

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

Lexi Ander

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

College running back, Trent Harte, has been living with his lovers, AJ Barnes and Brock Everett, for two years. Caught in a compromising position, rumors abound. It's hard enough to be an openly gay football player, but gossip and snide comments only adds to his stress. Threats against his partners cause Trent wonder if he should step back from the relationship.

AJ and Brock know there is something wrong when Trent begins to pull away. A call from Trent's father only adds to the distress. AJ and Brock refuse to let him shoulder the responsibility alone, and they call for help. Will Trent find the strength to withstand the pressure and hold on to those he loves? Or will AJ and Brock be too late to convince Trent that they are playing for keeps?

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

By Lexi Ander

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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

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Photo Description

Two blond men with short crew cuts are caught in a deep, openmouthed kiss. A third man stands slightly apart and behind the shorter man, with his arms at his waist tugging up his T-shirt. He is reaching around him to stroke the smaller man's stomach.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These men love each other and are happy together, but one of them (the one on the left) is starting to succumb to the pressures of being in a ménage à trois. Something the outside world doesn't even want to try and understand. He's not sure if he should let them go, so at least they can be together without all the added stress their kind of love brings. But doesn't he know they will never let him go.

Please no D/s or BDSM and a very HEA would be appreciated.

Sincerely,

Mandy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: M/M/M, college, sports, military, assholery, foot wrangling, established relationship, blackmail, don't mess with the mom

Word count: 23,138

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

By Lexi Ander

CHAPTER ONE

~Brock~

“You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me!” Brock Everett threw his pen across the table as a Puma’s player unnecessarily hit the Ducks’ running back, number forty-three Trent Harte, yet again. The force of the tackle landed Harte on his back with a shoulder planted in his gut.

Interning for the local sports news channel, Brock normally loved the view of the football field from the press box. Not today, watching this bullshit. Certain Puma players had been dogging Trent Harte’s every step. There’d been half a dozen similar demonstrations of excessive force from the opposing team throughout the entire game. Every single time, the refs looked the other way. They ignored the clipping, chop blocking, tripping, *and* the two times a player grabbed Harte’s face mask to pull him down. At this last slam, Ducks’ Coach Penzaks looked like he was having a coronary on the sidelines, screaming at the ref before calling time-out.

“Penzaks should’ve pulled Harte from the game from the beginning. What does the coach expect? Harte’s an openly gay player. With the leak insinuating he’s depraved as well, the other players aren’t going to put up with that shit no matter how good he is,” said Natasha Lewis. The brunette, who interned for the rival sports reporting syndicate, leaned across the partition dividing the different news desks, her eyes bright as she waited for Brock’s response.

“Love your view of the players, Natasha. Don’t paint them all as narrow-minded assholes. No wonder you have problems obtaining interviews—you’re prejudiced and it shows.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Brock regretted saying anything at all within the barracuda’s hearing. She seemed to thrive on adversity, and he often wondered why she majored in sports newscasting. With her adversarial reporting style, and the way she went out of

her way to muddy the waters, there were other syndicates she would be better suited to work for.

“So what if it’s becoming more acceptable to be a homosexual player?” Natasha asked with a fake pout. “Regardless of that, the other football players aren’t going to allow a pervert to play amongst them.”

The intern from the other side of Brock, Robert Hooney, snorted loudly. “Right now his sexual proclivities are a rumor. We’re supposed to report the *facts* that have to do with the game. Even if it’s true and Trent is the boyfriend of two other men, how’s that any different from other players who traipse around clubs with two women hanging on their arms every weekend? Harte doesn’t party, he doesn’t club hop, and I heard he never drinks alcohol. If any of the many rumors are remotely correct and he’s involved in a monogamous relationship with more than one person, why the hostility?”

Natasha made a sour face. “Everyone knows that type of behavior isn’t normal. Anyone screwing around with more than one person at a time and dubbing it as a *monogamous relationship* is lying. It’s an experiment, not a relationship, and certainly not natural.”

Brock ground his teeth, despising that a player’s sex life even rated a mention in the press box.

“Says the woman who’s dated a half-dozen men. Your stance sounds very much like *marriage is only between a man and a woman*.” Robert’s voice held a note of censure. “If Harte was a heterosexual, he would be considered a *stud*,”—Robert made air quotes when he said the word—“by both men and women, and considered a catch. So why would it be perverted if it’s two men?”

“That is an unfair characterization!” Natasha’s scandalized expression twisted her face into an ugly mask of righteous indignation.

Robert grinned. “Just calling them like I see them.”

Natasha’s response was lost when the time-out ended. The players jogged back onto the field. Brock watched as number forty-three, Trent Harte, took

his place in the lineup. Brock's eyes narrowed. It looked like Harte moved with a slight limp.

Hoping he was mistaken, he gritted his teeth and made himself relax back into the chair. He wasn't friends with anyone in the press box; therefore, no one here knew he was one of the running back's lovers. As difficult as it was to listen to the discussion about his boyfriend, he wouldn't make a confession. It would be useless because they'd already formed their opinions.

Talk of Harte and his supposed lovers should have died down and become old news as time passed. The rumors were three weeks old, but the speculations regarding the number of men in Harte's bed stayed fresh. Brock thought he knew who to blame, but without solid proof, Trent would be disappointed if Brock took matters into his own hands.

The Ducks' quarterback, Brad Jones, snapped the ball. Harte shot like a rocket down the field for the catch, making the final touchdown with mere seconds left on the clock. Instead of breaking off, three Puma players tackled Harte after the play ended. Whistles blew, but the call came too late. The lack of referee involvement obviously pissed off the members of the Ducks' team, judging by the way they went after the three defensive players. Ten seconds left on the clock and it appeared there would be a brawl at the goal line. Brock grinned broadly, overjoyed Trent's teammates had his back. Referees converged on the group before the melee got out of hand, but the tension was running high.

The rest of the game played out with a field goal and a ten-point win for the Ducks. Packing up before the players started to file off the field, Brock made sure his written report on the game had been finished and sent. He knew he should've attempted to get a quick interview from the players, especially with the referee debacle, but his mind wasn't on his report.

Robert and Natasha snarled back and forth at each other over his head. He didn't bother to glance up when the two of them went quiet. He sensed them watching him curiously as he packed up to leave instead of participating in the usual after game banter.

He attempted to disguise his emotions, but frustration still caused his hands to shake as he stuffed his laptop into the travel case. This wasn't the first time in the last couple of weeks Brock became fighting mad over the harsh treatment Trent received or from conversations he'd overheard. Watching his lover being needlessly pummeled on the field only added to the simmering anger Brock had been hiding.

Even his and Trent's cool-headed boyfriend, AJ Barnes, was susceptible to the constant hostility Trent had been subjected to. The other night, AJ came home with a fat lip and bruised knuckles. The former Marine claimed an accident, but Brock didn't think Trent bought the lie because *he* sure as hell hadn't. Later on, Brock learned through campus gossip AJ had been defending Trent against the harsh words of several bigots.

If their Marine could be injured, then Brock didn't stand a chance in a similar situation. Mouth shut, head down, he did his best to ignore people's prejudice and snide words. Trent reasoned if they ignored the remarks, things would eventually settle down. Brock didn't feel so sure anymore, even if some days were better than others.

Today wasn't one of them.

In the last play, when the three players tackled Trent for the final time, Brock's heart had stopped. After everyone moved off the Ducks' running back, Trent had simply lain there.

Motionless.

He'd been terrified. If Trent hadn't gotten up of his own accord, regardless of the consequences or how irrational the response, Brock would've done his best to cause bodily harm to every person responsible. His lover eventually rose from the turf and walked stiffly off the field with the team. Nothing had been announced regarding Trent's injury status, and Brock burned with the need to know, to make sure the man he loved was unharmed.

Without a word to the other interns, Brock threw the strap to his laptop case over his shoulder and strode out of the press box. Thankfully, today was Friday and he wouldn't have class until Tuesday. Until then, he had his men

all to himself. He definitely needed some loving to help him fight the negativity haunting him.

Brock hurried to meet AJ. The shortest of the three of them, AJ made up for it by being bigger than life. The former Marine also had a dirty mouth, which AJ worked hard to change. Brock had never seen the man lose his temper, yell, or act out. The man exuded such calm, and Brock wondered if the trait came from AJ's Armed Forces training. On the days when Trent pushed Brock's buttons, the two of them would fight until AJ stepped in. He was the one who made them work things out, and then they'd have make-up sex. Brock felt the corners of his lips lift into a secret grin as his spirit lightened. The amazing sex was *always* a good reason to pick a fight.

Five years older than Brock and Trent, AJ was in his junior year working toward a degree in physical therapy. They hadn't yet talked about what would happen this coming summer when he and Trent graduated. Brock wanted a bigger, more permanent house but he didn't know what his lovers' expectations were.

AJ leaned nonchalantly against the wall outside the restricted press area. Brock's breath hitched a little when AJ straightened, moving with the grace of a dangerous predator. The man never walked anywhere. He prowled, so quiet sometimes he'd scared the shit out of Brock a time or two in the couple of years they'd been together. The first time it happened, Brock became so turned on he attacked AJ. The hot and dirty kitchen sex left skid marks on the floor where the kitchen table had slid across the linoleum into the wall as AJ fucked him.

Large, gray eyes met his and turned molten, as if something in Brock's expression had given away his thoughts. "I'll be glad when your hair grows out again," AJ commented as Brock approached.

"Not attractive?" He self-consciously ran his hand over his spiky hair. He'd cut off the dirty-blond locks in a military cut similar to AJ's for the internship interview. "Come on, let's go pick up Trent."

He knew he should have gone with a simple trim. Unlike his lovers, Brock didn't sport a hard body nor was he attractive. The small pooch around Brock's waist, caused by his enjoyment of rich foods and lack of regular exercise, made his hair his best asset.

AJ crowded up behind Brock when he stopped to open a door. "You're one handsome man, Brock Everett." Hot breath skittered over the shell of his ear. AJ stood close enough he felt the man's body heat through his clothing. "I don't know what has gotten into you lately about your appearance. Bottom line, Trent and I will make love to you until you feel as gorgeous as we know you to be. Besides, who said I liked your hair for anything other than something to hold onto?"

Brock shivered at the thought. His pulse picked up as he considered the possibilities. AJ reached past him, grasped the door handle, and pulled. AJ smirked but didn't comment as Brock moved his laptop bag in front of his groin to hide the evidence of his arousal. Brock stepped through the doorway and together they walked abreast down the corridor. The traffic in the hallway discouraged any more sexually heated conversation, but it was too late. Brock was hard and wanting. He hoped Trent wouldn't be long, because he needed to be at home in bed with his guys.

"Did you watch the game?"

"Stupid assholes." AJ didn't raise his voice, but the calmly spoken expletive was his equivalent of a shout. When they first met, AJ's vocabulary consisted of "fuck" every other word. The man sometimes slipped back into old habits when he was frustrated or upset. Brock considered his Marine's comment very mild, and a definite improvement on what it could've been.

"You and I both know this is all George Mahoney's fault. The rumors started right after he walked in on us." Brock had been cussing George's big mouth for the last couple of weeks.

They were well aware George enjoyed causing problems for other members on the football team. The man was a bully and had been knocked

down more than once for his behavior. Unfortunately, confrontation only made his tactics more subtle.

“We knew better than to let our guard down around that loudmouth,” AJ responded. For various reasons, none of them were demonstrative in public. “Only our closest friends know Trent is in a relationship with us. We’re careful around people who could make life difficult for us, like Trent’s father. So far, we’ve been fortunate in the reactions we’ve received.”

Brock nodded in agreement. “It’s a pity your little sister brought George to the barbeque as her date. And even if you didn’t like the type of attention she was getting from him, most of George’s focus was on Susan.” Brock examined the events of the party carefully as he walked. “It was a bit odd that those two were the last to leave the party, though. From the way he was acting, I would have thought George would try to hustle Susan out earlier.”

“I should’ve made sure the door was locked when I escorted them out.” Brock suspected AJ blamed himself for what happened. “My head wasn’t where it should’ve been.”

“How were you supposed to know George would return to retrieve Susan’s keys?” Brock replied, attempting to sooth AJ. None of them could’ve foreseen someone stumbling onto their private moment.

“I still don’t understand why George attacked Trent. It’s not like he doesn’t know Trent’s gay. It seems strange that George would get so angry we’d need to kick him out of the house.”

“The next day the rumors about Trent began,” Brock added. “I don’t know why our names weren’t mentioned.”

“It’s personal,” AJ concluded. “Whatever is going on between George and Trent, it must be personal to George. He’s out to ruin Trent, and we aren’t important... let’s just hope George doesn’t realize he can use us to hurt Trent.”

Brock knew he shouldn’t have allowed Trent to talk them into staying quiet. “So far, Trent’s the one who’s borne the brunt of the fallout.” With George keeping the gossip mill running, Brock reconsidered his agreement with Trent. “It isn’t fair to allow Trent to bear the burden alone.”

“I agree.”

Finally reaching their destination, Brock and AJ took up positions against the wall ten feet from the doors to the home team’s locker room. Normally they waited in the parking lot, but with the continued hostility, he and AJ had taken steps to ensure Trent didn’t go anywhere alone. People were less likely to cause trouble with witnesses around.

“Susan left another message on the landline this morning. She’s still apologizing for what happened.” Brock hated that AJ and his sister’s relationship was strained because of the bigot.

