



*Brentnie*

FRESH HELL: BOOK ONE

CHARITY  
PARKERSON

**Breathe**

**Fresh Hell #1**



Charity Parkerson

Punk & Sissy Publications



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—Warning: This book is intended for readers over the age of 18. Some of my books contain allusions to past abuse and trauma. I try to have nothing triggering on page and treat every situation with care.

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## INTRODUCTION

***OMRI RUINED TRIPP'S LIFE and career. His reputation is shot. That doesn't mean they're done.***

A stupid reality show. Tripp should have never agreed to do a celebrity season of *Fresh Hell*. But he honestly thought six weeks of ranch life and ridiculous challenges would be an easy million bucks in his pocket. As a pro football player, he thought he could skate through unscathed. Unfortunately, Tripp also never expects to find himself attracted to another contestant bent on winning, an overly cocky French actor named Omri, especially since Tripp has never wanted another man. He one hundred percent never expects the show and Omri to wreck his entire life.

Omri never meant to level Tripp's life. It was just a game. They were in a bubble while on the show. Their every move recorded for the world to see. He doesn't realize until they leave the ranch how much damage he's done. There's no way Omri will let Tripp suffer any consequences because of him. Now he just needs Tripp to cooperate and let him fix things.

Oh, and Omri needs to figure out how to fall out of love with Tripp since there's zero chance the stubborn football star will choose him.

*Fresh Hell* might be the name of the show that started it all, but it's truly symbolic of the characters' lives in this series by author Charity Parkerson, where the men will face challenges they never expected. These are a combination of sports, bi-awakening, and several other sub genres with interconnecting characters. They are best when read in order.

## PROLOGUE

“ALL NEW SEASON. ALL new location. Celebrities on a ranch... just outside of L.A.? What? Watch this season of *Fresh Hell* with a new twist to see some of your favorite celebrities getting down and dirty on the farm. Will they survive?”

Omri switched off the TV and set the remote aside. He pinched the spot between his eyes where a pain bloomed. What a shit show this was about to be.

## CHAPTER one

SIX WEEKS. SIXTEEN CONTESTANTS. Tripp was so sick of hearing those words and he had just arrived. He still didn't know why he had agreed to do this show. His momma would have been proud, he supposed. If he won, the million-dollar pot went to a local children's hospital. She would have liked that.

*“Mon Dieu. Are we expected to shower here?”*

The loud words in a French accent floated down the stairs of the two-story house where the show was being filmed. From the moment they had stepped through the doors, strategically positioned cameras caught their every move. According to the producer, Gideon—a too-slick Hollywood type who Tripp hated on sight—the best footage would be spliced together later for viewers. The way Gideon had smiled as he made the claim still sent chills down Tripp's spine. It was like the guy got off on watching a little too much. Yikes.

*“We have to share!”*

This time, the French accent had Tripp wandering into the hallway. Gideon stood outside an upstairs bedroom with a man Tripp had never seen before. Before that moment, Tripp had never understood what it truly meant for someone to be stunning. The guy stopped Tripp in his tracks with his face and Tripp was straight. Some facts were just undeniable, and this was one. The guy was... whoa.

“I’m betting Omri Francois has never stepped foot in a house this small, much less had to share a shower. He won’t last two nights.”

Tripp glanced over at the guy who spoke close to his ear. He had seen him before. James Hammer worked on another reality show Tripp caught occasionally where they restored old cars. “I don’t know who he is.”

James’ eyebrows rose. “Really? Shit. I’m straight as an arrow and I’d fuck that dude. He’s big time. I don’t know how they got him here. He’s an A-lister. I wonder what they’re talking about up there.”

A cameraman leaned in as he passed. “Gideon’s probably promising Omri his roommate will go home in the first vote so he can he have a room to himself.” He snickered and kept moving.

Tripp and James exchanged a glance.

“Who’s his roommate?”

James smiled. “I am.”

A smile exploded across Tripp's face. "Good luck, then. You should probably watch your back."

James shrugged. "I'm not worried." He patted Tripp's shoulder. "But I'm going to head up and see if I can get his phone number just in case. I don't want to miss my chance if I won't be around long."

Tripp shook his head and watched James go. His gaze automatically moved to the top of the stairs and collided with Omri's stare. His breathing changed without warning. Tripp didn't look away. Omri didn't either. It was the strangest moment of his life. They had never spoken. Tripp's gaze moved to Omri's lips. They were the most beautiful he had ever seen. Full and... Tripp shook his head. What the fuck? He turned away and headed inside his room. Jesus. Why was his dick hard?



Moving into a house with fifteen strangers for six weeks was unnerving, but it wasn't the most uncomfortable Omri had ever been in his life. He would survive. The disgusting shower with a moldy curtain inside his bedroom was another matter. That was just gross. They had known people were coming and still left that bathroom looking like that. All of that was forgotten the moment Omri caught sight of the man at the bottom of the stairs. The oddest sensation spread inside Omri's

chest after the unexpected moment of eye contact with the sexy stranger. His head went fuzzy.

“Hey, I’m James.”

Omri blinked. He realized he still stared at the spot where the man he had been. His gaze swung toward the leather-clad person introducing himself. “Omri.”

“I know. We’re roommates.”

Omri dipped his chin and fought the urge to curse. He didn’t want to be here. “I promise I don’t snore.”

“It’s fine if you do. I like a little spice added to my sleep.”

Omri smiled. He would make the best of this. James seemed willing to as well. A horn blew in the distance before Omri responded. Everyone stepped outside their rooms. Omri’s head automatically turned toward the dark-haired beauty downstairs. He didn’t look Omri’s way again.

“What do you reckon that’s about?”

Before Omri could answer James’ inquiry, the front door opened. A huge cowboy filled the space. “Everyone outside. There’s no rest on my ranch.”

Omri and James exchanged a glance and headed downstairs. As they filed out, he found himself in the wonderful position of being behind his dark-haired beauty. His ass was perfection. Omri leaned closer to James. “Who is that?”

“Tripp Hamilton.”

James barely got the name out before they were being shushed.

“Our first challenge is an easy one.” Omri paid close attention to every word the ranch’s superintendent, Rick, said. He looked capable. Omri had learned—from years of working on various sets—to always pay attention to the experts. That was the best way to succeed and stay safe. Rick held up a saddle. “You won’t survive on this ranch if you can’t saddle a horse properly, mount, and ride. I will demonstrate one time. Then each of you will be given your own saddle and horse and you have fifteen minutes to be on your horse competently. Anyone who can’t figure it out before then goes home before you’ve even unpacked. Understood? Let’s go.”

Omri’s shoulders relaxed. He stopped paying attention. He knew how to do all of this. Just last year, he had spent six months on a role where he had spent his entire days on horseback. Omri was free to stare at Tripp’s perfect form. Damn. He was pretty. Tripp glanced over his shoulder, catching him staring. Omri smirked. For a moment, they held each other’s stare before Tripp silently dismissed him again. Omri wanted to stamp his foot in frustration. Men didn’t dismiss him.

“Your fifteen minutes begin now.”

Omri tore his gaze away from Tripp’s ass and headed for the nearest horse. He had to make it six weeks and then one million dollars would go to a human rights organization that was dear to his heart. He had to keep that goal in mind.



“Fuck, Omri. I don’t know shit about horses. Where does this thing go?”

Omri glanced James’s way. Sweat poured down his face. He looked panicked. Omri tried showing him what to do on the sly. Things didn’t look good for James. Omri had to finally give up helping him and climb into his saddle. He looked over and found Tripp watching him from the top of his own horse. Damn. He had blue eyes. They were dark. Sexy. Maybe ranch life wouldn’t be too bad after all.

## CHAPTER TWO

*FRESH HELL* . Omri couldn't say the show wasn't aptly named. Every day he woke up on the set of the back woods ranch to take part in the reality show was a new day of hellish torment. Of course, there was no torture worse than the existence of Tripp Hamilton. Six foot two and likely around two hundred and forty-five pounds of solid muscle, he had an ass, thighs, and shoulders that made Omri want to spend the rest of his life on his knees in worship. Omri had learned through veiled questions to other contestants Tripp played the American version of football that, as a Frenchman, Omri had never fully understood. Still, the sport had made Tripp's body a fucking dream. Watching him move around the set, while snubbing Omri at the constant, was a vexation Omri had never faced before. If the way he ignored Omri was a ploy on Tripp's part, it was a damn good one. He had Omri's attention. Unfortunately, *Fresh Hell* was a game, Tripp was a competitive sportsman, and Omri wanted to climb him like a prize horse and ride him. Those things didn't mix. Tripp

treated the show like there could only be one outcome: him winning. Omri saw several ways the show could end. They could end up in bed. Tripp could follow behind him on a leash, on his knees, and begging to get his dick sucked. Omri particularly liked that image. They could get fined by the network when Omri got his back blown out on primetime television. The possibilities were endless. The only thing Omri couldn't handle was Tripp continuing to play as if Omri didn't exist.

His gaze slid toward the dark-haired beauty. Tripp's blue eyes always looked like he plotted his next move. Omri wanted to hear his thoughts. It never happened. Tripp didn't have anything to do with anyone on the show. Everyone tried engaging with him. While he stayed congenial and professional, he made no attempts at friendship. It was obvious he treated this show like a job and nothing else. Omri wondered if he needed the money. He doubted it. As far as Omri knew, each celebrity intended to donate their winnings to a different charity if they won. He honestly didn't understand why Tripp couldn't let go and just have a good time. It was only a game, after all. Nothing that happened on this ranch mattered one ounce. Omri had to look at things that way. Otherwise, he would lose his mind.

“As you all know, the original version of *Fresh Hell* was filmed at Crooked Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. Unfortunately, the ranch's owner decided to sell and the show's creator, Dex Wise, moved on to other projects. Now we're making do here in Serene City. On one hand, it's a much

easier commute from L.A. On the other, we're two hours outside of L.A. We have to sell this new location to a skeptical public. The world doesn't equate California to farm life. This season needs to be better than all the rest. To be frank, we need more drama. We need people on the edge of their seats."

Omri smirked and looked Tripp's way. "He's talking about you. No more hiding in the corner, sexy."

Everyone chuckled, except Tripp, of course. The moment was being filmed. Every second was recorded from the instant they stepped foot on the property. Omri knew how to play the cameras. He was an actor by more than trade. It lived in his blood. Acting was his passion. He existed for the spotlight.

Tripp ignored him. The way he always did.

The show's producer, Gideon, did not. Producers never dismissed him. At least not on set. Gideon knew how to play him off set. Always had. Gideon smiled. His too-white teeth flashed as he snapped his fingers and pointed at Omri. "Yes. Omri gets it. Engage and enrage. We need budding friendships and feuds." Gideon's gaze moved down Omri's body. "People making eyes at each other from across the room. Secretly making plans to meet in the barn later while trying to hide from our cameras. Come on, people. You've seen reality TV. You know what audiences expect." They'd had this conversation a dozen times already and only three people had been voted out so far.

Omri nodded. A coy smile stretched his lips. "If there's one thing I know, it's how to please."

“Fuck. I don’t doubt it.”

Omri didn’t know who muttered the words under their breath, but he would take them as a compliment, especially since he knew Tripp likely heard them and they would make Gideon angry.

Gideon smacked his hands together. “Okay, everyone. Let’s get ready for another day of TV magic.” He pointed at Omri. “May I speak to you in private for a second?”

“Of course.”

Omri stood and did his best to avoid the accusatory glances tossed his way as he followed Gideon into the kitchen. He knew the other contestants thought the show was somehow rigged in his favor, since Gideon always showed him too much attention. That wasn’t the case. There was no way to fix a game like this. Too many factors went into winning. Still, Gideon’s constant heated glances and sidebars weren’t making life easy for him on set. Omri had barely made it through the latest voting session. Everyone there hated him. Omri was used to working under pressure, but damn. Everyone was set to vote him out the very first time he didn’t have immunity.

“What can I do for you?” Omri asked the second they were out of earshot. He didn’t want to be too far out of shouting distance while alone with Gideon. He no longer trusted Gideon, and he didn’t want anyone, especially Gideon, thinking this chat was anything other than professional.

Gideon leveled a serious look at him. All hints of the usual flirt were gone. His dark eyes seemed to bore into Omri’s soul.

“It’s obvious you’re the star here. This show is on thin ice.”

Omri nodded. He got it. They were reviving a hit show with a new twist. If they flopped, Gideon would be a laughingstock. No matter their past, this was their careers. “I hear you.”

“I’m counting on you to make some things happen.”

“Excuse me.” Tripp’s huge body squeezed between them, catching Omri off guard. He slowed. Their gazes met. Tripp’s eyebrows rose in silent question. Warmth spread through Omri’s chest as he realized Tripp was checking on him. Omri flashed him a small, reassuring smile, and Tripp’s chin dipped in a subtle nod, letting him know he understood.

The moment passed, and Omri met Gideon’s gaze once more with a renewed spirit. “You don’t have to worry about a thing. When this season airs, no one will talk about anything else. I guarantee it.”

Tripp had finally looked at him and shown him kindness. It was over for Tripp now. Omri had his sights set on a sexy sport’s ballplayer, and he always got what he wanted. He was about to give the world one hell of a show. One way or another.



Six weeks on set had sounded like nothing until cameras tried following him while he took a shit. *Fresh Hell* had been aptly

named because damn. Tripp could barely hold his eyes open after two weeks of nonstop harassment and challenges. Three people had been voted off so far. He thought he was likely still safe, but still he couldn't get caught slipping. There were four weeks left and thirteen contestants. That meant they would have to start eliminating people faster at some point. Tripp had to watch his back, but maybe he also needed to start making alliances. Most of the people he was up against were people used to doing jobs where they read some lines and went home. It was Tripp's job to be a winner. People would judge him as the dumb jock of the bunch. That's what people did. If Tripp couldn't win, he had to be one of the very last people to go home. He carried the weight of all athletes who had ever been invited to dance for the public's entertainment on his shoulders.

As they headed outside for the day to start a new round of challenges, Tripp tried not looking Omri's way. The guy was just everywhere all the time. Tripp couldn't explain it. It had become like a sickness for him. He had to make his eyes stay somewhere else. Never in his life had he been so obsessed with simply seeing anyone. He wanted to just... stare. It made no sense. Honestly, it kind of pissed him off. Tripp didn't understand why he couldn't stop. It was a whole-ass job forcing himself to focus on any place other than Omri's ass.

“With thirteen contestants left, our next challenge would have been unbalanced, but Yuri won immunity last night by volunteering to clean the entire barn alone. He's exempt from today's competition.” The blond host of the show, Rush, cast a

devilish smile—for the camera’s benefit—as he eyed each of them. His light green eyes flashed with mischief. They were all dressed in clothes they didn’t mind throwing away, as instructed. “Boy, are you about to wish you had fought Yuri for the job.”

A groan rang through the group and Tripp’s head. Omri and Tripp were the only two who didn’t outwardly show any weakness. Sometimes, Omri impressed the hell out of him. For someone so polished, Omri always kept a straight spine, no matter what got thrown their way. He had pride. It was obvious he didn’t want anyone to see him sweat.

Rush pointed at Tripp, catching Tripp off guard, since he was—once again—trying not to look at Omri. “Tripp, since you won the last competition, you are team leader one. Manfred, you came in second. You’re our second team leader. This is that moment in gym class we all hated. Come up here and choose your teams. Tripp, you’re the blue team. You choose first. Manfred, you’re the red team. You choose second. Then you two alternate. Got it?”

Manfred and Tripp exchanged looks. Manfred’s hazel eyes said it all. He hated this as much as Tripp. They nodded at each other and then did as told.

Tripp moved to stand next to Rush and did the one thing he knew—no matter what they did today—would be the best decision for his team. “I choose Omri.”

The smirk that touched Omri’s lips did something to Tripp’s knees and stomach. He couldn’t explain the sensation. It was



like butterflies and weakness. His brain went fuzzy. The rest of his choices were a blur. He didn't find his way back to reality until halfway through the rules of their challenge were being read and the horror set in.

“The team that finds the most flags corresponding with their team's color in this field of mud and manure in five minutes wins first shot at a hot shower and immunity at tonight's vote. The remaining contestants will all be at risk of going home by the end of tonight's show.”

Tripp looked his team's way. “Did he say we're digging through shit?”

