

# HORIZONS

MICKIE B. ASHLING



*Dreamspinner Press*

Published by  
Dreamspinner Press  
4760 Preston Road  
Suite 244-149  
Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Horizons  
Copyright © 2009 by Mickie B. Ashling

Cover Art by Dan Skinner/Cerberus Inc. [cerberusinc@hotmail.com](mailto:cerberusinc@hotmail.com)  
Cover Design by Mara McKennen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press, 4760 Preston Road, Suite 244-149, Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-935192-86-2

Printed in the United States of America  
First Edition  
April, 2009

eBook edition available  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-935192-87-9

To Jeannie, my beta and good friend, who stresses over every comma and misplaced word. To the members of my small critique group who have helped to bring this story to life with their honest and loving feedback. And to all my readers at LIVEJOURNAL and other sites who have supported my writing for years and given me the confidence to send off a manuscript for consideration.

# CHAPTER 1

JODY was standing in front of the nurses' station, finishing up his report for the day. He was interrupted by the squawk of the ambulance and the sound of running feet, the usual precursor to a new arrival at the trauma center. A gurney was pushed into the holding area with a football player in full gear, holding his left arm at an awkward angle. He had streaks of mud down his left cheek, and his jersey hung heavy with encrusted dirt and bits of grass. He was accompanied by a man who was holding a helmet and duffel bag.

They ended up in cubicle six, Jody's section of the ER. He knew he was still on the clock even though he only had ten minutes left, so he forced his relaxed brain to switch back to doctor mode as he moved down the hall. He raked long fingers through the mahogany-colored hair that fell loosely over his forehead, trying to make himself presentable. He'd been here for almost twelve hours and was starting to feel like old laundry.

He paused for a split second, listening to the sound of a voice raised in anger, and he pushed the door open to reveal the injured player sitting on the bed. He was still in his football uniform, minus his jersey, which had apparently been cut off. His pads had not been removed yet, and they looked completely out of place in this setting.

The guy in the Cal T-shirt stopped talking the minute Jody walked into the room. Whatever he'd been saying had upset the blond, who had tears running down his cheeks. He wiped them away quickly, but the two spots of color high on his cheekbones were enough to cause Jody to question what was going on.

"Is everything okay?"

"Just trying to figure out how we ended up in this place," the coach replied. "This should have never happened."

"Well, regardless of the whys and the wherefores, you're here, and I'm in charge now." Jody spoke quietly, but left little room for argument. "You need to step outside so that I can examine your player."

The coach muttered a protest, but Jody was firm as he watched him leave the room.

The football player stared at him. The color on his cheeks remained high, but the tears seemed to be dissipating. Jody walked over to the sink on the other side of the room, filled a small plastic cup with water, and brought it over to his patient. "Why don't you have a sip of water?"

"Thanks," the blond replied, taking the blue cup with a trembling hand and swallowing the liquid in one gulp. He handed the cup back gratefully, and Jody took it and tossed it in the wastebasket. The man was definitely easy on the eyes, and Jody felt a quickening of his pulse and a burst of energy surge through him.

"I'm Dr. Williams," he said gently.

"Clark Stevens," the blond countered, saying it as if he expected Jody to recognize the name immediately.

Jody glanced at the patient's chart. "So you are. Nice to meet you." He touched him on his good arm and continued, "Looks like you had a bad fall."

"Yeah, it was stupid. I got distracted and lost my footing," Clark replied in a normal voice, seemingly recovered from the earlier upset.

Jody started to move the player's arm but stopped when he saw him wince. "Does it hurt when I do that?"

"A little bit."

“It appears to be broken, but I’ll need an X-ray to confirm the diagnosis. I’m going to give you a shot for the pain.”

“No!” Clark was emphatic. “No shots.”

Jody could tell that the guy was frightened and still agitated for reasons other than the obvious. He tried to take a gentler approach and said, “This is going to get very uncomfortable when you get to radiology. They’ll be moving your arm around, so I really think you should reconsider the shot.”

“No, I only do painkillers in extreme circumstances.”

“Broken bones aren’t extreme enough?” Jody asked, raising an eyebrow. The football player shook his head, and Jody wondered where this was coming from.

“It’s your call, Clark. The orderly is going to take you up to the second floor, so you’re going to have to lie down and just relax. Is there any way we can get these pads off without cutting? I know nothing about football.”

Clark nodded and reached up to unclip the straps, but it was awkward going with one hand. Jody saw this and moved forward, placing his hand on Clark’s, surprised by the sparks that flew between them. Clark made no attempt to help Jody, seeming to enjoy his fumbling with a slight grin on his face. Jody was not unaware of this little game, and he paused in his movements, looking at the football player with a dawning perspective.

“Tell me how to unfasten this?” he asked, staring at Clark’s mouth. It was the kind of mouth that was made for kissing.

“It’s the silver clip,” Clark said, moving Jody’s hand toward the center of the pads. The cubicle seemed smaller all of a sudden as the body heat and electricity between them surged. Jody found the opening and unsnapped it, freeing the pads from their tight harness. He removed them gently, unable to avoid touching the tight muscles of Clark’s smooth shoulders and biceps. They were both holding their breath by the time Jody slipped the pads off.

“Can you move your arm toward me?” Jody inquired, watching Clark bite his lip and frown as he attempted to move. “I really wish you’d let me give you something for the pain.”

“I’m doing just fine, Doc. How about you?” Clark asked, shaking Jody up even more with a mischievous smile.

The guy was now flirting openly, but Jody took a step back, needing to know if he was for real. “I’m not the patient here, Clark. You are.”

I LAY on the gurney, watching the ceiling lights whiz by on our way upstairs to radiology. I couldn’t believe I was in this situation because of one moment of carelessness. Then again, I could. Most of the shit that happened in my life was because I didn’t pay attention.

The big plus in all of this was the doctor, of course. How’d I luck out and get someone that looked like that? Most emergency room personnel looked like they’d seen better days. The last thing I expected to see was a hot young guy with shoulders that belonged on a swimmer, not a doctor. They made his blue scrubs look like they were painted on. His eyes seemed to see right through me, and that mouth of his was way too sensual to belong to a physician. He had no right to look like that and expect a guy not to react.

I was pretty shocked that I’d given in to the impulse. I usually kept a tight rein on my emotions, especially when I was at home. Berkeley was too small and the football world too tight-knit for me to risk anything. I just couldn’t stop myself tonight. Watching the doc fumbling with my pads was enough to flip the switch.

He’s probably in shock right now, wondering what the hell happened back there. He said he knew nothing about football, so he probably doesn’t know who I am, but wait ’til he starts to ask questions. Then he’ll think he’s had an out-of-body experience and imagined it all. The idea that Clark Stevens actually flirted with him would be unbelievable.

I squeezed my eyes shut and let the dark thoughts take over, opening up the side of my personality that I kept locked up tighter than any jail cell on Alcatraz Island. It was a secret that I only let out when the pain became too much and the longing found me surfing the Net’s many porn sites. This was the me who was completely and achingly



aroused by the thought of a naked male pressing his rock-hard cock against mine or imagining myself on my knees sucking on another man until he spewed hot cum all over my face and chest. This was the Clark Stevens who only I knew. The one who had yet to make any of his man-on-man fantasies come true.

If I were out on the field I'd be tackling practice sleds until I dropped from exhaustion. It was the only thing that helped keep these thoughts out of my head, so I hit harder and ran faster, turning into a machine; an unstoppable one that had the world of college football sitting up and taking notice. I was voted MVP three years running. I was the one agents were checking out and the NFL was salivating over, the one who would be eligible for the draft next year. I was the guy who had the world in the palm of my hand if I didn't blow it and let this same world know that I was gay.

THE elevator door opened, and Jody watched as the gurney was wheeled back down the hall. The orderly stopped pushing when he saw him, and Jody looked down at Clark and noted that there were beads of sweat on his forehead, the pain written all over his gorgeous face.

"It's getting worse, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yeah, it is. All the manipulation upstairs didn't help."

"Let me give you something."

"No codeine, okay? The stuff makes me puke."

"I didn't know that," Jody said, scribbling some notes in Clark's chart. He asked the nurse to prepare some Demerol, and she came back with the syringe. He rolled Clark over gently, moving his hospital gown up to expose the area.

"Hey, watch out for hidden paparazzi. They'll pay big money for a booty shot."

"Sorry," Jody said quietly. "I should have waited 'til we were back in the room, but I wanted you out of pain as soon as possible."

"Hey, Doc, I was just kidding."

"I know," he replied, ruffling Clark's hair gently.

“Well, is it broken?” Clark asked, as soon as they got in the room.

“There’s a hairline fracture on the ulna, but it should heal in no time. We need to cast it from here to here,” Jody said, drawing an imaginary line on Clark’s arm, causing goose bumps to break out all over. Jody noticed but said nothing.

“This won’t affect my career, will it?”

“Not at all,” Jody replied.

“How long will I be in a cast?”

“Not very long; maybe four weeks.”

Clark was starting to get groggy from the pain medication that had just kicked in, so he closed his eyes, which was just as well. Jody didn’t think he could stand looking at those aqua-colored eyes for one more minute without bending down and kissing each eyelid gently.

The phone rang, and Jody picked it up immediately. “Dr. Williams.” He listened to the voice on the other end and responded, “Yes, I’m your son’s attending physician. He has a minor fracture on his forearm, and we’re casting it right now.” Jody remained silent as the voice on the other end of the line did all the talking. Finally, he said, “No, Clark cannot come to the phone, but I’ll have him call you as soon as he’s able. You’re welcome.” Jody put the phone down and looked over at Clark who was looking at him with glassy eyes.

“Who was that?” he slurred.

“Your father.”

“Of course it was.”

“He sounded really concerned and wants you to call him as soon as possible.”

“I’m sure,” Clark sighed and closed his eyes again. “And if I don’t call him, he’ll call me.”

“Don’t you two get along?”

“As long as we do things his way, we get along just fine.”

“I see.”

“It’s all good, Doc,” Clark said, passing out completely.

WHEN I woke up, the doc was staring at me with concern. His eyes were the color of warm caramel, and the shadows on his jawline made him look dangerously sexy for some reason. I was flying high on the drugs, and my guard was down, so I reached out for his hand, comforted when he gave my own a reassuring squeeze. I left my hand in his.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, in a voice that felt like a caress.

“Like I’m drunk.”

“Are you in pain?”

“No.”

“Good. We cast your arm while you were out of it.”

I was surprised that it was all over. I lifted my left arm and saw the white cast. It seemed to belong to someone else; I was so physically removed from it. “Looks like you did a good job, Doc.”

“You’re good, Clark. I’ll sign the discharge papers, and you can go as soon as your ride gets here.”

“Will I see you again?” I asked, pulling him back beside me and holding onto his hand again. I couldn’t seem to let him go for some reason or keep the eager tone out of my voice. It sounded pretty needy to my ear, and I hoped that he didn’t hear it that way.

“Of course, you will.”

“Any restrictions?”

“Keep it dry.”

I SPENT that night dreaming about him. It was a recurring dream, only in the past the faces had been hazy and nondescript. This time the body that was making me toss and turn had the doc’s face, and with that the dream became much more intense and I woke up to a raging boner, which I took care of in seconds as I imagined his mouth moving up and down my cock.

I lay in bed and wondered where the hell this was all coming from. It was one thing to act on the spur-of-the-moment, like I’d done earlier

today, but to actually dream about the man was something else altogether. Being raised in a primarily all-male household left little room to indulge in these fucked-up thoughts. If anyone in my family found out I was harboring fantasies about my doctor, or any man for that matter, I'd be thrown out in a second. Even my mother wouldn't be able to save me.

I'd lost my virginity when I was thirteen, most probably because I was already almost six feet tall and looked like I was eighteen. It was hurried and over in about four minutes. After that there was an endless stream of women who passed through my life. I made it a point to sleep with as many of them as possible hoping this would keep the other feelings at bay.

Unfortunately, not one of them made me sit up and pay attention for longer than a few days. They didn't stir my blood or play any part in my ongoing fantasies. I developed a reputation as a player, the ultimate challenge, the one who refused to commit.

As I got older, the women continued to throw themselves at me, and I did my best to live up to everyone's expectations. However, no amount of dating seemed to keep the other feelings away. I still looked at certain men longer than I should have, still imagined what it would be like to have a man take me in his mouth. These thoughts continued to plague me on a daily basis, and now the doc seemed to be the main attraction in this ongoing slide show in my head. Imagining him naked and begging was enough to get me off in mere seconds.

My weekly visits as an outpatient did nothing to curtail this desire; in fact, I went out of my way to wear shirts that were difficult to remove so that he'd have to help me. I knew I was playing a stupid and dangerous game, one that would never see fruition. I was sucked in as swiftly as an animal in quicksand, unable to stop myself from sinking deeper and deeper. Every touch of his sent electrical shockwaves straight to my groin.

The worst part of it was that I sensed he wanted me as well. He and I had become quite adept at touching each other unnecessarily. I could tell by the way his hands trembled by the end of each visit and his breathing would shift and become a little ragged. The last time he all but threw me out, urging me away in a voice raspy with suppressed feeling.

It was at my final checkup that I decided to ask him out for dinner. I did it on the pretense of gratitude for a job well done. In actuality, I was throwing caution to the wind, giving in to the impulse once again.

“You don’t need to take me to dinner, Clark. I didn’t do anything special.”

“Maybe not, but I’d like to anyway. Come on; let me buy you a meal.”

“Clark, you don’t have to.” The doc seemed very reluctant, probably in light of all that was going on with us during my follow-up visits, but I persisted, and he finally agreed.

We drove to Skates on the Bay in his black BMW. You could have eaten off the floor, which really said a lot about the man. I wondered if he was this anal about everything else in his life.

“Tell me something about you,” I asked, after we got settled and the waiter brought our drinks. He was having a frozen margarita, and I had my usual Corona.

“There’s nothing much to tell. I’m just a simple Midwesterner living out his dream in the Bay Area.” His smile came easily, along with that small dimple that I noticed on the first night we met.

“Are you some kind of genius?”

“Why do you say that?”

“You went to Stanford, didn’t you?”

“You don’t have to be a genius to go there. I just got lucky.”

“Oh, come on. You were probably on the fucking honor roll in your school.”

He laughed out loud, but I was comfortable with it, knowing he was laughing with me and not at me. It was the end of the day, and the shadow on his face was thick, giving him that dangerous look that I found so appealing. His hair fell over his forehead, and he raked it back with his long fingers in an unconscious move. I tried to imagine what that hair would feel like fanned out all over my chest. I was embarrassed by my own thoughts, so I pulled a piece of bread out of the basket and started tearing it to shreds.

“I was a good student,” he said, breaking through my train of thought. “Do you come from a big family?”

“Oh, yeah,” I replied, “There’s a bunch of us. I’m the runt of a five-son litter.”

“No kidding!”

“Yup. I’m the baby of the family, subject to all the indignities of being the youngest.”

“Such as?”

“My brothers bullied me constantly, so I learned how to fight at an early age. I also got quite good at running away from them.”

“Like Forrest Gump.”

I laughed at his comment, a picture of Tom Hanks running across the football field vivid in my brain.

A waiter came over to take our order. “My name is Brad. What can I get you guys?”

I rattled off my usual: steak, medium rare, and a baked potato, loaded. Jody ordered some kind of fish.

“Hey,” the waiter said, sticking the pencil behind his ear and getting really animated. “Aren’t you Clark Stevens?”

I nodded.

“Dude, I’m a huge fan!”

“Thanks a lot.”

“I’ve been watching you ever since you started at Cal. Your numbers are outstanding, man!”

I could feel my cheeks burning up, an embarrassing physical trait I couldn’t seem to outgrow.

“I heard you broke your arm?”

“I’m all better; in fact, this is the guy that patched me up.”

The waiter turned to look at Jody. “This kid’s going places, Doc!”

“So I’ve heard.”

“I’ll be bringing your food as soon as I can.” He gathered up the menus and left.

Jody took a sip of his drink and said, "I had no idea you were so famous."

"This is Berkeley, Doc. Anyone who likes football knows me. Outside of this area though, I'm nobody."

"I think you're just being modest."

"Let's not talk about me anymore."

"Okay... what do you want to talk about?"

"How come your name is Jody? Isn't that a girl's name?"

He cracked a smile and said, "My real name is Jude. Jody's a nickname that stuck."

"Oh. Doesn't it bother you to have a girl's name?"

"Not at all. What about you, Clark? Were your parents big Superman fans?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, Clark Kent, Superman's alter ego."

"I was named after Dwight Clark."

"Who?"

"San Francisco 49er. Best wide receiver *ever*. He was huge the year I was born."

"In case you haven't noticed," Jody said, leaning forward, "I'm not a big football fan."

"I'm beginning to figure that out. Let's change the subject then. Tell me about your girlfriend?"

"No girlfriend."

"Why not?"

"I'm gay."

"Oh..." I was stunned to hear him say it out loud. Stunned, but a little jealous that he was so sure of himself.

"You don't look gay," I said quickly, immediately realizing how stupid that sounded.

Jody's surprise was evident in the shift of his body and his raised eyebrows. He looked confused by my last statement. Finally, he cocked

his head to the right and said, “Do you think we all wear mascara and sequins?”

“No,” I said quickly, backpedaling like mad. “I don’t know much about your world.”

“I didn’t think so,” he said, taking a sip of water and getting serious again. “Does it bother you? Being seen in public with a gay man?”

“Why should it? You don’t look gay. Besides, you’re my doctor; nothing else.”

“Right,” Jody said, never taking his eyes off mine. I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks again. Could he tell about me? Did gay men just know about other men who were attracted to them, but too scared to do anything about it? Was I sending out some sort of signal I wasn’t aware of? My mind was filled with a thousand questions, but all I could think of to ask was, “Have you always known you’re gay?”

“I knew something wasn’t right when I preferred watching Martha Stewart over *Monday Night Football*,” he answered easily. “Then when I started salivating over Sean Connery’s hairy chest, I knew I had issues.”

“I’ll bet,” I replied, unable to keep the smile off my face. “Were your parents pretty cool?”

“They were, after they got over the initial shock. My father had me when he was in his forties. He was a widower when he met my mother, so by the time I was born, he was old enough to be my grandfather, and he spoiled me rotten. He’s never been able to stay angry at me for longer than a day, so when I announced that I was gay, he took it in stride and launched on this quest to make me the best-educated gay man in Illinois.”

“How?”

“By keeping me disease free. He was rabid about safe sex, and I had videos hurled at me left and right. At the time, I thought it was all a little over the top, but as I got older and learned more, I realized what a loving thing he did. Mind you, this was all coming from a straight man with two grown sons. He could have just ignored me, hoping it was a phase that would pass, but he chose to be honest and open, which made an incredible difference in my state of mind.”

“You’re lucky they accept you for who you are.”



"I am.... My parents were way ahead of their time. They acted like PFLAG parents long before they ever heard of it."

"What's PFLAG?"

"It's a support group for parents of gay kids."

"What about your mom? Do you two get along?"

"She's a sweetheart, but I was always closer to my father."

"That's great," I said.

He must have heard the envy in my voice because he asked, "I know we talked about this before, but you never really gave me an answer. Don't you and your dad get along? He seemed very interested in you and your career."

"That would be an understatement."

"Oh?"

"Let's not talk about him. I want to enjoy my dinner," I said with a slight frown. The idea of discussing my father and his obsession with my career wasn't exactly appealing.

"Do you always shy away from carbs?" I asked, noting the lack of rice or potatoes on Jody's plate.

He shook his head and swallowed before answering. "Not really. I just watch what I eat. I can't afford to get love handles at my age. Once they creep up they're hard to get rid of."

"What are you, twenty-six?"

"I knew that French cream was a good investment," he joked. "I'm thirty-three."

"Big deal... you're not that old."

"That's easy for you to say. You're still in your twenties. Once you pass thirty, it's downhill all the way."

"Aww, come on... you look great." Our eyes met and held, the unspoken words thick as syrup between us. My cheeks felt like they were on fire, so I quickly looked down at my food, attacking my baked potato with my fork.

"Clark?"

“Yeah?”

Jody reached across the table and laid his hand on mine. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

I pulled my hand back instantly, looking around to see if anyone was watching. Jody was taken aback by my reaction, his facial expression mirroring his surprise as it changed from warm to icy cold. I was ashamed of what I had just done, but it was too late. I wanted to say “I’m sorry.” Instead I remained silent.

The evening was ruined after that. Conversation became stilted, and I could tell that Jody wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. We finished our meal, declined dessert, and when I asked for the check, he reached for his wallet.

“Don’t, please,” I insisted. “I told you this was my treat.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Those were the last words he spoke that night. I wanted to say so much, yet I ended up saying nothing, an omission that would haunt me for days.

## CHAPTER 2

WE drove to the hospital parking lot in silence. I pointed out my car, a beat-up Volvo I'd inherited from my mother, and he pulled up beside it and waited silently as I got out. He nodded when I thanked him, but took off without saying a word.

I stood there and watched him drive away, the custom license plate mocking me with the letters PROUD2B framed with a thin strip of rainbow colors.

The inside of my car was a disaster; a rolling locker room filled with clothes, books, and fast-food wrappers. I made a mental note to get the shit cleaned up, even though I knew the likelihood of that happening was pretty slim.

The drive from the hospital up Telegraph Avenue toward the Cal campus was slow this evening. It was Saturday night after all, and the streets were clogged with bikers and pedestrians. I tried to rein in my impatience, but I was fidgety and angry; probably because the last hour of an otherwise pleasant evening had turned sour due to my fucking homophobic behavior.

*He must think I'm the biggest ass....*

I got to my building and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time, trying to blow off some steam. The look on Jody's face when I pulled my hand away was stuck in my head. I got to my apartment and

fumbled with the door, finally pushing it open and then slamming it shut behind me.

The light on my answering machine was blinking so I hit the button and listened to the message while I wandered over to the fridge to pull out a beer.

“Hey, Clark... it’s me.” Nikki’s perky voice reverberated. “Call me when you get in. I’d love to hook up.”

No surprise there. She was my self-proclaimed stalker, following me around since I was in the eighth grade. Nikki had developed a thing for me years ago, and it continued to this day even though I told her it was going nowhere.

She was persistent and also very convenient. Somehow she always ended up in my bed, which had everyone thinking we were a couple when nothing could be further from the truth. The reality was that it meant nothing to me. She was a means of release, someone I was comfortable with who was always available.

Tonight I was in the mood to forget the hurt in Jody’s eyes so I hit speed dial, and she picked up after a second. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“Come over.”

She was at my place in no time since she lived about five blocks away. I heard the knock, pulled the door open, and yanked her up against my body, practically ripping off her clothes and carrying her to the bed. Foreplay was unnecessary because she seemed just as eager to get on with the main event, pulling me roughly toward her and rutting against me, grabbing my cock and moving it back and forth across her wetness, hissing at me, begging for it. The condom was on before I knew it, and I closed my eyes and pushed into her, feeling her stretch to accommodate my size, listening to her groans as she thrashed about.

I was on automatic, pumping in and out of her, waiting for the release I badly needed. My mind kept wandering though, the fantasy easily taking over, and the blond cheerleader with the angelic face wasn’t beneath me anymore. It was Jody looking up at me with his chocolate-colored eyes, his mouth stretched in a seductive smile, his tongue licking

my lips, murmuring “fuck me” over and over. I exploded into Nikki, our bodies shuddering at the same time and, when I was spent, I rolled off her and moved to the other side of the bed, hoping she wouldn’t do the cuddle thing because I didn’t think I could stand it tonight. Not when the only arms I wanted around me were lean and muscular and male.

I got out of bed and padded off to the kitchen, threw the condom in the trash, and pulled a Corona out of the fridge. “You want anything to drink?”

“I’ll have whatever you’re having,” she called out. *Of course you will*, I thought. *Whatever you want, dear....*

I watched her as she stretched out on my bed looking like something out of *Playboy* magazine. There was no denying the fact that she was a knockout. Her hair was the blond that bordered on platinum, and her eyes were as blue as a summer sky. She sat up, and the sheet fell away from her breasts. She did nothing to cover up, exposing them proudly, the pink nipples made pinker by her recent orgasm. They were as beautiful as the rest of her, and I should have been madly in love. But I wasn’t. My heart felt dead.

I reached for the pile of mail that was sitting on the table. I’d left it to accumulate and there was a few days’ worth. It was the usual stuff, but one letter caught my attention. It had the Cal logo on the upper left-hand side. I ripped it open and saw that it was from the registrar’s office, with a list of my grades, class standing, and units completed to date. The English class was listed as incomplete with a note saying that I needed to take it and pass before I could graduate, let alone play football.

“Fuck!”

“What is it?” Nikki asked.

“The English class again. It’s ruining my life.”

“Oh, come on, Clark. It’s not that bad.”

“Drop it, Nik. I’m not in the mood for a pep talk.”

She got off the bed and sashayed over to where I stood, rubbing up against me like a Persian cat in heat. I was starting to get hard again, so I let her lead me back to bed for another session before we both passed out.

The next morning I found that my mood hadn't improved at all. Seeing her tousled head in my bed should have made me feel better, but it didn't. I got up quietly, threw on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, grabbed a bottle of water and my car keys, and left for my usual morning run. Hopefully Nikki would be gone by the time I got back.

It would have been so simple if I could just fall in love with her. None of these nagging doubts would exist, and both our families would be ecstatic. Instead, I always felt guilty after we'd been together, knowing I'd used her to get off.

Her parents and mine were good friends, part of the tight-knit community in Folsom that had known each other for years. Our fathers worked together at the prison, and when they noticed Nikki's interest in me, they practically set a wedding date, not even bothering to see how I felt about it. They just assumed the feelings were mutual, and after a certain point I didn't think to set them straight.

The only one who really knew how I felt was Nikki. She knew that I didn't love her that way. I cared for her as much as I cared for my brothers. It was a familial love, only with benefits.

The guilt weighed heavily this morning, thinking about all we'd done last night. The worst part was the fact that I'd been fucking someone else in my head. Someone who would probably never want to see or talk to me again after the little stunt I pulled at the restaurant.

It was a beautiful Sunday morning, and I headed for the track, doing my usual five miles until the sweat poured off my body. It felt good to be doing something physical, banishing the demons that had resided in my head for more years than I could remember. Exercise had always been the best sedative for me, the endorphins coating me with a sense of calm.

After checking the glove compartment to see that my wallet was in its usual place, I decided to make a coffee stop on my way home, choosing to go to Andronico's instead of Starbucks. My refrigerator was completely empty, so I headed toward my favorite store, mentally going over the things I needed to buy. I glanced up at the mirror and saw that I looked halfway decent, even though my hair was still wet and plastered to my skull. I ran my fingers through the bone-straight hair and fluffed it up a little so I didn't look like I just got out of the shower. My eyes were

more green than blue today, a phenomenon that I lived with. The ever-changing kaleidoscope of my eye color was always a good topic of conversation.

I grabbed a cart and headed up the aisles, picking cans and boxes off the shelves and tossing them in without thinking. I was hoping not to forget anything, but I knew better. I'd probably forget the most important thing.

I turned the corner, heading up to the food court, and almost ran into Jody Williams and a companion. The shock of seeing him up close after dreaming about him all night threw me for a moment, and I stammered out a greeting.

"Hi, Jody. How's it going?"

"It's all good," he replied, barely cracking a smile. "This is my friend, Lil Lampert." His lanky companion was Jody's direct opposite in appearance, towering over him by at least five inches. While one looked completely straight and professional, the other could have been a poster boy for Castro Street and all it stood for. He was wearing a lime-green T-shirt and orange cut-offs with the requisite matching orange Crocs. His spiked brown hair had red, gold, and silver streaks, and, of course, the gold hoop in his left ear completed the picture.

"I'm a big fan," he said, sticking his hand out for me to shake it. It was surprisingly firm, not what I expected.

"You know football?" I asked stupidly, wanting to kick myself again. I seemed to be digging my hole deeper and deeper with regards to Jody.

"Don't look so surprised! Some of us Nelly queens actually enjoy sports," he replied, looking at me in amusement. He probably thought I was an idiot as well. God only knew what Jody had told him about last night's dinner conversation.

"You guys live around here?" I asked. "I don't recall seeing you at this store before."

"I do," Jody replied. "I live up the hill near the Claremont Hotel."

"I live in San Francisco, but then I'm sure you already figured that out," Lil said pointedly.

“What brings you our way?” Berkeley and San Francisco were worlds apart even though we were neighbors.

“Oh, I come out every other weekend to spend Sundays with Jody. If I didn’t do that, he’d shrivel up and die without ever seeing sunlight. All he does is work.”

“Shut up, Lil.” Jody smiled at him, the accompanying dimple finally showing up as well. “Lil and I were roommates in college,” Jody continued. “But now he’s decided he’s my mother.”

“Well, someone has to take care of this boy, since he won’t do it himself,” Lil said, lowering his voice to a whisper, as if Jody weren’t there. “He’s all about taking care of others, you know. The great healer who ignores his own need.”

“Got it. Well, I’ll let you guys get back to your shopping,” I said, trying to move my cart around them.

“It was nice meeting you, Clark,” Lil threw out as I passed him by.

“Same here.”

I walked away from them, feeling their eyes boring into my backside. I turned back for a minute and saw them walking off, Lil’s arm draped loosely across Jody’s shoulders, which were broader and more muscular than I ever remembered them to be. In fact, everything about his body was quite a surprise, once he removed his scrubs and other work attire. His legs were lean and well-formed, tanned a golden brown, despite Lil’s remarks about Jody not seeing any sunlight. He was wearing Spandex biker shorts and a skin tight T-shirt that left little to the imagination. I couldn’t stop staring.

JODY was at the checkout stand unloading his cart while Lil flipped through the pages of the *National Enquirer*. “He’s better-looking in person,” Lil said out loud.

“I know! It’s criminal that anyone should look like that,” Jody answered, stacking his groceries on the moving belt.

“You know he’s bent, don’t you?”

“Get the fuck out of here.”



“I saw him checking out your ass.”

“You’re delusional.”

“No, Jodes, you are.”

Jody looked at his best friend and frowned. “Do you really think so, because I was picking up a signal too, but I thought I might be imagining it?”

“Honey, you’re not imagining anything.”

“Well, if he’s gay, he’s got some major issues he needs to deal with.”

“No doubt.”

“I’m not wasting any energy on this.”

“Methinks thou doth protest too much,” Lil said pointedly.

Jody stuck his tongue out at his best friend, and Lil cracked up, his raucous laughter heard throughout the store.

## CHAPTER 3

IT was almost two weeks before I saw him again.

I was back in the emergency room, sitting in the small cubicle I'd become very familiar with. "What are you doing here?" Jody asked, surprised to see me again.

I had hoped there would be another doctor on duty, but of course that hope died as soon as he walked in. "I had a fight with a wall, and I lost."

"What?"

"Oh, forget about it! Just look at this and tell me it's all good." I stuck my left hand out, practically shoving it in his face. The only reason I was here was because my coach happened to be around when I had my meltdown, and he insisted that I have it looked at.

Jody sighed deeply, and he reached out. "Let me see."

I reluctantly placed my hand in his, noticing how his eyes were a darker shade of caramel today and his face had that perfect five o'clock shadow, even though it was only three in the afternoon. He was even hotter than the last time I saw him. His mouth was rosy pink, and I tried to imagine what it would be like to kiss him.

"Your knuckles look like ground beef. What did you hit again?"

"My locker."

“Why?”

“You’d never understand.”

“Try me.”

“It’s a school thing. I got a note from the English department, and I kind of lost it.”

“What did they want?”

“To tell me that I’m about to flunk a required class, and if I didn’t get my ass in gear, I may not fucking graduate, let alone play football!”

“I see.”

“How could you possibly? You are a fucking genius that went to Stanford,” I spat out, my voice starting to rise to a dangerous level.

“Clark,” he said, putting his hand on my knee, “stop it.”

I looked up at the ceiling, trying to get a grip, but I could feel myself spiraling again and the inevitable tears of frustration showing up. I swiped at them angrily. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Jody said gently. “Why don’t we talk about this?”

“No!”

“Why not? How can I help if I don’t know what’s going on?”

“You can’t do anything, Jody. I’m a fucking loser.”

“Hey, come on now,” Jody said, looking surprised by my words. “You’re Clark Stevens, football star. That doesn’t sound like loser to me.”

“Maybe not in football, but I’m definitely a loser in other areas of my life.”

“Tell me,” he said, coaxing it out of me.

“I’ve got ADD, you know, attention deficit.”

“I know what it is, Clark. It’s not the end of the world.”

“It is if you can’t pass a fucking English class!”

“Do you have a problem with reading or retention?”

“Both! The reading makes me sleepy so then I zone out and forget everything I’ve read. It’s always been an issue.”

“There are drugs to help with this problem.”

“I know, but my father never wanted me to take them.”

“Why the hell not?”

“He said they’d stunt my growth.”

“Bullshit!”

“He said they would make me stupider than I already am.”

“Your father said this?” Jody was clearly shocked by that statement. “Where did he ever get that idea?”

“I’m not sure. Probably from one of his friends.”

“Didn’t your parents ever take you to see a legitimate doctor? He would have set them straight about the medication.”

“They did, except the bottom line was my football career. My father didn’t want anything to affect it, and since this problem of mine never surfaced while I was playing football, he chose to ignore it, hoping it would go away.”

“Oh, that was really brilliant on his part. Didn’t he realize it was only going to get worse?”

“No... he thought that if he screamed loud enough and pushed hard enough, I’d get my head out of my ass and pass my classes.”

“I swear, some people should never become parents,” Jody muttered under his breath.

“Hey,” I said, reaching out to touch his arm. “He did what he thought was the right thing. I’ve made it this far, something I never thought I’d be able to do.”

“You have a natural gift, Clark. Your father had nothing to do with it.”

“If I’d gone on the drugs, I may not have developed to my full potential. Who knows?”

“You’re buying into his bullshit as well.”

“Will you just patch me up and let me go?”

“What’s the point? You’ll be back here again after another temper tantrum.”

I turned away from him and looked out the small window. The frustration was getting to me again, compounded by intense shame, made even worse by the hot tears that blinked out of my eyes.

“Clark, look at me.” Jody cupped my face and wiped the tears away with his thumb. “I’m going to help you.”

“How?” It seemed like an impossible task.

“I’ll tutor you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’ll get you through this. I can’t believe he didn’t let you go on the meds.”

“Don’t start again.”

“I won’t. I’ll drop it for now, but this is not over.”

“Thank you.” I looked into his eyes, sure that I’d see pity or scorn. Instead, I only saw concern, which made me even more grateful.

“You’re welcome,” he said softly. “Come to my house tomorrow night and bring your books. Let’s see if we can’t make this work.”

I wrote down his address, and we settled on eight o’clock. I left the hospital a much calmer man than when I had entered it.

JODY stood at the entrance of the ER, watching Clark leave. He turned and went into his office and poured himself a cup of the sludge they called coffee, grimacing after taking a sip. He swallowed it just the same, knowing there wasn’t anything better in the cafeteria.

He shook his head in disgust, thinking about all the things that Clark had just revealed to him. The damage that some parents caused in the name of love or good intentions was enough to make him want to quit his job sometimes. He’d seen it all at this place: people who were victims of physical and mental abuse, yet somehow, human nature continued to surprise him with its resilience. Listening to Clark defend his father’s actions had not come as a shock. He’d stood over countless victims who were battered and broken, who continued to defend the person who had caused the injury, thinking somehow that they deserved

it. And why was it always the beautiful ones who seemed especially susceptible? He snorted out a frustrated laugh, trying to shake off this depression that had suddenly snuck up on him.

He couldn't get over the fact that Clark's father had arbitrarily decided not to put him on medication for the attention deficit disorder. Even though it wasn't a cure, it offered relief, helping people to focus and function in a world many considered overwhelming. The fact that Clark had been able to get this far without the drugs spoke volumes of his tenacity, but at what price? He was obviously very fragile with regards to his mental ability, clearly impressed when he'd heard that Jody had gone to Stanford.

This made him even more appealing, the combination of beauty and need an irresistible pull. Jody had never been able to say no to anyone who needed his help, but he wondered if he was making a big mistake in offering to tutor Clark. He knew that he wanted him; he was honest enough to admit that. The man had been on his mind ever since they first met, the physical attraction powerful and gripping. The icing on the cake was this new development. Now he was even more attracted, the healer in him galloping to the rescue.

Lil would argue that it was more than that. He would tell him to walk away, to not open his heart again to another lost cause, yet Jody knew he was being sucked in as sure as he knew that Clark had more baggage than he could handle. Being a closet case was bad enough. The fact that Clark was a jock enmeshed in the world of sports was even worse! Adding the ADD and his insecurity to the mix was a recipe for disaster. Lil would probably go through the roof!

They'd both seen friends crash and burn whenever they were forced out of the closet. No amount of convincing or support would help. It was a personal decision that every gay man had to deal with at some point in his life. Somehow though, Jody didn't think that Clark was anywhere close to dealing with his internal struggles. He wondered if he ever would be.

The phone rang, snapping him out of his melancholia, the business of patching up broken bodies grounding him again. He spoke into the receiver, telling whoever was on the other line that he'd be there in five minutes.

TRAFFIC was snarled at Telegraph and Ashby. I waited for the gridlock to break up, the sounds of Linkin Park coming through the speakers, telling me that in the end, nothing really matters. Ironical words after the trauma of the past few hours. My conversation with Jody kept replaying in my head. Even though I'd defended my dad, I knew that his refusal to put me on drugs was a mistake. The jeers and taunts of my brothers were still fresh in my brain. The sense of failure whenever I was unable to do my schoolwork always outweighed any sense of accomplishment on the football field. I envied people who could read a book without nodding off. I wanted to be the person teachers called on, knowing they'd get the right answer. Instead, I'd always sit at the back of the class and pray they wouldn't notice me.

My frustrations drove me to act out at an early age. I was well-known for my short fuse, my anger a pretty common occurrence in our house. My brothers would call me Clark the Spark, always waiting to see what I'd destroy during a temper tantrum. The doctors had advised my parents to sign me up for some physical activity to give me the release I needed. The end result was football, a sport I seemed to be well-suited for. The double-edged sword was the fact that my father balked at giving me the medication I needed because of my prowess on the football field.

The only time I felt good about myself was when I was in uniform. It was also when my brothers started to give me some modicum of respect and lighten up on the insults. They knew I had more talent in my little finger than all four of them rolled together, so they shut their mouths for once and let me do my thing.

And football was definitely my thing. Everyone's opinion of me shifted, and I was no longer called the family dummy. I still had problems with attention, even while I was playing football, but in that environment, it was something I could control. So long as I knew exactly where I needed to be at a given time, I could complete the task.

It was when I was off the field where I continued to flounder. My brain just didn't work the way it should. I would forget things half the time, unable to get from point A to point B without getting lost somewhere along the way. I had a hell of a time finishing anything, such

as laundry. My clothes were always appearing a day or two later, after someone found them abandoned in the dryer. Going to the store without a list was a big deal. Remembering where I put the list was a fucking joke. I'd always start out doing one thing and then end up going off on a tangent somewhere along the way.

School had always been a primary source of tension. In high school, the teachers watched out for me, thanks to the badgering of the football coaches. I became one of the "special" kids who were babied along. A lot of teachers turned a blind eye to my shortcomings for the sake of the team. This was an all too common occurrence; I would come to find out. I wasn't the only one who had issues with learning and attention, but that didn't make me feel any better.