The former Marine stared at his scuffed and worn sneakers. Brock was pretty sure AJ hadn’t spoken to her since the party. The call to the house phone instead of AJ’s cell only confirmed Brock’s suspicions.

“You should call Susan. She’s not responsible for George’s actions,” Brock encouraged, nudging his lover with his shoulder.

“No, it was my fault. I should’ve made sure the door was locked before I started anything. If I’d paid attention and not been so excited, we would’ve been interrupted by a knock instead of George walking in on us.”

“AJ,” Brock paused until his lover’s dark brown gaze met his own. “George could’ve easily used the gate to the backyard if we’d been too occupied to hear him at the front door. Either way, unless we’d locked all the doors, retreated to the bedroom and closed that door as well... I personally believe George was determined to catch us at *something*. He’s the one who didn’t belong and the one who overreacted. He’s never been a pleasant person, but his attitude has been malicious ever since then.”

“Did you see how Pumas’ players treated Trent?” AJ grumbled. The stress of the situation wore on all of them, even his even-tempered lover. Brock understood the man wasn’t upset with him but with the situation. “It’s only a rumor and people are out there on the field intentionally hurting him. If I ever see George again...”

“No, you won’t,” Brock admonished, discreetly brushing his knuckles against the back of AJ’s hand. “We made a promise to Trent, which I intend to

keep until I can get him to renegotiate. Until then, if I can't twist George's balls off then neither can you."

The corner of AJ's firm mouth kicked up in a half grin, his gray eyes sparkling with mischief. "Yeah, you'd like to, wouldn't you?"

If his boyfriends only knew what Brock would be willing to do for them! "If I remember correctly, Susan already did."

"Too bad I wasn't there to see it," AJ said, a little too wistfully.

"Another reason for you to call her, to thank her." Personally, Brock thought Susan rocked. She'd been shocked when they'd physically hauled George out of the house after he busted Trent's nose. AJ returned to Trent while Brock stood on the porch and made sure George left. When the football player started cussing Trent in the front yard, Susan had taken the man in hand and shoved him in the car, alternately yelling at George and apologizing to Brock.

The door to the Ducks' locker room opened, and players began to file out. Some greeted family or friends waiting in the hallway. Most acknowledged Brock and AJ in some way, only a few scowled or ignored them.

A couple of long minutes later, George entered the corridor alone. His eyes widened when he spotted the two of them leaning nonchalantly against the wall. A barely concealed sneer crossed his face. The team's quarterback, Brad Jones, pushed George from behind as he attempted to exit the locker room and then grasped George's bicep while he whispered into the player's ear. By the expression on George's face, he didn't like what he heard.

Snatching his arm away from the quarterback, George stormed down the hall in the opposite direction. Brad watched the defensive lineman leave. Hiking a heavy duffle higher on his shoulder, Brad hesitated a moment before nodding his head at Brock and AJ in acknowledgement.

"Guys," he mumbled as he strode past them.

AJ scowled after him. "I wonder what that was all about."

CHAPTER TWO

~Trent~

Trent left the trainer's room feeling slightly better than when he'd gone in. The deep tissue massage to loosen up the muscles in the small of his back and his left calf worked wonders. He would be sore and a little stiff for a couple of days, but that was it. No torn muscles or ligaments to worry about. The last thing he needed was to be injured while the NFL scouts were out.

He'd hoped everybody would be gone by the time he went back to the locker room. Most were, but Brad Jones and George Mahoney were yet to leave. Trent's heart sank when George dogged his heels back to the locker, the bully crowding Trent when he stopped.

"I'm sick and tired of playing second fiddle to you, Harte," George sneered in Trent's ear. "It's bad enough I have to play on the same team with you, but to watch you steal *my* spotlight when you're such a sick fuck is worse. People should know their golden boy isn't so perfect, then I would be given the attention that is my due."

Trent glanced up to meet George's hateful gaze. "Get out of my space, George. I don't know what your problem is, and I really don't care. You'd better back off."

Trent'd had enough of the sneers and cruel words from the narrow-minded asshole. He knew his fellow teammate fed the rumors. But the vitriol he threw at Trent whenever they were alone confused him. He hadn't done anything that he knew of to cause the man to hate him. Trent was past the point of attempting to figure George out. Now, the man's behavior only pissed him off, and ignoring George only seemed to make his attitude worse.

George disregarded Trent's warning and bumped his solid chest against Trent's. George was a huge defensive lineman and a virtual steamroller on the field. As a running back, Trent had strength and bulk but nothing close to the person who towered over him, crowding menacingly into his personal space.

“What would it take to push you off the pedestal Coach put you on? I don’t give a flying fuck about your *boyfriends*. I wonder what would happen to Everett’s internship if the sports network found out what you guys are doing in that dump of a house? Do you think they’d consider keeping his skinny ass on when they discover your filthy secret? Fucking pervert.”

Trent flushed with suppressed rage. This wasn’t the first time in the last couple of weeks George had threatened Brock or AJ. He ignored the sneers on the field, the clipping, chop blocking, and the referees looking the other way. What he wouldn’t allow was harm to anyone he loved.

Trent refused to reply to George’s threat. Any response would let George know he’d gotten under Trent’s skin. He needed to calm down before he did or said something he’d regret.

“Mahoney!” Brad yelled from across the aisle. “Harte already has a boyfriend, or are you trying to get in his pants too?”

“Fuck you, Brad. Mind your own business,” George shot back.

“You know, Mahoney, Trent has been frank about his sexuality from the very beginning. You’ve never indicated you had a problem with him until the last couple of weeks. He doesn’t party, he doesn’t go clubbing. I don’t remember seeing him out on a date. Trent’s been low-key all of this time. A friend of my sister’s said she took you to a barbecue at Trent’s place right before this mess began. I’ve been wondering where these rumors came from. No one seems to know how they started. Do you have anything to say about that?” Brad stood there in a white T-shirt and a loose pair of jeans with a towel around his neck, waiting for George’s response.

Trent didn’t know why George hadn’t claimed he was the one to catch Trent and his lovers together. Instead, the man started rumors without the information pointing back to him. Trent thought George hid his involvement to dodge the backlash from the team, or maybe he didn’t want people to know he’d been at Trent’s house. One lover or two, why did it matter to the man?

“Fuck you, Brad. You can’t tell me you want this sick asshole on the team.”

Brad threw his towel in the laundry bin. “You know what I want? I want to win. I want to keep my first-round draft placement, and right now all I see is a jealous asshole who’s doing his damndest to ruin my chances at a fucking awesome career.”

“He’s the one...”

“Shut the hell up. The Pumas were all over him tonight because of your whispers, you prick. If you fuck this up for me, I’ll make sure you regret it for the rest of your life. You’re messing with my goddamn livelihood because you can’t keep your nose out of other people’s business.”

George snarled, slamming his shoulder into Trent’s on the way out of the locker room. Brad followed close behind without a glance or word to Trent.

He slumped on the wooden bench, placed his elbows on his knees, and cradled his head in his hands. The stress of the last couple of weeks drained him. The derisive looks, the slurs, and the lewd comments echoed around in his head with nowhere to go. He’d attempted to ignore the overly rough behavior on the field, and the fact the referees turned a blind eye to what should’ve been penalties against the other team. What had been harder to dismiss were the growing number of threats to his lovers. The majority of the bullying came from people who didn’t know him, Brock, or AJ.

George was different though; Trent’s teammate *knew*. So far, the names of his lovers hadn’t been leaked, but it was only a matter of time before someone put together the clues. Would George follow through and disclose information about Brock to the sports network and jeopardize his chances of being hired on at the station? Or was the taunt hollow, designed to make Trent worry?

Trent removed the towel from around his waist, scowling as he stood and pulled on a pair of black briefs. Could he live with himself if Brock lost his internship? What would happen if word got out, or God forbid, a reporter snapped a shot with the three of them together? Just the implication would sink his men. Would AJ and Brock be able to obtain a job without the employer scrutinizing their background and possibly finding out?

AJ's sister, Susan, was enrolled in human resource courses. Just last month she mentioned how employers conducted personal checks on applicants by searching through social media outlets such as Facebook, Pinterest, and Tumblr to evaluate the candidates' conduct.

Their relationship was unconventional, outside of what most considered normal. They didn't hide it but, understanding the pitfalls, the three of them had been careful whom they confided in. This vendetta of George's could ruin Brock's and AJ's chances at a solid career. His own placement in the draft picks was based on his performance, but it didn't guarantee he'd have a job after the first year, or his teammates' acceptance.

He'd deal with the repercussions to his own future, but could he stand by and do nothing if George followed through with his threat? The answer was no, he couldn't. Brock and AJ meant too much to him to allow their lives and futures to be destroyed because they were involved with him.

Trent's legs went weak, and he quickly sat back down to keep from falling on his face. He'd been with AJ and Brock for two, going on three, years. When did they become more important than anything else in his life? He would do anything to make sure they were safe. George would probably try his damndest to ruin them. There was only one way to keep that from happening. It was as if a tight band constricted around his chest, making it hard to breathe. Could he give up Brock and AJ? He wasn't sure he'd adjust to being without them.

Angrily, he shoved a leg into a pair of dark jeans. Did it make him selfish if he didn't want to leave them? That his mind ran a mile a minute searching for a way to keep them close?

He had the perfect life. It wasn't glamorous. They lived in a fifty-year-old duplex too small for his family of three. Everything they owned was secondhand, and it didn't matter to any of them. They had each other. The feeling of home, the laughter, the pranks, the arguments, the quiet moments, the make-up sex, the love, all of it made his life *perfect*.

And it was slipping away.

Now, people he'd known for years looked at him as if they didn't recognize him. He'd seen some of the expressions of dark suspicion thrown at Brock and AJ. Would his lovers even tell him if they were being harassed? AJ had come home with a busted lip the other day and an excuse of an accident in his lab class. Had they already been hurt because of him?

Trent's father had called last night. He, too, had heard the rumors and demanded confirmation, which Trent refused to give. He'd said nothing to his lovers about the brief but caustic conversation. His father had demanded Trent's presence for dinner after the game—without his roommates. He could already hear the words of the one person who made no bones about his disappointment in Trent. It was hard enough to disregard his parent when he listed all the ways Trent was imperfect, and still choose to be an openly gay football player. He didn't want to get into an argument with the man for being in a monogamous ménage à trois.

Trent snatched up his tennis shoe and threw it across the empty room, where it slammed into the metal door of the linen cabinet with a loud ringing clang. "Goddammit!" he bellowed.

The door to the locker room burst open, AJ stormed through with Brock hot on his heels. The former Marine's gaze swept the area before coming to rest on Trent.

"There was a noise and a yell," AJ explained before he searched the room again.

Trent's blood warmed to see AJ ready to come to his defense. Brock rushed to him, his lover's expression one of deep concern. Trent blinked a couple of times to remove the grit from his eyes. He would do what he had to in order to keep them safe. What exactly that would be, he wasn't sure of yet.

CHAPTER THREE

~AJ~

Waiting for Trent in the corridor, AJ didn't think, only reacted to the loud noise and muffled yell. He pushed off the wall and stalked into the Ducks' locker room ready for action. Still pissed from what happened to Trent on the field, AJ was already pumped. He felt guilty because Trent bore the brunt of people's prejudice. He wanted to be standing next to his men, sharing the burden George had caused them. Trent made them promise not to do or say anything—yet. His lover had been sure the situation would blow over without him or Brock being dragged through the mud. AJ would prefer the mud to the silence.

Storming through the door, he was ready to hand someone his ass for not backing Trent up. Disappointment hit him when he discovered his lover was the only player left in the locker room. The pained expression Trent wore said something had happened. With an expert eye, AJ assessed his boyfriend, from his bare muscular chest to the running back's damp, dark hair, and the shaky hands that scrubbed over his face.

AJ moved farther into the room, glancing around again to verify there was no one else around. He noticed Trent's tennis shoe on the floor across the room and retrieved the sneaker. Brock rushed to Trent. AJ knew his lovers well and easily saw how upset and flustered Brock was. The man moved as if to touch Trent then shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks instead.

AJ grimaced. None of them, for various reasons, were comfortable with public displays of affection. At times like these, he wished they could express themselves better. Trent needed them. The sheer agony in Trent's blue gaze and the tension in those wide shoulders told him that.

They needed to get him home. Now.

"Are you all right? The Pumas were assholes."

A small satisfied grin crossed Trent's face. "I'm sore but the trainer cleared me. I'll need to spend some time in the hot tub."

Brock's lids lowered as he pinned Trent with a steely gaze. "You were limping."

"I'm not injured," Trent promised.

AJ held back a snort of disbelief. When they got Trent home, he would be able to discover for himself if his lover had been injured.

He handed the shoe to Trent. "Come on, let's go home."

Trent's sapphire gaze didn't meet his. Something else bothered the big man. That was fine. AJ would pry the information out of Trent at home. The last couple of weeks had been tough, but he'd thought Trent handled the negative reactions pretty well. Something had happened today to shake up their running back.

Trent finished dressing in silence, with Brock hovering. The need to touch was visibly eating at Brock. AJ could barely stand the uncertainty on the man's face. He wanted to soothe both of them, but this wasn't the place.

"Come on," AJ urged, opening the door to the long corridor. Brock ushered Trent out.