A horn blew, signaling the start of the game before anyone had time to answer. Everyone scrambled. People dove into the pile of mud and manure like a swimming pool with zero shame. Tripp refused to be outdone. He spotted a blue flag and went for it. Manfred elbowed him in the ribs. Tripp saw red. Horse shit hit him in the face. One nostril immediately stopped working. He coughed and spit. The world spun. Tripp gagged as he fought for air and desperately swiped at his face, making things worse. He ripped off his shirt, using the material to wipe away the thick, warm, and fresh crap that tried working its way into his mouth. Wolf whistles cut through the air as the other contestants enjoyed his strip show while he merely fought to survive.

A loud buzzer sounded. “That's time. Red team has seven flags. Blue team has five. You know what that means. Our red team wins first shot at a hot shower and immunity at tonight's

voting ceremony. Meanwhile, blue team gets to enjoy the skin benefits of a manure bath a few minutes longer.”

Laughter rang out around Tripp. He was too busy trying not to die to listen. Grumbles and congratulations went on around him. Then cold water poured down Tripp’s face, saving him from suffocating.

“Ooh. Poor Tripp. Always the mess.”

That taunting French accent that had been tormenting Tripp since his first day cut through his misery. Soft material swiped at his face. Tripp could finally see. Cornflower blue eyes came into focus, staring at him with a mixture of laughter and something else Tripp could never quite explain. For whatever reason, Omri had zeroed in on him from day one. He was always inches away, tormenting Tripp with his existence. Tripp had to believe it was Omri’s fault. He had cast some sort of spell over Tripp. How had he existed in the world and Tripp not known? Tripp realized he had been busy with training, commercial deals, charity work, and everything else. He didn’t have time to go to the movies. Plus, from what he gathered, Omri did deep, dramatic films that weren’t Tripp’s thing, but still. He was so fucking beautiful. Breathtaking. Tripp couldn’t look away.

“Say something, sexy. Can you breathe? I know all the muscle makes you a slow thinker, but you’ve got this. Are you still with us?”

Tripp blinked. Sometimes, Omri’s full lips made him forget the world watched them. “Yeah. I can breathe.”

“Good.” He fell into a litany of rapid and angry-sounding French Tripp couldn’t understand before turning away.

Tripp scowled and watched him go. His tan-colored jeans had mud and horse shit smeared on them from their flag fight, but they molded to his perfect ass, leaving nothing to the imagination.

“He’s saying he’s glad you’ll live to smell the shit for the rest of the night, since it’s your fault we lost.”

Tripp’s head whipped around. He focused on Shelby, a celebrity chef from their team.

She continued translating. “He says for someone who plays sports for a living, you are incredibly bad at them.”

Tripp’s eye twitched. “Is that right?”

Shelby nodded. Her blonde hair stuck to her cheek. She didn’t look bothered. “There were some insults thrown in that were either about your mother or your dog. I couldn’t quite make those out. Either way, you definitely don’t want to know.”

Aggravation boiled in Tripp’s gut. He fucking hated this place. Everything hurt. He was sunburned, hungry, covered in shit, and wanted to go home. Topping things off, he had this haughty French dude completely under his skin for reasons he couldn’t explain. Now the guy was talking shit about Tripp’s mom. No. Just no. Tripp had hit his limit.

Tripp scooped up a handful of horse shit and threw it. His aim was perfect, as always. It hit Omri in the back of the head with

enough force to send him sprawling. He landed face first in more shit.

Tripp roared with laughter.

Omri scrambled to his feet. He swiped the brown muck from his face and came after Tripp with murder in his eyes. Tripp saw something in Omri. He realized the man might actually kill him. Still, he never backed down from a fight. He braced himself against the impact of Omri's body as it launched full force against him. They collided. The air left Tripp's lungs in a grunt. They scrambled for purchase. Their bodies were slick with shit and mud, as they each tried getting the upper hand and forcing the other to eat the piles they stood in.

Shouts went out around them. Tripp couldn't understand a word. Hands pulled at him, but his mind and body had one purpose: revenge. Omri's body wiggled against his, making it impossible for him to get a good grip. Every muscle Omri possessed was perfectly cut—like the man had been carved from marble by a renowned artist. Tripp wanted to feel every inch. A harsh blast of cold water gusted over them, blowing them off their feet and halfway across the field, like a hit from a firehose. The water kept coming until they held their arms up in surrender.

The ranch superintendent stood with his hands on his hips, looking furious. Gideon and Rush were at his side. Rush looked confused. Gideon's expression was completely blank, but Tripp had a sneaking suspicion he was thrilled.

“Inside. Now. Both of you.” At Gideon’s calm tone, the production team scrambled. “Everyone else. Hit the showers. Tonight’s vote is cancelled. We have some decisions to make. We might have two contestants going home.”

Tripp fought not to shoot Omri an accusing look. This was all his fault. Tripp didn’t know whether to punch him or kiss him, because this entire experience left him a confused mess. He had never been more fucked up in his life.

## CHAPTER THREE

PART OF OMRI WANTED to be angry. He had never been good at holding a grudge. Plus, he had seen the passion in Tripp and now he couldn't un-see it. Not to mention Omri was definitely on Tripp's radar, just as Omri hoped, and Omri had only been acting. This was his job, after all. Omri had gotten his way by capturing Tripp's attention, except they were likely going home tonight and Omri didn't know where home was for Tripp. Obviously, Omri could afford to travel to wherever Tripp lived, but... Omri's steps slowed on the way to the house. His gaze moved in Tripp's direction. His thoughts had truly headed straight for seeing Tripp for real at the end of this shit show, and Omri didn't know why. They didn't know each other at all. Omri was a romantic at heart. Tripp was fucking beautiful, and he had checked on Omri when Gideon had pulled him aside earlier. That messed with Omri. Maybe he needed to go home.

Tripp stared straight ahead. His gaze stayed locked on the three men leading them inside. Rush, Gideon, and Rick had

their heads together. No doubt they debated Tripp and Omri's fate. Omri couldn't look at anyone but Tripp. He wanted to push him again. Omri needed to see the man's heat flashing at him one more time. Sometimes, Omri felt very fake—like he didn't exist any longer. There was nothing about his life that was only for him. When he had flung himself at Tripp, Omri had felt more alive in that moment than he had in years. He wanted to do it again. Recklessness raged through him.

Gideon glanced over his shoulder. "You two go ahead and grab a shower. We have a plan. You may as well get clean."

Omri tore his gaze away from Tripp to focus on Gideon.

Gideon held his stare. Everyone kept moving, except for Gideon. Omri's steps slowed. He knew Gideon wanted him alone again.

Tripp suddenly stopped and crossed his massive arms over his chest with his feet braced apart. His gaze moved between them.

Gideon's eyebrows raised. "You're good to go."

"Yeah. I don't think so."

At Tripp's smart-ass comeback to Gideon's dismissal, Omri bit the inside of his cheek.

Gideon looked between them.

Omri kept his expression intentionally innocent.

Gideon motioned Omri's way. "I just need a second alone with Omri."

“Nah. I don’t think so.” Tripp sounded calm, but his eyes didn’t look it. “Everyone here is a little fed up with the sidebars. If you want people to think this show is a fair competition, you need to stop with the favoritism.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Omri rolled his eyes and pushed his way between them, enjoying the way he smeared shit on Gideon’s expensive suit a little too much. He headed for the stairs. “You two can work this out without me. I need a shower.” Omri jogged up the stairs to his room before anyone could argue. Honestly, there was no favoritism. The show wasn’t rigged. Tripp wasn’t wrong, though. Gideon was causing problems Omri didn’t need, but that was why Omri was here. It was punishment. That was a whole other story and Omri didn’t care about anything but getting clean. Luckily, his roommate had been the first person voted off the show and he had the place to himself. He could close the door and no cameras followed him inside the bathroom. Omri knew they would be waiting when he stepped outside the bathroom, hoping for all the shirtless shots they could get. For now, though, he had a moment to just be silent and still.

He relished the hot water streaming down his body. The moment he closed his eyes and dipped his head beneath the deluge, he recalled Tripp’s hands on his body. While Omri had been playing at fighting Tripp, Tripp had been holding back. Omri had felt the tension in Tripp’s muscles. The way he intentionally let Omri slip through his grasp. He never hurt Omri. Tripp was huge. He could have easily knocked Omri out



with one blow. Tripp hadn't tried hitting him at all. Fuck. He had a nice body. Omri liked him a lot. He wondered why Tripp had gone along with that mud show. It didn't really benefit Tripp to stand out. All he had to do was survive until the end and he could have an easy million dollars for his charity. Gideon would never allow Omri to keep his head down. He was too busy trying to hurt Omri for dumping him, even though Gideon had been the one who cheated. Bastard.

Once he was as clean as possible, Omri shut down the shower and snagged a towel. He scrubbed at his hair and body, killing time. The last thing he wanted to do was open the bathroom door and be on display again. No one knew how tired he was of being watched. For decades, Omri hadn't been allowed to step outside his home without a camera in his face. Now, there were cameras inside the house too. He didn't get a moment's peace.

Omri pulled on a pair of workout shorts and squared his shoulders. His t-shirt was on the dresser. He couldn't avoid the cameras forever. With a breath for strength, he pulled open the door. Gideon stood on the other side. No cameras waited. That couldn't be good.

Gideon's hungry gaze moved down Omri's body before returning to hold his stare. "You did great today."

Omri tried to smile. He feared it looked every bit as strained as it felt. "I told you I understood how important this is for you."

"You won't go home tonight."

Omri fell back on his acting skills, hoping to save himself. A bright smile tugged at his lips. He swept his hand up Gideon's chest before gently pushing him away, hoping to keep the gesture playful while reclaiming his personal space. "You don't know that." He cast Gideon a coy look as he reached for his shirt. "Unless you really have rigged this game."

Gideon set his hand on top of Omri's, stopping him from picking up the shirt. "You won't be needing that, and you're right. I don't one hundred percent know that. But I know you, and I have faith in your skills. Let's head downstairs. Once you hear what's up, you'll know I'm right."

As much as Omri wanted to cover himself to get away from Gideon's heated glances, going downstairs and no longer being alone sounded even better. Omri headed for the door without arguing.

Gideon snagged his waist, stopping him before he cleared the bedroom door. Omri glanced his way. Gideon's eyes flashed with open interest. "By the way, while I have you alone, when filming is wrapped, I'd love to take you to dinner."

Fuck. He had almost made his getaway. "Of course." It wasn't an answer. He knew Gideon would see it as a yes. Omri just wanted to survive unscathed. Gideon wasn't just Omri's ex. He was *the* ex. The one who kept Omri a secret and then leveled his life like nothing happened. Now, here he was, expecting everything from Omri all over again after pulling all the stings to get him here against his will. Omri didn't have another round left in him. He just had to survive tonight. One

way or another, he would go home tonight. But first, he would seduce Tripp, because damn. That man was fine as hell and nothing felt good anymore anyhow.



A crew member snagged Tripp fresh out of the shower before he even had time to put on a shirt. Now he sat on the couch and seethed. The house was oddly empty. According to the cameraman who often slipped Tripp info, the eleven housemates who were safe from tonight's vote had been moved to a different part of the ranch for the night while Omri and Tripp underwent a one-on-one challenge. While everyone else was treated to a bonfire with food and drinks, they would face a punishment that would determine which of them would be going home. At this point, if not for the contract Tripp signed, he would voluntarily go. Diving into horseshit had been his breaking point. No one said a thing about catching a disease to stay here. Training wasn't that far out and he didn't want to get put out by some crazy poop-born illness. As it was, they would all likely have pink eye in the morning. Fucking disgusting.

Omri descended the stairs with Gideon on his heels. Tripp's annoyance doubled. Omri wasn't wearing a shirt, and Gideon looked at the guy like his next meal. Tripp wanted to put his fist through the wall. He couldn't explain it. There was just something about the whole Gideon-Omri dynamic. Gideon

always looked at Omri in a way that made Tripp's skin crawl, while Omri did a piss-poor job of hiding his discomfort. Omri would smile at all the right moments and flirt when it suited him, but there was a desperate edge to the entire situation. If Tripp didn't know better, he would say Omri was scared of Gideon. The way Gideon shadowed his every move, Tripp wondered if Omri should fear him. Gideon definitely gave off some stalkerish/rapey vibes. Tripp didn't like him.

Gideon didn't spare Tripp a glance. He motioned Rush's way. Rush, who had been hiding in the corner playing on his phone, jumped to his feet and immediately into character. He arranged his features into a seriousness this type of show did not warrant on any level, but whatever. Like everyone, he was a professional in his business.

"Today, we were disappointed by the violence shown on the game field."

Tripp fought not to roll his eyes. He didn't stand up and give any of this shit his attention. This was dumb.

Luckily, Rush spoke more to the camera than them. "You might notice the two contestants up for elimination tonight are missing their shirts. That's because we have one for them."

A crew member stepped forward and unfurled a long, large, and white t-shirt. It looked like a nightgown.

Rush motioned its way. "Some of you might have experienced this as a kid, but this particular punishment is well known on farms across the land, so it's fitting we should do this here. This is called a get-along shirt."

A groan rose and stuck in Tripp's throat. He hadn't been punished this way as a child since he was an only child, but his high school coach had enjoyed pulling this one during training camp.

Rush motioned Omri closer and for Tripp to stand as he explained. "Our two contestants must wear this article of clothing together. They'll do everything together in this shirt, learning to move together as one, and get along until one cries uncle. The first one to give up is the one who goes home."

Tripp blew out a sigh. He glanced Omri's way, determined to simply say he would go home now before he was stuck inside a shirt with someone six inches shorter than him. This was ridiculous. He wouldn't torture them like this. Instead, his gaze skimmed Omri's abs before bouncing back to Omri's face. Goddamn. What was it about the guy? Tripp wasn't gay. He didn't look at men the way he looked at Omri. There was just something inherently sexual about Omri. He drew the eye. A sweet smile touched Omri's lips—like a silent apology. Something stirred in Tripp's chest. He got the feeling it was the first real smile he had ever seen from Omri. Damn it. He would put on the shirt.

Two crew members worked at getting the shirt on them. Their heads went through one hole. Tripp's left arm got one arm hole. Omri's right arm got the other. The shirt was so big, it fell to the top of Tripp's knees. He knew they looked dumb as hell. Tripp refused to show an ounce of weakness even though he knew, after this show aired and his next season started, he

would catch hell from his teammates. They would never let him hear the end of this.

Rush nodded, as if satisfied by their predicament. “Here are the rules. You have to stay inside the shirt at all times. Its large size should give you the freedom to do everything you need to do, including using the restroom.”

“What?”

Omri sounded every bit as horrified as Tripp felt.

Rush didn't look sympathetic. “You heard me. We take today's offense very seriously. This show does not condone violence. The person who hopes to continue this season with us needs to show their dedication to following the rules. If you want to use the restroom alone, you can choose to leave the show.”

The muscle in Omri's jaw flexed. Tripp could practically hear his teeth grinding. Inside the shirt, where no one could see, Tripp brushed the back of his knuckles against Omri's, trying to silently lend him strength. They didn't have to give these assholes the satisfaction of showing weakness. He felt Omri's muscles relax.

Rush turned toward the camera and addressed the future audience. “I'm about to join the rest of the household at the bonfire. We'll check back in periodically throughout the night to see how things go.” Rush and Gideon headed for the door, leaving behind a cameraman. There were also several strategically placed cameras all over the house that ran all hours of the day.

Gideon tried catching Omri's eye, but Omri didn't look his way. Tripp got more satisfaction out of that than he cared to admit.

When they were as alone as they were going to get, Omri sighed. "Well, fuck."

A smile snapped to Tripp's lips. He couldn't help it. Despite their current position, Omri nicely summed up the situation. "I'm starving. Do you trust me?"

Omri met his stare at the question. He looked tired. "*Oui.*"

"*Oui?* You must be tired. Come on." He linked arms with Omri beneath the shirt. "I used to have this coach in high school who liked to use these damn get-along shirts as part of training camp. We got pretty damn good at functioning. Let's find something to eat." As one, they headed for the kitchen.

Tripp leaned inside the pantry and snagged a jar of peanut butter. He held it out to Omri. "Twist."

Omri curled his nose but twisted off the lid while Tripp held the jar. "Almond butter is better."

"Well, they didn't let your bougie ass shop, did they? We have to eat what they left us."

Omri blew out a soft breath. Tripp didn't miss it. "Is there a reason you don't like me?"

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me what's going on between Gideon and you?"

Omri took another tired-sounding breath. He set the lid on the counter. “There’s nothing going on between us.”

Tripp set the peanut butter on the counter and turned, leaving them chest to chest inside the shirt. “I don’t like to be lied to.”

