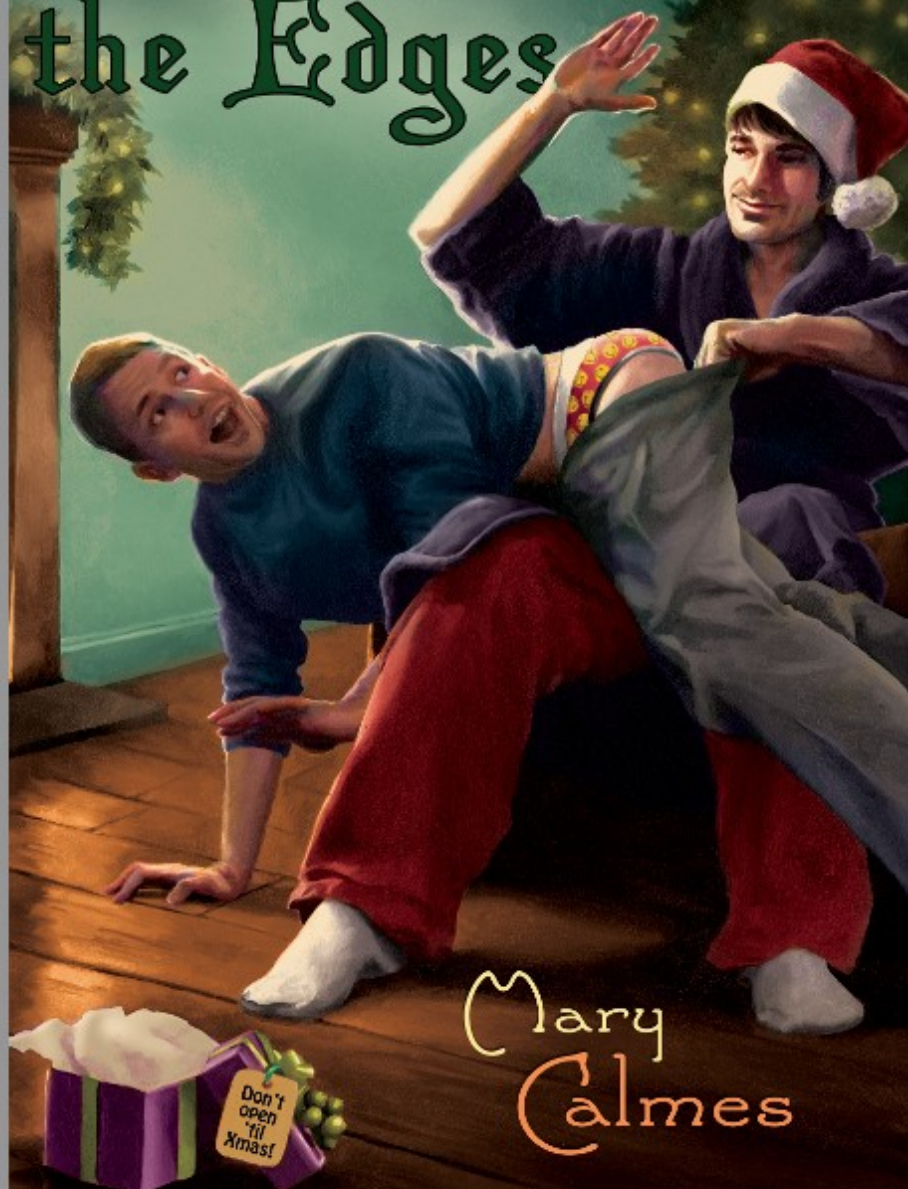


Ice Around the Edges



Mary
Calmes

I

I HATED hospitals, and having spent the last two weeks in one, I was dying to go home. Not that there was anyone to go home to, but still. The smells, the sounds—I was ready to get the hell out of purgatory. And the wound, under the bandage, was itchy now instead of painful.

“Hey.”

Looking up, I was stunned.

“What?” he groused at me, irritated that fast.

I was speechless. The man who had just walked into my room was my ex, but what made it amazing was that he wasn’t my last one. He was not Ari Klein, who had decided that living with a man who ran a homeless shelter was too much work, and he was not Sean Harris, who I had spent three years with before that. The man I was looking at was Dixon Bain, the very first man I had ever loved, back a million years ago when I was young and stupid and twenty-two. It had begun at eighteen, when we were both freshman in college at the University of Chicago, and ended four years later, when he returned to New York.

“Holy shit,” I managed to get out.

He walked over to the bed, took off the black cashmere and wool overcoat, and draped it over the end. He was wearing a navy blue suit underneath, the epitome of polished

and professional. I was thinking he should have been on the cover of GQ.

“Can I sit and talk to you?”

“Course,” I told him, too out of it to do anything but stare at him. I watched him grab the chair that my boss sat in an hour before and move it next to the bed. He sat down facing me. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Dark olive green eyes focused on me.

“Jesus, Dix, what’s it been?”

“Ten years.”

I knew for certain it was at least eight, but I would take his word for it. “And you’re doing what? Just...visiting?”

He cleared his throat. “You know Gwen Dawkins of Peterson Dunbar, don’t you?”

It took me a minute, because really, it had been forever since I’d laid eyes on the man, and I was having just the most surreal moment ever.

“Ev.”

And he was shortening my name like it was normal and expected and still us.

“Um, yeah, she—she’s the community outreach coordinator at PD.”

He nodded, leaning forward. “Well, I don’t know if you know or not, but Peterson Dunbar is an affiliate of Bain Limited.”

I shook my head. “No, I had no idea.”

His eyes were hard to describe, because when you said olive green, people immediately had a vision in their heads of what that looked like. But Dixon's eyes... his eyes were this clear green mixed with brown, the color of dark khaki but with a sort of simmering intensity in them everyone always noticed. They were unique, just like he was. When I had been spellbound by the man those many years ago, just looking up and finding myself caught in his gaze had made my cock hard. I was very glad that I was swaddled under layers of blankets so he couldn't see the reaction I was having to him. Some things never changed.

"So." He cleared his throat. "When Gwen sent an e-mail to her boss saying that she felt a donation in your name to the shelter you ran would be a good idea, sort of a gift for the holidays, I had to sign off on it as my director of charitable contributions is out on maternity leave."

I nodded.

"I e-mailed her back, asking why we were making a donation in your name, and she explained that she felt it would be a nice gesture, as the shelter would be missing their director for at least a month while you recuperated from getting shot."

I had the weirdest feeling that I was dreaming. "So you came all the way from New York just to check up on me?"

"Yes."

I saw how tense he looked. "Why?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"But why would you?"

"Because you got shot, idiot."

I squinted at him. "What's wrong with you?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said sarcastically. "What could it be?"

"I have no idea."

"I needed to see you."

"You could have just called."

"Yes, I could have."

Taller than me, broader, more muscular, he was a swimmer just like I was. We had swum on the same team in college; it was how we had met.

He was not the kind of man you noticed right away; he grew on you instead. It took hours of listening to his low husky voice, days of noticing the way his lip turned up in the corner when he smiled, and months of having the heavy-lidded gaze leveled on you for the slow heat to build to recognition. When I was eighteen, it had taken me an entire semester to realize that it wasn't air I needed—it was Dixon Bain.

He was sexy and hot, but not necessarily handsome. Ten years looked good on him. He had laugh lines now, his copper-colored hair was cropped short, and the eyebrows, dark and expressive, were no longer hidden under heavy bangs. I used to push his hair out of his face to trace down the long nose, the full lips, so I could see him, kiss him. There had been more-beautiful-than-him men in my bed over the years, but never one as sensual or one I loved quite so hard.

"Evan."

"Sorry, tell me why you didn't just call?"

"Because I wasn't sure if you'd talk to me or not."

"Why wouldn't I?"

He shrugged broad shoulders.

"You don't need a reason to call me. You can just call."

"I thought I did."

I smiled at him. "'Cause you're an idiot."

"This is not news," he said, reaching for my hand, and I let him take it.

"You look good."

"I wish I could return the compliment," he said, taking a deep breath in as he leaned on the bed. "You look like shit."

I cracked a grin, and my lip hurt because it was split. "Nice."

He squeezed my hand gently. "So I don't see anyone around."

"Meaning?"

"Is there a guy in the picture?"

"Not right now."

"Why not?"

"You know me." I grinned lazily. "I'm difficult."

"You just want to save the world, is all."

"Yeah, well, that's really annoying to most people."

"When did the last guy bail?"