He followed Brock and Trent out of the stadium to the parking lot. Only three cars filled the spaces, including theirs. AJ breathed a sigh of relief when it appeared there wouldn't be a confrontation with strangers. They needed to sit down and figure out a better way to deal with George's bullying. He may have promised he wouldn't do anything, but that didn't mean he couldn't call in a favor or two. AJ was one step away from doing just that himself.

The drive home was quiet. The last couple of years they'd lived off campus in the duplex. AJ smiled as he remembered their first days as roommates. The sexual tension had simmered between them for weeks. AJ was pretty sure he and Brock had been hard all the time before Trent tackled both him and Brock to the floor, kissing them soundly. The passion between the three of them exploded like a powder keg. For three days straight they screwed each other's brains out, occasionally eating when they didn't sleep from exhaustion. It took much longer for them to sort out the bumpy road of their growing relationship.

He glanced in the rearview mirror to see Brock leaning his head on Trent's shoulder. The result was worth weathering every dip and curve.

AJ couldn't pinpoint any one defining moment where he realized he'd fallen in love with them. He wasn't sure when their connection moved from friends with benefits to one of great affection. It wasn't something he dwelled on. The how or the when didn't matter to him. What did count was the here and now.

He parked the car in the driveway. Unusually for him, Trent got out without a word. Throwing AJ a worried glance, Brock followed. He made sure the car was locked up before he trailed after his two lovers, watching Trent carefully. Closing the front door behind them, AJ leaned back against the cool wood. Trent walked two steps into the living room before Brock pulled the big man into his arms. AJ studied their profiles, Brock's anxious expression, and Trent's pinched one.

"Shit, Trent, I worried you were hurt." Brock's fingers laced at the nape of Trent's thick neck, forcing the running back to meet his gaze.

Trent's arms hung limply at his sides, his face showing a wide range of emotions before an expression of naked anguish dominated.

"Brock," the big man whispered. "I'm fine, but if something was to happen to you or AJ..."

Brock looked at Trent with an aggravated expression. His thumbs caressed Trent's cheekbones. AJ watched as Brock held that blue gaze until Trent pulled Brock closer. He palmed the back of Brock's head, running a hand through the short bristle.

"I miss your hair."

"It'll grow back." Brock made a low, sexy noise. "God, I need you to kiss me."

AJ watched as they stared at each other, so much being said with their eyes, making words unnecessary. Seeing Trent drink in Brock's features, as if

it had been too long since he'd seen Brock, made AJ want to join them. He held still against the door for now, waiting to see what happened.

AJ adjusted his aching erection, his gaze following Trent's plump lips as they brushed teasingly over Brock's, causing their lover to continue to make more delectable noises. When Trent finally pushed their mouths together, Brock pressed tightly against the running back. In no time, the kiss turned heated and ravenous.

Being a voyeur was something AJ acknowledged about himself as a teenager. There were times he loved watching just as much as, if not more than, participating. His lovers knew this and would sometimes put on a show for him as he directed. It wasn't something they did all of the time, but it threw a little extra spice into their relationship.

As it was, AJ grew harder as he watched his lovers kiss. Brock opened his eyes and turned his head to pin AJ with a molten-chocolate stare. Trent caught Brock's chin and brought his lips to where Trent easily drew him back into the kiss. The image they made together caused AJ's pulse to pound in his veins. The glimpses of tongues moving and the harsh breathing was just as arousing as the sight of Brock stripping Trent without breaking contact. He knew from experience how drugging Brock's kisses were.

Brock ran his hands lightly over Trent's firm body, first tweaking then soothing sensitive nipples, trailing the tips of his fingers through Trent's trimmed pubic hair. Trent fumbled with Brock's pants, not as coordinated as their lover in his attempt to unbuckle the sturdy belt so he could reach the treasure trapped underneath.

The shrill sound of a cell phone ringing broke the seductive atmosphere. Trent and Brock halted, trying to catch their breath. AJ knew who that particular ringtone belonged to—Trent's father, William Harte. The big man growled before bending to search the pants pockets at his feet.

He didn't look at either Brock or AJ as he answered, "Hello." Pause. "No, I didn't forget... No, you said six o'clock." Trent glanced at his watch. "That's only forty-five minutes from now. I—fine—no, sir."

AJ waited for Trent to tell them what his father wanted after he hung up. Instead Trent hitched up his underwear.

AJ pushed off the door. “What did he want?” he asked.

“The daughter of one of the stepmom’s friends relayed campus gossip. She asked Dad about it.” Trent gathered up his clothes off the floor, a scowl marring his forehead.

Trent’s father was a cold bastard. William barely tolerated his son. From what AJ surmised, the man didn’t care what Trent did as long as he was the best and kept his nose clean. Rumors of a scandalous ménage à trois affair definitely wouldn’t meet William’s strict criteria for his only son. In addition, AJ recently read about William Harte contemplating running for mayor in the next election. He could imagine what the old man wanted to “talk” about.

“I’m supposed to meet him for dinner at the Nines in forty-five minutes,” Trent added, his fist gripping the cell phone until his knuckles turned white.

“Then let’s get to it. We don’t have much time.” Brock headed toward the bedroom.

“Alone.” Trent’s voice was loud and slightly high-pitched in his vehemence. The single word stopped Brock in his tracks. “I was instructed to meet my father for dinner—alone.”

Brock spun on his heel, anger sparking in his brown eyes. “If you think we’re going to let you go talk to that—that—that man by yourself, you’ve got another...”

“Alone, Brock. I’m going by myself. It’s not up for discussion.” Trent stormed by Brock. AJ noticed Trent’s barely hidden flinch at Brock’s wounded look. Neither one of them moved until the bedroom door closed behind their lover.

“Something’s wrong,” Brock commented softly as he stared at the barrier.

“I know.” AJ pulled Brock against his side, running a comforting hand down Brock’s lean back as they gazed at the bedroom door.

Brock's body issues made him insecure at times. AJ didn't think Brock believed him when he confessed to loving Brock's yielding, more natural body. He especially loved the extra softness right above Brock's belt. He wondered sometimes if stroking Brock's stomach was a kind of fetish or kink they didn't have a name for. Simply stroking his lover's waistline, feeling the slight swell under his hand, like now, aroused him.

Brock threw an arm around AJ's right shoulder, resting his cheek at the crook to the left of AJ's neck. Lost in thought, AJ's eyes were trained on the closed door.

"What are we going to do about it?" Brock asked. "It feels like he's shutting us out. I sensed it in the locker room. You know what happens when he visits his father. All of Trent's happiness is leeches out of him. When he returns, it takes him days to bounce back from an afternoon at home. I don't know what that man does to shatter Trent's confidence. It makes me glad mine died when I was young. For someone to have that much control over me and then to abuse it—I'd never go home."

AJ ran a comforting hand down Brock's back. Growing up in the foster system gave the man an unhealthy view of families. In the time AJ had known him, Brock had shunned any kind of family connection until he met Trent's mother, Trisha Harte. While Brock usually dodged the coddling of his friends' mothers, Trisha had a way about her that drew Brock in. The man seemed simultaneously confused and awed by her. When Brock began to dote on the woman, AJ knew Brock to be well and truly caught.

The bedroom door swung open and Trent strode into the living room wearing his best suit and tie, the one that matched his blue eyes. Damn the man was fine. Brock's arm tightened around AJ as Trent walked by without glancing at them.

Wallet, keys, and cell phone; Trent pocketed them all. Pausing at the front entryway, hand grasping the knob, he stared fixedly at the door. "You know if anything were to happen to the two of you... if I was responsible, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

AJ waited for more, a clue as to what had upset the man, but all he got was a shake of the head and a slammed door.

“I don’t understand.” Brock sounded close to tears even though his eyes were dry. “What was that supposed to mean?”

AJ kissed Brock on the neck, the pulse under his lips thumped fast. He pulled out of the embrace and strode to the bedroom they shared. He glanced back. Brock followed, hands jammed into his pants’ pockets.

“It sounds to me as if he’s worried something will happen to one or both of us.” AJ opened the sliding closet doors and searched the farthest back corner.

“That makes no sense. What would hurt us?”

As AJ tossed a suit still encased in the dry cleaners’ plastic on the bed, he noticed Brock watching him closely. “Actually, it makes perfect sense.” He continued to dig into the closet, retrieving another similarly wrapped suit. “There’s twisted rumors on campus. Trent suspects I didn’t accidentally injure myself.” Brock snorted. “Imagine what people have said to him when we aren’t around?”

Brock’s eyes narrowed, his lips pressed into a hard line. “You think someone threatened him?” Brock grabbed the second suit from AJ.

“Us. I think someone threatened us.”

“So we go to the police, get restraining orders, move, whatever works.”

“Brock,” AJ faced his brown-eyed lover. His mind spun in so many dark directions he felt as if he were floating, his motions sluggish. Marshaling his thoughts into a coherent order he said, “Imagine a photographer sneaking a picture of us without any of us noticing. What would it do to us? Do you think a sports network would keep you as an intern or hire you full time after your face is plastered all over the tabloids? *Headline: NFL Draft Pick Caught in Gay Ménage à Trois*. Do you think an employer will hire you after that? How hard do you think it’ll be for me to get a job after graduation? I’ve got a year and a half left but with the spotlight of an NFL player, it could still be muddying the waters then.”

“I could do something else,” Brock immediately replied. AJ wondered if his lover even thought about what he offered before he said it.

“Being a sports writer is your dream job. I know it. Trent knows it. Do you think he won’t blame himself if you miss out? If he was a regular Joe graduating with a BA in business, no one would care. But no, he’s the best college running back, and his life will be in the spotlight. He’ll feel responsible if he thinks being associated with him ruined our lives.”

Brock unwrapped the charcoal-gray suit, his expression pensive. “Add into the mix that cold bastard and his wish to run for mayoral office. Son of a bitch! As if Trent didn’t already have enough on his plate.”

Brock stripped quickly and headed for the bathroom. AJ followed, taking in all of the smooth skin, Brock’s ass flexing with each step. They didn’t have time to take individual showers if they were going to drop in before Trent’s father did any permanent damage. At any other time, AJ would’ve had Brock plastered against the tiled wall, working out the stress of the day. Today, they both felt a sense of urgency that ushered them through a quick shave and shower.

“You don’t think he’s considering leaving us, do you?” Brock asked, his voice barely above a whisper. He pulled on a pair of silk boxers.

“If he thinks we’re better off, believes the spotlight will crush our dreams, or someone has threatened to harm us in any way? Then yes, he’s giving it serious thought.”

Brock angrily slipped his arms into the sleeve of a dress shirt. “I don’t understand why.”

AJ buckled the belt about the waistband of his dark slacks. “He loves us. He’s always tried to safeguard us. If he doubts his ability to shield us, he’ll sacrifice his own happiness to protect us.”

Brock went so pale AJ thought the man would pass out. “How do we keep him from doing something like that? AJ, I don’t want to lose him. I don’t care what people say or do.” Brock’s hands shook as he tried to slip the black leather belt through the waistband loops.

“We find him. Make sure he understands we won’t walk away from him, no matter how hard life becomes. And we call for help.” AJ scrolled through the contact list on his cell phone. Locating the number he searched for, he hit talk, and pressed the phone between his ear and shoulder to help Brock with his belt.

“Hello?” said a warm, throaty voice.

“Mrs. Harte, this is AJ Barnes...”

“AJ! How are you doing, son? Is Trent okay? I’m assuming that since you are calling me there is something wrong.”

“No, ma’am, he’s not physically injured, but there is a problem I need your help with.” AJ hoped Trent wouldn’t be too angry with him for what he was about to do. “Trent is meeting his father for dinner right now regarding his relationship with Brock and me.”

CHAPTER FOUR

~Trent~

Trent stood at the restaurant bar of the Urban Farmer inside of the Nines resort and waited for his father. He sipped a Coke with a half-dozen maraschino cherries sitting at the bottom of the glass. The coach would strangle Trent if he knew how many empty calories he'd consumed. It was still better than having a shot of tequila. Though, the alcohol began to sound better and better as the minutes slowly ticked by.

Trent wasn't sure what he'd give to go back and undo the day George caught them in the backyard. Not that he liked the secrecy. Truly, they weren't all that inconspicuous. A few close friends were aware of the intimacy between the three of them. Most people regarded Brock, AJ, and Trent as best friends and roommates.

None of them were fond of public displays. Trent didn't feel a need to stamp himself all over his lovers. He was secure in their affection and loyalty. If any one of them were to be poached, it would be Brock. Still, Trent had never worried because the man was oblivious. Brock didn't consider himself desirable. And most of the time, AJ exuded a stay the hell away attitude and only the boldest dared approach. When they did, AJ simply ignored them.

Since George started his crusade to ruin him, people had been looking at Trent with open scorn. There were times he was unable to ignore the derisive comments. Growing up with his father's overbearing personality and contemptuous words, he was used to acidic scrutiny. He'd also seen a few people regard his roommates with speculation, and he hated it. If people knew for sure, Trent didn't know how he'd react. He wasn't a violent man, but the first time someone treated one of his lovers the way he'd been treated, he couldn't guarantee he'd have the willpower to walk away.

At times, it had been difficult being an openly gay football player. The added pressure from the speculation of his involvement in a relationship with multiple partners was slowly wearing him down. Strangers thought they had the right to comment on his lifestyle and attempted to reduce his relationship

to something dirty. He didn't want Brock or AJ to be put under that type of stress. They shouldn't have to be subjected to the negative backlash currently drowning him.