Perfect blue eyes held his gaze without wavering. “I’m not lying.”

“Then he wants something to be going on between you.” Tripp had no idea why he couldn’t let this go, other than Omri’s serious expression never wavered, and Tripp liked this version of him.

“I can’t control other people’s desires.” Omri shuffled closer. Every muscle in Tripp’s body went on full alert, including his dick. No one was more surprised than him. He tried scrambling backward. Unfortunately, that pulled Omri along for the ride. The small of Tripp’s back hit the edge of the counter. Omri’s body went flush against his. A pained sound escaped Tripp before he could stop it. Omri didn’t move away. Tripp didn’t push him away. His mind was a mess. There was no chance Omri missed the erection between them.

Omri’s hips rocked forward. It penetrated Tripp’s thick skull that Omri was hard for him, too. He couldn’t look away. Tripp didn’t know what to do or say. Not only had he never felt this way, he also didn’t know if another man had ever looked at him the way Omri did. He didn’t know how to react.

“Sorry.” He had no clue why that was the word that escaped him, but he couldn’t think clearly. He really liked having Omri



against him, but he didn't think he should like it. Tripp had never been more scared or confused.

Omri didn't respond. The hand hidden inside the shirt found its way inside Tripp's workout shorts. Tripp knew his eyes had to be as big as saucers as Omri's fingers encircled his erection. Logically, he knew there were likely dozens of ways he could shut this down. Not a single way out floated to the surface. He couldn't move. Omri had him hypnotized. Tripp couldn't look away from Omri. He couldn't let himself think. Tripp refused to blink as the lightest stroke began on his shaft. Part of him recognized they weren't alone. Omri did his best to hide what went on out of sight. Tripp didn't know how to play it cool. Never. Not one time in his life had another man touched his dick. Tripp wanted Omri. The realization seized his lungs. His entire body ached. From the moment he set eyes on Omri, the man's existence had tormented him. Tripp had secretly craved this, but he never would have allowed it to happen. Yet here they were while a cameraman was in another room just feet away and several more cameras caught them from every angle. Omri licked his lips as if he could taste Tripp... as if he might kiss Tripp.

The front door flew open while neither of them noticed. They were in their own world now.

Tripp's gaze zeroed in on that perfect mouth and didn't move.

“Breathe.”

At Omri's demand, Tripp blew. A stuttered breath left his lungs as his underwear filled with cum. The humiliation hit

before the last spasm of his orgasm even died. Tripp tore his way out of the shirt and headed for the stairs. He took them two at a time.

“Tripp. Wait.”

Tripp could barely hear a thing as Omri followed on his heels. Tunnel vision carried him to his room. He needed to get out of his cum-filled clothes, grab his things, and go. Tripp had to get as far away from Omri as possible. What had he been thinking? The world would see this. He had let another man stroke him to completion while the whole fucking nation watched. Was he insane? This was his career. His brand. He had worked his entire life to get where he was and he just let that happen. What the fuck was wrong with him?

“You mother fucker. I should have known you wanted him.” Gideon appeared in the bedroom doorway behind Omri while Tripp fought not to black out from the stress and rage. Nothing made sense.

Omri tried blocking Gideon’s path. “Stop it, Gideon. You’re making a fool of yourself. Stop acting the jealous lover. You most certainly are not and I won’t be humiliated like this.”

Tripp scrubbed his forehead. Everything felt like a blur. His body shook from the powerful need to touch Omri. He still wanted all the things he denied himself. An orgasm wasn’t good enough. The way Omri had licked his lips... fuck. Tripp wanted to taste them. He had never seen a more beautiful mouth. Tripp didn’t want to want any of this.

Gideon shoved Omri out of the way. Omri hit the doorframe hard enough to crack the wood. Tripp saw red. He moved without a single thought. Gideon's head snapped back as Tripp's knuckles split from the blow. The satisfaction was short-lived. In an instant, Tripp saw his future unfold. It was over. Everything he had worked so hard to achieve had just slipped through his fingers from one night of stupidity, so he could feel Omri's touch just one time. He was an idiot. Nothing would ever be the same again. All because he had thought with his dick.

## CHAPTER FOUR

WITH HIS HEAD IN the clouds and his latest script forgotten beside him, Omri stared out the window at the ocean. He didn't see anything anymore. His thoughts owned him. For nowhere near the first time, he wondered if he should move home. In many ways, he loved California. America, some days he had mixed feelings. Honestly, though, Omri knew his heart wasn't in France either. There was something missing in his life. The harder he searched for happiness, the more elusive it became. He had been in some form of acting since he was too young to recall. His move from France to L.A. had come at fifteen. He had stepped off the plane alone and into a country he knew nothing about. Now, at thirty, he was... damn. He didn't know. Exhausted seemed to be the right word.

Neo stormed into the room, bringing with him the fury only the tall, blond secretary could achieve. He had a passion and vitality about him that made Omri love him. Omri feared he had lost his spark long ago.

“We just had a visit from Konner.”

“My solicitor? What brought him out this way? I thought he hated leaving L.A. for any reason.”

Neo’s amber eyes flashed with barely suppressed rage. He shook a folder filled with papers at Omri. “You’re being sued.”

“Oh. By whom?”

A loud huff burst from Neo. “You’re always so damn calm. Tripp Hamilton.”

Omri’s eyebrows rose. He hadn’t seen that one coming. “I can’t imagine what reason he would have for suing me. It’s been weeks since we were booted from the show, and we haven’t been in contact since. I’m the one who got shoved into a doorframe. What reason could he possibly have to sue me?”

Neo shrugged. “Apparently, your whole on-camera sexual situation lost him some big sponsorships. Then the thing with Gideon afterward got him suspended by the league, which in turn caused him to get cut from the team. That lost him the remainder of his commercial deals. It seems he blames you for the entire fiasco.”

Omri blinked. “Are you being serious? All that happened over such a trite thing?”

Neo made a dismissive gesture. As always, his blond hair was perfectly styled. Despite the news he dropped, and his earlier rage, he looked completely unruffled. “You know these Americans. Sex is very taboo here for some ridiculous reason. Apparently, the league also looks poorly on outbursts of violence, even though he was clearly standing up for you.

Nonetheless, there are several zeros at the end of what he's asking for the ruination of his reputation. You'll have to respond."

"Very well." Omri stood. It pissed him off that Gideon could have cut that scene from the show, and saved Tripp from that heartache, but he hadn't because why would he? Things were kept hidden enough beneath that T-shirt to be aired without consequences for Gideon. That was TV gold and Tripp had made the huge mistake of allowing Omri to touch him. "We'll take the Porsche. Unless you want to drive."

Neo didn't move. "To where?"

"Tripp's place, of course. I'm assuming you have an address in all that paperwork."

Always the professional, Neo dropped his gaze to the papers he held. "He lives in Oceanside. That's not terribly far, but still. We can't just go, and that's not what I meant, anyhow. I meant we need to work on a response for the press and set up a meeting with your lawyers."

Omri made a dismissive motion and pulled out his phone to search for directions to Oceanside, since he had never been there. He curled his nose. "Ugh, an hour and a half from here, which really means like two hours with traffic." A smile snapped to his lips. "But at least it's still on the same coast."

Neo sighed. It wasn't a sound of relief. "This man is suing you. Going to see him will only make things worse. You are my boss, of course, but I must be the voice of reason here. Going there will likely tank you in court. You shouldn't be

excited about him living on the coast. Why is it always the toxic men who do it for you?”

Omri ignored Neo’s question. He didn’t need to think. Omri headed for the mudroom to grab his shoes. “Don’t worry. This won’t make it all the way to court. Tripp will take one look at me and forget this ridiculous suing business. I won’t let him be unemployed because of me. This is unacceptable. You know me. My will is strong.”

Neo tilted his chin up and looked at the ceiling, as if praying for strength. He pinched the spot between his eyes. After a moment, he sighed. “Fine, but I’m driving. You don’t even know where Oceanside is. It’ll be midnight before we get there with the way you drive.”

Omri’s face screwed up in confusion. “It’s two in the afternoon.”

“I stand by my statement and we’re still taking the Porsche.”

Omri bit his bottom lip and tried not to seem as excited as he felt. His earlier maudlin mood vanished. Despite the fact that Tripp was angry enough to sue him, Omri couldn’t wait to see him again. Butterflies stirred in his gut at just the idea. Damn. He couldn’t believe his team had dumped him because of the whole ordeal with the show. Omri found a pair of shoes and wandered out to the car while mulling things over from every side. After Tripp punched Gideon and everyone started screaming, Omri had walked away. He had packed his bags, booked a car, and called Konner to absolve his contract. Konner had threatened Gideon with everything possible to

make him go away. Omri had stayed out of it. He hadn't wanted to think about any of it again.

But Tripp, Omri hadn't stopped thinking about him. The way Tripp had so easily blown beneath Omri's touch had haunted him. At that moment, Omri had seen something in Tripp. They had matched, as if they both had something missing and had found it in each other. Omri ached for another shot. But the way Tripp had responded afterward, that wasn't something Omri cared to repeat. Omri had dealt with his fair share of violent men in the past. Passion was one thing. Rage was another. Omri wasn't sure which he had seen in Tripp as Tripp had blown in his hand. His expression had looked a lot like hatred. Omri didn't want another man who hated him because he didn't want to want him. That was a terrible place to be.

By the time they made it to Oceanside, Omri had made up his mind. He would fix the damage he had done, and that was it. Omri owed Tripp that much. Once he had undone the havoc he had wreaked, Omri would bow out again. If Tripp wanted to see him again, then he would find him.

Omri was a little surprised by Tripp's home as Neo turned into the driveway. It was just a house. The place was nice. It was in an upper middle-class neighborhood, but it wasn't anything like Omri would have imagined for someone who played professional ball and had enough commercial deals to sue over the loss of them.

There was a maroon-colored extended cab Ford F-150 in the driveway. It looked freshly washed. Omri hoped that meant



Tripp was home. He circled the multi-colored brick home to the bright red front door and rang the doorbell. Neo followed closely on his heels, watching his back the way he always did. Omri had to ring the bell twice more before it finally swung wide. He nearly swallowed his tongue as Tripp's large frame filled the open doorway. He was shirtless and in a pair of old sweatpants that had been cut into shorts. His hairy chest was on full display. Omri's gaze moved down Tripp's body. Tripp closed the door in his face.

For a moment, Omri blinked at the closed door. Then he glanced behind him for confirmation that had just happened. Neo looked every bit as shocked as Omri felt. His shoulders squared. No one shut the door in his face. In fact, no one sued him, especially after he gave them a goddamn hand job. That was it. He was done. If Tripp wanted to sue him, Omri would give him a reason. He was done playing nice.



He was here. Tripp couldn't believe Omri had shown up at his door. He didn't know what to do. Part of him wanted to open the door again and invite him in or scream at him to go away. In reality, all he did was stand frozen in the center of his living room, unsure of what to do. Then the door flew open. An enraged-looking Omri stood on the other side with a tall, blond guy on his heels.

Omri stepped inside. His eyes flashed with anger. His flushed cheeks made the blue irises pop. Tripp couldn't look away. "How dare you slam a door in my face when I came here to help you?"

"Did you just kick in my door?"

Omri didn't answer. "It took us two hours to drive here. Do you have any idea how bad traffic is between our houses? And I have a script to memorize. Since you're suing me, I shouldn't have bothered with you, but—for whatever reason—I care. Then you slam the door in my face." He said something in rapid-fire French and the blond nodded, as if he couldn't agree more.

"That had better not be more insults about my momma."

A line appeared between Omri's eyebrows. "What?"

Tripp made a helpless gesture. He was twice Omri's size, but the guy intimidated the hell out of him, and Tripp didn't know why. "The day we fought. You insulted my mom."

Omri blinked. "I've never met your mother. Why would I insult her?"

This was the oddest conversation. Tripp didn't know how to stop. "That's what Cheryl said," he said lamely. Damn. He didn't know how to fight Omri.

For a moment, they simply stared at each other. Tripp forgot why he had spent the last two months enraged. Damn. Had it really been eight weeks since he set eyes on Omri? Tripp had forgotten how powerful his presence was.

Finally, Omri made a dismissive gesture and crossed the room as if he owned the place. “The past is the past. My solicitor says you’ve had problems because of me. I’ve come to make it right. Let’s settle this.” He moved past Tripp and into the living room. Tripp watched his every step, enjoying the show. Omri sat on the leather couch and met Tripp’s stare, as if waiting.

His companion moved to stand at Tripp’s side. Tripp glanced his way. The guy flashed him a tight smile. “Neo.”

“Tripp.”

“Pleasure.”

With a nod, Tripp went back to holding Omri’s gaze. “I don’t know what you want to hear. My lawsuit says it all.” He hated himself. This was what lawyers were for, and Tripp hadn’t expected to face Omri directly like this. He hadn’t wanted to sue, but he couldn’t sit back and do nothing after losing everything.

Omri’s chest expanded on a deep breath. He slowly blew it out, as if trying to stay calm. “Okay. Which team were you on?”

“Nevada.”

For a moment, Omri looked genuinely confused. “But you live in California.”

Tripp fought a smile. “My family is from here.”

Omri’s confusion cleared. “Wouldn’t you rather play here?”

Tripp shrugged. “Sure, but it doesn’t work that way. Not that it matters anyhow. Having legal troubles isn’t something any team wants to deal with, and Gideon has been relentless. If he’s had an avenue to pursue, he’s done it. He’s made it very clear that touching you was a mistake. He’s now suing me, so I’m suing you.”

Neo hissed like a cat.

Omri nodded, as if he couldn’t agree more. “Exactly. Okay. Give me five minutes. I can fix this.” He pulled out his phone and clicked around.

Tripp’s eyes burned from staring at him. He forced himself to look away and focus on something else. Tripp met Neo’s stare. He had nice amber eyes, despite the coolness of his demeanor. “Are you two a couple?” God help him. Tripp had no idea why that was the first thing that popped from his mouth.

Neo laughed. “Oh. No, honey. Two power bottoms do not a happy couple make. I’m Omri’s secretary slash assistant slash fashionista slash bodyguard. I might not look like much, but I will stab an overenthusiastic fan in the throat with my fingernail file, if I have to do so.”

Tripp didn’t doubt it.

“Hey, Billy.”

Tripp’s head whipped Omri’s way. He had his phone pressed to his ear. Tripp looked back Neo’s way. “He’s not talking to Billy Freeman.” It hadn’t been a question. There was no way. Billy Freeman’s father owned the Anaheim Apollos. Even

though his father owned the team, Billy ran every aspect of the team while his father enjoyed the profits.

Neo flashed him a smile and a wink.

Tripp went back to watching Omri. He listened to Omri's side of the conversation while completely floored.

“Thank you for the flowers you sent after the awards. They were perfect. You always brighten my day.” Omri paused. He laughed. “Of course, I read the card. Did you not get my thank you note? Hmm, well. Gideon trapped me into that dumbass reality show, or I would've called sooner.” Omri bit the side of his nail and purposely didn't look Tripp's way as he listened to whatever Billy said. A sad smile touched Omri's lips. “I know you did, sweetie. A lot of people tried warning me. You weren't alone. In a way, that's why I'm calling. My friend needs a job.” A bark of laughter escaped Omri. “Yeah, Tripp. Well, you know me, so you know it's my fault.” Omri's smile kept Tripp mesmerized. It was obvious they were genuine friends. This wasn't some loose connection Omri called on a whim and a hope.

Omri's gaze moved Tripp's way. He held Tripp's stare as he spoke with Billy. “I'd bet my reputation he's a complete professional. Gideon pushed him over the edge. This isn't his fault.”

Tripp's throat swelled. No one ever went to bat for him. Omri had no reason to do so. No doubt his lawsuit had zero hope if it went to court. Omri could afford to drag things out until

Tripp didn't have a single cent left to fight him. There was no reason for Omri to do this, yet he did.

"I'll let him know. Thank you, Billy. We'll make plans soon." Omri set his phone aside. "Report to Billy's office at the Apollos' stadium tomorrow at eight a.m. sharp. Be ready to negotiate a contract. They just had a lineman go on IR. You're saving them a hunt for a replacement."

Tripp blinked. "Are you serious?"

Omri stood. "I said I would fix it and I did."

As much as Tripp hated to be that guy, his job was only one part of the bullshit he faced. "That sounds great, but how long until Anaheim drops me with Gideon, hounding me nonstop?"