I SPENT the next day in a state of high anticipation. I kept checking and rechecking my answering machine to make sure Jody hadn't called to say he'd changed his mind. My backpack was loaded with books and note pads to make sure I had everything I needed for our session tonight. Finally, when I could do no more, I left the apartment and went running again. I needed to stay focused and so far this was the only method that seemed to work.

After running, I came home to shower and change. My answering machine was blinking, and I hit play with a sense of dread, fearing the worst. Instead of Jody it was my mother, which was a huge relief. I hit redial, and she was on the phone after a few rings.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hi, baby. Where were you?"

"Out running."

"Can you come home this weekend?"

"Why?"

"It's Robby's birthday." He was my oldest brother and was about to turn thirty. He was also the only one in the family that was married and soon to become a father.

"I'll drive up on Saturday."



“Why not Friday night?”

“Things to do, Mom.”

“What things?”

“Uhh... is this the FBI?”

“Sorry, sweetie.”

“It’s okay.”

I hung up and went to shower to get ready for my meeting with Jody. I still couldn’t believe he was willing to do this for me. After the way I acted that night at the restaurant, I was surprised he even consented to see me that day in the ER. I wondered if he was used to the insults and rejection because he was gay. I stopped myself as soon as those thoughts entered my head. I was doing it again, making assumptions about something I knew nothing about.

Gay sex permeated my father’s existence. He’d come home from work, ranting about everything that went on in prison, calling them freaks of nature. The little I knew about gay men was what I’d picked up from his tirades. The worst part about listening to him was the knowledge that I had an unhealthy interest in other men that I’d been smothering on a daily basis for a long time.

I was perfect on the outside. Shit, I’d been told how good-looking I was since I was four years old. I was tired of hearing it. None of the words meant anything, because I knew I was flawed. I just had to make sure that no one else figured it out.

## CHAPTER 4

“CLARK!” Jody said, shaking my arm to get my attention. We’d only been reading for ten minutes, and I was already starting to zone out.

“What?”

“Pay attention,” he said with infinite patience.

“You’re going to get sick of saying that.”

“Come on,” Jody cajoled, grabbing a piece of white paper and drawing some stick figures and circles on it. We were reading James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*; an easy book, Jody had remarked when I handed it to him. If it was so simple, then how come none of it made sense when I was reading it? He drew a plane and some mountains, almost treating me like a five-year-old.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

“What?”

“Drawing pictures. I feel like I’m in kindergarten.”

“You’re paying attention, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s why I’m drawing pictures,” Jody said. “Some people are more visual than others. They need to see, rather than just hear. You’re obviously one of those.”

“Is that why I get football and all the plays? ’Cause they draw everything up in diagrams?”

“Probably. I’m sure that couldn’t hurt. Plus, you love the sport.”

“I guess. Okay, so go on and explain this.”

“Okay, here’s the plane and the four passengers. Henry Conway, the British consul, Charles Mallinson, his vice-consul, Henry Barnard, whose real name is Chalmers Bryant. He’s an American finance guy that just embezzled one hundred million dollars and is on the run. And lastly,” Jody said, putting his finishing touch to the drawing, “this woman is named Roberta Brinklow. She’s a missionary. They’re about to leave Afghanistan for parts unknown. People are being evacuated, and these four are thrown together on the little plane.”

“Then what?” I asked, running my tongue around my lips and staring at Jody’s face. He had this flawless skin and this mad stubble that made him look dangerously sexy. I’d completely forgotten what he just said.

“Clark.”

“Huh?”

“What are you thinking?”

*Oh man, you don’t want to know.* “Nothing.”

“Can you get your head back in the story?”

“I’ll try.”

“Okay... focus now. The plane takes off, and no one seems to know where they’re going. It’s almost like they’ve been hijacked.”

“Were they?”

“No one knows for sure. The other passengers are hoping Conway knows, since he’s in charge, but he has no idea where they’re headed, and to make matters worse, they develop some kind of engine trouble, and the plane crashes high up in the mountains. The pilot is injured and just before he dies, he tells Conway about a lamasery called Shangri-La.”

“What’s a lamasery?”

“It’s a monastery where holy men reside.”

“Why the fuck don’t they call it that?”

“Because it’s the correct word,” Jody said, smiling at me, showing off his teeth and that dimple that was making me crazy.

“Go on,” I said, forcing myself to look at the paper and not Jody.

“Just after the pilot dies, they notice a group of people appearing on the horizon, coming toward them carrying an old man on a chair.”

“What do you mean on a chair?”

Jody drew two lines on the paper and put a chair on top of the lines with another stick figure on it. “Like this.”

“Oh.”

“The passengers are confronted with strangers who look Chinese, so Conway concludes that they are definitely somewhere in or around Tibet. The guy on the chair tells them his name is Chang, and he’s going to take them to Shangri-La.”

“To that place, the lama, whatever.”

“The lamasery.”

“Kay.”

“So the small group begins the trip to Shangri-La. Most of them go along willingly, but Mallinson is unhappy about everything that’s occurred so far and doesn’t want to go.”

“What’s he all pissed off about?”

“He’s negative and stuck in his ways... can’t deal with change.”

“But he goes anyway.”

“No choice. They would have left him there.”

“And when they got there, what happened?”

“They see a beautiful ancient stone building on top of a mountain, shrouded in mist, and Conway is taken by his surroundings.”

“And the others?”

“You are going to have to find that out for yourself. We are done for tonight. It’s late, and I have to be up at five in the morning.”

“It’s only ten!”

“Time for bed.”

“Okay,” I said, giving in. “Thanks for doing this. You have no idea how relieved I am.”

“I can guess,” Jody replied seriously. “It’s not right; what they did to you.”

“Hey,” I said, stretching out my hand and placing it on top of his. “It’s all good.”

Jody searched my face, waiting. When nothing was forthcoming, he said, “Is it?”

“It is,” I said quietly.

“All right.” He stood abruptly and walked over to the other side of the kitchen and pulled open the door. “I’ll see you again on Monday. Have a nice weekend.”

I picked up my book bag and threw all my stuff into it. When I got ready to walk out the door, Jody stopped me by putting his hand on my arm. We stared into each other’s eyes for the longest time, the sexual tension curling around us like cigar smoke. Finally, Jody broke eye contact and turned and walked over to the kitchen sink, turning his back to me, which was just as well, because my body was betraying me in a painfully obvious manner. I made my way out the door and slammed it shut behind me.

When I got to the car, I sat there for a minute trying to get my emotions in check. I started the engine and drove down the hill, passing the Claremont Hotel to my right and heading out to Telegraph Avenue. I was too wound up to go to bed, so I decided to head out to Folsom. At this time of the night, the traffic would be nonexistent, and I’d probably be there by midnight. Who cares if I hadn’t packed a bag? The need to get out of town and away from Jody was paramount.

JODY grabbed a beer out of the fridge, adjusting himself as his erection pressed tightly against his pants. This seemed to be a common occurrence whenever Clark was in his thoughts or close at hand. He’d almost done something stupid tonight, the need to kiss and taste him clawing at his gut, but common sense prevailed, averting what would have probably been a major disaster. He was pretty sure that Clark would

push him away or, more likely, punch him in the face. He didn't expect him to come willingly to the dark side.

Jody pushed the sliding door open and stepped out on the deck. It was warm tonight, surprisingly humid for the bay area, the thick air enveloping him like a shroud. He threw himself on one of the Adirondack chairs and leaned his head back against the dark green wood, giving in to his thoughts.

God, he was beautiful! Clark was a perfect physical specimen, made even more appealing by the fact that he was unaware of his effect on people. Jody couldn't see the ego anywhere. In fact, he was the opposite; humble and even pathetically grateful for the attention that Jody was paying him. Clark seemed almost childlike in his countenance, despite the fact that he was a rising star in his world.

Jody hadn't felt this kind of attraction in ages. The last time he'd lusted over a man like this was early on in his college career, the year he met Rick. That attraction was almost as powerful as this, only it had not ended the way he hoped. It had been a long time since he'd felt this way, the elevated blood pressure and racing heart reminding him every minute that he was alive and part of the world again.

Thoughts of Clark did things to his body that he'd buried along with his lover four years ago. He seemed to be reviving them with his mere presence, the need to touch and feel consuming him on a daily basis. Jody was walking around in a permanently aroused state, his boner a constant reminder of his need. He imagined what Clark's lips would feel like pressed up against his.

He groaned and gave into the need, tugging on his zipper and releasing his cock, which was now engorged with desire for an untouchable man. He rubbed his thumb around the head that was slippery with drops of moisture, and he closed his eyes and let the fantasy fly.

The blond head was bent over him, the soft lips nibbling at the tender skin, the tongue licking him with hot, pressing strokes, moving up and down his cock with practiced skill while his other hand cupped his balls, kneading them gently. He groaned out loud, bringing himself to orgasm easily, watching the milky liquid spurt out of him, and he sighed, knowing that he'd be alone again as soon as the pulsing stopped.

He stood and made his way back into the house, turning off the lights on his way to his bedroom, and he threw himself on the bed, not bothering to change. He pressed his face against his pillow, and he knew he was crying, the tears coming out of nowhere, for the first time in years.

THE door squeaked and I opened my eyes to see my mother standing at the foot of the bed.

“Hey, Mom.”

“I thought you weren’t coming until today.”

“Change of plans.”

“Do you want some breakfast?”

“What time is it?”

“Almost eleven.”

“Nice of you to let me sleep so long.”

“Well, it is the weekend. I figured you could use the rest.”

She hovered over my bed with a coffee cup in her hand, and she passed it to me as soon as I sat up and leaned up against the headboard.

“Here you go, honey. Nice and sweet, just the way you like it.”

“Thanks.”

I loved her to death, but she always made me feel like I was ten years old. She couldn’t get it in her head that her “baby” was twenty-three years old and about to become a senior.

“Where’s Dad?”

“Out in the yard with Zach and Jason.”

“And the rest of the gang?”

“Robby’s not here yet, and Michael’s at the store getting the beer.”

“Do you want me to do anything?”

“Not until later. I’d like you to help with the tables and chairs.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“What is it, sweetie?”

“Why are you making such a big deal over this birthday?”

“It isn’t every day that you turn thirty.”

“Is that such an important number?”

“Well, not really, but in your brother’s case I think we’re doing this because he’s about to become a father, and then it will be all about his child. This will be the last time he’ll be the center of attention. At least for a long while,” she said, laughing gently.

“If parenting makes you invisible, then I suppose no one has paid any attention to you in years, huh, Mom?”

“Don’t be silly. I get plenty of attention,” she said, looking at me with eyes that mirrored mine. In fact, everything about my mother was like me, including her need for my father’s approval.

“Clark, we got a call from your coach.”

“I figured as much.”

“He told your father that there was some sort of problem.”

“I’ve got it on lockdown, Mom.”

“Dad’s going to say something.”

“I need a shower.... Do you mind?”

“I’m going,” she said quickly, knowing there was nothing under the sheets except my naked body.

I turned the water on full blast, steeling myself for the confrontation with my dad. I knew it was going to be another round of cross-examination, but at least I had an answer for once. Having Jody in my court would keep my father happy and get him off my back until the grades came in.

Thinking of Jody only gave me another excuse to get rid of my morning boner. I imagined him in the shower stall with me, on his knees with my cock in his mouth. That picture was enough to get me off, and I exploded, shooting ropes of cum all over the tiles and the glass door. I imagined Jody sliding up from the floor and kissing me on the neck, rubbing his cock against me, and I moaned into my hand, miserable.



My father approached me while I was setting up the tables and chairs. He was already on his fourth beer, so I knew this wasn't going to be good.

"What's this I hear about an English class?"

"I've got it under control, Dad."

"What are you doing about it?"

"I told you. I'll pass it."

"How?"

"I've got someone helping me. A tutor."

"Who is he?"

"The doctor who fixed my arm."

"The one from the ER?"

"Yeah."

"Why's he helping you? Is he a Cal fan?"

"No, he's just a nice guy."

"He better not give you any of those bullshit drugs."

"He's not!"

"Listen up, Clark," my father said, his face now inches away from mine. "You're almost at the finish line. There are scouts out there that are plenty interested in signing you up for the NFL next year, if you don't fuck this up!"

"I'm aware, Dad."

"Then see that you don't forget it! I don't want any more phone calls about this, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

I watched him walk off, mingling with the other guests. Everyone I grew up with was at the party. Robby and his very pregnant wife, Linda, were surrounded by guests while they opened up his presents. I stood there wondering what it would have been like to be him; the oldest child with no special athletic skills, just a normal person. Dad never meddled in his life. None of my other brothers were subjected to this kind of scrutiny.

It was getting harder and harder to put up with him. When I lived at home, I didn't realize how bad it was, but I'd been away now for three years, and the distance gave me a whole new perspective. Maybe Jody was right. Maybe my life would have been completely different if they'd let me go on medication or get some kind of counseling for the ADD. Then I wouldn't have all these issues, and I wouldn't have him breathing down my neck constantly. But then again, maybe I would have never made it as a football player.

"Dude, is he up your ass again?" my brother Jason muttered under his breath while he handed me a bottle of Corona.

"Oh yeah. It's great coming home and listening to the old man bitch."

"He was in one of his rages after your coach's phone call."

"I wish he'd stay out of my fucking life."

"He would if you'd just do your work."

"Come on, Jason... don't you start."

"You gotta pass this class or you're fucked!"

"I know!"

"What's the plan?"

"I've got someone helping me.... It'll be okay."

"I hope so. You know how much pussy I'm going to get when they find out my baby bro is in the NFL?"

I laughed and shoved him away from me. "You fucker. This is all about snatch, isn't it? You couldn't care less about me."

"Hey, I gotta get something out of this! Come on, little brother. Let's go join the party."

We moved over to the table closest to the makeshift bar where my other two brothers and their friends were doing their best to finish off a keg of beer. They were all pretty shit-faced.

Michael, Jason's twin, stood up holding a beer mug like a microphone and doing a piss-poor imitation of Jimmy Buffet. It was hilarious, especially since he couldn't carry a tune to save his life. Zach was well into his first six-pack and feeling no pain either. He was brother

number two and the one who was most similar to our father. Not so much in appearance, but more in his mind-set. He was an armchair quarterback whose entire life revolved around sports. His biggest regret in life was that he didn't have my talent.

The twins were only eleven months older than me, so we had a lot more in common. In fact, when we were little, people thought we were triplets, because we were so close in age and all three of us were blond and blue-eyed. Zach and Robby were brunets like our dad. They had always treated the three of us like dirt, ordering us around as if we were their personal slaves.

Zach looked up at me, his eyes starting to lose focus from the booze, and he slurred, "Look who it is, everyone. 'Sparky,' Cal's number-one hotshot."

"Fuck off, Zach." I gulped down my drink, pulled up a chair and settled in for the duration. This was going to be a long weekend.

## CHAPTER 5

I GOT back to Berkeley late Sunday night. The hangover wasn't as bad as I'd anticipated since I'd been watching my booze intake. The last thing I wanted was to lose control in front of everyone, especially my father.

My answering machine was blinking, and when I checked the messages, I heard Nikki's voice, wondering where I was. I'd forgotten to mention the party and the trip out to Folsom.

I punched in her numbers, and she picked up on the second ring.

"Hey, stranger! Where were you all weekend?"

"I went home for a party."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she whined, in that little-girl voice she used whenever she pulled the guilt trip.

"I forgot," I replied, reverting to my perennial excuse.

"What was the occasion?"

"Robby's birthday."

"Did you have fun?"

"It was okay. Everyone got hammered."

"I would have liked to have gone with you."

“Sorry. I didn’t think to ask.”

“That’s part of our problem, isn’t it?”

“What?” I knew where this conversation was headed.

“You never think of me, other than when you’re horny.”

“Nikki, stop!”

“Can I come over?”

“I’d rather you didn’t. I’ve got stuff to do.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t bug me, Nik.”

“Clark!”

Fuck, now the begging started, getting on my last nerve. I wanted to slam down the receiver, but I couldn’t do it, so I remained silent while she whimpered on the other line.

“Why are you always so mean?”

“What are you talking about? How am I mean?”

“You won’t let me into your life.... I love you, Clark. Why are you like this?”

Here we go....

“I don’t want to discuss this over the phone.”

“Then let me come over.”

“No!” I was pretty adamant about not wanting to see her tonight. I knew that we’d end up in bed again, and I just wasn’t in the mood for her brand of loving. More importantly, I was tired of our situation. It wasn’t fair to treat her like my own personal fuck-buddy when she wanted to be my girlfriend and eventually my wife.

“Hey, why don’t we meet sometime in the middle of the week?” I suggested, hoping this would placate her. “We’ll go out and have some pizza and talk.”

“How about tomorrow?”

“I can’t. I’ve got tutoring.”

“For what?”

“My English class.”

“Who’s the tutor?”

“What does it matter?”

“I want to know.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Clark, wait! Let’s meet on Tuesday.”

“Okay, I’ll call you.”

I hung up, dreading the meeting already. It would be tough to tell her that she wasn’t wanted. I worried that she’d lose it, but I couldn’t continue to encourage a relationship that was so one-sided. She deserved more, and so did I.

The thought of being alone tonight wasn’t appealing. I could have used a mind-blowing session of sex. It had been over two weeks, which wasn’t normal for me. Unfortunately, she wasn’t what I wanted. I knew what I wanted; I was just too scared to go out and get it.

I stripped off my clothes and hit the light switch, throwing myself on top of the bed, hoping exhaustion would take over. Unfortunately, the only thing that took over was my hand, moving toward my swollen dick. This was the second time this weekend that I was about to whack off with Jody on my mind.

I kept seeing his broad back in that tight T-shirt he was wearing when I ran into him at Andronico’s. He was surprisingly fit for someone who professed to be uninterested in sports. The muscles were clearly visible under his shirt, and I could only imagine the gym time involved to achieve such results. His chest was probably just as amazing, and at this point I started to groan, working my cock while imagining my mouth on his nipples, wondering if he had a light layer of fur or if he was hairless. I’d heard that queers were into waxing, and I hoped for some reason that he wasn’t.

I was working my way down his chest, past his stomach and settling on his groin, which was covered with curly, dark hair. I couldn’t stop the noises that were coming out of my throat as I pulled at myself, imagining Jody’s mouth and tongue wreaking havoc on me. It was over before I knew it, and I felt myself spurting into my hand, overflowing

onto my stomach and parts of my chest. I lay there in the dark, imagining Jody's tired body draped over me, and I closed my eyes and finally fell asleep.

THE next evening I stood in front of Jody's front door, worried and apprehensive; convinced that he would see right through me and know that I'd been jerking off with him on my mind.

The door opened, and Lil stood there in a white, ruffled apron over the orange shorts that just screamed *fag*. His yellow T-shirt had the words *I'm So Pretty* splashed across the center.

"Oh, my, aren't you delectable!" Lil twirled around like a fucking ballerina and tiptoed back into the main part of the house screaming, "Jody! Hunkalicious has arrived!"

I continued to stand there with my mouth agape until Jody appeared.

"What's the matter?" he asked with a slight grin on his face. "Did Lil scare you?"

"I just wasn't expecting him." More like blown away by his presence.

"He's on vacation and has decided to spend a few days with me. Come on in. I promise that if you cross the threshold you won't turn into a raging queen."

"Whatever," I said, a little apprehensive.

"Come on, Clark. Lil's just putting on a show for you. He loves to shock the straight world."

"Well, he's pretty shocking, all right."

We made our way into the kitchen, which now resembled a war zone. Gone was the methodical neatness of the other night. Lil was cooking and every pot and pan in the house knew it!

"We're going to need to study somewhere else," I said, looking at Jody with such a pitiful look he started to laugh.

“Don’t worry. I hadn’t planned on doing it in here. Lil, do you think you could find it in your heart to whip up something frosty for us?”

“Sure, honey, what would you like? Clark?”

“A Corona would be just fine, if you have it.”

“I’m sure I can manage that,” he said, pulling a beer out of the fridge. “Jody, honey, your frozen margarita will be up in two shakes of a twink’s tight ass.”

“Lighten up, Lil,” Jody said, swatting him on the arm with the book he held in his hand. “Clark’s freaking out.”

“Oh, don’t worry, hon,” Lil said, batting his eyelashes at me and blowing me a kiss. “You’re safe with me.”

“Jesus.” I shook my head and headed out the sliding door to the patio. There were several recliners and a hot tub on the redwood deck and a table that sat four. I put my book bag down on a chair and stared out at the view in front of me and whistled. “You have a three-bridge view, man. This is fucking awesome.”

“I know. It’s the only reason I bought this house.”

“It was worth whatever you paid,” I said, staring out at the sight of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Oakland Bay Bridge, and the San Mateo Bridge to the far left. It was a perfectly clear night, and you could see the city without its usual shroud of fog. “How long have you lived here?”

“Not too long. I lucked out last year when one of the doctors put a ‘For Sale’ sign up. I decided it was time to settle down and become an official Californian, be respectable, own property. No more apartment dwelling for me.”

“So you’re going to stay and never move back to Chicago?”

“Hell, yes! I love this place and wouldn’t trade it for anything. The thought of a Midwestern winter gives me the shudders.”

“What about your family?”

“I visit at least twice a year. That’s enough.”

“I suppose so.” I took a sip of my beer and looked around. The garden was beautifully maintained, abounding with red and pink flowers that were still blooming despite the fact that we were already into early November. “Are you a gardener as well as a healer?”



"I'd love to say yes, but sadly, that's not the case," Jody replied, running a hand through his hair. It looked like wet silk tonight, a deep mahogany that glistened in the light of the tiki lamps that surrounded the deck. I was fatally attracted to him, like the bugs that were flying around, running into the insect zapper and falling down dead. I was as powerless to resist as they were.

"I love my garden," Jody said, breaking through my thoughts. "But, I have no time, and more importantly, no inclination. So I hire someone to take care of it for me."

"He does a great job," I answered, responding on cue, but really only noticing what Jody looked like under this lighting. I'd forgotten the flowers and the question. All I could think of was the man in front of me.

"Shall we get started?" he asked, moving me toward the table and pulling out a chair.

THEY'D been taking turns reading, which seemed to help Clark from wandering off mentally. He read well, only stumbling over a few words, looking up at Jody each time, to see how he'd react. Clark's voice wasn't very loud, and Jody wondered if this was because of nerves or if it was his normal reading voice.

He reassured him each time he stumbled, reaching across the table and giving his arm a squeeze, nodding his head and urging him on.

"You pronounce your As funny," Clark said, looking up from the book. His eyes had an upward tilt to them, almost almond-shaped, which was unusual in an obviously Caucasian face. They weren't blue or green, but more like a combination of both, an iridescent aquamarine, with a touch of purple underneath all the layers. They reminded Jody of the playing marbles he had as a young boy, except Clark's eyes were much more fascinating.

"It's 'cause I'm from Chicago. Everyone from the Midwest talks like this," Jody replied, caught in Clark's gaze. He leaned forward and said huskily, "Has anyone ever told you that your eyes are incredible?"

“I’ve heard it a few times.” Clark grinned like a kid, completely unaffected, which made him even more beautiful. Jody couldn’t stop staring at him.

Clark ran his tongue around his mouth and sucked in his lower lip, chewing on it a little, obviously a nervous habit.

“Does it bother you when I say things like that?”

“What things?”

“That you’re beautiful?”

Clark’s cheeks turned bright pink and he opened his mouth to say something, but must have had second thoughts, because all he did was shake his head and say, “No.”

“Good... because you are... beyond beautiful.”

“Jody.”

“You don’t have to say anything, Clark.”

He nodded and looked down, the color in his cheeks a testament to his inner thoughts.

Jody put down the book and waited. “Would you give me a summary of what you’ve just read?” He thought it best to get back on topic before he did something really stupid, like reach across the table and grab Clark’s face.

“I’ll try.” Clark must have felt like he was being called upon to recite something in front of a class, because he started to fidget and looked even more nervous. Jody touched his arm gently and said, “It’s okay, Clark. It’s just me.”

“Kay,” he replied, an embarrassed laugh escaping. “The group of travelers are fed and made comfortable. They’re pretty impressed with the accommodations and everyone seems okay with things, except for the jerk, Mallinson.”

“The vice-consul.”

“Right. He keeps badgering for more info, but Chang, the guy who was sitting on the chair, refuses to say any more. So Mallinson freaks and passes out.”

“Yes.” Jody nodded. “He’s upset because Chang won’t give him a date for when they can leave, and after he passes out, Chang blames it on the altitude.”

“But the others seem fine with the place, right?”

“Uh-huh.” *God, you are so fucking beautiful....*

“Jody?”

“What?” Jody had drifted off to fantasyland, imagining what it would be like to kiss the lips that Clark continued to gnaw at. He’d been with good-looking men before, but Clark was in a category all by himself.

“Now who’s not paying attention?” Clark teased.

“Sorry. I was just thinking of something else.”

“What were you thinking of?”

“Nothing important. Please continue.”

“Conway convinces Chang to be less evasive and give Mallinson some straight answers, so Chang then tells him that in two months, they may be able to leave. Mallinson is pissed, but no one else seems to mind. The others have fallen in love with Shangri-La.”

“So far, so good,” Jody said, smiling at Clark’s version of the story. “Next?”

“Conway overhears talk. He discovers that their landing was no accident. He also meets this young Chinese girl named Lo-Tsen, who plays some sort of musical instrument, and he’s fascinated by her. I guess that means he’s got the hots for her, right?”

“I guess you could call it that, although I’m sure James Hilton wouldn’t use those words,” Jody replied, smiling slightly. “What else?”

“Everyone seems cool with the place. Chang tells Conway that the head honcho, llama, dude, wants to meet with him, which is a big deal. How’s that?”

“Very good, Clark. I’m surprised that you’re having a problem on your own. You obviously understand every word you read and your analysis, although modernized, is pretty accurate. Why are you having such issues with this class?”

“It’s different when I’m reading with you. I don’t fall asleep, and you sort of nudge me when I start to zone out. My teacher couldn’t care less.”

“I care,” Jody said. *More than I should....*

“I know you do, and I’m grateful.”

“I’m more than happy to continue with this, if you are getting some benefit from it.”

“I am,” Clark answered, looking at him pointedly. He could read whatever he wanted into that reply.

Lil finally came outside, waving a long spoon and flitting around like a mosquito. “Are you gentlemen hungry yet?”

“Starving,” Clark answered.

“I could eat,” Jody said. “I’d love a refill on this, please?” He passed the empty margarita glass to Lil, smiling up at him, the dimple making its scheduled appearance. Clark was staring at him intently, and when he looked away finally and turned toward Lil, he realized that he’d been watching him the whole time.

“Like the view?” he asked with a smirk that Clark could only describe as wicked. *I am so busted.*

“Yeah. Could I have another beer?”

“Sure thing, sweet lips. One Coronita coming up.”

“God, is he always like that?” Clark asked Jody as soon as Lil left.

“Like I said earlier, he loves to shock straight guys. Believe it or not, he’s a brilliant architect and the best friend a guy could ever have. I trust him with my life.”

“Who woulda thunk.”

“I know. Looks are really deceiving, especially in his case. So, how was your weekend?” he asked, changing the subject.

“It was all right. I went home for my oldest brother’s thirtieth birthday party.”

“Was it fun?”

“The usual.”

“Did your girlfriend go with you?”

“What girlfriend?”

“I just assumed you had one,” Jody said, raising an eyebrow.

“No, too much trouble.”

“How so?”

“I just don’t have one. Let’s drop it, okay?”

“Okay,” Jody said, backing off instantly. By then Lil was back from the kitchen with the drinks and a tray overflowing with chips, salsa, and guacamole.

He placed the tray on the table, and then he went back into the house and brought out another tray of steaks and vegetables on skewers that he was going to grill on the Weber that was off to the side of the deck. There was also a mixed green salad and a bowl of tiny red potatoes tossed with parsley and olive oil.

“Everything looks really good,” Clark said, scooping up some salsa with a corn chip.

“I am a fabulous cook, and I plan on making some lucky man very happy one day.”

“Well, I’m happy right now,” Clark replied. “Thank you for feeding me. I didn’t expect this at all.”

“Welcome, sweetie! I love a man with good manners. Don’t you, Jodes?”

“Lil!” Jody said, giving him a warning look.

“Going....” He moved away to start the grill.

Clark and Jody fell into a comfortable silence, alternately stuffing their faces with the appetizers and finishing their drinks. After a short time, Lil joined them with the steaks and the veggies.

“Dig in, men. It’s feeding time at the zoo.”

So they did, enjoying every bit of the food that he’d prepared. Finally, when Clark could eat no more, he pushed away from the table, groaning. “I need to walk off this food or I’ll burst. I ate way too much.”

“Why don’t you go with him, Jody? I’ll clean up,” Lil said easily.

“Thanks, Lil,” Jody said, looking at Lil, who nodded his head and waved his hand in Clark’s direction.

“Go!”

## CHAPTER 6

WE were walking on Tunnel Road, watching out for the cars that careened up and down the hill.

Jody lived high up in the Oakland hills, almost at the Berkeley border, close to the vintage Claremont Resort Hotel. Most of the houses in his neighborhood had withstood the firestorm that swept through the hills that Sunday morning in October of 1991. No one could explain how some houses were spared and others were razed to the ground, but the combination of the Diablo winds and the dry, brittle vegetation had created the perfect environment to turn the hills into a roaring inferno. The few residents whose homes were spared felt like they'd survived an atomic bomb, the devastation was so complete.

"Were you in the Bay Area at the time of the fires?" I asked, as we continued our brisk walk through the neighborhood. I had slowed down to let Jody catch up and we walked side by side, turning onto a side street that had regular sidewalks rather than trying to navigate the main road.

"I'd just started medical school. I remember seeing the smoke all the way from Palo Alto. It went on for days."

"Yeah, it was awful. Many months later my dad piled the entire family into our minivan, and we drove out here from Folsom to see the damage. I kept thinking of all the animals that died that day, and the people of course, but I was eleven at the time and really into wildlife."

“Do you have a pet?”

“No. My life is a little too hectic right now.”

“What’s your schedule like now that football season is over?”

“I go to the gym almost every day. I can’t afford to get fat and lazy during the off-season ’cause it’ll be that much harder to get in shape in the spring.”

“Is that pretty standard with all football players?”

“Yeah. What about you? What do you do on your days off?”

“Oh, a little bit of everything. I have two days off each week, but they’re not always consecutive, so my free time is precious.”

“How often do you work out?”

“Every day. I have a Bowflex in the garage, and I try and run every morning for my cardio.”

“It shows.”

“Thanks,” he replied, seemingly pleased that I’d noticed.

“Are you seeing anyone?” I asked, curious about his love life.

“Not right now.”

“Do gay men date like straight people, or do they just see someone they like and hook up?”

Jody looked at me and smiled, evidently amused by my curiosity.

“I didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” I said quickly, wondering if I’d put my foot in my mouth again.

“It’s okay,” Jody said. “Most of us are just like everyone else, Clark. We have the same fears and desires, the same insecurities.”

“I thought gay men just fucked around randomly.”

“You’re buying into all the movies and stories about us,” Jody said, changing his walk into an exaggerated strut. “The gay predator,” he growled, lowering his voice and trying to sound sexy.

I huffed out a laugh and said, “Yeah, like those guys on TV.”

He stopped moving and stared at me for a minute, waiting for me to slow down. “The reality is that the majority of us are just looking for love, like everybody else. We want someone to come home to, to listen



to us when we bitch, to hold at night. We're no different from the rest of the world."

"I didn't know."

"Most heteros think that because we're gay, all we think about is sex. I know there are gay men like that, just like there are straight men that go from girl to girl, but most of us aren't much different from you. We all want the same things, Clark."

"Have you ever had a long-term relationship?"

"Once."

"What happened?"

"Long story," he replied, looking away from me. He seemed to be remembering something horribly painful because his eyes were welling up with tears, making me feel like a shit for even bringing it up.

I reached out, touching him lightly on his arm. "It's cool, Doc. We don't have to talk about it."

He huffed out a wry laugh and said, "Sorry. Didn't mean to get all drama queen on you."

"Don't worry about it."

"Do you have anyone special?" he asked, as we resumed walking.

"Not really. There's this girl, Nikki."

"Do you love her?"

"No!" I was pretty adamant when I said that, so he looked really confused and shook his head.

"Then why even mention her?"

"We've been together for years, practically grew up together, you know, same town, same schools."

"Is she your girlfriend then?"

"Fuck-buddy," I threw out.

"Oh."

"She'd like more... I just don't love her like that."

"But you're fucking her? That's cold, isn't it?"

“I know. I keep meaning to break it off, but it’s tough. She really loves me.”

“Doesn’t she realize it’s one-sided?”

“She’s in denial... keeps thinking I’ll wake up one day and be madly in love. It ain’t gonna happen!”

“Have you ever been in love?”

“No.”

I moved ahead and started to jog in a slow, comfortable gait. I looked over my shoulder and saw that Jody was running as well, picking up speed, and trying to keep up with me. I don’t know why I was running from him, but I just felt I had to get away from his all-knowing eyes and probing questions.

He took the lead, and I let him, since this was his neighborhood and it was dark. Plus, I had no clue where we were headed. We turned a corner, and I realized we were back on the main road, heading back up the hill towards the side street where he resided. All of a sudden, a black Escalade roared up and would have hit Jody if I hadn’t tackled him and shoved him off to the side of the road. We landed in a deep ditch, shocked that the car kept on going, not even slowing down for a second.

“What the fuck!” I was winded but unhurt. “Are you okay?” I asked, seeing that Jody was flat on his back.

“Yeah. I think I may have twisted my ankle though.”

“Here, let me help you.” I stood up and moved over to where he lay. I squatted on my heels and moved his left foot slowly. “That hurt?”

“A little.”

“You better lean on me. Come on,” I said, grabbing his right hand and pulling him up. He wobbled on his left foot, keeping the right one off the ground.

“Can’t you put the other foot down?”

“Not yet... hurts.”

I could see him grimacing in the dark, and I felt responsible, since I was the one who shoved him.

“I’m really sorry about this. I guess I shouldn’t have been so rough.”

“Are you kidding? I would have been so dead if you hadn’t pushed me. I owe you my fucking life!”

“Here, put your arm around me and let me support you.”

Jody tried to put his arm on my shoulder, but I’m six-four and he’s probably around five-eleven, so it was awkward. I ended up moving his arm down around my waist and let him lean into me. I had my arm on his shoulder, and I was practically lifting him off the ground so he wouldn’t have to use the injured foot, but our movements were slow and finally I decided to just pick him up and carry him.

“I feel like Debra Winger in *An Officer and a Gentleman*.”

“Never saw it.”

“You’re not even panting.”

“I’m pretty strong, Doc.”

“And I’m pretty heavy.”

“What are you, one-eighty-five?”

“How’d you guess?”

“I bench-press three hundred pounds on a regular basis. I know my weights.”

“I can see that.”

I stopped a few feet from his house and looked down at the man I had cradled in my arms. My emotions were playing all kinds of tricks on me, one minute delighted that I had him in my arms, the next minute uncomfortable because of the closeness, then just as quickly swinging back to relief that he was safe and with me.

His face was so close, and his lips were tempting as he looked up at me with that killer smile of his. It would have been so easy to bend down and kiss him, to finally put an end to the curiosity of wondering what it would be like to actually kiss a man, but it would have opened up a whole new set of issues that I wasn’t prepared to deal with. The fantasy would have to stay in my brain, where it belonged.

I made my way up the walk, and I rang the doorbell, waiting for Lil to open up and let us in.

JODY lay on the sofa, his leg stretched out in front of him, a big icepack tied to his ankle with a kitchen towel. Lil hovered over him like the proverbial mother hen, making sure his little chick was safe and comfortable. Clark had taken off about fifteen minutes ago, and they were alone in front of the television set.

"Here's an Advil, sweetie. Take it so the swelling goes down," Lil said, passing the pill and the glass of water.

"Thanks," Jody replied. Lil had always nurtured him, taking him under his wing from day one of their friendship.

"Are you in pain?"

"Not from my foot."

"Oh, sweetie... you've got to let this go."

Jody stared at his best friend and shook his head. "I'm really trying."

"He *is* fucking gorgeous!"

"It's more than what he looks like, Lil."

"I know! He'd be easier to resist if he were the usual, piece-of-shit jock, but he's so adorable, you just want to squeeze him."

"Among other things," Jody groaned.

"Oh, Jodes, you're doing it again."

"It's not the same!" Jody protested. "He's nothing like Rick."

"But the situation is! You know that nothing good will come out of this."

"You don't know this for a fact! I can feel a connection with him, He's attracted to me; I know it!"

"I don't doubt that for a minute! He was eating you up with his eyes tonight."

“Really?” Jody answered, the happiness written all over his face. “When?”

“When, not? He couldn’t take his eyes off of you, but that’s not the point!” Lil jumped off the sofa and started to pace. “You’re opening your heart again—to the wrong guy. At least Rick was gay! Clark’s not even from our world, Jody. He’ll never come out of the closet, never acknowledge his need. He may end up hating you or worse for shaking up his world.”

“He’d never hurt me. He’s not like that.”

“How long have you known him?”

“I know... I’m not being smart.”

“You’re thinking with the wrong head.”

“Since when has that been a problem for you?”

“Honey, you need to get laid. That’s painfully obvious.”

“I want him.”

“You can’t have him.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because, it would never work!”

“Bullshit!”

“You are the most stubborn man!” Lil accused, his arms akimbo. He was glaring at Jody.

“It’s my Midwest upbringing,” Jody smiled, trying to win him over. “We’re a tenacious lot.”

“Don’t you be training those puppy-dog eyes at me, Dr. Williams. You are not going to listen to a single word of advice, are you?”

“I hear everything you say.”

“But you will do exactly what you want, like you always have. Haven’t you had enough tragedy for one lifetime?”

“Rick and I were happy.”

“Not for long, but you knew that would happen from the get-go, yet you forged ahead, like the fucking Marines!”

“Like I said,” Jody answered quietly. “Tenacious.”

“Oh, sweetie. What am I going to do with you?” Lil wrapped Jody in his arms and held him tightly.

## CHAPTER 7

IT was Tuesday night and I was sitting at Round Table Pizza, waiting for Nikki to get there. I had just started on my second bottle of Corona when they placed the extra-large, double-pepperoni, double-cheese pizza in front of me. It was hot and oozing grease and looked delicious, but my stomach was in knots, worrying about where this conversation with Nikki was headed. She finally showed up, ten minutes late.

“Hi, Clark!”

“Hey.”

She slid into the booth across from me. Her hair was up in some kind of twisty thing. She barely had any makeup on, except for that shiny stuff that made her lips look totally kissable. And I thought again, how simple this could be, if I just put my mind to it. There wasn’t one part of her that wasn’t desirable. Yet I knew she wasn’t what I wanted.

“What did you want to talk about?” she asked, all excited.

“I think that it’s time you started dating other people,” I said, as quickly as I could, before I changed my mind.

“What!”

“I mean it! Why are you wasting your time with me?”

“I don’t consider being with you a waste of time,” she said, her eyes already starting to swim with tears. I felt sick, and I automatically reached for her hand.

“I meant that you should be with someone who’s willing to make a commitment to offer you a future. There are a lot of guys out there who would be honored to have you for a wife.”