"As hard as you're scowling at your drink, someone would believe it's offended you in some way."

Trent glanced up as a well-dressed forty-something gentleman sat on the barstool next to him.

"I'll have what he's having," the man told the bartender before he held out his hand. "If I'm not mistaken, you're Trent Harte, the running back for the Ducks. The newspapers say you are incredibly quick and run with power. You also have a nasty spin move that keeps the other teams guessing."

Trent's neck grew warm as a blush crept up into his cheeks at the stranger's praise. He gripped the cool, dry palm in a friendly handshake, clearing his throat. "That's what they say. I just play ball," Trent replied. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name." The gentleman seemed vaguely familiar but Trent couldn't recall where he'd seen him before.

"My friends call me Mack." Carefully combed dark hair was turning silver at the temples. Large sky-blue eyes were framed by thick lashes that crinkled attractively at the corners, giving the impression Mack laughed often. A straight, Roman nose dominated over full, smiling lips; handsome enough Trent doubted Mack ever hurt for a date.

"I hear your chances at being picked up by an NFL team are excellent. There's the scowl again. Are you rethinking your career choice?"

Trent sipped his Coke, stalling. He wasn't sure how he wanted to answer the question. His gut said honesty. Did he protect his lovers with a lie? Dishonor his relationship and what he felt for AJ and Brock with a half-truth which was essentially—a lie? Or respect them by telling the truth?

"I love football and I want to play for as long as I can."

Mack leaned an elbow on the bar, giving Trent his full attention. "I sense a but coming."

Trent favored the man with a slight grin. Something about Mack was—different. Open, friendly, engaging. He made Trent feel as if they had known each other for a long time, which was crazy once he thought about it. For all he knew, Mack was a reporter trying to get a scoop on the “depraved” football player. Honestly, he needed to talk to someone, an unbiased person who wasn’t connected to him in any way. His thoughts had been swirling in vicious circles for hours now, and Trent desperately needed a sounding board.

Before he put any more thought into what he was about to do, he said, “I’m not sure I like the spotlight playing in the NFL would shine on my personal life.”

Mack laughed, his mouth stretching wide and eyes crinkling at the corners to make the man look younger than Trent had originally estimated. “Most players like the attention.”

“I didn’t mind it when it focused on my performance as a player. My personal life is mine, though, and I don’t want reporters digging around in it.”

Trent took another sip of his drink. His face was hot from shock and embarrassment. He couldn’t believe he’d revealed so much to a perfect stranger.

Mack was silent for a moment, nursing his own Coke. “I’d think being an openly gay player would desensitize you to such examination. You’d be the first acknowledged gay man to play in the NFL. You’re bound to get additional scrutiny simply for that—but I don’t think that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Not really,” Trent confirmed. “I’ve played four years of college ball just as I am. It took some of my teammates a year before they realized I wasn’t interested and wouldn’t molest them in the shower. I know I’ll have to go through a transition period again with whichever team picks me from the draft. Some of the comments this fall have been discouraging, but I do have a degree and if things don’t turn out as I had hoped, I can always change my career path. I love to play ball, Mack, but I don’t have to play professionally.”

“That sounds like you have a game plan.” Mack set an empty glass on the bar and Trent grinned at the turn of phrase. “Then why are you concerned about the press?”

Trent gulped his Coke, almost choking on a cherry. He didn’t think he could answer the question. Mack’s brows made a hard V over the bridge of his nose when it became evident Trent refused to comment.

“Oh, I see.” Mack ordered a refill.

Curiosity got the better of Trent. “You see what?”

Mack slipped a twenty to the bartender and waited for the man to leave before he answered. “The rumors?”

Startled, Trent stood up, ready to end the conversation before it could go too far in that direction.

Mack placed a staying hand on Trent’s forearm. “I sincerely apologize. I didn’t mean to spook you.”

Perched again on the edge of the stool, Trent nodded, not sure if he wanted to wait around to hear what Mack had to say. He liked the gentleman and didn’t want to be disappointed if the guy turned out to be narrow-minded. Glancing at his watch, Trent noted his father was late.

“Hypothetically...” Mack started, drawing Trent’s gaze back to him.

“Hypothetically?”

“If the situation in the rumor existed, couldn’t it be easily remedied?”

A part of him urged him to leave. A part of him wanted to see where the conversation went, and maybe a small part dared Mack to say something derogatory. “If the incident was singular,” Trent replied, “then yes, because it wouldn’t happen again. People would chalk it up to college fun, experimentation, or my personal favorite—all gay men are sluts and can’t commit to a monogamous relationship.”

Mack chuckled against the rim of his glass. The man wasn’t snide or condescending as Trent had feared he’d be. Slowly, Trent began to relax again.

“Hypothetically, if the situation was more—permanent and the press able to come by proof...” Mack trailed off, scowling as if he just now understood the scope of such a situation.

“Then the livelihood of all parties involved would be compromised. The relationship is far out of the realm of ordinary; few would understand and even fewer would accept. Someone in that situation, if they were seriously involved, would have to consider all of the options.”

Mack nodded in agreement. “Those options would be to distance themselves from the relationship, give up their dream career, or say ‘to hell with it’ and weather the storm. None of the choices are easy. The real question is what this person would be willing to do to keep the people they love in their life.”

“No, Mack, the question is how to keep their loved ones safe because even if—hypothetically—this person drops their dreams, would their family be safe if the wrong people suspected and retaliated?”

“So, you’re saying there are also threats of harm to consider?”

Trent didn’t reply, only stared into his empty glass. He wasn’t shocked anymore he was discussing his personal life with someone he didn’t know.

Mack waved the bartender over, indicating Trent needed a refill. “Are you sure you don’t want something stronger?” Mack offered. Trent politely declined. “It seems these partners will have much to consider together.” Trent glanced at Mack inquiringly. “If they are in a relationship, then all involved are responsible for the outcome. One can’t decide for the rest. Trust them to know their own minds. I wouldn’t imagine these men are complete idiots. Only a foolish person would walk away without consulting them—hypothetically.”

Trent stared thoughtfully into his glass, reluctantly admitting to himself Mack had a point. Would Brock and AJ understand he only wanted the best for them? He’d hidden the difficulties he’d had, neither had he been upfront about the derisive comments, and now the threats.

“There you are!”

Trent turned at the sound of the husky feminine voice. He came face to face with a lithe and beautiful African-American woman. Her hair was cut close to the scalp; the ends of the dainty curls dyed caramel. With her sparkling eyes, full smile, and a formfitting red dress, she was stunning.

Mack leaned down, the woman turning for the kiss to be placed on her upturned cheek. The smoothness of their actions told Trent this was something that happened regularly. “No smudging the lipstick, love,” she said when Mack frowned. “You know how long it took me to get it right.”

“I told you a half an hour ago you were already perfect,” Mack murmured. Trent wondered if he should move away and give them privacy. The intimacy of their joined gazes caused him to feel like an intruder.

“Keep playing your cards right and you might get a reward for comments like that.”

Trent could tell by the way she regarded Mack, the man was already there. He’d seen the same expression on both AJ’s and Brock’s face more than once.

“Alissa, meet my new friend, Trent Harte.” Mack slipped a possessive arm around her waist.

Trent choked back a laugh. Like he would steal Mack’s girl. He took Alissa’s hand between his palms. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Maybe we should come here more often if all the men are this courteous,” Alissa replied with a mischievous sideways glance at Mack.

Mack growled, a playful grin twisting his lips as he gently pulled Alissa’s hand from Trent’s grasp. “As long as they are already spoken for, like Trent is, then I don’t see the harm.” Alissa chuckled.

“Trent, would you like to join us for dinner?” Alissa asked as she pushed out of Mack’s arms.

“Thank you for the invitation, but I’m waiting for my father,” Trent glanced at his watch again. “He’s spectacularly late.”

“If he had been on time, I wouldn’t have been able to chat with you,” Mack pointed out. “Here, take my card. I’d like to get together again—and good luck!”

Trent raised a hand in farewell, slipping the business card into his pocket. He was surprised at how much he’d enjoyed the conversation. It didn’t turn out as he had anticipated, which was a good thing. He’d consider Mack’s invitation to get together again. God knew he could use a friend.

His father arrived fifteen minutes later, no apology or explanation given. Trent didn’t relish spending time with the man. Their interactions were always stiff and formal. He was aware he’d never please his dad—it had been proven time and time again. But the optimist in Trent continued to try.

When Trent started college, he wasn’t surprised when his mother divorced his father. She admitted the only reason she stayed had been for Trent’s benefit. She didn’t want her son to have to experience the dark side of divorce while still living at home. The only one who seemed to be shocked by the development had been his dad. Trent knew his father blamed him for his mother leaving. The uneasy father-son relationship went from cool to frigid.

His father’s cold, gray gaze scanned the room until it came to rest at the bar where Trent sat. Physically, the man was an older version of himself. Trent tried to find something of his own character in his dad and came up empty-handed. The outer shell seemed to be the only thing they had in common, which in and of itself was a blessing in disguise.

Appearing untouchable in his expensive charcoal three-piece suit, his dad strode to his favorite table. Trent knew his father often dined at the Nines because the man enjoyed the exposure and prestige of the five-star resort. Trent thought it was a little pretentious to claim the table without waiting for the staff.

He slid off the stool and grabbed his cherry Coke. William hadn’t done or said anything, but Trent knew from experience he was supposed to follow. The only blessing about the evening would be the fact they were in public, which meant his father would curb his behavior because appearances mattered to

him. Everything about the man circled around other people's perceptions, especially now that he was considering running for mayor.

A sharply dressed waiter in black and white arrived at the table shortly before Trent. The server poured water for his dad as Trent slid into the curving booth opposite his father.

"Would you like an appetizer, Mr. Harte, or are the two of you ready to order?"

"Bring me an amaretto, Tommy. My son will not be staying for dinner. I have other guests who will be arriving in a half an hour."

"As you say, sir." The server backed away.

Trent was tremendously happy he wouldn't be expected to stay and spend the evening being polite.

"Is there any substance to the rumors surrounding you?" William's palms rested on the table, his gray eyes steadily regarded Trent.

The question, more of a demand, triggered Trent's rebellious streak. He sat back, hands folded on the table in front of him. "What rumors are you talking about?"

Trent knew from experience he wouldn't like what his father had to say when the man leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Don't fuck around with me, boy," William hissed so vehemently spittle hit Trent. "You know very well what I'm talking about. I don't give a damn if you sleep with men or women. Pick one and only one. I am running for mayor in two years. I do not need to battle the press on your sexual deviancy. That you are queer will put the liberals in my pocket but this... this... experimentation will stop right now. I will not have you tainting my good name with these filthy activities..."

He'd known—Trent made himself breathe through the burn in his lungs—he'd known his father didn't love him, much less like him, but he'd never understood why. He'd worked hard for years in attempting to gain the man's approval only to continually fail. He didn't think he'd been a terrible son. But there were personal lines Trent refused to cross to please someone.

A year into the relationship with Brock and AJ, he'd finally come to the conclusion that he would never be able to please his father. The understanding hadn't helped, hadn't made him stop hoping. Even now, he wished he didn't care what his father thought. Just once he would like the man to look at him with a little pride. Trent held damn good grades, attended college on a football scholarship, and now it appeared he would be in line to be a first-round draft pick for a promising career in the NFL. How many people could accomplish that?

"...if you do not do what I said, I'll personally make sure your lovers—boyfriends—won't work in this city."

Trent's blue gaze snapped up to see his father's self-satisfied expression.

"Are you even fucking listening to me?" His father hissed, his cheeks a splotchy red with indignant anger.

No, he hadn't been.

His father huffed a laugh. "Do I have your attention now, boy? I will make it to where no one will dare to be your lover, much less associate with you if you don't stop this depraved behavior. I'll start with your roommates."

"You can't do that. You don't have that kind of pull," Trent snapped angrily.

"What do you think I have been doing with my time since you convinced your mother to leave me? I've made connections, friends, people who will listen to what I say, people who will want to be on my good side when I am mayor. If I were to say something, what do you think will happen?"

CHAPTER FIVE

~Brock~

Brock felt so angry he practically vibrated. His mind supplied a slideshow of ugly scenarios of what William Harte could say to Trent. He'd barely heard what AJ said to Trisha on the phone earlier. He'd been getting into his suit and dreaming up ways of knocking Trent's father on his ass. Not that it would help, but he would feel better.

AJ was so calm on the surface. Anyone unfamiliar with his stoic lover wouldn't recognize something was wrong. Brock knew better. AJ dressed like he was suiting up to go into battle. Hands steady, voice hard, and the steely cast of his eyes that could cower the biggest men on campus. Brock found it so fucking hot that in any other situation, he would've jumped AJ and fucked him with complete abandon. How lucky was he to find not just one but two men to love? He was crazy in love and wouldn't change what they had for the world.

Brock watched as AJ buttoned up his black silk dress shirt with nimble fingers, his broad shoulders pulling the fabric snug. The former Marine's gray eyes were stony as he added silver cuff links. Brock had to admit the military cut looked better on their Marine's sandy-brown hair than on him. AJ fumbled with the blue silk tie and Brock gently tugged it out of his lover's hands. Draping the cloth around the upturned collar, Brock met AJ's hard gaze before glancing at the slightly parted lips below. The tip of a pink tongue darted out, touching the top lip in invitation.