Omri pinched the spot between his eyes. He was beautiful. Tripp blinked at his own thoughts. What was it about this guy? He really messed with Tripp's head. Five minutes in the same room and—once again—Tripp had all the same raging confusion he suffered on set. Omri was just... Tripp took a steadying breath. He was like seeing Lauterbrunnen, Switzerland for the first time. Breathtaking.

"I'll take care of Gideon," Omri said, heading for the door and calling Tripp back to reality. "You just worry about getting the best deal you can get out of Billy." Tripp wanted to beg Omri to stay a few minutes longer. Omri disappeared through the doorway before Tripp could say a word.

Neo hesitated. He met Tripp's stare. His lips parted and then snapped closed again, as if he fought against himself. Then he

lost the battle. “I hope you appreciate Omri’s interference on your behalf with Gideon. That’s exactly what Gideon hoped to achieve by attacking you. He won’t settle for anything short of Omri’s soul. Personally, I’m not sure you’re worth it.”

Tripp might have argued if Neo didn’t leave him with that blow. Not that he knew what to say anyhow. Tripp had sued Omri, and Omri had shown up to have his back when everyone else had walked out. He wasn’t sure he was worth what he might cost Omri either. What did a soul go for these days? Tripp’s eyes fell closed. He would call off the lawsuit. At least it looked like he would have a job now, even if he didn’t know how little Anaheim intended to pay. He imagined they planned to go as low as possible, considering the current state of his reputation. Still, beggars couldn’t be choosers, and he had a job offer on his plate. His career wasn’t over. Thank God. Well, thanks to Omri. Tripp would find a way to help him with Gideon. Somehow. Fuck. He had no clue where to start with that one, but Tripp wouldn’t let him flounder alone. Fucking Gideon. That guy was the worst.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE APOLLOS' STADIUM SMELLED like home. Tripp took a deep breath as he headed for Billy's office. He knew soon enough there would be lawyers and agents battling it out for the best deal, but for a moment, Tripp was in his element again. No one understood. When he had been cut loose from Vegas, he had seen rock bottom. Football was all Tripp had. He didn't know how to do anything else. Unlike most people who used their skills to get an education, Tripp had left college early—after winning one championship—to enter the draft. That had never felt like a mistake until he thought he would never play again. He thought the league was through with him. Tripp took another breath and knocked on Billy's office door.

“It's open.”

Tripp turned the handle. He had never seen Billy Freeman in person. They matched in size. Billy met him halfway across the room, wearing a bright smile. His brown hair was shaved down the sides. A yellow polo showed off his massive, tattooed arms as he reached to shake Tripp's hand.



“Tripp. It’s great to finally meet you in person. Omri says all good things.”

The smile that touched Tripp’s lips at the sound of Omri’s name shocked even Tripp. He felt it happen and couldn’t stop it. “He exaggerates, I’m sure.”

Billy snorted. “Let’s hope not. I’m taking a chance on you on his word.”

Tripp nodded. He got it. “I won’t let you regret it.” Tripp couldn’t betray Omri like that.

“I hope not.” Billy motioned toward the door. “I thought we could go on a tour before we get started. That way, you can check out the place and we can get to know each other.”

Tripp made a helpless gesture, since he was at Billy’s mercy. “Sure.”

Together, they headed for the door and down the hall. Side by side, they toured the empty locker rooms before heading down the tunnel on to the field. They made small talk. Tripp’s nerves calmed a little more by the moment. Turf beneath his shoes was the beat in his chest. He could win here.

“So, you got on Gideon’s bad side.”

Tripp winced. He hadn’t expected Billy to throw it out there like that. “It seems so.”

Billy stared at the empty field, squinting at the sun. “He’s a rat bastard, and you seem like a stand-up guy, so I’m not surprised.”

As much as Tripp hated himself for prying, he had to know. “What’s the story with Omri and him? Omri says he’ll talk to Gideon and get him to drop the lawsuit against me, but Neo says it’ll cost Omri his soul. I’m just curious what I’m in the middle of here.”

A low chuckle rumbled from Billy’s chest. “Neo. That’s a name I haven’t heard in a minute.” Billy’s smile fell. “Yeah, if Omri negotiates with Gideon, Gideon will level him. They used to be a couple.” Billy turned and headed back inside. Tripp fell into step beside him, hanging on every word as Billy continued his story. “Gideon meant everything to Omri, but Gideon didn’t want anyone to know they were dating. He said it was because he didn’t want anyone to think Omri hadn’t earned the big roles he landed. The truth was Gideon didn’t want to give up fucking every young hot actor he could get on the side. Everyone tried warning Omri, but Gideon was pretty fucking silver-tongued when it came to Omri. He decimated Omri before the end. Of course, Omri isn’t a weakling. Once he’s done, he’s done. Now, Gideon wants him back and Omri won’t give him the time of day, and no doubt you look like you’re in the way.”

They stepped inside Billy’s office. Billy circled his desk and motioned for Tripp to sit. After taking his seat behind the desk, Billy stared into space for a minute while brushing his thumb across his bottom lip. Finally, he seemed to come back to himself. His light green gaze focused on Tripp. “I’ll make you a deal. Tell Omri I’ll take care of Gideon if he’ll send Neo to have dinner with me.”

A smile snapped to Tripp's lips. "Done."

A sharp bark of laughter burst from Billy. "I think we'll get along just fine."

Tripp hoped so, because his entire future rode on this one relationship. Plus, he got the feeling Billy had what it took to crush Gideon. He kind of wanted to see that happen. No doubt Neo would eat Billy alive, though. Sheesh. Tripp had no idea how any of this would end.



Omri had put off calling Gideon for as long as he could. He knew he couldn't let Tripp take the fall for sticking up for him. Omri also knew the only reason Gideon was going after Tripp so hard was to get under Omri's skin. If Gideon couldn't control Omri one way, he would find another. It had always been that way. Gideon hadn't made it to being one of the top in his profession by playing by the rules.

With a breath for strength, Omri grabbed his phone and moved to the window. He stared out at the ocean for a moment before he made the slow scroll through his contacts. Because he was a masochist at heart, Omri clicked on Gideon's name and scrolled through some of their old messages. They were such a wild progression from passionate love to hate all the way back around to Gideon's pleas for a second chance. Omri rubbed his chest. People didn't fall out of love when it was real. For

Omri, it had been as genuine as it came. He was an actor. Omri was damn good at pretending it didn't hurt. That was all Omri did, all hours of the day anymore: he ached.

His finger hovered over Gideon's name. He didn't know what he would say. The doorbell rang, saving him. Omri shoved the phone in his back pocket and headed to answer. He would take any reprieve he could get. Omri pulled open the door to find Tripp on the other side with a huge vase full of monkey orchids.

A smile snapped to Omri's lips. "Hey."

Tripp held the flowers out to Omri. "Billy tells me these are your favorite. I wanted to come by and thank you for helping me."

As Omri accepted the vase, he stepped aside and let Tripp inside. "Oh, wow. Where did you find these this time of year?"

Tripp's blue eyes flashed with humor. "You have to let a man have some secrets."

"Billy hooked you up with his source."

Tripp laughed as he followed Omri into the kitchen. "Billy gave me his source."

Omri couldn't stop smiling as he set the huge batch of purple flowers on the counter. He fingered one bloom. "It doesn't matter how you came by them. I love them. They make me smile. They look like little monkeys with their dicks hanging out."

Tripp eyed the arrangement. "Well, now I'll never un-see it."

Another laugh burst from Omri. He honestly didn't know what it was about Tripp. Omri simply enjoyed his company. "How did things go with Billy?"

"Great. Amazing, actually. I expected to get undercut on my salary because of my legal troubles, but that didn't happen. They matched my Vegas contract. Also, a bit of good news for you. Billy says if Neo agrees to one dinner with him, then he'll handle Gideon."

Omri immediately dug his phone from back pocket and called Neo.

Neo answered on the first ring. "*Allô?*"

"Hey, babe. I need a favor. Please stop by the store, grab a bottle of Billy's favorite wine, and swing it by his office."

"Of course."

Omri met Tripp's stare and smiled. "Please remind him this fulfills my end of our deal."

"Will do."

"You should wear the white heels."

Silence met Omri's suggestion.

Omri's smile grew. "It's a sports stadium, gorgeous. There might be lots of huge men there. You're a stunner in the white heels."

"Good call."

Tripp bit his bottom lip, visibly fighting back a laugh, and something shifted in Omri's chest. "I'll let you get to it. Good

luck.”

“*Au revoir.*”

Omri disconnected the call and set the phone aside.

Tripp shook his head. “Won’t he be mad at you?”

“I suppose we’ll see.”

For a moment, they held each other’s stare. Tripp shook his head again. “I honestly don’t know what it is about you.”

Omri was lost. “What do you mean?”

To his surprise, Tripp blushed. A smile touched his lips and fell away just as fast. He met Omri’s stare before quickly dropping his gaze again. “Um. You’re beautiful, but I’m straight.”

“Oh.” Omri’s heart immediately packed its things and headed for the hills. He wasn’t dumb. Omri was just a little pissed off, though. “I hate to be the one to tell you, but you’re not straight. You might not consider yourself gay, but you’re definitely not straight. With that said, I appreciate your honesty.”

A line appeared between Tripp’s eyebrows. “Why do you sound angry?”

Omri blew out a loud huff. He couldn’t help it. Every time he got close to Tripp, Tripp shoved him away and then played dumb. It was exhausting. “Confused men are the worst. You want me, but you don’t. No doubt, you’ve thought about it, but you don’t want to act. You’re here, which leads me to believe

you're hopeful. But I don't doubt you're also dead set no one thinks for a second you're seeing me. How am I doing?"

Tripp blinked. "I'm not seeing you."

Omri had a migraine coming. He rubbed his temple. "Thank you for the flowers. I'm glad everything worked out with Billy."

Tripp still looked confused as hell, but he nodded. "Are we good?"

"Sure."

Tripp's open confusion doubled. "Um. Okay. I guess." He shoved his hands in his pockets. The muscles in his forearms flexed.

Omri rubbed his forehead again.

"Are you okay? You're kind of pale."

Great. Now Tripp was insulting his looks. "I'm fine. You should go celebrate your new job. I don't want to keep you." He headed for the door, determined to see Tripp out. A blinding pain spiked through Omri's eye, weakening his knees. His hand shot out, colliding with the wall to keep his balance. The world tilted and—for a moment—he thought he lost the battle against the pain. Then he found himself staring into Tripp's eyes and Omri realized Tripp had swept him off his feet.

"What's wrong with you?"

The lack of emotion in Tripp's voice and expression saved Omri's pride. If Tripp had shown any weakness, Omri might have snapped. Tripp's calm demeanor soothed him. "I have debilitating migraines. Today is a bad day. It's nothing."

Tripp nodded and headed for the couch. He sat with Omri in his lap. They didn't talk. Tripp didn't paw at him. He just held Omri against his chest and in the warm cocoon of his thick arms. The thumping of his steady heartbeat eased Omri. Silence engulfed them. Tripp never made a sound of complaint. If he was uncomfortable, he didn't show it. Omri hurt too badly to look at things too closely. He had suffered from migraines his whole life. Omri knew he would live, but damn. Sometimes, it felt like a near miss.

"Your mother must be very proud of you." Omri didn't know where the words came from. The pain made him emotional.

"I'd like to think she was."

The quietly spoken words had Omri's gaze shooting to Tripp's face. "Was? I thought you said she lived here in California."

Tripp gave the smallest shake of his head. "I said my family is from here. My mom was killed in a car accident last year. She's buried a few miles from my house."

"What about your father?"

"I never knew him."

Omri's chest hurt. He suddenly didn't want so badly for Tripp to leave. Omri wondered if he had anywhere to go. Anyone to



celebrate with. Omri squeezed his eyes shut. “Just let me take my meds and I’ll take you out to celebrate your new job.”

Unexpectedly, Tripp stroked Omri’s face and then massaged his temples. A sigh escaped him. The tension drained from Omri’s shoulders. Tripp didn’t say a word. Omri’s breathing deepened as Tripp snuggled closer and continued rubbing Omri’s temples, soothing him. Everything fell away. Nothing mattered. The sound of their combined breathing was the last sound Omri heard as the world drifted away. He couldn’t recall ever feeling more cherished.

## CHAPTER SIX

SINCE WAKING UP ALONE on his couch after falling asleep in Tripp's arms, Omri had a hard time thinking about anything else. That was the only reason he sat in Billy's owner box on a Sunday. Billy had invited him to countless games in the past, but football had never appealed to him. He didn't understand the rules and didn't have time to learn. The game still didn't draw him in, except he could barely take his eyes from the field. At least, not when Tripp was on it. Otherwise, Omri was good to mingle and drink.

Billy was more intense than usual. Omri chalked that up to working. This team was his life. Omri understood having a deep passion. After all, the moment Tripp went back out onto the field, Omri became a whole new person. His shoulders tensed. He leaned forward, trying to get a better view. He suddenly felt like an expert on the game.

Billy spoke close to his ear, scaring the shit out of him. "You know, hitting people is his job. He's not getting hurt. You can relax your shoulders." Billy massaged his shoulders, as if

proving how tight Omri's muscles had become. "You'll give yourself a migraine if you keep tensing up every time he's on the field. Then you won't get to see him after the game."

Omri flashed Billy a smile, trying to play innocent. "I'm not worried. Plus, I'm sure he'll be too busy after the game to bother with me."

Laughter flashed in Billy's eyes, as if he saw right through Omri. "Yeah. I kind of doubt that. You were all he talked about when he was at my office."

"Well, of course. I am the common ground between the two of you. What else would you have him speak about?"

Billy shook his head.

Omri's eyebrows rose. "What?"

"You don't want to hear my thoughts. They'll only make you mad."

Omri waved his hand, brushing away Billy's concerns. "Getting upset at the opinions of friends is for the weak. I assure you I am thick-skinned."

"Okay." Billy took a breath, as if bracing for the worst. "I watched the episodes of *Fresh Hell* you were in, because it's you, of course. You know I always support you."

"A love that goes both ways."

Billy smiled at Omri, pointing out the obvious. They had been best friends for fifteen years. Nothing could change that. "Anyhow, maybe you should watch the episode of the two of

you trapped in that shirt. You should see how you looked at each other. I really wish you'd stop letting Gideon win by not letting anyone else in. This guy... I don't know. He's different."

"He's straight. Or so he claims to be," Omri said, dropping the cold facts on Billy.

Billy snorted.

They exchanged a look and then roared with laughter.

Billy swiped at his eyes. "Fuck." Billy took an audible breath, obviously trying to get himself under control. "In his defense, this is a tough sport to be openly gay." He pointed at Tripp on the field. "But that's a tough dude. He didn't hesitate to put hands on Gideon in your defense, even though it cost him everything. Gideon never would've done that for you."

There were a lot of things Tripp had done in the short time they had known each other, Gideon would have never done. That was why Omri couldn't stay away. God knew he was making a fool of himself. This would likely lead nowhere but to heartache. Yet Omri couldn't leave. He had to see where this went, even if it ended badly. Omri was a lover at heart. He didn't know how to stop and he didn't have to watch that episode. Omri had been there. He wanted to be there again.



They won their first game with Tripp on the team. Outwardly, Tripp kept his cool. On the inside, he was a mess. No one understood how important it had been for them to win. Obviously, it had been a team effort, but he couldn't let Omri and Billy's chance on him be wasted. Tripp needed the world to see Vegas had lost a valuable player when they chose their reputation over standing with him. He knew pride was a bad thing, but he still had it. When Tripp had gone after Gideon, he had stood up for what was right. He still believed that. His gaze moved around the locker room. He didn't miss the way some of the guys avoided him—like he might try checking out their junk if they didn't stay on guard. Others seemed to try harder to let him see their goods. Tripp wasn't oblivious. Even if people hadn't seen the latest season of *Fresh Hell*, they had heard about Omri and him. The world thought he was gay now. It was an odd conundrum.

Magazines geared toward the LGBT+ community were reaching out to his agent like crazy, wanting interviews or photo shoots. The doors that closed for him reopened in different ways. Tripp didn't know how to feel about any of it. He wasn't gay. Tripp had spent years inside locker rooms with some of the most famous and fittest men around. But not once had he wanted a piece. Omri was the only one fucking with his head. He was the one finding his way into Tripp's dreams, making Tripp's hand go south during his showers. Maybe one day, he would wake up and find tons of men hot. He didn't know, but—right now—Omri was the only person who did it for him. Really, Tripp thought that was what it boiled down to:

the person. Omri as a person made Tripp extremely hot and smile more than he had in years. He wanted to see where that went. Everyone already thought he was gay anyhow. What did it matter now?