"He didn't bail; the relationship was called on account of time. He wanted more of mine, and I couldn't give that to him."

"You always did suck at time management."

There was no arguing that point. "So you just pop back into town after ten years to catch up?"

"You're hurt. I wanted to see you."

"Why?"

He let my hand go and raked his fingers through his thick hair. "Because all the things I thought were right were wrong."

"I have no idea what that means."

"No, I know." He sighed deeply. "But one thing is for sure."

"What?"

He leaned back in the chair, his hands locked behind his neck as he studied me. "You would not be in the hospital right now if you were with me."

"Oh no?"

He shook his head. "No. This is the result of no one keeping track of you."

"Uh-huh."

He cocked an eyebrow. "You disagree?"

"Please, Dix, the guy that did this is a fuckin' psychopath. There was no way anyone could've protected me from this."

He nodded. "Forgive me if I disagree and say bullshit."

I let out a quick breath.

"I would have kept a better watch over you after he threatened you the first time with the fuckin' gun," he said pointedly.

"How'd you know about the gun?" I asked, because the man who had shot me, Andrew—Drew—Sims, had in fact made more than one trip to the shelter to threaten me. He did not like the fact that I spent a lot of time talking to the kids, boys and girls ages fourteen to seventeen, who he'd strung out on drugs. First he befriended them, then he got them hooked on drugs, and then, when he was sure he had them good and addicted, he had them turn tricks for him. He was the biggest piece of lowlife scum I knew, and I never missed an opportunity to screw with him. And because I was seen as doing the community a service, the police in downtown Chicago checked on me, and when I said I was worried, they would go mess with him for no other reason than my word. The fact that he was a pimp wasn't the problem; the fact that he preyed on children was. Apparently he had finally had enough. It sucked for him that I lived through his attempt on my life, because now, with everything else he had done, it was life behind bars for Mr. Sims.

"Ev?"

I looked up at Dixon.

"You had a restraining order against Andrew Sims. He wasn't allowed within a hundred feet of you or the shelter at any time. That's a matter of public record."

I shook my head. "I'm too tired to argue with you."

"I bet," he said, leaning forward, both hands taking my one. "Hard to debate the truth."

“Knock it off,” I sighed, closing my eyes.

He was quiet, and I felt his fingers sliding between mine.

“Let go.”

“Make me.”

“Why don’t you go home?”

“Sure. Why don’t you come with me?”

My eyes drifted open. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Evan, you are in desperate need of me.”

“Oh? How you figure that?”

“Look around.”

I didn’t say anything.

He put a hand on the side of my neck, and his thumb slid over my jaw, under my chin and down, stroking my skin. His hand on my neck was warm, and I was getting sleepy.

“You were always a sucker for me petting you.”

I grunted because my energy was gone. My eyes would not stay open.

“I have something to say, all right?”

“G’head,” I said, and my voice was deep and raspy.

“Okay,” he said, his thumb sliding up and down my throat. “Now, I don’t want you to get up on your high horse and be offended. I just want you to listen.”

“Sure.”

"All right. So we both know that any guy who isn't me isn't going to last."

"Oh?" I smiled, opening my eyes to look up at him. "How come?"

"Because no one but me is strong enough to take your bullshit on a day-to-day basis."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, it is," he said firmly, standing up, walking several feet from the bed, and turning back around to look at me. "You are so much work."

And it clicked then how he had no idea who I was anymore. "I used to be work; I'll give you that. The way we fought and made up and the stuff that got broken when we went at it... whole lotta drama back then," I agreed. "But I'm not that guy anymore, Dix. I've learned stuff from everybody I've been with. When I was with you I had no clue who I was. I'm different now."

"I'm sure you're different in some ways, but not in the way that matters."

"Like?"

"Like you need someone to remind you to eat and take your vitamins and go to bed. You used to forget to sleep for days at a time until I came home and held you down and fucked you so hard and so long that your body gave up and you passed out."

Jesus.

I remembered when he used to walk in the door after working back-to-back shifts at the restaurant for a few days and I was still awake. If he wasn't home to lie down with, I

forgot to go to bed, and then I was so wired I could barely even breathe. I would listen for him, for his return, with my whole body. I was tense, overwrought and vengeful, picking a fight with him the minute he walked in the door. He would shake his head like I was ridiculous before he'd throw me down, manhandle me like I wanted—needed—and bend me over the bed and take me hard. I would crack and crumble and collapse under him. His arms tight around me, holding me close... I had never slept better, so safe, so loved.

Crap.

"You put everyone else before yourself; you always have. It's a great quality, and it's scary as hell at the same time."

I smiled and let out a sigh. "I'm a big boy now, Dix. Nobody has to take care of me anymore."

"Oh yeah? Who's at home to take care of you now?"

I had no answer for him.

"Are your folks coming in from Dallas?"

"They're actually on a cruise for the holidays."

He nodded. "Did you call them?"

"No. They've been waiting to take that vacation forever. I didn't want to ruin it."

"And your brother Craig and his wife?"

"They have a new baby, so they're not traveling this year. They wanted me to come to Atlanta, but... I have a lot to do at the shelter."

"You mean you *had* a lot to do at the shelter. Who's taking over for you?"

"I... the assistant director. He's got everything under control; he came by today and gave me an update. My boss came by too. I think he was concerned that I'd be worried, so he dropped by to make me feel better."

"So let me understand: they will get along just fine without you."

"For a short amount of time, yes."

"I see." His voice dropped low as he looked at me. "So technically, you could be off from now until what—after New Year's?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay, then you should come and stay with me for a little while. Just a few weeks or so and see how it goes."

I just stared at him.

"What?"

"Are you drunk?"

He scowled at me.

"Dixon, have you lost your mind? Do you even remember why we broke up?"

"Yeah, I remember. I was twenty-three, you were twenty-two, I had to go back to New York to take my place in the family business, and you wanted to be a fuckin' social worker here in Chicago. That's why we broke up."

"No-no," I corrected him, "don't even try to blame the end on me. We broke up because you couldn't tell your rich conservative family that you were gay."

He squinted at me.

"It's true," I said angrily, annoyed that even after so long it still hurt. "You told me what your Dad said when you heard him talking to your grandfather that time."

He was silent.

"And in a way it was easier for you to use your Dad's words instead of having to come up with your own."

"I used to be a coward."

"And you're not anymore?"

"No."

"Well, good for you."

"You don't believe me," he said flatly.

"No sir, I don't."

"Evan, I need to talk to you."

"Nothing that comes out of your mouth will fix something that happened ten years ago, Dix. Just forget it."

"I tried, it didn't take."

I had no idea what that meant, but I was too tired to hear about his epiphany or to debate with him, so tired, and I needed water and I needed to rest. "Okay."

"That's it?"

"Can I have some water?"

"No, you can't have any fuckin' water. I wanna know what the hell you're—"

“Nurse!”

“Shut up,” he growled, and I smiled as he moved around the bed. I didn’t even realize I had closed my eyes until the straw pressing against my bottom lip made me open my mouth. I drank as much as I could and then let my body sink back down into the bed.

“Ev.”

“Go back to New York, Dix,” I mumbled, my eyes fluttering, trying to open but unable to. “It’s okay. I know you couldn’t keep me. I know your father hated me.”

“It’s not true.”

But I was way too tired to keep talking to him. When I felt his lips on my forehead, I sighed deeply. I couldn’t help it.

“I missed you, you stubborn prick.”

I smiled before I fell asleep.

II

I WOKE up and I was alone. Half of me was thrilled that he was gone, but the other half, the sentimental half, was hoping that he would have stayed to at least eat dinner with me and take a stroll down memory lane.

“Hey, you’re awake,” he said as he walked into the room.

Dixon Bain, the man I had not seen in ten years, sailed back into my hospital room looking better in black jeans and a gray crew neck sweater under a leather jacket than he had in the suit earlier.

“You’re still here.”

He held up a bag and jiggled it for me. I saw the name of my favorite Chinese restaurant in the city on the outside. The fact that he remembered, after a decade, made it suddenly hard to breathe.

“I asked,” he said, pulling the sliding hospital table around and setting down the bag. All his movements were always decisive and fast and abrupt. He startled a lot of people but, for some reason, never me. “And they said that kung pao and sweet and sour soup wouldn’t kill you.”

“Thank you,” I said as he continued to arrange the utensils and the take-out containers in front of me. There was a Pepsi for me, too, and that looked like heaven.