“I don’t want anyone else. I want you!”

“I’ve told you a million times that it’s not going to happen. I don’t love you that way.”

“You loved me plenty the other night.”

“Nikki... it’s just sex between us. Good sex, I’ll give you that much, but you deserve more.”

“Have you met someone else? That’s it, isn’t it? You’ve met someone you’re attracted to.”

“No! It’s not like that at all.” I ran my hand through my hair and leaned back against the red leather seat of the booth. This was a lot harder than I thought it would be, simply because she really hadn’t done anything different. She’d been this way since eighth grade. Why was I pushing her away now? Was it because of Jody and his questions, or was it just the right time for some honesty?

The pizza was still warm when I took a bite, but the sight of Nikki in tears had made me lose my appetite. I could have been eating wood chips for all I knew.

“I don’t care that it’s only sex, Clark. I’d rather have that, than nothing at all.”

“You’re not thinking right. Maybe I have to start thinking for you.”

“No! Please... don’t toss me away.” She was begging now, her tears falling quickly, snot running out of her nose. I grabbed some paper napkins out of the dispenser and handed them to her, watching as she mindlessly sopped up her face, all the while looking at me as if I’d betrayed her in the worst way. “All I’ve ever done is love you, Clark.”

“I know, and I love you back... just not the way you want me to.”

“I don’t care! I’ll take whatever I can get!”

“Nikki, it’s wrong.”



She got up and slid in beside me. “Clark, you’ve always been honest, I’ll say that much. I’m the one that’s had illusions.” She seemed calmer now, and her tears had dried up. “I suppose I was encouraged because you never pushed me away.”

“My fault.... I’m a selfish pig.”

“No, you’re not at all. I’m willing to work on this; I just can’t go cold turkey. I’m kind of addicted to you, the way other people are to cigarettes.”

I had to laugh, because her statement was so true. She really was obsessed with me, but I felt comfortable enough to just let this go for now. I’d said my piece, and she’d heard me. The rest of this was going to have to just play itself out.

I put my arm around her shoulder and hugged her up against me. “You’re a great girl, Nik, and a good friend. You should have no problem finding someone you deserve. Let’s lighten up on the phone calls and the visits, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, the sadness weighing her down already.

“Come on. Let’s eat.”

“CLARK, it’s Mom.”

I had the phone up to my ear, after being jarred awake by the incessant ringing.

“I know who this is. Jesus, Mom, do you have to call so fucking early?”

“Don’t be disrespectful!”

“I’m not,” I groaned, wishing I could throw the phone up against the wall.

“Your brother had the baby.”

“You mean Linda had the baby.”

“It’s another boy,” she said, sounding very disappointed.

“It’s just as well, Mom. She’d have grown up a tomboy with all the men in her life.”

“That’s ridiculous, and you know it.”

“Just trying to make you feel better.” I groaned and rolled over, pressing the pillow against my morning boner.

“Can you come home and see them?”

“What day is it?”

“It’s Thursday.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll come for the weekend. I can’t leave today; I have a session with the doctor.”

“What doctor? What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Mom. I already told you, the guy who’s tutoring me is a doctor.”

“I forgot he was a doctor.”

“He’s a friend, who also happens to be a doctor.”

“Is this working?”

“I’m actually learning something.”

“That’s wonderful, sweetheart. So, I’ll see you tomorrow night?”

“Yeah.”

We disconnected, and I lay there, trying to get back to sleep. It eluded me though, now that I was awake and, more importantly, thinking of Jody again. I hadn’t seen him since the night of the twisted ankle, but there had been no phone call canceling our session, so I assumed that everything must be okay.

I rolled over again, hugging the body pillow, pressing against the soft fabric and humping it slowly, imagining Jody’s ass underneath me. I had no idea what that would feel like, but I could only imagine that it would be good. Everything about Jody seemed so right. It was getting harder and harder to push the images away, especially when we were together.

The more I got to know him, the more I was drawn to his quiet confidence. He was so easy to talk to, fun to be around. He wasn’t high maintenance like a lot of people I knew; it was effortless and so good. I think the best part about him was that he knew nothing about football. I felt that he actually saw me, Clark Stevens, regular guy.

I PULLED into the driveway at Jody's house and killed the engine. He'd probably be pissed at me 'cause I hadn't done my homework. I couldn't get past chapter seven for some reason. It was probably because I had a lot more on my mind than Shangri-La. The urge to tell Jody what I was feeling was distracting me to no end. I couldn't get it out of my head, and I wondered if today I would finally have the guts to say something.

I got out of the car just as he opened the front door. He stood there with a big grin on his face, wearing the black biker shorts with a white tank top this time. I was surprised again by his well-developed chest and arms. He had the physique of a gymnast, and the golden tan only enhanced his looks. It was very hard not to stare, so I focused my attention on the elastic bandage wrapped around his ankle.

"You're standing on your foot. That's a good sign?"

"Yup."

"No Lil?"

"Nah, he's gone back to the city."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Hey!"

"I know," I said, throwing up my arm in a mock stop sign. "He's a great guy."

"He is."

"He's also outrageous!"

"That too." Jody laughed.

"I can't believe he's your best friend," I said, standing in front of him. He looked up at me with those Tootsie Roll eyes and smirked, bringing forth that dimple that made him look so fucking cute.

"You got a problem with it, Mister?"

"And what if I do?" I said, moving my face that much closer.

"I may have to discipline you."

"You think so?"

I picked him up and threw him over my shoulder, amused at his feeble attempts to escape. He was pounding me on the back and calling me a big lug. “Now what was that again about disciplining me?” I asked as I put him down, feeling his body slide against me, rubbing in all the right places.

We stood there looking at each other, clearly wanting to take this further, but no one willing to make the first move. I knew I had a raging hard-on, and I imagined he did too. We were both breathing heavily, and my face felt like it was on fire. He ran his tongue around his lips, a habit of his that never failed to make my blood boil and create this horrible urge to grab his head and kiss him.

“You are rocking my world without even trying,” I said in a barely controlled whisper.

“Clark?”

I spun away from him and crossed over to the other side of the room, throwing my book bag down on the table. I sat abruptly, not willing to stand and show him that my pants were tenting in front of me. It was bad enough that I had to have a tutor, but I would be damned if I was going to let him see that I was lusting after him, like some pathetic fourteen-year-old schoolboy.

He remained where I’d left him, a pained look on his face.

“Well, are we going to study or what?” I asked, slamming a book on the table.

## CHAPTER 8

I WAS behind the wheel of my car, speeding up I-80, heading out to Folsom. I'd been in a miserable mood since I left Jody last night.

We had sat down for an hour, attempting to read through a few chapters, but the dynamic between us had changed after the close body contact. We were like two prizefighters, tiptoeing around each other, afraid to meet in the center of the ring for fear of the explosion that would occur. He could tell I was at my breaking point as I clenched and unclenched my jaw the entire time we were reading. I couldn't bear to look at him, and when his hand accidentally brushed mine, we both jumped in shock.

It was torture in the most erotic, mind-bending way. I would have probably disgraced myself if he touched me again, and so I just stood up, kicked back the chair, and told him I had to go. He sat there and nodded, looking the other way. I knew he was as affected as I was because his hands were trembling when he held the book and his eyes were shimmering.

I pulled into my parents' driveway, completely unaware of the distance I'd traveled. The house seemed unoccupied, and I yelled out my mother's name, getting no response.

Hunger seized me suddenly. I couldn't remember when I'd last eaten, so I pulled open the refrigerator door and grabbed the essentials of

a sandwich—the cold cuts, the mayo and mustard—and a bottle of Corona, balancing everything like a circus juggler. By the time I'd polished off my lunch, the troops were starting to arrive.

“Dude, when'd you get in?” Zach grunted out, looking like he'd been through a war.

“What's with you?”

“I've been out helping Robby lay carpet in the baby's room.”

“Talk about last minute.”

“I know.”

“Did you get it done?”

“It's all good. Are you staying the night?”

“May as well.”

“Is Nikki with you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“We're not joined at the hip, you know.”

“You're lucky to have her, dude. She's hot as fuck!”

“We're just friends.”

“What a dumbass!”

“Don't call me that!” I spat out, just itching for a fight. I hoped he'd say it again, because I was in the mood to break something, and his face was as good as anything else.

“What the hell is going on?” My dad had just walked through the door and caught my end of the conversation.

“Tell Zach to mind his own business.”

“Why are you in such a foul mood?”

“I'm just tired of people telling me what I should and shouldn't do.”

“Like who?”

“Like never mind!”

I stood up and walked out of the room, making my way down the hall toward my bedroom. I threw myself on the bed and put my right arm over my eyes, willing myself to calm down. I knew I'd overreacted to Zach's few questions. I knew why I was in such a state, and it had nothing to do with anyone in this house.

After a few minutes, I heard a light knock on the door, and my mom popped her head in. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." Why the fuck not.

She sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed her hand up and down my leg. "What's bothering you?"

"It's nothing, Mom."

"Don't tell me it's nothing. You're in one of your moods again, and I really don't want any problems this weekend."

"Then tell Zach to leave me alone. Tell everyone to leave me alone and get out of my business. You included!"

"What the hell have I done?"

"Nothing! Just go, Mom. I'm sorry."

"Sweetie, is it Nikki? Have you two had a fight?"

"Oh, please... give me a break."

"What then?"

"Nothing. Just go!"

"Fine!" She stood up and walked out the door, slamming it in a childish fit of temper.

It's funny that she would accuse me of having a "mood." Everyone around here was into door-slamming and yelling. We were not the most peaceful household in the world, and I suppose with five sons, any gentleness in my mother was soon replaced by the need to be as tough as nails so that her boys wouldn't ride roughshod over her. The only time she showed her gentle side was when we got sick or hurt. The rest of the time she was all business, which brought my thoughts back to something I'd questioned many times before.

Why did I have these feelings for other men? It's not like my mother dressed me in pink or played with tea sets around me. I was

handled in exactly the same manner as my other brothers, except for the special attention to my schoolwork. Maybe it had something to do with the ADD? Was that same gene the one that made me think about guys the way my brothers thought about women?

I wondered what Jody would think of my family. He already disliked my father for the mishandling of my attention deficit. I couldn't imagine what it was like to grow up in a family as accepting as Jody's. For a father to actively go out and show a gay son how to have safe sex was mind-boggling. Neither one of my parents had given us any sex education. They just assumed we knew what we were doing. The only time I heard anything about sex was when Magic Johnson resigned due to his HIV status and my father sat in front of our TV set and called him a fucking queer. He then turned to us and said, "See, this is what happens when you stick your dick in the wrong places." The fact that Johnson contracted HIV from a female meant nothing to my dad. He heard HIV, and he assumed Magic was queer.

I was around ten or eleven at the time, already harboring a few man fantasies, and as soon as I heard that I shoved them so far back in the closet they were buried for years. All my efforts to be "normal" in that area of my life were successful due to the countless number of females who threw themselves at me. Every time I'd start thinking of a male body, I'd actively seek out a female or watch a girly video or read *Playboy*; anything to keep the visions of men out of my brain.

This brought me to the real reason why I was so angry I was vibrating in place. All my efforts to be like all the other men in my family were useless, because I wasn't like them. I was a twenty-three-year-old jock on the brink of an NFL career, daydreaming about kissing Jody's mouth, of tasting a man for the first time. I wanted to run my hands over his chest, down his stomach, and finally feel that hard-on that had pressed up against me on at least two occasions. I imagined getting down on my knees in front of him and pulling down his zipper, freeing up his cock and finally taking him in my mouth, his taste so real. I was rigid with want, flipping over and groaning into my pillow as I pressed up against the mattress, knowing this would never happen because I was too chicken-shit to do anything about it.



JODY was in his garden, puttering around with a hedge clipper, pretending to know what to do, but utterly clueless.

He was really killing time, waiting for Clark to come and start the tutoring. He'd left work early, knowing this was a teaching night, wanting to shower and change before Clark's arrival. He knew he was acting like a lovesick teenager getting ready for a date, but he couldn't help it. His brain was so far up his ass these days, it's a wonder he hadn't killed anyone at work.

He hoped that Clark would be in a better mood tonight. The last time they were together, Jody finally got a glimpse of the famous temper that seemed to rule Clark's life. He was visibly shaken by their embrace, unable to stay focused on the reading at all. He left in under an hour, avoiding Jody's gaze and his touch.

This whole situation was a mistake. He should never have offered to tutor him. The close physical contact was torturing them both, and unless someone broke the standoff it would only get worse.

"You're playing with fire," Lil kept telling him. "He'll never cave, and you continue to suffer. Why do this to yourself?"

This was exactly what he didn't want to hear. His thoughts, verbalized in such a cold and matter-of-fact way. He didn't choose this! The last thing he needed in his life was a closet case. Falling for Clark wasn't something he'd planned on doing. It just happened, and now that he was caught in his web, he was unable to find a way out. The more time he spent with him, the more he realized what a great guy he was.

He was so much more than an athlete. He was funny and thoughtful and a really good son, respectful to a father who had mentally abused him for years. He'd put him down at every turn, reinforcing Clark's belief that he was dumb. The truth of the matter was that most people with ADD were mentally above average but were so insecure about their capabilities that they never even acknowledged having a brain. This was compounded by the fact that he was a jock and no one gave him any credence at all, assuming he only had sports on his mind. No one had bothered to dig a little further, especially no one in his family.

Jody gave up trying to find any easy way out of this. He knew there was none. He had to trust in his instincts, to continue to tutor Clark and make sure he passed the class. Everything else would have to run its natural course. What that was, he had no idea. He turned away from the rosebushes and made his way into the house.

## CHAPTER 9

I'D decided to end my relationship with Jody, willing to take my chances at getting through the English class on my own.

It was just too difficult to be around him, and I needed to let this go before I did something stupid. I wanted to tell him in person rather than leave a message. It was the least I could do, considering how much time and effort he'd invested in me.

I'd made that decision over the weekend while I was in the hospital looking at Robby and Linda's new baby. The kid looked like E.T., all eyes and hands, but I was sure that eventually he'd grow up to be good-looking like the other members of the Stevens clan. I glanced around the room and saw them all: my four brothers and my mom and dad gathered around my sister-in-law's bed, kidding with her about the kid's future Little League scores.

I tried to imagine what it would be like being among them, an out-and-proud homo. It was an impossible thought, as alien to my world as football pads were to Jody's. It was never going to happen. I wanted to be like everyone else in the room, to be comfortable in my skin, and the only way to do it would be to shed the layer that was creating the problem. To cut off all ties with anything that made me question my role in life.

I climbed into my car and made the trek across town over to Oakland, turning left on Ashby, and then climbing up toward the hills. I passed the Claremont Resort Hotel on my left and then turned right onto Jody's street. I parked the car, moving in slow motion almost like a man going to the gallows or the electric chair. This was not how I envisioned my next encounter with Jody, but I was determined to do this. I rang the front door and almost passed out when he opened it. He was naked, but for the white towel wrapped around his waist, and I stood there paralyzed, unable to move, let alone breathe. His body was everything I imagined and more.

"Hey, come in. I'm on the phone with my dad." Jody smiled. "Sorry about this," he whispered, pointing at the towel. "I was in the shower when the phone rang."

"No worries."

I was trying not to stare, passing by him and acting as nonchalant as possible. I went to the living room and threw myself on the sofa while he finished up his phone call.

"Okay, Dad. The twenty-third it is, leaving to come back on the twenty-sixth. That should put me ahead of the holiday rush."

He paused for a minute. "I'll take a cab. Don't worry about picking me up. Okay. Later, Dad."

He hung up and smiled at me, the Jody combination of dimple and white teeth, knocking me on my ass. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself. Going someplace?"

"Home for Christmas."

"Oh. I'd forgotten; it's just weeks away."

"Yeah.... Will you excuse me while I go and put some clothes on?"

"Umm, sure."

"Do you want a beer while you're waiting?"

"Okay." I stood up and went over to where he was standing and watched him pull a beer out of the fridge. I was devouring him with my eyes, and I'm sure he could feel me staring at him, even with his back to me. He turned abruptly and caught me looking. I could feel the heat

staining my cheeks and the blood rushing to my groin. My heart was hammering against my chest so loudly I was sure he could hear it!

He came up to me slowly and handed me the beer, clutching the bottle as I reached for it. He wouldn't let go, so I had to grab his hand and pull hard until he was pressed up against me. We were staring at each other again, just like we'd done so many times in the past few days, but this time something shifted. I don't remember who made the first move, whether it was him or me. All I know is that I moaned out his name, and I felt his hand reaching up and grabbing my neck to pull me down toward his mouth, and he kissed me.

It wasn't a girly kiss, not soft or tender or romantic. It was an open-mouthed, hungry kiss, possessive and forceful. His tongue swept the inside of my mouth, probing and meeting mine. We danced around each other's taste while we groaned out our mutual need. I could feel his cock, rigid against my leg, easily discerned under the towel.

I closed my eyes and let him take charge, lost in the feel of his lips sucking on mine. This was something I'd dreamed of for almost my entire life, and now that it was finally happening, I was blown away. I wasn't put off by all the maleness pressing up against me. The feel of his lips on mine was not repugnant or strange; on the contrary, it had never felt so good or so right. We couldn't get enough of each other; our hands were all over the place, exploring roughly.

There was a small nagging, way at the back of my head, telling me to be cautious, to not take this any further, but I couldn't seem to stop. Hearing him moan out my name was only egging me on. I pulled him closer, kissing him harder. I felt his hands slide under my shirt, running rampant over my chest, and my heart almost stopped when he reached down and cupped my sex outside of my jeans, rubbing his hand forcefully, coaxing another groan out of my mouth. I felt him pulling down my zipper, easing his hand into my briefs, and that's when I realized this had to stop or there would be no turning back. I pushed him away roughly.

"Jody, stop!"

"Why?" His lips were swollen and pink with passion, his eyes wild with desire. I had never seen him look this good.

"I can't do this."

“You want me as much as I want you,” he accused.

I turned from him, fighting tears that sprung up against my wishes.

“Clark, please....” I felt his hand on my arm, and I shrugged it off, desperate to escape from him and the truth. I felt his hot breath on my neck, sending shockwaves throughout my system; my erection was thick and heavy against my pants. I couldn’t catch my breath... it felt like I was drowning. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

I raced out the door and climbed into my car. I started the engine, all the while weeping like a girl, my tears blinding me as the car careened down the hill. I kept hearing the desperation in Jody’s voice, and I was sick to my stomach, knowing I was the biggest coward in the world, because I was too afraid to admit that I wanted him so badly I could taste it. I pulled the car over to the side of the road, and I sat there with the engine running, fighting the same battle in my head that I’d been waging for years. I was clutching the steering wheel so hard I almost broke it in half; my knuckles were white with tension. I kept telling myself to keep on driving, to get away from him and put this to rest, but my emotions were doing a number on me, tearing me in all directions. I rested my head on my hands, waiting to see if I could get myself under control, but the only thing happening was more tears running down my face and a horrific sense of loss that kept pulling me in the direction of the house up the hill. I must have sat there for at least ten minutes, hoping I’d come to my senses, but it wasn’t happening. The reality was that the battle was over, and it was time to surrender.

I sat up straight and backhanded my tears, put the car in gear and did a U-turn, racing up that hill in a squeal of burning rubber. The front door opened as soon as I killed the engine, and I ran up the walkway and saw him standing there, still wrapped in that damn towel, and I grabbed him with both arms and slammed him hard against the closest wall and buried my face against the side of his neck.

“I had to come back,” I said, littering kisses all over him. “I’m sorry... so sorry, Jody.” I was moaning, running my hands up and down his back, pressing him tightly against me. “Please....”

He wrapped his arms around my neck, pulling me impossibly close, his mouth over mine in mere seconds. “Don’t think, Clark,” he whispered. “Just feel.” His breath was warm and sweet, his lips sucked

on mine, and I did exactly as I was told. I felt the rush of emotion, the pulling against my groin, the tingling in my arms and legs. I was trembling with need; I wanted to feel his mouth on my cock so badly I thought I'd die in the next few minutes if he didn't touch me. Our bodies pushed against each other, his flimsy towel doing nothing to cover the hardness that I felt against my leg. I let my hands wander all over his back and down his tapered waist, finally resting on his ass, and I squeezed with both hands, hearing a moaning in the distance, not realizing it was coming out of my mouth. Jody stepped back and looked at me. "It's your call," he whispered, the fire in his eyes saying it all.

I tugged at the white towel and watched it fall to the floor, revealing a line of dark hair from under his belly button, down his stomach, stopping at the top of his groin where a perfect patch of curly hair framed an impressive cock that was thick with need.

"Jo," I exhaled the breath I'd been holding, and I reached out for him and dragged him back up to me.

He started to kiss me again, even as he tugged at my T-shirt, pulling it up my torso and throwing it across the room. He ran his hands all over me, moaning out my name before he pressed his mouth to my nipple, flicking at the hard nub with his tongue, taking it between his teeth and biting softly, encouraged by the sighs that were escaping from my throat. I was pressed against the wall, trapped by his greedy mouth as he worked me, sending signals straight to my throbbing cock, as it lengthened and hardened, on fire with his every move.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, as his fingers tangled in my soft chest hair. I pulsed against him, whimpering, desperate for his touch. I heard him say, "Please," as if he could read my mind, the strain on him clearly evident as he looked up into my eyes while he moved his hands down my body. I nodded, unable to stop this. I was too far gone. I felt him pull my jeans and underwear down with both hands, leaving them to pool around my shoes. I heard his sharp intake of breath when he saw my cock stretched to the maximum.

"God," he said, in a voice ragged with desire as he sank to his knees and buried his face in my crotch, rubbing his cheek against my stomach and cock, inhaling my scent. I watched him open his mouth and suck me in, closing his eyes and humming with pleasure as he engulfed

me, whimpering in ways that made my skin erupt into miles of goose flesh. The sight of him on his knees with my cock sliding in and out of his mouth was the most erotic thing I'd ever seen in my life. I grabbed his head with both hands, running my fingers through the dark silk, needing to hold onto something as he worked me over, giving me pleasure like nothing I'd ever experienced before. My world shifted, everything I'd known reduced to a reality of heat and moisture, every sucking motion bringing me that much closer to the culmination of a fantasy that had teased me for years.

"Jo," I huffed. "Take me."

He answered by pulling me tighter against him, kneading my balls while he continued to pump with his mouth, and I exploded in a river of hot cum, pulsating into his mouth much too soon, and he let me, swallowing greedily as he milked my cock with strong, sucking motions. I watched from above, in shock that this was actually happening and the incredible man on his knees was swallowing every bit of me and enjoying it!

Finally, when the trembling in my legs stopped, he let go of me, licking up the residue around my shaft and my balls, lapping at me joyously like a kitten around a puddle of milk, and I wondered again how I ever thought I would be able to walk away from this when every part of my being kept telling me this was what I wanted.

I pulled him up and held him tightly, my heart still beating wildly against his. We said nothing and continued to hold each other, and then I felt the kisses again, on my neck this time. We shuffled across the room, never letting go of each other, and I let him steer me toward his bedroom. He kicked the door open and we were on his bed in seconds, our bodies pressed against each other, chest to chest, cock to cock, and I felt myself getting hard again as he rutted against me. We shifted position, and he ended up under me while I undulated against him this time. He was thrashing on the bed, moving his hips against mine, his erection pressing hard against my stomach.

"Fuck me," he begged, the words incinerating me.

"Yes," I whispered, yanking at my pants that were still caught at my feet, pulling them off impatiently, toeing off my shoes and tearing at my socks, wanting only his bare skin against mine.



He reached over to the nightstand beside the bed and pulled open the drawer, grabbing a condom and some lube, and I watched him rip the package open with his teeth and roll the latex on my cock as it rapidly extended to its full length again. “Fuck, you’re huge,” he whispered, squeezing some lube into his hand and slathering it all over me. He nudged me toward the middle of the bed, spreading his legs apart so that I was in between them as we continued to kiss and rub up against each other.

“Put my legs on your shoulders,” he instructed, helping me along as I changed position and grabbed one ankle and then another and placed them close to my neck.

“Now ram that giant cock into me,” he begged, grabbing hold of my ass and pulling me toward him.

I was hovering over him, staring down at the warm, brown eyes, and he nodded his head, urging me on. “Do it, Clark.”

I started to push, impeded by the tight ring I was unfamiliar with, and I looked at him questioningly. He just pulled me hard against him, and I felt myself slide past the barrier and his ass gripped me in a velvet vise that was tighter and sweeter than anything I’d ever known! He screamed out my name, and I huffed out his, the pleasure more intense than I can describe.

I watched him wrap his fingers around his cock, pulling at it while I moved in and out of his ass. I got up on my knees and pulled his body higher so that I could sink in deeper, all the while watching him jerk off as I rolled my hips, watching my cock sliding in and out of him. It was the most erotically charged moment of my life. I was overwhelmed, my emotions at a breaking point, and the tears poured out of my eyes unconsciously, falling in steady droplets on his chest. He was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen, and I knew that my life would never be the same again.

“God... I’m so close,” I huffed out, moving in and out of him like a piston. We erupted at the same time, his cum shooting out of him in thick white ropes, splashing me on the chest and neck while I poured into the condom, shuddering as the orgasm ripped through me like a bullet.

I collapsed on him, our hearts beating wildly against each other, both cocks still pulsating, arms and legs tangled, slick with sweat. His

arms held me in a death grip, his breath hot against my ear. “You are everything I imagined you’d be,” he whispered.

“So are you,” I replied, closing my eyes and relishing every second of this.

## CHAPTER 10

I ROLLED over and felt another body in the bed. My eyes flew open, and I saw Jody lying on his stomach, his head turned toward me.

I pushed up and leaned against the headboard, checking out the body that lay splayed and replete beside me. It was a beautiful sight.

“You’re staring,” he whispered, moving his hand and grabbing mine.

I huffed out a laugh and squeezed his hand. “I can’t help it. You’re fucking hot.”

He stirred and rolled over, stretching like a cat; his morning boner was a thing of beauty. I ached to take him in my mouth. His cock was surprisingly thick, and I wondered what it would feel like to give him a taste of his own medicine. Last night had been incredible, but it was all about him giving me pleasure. This morning all I could think about was reciprocating.

“If I go down on you,” I whispered huskily, moving slowly toward him, “does this make me an official queer?”

His moan was answer enough, and I positioned myself in between his legs and looked at him for a minute. He whispered my name, holding his breath, and then he sighed deeply as I wrapped my lips around the bulbous head, now slippery with the drops of moisture that had sprung

up to welcome me. I sucked on him slowly, running my tongue around the smooth flesh, teasing the slit. I'd never done this before, but it seemed as if my body knew exactly what to do. I'd been practicing this in my head for years, but the reality was a million times better.

I worked the man underneath me; the one who'd taken me to such incredible heights last night. I felt his hips moving up and down, helping me along as I became more aggressive, testing my gag reflex, relieved to find out that I had none. His cock filled my mouth, hitting the back of my throat, and I sucked him with a single-minded purpose, trying to give back the pleasure I'd received. I felt his hands running through my hair and grabbing on for dear life as he started to thrash. "Clark...." He attempted to pull out. I knew he was close. I could feel his body straining against me, his balls tightening and pulling up, and soon I was rewarded by the warm rush of his semen filling my mouth as he sobbed out my name over and over again. I swallowed like a pro, never missing a beat, and I realized that it was now official. I was definitely gay.

I moved up to put my mouth on his, sharing his taste with him as he continued to moan.

"I guess I done good, huh, Doc?"

He laughed gently, wrapping his body around mine. "You done more than good... you were perfect!"

We lay entwined for several more minutes until the alarm sounded, and Jody moved to turn it off. "I wish I could stay in your arms all day."

"That would be amazing," I replied, kissing him gently on his forehead. "My Jo-Jo."

"What'd you call me?" he mumbled, dozing against my chest.

"Jo-Jo."

"Why?"

"You're going to laugh when I tell you."

He pushed away from me, a smile tugging on his mouth. "Why'd you call me that?"

"I had a dog when I was about nine. He had these big brown eyes, kind of like yours, and his name was...."

"Jo-Jo."

“Right! We did everything together. He was run over when I was almost thirteen. I thought I would die of grief.”

“Aww, that’s horrible. Did you ever get another dog?”

“No, I just couldn’t see replacing him, so I never did.”

“Well, I suppose I should be flattered, even if you’re comparing me to a dog.”

“Be flattered,” I said, grabbing him hard against my chest. “He was beautiful, and I loved him.”

“Thank you,” Jody said very quietly. He was silent after that, probably wondering if there was any meaning to my statement. I wasn’t sure what I meant either, or maybe I did, but it was too soon.

We lay in bed, waiting for that alarm to go off again. It was sometime around six in the morning, and I stirred and pulled him up higher on my chest. It was comfortable, and I felt so relaxed. “Did you know from the beginning?” I asked softly.

“What?”

“That I was gay?”

“I had hoped. Lil told me you were as soon as he met you.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“He caught you checking out my ass.”

“He’s a piece of work.”

“I told him he was delusional, but he insisted you were bent, and he was right as usual.”

“How long have you known this guy?”

“Over ten years.... He taught me everything I know about being gay.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was a hick when I got to San Francisco... practically a virgin.”

“Practically?”

“I had one encounter before I moved out here.”

“Shit! How old were you?”

“Too old to be a virgin. Lil fixed that problem immediately.”

“I’ll bet. Did you and he ever...?”

“Absolutely not! We’re friends; nothing else.”

“That’s good.... I don’t share very well.”

“Possessive already, after just one night?”

“Yeah, you got issues with that?”

“No.” Jody laughed. “I feel like I died and went to gay heaven.”

“Maybe we both did.”

“Clark?”

“What?”

“What happens now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is this a one-shot?”

“I hope not,” I said, rubbing my face against his neck. I knew where he was going with this line of questioning; I just didn’t want to deal with the answers.

“Are you going to come out?”

“Fuck no!”

“I see.”

“No, you don’t see. Football doesn’t tolerate homos and neither does my family. I can’t come out.”

“You’re throwing the word ‘homo’ around like it belongs to someone else,” Jody said, starting to move away. He eyed me to see my reaction, and I was starting to get agitated.

“You don’t understand!”

“I do, Clark, but that doesn’t mean I have to like what I’m hearing.”

I threw my head back on the pillow and covered my face with both hands. “Jo, listen to me, please.”

“I’m listening.”

“Twenty-four hours ago, I was straight. Now you’re expecting me to go out there and tell the whole world I’m not. I can’t do that.”

“Clark, twenty-four hours ago, you were gay. You’ve been gay all your life, if what you’ve told me is true.”

I looked at him, and I could see that he was trying very hard to be patient with me, but considering how out and how proud he was, I was sure that he had nothing but contempt for my cowardice. Well, there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it—certainly not now, when I was on the brink of realizing my dreams.

I stood up to go to the bathroom, kissing him quickly before I moved away from him. He was sitting up, his back against the headboard. He had one leg bent with an arm resting on it and the other was flat on the bed, the sheet barely covering his groin. The sun was peeking through the blinds, and it cast shadows on him, striped ones, making him look like a poster I’d seen in some magazine.

“You’ve changed my life; you know that, don’t you?” I was standing in the middle of the room stark naked, and I saw his eyes move up and down my body hungrily.

“Do you think that mine will ever be the same?” he asked, the need in his eyes pulling at me like a magnet.

I crossed the room in a few steps and took him in my arms, kissing him softly, listening to him sigh with pleasure. “Don’t hate me,” I begged, outlining his mouth with my tongue. “I can’t lose you now that I’ve just found you.”

“I could never hate you, Clark,” Jody said gently, cupping my face with his hand. “That will never be the issue.”

“Give me some time to wrap my head around this.”

“I have no choice. You’ve gotten under my skin really bad.”

I felt the tears threatening to appear, and I bit the inside of my cheek to take my mind off what he’d just said. I didn’t want him to see how emotional I was getting, how important it was to hear those words, because I wasn’t sure where this was all heading. I’d never felt the need to be with anyone this badly. All my past experiences with women had been one-night stands except for Nikki, and even though that had become a steady thing, it was unsatisfying and never left me with a burning desire for more.

The thought of walking away from this was not to be borne. I was crazy about Jody, and I knew that eventually I would have to take some kind of stand, make some tough decisions; I just couldn't face any of that right now. All I wanted to do was be with him. Be loved by him and love him back.



# CHAPTER 11

THREE days had passed. The most exciting three days of my life.

Our daily routine never changed, his at the hospital, mine at school. It was nighttime that had taken on a whole new meaning for us. This was our time, and the past three nights had been a series of long and drawn-out sessions of lovemaking that left us both drained but sated. I'd been having sex since I was thirteen, yet I felt like a virgin with him, learning all the ways that men love each other. It was an erotic journey that only left me craving more, and whenever I'd think about him during the day, I'd feel myself getting aroused again, wishing the time would fly by so that I could be in my car on my way to him.

Somehow, we'd still managed to squeak in some tutoring. He insisted that we keep that up, concerned that I pass my class. It was easier to focus, now that all the sexual tension had dissipated somewhat. We were still acting like horny dogs, sniffing around each other as soon as we got together. It wasn't unusual for us to go at it at least two times before settling down with the book in between us. Then it was this constant reaching over to kiss or touch. It's a wonder we read anything at all, but we were getting through the book, little by little.

"What are you doing for Thanksgiving?" I asked, interrupting our session once more.

“Nothing.... I thought I was going to have to work that weekend, so I didn’t make any plans. It turns out that I’m free for three days.”

“No shit! Come home with me. Spend it with my family in Folsom.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Come on. They won’t suspect anything. Hell, you don’t even look gay.”

“Clark, I have no desire to spend three days with your father.”

“I only meant Thanksgiving Day. We can drive up and back on the same day, and then we’d have the rest of the weekend to play.” I grinned, waiting to see his reaction.

“You’ll do anything to get out of reading, won’t you? Even start an argument.”

“Who’s arguing?”

“I won’t hide who I am, regardless of how he feels.”

“Well, I was hoping you’d leave your sexy-bitch shoes here.”

“You’re an ass!”

“Aww, come on, Jo-Jo. I don’t want you alone on Thanksgiving. It’s un-American.”

He caved, as I knew he would. I was beginning to discover that this man was a big softie where I was concerned, never able to resist any of my requests. I knew this deep down inside and the knowledge that he cared so much turned me to mush. I was falling deeper and deeper under his spell.

JODY and Lil were sitting out on the patio of the Yank Sing restaurant at the Rincon Center in San Francisco. There were empty plates piled high on their table, testament to the mountains of dim sum they had consumed. They were finishing their meal with the delectable buns stuffed with a sticky, sweet yam concoction.

Jody sipped his cup of black tea, sighing with satisfaction. “That was amazing. Thanks for talking me into this.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie. We need to do this more often.”

“I don’t think my stomach can handle this on a regular basis.”

“Oh, you know we’ll be hungry again in an hour.”

“This will have to hold me for a while. I’m meeting Clark at five for another session.”

“Of what?” Lil asked, hardly able to keep the smile off his face.

“Of tutoring,” Jody answered, doing his best to keep his face from revealing anything.

“Honey, I’ve known you for a long time, and that look can only mean one thing. When did he cave?”

Jody rolled his eyes, annoyed at being found out so soon.

“Tell me!” Lil squealed, jumping up from his seat. “Was it bliss? Who made the first move?” Lil bent forward and whispered, “Is he hung like a horse? I want details!”

“Lil,” Jody said forcefully, looking around to see if anyone was observing them. “Keep your voice down!”

“Come on! Stop acting like a prude and talk to me!”

Jody started to fidget, actually uncomfortable under Lil’s gaze. They’d always shared information in the past, but somehow, this was different.

“This is more than just sex, isn’t it?” Lil said, the realization finally dawning on him as he watched his friend squirm in his seat. “You’ve really fallen for him!” Lil exclaimed, the disbelief written all over his face.

“I don’t want to discuss it.”

“My God!”

Jody continued to sip his tea in silence.

“Sweetie,” Lil said, switching persona instantly from raging queen to serious architect and friend. “You need to walk away from him.”

“Why?”

“You’re doing this to yourself again.”

“What?” Jody sighed, knowing exactly where the conversation was headed.

“It’s Rick, all over again.”

“Don’t compare this relationship with the other one.”

“Why shouldn’t I? You’re going into this with your eyes wide open, knowing he’s a closet case with major issues.” Lil’s normally cheerful face looked troubled when he said, “Jody, this will not have a happy ending.”

“It’s not the same at all, Lil. Clark’s not going to die on me.”

“But he’ll deny you and walk away, eventually. Once he’s gotten the itch out of his system, he’ll go back to being Berkeley’s number one het stud.”

“He’s not like that! He’s really struggling with his sexuality.”

“And you want to be his first experiment? You’re fucking nuts!”

Jody looked at his best friend through eyes that shimmered with sudden tears.

“You need to walk away! Now, before you’re in too deep.”

“Too late,” Jody answered.

“No!”

“I’m in love with him.”

“Fuck!”

“I know,” Jody whispered, shaking his head. “I’m fucking crazy about him.”

Lil sat back in his chair, the wind completely knocked out of him. His friend had always had a penchant for lost causes, but this was too much. “Sweetie, you really need to think this through. He’s not only in the closet; he’s got a father who’s demented, according to the rags.”

“I know he’s sort of an ass, but demented?”

“You know how I love football.”

“Yeah, yeah... you jerk off to the pictures.”

“Really, Jodes... give me some credit. I actually watch the games and read all the commentaries. Then I jerk off.”

Jody finally grinned. “And the point of this is?”

“Every article about Clark has mentioned his father. They say he’s controlling and rules his son’s life. A lot of teams who would normally be interested in signing him up are shying away from him.”

“That sucks!”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong! There are still a lot of people interested and willing to overlook his dad. However, I don’t think they’ll overlook daddy *and* the gay factor—that would be a lethal combination.”

“Lil, this is 2003, not the eighteenth century. Gay is very fashionable right now.”

“Not in football, and not in his dad’s world. You are opening yourself up for a massive dose of heartache.”

“I think you’re exaggerating.”

“Oh my God! Has he even talked about coming out? Did he say he loves you?”

“No!” Jody spat out. “It’s way too soon. I haven’t even told him how I feel.”

“Jody, I beg you,” Lil implored, “Walk away from this. It’s taken you years to get over Rick. I don’t think I have the strength to do that again.”

“It won’t be like that. Now, stop being a drama queen and ask for the check. I need to go.”

“Wait,” Lil said, reaching out and stopping Jody from walking away. “Throw me a bone at least?”

“What?”

“You know.... How was it? Is he hung?”

Jody paused for several minutes, knowing the suspense was killing Lil.

“Let’s just say that he’s... magnificent.”

“That good?” Lil asked almost reverently.

“Better.”

THE tavern was filled to capacity tonight. There were several people I recognized, including Nikki and her cheerleading buddies. They were at a table, empty beer bottles lined up like soldiers on parade. The girls were loud and flirtatious, calling out lewd commentaries to some of my teammates who were playing pool on the other side of the room.

“Clark!” Nikki yelled out, waving to get my attention. Soon the chanting started, the singsong voices going, “He’s here! It’s Clark! Hey, Clark!”

I walked over to their table and couldn’t keep the smile off my face. “You guys are shit-faced! How long have you been here?”

