've fucking had it. Who the *fuck* do you think you are?" He looked into the director's eyes without blinking.

The set became silent. The tension between Cody and the director had been building for a long time. The dancers looked at the director to see what his reaction would be.

"*I'm* the fucking director," he shouted back.

Cody took a deep breath, then stormed off the set. He went back to his dressing room and slammed the door shut. While he was walking, he heard the director shout, "Get Grayer on the phone. Tell him to come over right now and take care of this."

A half hour later, there was a knock on Cody's door. "Who is it?" Cody shouted.

"It's Grayer. Open the door right now. I'm not playing games." Grayer was one of the producers of the video. Since he'd been secretly sleeping with Cody, he'd begun to get involved in Cody's career, investing his time and his money. Supposedly, Grayer was the only one who knew how to keep Cody in line.

Cody hesitated for a moment, then stood up and opened the dressing room door. When Grayer walked inside, Cody said, "I'm not going back out there until the fucking director is fired."

"Are you fucking crazy?" Grayer shouted. "This is the last day. You don't fire a director on the last day. You fucking do what you have to do and get it over with."

Grayer looked at the dressing room table. He picked up a bottle of pills and read the label. "How many of these stimulants have you taken today?" he asked.

Cody looked down at his shoes and shrugged his shoulders. "Just a couple. I needed the energy." His voice became soft and innocent, hoping to get pity from Grayer.

Grayer frowned. He put the pill bottle down and went to where Cody was standing. He grabbed Cody's shoulders and shook him a couple of times. "Listen to me," Grayer said, "I've got my money and my reputation all tied up in this fucking video. You're going to put on a smile and go back out there and perform." He shook him harder. "Do you understand me?"

"Let go of me," Cody said. His eyes filled and his stomach was twisting in knots. He tried to pull away, but Grayer held him even tighter.

Grayer grabbed the back of his head, kissed him on the mouth, and squeezed his ass hard. When he stopped kissing, he said, "Now get out there and make the fucking video. This is costing me a fortune, and your career is at stake with this one. If this video isn't perfect, you're going to be all washed up before you can swallow your next fucking pill."

When Grayer mentioned his career, Cody raised his eyebrows. He didn't care about Grayer losing money on him. He didn't care about the director. But he cared about

his own career. So he pushed Grayer back and smoothed out his shirt. He took a deep breath and said, "Go fuck yourself. You're nothing but a fucking closet case." Then he walked back to the set to resume shooting the video.

For the rest of the day, Cody remained calm. He listened to the director, clenching his fists the entire time. After they shot the last scene, Cody walked off the set, never looking back, and gathered his things in his dressing room. Everyone else was going to a party to celebrate finishing the video. But Cody was going home. His legs felt weak and his voice was wrecked. By the time he sat down in his car outside the studio, all he could do was look up at the moon roof and sigh.

On the way home, he took two dudes to relax. He'd take two more in a couple of hours, then he'd take a few sleeping pills before he went to bed. He knew if he didn't start taking the pills now, he'd be up all night. And he needed to sleep. If it had been possible, he would have slept for a full week.

When he pulled into the driveway, he saw Grayer's car near the garage and another strange car near the front walk. The car looked slightly familiar, but it was dark and the pills were starting to fog up his head. He parked next to the strange car, hoping Grayer hadn't invited anyone for dinner. Cody didn't feel like smiling or talking tonight. The thought of putting up a front, after the day he'd just experienced, made him nauseous.

The house was dark; just one small light on in the entrance hall. Cody looked into the living room and the library, but both rooms were dark and empty. So he went around to the back of the house, where he saw lights on outside near the pool. One of the glass doors was wide open and he heard voices. Grayer was talking to someone, but Cody

wasn't sure who it was. He slowly crept up to the door and stood beside it, leaning forward so he could hear what Grayer was saying.

"Don't be so fucking uptight," Grayer said in a low sultry voice. "Take off your pants and let's have a little fun. Cody won't be home for a while yet. He just wrapped up a new video and there's a party tonight. Cody never misses a party where he can be the center of attention."

Cody moved forward and looked out at the pool area. It was dark inside the house and no one could see him. Grayer was standing there naked, talking to Cody's ex-partner, Roy.

Roy was fully clothed. He wasn't looking at Grayer's naked body; he was looking at the pool. When Grayer put his hand on Roy's ass, Roy stepped back and said, "I only stopped by to see how Cody is doing. Since he's not here, I should be going. I'll let myself out."

Cody pressed his palm to his throat. Grayer's penis was semi-erect. He reached for Roy's crotch and said, "I've been told I'm one of the best cocksuckers in Hollywood. All I have to do is get down on my knees and pull down your zipper. I'll bet a hot guy like you likes getting serviced by a pair of wet lips. I'll bet you're hung, too. You don't have to do a thing either. No reciprocation necessary. I just want to get you off, big guy."

Roy put his arms up and stepped back. "I'm sure you are the best cocksucker in Hollywood," he said. "But I really have to be leaving now. Just tell Cody I stopped by and that I'll call him."

Before Grayer had a chance to respond to Roy, Cody stepped outside to the pool area and said, "Well, well, Grayer. You could have fooled me. I had no idea you were



such a good cocksucker, and I'm the one who's been sleeping with you." The sex between them had never been good.

Roy rubbed his jaw and put his hands into his pockets. He stared down at his shoes and shook his head.

Cody walked up to Grayer and said, "So this is what you do when I'm not home. And with my ex-lover?"

Roy frowned. "Nothing happened between us," he said. "I was just leaving. I only stopped by to see how you were doing. I heard about what happened to Joey, I started thinking about the past, and I felt bad. I just wanted to talk."

Cody smiled. "I know nothing happened, Roy. I was listening at the door. But that's thanks to you, because you're a good, decent man. If it were up to Grayer, the best cocksucker in Hollywood, he'd be on his knees right now sucking you off." Then he looked at Grayer and said, "You absolutely *disgust* me."

Grayer gave Cody a mean look. "I'm not a monk, Cody. I'm a man and I have needs. You've been too tired to fulfill those needs, so I've decided to fulfill them elsewhere."

Roy pulled his keys out of his pocket. "This is getting way too personal. I'm going to leave. I'll find my own way out." He turned and tapped Cody on the shoulder. "I only stopped by to say hello and to see how you were doing."

Cody smiled. "Thank you, Roy. I appreciate it. I'm sorry you had to experience this."

When Roy turned to leave, Grayer went to a table and reached for a cigarette. He was still naked and didn't seem to care. He lit the cigarette and took a long drag. "I'm

glad you came in tonight and found me like this,” he said. “I’m leaving tonight and I’m not coming back again. I’m going back to my own place. We’re finished.”

Cody ignored Grayer. He watched Roy walk away, wondering why he hadn’t fought harder to keep Roy. When he heard the front door close, his heart started to beat faster. He didn’t want to be alone again. The thought of sleeping in a large empty bed made his hands tremble. He turned and faced Grayer. He took a few steps forward and said, “Don’t go. We can work this out. Don’t leave this way.”

He wasn’t in love with Grayer, but Grayer made him feel safe and protected. Grayer knew how to calm him and make everything all right again.

But Grayer shook his head. “It’s time to move on,” he said. “I need more. Besides, we were both doomed from the start.”

Cody tilted his head and gave him a look. He had no idea what Grayer was talking about. “Why were we doomed? I thought we were good together.”

Grayer smiled and shrugged. “We’ve been fooling ourselves. We’re doomed because we’re both bottoms,” he said. “That never works out in the end. And if it does, it winds up being a sexless relationship based only on mutual affection. Which is fine for some people, but I need more than that. I need a real man. I need to get fucked on a regular basis.”

Cody clenched his fists. All this time Grayer had been pretending to be the dominant one in bed. Grayer had been the guy on top since they’d first been together and Cody had no idea that Grayer was a bottom. Cody swiped the table clean with his arm. A bottle of vodka, a few crystal cocktail glasses, and an ashtray crashed to the tiled floor. “You fucking liar,” he shouted. “You are a fucking creep. I’ve made a few big mistakes

in my lifetime, but so far you've been the biggest." He folded his arms across his chest. "Now get out of my house."

Grayer looked at him and smiled. "Gladly," he said.

When Grayer was gone, Cody poured himself a tall glass of vodka and stumbled up to his bedroom. Even though the room was spinning and everything was distorted, he was still terrified he wouldn't be able to sleep that night. He'd taken four dudes and they didn't seem to be working. Usually, the tips of his toes tingled and his fingertips went numb. So he removed his clothes and got into bed. He pulled the covers up to his neck and reached for a bottle of strong sleeping pills on the nightstand. The vodka and the dudes were working, but he wanted reassurance. He had trouble opening the pill bottle. It slipped from his hand and sleeping pills fell out all over the top of the nightstand. He grabbed a few pills and laughed. All he needed was a good night's sleep and everything would be better in the morning. He put the pills into his mouth and took a hard swallow of vodka to wash them down.

By the time the phone started to ring, his head was on the pillow and his arm felt like it weighed two hundred pounds. He fumbled for the phone, knocking the vodka and the sleeping pills off the nightstand. He lifted the receiver and said, "Who is it?" His voice was soft and slurred and cottony.

Someone shouted into the receiver. It sounded like Lance Sharp, but Cody couldn't be sure. His eyes were heavy by then and he didn't want to waste good sleeping time talking on the phone. So he said, "I need sleep. I'm so tired." Then he dropped the phone on the floor beside the bed, rested his head on the soft pillow, and closed his eyes.

## Chapter Sixteen

When Cody opened his eyes again, bright sunlight was streaming through the room. Lance and Roy were standing at the foot of his bed. Rush was sitting on the edge of the bed next to him. Cody tried to sit up, but it felt as if there was a one-thousand-pound weight resting on his head. His mouth was dry and had a sour taste in his mouth. He rubbed his eyes with both hands and looked around the room. When Rush saw he was awake, he grabbed Cody's hand and smiled.

Cody tipped his head to the side and asked, "What are you all doing here?" It took him a moment to realize he was in his own bed, in his own house. At first he thought he was dreaming.

Rush gave Lance and Roy a look. Lance raised his eyebrows and Roy frowned and looked down at the floor. "You had a slight accident last night," Rush said. "You overdosed on sleeping pills. We had to have your stomach pumped. The doctor just left. He said it wasn't a large amount and that you're going to be fine." Rush squeezed Cody's hand and lowered his voice. "It *was* an accident, wasn't it, Cody?"

Cody sat up higher and rubbed his eyes again. "Of course it was an accident," he said. "I took a few extra pills to be sure I'd sleep." His voice was hoarse and wrecked, and the sour taste made him nauseous. "I had my stomach pumped and there was a doctor here?" The last thing he remembered was dropping the sleeping pills all over the floor.

"When I called you last night," Lance said, "to ask how the last day of shooting went with the music video, you sounded bad. So I called Roy and he told me what happened with Grayer. After that, I called my doctor and we came over here as soon as

we could.” He tapped Roy on the back. “We called Roy, too. We figured he still had a key to the front door.”

Roy shook his head. “I can’t believe you did this, Cody.”

Cody shrugged his shoulders and forced a smile. He didn’t want them to think he’d done it on purpose. He *hadn’t* done it on purpose. He’d just lost track of what he’d been taking that night. “It was an accident. I had a stressful day and all I wanted to do was sleep. Trust me, I’d never kill myself over a man like Grayer Crowley.” He looked at Rush and sighed. He didn’t want this in the tabloids. “Who else knows about this?”

Rush shrugged. “Just us and the doctor. And the doctor won’t say a word to anyone. He’s been Lance’s doctor since he moved out here. That’s why we called him first instead of calling 911. We wanted to keep this out of the press for your sake.”

Cody squeezed Rush’s hand with both of his hands. “Thanks, guys,” he said, “I really appreciate this. If something like this got out, it wouldn’t be good for my career. I can just see how the vultures would love reading about it. Radcliff Benson would hang the headlines over his mantel and light candles.”

Roy folded his arms across his chest and said, “I’m still not sure we did the right thing.”