“When you’re finished here, Billy wants to see you in the owner’s box.”

The guy who interrupted Tripp’s thoughts was someone he had seen a time or two before, but Tripp couldn’t recall his name. “Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

A few of the nearby players cast him questioning looks. Tripp shrugged and finished gathering his things. He had already showered. There was no reason he couldn’t head there now. He couldn’t imagine what Billy had to say, but Tripp hoped it was only good things. Tripp honestly felt like he had put on a good showing today. Next Sunday, they would be in Tennessee. He would study footage of them this week to see what he could learn.

On the way to the owner’s box, he tried to think about what he already knew about their next opponent. They had a running back from Alabama that was hard to beat. He had to keep his mind busy. The entrance to the owner’s box came into view. He spotted Billy. Billy stepped aside and there he was: Omri. Tripp’s breathing slowed. He forgot about the upcoming game. The tension left his shoulders. His gaze ate up the sight of him. In blue jeans and a blue button-down shirt, both items molded to his every muscle. Omri looked fucking amazing. Tripp picked up the pace.

Omri headed out.

Tripp's smile fell. Omri couldn't leave. Tripp had to talk to Billy, but he wanted to talk to Omri too. He had never been more torn in his life.

"Omri."

Omri turned his way. His face lit. Tripp's heart sped. He swore Omri looked happy to see him. The knowledge did something to his chest. "Tripp. Hey. Congratulations on your win. Billy is much pleased. You must be thrilled."

Tripp nodded. "I am. I'm told Billy wants to see me. Don't leave." He held his hand out in a stopping motion. "Please, just let me run in here real quick and find out what Billy needs, and then we can go."

Omri's eyebrows rose. "Go?"

Tripp couldn't stop smiling. "Yeah. Go. You said we'd go out to celebrate my new job, but then you fell asleep on me. Are you backing out on me now?"

"Ah. You're right. I said as much. Let's go see Billy. I know just where to take you to celebrate. Well, you'll have to drive. Billy had a car pick me up today."

That sounded perfect to Tripp. It sounded like Omri couldn't get away. "No problem." Side by side, they headed inside the owner's box. It was empty. "Um. What the hell?" Even Tripp heard the laughter in his voice. "Why did he send for me, then disappear?"

Omri shook his head and pulled out his phone. "I'm sure I know, but let me text him to be sure."

Tripp waited while Omri clicked around on his phone. After a few seconds, the device chimed and Omri tucked it into his back pocket.

He snagged Tripp's arm. "Let's go, handsome. It's as I thought. He didn't want you to miss seeing me before I left."

"Oh." Tripp couldn't say he was disappointed. He liked Billy, but Omri was better. "So, where are we headed?"

"To the only place in town that matters. Urban Mixer."

Even though he had heard of the place, since it was owned by a famous ex-basketball player, Tripp had never been there. "You know, oddly, I've never been to the place. I know where it's at, though. Are we dressed okay? I thought they had like a code or something."

He felt Omri shrug. "It depends on who you know."

"Or who you are."

"That too," Omri said shamelessly.

They made it to the parking garage without running into anyone. At least, not anyone Tripp noticed. He was too focused on Omri to see much else. The lights flashed on his F-150 as they neared the truck. Omri released his arm and climbed inside the passenger's side. Tripp wondered if he should have opened the door for him. He didn't know how any of this worked. In fact, he over thought every tiny thing all the way to the exclusive restaurant. Tripp knew he needed to



relax. He didn't doubt Omri would let him know if he did something wrong.

Tripp parked where Omri directed. There were people lined up at the door, waiting to get in. With his chin held high, Omri walked past them, keeping his gaze straight ahead. Tripp followed. He couldn't look at anything else. Since signing his first multimillion-dollar contract, Tripp should have elevated to Omri's status. He never had. Inside, he was still the poor kid raised by a single mom. He didn't know how to be extravagant and carry himself the way Omri did. Omri was a star. Even if he didn't know it, he would know it. Everyone pulled out their phone to record or snap pictures. Omri didn't wait in line, and no one expected it. He was met at the door and treated like royalty.

Once inside, Tripp had to stop his jaw from dropping. The restaurant was amazing. Even though it was midday and sunny, inside, it turned to night. The ceiling was made of twinkling stars. Soft music played. The noise from outside immediately vanished. They were headed for a moonlight dinner in a restaurant filled with people, yet they might as well have been alone. The place screamed romance, intimacy, money, and class. Each table was strategically placed, so people weren't watching each other while eating. They were circular-style booths where they were forced to slide in close. The walls of each booth were high, so no one could see anything they did or hear anything they said. White table cloths and crystal glasses made the darkened building almost eerie.

Before they made it to their table, Tripp heard someone call Omri's name. Omri glanced their way and then kept walking. Gideon appeared from the booth and his gaze collided with Tripp's. Tripp could tell by the mixture of anger and surprise in his expression, he hadn't seen Tripp until he stood. He reclaimed his seat. Tripp smirked. That was what he thought. Tripp didn't want to lose a second job, but Gideon wouldn't harass Omri on his watch.

They finally slid into their intimate corner table, away from the crowd. Tripp moved closer than necessary. His thigh brushed Omri's beneath the table. If Omri noticed, he didn't say a word. He also didn't move away. Omri ordered a bottle of champagne before they were left alone.

"This place is gorgeous."

"I believe it's a labor of love. Urban was very much a part of every stage of development."

Omri's claim surprised Tripp. "Are you friends with Urban?"

"In passing."

Tripp shook his head. Omri knew everyone. He supposed that was part of being uber famous. Everyone probably fought to know Omri. He changed the subject. "I honestly expected Gideon to be over here, trying and failing to rip me limb from limb."

Omri leaned closer to Tripp. Tripp wondered if Omri was even conscious of the movement. "Gideon isn't the type to show out like that, but even if he was, Billy said he would take care of

him. It looks like he has. He's offered to do so in the past, but I refused. Pride is an ugly thing."

Tripp's gaze dropped to Omri's full lips. He swallowed. Jesus. Temptation gnawed at his gut. He forced his gaze back to Omri's eyes. That wasn't better. He tried staying on topic. "Speaking of Billy. How do you two know each other, anyhow?" Knowing Urban in passing was one thing, but Billy seemed to be a genuine friend.

A bright smile snapped to Omri's lips. "This is L.A."

"And?" Sometimes Tripp wondered if Omri kept him confused on purpose.

Omri shook his head. "Billy and I are the same age, this is L.A., and we're both famous. We went to the same exclusive private high school," Omri added when it became obvious Tripp still didn't understand.

"Oh." That hadn't occurred to Tripp. "Still, you two don't seem like you'd hang out."

A snort burst from Omri. "We're gay in L.A. Of course, we'd hang out."

Tripp kept trying to explain himself, but he felt like he was only digging himself deeper with each word. That didn't stop him. "I just meant you two seem very different."

"Actually, Billy was a scrawny nerd who got horrendously teased in high school. We were best friends. Still are."

Tripp blinked. He hadn't expected that. "Really? Not that I expected either of you would've been bullied in school, but I

guess I expected Billy had rolled from the womb a six-foot-six, two-hundred-fifty-pound tatted behemoth.”

Omri’s musical laughter made the confession worthwhile. “No. He didn’t beef up until college. When I moved here from France, I was basically property of the movie studio. They stuck me in private school during the day and worked my ass off at night. Billy was my only friend.”

“What about Neo?”

Omri’s expression turned loving. “He was my childhood best friend back home. As soon as I could, I brought him here. I think Billy took one look at him and fell in love.”

“But he was a scrawny kid with no hope,” Tripp surmised.

An odd look passed over Omri’s face. “I think Billy believed he was a scrawny kid with no hope. Neo has always been his white rabbit.”

Tripp’s forehead furrowed in his confusion. “Do you mean white whale?”

Omri blinked. “No. Neo is quite tall, but he’s no whale. He is quite fast, though.”

A bark of laughter burst from Tripp before he could stop it. “I can’t tell if you’re joking.”

“You’re laughing, so I must be.”

Somehow, they had leaned even closer to each other. Omri was close enough Tripp felt Omri’s breath brushing his skin. They might have been alone for all Tripp noticed. Tripp had

his arm draped across the wood between the seats and the booth. Omri was tucked beneath his arm. All Tripp had to do was close the final inches between them.

“I’m not a seven-day free trial of tasting the rainbow.”

Tripp couldn’t stop smiling despite the way Omri suddenly became serious. His fingertips brushed the back of Omri’s shoulder, making him realize he had embraced Omri at some point. He didn’t stop. “I don’t think anyone would mistake you for the starter pack of anything. You’re definitely the premium package. All the movie channels.”

Omri huffed. “I’m serious. I’m tired of—”

Tripp would never find out what Omri was tired of because he kissed him. He didn’t think about it. One second, he stared at Omri’s mouth, and the next, he tasted it. Omri’s lips parted beneath his. Their tongues met. Tripp didn’t know what he expected, but he found everything. He didn’t know how else to describe it. For over a year, since his mom passed, he had been alone in the world and feeling adrift. Tripp didn’t feel that way with Omri. He was exactly where he was supposed to be. But his body also burned with the fire of a thousand suns, and they sat in the middle of an exclusive restaurant.

Tripp forced himself to pull away. With one arm still draped across Omri’s shoulders, he picked up the menu from the table to hide the hunger he knew his expression had to show. “So, what’s good here?”

Omri’s stare bored into the side of his face. Tripp couldn’t look at him. His dick tried crawling out of his jeans and he

already knew how fast Omri could make him blow.

“Not a free trial.”

A smile exploded across Tripp’s face. His hold tightened on Omri’s shoulders. He tucked him closer to his side. “Premium package.”

Omri squeezed his thigh beneath the table and, like that, they were a couple. It was easier than he expected. Now he just had to make it through this meal without falling on Omri like a starved fool. He had a feeling that would be the hardest part of their date.



Holy shit. Omri didn’t know what he had gotten himself into, but he didn’t want to stop. Billy was right. Tripp looked at him like no one else did. Omri couldn’t un-see it once he noticed. They had been talking and Tripp kept leaning closer as if something invisible slowly tied them together. Fuck. That had been one of the hottest moments of his life, and it had only been a kiss. Tripp had shaken him. Now they sat outside Omri’s house and Omri couldn’t say goodbye.

“Thank you. This was the best celebration imaginable.”

Omri couldn’t stop smiling. “Would you like to come in? I mean, I understand if you’re not ready. Honestly, I’m not

asking for anything.” He bit his bottom lip before he talked himself into a corner.

Tripp’s intense gaze never wavered from holding Omri’s stare. “I’m ready for as much or as little as you want.”

For some reason he couldn’t explain, Omri fought a blush. He had a feeling—even though Tripp had never been with another man—he would have no trouble figuring it out. Still, Omri didn’t want a repeat of last time. “Are you sure? Last time, you were pretty angry after I touched you.”

Some of Tripp’s intensity faded. “I’m sorry about that. You deserved better from me.”

“We were under a lot of stress.”

Tripp shook his head. “You don’t have to make excuses for me. I didn’t know how to handle wanting you when I had never craved another man the way I ached for you. Still ache for you.”

Goddamn. He took Omri’s breath.

Tripp blinked as if physically pulling himself away from the images inside his head. Omri damn near panted at the idea. Tripp cleared his throat. “It doesn’t matter the reason. I would lose my shit if anyone else lashed out at you the way I did. So, I definitely expect better of myself.”

They had to go inside. Tripp was about to talk himself into getting his dick sucked in the truck. “We’ll see.” Omri slid from the truck and headed for the door. He felt Tripp on his heels. Omri couldn’t focus on anything else. He didn’t

remember letting them in the front door. His every fiber stayed tuned into what Tripp might do next. He wasn't disappointed.

The moment the door closed behind them, Tripp's body molded against Omri's back. His mouth found the side of Omri's neck. Omri's head fell back in surrender, hitting Tripp's solid shoulder with a thud. Tripp cupped Omri's erection through his jeans and massaged. Omri's knees weakened. Omri wasn't a small guy. He was average. Tripp made him feel tiny. Manhandled. It was hot as fuck. Tripp's teeth sank into Omri's neck. A moan vibrated from Omri's throat. He couldn't recall anyone making him so hard, so fast.

Tripp's mouth moved to Omri's ear. He licked. "I already know I won't last long once you touch me. Sorry about that. It's you. You drive me insane."

A pant burst from Omri. He could barely see straight, much less think. "Don't worry. I plan to take good care of you." With that promise still lingering between them, Omri took Tripp's hand and led him down the hall and through a separate corridor to his bedroom. Tripp didn't make a sound. Omri glanced over his shoulder. Tripp watched Omri's ass. Omri smirked. Everything Tripp did filled Omri with confidence and power.

Omri led Tripp to the edge of his bed. "Sit. Get comfortable. I have to get ready."

Tripp tried pulling him into bed. "Why are you leaving me? You don't need to get ready for me?"



The way Tripp kept him blushing was new to Omri. He was usually more shameless, but Omri wasn't used to having to explain the ins and outs of gay sex. "Um. Yeah. You definitely don't want to have sex without it... unless I put in the work... you know?" Omri knew he had to be every bit as red as he felt. "You don't want to... I have to, you know... goddamn. Um." He pinched the spot between his eyes and then tried again. "So obviously you know how sex with men works, right?"

Tripp kissed Omri's chest and unbuttoned Omri's jeans. "Uh, huh. I'm listening."

Omri wasn't sure that was true, since Omri's dick was already in Tripp's hands. "There's some beforehand cleaning involved."

Tripp shocked Omri's mind blank by leaning forward and licking his crown. Never, ever, had he expected Tripp to go all in like that. He forgot what they were talking about. Tripp's hands shoved inside the back of Omri's jeans. He massaged and worked Omri's pants down his hips, teasing Omri into the bed. Somehow, he ended up on his back with his pants around one ankle and Tripp's tongue in his mouth. Tripp played with his cock, balls, and hole. Omri completely lost himself. What Tripp lacked in experience he made up for in pure desire.

Somewhere between kissing and touching, they ended up nude. They explored each other's bodies. Tripp was big and beautiful. He kept Omri entranced. Tripp rolled, bringing Omri with him, and draping Omri over him like a blanket. With

Omri straddling him, Tripp buried his fingers in Omri's hair and held him in place as he spoke against his ear.

"I got what you were saying earlier about prep. You can do that in the future, if you want, but I don't need it. I want to be inside you and I don't have the patience to wait. Everything about you turns me on. I'm not scared I might get dirty by fucking you exactly how I want."

Tripp fascinated him. Omri knew men who had been out and proud their whole lives who wouldn't dare touch another man unless he was clean enough to whistle. By all appearances, Tripp had decided he wanted Omri, and he held nothing back. Omri was in danger. He could love this guy who wanted him to be himself. Omri always fell too easily.

Rather than saying all the thoughts that might scare Tripp away, Omri leaned over and pulled open his bedside drawer. He grabbed a condom and lube. While sitting on his heels, Omri held Tripp's stare as he ripped open the condom. Tripp's chest rose and fell, as if his excitement grew by the second. Pre-cum leaked onto his stomach. Omri's mouth watered at the sight.

"Beautiful."

Tripp smiled. "No one's ever called me that."

"You can't say that now." Omri rolled the condom down Tripp's erection. He coated the outside in lube.

Tripp's breathing deepened. "I don't think anyone's ever looked at me as intensely as you do."

A smirk tugged at Omri's lips. "Funny. I think the same of you."

"That's because nobody wants you as badly as I do." Tripp's claim came out sounding hoarse, as if he found the end of his rope.

Omri held Tripp's erection and positioned himself above it. "That's good. There's no going back now." Omri impaled himself. He threw his head back and strained against the intrusion. Before he adjusted, Tripp grabbed his cock and tugged. Omri chased the pleasure. He didn't care about anything but release. Omri rode Tripp's dick, taking him hard just the way he liked, while Tripp pumped at his erection like he jacked off his own dick. There was no style. Omri was used to being in charge and twisting out every drop of pleasure from his partners. Sex with Tripp was different. While Omri still took the dick the way he liked, Tripp didn't let him be completely in charge. It was obvious Tripp wanted Omri to know who made him come.

"Your asshole is so hot and tight. Jesus. You're making me crazy. I feel everything. You're trying to suck me deeper."

Omri ground his back teeth. He didn't want to blow too fast. Experience had taught him that coming too quickly meant coming back to reality, and the pain followed. Tripp kept meeting him pound for pound, making it harder for Omri to hold back.