“Many, many hours,” Nikki replied with a goofy look on her face. I hadn’t seen her much since our meeting at Round Table even though she’d called several times trying to set something up.

“I think you’ve had enough to drink. Why don’t you let me take you ladies home?”

“That’s so nice of you,” one of the girls said, and the chanting started again, the “Go, Clark” reverberating in the room.

“Come on.” I pulled Nikki up off the chair, and she latched onto my neck, pressing herself tightly against me. I gathered the group together while my teammates hooted and hollered at me, asking to share the wealth. I flipped them the bird and hustled everyone out of the bar.

We piled into the Volvo, four in the back and Nikki up front with me. She tried to get her seat belt on, but struggled with the latch, so I reached over to help, accidentally brushing her breasts with my arm.

“Oh, sweetie, don’t try and cop a feel. These boobs are all yours, if you want them.”

“Shut up, Nik. You’re wasted.”

“She’s wasted... she’s wasted... she’s wasted.” The girls started up with their chant, instantly grating on my nerves. I wanted to throw everyone out of the car, regretting my decision to drive them home. Fortunately, they lived within a few blocks of each other and so I drove to the first place, saw two of them up to their apartment, and moved on to the next building, dropping off two more of the girls.

When we got to Nikki's building she could barely walk, so I hoisted her over my shoulder like a floppy ragdoll and made my way into the building. I took her key from her and fumbled with the lock, finally pushing the door open and making my way into her apartment.

"Don't leave," she mumbled when I put her down.

"You need to sleep this off, Nik. Call me in the morning if you want."

She sat up and pulled me by the arm, wrapping herself around me, whispering "fuck me" in my ear.

"Nikki, come on."

"Please.... I've missed you."

"No."

She sat up and pulled off her blouse and her bra, flinging everything across the room.

"Look at me!"

I looked, but didn't see anything I wanted. Whatever feelings I had before had died completely. She couldn't get a rise out of me, even if she tore every piece of clothing off her body. It just wasn't going to happen.

"I'm sorry, Nikki... I gotta go."

I walked out of the apartment to the sound of her weeping in the background.

## CHAPTER 12

IT was Thanksgiving Day, and they were on their way to Folsom.

Jody was filled with misgivings about this visit. He and Clark had talked it to death, and although he wasn't going to lie if anyone asked him point blank, he wasn't going to make the public service announcement either. Clark had pretty much convinced him to remain on the down-low for his sake.

It was hard to resist such an impassioned plea while he had his cock in Clark's mouth. The sexual energy between them remained at an all-time high, each encounter better than the last. He'd expected him to be more reticent, considering this was his first gay experience, but the man was insatiable. He'd never been around anyone who needed as much sex. Clark seemed to have gotten around most of his self-imposed taboos when it came to man-on-man, adapting to every new position like a pro. The only experience yet to be conquered was his ass. He'd passed on that suggestion several times, considering it to be the ultimate declaration of his homosexuality, and Jody hadn't pressed, more than happy to bottom for his incredibly sexy top.

Jody's thoughts were interrupted by Clark's hand, reaching across from the driver's side and squeezing his leg gently.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"



“Well, we’re driving into unfriendly territory.”

“I can handle it, Clark. I’m a big boy.”

Clark moved his hand toward Jody’s groin and started a slow rub. “And getting bigger by the second,” he said, his smile turning into that naughty grin, the one he got every time he was about to plow into him.

“You’re a sex maniac, you know that?” Jody’s cock was instantly reacting to Clark’s touch.

“Oh, excuse me,” he said, with mock exaggeration. “Would you like me to stop?”

“No, you big lug. You keep driving while I provide the entertainment.”

Jody surprised him by bending his head and tugging on Clark’s zipper, freeing up his always impressive cock. Jody couldn’t stop the whimper that came out of his mouth, blown away by the size and the beauty of Clark’s penis, but more importantly, by the knowledge that it was his for the taking. “You’re fucking hot,” he whispered, pausing for one second before opening his mouth and taking Clark in as deeply as possible.

“Jesus, Jo....”

He put his hand up to Clark’s mouth, signaling him to be quiet, and he proceeded to destroy him with his tongue, loving the sounds that came out of Clark’s mouth, each sigh and huff, the only impetus he needed. Clark’s hips were moving back and forth, rutting against Jody’s face, the cruise control keeping the car at a steady pace, the highway all but empty due to the holiday.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed, his entire body going rigid as the sweet, hot taste of him filled Jody’s mouth in delicious, pulsing waves.

“Oh my God, you are fucking insane,” he groaned as Jody finished him off, licking away any residue, putting his cock back in his pants, nice and neat.

He turned toward Jody, his jeweled eyes blazing and he said, “Thank you,” with such wonder that Jody was humbled. “You’re welcome, beautiful.”

He grabbed Jody's hand and held it tightly all the way to his parents' house.

When they got there, Jody pulled out the large bouquet of flowers he'd bought for Mrs. Stevens and they walked into the house via the kitchen, a room that was bustling with activity and people.

"Clarkster!" a young man in a Tony Hawk jersey and blue jeans called out. He was as tall as Clark and as blond, but slimmer and not quite as dazzling. His eyes were a muted blue, but they sparkled with joy at seeing his brother.

Clark hugged him and turned to Jody. "This is Jason, part of a matched set."

"Nice to meet you," Jody replied, extending a hand.

"Hey," Jason answered, giving him a squeeze.

"Where's Mike?"

"I don't know. Maybe watching the game."

"Clark, sweetheart!"

Clark's mother walked into the kitchen. She was dressed in light blue, a good color for her, accentuating the sky-blue eyes that were similar to her son's, but not nearly as arresting. She wrapped an arm around Clark's waist, her head barely reaching his chin, and stood there looking at Jody with a pleasant smile. "You must be Dr. Williams."

"Please, call me Jody," he said, shaking her hand and passing her the bouquet of flowers with the other.

"How lovely! Thank you."

"Thank you for having me over."

"Clark tells me that you're from Chicago."

"Yes, but I've lived in the Bay Area for almost thirteen years now."

"Almost a native," she smiled easily.

"Not quite, but I'm getting there."

"He still talks funny," Clark threw out. "He pronounces his Aaaa's, like weird," he teased.

“Shut up, Clark,” Jody answered, “I’m working on trying to lose that.”

“Well, come in please. Make yourself at home. It’s the least we can do for someone who’s willing to help this boy in school.”

“He’s hardly a boy, Mrs. Stevens,” Jody said, staring at Clark.

“Did I hear voices?” Jim Stevens walked into the kitchen, making his presence known.

“Hey, Dad. This is Jody Williams, the doctor that’s tutoring me.”

“My pleasure,” Jim said, extending a hand.

“Who’s winning the game?”

“Denver’s kicking ass,” Jim replied. “The Cowboys are going to be crying tonight.”

“Tough shit,” Clark said. “They could stand to lose once in a while.”

“What do you mean, once in a while? Those fuckers have lost their last four games.”

The conversation erupted into a play-by-play between Jim, Clark, and Jason, turning into an animated discussion on who would eventually get to the Super Bowl. They may as well have been speaking Mandarin for all Jody knew. His knowledge of football continued to be bare bones. The only thing that interested him about the sport was Clark Stevens.

“Would you like something to drink, Dr. Williams?” Mary asked.

“Please, call me Jody.”

“Of course. Would you like wine or beer? We also have soda.”

“A glass of wine would be nice.”

“I think we have a nice chardonnay from Napa. Will that work for you?”

“Sounds great.”

She pulled a bottle out of the refrigerator and a wineglass from the shelf, handing it to Jody. “Would you mind uncorking it?”

“Not at all. Where’s the corkscrew?”

“I think it’s over in that drawer,” she said, pointing to a drawer near the oven.

The back door opened, and a young couple carrying a baby in a car seat walked into the house.

Mary rushed over to look at her grandson. “Can I carry him for a while?”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Linda, Robby... this is Dr. Jody Williams. He’s Clark’s friend and tutor,” Mary said, stopping her cuddling and cooing for a minute.

Robby looked over at Jody and smiled. “She’s a sucker for babies.”

“Isn’t everyone?” Jody asked.

“I’m not,” a voice rang out, attached to a body that was obviously Jason’s twin, Michael. “Who are you?”

“Michael! You are so rude!”

“I’m not rude, Mom! I just want to know who he is.”

Clark moved over to where they were standing and got his brother in a headlock, giving him a knuckle rub on the head. “This is my brother, Mike. Hell on wheels and trouble with a capital T.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jody replied, amused by the mischievous look and demeanor of this brother. He was undoubtedly everything Clark accused him of.

“Hey, you’re the doc, huh?”

“Jody Williams,” he replied.

“Jody? Isn’t that a girl’s name?”

“Mike!” Everyone in the room screamed at him.

“It’s okay.” Jody laughed, setting everyone at ease. “I’ve been called worse.”

“Jeez, bro,” Clark said, frowning at Mike.

“What? Isn’t it a girl’s name though?”

“My real name is Jude.”

“Then why the fuck don’t they call you that?”

Clark turned to Jody and said, “Didn’t I just tell you he was a pain in the ass?”

“It’s fine.”

Everyone seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief when they saw that Jody wasn’t upset. Mary handed the baby back to Linda, Robby’s wife, and moved over to the sink to start peeling potatoes. “Okay, everyone out of here. Dinner will be ready in two hours. Linda, you can stay if you want to help. Robby, take the baby to the family room.”

“Yes, drill sergeant!” All four boys answered at the same time, laughing when she flipped them a finger.

WE were gathered around the big dining room table, the extra leaves in place to accommodate all nine of us. I looked at Jody, who was sitting across from me, checking to see if he was okay. The past two hours had been all about football, everyone crowded around the set to watch the end of the Denver-Dallas game. It was pretty standard fare for Thanksgiving at the Stevenses’ home.

“You okay?” I asked, low enough so no one really paid much attention.

“I’m good,” he replied, training those caramel eyes at me, making me want to leap across the table and kiss the rosy lips that he was wetting with the tip of his tongue.

I nodded, glad that he seemed fine. Everything was going smoothly, the family seemed to be comfortable around Jody, and I was starting to finally relax when the doorbell rang. “Are you expecting anyone?” I asked.

“No,” my mother replied, equally as surprised.

I stood up and went to open the door. Nikki Bartlett stood there, dressed in a short, pink skirt and a white tank top. I stared at her stupidly, wondering why the fuck she was here.

“Hi!”

“Hi,” I answered, on automatic. “What are you doing here?”

“Your dad invited me over.”

## CHAPTER 13

MY blood pressure shot up ten points, watching Nikki bounce into the room, passing around hugs. I was furious at my father for presuming that I wanted her to spend Thanksgiving with us.

Everyone scrambled to get another place setting for her and naturally, my parents insisted that she sit beside me, which pissed me off even more.

“Doc, you know Nikki, don’t you? She’s Clark’s girl,” my dad said with a big smile on his face.

“No,” Jody replied. “We’ve never met.” I could almost see the icicles forming on his face as he looked at Nikki coldly.

“I’m Nikki,” she said, her cheerleading smile appearing instantly as her head bobbed up and down.

I looked down at my plate and clenched my thighs with both hands, willing myself to calm down. Everything had been going so well; Jody was comfortable, the family welcoming. Now, all my defenses were back up again, expecting the worst.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Jody replied. I looked up at him and was confronted with a stranger. My gentle Jo-Jo had disappeared, and in his place sat a ferocious pit bull, poised to attack.

“How come I’ve never met you before?” Nikki asked, sitting down and reaching for the glass of wine that my mother had put in front of her.

“I don’t know.”

“How do you know Clark?”

“I’m his doctor.”

“Doctor?”

“You remember when I broke my arm a couple of months ago?” I interrupted.

“Yeah.”

“Jody treated me, and we’ve become friends.”

“Oh! That’s weird.”

“Why’s that?” Jody asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Clark’s never mentioned you,” she replied, shifting in her chair.

“Dr. Williams is tutoring Clark in English,” my mother interjected.

“I didn’t realize doctors had time to do that.”

“I do have a life outside of the hospital.”

“I’m sure you do, but isn’t this above and beyond the call of duty?”

“Not really.”

“I tried tutoring Clark at one time, but it didn’t work out,” Nikki stated.

“I’ve had some experience with this,” Jody replied, not offering any more details.

“Yes, I’m sure you’re much more qualified than me.”

I felt like I was watching a tennis match between rivaling players. The animosity between them was very obvious.

“How come you’re here with Clark? Don’t you have a family?”

“Nikki.” I glared at her, willing her to shut up.

“He’s from Chicago,” my brother Zach answered. Everyone in the family had stopped eating and was watching this exchange with interest.

“Don’t you have a wife or girlfriend?” Nikki asked rudely.



Jody stood abruptly. “Clark, will you show me where the bathroom is?”

“Sure.” I stood immediately and walked out of the dining room with Jody following closely behind.

We entered my room and I shut the door gently, looking at him beseechingly. “Jo, I’m really sorry.”

“This is fucked!”

“Please... just cool it, okay? Don’t say anything or this place will explode.”

Jody was shaking, he was so pissed. I grabbed his hand and squeezed. “Please, Jo-Jo... for me.”

“I’m not lying, Clark. If she asks me again, I’ll tell her the truth.”

“She wouldn’t dare.”

“I hope not, for your sake. Now kiss me so I can go back and face that cunt.”

I put my mouth on his, tasting his tongue as it forced itself into me. “You’re mine,” he growled.

“Jo....”

He grabbed me again, kissing me deeper this time, his erection pressing hard against mine. “Your jealous side is very sexy,” I whispered, reluctant to pull away.

“You owe me a blow job, all the way up I-80.”

“You got it,” I promised, adjusting myself.

By the time we got back to the dining room, Nikki was being entertained by Mike and Jason, her entire line of questioning forgotten. The dinner passed with no more incidents, and afterwards I stood at the kitchen sink, passing dishes to my mother as she dried them and put them away. It was tradition in our family that the boys did the cleanup after a big dinner like this, but Mom insisted on drying the china, always worried that we’d chip or break something.

“Are you and Jody planning on spending the night?”

“No, we’ll drive back. He’s got to work tomorrow.”

“He seems like a very nice man. Is the tutoring really helping?”

“Yes, he is, and yes, it’s helping.”

“That’s nice. I’m glad it’s working out for you, sweetheart. It will be good when this is all over, won’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“YOU don’t have to,” Jody said, pushing Clark away gently. He’d switched places with him because Clark wanted to make good on his promise to blow him, but he was no longer in the mood. The whole outing had been spoiled by Nikki’s sudden appearance. Jody was almost sullen as the car barreled up the freeway, heading home toward Berkeley. Clark kept asking him what was wrong, and he answered him in monosyllables, insisting that everything was fine when in fact, nothing was. Seeing Nikki with Clark and his family had only reminded him that he was living in a dream world. The chances of Clark coming out and making a life with him were zero to none.

It had been a wonderful interlude, something he’d treasure for the rest of his life, but it was time to face reality and end it. He knew that staying in this relationship would only cause them both pain, so he felt that it would be best to say goodbye while they were still on good terms. Clark’s exams were next week, and Jody was pretty confident that he’d pass English with flying colors. There really was no more need for any kind of contact between them.

Jody had shocked himself and Clark with his jealousy. He couldn’t remember ever acting this way, and he realized how deeply he was caught under Clark’s spell. The thought of Clark with anyone else was a gnawing ache in his gut. He’d not been in love like this in years, and even then, it was nothing compared to this. Clark seemed to bring out emotions in him that he never even knew he had. He became territorial and primal, fiercely protective, even though he knew that he had no rights whatsoever. Jody was afraid that staying with Clark would only increase this infatuation to the point where he’d lose himself completely. He’d never lied about his lifestyle. He was proud to be gay and a huge advocate for his community, yet this afternoon, he would have lied for Clark’s sake despite his brave words in Clark’s bedroom. He would have

denied who he was, and that thought alone was scaring the crap out of him. He looked over at Clark. He was asleep, leaning up against the door, looking so beautiful and innocent in repose. The thought of never being able to kiss him again made him groan out loud.

He pulled up to his house and turned off the engine. The sudden silence must have woken Clark because he stirred, and Jody reached over and touched him gently.

“We’re home?” Clark asked, blinking awake. He reached for Jody and practically dragged him out of his seat, moving around to accommodate him. He embraced him fiercely, refusing to let him go even as Jody struggled to pull away.

“Please, just let me hold you for a second.”

“Okay,” Jody replied, giving in once again. They stayed that way for a few minutes until Clark shuddered, and Jody heard the sob that escaped from Clark’s lips. He pulled back suddenly and was shocked by the sight of the tears that were leaking out of the beautiful eyes.

“Clark....”

“I’m so sorry.”

Jody watched as Clark attempted to get control, but he wasn’t having much success. The tears kept on coming, and Jody’s weren’t that far behind, so he just embraced him again, feeling their hearts beating steadily against each other.

“I’m sorry about today,” Clark said again, pushing away from him. “I know that must have hurt.”

“It did.”

“I had no idea she would show up.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“You’re disappointed in me.”

Jody shrugged, completely at a loss for words.

“What did you expect me to do?”

“It doesn’t matter, Clark. Let’s drop it for now.”

“Did you like my family?” Clark asked, as if the answer would make a difference.

“They were very nice.”

“The truth?”

Jody smiled sadly and said, “What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know.... What you feel?”

“What I feel is completely out of control. The truth of the matter is that your family would hate me if they found out I was gay.”

“They’ll never find out!”

Jody shook his head and got out of the car.

I FOLLOWED in silence, surprised when he didn’t even bother to turn on the lights. He was standing at the picture window in his living room, leaning against the glass. The lights of San Francisco were easily visible, as well as those of the Golden Gate and the Bay Bridge. I moved over to where he stood, and I put my arms around him and pulled him toward my chest. He leaned his head back, and I could smell his cologne, the new one that he’d bought the other day, with the outrageous price tag. It smelled like a football field after the grass is newly mowed; a fresh, citrus-like smell that would forever remind me of him.

He turned toward me, and we started to kiss, slow and easy, a gradual exploration of two mouths still getting to know each other. He tasted so good, probably because he was a nonsmoker and a little anal about his oral hygiene. Two things about him I’d learned over the past few weeks.

He was a great kisser, able to reduce me to a trembling wreck in mere seconds as he sucked on my tongue and bit my lower lip aggressively. His hands began their slow dance, lifting off my shirt and tossing it aside so that he could run them gently over my chest, toying with my nipples, bringing them to a peak, turning my knees to jelly, and unleashing a million butterflies in my stomach.

I was hard as a rock by then, rutting gently against his erection as he continued to fondle my nipples, all the while teasing me with his tongue.

“You’re driving me crazy,” he whispered, moaning as his mouth left mine and made its way gradually down my chest, past my stomach and finally stopping at my groin. My pants were off in minutes, and he took me in his mouth, consuming me with wet, sucking heat. “Jo, I...” I stopped right there. How could I tell him how I really felt when we’d only been together such a short time? He would think I was insane, a virgin falling for his first fuck. I pulled him up my body and said “I want you,” instead of “I love you,” which would have been much more accurate.

He grabbed my hand, and we made our way into his bedroom, leaving the lights off.

We lay down on the bed and started to kiss again, soft, fluttering kisses that left us both breathless. “You’re torturing me,” I whispered.

“Not torture, my love. Just adoring every part of you.” He moved down slowly and when he got to my groin, he pushed my legs up and apart, putting his mouth where no one had ever been before, and I bucked in surprise, pushing him away. “Don’t!”

“It’s okay, Clark. Just calm down. Let me love you.”

I tried to pull away, freaked out that anyone would actually want to put their tongue on my asshole, but he held me down, soothing me with his hands, talking in a slow, gentle voice, telling me I was beautiful. Finally, I started to relax, and this time when he put his mouth down there I froze in place, but I didn’t push him away.

It was like nothing ever before; erotica that I’d previously read and heard about, but had never experienced. A warm, wet pushing that made me whimper like a girl and thrash around as his tongue became more aggressive, pushing into me in determined, twirling motions. I was writhing and bucking in seconds, opening my legs wantonly, letting him have me without any shame.

He turned away for a minute and pulled open the drawer of his nightstand, fishing around for the condom and the lube, and he straddled me, looking at me questioningly, waiting to see if I’d let him, but I shook my head vigorously, not ready for that final step. What he’d done just now was intense. I didn’t think I could handle any more surprises tonight, so I pushed him off me, laid him flat on the bed as I took the condom from his hand and rolled it on myself instead, spreading the lube

on both of us. I sighed deeply as I sank into his tightness, feeling him clench around me. “God, you feel so good.”

“You too.”

I started to move slowly, savoring every minute of this, feeling his legs hug my body, his hot breath on my neck.

“I love being inside you,” I whispered, resting my head on his forehead.

“This is who you are, Clark.”

I kissed him greedily, not wanting to hear what he was saying. I wanted to forget every bad thing that had happened today. All I wanted to do was be with this man and not have to worry about consequences or repercussions or life-changing decisions.

JODY squeezed his eyes tightly, feeling Clark moving back and forth in slow undulating movements, pushing in and pulling out, giving him that slow burn that he asked for, his tumescent cock stretching and filling him.

He knew he was in trouble. Lost to a man who’d never be comfortable in his own skin. He should have sent him home tonight; all his resolve had gone by the wayside as soon as he saw the tears. He’d allowed his feelings to take over, choosing to make love rather than fight it. His reality was completely eclipsed by Clark.

“Feel good, Jo-Jo?”

“Yes,” Jody answered breathlessly. Clark had told him once that he loved to watch his face when they were making love. The feeling was mutual because seeing Clark’s face in the throes of passion was the ultimate aphrodisiac. Knowing that he gave him so much pleasure was extremely satisfying.

Clark thrust in and out, and he paused for a second to shift position, changing the angle of his penetration, hitting Jody’s gland with the next push, already aware of this spot and how to bring his partner to a gasping, shuddering climax.

“Fuck me, please. Don’t stop!” Jody murmured incoherently as he was consumed.

And the pleasure swept through them, grabbing hold of their bodies, milking them dry, and the moaning was the only sound that one could hear as they clung together desperately, afraid to voice the words that were locked in their hearts.

## CHAPTER 14

THE days following Thanksgiving were idyllic in many ways. Jody and I seemed to have found a tentative truce, keeping our internal fears at bay and just relishing our time together. I practically lived at his place, only running home to pick up a change of clothes or to check on my mail. The rest of the time we spent lazing around doing absolutely nothing. The most pressing things on our minds were food and sex. Jody never mentioned my English class, so I didn't ask about his job. We were like two people on vacation savoring every second of our time together, because we knew that come Monday, reality would be back with a vengeance.

"You want to go out today?" he asked, caressing my chest. We were sitting out on his deck with towels wrapped around our waists and not much else. The weather was cooperating fully, the temperatures in the high seventies, adding to the illusion that we were on holiday. It was around eleven in the morning, and I was soaking up the sun, replete from the satisfying breakfast he'd cooked and even more from the amazing sex we had last night.

"Can't we just stay here and fuck all day?"

"That's what we did yesterday and last night," Jody said, his grin and accompanying dimple a magnet that drew me in easily.



“I know. I’m just not in the mood to be looking over my shoulder every second, worrying about who might be watching.”

“You want to go to Marin?” he asked, ever mindful of my fears. “How about a day at the beach? We could pack a lunch and drive out to Stinson. Wear a giant hat and white sunscreen; no one will know who you are.”

“It’s still the Bay Area. I’m bound to run into someone. How about if we stay right here and wear each other out?”

Jody grinned and bent down to kiss me. “It’s going to take more than twenty-four hours to wear me out.”

“I’m beginning to realize that,” I said, groaning as his hand slipped under the towel and wrapped itself around my cock, which was coming to life again. “Who knew that a serious doctor could be such a sex fiend?” My voice was turning husky with desire, my body responding to his touch like a fine-tuned automobile, quick to accelerate, going from silent to purring in a matter of seconds.

“You’re looking at a man in his prime,” Jody said, nuzzling my neck with bites that tickled and teased.

“What am I?”

“A newbie.”

“What?”

Jody’s chuckle was deep and sexy. “You’re such an innocent, Clark. I’m having way too much fun teaching you new and improved ways to have sex.”

“I know! What is it with you and blow jobs? Is there a school I need to go to? Your blow jobs are, like, out of this world!”

“Gay men give better blow jobs for one simple reason. We love cock much more than women do,” Jody pronounced. “We not only love cock, we worship it! Think about it, babe. Our cocks are the first toy we reached for as infants. They’re the last thing we touch before we go to sleep; they comfort and give us pleasure. Many men fall asleep holding their cocks. How many women go to sleep holding their best friends on a nightly basis?”

I looked at him as he expounded on his theory. He had his doctor's face on, pretending to be serious, but his eyes sparkled with mirth.

"I would tend to agree on that last point."

He nodded, smiling that sexy smile of his that was such a heart-stopper.

"Prove it," I urged, grabbing him and holding him tightly.

"Prove what?"

"Prove how much you love my cock," I said, moving to accommodate him. He pulled my towel aside and bent forward, rubbing his cheeks against my shaft. I groaned like I was in pain.

"Clark," he lifted his head and looked at me with eyes that were glazed over with passion. "Let me shave your balls."

My heart did a little hiccup when I heard the request. "Now?"

"Yes. Can you get away with it?"

"I'm on hiatus, remember? No one's going to see my balls except you."

"God... please, let me."

"Okay."

We stood, our towels dropping onto the redwood, and we moved into the house, his hand gripping mine tightly. I was excited and apprehensive at the same time. The thought of being exposed in such an intimate way was a little daunting, but so were some of the other things Jody had done to me in the past two weeks. A whole new world was opening up in front of my eyes; a world filled with erotic layers and comfortable silences.

We went straight to the bathroom, and he made me sit on the counter on top of a towel so I wouldn't slip. He put a brand-new blade in the razor and pulled down the can of shaving cream. Squirting a small portion in his hand, he massaged the cream all around my balls and down my ass-crack. My cock was leaking with excitement, pointing against my stomach. I groaned as he spread the cream over me, hissed when I felt the first scrape of the blade, whimpered when his fingers spread me apart and said, "Bend your knees, baby. Open wide for me."

"Jo-Jo." My cheeks flamed red with embarrassment.

“You’re beautiful, Clark, every millimeter of you.” He said this almost reverently, like he was worshipping at a fucking altar.

“I’m going to shoot all over you if you don’t stop looking at me like that.”

“Wait ’til I’m done, babe. I can’t wait to suck you off, now that you’re nice and smooth.”

He finished and wiped me with a warm washcloth, staying a little longer around my asshole than I thought was necessary.

“What are you doing?” My eyes were glued to his.

“I want you to feel this,” he whispered huskily, as he put his finger in my mouth and said, “Suck.”

I did, responding like a robot.

“I’m going to fuck you in the ass.”

“No!”

“Just my fingers, big guy. Relax.”

“Not yet.” I shook my head even though I could feel my resolve weakening as his fingers gently played in the area around my hole.

He knelt and started licking around my newly shaved balls. His saliva coated me; his morning beard was rough and scratchy as he rubbed his face on my thighs. I sat there wide open, a slut to his desire.

“Jo, suck me off.” I heard myself begging, but I didn’t care. I was going a little crazy; his fingers were playing dangerous games with me, moving in and out of my asshole, stretching it and sending sensations that rocketed up and down my spine, turning my brain into a puddle.

I cried out when he started to suck, swallowing me so deep I could feel his throat as the tip of my cock hit it, his humming making everything vibrate. Meanwhile, his busy fingers were inside me, pushing at the tight rings, grazing my prostate, which caused me to buck and whimper.

I screamed when he prodded the right spot, and I exploded into his mouth, shooting down his throat as he swallowed smoothly. It was hot as hell watching him.

I hopped off the counter and grabbed his hand, moving toward the bedroom, determined to reciprocate. I wanted to hear him whimper and feel him pull at my hair. That was a bigger turn-on than anything else.

I heard him sigh as soon as I took him in my mouth; the movement of his hips encouraged me to swallow as deeply as possible. I could feel myself getting hard again, thanks to the noises coming out of his throat, and I laved him with my tongue, nipping at the soft skin of his balls, rolling them around in my mouth. His hands were gripping my shoulders, his needy noises goading me on.

“Please....”

I heard him beg, felt him pulling me up his chest, and I settled in between his legs as he spread wide. “Tell me what you want, Jo.”

“I want you inside of me.”

I reached for the pile of condoms that we’d placed on the nightstand, and rolled one on in record time. The lube followed next, as I slathered a generous amount on both of us. I breached him forcefully, holding my position for a second as our bodies adjusted to each other. I was enveloped in the sweetest warmth, wrapped in a cocoon of arms and legs and dark places that were squeezing the life out of me. I started to move again, picking up speed as he reciprocated, stuttering against me like a jackhammer. Each thrust was stronger as I slammed into him repeatedly, his screaming a sound of pure joy.

JODY couldn’t move. His body had been sucked dry by the mountain of a man that lay boneless on top of him. By the time the hammering in their hearts had stopped and his throbbing ass had calmed down, Clark was fast asleep, snoring gently against his neck.

Their relationship was getting more intense with each passing hour, and even though the words never crossed their lips, the emotions were clearly apparent in everything they did. Jody knew that Clark had crossed some internal line the night they’d come back from Folsom. They hadn’t spoken of it at all, but the shift in Clark’s feelings was easily apparent. He was much more relaxed and openly affectionate.

When they were alone like they'd been these past few days, he was the perfect partner, easygoing and even easier to please. He ate anything Jody put in front of him, only grumbling when Jody insisted that he have lima beans. Clark hated them and refused to budge, pouting like a kid. It made Jody laugh, and he ended up throwing the entire plate in the garbage, picking up the phone and ordering pizza instead. Clark's private persona was so much more than a football star. He could charm the pants off of Jody with a few quick words, and it was this side of him that gave Jody hope that there might be a future together.

He knew that Clark was much more than an athlete. He'd realized that Clark had a fine, inquisitive mind shortly after their first tutoring sessions, but Clark was a product of his upbringing. The more he was told how scattered and dumb he was, the more he was convinced it was true. He had trouble accepting Jody's compliments when they were studying. He was a little thunderstruck when Jody would carry on a serious conversation and actually listen to his replies. Clark told him that he couldn't remember the last time anyone had listened to a thing he had to say on any subject other than football.

The ADD continued to plague him, yet he refused to take any of Jody's advice. He was adamant about not trying any of the pills, and so his struggle to remember and stay on task continued unrelentingly.

"Have you seen my keys?"

It was a daily question, and each time something was lost or misplaced, the situation would escalate into an all-out crisis with Clark all but vibrating in place, his angry words hurled at himself nonstop.

This duality kept Jody on his toes, never knowing who he'd be facing next. It was exciting and terrifying at the same time. Jody's life had been all about routine, order, and discipline. Being with Clark was like riding on the tails of a bucking bronco. Beautiful and calm one minute, completely out of control the next.

It was Sunday afternoon and we'd decided to go to Andronico's to make a food run. We'd depleted everything in the house, and the only thing left in the refrigerator was water.

I was standing in front of the cereal boxes, trying to decide what to buy. I hated choices—too many of them always confused me—so I ended up reaching for my usual box of Frosted Flakes.

“That stuff is terrible,” Jody said as he stood beside me.

“It tastes really good.”

“It’s full of sugar and preservatives. It doesn’t have one redeeming factor.”

“I like it,” I whined.

Jody looked at me and laughed. “You’re like a four-year-old,” he said, grabbing my neck and pulling me up to him, his arms moving around me tightly.

I joined in the laughter, but it died in my throat when I looked up and saw Nikki staring at us from a few feet away. I practically jumped away from Jody, acting like I’d just seen a ghost. Her facial expression was classic, the look in her eyes changing from shock to fear to denial. I knew that I was fucked, but I made an attempt to smooth over the situation, walking up to her as if nothing had happened.

“Hey, Nik. When did you get back into town?”

“Yesterday,” she answered. “Where have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you all night.”

“Oh, I turned my phone off.”

“I went by your apartment several times, but you were never there and neither was your car!” She hurled the words out like an accusation. “Have you been with *him* all this time?” She said the word *him* like it was the dirtiest thing in the world. It made me sick to hear her talk like that.

“Yeah, I’ve been staying at Jody’s. We’ve been studying.”

“Really? And exactly what has the good doctor been teaching you?”

## CHAPTER 15

I WAS walking into the lobby of my apartment building when I ran into my mother and my brother Jason. Seeing them both was a shock! It was Wednesday, around two o'clock in the afternoon, and I had just come from the gym.

"What are you guys doing here?" I looked at them blankly, my mind racing with terrible thoughts. "Is Dad okay?"

My mother looked a little agitated, and Jason seemed somewhat confused. They followed me up the stairs and were silent as I fumbled with the locks.

"You want anything to drink?"

"I'd like some water, Clark."

"Okay. Jason?"

"I'll take a soda."

I tossed him a can of Pepsi, which he caught easily, and then I brought a bottle of water over to where my mother was sitting.

"Jason, would you mind going for a little walk? I'd like to speak with Clark in private."

“Sure,” he replied, and he looked at me from across the room and shrugged his shoulders. Apparently, he was clueless as to the reason why they had made this trip.

He slammed the door on his way out and I went to sit beside my mother on the sofa.

“I’m here because I got a phone call from Nikki, and I was a little concerned.”

“What did she want?”

“She said that Dr. Williams is gay.”

“Says who?”

“Says Google, apparently.”

“Huh?”

“Nikki was rather upset when she called. She asked to speak to your father, but he wasn’t home, so I convinced her to tell me what was going on.” My mother kept fiddling with the straps of her purse, folding and unfolding the leather, fidgeting as she talked. Her face had turned pink, the way it always did when she was embarrassed, but the part I was concerned about was the fact that she looked like she was about to cry. I knew that Nikki had said something to upset her.

“Clark, she says that you might be gay too.”

“Why? Because Jody’s my friend?”

“So you’re not denying it? He’s gay?”

“Mom, it’s really none of your business what he is. All you need to concern yourself with is the fact that he’s helping me with this English class and it’s working! I’ll know in ten days if I’ve passed the class or not. Just before Christmas break.”

“But if he’s gay, you shouldn’t associate with him! People will think you’re gay too, and that will get back to the scouts, not to mention your father, and all hell will break loose, Clark.”

“It shouldn’t matter at all. This is bullshit!”

“Nikki said I should ask you about Rick Roman. Who is he?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“Why does she think you’d know him?”



“Mom, let me tell you a little bit about Nikki, okay?”

“Okay.”

I told her the basics, leaving out the part that we were fuck-buddies for a long time. She didn’t need to hear that, although hearing that I had been sleeping with Nikki would have eased her mind about the other question she had.

“So you don’t love her?”

“Not that way.”

“Why have you pretended otherwise?”

“No one has bothered to ask.”

“But you were always with her?”

“Mom, this conversation needs to end.”

“Why does she think you’re gay?”

“Because I don’t want her, so she’s got to blame someone or something.”

“But calling you gay is a little far-fetched, isn’t it?” My mom finally smiled when she said that.

I shrugged my shoulders and kept silent. I wasn’t prepared to say anything to anyone. It was none of their damn business.

“Are you going to tell Dad?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Why?”

“I think he’d go a little crazy if he found out you were being tutored by a homosexual.”

“Even if said homo is really helping me?”

“Honey, it wouldn’t matter.”

“I guess not.” I stood up abruptly and started to pace, the indecision pulling me every which way. I was so tempted to say something, but I knew she’d never be able to handle it. I turned and looked at her sitting on the sofa, the picture of the concerned mother.

“What about Nikki though? Is she going to call Dad and tell him?”

“I’ve convinced her to hold off. I told her I’d come and talk to you.”

“And what will you tell her?”

“That you’re not gay, for one thing.” She laughed, the idea that I’d be gay so ridiculous she didn’t even give it another thought. “If you’re finished with this class in ten days, then there’s really no need to associate with him, is there?”

“Mom, he’s not just a tutor. He’s a friend!”

“You can’t have a gay friend!”

“Why the fuck not?” The idea of anyone telling me who I should or shouldn’t have as a friend was really starting to piss me off.

“You’re not going to throw everything away for some guy you’ve just met! He’ll understand when you tell him the reasons.”

“Mom, do you know what you sound like? You’re as bad as Dad.”

“Clark, I’ve nothing against Jody. He seems like a very nice man. However, you are on the brink of an NFL career. You can’t afford to have anything suspicious clouding your profile. Football players are a dime a dozen. They’d pass on you in a minute if they thought for one second that you were gay.”

“Mom this is the Bay Area, for one thing, and 2003 for another. Your thoughts are pretty archaic.”

“Call me what you want. I just know that there would be severe repercussions to your career if they even suspected you were gay, which is ridiculous, because you’re not!”

I looked at her for the longest time, trying to imagine what she’d do if I were to tell her that I had Jody’s cock in my mouth five hours ago. She’d probably have a fucking heart attack.

“So, what exactly do you expect me to do? I’m not going to propose to Nikki to set her mind at ease. That’s never going to happen.”

“Well, at least go and talk to her. That way she won’t think that Jody is infecting you, and maybe she’ll drop this entire line of questioning.”

She started to get up and then sat down again. “By the way, ask Jody about this Rick person. Nikki seemed to think it’s important, for some reason.”

“Sure thing, Mom. Can we talk about something else now?”

“Honey, I’ve got to run. Your dad is expecting me to be home when he gets off work. If I’m not there, I’ll have to explain.”

“Which would open a huge can of worms, right?”

“Exactly.”

I moved over and gave her a big hug. She was a tiny thing. Her head barely grazed my chest, but she was a strong woman who had raised five sons and lived with a difficult and demanding husband. I wanted to say something. I needed to talk to someone about my feelings for Jody, but I was reluctant to dump my thoughts on her. It would create major problems, and I didn’t think that it was fair to saddle her with all my questions when I wasn’t sure what I wanted. I decided to say nothing and spare her the anxiety.

We called Jason on his cell phone and asked him to come upstairs.

“So, what the hell was this trip all about?” he asked, waiting for someone to enlighten him. Mom had gone into the bathroom so he decided to get nosy.

“Nothing important.”

“It’s got to be pretty important for her to make a two-hour drive.”

“It doesn’t matter, Jason. Just drop it, okay?”

They finally left, and I threw myself on the couch, waiting until six o’clock so that I could go over to Jody’s and play twenty questions with him.

JODY nudged his car into the garage and killed the engine. He’d had a surprise phone call from Clark, asking if he could come over, even though they’d agreed that tonight was going to be a night off for both of them. They’d been inseparable since Thanksgiving, almost a week ago,

and so they decided that tonight would be all about catching up on laundry and chores. That was before the phone call.

Jody went straight to his room, where he changed into shorts and a T-shirt. The room was a mess. He and Clark had run out before they'd had a chance to change the sheets, so he did that now, pulling them off and gathering them in his arms. He made his way back out to the garage, where he had the washing machine and dryer. He could smell Clark on the sheets, as well as his own body odor: a combination of lemon, sweat, and dried-up spunk. It should have revolted him, but it didn't. He missed Clark already, and it had only been nine hours.

He threw everything into the machine, poured in the detergent, and started it. In the kitchen, he pulled a Corona out of the fridge just as he heard the Volvo sputtering up the driveway.