Cody stared at him, eyebrows furrowed. “Why would you say something like that?”

“Because we’re not sure if you have a serious drug problem or not,” Roy said. “If you’re addicted to these pills, we need to take care of it fast before something like this happens again.” He reached down and held Cody’s foot in his hand. “I know we’re not a couple anymore. But I can’t stand the thought of losing you.”

Cody sat up straighter and smiled, then waved his arm and said, “I’m fine. I don’t have a problem with pills. I don’t have an addictive personality. I can stop taking them whenever I want.”

Roy looked at Lance and rolled his eyes.

Rush reached forward and grabbed Cody’s shoulders. He looked into Cody’s eyes and asked calmly, “Are you sure? If you need help, and you do have a problem, we’ll be there for you.” He sighed and hesitated for a moment. “I also know that if you’re not willing to admit there is a problem, nothing we do is going to help you.”

Cody leaned forward and hugged him. “I’m sure, guys. I just lost track of what I was doing last night, is all. I can stop taking the dudes anytime I want. I’ll be just fine. I promise.”

Cody truly believed it.

\* \* \* \*

In the months to come, however, nothing changed. Cody continued taking a combination of stimulants during the day and depressants at night. He did take them with care, always counting the pills so he wouldn’t overdose again. But his life started slipping down and he didn’t know how to hold onto anything. He missed important appointments and he was quick to lose his temper. He even backed into his own garage one night and ruined his car. Though his drug problem wasn’t public knowledge yet, people in Hollywood started to avoid him. Those who had dealt with their own drug problems looked at him and sighed. Cody shrugged it off as jealousy. His new video was a huge hit, and the song had gone platinum almost overnight. People with drug problems couldn’t be that successful.

Then one night, after an embarrassing scene in a restaurant where Cody threw a basket of rolls at a waiter because they weren't warm enough, Rush pulled him aside and said, "We have to talk. I've spoken to Lance and Roy and we all think you have a serious problem. We want you to check into the substance abuse program at The Harvey Milk Clinic as soon as possible and get help. We'll support you all the way." Then he looked into Cody's eyes. "But you have to work with us. You have to admit there is a problem."

Cody's eyes grew wide. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was in the restaurant alone with Rush. Lance was having dinner with a client and Cody didn't know where Roy was. Cody smoothed out his napkin and said, "I don't have a problem. I'm fine. I just lost my temper with a waiter. It's no big thing. I'll apologize and leave him a huge tip. Besides, I don't have time for a problem. I'm starting to gear up for another concert tour soon. This is an international tour and I have a lot to prepare."

Rush smoothed out his napkin and said, "I'm just not sure, Cody. We all want to come over and talk to you tomorrow night. We're bringing a professional counselor with us."

Cody laughed. "It sounds like an intervention," he said. He'd heard about interventions, but he didn't know how it applied to him. He was a successful celebrity with plenty of money, and he wasn't a drug addict or a drug dealer. His pills came from real doctors with real prescriptions. "It's just a waste of time. I don't have a problem." He wanted to crack a plate over Rush's head for talking to him this way. There he was, perfect Rush, dressed in a tasteful outfit with his perfect body and his perfect hair. Rush had done the impossible; he'd made tacky underwear modeling look dignified. Everything Rush did looked simple and easy. He even had the perfect relationship with

Lance. In Rush's world of absolute perfection, he couldn't even begin to understand what Cody's life was like. He'd never know how hard Cody had worked to get where he was and how hard he'd worked to please his fans and his critics. But Cody didn't want Rush to think he was mad. So he forced his voice to remain calm and he chose his words with care.

Rush closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he said, "Cody, I just can't stand by and watch you ruin your life. I love you too much. We've known each other too long. What kind of a friend would I be if I ignored the fact that you might have a problem?"

Cody smiled. "Let's have a nice quiet dinner together and talk about this later. It's been months since we've seen each other. I promise, I'll take good care of the waiter. I shouldn't have gone after him like I did."

Rush agreed not to discuss the matter any more that evening, but on the way to their cars, he said, "We'll be over around seven tomorrow night. Roy's coming, too. He's very worried about you. We just want to talk this out with a professional to see if there really is a problem. And if the counselor thinks there isn't, no big deal."

Cody laughed and said, "You'll be wasting your time. I've never been better in my life."

On his way home from the restaurant, Cody thought about what Rush had said. He gripped the steering wheel and took a few more dudes to calm his nerves. How dare Rush assume there was something wrong with him? He knew for a fact that Rush took dudes himself when he wanted to relax. He had no right to point the finger at Cody, with



his sainted, condescending voice. If Rush and Lance and Roy wanted to corner him and make him believe he had a problem, they were going to do it by themselves.

Cody turned the car around and headed to the airport. While he drove, he called the airlines and booked the next flight to San Francisco. He smiled and took another dude. They could have all the interventions they wanted. But he wasn't going to be around to suffer through them. There was nothing wrong with him, and he was going to prove it to everyone.

\* \* \* \*

By the time the plane landed in San Francisco, it was after midnight. Cody's fingers were numb and his toes were tingling. In addition to the dudes, he'd had a few martinis on the plane. He laughed and joked around when he stumbled out the door and fell into a flight attendant. He apologized with a slurred voice and made an excuse about how tired he was because he'd been working all day. He wasn't sure if the attendant recognized him or not. He'd put on a black baseball cap back in L.A. that he'd found in the back seat of his car. It covered almost half of his head. He thought he was fooling everyone; he didn't have a problem. But he didn't see the way the flight attendant scowled and rolled his eyes as he stumbled out of the plane.

He found a taxi outside the airport and told the driver to take him to the Castro. He was feeling free and detached and he wanted to walk around and check out the hot guys in a gay neighborhood. For some reason he couldn't explain, he wanted to be around other gay men just like himself—real gay men. He'd been portraying a public image for so long, he wasn't sure who he was anymore. He was openly gay; his entire life had been defined by his gayness. But there was a catch: he was the gay man the public

wanted him to be. He was the nice, quiet gay guy who wasn't political and looked like a straight guy. He'd once overheard a woman say, "Why can't the rest of *them* be just like Cody Atkins?" In public, Cody Atkins didn't cruise gay bars and didn't even think about having sex with other men. Cody had always been aware of his public image. He knew they wanted him to be sexless, and that's what he gave them. It was okay to be gay as long as he fit into the mold they wanted to see. It was cool to be gay, it was trendy to be gay—as long as he didn't French kiss another man in public. But he'd paid a price, too. There were times when he felt more like an image of a gay man than an actual human being.

The taxi dropped him off at 19th and Castro. He was carrying five one-hundred-dollar bills in his wallet and he didn't want to pay with a credit card because he didn't want the driver to see his name. So he handed the driver a one-hundred-dollar bill and said, "Keep the change."

The driver looked down at the money and smiled. "Thank you, sir," He didn't offer to give him change.

After that, he went to a bar and had another drink. He laughed and flirted with a group of rugged guys in one bar, kissing each one while they took turns playing with his ass. They actually pulled him into a dark corner of the bar, unfastened his jeans, and took turns putting their hands down his pants. Though everything was distorted, he knew they were all dark, that they were all wearing black leather, and that they all had thick facial hair. He liked the way their large strong hands went down his pants; their deep throaty voices made his penis grow. He wiggled his ass and arched his back until they tried to

pull his pants all the way down. He stopped them just in time and left them standing in the back of the bar.

Then he went to another bar a few blocks away. This one was dark, with red walls and fewer people, and there were male strippers dancing on top of the bars. He sat down at the bar and ordered a drink, watching a young blond guy in a tight gold g-string shake his ass back and forth. When the blond guy stepped in front of where Cody was sitting and shook his penis in Cody's face, Cody pulled another one-hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and shoved it into the young guy's g-string. Then he laughed so hard he fell back into the lap of a strange guy sitting next to him at the bar. The guy was in his mid-thirties and he had thick brown hair. He wore a brown leather jacket, ripped jeans, and a white T-shirt. His face was long and lean, with a strong chin. He reminded Cody of the rough-looking guy who did his landscaping each week.

The guy seemed to know that Cody was wasted. He wrapped his arms around him and whispered into his ear, "I'll bet you're a dirty little fucker. I'll bet you could take off your clothes better than that guy who is already up there."

Cody threw his head back and licked the guy's jaw. He had heavy stubble and his breath smelled like beer and tobacco. "I'll bet I could, too," Cody said, grinding his ass into the guy's lap. No one had ever referred to him as a dirty little fucker before. For the first time in a long time, he felt free enough to do whatever he wanted to do.

The guy was there with two of his buddies. He looked at them and nodded, then whispered to Cody, "Why don't you come back to my place and put on a private show for me and my buds here?" He nodded toward his friends.

Cody looked at them and smiled. One was big and husky, with a goatee and short dark hair. The other was completely bald, with two gold earrings and a tattoo on his upper arm. Cody reached down and grabbed the guy's crotch. He squeezed his balls a few times and smiled. "You guys lead the way."

The next thing Cody remembered was waking up in a strange bed. He was stark naked and his body was sprawled out across the middle of the bed. His head was resting on a hairy abdomen and there was dark pubic hair next to his lips. His legs were mingled with a strange man's hairy legs and there was a large hand groping his ass. He lifted his head and looked around. He was in bed with three naked men, in a room with cracked wallpaper and chipped paint. His head was spinning and he had trouble focusing. When he tried to move, the hand on his ass forced him down again.

"Get your fucking hands off me," he said. "I'm getting up."

The guy laughed. It was the guy who had been sitting next to him at the bar the night before. The guy was naked and Cody's stomach was resting on his penis. "You're not as sweet now as you were last night when my buddies were taking turns on you. I never saw anyone who liked to get fucked as much as you." Then he patted Cody's ass a few times and forced his finger inside Cody's anus.

Cody jumped up off the bed and looked for his clothes so he could get dressed. How could he have been so reckless? If these guys recognized him, his career would be over. Two of the guys were still sleeping, snoring so loudly their chests were heaving. He just wanted to find his clothes and get out of there as fast as he could. His shirt was on the floor and there were three used condoms on top of it. He took a deep breath; at least

they'd had safe sex. His pants were halfway under the bed and there were two pairs of white briefs on top of them.

The guy who was awake rubbed his eyes and said, "Why don't you come back to bed and relax? When my buddies wake up, we can have more fun. You seemed to like what we did to you last night. We can repeat it this morning."

Cody bit the inside of his mouth and took a quick breath. He was almost dressed, but he couldn't find one shoe. "Thanks, man," he said, putting on the baseball cap and looking away, "I've gotta get moving." The guy seemed harmless enough, but he had a huge chest and bulging biceps and Cody didn't want to piss him off. All he wanted to do was get out of there and find a good hotel where he could soak in a hot tub and wash their strong smells from his body.

His shoe was beneath his jacket near the end of the bed. When he put the shoe on, he reached into his jacket and found a bottle of dudes. He popped the cap and took a couple. With each move he made, his head pounded and things looked hazier.

When he was dressed, he didn't even bother to say goodbye to the guy in the bed. He raced out of the room and down a narrow hallway that had uneven wooden floors and yellowed wallpaper. He tripped several times and fell into the wall. He stumbled down three flights of stairs, holding the rickety banister to keep his balance. When he reached the street, he saw a taxi at the other end of the block. He ran into the street without looking and lifted his arm high, hoping the taxi driver would see him. While he waved, he heard a loud screech—and a blunt object struck him from behind.

He fell forward and landed on the pavement. The last sound he heard was a woman shouting. He wasn't sure what she said, but it sounded like, "Call 911."

## Chapter Seventeen

When Joey Delaney was first admitted to The Harvey Milk Clinic, Harriet and Anderson paid his bills from the money he'd earned from the television series. His medical bills were astounding. Each time Harriet paid one, her hands shook when she dropped it into the mailbox. They reached the six-figure mark in a matter of months. And the timing couldn't have been any worse. After Joey's show had been canceled, he'd gone downhill fast. Because he wasn't working, he had no insurance, and no other insurance company would pick him up with a pre-existing condition. He had too much money to qualify for government assistance and not enough to pay on his own. And even when his own money was depleted, the government wouldn't give enough assistance to pay for the expensive care he was receiving at The Harvey Milk Clinic. He'd have to transfer to a state facility.