He got me situated, moved the pillows around, raised the bed, and when I was comfortable and he was confident of

my angle, I was allowed to eat. He sat beside me, but there was nothing for him.

“Dix,” I said his name softly, reverently, “you want some?”

“No, baby, that’s all yours. I ate on my way over.”

The *baby* had come right back. He was only one year older than me, but always it had been his word for me. I never let any other man use it. “Thanks for thinking of me. This is really nice of you.”

“Yeah, well, what’s the use of storing useless information in your brain if you never use it?”

I smiled up at him.

“But it’s funny, ya know,” he said. “I doubt I could tell you what my last boyfriend liked on his hamburger, but if you ask me to tell you what you like I’ll say ketchup, mustard and pickles, no onions, no cheese.”

“And you would be right.” I chuckled, which was pretty good considering my heart was in my throat.

His gaze was unwavering, and I would have looked away if I could have. But looking at Dixon Bain had always been my pleasure, and nothing had changed.

“Hey,” he began, breaking the spell. “Do you remember when I used to work those double shifts at Boondocks and I’d come home and you’d cook me dinner?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, remembering the bar and grill close to campus that he’d worked at all through college. I had gone the copy shop route; he’d been a waiter.

"I had to work to show my Dad I was serious about my own education."

"Yes, I know."

"But when I'd get home we'd screw around and you'd rub my back and I'd fall asleep."

"I remember."

"I used to wake up, and you'd be asleep next to me, and... I always loved that."

"I know you've spent the night with other people since me."

"Yeah, but you're the only person I've ever lived with."

"Really?" I was surprised.

"Yeah, really." He was defensive.

"Interesting."

"Why?"

My eyes flicked over to him. "'Cause it's something grownups do, Dix."

He grunted.

"What?"

"Nothing. I just... I can't get over seeing you. It's so weird."

At least I wasn't the only one.

"Weird and expected at the same time."

"Expected?"

"Well, yeah. I always figured I'd see you again."

"You did?"

“Sure, that’s why I wasn’t all racked up when I left, ya know? It never felt like forever.”

“It did to me. I didn’t realize you were actually going to go until you kissed me that last time and walked out the front door.”

He was staring at me, studying my face.

I smiled wide. “Jesus, Dix, I was so crazy about you I thought we’d be adopting kids together and have a house in the suburbs. I had no idea about anything.”

He got off the bed, crossed the room, and brought back one of the ugly regurgitated-yellow hospital chairs to sit in.

“You’re getting comfortable,” I teased him, “you planning to stay all day?”

“Yep,” he told me. “I talked to your doctor; he said you could go home tomorrow. I already stocked the fridge and—”

“What?” I nearly choked on a piece of chicken.

“What?” He looked confused.

Home?

“Evan?”

“Home?” I finally got the word out.

He squinted at me. “I missed something.”

“You’re taking me home?”

“Yeah,” he said, glancing around the room. “I don’t see anybody else waiting to do it.”

“Dixon, you—”

"I took your keys and your wallet and went to your place. I like your apartment. It's small, but that's to be expected on your salary. You own it?"

"On my salary?" I was indignant.

"Pull the stick out of your ass, Evan. We both know you don't make shit; you don't have to be a dick about it. You can fit three of your place into my loft in Manhattan."

"Okay." I put down my fork. "I will have you know that that apartment is in a historic building and—"

"Yeah, I already knew it was small. But I don't care if you own it, either way it can be sold, whatever... let's just worry about tomorrow. Now, I already got—"

"What are you talking about?" I yelled.

His scowl was dark. "Tomorrow when I take you home I need to make sure that your place is stocked until you're okay enough to fly to New York with me for Christmas."

"You hate Christmas!" Which was not what I meant to say, but was what came out.

"Yes, I do," he said, reaching for my hand, which, for whatever reason, I let him have. It was an automatic response: if Dixon wanted something, I gave it to him. It was ingrained deep inside me, too deep to try and reason with. "But when I was with you I missed my family, and when I was with my family I missed you. Maybe if I take you to New York, maybe this year it will be different." He sighed deeply. "Maybe this year I'll finally have what I never knew I always wanted."

He had lost his mind and I hadn't noticed.

"I have someone I would like you to meet."

I watched as he got up and walked out of the room. I took that opportunity to make sure I was awake. I felt awake, everything looked normal; there were no clowns anywhere that I could see... it all felt real.

And then the fear hit me.

Someone I would like you to meet.

That's what he was trying to tell me. He had finally told his father to go to hell, and now there was a man he loved in his life who he wanted me to meet. Oh dear God in heaven, I was not quite ready for that. You closed the door forever on possibilities in your secret heart when you met the significant others of old lovers.

"Evan."

I looked up, and there at the door was a very beautiful, very elegantly dressed woman wearing a white fur coat. When she took off her gloves, the diamond on her left hand caught my eye. It was as big as an ice cube.

"Oh," she said, crossing the room to me, "from the way Dixon always went on, I thought he was exaggerating, but your eyes really are the loveliest shade of brown, and those cheekbones— if I'd been so blessed I would have married better."

"Mother," Dixon gasped.

She chuckled and walked up beside the bed. "I'm Lucinda Bain, Dixon's mother." She smiled down at me. "And you are Evan Kano, are you not?"

I coughed hard, offering her my hand. "Yes, ma'am."

She bent and kissed my cheek, and when she leaned back, she turned to ask her son to take her coat. Apparently,

he needed to be careful with it since it was Dior and mink. She told me that he was so enamored of me that he'd forgotten his manners.

I looked over at him, and he rolled his eyes.

"Evan."

I turned back to the woman standing there beside my bed in the Donna Karan suit. Everything about her was tasteful elegance, and she had the warmest eyes.

"It's so good to meet you," I said, and I heard my voice catch because I had always hoped to meet her and had instead met Dixon's father, who hated me. He had been in town on business, and Dixon and I had had dinner with both his father and grandfather. It had been the end of us; I just didn't realize it at the time.

"Oh my darling," she said, hand on my cheek as she brushed away a stray tear.

I was overwrought from being shot. I had my out.

Dixon came around the bed, leaned over, and wrapped me in his arms. My breath hitched because I wasn't expecting it.

"Hug me back," he ordered, "you know you're dying to hold me."

And I was, even if he was being an arrogant ass about it.

I turned my face into the side of his neck, and hugged him as hard as I could. He was warm and solid and strong and just him, just Dixon. And I was terrified that somewhere buried not so deep down was a love that had simmered for ten years.

“Okay,” he said after long minutes, letting me go, easing me back before gesturing at his mother. “Go.”

“Oh really? Is it my turn now?”

He growled at her, and her smile was luminous. She didn’t just love him; she adored him.

“Evan,” she said with a smile, “darling, I know I don’t deserve it after the way I’ve treated you, but could you spare me a few moments of your time?”

“I don’t... when exactly did you treat me bad?”

“Sweetheart, I never once picked up the phone to see how you were after you and Dixon broke things off,” she confessed, moving to perch delicately on the edge of my bed. “I wanted to of course, but I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about that since we had never actually met face to face.”

“I—”

“I mean, I heard all about you of course... how smart you are and how beautiful and funny and just every little thing so I felt I knew you, but still, I didn’t think it was my place to just ring you up out of the blue.”

“I would have loved that, Mrs. Bain,” I told her.

“Please call me Lucinda.”

“Lucinda,” I repeated.

“I just felt terrible... after four years and then to just have it end because of...” She took a quick settling breath. “There’s been a terrible mistake made.”

“And what is that?”

Another deeper breath. “It’s a bit of a story.”

“Okay, go ahead.”

She moved a lock of hair that had escaped the French twist from in front of her face. I was betting that when she let the thick blonde mane down that it fell to her shoulders. “Well, a week or so ago we were all having dinner together, the whole family, even my father was there, eighty-eight and still going strong.” She stopped and smiled at me. “He’s a pistol, but that’s... anyway, while we were eating Dixon brought up that fact that you had been involved in a shooting and all of a sudden Mr. Bain asks after you.”

“Oh, that’s kinda funny,” I said because I had no idea what else to say. I didn’t want to say that because her husband was a homophobic asshole and that her son was a coward that four years of my life had been flushed down the drain.

“No, you don’t understand. Dixon became furious. He got up and yelled at his father right there and tells him to stop pretending that he cares at all.” I reached out for her hand, which she immediately took. “I had never seen that particular look on my husband’s face before, and it took me a minute until I realized what it was.”

I waited. I didn’t really care, but the story was interesting.