Clark walked in and took one look at Jody and had his arms around him in a second. He squeezed tightly and pressed his face on Jody's neck, inhaling and groaning at the same time. "I've missed you."

"Me too."

They stood there for several minutes, kissing and holding each other before breaking away. "You want a beer?"

"Sure," Clark replied.

"So what's going on?" Jody asked gently, handing him the bottle.

"I had a little visit today from my mother and my brother Jason."

"Oh?"

"My mom wanted to know if you were gay."

"Really."

"Yup. I guess Nikki didn't waste any time. She fucking Google'd you!"

"Damn those search engines!" Jody snorted out a semblance of a laugh.

"Who's Rick?"

"Rick?" Jody turned to Clark, the surprise very evident on his face.

"Yeah, Rick Roman. Who is he?"

"Who wants to know?"

“I do.”

“Why?”

“Nikki mentioned his name to my mother. She seemed to think he was important for some reason, and now I’m curious as well. What’s this about?”

Jody sighed and took a long pull off his bottle of beer. He grabbed Clark’s hand and started heading out the kitchen door, toward the deck. “Come on, gorgeous. Let me tell you a story.”

They shared one of the recliners that was pointing toward the city and were rewarded with the spectacular view of twinkling lights from across the bay. Clark settled Jody in between his legs, with his head resting high up on his chest.

“Rick Roman was my former lover,” Jody said quietly. “He died of HIV-related illnesses four years ago.”

“Shit!” Clark said, quietly. “Are you that famous that Google would be mentioning him?”

“I’m not, but he was.”

“Why?”

“His parents own several vineyards in the Napa Valley. Their wine is pretty well-known. You’ve probably seen the bottles. Roma Reserves?”

“No, I’m not much of a wine drinker.”

“Anyway, his family has mad money, and so everyone knows them. I met Rick when I just started my internship at San Francisco General. He was admitted for the first of many bouts of pneumonia.”

“How could you go out with him when he was positive?” Clark pushed Jody away, suddenly looking alarmed, and said, “You’re not positive, are you?”

“No, Clark, I’m not!”

“Okay,” he said, pulling Jody back toward him and getting comfortable again. “He must have been very special if you could overlook his disease the way you did.”

Jody was surprised that Clark would say such a thing. Most people had called him a fool. His respect for his young lover went up several notches. “I was young and naïve. Rick was an attractive, charismatic man. He was the life of the party with an entourage that lit up the city of San Francisco wherever they went. I fell for him almost immediately.”

“But you knew he was positive? You had to have known, working in the hospital.”

“Oh, I knew. I was just an optimist; convinced that I’d be able to keep the disease at bay with all the new meds.”

“Were you with him a long time?”

“About three years. The last one was all about caring for him. He sort of faded away.”

“I’m sorry. Maybe you shouldn’t have fallen for him.”

“Come on, Clark,” Jody turned and looked at him. His eyes were shimmering and he bit his lips to keep them from trembling. “You don’t pick and choose who you fall in love with. It just happens.”

“I know.” *God, do I ever know.* “How come you guys were in the news?”

“He was the son of millionaires. His life was news. The press loved him, and when we started dating, I became news as well.”

“So, are there pictures of you two on the Internet?”

“I’m sure there are. We were the ‘it’ couple for quite some time.”

“And when he died?”

“The press went crazy when they found out that Rick had left me his apartment on Nob Hill and a bunch of other things that I ended up selling and then donating the proceeds to the AIDS Foundation. They kept asking to interview me, but I refused. I couldn’t talk about him for a long time.”

“And you haven’t been with anyone since?”

“Not until you.”

“Boy, you sure know how to pick them, don’t you?”

Jody’s laugh sounded more like a sob, it was so pitiful. “That’s what Lil keeps telling me.”

## CHAPTER 16

WE were still out on the deck wrapped up in a warm blanket. The sun had long gone, and the night air had turned chilly as we huddled together for warmth. Jody's head was on my chest, his silky hair tickling me with every breath, and I blew at it and watched it float around him for a second and then settle back down again.

He had seemed so vulnerable when he was telling me about his former lover, and I questioned the wisdom of our attraction. Being with me would only lead to more heartache for him if I didn't step up to the plate and own up to this.

"Jo."

"What?"

"Do you ever worry about us?"

"I'm trying to live in the moment, Clark."

"This thing between us isn't letting up, is it?"

"No."

I was so tempted to come right out and say it. Did gay men even say the words *I love you*? There was so much I didn't know about his world. I felt like an explorer on the adventure of a lifetime, yet I was completely unprepared. All I had was the shirt on my back and a heart full of hope and love.

“Do you ever regret being with Rick?” I nuzzled his neck and licked at his ear, enjoying the sensation of him squirming underneath me. It was empowering to know that I had this kind of effect on him. The chemistry between us continued to increase with each new level of intimacy.

“I have few regrets in my life, and Rick Roman will never be one of them.”

“So the few years you had were worth all the pain afterward?”

“I wouldn’t trade a single one of those days for anything. He was a unique person, Clark. I learned so much from him about being gay. He taught me to be proud, to stand up to scrutiny with my head held high. Even when he was at the end of his life, his sense of self never wavered.”

“I’m starting to get a little jealous of a dead man.”

Jody turned and looked up at me. His eyes were a pool of warm taffy, shimmering in the glow of the tiki lamps we’d lit earlier in the evening. He placed a hand on my face and outlined my lips with his thumb, never releasing me from his gaze. “Don’t be jealous,” he said in a voice that I could barely hear. “You’ve got something that Rick could never have.”

“What’s that?”

“You have a future with me.”

I bent to kiss him, moaning when he opened his mouth to accept me so easily. I didn’t have to hear the words to know what he was saying, but I had to tell him how I felt. The words were fighting to come out.

“Jo-Jo.”

“Hmm?”

“I really... care... for you.”

“I care for you too.”

“Don’t give up on me, okay?”

“I’m not going anywhere, Clark.”



“Thank you.” We held on to each other, and even though I was comforted by the closeness, I was a little unsettled by the whole conversation.

“Jo?”

“What?”

“I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.” Jody laughed gently. “Shall we order some pizza?”

“No, I think I want a bowl of Frosted Flakes.”

“No!”

“Why?”

“What am I going to eat while I watch you stuff your face like Tony the Tiger?” He sat up and stared at me. “Actually, you do look like a big cat. Your eyes almost glow in the dark. How did you get such weird eyes?”

“I have no idea.”

“I keep expecting you to meow at me or drop a rat at my feet. Maybe I should just call you Kitty.”

“Shut up!”

He laughed at my outrage and said, “You’ve been calling me a dog’s name for weeks now. I think I have the right to call you whatever I want.”

“But Kitty sounds so....”

“Gay?” Jody said, his smile reaching from ear to ear.

I nodded my head, trying to keep the smile off my face.

“Okay, let’s make it manlier. How about Kit?”

“Kit is good.”

“Okay, it’s official. Jo-Jo and Kit. We’re going to need to register with the American Kennel Club.”

“You’re nuts!”

“Crazy about you,” he whispered.

“Let’s go out.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. He seemed to be taken aback by my request. I’d been reluctant to be seen in public with him, but tonight, for some reason I didn’t give a damn.

“Yeah, what the fuck! Nikki’s already informed my mother about you! Why the hell does it matter now? Apparently, anyone can look you up on the Internet and get answers.”

“Kit, listen to what you’re saying. Anyone can find out about me, but not about you!”

“So?”

“So, your mother’s right in a sense. If you’re seen with me enough times, people will wonder.”

“Fuck ’em!”

Jody looked at me with a raised eyebrow. “Fuck ’em?”

“You heard me.”

“Are you planning on coming out if someone confronts you?”

“Let’s cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“Your bravura is admirable, my beautiful Kit, but it’s not realistic. If your father were to walk into this house right now, you’d deny me without a second thought.”

“You don’t have a lot of faith in me, do you?”

“I’m older and a lot more cynical.”

“Why? You’ve had it easy with your coming out. Your parents accepted who you are without any problem. What’s turned you into such a cynic?”

“I’m a trauma doctor, Clark. I’ve seen more cases of love turned to hate than you care to know about.”

“That’s just fucked up.”

“It is.” Jody stood up and grabbed the blanket, pulling me along with it. “Come on; let’s go and pick up some greasy Chinese food.”

“Yeah, the garlic noodles with the hot peppers.”

“We’re going to stink,” Jody announced. He bent down and kissed me on the lips, taking his time with it, sweeping his tongue around my mouth possessively.

“What was that for?” I asked, breaking away reluctantly. “Not that you need a reason.”

“That was for being so gorgeous and for making me happy.”

I RAN into Nikki the next day outside of Starbucks. She greeted me like a long-lost friend, completely ignoring what had happened the last time we were together. I had no intention of being as kind or as forgiving.

“Thanks a lot!” I spat out.

“What are you talking about, Clark?”

“Your bullshit phone call to my mom. Why don’t you mind your own business?”

“You are my business!”

“I’ve never been your business; I thought we’d already established that.”

“I just wanted your parents to be aware of certain facts.”

“Whatever Jody Williams is or isn’t has nothing to do with my parents, or you for that matter.”

“If your coach or the other guys were to find out you’re seeing a queer on a regular basis, they’d laugh you off the team.”

“He’s a good teacher, and I expect to pass my class because of him. Why is his personal life so important to you?”

“I don’t want his reputation to tarnish yours in any way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Dr. Williams is quite famous. Why don’t you try to read all about him on Google? I got all kinds of info on him.”

I stood there looking down at her and saw something I’d never seen before. She was acting like a betrayed wife, getting all possessive and hostile, something she’d never done in the past. It was creepy in a way.

The easygoing friend who went along with my every decision seemed to have disappeared. Was she acting this way because she sensed a real threat for the first time? In the past, I'd never given a passing glance at any of the women who'd thrown themselves at me, so her position as my number one stalker was pretty secure. Jody's appearance in my life had knocked her out of first place, and she could sense this somehow. It was some female instinct thing, but she was dead-on in her assessment.

"So he had a big-shot boyfriend who died. Who gives a shit?"

"Oh, he told you?"

"You were the one who started all this. We wouldn't have talked about it if you hadn't picked up the phone and called my mom. What were you trying to do? Get my dad all riled up so he'd put on his Klan outfit, and come and beat up the queer who's bothering me?"

"No!"

"What then? Did you think anything good would come from that phone call?"

Her tears started to flow, and normally, I would have stopped and taken her in my arms. Her crying had always worked in the past, but I was too pissed to be affected. I was glad she was crying!

"Nik, you need to stay out of my life! Mind your own business and keep your mouth shut!"

"Don't you care about my feelings at all?" she whined.

I paused and took a deep breath, trying to get the anger under control. It was increasingly harder to maintain any kind of civility around her. She was starting to get under my skin like the worst splinter, but I realized that I had to play nice or this would all blow up in my face.

"Nikki, I do care about your feelings. I've already told you that I care very much, but not in the way that you want."

She reached out to me, and I stepped back, away from her touch. "Let me say this again, so it's clear and there's no misunderstanding. I do not love you; this whole Barbie loves Ken idea of yours is never going to happen. Put your dreams away and move on, please!"

"Are you in love with him?" she asked, her face twisting in shock.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

“You’re acting like you are! You’re gay, aren’t you? All this time I thought it was because you had commitment issues, when the reality is you don’t love me because I don’t have a cock!”

“You’re out of line, Nikki! I’m so done with this conversation.”

“Clark... please, I’m sorry!” She reached out again, and I shrugged her off. I turned and left her standing on the sidewalk. I was pissed! I could have cheerfully wrung her neck for what she’d just said, but the truth of her words had slapped me across the face like a wet rag. I was doing exactly what Jody said I would do. I was denying our relationship. How did I think that I’d be able to stand up to my father and the rest of society when I couldn’t even tell Nikki?

It was six o’clock and Jody was getting ready to go home. He’d just received a call from Clark telling him that he’d passed the English class. He sounded so proud of himself and so happy, it made Jody smile into the phone just listening to him.

“Can we go out to celebrate?” Clark asked, as if Jody needed an excuse. He was dying to go out in public and show the world that they were lovers. Clark was the one who was always so reluctant.

“I’ll call Chez Panisse.”

“You think we’ll get in on such short notice?”

“I’ve been a customer for years, Kit. They’ll get me in.”

“Okay. Meet you at your house?”

“Yeah.... Give me about half an hour.”

Jody pocketed his cell phone and made his way out to the parking lot. He had a reserved spot with his name on a sign. When he got to his car, he stopped moving. He could feel his heart rate accelerating and his breathing starting to speed up, a precursor to a well-deserved panic attack. He started to shiver uncontrollably, despite the temperate climate around him.

All four of his tires were flat, and the word “queer” was spray-painted in blood-red across the trunk of his car.

## CHAPTER 17

JODY couldn't stop shaking. He'd seen this kind of reaction before, but it had always been someone else who was the victim.

Growing up in a hate-free environment had its disadvantages. He'd become complacent, forgetting that there were people out there who still considered homosexuals to be deviants. Moving to the Bay Area had put him in another comfort zone altogether. People hardly looked twice when two men had their arms around each other or kissed in public. And yet, here he stood, in the parking lot of his workplace, staring at his trashed car. He felt violated and absolutely terrified!

He dialed 911 and asked to be connected to the police department. After giving all the particulars, they told him to call someone to set up a tow, but to stay on the premises until the police officer arrived. He hung up and dialed the auto club, sighing into the phone when they told him that it would be at least forty minutes. The last call he made was to Clark, deciding at the last minute to keep the news of his car to himself. The last thing he needed was an out-of-control football player.

"Kit."

"Who?"

"Clark, it's me."

"Oh, hey! I forgot the whole Kit thing."

"It's okay, babe. I'm tied up and won't get out of here for another hour. Do you still want to meet for dinner?"

"Don't you think this is worth celebrating?"

"Of course it is," Jody replied, determined to keep the worry out of his voice. "Can I meet you at eight? That will give me a good hour to get all my stuff in order."

"That's fine. Shall I meet you at Chez Panisse?"

"Yes, I already made the reservation."

"Okay."

Jody disconnected just as the police car was pulling into the parking lot.

"Well, well... what do we have here?"

"Officer."

"Is this your car?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see who did this?"

"No."

"You gay?"

"Yes."

"Huh," the cop said, shaking his head. "Don't these people know what year it is? I mean, shit, man... all they got to do is turn on the TV. *Will and Grace* reruns are on every night."

Jody couldn't help but laugh. The policeman's wry sense of humor put him at ease instantly.

"What's your name, sir?" the cop said, pulling out a small notebook and writing furiously.

"Jody Williams. I'm a doctor at this hospital."

"You know anyone who might want to hurt you?"

"No, sir."

"Of course not. You realize that trying to figure out who's involved in this incident is close to impossible."

“I understand. I’m just reporting it for insurance purposes.”

“Yup. Those fancy Michelins are gonna set you back a grand,” the cop said, making a circle around the car and shaking his head.

*More like two grand*, Jody thought, *but who’s counting?*

“Well, I’ll put in a report for you, but I really wouldn’t get my hopes up.”

Jody reached for the police report and signed it just as the tow truck pulled up.

“I’ll see you later, Doc. And good luck with the new paint job.”

“Yeah, right.” He’d finally stopped shaking, but he was worn out from the rush of adrenaline. He needed a good stiff drink to settle his nerves.

He had his car towed to a body shop that had done some work for him in the past, and then he called for a cab to drive him to Shattuck Avenue to meet Clark at the restaurant.

Clark was already seated when he got there; a bottle of white wine was chilling in a silver container off to the side of the table. The waiter came and poured them both glasses of the Pinot Grigio, and Jody lifted his glass to toast Clark.

“To the hunkiest student at Cal Berkeley.”

“And the sexiest doctor at Alta Bates.”

Clark reached across the table and gave his hand a squeeze. Jody was surprised by the public gesture. He looked around to see if anyone had noticed and was relieved that most of the people in the room were engrossed in themselves and their food. Nonetheless, he pulled his hand back gently.

“What grade did you get on the final?”

“I got a B.”

“That’s it then? No more dreaded English classes?”

“I’m done with it.”

“I’m glad.” He could see the relief so clearly on Clark’s face, the pride in his accomplishment easily discernible. “You really are much smarter than you think.”



“You’re just saying that to get on my good side,” Clark grinned.

“I’m saying it because it’s the truth. There is much more to you than football. You know that, don’t you?”

“I know it, but no one else seems to think so. I’ve always wondered what I’d do if I couldn’t play.”

“Have you ever explored other possibilities?”

“I really like coaching kids. They’re enthusiastic and filled with so much joy for the sport. You lose that as you get older and factor in standings, money, and fame.”

“Isn’t that the degree you’re aiming for?”

“Yeah. Phys ed. I just never thought I’d actually use it.”

“Why not?”

“Jo, I’ve been told for years that I’m going to play professional football. It’s not something I ever questioned.”

“If you woke up one morning and there was nothing or no one to tell you how to live your life, would you still pick football?”

“It’s hard to answer that right now. I’m at the top of my game and enjoying it. Ask me that when I’m having an off day and our scores suck.”

Jody smiled. “That wouldn’t be fair though. Your decision would be based on a whim, a bad mood. I’m asking you now, while you’re at the top, if you were given a choice, would you play ball?”

“I think so, at least for a year or two. I’d like to experience playing against the big leagues, see if I’m good enough to compete with those guys. Then I’d like to do something else.”

“You can be whatever you want to be, Kit. Your choices are endless, so don’t limit yourself to two.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, okay?”

“Okay.”

The rest of the evening was a pleasant blur for Jody. He had too much to drink and not enough food, but the incident with his car kept haunting him, so he kept washing it away with the excellent white wine.

“I’m going to have to drive you home.”

“I know,” Jody replied with a goofy grin. “That’s why I took a cab.”

“You did? Where’s your car?”

“Left it at work.”

“Good thing. Did you have a bad day?” Clark asked, surprised to hear that Jody had left his car.

“Same old shit, different day.”

“That bad, huh?”

Jody shrugged.

“Let’s go home, Jo. I’ll make it all better.”

Jody smiled suggestively and leaned forward. “Is that a promise?”

“You bet.”

Jody put his hand up and signaled the waiter.

I WAS lying in bed with a sated Jody by my side. “I’m getting better and better at this, aren’t I?”

“You’re a good student,” Jody slurred, barely able to keep his eyes open. “I think you’ve just graduated Blow Job 101.”

“You’re so fucking drunk.”

“I know. Sorry, Kit.”

I wondered what had set him off. Jody was always in control, and it never occurred to me that a day on the job could affect him so much. There must have been one hell of an accident to cause this much grief.

I heard the gentle snoring coming from his side, and I stood up and made my way outside. I wasn’t sleepy yet. Probably too wound up from all the excitement this morning. Seeing that passing grade was as good as hearing I’d been chosen most valuable player of the year. It was better, actually, since I’d accomplished something much harder than playing football.

I turned on the TV and threw myself on the couch. It was the usual late-night crap, and I surfed the channels trying to find something good, finally settling on *The Tonight Show*.

Jay was interviewing a couple of the actors who had starred in that cable show about the gay guys. I listened with half an ear, wondering if they were really gay or not. I also wondered how long I was going to keep up with my charade.

It was becoming increasingly obvious to me that I was crazy in love. I assumed that the feelings were reciprocated, but since neither one of us was willing to make the verbal commitment, I could only hope. Which brought me back to square one. What do I do about it? I could only pretend for so long. Already, it was getting harder and harder to leave him at night or early in the morning to go back to my place. Eventually, we would have to talk about me moving or something.

How long could I keep on pretending that we were just friends? If Nikki suspected, so would my family, and eventually the team would get wind of this and I'd have to confront them, make some kind of decision. Was I willing to jeopardize my entire future? See the look of disappointment in my dad's eyes when I said the word "gay"? He'd probably never talk to me again, and I could only imagine what the press would make of this.

Christmas was a week away. I couldn't bear the thought of Jody being gone for ten days. He'd asked me to come with him, meet his family in Chicago. At first I'd balked at the idea, but now, I realized it might be a good thing. I would be far away from the constant pressure in a part of the country I'd never seen before. It was already snowing out there. That alone was inducement enough. Having a white Christmas had always seemed like a fairy tale to me, something in the picture books that I'd never experienced.

I decided to take him up on the offer. I'd go to Folsom in the next couple days, bring the presents, and make my excuses to the family. It would be the first time I'd ever been away at Christmas, but I didn't care. I had to be with him.

THE drive out to Folsom had been uneventful, which was a good thing, because I was apprehensive enough. I didn't want to subject Jody to any backlash or unpleasantness from the Stevens clan. He didn't deserve it or need it, so I insisted on doing this by myself.

I pulled up to the driveway and parked in my old spot. I made my way into the house with an armful of gifts, went into the living room, and dumped them on the floor underneath the Christmas tree.

The house smelled really good, the fresh pine scent always a precursor to the holiday season. Mom had probably made cookies last night because that smell was also prevalent.

"Clark! When did you get in?"

My mom came into the living room, staring at me like I had two heads.

"I just got here." She continued to stare so I went over and gave her a big hug.

"Why are you here? You're not due home for another few days."

"Just thought I'd bring your gifts and tell you and Dad that I'm going away for Christmas. I won't be home this year."

She was shocked. The expression on her face surely said it all.

"Where are you going?"

"To Chicago."

"With him?"

"Yes."

She stepped back, acting as if I'd slapped her. "No," she said, the horror in her eyes saddening me.

"Come on, Mom. Don't get all wigged out."

"You can't go with him, Clark. What will people say?"

"What people?"

"Your father, for one thing. And your brothers!"

"Do they know he's gay?"

“Of course not! You think I’m crazy? If I told them he was gay, your father would have driven to Berkeley and dragged your ass out of that apartment.”

“And done what, Mom? Throw me over his knee and spank me? I’m not a child anymore. He can’t make me do anything I don’t want to do.”

“You owe him, Clark.”

“Owe him?”

“Yes. After everything he’s gone through, *we’ve* gone through to ensure that you have this career, you owe it to us to succeed.”

“Mom, I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“Believe it! You will not jeopardize an NFL career by associating with a known homosexual.”

“What if I told you I was a homo as well?”

“Don’t be disrespectful by even mentioning that in this house. You and I both know that you’re not!”

“Right,” I said, replying like a robot, the word automatically coming out of my mouth. I was too shocked by her attitude to say anything else. If she was reacting this way, I could only imagine how much worse it would be with my dad.

“I’m leaving, Mom. Say Merry Christmas to everyone. I’ll call you and Dad when I get back from Chicago.”

“Clark, please!” She had this desperate look in her eyes, but I couldn’t feel sorry for her. I was too shocked and too hurt. I’d hoped to find an ally, someone who would help me through this, and all I ended up with was one more person I’d have to convince. Not exactly what I expected.

## CHAPTER 18

THERE was snow everywhere! It was a glorious sight and one I'd been looking forward to for days. Leaving Berkeley had been easy once I'd gotten over the hurdle in Folsom. My dad never called to try and stop me, so I assumed that Mom had chosen not to share the fact that Jody was gay. Her reasons were pretty obvious, and I was grateful for the opportunity to go on this trip without any interference on his part.

Jody's mother and father embraced me as heartily as if I were a child of their own. I was comfortable instantly.

"We're so happy you could come," his father stated, taking my coat and hanging it in the closet near the front door. He was much older than my dad, but I'd expected that, remembering our conversation from months back when Jody first told me that this was his dad's second marriage. He was slim and erect for a man in his late seventies. He still had some hair on his head, although it was as white as the snow on the lawn. He was strong enough to lift my duffel and carry it down to the basement, which was set up like a separate apartment, complete with a kitchen.

"Dad, this turned out really nice," Jody said, looking around and admiring the renovation.

"Your father has been working on this nonstop," Margaret Williams gushed, eagerly showing off her husband's handiwork.

“He did this all by himself?” I was shocked that someone his age could take on such a task, much less finish it. It looked like a professional job.

“My dad is a wonder with the saw. He has hands of gold,” Jody said, smiling at his father.

“So do you, Son, except you’ve chosen to use your talents in the medical field.” He embraced Jody and just stood there, holding him close. “I’m so glad you’re home,” he said, beaming from ear to ear. “We both are. Isn’t that right, Marge?”

“Oh, yes,” she replied. “And we’re so glad you’ve come with him, Clark. Jody has never brought anyone home for Christmas.”

“Really?” I was surprised and flattered.

“We’ll leave you two to get settled. Come upstairs whenever you’re ready. Dinner is at seven,” Marge said sweetly. “I hope you like pot roast, Clark?”

“You’ll find that I eat almost anything, Mrs. Williams.”

“Please, call me Marge.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“And you can call me Steve,” the septuagenarian said easily, treating me like someone special in Jody’s life and not some guy he’d picked up in California. I was more impressed by the minute.

“Thank you. I’m very grateful to you both for having me.”

“We are grateful that you are making our boy smile again. It’s been a long time since we’ve seen that,” Steve said. “Not since Rick.”

“Dad,” Jody said gently, shaking his head.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Shouldn’t I have mentioned that name?”

“It’s okay, Dad. Clark knows.”

“Then you know how long it’s been since I’ve seen that beautiful smile. I thought it disappeared forever,” Marge said, looking at Jody lovingly.

“Okay, you two need to go and let us unpack. We’ll be up soon,” Jody said, taking both his parents by their hands and moving them toward the stairs. “Out you go,” he joked, pushing them both gently.

“They’re wonderful,” I said, taking Jody in my arms and holding him against me. “Now I know why you’re so sweet.”

“Shut up and kiss me. It’s been hours.”

I did as he asked, pressing my mouth on his. It started out slow and easy, but rapidly turned to heat, the chemistry between us ever-powerful.

“Do we have time for a quickie?”

“Yes,” Jody responded. He played me like a piano, knowing which part of my body would respond to his touch. He was a master at bringing forth the sounds that were music to his ears. He grazed my engorged cock with a feather-light touch. “Have you been saving this for me?” he whispered, every nerve ending in my body heightened by his presence.

“Jesus...”

“Kit,” he moaned, running his tongue around my lips. He slid my zipper down and slipped his hand easily inside my pants, rubbing my cock outside my briefs, feeling the wet spot that seeped through the cloth.

“Please,” I begged, pushing him down on his knees. I watched as he took me in his mouth, and I wondered how I’d ever lived without this. He milked me, making short change of my boner. I grunted and sighed, leaning against the wall as he did all kinds of wonderful things. I knew I wasn’t going to last very long. I’d been on the verge of an orgasm for hours, wanting to jump his bones on the plane and being denied. We had that one kiss, right after takeoff while the cabin was darkened, and he’d fondled me and pulled his hand back as soon as the lights came back on. I’d been semi-hard since then.

“Jo-Jo.” He pulled me closer when he heard me call his pet name, squeezing my thighs, moaning and pushing my cock even farther down his throat. I felt the orgasm in waves, lapping at me like his soft tongue, a sweet calm that enveloped me from head to toe even as I shot my load down his throat. He never paused for a second, swallowing every last drop of me.

“God....” It was the only word I was able to come up with, and it seemed so inadequate.

I pulled him off the floor and kissed him, tasting myself on his tongue. I toed off my shoes and pushed my pants off. They were halfway



down my thighs, and I wanted them off me so that I could move. I picked him up easily and carried him to the bed. We lay side by side, kissing nonstop. I couldn't seem to get enough of him, and he sensed this somehow, never pulling away, taking his time with me.

I struggled with his shirt, his belt, his pants, pulling them off one by one. I practically tore my shirt off, needing to feel bare skin. Finally when there were no more barriers, I pushed him on his back, and I started trailing wet kisses down his torso, ending at his groin. I practically whimpered when I took him in my mouth, reveling in his taste, loving the feel of him filling me, his moans encouraging my feeble attempts to bring him to heights he routinely brought me. I loved how he lifted his hips for me, how his hands gripped my head, how he kept calling my name, saying "Kit" softly, like he would a prayer. He'd become my entire universe, this gentle man who demanded so little, and I was overcome by my feelings.

He tried to pull away. He still worried that I'd be put off by his taste, but I held on tight, swallowing all of him as he came in a flood of sweetness, his body tensing a second before the rush and then slowly softening in my mouth. He lay spent as I lapped at him, cleaning up the residue around his cock and his balls, licking at him gently.

"My Kit," I heard him say even as I moved up his body and buried my face in his neck. We lay there for what seemed like hours but was probably only minutes, listening to each other's hearts beat, finally settled, for the moment at least. I knew this was an appetizer that would be continued after dinner.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"Don't ever thank me for that. I love doing it."

"How did I ever live without you?" Jody mused.

I answered him with another deep kiss, hoping it would show him what he meant to me. The thought of living without him was now unbearable. There was no way in hell I'd give this up.

THE next day was spent touring downtown Chicago. Jody took us to Marshall Field's for a few hours of shopping, everyone going their

separate ways and meeting again after an hour and a half, arms overflowing with beautifully wrapped packages. We left together and walked over to the Kris Kindle market at Daly Plaza where we stuffed our faces with the traditional German meal of bratwurst, sauerkraut, and draft beer.

It was a perfect winter day. The air was brisk, but there was no wind for once, so it was tolerable. The sun was shining, and the streets were packed with people scurrying around doing last-minute Christmas shopping. I was wearing a Chicago Bears jacket; a big, old, downy thing that kept me warm and incognito. My Cal jacket was hanging in our closet back home. I had a hat and sunglasses on, and I was a million miles away from Berkeley. I was reasonably sure that there was no one around who would recognize me, and the freedom of being openly affectionate was intoxicating. I felt almost drunk, loving his arm in mine or his hand on my face or the quick peck on the cheek. His mom and dad thought nothing of it, and I felt at ease for the first time in months.

We spent the rest of the day walking up and down the Magnificent Mile, popping in and out of stores, pigging out on Garrett popcorn. I felt like a kid, the first time I tried the mix of cheesy popcorn interspersed with caramel. It was decadent, and I kept shoving handfuls in my mouth.

“You’re a sugar junkie,” Jody teased.

“Hey, there’s protein in this.”

“How do you figure?”

“The cheese?”

“Is negligible. You’re going to be on a sugar high for hours, bouncing off the ceiling.”

“The better to keep me up all night,” I whispered.

He grinned at me and shook his head, moving off in the opposite direction, but I pulled him back, grabbing his hand and yanking him up to me. We were standing in front of the Rock ‘n Roll McDonald’s on LaSalle Street with people all around us, and I didn’t give a shit! I kissed him as if we were the only ones there.

JODY sat on the floor of his parents' living room with packages all around him. There was wrapping paper everywhere. No matter how quickly Clark scooped up the debris and stuffed it into the big, black garbage bag, the piles of colored paper kept on growing.

His parents sat on the sofa, enjoying the sight of their grown son opening presents like a little boy, exclaiming with delight after each revelation. Clark was just as excited, stunned when he saw the amount of boxes that had his name on them.

"Jody, did you see this?" Clark asked him, the look of surprise clearly evident on his face. He held up the soft leather jacket that his parents had purchased. It was the same as the one they'd bought for him.

Jody was touched that his parents had gone to all the trouble for Clark. They were obviously fond of the man and wanted him to feel at home. Steve had even purchased a book on the history of sports in the city of Chicago, a veritable who's who of the sporting world in this Midwestern town. They teased Clark and told him he may as well read up on it in case he got drafted by the Bears.

Dinner that night was their traditional standing rib roast with popovers, mashed potatoes, and a green bean casserole. Marge had even made a platter of macaroni and cheese from scratch; a heart attack waiting to happen, Jody teased, digging into one of his favorite comfort foods. Dessert was a three-layer chocolate cake that tasted every bit as good as it looked.

Everyone sat at the table groaning. After a few minutes, Clark stood and started to gather the dishes. Marge attempted to get up and help, but he firmly pushed her back down on her chair and said, "No, the cook never cleans up at our house. Now is your chance to just sit and enjoy your tea. Jody and I will do the dishes."

"Thank you, sweetheart," Marge replied, grateful for the gesture.

They finished cleaning up in no time and went back into the living room to sit in front of the fire and have after-dinner drinks. Jody sipped at his Courvoisier while Clark nursed his. It wasn't one of his favorites, he'd said when handed the drink, but he accepted it anyway.

Finally, around ten-thirty, Jody's parents made their departure. They'd had a long and happy day, and it was time for them both to rest.

Jody and Clark stayed and sat in front of the fireplace, watching the flames and listening to the crackling and hissing of the sap as it was released. There was soft music playing in the background, traditional Christmas carols that Marge had put on earlier.

Jody stood and pulled a small box that he'd hidden behind one of the branches of the Christmas tree. "I saved this for last," he said, handing over the gift.

"Why'd you go and do that? You know we already exchanged gifts."

"I know, but I wanted to give you something special," he said. "A little something that would remind you of me."

Jody watched as Clark ripped at the paper, and looked in wonder at the contents of the box. He pulled out the necklace that had the small charm in the shape of a dog with the words "Jo-Jo" written on one side and the date on the other. It was a manly-looking necklace, similar to a soldier's dog tag, except it was made of eighteen-carat gold.

"It's beautiful," Clark said gently, his eyes shimmering and looking more jewel-like than ever. "Do you have one?"

Jody reached inside his shirt and pulled out his matching necklace to show Clark. His charm, in the shape of a cat, was also engraved, the word "Kit" clearly evident.

"Thank you," Clark whispered, bending forward and kissing Jody deeply. He stayed close to Jody, pressing his forehead against him. He let out a deep sigh and said, "Jo-Jo?"

"What?"

"I love you."

Jody pushed him away so he could look in Clark's eyes. The tears that were hovering earlier finally made their appearance, pushing out of his eyes and falling in slow drops down the beautiful face that was clearly apprehensive about what he'd just said.

"Kit, I've loved you almost as long as I've known you."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't want to scare you." Jody's face was now wet as well, his tears joining Clark's as the emotion overwhelmed him. "I've been in

love with you for months,” he whispered, taking Clark’s hand and pressing his mouth to it. “You are everything to me.”

“You’ve changed my life, Jo,” Clark said, pulling Jody toward him and encircling him with strong arms. “I’ll never be the same person.”

“I hope that you never have cause to regret it.”

“I love you, Jo. How could I possibly regret it?”

## CHAPTER 19

AS soon as the plane touched down in Oakland, we were off and running.

We took a cab from the airport because Jody's car was still at the shop. I dropped him off at his place, and then the cab headed toward the Cal campus and my apartment. There was the usual mess I had to deal with, the accumulated mail and listening to messages on the answering machine. Nothing earth-shattering had occurred in my absence, even though the world as I knew it had shifted drastically. Now that I'd finally said the words, I knew that I'd have to deal with the consequences and face my parents first and my team second.

I picked up the phone and called home, determined to get this over with. Jason picked up on the second ring.

"Hey, bro! What's doing?"

"Clark! When'd you get back?"

"I just did. Who's at home?"

"Mom."

"What are you doing there?"

"I'm taking down the bloody tree."

"You drew the short straw, huh?"

“Yup, I’m so blessed.”

I laughed, imagining the look on Jason’s face when he found out he had the dreaded task of taking down the Christmas tree and disposing of it.

“Would you get Mom on the phone, please?”

“Sure,” he answered, putting the phone down. I waited a few minutes and, finally, my mother picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi.” It was obvious from her tone that she was still pissed about my leaving.

“I’m back.”

“That’s nice. Did you have fun?”

“It was great.”

“I’m glad.”

“Can I come out there and talk to you and Dad?”

“What about?” she asked, the tone of her voice shifting quickly.

“About me and Jody,” I answered, practically holding my breath.

“No,” she whispered, the world escaping from her lips unconsciously. “What are you planning on telling him?”

“I’d rather do it once, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, God! You’re going to tell him you’re gay?”

“Mom, I said I’d rather do this in person.”

“You can’t do this, Clark!”

“Why?”

“He’ll blame me! He already blames me for the ADD. If you tell him you’re gay, he’ll say that he’s been right all along. That I babied you more than I should have!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

She started to cry, barely able to get the words out of her mouth. I stood there and held the phone so tightly my hand was going numb. I

couldn't believe what I was hearing. I decided to try and change tactic, see if I couldn't put her in a better place.

"Was he upset that I left for Chicago?"

"He was surprised. He couldn't figure out why you'd want to be away from your family at Christmas."

"But he wasn't angry?"

"No, of course not! But he will be if I tell him what's really going on."

"Mom, you need to calm down. This is my life we're talking about, and I have to do it my way."

"I beg to disagree! What you do with your life will affect mine! I've put up with his verbal abuse for years, every time you'd bring home a failing grade. Somehow your disability became my fault. Whenever he'd see us going over your schoolwork, he'd tell me I was turning you into a big baby and that I'd better watch it. No son of his was going to grow up a mama's boy!"

I was so stunned I couldn't even venture a reply.

"And now you are not only going to confirm the fact that you are a mama's boy, you're going one worse. You're a fucking queer!"

She spat that sentence out like vomit! She may as well have slapped me in the face, it hurt that much. I had never heard my mother use a cuss word, and for her to drop it so easily in conjunction with the word *queer* was as devastating as a physical slap.

"I'm hanging up now."

"Don't!"

"I can't talk right now. Bye, Mom."

I put the phone down and then took it off the hook. I had no intention of speaking to her again. Not until she apologized. I wiped the tears off my face, not even realizing that they had been pouring out of my eyes. I sat down on the sofa and then curled up into a ball, wanting to just make it all go away. How could this be happening? What kind of people would reject their own child because he didn't conform to their idea of perfect?



JODY was sorting through his mail when his phone rang. He picked up on the first ring, expecting Clark on the other end. Instead, he heard a female voice.

“Dr. Williams?”

“This is he.”

“It’s Mary Stevens.”

“Oh, hello.”

“Stay away from him!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Stay away from Clark, or you’ll regret it. Last time, it was your car. The next time, it’ll be you!”

“Mrs. Stevens... we need to talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about! You will destroy him and this family in the process. Stay the fuck away!”

She hung up, and Jody stood there, staring at the phone in shock. He couldn’t believe what she’d just said. Admitting to the vandalism was bad enough, but threatening him was another thing altogether.

He picked up his phone and hit Lil’s number on speed dial.

“Hi, sweetie! When did you get back?” Lil was his usual, perky self; a breath of fresh air in a day that was rapidly turning to shit.

“Hey! I need to talk to you,” Jody said seriously.

Lil picked up on Jody’s tone instantly and shifted to his business voice. “What’s the matter?”

Jody told him briefly what was going on. He tried to keep the emotion out of his voice, but forgot who he was talking to. Lil knew exactly what was going through Jody’s mind. The fear was very obvious to his best friend.

“I’ll be right over,” Lil said, even though right over meant a forty-five-minute drive.

“Thank you.”

“Sure thing, sweetie. Don’t move from that spot.”

“I won’t.”

Jody opened the door of the refrigerator and saw that there were a couple of Coronas left over from before they’d left town. He pulled one out and drank half the contents in one gulp. He made his way out to the deck, where he sat for a little bit even though it was chilly and he was only in a T-shirt. The cold air didn’t bother him as much as everything else that was going on with Clark’s family. What kind of woman would say such things to a man she didn’t even know?