"Goddamn. I really want you to come all over my stomach. Until I met you, I never thought about things like that. Now

it's all I think about. I want to watch your dick spit while you cry my name the way I do for you in the shower every night since we met.”

A cry tore from Omri's throat. Cum jetted from his cock, painting Tripp's stomach. Tripp made a sound akin to pain while Omri gasped and a spasm rocked his soul. He couldn't see his way through the pleasure. His dick twitched in Tripp's capable hand. Then Tripp flipped, and Omri's feet were in the air. He gripped the headboard as Tripp fucked him so hard Omri could only hang on for the ride. He hit at the perfect fucking angle, though, and Omri was in heaven. In a matter of minutes, a second orgasm hit, surprising a cry from Omri. Tripp growled and cried Omri's name. He collapsed, crushing Omri beneath him. Omri couldn't breathe. He didn't care. There was nothing but ecstasy. He could die right then, having lived the perfect life.

Then Tripp rolled to his side for Omri to pull oxygen into his lungs. Tripp gathered Omri into his arms. Omri's muscles had turned to jelly. He let everything happen to him. Tripp kissed his cheek and neck.

“Damn. That was perfect. Just let me catch my breath and I'll make you come again.”

Fuck. Omri wasn't sure he would survive this man. He'd die happy, though. Omri had never been this fucked up by anyone or this obsessed.



The level of peace Tripp achieved by simply cuddling with Omri for hours couldn't be replicated. He was happier than he had been in ages. Tripp didn't want the day to end. He wanted to know every detail about Omri's life. They were more than friends, but Omri felt like Tripp's closest friend, even if that didn't make sense to anyone else. That meant Tripp had to know as much as he could.

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

He felt more than heard Omri's chuckle. "I think we're beyond asking permission about personal things."

"How did Gideon convince you to do his show after everything he did to you?"

Another soft chuckle cut through the darkness. "I won't ask how you know about all that. Billy probably told you the whole story." Omri cleared his throat. It was an uncomfortable sound. "Gideon didn't convince me of anything. Neo did."

That had Tripp's attention. Thankfully, Omri didn't make him ask for an explanation.

"Gideon had called in favor after favor, trying to get me on the show. My agent was leaning on me pretty hard. The whole thing had me stressed and losing weight. I didn't understand how someone could hurt me so much and then still continue to demand more from me so blatantly. The audacity of it all

choked me all hours of the day. Then Neo sat me down and made me realize I had all the power. All I had to do was say yes and go. It was six weeks out of my life. All I had to do was smile and pretend—which is my greatest strength—that I didn't care, and he couldn't hurt me. Neo thought, once Gideon saw I intended to be nothing but the professional actor, then he would understand we are done, and I won't be bought through my career. I knew Neo was right. Likely, I will have to work with Gideon again at some point. It's important he sees we are done.”

Tripp couldn't imagine having to work with someone who had fucked him over the way Gideon had done Omri. His grip tightened on Omri at the thought of Omri being forced to work with Gideon in the future. Tripp had already punched the guy once. It wasn't enough.

Omri gently scratched Tripp's scalp, easing his rage. “I can practically feel you seething. You should stop. Anger wrinkles the skin and I'm glad he's an ass. If he wasn't, I wouldn't have met you.”

That was true. The tension drained from Tripp's muscles. “I've heard cum is a good skin cream. You should climb up here and blow on my face.”

Omri's body shook with laughter. A playful slap landed on his chest. “*Mon Dieu*. You have too much stamina.”

Tripp couldn't stop smiling. He also didn't think he could get hard again if he tried, but he would give it a shot if Omri actually agreed. Tripp feared he would do anything for Omri.

There was happiness, and then there was this amazing feeling Omri gave him. The two feelings didn't even compare. Tripp was already addicted. He couldn't imagine ever wanting anyone else ever again.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“IS IT TRUE THAT you’re dating Omri Francois?”

“Yes.”

Tripp didn’t slow. It wasn’t that he cared if Anna Lively interviewed him. He had answered her questions more times than he could count over the years. Today, his team had pulled out another last-minute win. He was showered, bruised, and ready to get home to Omri. Between their equally busy careers, they didn’t always see each other as much as Tripp liked. It had been two weeks since Tripp set eyes on Omri in any way other than FaceTime. He didn’t have time for Anna today.

Yet she stayed hot on his heels. “In all my years of interviewing you, I have to say this is the first time I’m genuinely jealous. Omri is gorgeous.”

Tripp flashed the blonde reporter a smile and kept walking. “Agreed.”



“You look happy. That’s nice. Since your mom passed, you haven’t smiled much.”

Before Tripp could think of a way to respond, Omri appeared from nowhere, stepping into his path. “Surprise.” He held a single red rose. “I don’t know if you like flowers, but it felt wrong to show up empty-handed.”

Tripp pushed the flower aside and hauled Omri into his arms. He claimed Omri’s mouth, uncaring of who watched. Tripp hadn’t known he could miss a person so much.

Omri chuckled against Tripp’s lips as his arms wound around Tripp’s neck. “Hello to you too, sexy. I missed you.”

Tripp couldn’t stop smiling now that he held Omri. “Hey.” He stole another quick kiss. “What have you been doing since I saw you last? Don’t leave anything out.”

Omri linked fingers with him and towed him in the opposite direction of the parking lot. “Come on.”

“Where are we headed? I’m ready to take you home.”

Omri glanced over and winked. Tripp knew then he would follow Omri anywhere. Omri towed Tripp into an empty alcove. “Tell me you love the flower.”

“Of course I do. It’s from you.”

“Who was that woman?”

Omri sounded jealous, but Tripp couldn’t be sure. “A sideline reporter. She just asked if we were dating and I said yes. Was I wrong?”

Omri backed Tripp farther into the alcove. Tripp swore he saw Omri's heart in his eyes. "I knew you weren't hiding me, but you actually told a reporter about me."

It hadn't been a question, but Tripp still nodded. "Of course. She was in my way. I wanted her to move so I could get home to you."

Omri flattened his palm against Tripp's chest. His hand slid upward. "I missed you so much. You're all I've thought about."

Tripp's heart sped. His skin tingled. He couldn't see anything but Omri. "Same."

"I had Neo bring me straight from the airport so I could surprise you."

"He's much appreciated." Even Tripp heard the heat in his voice.

Omri's gaze moved down Tripp's body. "Where's your truck?"

"Come on." Tripp snagged Omri's hand and headed for the parking garage. The last few feet, he lifted Omri from the ground and ran, rushing to have him alone. Omri's laughter reverberated through the half empty garage as Tripp tossed him inside the truck. As Tripp climbed behind the wheel, Omri overcame him, claiming his mouth. Their tongues fought. Ragged breaths filled the cab of the truck. Omri massaged Tripp's rapidly growing erection through his jeans.

Tripp gripped the door handle and held on as Omri kissed a path down his chest. His truck was high enough no one could

see in if they walked past and the parking lot was nearly empty. Not that any of that mattered. There wasn't a chance in hell Tripp would stop Omri. Omri set Tripp's cock free and swallowed it. Tripp's hips left the seat. A sound escaped him he didn't know he could make. Tripp couldn't tear his eyes away from the sight of Omri sucking his dick. They had only been dating two months, and it seemed like they barely saw each other, but Tripp felt something for Omri. His life had never been this wild or this fulfilling. Jesus. Omri had a talented mouth. He put Tripp to shame with how fast he could make Tripp come. He used his black magic wizardry to blow Tripp and all Tripp could do was fuck Omri's throat while crying his name.

In no time, Tripp's balls were drawn up tight. He dug his feet into the floorboard and punished Omri's throat. Omri never slowed. He sucked hard and Tripp lost his soul. The air left his lungs. His body shook as he filled Omri's mouth with cum.

"Damn. That's it. Swallow it like a good boy. Fuck. You're so fucking hot."

Omri kissed him, forcing Tripp to taste his own cum. Tripp didn't lose an ounce of arousal. He never did when he was with Omri. Tripp feared he never would. Truth be told, a lot of things about Omri scared him. Tripp thought he might have lost more than his soul to the guy the moment they met. He didn't know if he cared.



Tripp had told a reporter they were dating. Damn. Maybe Tripp didn't realize how much that meant to Omri, but Omri couldn't get past it. The last guy who had stolen Omri's heart had kept him a secret. Tripp had told a reporter they were dating just to get her out of the way so he could get to Omri faster. What was happening to his life? He very much feared it was love again. Sheesh. One day, Omri wouldn't fall so easily. That day wasn't today.

After surprising Tripp at the stadium, blowing him in the parking lot, and coming home to being made love to for hours, Omri couldn't stop staring at Tripp with stars in his eyes. Omri didn't have a trusting heart. Half the time, he caught himself holding his breath and waiting for the other shoe to drop. When they weren't together, he scoured the gossip columns for any whisper of Tripp dating someone else. Everything about them felt new and fragile. He didn't want to lose again.

"What are you thinking about so intently?"

Omri crawled into Tripp's lap on the couch. "Christmas. Do you know it's only a week away and we don't have a tree or a single present wrapped? What's wrong with us?"

"We have to remedy this."

Tripp stood, tossing Omri over his shoulder as he went, as if Omri didn't weigh one eighty. He headed down the hall. "Let's find some clothes and I'll chop a tree."

Omri snorted. “I don’t want a real tree. They’re messy.”

“Okay. We’ll find some clothes and you’ll drive us then. I have no idea what you want.” He tossed Omri on the bed with enough force he bounced.

Omri stared up at Tripp. He couldn’t stop smiling. Happiness ruled everything. “I want you.”

Tripp froze. “You have me.”

“I know. But I want more of you. We don’t see each other enough.”

Tripp chewed his bottom lip and stared into space. With his hands on his hips and wearing nothing but his underwear, he was the sexiest sight Omri had ever seen. Tripp finally focused on him. “Well, I mean, regular season is almost over. It’s looks like we’ll make the playoffs, though. With your filming schedule, I don’t know how to do more than I am.”

“Move in with me.” The words just popped out. Omri immediately tried amending them when he realized how insane he sounded, since—realistically—they hadn’t been together that long. “I mean, I understand if you don’t feel comfortable giving up your house, but at least take a closet and a key. Move some stuff here and treat this place like home too, so I know you’ll be here when I get home.”

“You’re serious.”

Tripp didn’t sound upset, merely surprised. Omri chose to chew his bottom lip and wait rather than continue reiterating how serious he was. He watched Tripp think about his offer.

Omri's heart moved into his throat and didn't budge. If Tripp said no, Omri could hardly blame him, but it would still hurt.

A small smile touched Tripp's lips. "You're serious," he repeated. This time, a hint of wonderment filled his voice.

Omri nodded. "I like having you around. One might even say..." Omri swallowed. The lump in his throat grew. He tried again. "One might even say I love being with you."

Tripp watched him with such an intensity that Omri couldn't blink. He was too mesmerized. "What are we talking about here?"

Omri shrugged. Someone had to be the one to risk it all. He was used to playing the fool, so it may as well be him. "I suppose we're talking about the fact that I'm in love with you."

Tripp took a ragged and sharp breath as if the words punched him in the chest. "I thought." Tripp cleared his throat when his voice broke. "I thought it was just me. Like maybe it was in my head. Like I was making up how real it feels when we're together, but I'm not. Am I?"

Omri thought he might cry. His eyes burned. He shook his head. "You're not." He had never felt so much so quickly for anyone, and he was one hundred percent sure it was real even before Tripp looked at him the way he did now. But now, there was no denying what he felt. He was overwhelmed.

Tripp blew out a slow breath, as if barely holding his shit together. "I've always known there was something special

about you. About us. Yes. If you want me here when you get home, then I want that too.”

A smile exploded across Omri’s face. He hadn’t known what he expected when he started down this road with Tripp, but he hadn’t regretted a single second. Omri wouldn’t let Tripp regret him either. Christmas first, and then the playoffs. From there, the world was theirs as far as Omri was concerned. Tripp would see. With him, Tripp would always feel like a king.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

TRIPP: *I miss you.*

Omri: *Aren't you supposed to be working?*

Tripp: *Yes.*

Omri: *You just left the house.*

Tripp: *I know.*

Omri: *I miss you too.*



Omri: *One more sleep and I get to fly home to you.*

Tripp: *I'm keeping your side of the bed warm.*

Omri: *Don't get too used to that side of the bed.*

Tripp: *You can sleep on top of me.*

Omri: *I agree to this trade.*





Tripp: *I have an interview with Anna Lively, then a meeting with Billy. After that, I should get to come home.*

Omri: *I'll be waiting. No rush. I love you.*

Tripp: *I love you too.*



Life had been such a whirlwind. Not just his personal life, but also his career, and Tripp was exhausted. Their team had barely made the playoffs. Truthfully, he knew in his heart it ended for them here. They were playing hurt. While they had heart and everyone wanted a big win with their last breath, they were down to no real running backs and their QB was more tape than tendon. He was one good sack away from being taken out and their opponent knew it. That didn't mean Tripp showed his doubts during a single interview.

“If you could say one thing to your old team right now, what would it be?” Anna's brightly painted lips stretched into an evil smile. She knew she gave him the chance of a lifetime with that question.

Tripp tried to take the high road. He chuckled. “Yeah. I should leave that alone.”

She smacked his knee with the stack of papers she held. “Come on, Tripp. You’ve played a big part in making it to the playoffs this year. You helped elevate this team. I think you’ve earned the right to make one statement.”

He shouldn’t. Damn. He might not make it to the playoffs again. “I guess I would say, maybe if they would’ve been willing to weather one small controversy with me, then maybe they’d be the ones sitting in the playoffs right now.”

Anna laughed. “You heard it here first, folks. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Tripp. Tell Omri I said hi.” Anna turned her focus to the camera and went back to the script on which player was up next to be interviewed while Tripp slipped away. He headed for Billy’s office. The day had been an insane PR day filled with interview after interview. It was part of the job no one saw. Sometimes, they put in a full ten hours of doing nothing but waiting to be passed around, so each channel and news outlet got their quote, clip, or sound bite of the day. He knew Billy was the same. Tripp hoped he was done for the day. A receptionist saw Tripp coming and motioned for him to head inside Billy’s office without knocking.

Billy was on the phone, but he smiled and motioned for Tripp to sit as Tripp came through the door. Tripp chose his usual seat across from Billy’s desk and sat. He didn’t pay attention to Billy’s conversation. It was business stuff. Standard and boring. Thankfully, Billy cut it short for Tripp.

“I have to let you go. My next meeting is here.” Billy said his goodbyes and dropped his headset on the desk. “Jesus. I don’t know about you, but goddamn.”

He got it. This had been a long day. “Agreed.”

“I know I told you I would hook you up with my jeweler, but you know if we stay here, they’ll just put us back to work.”

“Yeah. I know, but Valentine’s Day is in two weeks. If I wait, your guy might not have time to do what I need.” Tripp had made the mistake of confessing his Valentine’s plans for Omri to Billy. Then Billy had taken over... the way Billy tended to do. He couldn’t stop being anyone’s boss for five minutes. Billy insisted he not only knew a guy, but that guy was the best at what Tripp needed. Then Billy had insisted he orchestrate an introduction and be part of the process since he knew Omri, and Omri’s tastes. Tripp honestly felt a bit pushed aside on plans he had wanted to make, but whatever. He just wanted Omri to be happy.

Billy stood and peeled off his jacket and tie. He rolled up his sleeves. “Don’t worry. We’re still meeting Grant. He’s meeting us at Urban, so we don’t have to worry another reporter will snag us. Plus, I know you don’t want your surprise ruined and every reporter in town is here.”

That was true. Still, Tripp had been ready to get home to Omri hours ago. “I’ll follow you there so I can head home afterward.”

Billy nodded. “Perfect. I have a date tonight, so I need to keep this short anyhow.”

Tripp didn't ask questions. He didn't want to know. From what he could tell, Billy always had a date, and it was never the same person twice. It wasn't worth his breath to bother. The faster they got to Urban Mixer, the better. He was ready to be home.



Since Omri had some voiceover work to do online, he missed Tripp's interview live. He caught the recap. Omri leaned closer to the TV, biting back laughter as Tripp called out his old team for ditching him. They deserved it, but everything happened for a reason. If Tripp hadn't been dropped by his old team, he wouldn't get to come home to Omri most nights. Everything had worked out in the end. He just sometimes wished Billy hadn't taken such a liking to Tripp. Billy enjoyed monopolizing Tripp's time a little too much. Omri had wanted to go to dinner tonight. Instead, he had gotten a text that Billy wanted to swap meeting locations from his office to Urban Mixer. Honestly, that didn't surprise Omri. If Billy stayed on site too long at the stadium, no one gave him any peace. Still, Omri wanted Tripp to have some rest too.