“He was baffled. Mr. Bain was at a complete loss, and so he asked Dixon what in the world he was talking about.”

Funny that Dixon’s father would try to pretend that he had no idea, but no one ever liked being confronted by the elephant in the room. It made sense that he would plead ignorance.

“Well, out of the blue my father remarks that he’s confused. He had thought that Miles ended it with the girl because of how unsuitable she was. He thought that Mr. Bain’s opinion of the girl had been unfavorable.”

I shrugged. “That’s okay. I know Dixon’s grandfather, your father, is from old money. I’m sure to him I wasn’t good enough to date his grandson.”

“You didn’t hear me,” she said. “Listen again: Miles; and the *girl* was unsuitable.”

My head snapped back to her from where I was looking out the window.

She nodded.

“Miles?” Dixon’s brother? His brother Miles? “Girl?”

“Yes, to both.” She sighed, patting my hand. “I asked my father where he ever got the idea that the girl was unsuitable, and he turned and looked at my husband and said that they had been talking about it ages ago when they were in Chicago on business.”

I waited as she took a deep breath.

“Dixon is fuming at this point and says his grandfather has it all mixed up and that the conversation had nothing to do with Miles or a girl but had everything to do with you, Evan, his boyfriend. There was no girl, there was never a girl, there was only you. He told both his father and his grandfather that he had overheard the conversation in question and that was why he broke up with you, because he knew his father would never accept you into the family.”

“Wow.” I shook my head. “Well, it’s certainly nice to finally hear the—”

“No.” She quieted me, her fingers curling around mine, squeezing gently. “Listen now. So Mr. Bain is just sitting there staring at his son, and finally tells him that he owes his grandfather an apology. My father doesn’t have anything wrong, Dixon does.”

“What? I’m so lost I—”

She smiled wide. “I know. I was too. We all were. Myself, Dixon, my son Miles, my daughter Alyssa, all of us sitting there staring at Mr. Bain like he’d grown another head.”

“What happened?” I asked her, riveted.

“Well, finally Dixon says that he knows his father and grandfather didn’t approve of you, and do you know what my father said?”

“No.”

“He said that he was unaware that Dixon dated women.”

I glanced over at Dixon. He was looking at me with the most pained expression on his face, fingers laced on top of his head.

“No one heard him when he said girl, either.”

“Oh shit,” I breathed. “They were never talking about me.”

“Right,” she said as she nodded, “they were never talking about you.”

“Oh my God.”

“Oh my God is right. Mr. Bain then tells us that the night he spoke to my father about bad choices in partners, he was speaking of Danielle Vicksburg, Miles’s girlfriend from college. He had been saying that even though she was

from an excellent family, he had found the girl completely unsuitable, not at all like Evan.” She finished, enunciating my name for maximum effect.

I had to start breathing before I passed out.

“Oh yes.” Her smile was huge. “He goes on to say that he and my father had both found your zeal to help the common man admirable, if deluded.” She chuckled. “And that you were a pistol and the way you had bantered with him had been delightful. You didn’t back down from your moral stance, and he found that refreshing. He told Dixon that he had always been confused by the fact that, as enamored of you as he said he was, the romance was not pursued after college. He found that strange but thought perhaps the two of you had simply drifted apart. He was certainly not about to interfere in the love lives of his children outside of premarital agreements.”

“Oh.” I stared at her, stunned.

“Yes.” She nodded. “I couldn’t believe it, and Dixon was just completely shaken. Sweetheart, he went absolutely ashen, let me tell you.”

“I’ll bet.” I grinned at her, looking over at Dixon. “He broke up with me for no reason.”

“Yes, he did.”

He was standing at the window with his back to us, watching the rain come down outside.

It was funny... and sad... very sad.

“And may I tell you that his father gave him quite a lecture on eavesdropping and acting on impulse without the

facts. He went on, quoting some line from *Othello*, but by that time, I know Dixon wasn't even listening."

"Well." I sighed. "It's nice to know that Mr. Bain had a good impression of me. We got along well that day, and so when Dixon told me what he said... I was confused. People normally like me or hate me right off, so it was weird. Good to know that I can actually read that stuff right."

"You did," she assured me. "I only ever wanted my children to be happy, and even though we come from what is construed as old money, that does not necessarily go hand in hand with racism, homophobia, or prejudice, as much as other people may presume. My father taught me that character was the true test of a man—or woman—and Mr. Bain's family, my husband, gave him those same values. We instilled that same appreciation in our children."

"Yes, ma'am." I said softly.

"Lucinda," she corrected me.

"Lucinda."

We were silent, staring at each other. She had a great face.

"Where are your parents, Evan?"

"They're on an Alaskan cruise for the holidays."

She nodded as she let my hand go and stood up. "Well, I just came to see you, and now I have to get back to the airport as I have to be back in New York by tonight. Dixon's father and I are going to the opera."

"Sounds fun," I offered lamely.

"It sounds hideous, but it's for charity, so... but tomorrow I meet with the caterer about Christmas dinner and New Year's, so... will you come?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"Your parents are on a cruise. What other plans did you have?"

"Oh no, Lucinda, I have friends here in town who—"

"Talk to Dixon and then let me know," she said, leaning over to hug me.

She smelled like musk and spice, not girly, and I liked that. I got a kiss on the cheek after the hug, and she stood over me and smiled. "I think I finally understand why there's never been anyone else serious in my son's life."

I smiled weakly at her.

"Let me know, sweetheart," she said, turning to go.

"Thank you for coming," I said, catching her hand, keeping her there. "It means a lot."

Heavy sigh from her. "I'm late, but it's genetic really." She chuckled. "I got it from my mother, and I passed it along to Dixon."

"Please give Mr. Bain my best."

"Please come for Christmas and tell him yourself," she pressed, crossing the room to her son and the mink he was holding up for her.

He helped her on with the coat and then spun her around and hugged her tight.

"Oh my," she chuckled, patting his back. "I like being rewarded this way. What else can I do for you?"

He put his face down in her shoulder, and I saw him shudder.

“Oh, love.” She sighed deeply. “I hope you get what you want this year.”

I turned my head away, looking out the window to give them some semblance of privacy. When she called out the goodbye to me from the door, I had enough time to turn and see her wave before she was gone.

Alone with Dixon, I had no idea what to say.

He cleared his throat.

“You could have just told your father to go to hell when you believed what he thought was real. You could have, but you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t, and there’s no excuse for that.”

“You were a coward.”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t want to be disinherited.”

“No.”

“And so you threw me away, because the thought of losing me was easier than the thought of losing your family and your money.”

“Yes.”

At least we were clear on everything.

After long minutes of thundering silence, I told him to go.

“Why would I go now?”

I shook my head. "It changes nothing. I mean, it was awesome of your Mom to hop on the family jet and make the trip from LaGuardia to O'Hare, but nothing is fixed. You still left, I still stayed... we have completely different lives."

He shoved his hands down in the pockets of his jeans and moved closer to the bed. "I want you to come home with me."

"I could never do that."

"Why not?"

I shook my head. "'Cause what am I, above all else?"

"I don't know. What?"

"You know."

"No, I don't fuckin' know," he said, suddenly irritable.

"Yeah, you do."

"Evan, I—"

"I'm a romantic. You know that."

He nodded. "Yeah, I do know that."

"So you know that us, together, that was done so long ago."

He cleared his throat. "I don't accept that."

I sighed heavily, owning up to my piece of the mess. "Some of it, more than half of it, the reason we broke up.... yeah, most of it was how you thought your Dad felt and so in turn how your family would feel, but some of it was me. I loved you too much, too hard, and it was suffocating, so you got rid of me. I get it. I'm not stupid."

"I never said you were stupid."

I shrugged, hoping to piss him off, hoping he'd go away so I could be alone to process the last ten years of my life.

He looked at me hard. "I think it's great that you know everything."

"Not everything." I gave him a slight grin. "But I do know the difference between being in love and being in lust and being a convenience."

"You're wrong."

"I don't think so."

"You're such an ass."

"Sorry." But I wasn't.

"No, you're not. Don't say—you know I hate automatic apologies."

I nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"I think I should go."

I nodded. "I think you should too."

"I thought you needed me."

"I used to." I felt the sting behind my eyes. "Not anymore."

He put on his leather jacket, adjusted it, and then faced me. "If you change your mind, will you call me?"

"Yeah," I said, wiping a tear away. "You bet."

He shrugged. "I always end up leaving."

"It was good you came. It means a lot."

"Did it?"