Eventually the cold penetrated the fog in his brain. He was shivering uncontrollably so he went back into the house to grab a sweatshirt. He sat on the bed and tried to decide whether he should tell Clark. He was sorry now that he’d never told him about the car. How was he going to tell him what had just happened? The fact that Mary had verbally threatened him was hard enough to believe, and he’d heard it with his own ears. He couldn’t imagine how Clark would react. He wouldn’t be surprised if Clark thought he was lying. The whole situation was hard to comprehend.

He lay on the bed and waited for Lil to bang on the door. Finally, he heard the unmistakable sounds of a car struggling up the driveway. He made his way out to the front door and stood there in silence, waiting for Lil to get out of the car. Lil walked up the pathway and immediately took him in his arms and held him tightly. “I’m here.”

“Thank God.”

“What is it, Jodes?”

“He loves me,” Jody answered, “but it’s about to ruin his life.”

IT must have been six in the evening by the time I got off the sofa and started to move around again. My tears had all dried up, but the ache in my heart was now a permanent thing. I had to go and be with Jody. I needed to feel his arms around me, to hear his voice reassuring me that this would all work out. His was the voice of reason, the only thing that made any sense. I grabbed my keys off the kitchen counter and left the apartment.

When I got to Jody's house, there was an unfamiliar car in the driveway. Maybe it was the rental. It was a newer vehicle, an Audi, with San Francisco plates. I got to the front door and knocked, even though I had a house key. I wasn't sure who was inside so I thought it best to let him answer.

The door opened, and Lil stood there, looking unusually conservative. He was dressed in business attire, his hair slicked back and his manner grave. I almost didn't recognize him.

"Hey, Lil. Can I come in?"

"Of course." Lil moved aside, and I followed him into the house. We went into the living room, and I saw Jody sitting on the sofa. His face lit up as soon as he saw me, and I went up to him and kissed him on the lips. I didn't really care that I had an audience. I just needed to kiss my man.

"You okay?" I asked, sensing that something was wrong. What was Lil doing here on a weekday anyhow?

"I'm fine, now that you're here."

I looked at Lil, who was watching us from the other side of the room. His facial expression was serious, but he seemed to be content with my behavior so far. There were no snide remarks coming out of his mouth.

"Are you hungry?" Jody asked, pushing my hair away from my forehead. It had grown drastically since the end of football season, and I kind of liked having it this length for a change, except when it got in my eyes.

"For you," I whispered into his ear. "How long is he going to be here?"

Jody looked at me sadly and said, "Kit, we need to talk."

He looked devastated, like someone had just died or something. I felt this terrible sense of foreboding. Fear wrapped itself around me like cold and clammy hands. I shivered all of a sudden, thinking of the old adage about people walking on my grave.

Jody held my hand and pulled me down on the sofa beside him. Lil came over and sat on the chair opposite the coffee table, and he and I

both listened as Jody started to talk. He told us about the car being vandalized just before our trip, and then he talked about my mother's phone call. When he finished, he looked at me to see how I'd react.

"I'm so sorry," I said, knowing how lame it sounded.

"Clark, it's not your fault."

"Of course it is! It's not your mother that's gone off her rocker."

"Look, you guys," Lil interjected. "This isn't just about Clark's mother."

"He's right," I seconded. "Wait until my father hears; then the shit will really hit the fan."

"Kit," Jody said, looking at me with concern. "We can turn this around if you want to."

"No! I'm standing by you!"

Lil raised an eyebrow and said, "My, my... I'm really impressed."

"Oh, fuck off, Lil." I couldn't deal with any of his crap today.

"Sorry."

"Do you hate me?" I asked Jody, pulling him up against me.

"Clark, if I loved you any more my heart would explode."

"You guys are like fucking Romeo and Juliet," Lil said, rolling his eyes and crossing his legs dramatically.

"Shut up, Lil," we both said at the same time.

Lil stood up and started to pace. "I think you should call the police and report this. It's a threat against your physical person and should go on record."

"I think not," Jody said emphatically.

"Don't ever say that I didn't warn you."

"Lil, I asked you here for support. If I wanted legal advice, I would have called a lawyer."

"Sweetie, I love you to death. You're my BFF, and I want nothing but the best for you, and you too," Lil threw out that last bit, looking in my direction. "But the long and the short of it is that this is not just a

lifestyle change. We are talking about an NFL career and millions of dollars. Am I not correct, Clark?”

“Yes.”

“If the scouts find out he’s gay, it’s all over but the shouting. His mother knows this, and his father will go insane when he finds out about you two. There is nothing in the world that will make this get better.”

“What if I stay in the closet?”

“You’re certainly welcome to do that. There are hundreds of athletes that do, but unfortunately, your mother is now involved. And so is your ex-girlfriend, from what I understand.”

“I can tell them it’s all a lie. I can make this go away.”

“Will you sleep with her again to make it all better?” Jody asked, defeated.

“Jo.”

“Don’t, Clark. I need time to process this.” He stood and walked away from me, going over to the picture window and leaning against it.

I looked at Lil and silently begged him to leave us alone. He nodded his head and stood up. “Call me later,” he whispered in my ear, squeezing my hand. “I know you love him. You’ll do the right thing.”

“I hope so,” I said, not really sure that I could.

I went up to Jody as soon as I heard the door slam and the car starting up. I reached for him, pulling his back up against my chest, and I leaned down and nuzzled his neck. “I love you,” I said forcefully, reassuring him that despite everything, that hadn’t changed.

He sighed and turned around, wrapping his arms around my neck. “I love you too, Kit.”

“I know, Jo. I’m not sure what to do next, but I know one thing for sure. And this I promise you.”

“What?”

“I will never sleep with Nikki again.”

“Thank you,” he said in a whisper. “That would have killed me.”

“Come to bed,” I begged.

He nodded and followed as I pulled him by the hand. We took our clothes off and climbed under the covers. I pulled him close, and we got into our favorite position, spooning against each other comfortably. There wasn't much to say, so we didn't say anything. All we could do was find comfort in our embrace and hope that it would be enough for now.

## CHAPTER 20

I WAS on my way to Folsom to speak to my mother. Jody wanted to come, begged me even, but I refused.

I was determined to keep Jody as far away from my mother's irrational behavior as possible. I couldn't understand where she was coming from, and she was someone I'd known all my life. How could I expect him to deal with her when he'd only just met her? I didn't even know what to expect myself. The woman I knew had no resemblance to the person who had been so hateful on the phone.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw just one car in the garage. Dad hadn't come home from work yet, which was for the best. I wasn't quite ready to face him.

I walked into the house via the kitchen and saw her sitting at the table.

"Clark! What are you doing here?"

I pulled out a chair and sat down. I stared at her for the longest time, trying to see some physical sign of change. She looked the same, a little older perhaps, a little more tired, but I was looking at the same sweet face I'd known all my life. Her blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail, as was her custom. The blue eyes behind the glasses were still sharp and focused. She was chewing on her lip in that nervous habit

she'd always had, and her hands were fidgeting with the napkin in front of her, folding and unfolding it repeatedly.

"I've come to see for myself."

"What?"

"How it's possible that you could make threats and vandalize a car. Jesus Christ, Mom! Have you lost your fucking mind?"

"I haven't, but apparently you have!" she rebounded, without hesitation. "Since when have you preferred men over women?"

"Look." I stumbled; shocked that she'd throw that out so easily. I expected a gradual buildup to this conversation, a lead-in of some sort. "I've been meaning to talk to you, but the opportunity has never been right."

"What the hell are you thinking, Clark? Have you always been gay?" The look of disgust in her eyes was plain to see. I may as well have been covered in slime.

"I've never acted on it."

"You know it's wrong, or you would have said something years ago! It's abnormal, against God and nature!" Her voice was creeping up, her agitation visible in the shaking hands and mottled skin.

"I've fought this for years, Mother. I can't help who I am."

"Oh yes, you can!" she screamed, standing up and leaning forward. "You will stop seeing this man, cut all ties with him. Go back to the life you've been leading. Get engaged to Nikki. Marry her!"

"No."

She sat down abruptly and burst into tears. That one word knocked her down, and she put her head in her hands and wept as if I had just told her I had cancer.

I reached across the table and tried to take her hand, but she pulled it back. "I love him, Mom."

"Oh my God," she wailed even louder. "He'll kill us."

"Jody is the kindest, gentlest man I know."

"Not him, you fool. Your father!"

"I'm sure he'll be upset, but hopefully, we'll get past this."



“How can you possibly think that? This just confirms the fact that you are so caught up in this thing that you’re not thinking straight. Do you honestly think that your father, or your brothers for that matter, will sit by and let this happen? If you do, then you have lost what little sense you have.”

“They’ll have to. I’m not leaving him.”

“You’re being completely selfish! You have no idea how much we’ve sacrificed to get you to Cal.”

“What are you talking about? I’m on a scholarship.”

“You’re on a partial scholarship, Clark. We are paying for everything else; the apartment, your books, your daily expenses. Do you think that money is just falling from the sky? We are in debt to the tune of one hundred thousand dollars, which I would have never mentioned if you hadn’t done this radical detour.”

“I’ll pay you back.”

“The pleasure of seeing you play in the NFL would have been payback enough! It’s never going to happen if you don’t drop this whole gay notion of yours!”

“It’s not a notion, Mom. It’s who I am.”

“No! The Clark I know is a man’s man. Women have thrown themselves at you for years, and you’ve responded! Don’t give me this bullshit about who you are. I know who you are! You’re a confused kid with a mental disability. I’m your mother, for God’s sake. Don’t you think I want the best for you?”

I stood. I’d heard enough. “What you want is the best for you and Dad. You couldn’t care less about me. If you had really cared, you would have let me go on Ritalin to spare me all the anxiety I’ve had to deal with in school.”

“Oh, so now that’s my fault too? I’ve been hearing that for years. Your father told me long ago that I should have stopped at four. That the runt is always defective somehow.”

“Hey, don’t sugarcoat anything, Mom! Let’s just make sure that your freak child hears it all today.”

I don't remember when the tears started. I just know that I was backhanding them as I walked out the door and started the engine of my car. I think I cried most of the way home. It felt like someone had just stuck their hands down my throat and pulled out all my innards. What I was feeling was far worse than any injury I'd ever sustained on the field.

I knew that coming out was going to be the most difficult thing I'd ever done in my life. I knew it would be an uphill battle with my team. What I never expected was this kind of intolerance from my own mother. She'd always been my biggest support at home. She was the only one who took the time to sit down and help me with my homework, fending off my brothers, running interference between my dad and my teachers. She'd always had a kind word or a hug, which is what made this all the more painful.

I picked up my phone when I got closer to home and speed-dialed Jody. He picked up on the second ring.

"Hey, you," he said gently. "How'd it go?"

"Not good," I answered, trying to keep the pain out of my voice, which was useless. He could read me like a book.

"Where are you?"

"Approaching the maze. I should be in Berkeley in about ten minutes."

"Meet me at the house."

"Don't you have to work?"

"I can get away. Meet me, please?"

"Okay."

"I'M leaving for the day. Page me if something urgent comes up."

Jody hung up on the night supervisor and grabbed his jacket. He glanced at his watch; it was almost seven in the evening. Close to the end of his shift, this was just as well. Clark sounded awful on the phone.

By the time he got home, Clark was already there. He walked in through the kitchen and saw a case of Corona sitting on the table. There were two bottles missing.

“Kit!”

“Out here.”

He made his way out to the deck and saw his lover sitting in the hot tub, a bottle of Corona in one hand and a joint in the other.

“I guess this is a lot better than putting your fist through a wall.”

“And a lot more fun,” Clark replied, grinning at him. “Get in.”

“Give me a minute.”

Jody started taking off his clothes. His gaze never left Clark, who was well on his way to a night of excess. He could see the pain in the beautiful eyes, even though the words never crossed his lips. Something terrible had happened with his mother but he didn’t seem eager to share the news.

“Are you planning on telling me what happened?”

“Not right now. Let’s just get fucked up. Then you can show me more ways to make you crazy in bed.”

Jody reached over, took the joint from Clark’s hand and inhaled deeply, holding it in his lungs. He exhaled and leaned back on the headrest, settling in for a long night.

Several beers later, they had moved into the bedroom. Clark was starting to grope Jody in the water, and Jody was more than ready to respond; however, he insisted on doing it in bed and not the hot tub.

“Do guys sixty-nine?”

“Of course,” Jody replied, enjoying the weight of Clark’s body resting on him. They were laying chest-to-chest, cock-to-cock.

Clark rolled them over, now under Jody. “I want to be on the bottom,” he said.

“Do you?” Jody answered, smiling widely. He couldn’t get over Clark’s sense of adventure in this new world of gay sex. It pleased him immensely to know how much pleasure he was getting from this aspect of their relationship. He turned around and planted each knee on either

side of Clark's chest, and he bent down to engulf the blond's cock in his mouth. They groaned simultaneously. Jody stopped in mid-suck when he felt Clark tonguing his asshole. He was in shock that his novice lover was venturing so far into uncharted territory. Shocked, but incredibly aroused, made even more so by the sounds of pure pleasure coming out of Clark's throat.

He swallowed Clark, taking him in as far as was physically possible. He was a large man; everything about him was super-sized, including his penis, but Jody wasn't deterred in the least, and with a combination of practice and technique, giving Clark a blow job had turned into a mind-blowing experience for both of them.

"I love doing this," Clark moaned, sticking his tongue inside Jody, forcing his way through the tight rings. His desire moved up a few notches as he listened to Jody moan and felt him undulating over him. "It makes me crazy to know that you are so turned on when I do this for you."

"God, Kit... don't stop."

"You like this, Jo-Jo? And this?" Clark asked breathlessly, as he nipped and laved at Jody's perineum.

Jody was starting to buck, losing all concentration.

"I have to fuck you," Clark said, pulling away and getting on his knees. He had Jody in front of him, now on all fours. "Jo, please, can we do it like this? You know, bare, without condoms? I'm clean. I get tested every six months. Please, Jo?"

By now, Jody's brain had ceased to function. He was reeling from the pleasure of having Clark's tongue up his asshole. He rested his head on his hands and prayed that Clark would fuck him, condom or not. "Yes," he whimpered softly and then again with more force, "do it, Kit! Fuck me hard!" He braced himself and felt Clark push, tentative at first, and then he felt him slamming into him, balls deep as his body gripped Clark's girth, causing them both to cry out. "Jesus, God," Jody moaned, snaking a hand around Clark's hips and pulling him closer.

"You feel so good," Clark said, huffing a little with each stroke. "I love the way you make me feel."

“I love you!” Jody cried out. He was lost in a world of pleasure, his universe centered on the man who was plowing into him, the cries and whimpers now streaming out of him nonstop.

“Jo-Jo,” Clark growled, bending his head and biting Jody’s shoulder. They both came in a rush of moist heat, reveling in the freedom of making love without the protection of the condom, another huge step forward in their relationship. Clark collapsed in a boneless heap, listening to their combined heartbeats knocking against his chest.

They pulled away for a minute, only to end up in each other’s arms again as they lay back down, spooned in the wet, sticky mess.

“I love you, Kit,” Jody whispered, feeling Clark’s breath against his neck.

“Love you, Jo.”

I WOKE up with a massive headache. It felt like the entire Cal marching band was moving up and down in my brain. I groaned and reached over to grab Jody, but there was nothing there. I opened my eyes gingerly, expecting the sunlight to stab at them and make me cringe. Fortunately, the blinds were still drawn, but Jody was gone.

“Jo?”

No response. I sat up in bed, a little disoriented. I had no idea how many beers we’d consumed or how we ended up in bed. The last thing I remember was fucking Jody ’til we screamed. That stood out very clearly in my brain.

I looked around and saw a note propped up on the pillow beside me. I grabbed it as I made my way out of bed and into the bathroom to take a leak. I started to read while I was pissing, and I stopped, stepping back in shock and almost missing the toilet.

“No!”

I ran into the room and searched frantically for my phone, all the while picking up clothes and struggling to get them on while holding the phone up against my ear. Finally he picked up.

“Don’t be angry,” he said quietly.

“Jo, please, don’t do this.”

“I’ve got to go there to try and talk to her, Kit. She needs to know how much I love you. How much we love each other.”

“Jody, please. Turn the car around; come back here.”

“Too late, babe. I’m halfway there.”

“Fuck!”

I disconnected, grabbed my shoes, and raced out of the house.

# CHAPTER 21

JODY pulled up to the house that he'd seen only once before. It was a quiet Saturday morning on a relatively mild January day. He was apprehensive, but he kept telling himself that this was the twenty-first century and people were more tolerant. He'd just have to convince Clark's parents that he only had their son's best interests at heart. If he could show them how much they loved each other, he was sure that they would understand and the threats would stop.

He rang the doorbell and waited a few moments. Mrs. Stevens opened the door, and stood there looking at him in shock.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'd like to talk to you, please."

"I have nothing to say to you. You need to leave!"

"Who is it, Mary?"

He heard Jim Stevens calling from inside the house, and sure enough, he was standing beside his wife in no time.

"Doc! What a surprise!"

"Mr. Stevens. May I come in?"

"Of course. Is Clark with you?"

"No, it's just me."

“What are you doing in Folsom? Surely not making a house call?” Jim said, trying to make a joke.

“No.” Jody smiled his reply. Mary watched in silent apprehension.

“Please, come in. You want some coffee?” Jim asked.

“That would be great.”

They moved into the kitchen and sat at the table. The coffee was poured, the cream and sugar dispensed, and Mary sat down with them.

“So, what can I do for you, Doc?”

“I’ve come to try and tell you what’s going on.”

“Is everything okay with Clark? I know he passed the English class, so that’s all good.”

“Yes, he did great!”

“Thanks to you,” Jim said easily. “He’d have never made it on his own.”

“I think you underestimate your son, sir. No disrespect intended.”

“None taken, Doc, but I know Clark. He’s not good in school.”

“Clark is very intelligent; he just needed the right tools. He should have been put on medication years ago.”

“I don’t see that it’s any of your business.” Jim frowned.

“I disagree. As his physician, it is my business.”

“Look, you’re not his regular doctor. You helped him out in the emergency room and with the English. That’s all. You know nothing about Clark, or what we’ve had to deal with all these years.”

“Mr. Stevens, I’ve dealt with ADD before. There are numerous ways of helping him, none of which you’ve done.”

“Don’t be telling me how I should raise my kid!”

“He’s not a kid anymore. He’s an adult with ADD. He needs to go on meds.”

“Bullshit! What gives you the right to tell me and my wife what to do?”

“I’m in love with your son. I want what’s best for him.”



“Excuse me?” Jim looked at Jody in horror, with the realization of what he’d just said finally sinking in. “You’re a fucking queer?”

Mary reached out and touched him on the arm. “Jim.”

“Did you know?” he asked, turning on her suddenly. “Did you know he was a fruit?”

“Yes.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?”

“I just found out.”

“Who else knows? Does Clark know?”

“Clark and I are lovers.”

Jim stood and reached across the table and grabbed Jody by the collar. He pulled him across the table and spat in his face. “How dare you say that in my presence?”

Just then the door opened, and Clark walked in. He looked completely distraught.

“Dad!”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Let go of him!”

“Do you know what he just said? He said he was fucking you!”

Clark looked at Jody in alarm and then back at his father. “You must have misunderstood.”

“There’s no misunderstanding here, boy! Are you or are you not having a relationship with this homo?”

“Dad, please. Let him go.”

Jim released Jody with a rough push, sending him falling backward. Clark caught him before he fell, and he held onto him with both hands.

“Don’t touch him!” Mary said.

Clark shook his head and wrapped his arms around Jody. “We need to talk,” he said quietly to his stunned parents.

THEY were looking at both of us like we were bugs. My father couldn't have been more disgusted if I'd walked in with lipstick and high heels.

"You have got to be joking," he said.

"No. I'm gay."

"The fuck you are!"

"I am, Dad."

"You're not gay! It's him!" He pointed his finger at Jody and stood up, poised for a fight. The blood had rushed to his face, and I could see that he was using what little self-control he had, but his voice rose alarmingly as he continued his accusations. "This person beside you has turned you. You were normal until you met him!"

"This person has a name," I replied, doing my best not to lose my temper as well. It was the most difficult thing in the world for me to do. I would have preferred to take Jody in hand and walk out of this room, except nothing would have been resolved.

"Dr. Williams is a deviant, and you need to steer clear of him! If anyone finds out about this, it's all over."

"You mean anyone in football, right?"

"Of course! What else are you good for?"

"Right," I said, blinking away the tears that came automatically. My father was an expert at pushing the buttons that made me sick to my stomach.

Jody took my hand, offering me what little solace he could. I squeezed back and turned to my parents. "I know this is coming as a shock. I didn't plan to tell you this way, but it's out in the open now, so you may as well deal with it."

"There's nothing to deal with. You'll stop seeing him," my father said firmly.

"No, I won't."

"You'd better, or I'll fuck him up bad. We know how to deal with fudge-packers in prison. All it'll take is one phone call."

“Are you threatening him?” I was incredulous again. This was the second time in forty-eight hours that a parent of mine had threatened Jody.

“I’m not threatening! I’m telling you, point blank! Stop seeing him, or I’ll stop it for you!”

“I need to speak with Jody in private,” I said, standing up and pulling Jody alongside of me. “Come on, Jo.”

We made our way out of the house. I walked toward his car, and we stood there looking at each other in silence. Finally he said, “I’m sorry. I should have never come out here.”

“It’s okay. This was bound to happen sooner or later.”

“Kit, I love you. All I wanted was to make this easier for you.”

“Jo. I’m not sure you can ever make this easier. You see what I’m dealing with.”

“I do. I love you, Kit. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Would you do me a favor and go? Let me speak with them alone, just the three of us. Maybe I can get through to them, try and make them understand.”

“I’ll do whatever you want.”

I kissed him on the lips and watched as he got into the car. “I’ll be waiting for you,” he said, unable to disguise the worry in his voice.

“I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you too,” I said, giving him another peck on the lips through the open window.

I watched him drive off, his license plate reminding me that I needed to stand firm. To be proud of who and what I was. I walked back to the house and opened the kitchen door, only to be yanked by the shirt and slammed against the wall by my father.

“You fucking stupid son of a bitch!”

“Dad!”

“Jim!” my mother screamed. “Please,” she started to cry, pulling at his arm, trying to move him away from me.

“Let go of me, Mary!” he yelled at her, shoving her off him.

“I saw you!” he threw out, the saliva flying out of his mouth, hitting me in the face. “I saw you fucking kissing him!”

I started to shake, the rage coursing through me like an electrical current. My hands balled into fists, the nails digging into my skin. I itched to hit him; I wanted to tackle him up against the wall and hurt him the way he hurt me. It took every ounce of willpower not to.

“Let go of me,” I said in a controlled whisper. “Let go of me before I do something dumb.”

“Dumb? You’ve already done that!” He stepped back and shook his head. “Do you honestly think that you’re going to get away with this?”

“Dad, I’m not trying to get away with anything. I just want to live my life.”

“Your life does not include being a homosexual! There’s no room for that kind of sickness in this family or in football! Do you understand?” He was screaming, his entire body was shaking, and he looked like he was about to have a stroke.

Just as I was about to turn away, the door opened and Zach and Jason walked in. “What’s all the yelling about?” Jason asked. “Hey, bro.”

“Hey.”

“What’s going on?” Zach asked Dad.

“Your brother has turned into a fruit!”

“What?” Jason and Zach both looked at me in shock.

“It’s true,” Dad said. “His boyfriend just left here.”

“What boyfriend?” Jason asked, clueless.

Zach started to laugh. “I always knew you were fucked up.”

“Shut up, Zach!”

“Who is it?”

“That guy who was over for Thanksgiving.”

“No!” They both said in unison.

“Yeah, turns out he’s a big cocksucker.”

“Does he give as good a blow job as Nikki?” Zach asked.

I hit him, square in the face. I had to. My hand shot out and connected with his nose, and I heard the crunch, saw the blood, and watched as everyone scrambled to pull me away.

“Fucker!” he screamed. “I will get you back!”

“You shouldn’t have said that!” I yelled at him. “He’s done nothing to you!”

“He’s ruining your chances at the big time! You think we’re going to give him a medal?” my father said, helping Mom clean up Zach. There was blood everywhere. She got ice out of the freezer and pressed it to his nose with a towel.

“It’s my life and my career. Why are you all getting into my business?” I was crying by now, my standard reaction to strong emotion. I was sorry I hit him, but sorrier still for his remark.

“Listen up, kid.” My father came up to me and held my shirt, speaking in his deadly prison-guard voice. “I’m going to say this one time and one time only. You are going to play in the NFL. You owe it to us and to yourself. This is what we’ve been working toward all your life.”

“Dad.”

“Don’t fucking interrupt me! If I hear one whiff of anything, about you, about him, about being queer, there will be repercussions. Do you understand exactly what I mean?”

“Yes.”

“Good! Now, get the fuck out of here. I can’t stand to look at you!”

THIS drive home was as bad as yesterday’s, except there was a part of me that was relieved in a sick sort of way. It was finally out in the open, and I could stop making myself crazy over a decision that had just been taken away from me.

Now the question was whether I would continue to play football or not. There was no doubt in my mind that I would keep on seeing Jody, my father's threats be damned. We'd work something out, go into hiding or crawl into some closet, if necessary, but I wasn't going to give him up.

I stopped at In-N-Out Burger on my way, shoving the fries into my mouth and chewing on the cheeseburger mindlessly. It took my thoughts away from what had just happened. I wondered how long it would be before I heard from Jason. He and I were always close, and it would really hurt if he chose to shun me like everyone else. I knew that Zach would never forgive me, but it was par for the course. He and I had butted heads all our lives, so this was no surprise. As for Michael and Robby, who knew? I could only imagine what version of this story they would hear.

## CHAPTER 22

“CLARK? It’s Jason.”

“Hey! Where are you?”

“We’re on our way to your apartment.”

“Who’s *we*?”

“Mike and I.”

“How long before you get here?”

“About twenty minutes?”

“Okay.” It had been three days since the incident at my parents’ house, and Jason’s call was the first time I’d heard from anyone.

I was at home, doing laundry and sorting through mail that had accumulated in the past week or so. Jody had teased me, telling me I should just pack a bag and move all my shit to his house, but I resisted. Somehow it didn’t feel right to be mooching off of him.

It was bad enough to be in debt to my parents. That had come as a total shock! All along I thought I was on a full scholarship. I should have known that my grades weren’t good enough to get me that kind of a free ride. Now I had to figure out a way to pay my parents back as soon as possible.

If I were drafted into the NFL, the money would come easily. Aside from the yearly pay, there'd be a signing bonus which I would receive immediately. That would get my mom and dad off my back and allow me to live my life without having to answer to them. *If* I got picked.

My father's words had not fallen on deaf ears. I knew he was right about rumors and how they could affect a potential career. I wasn't that stupid to think that I could overcome those odds.

I loved Jody. That wasn't the question. The question was how to reconcile football and being gay. It was all too new, and even though we had the time in Chicago when everything seemed so perfect, I knew that I didn't live in that kind of a world. A professional sport was a business, and football was one of the most expensive and vicious of them all. The scouts wouldn't hesitate to drop me if there were one whiff of a problem.

And being a homosexual was still considered a problem even in this day and age. I knew it, and so did my dad. If there were gay players out there, they were deep in the closet. The ones that had come out openly no longer played the sport.

All the pros and cons had been consuming me since the meeting in Folsom. I felt like the ball in a pinball machine, finding a solution for one question, only to be blocked by another. It was driving me crazy, and Jody as well. He knew I was on edge. He'd apologized a million times for going to Folsom and outing me even though I'd reassured him and told him that it would have happened eventually. Of course, I would have preferred to have done it my way, but it was done, and I had to move forward, learning how to deal with the situation.

My thoughts were interrupted by the buzzer announcing the arrival of the twins. I opened the door just as they got to the top of the landing, and we all stood there looking at one another like total strangers.

"Well? Do I look any different to you?" I was expecting this meeting to go from bad to worse.

"Come on, bro," Jason said quietly.

"You may as well say it now and get it out of the way. Do you think I'm a freak because I'm gay?"

"Are you really?" Mike asked, shaking his head in disbelief.



“Yes.”

“How long have you known?” Jason asked. He seemed completely blown away by the whole concept of me being homosexual.

“A long time... I just kept resisting it.”

“Can’t you keep resisting?” Mike asked. “Maybe these feelings will go away if you try really hard.”

“It’s not a sickness, Mike. It’s who I am.”

“Shit, Clark! I feel like I’m on acid or something! This is going to take some getting used to.”

“Since when do you do acid?”

“I don’t! But I’m sure that if I did, it would feel as weird as this.”

“Do you hate me too?”

“Who hates you?” Mike asked.

I could feel the tears too close to the surface so I chewed on my lip, trying to keep it together. “Zach hates my guts, and Mom and Dad are ready to disown me.”

“Fuck Zach!” Jason said. He grabbed me and pulled me tightly against his body. “I love you, no matter what you are.”

He held me while Mike watched. I could tell that he was undecided for just one second, but something must have clicked in his head because he walked toward us and embraced me as well. “Oh, what the hell, man. You’re my fucking brother.”

“Thank you.” I was overcome, and the tears spilled down my face.

“It’s going to be okay,” Jason said, trying to soothe me, the way he always did when I was a kid.

“Can you promise me one thing though?” Mike asked, stepping back and looking me in the eye.

“What?”

“Don’t touch him when I’m around. That would be too creepy.”

I laughed through my tears, and I grabbed him in a headlock. “I promise.”

“Okay, is that it then? You got any beer in this house?”

I loved Michael. He never censored anything. He gave the words “open mouth, insert foot” a whole new meaning. Plus he never lied. My brother was as loyal as a dog and just as ferocious when it came to protecting the people he loved. If he said that my being gay was okay with him, then I knew it was all good.

We spent the next few hours watching the new James Bond movie. Mike was a great mimic, and by the time the movie was over, he was speaking in a British accent and strutting around like Bond. We had pizza delivered and polished off the two six-packs of Corona I had in the fridge. All in all, it was a pleasant visit. I missed these guys so much. We were inseparable as kids, and the thought of being alienated from them was too awful to even think about.

Just as they were leaving, my phone rang. It was Jody, and I told him to come over and asked the guys to stay and wait for him. I wanted him to see that they were okay with this. It would reassure him that not all of my family members were homophobic pricks.

JODY hung up and got into his car. He was pleasantly surprised to find out that the twins were visiting Clark. It was a huge weight off his back to know that someone in the family was on Clark’s side.

His guilt had weighed heavily for days because of what he’d done. Lil had told him to get over it, but he still felt sick to his stomach when he thought about the scene at the kitchen table. He couldn’t understand how parents could be so cruel to their own child. It was beyond anything he’d ever experienced.

He knew that things had gone from bad to worse when he left the Stevenses’ house. Clark hadn’t given any of the details other than to say that he thought he may have broken Zach’s nose. He said it in such a nonchalant way, as if that kind of violence was commonplace in their household. It was hard for Jody to understand the dynamics of growing up in an environment with so much testosterone. He supposed that fighting amongst brothers was a pretty common thing, but being an only child had him at a disadvantage since he’d never experienced the joys of sibling rivalry. He had no idea what it was like jockeying for a parent’s

attention, begging to pick the TV show of the night, or fighting to sit up front instead of crammed into the backseat of the family vehicle. This was normal in a house filled with children, but to break a nose without so much as a second thought seemed a little extreme.

He pulled up in front of Clark's apartment building and made his way upstairs. He knocked, and when Clark opened the door he said, "The guys are here, and I promised them we wouldn't touch each other in their presence."

"That's fine." Jody smiled at his statement. He supposed that it would take a while for Clark's brothers to wrap their heads around the thought of their football star being gay. Hopefully, they would come to realize that this was not a death sentence and nothing had changed between them.

"Hey," the twins both called out in unison when he walked into the apartment.

He nodded in their direction and reached for the beer that Clark was handing him. He took a long pull and a deep breath and tried to relax even though he was a little nervous. Jody felt like he was on display as the two sets of eyes practically bored holes into him.

The twins were toned-down versions of Clark. Just as tall and blond, but not as arresting. They would be considered hot if Clark hadn't been in the same room. Clark's physical presence was all-encompassing. Every part of him was perfection from the top of his platinum blond head to the bottom of his very large feet. He exuded a maleness that was hard to beat, and each time Jody looked at him, his heart rate would speed up automatically.

"So, Doc," Mike said, rubbing the bottle of beer in between his hands. "Have you always been gay?"

Jody looked at him, surprised at his bluntness. "Yes."

"Do you even like football?"

"Mike!"

"It's okay," Jody said, looking at Clark, who was starting to get agitated. "Actually, Mike, I know nothing about the game."

"No shit? So what do you guys talk about? Or do you even talk?"

“Michael!”

“Oh, lighten up, Clark. I’m just trying to get to know your boyfriend.”

“You’re badgering him.”

“No, he’s not,” Jody replied, grinning at Clark. “Your brother is much more than football, Mike. We talk about a lot of things.”

“Yeah? You love him?”

“Michael!” Jason and Clark yelled at the same time.

Jody shook his head and raised his hand in a stop motion. “It’s okay, really. I do love him, Mike. Very much.”

“Well, you’d better, ’cause this is going to get ugly. I just know it.”

“How so?” Jody’s fears came rushing back when he heard that statement. Was Mike just stating a foregone conclusion or did he know something no one else did?

“My dad’s really pissed, and when he’s like that, it’s scary. There’s no telling what he’ll do.”

Clark sat down beside Jody, and despite his promise to his brother earlier on, took Jody’s hand and held it tight. “Don’t listen to him, Jo. He’s exaggerating.”

“You know he’s not,” Jason interjected from the other side of the room.

“Look, let’s not talk about Dad, okay?”

“Fine,” Mike said. “Just watch your backs, both of you.”

“What the hell, Mike! We’re not the fucking Sopranos.” Clark was visibly upset. “You’re scaring the heck out of Jody.”

“I’m sorry. I just think that you should be prepared.”

“We’re fine, okay? This will all blow over, and everyone will calm down in a few weeks.”

Jason and Mike both looked at Clark and shook their heads back and forth.

It was March seventeenth, St. Patrick's Day, and my twenty-fourth birthday. We'd decided to spend the day in Sausalito, browsing the boutiques and doing the whole tourist bit. We even planned on taking a ride on the Blue and Gold Ferry, touring the bay with a glass of wine in one hand and binoculars in the other. I'd never done it before, even though I was born and raised in California. Jody insisted that it would be fun to relax for a couple of hours on the boat.

The only downside to the trip was the fact that we'd have to watch our behavior in public since I was bound to be recognized. I put on a baseball cap and sunglasses in the hopes that I would pass for an ordinary citizen.

Highly unlikely, according to Jody, since most ordinary people weren't six-four and didn't look like Nordic Gods. His words, not mine. In any case, we got into the BMW around nine in the morning and made our way across the Bay Bridge and into San Francisco, and then proceeded across town and through the park before crossing the Golden Gate Bridge into Marin County. It was ten-thirty by the time we got to the tiny artists' enclave. It was a beautiful spring day, the sun was shining brightly, and we could see the San Francisco skyline easily as the fog had dissipated hours ago. We parked the car and made our way over to one of the restaurants along the wharf for some breakfast.

"I'll have the Irishman's skillet, three eggs over easy, and waffles on the side with strawberries on top. Oh, and hold the whip cream. I'm on a diet." I smiled at the waitress, handing her the menu.

Jody stared at me. "Christ! Are you sure you'll have enough?"

"Hey, in two weeks, I'll have to watch everything that goes in my mouth."

"So are you planning on having every known food group today?"

"Just about." I grinned at him, amused by the look of shock on his face.

I made a pig of myself, telling Jody that this would probably be the last time I'd have a normal meal, since spring training was about to begin, and I'd have to start eating more protein and watching my caloric intake. I tried to explain how intense things were going to get, how my life would become all about football again. Jody had no clue as to what

the sport entailed training-wise. He didn't realize that aside from all the time spent on the field, there was an equal amount of time spent in the gym and countless hours watching videos of other teams, learning their plays and planning ours.

"You know, once practice starts, I'm not going to be over at your house that much."

"Why not?" He sipped at his coffee, waiting to hear my reply.

"I'll be exhausted by the time I get home. It'll be easier for me to crash at my apartment."

"I'm only going to see you on the weekends?" he asked in shock.

"It depends on what's going on. I'll try and make it over to your place during the week, but I can't even tell you what days I'll be free."

"Can't I come over to your place?"

"Sure, if you don't mind watching me sleep."

"I'd rather do that than not see you at all."

"We'll work something out, Jo. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried; I'm spoiled. I've gotten used to seeing you almost every day. I'm going to miss you."

These past few months had been great. We were in our own little world, learning more about each other every day. It was our honeymoon phase, so to speak, and it was about to end, so I suppose we were both a little fearful of the future and trying to hang on to every last minute. "I'll miss you too, Jo."

"Are you happy, now that football's about to start again?"

"I didn't realize how much I missed it until I put my pads and helmet on and walked out on the field. It's who I am, Jo. I can't imagine doing anything else."

"What about the coaching that we talked about?"

"That's always there, but it's the end of the journey. I can't imagine starting out as a coach."

"So you've pretty much made up your mind about the NFL?"

"I'd be stupid not to accept if they want me."

As soon as we finished breakfast we walked to the landing to catch the ferry for the tour. We stood in line with all the other tourists and made an effort not to touch each other when all we wanted to do was kiss and make out. We'd been together for months now, but the sexual chemistry between us was at an all-time high.

When we finally boarded, we made our way to the back of the boat. There was an area where we could sit and soak up the sun, feel the wind on our faces. There were only six chairs out there, and fortunately two of them were vacant, so we settled in for the ride.

It couldn't have been more perfect. The tour took us past Alcatraz Island, under both bridges, the Golden Gate and the Bay Bridge. We skimmed along the shoreline of San Francisco where we could see all the landmarks clearly, the Transamerica building, Coit Tower on Nob Hill, the Embarcadero, Fisherman's Wharf. I seemed to be seeing everything with fresh eyes, thanks to the man beside me. Jody's presence was the most reassuring thing in my life, and even though his eyes were covered by sunglasses, I knew that they looked at me with unconditional love. I was truly happy and at peace with myself.

I grabbed his hand and kissed it, unmindful of onlookers. "I love you, Jo."

"Love you too." He answered so easily, and I knew without a doubt that he meant every word. His brown hair looked like burnt sugar as the sunlight bounced off it and I forgot where we were. I kissed him on the lips, lingering longer than I should have. We pulled apart and looked around quickly to see if anyone noticed and, apart from the few people sitting around us, no one seemed to care. We were just another tourist attraction: two San Francisco queers kissing in public.

## CHAPTER 23

“MOTHERFUCKER!”

Jody threw the paper across his desk, watching it bounce on the wall and fall on the floor in separate pieces, like giant confetti.

What had set him off was an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in one of the gossip sections, brought to his attention by the head nurse in charge of malicious gossip.

“Dr. Williams, how come you never told us about your hunky new boyfriend?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the picture of you in the paper, sucking face with some guy who looks very much like a certain football star we know and love.”

“What?”

Jody’s heart almost stopped as she spoke, and he grabbed the paper out of her hands and made his way to his office to see for himself. There it was, a five-by-seven of them kissing on the ferry. They were both in sunglasses and Clark’s hat was on, but there was no mistaking the physique. The caption under the photo read, “Who’s the new man in Jody Williams’s life?”