There were other problems. Joey's accountant had made grave errors, and Joey wound up owing the government a great deal of money in back taxes. In order to pay those taxes, they'd have to sell the house in the Hollywood Hills. Anderson had never been involved with Joey's financial matters, or any financial matters, and all this left him breathless. Harriet explained everything to him in detail while he stared into the fireplace wondering what else could go wrong with his life.

Harriet said, "After the house is sold and the back taxes are paid, there will be enough money left to keep Joey at the clinic for about six months. And that doesn't include our household expenses." She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "After that, we'll have to find a less expensive place to put him."

Anderson sat quietly and thought. He hadn't worked as a model in a long time and he didn't have enough money in his own bank account to afford Joey's care. And he was still sending his mother money each month. "We'll both have to get jobs," he said. "I'll start looking for modeling jobs as soon as possible. I'm sure you can find something. We have to keep Joey where he is. I don't want him anywhere else."

Harriet shrugged her shoulders. "I just don't see how we're going to do it, Anderson," she said. "The kind of modeling you do will never pay the bills at the clinic, and I know I can get a decent job, but nothing that will cover Joey's expenses and medical bills. I've already listed my place in New York for sale. But I have to find a place to live out here now. I'm thinking about moving closer to San Francisco to be near Joey. I admire your tenacity for wanting to keep Joey where he is. But we have to face facts. Eventually, Joey will have to be moved to a cheaper facility."

Anderson looked up at a photo of Joey over the fireplace. It had been taken the night he'd done his singing act in a New York nightclub with Cody. Knowing Joey would never make love to him again left him with an empty feeling he knew would never be filled. But that didn't change the fact that he was still in love with Joey, or the fact that his feelings for Joey went far beyond sex. So he clenched his fists and looked Harriet in the eye. "I'll figure out a way, Harriet. I swear to God I will. Joey will remain where he is for the rest of his life."

The very next day, Anderson started looking for work. He called his small-time Hollywood agent (he wasn't big enough to be represented by Lance or Bart Hasslet) and told him he was actively searching for as much work as he could get, and there was nothing he wouldn't do. Then he listed the house with a Realtor and started thinking of

ways to economize his life. The fact that Harriet was planning to move to San Francisco so she could be closer to Joey and visit him often eased Anderson's fears. Unfortunately, Anderson had to stay in Hollywood, where there were more job opportunities. He wouldn't be able to see Joey as often. But paying Joey's expenses was his only priority.

Then one cool morning while Anderson was packing to leave his home for good, just when he was about to give up all hope, his agent called. He told Anderson there were two interesting job offers and he wanted to meet with him in his office that afternoon. Anderson hung up and ran into his bedroom to get dressed. He had been searching for work for months and he hadn't found anything even halfway decent. The only thing for which he was qualified was looking good. Harriet had found a position at a public relations firm and she'd moved to San Francisco a week earlier to start a new life. But her job paid average wages and would never take care of Joey's expenses.

Later that afternoon, his agent told him about the job offers. The first offer made Anderson sit up and smile. A small TV station in Sacramento, which was closer to Joey, was looking for a new weatherman and they liked the way Anderson looked. They also liked the fact that he'd already had minor national exposure as a male model and some people would recognize him. The second offer made him sit back in his chair and sigh. It was from a film producer who had seen Anderson's underwear ads. The film producer also liked the fact that Anderson had some national exposure and that some people would recognize him.

Anderson listened to his agent without saying a word. The weatherman position at the small TV station was a dream job for someone like Anderson. The hours were regular, it was good clean work, and he'd never have to worry about taking his clothes off in front



of a camera again. The only problem with the job was the salary. If it hadn't been for Joey's expenses, the salary would have been fine with Anderson. But he didn't see how he'd be able to afford Joey's bills along with his own meager living expenses.

The second offer was unexpected. The agent told Anderson about it without mincing his words. A film producer in Europe wanted Anderson to sign with his studio for a huge amount of money to star in a series of erotic, all-male films. The producer was so excited about getting someone with Anderson's experience and exposure he was willing to offer him a record amount of money and a contract that would include all of his living expenses. Anderson's agent referred to these films as "art films," but Anderson knew better. The producer was the owner of Palomino Studios, the largest and most successful all-male porn studio in the world.

If Joey hadn't been sick, Anderson would have turned down the second offer immediately and jumped at the first offer. But Anderson told his agent he wanted to think about both offers for a day and that he'd get back to him by noon the next day. Then he got into his car and drove north to San Francisco to see Joey. The drive would help him think. Seeing Joey's face would calm his fears. Anderson had reached an important crossroad in his life and he wasn't sure which way to turn. He had to decide between what he wanted to do most in the world, and what meant the most to him in the world.

After spending three hours watching Joey sit in a wheelchair and stare at his lap without saying a word, Anderson went to a cheap motel on the outskirts of San Francisco. He took a few dudes and slept well that night. When he woke up the next morning, he didn't wait until noon. He called his agent first thing and told him he was going to accept the deal with the film producer. The money was too good to turn down; it was a once-in-

a-lifetime opportunity to be financially free. He'd be able to pay for all of Joey's expenses and he'd never have to worry about money again. But he agreed to all this on one condition: in addition to the money they were already offering him, he wanted a percentage of each film he starred in. This, he knew, would assure Joey the best care for the rest of his life.

## Chapter Eighteen

When the house in the Hollywood Hills was finally sold, Anderson took a quick trip to San Francisco to say goodbye to Joey. He was flying to Paris to begin shooting the new films and he wouldn't be able to see Joey as often. Palomino Studios agreed to Anderson's financial demands and signed him to a contract that would guarantee his financial future, where he'd also receive a percentage of each film. He didn't go into the details with Harriet about what he was doing, but he knew she read the trade magazines. And because his deal had broken all prior records in the adult film industry, Anderson knew she couldn't have missed the announcement.

But she never said a word about it. When he hugged her goodbye as he was leaving Joey's room at The Harvey Milk Clinic, she squeezed him tightly and said, "Thank you for everything. I don't know what Joey, or I, would do without you."

He hugged her back and said weakly, "I think I'm doing the right thing. Take care of him while I'm gone. And keep me posted about what's happening with him."

"I will," Harriet said. She stepped back and shrugged her shoulders. "Sometimes we just do what we have to do in life. And it's not always easy." Then she looked him up and down and smiled. "Just so you know, if I looked as gorgeous as you, I'd be doing the same thing you're doing right now. But unfortunately, I'm a fucking dog."

He laughed. He was glad she'd found humor in the situation. "I know you would, Harriet. You're a tough woman."

She smiled. "Not as strong as you, Anderson."

Anderson did not tell any of his other friends about his plans. Rush had left a few messages on his voice mail, but he'd never returned them. He figured Rush and Lance had probably read about the deal with Palomino the same way Harriet had. And Cody was so screwed up with drugs, he didn't know what he was doing. Anderson didn't want to go into detail with anyone, and he didn't want anyone questioning his motives or trying to change his mind. As far as his mother was concerned, he knew the only thing she cared about was getting her monthly check in the mail.

In Paris, Anderson settled into a quiet life that revolved around his work. The films he was starring in required a great deal of physical energy. He had to work out daily, which included five-mile runs each morning, to keep his body in perfect shape. But this was nothing new to him. He'd stopped eating carbohydrates years ago. He hadn't had ice cream for so long, he'd stopped craving it. He was a professional and even though he was doing porn, he wanted to do it as well as he could. Though he wasn't in love with making porn, he secretly liked the fact that he was doing something no other adult film star had done in the past. This, he knew, would go down in adult film history. The money it generated would keep Joey safe for the rest of his life.

The title of the first film was *Ten Man March*. The first time Anderson heard it, he wasn't impressed. It didn't even sound grammatically correct. But when the producer explained the title, Anderson raised his eyebrows and took a long, deep breath. There wasn't much verbal acting required. It would all be filmed inside a studio so he wouldn't have to go on location anywhere. The plot revolved around Anderson and his body. All he had to do was lie back in a black leather sling while ten different guys took turns fucking him. In the end, while the tenth guy fucked him and he climaxed, the other nine

guys who had already fucked him would stand around cheering him on. This would be the first film in the entire series. After that, he'd make nine more films with similar titles. The second film would be titled *Twenty Man March*, the third, *Thirty Man March*, and the numbers would increase in the titles until the final film, *One Hundred Man March*.

The producer, so he claimed, was going for his own artistic ambiance with these films. He was tired of the same old porn flicks with awful background music and actors who clearly didn't like what they were doing. He wanted a mixture of reality and fantasy. The reality of these films was that it was actually happening to Anderson and that real guys who had never acted before were fucking him. The fantasy was that there were a lot of gay men out there who wished it could happen to them. Each man who fucked Anderson would be different. Nothing like it had ever been done before. And the producer needed a star who already had some exposure, like Anderson, to pull it off and make it look real. Anderson would have to pretend that he enjoyed getting fucked by all these men, and he had to maintain an erection the entire time. The producer wanted each film to be shot without scene breaks and choppy cuts. When it was time for one hundred men to fuck Anderson, the producer actually wanted one hundred men to do it all in one nonstop scene.

The first film went off without any problems. The inexpensive set was stark, except for a black leather sling and a leopard rug. The guys all wore condoms and they treated Anderson very well. The next few films went smoothly, too. But by the time they reached the point of fifty guys taking turns on Anderson, some of the actors had trouble getting erections because they'd been waiting so long. Others had problems coming. Anderson had to stroke them gently and talk to them nicely to get them aroused, which

required a lot of his energy. But he was a professional in each film, and he was always able to get them hard and get them off. He had a way with men; he knew how to stroke their egos and their dicks at the same time. And Anderson never had a problem losing his own erection once.

When each film was released, it was a huge success. In adult film circles, Anderson's name became synonymous with the phrases gang bang and power bottom. The viewers loved his innocent smile and the way he treated each guy with such gentle, tender concern. Each time a guy mounted him, he looked into the guy's eyes and made it look as if there was no one else in the room. People were fascinated by the fact that Anderson could take on so many men at one time. Fan clubs formed; gay bloggers all over the world started writing about Anderson in blog posts. They wrote him fan letters and begged him to make more films. In a way he'd never expected, the series of films became cult-like obsessions in only months, and he was on the verge of becoming a pop culture icon. Some of the attention even crossed into the mainstream media, when a group of film students decided to focus on Anderson in a documentary about the adult film industry.

It was a positive, objective documentary. The fact that he was the son of a famous ex-socialite made him intriguing as a pop culture icon. But they made the documentary without Anderson. He would not consent to a personal interview; he released no comments about it at all. After that, he became almost reclusive. When he left his Paris apartment to go shopping, he wore oversized hats and thick scarves, hoping the attention would die down soon. As far as he was concerned, when the last man fucked him and the series was over, he'd never do another porn film as long as he lived.

At the end of a shoot, his body was physically abused and exhausted. He took pain killers and dudes to fall asleep, longing for the day when he could go back home to spend his afternoons with Joey at the clinic.

As his fame increased, he lost touch with Rush and Lance. They tried calling but he never returned their calls. He was embarrassed about what he was doing. The large sums of money didn't matter, and the international attention didn't give him comfort. Cody was busy pulling his life back together. So Anderson never called his friends back. He talked to Harriet several times a week on the phone. If she was reading about all the publicity Anderson was getting from his pornographic experiences, she never said a word. They spoke to each other as if Anderson worked for a corporation and he was away on a long business trip. The first time his mother heard about what he was doing, she screamed and shouted at him, threatening to disown him completely. But when he told her about all the money he was making and that he'd be sending her bigger checks each month, she stopped shouting and said, "Well, I guess there are worse things you could do."