Brock cleared his throat. "So what's the plan?" He noted the low, husky quality of his voice as he mentally undressed his lover, even as he worked to knot the tie. When he glanced up, AJ's eyes flared as if he could sense Brock undressing him in his imagination. The man probably could. He'd never been very good at hiding his emotions or what he was thinking from his lovers; they beat him at poker every time.

"We're going in to claim our lover. Make sure he understands we aren't going anywhere."

Tie securely in place, Brock flipped the collar down. He smoothed his hands along AJ's torso to rest them on the man's hips. "And if he doesn't understand?"

The harshness bled out of AJ's expression for a moment. "Then we tie him to the bed until he does."

Brock chuckled. "I like that plan, but I'm not feeding him like a baby."

With a palm on the nape of Brock's neck, AJ pulled him down into an all too brief kiss that promised wicked things to come. "Let's go get him." AJ donned his suit jacket, tugging the sleeves into place.

Brock scowled as he locked the front door behind him and followed AJ to the car. "If his father's hurt him..." Brock didn't finish the statement, but neither did AJ respond. His eyes though, they promised retribution.

The twenty-minute drive to the Nines was made in silence. Brock kept thinking about all of the times Trent had visited his father and come home quiet and withdrawn, his self-confidence shattered. Trent would work doubly hard in his classes, and at practice, until he dropped from sheer exhaustion. Brock hated it. He worried one day William would push Trent too far and his lover would end up in the hospital from trying to please the cold-hearted bastard.

The car was barely placed in park when Brock unbuckled the seatbelt and hopped out. Halfway to the front doors, AJ snagged his elbow.

"Slow down, wild man," AJ soothed. "We'll do this with some dignity. Running in there like a rejected lover and making a scene isn't going to do anyone any good. We're here to support Trent, show a united front."

Brock understood, but he was angry and worried. People judged them and the type of relationship they chose, insisting they live their lives by a certain traditional standard. How was it anyone's concern what they did behind closed doors? Well, fuck 'em all. His personal life wasn't anyone's damn business.

“I’d rather get to the part where we twist Mr. Harte’s arm into seeing things our way and leaving Trent alone,” Brock replied. He could help with the twisting.

AJ snorted a laugh. “You want to go Godfather on him? Strangely, I think Harte would understand that tactic.”

As soon as Brock stepped through the heavy, dark doors of the restaurant, his gaze searched the room until he spotted the old bastard. What Brock saw told him everything he needed to know. Trent sat glaring at his father, hands fisted on the table before him.

Not thinking about it, Brock grasped AJ’s hand and dragged the former Marine behind him into the posh restaurant. Neither Harte registered their approach until Brock halted next to Trent, AJ brushing Brock’s shoulder when he stopped.

Trent glanced up, a surprised expression crossing his face before it was replaced by one of intense relief. That was all the invitation Brock needed. He’d planned to let Trent know they were there and would be close-by, but his lover’s obvious relief blew that plan right out of the window. He refused to stay at a discreet distance when Trent needed them.

“Scoot over,” Brock urged. “Sorry we’re late. One bathroom between the three of us slows things down. Our next place will have to have two full baths. Definitely extra fixtures and a larger water heater because AJ always uses all the hot water. Besides, waiting on the two of you is getting old.”

Trent obediently slid down the curved booth. Brock knew he was babbling but it was that or verbally assault Mr. Harte for upsetting Trent. AJ had said dignified. This was as dignified as it would get.

AJ slid in next to Brock, his body loose as his gaze raked over Trent’s father with disdain. AJ hadn’t met the man yet, and Brock figured the former Marine was finally able to put a face to all the stories Trent had told them.

“This is the perfect time for you to take care of that issue we were discussing.” Mr. Harte barely disguised a grimace behind a strained smile as

he glanced at AJ and Brock's clasped hands. When Brock attempted to let go of AJ's palm, his fingers were held more firmly.

Trent paled, turning a little green around his mouth and eyes. "This isn't the place..."

"Oh, I beg to differ. This is the perfect place. Being in public deters inappropriate displays of temper. Tell them and then send them away. If they won't leave, I can have security step in to handle them."

AJ growled low. Brock knew he was the only one to hear the tiny warning of danger as everything about AJ suddenly turned deadly. His calm, considerate, passionate lover had just been switched off. Briefly, Brock wondered if he should be worried. AJ's extreme protectiveness fired up his blood. He discreetly adjusted his inappropriate erection and attempted to not grin at the shit-storm that was about to happen.

"I don't think it is wise to pressure Trent to do anything at this time, Mr. Harte," AJ cut in coldly.

William turned his cool, dark gaze on AJ. "Really now? I don't believe I addressed you. I do not care to hear your opinion or appreciate you sitting at my table."

AJ ignored Harte's response. Brock watched as AJ's steely gaze pinned the old bastard to his seat. "If you valued your son at all, you wouldn't back him into a corner."

Harte's jaw flexed, mouth set in a stern, flat line. "He's mine. My son. He does as he is told. He always has and always will. That is his duty to me." The reply was smug, self-assured, as if it were an everyday occurrence for him to refer to his son in the same terms he'd use for a well-trained pet.

Under the table, Brock slid a soothing palm over Trent's thigh, meeting his lover's stormy-blue gaze. "He's not a dog, Mr. Harte," Brock replied in Trent's defense. "He's his own man, and a fine one at that. If you can't treat him with respect, then you don't deserve his loyalty."

The corner of Trent's mouth kicked up, his sapphire eyes softening, saying a hundred things as he focused on Brock.

"I am tired of these games, Trent. If you don't tell them I will," William snapped, his voice rising slightly in volume.

Brock liked to think Harte's discomfort was due to AJ's lethal stare.

"Tell them what, William?" asked a smartly dressed strawberry blonde. She halted at the edge of the table, her gaze swiftly assessing the situation. "Scooch, William." She waved a delicate, manicured hand at Harte.

Hesitating for a second, he gave in and moved down the seat. Short, glossy curls bounced as the woman slid into the booth.

Ecstatic Trisha had come, Brock beamed as she took her seat. He glanced over when he felt Trent's fingers slide through his under the table. He gave a gentle squeeze before turning his attention back to Trisha Harte.

"Trisha, what are you...?"

"Trent, how have you been? I haven't seen you since the barbecue. The game today was grueling. I already sent in a formal complaint to the school. The actions of the referees were deplorable."

"Evening, Mother. It's been a rough day. I can't wait for it to be over."

"Hmm." Trish turned her blue gaze, so much like her son's, on William. Her expression hardened. "I thought we had an agreement, William. You were to quit trying to force Trent to be someone he's not and I would leave you alone. Are you breaking your promise?"

"Now, Trisha, you know that I will be running for the mayor's office in the next election," William started haltingly, as if he was carefully considering each word before he spoke.

Brock was mesmerized; the cold bastard squirmed like a worm on a hook, not quite able to meet Trisha's gaze. AJ tightened his grip on Brock's hand, an infectious grin splitting his face. With rapt attention they watched Trisha work her magic.

“Good for you, William, but that doesn’t answer the question.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to allow this”—Harte pointed a finger at each of them—“embarrassing behavior to continue.”

“He is old enough to make his own decisions. His life is his own,” Trisha smiled at Trent.

“I will not allow his deviant behavior to tarnish my reputation. If he will not call it off, then I will make sure they leave him,” William ended the statement in a harsh whisper.

Trisha’s expression turned stony. “You should be worried about your own actions tarnishing your reputation, or have you forgotten? Is it necessary for me to remind you?”

“Now, Trisha,” William took her hand placatingly, which she immediately pulled away.

Using the thick, linen napkin, she wiped her hand as if William were contagious. “You don’t get to touch me. You lost that privilege a long time ago. This is the only warning you will get, William. Leave Trent alone, or we will be airing all of our dirty laundry in the public eye.”

Harte paled, his skin taking on an ashen color, but he shot a look of cold hatred across the table at Trent.

“I believe that’s our cue,” AJ said, rising from the booth. “I’m sure Mr. Harte has other plans for the evening.”

Brock slid out, pulling on AJ’s hand but the former Marine wouldn’t release him. Fine. He held onto Trent’s palm as he slid out of the booth, tugging the big guy along. At first Trent resisted, causing Brock to glance back at the big man. Warring emotions flickered across Trent’s face, reminding Brock of the silent movie he’d once seen in class, where the expressions were so clear he didn’t need dialogue to understand what the scene. Without realizing what he’d done, Brock had asked Trent to make a decision. None of them put on displays in public for various reasons. With the rumors, sneers, the rough plays on the football field, pressure from his father, and now

accidental pressure from him, Trent had been put on the spot. If the man continued out of the booth with his hands linked to Brock's and Brock's to AJ's, any who were watching—Brock loosened his grip, fingers slowly sliding across Trent's palm. He couldn't put Trent on the spot like that. He wanted to convince the man to stay, not chase him off with silent demands.

"Trent, we'll talk again," William barked.

Sorrowful sapphire eyes glanced at William Harte. Trent's expression changed from sadness to regret. "No, Father, we won't. Please don't contact me again. If you do, I'll have a restraining order brought against you." Trent paused after rising from the booth and held his hand out to his mother, assisting her. "If you think to continue with the blackmail, I'll ask Mother about this 'rumored reputation'. You see, this gay son of yours, who you are going to use to garner votes from the liberal community, may have a thing or two to say about his father if something were to happen to the people he cares about." Trent leaned closer to William, his voice lowered to the point that Brock could barely make out what his lover said. "Some dogs, no matter how well trained, bite the hand that hurts them."

Brock wanted to whoop and scream touchdown! If AJ hadn't been holding his hand he might have too, because he felt that good. Trent finally stood up to his father. People underestimated how hard independence was when strict obedience had been ingrained into a person. Breaking those invisible chains was difficult and complicated. Brock felt only the deepest respect for Trent for braving the storm and drawing the line. The emotional cost couldn't be counted. Trent had always strived to earn his father's respect—his love. But William Harte had the heart of a glacier and yet Trent had continued to try—until today. Brock prayed his lover wouldn't regret his stance later on.

The running back stood to his full height, shoulders straight and proud. He offered Trisha his arm and escorted her to the restaurant entrance, stopping several feet from the gentleman waiting there for her. Leaning down, he presented his cheek for her kiss. She left behind a smudge of pink lipstick.

"Do you know how much I love you? I'm proud to be your mother." She smiled up at him with a warm, misty gaze.

Trent cleared his throat, his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed several times. "Yes, ma'am, I love you too."

Trisha turned her attention to Brock and AJ. "I'm impressed. You came here to support my son, and I couldn't be more pleased in his choice of friends and partners. You can never have too many people to love or be loved by."

Brock and AJ accepted kisses from her before she said her good-byes and accepted the hand of the waiting gentleman.

After she left, Trent shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor with an uncertain expression. "I'm sorry you had to witness that."

"I'm not," AJ replied, touching Trent's elbow. "Next time we would prefer to come with you, regardless of what that cold bastard wants."

Trent glanced up, his cheeks taking on an attractive blush. "Yeah? Not that we'll have any kind of a relationship now. I'm not sure how I feel about it."

"Yes, we'll come with you, regardless of what happens. Whether you choose to attempt to mend your relationship with your father or not, we'll stand behind either choice," Brock insisted.

Taking a white handkerchief from his pocket, Brock wiped at the lipstick mark on Trent's cheek. The stuff was stubborn and Brock's tongue pressed into his top lip as he concentrated. He thought he was probably scrubbing Trent's skin off attempting to remove the cosmetic, but the big man held still. Glancing up, he found Trent's gaze was riveted onto Brock's mouth.

"Is it gone?" Trent's voice had dropped an octave, sounding low and throaty. That was Trent's special bedroom voice. The one that, if he were at home, promised they wouldn't make it to the bedroom before Trent pounced.

Brock blinked. "W-what?"

"Mom's lipstick... from my cheek... did you get it all?" Brock frowned. Trent's lips were glossy—wet—what did he say? "You stopped wiping but you're staring... not saying anything, so I thought I'd ask."

"Ask what?" What were they talking about? Brock wasn't sure anymore. He did know he was thankful for tight briefs and pleated pants; otherwise

everyone in the restaurant would see, in great detail, how much he needed to be home—in bed.

A warm palm slid into his. Glancing down, he realized it was Trent's. His heart kicked up a beat at the sight of a large hand engulfing his. Not that he had small hands, he just forgot sometimes how much larger Trent was compared to him and AJ. The back of his lover's hand was slightly darker, the knuckles deeper, thicker.

Then it really hit him.

Trent was holding his hand in public. He never thought it was a big thing, simple physical contact. They touched each other all the time both in private and public. They horsed around, slapped each other on the back, gave slugs to the shoulder or thigh. They were open with their affection behind closed doors, and it didn't matter because that kind of physical contact wasn't for public viewing.

So he shouldn't feel like—Trent holding his hand now—it shouldn't be important. He knew where he stood with his lovers, didn't he? But his itchy eyes, the frog in his throat, and the rock sitting on his chest told him he'd been wrong. This was more than simply significant. It was essential to him, even if it wasn't to Trent. As AJ had claimed him earlier, Trent claimed him now.

Brock glanced over to AJ to see his reaction and noticed Trent held AJ's hand as well. Brock blinked several times. The former Marine wasn't shrugging in indifference at the modest contact either. His jaw was firm and his knuckles strained as if he were holding onto Trent tightly.