It was ironic! He and Clark were so worried about people recognizing the football player he'd forgotten that in San Francisco, he was practically a celebrity. He and Rick Roman had been news for several years. The gossip columnists had loved them, especially when they found out about Rick's HIV status. They became a romantic tragedy that everyone followed, and when it all ended with Rick's death, they continued to take an interest in Jody's love life. So much so that he'd virtually stopped going out in public for the longest time. Whenever he appeared with a male companion, they assumed he was the new lover. It shouldn't have come as a surprise then that someone had spotted him and taken the photo. He stared at the picture trying to determine if Clark would be recognized. His face wasn't visible at all, but his body sure was, and he wondered if anyone would figure it out. He doubted that Clark's parents even read the San Francisco paper, much less the gossip section.

He supposed that he'd have to tell Clark, even though it would only worry him. He'd been on another planet since spring training started, waiting for Nikki to make some sort of remark to the coaches or the team, but she'd been surprisingly decent, staying out of his way for the most part. He'd thrown himself into the practice schedule, dragging himself home exhausted, barely able to choke down whatever dinner Jody would bring over. Invariably, Clark would be asleep before the ten o'clock news. The only reason their relationship continued to flourish was because Jody spent a lot of time at Clark's place, choosing to stay the night at the apartment so he could hold Clark in his arms as they slept. Morning lovemaking had now become part of their repertoire.

He glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was close to the end of his shift. He picked up his phone and called Clark to see if Chinese food sounded good. He got the standard answer. "Whatever you want, Jo." He shrugged and told himself to get used to this. It was going to get worse when the season actually started. Lil had encouraged him to learn about football so that he and Clark would have more to talk about. He'd resisted up until now, but he was starting to realize the wisdom in his best friend's words. When he was dating a winemaker, he'd learned all about the process of making wine, so he supposed that it was now time to learn about the sport that was consuming his lover.

“CLARK, we need to talk,” Nikki said, running alongside of me as I made my way to the car. It was the end of the day, and I was tired, hungry, and ready to go home.

“What about?”

“About us.”

“I thought we already had this conversation.” I looked at her and shook my head, trying to figure out what she was up to. She’d left me alone since the start of spring training, pretty much sticking with the other cheerleaders and trying not to get in my way. Today was the first time she’d actually come up to me in private.

“Are you still friends with the doctor?”

“It’s none of your business, Nik.”

“We need a plan.”

“What plan? Why?”

“We need to continue to see each other, so no one suspects anything.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You can deny it all you want, Clark, but I know you’re gay. I’ve really thought this through, and even though I hate the thought of you with a man, I love you enough to want to protect you.”

I huffed out a laugh and thought this was a novel way of hers to get me to out myself. “You’re nuts!”

“I’m not! I’ve been keeping an eye on you. I know that you never go home; you practically live at his house!” She was starting to get visibly upset, and her eyes sparked with anger.

“Have you been following me?” I was starting to get pissed as well. The last thing I needed to worry about was being tailed by this girl.

“I’m not that desperate,” she said.

“Fooled me! You need to get a life, Nikki, and stop worrying about mine.”

“Then you’d better be more careful and stop making a spectacle of yourself. You’re all over the fucking Internet!”

I froze for a minute, completely thrown off-kilter by that remark. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about your little jaunt on the Blue and Gold Ferry a couple of weeks ago with your *lover*!”

“What about it?”

“See, you can’t deny that he’s your lover now, can you?”

“Will you just tell me what the fuck you’re referring to?” I wanted to wring her neck because I’d all but admitted the truth about Jody.

“I told you weeks ago that Dr. Williams was well-known, and so I’ve been keeping tabs on him via Google. Guess who’s on the Internet kissing him?”

I felt the blood draining out of my head, and I started to freak out. If she knew about this, so did a lot of people who might be interested in my career.

“You must be mistaken. It must have been someone else with him.”

I turned to walk away from her but she grabbed my hand and pulled me back. “Clark, it’s pointless to try and deny this, at least with me. You need a beard, and I would be perfect.”

“A what?”

“You’re not up on your gay lingo yet, are you?”

“Nikki.”

“Listen, I’m dead serious. I know you and I are over. I get it! I’ve finally accepted it, but I want to see you play in the NFL. I’ve invested too much time in you; I may as well get something out of this.”

“And what would that be?”

“I’d rather be your ex-girlfriend than nothing at all. Once you’ve made it to the big time, you can publicly dump me. By then, everyone will know me, and I’m bound to meet someone else.”

“And meanwhile?”

“We continue to ‘date’. Go out once in a while; make sure we’re seen in public places so people don’t suspect anything. You’ll lose it all if they find out, Clark. Use your head!”

“I need to go, Nikki.”

I turned to walk away and heard her say, “You’ll be sorry if you don’t take me up on this. Ask your boyfriend. See what he says.”

I spun around once more and looked at her, trying to determine if she was sincere or just being a bitch. I couldn’t tell anymore. So much had changed in the past few months, my perception of people altered by my life changes. I couldn’t trust my instincts as to who was friend or foe, so I decided to shelve this, at least for the time being, until I could discuss it with Jody.

“I’ll be in touch,” I said. “Let me think about it.”

She smiled, delighted that she’d gotten the admission regardless of how it came about. She didn’t care that the words hadn’t come out of my mouth. She knew she had me.

JODY sat quietly while he listened to Clark tell him about his conversation with Nikki. He was furious that she’d trapped him that way, virtually blackmailing Clark into dating her again.

“I think that she’s only doing this to get back in your bed.”

“Come on, Jo. Maybe she’s actually telling the truth. She does care about me, you know.”

“Oh, I know. Believe me, I know very well!”

“Hey!” Clark looked at Jody in surprise. “You’re not pissed, are you?”

“Yes, I am! Fuck that bitch and damn you for even contemplating this!”

Jody stood abruptly and marched over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of beer. He was visibly upset.

“Where the fuck is this coming from?” Clark asked, moving toward the kitchen. “You think I want to jump in her bed just because I’ll be seeing her again?”

“Shit happens,” Jody deadpanned.

“Fuck you!” Clark spat out.

“Fuck her and this whole situation!” Jody said loudly. “Being in the closet is one thing, but to deliberately lie to the public and pretend you guys are a couple is wrong! What about your parents? Are they going to think that you’ve come to your senses and dropped the whole notion of being gay?” Jody moved forward and looked up at Clark, who was staring at him in shock. “What about your brothers? Are you going to tell Jason and Mike that everything you said about being gay was a lie? Because you can’t pretend to be with Nikki and still profess to love me. Lies have a way of getting out of hand, and if you aren’t consistent, it’ll all blow up in your face.”

“Jo-Jo, calm down.”

“No! I’m not calming down. Where does this leave us?”

“Nothing’s changed between us.”

“The hell it hasn’t! You’re already acting like a stranger, and this is only spring training. I can only imagine what it’s going to be like once the season starts.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand.... I understand that you’re going to walk away from me. Football is a lot more important than being in love!”

“Jo, I have to play football. It’s what I do best. It’s also my only chance to make enough money to pay my parents back.” Clark moved closer, hoping that Jody would be more receptive, but so far, he hadn’t budged. “Look, Jo. If being seen with Nikki once in a while will help the illusion, then I have to do it. I can’t risk any kind of talk. There’s too much at stake!”

“And where do I fit into this great scheme of yours? Are you going to slink in and out of my bed in the middle of the night? Why don’t you leave a hundred dollar bill on the nightstand while you’re at it!”

“Jo-Jo, why do you have to make this sound so ugly? You know how much I love you.”

“No, I don’t, Clark. I thought I did, but obviously, I come second to your career.”

“Don’t make me choose between you and football! Why are you backing me into a corner?”

“I don’t know,” Jody said, all his anger leaving him as abruptly as it came. He turned away from Clark, hiding his tears. The last thing he wanted was Clark’s pity. If he couldn’t have his love, he certainly didn’t want him to stick around because he felt sorry for him.

“Jody, I’m not as brave as you are. I can’t face the world and tell them I’m gay. Not yet.”

Jody turned and saw that Clark was crying now. He stood there, a man stripped of all pride, looking at him with eyes that swam in a pool of tears. “I’ll lose it all if I come out. Please... don’t push me away because I’m a coward.”

“Oh Kit,” Jody cried out and moved swiftly toward Clark. He wrapped his arms around Clark’s waist and rested his head on the massive chest. “You’re not a coward! I’m just being a jealous queen.”

Clark let out the breath he’d been holding, and he broke down and sobbed when Jody pressed against his body. “Jo-Jo, don’t you know how much I love you?” he whispered, his words almost desperate.

“I’m just an insecure fag.”

“Don’t say that! Please, don’t say that, Jo. It means that I haven’t shown you enough.”

“Kit, you show me plenty. I just have this dream, that’s all.”

“What dream?”

“You know, you and me, out and proud, walking off into the sunset. Romantic shit like in the movies.”

“Hey, it’s not a dream. It’ll happen; just not today.”

“I’m sorry I’m being such a drama queen,” Jody said, looking up at Clark.

“Jo, don’t ever doubt that I love you. I may be a big closet case and a lying coward, but I love you so much it hurts sometimes. I would do anything for you.”

“Don’t sleep with her.”

“I give you my word,” Clark said, bending down to kiss Jody. They pressed against each other and moaned in a passionate duet that only escalated with every passing minute. “I don’t know what the future will

bring,” Clark whispered, in between soft kisses, “but I don’t ever want you to doubt my love.”

“You’ll just have to keep reassuring me, Kit.”

“I can, and I will.” Clark pulled Jody toward the bed, looking at him hungrily as he removed his shirt. They stood at the foot of the bed and continued to stare into each other’s eyes, kicking off their shoes and then pulling down their pants and briefs. Finally, when they were both naked and visibly aroused, Clark stepped forward and pulled Jody up to him and said, “I want you to make love to me.”

Jody groaned and wrapped his arms around Clark’s neck and pulled him down on the bed. He lay on top of Clark and rubbed against him as they continued to kiss. They were both on fire, the need to show the depth of their love paramount. “Fuck me, Jo,” Clark whispered, his erection pressing rigidly against Jody’s matching boner.

Jody broke away from the kiss and looked at Clark in shock. “Kit, are you sure?”

Clark nodded, his eyes boring into Jody’s with an emotion so raw that Jody was humbled. He pressed his lips to Clark’s and ravaged him with his mouth, all the while listening as Clark moaned and pleaded, whimpering with need.

“I want you to make me yours, Jo.”

“God,” Jody cried out, desperately reaching for the lube they always kept beside the bed. He knelt in between Clark’s legs and applied it generously on both of them. He’d never been with a virgin before and the pressure to make this a good experience for the man who was gifting him with this final act of surrender was increasing the emotional level a hundredfold. “I love you, Kit,” he whispered, positioning himself.

“Take me. Everything I have... it’s all for you.” Clark’s eyes glittered, his world now centered on the man who hovered over him, and Jody bent down and pressed his mouth to his, even as he thrust past the tight rings, balls deep into a world of sensation like no other. He felt Clark tense up for just a second, the quick intake of breath a reaction to the sting that was all a part of the pleasure. “Okay, Kit?” he asked, pausing in his movements.

“Yes, yes... don’t stop.”

And Jody started to move again, slowly at first, in a sensual dance that he needed to drag out, to make it special and unforgettable, to sustain them for all the bad times that were sure to come. Tonight was all about giving, proving that they had something special that couldn't be taken away, despite society and all the pressure. They needed this final act to remind them of how much they loved each other, and as Jody rolled his hips, glancing Clark's prostate, hearing his lover cry out in surprise, he was reassured in the knowledge that no one could ever make Clark feel this way, no one could bring him to the heights of passion that he could. "I love you," he murmured just as Clark's body clenched and shuddered around him, squeezing him forcefully.

"I'm yours, Jo-Jo," Clark declared, his heart thudding with emotion.

"I know, Kit, I know. Thank you for this."



## CHAPTER 24

JODY made his way down the corridor, heading for his office. It was the end of a long and uneventful day, made even longer by the fact that he didn't want to be here. He would have much preferred to be with Clark. His head had been in the clouds for the past eight hours because of last night and Clark's beautiful gesture. It was hot and romantic, and he'd been walking around with a grin on his face, dying to tell someone, but resisting the impulse to pick up the phone and call Lil. What Clark had done was the ultimate proof of his love, and Jody wanted to announce it to the world, even though he knew he couldn't.

They'd made love one more time this morning, and Clark had once again given himself with abandon, never hesitating for one minute.

"You're everything to me," Clark whispered, right after the most amazing orgasm of his life. It was a moment Jody would never forget, and if Clark meant to show him how much he cared, then he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. The only way that Jody would leave now was if Clark physically pushed him out of his life or if he dropped dead.

He logged off his computer, picked up his pager and car keys, and walked out of the office. The parking lot was full, and there was some daylight left so he didn't call the security guard as he'd been doing since his car was vandalized. He didn't feel the need tonight, confident in the fact that people were still coming and going. He made his way to his car,

hitting the alarm, hearing the chirp as the lights went on, flashing twice to let him know that the signal was received. He pulled the door open and just as he was about to get in, a man came out of nowhere and pushed him into the car roughly, shoving him over to the passenger's side. The stranger in black got into the driver's seat, started the engine, and began to drive off.

"Who the hell are you?" Jody couldn't believe what had just happened. The guy took his eyes off the road for a second and glanced at Jody. He had a day's worth of stubble and his faded blue eyes were rimmed in red, as if he hadn't slept in forever. Jody could smell him from his side of the car, a combination of cigarette smoke and strong body odor that was making him nauseous.

"Don't try anything dumb, Doc. I've got a gun in my coat pocket, and I won't hesitate to use it."

Jody's heart thudded wildly when he heard that. "What do you want from me? Money? I don't carry that much cash, but you're welcome to whatever I've got."

"No, that's not why I'm here."

"What then?"

"Let's just say that I'm here to deliver a message."

The stranger pulled a hard right, turning into an alley off one of the side streets. He drove as far as he could, trying to find a spot that was darker and more isolated. He stopped the car abruptly and pulled Jody over by grabbing hold of his leather jacket and yanking him roughly to his side of the car and out of the vehicle.

He slammed him back against the car and followed that with a hard slap across the face. "This is courtesy of the boys in Folsom."

Jody lifted his arm to try to protect himself, only to have it pushed aside as the guy laughed in his face. "Do you really think you can stop me? I could kill you right now if I wanted to, but that's a lot more money and not part of this contract."

"Please," Jody begged, hoping he could talk his way out of this. "I'll double whatever they're paying you, if you'll just leave me alone."

“That sounds real good, Doc, but here’s the thing.” The guy was now inches away from him, his breath a blast from hell. “I hate fags just as much as my boss does. You need a little reminder of who you’re dealing with. Don’t fuck with football players and keep your sorry mug off the Internet! One more picture of you sucking face with Stevens and you’re a dead man!” He punched Jody in the stomach so hard that his knees buckled from the force of the blow and he went down and landed on all fours, trying to catch the breath that was just ripped out of him.

“Why are you doing this?” Jody stuttered, trying to make sense of what was happening.

“Why?” the man asked even as he kicked Jody in the ribs. Jody thought he heard the crack of bone giving away, but he was in too much pain to try to diagnose himself. “Because you fags think that you can move right in and destroy a person’s life just because you have this need to get sucked off by a real man.”

“It’s not like that!”

“Don’t tell me what it is or isn’t, you cocksucker! Stay away from the kid, or the next time will be the last time.” His attacker followed up his hateful words with one more swift kick to Jody’s groin before he got in the car, started the engine, and drove off.

Jody lay on the ground, thankful that he’d been abandoned, although he had no idea where he was or how he was going to get home. He tried to sit up, aware of his labored breath and the wheezing that could only mean a cracked rib and a punctured lung. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed 911, hoping they’d be able to find him now that the phone emanated a signal. He tried to stay awake as he waited for help, but he kept drifting in and out of consciousness. Eventually the pain blanketed him, and he passed out cold.

The next thing he remembered was lying on a gurney in his own emergency room, looking up at the face of one of the residents.

“Doc. What the fuck, man? What happened to you?”

“I got hit by a Mack truck.”

“No shit! Who did this to you?” he asked, all the while taking Jody’s vitals and injecting him with morphine. “We’re going to need an X-ray, Doc.”

“I know. I think one of my ribs is broken.”

“Okay. You want me to call anyone?”

“No! Wait, yeah. You’d better call my friend. His name’s Lil.”  
Jody gave him Lil’s number just as he started drifting off again.

“CLARK?”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Lil.”

“Oh, hey. What’s going on?”

“Jody asked me to call. He’s having some big emergency at work and won’t be home tonight.”

“How come he could call you, but he couldn’t call me?”

“I have no idea, sweetie. It is what it is.”

“I guess. Did he say when he’ll be home?”

“Sometime tomorrow night.”

“What’s the big emergency?”

“No clue, sweetheart. Gotta run!”

“Okay.” I hung up and moved over to the refrigerator to scrounge for food. Jody usually brought dinner over, but tonight I was going to fend for myself. I turned on the TV to see if there was any news about the emergency that was keeping him away. Nothing was mentioned about any kind of crisis that might affect the hospital’s normal routine.

I picked up the phone and speed-dialed Nikki, deciding to call her while I was alone. It was better that we talk whenever Jody wasn’t around. She had the ability to bring out the worst in him, and I hated dealing with it. I knew that it was normal for him to be jealous—she was my ex-lover after all—but I had absolutely no desire to bed her or any other woman, for that matter. I was not only in love with Jody, I was in lust, big time. Just thinking about the things we did last night and this morning made me hard, and I couldn’t wait for him to get back. It sucked that I wouldn’t be able to see him for another twenty-four hours.

My thoughts went back to last night. Our lovemaking defied description other than it was the culmination of a lifelong dream, and the fact that Jody had been the one to give me this experience only served to make me love him that much more. I couldn't have been more committed if we'd stood in front of a priest and put on wedding rings. Of course, I'd have to prove this to him, because wanting to stay in the closet for now seemed like a complete contradiction to everything I was feeling. I was giddy with joy, wanting to shout it out to the world and tell them how much I loved him. However, the reality of our situation was sobering, and I knew I had to be practical. And even as I thought those words, Nikki's voice came on the line.

"Clark?"

"Yeah."

"What's going on?"

"Not much. I called to tell you I'm taking you up on the offer."

"Really?"

She sounded much too happy, so I decided to set things straight once and for all. "I want you to know that Jody and I are grateful, but you need to understand that this is all a charade. I am gay, Nikki. Jody and I are lovers."

I heard her gasp, and I knew that she was shocked. Even though she'd accused me of this, it was different hearing me admit it.

"Oh... my... God."

"What? Do you want to rescind the offer?"

"No, of course not! I just need time to process this."

"We can meet twice a week. Once at the tavern, when the rest of the team is there, and one other night we can decide on later. I want to be seen by a lot of people, so no quiet dinners at your place or movies."

"That's fine," she agreed, saying it quietly. She was probably still trying to wrap her head around my admission.

"Clark?"

"Yes?"

"Did you hate it when you were fucking me?"

God. I didn't want to deal with her wounded ego; on the other hand, I wasn't going to lie. She was probably the only person other than Jody who was going to get a straight answer from me. "I didn't hate it, Nik. I just love Jody more."

"I see."

"No, you don't, but it doesn't matter. The long and short of this is that whatever we had was great at the time we had it. But it isn't what I want or need."

"And he is?" Her voice had the unmistakable sound of tears being held back, but I was not to be deterred.

"I love him more than anything else in my life."

"Do your parents know?"

"We've had a huge falling-out over this, but I suspect that they won't be talking to you about it."

"Why not? They think we're practically engaged."

"And they probably want to see that happen. Really be engaged, that is."

"Should I say anything?"

"No! Let it go. We'll just do our own thing, and if they ask you about it, refer them to me."

"Won't they know this is all a lie?"

"Not if they want to believe that I've had a change of heart. They'll think I've come to my senses."

"Clark, can't we just go back to what we had? You've been with him and gotten it out of your system. Come back to my world."

"I'm sorry. I could never do that."

"Well, when did you want to start this?" she asked, taking a deep breath, seemingly resigned to her new role in my life.

"Next week is fine."

"We'll go to the tavern right after practice, next Tuesday. Hang out with the team, play some pool, and then leave together, okay?" she asked.

“Okay.” I was already anticipating what was to come, knowing I’d hate every minute of it.

“Nik?”

“Yes?” She said it with this air of expectation, hoping that I’d had an epiphany of some sort.

“Thank you for doing this.”

“You’re welcome,” she said softly.

“WHY the fuck don’t we call the cops?”

“I don’t want them to find out about Clark.”

“If you weren’t hurt so bad, I’d hit you myself.”

Lil was shaking, he was so angry at Jody. He couldn’t believe how stubborn he was being about this. It had taken Lil hours to get over his initial fright. Seeing his best friend lying on the gurney was the worst thing he’d ever experienced. He did not want to go through that again, but Jody was being stubborn. Lil wanted to file a police report, or at the very least, tell Clark what was going on, but Jody had made him swear not to do anything.

“They’ll want to know why anyone would want to harm me. Once they find out about my car, and now this, they’ll know that it’s not just a random thing. It’ll open up a can of worms, and I’m not going to do it!”

“Oh, my God, Jody! You are the most intractable man I know!”

“So sue me.”

“Jody, sweetie, I know how much you love him, but don’t you think he’d want you safe? If anything were to happen to you because we didn’t tell him about this incident, he’d never forgive us.”

“Lil, if Clark finds out about this, he’ll do one of two things; drive to Folsom and kill someone, or push me out of his life just to make sure this doesn’t happen again. I’d rather risk another attack than lose him. I also don’t want him going to his parents and flying off the handle. They already hate my guts. Our relationship has caused a huge rift, and I’m not going to risk another blowup. Besides,” Jody said, grabbing Lil’s

hand and squeezing it tightly, “nothing else will happen now that I know what to expect.”

“But don’t you think his parents will be expecting Clark to confront them since they were the ones who had you bashed?”

“I don’t know that for sure. It could have been one or the other parent or Nikki or Zach. The possibilities are endless.”

“And how do you propose to keep yourself away from these homophobic pricks?”

“I’ll learn how to protect myself and maybe carry a gun.”

“Oh, holy fucking Christ! You did not just say that!”

“Shut up, Lil. I need time to figure this out.”

“Jody, please, you’re not being smart. Hire a bodyguard, if you must, but don’t try and do this yourself.”

“And how am I going to explain a bodyguard to Clark?”

“I don’t know! Tell him he’s my new boyfriend.”

“We’re dealing with too many lies already. I’m not adding one more.”

Lil started to cry, his nerves finally giving out on him. “You’re going to give me a nervous breakdown.” He sniffled, wiping his eyes with a tissue that he pulled from the box near Jody’s bed.

“Lil, relax, okay? I won’t let anything else happen to me, I promise.”

“How can you say that? You have no idea what kind of people you’re dealing with.”

“Oh, yes I do! My attacker made it very clear.”

“And what exactly do they want?”

“They want me to leave Clark. They want to make sure he’s not spotted or outted or compromised in any way. In essence, I’m to stay away from him.”

“That’s like telling a rat to stay away from cheese.”

“Thank you so much for comparing me to a rat! First, I’m a dog. Now I’m a rat.”



“Huh?”

“Oh. Never mind, Lil. I need to get the hell out of here.”

“How do you plan on explaining your broken rib and the tape around your chest?”

“I have no fucking idea, but I’ll think of something.”

“I’m sure you will. You always do.”

## CHAPTER 25

“STAY a little longer,” Nikki said, pulling Clark back down in his chair.

“No! He’s waiting for me.”

“Right,” Nikki responded, rolling her eyes and grimacing. “We mustn’t keep the good doctor waiting.”

I looked at her and shook my head in disgust. This whole plan was for shit! She was getting territorial again, I was bored out of my skull, and Jody was vibrating in place whenever I’d come home from “date” night. It had been several months since we’d started this charade, and so far, we had everyone fooled. Even my fucking father called to tell me that he was glad I’d come to my senses and dropped the idea of being a pansy.

What a joke! Not only was I a pansy but I loved being a bottom, much to Jody’s surprise. My entire family would roll over in a collective faint if they knew how really gay I was. However, that didn’t take away from the fact that we’d embarked on this mission to get everyone off our backs. By everyone, I meant my parents, my two older brothers, and the entire football world. Our lives had changed drastically since spring training, and now with summer almost over and the season about to start, things would only get worse.

Jody was passing the time with extra trips to the gym, increasing his workouts to four days instead of his normal two. He’d started doing it

a few weeks after the big emergency at the hospital, which turned out to be his own emergency! A patient from the psych ward had attacked him and another doctor, bruising him badly enough so that he had to wear tape around his ribs for several weeks. He decided then that he was going to try to learn how to defend himself, to buff up and not let something like that happen again. His efforts hardly went unnoticed as his arms, shoulders, and pecs expanded in direct proportion to his diligence.

“You better stop this or I’ll start to get jealous,” I teased, running both hands down his shoulders and past arms that bulged nicely.

“Jealous of whom?” he asked.

“Of your personal trainer or anyone else who looks twice.”

“I thought I was the only one who did jealous?” Jody asked, bemused.

“That’s because you’ve never given me a reason before.”

“So now that I’m pumping iron, you think I’ve turned into some kind of slut?”

“God, I hope not.” I pressed my mouth to his and softly lapped at his lips like the kitten he’d named me after.

“You have nothing to worry about, Kit.”

“When do I get to meet your trainer?”

“Why do you want to meet him?”

“To make sure he’s old and ugly.”

Jody laughed at me, the sound so refreshing after months of anxiety. Even though we tried to act like nothing unusual was going on in our lives, we both understood the risks of being found out, and so the tension never really disappeared; it just moved in and out like the fog over San Francisco. Jody would come over late at night and leave at the crack of dawn in time to make it to the gym by six o’clock. On the weekends, I’d sneak over to his place and hole up there, never leaving until late Sunday night. It was a horrible way to live, but we endured it because we had to.

“As it so happens,” Jody continued with a wicked gleam in his eyes, “my trainer’s name is Alec, as in Baldwin, and he sort of looks like him, furry chest and all.”

“Fuck!”

“The good news is that he’s a breeder with four kids!”

“Better,” I said, waiting for more details. “Any other hot men I should start worrying about?”

“Nah,” Jody said. “Lucky for you, I’m a one-man kind of guy.”

“Despite the fact that I’ve turned you into a virtual recluse?”

“I still see daylight coming and going from work,” Jody said, playing along with me. “And the only person I’d want to go out with is either on the football field or in my bed. How can I complain?”

“You’re a pretty lucky guy.”

“The luckiest,” Jody said, pressing up to me.

It was Saturday night, and Jody paced back and forth across his living room, waiting for Lil. They were going to watch Clark’s first game of the season. Clark had given Jody a crash course in the finer points of football just so he’d know when to cheer and when to boo. Jody just wanted to sit high up in the bleachers and watch Clark in his uniform strutting across the field, looking gorgeous. He couldn’t care less about the sport, only the man playing it.

Finally Jody heard the sound of a car and grabbed his stadium chair and blanket as he made his way out the door. Lil was dressed in a Cal T-shirt and black jeans, looking every bit the loyal fan.

“How come you don’t have a Cal shirt?”

“I never bought one.”

“What kind of supportive husband are you?”

“The kind that’s living a secret life for the man he loves.”

Lil paused and looked at his best friend. “He has no idea how much you love him, does he?”

“Oh, he knows. I show him every day.”

“Do tell?”

“Not.”

“You’re no fun at all! What good does it do me to know you’re fucking the hottest guy out there when I have no details to fantasize over?”

“Stop!”

“You’re so protective of him.”

“Why? ’Cause I won’t tell you anything about our sex life?”

“Yes. What’s the fun in being gay if we can’t talk about cock size?”

“I already told you about his cock.”

“All you said was ‘it’s huge!’,” Lil mimicked perfectly.

“What other word should I have used?”

“Well, inches for one thing? Nine, ten? What is it? Is he a grower or a shower? Does he scream when he comes or does he moan like an old dog? Has he rimmed you yet? How well does he suck? When did he first bottom, or does he?”

“Jesus Christ, Lil! You’re acting like a fucking teenager.”

“I can’t help it. He’s gorgeous!”

“He is,” Jody said, his voice getting all dreamy. “Inside and out.”

“Oh, please! Spare me the romantic drivel. I want raunchy details, not vanilla-coated stories.”

“Watch porn.”

“It’s not the same. Okay, enough already. You’re absolutely no fun at all.”

“Sorry to disappoint, old friend.”

“Tell me how you’re doing, sweetie? Obviously working out,” Lil observed, squeezing one of Jody’s biceps. “You’ll start to look like the Arnold pretty soon.”

“Yeah, it’s going well. I’m even learning kickboxing. I just haven’t told Clark about it.”

“I’m assuming that we’ve had no more incidents, correct?”

“Right. Everyone seems to have called off the dogs since Clark and Nikki started going out again.”

“Indeed. And how’s the little cunt doing?”

“She’s still waving it at him every chance she gets. I would so love to see her turned into road kill.”

“Why, Dr. Williams... you’re channeling Joan Crawford. Next we’ll be feeding her dead canaries.”

Jody burst into laughter, happy to be with Lil after many weeks of not seeing him. They’d both been so caught up with life and living; there didn’t seem to be time for much else. Tonight was the first time in a long time that they were together just for the fun of it.

They parked the car and made their way into the stadium. The place was packed, the air rife with excitement as football fans crowded toward their seats. Jody and Lil sat high up in the bleachers, trying to remain as unobtrusive as possible. Jody fully expected Clark’s family to be here en masse, and the last thing he wanted to do was bump into any of them, so even though Lil would have preferred to sit closer, he’d won the argument.

Clark was having a great night with multiple receptions and rushing for two of the three touchdowns. At halftime, Cal was ahead by eight, and everyone was going wild.

“I’m going to get something to eat,” Lil said. “You want to come?”

“Hell yes! I’d rather not sit here and watch the cheerleaders shake their booty, especially one cheerleader in particular.”

“I hear you, brother. Come on.” Lil pulled Jody up from his seat, and they made their way down the steps and over to the snack bar. The lines were huge, but it was to be expected, and they waited patiently for their turn. Lil ordered the nacho special while Jody settled for some hotdogs. Once they were handed their order they balanced their food, along with the two drinks, and made their way through the crowd slowly. If Jody hadn’t been so concerned about spilling anything he would have noticed the group ahead, but as it turned out he was too caught up in trying not to get jostled, so he headed straight toward the Stevens clan.

They were all there, Mary and Jim with three of their five sons. The only one absent was Robby, who had elected to watch the game on TV with his wife and infant son.

“Well, look who’s here,” Zach threw out, staring at Jody as if he were dirt. “It’s Dr. Fruitcake.”

“Zach!” Jason admonished.

“What are you doing here?” Jim asked, addressing Jody.

“Last time I looked, this was a free country. I can be anywhere I want to be,” Jody replied.

“Anywhere but here.”

“Look, I just want to watch the game. I’m not here to cause any trouble.”

“I thought we had an understanding?”

“We did?” Jody asked, curious, until he realized what Jim was implying. “Oh, yes... your message.”

“Wasn’t it clear enough?”

“Loud and clear,” Jody replied.

“Good!” Jim said, the hatred written all over his face. “But it’s hardly relevant anymore, is it?”

“Excuse me?”

“Now that Clark’s announced his engagement,” Jim threw out triumphantly.

“Engagement?” Jody heard the word, but was having trouble processing the meaning.

“Yeah, didn’t you hear? Clark and Nikki are going to get married as soon as they graduate in June!” Zach smiled maliciously, loving the look of shock on Jody’s face. “Did you honestly think he was like you? You were a momentary aberration!”

Lil pulled Jody back before he could hit Zach. The food fell all around them as Jody dropped his tray in anger. He would have given his next paycheck to kick Zach in the mouth and try out his newfound boxing skills; however, now was not the time, nor the place.

“Come on, Lil,” he said quietly, turning abruptly and heading for the parking lot.

“Jody, what about our things?”

“Forget about them!”

Jody continued to walk toward the car, picking up the pace as he left the stadium behind. He had no idea that tears were running down his cheeks until he was stopped by a tug on his arm. It was Jason trying to talk to him.

“Jody. Hey, buddy, I’m sorry about what just happened.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“No. But you’re upset, and I wanted to explain.”

“It’s your brother that needs to be talking, not you!”

“I’m sure he’ll tell you as soon as he sees you.”

Lil put his arms around Jody and handed him a paper napkin that he’d tucked into his pocket earlier. “Here you go, sweetie.”

Jody ignored him and backhanded the tears instead. “I gotta go.”

“Do you want me to give Clark a message?”

“Yeah! Tell him that I send him all my best for a bright future.”

He turned and walked away from Jason, barely able to stand the sight of the blond who reminded him too much of his brother.

Jody was completely silent in the car on their way home.

“There’s got to be a perfectly logical explanation,” Lil said quietly. “I would tone down the hysteria until you speak to him.”

“I’m not so sure I want to.”

“Jody, you know you don’t mean that.”

“I’ve done everything he’s asked, Lil! I’ve been in the closet with him, shielded him from everything that’s happened to me, but I will not put up with an engagement, real or otherwise. It’s too much!”

“I’m sure that he has his reasons.”

“None of them would be good enough, and God help him if I find out he’s been sleeping with her all along.”

“I’m sure that’s not happened.”

“Bullshit! I wouldn’t put it past her to try and seduce him. She’s probably knocked up!”

“Jody, you’re spiraling. You need to fucking calm down.”



“Why would he do this? He made it very clear from the beginning that it was all an act. What would make him change, unless he’s had a change of heart and decided he’d rather live in the straight world?” Jody was practically screaming now, his tears pouring down his face in a torrent of pain.

Lil pulled into the driveway, killed the engine, and grabbed his best friend to hold him tightly against his body. He rocked him gently as he listened to the weeping that soon turned to a keening that broke his heart. His tears fell as well, easily affected by Jody’s heartbreak.

“Shh, Jody, please, sweetie. It’s going to be okay.”

“I love him so much, Lil.”

“I know you do, baby. And I’m sure he loves you just as much. You need to let him tell you why he’s done this.”

“I can’t do this anymore. I’m losing him the same way I lost Rick.”

“Jody, it’s nothing like that. Clark is alive and well, and if you’d just calm down and let him explain, I’m sure he can make this all better.”

But he didn’t. Clark stayed away that night and the next day. The phone never rang.

And the proud and stubborn side of Jody finally surfaced after months of being in hiding. The side of his personality that he’d repressed because of his love surged forward, preventing him from driving to the apartment to hear Clark’s explanation. He’d had enough of this, and even though his heart was broken and his life appeared to be over, he never once picked up the phone.

## CHAPTER 26

IT was Saturday, the seventeenth of March, and Clark's twenty-fifth birthday. Jody tried to push the thought out of his head even as the memories of last year's celebration blindsided him unexpectedly. He reached for the necklace that still hung around his neck and caressed the small charm, rubbing his thumb on the little kitten mindlessly.

The past five months had been the most miserable of his life. He'd been suffering from acute insomnia, choosing to work double shifts rather than go home to an empty bed. His good eating habits had gone by the wayside, but he kept up the visits to the gym, trying to take out his anger and depression on inanimate objects like punching bags and weights. He'd lost about five pounds and the dark circles under his eyes made him look haggard and older by at least five years.

Lil had been as supportive and loving as possible, but he could only do so much. He'd wanted to confront Clark and rip out his hair by the roots, but Jody had held him back, insisting that it wasn't his place or his relationship.

The first forty-eight hours after he'd heard about the engagement had been the worst. Every time the door opened or the phone rang, he'd hold his breath, thinking that Clark would make an appearance and explain the unexplainable. But of course, it never happened. His silence was as profound as Rick's death.

Jody couldn't understand how he could have been so wrong about Clark, how he had misread him so badly. Clark had been nothing but loving those weeks before the first game, thoughtful and tender in and out of bed. Every minute of every day had been about each other, yet Clark had been able to walk away without a backward glance. What kind of person would do such a thing?

Jody's initial reaction was anger. It almost consumed him with its ferocity. He wanted to lash out at the people who'd caused this rift, to hurt the entire Stevens family or Nikki or even the NFL, but when his anger was finally spent and he realized how futile it all was, he shifted his attention to bodybuilding, tearing into punching bags and lifting weights that challenged him and left him physically exhausted. Eventually, the anger slowly dissipated only to be replaced by an irrational fear for both their lives, and when nothing untoward happened to either one of them, he was filled with self-doubt, questioning every motive and every word that ever came out of Clark's mouth. Jody's confidence was shaken to the core, his psyche completely dismembered.

Clark had an amazing season, according to Lil. He was voted most valuable player of the year. There were pictures of him all over the local papers, and *Sports Illustrated* had done an article on college jocks who would be making it to the big time. Rumors about his chances in the NFL were no longer rumors but were now facts. There were at least three teams that wanted to draft him. What held Jody's interest wasn't so much the football, but all the articles about Clark and Nikki. They seemed to be the golden couple, favorites of photographers and columnists alike. And this was the ultimate betrayal. He could forgive Clark for what he'd done if it had only been about his career, but he would never forgive him if he were back in her bed.

Jody glanced at his wristwatch and saw that he only had a few more minutes left before the end of his shift. He should be going home to bed, but he was meeting Lil instead. They were spending the weekend in Napa, driving from one winery to another and staying overnight at the Silverado Country Club. It was his first outing since he and Clark broke up, the first time he'd taken Lil up on an offer to get out of town and try and forget. He knew that it was hopeless, but at least he'd spend the next two days in a drunken haze.

THERE was a knock on the door, and Mike stuck half his body through the opening before I could even reply.

“Okay if I come in?”

“Sure.”

I was home for the weekend to celebrate my birthday with the family and to meet Scott Healy, the agent my father had hired to negotiate my upcoming contract. He had a great reputation and seemed genuine in his desire to do what was best for me. He and my dad had spent hours going over the possibilities and were surprised that I showed little interest in what they were talking about.

It wasn’t surprising to me. I couldn’t care less which team picked me, so long as it was as far away from here as possible. I’d been going through the motions for five months and doing a damn good job of it, judging by all the accolades and hype my performance on the field had generated. It had been the best football season of my career, but I barely remembered one minute of it. I’d made a pact with my father to protect the man I loved, and all my energy was focused on keeping my end of the bargain.

No one in my family saw beyond the exterior, taking my last-minute switch from Jody to Nikki at face value, concluding that I’d finally come to my senses and done the right thing. No one cared to see beyond the obvious. If any of my brothers had bothered to look they would have seen that something was missing, that I no longer smiled, that the joy I always felt when I stepped out on that football field had disappeared the night I’d betrayed Jody.

I still cried his name in my sleep, waking with fresh tears on my face. Even my body had shut down; the arousal that came so easily when I was around him had disappeared. I couldn’t remember the last time I thought about sex. I had made a deal with the devil, but sleeping with Nikki wasn’t part of the agreement. I’d promised Jody I wouldn’t touch her, and I felt some small satisfaction in knowing that I’d kept that promise. At the end of each day I could tell myself that my betrayal had not extended that far.

“Bro?”

I’d completely forgotten that Michael was still in the room. I tugged on the chain around my neck, rubbing my thumb against the charm, a constant reminder of Jody and what we had. I caressed it as I’d been doing every day since he put it around my neck.