## Chapter Nineteen

Cody spent almost two hours getting dressed that morning and he wasn't even wearing anything special—just a simple black T-shirt and jeans. Rush and Lance were coming up for a visit and he wanted to look his best. He hadn't seen them in a while. He'd been in The Harvey Milk Clinic for months, working on his emotional problems, recovering from exhaustion, and battling his addiction to drugs. He hadn't had a dude since he'd been run over by that car in San Francisco. He'd been lucky that day. The car hadn't been going fast and he'd only suffered a mild concussion, superficial facial bruises, and a broken arm.

He didn't remember much about the morning he'd been run over by the car, or the events that had led him to San Francisco in the first place. He'd been so drugged up for so long he couldn't remember large chunks of his life. But he did remember that Rush and Lance flew to San Francisco immediately when they'd heard about his accident. He remembered the expressions of relief on their faces when they saw he hadn't been hurt and he'd be physically fine. And right after that, he remembered how they forced him to admit himself into The Harvey Milk Clinic to get help.

At the time, he tried to fight them. But they insisted, without giving him a choice. Lance threatened that if he didn't admit himself to the clinic, he'd drop him as a client. Rush said he'd never speak to him again. Cody knew they weren't joking. They'd looked him in the eye and stared him down.

Now they were coming to visit him, for the first time since they'd helped him get situated at the clinic. He took one last look in the mirror and smoothed the back of his



head with his palm. Then he took a deep breath and went down to the main lobby to wait for them.

When they arrived, he was sitting outside on a bench. It was a bright, warm San Francisco morning, with a blue sky and few clouds. He stood to greet them. He extended both arms and grabbed their hands. "I've missed you guys so much," he said. He was animated and he smiled widely, hoping they'd see how much he'd changed.

Rush hugged him and Lance patted him on the back. "You look great," Rush said. "You look just like that guy I heard singing in the theater on the day we first met."

Cody put his hands in his pockets and shrugged. His hands were a little shaky and he wasn't sure where to put them. He smiled and said, "I guess being in the loony bin has been good for me."

Rush gave Lance a look, clearly not knowing how to respond to Cody's humor.

Cody smiled and said, "Let's walk. There's a beautiful campus you should see. This place really is magical."

While they walked, Rush commented on the lush landscaping and the tall shade trees. There were pots of perfectly arranged flowers between clipped boxwoods and well-tended bonsai trees. One topiary was shaped like a dog; another was shaped like a crescent moon. They passed people in wheelchairs who didn't look up, and they passed people sitting hunched over on benches who stared straight ahead without moving their heads. But there were also other people walking and laughing. There were a couple of older men playing with a Frisbee. In general, if it hadn't been for a few poor souls, the campus looked more like a state park than a mental health facility.

When they stopped walking and leaned into an ivy-covered stone wall, Rush put his arm around Cody and said, “How are you feeling?”

Cody nodded and smiled. “I’m fine,” he said. “I’m a little wobbly, but I’m fine. I haven’t had a pill, a drink, or a cigarette in six months, and I’m finished with all that for good.”

“I’m proud of you,” Rush said. “I knew you could beat this.”

Cody took a deep breath. “Have you heard from Roy? He hasn’t been in touch at all.”

Rush pulled him closer. “Roy calls us all the time. He’s been asking about you since you arrived here.”

“I’m glad,” Cody said. “I think about him a lot. I made some huge mistakes that I’m sorry for. I really screwed things up.”

When Lance saw the fallen expression on Cody’s face, he smiled and asked, “Do you ever see Joey around here? We’ve tried to get in touch with both Harriet and Anderson, but they won’t return our calls. Harriet returned one call. But she didn’t talk long and she said very little about Anderson. ”

Cody frowned and stepped away from them. Joey was in the same clinic, but in a different section. He crossed to a small alcove with a tall, thin statue of a peasant woman carrying a bucket of flowers. He stared down at the statue and smiled. The expression on her face was mild, and her features were delicate and simple. “There was one evening,” Cody said, “when I went to the recreation room to see if there was any life around this place. Up until then, I’d spent my time in my room alone. I walked into the room and heard the piano playing. Every Friday night a professional pianist donates his time and

tries to get the patients to sing along with him. Most of the time, the patients just sit there rocking and staring. No one ever joins in. I was feeling good that night, so I asked the pianist to play something special.”

Rush walked over and stood next to him. “It must have been difficult,” he said.

“It wasn’t easy,” Cody said. “But I was feeling good that night and I wanted to sing. The pianist started to play my request. It was that old Sonny and Cher song I’d done with Joey back on the night we sang together in the nightclub. I was only a quarter of the way through the song when I heard someone else start to sing along with me. It was a man’s voice. I looked up, while I was singing, and I saw Joey. He was in a wheelchair on the other side of the room, with his head bowed, singing along with me. I slowly went over to him and we sang the song together. For that brief moment, he remembered every lyric and every note.”

Rush smiled. “How amazing,” he said. “Maybe he’ll improve. Maybe they are giving him medication to help him now.”

Cody shook his head. He took a deep breath and smiled. “I doubt it,” he said. “While we were singing, even though his voice was perfect, he kept staring straight ahead. My eyes were filled with tears. I was so happy to see him, my voice was shaking. But he didn’t even know I was there. I was a complete stranger. And when the song was finished, he lowered his head and stared down at his lap. I tried to get him to look up at me. I wanted him to recognize me. I got down on my knees and begged. But it was as if he wasn’t even there.”

Lance put his arm on Cody’s shoulder and said, “I’m afraid he’s not there. When I talked to Harriet, she said there’s no hope for him. She also told me that’s why Anderson

has been making those sensational erotic films in Europe. Joey had no insurance and they really needed the money. Anderson didn't have a choice. He had to make the films."

Rush frowned. "Such a shame," he said. "I think I can understand why Anderson doesn't return any phone calls now."

Cody's hands felt shaky and his mouth started to feel dry. This was the first time he'd had a normal conversation with anyone outside the clinic in months. Lance must have seen the confused expression on his face, because he stepped up to him and said, "I have some news you might be interested in, Cody. It involves work."

Cody turned and faced them. He tipped his head and asked, "What kind of news?" He hadn't thought about working for a while. He knew the press had reported all of the events in his life, including his addiction to pills, and he wasn't sure what all this had done to his public image.

"All you have to do is think about it right now," Lance said. "There's nothing definite yet."

"What are you talking about?" Cody asked. Suddenly, his hands felt stronger and a warm feeling passed through his body. He'd been so bored for the past month he would have painted his room if they'd let him.

Lance smiled. "They are casting a new play in New York. It's a musical called *Jump as High as You Can*. When I suggested you might be interested in the lead role, they were very excited."

Cody didn't hesitate, and he didn't stammer. "I want it, Lance. Please get it for me. I've always wanted to go back to Broadway ever since that fucker, Radcliff Benson,

had me fired.” He grabbed Lance’s jacket lapels and squeezed them. “Please get this for me. I’ll do anything. I’ll work for free.”

Rush and Lance laughed. “Calm down,” Rush said.

“I’ve been calm for so long I’m not even sure I’m alive anymore,” Cody said, releasing his grip from Lance’s lapels. “You have no idea what it’s like being in a place like this.” He turned to Lance and said, “I’ll do anything to get this part.”

Lance laughed. “I’ll talk to them, and I’ll let you know,” Lance said. “But you’re *not* going to do this for free. And I want to be sure you’re ready to do something like this.”

Cody grabbed his hand. “It’s what I’ve always wanted to do,” he said. “I know I can make this a hit. Tell them I’ll work harder than I’ve ever worked in my life. Tell them I’m through with booze and drugs and all I care about now is my career.”

## Chapter Twenty

When the last porn film, *One Hundred Man March*, was finished shooting, Anderson didn't even bother to watch the clips before it went into production. He'd been in Paris for so long he was starting to forget what Joey's handsome face looked like. The producer told Anderson he had ideas for other projects and he wanted Anderson to star in them. But Anderson refused. He knew what he'd already done with this series of films could not be repeated, he didn't want to make porn a full-time career, and he wanted to go home to America and live a quiet, simple life. He had enough money to last for the rest of his life.

To ensure that nothing would happen to Joey if something happened to him, Anderson had a legal will drawn up and left everything he had to Harriet. He even took out a large life insurance policy and made Harriet the beneficiary. He left nothing to his mother. He knew the only person in the world who would look out for Joey was Harriet. He trusted her with complete confidence.

On his way back to San Francisco, he stopped in New York for a few days. He wanted to see a few old friends and he wanted to be examined by his old doctor. He hadn't been feeling well for a weeks. His eyelids were always heavy, there were painful pulls in his abdomen, and his skin color was off. In bright sunlight, he looked almost yellow. He had no appetite and he couldn't sleep without taking dudes. His two worst fears were hepatitis and HIV/AIDS, and he wanted to be tested. Although the actors he'd had sex with in the films had used condoms, he knew accidents happened all the time.

He'd taken a few serious chances for the sake of making money. And he'd been fucked by more than five hundred and fifty different men in those films.

He only remained in New York for two days. He'd planned to stay a week, but he was restless and eager to see Joey again. The doctor arranged for him to have a series of tests as quickly as possible, including a few tests Anderson hadn't even considered. When the doctor heard his symptoms, he said it was better to be safe than sorry. So Anderson agreed to have the tests, then took the next flight out to San Francisco to see Joey.

But when he arrived at the clinic, Joey was having a bad day. He didn't recognize Anderson at all. He just sat in his wheelchair picking scraps of food off his plate and tossing them across the room. He mumbled foul words and spoke obscenities that made Anderson blush. Joey had never used foul language; he'd ignored people who did. When Anderson went to touch his arm, he shouted, "Don't touch me. I'm not a fag. Don't fucking touch me. I hate fucking fags."

Anderson released his arm. He wound up sitting in a chair that afternoon for four hours by Joey's side. He watched Joey closely, praying Joey would just remember him for a second. But it didn't happen. By the time Anderson stood up to leave, the nurse came into the room and gave Joey a shot to help him sleep. Anderson kissed the top of his head and said, "I love you. I'll be back tomorrow." Joey ignored him.

After that, he checked into a small hotel not far from the clinic. His legs felt heavy and the pain in his abdomen was getting stronger. He brushed it off as stress, ordered room service, and took a hot bath to calm his nerves. No matter how hard he tried, he

couldn't get the image of Joey's mean, empty expression out of his head. Joey's eyes had been blank—they'd reminded him of the vacant eyes of a feral cat.

When got out of the tub and brushed his teeth, he saw deep, dark circles beneath his own eyes. When they delivered his dinner he removed the lid and made a face. The smell of the steak turned his stomach and the sight of the salad made him want to heave.

So he put the food aside and got into bed. He pulled up the covers and turned on the television. By accident, he caught the tail end of a talk show. Cody was the guest and he was talking about a new Broadway show he was getting ready to do. Cody hadn't changed in that respect. He was always ready to promote before the project even got under way. Anderson laughed and rubbed his aching stomach. He smiled when he saw how good Cody looked and that he was ready to move on with his life after he'd been through so much pain and suffering.

A few minutes after that, his cell phone rang. Anderson reached for it without looking at the caller ID and said, "Hello?"

It was his doctor in New York. It was still early there. "I'm afraid I have some bad news," the doctor said.

"What is it?" he asked. "Do I have AIDS?" This had been his worst fear.

The doctor hesitated. "No," he said. "You tested negative for HIV/AIDS. You tested negative for all transmittable diseases. But when they did the full body MRI they found a large mass on your pancreas. This is why you've been experiencing pain and jaundice." He did what most good doctors did. He told Anderson the truth without hesitating.



Anderson tilted his head. He hadn't expected anything like this. "I see," he said. "And what does this mean?" But he already knew what it meant. He just wanted to hear it from the doctor. He knew a few people who had had pancreatic cancer. They'd all gone through treatments and surgeries and now they were all dead. He'd heard that from the time it was diagnosed, the patient usually had about six months left.

"I'll recommend a good specialist in San Francisco," he said. "Then you'll consult with him. It's hard to give out details on the phone. Are you okay?"