Omri's phone chimed. He bit back a growl. If Billy had decided he wanted Tripp to go clubbing now or some other such bullshit, Omri would put his foot down. Billy had been his friend for a long time. It wouldn't be the first time they had words. Omri wasn't scared to rip into Billy when the need

arose. A growl escaped Omri before he could stop it when Gideon's name popped up on his device. He almost tossed the phone aside without looking. Omri needed to block Gideon's number. The only reason he hadn't before now was because it had been so long since he heard from him, Omri had forgotten the guy existed. Before Omri had time to decide whether he would block Gideon now or ignore the text, a picture appeared on Omri's phone. Omri's heart jumped into his throat, cutting off all oxygen to his brain as he stared at the image. Tripp sat pressed against another man at Urban Mixer. They stared at an iPad together, smiling. Their faces were inches apart. Omri felt sick. He had thought Tripp was with Billy. Why would he use Billy as an excuse while he went out with another man? They were friends. Surely, he knew Omri could just ask Billy if Tripp had been with him. Or maybe Billy was the perfect cover. Hell, Omri didn't know. He couldn't think straight. All he could do was stare at the picture and feel his world crumbling.

Then the rage set in. Omri shot to his feet and grabbed his keys. If Tripp wanted to cheat, he would face the wreck he made. If he wanted to humiliate Omri, then he could do it all the way while the world watched. Omri was tired of being quiet while men trashed his heart.

He drove to Urban Mixer with white knuckles and barely any breath. His chest hurt and his eyes burned. As hard as he tried not to think, that was all he did. Tripp had just moved in with him. Why would Tripp do this? Tripp had sold his house and put everything on the line to be with Omri. It made no sense

for him to play Omri. Angry tears pricked at Omri's eyes. He always meant so little to everyone. Tripp could easily buy a new home. Living with Omri meant nothing. Omri hadn't taken the time to study that picture, so he didn't know if this other man was gorgeous or not, but it didn't matter. He obviously had something Omri didn't. Omri would let him have Tripp, but this man would look at Omri and see what his future looked like. Cheaters cheated on everyone. This man wasn't special. It seemed no one was. Every time he thought he met someone nice, they fucked him. He lost a little more of himself each time. Omri didn't think he had anything left of his soul after this one. He was finally completely broken.

As always, when he reached Urban Mixer, no one stopped him as he came through the door. Unlike when Tripp and Omri came to the restaurant together, Tripp wasn't seated at one of the intimate booths. He was at one of the larger open tables in the center of the restaurant where everyone could see. Tripp wasn't even trying to hide his infidelity. The pair still sat together.

Omri didn't recall moving from the door to the table. One second, he spotted them. The next, he stood over them with fury pouring from his veins. French spilled from his lips in his inability to vocalize his emotions in English. Tripp stared at him with a deep line between his eyebrows. The tiny auburn-haired sprite at his side stared at him with beautiful light green eyes and open confusion. Omri realized neither man could understand his words. He took a breath and found his English.

“How dare you sit here with another man and still text me words of love?” He switched his fury to the man who had stolen the love of Omri’s life. There was no way the guy hadn’t known about Omri. “And you, you can have him, but I hope you plan to give him a place to live because he has no place with me any longer, and I hope you enjoy being cheated on because that’s all you’ll ever get.”

“What?”

They both asked simultaneously while staring at him as if he had grown two heads. His anger doubled. Rapid breaths filled his lungs. He fought the urge to lunge. Omri felt certain he could take the sprite. He could scratch out his eyes.

“Look at the two of you all cozy, making the fool of me.”

The man at Tripp’s side looked Tripp’s way.

Tripp motioned for him to show Omri the iPad he held. “It’s okay. Just show him what we’re doing.”

The man tossed Tripp another pained look, then turned the iPad Omri’s way. “I’m Grant Emerson. The jeweler. We’re designing a personalized engagement ring for you.”

Omri’s knees weakened. “*Mon Dieu.*” The words came out in a whisper. He had never been more instantly horrified in his life. He knew exactly who Grant Emerson was. Omri had heard the name many times. Grant was famous for his designs. Anyone who was anyone went to him for their jewelry.

Grant snapped the case closed on the tablet and stood. “I’ll get started on what we discussed, if that’s still what you want. Just

let me know.” By his tone, Grant sounded like he thought Tripp should pass on marrying Omri. “Everything will be completed on time. I’ll leave you to enjoy your meal.”

Omri tried working up a smile as Grant passed. Grant’s expression said it all. Omri had made an ass of himself. Not only that, but he had ruined Tripp’s surprise for him.

Tripp motioned for Omri to take the seat Grant vacated.

Omri sat because he didn’t think his knees would hold him any longer.

Tripp draped his arm across the back of Omri’s chair.

Billy appeared before Tripp said a word. “Omri. Hey. Where did you come from? I didn’t know you were joining us.”

Omri tried for a smile. He thought it might have been more of a grimace in his attempt not to puke. “I didn’t either. It was a last-minute decision.”

“That’s too bad,” Billy said, tossing a few bills onto the table. “I ran into a friend on my way to the restroom and just agreed to... a thing. If I’d known you were coming, I would’ve delayed our plans.”

With a shake of his head, Omri waved Billy away. “Don’t worry about me. You know I’ll never complain about having Tripp to myself.”

Tripp lifted his glass to his lips and drank. The muscle in his jaw ticked like he ground his back teeth to a pulp. Each second that passed, Omri died a little more inside. He had a feeling he



had just ruined something beautiful, and he didn't know how to fix it.

Billy chuckled, oblivious to the tension. "I know, but still. Call me one day next week and we'll have lunch."

"I will."

At his promise, Billy slapped Tripp across the back and headed out, leaving them alone.

"I'm sorry." The words burst from Omri the second Billy was out of earshot.

Tripp looked his way. For a moment, he simply held Omri's stare. Finally, he blew out a sigh. "Will you at least tell me why you don't trust me?"

Omri's heart fell. "It's not that. I do trust you. It's just that Gideon texted me."

"Oh," Tripp said, interrupting him. "So, I told you exactly where I would be, and I can't be trusted. Meanwhile, you're still talking to Gideon."

Omri rubbed his forehead. "I'm not. He just texted me a picture of you with another man. You two looked very cozy. At the moment, it looked bad."

Tripp nodded. "Can I see this picture?"

Thankful for any reprieve, Omri dug out his phone and pulled up the image of Tripp sitting huddled together with Grant. He showed it to Tripp.

For a moment, Tripp stared at it in silence. Then he cleared his throat, as if trying desperately to cling to his temper. “So you didn’t see Billy’s arm on the other side of me?”

Omri tore his gaze away from Tripp and looked at the picture. Sure enough, it looked as if Billy had been badly cropped from the image. “Oh. Um. No. I didn’t notice that.”

Tripp blew out a slow breath. He took Omri’s phone and set it aside so he could hold Omri’s hand. When he met Omri’s stare, Omri’s heart dropped into his shoes. He had never been more certain in his life he was about to get dumped. Omri already felt the first cracks in his heart. “Baby, I love you.”

Panic struck. Omri pulled his hand away. He started hyperventilating. It struck without warning. “Don’t.” He couldn’t breathe. “Don’t tell me you love me and then leave me here. Okay. Just don’t.” Omri tried like hell to draw oxygen into his lungs, but there was no air. “That’s what everyone does. I can’t take it from you too. That’s what my family did before they sold me to the studio and sent me away. There’s always an ‘I love you but’ with everyone in my life. I don’t want to hear your but. Just stand up and walk away. Don’t tell me you love me and then show me you don’t.”

Tripp didn’t move. He looked calm and steady, and not at all like he intended to leave. “Are you done?”

Omri took a breath. Was he? Fuck. The room blurred. He never knew when he overreacted. Gideon was probably still there somewhere, hiding in the shadows and laughing at his meltdown.

Tripp snagged the back of Omri's neck and hauled him forward. As his lips touched Omri's, air finally fully filled his lungs. He supposed at least one of them needed to be sane. It wasn't Omri. Omri had lost his mind a long time ago.

"I'm sorry." The words cracked as he whispered them against Tripp's lips. A tear slipped down Omri's cheek. He turned his head and wiped it away on the sly. "Fuck. I always mess up everything. Gideon is likely still watching and loving this. I'm so sorry I ruined your plan. Just scream at me or something." Omri's head pounded. He felt guiltier than he ever had in his life.

Urban appeared from nowhere. "There have been some complaints. Is everything okay?"

Omri's eyes fell closed. It had been nearly two years since he even set eyes on Urban. He hadn't known the man still came to the restaurant. Of all nights for Omri's antics to blow up in his face. A pain sliced through his head behind one eye, making his stomach churn. Sometimes, the person failing him the most was himself. He didn't know how to stop.



Even though Tripp had never met Urban Tealman in person, he recognized the guy immediately. It was hard to miss a six-foot-six tattooed guy who had his face plastered all over cereal boxes for years. Under any other circumstances, Tripp might

have been happy to meet him. Right now, he didn't give a shit about anything other than Omri. Omri looked oddly broken, even though it was obvious Tripp hadn't been cheating. Tripp should be furious. He hated that Omri still let Gideon text him and would obviously believe anything that asshole said. Tripp wanted to rage at the knowledge that Omri almost let an ex destroy them, but Omri's panic and expression had Tripp scared as hell. He was in papa bear mode.

Urban still waited for a response.

Omri looked like he might completely fall apart any second.

Tripp stood and met Urban's gaze. "Sorry for the inconvenience. It's my fault. I had to cause a bit of a stir to pull off a surprise for Omri. If you give me a moment longer." Tripp removed his championship ring and dropped to one knee beside Omri's chair. A murmur went up around them.

Urban's open irritation fled. "Oh." He looked openly thrilled at the press his restaurant was about to get.

Tripp didn't give a shit about any of that. He held Omri's stare. Omri looked sad and beautiful. Tripp held the ring out to Omri. The only reason Tripp had it on today was for his interviews. "This definitely isn't the one for you. It probably won't fit in any way. Kind of like us. I shouldn't be the one for you. We shouldn't fit, but I worked hard for this ring, and that's nothing compared to how hard I'll work for us every day if you say yes. Will you marry me?"

Omri nodded. It was slight, but Tripp didn't miss it. Omri fell forward and pressed his forehead against Tripp's as he

accepted the ring. Tripp heard him take a ragged-sounding breath even as people clapped and shouted their congratulations. He knew Omri was still on the verge of falling apart. Tripp couldn't let Gideon have the satisfaction. He stood and lifted Omri from his chair in one swift motion, tossing Omri over his shoulder.

Tripp met Urban's gaze. "Is there any way I can pay later?"

Urban made a dismissive gesture. "Billy already paid. Congratulations on your engagement."

With a nod, Tripp headed for the door. He let people laugh, thinking the situation was very different from the rescue operation it had become. Their engagement was very real, though. Omri was marrying him, but they also needed to get out from beneath the watchful eyes of the public. That never went well for them. Tripp headed for his truck without looking back. Omri never made a sound. That terrified him more than he could say.

As he strapped Omri into the passenger seat of his truck, Omri stroked his face. "I'm sorry." He held Tripp's ring out.

Tripp's gaze dropped to the ring. The rage was back in an instant. "Don't you dare embarrass me by giving me back that ring. You said you'd marry me, and you will." Tripp slammed the truck door and circled the truck. Each step felt more like a stomp until he climbed behind the wheel and pulled the door closed. "And another damn thing, give me your phone."

Omri held his phone out to Tripp. He looked tired. Tripp had planned to block Gideon and boot the man from their life

permanently. His temper fled again at Omri's tired expression.

Tripp blew out a sigh and started the truck. "Never mind. I trust you." For a moment, Tripp stared at the street, looking for a break in traffic. He didn't see a thing. That morning, he had woken up thinking they had the perfect relationship. Now, he didn't know a damn thing.

"I love you."

Tripp's eyes fell closed. God, he loved those words in Omri's accent. He wanted to hear them for the rest of his life. "I love you too." Even Tripp heard the gruffness of his tone. He looked over and found the same eyes that captured him staring at him. The same lips that haunted him waited for him now. No one else would do. "I could never cheat on you. You mean everything to me. But I can't make you believe that. You have to trust that I'll always choose you no matter what, because I will. How do you not know by now that I'd rather have you than anything or anyone else? I don't know what else I can do."

Omri nodded. He switched his attention to his phone and clicked around on the device. "I blocked Gideon. You can look through my messages, if you want. That's the first time I've heard from him in ages. When I got his text, it reminded me I hadn't blocked him and then I saw the photo." Omri made a helpless gesture. "I was blindsided. Losing you is the only thing I can't handle. I panicked. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing." Even Tripp heard how tired he sounded. He held up his hand, hoping to wave away the tone he didn't

want to take. Tripp tried again. “If someone sent me a picture of you with another man, I don’t know how I would react. Maybe I’d be the same. Possibly I’d do something even worse. I’ve already punched one producer on your behalf.”

A slight smile touched Omri’s lips. Tripp took it as a win and pulled into traffic. “We’ll send Neo in an Uber to pick up your car later.” Right now, they just needed to get home and spend some time cuddling. They obviously weren’t as strong as he thought. Tripp needed to figure out why and just hold his sexy baby. He needed some time to breathe.



There had been many times in Omri’s life he had been angry with himself. He had never been this upset. Sure, Gideon had some blame here, but Omri had also damaged something about them. He didn’t know how to fix it. Omri had to find a way before Tripp left him... the way everyone did. Tripp didn’t understand. Omri couldn’t take it. His heart couldn’t withstand the blow. He had lost too many things. Omri didn’t want to go back to the way life had been before Tripp had shown him how one person could be a million times more amazing than anyone else.

He toyed with the ring he wore on his thumb. It was way too big for any other finger. Until Tripp had barked at him they were getting married, he thought Tripp had only been saving

his pride with that proposal. Now, Tripp wouldn't take back his championship ring. Omri wouldn't let him get away. No matter what it took. The truck stopped inside the garage and Omri leapt from the vehicle. He was on Tripp's side in enough time to press fully against him the second Tripp slipped from the truck. Omri had to feel Tripp's huge body against him, holding him. He needed that now. His hands dove beneath Tripp's sports coat, searching for warmth. He closed his eyes as he pressed his ear against Tripp's chest.

“Do you remember when we were both inside that t-shirt?” Omri untucked Tripp's shirt so he could get beneath it and touch bare skin. “I had to touch you. It was like the cameras disappeared. You looked at me and I stopped being Omri Francois. I was just some guy, melting under your gaze. You mean everything to me.” The final words came out in a whisper as it hit Omri anew how close he came to fucking up again.

Tripp spun. Omri found his back against the truck. Tripp's huge body leaned into him, stealing away the pain. “I didn't forget people were watching.” Tripp stroked Omri's bottom lip. “You had me mesmerized with this perfect fucking mouth. Still do, and I couldn't look away. I knew the cameras were there. But you touched me under that shirt.” Tripp opened the front of Omri's jeans and massaged Omri's dick, getting him hard while holding his stare. “I wanted them to watch. You're so fucking beautiful. I couldn't believe someone like you would touch me. Do you know how jealous everyone is of me? But they don't even know the half of it because you're a



million times more beautiful on the inside and it's blinding. I want you to come for me like I did for you that night. Then we'll go inside and you'll sit on my cock. You'll ride me and forget all the ugliness going on inside your head, because you're mine. I'll never let you hurt. You can always depend on me and trust me. I've got you."

Omri took a deep breath and released it. It sounded ragged as Tripp continued toying with his body. His dick sawed in and out of Tripp's hand while Tripp held his stare, refusing to let Omri look away. All he saw was love looking at him, and tears pricked his eyes even as his body strained toward release.

"I love you."

"I love you too. Come for me."

Omri clung to Tripp's shirt and rode his palm. As his balls drew up tight, Omri swore he would find a way to make Tripp the happiest man in the world. Tripp would never regret him again. Not even for a second. He would undo the damage he did today if it was the last thing he did. The back of his head hit the truck as an orgasm struck, stealing his energy and weakening his knees. He would give Tripp everything.