“Course,” I said, motioning him toward me. “Gimme hug.”

He moved fast, and his arms were wrapped around me, his face in my shoulder. “I’ll say it so you have it to hold over me... I want you back.”

“No you don’t.” I smiled, leaning my cheek in his hair. “You just got nostalgic when you heard I was hurt. It’ll pass.”

“No.” He pulled back, straightening up, turning for the door. “I want you. I’ll call you, all right?”

“Okay,” I said to his back as he left the room. It was a very dramatic exit. I was sure he was pleased. For someone who so hated theatrics in other people he loved performing himself.

III

I WAS having the weirdest few days. When I woke up from my nap after six that evening, having spent the day thinking about Dixon Bain and wondering what my life would look like if the man had stuck around, I was surprised to find Eric Downey in my room.

“Hey.” I smiled at him, wondering what my last fuck buddy was doing here. We had met at a party, and because I was drunk and he was horny, we had ended up in bed. In the morning, as uncomfortable as he had looked, desperate to get away from me, I had been certain that the assistant DA and I would not cross paths again. He was, by all accounts, a closet case.

“You’re awake.” He smiled at me, crossing the room to stand beside my bed. “I’m so glad.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to you.”

“’Bout what?”

He cleared his throat. “I wanted to know if you weren’t doing anything for New Year’s if I could take you out.”

Tall, dark, handsome man, why on earth would I say no?

“No, I don’t think so,” I told him sadly. “But I appreciate you coming by to ask.”

He was surprised; it was all over his face. "Why?"

"Because I'm sort of in the middle of something right now, and I need to sort it out before I do anything else."

"Something with a guy?"

"Yeah."

"Important guy?"

"Pretty much *the* guy." I sighed heavily.

He nodded, shrugged, held the plastered smile in place. "Okay, then, I guess I'll see you around. Give me a call if anything changes."

"I will, thanks."

And with that he was gone.

"Can I come out now?"

My head swiveled to the bathroom door, and there, peeking out, was Dixon Bain. "What the hell are you doing back here?"

He came out of the bathroom, and I as he strode forward I noticed how tight his jeans were and how they clung to his long, muscular legs.

"You're checking me out."

"I am not," I grumbled.

His cackle was evil as he moved to the side of the bed, pulled the curtain around, shielding us from prying eyes, and then climbed onto the small bed to lie down beside me.

"What're you—get off the bed, you're hurting me."

"I am not. Shut up," he growled back, putting his head down on my chest, on the left side where I hadn't been shot,

under my chin so that if I wanted to, *if* I wanted, I could rub my face in his hair. “God, you’re pain in the ass.”

“Dixon,” I croaked out his name.

“I’m hard to love.”

Weird segue, and I had no response for him. I never had any trouble with it except at the end.

“Most guys don’t get me.”

When we’d gone to school together, overwhelming was the word most used about him. Intimidating was next. He demanded your attention. He was so decisive, so instantly possessive, that there was barely time to breathe once he made up his mind that he wanted you.

“I scare guys off.”

“Me too,” I told him. The heat from his body was seeping into mine and my groin was filling with blood. “They run for the same reason you did: I smother them.”

“I never had a problem with that,” he said, shifting so his thigh dropped between my parted legs.

The pressure of his hard muscular leg pressed against my groin made me catch my breath.

“You alright?”

“Get off the bed.”

“I don’t think so.”

He slid his hand under the covers.

“Dix.”

He pushed my head back with his nose, and because I had always been easy where he was concerned, I offered him my throat. He pressed a kiss to it.

“You should stop.”

“I should be buried to my balls in your ass, but you’re not up for that yet,” he said, nibbling on my collarbone. “You’re gonna have to ride me instead.”

“I don’t... I top now.”

His laughter brought heat washing over my skin. “You’re so fulla shit. I have never met a greedier bottom than you. You’re the only guy I ever met who can get off just with a dick in his ass.”

“Just yours,” I said before I could stop myself.

“Well, that is the best news I’ve had in years,” he said as his fingers slid over my hip and under the waistband of my sweats. “And, so you know, your cock is the only one that just sucking can make me come.”

My heart hurt.

“I bet it’s still pretty,” he growled into my ear a second before my already hard, leaking shaft was fisted in his strong grip.

“Oh God,” I moaned, my back arching up off the bed, the contact so sudden, so forceful, so perfect.

“You will let me take you home and take care of you, you stubborn piece of crap,” he said, releasing me only to throw back the blanket and move down between my legs. “I made a mistake, but punishing me when you want the happily ever after just as much as I do is just bullshit.”

I was going to argue, but he bent and took me down the back of his throat.

“Stop!” I yelled at him, terrified that a nurse, or anyone else for that matter, could walk in at any moment.

He sucked hard all the way to the end and then swirled his tongue around the head before he lifted up to look at me. “Why stop?”

“Because we’re not together,” I told him.

“Sure we are, baby. We’ve always been together.”

“Dixon, you don’t just get to walk back into my life after ten years and—oh!”

The man had again swallowed the length of me down his throat, and the pressure combined with the heat and the wet was turning me inside out. He stroked me when he came up and then rose over me only to bend down and take absolute possession of my mouth.

I had kissed the man a million times, and each and every time, it made my blood race, pulse pound, and my skin go up in flames. The whimper rose up out of me as his tongue swept inside my mouth. And the way his lips sealed so perfectly to mine, the way I was devoured, the sound he made in the back of his throat, I understood that his ache for me was as bad as mine for him. When he lifted his lips from mine, just enough so I could catch my breath, I stared up into his dark liquid eyes.

“Dixon, I...”

“Just let me take you home,” he begged me, and the husky, low sound of his voice, so sexy, made my stomach flip over. “Lemme start with that.”

"It's not a good idea," I said, even as my hips rose off the mattress, pushing in and out of his hand, needing more contact, more friction. I wanted to come. "Christ, you feel good."

His very male grunt signaled his victory.

I opened my mouth to argue, but he bent and licked me, coating my shaft in saliva, sucking, swirling his tongue over the head, at the same time increasing the motion of his hand, stroking me hard.

"You taste so good, Ev... so good," he breathed out. "Come for me. Shoot your load down my throat. Gimme it all."

"But I... I'm... you..."

"We both know you're the king of the safe sex, Ev, and I bet it even says somewhere in that chart beside your bed. As for me, I'm having my secretary fax my clean bill of health here so I can give it you in the morning before I take you home."

"Don't do that, because I'm not gonna let you—"

"Oh the fuck you're not," he told me, making the suction so hard, so strong, that I was helpless to do anything but explode in his mouth. I came hard and it lasted forever, because there had been no one for so long and now suddenly, there was Dixon Bain who had been, at one time, everything.

He sucked me until there was nothing left and then licked me clean with his tongue before leaning back to stare down at me.

"That was amazing," I told him, because it was true and because I owed that to him.

He waggled his eyebrows at me.

"You're such an ass."

"I know," he agreed, leaning forward. "Now let me take you home."

"You don't have to."

"Can't you see I want to?" he asked me as he bent and kissed me long and hard and used his tongue. I had one hand behind his neck and the other with a handful of his sweater. I was not letting him off the bed.

"I just want to spend some time with you," he said against my mouth as he pressed himself along the length of me. "Say I can."

"You can." The light that came into his face irritated me, reminded me of just how easily I had succumbed. "But just for a day or so. You have to go before Christmas."

"I know, we're both going. I'm taking you home with me."

"No you're not."

"Watch me."

My growl sent him into hysterics.

IV

HE DIDN'T rent a car; he hired a car service, so we were picked up from the hospital in a town car and then driven to my apartment.

"You couldn't just rent a Toyota or something?" I teased him.

The look I got in return was priceless.

"You have no idea about normal people and normal-people bills, do you?"

"No," he told me, "but you don't know everything about being rich and staying rich, so shove your righteous attitude right up your ass."

"You know I—"

"Stop trying to pick a fight with me," he snapped irritably. "I went and got the chocolate syrup for you that you like to put in your milk because the regular chocolate milk is too sweet."

"You did?"

"Yes." He turned from the window to look at me. "So try and not be such a total prick, okay?"

I would have yelled at him, but he took that moment to lace his fingers into mine. He wanted to hold my hand, and since he had spoiled me for other men, because he was so touchy feely, I shut up and let him.

When I walked into my bedroom, I was surprised by all the additional pillows.

“What’s all this?”

“So you’re comfortable.”

I smiled at him. “I was okay before.”

“You’re hurt, Evan. You need to take it easy.”

