

## Chapter One

Hayden turned around so quickly he nearly fell off the weight bench he was sitting on. Some young guy was being screamed at by this hulk of a man talking down at him.

“Didn’t you see my stuff there?” the guy shouted.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize...”

“Well hopefully you do now? Geez...”

“Give him a break, dude,” his workout partner suggested. “He’s just a kid.”

*Roid rage, perhaps?* thought Hayden.

He gazed up at the sign on the wall. “We don’t criticize!” Perhaps the muscle dude hadn’t read the fine print, which also assumed Bluto could read. It was judgment on Hayden’s part that the guy with all the muscles and his workout buddy only cared about their bodies and nothing else. A glance at either of them made it clear weightlifting wasn’t a hobby.

Hayden didn’t try to hide the sympathy on his face as he saw the kid walking toward the locker room past his bench. He wasn’t sure if the kid was angry or upset, but he seemed to be on the verge of tears. The guy threw his towel over his shoulder and glanced at Hayden. In response he rolled his eyes at the younger man and shrugged.

The kid almost seemed as if he was going to say something, but then kept walking. He did have, however, what was a slight smile on his face, probably seeing Hayden’s previous expression. Hayden finished his last set and headed into the locker room. Grabbing his workout bag and bike lock, he started to leave when he noticed the kid sitting on a locker room bench, his face in his hands. He stopped, thinking he might say something to make the guy feel better, but never had the chance. The kid saw him and turned toward the other exit, leaving the gym.

Hayden strapped his workout bag on his bike and rode back to his house. He lived less than a mile from the gym, which was why he seldom showered there. Why take the time to bring product and clothes with you when they were already at home? Waste of time if you would’ve asked him.

It took less than fifteen minutes for Hayden to get ready for work. His suit and shirt were already hung out waiting for him to put on. He’d pick out a tie to go with it... that was always the last thing he’d decide on. The tie was his signature statement, often informing his business partner and staff what his mood would be based on how jovial or professional the patterns.

“You are *not* wearing that to work,” his soon-to-be ex-boyfriend, Greg, insisted in complete horror. Hayden’s lack of response rated a “*Really?*” from Greg.

Hayden shrugged, grabbed a cup of coffee to go, and waved goodbye in Greg’s direction without any verbal answer. He wasn’t going to win the argument—Greg’s tone indicated an

argument was exactly where he was headed—and Hayden had no intention of changing his tie, nor engaging his ex. He picked up his briefcase and headed out the door to his car.

He smiled when he opened the front door to his offices in downtown Santa Barbara.

*Olliveti and Associates, PC* and under that, *Hayden Olliveti, Esq.*, followed by *Gavin Jackson, Esq.*

It had been a long time coming, but Hayden finally had his own firm. His father didn't encourage him to become an attorney, nor was he supportive of his son going to college and law school. His dad figured he'd done perfectly fine without college, so why go to all that bother and expense? It took Hayden more than the usual time to finish law school. He didn't take out student loans and worked at least two jobs all the way through. He had the right to be proud at his business name and personal title on the door.

Gavin, his law partner in the practice, came from the lower side of high income. His parents weren't jet setters, but they made an excellent living as attorneys themselves. He chose to go into business with Hayden to avoid living in the shadow of his parents' firm. It wasn't that his dad was doing anything illegal, per se. But his choice of clients didn't sit well with Gavin. "My dad makes a decent living, while I prefer an honest one," was what he once said, though not to his father or mother.

"Nice to finally see you, Hay." Gavin greeted him as he walked in. "Ready for lunch?"

"Cute. Don't you have your usual midweek lunch with Mrs. Jackson?" he countered, speaking about Gavin's wife and not his mother.

"Oh shit! It's Wednesday, isn't it? Crap!" He turned toward Hayden's secretary. "Jenni, can you..."

"Did you fire your secretary?" Jenni questioned. "Because if not, you'll have to ask my boss standing next to you if he'd prefer that I stop typing up the brief I'm preparing for him. Oh, and pay me double if you intend to have me work for both of you, thank you very much."

Gavin growled and walked away.

"And a pleasant good morning to you, too, Jenni," Hayden remarked. "I'll get my own coffee."

"Damn well better. Are you and your partner done wasting my time?" She huffed and returned to her computer.

"Want a cup?" asked Hayden.

"To quote Ouiser Boudreaux from *Steel Magnolias*, 'Don't try to get on my good side. I no longer have one.'" She continued typing without a further word.

Hayden slipped into the coffee room, poured two cups of coffee, and returned to his secretary's desk where she continued working on the project.

"Here you go, Jenni. Hot, black, and three sugars."

“Just like I like my men, though considering the last two losers I dumped—thanks for helping with those divorces, by the way—maybe I should switch.”

“You mean you’re finally going to give me a chance?”