"Excuse me."

"Hi, Alissa." Trent flashed a genuine smile. "Please meet my roommates, Brock and AJ."

A beautiful African-American woman in a stunning red dress turned large, dark eyes on AJ and Brock. She glanced at the clasped hands, and the corner of her mouth quirked up in a cute half grin. "Mack and I noticed you didn't really have dinner. Come and eat with us, we would enjoy the company."

“We’d love to,” Trent replied. “I’m starving. I haven’t had anything to eat since breakfast.” AJ frowned. “We can talk later after we go home.”

Brock watched, relieved as the tension drained out of AJ. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Trent released their hands and bumped AJ’s shoulder. “I’m counting on it.” For a brief moment, Brock absorbed the look of tempered desire Trent gave them before leading the way to the table where Alissa and a gentleman with silver temples waited.

He didn’t know if Trent needed the time to unwind, but Brock could be patient. Before the three of them had moved in together, he’d waited three months to approach Trent and introduced himself to the running back for the first time. He could endure a couple of hours before he ushered his lovers home for some much needed TLC.

CHAPTER SIX

~AJ~

AJ was going to walk out of the restaurant with blue balls because Brock was making them suffer. The man was so full of sexual energy, AJ expected his lover to vibrate right out of his skin before Alissa invited them to dinner.

He knew there was table conversation, intelligent table conversation. For the life of him, he couldn't have repeated a word he said. He wasn't quite sure he spoke. Maybe he nodded or gave a word here or there, he honestly didn't know. He could barely smile at their hosts. He was sure they were nice, but his focus wasn't on conversation or topics or whatever.

No, Brock and Trent claimed his full attention. The sexual tension only climbed higher the moment they sat down. Brock sent lingering, heated gazes across the table at them and still held a discussion that had Alissa laughing and Mack replying enthusiastically. The brush over his fingers when he passed the salt to Brock sent electric tingles through the palm of his hand to his balls.

For a moment he thought he was the only one enthralled, but glancing at Trent, the running back was practically a pile of putty. AJ didn't know where this sexual mastery came from, not that Brock was ever reserved when it came to making love. Passionate, aggressive, and vocal, they always had plenty of foreplay before they were screaming each other's names.

No, this new mood, with Brock exuding sex appeal like a Curos dancer from ancient Crete whose exotic dances were said to drive viewers into a frenzy of sexual need—it was different. He and Trent were being stalked like prey. It was disconcerting at first, because AJ was the one who usually did the pursuing.

This sudden change in his lover was titillating and slightly infuriating. If Brock excused himself to go to the restroom, AJ wouldn't care where they were. He would follow and fuck Brock in one of the stalls while Trent stood guard. Then switch places with Trent. Their sexy man would come back to the dinner table well loved-on with extra incentive to go home.

Brock didn't leave the table.

As it was, he and Trent were stuck with discreetly adjusting their hard cocks while playing nice. Really, it was Trent's fault. They should've picked up drive-thru on the way home. But even as he thought it, he knew Trent needed the downtime. Mr. Harte laughed too loud in his corner table with his prestigious guests. Thanks to Brock, Trent only had eyes and ears for what happened at their table. The running back paid no attention to the stone cold bastard who ignored them as he left with his guests. AJ noticed. Strangely, Mack noticed, the man frowned deeply at Trent's father. But the important part was that Trent did not.

"Dessert, anyone?" the waiter offered while taking empty plates away.

"No!" AJ shared a look with Trent, cringing slightly at the vehemence behind their simultaneous answers. Luckily their hosts didn't take offense. Alissa hid a smile behind the back of her hand, glossy lips pressed together in suppressed humor.

Mack simply grinned outright. "I suppose it is late..." the older man hedged.

AJ checked out of the conversation again. Not his fault really. Under the table, his left calf was being stroked by Brock's foot. As if on cue, his right ankle was caressed by a wingtip belonging to Trent. The last time he played footsy in a public place—in a semipublic—in a—well, never. He'd never wrangled feet under a table with anyone.

He hadn't seen the point until now. The sly smiles both Trent and Brock gave him, the forbidden touches under the table. Yes, they were forbidden touches, more erotic than if one of his lovers had grabbed his cock in front of everyone in the restaurant. Secret touches full of promises, and holy crap, he didn't know that someone rubbing his calf would be such a huge turn-on. If he hadn't already been fully aroused from the dinner foreplay, the sneaky fondling of his legs would've done him in. Right then he was happy he had a suit jacket to button and cover the evidence of his arousal.

Quickly, short of being rude, Trent thanked a bemused Mack and Alissa for a delightful dinner, promising to get together again. AJ ushered his lovers out of the restaurant. He and Trent watched Brock stride confidently through the parking garage. Trent had taken a cab so that was one less hassle, because honestly, AJ seriously considered the possibility of having sex in the car. Unfortunately, on a Friday night, the parking garage had too much traffic, so he forced himself to endure for another twenty minutes.

It was the longest twenty minutes of his life.

Brock. AJ glanced into the rearview mirror to glimpse the man in question staring back with a wicked smile. Brock's gaze silently promised every single desire would be met and exceeded.

AJ was turned on three ways to Sunday, and when he finally pulled into the driveway and the car was shifted into park, Brock slid from the back, his body moving sensuously. The slamming of Trent's car door jolted AJ into action. The running back prowled down the sidewalk, his wingtips clipping on the hard cement.

Brock used his keys to unlock the door, throwing a heated glance over his shoulder before he entered the house. AJ jogged to the low porch, ignoring the two steps as he leaped up immediately behind Trent as they filed into the house.

AJ shut and locked the door then, for the second time that day, he watched his two lovers as he leaned against the sturdy wood. Instead of an air of desperation, it was heavy with desire and suppressed need. Brock removed his suit jacket and laid it over the arm of the armchair, carefully removing his cufflinks. Trent watched hungrily, like a man starved and salivating because he knew the meal would soon come.

"You know," Brock started, "There isn't anything you can't share with us."

AJ pushed off the door and shed his own dinner jacket. "Brock and I had this crazy thought that you were thinking about leaving us."

Trent's shoulders sagged.

Brock paused in unbuttoning his own dress shirt. “Why... why would you consider that?”

The running back raked his fingers through his dark hair, causing it to stand up. “There have been things said that concerned me. The thought of the two of you in danger because of me...”

“Then we go to the police.”

“Not threats of physical violence. What if you couldn’t find jobs or your dream job passed you by because of these rumors? I don’t want the two of you to regret being in a relationship with me because you lost everything else you cared about.”

AJ slid his palms around Trent’s waistband until they came to rest on the belt buckle. “I don’t see how that’s your call, big man.”

AJ braced himself as Trent relaxed back into him. Their running back might be taller than AJ but he still trusted AJ to be able to hold his weight. AJ’s tongue darted out to lick behind the curl of Trent’s ear when the man tilted his head back.

Brock moved in close, slowly removing Trent’s necktie. “Why would you presume to make decisions for us?” Brock asked softly, drawing Trent’s gaze.

“I want you guys to be happy. I thought if I left then at least you’ll have each other and not worry about whether someone is going to sabotage your futures,” Trent muttered softly.

AJ forced Trent to face him. “How is that okay?” he demanded.

Trent sucked in a quick breath. “I won’t have some greedy reporter make us look like freaks. I won’t allow them to twist what we have into something vile or dirty. And I definitely won’t be responsible for the loss of your dreams.”

“What about you?” Brock asked. “What happens to your dreams? They could still go after you, dog your heels through the NFL. No matter what happens, the rumors will always be there. Are you just going to give up on your dream, your career?”

Moving out of AJ's arms, Trent turned, cupping both AJ and Brock's cheeks. "You, the two of you, are my dream. I would be happy knowing you're safe... even if I can't have you."

"So that's it? You get to decide for us, tell us what to do? We aren't children to be shielded for our own good." AJ attempted to keep his anger from his voice. Right or wrong, he did understand Trent's only motivation was to protect them.

"You think it will be that easy to dump us?" Brock snapped. "Quit treating us like your father treats you. We're not going to ask how high when you say jump."

A flash of pain crossed Trent's expression and he mumbled a response too low for AJ to hear.

It appeared Brock wouldn't allow the meek answer to pass. "I didn't hear what you said, Trent. Is it that easy for you to walk away from this, from us?"

"No!" the big man barked, finally lifting his gaze from the floor. "Don't you know how much I love you two? I'm selfish for wanting to keep you two regardless of the consequences."

"Good, because we hadn't planned on letting you go."

Trent looked at them with a startled expression.

"Did you think we'd simply give you up? That we didn't love you enough to hold onto you with both our hands?" Brock asked in an agonized whisper.

"Oh, God, Brock, I didn't..."

"You thought we would value jobs more than... are you serious...? Jobs? Is that how shallow you believe us to be?" Brock spun on his heel, making a hasty retreat to the bedroom.

AJ watched their wounded lover withdraw. Did Trent actually think they would rather have a job than him in their lives? Did he think of himself as dispensable or that their love for him wasn't equal to his own for them?

"I didn't... I just..." Trent seemed to be a loss for words.

Sighing deeply, AJ nudged Trent's shoulder. "You should've told us what's been going on. It's what partners do. You have to value our input, trust we know our own hearts. It isn't your burden to bear alone, because you aren't the only one in this relationship. It is a relationship, right? If not, then what the fuck have we been doing the last two years?" AJ nodded his head in the direction Brock went. "You need to go to him and answer his questions. I'll be there in a second."

Trent moved as if he were fifty years older, fists pulling at his dark hair. AJ stood where he could see and hear while he removed his suit jacket and tie. Brock stood in the bedroom with his back to the doorway, fists on his hips, head bowed. Trent moved up behind their lover but Brock shrugged off Trent's touch even as the big man whispered into Brock's ear.

Taking off the cuff links, AJ placed them in a bowl on the couch table, shed his dress shirt, and then headed toward the two most important people in his life.

"Baby, please," Trent begged in a tortured voice.

"I'm not going to make love to you if you're planning to leave us. Dammit, it already hurts. You can't... you can't..."

Trent grasped Brock's elbow and spun him around. The running back pushed Brock against the wall. AJ held his breath as he watched, his erection pressed painfully against his fly. He knew what Brock needed, what they both needed to hear from their lover before they would go any further. Was Trent already gone?

AJ didn't believe so. Trent had held their hand, claimed them in public, but they still needed to hear Trent say he wasn't leaving. As much as they swore to not let him go, they couldn't force him to stay. They could cajole, coerce, and seduce, but if Trent later decided to walk out the door then they wouldn't be able to stop him.

It didn't mean they wouldn't try.

Trent loomed over Brock but the smaller man refused to look Trent in the eye. AJ pressed into Trent's back, only one layer of cloth between them, reminding the running back that AJ also waited to hear what he had to say.

CHAPTER SEVEN

~Brock~

Standing in the bedroom, Brock shook off Trent's touch. He ached to embrace Trent but his heart was already breaking. How were he and AJ to survive Trent leaving them? Something would always be missing. If Trent made love to them and then left, he knew he'd shatter.

A firm hand gripped his elbow and before he knew what happened, he was crushed against the wall. Oh. God. Trent's warm body pressed against him. How could he say no? His men knew he loved them, but he was unsure if they understood how much. Trent and AJ were it for him. People could scoff all they wanted but it didn't change the outcome. These two men were the great loves of his life, and he'd never get over losing either one.

The hard line of his lover's erection dug into Brock's stomach as Trent rotated his hips. He attempted to hold back a shudder, but he knew Trent felt it by the change in the man's breathing.

"Listen to me, Brock," Trent's words skittered across Brock's ear, raising goose bumps on his skin.

"Trent, don't," Brock forced out between trembling lips. He hated that sign of his weakness.

"Don't what?" Trent's large hand slid around and grasped the nape of Brock's neck.

"Don't make us think you're going to stay... I can't... not unless you choose us," Brock replied.

AJ moved around until he pressed into Trent's side, the former Marine's soft, gray gaze encouraging him.

Suddenly nervous, Brock studiously stared at the floor. He didn't want to see Trent's sad and resigned expression before the man walked away. But his lover refused to allow Brock to ignore him.

"Look at me," Trent begged, voice full of gravel.

Staring at Trent's wingtips, Brock was struck by a realization. Why should he allow Trent an easy way out? Meekly standing aside because he was hurting? With AJ's help, Brock could remind Trent of what they had together and make it hard for their lover to walk away from them. No, he wouldn't be quiet.

"Brock," Trent pleaded in an agonized whisper.

He glanced to AJ, seeing the same resolve reflected back at him. AJ gave Brock a small nod and then slipped a hand between him and Trent. Their lover moaned openmouthed as AJ palmed Trent's rigid cock through the dark dress slacks. Brock shifted his hips forward into the back of AJ's hand as he met Trent's heated gaze. The hand encircling the nape of his neck squeezed and massaged, bringing their foreheads together as AJ tortured Trent.

"Aren't we worth fighting for?" Brock panted, working the dress shirt out of Trent's slacks.

Trent's breath came in quick huffs, his eyes dilated, the black swallowing the blue until it was a thin ring. AJ moved around, slipping both hands around to cup Trent's erection from behind.

"Yes... you guys are worth fighting for." Trent gulped air, panting. "This isn't fair. I don't want you guys hurt."

Brock gripped Trent's face between his palms. "You leaving will hurt us more than anything else. Tell us how easy it is to walk away. How are we supposed to pick up the pieces and continue to be the same without you?"