## CHAPTER NINE

TRIPP WATCHED OMRI SLEEP for much longer than could be considered healthy or normal. He hadn't known it was possible to love someone so much until he fell for Omri. Everything about the stubborn Frenchman had sideswiped him. Tripp didn't regret a damn thing. But every time he thought he had this new life figured out, something new arose. He had never expected to see a weak side of Omri. It had Tripp wanting to fix things and protect him and just baby him all night. That broken look at the restaurant kept coming back to haunt him. Tripp felt lost as fuck.

His head pounded. Tripp glanced at the clock. It was two in the morning. He needed some water and Omri needed his migraine meds. It hadn't escaped his notice the way Omri kept massaging his forehead earlier and trying to press his eyeball in with the heel of his hand. Tripp needed to make sure he was ready for a bad day ahead. Omri didn't handle stress well. Tripp eased out of bed and headed for the door, making sure he didn't wake Omri. The lights were still on, and he spotted

Neo on the couch before he made it to the living room. Even though Neo lived there, they didn't cross paths often unless Neo worked closely with Omri on something for the day. Usually, they were on different schedules.

Neo glanced up from his phone as Tripp wandered into the living room. "You're up late."

Tripp nodded. "Stress, I guess."

Neo pulled a sympathetic face. "I heard about the Grant debacle."

That surprised Tripp enough he joined Neo on the couch. "Seriously? From who?" He knew there was no way Omri had talked to Neo. They hadn't been apart since they got home from the restaurant.

"Grant. He designed this bracelet." Neo held up his wrist. "Since then, we text back and forth almost daily. I hear Omri did not make a good first impression, but he left a lasting one. That's pretty much Omri in a nutshell, though. People either love him or hate him. Never a lukewarm feeling."

Tripp shrugged. He didn't really care how Grant felt. Omri's were the only feelings he cared about. "He's still upset about it."

Neo set his phone aside. "I'm not surprised. You—on the other hand—leave me pleasantly shocked. Anyone else would've run for the hills after a scene like that."

A flash of annoyance ran through Tripp. "It wasn't that bad. At the moment, if the shoe had been on the other foot, I probably

would've had questions too.”

A smile exploded across Neo's face. He shook his head. His smile fell. “You know, when we were kids, Omri's mom, she would take him to every audition. She would shove him in front of every camera. If there was a call for children to model clothing, she would have him there. She paid all her bills on his beauty. The first offer made to take him away and set her up for life, she jumped at the chance. I know she thought, when he turned eighteen, he would send for her and she could continue the scheme. But he didn't. He sent for me. Since then, I have watched one person after another do a different version of the same thing she did. Everyone uses Omri. Maybe it's for his money or his connections or his body. But for whatever reason, they don't love him. They only take his love and use it to get what they want from him.”

Neo stared at nothing, looking sad. “Omri keeps going and hoping when I would've given up long ago. Hell, I did give up long ago.” Neo met his stare. “But do you know what?”

“What?”

A bright smile lit Neo's face. “I honestly think you love him.”

“I do.” Even Tripp heard the laughter in his voice because it was ridiculous to him that anyone would believe otherwise.

Neo's smile faltered. “It won't be enough. You'll have to also be strong and patient. Many people caused a lot of deep pain before you came along. I know it's not your fault, but it's who he is. If you really love him, then that's who you love.”

Tripp knew that. That was why he was still there. “What about Billy and you?”

A loud laugh burst from Neo. He covered his mouth to stifle the sound. When Neo dropped his hand, he still smiled, and his eyes swam with laughter. “What about us?”

Tripp shrugged. “You’ve known each other a long time.”

“We have,” Neo agreed. “And we’re very different people. He grew up with all the silver spoons in his mouth while I grew up poor. It doesn’t give us much to talk about.”

“Omri seems to think Billy is madly in love with you.” Tripp didn’t know why he couldn’t stop. He simply enjoyed watching Neo squirm.

“Billy is in love with everyone he can’t have, which—granted— isn’t many people, but it’s still more than one.”

“What about when you were younger?” Tripp knew there had to be more to the story.

Neo’s expression changed, turning wistful. “He was very sweet back then. *Mon Dieu*.” Neo pressed his hand to his chest. “He had the most powerful singing voice I’ve ever heard.” Neo’s hand fell away. “Then he went off to university and came back a hulking boy in body and personality. Nothing was the same.”

A sad smile tugged at Tripp’s lips. “That’s a shame. There’s just something in your voices when you talk about each other. Something special.”

“It’s not uncommon to speak fondly of the past. It’s still the past.”

“Hmm. Well. I’d better head back to bed before Omri wakes up and finds me gone. He’s not holding up well as it is. I just need to grab his migraine meds.”

Neo flashed him a sympathetic smile. “He’ll be okay. You stayed. That’s what matters. Everything else will pass.”

Tripp hoped that was true. It was obvious Omri’s guilt still ate at him. Tripp didn’t know how to make him feel better about ruining his surprise. It wasn’t the surprise part that had been important to Tripp. Even though he had looked forward to seeing Omri’s expression when he unexpectedly dropped to one knee, the actually being engaged part was what mattered to Tripp, and they were now. But Omri had taken ruining things much harder than Tripp knew how to handle. While Omri looked cocky and not the least bit fragile, he was easily broken. Tripp wanted to be the man who always lifted him up, until one day, Omri looked around and realized he had healed while he wasn’t looking. He would find a way. Omri would see. Tripp had him. They were a team. This was forever.



The bed dipped beside Omri. His eyes shot open. He reached for Tripp, unsure if Tripp was coming or going. Fear choked him. The sensation didn’t ease until Tripp scooted closer. His

cool nude body pressed against Omri. He kissed Omri's temple.

"Hey."

He felt Tripp's lips shape a smile against his skin. "Hey."

"Where did you go?"

"I grabbed your meds from the kitchen in case you woke up with a headache."

Damn. He always made Omri melt. "Thank you."

"I ran into Neo. Did you know Billy has the most powerful singing voice he's ever heard?"

A smile snapped to Omri's lips. In Omri's heart, Neo was the only family he had. He loved that Neo obviously felt safe enough to admit that to Tripp. "It's true. You should ask him to sing sometime. He has no shame. Anytime, anywhere, he'll burst into song for you."

Tripp shook with silent laughter.

Omri couldn't stop smiling. It felt good in Tripp's arms. An overwhelming need to taste Tripp's happiness washed over Omri. He turned his head and pressed his lips against Tripp's mouth. Tripp hummed. The vibration took Omri's breath and stirred his cock. Tripp's fingertips skimmed his nipple. Omri's back arched, trying to get closer to the torturous touch. Tripp did it again. Omri whimpered. Tripp kept his touch so light, it drove Omri crazy.

"Please?"

Tripp didn't give in. He barely skimmed Omri's nipple again. Before Omri could demand more, Tripp's teeth sank into Omri's bottom lip and he pinched Omri's nipple with the perfect pressure to tear another moan from Omri. His huge body covered Omri's, pinning him to the bed. Omri sucked Tripp's tongue while Tripp blindly tried to open the lube they had stashed earlier. It didn't matter if Omri was still a little sore. He wanted all of Tripp. His monster had an insatiable appetite, and Omri was here for every second of it. Tripp always ensured Omri was taken care of in every way. Omri would be the same.

The air left Omri's lungs as Tripp pushed his way inside. It was obvious he tried to be gentle, but Tripp's dick matched the rest of him. He was a big guy. Tripp's kiss turned sweet. His thrusts were soft. He rocked inside Omri, hitting at the perfect angle, making love to Omri. Omri's eyes burned at the sweetness of the moment.

"I'm so in love with you."

Omri sniffed. Tripp turned him into such a baby. "I'm so in love with you too."

Tripp whisked his lips across Omri's, then nuzzled noses with him while still rocking inside him. "Will you marry me?"

"I already said yes."

Tripp kissed one corner of Omri's mouth and then the other. "That was under duress. I'm asking you now, while we're alone, and from the bottom of my heart. Will you spend the rest of your life with me? I'm so in love you. You absolutely



stole my heart the day you kicked in my front door. Please marry me. You're my best friend and my only family."

Omri wanted to laugh and cry. His body burned. His heart was so damn full. "*Oui.*"

A sexy chuckle rumbled from Tripp. "*Oui.* You've lost the ability to speak English. I know you mean it now."

A gasp tore from Omri as Tripp swapped positions and thrust hard. He saw stars. Omri's short fingernails dug into Tripp's skin. It was a definite *oui*. For the rest of his life. Goddamn. Tripp pounded over and over, hitting the perfect spot internally until he left Omri shaking. Cum filled the space between their bodies. Tripp bit Omri's chest as he pumped Omri's ass full of cum. It was the sexiest and most precious moment of Omri's life. He might not be able to tell anyone the story of their beautiful proposal, but it had floored Omri. There wasn't another man on the planet who compared to this one. He would take real love over all the riches in the world any day.

## CHAPTER TEN

OMRI HAD NO IDEA how Billy convinced Neo to attend the final playoff game, or hang out with them in the owner's box. Miracles never ceased or hell had frozen over because he was there. The two weren't really speaking, but they looked at each other when the other didn't notice. It was kind of cute and made Omri want to do some matchmaking. He knew a lot of years had passed since they had their crush, but he was happy and in love. Omri wanted everyone to be as happy as him.

With that said, Tripp's team didn't pull off any last-minute playoff miracles. He was kind of bummed about that, but he was also ready to have Tripp home full time. They sat together and commiserated while Billy left sporadically for interviews. He knew Tripp would have to shower and likely dozens of reporters would stop him along the way. Still, it felt like it was taking forever for Tripp to make his way to Omri. He barely stopped himself from pacing. Since his meltdown at the restaurant, Tripp had been more than amazing. They had grown closer in a moment when Omri had feared he had

pushed away the love of his life. Now Omri was ready for this season to be finished, so they could spend the next few months growing even closer. He wanted to lock their doors and keep Tripp tied to the bed. It needed to be their time now.

Neo took his hand and squeezed.

Omri flashed him a grateful smile. They had known each other long enough for Neo to have his number. Omri wasn't as patient as he should be sometimes. "Thank you for coming today. I know this was probably super uncomfortable for you."

Neo winked. A small smile played on his lips. "Oh. I wouldn't miss today for the world."

Confusion had Omri's eyebrows snapping together. Music filled the speakers of the room. Omri glanced around. The huge room that was normally filled with beer girls and strangers was empty. Tripp's team poured in, dressed to the nines. Billy followed them, holding a microphone. Omri realized the music coming from the speakers was Billy singing. It was an old wedding song from his home country.

Omri covered his mouth as Tripp filled the doorway behind Billy, wearing a tux and carrying flowers. A reverend followed on his heels.

"Thanks for joining us today. I know everyone is excited to watch this union of Tripp Hamilton and Omri Francois. We might have lost the game today, but we are still family here. Moments like these, this is where we show our wins."

Omri could barely see. Tears filled his eyes as Tripp and Neo pulled him to his feet. “I can’t believe you did this.”

Tripp’s smile was perfect. Unrepentant. “You didn’t think I’d let you slip through my fingers, did you? Are you marrying me today or what?”

Omri nodded. “Damn right I am. I’m not letting you get away.”

Omri heard people laughing and didn’t care at all. He had racked his brain since ruining Tripp’s engagement plans, trying to think of a way to make it up to him. This was so much better. He couldn’t believe Tripp had pulled off a surprise wedding. Omri also couldn’t believe how badly he wanted this. He might fight anyone if they tried stopping it. Omri might have ruined the engagement, but the wedding would be perfect if it was the last thing he did. Flawless. Just like them.



As much as Neo hated to admit it, he couldn’t take his eyes off Billy. Goddamn it. Why did he have to sing tonight? That voice brought back too many memories. Billy looked nothing like he did back when they had been eighteen and Neo had been too stupid to know he was out of his league. Money would always stick to money. Neo might be well off now

thanks to Omri, but he would never be on Billy's level. They would never be the same.

Light green eyes swung his way and caught him staring. That was one thing about Billy that hadn't changed. Those eyes were exactly the same. Sometimes, that fucked with Neo a little. Everything else about Billy was different... except he sang tonight. That goddamn voice that had stolen his soul was the same too. Neo didn't look away, and he didn't know why. Billy didn't smile. Neo didn't either. At their friends' backs, they listened to vows being exchanged, yet they held each other's stare. Neo couldn't explain their connection. Then again, Billy had always been a bit of a mystery to him. He had a way of drawing Neo in before shutting him out again. Neo looked away. That would never change. Money always won in the end. Neo was just a nobody from the streets of France. He had gotten lucky when Omri had befriended him and brought him to the states. There was no chance for him with someone like Billy Freeman. Heartbreak waited down that road. Neo knew. It had already happened once. That was why he would never love again.



Tripp really had to hand it to Billy. When he told Billy he wanted to surprise Omri, the guy had been all in. But then again, Tripp suspected Billy was a bit of a romantic at heart. Despite having a hard time tearing his eyes from his sexy

husband, he didn't miss the way Billy's gaze kept finding Neo everywhere he went. No matter what Neo said, Tripp had a feeling they wouldn't resist each other forever. Love always won.

By tomorrow morning, the entire world would know he had married the sexiest man on earth. Him. Damn. There was no way Tripp could have predicted his life would have ended up here. His teammates kept congratulating him. No one showed any hate. Tripp could barely breathe. Emotion choked him each time he looked Omri's way. Omri looked happy and wicked. Their gazes met. A sexy smirk touched Omri's lips.

Billy slapped his shoulder and squeezed. "Damn. I'd be jealous if Omri wasn't like a brother to me."

Tripp glanced his way. "Thank you for helping me throw this together last minute like this."

Billy shrugged. His gaze moved Neo's way. "It's no problem. You're giving me a chance to work on something I've been meaning to turn up the pressure on anyhow. This wedding gives me an excuse. Congratulations again and good luck." He headed Neo's way. Neo visibly panicked and looked for any escape. A chuckle rose and stuck in Tripp's throat.

Omri untangled himself from their well-wishers and moved to stand toe to toe with Tripp. "I can't believe you did this."

"Are you upset?"

Omri shuffled closer. Heat flashed in his eyes. "Definitely not. It was perfect. Anything else would've been too much stress

for me. Everyone would've wanted a piece of our wedding and I wouldn't have gotten to enjoy it at all." Omri shook his head. "I'm always so blown away by you."

Happiness had Tripp hauling Omri closer. "The night isn't over. Just wait until we're home. Damn. When I have you alone—"

"Oh. Does this mean I get to sweep you away for a holiday? You planned the secret wedding. Can I take you on a secret honeymoon?"

The excitement in Omri's voice filled Tripp's chest with pride. A small part of him had worried he made the wrong choice rushing Omri to the altar, even though Billy and Neo agreed it was the right move. The happiness in Omri's expression meant everything to him.

"You can do whatever you want with me. I belong to you."

Omri traced the line of his jaw. "Damn right you do. My sexy husband. I fucking love you."

"I love you too."

"Are you kidding me? You can't be serious, Omri. Marriage will ruin your career. Don't tell me the rumors are true."

Tripp's head jerked up. His gaze shot toward the door as Gideon crashed his way inside. Everyone looked between them. If it hadn't been his wedding, it might have been comical the way everyone's head turned toward the door and then back their way in unison. Then, one by one, his teammates turned their backs.

Gideon shifted nervously. His brown gaze locked onto Omri, silently pleading. Omri turned away.

Tripp glanced at Billy.

Billy dipped his chin and pretended not to see a thing as Tripp crossed the room and landed a solid punch square in the center of Gideon's face. The satisfying crunch beneath his knuckles was nowhere near enough for the nonstop harassment, but it would have to be. Gideon wouldn't find any witnesses here if he sued him or tried pressing charges.

Gideon hit the floor, holding his nose. Blood flowed freely around his cupped hands. His muffled curses fell on deaf ears. As far as anyone knew, he fell and landed on his face.

“Stay away from my husband.”

Tripp turned away and did one of his favorite things. He snatched Omri from his feet and tossed him over his shoulder. Shouts followed behind them. Tripp couldn't make out the words. His mind was locked on one goal: taking Omri to bed to seal the deal on this marriage. No more craziness. No more interruptions. The season had ended. He had time to focus on being the perfect husband. Their life would be good. Omri squeezed his ass. Tripp smiled. It would be damn good. How could it be anything less? He'd found the perfect man.

Keep an eye out for the next Fresh Hell, [\*Exhale\*](#).



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHARITY PARKERSON IS AN award-winning and multi-published author with several companies. Born with no filter from her brain to her mouth, she decided to take this odd quirk and insert it in her characters.

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