I looked at him.

“Sit,” he said quickly, passing me a game controller.

I looked at it as I sat down on the bed. “Why do I have a cordless controller?”

“So you can lie down and play video games.”

“I see.” I smiled at him. “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“Thanks,” he said softly. “What can I get you to drink?”

“Nothing.”

“You wanna watch a movie?”

“No.”

“Okay,” he said, and then he left the room.

I put the controller on the night table and watched him go. He got very busy coming in and out, carrying stuff, and asking me if I wanted or needed anything each and every time. I understood then that I wasn’t the only one who was a little weirded out. Over the next hour it made me tired just watching him hustle around the apartment. I reached out and took his hand the hundredth time he passed by me.

“Yes.” He smiled down at me expectantly. “What can I get you?”

“Nothing,” I said, looking up at him. “I just wanna lie down.”

“Oh.” His brows furrowed slightly, like he was worried. “You need help?”

“No. I want you to lie down with me.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

“Cause you’d end up getting attacked, and you’re not up for that,” he said firmly, squeezing my hand before he let it go, turning to leave the room.

I held him there. “I’m not?”

“No.”

“How do you know?” I asked. I was actually feeling pretty good. My orgasm the night before had pretty much sealed the deal on my need to bed the man. I was more than ready. And even though I was concerned that my body and my heart were still a little too closely entwined where he was concerned, I wanted him too much to worry about it.

“Ev,” he sighed, “I haven’t slept with you in forever, and all I wanna do when I look at you is....” He trailed off, and I saw his jaw clench hard.

“What?”

“Never mind,” he snapped out, forcing a smile even though his voice was full of sand. “Quit buggin’ me. Lay the fuck down.”

“I’d rather lay down with you.”

He took a step away from me. “Ev, you’re hurt, and I already feel crappy enough about what I did to you

yesterday, and you've been through this huge ordeal that I don't even know how to... I'm so lucky that you—"

"You're a mess."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "You have no idea."

"You were really worried about me," I said.

"Yes." He nodded, and I saw his gaze turn soft.

"Come here."

He just stared at me.

"Why don't you wanna be close to me? You didn't have any trouble in the hospital."

"It was different in the hospital." He cleared his throat. "I couldn't—we couldn't do any more than what I..." He swallowed hard and then cleared his throat. "Here's the thing. I wanna make love to you so bad that it's just—"

I laughed out loud. "Make love to? That's a bunch of shit. Since when?"

He wiped his eyes roughly, smiling slightly. "Yeah, right."

"Say what you mean," I demanded, my voice flat.

He nodded, eyes on the floor before they flicked up to mine. "I wanna fuck you."

"Then do it," I told him.

He smiled at me like I was five. "Honey, you don't get it," he said indulgently. "You don't have the stamina to take what I—"

"If I ride you, like you said before, it'll be fine."

His moan was loud and deep, filled with need. “Ev, I... I would be all over you, and I would really try and be gentle if I got in bed with you, but maybe I wouldn’t be able to stop or be gentle or—”

“Yes, you would,” I assured him. “And I’m in better shape than you think.”

He looked so pained.

“So what, then, if you don’t trust yourself?”

He blew out a quick breath, clearly relieved that I was dropping it. “We’ll just wait until you feel better.”

“And what if the spell wears off by then? What if I tell you to just go home without me?”

“You already did that.”

“Well, what if this is your one and only shot? What if me saying ‘Dixon Bain, please let me feel your cock buried inside me’ is the only offer I’m going to make you?”

“I would rather never fuck you again than hurt you right now.”

“Then maybe you should just go,” I said, because I was committed to the line of conversation at that point. I couldn’t back down or show any fear. He had to think I didn’t care one way or another.

“No thanks.” He shook his head. “I can’t do that. I’m just gonna torture myself and stick around.”

“Torture?”

“Yes, this is torture for me, but I deserve it, so that’s okay.”

I sighed deeply. “I didn’t fight.”

He moved and sat down beside me on the bed.

I shrugged, but my eyes never left him. "I mean I didn't fight for you. I just got up on my high horse and was like, if I'm not good enough for him, then fuck him."

His eyes were locked on mine.

"I could have fought with you, for you... I could have made you let me talk to your father, and everything would have been cleared up ten years ago instead of us losing so—" His sharp intake of breath cut me off. "What?"

He cleared his throat. "You were saying that we lost a lot of time, and so that means that maybe you want that time back, and if you do want that time back, then maybe you want some time now."

"Your mind is really scary."

"Yes, I know."

"You think just because it's Christmas that I'm gonna be overly sentimental."

"Where I'm concerned, I would be really pissed if you weren't at least a little sentimental."

I nodded before leaning in close to him.

"Quit," he warned me. I kissed where his jaw muscle was flexing. "You need to stop." He tried to smile, shifting to get up.

"No."

"Evan."

I reached for him, my hand slipping behind his neck as I drew him toward me. I kissed him slowly, and I heard his breath flutter before I parted his lips with my tongue,

slipping it inside his mouth. The moan was full of agony, and I smiled as I leaned back to look at him.

“You’re trying to kill me.”

I took his face in my hands and pulled him back to me. I kissed him with everything I had. He had to know how much I both wanted and needed him, at least for the moment.

“What?” I asked him after ending the kiss.

“You gotta quit.”

I leaned in and kissed him again, long and hard and heated with more of my tongue. Finally I let him go, but only when he was panting for air.

He took a deep breath, his face flushed, his breath catching, his bottom lip trembling. “You listen really well, Kano.”

I smiled lazily, the effect I had on him obvious. “Yes, I know.”

“Christ.”

“What?”

“I crave you like a drug,” he said matter-of-factly, and I noticed that he didn’t look at all happy about it. “I have since I was nineteen fuckin’ years old, and it hasn’t changed one little bit. What the fuck is that?”

I chuckled.

“Baby, please.” He looked like he was in pain. “Just lay down and—”

“Shut up.” I grabbed a handful of the long sleeved T-shirt he was wearing. “Take this off.”

He just stared at me.

"You want me to beg?" I asked him, stroking his throat with the back of my fingers.

He pulled it off roughly and threw it on the floor.

"Lay down."

"Ev—"

"Quit," I grunted, cutting him off. "You talk too much."

He did as I asked, throwing pillows off the bed as he moved. I watched the muscles in his arms cord, admired his ass in his tight jeans and the way his hair fell into his eyes. He was so sexy and beautiful, and it seemed like, if I wanted, if I just said the words, that he could belong to me all over again. I ran my hand over his back.

"What?"

"Nothing. Lay down."

He lay on his back, and I stretched out beside him, propping myself up so I could look down into his beautiful eyes, careful of the angle so I wouldn't rip the stitches in my chest.

"Evan, what can I do to help?"

"You've already done it," I told him. "Who knew that this Christmas I was finally getting closure? That's quite the gift, Mr. Bain."

"Could you just cut the shit? We both know you haven't been pining away for me for—"

"You don't know anything," I confessed, staring down into his eyes. The green was so dark at that moment, so clear. "You were my first everything. First guy I ever slept

with, first guy I ever lived with, first guy I ever loved. Every one that came after has been compared to you, and the way it ended... I never saw that coming.”

“Evan—”

“It’s okay.” I grinned down at him. “We’re both at fault: you gave up and I didn’t fight. We’re both idiots.”

He put a hand through my hair and trailed his fingers down my throat. “I don’t want to be an idiot anymore.”

“It’s too late,” I teased him.

The pained expression on his face made me realize that we were talking about two different things. “Oh no, Dix, I mean that it’s too late ‘cause you’re already an idiot.”

It took a second for my words to filter into his brain but when they did, he scowled at me.

I let out a deep breath, and he lifted, rolling me to my back, moving so he was over me. He slipped his leg between mine and leaned down and kissed me. His hands on my face were caressing, tender.

“Dix—”

“Here, let’s take this off,” he said, his voice deep as he gently eased my T-shirt up and off.

“You know I—”

“Evan, honey,” he said gently, sliding down my body, careful not to put any weight on me. “We’re gonna be careful with those stitches,” he promised, kissing where it hurt.

I felt the tears sliding down my face, and I wiped at them.

"It's okay," he whispered, brushing them away, kissing my eyes and then my mouth. I could feel his growing urgency and my own desire for him.

"I don't expect this to be any more than—"

"For fuck's sake, Evan," he said slowly, his voice deep and husky. "You think you're the only one who was there for four years? You think you're a saint and I'm just the fuck-up that lived with you?"