Anderson's voice remained calm. "I'm fine," he said. Then he thanked the doctor for calling him and said he'd wait to hear from him about the specialist. He turned off the phone and stared down at his lap for a long time. He knew there was no cure for pancreatic cancer, and the last thing he needed were more medical bills on top of all Joey's expenses. And if his body was going to be ripped open by surgeons and torn down by chemotherapy, he wouldn't be modeling or making films anymore.

When his cell phone rang a half hour later, he lifted it off the bed in slow motion. It was his mother. She was calling because her last check hadn't arrived. Her voice sounded hollow in the small phone, and each word she mouthed echoed because it was a bad connection. The room started to spin in circles and he pressed his palm to his forehead, forcing his voice to remain natural. He clenched one fist against his head and told her he'd just mailed her a check from New York and she should be getting it tomorrow. He almost told her about his cancer. He even began the sentence with, "There's something I have to tell you...." But she interrupted him and started talking about what his next career plan was. She thought it might be wise for him to do more

porn flicks. She said the money was good and she reminded him he wasn't getting any younger.

While she was talking about the type of porn he should do, he clicked off the TV. Then he reached to the nightstand and opened a full bottle of dudes. He stared at the bottle for a moment, then started taking the pills. He popped them into his mouth three and four at a time, washing them down with a warm glass of tap water. When the entire bottle was empty, he told his mother he was tired and he'd call her the next morning.

## Chapter Twenty One

While Lance was in the bedroom packing to leave for New York, Cody was outside in the pool. Cody had been staying with Rush and Lance. When he'd been discharged from the clinic, Rush had insisted on taking him back to Malibu so he wouldn't go back to an empty house in the Hollywood Hills alone. At first, Cody had refused, hating the thought of imposing on them. But Rush insisted with such strength Cody finally agreed. And he wouldn't be there for long anyway. He had also agreed to star in the new Broadway show, *Jump as High as You Can*, and he was moving back to New York to begin rehearsal. Lance was going with him, and he'd be commuting back and forth to the West Coast. Bart Hasslet thought it would be best for the show if Lance went. Cody still had to prove he wasn't taking drugs anymore and Bart wanted Lance there to support him. Rush wasn't happy about Lance going back to New York, but he knew it was the best thing for Cody, whom he considered one of his best friends.

Rush turned on the TV and pulled a bag of fresh coffee beans out of the closet. Cody and Lance were leaving for the airport in less than an hour and Rush wanted Lance to at least have a cup of coffee and a glass of juice before he left. While he was measuring the coffee, Cody walked into the kitchen and said good morning. He was completely naked, drying the front of his body with a large black towel. Rush smiled and stared down at the coffee maker, but he was clenching his teeth. Rush and Lance's Malibu home was casual and simple, but Rush thought Cody should have been wearing something—at least a pair of briefs. If Rush had been a guest in someone's home, he wouldn't have been walking around stark naked as if it were perfectly normal.

While Cody was drying his body, Lance walked into the kitchen with his suitcases. He was wearing a black T-shirt and a tight pair of low-rise jeans. Rush switched on the coffee maker and smiled. He was about to move from behind the counter to kiss Lance good morning when Cody tossed the large towel over the back of a stool and fell into Lance's arms. He hugged Lance, rubbing his naked body against Lance's tight jeans, and said, "I'm so glad you're coming to New York with me. I don't know what I'd do without you. I'm going to need someone strong." His voice was low and meek: a sickening, breathy stage whisper.

Lance smiled and tapped his shoulders. He wasn't sure where to put his hands. "Don't worry about it," Lance said, waving his arm. "I'm looking forward to spending some time in New York. I miss it."

Rush smoothed out his hair and smiled. He was wearing a pair of loose plaid lounge pants and a wrinkled white T-shirt. Cody's naked back and sweet, firm ass was exposed to him. Rush raised one eyebrow and gave Lance a look. He felt like snapping a wet dish towel against Cody's bare ass. But he smiled and said, "Why don't you go up and get dressed, Cody? Your coffee will be ready by the time you get down. You don't want to miss the flight." He continued to smile and kept his voice upbeat. But inside he was seething. He'd noticed Cody had a semi-erection and it was pressing into Lance's jeans.

When Cody stepped back, Lance pointed to the TV screen and shouted, "Look, isn't that Harriet on TV? Turn up the volume."

Rush turned up the volume, then handed Cody the large towel. "You'd better put this on," he said. "It's chilly this morning."

Cody took the towel and wrapped it around his waist. He smiled and said, "I am a little cold. I don't want to get sick before rehearsal even starts. And I really shouldn't be walking around naked in front of Lance this way."

Lance was staring at the TV. He waved his arm and said, "Nonsense. We're all guys. Don't worry about it."

Rush pressed his lips together and folded his arms across his chest.

They all turned toward the television. Rush thought it was going to be a promotion or something for Anderson. But when he saw that Harriet was walking next to a stretcher, he took a quick breath. There was a dead person on the stretcher, covered in a brown body bag. Harriet was wearing dark glasses, a dark coat, and she was holding a handkerchief. There were photographers and reporters all around her. A man in a dark suit who looked like a police detective was holding her elbow. Someone shoved a microphone in Harriet's face and she pushed it away with a quick swipe. When the TV announcer said that Anderson, who was well known for his adult films, had been found dead that morning in a hotel room outside San Francisco, in an alleged suicide, Rush pressed his palm to his chest and gasped. His knees felt weak and his heart starting beating faster.

"Oh my God," Cody cried, gripping the back of a stool. "I thought he was doing so well, too. I knew he was upset over Joey. But he became so successful overnight." He paused. "I can't say I'm shocked, though. These porn people never have happy endings."

Rush glared at Cody for a moment. He sounded too smug for someone with his own drug problems. Then he turned to the TV and watched them lift Anderson's body into the back of an ambulance. He watched Harriet wipe a tear from her left eye. "I had

no idea Anderson was that bad,” Rush said. “I should have insisted on keeping in touch with him. I should have been there for him. I’ll never forgive myself for this.”

Lance put his arm around Rush and hugged him. “You can’t blame yourself,” he said. “Sometimes people do these things and we never know why. Anderson knew you were his friend. He loved you very much.” Then he shook his head and said, “It’s so sad.”

\* \* \* \*

In the months that followed, it was officially determined that Anderson had overdosed on dudes. The reports called them barbiturates, but Rush was all too familiar with the term “dudes.” The death was officially classified as a suicide. But it also became public knowledge, after an autopsy, that Anderson had been in the final stages of pancreatic cancer. When Harriet heard about the cancer, she contacted Anderson’s doctor in New York and insisted he hold a press conference to let the public know that Anderson knew about the cancer before he committed suicide. She arranged the entire event herself. She stood beside the doctor on the platform, wiping tears from her eyes while he spoke.

It eased Rush’s guilt to know there had been an underlying reason behind Anderson’s suicide, and that Anderson did have a fatal disease. Rush probably couldn’t have done anything to change Anderson’s mind. But that was the only comfort Rush found during that time in his life.

While Lance and Cody were in New York, Rush started taking dudes himself. He wasn’t sleeping, and he felt as if his life was spiraling in circles and he couldn’t stop it. Though he spoke frequently to Lance on the phone, he detected something was missing in their conversations. When Lance had first left for New York, he’d complained about how

much he missed Rush and how much he loved him. They even had phone sex in the middle of the night. But as the weeks passed, their phone calls grew shorter and less frequent. Rush noticed changes in Lance's voice. He was curt and evasive instead of loving and supportive; he was always hanging up fast because he was late for something important. Lance only talked about the new show or other aspects of his work, and he stopped mentioning how much he missed and loved Rush.

And there were rumors. Along with every article in the entertainment magazines about Cody's Broadway comeback and his addiction to drugs, there was a short mention of how close Cody was getting with his handsome agent and attorney, Lance Sharp. They implied Cody and Lance were sleeping together; they implied that Rush, the international male model, was the scorned third party and that Lance was jilting him. Their alleged affair was all over the Internet. Even Harriet called Rush to see if it was true or not. She told Rush, puffing on a cigarette, that she'd always thought he was too good for Lance, and that Cody was nothing more than common street trash. Of course Rush denied all the rumors to everyone. But on the inside, he was falling to pieces.

Then one night, after watching a story about Lance and Cody on television, Rush called Lance's hotel room and Cody answered the phone. It was late, after two in the morning New York time. Rush pretended he wanted to tell Lance something important about a property tax issue regarding the Malibu house. But when Cody answered the phone, Rush's jaw dropped. Why would Cody be in Lance's hotel room that late at night? Rush cleared his throat and said, "Ah well, Cody. Is Lance there? I have to tell him something important."

Cody yawned into the receiver. “We just got in. He’s in the shower. I’ll tell him you called.” His voice was light and friendly, as if this were perfectly natural. There was a loud click and a moment of silence. When Cody spoke again, he said, “I’m sorry. I was taking my pants off and I dropped the phone. It landed right in my underwear.” Then he started to laugh.

Rush hung up. He didn’t say a word. It sounded as if they were about to have sex. His stomach started to burn and his eyes filled with tears. Evidently, all the rumors he’d been hearing about Lance and Cody were true. He sat in a chair for a long time and stared at the bedroom wall, and then he took four dudes and fell into bed sobbing.

The next day, Rush didn’t get out of bed. He waited for Lance to call, wondering if Cody had even bothered to tell Lance he’d called the night before. When Lance finally did call, it was almost midnight New York time.

“Are you okay?” Lance asked. His voice was soft and distant.

It was hard to speak. He’d taken more dudes and his lips felt numb. “I’m fine,” he said, trying hard to be strong. “I called you last night. Cody answered the phone in your hotel room.” He didn’t want to accuse him, but he wanted the information out in the open to see how Lance would react.

Lance sighed. “Look,” he said, “this is difficult. I’m just going to come right out with it. I want to take a break.”

Rush laughed—he sounded so businesslike. “You want to take a *break*?” he repeated. “We aren’t dating, Lance. We are supposedly a couple. We can’t get legally married, but I thought we were committed to each other just like a married couple. I



thought we were in love. I know I'm still in love with *you*. What happened? Why are you doing this to us?"

Lance hesitated. "I don't know what happened. I've been very confused since I arrived in New York. And I'm sorry. I do love you."

"Do you want to '*take a break*' because of Cody? Are you sleeping with Cody now?" Rush asked.

"I'm sorry I said I want to take a break," Lance said. "It was a poor choice of words. I'm an idiot. And I don't want to go into detail about Cody. He's still very fragile and very vulnerable. I don't want him to get hurt with any bad publicity right now."

If Rush hadn't been on drugs and his entire world hadn't been crumbling around him, he would have laughed into the phone again. Lance was worried about Cody? There was nothing innocent or fragile about Cody. Cody had been an aggressive viper since the day he'd met him, and he'd always be one.

Rush took a deep breath, forcing his voice to remain calm. "So what does this mean, Lance?" He wanted Lance to be the one who said it first. After all, it was Lance who started it.

"I think we should separate," Lance said. "I have to go now. I'll call you later this week. I'm so sorry, Rush. I'm so very sorry. I didn't plan for this to happen." Then he hung up the phone and the line went silent.

\* \* \* \*

For the next two days, Rush remained in bed. He didn't eat, he didn't shower, and he didn't get dressed. The only reason he was able to sleep was because he kept taking dudes. He wanted to numb every inch of his body, inside and out. When he tried to

imagine what his life would be like without Lance, he crawled to the bathroom and vomited.

On the third day, the telephone rang. He was still in bed, wearing the same lounge pants he'd been wearing all week. His hair was sticking up and his mouth felt crusty because he hadn't brushed his teeth in days. It was after ten o'clock at night in Malibu and he had a feeling Lance was calling. He didn't answer; he didn't want to speak to Lance. This was much worse than the first time they'd broken up, because they'd been living together and sharing their lives as a couple for a long time. They'd made plans for the future, and all those plans were gone now. The thought of talking to Lance about money or how they would divide their assets made his hands tremble.