"You would have each other..."

"This isn't a two-plus-one relationship. You can't leave and expect us to have what it takes to stay together. We need you."

"AJ... Brock..."

"Is it that easy to leave us behind? Can you go out there and live a perfectly happy and normal life without us?"

"No." Trent squeezed his eyes shut.

“No, what? Tell us,” Brock demanded.

Trent’s breath hitched. “If I walked out of here now, I’d leave my soul behind. I’d die a little each day without you two.”

“Thank fuck,” AJ growled.

As scary, as stupid, as wonderful as he felt about Trent’s agonized admission, Brock could have shouted for joy. He brushed their lips together, swallowing the low whimper. His tongue swept past the parted lips to devour Trent’s mouth as AJ urged them toward the bed. Trent broke the kiss, panting hard, his lids fluttered closed as the weight of the belt caused his slacks to sag after AJ unbuckled them so he could delve into Trent’s briefs.

“So fucking unfair,” their big man gasped, bucking into AJ’s hand.

“Don’t expect us to be fair.” AJ’s voice had a hard sexual edge. “Not when we’re playing for keeps.”

Brock’s fingers fumbled at Trent’s shirt buttons. He trembled as if this were his first time making love. “I’ll buy you another one,” he snarled right before he grabbed the overlapping edges and wrenched them apart. The sound of torn cloth and the ping of buttons were lost to Brock as he attacked the exposed collarbone. Trent’s skin formed goose flesh in the wake of Brock’s tongue as he licked a path down the muscular chest. Soft cursing erupted when Brock nipped a small brown nipple.

AJ relieved Trent of his slacks and briefs. His feet becoming entangled, Trent fell backward onto the bed. The nervousness from the moment before gone, Brock deftly unbuttoned his own shirt. His stare raked over Trent’s straining cock, the ruined shirt caught at his elbows, dark hair tousled, pants caught on the man’s wingtips. Trent’s gaze locked onto Brock’s fingertips, following their downward motion, then jumped over to AJ who disrobed just as slowly as Brock did.

“I need you guys,” Trent confessed. “I’ll always need you. You’re buried so far under my skin...”

AJ moved fast, kneeling on the bed next to Trent, trapping his face between AJ's palms, and claiming Trent's lips in a rough kiss. They both moaned aloud. It was one of the sexiest things Brock had ever seen. AJ's wild bursts of passion consumed them completely when they were on the receiving end. Trent was being eaten alive.

Brock knelt to slip the shoes off of Trent's feet, freeing the pants. The running back leaned on his elbows as AJ pulled low, raspy sounds from Trent with a simple kiss. They were beautiful together. Trent's wide shoulders, large rippling muscles, sculpted firm pecs, and washboard abs were perfect next to AJ's Marine-cut body.

It had been a couple of years since AJ left the military service but his continued physical discipline kept the man's body toned and fit. Out of the three of them, Brock was by far the least athletic. He went to the gym, just not as religiously as he consumed his favorite foods. Not that his lovers seemed to mind his soft stomach and slight pooch; the fact they didn't require him to be perfect made him love them all the more.

AJ had maneuvered Trent farther across the mattress. Brock searched the side table drawer for the lube. Back on the California king, the kiss had turned into a raging fire that engulfed his lovers. Trent's fingers encircled AJ's cock as he slowly thrust into Trent's large hand.

Encouraging Trent to move so he could crawl between the running back's legs, Brock's gaze raked over the neatly trimmed pubic hair. Heavy, round balls nestled at the apex of Trent's thighs, right below a long, ruddy cock which pointed toward Trent's navel. Slowly Brock's gaze travelled up the rigid abdomen to meet the piercing expressions of both of his lovers. Their mouths were parted with soft panting, lips pink and swollen from kissing.

Trent's lids fluttered closed as Brock ran the flat of his tongue along the hard column to the flared tip. AJ's gaze narrowed as he watched Brock swirl his tongue around the tip before sealing his lips against the silky skin and plunging down the shaft. Brock felt powerful, sexy, and desired as his lovers stared at him. He moaned around the thick shaft, and Trent's hips bucked forward, his breath coming in loud, hitching blows.

With lubed fingers, Brock readied himself. The need to be impaled on Trent pushed him to work quickly. Pulling off the hard cock with a pop, Brock moved to straddle his lover's hips.

"Oh, damn, Brock!" Trent groaned as Brock pumped his lover's rigid shaft before placing the head at his hole.

Steadily he bore down, his body stretching tightly around Trent's solid length "AJ... Trent..." His voice was full of suppressed desire. He couldn't think, much less express what he needed. All he could do was feel the coarse hairs of Trent's thighs that brushed against his legs, the rough hands that gripped his hips, and the column of firm flesh that filled him until he thought he would split in two.

"We've got you," AJ whispered against Brock's lips before slanting his mouth down in a luxurious kiss.

Yes. They had always been there to keep him from falling over the edge. What they had collectively, what they did, it wasn't sex or fucking or some kind of fun mutual release. No—the three of them made more than simple love. It went beyond fondness or sweet affection. Combined together, their bodies expressed passion, wordlessly spoken devotion, and trust. The music of their souls spilled ardor into each other until they were filled, full and complete within one another. It wasn't something strangers could see, nor could someone steal it away.

This is what Brock wanted Trent to remember. Right here was how their life was supposed to be. Not one, not two, but three of them entwined together, and that was what Trent needed to be reminded of. Trent's palms moved over Brock's thighs while AJ stole his breath away. In his lovers' touches, he found his resolve. He refused to allow anyone to take this away. There was more than one way to protect his lovers, and Brock swore he would bury anyone who attempted to break them apart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

~Trent~

Trent lay on his back and gritted his teeth as Brock's body slowly swallowed his rigid shaft. The grasping heat encasing his length made him want to arch into Brock to bury himself as deep as he could in his lover. But he allowed Brock to set the pace and watched with awe as he reached out to grasp AJ's thigh, needing to touch their quiet Marine as his body was sheathed inside Brock.

AJ was right there when Brock called out. The sight of the loving kiss given with such heated abandon always turned him on. They were the most beautiful part of his world, and being with them enriched his life tenfold. He'd give everything he had to be able to watch them for the rest of his days.

Brock's fingers entwined with his as AJ's palm covered Trent's hand where it gripped AJ's leg. Connected, all three of them linked together. Even when he woke in the middle of the night, they would have subconsciously moved until they were all touching in some way. How could he live without that?

Answer—he couldn't.

He should've known from the beginning he wouldn't be able to leave them. Sometime within the last two years, AJ and Brock had crawled so far under his skin, he couldn't separate them from him. He realized he didn't want to. If he left, he would only be a shell of a man, missing two huge parts of himself that he'd never be able to reclaim. Not only that, his leaving would crush them. They wouldn't stay together, because he would have unintentionally splintered them apart. In striving to protect them, he would have been the one to destroy them. Now he could clearly see what they had been trying to tell him all night. They were three equal parts of a whole, and the two wouldn't fit together without the one missing piece. He couldn't do that to Brock and AJ, because they were more precious to him than the air he breathed.

Brock's bottom made contact with his groin, breaking the kiss between Brock and AJ. Trent reached up to grasp AJ by the neck and pulled him down to claim his mouth. Brock groaned, and Trent reached for him with his other hand to bring him down into a three-way kiss full of heat and desire and a climbing urgency.

"Will you make love to me?" Trent pleaded. He gave AJ a firm pump. Those two weren't the only ones who could play dirty.

The corner of Brock's mouth cocked up into a sultry half grin. "You want us to what? Leave you alone?" Trent gripped Brock's hip, keeping him in place, half afraid Brock would actually leave. "No?" His lover's voice dropped low. "Or do you need us to remind you who you fuckin' belong to?"

"God, yes." Trent's reply turned into a loud moan when Brock rotated his hips, grinding his ass into Trent's groin.

Falling forward, Trent was bracketed between Brock's arms. "Was that a yes?" the man teased, warm, wine-scented breath filling Trent's nostrils.

He couldn't hold back. He thrust into Brock in a slow, torturous glide. His hands ran over Brock's slender bowed back until he gripped his lover's ass cheeks with his palms, spreading the globes wide. Bracing his feet, Trent drove deeper into Brock's tight heat, loving the way Brock's body clutched at him when he withdrew only to welcome him back. Palms on Trent's chest, Brock moved with Trent, head back, eyes closed as he made sweet sexy noises.

AJ captured Trent's mouth. They were past the foreplay kisses with closed mouths and gentle brushes of the lips. No, they were far, far past that point; AJ sucked Trent's tongue into his mouth so he could chase AJ's with his own. As soon as the former Marine pulled away, Brock took over, testing before going in for full possession.

God, I don't have enough hands. Trent wanted to touch and tease, to wrap around and sink into them. So many things—there was so much he wanted to do with them, to them. Brock pulled back from the kiss. Trent needed air, his chest heaved, his breathing loud in his ears.

“You said something about needing us to remind you?” AJ held up the bottle of lube, raising a brow in question, and Trent quit breathing.

In answer to the unspoken question, Trent sat halfway up, abs straining as he collected Brock securely in his arms and flipped over. Brock lay on his back, lips parted as Trent firmly pushed into the man’s tight hole. Glancing over his shoulder, he watched AJ slick up his cock with one hand, the other stroking one of Trent’s butt cheeks. A thumb massaged his puckered entrance and he dropped his head to Brock’s shoulder.

God, he loved it when they were able to make love in this position. Different class schedules, jobs, and responsibilities meant they weren’t always home at the same time except for a couple of days a week. It didn’t mean they abstained from sex, only that when the three did come together he chose certain positions over others. He didn’t care where he ended up in the mix. This was his favorite, because all three of them became physically connected. In the beginning, it hadn’t been easy, but they’d had time to perfect it. Some things were all about timing.

“Hurry,” he barely choked out. He spread his legs wider, silently begging to be filled.

AJ moved behind him, stroking his hole with lube-slick fingers. Trent’s hips jerked, his whole body shuddered. He needed this, to be surrounded by them, holding them and being held in return. Brock made nonsensical noises in his ear, hands firmly holding Trent’s hips to keep them from following AJ’s retreating fingers. He always felt exposed when he bottomed—vulnerable. He was fortunate to have two lovers who could turn that feeling around into a burning desire until he would plead to be penetrated, needing it like he needed his next breath.

Brock’s hands slipped down until he cupped the globes of Trent’s ass in his palms and spread the cheeks apart for AJ. His balls were rolled, the taint rubbed until he pushed back far enough that he slipped out of Brock.

“Easy lover,” Brock crooned.

Confidently grasping Trent's shaft, Brock guided Trent back into his body, whispering affirmations while Trent groaned from the dual sensations of his cock gripped in a tight sheath and a thick, calloused finger slipping past his guardian muscle.

Perfect. So perfect. He'd almost ruined what they had together because he'd been afraid. "I'm so sorry, so sorry," he babbled, the virtual steel band around his chest tightening until he couldn't breathe. His eyes burned, making him unable to see but feeling AJ and Brock all around him. "Please forgive me, I apologize... I..."

AJ draped over Trent's back, the man's hands stroking and soothing as he spoke in one ear and Brock in the other.

"We have you. We're not going anywhere."

"You're safe. We won't let you fall."

"We love you."

"Oh, God, what was I thinking?" Trent's throat burned and he squeezed his lids shut.

"Not now. We'll expect you to suck up and beg later but right now we just want to love you."

Trent nodded. AJ nipped him on the earlobe, and Brock started sucking up a mark on his collarbone.

Chuckling at the low noise Trent made, the heat of AJ's body retreated as AJ sat up and ran a hand down the cleft of Trent's ass, tapping his hole with a finger. He heard the snick of the lube cap. A dark laugh sounded before cool slick trickled over his heated skin. Trent yelped and thrust, not that Brock complained as he gripped Trent hips with a "yes" hissing from his lips.

The sting of the stretch was a reminder of how long it had been since he'd received. He buried his face in the nape of Brock's neck, gasping in pain, in pleasure. He wasn't sure which ruled his body at the moment. He didn't care as long as they didn't stop.

The blunt head of AJ's cock nudged his entrance, and Trent tensed. Brock ran soothing hands up his arms over his back, down his hips to his thighs, cupping and rolling his balls. AJ whispered words he couldn't quite make out, because all of his attention was focused on the slow thrust that split him open, filling him completely until he couldn't possibly hold more.

"Come on, Trent," AJ coaxed. "Relax, let me in."

He breathed steadily, concentrating on loosening his muscles.

"There we go," AJ soothed. "You're so tight. We're going to love you so good."

Pubic hair brushed his bottom. The former Marine licked a path up his spine. Leaning back and wrapping an arm behind AJ's head, Trent pulled him in for a kiss. It was awkward and sloppy and amazing. Releasing AJ, he gazed down at Brock who patiently waited as he ran his hands over Trent's body. There for a moment, the briefest of seconds, Trent thought he would lose it, break down and be crushed by his emotions. Then AJ began to withdraw and the pleasure bloomed, forcing aside everything else.

"You like that?" AJ asked. "Is this what you want, big man?"

"Oh, yes, give it to me," Trent panted.

He held Brock's brown-eyed gaze. "Are you ready for some loving, baby?"

"About fucking time," Brock grumbled, but Trent saw mischief as well as anticipation in his lover's gaze.