"No, I just—"

"I was there because I wanted to be! I loved you, I still fuckin' love you, and I never stopped. And the whole time that you've been comparing guys to me, I've been doing the same exact thing. Do you have any idea what it's like to know that you fucked up the only shot you're ever gonna get?"

"Yes, honey," I soothed him, my fingers trailing through the short thick hair. "I do."

"Jesus, Evan," he groaned, "just...just say it already. Say it's okay. Say you forgive me for being a coward, for running, for putting anyone before you."

I sighed. "It's funny, you know. I mean, you're one of the most selfish people I know, and the one time I was counting on you getting what you wanted, instead you gave into the pressure from other people—or what you perceived to be pressure at the time."

He looked startled, and I laughed at him.

"Oh shit, I did." His eyes were huge. "I never even thought of it that way."

"Because it's a fucked-up way to look at it." I chuckled.

He moved quickly, rising to his knees, straddling my hips at the same time he arched over me, hands on my face. “Baby, please, please just gimme another chance. Come for Christmas, come look at my life and see if you like it. You can help me be a better man and still save the fuckin’ world.”

“You wanna take me home like a stray dog for Christmas?”

“You’re not a stray dog. You’re the love of my life, you fuckin’ idiot.”

He said the sweetest things.

“Dixon.” I breathed his name at the same time I reached out and put a hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down to me.

“What?” he asked, just the corner of his mouth curling.

I trembled hard.

“Tell me what you want.”

I felt the tears slip from under my eyelids because the feelings were suddenly overwhelming. I had never needed him so badly. “Please.”

The second his lips touched mine, I parted them for him. I heard the noise in the back of his throat as he tilted my head back, his tongue tasting me, his mouth hungry and rough, the kiss deep and wet. I arched up into him as his hands slid under me, over my ass. I grabbed him, arms around his neck, tight and clinging, holding him there, making sure he couldn’t get away. He yanked me to the edge of the bed and unbuckled my belt. He checked my face, and

when I smiled, giving the okay, he went to work on my jeans. He peeled them and then the briefs underneath off my legs.

“If I forgot to tell you yesterday, Ev, you’re still fuckin’ beautiful.”

I trembled as his hot gaze raked over me. He opened my legs and wrapped them around his narrow hips. I felt his hands on the inside of my thighs. Chills of pleasure rolled through me, and I broke the kiss because I couldn’t breathe.

“Look at you needing me.”

There was no question.

“Is the stuff in the nightstand?”

I nodded.

He shifted over, one hand on my hip, the other rustling through the contents of the small drawer. I smiled when I felt him cup my ass.

“What?”

“You never could keep your hands off my ass.”

“Because it’s round and firm and perfect,” he assured me. “The first time I ever saw you walk into the locker room in your jeans, I was in love.”

And I was going to banter with him, tease him, but he chose that moment to wrap his fingers around my needy cock. “Dix.”

“You’re crazy about me,” he said as his lips opened on my collarbone and his fingers tightened, stroking, tugging gently. The shudder tore through me, the hoarse moan uncontained.

“Dixon,” I called his name, hands in his hair, on his neck, down his back, clutching him to me.

“Tell me.”

“I need you.”

His lubed fingers slid inside me, and I rocked up into him, vaguely aware of the jingling of his belt buckle, the crinkling of foil. He was ready to sheath himself inside of a condom.

“Wait... you don’t—you gave me that stupid piece of paper this morning, and there’s only ever been you without,” I panted, my breath shuddering.

He froze, his eyes locked on mine. “Me too... I never, I would never... you trust that?”

“You... always.” I looked deep into his eyes. “With my life.”

The muscles in his jaw and neck tensed, and I saw his pupils dilate. I trusted him, and the fact that I did, that it was total and implicit, all of it tied up with how he saw himself, had turned him on big time. I knew him, knew his heart, and I had given him the piece that no other man could. He didn’t have to convince me of who he was. I knew he was the good guy.

“Please,” I breathed into the side of his neck before I bit him. He smelled so good, and his skin tasted even better. I licked and sucked and nibbled and knew from the shiver that ran through him that he was just as far gone as I was. “Dixon... need you.”

He grabbed my legs, locking them back around his hips, and eased himself inside me, so slowly, so gently, filling me,

his eyes never leaving mine. I watched his eyes drift closed, his head fall back as my name was whispered over and over. He had never felt so good.

“Jesus, Dixon,” I moaned, my legs wrapped around him so tight, my hands fisted in the sheets. I had missed him, the way he filled me and stretched me, and my body shuddered in celebration that he was home.

“Baby,” he growled, before he pulled out slightly only to thrust back in so deep, so fast that I yelled his name.

He froze, and I saw the fear wash over his face.

“No.” I laughed, and only with him could I ever in the middle of sex. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

“I don’t wanna hurt—”

“Dixon,” I murmured, my hands running over his hot skin, gliding over the rock-hard muscles, the chiseled abs, and delighting in the feel of his body against mine. “I missed you so bad.”

He drove deep inside me, and I was lost, mindless, the only thing that mattered was the man in my arms. My muscles clenched down on him, my body was hot and flushed, and the rolling wave of orgasm swept me up and drowned me. I screamed his name.

He thrust into me over and over, not worried, knowing that as hard as he could was what I wanted. It was overwhelming, because I knew his body as well as my own, knew when he wanted my legs as tight as they could be, holding him as he slid in and out of my now-wet heat and kissing him fiercely, my tongue buried in his throat. He shuddered in my arms, my name breathed into my mouth as

he released himself inside me, filling me. The kiss deepened, slowed as he slanted his mouth over mine, his arms holding me tight against his heart. When he pulled back, he stared into my eyes, and I stared right back.

“Christ, Ev, you feel so fuckin’ good.”

“You too.” My voice caught, sounding ragged. My hands were still buried in his hair, my legs still wrapped tightly around his hips.

“Shit,” he groaned, his arms tightening, making sure I couldn’t get free.

“Is there something wrong, Mr. Bain?” I teased.

He let his head fall forward, and I chuckled, lifted it so I could kiss his forehead, down the bridge of his nose, run my tongue across his swollen lips.

“Stop.” He moved his head, his eyes clouded.

“What’s wrong?”

He eased out of me, rolling me sideways, away from him so he could spoon around me.

I caught my breath. It was his favorite thing, to lay with his groin pressed against my ass, his thighs plastered to mine, his face in my hair, my head pillowed on his bicep. From the first time we had ever been in bed together, he had curled his larger frame around mine. And I had loved it and I had missed it, never being comfortable enough with anyone else to even ask.

“What are you thinking?” he asked me. “You’re a million miles away.”

I pushed back, wiggling my ass against him.

"Stop moving," he ordered, tightening his hold.

"Dixon, you—"

"I want more than this."

"What?"

"I don't just want to screw you for my Christmas present."

The snort of laughter came out of me before I could muffle it.

"It's not funny."

It was hysterical, was what it was. I rolled over to face him, my head still on his arm.

"I want you to come home with me."

"For Christmas, yes, I know."

"No, not just for Christmas."

"For New Year's too?"

He growled at me.

"To keep? You wanna keep me?"

"God, yes," he groaned, "please lemme keep you."

The crooked smile, the way the laugh lines in the corners of his eyes crinkled, his hand smoothing down my spine to the small of my back, all of it was making me dizzy.

"Please," he begged.

"We're different now."

"Just—just come and see and make up your mind later, alright?"

"You're just tired of dating, and I'd be convenient to come home to."

"There's nothing convenient about you. I think pain in the ass describes you much better."

I stared up at him as he smiled down into my eyes.

"You drive me fuckin' nuts. You always have. Ever since you were eighteen, you've been making me crazy."

I sighed, touching his face, marveling at the fact that with age the man had just gotten better looking.

"When you're around, I remember who I am."

The darkest, clearest eyes I had ever seen were looking at me like I was an angel straight from heaven. I could barely breathe.

"So, can I take you home with me to meet my family ten years later?"

I wrapped my arms around his neck and rolled gingerly over on top of him, easing him down under me, putting him flat on his back. I kissed him and bit him and sucked on his tongue. When I rose over him, straddling his thighs, I realized that he was ready for round two.

"Hey," he said as he shifted under me.

I smiled down at him. "What?"

"I slept with a lot of guys, all right?"

"Okay."

"Like way more than twenty."

I nodded. "Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"No, I just want you to know."

"Now I know."

"And you?"

"Just three," I told him.

"Three."

"Yep."