The phone rang seven times. Rush waited a few minutes and listened to the voice mail. He squeezed the pillow, bracing himself for what Lance had to say. But it wasn't Lance. It was his aunt back in Connecticut. Her mild voice drifted from the speaker to his tired ears like a dose of strong medicine. "I hope you're okay, sweetie," she said. Her voice cracked a few times. "I had a bad dream about you last night and I'm worried. I haven't heard from you in almost a week and I miss your voice. Give me a call and let me know you're okay. If you need me, I'll be on the next flight out."

His eyes filled with tears. He knew how much his aunt hated flying, yet she was willing to get on a plane, alone, if he needed her. He usually talked to her at least every other day. She was the only family he had left in the world and he liked checking up on her. But since his last talk with Lance, he hadn't phoned anyone.

Suddenly, a feeling of calm passed through his body. He looked at the nightstand and stared at a bottle of dudes. He picked up the bottle and threw it across the room with

all his might. It hit the wall and the cap fell off. All the pills fell behind a dresser. He crawled out of bed, stumbling on the floor more than once, and walked out the back door. The cold night air penetrated his skin. He tripped over a rock and fell face first in the sand. Then he lifted his head and crawled toward the ocean. When the cold water hit his face, he looked up at the sky and tried to clench his fists. “No more,” he whispered. “I want my life back, and I’m not going to let anyone or anything define me ever again.”

He remained there for a while. The cold salt water soothed his pain. He let the waves pass over his body until his eyes were wide open and his legs felt strong enough to walk. Then he stood up and walked back to the house. When he reached the bedroom, he called his aunt. When she asked how he was, he smiled and said, “I’m fine. Actually, I’m coming home tomorrow. And I’m coming for good.” His voice hadn’t been that steady in months.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

While Lance was talking to Bart Hasslet on the telephone in the other room, Cody tiptoed to the doorway and leaned into the wall so he could hear what Lance was saying. They'd just taken a shower together and Cody had given Lance such a long, slow blow job, the sides of his face ached all the way back to his earlobes. He knew Lance was going out alone that night, but Lance had been unusually evasive about his plans. After the shower, he put on a tuxedo and smiled too much. He told Cody it was just another boring business meeting with Bart and a new client.

Cody wanted to make sure Lance wasn't meeting another guy. Since Lance had left Rush, Lance and Cody had been sleeping together. Lance made it clear that they weren't involved in a serious romantic relationship—he'd told Cody from the start he wasn't getting seriously involved with anyone.

But Cody wasn't about to let Lance Sharp, or anyone else, cheat on him. Cody was a star and everyone knew he was sleeping with Lance. If Lance's boring business meeting wasn't important, Lance wouldn't have worn a tuxedo and he wouldn't have left the bedroom to speak to Bart in private. Cody knew there was something going on behind his back and he was determined to find out what it was.

Their hotel suite was large, but Cody could see and hear everything Lance was saying in the next room. Lance told Bart that Cody was in the bathroom and that Cody had no idea where he was going that night. Then Lance rubbed his jaw and said, "I hate lying to Cody this way. But I can't take him with me to this press party. If Radcliff saw me bring him into the room, Radcliff would go out of his mind. He actually called me

this afternoon and told me, without thinking twice, to leave Cody at home. It's better this way. Besides, Cody needs his rest for opening night tomorrow. He's been working hard and I know he wants this show to be a hit."

When Lance said goodbye and hung up the phone, Cody jogged back to the bathroom and closed the door. A minute later, Lance knocked on the door and said, "I'm leaving now. Do I get a kiss goodbye?"

Cody opened the door and smiled. He was naked and he'd just combed his hair. He put his arms around Lance's shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. "Be a good boy tonight," he said. "I'll see you later."

Lance patted his ass and smiled. "I won't be late," he said.

When Lance was gone, Cody opened his laptop and did a fast search for Radcliff Benson. It wasn't difficult to get the information he wanted. He discovered there was a press party that night for Radcliff at one of New York's most exclusive hotels. It was one of those less publicized events, a photo opportunity where people within the industry got together and celebrated each other while the press took pictures. Cody assumed they were doing this because Radcliff's new show had opened to more than a few bad reviews.

He closed the laptop and smiled. This was the chance of a lifetime to get even with Radcliff Benson for having him fired once. He reached into the desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of dudes. He took two pills and swallowed them back without water. Since he'd started working on the new show, *Jump as High as you Can*, he'd started taking dudes again. No one else knew he was taking the pills; they didn't understand the pressure he was under to make this show perfect. If the show failed, his career would be ruined. He told himself he'd stop taking the pills after opening night. He'd be more

relaxed then and he wouldn't need them anymore. He was just using them to get through a stressful time, and there was nothing wrong with that.

After he took the pills, he went to his closet and pulled out his own tuxedo. He held it up and stared at the lapels with his tongue pressed to his cheek. It was just a dull black suit. Every other man at the press party would be wearing the same thing, including Radcliff. If he was going to crash the event and upstage Radcliff, he figured he had to do it with a little more style than a boring tuxedo.

So he put the tuxedo back into the closet and reached for something else that was covered in a heavy garment bag. It was a sexy, revealing costume, consisting of an oversized black leather biker jacket with exaggerated zippers and nail heads, a pair of black fishnet pantyhose, a black leather thong, and black biker boots with a four-inch heel. His character in the play was an outrageous, drug-ravaged rock singer, and Cody would be wearing this costume during a dramatic, intense dance scene in the play. This was the showstopping song of the entire play, when he actually had to jump as high as he could. Cody had been rehearsing it for weeks to make it perfect. The costume was in his closet because he often rehearsed in his hotel room late at night when he couldn't sleep, and he liked to be completely in character when he rehearsed.

When Cody was dressed, he called a private limo service and said he needed a car for the night. Then he looked into a full-length mirror and smiled. The black leather jacket covered the top half of his firm ass, but the bottom half of his ass was almost totally exposed through the fishnet pantyhose. The back of the black leather thong rode up his ass crack and separated his ass cheeks, and the front of the thong rounded forward and made his genitals look enormous. He took a few steps back and turned sideways,

knowing that when he walked into the room where the press party was taking place, everyone would turn away from Radcliff and stare at him. He couldn't wait to see the expression on Radcliff's middle-aged face. Cody had been waiting for years to get even with him.

Cody told the limo driver to circle the block a few times. He wanted to make his grand entrance after Radcliff arrived, while all the guests were standing around congratulating Radcliff on his new show and taking his picture. And Cody timed it with perfection. When he finally did enter, Radcliff was standing in the middle of the banquet room, surrounded by members of the press and photographers. The entire room went silent, then began to applaud him. Cody lifted his head, smiled, and walked through the banquet room alone. People stared at his half-naked ass and murmured things to each other. The photographers turned away from Radcliff and started taking Cody's picture. Cody tried to ignore Radcliff completely, but he did take a quick glance in Radcliff's direction to see the expression on his face. Radcliff's hands were clenched together below his waist. His jaw dropped, his eyebrows pointed down, and it looked as if he was about to stomp his feet.

Cody continued to smile and nod at the guests, then went to where Lance and Bart were standing and gave Bart a kiss on the cheek. Bart gave Lance a look and frowned. Lance turned to Cody and said, "What are you doing here? And why are you wearing that costume?"

Cody patted Lance on the back and said, "I just wanted to drop by and congratulate Radcliff on his new show, is all. I hope I'm not interrupting anything. I thought that if I wore the costume, it would be good publicity for opening night."

Lance frowned and rubbed his jaw. He stared at his shoes, not knowing what to say or how to reply.

Cody knew Lance couldn't argue with him: it *was* good publicity for the show. The press loved seeing Cody look so good after his time at The Harvey Milk Clinic. Bart, however, left them alone. He ran over to Radcliff and whispered something into Radcliff's ear. The entire room was talking about Cody by then. They came over to congratulate him on his new show and to wish him the best on opening night. He smiled at everyone and posed for the cameras, and even waved at Radcliff from across the room. Radcliff stood there glaring at him with tight lips, whispering something into Bart's ear, shaking his fist the entire time. When Cody lifted his arms all the way up, exposing his entire ass in fishnet pantyhose so the photographers could get some good photos, Radcliff pointed his finger in Bart's face and stormed off to the bathroom alone. No one even saw him leave the banquet room; no one cared. They were all too busy staring at Cody's sexy costume.

But Cody saw him leave. He waited for a few minutes, shaking a few more hands and smiling for a few more photos. Then he politely excused himself and headed to the bathroom alone. When he opened the bathroom door, Radcliff Benson was lighting a cigarette in front of a long row of gilded mirrors.

Cody walked to the sink and looked into a mirror. He smoothed the back of his head and said, "You should consider giving up smoking, Radcliff. It causes wrinkles, old boy."

Radcliff took a hard drag and lifted his right eyebrow. He smiled and said, "I'd like to put it out right in your face, you little cunt."



Cody stepped away from the mirror and faced him. His eyebrows went up and he put his hands on his hips. "It takes one to know one, cunt."

Radcliff smirked. "Actually, you look rather well for just being released from the nut house."

Cody glared in his direction. "It wasn't a nut house," he said. "It was a rehab for people with addictions. There's a difference. But I guess you wouldn't know, Grandma. Back in your day they only had nut houses and you got there by horse and buggy."

"Ha," Radcliff shouted, "back in *my* day, doll, they would have locked you up in the nut house for good, clipped your horns, and thrown away the key."

Cody bit his bottom lip and thought for a moment. He smiled and said, "Sorry about the bad reviews you're getting. If you'd like, you can stop by and watch me rehearse for my show. You might pick up a few valuable things while you're there."

"The reviews weren't bad. They just weren't great. And the only thing I could pick up from you are crabs," Radcliff said.

Cody smiled. "You're just jealous because I don't have to pay escorts and whores to come home with me."

"And that's because you *are* a whore," Radcliff said. He took a drag from his cigarette and tossed his head back.

"And you're a dried-up old queen who doesn't know when to stop," Cody said.

Radcliff turned and looked Cody in the eye. He dropped his ash in the sink with one fast tap. "You wanna play, doll?" he said. "I'll take you on. But you'd better be prepared. I've come across your type many times before. I buried them all, and I can bury you. You're nothing but a drugged-up little fake, trying as hard as you can to hold on to

what little you have. I've been in this business for thirty years and I'll be in it for thirty more, long after they've found you dead in some sleazy motel room from an overdose. I've got what it takes to survive. I'm tougher and stronger than you'll ever be, doll." The butch, fake-masculine tone he used in public had disappeared. Now his voice had the authentic, effeminate quality he only used around close friends.

Blood rushed to Cody's head and he clenched his fists. He lunged forward and grabbed Radcliff's shoulders. "You're nothing but a washed-up, self-loathing old queen who never had the guts to come out of the closet." He shook Radcliff a few times. "You think they don't know you're an old queen. Do you really think the world thinks you're a *bachelor*? Give me a fucking break. No one even uses that word anymore. Who the fuck do you think you've been fooling all these years? At least I've always had the guts to be openly gay, and to show the world who I am. I may be many things, but at least I've always been authentic. And there are other gay men out there who appreciate it."

Radcliff pushed Cody hard. Cody fell back and landed on the bathroom floor. "Doll," Radcliff said, "you're not even worth my time. You're nothing but trash. Go back to the gutter where you belong, then get down on your knees and do what you do best."

But Cody stood up fast. He lunged again and pulled Radcliff to the bathroom floor. They rolled around for a few minutes, pulling and tugging each other. At one point, a bottle of dudes fell out of Cody's upper pocket. Radcliff reached for them fast and held them above Cody's head. He smiled and said, "Look what I just found. I guess they didn't do such a great job in the nut house after all. I knew you'd never stop taking these. Once a drug addict, always a drug addict. You'll wind up just like that other friend they found dead in a hotel room in San Francisco."

Cody reached for the pills and said, "Give them back. I'm not taking them. I just like to have them with me."

But Radcliff's arm was longer; he held the pill bottle up higher. "I'm going out there right now and I'm going to tell the entire press party what just fell out of your pocket. I'm sure they'll just love this."