“I *meant* I’d start dating black *women*, you misogynistic bastard, not a middle-aged gay man, so do not get your hopes up. You’ve got Mrs. Hamilton waiting for you in conference room one, and no, you’re not late—she’s early, as usual. She already has coffee. All the files you’ll need for today are in your office. You have a luncheon with the president of the bar association at 1:00 p.m., and your new paralegal will assist you with your two new clients this afternoon.”

“Thanks, Jenni. I should give you a raise.”

She pushed her glasses over her braids and crossed her arms. “I’m waiting.”

“Let’s talk after lunch.”

“Uh-huh.” She replaced her glasses and returned to the brief.

Mrs. Hamilton’s issue wasn’t anything but racking up some billable hours to spend time with a dear, albeit somewhat forgetful, older woman. At lunch, the president of the bar association was plying Hayden for information on his leadership plans in the local legal community. She was attempting to find someone to replace her to her satisfaction when she retired the following year. Considering the woman’s anti-feminist stance and anti-gay rhetoric, he had no immediate hopes of getting the position. He made it clear they didn’t see eye to eye on much of her agenda. Though the way he skirted around the points of contention, she seemed clueless with his responses.

*The way she’s acting, Hayden thought, it sounds like she’s ready to announce me as her successor.*

He had a way with people, making the person feel they were getting exactly what they wanted. Then, later, they’d realize he hadn’t agreed at all. It worked perfectly in court and served him well in the rest of his professional career and private life.

The new clients in the afternoon would have to be handed over to a junior partner, as neither one of them could pay his hourly rate. They were young, and their issues didn’t require an attorney with a ton of experience; just someone qualified, which all their junior partners were. As Jenni had told him, his new paralegal had the folders prepared and briefed him well prior to the meetings. That evening, Hayden left the office around 7:00 p.m., after reviewing the brief Jenni had been working on most of the day, and, as usual, was the last one out the door. He set the alarm, locked the front door, and drove home.

The lights were off, save the one light in the living room that was on a timer, and Greg’s car was nowhere to be seen. He brought in the mail, meaning Greg hadn’t been home much that afternoon when it had been delivered. He checked his phone.

*Over at Marty’s. Won’t be home tonight. G*

Hayden couldn’t figure out why he bothered to text him. It’s as if Greg was trying to rub it in his face that he’d been having an affair. He thought he’d pulled the wool over Hayden’s eyes for

the past couple of months, but Hayden knew exactly what was going on. Greg spent far too much time on his phone texting Marty, at all hours of the night, and frequently “had to stay over” for the most believable—not—reasons. Both men had identical phones, and Hayden inadvertently picked up Greg’s one evening while his ex was in the shower a few weeks prior.

*Hey... got lube but out of condoms. Can u pick up some when you come over?*

It was from Marty. It only confirmed what he’d figured out already, but it wasn’t the request that bothered him. It was Greg’s response.

*We don’t have to worry about that, do we? I trust you. Don’t you trust me?*

It was the middle of May when he found out. Hayden thought about kicking him out then, but that would have been vindictive, at least in Hayden’s mind. Jenni, on the other hand, was all for throwing his shit out in the yard and changing the locks. He confronted Greg before he left for Marty’s, and, of course, he denied it completely. Hayden told him to open his phone. When he saw the texts, he disregarded the obvious and started deriding Hayden for not trusting him. That tactic didn’t work well for Greg, as Hayden ignored his protests and promptly gave him his marching orders.

“You can stay for the time being, but I want all your stuff out of my bedroom and bathroom by tomorrow. You can sleep in one of the guest rooms—I don’t care which one—but I expect you to be out by the first of July, if not before.” He didn’t wait for Greg’s comments or complaints. He walked quietly to his office, closing the door behind him.

Hayden hadn’t given Greg a choice, and he didn’t care. They’d only been together since the previous spring, and Greg had been living in Hayden’s house rent-free since their second month. Hayden wasn’t concerned he’d gotten an STI of any kind—they hadn’t had sex in the past two months—though he did get tested two weeks after that conversation. He was still HIV negative, and the other tests came back non-reactive for anything else.

Hayden changed into his gym clothes and headed back to the gym for some cardio. He preferred weight training in the morning, but cardio was important, too. He couldn’t spend hours in the gym, but he wanted to make sure sitting all day in an office didn’t impact his physique. It was safer to drive at that hour, though he hated wasting the gas. Better to be safe than sorry.

He stashed the light coat he’d worn over in a locker and headed out to the ellipticals. As he was walking down the aisle, he saw someone struggling on the squat machine with far too much weight. He ran over to help the guy, grabbing the bar, and lifting it into a rung only inches away from the guy’s neck.

“Are you crazy? Why the hell are you trying to...”

He looked at the guy, only to recognize it was the same kid as that morning.