After a couple of false starts, they found their rhythm. Trent felt himself riding a wave of pleasure that had him babbling. He wasn't sure what he said with his mind wound up in a cottony haze. By the noises coming from AJ, Trent knew his lover was close. Brock undulated under him, pupils blown wide in desire. Grasping Trent's face, Brock beckoned for a kiss. AJ gripped Trent's hips roughly, grinding his groin into Trent's ass as the Marine came hard.

After AJ pulled free, he fell onto the bed next to them. Trent hooked Brock's knees onto his elbows and started searching for that sweet spot. He

knew the moment he found it by the way Brock gasped and his neck arched, head back digging into the pillow as he released throaty groans of pleasure.

“Oh, God, there. Right there. Don’t stop. Don’t stop. Aww, fuck! I’m going to come!”

Brock palmed his cock and stroked to the rhythm of Trent’s thrusts. Their breaths came in harsh bursts as they chased their orgasms.

“Come for me Brock, I need you to come for me.”

Trent was holding on by the skin of his teeth, wanting his lover to come first. When the orgasm hit Brock, his lover clamped down on Trent, dragging him over the edge. He continued to thrust raggedly, drawing out the fantastic sensations. AJ drew Brock into a languid kiss. Almost at the same time, they reached up for Trent, dragging him down so he could join in the sweet and sloppy kiss.

Trent ran his fingers through the seed on Brock’s belly, cum dripping down the inside of his thighs. Gently pulling out, he left the two lying limply on the bed while he went to quickly wash up. After switching on the light to the bathroom, Trent prepared three washcloths. He washed up before heading back to his men, who waited for him in the California king. After cleaning AJ and Brock, he threw the rags in the direction of the bathroom door and flopped on the bed on the other side of Brock. The tension began to build, and he gazed apprehensively at AJ and Brock.

“I’m sorry. I was worried you’d come to resent me if George went through with his threat.”

AJ mirrored Trent, lying on his side, head propped as he leaned on his elbow. “Are you kidding me, that fucking asshole George threatened you?”

“You actually, both of you... and so did my father.” Trent nervously licked his lips and told them everything that had happened in the last couple weeks since George had walked in on them. Not only the conversations he had with George and his father, but the other things that had happened around campus. There had only been three altercations at school. While they were all nonviolent, there’d been spitting and slurs.

They were quiet for a while after Trent finished. He had expected a lot of yelling, not the silence. Somehow that was worse than raised voices. If they were screaming at him then he'd know how they felt.

"I, well, I think both Brock and I understand you wanted to protect us. I get it but you're going to have to cut that shit out. You don't have a right to make decisions for us, Trent. I don't care how afraid for us you are. That is the same crap you complained about when it came to your dad."

"I..." Trent felt positively sick, his stomach rolling with nausea. They were right. He'd pulled something his father always did.

"We are responsible for our own decisions. Trust us to know what is right for us." Brock bit his lip. "Tell me something, did you want to leave?"

"No! The thought of leaving killed me. I believed I was being selfish, wanting to keep the two of you. I know we didn't hide, but the reaction from some people made me..." Trent scrubbed a hand over his face and rolled onto his back.

"What happens if a reporter gets wind of the rumors and writes an article on us? It won't matter if George and my father leave us alone. If I'm picked up in the NFL draft, a story could ruin all of us." He glanced at Brock and AJ, who steadily gazed back. "I'm not worried about myself. I'll find something else, but if you lose your dreams it will be my fault. And as much as I would like to, we can't rewind the clock and go back to a time when people weren't staring at me like I'm a museum display. I don't know what to do anymore."

Nimble fingers laced with his. "You don't have to have all the answers, Trent." Brock tugged on Trent's hand, urging him to come close. Rolling over, he put his head on Brock's chest and reached across for AJ.

"Some things will have to change." AJ smoothed Trent's damp hair off his forehead. "We knew that at the end of the spring semester we'd need to make decisions on where to live, and where I would continue classes after you are picked up by a NFL team. This is just something else that we're going to have to discuss and make plans for. But we have to do it together."

Trent nodded. "Okay, together."

~AJ~

AJ mindlessly worked his way through making breakfast. He also made a call, cashing in a favor to a friend who promised to have a “friendly chat” with George. The football player wouldn’t be hurt, simply reminded he wasn’t the biggest dog on the block. If that didn’t work then he’d call a lawyer friend and cash in another favor.

He worked on autopilot, thinking about what happened the night before. As much as he was upset at Trent, he couldn’t blame him. The big guy had been scared. AJ wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but so was he. He wasn’t worried about the reporters or the assholes. No, he was afraid the stress of having an unconventional relationship would wear on his men. If they were overcome by the pressure, he’d lose them. He was tired of losing people he loved. Or they’d pull through, better and stronger. His sister, Susan, was the optimist. Him, not so much after all he’d seen. She would go with the latter. He chose to believe in her optimism this time.

“What’cha thinking about?” Trent’s arms slid around his waist. “You’re frowning at the bacon. Did it go bad?” AJ had slipped on a pair of basketball shorts after his shower. His skin tingled at the feel of Trent’s bare chest covering his back.

“Thinking about Susan,” AJ replied. “I should go and see her.”

“Good man. It’s about time you spoke with her. George’s issues aren’t her fault.” Trent planted a kiss on AJ’s neck, then went fishing in the refrigerator.

He glanced over as Trent bent at the waist. The running back wore a pair of ratty, gray sweats with an overstretched, elastic waistband that allowed the pants to hang lower than they were designed to. He couldn’t make out any telltale signs of a pair of briefs. AJ shook his head. He had plans for the morning, and they didn’t involve getting back into bed.

“I thought I’d go to see her this morning, unless there was something we were supposed to be doing.”

“Oh my God!” Brock’s yell came from the bedroom. “You’ve gotta be fuckin’ kidding me! Holy... Trent! You asshole! Oh my God!”

AJ followed Trent to the hallway. Brock strode out of the bedroom holding the slacks Trent had worn the night before, waving a business card in the air.

“I can’t believe you let me act like a... a... hussy last night.” Brock brandished the card like a weapon. “You! You couldn’t have told me who we were having dinner with and... oh my God! What they must think of me!” The man looked and sounded truly scandalized.

“What are you talking about?” Trent looked as confused as AJ felt.

“Don’t look at me like that!” Brock paced the hall. “We had dinner with the fucking recruiter from the Dolphins and I was... I was...”

“Oozing sex,” Trent replied, a lazy smile twisting his lips.

Brock halted, mouthed Trent’s words, and then scowled. “I all but threw my dick out on the table. That was not ‘oozing sex’. I was out of control. Now they know about us, and oh my God! They were scouting you, and I was humping your leg under the table.”

“I was too,” AJ confessed.

Brock’s eyes were huge as he turned to AJ. “Noooo...” Brock couldn’t have sounded more appalled.

Trent chuckled and immediately held his hands up when Brock turned his piercing gaze on him. “You did nothing, absolutely nothing, that was inappropriate,” the running back soothed. “Yes, you were sexy, and you had me hard throughout the dinner, but you have nothing to worry about. I spent a half an hour with Mack before Dad arrived and we talked about...”—Trent circled his finger between the three of them—“I don’t think he had a problem with us. He was also the one who reminded me of a couple of things.”

“Oh, yeah, what’s that?” Brock visibly swallowed hard as Trent approached.

“I think it would be better to show you.” Trent’s voice was low and guttural. The way he prowled seemed to make Trent appear bigger, taller.

Brock's eyes widened, his hand dropping to rub at the groin of his shorts, tongue darting out to lick his full lips.

Before Brock could reply, Trent had him flipped over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, and continued to the bedroom. AJ chuckled at the antics. Today was so much better than yesterday. He wandered back into the kitchen to turn off the stove. It seemed breakfast would have to be put on hold until his lovers finished playing. Saturdays were the best days of the week. He thought he could visit Susan and be back before his lovers even knew he had gone.

"Oh, I forgot about the food." Trent stood in the kitchen doorway, those ratty sweats hanging dangerously low.

AJ turned to Trent, puzzled. Why wasn't he with Brock? "What are you... hey!"

In the blink of an eye, AJ was staring at Trent's ass upside down. What a nice ass it was too. "I guess I can see Susan later," he wheezed out as he slid his hands into Trent's sweats.

EPILOGUE

~Trent~

The brilliant light, the camera shutters clicking, the murmuring, all of it was more intense than Trent thought it would be. The table before him was covered with a teal tablecloth adorned with the Dolphins' insignia. To his right was Jason "Mack" MacKinney, scout and recruiter for the Miami Dolphins; next to him sat the coach and the two assistant coaches. Trent had been introduced—twice—he knew their names, but if someone asked him right then, he wouldn't have been able to say what they were. To his left sat the four other players the team had picked up during the draft. He'd shaken their hands in greeting an hour earlier, but he was pretty sure they were in the same boat as he was—too stunned to speak intelligently.

A flurry of flashing blinded Trent. He blinked several times, but continued to see spots. On the other side of the table sat the press. Trent rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans. He felt eternally glad AJ had insisted on a dark blazer, because he was pretty sure anything else would have revealed his nervous sweating.

Over and over they had talked about this, he, AJ, and Brock. They had rehashed one argument after another about how public to make their relationship. Mack had coached them how to handle the press, what questions to answer, and set them up with a public relations manager. Brock and AJ held firm to their decision, and Trent continued to be terrified. The difference now—his faith that his lovers, partners, the two most important people in his life, would be there with him. And if needed, they would catch him.

He inhaled raggedly and rubbed his palms on his pants again. As luck would have it, they had Mack in their corner, and over the last several weeks Trent had come to admire and respect the man who'd become a friend. The owner and the coaches were aware of his concerns, and nobody cared as long as he continued to perform. But the real test was here, in front of him. He wondered if the reporters would eat him alive.

The press conference started out well enough. Coach Rogers fielded several questions before the board was opened up. With climbing optimism, Trent thought he might pass through unscathed.

“Trent Harte, there are reports you’re in a relationship with men.”

Trent couldn’t tell who spoke, because the spots caused by the earlier flurry of flashes continued to blind him. So he made his statement in the direction the voice came from. “Well, I am gay so yes, I have a relationship with men.”

“Trent, how many men are you dating currently and who tops?”

His eyebrows climbed up to his hairline as he coughed into his hand. Mack scowled at the reporter. “Stacey, I didn’t know you started working for Playgirl. Next question please.”

“Trent, how do you think your dating habits will affect your playing performance?”

Mack began to answer, but Trent raised a hand to hold him off. “I’ve been in a monogamous relationship for two years. My personal life hasn’t impacted my performance on the field.”

“Trent, you’re saying you’ve been in a monogamous relationship for two years...”

“Yes, our three-year anniversary is coming up in about a month,” Trent replied.

“All right, three years. How does that work?”

“George, I don’t see how this questioning has anything to do with...” Mack began.

Trent interrupted, “I’ll answer the question.”

Mack pursed his lips and addressed the press. “Fine, but from here on out, the questions will be kept professional or you will be escorted off the premises.”

Trent located the reporter who'd asked the question. "Being a part of a ménage à trois... a threesome—however you want to put it—this relationship is really no different than any other partnership. I'm accountable to two people instead of one. It requires me to be secure with who I am, that I practice respect, understanding, and compromise. I must have complete trust in myself, as well as in my partners. And it's extremely important to communicate. If I don't talk, if I can't express myself, then a relationship like this would never work."

The rest of the press conference was a blur. Questions were asked of the other new players and the reporters kept the questions respectful. Trent was well aware that this had been easy compared to what it could've been like, but there would always be a next time.

Mack rose from the table with Trent, and they walked out of the press room together. "Are you sure you guys won't come to the party? Alissa has been asking about you three."

"No, Mack, I think I want to go home for now. We're still unpacking. Maybe next time." Trent backed up a couple of steps toward AJ and Brock, who waited by the exit, their smiles open and wide. Mack glanced behind Trent before nodding.

"Next time, then."

Trent didn't hesitate. He spun on his heel and opened the door, ushering his lovers out of the room. The walk to the car was longer than he thought it should be.

"You did pretty good," AJ said.

"I thought you were going to throw up at the beginning." Brock took his hand.

"I did too. I think I still might," he confessed.

"Well, do it before we get in the car because I am not pulling over on the interstate," AJ said. "Miami has messed with my sense of direction. Do people get mugged on the interstate here, or is it carjacked?"

“Huh. Too bad,” Brock quipped, ignoring AJ’s question.

“Too bad, what?” Trent asked.

Brock scratched the bridge of his nose. “Well, I was thinking about sex and ice cream. Or ice cream and sex. But if you don’t feel good and if AJ is going to get us lost...”

AJ picked up the pace. “I won’t get us lost. I noticed an ice cream place near the house. We can grab it on our way.”

Trent tugged on Brock’s hand, hauling him along, attempting to keep up with AJ. “I feel right as rain. I’m good. I’m real good.”

Brock laughed. “I just bet you are.”

THE END

Author Bio

Lexi has always been an avid reader, and at a young age started reading (secretly) her mother's romances (the ones she was told not to touch). She was the only teenager she knew of who would be grounded from reading. Later, with a pencil and a note book, she wrote her own stories and shared them with friends because she loved to see their reactions. A Texas transplant, Lexi now kicks her boots up in the Midwest with her Yankee husband and her eighty-pound puppies named after vacuum cleaners.

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