Then Cody reached for the top of Radcliff's head and pulled his hair. But when he pulled, Radcliff's hair came off in his hand.

They both stopped moving and stared at each other. Then Cody looked down at the wig he was holding; he looked up at Radcliff's bald head. Cody stood up slowly and laughed. He shook the wig up and down and shouted, "You're fucking *bald*. I had no idea! And if you think they'll love hearing about my pills, wait until they see your shiny old head, Grandma."

Radcliff stood up and crossed toward him. "Give me that," he shouted. "Give it back to me now." He was out of breath, still holding the bottle of dudes.

Cody smiled and shook the wig again, then ran into a bathroom stall and said, "Come and get it, Grandma, before I flush your entire career right down the toilet."

Cody heard Radcliff run after him. But Radcliff didn't say anything. After a moment of silence, Cody opened the door of the stall. Radcliff was leaning back against a wall and the bottle of dudes was on the floor next to his feet. He was holding his bald head in his hands and his chest was heaving. Cody dropped the wig on the bathroom floor and picked up the pills. He took a deep breath and said, "There you go. Now we're even, Grandma."

Then Cody walked toward the bathroom door and adjusted his costume. He quickly looked into the mirror and made sure his thong was riding up the middle of his ass correctly. He looked back and saw Radcliff bend down to pick up the wig. Radcliff's knees were stiff and his face was red. Cody rolled his eyes a few times and opened the door. When he stepped into the banquet room again, he smiled as wide as he could and headed back to where Lance and Bart were standing.

### **Chapter Twenty-Three**

On opening night, Cody got out of the limo at the stage door entrance and slowly walked to his dressing room. Everyone else in the theater was rushing around, shouting about last-minute details that were important to the show. The assistant director's face was red and there were beads of perspiration dripping down his temples. The director was explaining something to the choreographer, waving his hands back and forth above his head, with sudden, urgent jerks. Cody passed them by and smiled. He took a deep breath and waved to the music director. He had been taking dudes all day. He'd popped three into his mouth on the way to the theater and he couldn't even feel the bottoms of his feet anymore.

He told himself he had everything under control. He was only taking the pills because it was opening night and he wanted to be as relaxed as possible. But when he passed by a rehearsal room and heard his understudy singing one of his songs, he stopped short to listen. He tightened his fists, and his heart began to pound in his ears. The understudy was a polite young man in his early twenties with dark brown hair, smooth even skin, and wide blue eyes. He reminded Cody of Rush, with that natural innocence that was impossible to obtain; one had to be born with it. When he entered a room, everyone looked to see who he was. When he sang, his deep, sexy voice had perfect pitch and perfect control. There was no doubt his understudy had innate talent, and that he knew what to do with it.

Cody watched the understudy sing while his stomach twisted in knots and his head throbbed. Cody didn't like that he was rehearsing this way in front of everyone on opening night. It looked like he was trying to make Cody look inferior.

So Cody stormed off to his dressing room and poured himself a tall glass of vodka. By the time Lance came backstage to offer Cody his support, Cody couldn't even stand up straight. The show was about to begin and he wasn't even in costume yet.

Lance stared at him. His face turned pale and he said, "You'd better get ready. You only have five minutes."

Cody waved his arm and said, "I have plenty of time. I know what I'm doing. I'm a star." His words slurred together and his T's sounded like S's.

Lance shouted into the hallway, "Get me a pot of black coffee. Now." Then he turned back to Cody and shook his head. "I can't do this anymore, Cody. This isn't what I want, and it's not the way I want to spend my life."

Cody, drunk as he was, shot Lance a dead stare and said, "Then you'd better stop fucking around and find a nice quiet guy to settle down with, Lance. You're not getting any younger."

Lance frowned. "Let's just get some coffee in you."

Cody stood up and crossed to the doorway where Lance was standing. But before he got there, he tripped and fell over his own feet. When he landed on the floor, Lance dropped his coat and reached down to help him up.

"Let go of me," Cody shouted. "I'm fine. I can get up on my own. I just wasn't looking where I was going."

He tried to get up twice, but he kept falling back down on his face. Lance finally leaned forward, put his hands beneath Cody's arms, and pulled him up to his feet.

When Cody was standing, he pointed to Lance and said, "I want him fired. If you don't fire him, I'm not going on tonight."

Lance spread his arms apart and shrugged. "What are you talking about?"

"The understudy," Cody said. "I want him fired. I'm not going on stage if he's in the theater. He's trying to steal my part, and I won't have it. I'm the star."

Lance closed his eyes and shook his head. Before he had a chance to reply, one of the assistants brought a full pot of coffee and placed it on Cody's dressing table.

Cody shouted, "I don't want any fucking coffee, damn it." Then he tried to swing at the coffee pot on the dressing table and missed so hard he fell down again.

By that time, the director and the producer were standing in the doorway. The director shook his head at Lance, and the producer looked down at Cody and frowned. Cody was on the floor, crawling around, trying hard to get up on his own, but it looked as if he were moving in slow motion.

"He'll be fine," Lance said. "I'll get some coffee into him. Can we delay the show for a few minutes?"

The director shook his head. "He can't perform this way. He's too far gone."

Cody was listening. He stood up and went to the door. He leaned into the frame and said, "I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me." The entire world felt as if it were spinning. He saw the director standing next to someone; Lance was holding his elbow. At first, he couldn't make out the person standing next to the director, then he realized it was

the understudy. The ambitious little fucker must have been waiting for him to make a mistake. Cody shouted, "I'm fine. I'll get into costume right now."

The director ignored him. He turned to the understudy and asked, "Can you do the show? Are you prepared?"

The understudy jumped forward. He smiled and said, "I'm ready. I've been watching and rehearsing this part for weeks just in case something happened." Then he gave Cody a quick look and smiled. The expression on his handsome young face was a combination of gloating and satisfaction. To the others, he looked eager and innocent. But Cody knew what he was doing.

When Cody saw the understudy smile, he lunged forward and wrapped his hands around the understudy's throat. "Oh no, you don't, sweetie," he shouted. "No one is taking my part away from me."

Both Lance and the director had to pull Cody away from him. While Lance held Cody, the director shouted to the understudy, "Go into his dressing room and get into costume." Then he shot Lance a look and said, "Lock this one up until the show is over. He can sleep it off. We'll come back for him when the show is over."

Lance took Cody to an empty dressing room in the back of the theater. Cody had stopped fighting by then. His arms were limp, his head drooped into his shoulders, and he couldn't walk alone. Lance lowered him to a sofa and said, "I won't lock the door if you promise to stay here and sleep it off. Do you promise?"

Cody nodded yes. He didn't have the energy to do anything but sleep. He wanted to fall asleep and never wake up again.

\* \* \* \*



When he finally did wake up, the backstage of the theater was dark and silent. He heard the show going on out front—the audience was applauding the end of a song. His head throbbed and his eyes were burning. He stood from the sofa and said, “I don’t need them. I don’t need any of them.” Then he went back to his own dressing room to get his coat and a baseball cap. After that, he staggered into the hall, toward the stage door exit.

He went to a small pub down the street from the theater and sat on a stool at the end of the bar. The baseball cap was pulled down to his eyes, and the brim covered half his face. It was a narrow, dark place and it wasn’t crowded that night. Cody had been there before and the bartender knew him. He’d always liked the fact that he could sit way in the back and no one would recognize him. He ordered vodka on the rocks and took two more dudes. By the time the bar was ready to close, he’d lost all track of time. The bartender offered to call him a taxi, but he refused with a smile, handed the bartender a fifty-dollar tip, and walked into the street on his own.

When he reached the theater, he stopped on the sidewalk and looked up at the marquee. *Jump as High as You Can* was spelled out in bold lights, and his name, with top billing, was twinkling. He leaned forward and gave the marquee his middle finger. Then he wiped his mouth and shouted, “You can all go fuck yourselves. You need me more than I need you. I’m the star. I’ll always be the star.” He went down to his knees on the cold, hard sidewalk. He pointed up and shouted, “Cody, Cody, Cody. Isn’t that a huge fucking laugh?” While he shouted his own name over and over, he reached forward with both hands and started clutching the air as if he was stuck in quicksand and he was reaching out for help.

Traffic continued to pass. People stopped and stared at him for a moment, then continued walking. The show had ended and everyone in the theater had gone home. The only people left on the street didn't know who he was. If anything, they thought he was just another sloppy drunk in a baseball cap. But Cody was too far gone to even care what anyone thought. He didn't know what he was doing. The only thing he felt was a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach.

But when he reached into his pocket to get a few more dudes, someone came up from behind and reached under his arms. It was someone strong, a man with large solid hands. The man lifted him to his feet and held him by his waist.

Cody turned slowly; his eyes rolled back and it felt as if the street was turning with him. He almost lost his balance and fell again, but the man holding him smiled and said, "I've got you. Don't worry. I'm going to get a taxi and I'm going to get you back to bed safely."

Cody's vision was blurred, but he knew the voice. He lifted his head and whispered, "Where did you come from?"

Roy lifted his arm and hailed a cab. Then he smiled and said, "I came to New York for opening night. I was worried about you. When Lance told me what happened, I went backstage to find you and you were gone. I've been looking for you since the last act. I had a feeling you'd go back to the theater. Everyone else thought you'd just go back to the hotel."

Cody smiled. He put his arm around Roy's waist and said, "I love you so much. I've never stopped loving you. I've been a fool. I should have held on to what I had." He held him tighter. "Please don't let me wind up like Anderson. I don't want to be like this.

I just can't help myself. I thought I could handle the pills, but I'm not as strong as I thought I was." He grabbed Roy's jacket and looked into his eyes. "I don't want to die this way."

"I love you, too," Roy said. "I promise we'll get through this. And it will only make us stronger. But you have to trust me."

"Can you forgive me?" Cody asked. As stoned as he was, he knew his mistakes.

Roy didn't hesitate. "If you love someone unconditionally, and the love you feel for them is stronger than anything else you feel, forgiveness becomes a way of life."

"I'm sorry for the disappointments," Cody said. "I'm so sorry."

Roy shrugged his shoulders. "Life is filled with disappointments. We get past them. We don't have a choice."

Cody nodded and squeezed Roy's waist. He thought about Anderson and how desperate Anderson must have been. He was sorry he hadn't been there for him. He was sorry that Anderson hadn't had someone like Roy to help him stand again. Most of all, he was sorry for what he'd done to Rush.

When the taxi pulled up the curb, Roy helped him get into the back seat. When Roy sat down next to him and told the taxi driver where to go, Cody leaned into Roy's side and took a quick breath. It had been a long time since he'd felt this safe and warm. The world was still turning and his mouth was dry and hot, and each bump and jerk of the taxi turned his stomach and wrecked his head. But he knew, for the first time in his life, everything was going to be fine. An easy, comfortable feeling passed through his body and it had nothing to do with the pills or alcohol he'd swallowed earlier. If he'd had the energy, he would have pulled the bottle of dudes out of his pocket and tossed them right

out the window, one at a time, so the traffic would crush them and they'd never hurt anyone else again.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

“I see your friend Cody left his new Broadway show and returned to Hollywood,” Rush’s aunt said. She was reading the newspaper. Her suitcases were in the front hall because she was leaving for Florida later that day for a month-long visit with her cousin.

Rush looked across the table and stared at the back of the paper. He hadn’t heard from Cody or Lance since he’d moved back to New England. “Interesting,” he said. “Does it say why he left the show?” He lifted a coffee mug and took a sip. They were in the kitchen, at the breakfast table. It was a cold, sunny Saturday morning. There had been a snowstorm Friday, dropping more than eight inches in his part of Connecticut. The windowpanes were glistening, and the rooms in the old house seemed brighter than usual.

His aunt stared at the paper. She was more than seventy-five years old and didn’t use reading glasses. “It doesn’t go into detail,” she said. “It just says he left for health-related reasons and he’s going back to California with a guy named Roy to take care of his health.”