His eyes didn't leave mine. "And?" he asked as his hands slid up my thighs.

"And what?" I sucked in my breath as he took hold of my rigid shaft, milking it gently, lazily. Everything he did to me felt incredible.

"And did any of them make you scream?" he asked as I lifted up, giving him time to shift under me, the dance we had perfected so long ago. As I sank back down onto him, taking him in, letting him fill me, impale me, I felt his body jolt under me, saw his bottom lip quiver even as his eyes remained locked with mine.

"No, Dixon," I purred, leaning down, angling him in deeper as I licked a line up his throat. "I only scream your name."

"Shit," he groaned out, his voice cracking. "You're so hot and tight."

"Yeah? I feel good?"

"Always... God, I missed you."

"Good," I said, rising and lowering myself on the quickly hardened shaft.

"I missed you," he said again, his hand on the small of my back as he rolled me over, lifting my legs so they were over his arms. "I'll be gentle. I don't want to hurt you."

"You've never hurt me, and please, Dixon... don't you dare be gentle."

The sound that came out of him was pained.

I slid my calves up the bulging biceps to his broad shoulders. "Please," I said, squirming under him, trying to get him to move. "This is me. Pound me though the goddamn mattress."

Oh my God, the growl before he tried.

I WOKE up to Dixon holding my hand. He was rubbing my palm with his thumb, and then he lifted it to his mouth and kissed it. I sighed contentedly, basking in his attention.

"I forgot how good you feel next to me," he said sleepily, his voice deep. I watched him lace his fingers with mine before turning his chin to look into my eyes.

"Hey you." I smiled at him, moving my leg under the covers, draping it across his thighs. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," he promised, brushing the hair back from my face.

"So why did you come see me?"

"You know why."

I just stared into the heavy-lidded eyes.

"I'm tired of screwing," he said gruffly. "I fuckin' hate it."

"Most men your age like screwing a different guy every night."

“Well, I don’t, I want to belong to one guy. I want to belong to you.”

“And?” I asked, smoothing my fingers across his right eyebrow that ended in a scar.

“When I talked to my father that day after I heard you were shot, I just... I thought, if I don’t take a chance to see if things could be fixed between us... I had to just come see.”

“I’m glad you did.”

The muscles in his jaw clenched.

“And I will go home with you for Christmas.”

He nodded fast, unable to speak.

“And New Year’s, and we’ll see what happens.”

“Okay,” he said hoarsely, smiling even as he caught his breath.

“Even if this doesn’t work,” I told him, and I felt the shiver course through his larger frame, “I love you.”

He grabbed me, and I gasped because it hurt just a little, but love *did* hurt. Just a little.

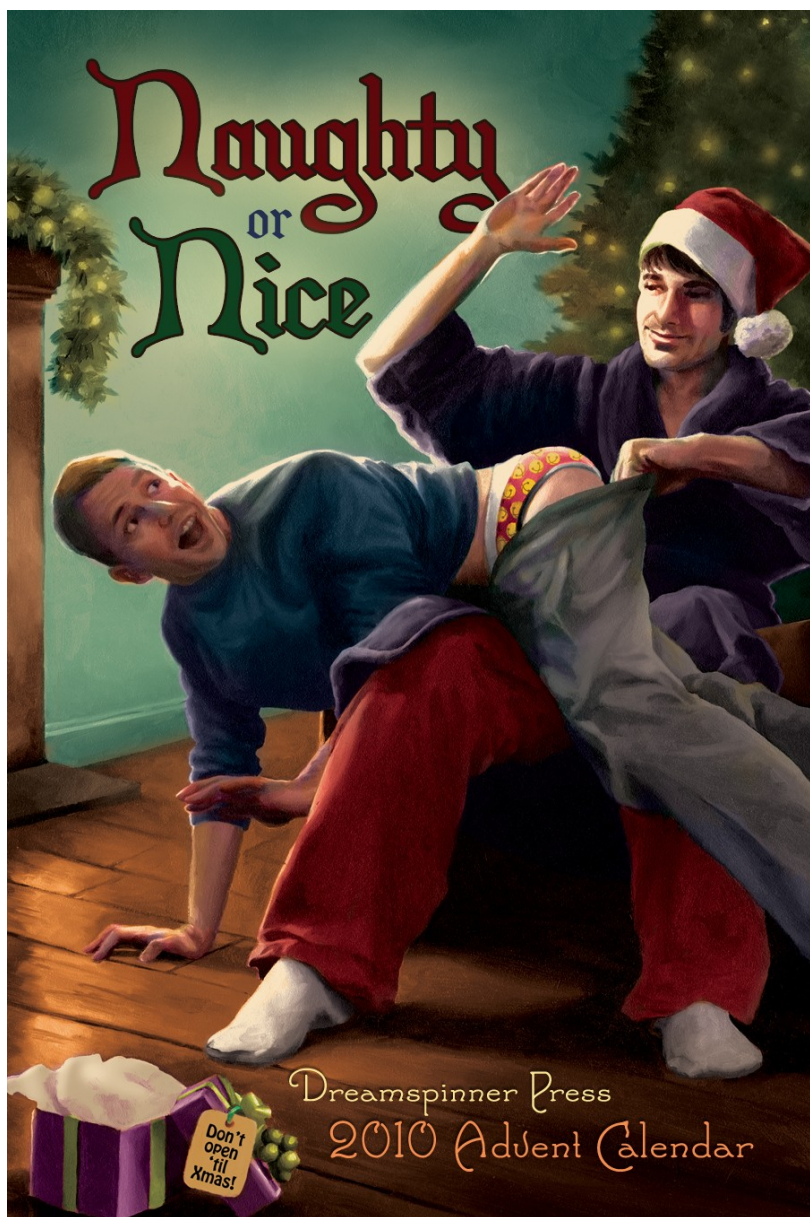
“It will work,” he promised me. “I deserve it, I’ve been good this year, and I need a little Christmas happy.”

“Look at me.”

He leaned back, his eyes locked on mine.

“Merry Christmas, baby.”

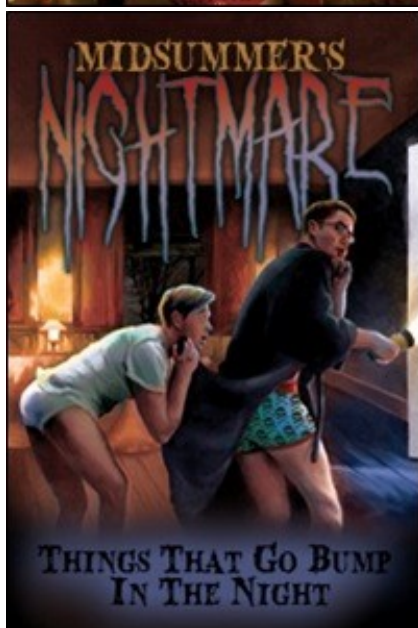
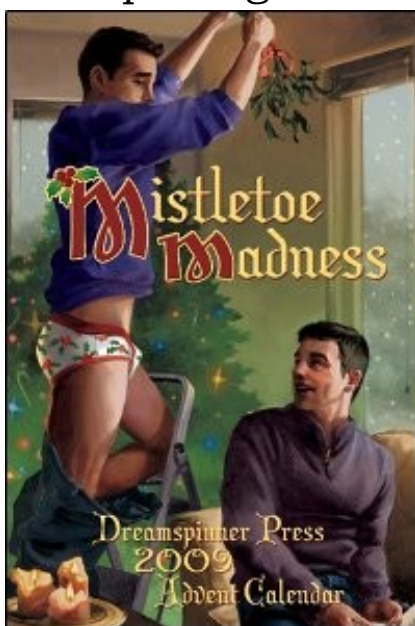
And the scorching kiss I was given let me know that I was really all he ever wanted.



Have you been Naughty or Nice?
Get the whole package of holiday stories at
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.

More Daily Dose
and Advent Calendar packages



<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

Ice Around the Edges ©Copyright Mary Calmes, 2010

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

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

Cover Art by Paul Richmond <http://www.paulrichmondstudio.com>
Cover Design by Mara McKennen

This book is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of International Copyright Law, subject to criminal prosecution and upon conviction, fines, and/or imprisonment. This eBook cannot be legally loaned or given to others. No part of this eBook can be shared or reproduced without the express permission of the Publisher. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press at: 4760 Preston Road, Suite 244-149, Frisco, TX 75034 <http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

Released in the United States of America
December 2010

eBook Edition
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-763-4