“What is it, Mike?”

“Why aren’t you with Dad and Scott, listening to the negotiations?”

“I’m sure they’ll call me if they need me.”

“You don’t seem very enthusiastic about this,” Mike said, questioning my lack of interest.

“I’ll get excited later.”

“Clark, I need to ask you a question.”

“What is it?”

“Are you happy?”

I huffed out a bitter laugh, shaking my head with surprise. “It seems like I should be, don’t you think? I’ve got it all: the career, the woman, the life Dad wanted for me?”

“Well, that answers my question,” Mike said. “You’re miserable, aren’t you?”

I turned to look at my brother—really look at him. He seemed genuinely concerned, and I was shaken for a minute. The tears pushed up so quickly, I didn’t have time to put my mask in place.

“Mike.” I was going to brush him off, to tell him he was wrong, but my body betrayed me, and the tears started to fall. I turned quickly and moved away from him, but he followed and pulled me back and said, “I have to tell you something, bro.”

“Would you please get out of here?” I was embarrassed by my weakness and didn’t want to hear anything he had to say.

“I can’t, Clark. I should have said something months ago. I was just too scared.”

I spun around and saw that he had tears in his eyes as well. “Scared of what?”

“Of being wrong and rocking the boat.”

“Mike, what are you talking about?”

“Why are you no longer with Jody?” He waited for my reply, finally shaking me by the arm and demanding an answer. “Why did you tell us you were gay, if you aren’t? Was it all a lie?”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Clark, please, I need to know.”

I was trying to figure out why he was asking me all these questions after the fact. “It wasn’t a lie, Mike.”

“Then why the fuck isn’t he still in your life?”

“I’m not good for him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Being with me was too dangerous. He could have gotten hurt, and I wasn’t going to let that happen.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Mike said. He was agitated, pacing around me like an angry tiger while he backhanded his tears. “Who told you that he was in danger?”

“Let’s just say that I received a not-so-subtle threat.”

“From Zach?”

“No, actually, it was from Dad.”

“What did he say?”

“That Jody’s life was in danger if we persisted in our sick little romance. He said that it would be so easy to make sure that Jody had an ‘accident’ on his way to work or coming home from the hospital. He basically threatened to set his guys on him, beat him up and hurt him if I persisted in my wicked ways.” I threw myself down on the bed and covered my face with both hands. Finally, I looked at Mike and saw that he was staring at me in horror. I sat up and continued. “Dad knew everything about Jody, Mike. He knew his fucking schedule, where he was every minute of each day. He knew the names of his parents, where they lived, how often he and I were together. He knew what time Jody got off work, when he’d meet me, when he’d leave my apartment, how many hours I’d spent in Jody’s house. He was having us followed! I think that he even had our phones tapped, if that’s possible.”

“And you believed him?”

“Of course I did! Every fact he had was completely accurate!”

“He lied to you.”

“What?”

“He fucking lied!” Mike screamed.

“I don’t understand.”

“Dad had Jody beaten up a month before the season opened!”

The blood seemed to be draining out of my body. I could feel my extremities going cold and the buzzing in my ears. I would have probably fainted if I weren’t so shocked, but I had to hear all of this, to make sure I wasn’t imagining this conversation.

“What the hell are you saying?”

Mike started to cry again, big sobs that wracked his body. I grabbed him and hugged him against me, wondering what could have possibly happened to turn him into such a wreck. He was the toughest kid, never afraid to get into a fight or stand up for his beliefs, but tonight he seemed genuinely terrified.

“Clark, I’m so sorry.”

“For what, bro?”

“I should have told you.”

“You’re telling me now.”

“Isn’t it too late?”

“Let me decide that. What exactly happened?”

“I walked into the house sometime last summer; it must have been August or September. I wasn’t supposed to be here, it was the middle of the day, but I’d forgotten to pack a lunch and I had no money, so I thought I’d grab a sandwich.”

“Okay.”

“I heard voices coming from the family room. I don’t know why I didn’t just barge in like I normally do, but I decided to eavesdrop instead. To see what was going on.”

“And?”

“It was Dad with a couple of the guys from work and John, Nikki’s dad. There were four of them in the room.”

“Whatever, bro.”

“They’d been drinking, and they were telling Dad how they almost kept the BMW, but decided to ditch it at the last minute because it was too risky.”

“The BMW?”

“Yeah. I didn’t have a clue what they were talking about. The only reason I stayed to listen was because John said he was so tempted to rip the faggot’s balls off his body and stuff them down his throat.”

“Why did you think that was important?”

“I heard the word faggot.”

“Right.”

“Clark, I was still dealing with your fucking revelation. That word just rang a bell!”

I reached out and touched him on the shoulder. “It’s okay, Mike. Go on.”

“Dad thanked them for their help, and the talk switched to you and football. They made Dad promise to get them tickets for one of your games.”

Mike looked down and fidgeted with his hands. “I never put two and two together, Clark. Not until you stopped seeing Jody, and Dad and Mom were talking in the kitchen one day. She asked him if he thought you’d be okay, and he said, yes, that he’d taken care of your problem.”

“And what did she say?”

“She asked him how he’d fixed the problem.”

“And what did he say? Christ, Mike, I feel like I’m pulling teeth here!”

“He said that he kicked that ‘little queer’s ass’ from here to kingdom come!”

I couldn’t believe it. I had to find out for myself if Mike had misunderstood the entire conversation. I had no idea how to go about it, but I figured I’d start with the hospital, since I recalled the incident at the



emergency room when Jody had supposedly been attacked by a patient. Now I wondered if that was the night he'd been hurt by my dad. I grabbed my phone and dialed Jody's hospital, asking to be connected to the administrator's office.

"Hi there!" I tried to sound as professional as possible. "My name is Scott Healy, and I'm with the *Oakland Tribune*. I'm doing a follow-up on that gay bashing that happened last summer. You know the one that involved one of your doctors?"

I listened as she acknowledged the query, telling me that it was a terrible incident, but fortunately, Dr. Williams seemed to have made a full recovery.

"Did anyone ever find out if the incident occurred outside the premises of your hospital or within?"

"Oh no, sir. This happened outside hospital jurisdiction. Dr. Williams was brought in by ambulance."

"Who called it in?"

"Let me look it up." She put me on hold for a second. "He must have, because I don't see any police reports."

"I see. Well, thanks for your time."

"No problem. Have there been any more bashings?"

"Yeah. We're checking to see if there's a connection."

"Well, good luck."

"Thanks again." I was stunned and turned to Mike. "You're right. He *was* hurt. That's why he came home in another car. He told me he that he got rid of the BMW because it was bad luck! He didn't tell me that it was fucking stolen! Why the fuck didn't he tell me?" I yelled at Mike, my anger surging through me like a tidal wave.

"Maybe he was scared of what you'd do. Maybe they threatened him as well! How the fuck should I know!" Mike screamed right back at me.

"You should have said something, Mike. Why did you wait so long?"

"I'm sorry. I was scared and confused. I didn't put it all together."

I sat on the bed and buried my head in my hands. It was Mike's turn to comfort me, to wrap his arms around me and tell me we'd fix this. I had no idea how. Wasn't it too late? How would I ever be able to face Jody after the way I'd acted? He probably hated me.

First things first though. I had to confront the devil and see for myself how truly rotten he was. I'd always known that football meant more to him than I ever did; I just never realized how much.

I stormed out of my room with Mike on my heels, pulling at me and telling me to calm down. "Bro, come on, take a minute and think about what you're going to say."

"There's nothing to think about."

I walked into the kitchen and looked at my father and said, "You're a fucking liar!"

"What did you just say?" He glared at me, expecting me to back down like I always did in his presence. Scott Healy looked at me in surprise and then looked at my father to see how he'd react.

I walked up to my dad and hauled him up off the chair and said, "You lied to me!"

"About what?"

"You said you'd leave him alone, that if I did everything I was supposed to do, you wouldn't touch him!"

"And I didn't."

"That's because you already had! You hurt him a month before we even made our little agreement! You're a fucking piece of shit! I can't believe you're my father!"

"And I can't believe you're acting this way over a fucking queer! How dare you throw over a beautiful young woman for that piece of filth! Nikki was nothing but good to you! You were about to ruin her life as well as your own. I was only trying to protect you!"

"It's my fucking life, Dad. You had no right to meddle in it!"

"Well, that's where you're wrong, kid. Your career has always been my business. You never had enough brains to figure out what the hell to do with it. I just made the decision for you."

"You did not just call me dumb!"

“Clark, the smartest thing about you is your talent. You are nothing without football, and the sooner you accept that the happier you’ll be.”

Scott was looking at both of us, confused by the entire conversation. “What’s going on here? Why are we talking about queers?”

“Because,” I spat out, “I’m gay. That’s why!”

“Why you stupid cocksucker.” My father walked up to me and slapped me in the face. He slapped me so hard my ears were ringing and I finally snapped.

I wrapped my hands around his neck and started to squeeze. I was blinded with rage. I wanted to kill him, to make him suffer the way he’d made me suffer these past five months. To hurt him the way he’d hurt Jody. I was completely out of control, unaware that people were screaming and trying to get me off of him. Michael was practically standing on my back, trying to pull my hands away from my father’s throat. I could see my dad’s face turning all shades of red, and his eyes were starting to bulge. “I hate you,” I said, the words coming out of the depths of my soul.

Something hit me. I found out later that my mother had pulled a rolling pin out of a kitchen drawer and smashed it into the back of my head. I remember letting go, seeing my father standing there, taking in huge gulps of air. I remember the screaming, and Michael crying and calling my name.

And then the world went black, and I remember nothing after that.

## CHAPTER 27

LIL pulled up to the driveway and was surprised to see another car blocking the garage. It was late Sunday night, and they'd just come back from their Napa adventure.

"Oh, dear," Lil muttered under his breath, looking over at Jody who dozed beside him.

"What is it? Are we home?"

"We're here, and it looks like you've got some visitors."

Jody sat up and shook his head, trying to wake up. He'd slept most of the way, having had a little too much at the wine tasting. Lil had volunteered to swish and spit so that he'd be able to drive them home. It was a two-hour drive, so that had given Jody the little bit of time his body needed to filter some of the alcohol in his system. Nonetheless, he wasn't exactly at his sharpest.

"What the hell are they doing here?" Jody asked when he finally realized that it was Jason and Mike, standing beside a black car.

"Why don't we find out before we get all excited? Okay, sweetie?"

"Stop the car."

"I am!"

Jody got out before the car even came to a full stop, and marched over to where the boys stood against their vehicle. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Nice to see you too, Jody.”

Jody glared at both of them, waiting for a reply.

“We’re here to deliver a message.”

“After five months of silence he sends messengers? Well, fuck that,” he said, spinning away from them and going into his house. He went straight to the refrigerator and pulled out a beer and swallowed half of it in one gulp. He was surprised how quickly the anger came rushing back, but when he saw Jason and Mike, living reminders of the man he was trying to forget, he was assaulted by feelings he’d been trying to repress for months.

The door opened and Lil walked in with the two men trailing behind him. “You still here?” Jody asked.

“Look, we really need to talk to you,” Mike stammered out.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Jody, why don’t we listen to what they have to say?” Lil interjected, trying to smooth over an awkward confrontation. “Why don’t you just tell us what you want?” Lil said, addressing the twins. “Jody and I share everything, so there’s no need for secrets.”

“Yeah, just spill it,” Jody said, taking another gulp and draining the bottle. “Hand me another beer, Lil.”

“Is there a reason Clark couldn’t deliver the message himself?” Lil asked politely, unlike his best friend, who was being belligerent and doing his best to be as obnoxious as possible.

“Clark’s been hurt. He’s in the hospital with a concussion.”

Jody stopped just as he was about to take another pull off his beer, and he asked quickly, “Isn’t football season over? How’d he get hurt? Is he all right?”

Jason and Mike were gratified to see the look of concern sweep over Jody’s face.

“There was a fight, and he got hit in the back of the head. He’ll be okay; he just has to stay in bed for another twenty-four hours. He asked us to deliver this,” Mike said, shoving a small box at Jody.

“What’s in it?”

“I think he wrote you a note.”

Jody opened up the box and saw the necklace that he’d given Clark almost two years ago, the twin to the one he had hanging around his own neck. Seeing it brought a rush of tears, and he blinked them away and walked out of the room so that he could read the note in private.

*Jo-Jo, Clark had written, I don’t deserve it, but I beg you to meet me, so I can explain. I’m sending this necklace so you know this is really me, and not some sort of trap my father is setting. Bring it with you to the Shangri-La Motel in Sausalito, the one we stayed at last year. If you decide not to come, toss the necklace, ’cause I won’t be needing it anymore.*

*I’ll be waiting for you on Wednesday in the parking lot until eleven o’clock at night. Please listen to the six o’clock news on Channel Two before you come.*

He’d signed the note “Kit,” which made it even more touching, and Jody angrily wiped the tears that trailed down his cheek. He pulled the necklace out of the box and placed it around his neck on top of the other one and made his way back to the kitchen.

“Tell your brother that you’ve delivered the message,” Jody announced, being a little bit more civil.

The men stood up in unison, double visions of the man he’d been craving for months, and the feelings that he’d been trying to get rid of came rushing with such force he had to sit down to try to steady himself.

“Then I guess we’ll be going,” Jason said, reluctant to leave.

“Jody?”

“Yes?” he replied, looking at Mike, who was trying to say something but seemed to be struggling.

“He really loves you.”

Jody sighed loudly, then shook his head and waved Mike off. “Just go,” he said.

They left and Lil pulled out a chair and sat down. They sat in silence for at least ten minutes.

“Are we going to talk about it?” Lil finally asked. “Or are we going to sit here all night, pretending they were never here?”

“He wants to meet me.”

“Well, I suppose that’s a good start. Where and when?”

“Lil, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t go through this again.”

“Jody, look at me.”

“What?”

“You still love him.”

“Of course I still love him! I’ll always love him, but it’s not enough,” Jody said almost desperately. “It wasn’t enough before, it won’t be enough again. I can’t compete with football and that world. I just can’t, Lil.”

“Won’t you at least listen to what he has to say?”

“I’ll just get sucked in; I won’t do it!”

“Where does he want to meet?”

“In Sausalito, at the motel we stayed at once before. We picked it because of the name, Shangri-La. This was when we thought that we could change the world and find utopia.”

“Sweetie, you can still find your utopia. It’s all a state of mind.”

“That’s bullshit, Lil, and you know it! His world does not allow people like me in it.”

“You’re making assumptions. You have no idea why he’s been silent all these months.”

“Why the fuck are you defending him? Weren’t you the one who told me that you could cheerfully castrate him?”

“Maybe I was wrong.”

“What? What drug did you just take?”

“Oh, stop being so cynical, Jody. It doesn’t suit you.”

Jody stood abruptly and started to pace. “Look, I’m terrified, if you must know the truth. I’ve spent the past months in hell, and I’m just now getting to a point where I can stand to even open my eyes in the morning. I can’t backslide, Lil. If I let him into my heart again and he tramples it once more, I’ll never recover.”

“I understand.”

“Do you? Do you know what it’s like to die a little every day? Do you know how often I’ve wished that someone would just get a gun and put me out of my misery? I’ve been walking around with a broken heart for months, Lil, and it’s just now starting to scab over. You’re asking me to rip that scab off, knowingly, and watch me hemorrhage right in front of your eyes.”

“Sweetie, if you don’t go and listen to what he has to say, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life and you may as well buy the gun and do the deed.”

“I can’t make a decision right now. I need time to process this.”

“Would you like me to stay with you? I have vacation days that I can use.”

“Yes. I’ll call off as well.”

“Okay.”

Jody stood and went to the refrigerator and took out another beer. He was well on his way to getting absolutely shit-faced, but not before he made the call to the hospital. He picked up the phone and walked out of the kitchen.

Lil spent the next three days nursing Jody. His mood swings alternated between deep despair and shallow self-pity. The crying jags were the worst. Lil had no idea how badly his friend was hurting until he sat with him for hours listening to him weep.

He’d been with Jody throughout Rick’s illness, witnessed how he dealt with his death, and although the sorrow was deep, there was a certain amount of relief in knowing that his lover no longer suffered and had moved on to a better place.

This scenario was completely different. Apparently, Lil had only seen the tip of the iceberg over the past few months. Now he was seeing



it all, every layer and pretense stripped away, and he was shocked at the depth of love that was consuming his friend. By the third day, both of them were exhausted.

“Sweetie, that’s it! We’re calling an end to this pity party.”

“I guess so. I don’t have any tears left.”

“You need to get in the shower and get ready to go. You’re supposed to meet him tonight. How long will it take you to get there?”

“I didn’t say I was going.”

“Get in the fucking bathroom! You need to shave and shower; you reek, sweetie, and I’ll be damned if you go to your assignation looking like shit.”

“Assignation? You’re making this sound like *Casablanca*.”

“It may as well be. It’s all so mysterious and melodramatic; so perfectly gay,” Lil said with a huge smile. “Come on, baby. Lighten up a little. You’re about to see the beautiful one after months of him missing in action.”

“Oh, God.”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Lil commanded. “No more crying! Shower, now!”

By the time Jody had finished getting ready, it was almost six o’clock in the evening. He’d changed shirts three times before he finally settled on a simple blue T-shirt that showed off the nicely shaped torso he’d been working on so diligently over the past many months. His nerves were completely shot, and he kept veering off into hyperventilating, so much so that he’d have to consciously think about breathing exercises to regulate himself and calm down.

Lil turned on the TV, just as the familiar music of the Channel Two news team came on. He’d made them both sandwiches and they sat, side by side, to see what was so important.

It was the usual pair of announcers, droning on about all the good and bad news that had occurred that day. In the middle of the broadcast, one of them was handed a slip of paper, and he read it and looked at his partner and said, “Well, John, this is certainly a first.”

“What is?” the other man replied.

“Ladies and gentlemen, here’s some breaking news from the sports desk. It seems that potential first-round draft pick Clark Stevens of the University of California at Berkeley has made an announcement that may or may not affect his chances at the draft.”

“What did he announce?”

“Clark Stevens has made an announcement to his agent and to the football world at large. He’s informed every owner in the NFL via a certified letter that he’s gay. He says he won’t play the sport without the man he loves by his side.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. The *man* he loves!”

“Well, this is definitely newsworthy. Almost as exciting as Edward the Eighth, abdicating the throne of England for the woman he loves.”

“Well, it’s not quite the same, but it’s certainly significant.”

“I’ll say. Isn’t this the guy that could make twelve million dollars by signing on the dotted line?”

“The very same.”

“So why is his announcement so significant? This is 2005 after all, and we’re a much more tolerant society. Equal rights for everyone, right?”

Jody stood up in slow motion, like a man walking under water. He dropped his sandwich and the drink as well. He didn’t hear Lil exclaim, or pay any attention to whatever else was being said about Clark’s career and the money. All he could think of was that one sentence, that Clark wouldn’t play football without the man he loved by his side.

“What time is it?” he said, grabbing Lil by the arms and dragging him off the sofa.

“What, honey?”

“What time is it?” Jody was frantic, his face was flushed and he seemed to have trouble breathing.

“Jody, sweetie, you need to calm down! Isn’t that the most romantic thing you’ve ever heard?”

“Lil? Please, where the fuck are my car keys? And the necklace? Where’s Clark’s necklace?”

Lil grabbed Jody and hugged him tightly against his body. “Deep breaths, baby. Both necklaces are around your neck. Your car keys are on the table, and your jacket is right here.” He pulled away from Jody and picked up the leather jacket and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” Jody said, still half-shocked.

“Go, sweetie,” Lil said, pushing Jody, almost squealing with excitement. “He so fucking loves you!”

THE waiting was killing me. He’d almost run out of time. I looked at the clock again and saw that it was now eleven. There was a car pulling in. I thought it might be his. It was his; I’d recognize that license plate anywhere. PROUD2B. And for the first time in this long and twisted journey of ours, I hoped that I’d made him proud.

I got out of my car and waited for him to pull up alongside of me. We were in the parking lot of the motel, and the lights were pretty dim. He looked exhausted but beautiful in the dark shadows. His hair was a bit longer than I remembered, but the eyes were the same, and the spark of interest when they rested on me was all the reassurance I needed. I’d never been happier to see anyone in my life.

“You look like shit,” Jody said. “What did you do to your hands again?”

I snorted out a laugh. I must have looked like a casualty of war, with the ace bandage around my head and hands that were covered with red marks. “You don’t look so hot yourself,” I countered.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I punched a hole in our kitchen wall.”

“So what else is new?” He walked toward me, never taking his gaze off my face. “I can’t believe that you just outted yourself.” Finally, when he was but a few feet away, he tilted his head back and said, “Why’d you do it?”

“I didn’t do it for you, Jo. I did it for me.”

“Good answer,” he whispered.

His gaze burned through me. I didn’t realize how much I missed him until he stood in front of me. His soft brown eyes sparkled with unshed tears, and I wanted to drown myself in his embrace, to kiss away the hurt that I’d caused, but I had to answer his question. I had to make him understand. “I did it for me, Jo-Jo, because it was time I came to terms with who I am. The public outing was my gift to you, to prove how much I love you.”

Jody grabbed me by the neck and kissed me hungrily, the evidence of his desire pressing rigidly against my thigh. My arms encircled his waist, lifting him off the ground. He latched on, clinging to me with arms and legs wrapped tightly around my torso, never letting go of my lips. I heard him making those needy, begging sounds that always went straight to my cock, and I could feel myself growing and pulsating for his touch. “God, I’ve missed you,” I sighed, running my tongue around his lips, overwhelmed by the desire that raced through me. It had been months since I had ached like this.

“Do we have a room?” Jody was breathless, covering my face with kisses.

I put him down and took his hand, practically running to our room, where I fumbled with the keys while he waited impatiently behind me. Finally, I got the door open, only to be slammed up against the wall by Jody, who attacked my mouth with a ferocity that I’d never seen before.

“I need you,” he hissed, biting and scratching and marking me. We were like two wild animals, desperate in our need, every nerve ending on fire with a craving that would destroy us if we didn’t see it to fruition. I was kissing him everywhere, literally tearing the clothes off his back, inhaling his scent and moaning with pleasure as I was doing it.

We were lying on the bed, naked, lusty and hard, grinding into each other without any tenderness. This wasn’t about love right now. This was pure sex, two men in heat who had to have each other or die trying. His fingers tangled in my hair, pulling and twisting. “Have you been with anyone?” he whispered, all the while sucking on the soft skin under my ear.

“No.”

“Did you fuck her?”

“Never!”

He growled and said, “Good answer,” for the second time that night, and he bent down and swallowed me, taking my cock all the way down his throat and groaning as he did it.

I let him have his way with me, sighing in pleasure as I turned my life into his hands once more.

He pulled away from me for one second, and I was caught in the warm glow that emanated from his eyes. They were golden-brown tonight, sweeping over my face, familiarizing themselves with me again after so many months of doing without. His gaze was riveting, and I was pinned to the bed, unable to break away from the stare that was almost primal in its intensity. I heard sounds coming from my throat, needy sounds that only stopped when he said, “Come for me,” and he swallowed me again, making wet, sucking noises, driving me wild, pushing me to the brink much too soon, and I exploded in hot spurts, lost in sensations as he swallowed around me, sending electric bolts up and down my spine while I rutted against his face. His hands were everywhere, squeezing with a fierceness that almost hurt, but I didn’t care.

I pulled him up my body, dragging his cock against my groin and stomach. He pressed his lips to mine, sharing my taste, which still coated his tongue, and I sucked greedily, making begging noises while his hips undulated against mine. “Please, Jo, make me scream, baby.”

“Lube?”

“Pocket.”

Jody started to laugh, and we both said *good answer* at the same time, and he bent down and pulled my jeans off the floor and fumbled for the small tube of lube that I’d brought on the off chance that this would happen. He slathered some on his cock, lifted my legs, placing them on his shoulders, and slammed into me without any preamble, grazing the one spot that always made me scream.

“I love you,” he said, seconds before he came, and my arms and legs wrapped around him, holding him close as he spilled into me in a pulsing, steady stream.

Eventually, when our hearts slowed to a reasonable rhythm and the twitching and shuddering had subsided, he rolled off and sat up, pulling my necklace off his neck. He gave it back to me, laying it tenderly against my skin, all the while staring at me with those eyes that had captured me a lifetime ago.

“Don’t ever take this off again.”

“I won’t. Will you ever forgive me?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Forever?”

“And even after that.”

# EPILOGUE

*Berkeley, California, 2007*

“CLARK! Mr. Stevens! Over here, please.”

I turned to my right and the flashbulbs went off, followed by several more, as Jody and I made our way outside the arrival area of the San Francisco International Airport. We’d just flown in from Chicago and already were being bombarded by the paparazzi that seemed to permeate our existence since my public outing.

Jody and I had become celebrities, gay icons of the year, and fodder for every tabloid from here to New York and back. When the public heard that I had outted myself for the man I loved, I became a national hero. Every gay man within a hundred feet wanted a picture of me or an autograph. Women found the whole idea romantic as hell despite the fact that we were homosexuals. They still thought that any man who would be willing to give up so much for the person he loved, regardless of the sex, was worth knowing. I even had fucking fan mail. It was so bizarre!

Jody took it all with a grain of salt, having lived under this kind of scrutiny once before with Rick. When the press found out who I was in

love with, it got even more out of control! For weeks, all they talked about was Jody and Rick, Jody and Clark, Clark and Jody.... Christ; you'd think we were movie stars or something!

"Dr. Williams! What are you guys in town for?"

"A wedding," Jody replied, keeping his head down and trying not to get photographed again. The people at Northwestern Medical Center knew he was gay, but I was pretty sure they wouldn't want the new head of their trauma center in Chicago to be plastered all over the *National Enquirer*.

"Are you guys getting married?" The reporter had almost imploded when he heard Jody's reply, thinking that he had the scoop of the year.

"It's not our wedding," Jody answered, shaking his head. "It's a friend."

"Oh," he replied, visibly disappointed. "Maybe you guys will be next?"

"Maybe." Jody smiled that wicked smile of his, the one that made his dimple show up on his left cheek. I felt my cock twitch, and I adjusted myself as casually as possible as I bent toward his ear and whispered, "You'd better behave yourself, or I'll really give them something to talk about."

Jody laughed out loud and grabbed my hand just as the limo pulled up. We got into the car as the cameras clicked and flashed some more, and were finally sped off to Berkeley, far away from the media scrutiny.

"When the fuck is this circus going to end?" I turned toward Jody and said, "It's been over a year and a half. Don't they have something more exciting to talk about?"

"Kit, I doubt that their boring news could generate as many sales as pictures of your chest."

"Shut up."

"Besides," Jody said, leaning toward me and giving me a soft squeeze, "you know I get off when people turn green with envy."

"You're not exactly a troll, you know. You're the hottest doctor that's ever graced the halls of a Chicago hospital."



“Christ! It’s weird living there, isn’t it? Didn’t I swear I’d never shovel snow again?”

“I’m doing the shoveling, so stop bitching about it. Besides, it’s only temporary.”

“Well, Mom and Dad are over the moon, so that makes it worthwhile.”

“I love Mom and Dad,” I said, grinning at him. Jody’s parents had insisted that I call them that as soon as we moved into their basement apartment. We’d elected to live with them, because we didn’t want to buy a place in Chicago. We wanted to keep the house in Berkeley without renting it out, and it would have been too much of an expense to maintain two houses. This way, everyone was happy, especially his parents.

“We’ll be back here before you know it. My contract with the Bears is half over.”

“I miss our hot tub and the deck.”

“We’ll be there in less than twenty minutes. Thank God you decided not to sell.”

“Or rent! I’d hate to have someone else enjoying my view while I’m here.”

I moved up to Jody and brought him close to me. The glass between us and the limo driver was closed. Even though this was the Bay Area, we were still a little cautious about public displays of affection.

Jody leaned his head back on the car seat and moaned as I caressed his mouth with soft kisses. “Are you worried, Jo?”

“A little bit,” he sighed. I knew that this trip was going to be traumatic for both of us, but we had to face our demons once and for all. I promised Nikki I’d be the best man at her wedding, and damn it, I had to do it, even if it meant facing my father, and most likely, Zach.

“Why is your dad walking her down the aisle, anyway?”

“Jo, we’ve already had this conversation; her father’s still in jail.”

“And despite the fact that you and I put him there, she wants us at her wedding?”

“She was as shocked as everyone else, Jo. She had no idea that you were bashed or that her father did it! You know that she turned out to be pretty decent at the end.”

“I still don’t trust her.”

“You’re a jealous, possessive boyfriend.”

“Damn right, and don’t forget it!”

“Forget it? I love it when you’re this way. It makes me hornier than fuck.”

“Kit, growing grass makes you horny. The rising sun makes you hard. Birds chirping in the trees turn you on!”

“All right, all right, I get it!” I said, laughing at his teasing. “I’m a horny old dog!”

“No, I’m the dog... you’re the big kitty, remember?”

“Right.” I pretended to purr and meow my way up and down his neck, reaching for his zipper and pulling it down slowly. I slipped my hand inside his jeans and felt his rigid cock. “Who’s the horny dog, now?”

“Fuck.”

“If I blow you, will the driver watch?”

“It’s called a privacy window for a reason. Kit, stop doing that if you’re not going to follow through on this.”

“Do I look like someone who can’t complete a task?”

Jody’s smile was one of deep satisfaction. After months of cajoling, I’d finally let him talk me into taking the medication for the attention deficit, and the difference it had made in my performance on and off the field was dramatic. “Not since you’ve started to follow your doctor’s orders.”

“I love my doctor.”

“Love you too, my big tiger. Now behave yourself. We’re almost home.”

I purred against him and held him in a tight embrace. I was so grateful to be holding him after almost losing him all those months ago. We were exactly where we wanted to be in our relationship, and it

seemed as if we had found our utopia despite all the conflict we'd had to overcome to arrive at this place. Our union had continued to flourish and grow, and now almost a year and a half later, we were about to confront two of the three men who had almost destroyed us.

"What if they do something rash?" Jody whispered.

"Jo, there's a restraining order on my father and Zach. They are not allowed to talk to us or be within twenty feet of us, unless we want them to be. Plus, Nikki assured me that there would be security at both the church and the reception."

"But if he's walking her down the aisle, and you're going to be standing with her husband-to-be; that's a lot less than twenty feet!"

"I'm pretty sure he's not planning on doing anything stupid. He promised Nikki's dad that she'd have the best wedding ever, and since he's the one who basically caused her father's jail time, he probably feels guilty as hell that John's not there."

"I wish I could stop worrying about this."

"You can't help it, Jo. You're the worrier in this family."

"I don't know how you can be so calm, Kit. It's the first time you're seeing them since we left."

"I'm calm because we won, Jo. You're here beside me where you belong, and nothing they can do or say will change that."

"Will your mother be there?"

"I'm not sure. Mike said they've been visiting every week, and she seems more like her old self. She's been asking about me."

"She's had the best that money can buy, thanks to you. She should have made a full recovery by now."

"Her speech is still a little slurry, according to the twins. But all movement is back."

"Well, that's a relief. Coming back from a massive stroke isn't an easy thing. She's lucky the paramedic picked up on her symptoms immediately."

"They had their hands full that afternoon, between me and her being unconscious."

“I don’t want to think about that anymore.”

“You’re the one that brought it up.”

“Sorry.”

I meshed our fingers in a tight grip and said, “No worries, Jo-Jo.”

“None,” he replied, kissing me on the cheek.

THE house was clean and had been aired out by the service he’d hired to maintain the property while they were away in Chicago. Jody did a brief walk-through while Clark was putting their luggage away, enjoying the sight of his own furniture and his own space.

His parents had bent over backward to make their apartment as comfortable as possible, and it was. They wanted for nothing. But it wasn’t home anymore. Home was right here, and what better way to celebrate their homecoming than to sit out in the hot tub and enjoy the beautiful view they’d been missing all this time.

It seemed almost karmic that they ended up in Chicago when any other team could have picked Clark. Despite his father’s predictions, his value as a player and a media draw went up a hundredfold after his announcement on TV. Teams were scrambling to sign him up, and he settled on the Bears because of their distance from his family and everything that had happened, but also because of Jody’s ties to Chicago.

And now they were back after being away for almost a year and a half. Back to confront their nemesis and to try and get past this whole sordid affair. He knew that despite Clark’s bravado, there had to be a part of him that was a little apprehensive about seeing his family for the first time since that afternoon so long ago. He’d been in constant touch with the twins, and they’d even had them out to Chicago for a few weeks to watch him play, but he hadn’t seen Jim or Mary since he walked out of their lives. His only contact with them was the monthly check he wrote to the nursing facility that was helping with Mary’s recovery. Clark still felt a little twinge of guilt when he thought of his mother having a stroke because of him, despite the fact that Jody reassured him constantly that it wasn’t his fault and, if anything, Jim should be the guilty party.

Nikki's wedding would be the perfect venue for the reunion. It was public, and the likelihood that they would say or do anything untoward was pretty slim.

When Clark had first mentioned the fact that Nikki was dating a former teammate, he seemed really pleased that she was moving on with her life. However, when she asked Clark to be best man, Jody thought the whole idea a bit odd. What kind of woman wanted an ex-lover to be her best man? Obviously, Clark was much more than that. Jody kept forgetting that they'd known each other for years, first as friends and then as lovers. She seemed to bear no grudges toward either one of them, despite the fact that her father was in jail after Jody picked him out of the police lineup.

Tomorrow, they were driving to Folsom for the afternoon wedding. They were going to stay the night at a local hotel and then drive back to Berkeley to spend another five days here. Jody just wanted the whole thing to be over and done with. He wanted to see Clark at peace and no longer haunted by the aftereffects. Only then would Jody stop worrying.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of his lover walking toward him with nothing on but a towel draped around his neck. The sight of him naked still made his heart thump wildly, causing an instant reaction in his groin.

"Well, you've made yourself at home in no time."

Clark grinned and said, "You want to play?"

Jody smiled and started to strip off his clothes in the living room. He made record time in going from fully clothed to naked, and he let Clark take him by the hand and lead him out to the hot tub. He had already set up the bucket of iced beers along with the chips and salsa.

"How long have you been planning this?"

"I've been thinking about hot tubs all winter long."

Jody laughed and said, "I told you. Chicago winters are for shit!"

"They're pretty intense, but it's been a good experience. Now, get your body over here and come play with me."

Jody made his way over to Clark and entered the tub gingerly. It took him a minute to adjust to the temperature, but he was comfortable in

no time, and he and Clark sat and enjoyed the warm June day and the amazing view.

“Jo?”

“Hmm?” he replied, basking in the warmth of the sun and the pulsing jets of water.

“Sit on my lap.”

Jody looked over at Clark and saw that he was hard and already more than ready for him.

“You really do want to play, don’t you?”

“Uh-huh.” He pulled Jody toward him and made him straddle his lap, wrapping his arms around his waist, and they started to kiss and move against each other in a gentle, languorous, swaying of their hips. This wasn’t going to be a frantic fuck, but more of a sensual dance, a perfect combination of sex and love. “I love you, Kit,” Jody whispered in his ear, and he felt the intensity of Clark’s desire pressing against his stomach.

“I need to get inside you, Jo.”

“Okay.”

“Can we do it this way?”

Jody repositioned him, parting his legs wider and lifting his hips. He wrapped his fingers around Clark’s cock and guided him, feeling the push and the sting, and they groaned in unison as his body clenched around the fullness that was impaling him. “God, you feel so fucking good,” Clark sighed.

“Love you,” Jody said again, his body adjusting automatically to his lover’s girth, and they continued to move against each other, picking up the pace as the passion grew. Soon they were moving frantically, chasing the orgasm that they both needed, Clark’s hands pulling and pushing Jody’s hips forward and backward, helping him along while Jody hung on for the ride of his life. The finale was as intense as the buildup; Clark felt Jody pulsing against his stomach, even as he let go deep within his lover’s body, made that much better by being surrounded in warm water that fizzed and bubbled around them. There was no escaping the gripping walls of Jody’s canal as it milked him in perfect

rhythm with the pulsing of his cock, and they cried out in unison and clenched each other as they shuddered through it.

“Love you, Jo.” Clark whispered. “So much.”

THE wedding was over. Nikki and her new husband stood in the reception line, greeting all their guests. She looked radiant in her white gown, made even more beautiful by the smile that seemed to come from deep within. She seemed genuinely happy, and I couldn’t have been more pleased.

The most awkward moment came when I had to face my father as he brought Nikki up to the front of the chapel. He looked at me, and I acknowledged him with a nod.

Jody and I had made it through the picture taking and the media frenzy. It wasn’t every day that professional football players gathered en masse, and the press was going nuts. As usual, we were bombarded by questions, and I pointed them in the direction of the newlyweds, reminding the photographers and everyone else why they were here.

“Are you and Dr. Williams getting married soon?” one of the guys with the press tag on his chest asked.

“Why don’t you guys just wait to find out?”

“Aww, come on... throw us a bone, will ya?”

I grabbed Jody’s hand and moved away from the group. The last thing I wanted was to take the spotlight away from Nikki. We were standing around the buffet table drinking champagne when my father and mother walked up to us.

I felt a rush of tenderness when I saw her. She’d aged tremendously, and one side of her face still drooped a little, but her blue eyes lit up when she saw me. She opened her arms, and I flew into them and held her against me, loving her for the woman she used to be, and not the woman who had gone off the deep end those many months ago.

I turned and saw that my father and Jody were shaking hands and seemed to be deep in some kind of a conversation. I walked toward them and stood in front of my dad.

“Are you doing okay?” he asked.

“Fine.”

“You had a great season.”

“I know.”

“Sticking with the Bears?”

“We’ll see.”

He nodded and said, “I’m sure you’ll make the right decision.”

He walked away with his arm around my mother. Zach was at the other side of the garden and never came up to me. Who knew if he’d ever get over this, but right now I didn’t care. What I did care about was the surprising words that had come out of my father’s mouth; his fucked-up way of apologizing and acknowledging that I’d been right all along.

“What did he say to you before I got here?”

“He said that he’d come to realize that the most important thing in life is a united and healthy family. Then he apologized for last year and shook my hand.”

“What drug is he on?”

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s just be grateful he’s had an epiphany. Come on, Kit,” Jody said. “Nikki’s about to throw her bouquet.”

We stood at the back of the crowd and since I towered over everyone, I caught the flowers easily, and I looked down at Jody and said, “Next year, it’ll be our turn.”

He smiled at me and the dimple showed up right on cue. “You got it, big guy.”




MICKIE B. ASHLING is the penname for a responsible office manager by day and a writer of steaming M/M erotica by night. Mickie loves men, starting with her four grown sons, her dog Charlie, and her male cat, Calvin. She's surrounded by them at every turn, and she continues this romance with everything male by writing love stories about men who love men. Nothing can ignite her muse faster than the thought of two hunky guys getting it on. Her family despairs of this need but has quietly given up on her. She's promised them that someday she'll write a het romance, but no one who really knows her is holding their breath.


Visit Mickie's Blog at <http://mickieashling.livejournal.com/>

Email Mickie at [mickie.ashling@gmail.com](mailto:mickie.ashling@gmail.com).





*Dreamspinner  
Press*



For more of the  
best M/M romance,  
visit

*Dreamspinner Press*

[www.dreamspinnerpress.com](http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com)