Rush’s eyebrows went up and his head tilted to the side. His aunt had never met Roy or Cody and she knew nothing about their personal lives. She’d only heard Rush talk about Cody briefly. “I see,” Rush said.

“Do you want to read it?” his aunt asked, lowering the newspaper so she could see his face.

He smiled and stood up from the table. He kissed her on the cheek and said, “Not right now. I’ll read it later. I want to go outside for a long walk with Dustin. I love the cold weather and I’ve missed the snow so much.” Then he clapped his hands and a large

golden lab bounced into the kitchen. When he'd moved back to New England, he'd adopted the two-year-old lab at the local animal shelter. The dog had already had a name: Dustin. He'd belonged to an older man who had passed away the same time Rush had moved back East for good. From the start, Rush was amazed at how well behaved Dustin was. He came when Rush called him, he sat by the back door when he wanted to go outside, and he walked beside Rush without a leash, as if he were human. There were times when Rush thought Dustin was psychic: all Rush had to do was look at him a certain way and he understood what Rush wanted.

"Be careful outside," his aunt said. "It looks deep."

Rush smiled. "I will. I'm only going up the old dirt road next to the barn. I'm sure it's already been plowed." The old dirt road was between his property and the farm next door. The farmer who lived next door usually plowed it right away.

He crossed to the back door and put on a black ski jacket. Dustin was already standing in front of the door, wagging his tail. Rush pulled a black knitted cap from the pocket and covered his head. When he stepped outside, he put on thick black ski gloves and took a deep breath. He looked up at the roof and smiled. The air was cold and fresh, and icicles were already forming in the eaves. Dustin was running around in circles, making narrow, messy paths in the smooth, even snow. Rush tapped his right thigh and said, "C'mon, buddy. Let's go." Then he pointed to the barn. "This way."

They walked around the house and headed toward the barn. The snow was deep, but light and powdery. Everything was unusually still that morning. Rush had forgotten how a heavy snow seemed to insulate all sound and movement. He stepped on a twig and it cracked with a dull thud. A passing car swished by without leaving an echo. Rush felt

strong. He hadn't had a pill or a drop of alcohol since the day he'd thrown the bottle of dudes across the room. Moving back home had given him a new sense of well being he didn't think he'd ever be able to obtain.

Rush had made enough money as a supermodel to live the rest of his life without ever working again. But he still had contractual obligations to fulfill with his modeling career, which meant he'd have to do some traveling at certain times of the year. He took his work seriously and he didn't want to let anyone down. Eventually, he knew he'd stop modeling and go back to law. He'd already started doing pro bono work with a local law firm. He was helping people with HIV/AIDS appeal their canceled disability insurance. He'd learned that large insurance companies were targeting people with AIDS, claiming they were not disabled, without researching each case individually and getting the facts right. Each case he saw was different because there wasn't enough information about HIV/AIDS to give generalized summaries. The people Rush saw didn't have the physical or mental strength to do the appeals alone, and they needed their disability insurance to survive.

For the first time in his life, Rush felt as if he were making a real difference in the world. He'd been lucky in many ways, and he wanted to start giving back some of the things he'd been given. But more than that, when he went to bed at night, he didn't need dudes or anything else to fall asleep.

When he reached the dirt road, he tapped his thigh and called Dustin to his side. Dustin was behind him, digging for something in the snow, but he didn't pay attention this time, which wasn't like him. He stood in the middle of the dirt road, staring down the

hill, about one hundred feet from where Rush was standing. Rush tapped his side again and shouted, “Dustin. C’mon, buddy. Let’s go.”

Dustin ignored him. He continued to stare down the hill until a tall figure appeared in the distance—then he started to bark. But his bark was light and he was wagging his tail as if he knew who it was. The sun was in Rush’s eyes. All he could see was the image of a tall man wearing a black leather coat, waving his arms back and forth.

Rush took a deep breath and frowned. He had a feeling it was Harold, his old boyfriend. Harold had been calling him since he’d moved back to New England and Rush been making excuses so he wouldn’t have to see him. Harold was persistent, even sending Rush suggestive texts on his cell phone. Since Rush had moved away, Harold hadn’t become involved with anyone seriously. Now that Rush was back, he wanted to resume their old relationship, and he was dying to get into Rush’s pants again. The fact that Rush was a supermodel made Harold want him even more. But Rush wasn’t interested in Harold or anyone else. He liked Harold, but he knew he’d never love him. Rush closed his eyes and looked down at his boots. It was just like Harold to follow him up the dirt road and corner him by surprise. This time, Rush swore, he’d be firm and tell Harold he only wanted to be friends.

Dustin continued to bark. The man approaching Rush bent down and patted the dog’s head a few times. When he looked up again, he called, “Your aunt told me you were up here.”

Rush blinked twice. It wasn’t Harold following him. It was Lance Sharp.



Rush squared his shoulders and started walking toward them. “What are you doing here?” he asked, trying hard not to breathe too fast. He didn’t want Lance to think he was excited.

“I wanted to see you,” Lance said. He walked up to him and gave him a hug.

Dustin was running around in circles, wagging his tail and yelping at Lance as if he’d found his long-lost best friend. Rush gave the dog a knowing look and said, “Be good. Calm down.” Lance was a stranger. Dustin should have been growling at him.

The dog went up to Lance’s side and stood still. Lance placed his palm on Dustin’s head and said, “Don’t get mad at him. He likes me.” Lance was smiling too widely and his voice was too animated. “You used to like me, too.”

Rush closed his eyes for a moment. He hadn’t seen Lance since Lance had left Malibu with Cody. His heart started to beat faster and his face felt flushed. “And you used to like *me*,” he said. Then he turned his back on Lance and walked up the hill.

Lance jogged up to him. He put his arms around Rush’s waist and buried his face in Rush’s neck. “I’ve missed you so much,” he whispered. “I don’t blame you if you hate me. I deserve it after what I did to you. I’m so sorry.”

When Lance used the word hate, Rush’s eyes filled with tears. Even now, after all he’d been through, he knew in his heart he could never hate Lance. If anything, he loved him even more. But he pulled away from Lance and said, “I’ve changed since the last time you saw me, Lance. I know what I want now and I’m not going to compromise anymore. I’m not the same person I was back in Hollywood. Gay men of my generation are learning they can have lifelong relationships...even marriages...just like everyone

else. I want to be like the guys on the cover of that book we saw once, while we were walking through SoHo. At least I want to try to be like them.”

Lance reached out and grabbed Rush’s arms. He looked into his eyes and said, “I’m not the same either. I’ve changed, too. I want you back. I’ll do anything to prove it. Just tell me what you want me to do. Tell me how I can prove to you how much I love you. I’ll buy rings and we can get married, just like the guys on the cover of the book.”

Rush spun around. He clenched his fists and shouted, “You cheated on me, you bastard. You cheated on me with *Cody*. How could you do it?” He stopped for a breath and he wiped a tear from his cheek. “I love you so much. I don’t know if I can go through that again.”

Lance lifted his arms. “What I did was a mistake. I know that now. But I didn’t cheat on you. I’ve never cheated on you. When I was with Cody, you and I weren’t a couple anymore. I was never with him, or anyone else, while we were together. I swear on my life. When we were a couple, there was no one else.”

Rush looked up at the trees and rolled his eyes. “What about that night I called your hotel room in New York and Cody answered? It sounded to me like you were about to have sex. Cody told me pointedly that he’d just removed his pants.”

Lance shook his head. “Cody was lying. I was in the bathroom and Cody was just leaving my room. We hadn’t done anything together yet. I told him we wouldn’t do anything until I spoke with you. He tried to take off his pants and I stopped him. The next night, I called and told you how I felt. Give me that much credit. I didn’t cheat on you.”

Rush knew how to read his face and he believed him. He took a deep breath and sniffed back. Lance had a point. It didn’t make him feel any better, but at least Lance

hadn't lied to him and he hadn't cheated on him while they were together. "I'm not going back to New York or Hollywood," he said. "I'm staying here for good."

Lance put his arms around him and said, "Then I'll move here. I can commute to New York. We can keep a little *pied-à-terre* in the city when we have to stay over, and we can make this our full-time home. I'll sell the Malibu house. I haven't been back there anyway since you left, and I'm not going back there alone." He kissed Rush's earlobe. "I'll do anything. Just give me the chance to prove it to you."

Rush's body tingled and his legs felt weak. Since he'd moved to New York, his entire life had been about taking chances, not giving them to someone else. With Lance's strong arms around him, he felt warm and safe again. But he wasn't sure—he didn't want to return to the life he'd just left. He knew if he did, the deep, dark valley he'd escaped from once would devour him this time.

So he lifted his arms and placed his hands on Lance's neck. He rubbed the back of Lance's head and said, "I love you, too, Lance. But I'm not sure it's possible anymore. I don't know if we can get back what we had."

Then he kissed Lance on the cheek and stepped back. He turned and tapped his thigh so Dustin would follow him up the hill. As he started to walk, he was terrified to turn back. He wasn't sure if Lance was following him.

When he finally reached the top of the hill, where the woods opened and there was a view of a wide, flat meadow below, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Lance was right behind him. Dustin looked up and tilted his head to the side. Rush didn't move.

“Just give me a chance to prove how much I’ve changed and how much I love you,” Lance said again. “I’m only asking for one more chance. I promise I will not disappoint you this time.”

Rush pressed his lips together and stared down at the meadow. He wanted to fall back into Lance’s strong arms and make love to him right there on the road, but his body remained rigid and he couldn’t move his legs.

Then, down in the meadow, not far from where they were standing, he saw something unusual. He tilted his head to the side and leaned forward. Dustin was on the other side of the road by then and wasn’t paying attention. Rush pointed and whispered, “Lance, look down there. Do you see what I see? Am I losing my mind?”

Lance stepped up and stared at the meadow. He put his arm around Rush’s waist and said, “I see it. I can’t believe it. But I see it.”

In the meadow, standing still in the snow, was a strong, regal deer. But it wasn’t just any deer: this one had large antlers and white spots all over its back, just like the calico fawn they’d saved the first weekend they’d spent together in Connecticut. The deer turned and looked up at them. He stared in their direction without moving a muscle. Rush leaned into Lance and rested his face on his chest. He sighed and said, “It can’t be the same one.”

Dustin ran to where they were standing. When he saw the deer down in the meadow, he barked a few times and wagged his tail. The bark didn’t frighten the deer, but he did shake his head and turn in the opposite direction. When he started to slowly walk away, he hobbled with a slight limp.

Rush pressed his palm to his throat. “Did you see him limp?”

Lance nodded. He put his other arm around Rush and said, "See, even the deer thinks you should give me a second chance. What we have together is as rare as a calico deer with a limp."

Though he knew Lance wasn't joking, Rush laughed. He leaned into Lance's hard body, then put his arms around Lance's shoulders and kissed him on the lips. When he closed his eyes and inserted his tongue in Lance's mouth, Dustin started to bark and run around in circles.

A moment later, Rush stepped back and looked at Lance's body. He was wearing a black leather jacket, but he wasn't wearing gloves, boots, or a hat. He looked like he was going for a stroll in Central Park instead of a hike up a snowy New England road. Rush smiled and said, "We'd better go back to the house. You must be freezing, and your feet must be soaked."

Lance laughed. "I'm fine," he said. "And I'm not leaving this spot until I have an answer. Can I have one more chance?"

Rush nodded. He didn't have any doubts. He was stronger now and he'd learned from his past mistakes. "How can I say no to the only man I've ever loved?"

Then he pulled off his gloves and gave them to Lance. "Put these on. Your hands must be freezing. When we get back to the house I'll give you dry shoes and socks. I'll build a fire and you can wait for me. I have to take my aunt to the airport this afternoon. She's going to Florida for a month to visit her cousin."

When they started to walk downhill again, Rush turned back to call Dustin, who'd gone over the hill to explore the other side. As he turned and shouted Dustin's name, he looked into the meadow again. The deer was on the other side of the meadow and he

could still see its outline. The deer stopped and stared at him. They looked at each other for a second, then the deer limped off to a wooded area on the other side of the meadow.

THE END

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