

A silhouette of a construction worker wearing a hard hat and holding a hammer, standing on a steel beam. The background is a sunset sky with a bright sun low on the horizon, creating a silhouette effect on the worker and the steel structure.

ANY CLOSER MARY CALMES

Chapter One

“SO BRIAN says you used to be a porn star.”

In retrospect, it was a hell of a way to start a conversation.

After I realized he wasn't answering, I looked up and saw that my friend, Charlie Ryder, was not breathing.

“Breathe,” I suggested, smiling at him.

As soon as he did, he sucked hot coffee down the wrong hole, burned his throat, and started coughing. Maybe air was overrated.

I got up to get him some water, gave him a pat on the back as I walked by, and when I returned, placed a tall glass down in front of him. “Sorry.”

His eyes were huge, and as I took my seat back down across from him at the table in the crowded diner, I noticed, like I didn't usually, that his lime-green eyes were just the prettiest color I had ever seen in my life. I was also a fan of his short, closely cropped curls and his thick, perfectly curved brows. Normally, I didn't really see the individual parts of the man, but instead, the whole that was my friend.

I saw Charlie's face when he smiled, heard his voice when he yelled at me, and noticed the space he took up when he was sitting beside me in my truck. I was aware of him peripherally, but I didn't focus on him. Today I was really looking at him. Today I noticed the fluid way he moved, the delicate cut of his features, and how fine-boned

his hands were. The scrutiny had been brought on by something Brian had said.

My old high school friend was back in town to see his family and had looked me up just to have drinks and dinner. Or so he had said initially. I didn't know he needed money at that point. So at the time, we had been walking out of the office when Charlie was on his way in from another job site. There were ten men, plus me and my partner Paul, so any number of us were coming and going through the office at all hours. The only person who never left the office was Alison Reynolds, Ali, who looked like she was sixteen but was actually ten years older than that. So I had waved, and Charlie had waved back, and Brian had been flash-frozen beside me, suddenly unable to move. When I walked around in front of him, he had pointed.

"Chaz," he said.

I pointed to myself, chuckling. "Leo."

"No," he choked, swallowing hard, finally turning his head to look after Charlie. "Chaz. That's Chaz Ryder."

"Charlie Ryder." I smiled at him. "But Chaz is close, I guess."

"No, no, no," he exhaled. "That's Chaz Ryder; I've seen all his movies."

"His movies?"

"Holy shit."

"What're you talking about?"

"He's a porn star."

I snorted out a laugh. "No, he's really not."

"He is."

“That would be hard, since he works for me,” I assured him.

“Maybe now he does,” Brian agreed. “But I swear to God, Leo, all he used to do was go to the gym, pose for pictures in magazines, and fuck.”

But there was just no way.

WHEN we got back to my house in Easton, just outside Carson City, Brian took a seat in my office, opened up my laptop, got the Internet up, and after a few keystrokes, I was looking at a website for Dreamland Productions. There, dressed in black leather shorts that buttoned up the sides, leather boots that laced up to his knees, a leather harness, and nothing else was Chaz. His hair fell to the middle of his back, his manicured goatee lined his jaw, and matching stubble adorned his upper lip. His neon-green eyes were lined in dark forest green and narrowed in half. The full, pink, pouty lips were twisted into a gleaming, wicked smile, and every defined, rippling muscle on his carved physique was oiled. He looked like some Greek god playing at bondage. I had never in my life seen a more beautiful man. I wanted to lick every inch of him.

“Huh,” I said instead of moaning. “I bet he wore braces when he was a kid.”

“Who the fuck cares about his teeth?”

But the smile was made that much better because his teeth were perfect.

“You see? It’s him. You wanna see a video? I have a membership.”

“No.” I winced, because really, the idea of seeing any of my friends have sex was revolting. And I had put Charlie Ryder firmly into the “friend” category three years prior. He had started out just driving but quickly moved up with his work ethic and desire to learn. Once I knew he was going to be permanent, I stopped checking out his ass and started being one to him. If he was going to be around, I had to stop being polite. Surprisingly, like the rest of the men who worked for me, he seemed to be able to handle me being me. I was glad.

“Holy shit, Leo, have you tapped that?”

Gross. I pointed at the mouth-watering porn star on the screen. “That man is not the same one I have working for me.”

“Yes, he is.” Brian leered at the screen. “And wait until I let everyone know that—”

“Don’t say a word to anyone, Bri,” I cautioned him. “Or you can kiss your loan goodbye.”

“What?” he yelled at me. Ostensibly he was in town to see his folks, but in reality, he was there to hit me up for money. I had agreed, but I could take my patronage away just as easily.

“You heard me,” I assured him. “If Charlie wants to put up drywall now instead of screw hot men, who are we to blow his cover?”

“You’re kidding, right? This is huge!” He turned to look up at me. “Leo, everybody’s been wondering what the hell happened to him. I mean he was just—he was Chaz Ryder, and then *Rough Love* came out four years ago and—”

“What’s *Rough Love*?”

“Lemme show you.”

“No,” I said, closing his laptop fast so he had to pull his hands free before I snapped it shut on his fingers. “Just tell me.”

He looked up at me, and I took a few steps back so he wouldn’t get a crick in his neck trying to hold my gaze. I wasn’t so tall, six-three, but when he was sitting with his head tilted back, it had to be annoying.

“Bri?”

He shrugged. “I’ve seen it, like, I dunno, twenty times by now, and at first it was hot, and it still kind of is, and definitely if your kink goes to rape, to the fantasy of rape, it’s just—amazing, but the last time I watched it, I started to see what people mean in the online forums and chat rooms and stuff.”

“I’m not following.”

Quick breath. “Well, it starts out like it’s real, you know, like some guy invited Chaz Ryder, big porn star, out on a date, and they’re coming home, probably back to this guy’s place, and then suddenly they’re in this big empty room with ten other guys.”

My stomach did a quick twist into a knot.

“And then Chaz starts looking around, and he’s laughing, but then his face changes, and you can tell he’s getting pissed, you know? And then he starts yelling at Doran Lear, who everyone knows is his producer, and finally he starts screaming that no matter what, he’s not doing a gang bang, won’t ever do one no matter what Doran says.”

I could feel the hair start to rise on the back of my neck.

“And then they grab him.” He smiled at me, and I had a terrible urge to sink my fist into my friend’s face. “Fuck, Leo, it’s so hot. I mean, he’s struggling and screaming and yelling, and when they tear off his clothes and put the ball gag in his mouth, I mean—you should see him, he’s so... he’s gold all over. I mean just—fuck. And he has the most perfectly round little ass you have ever seen in your life, I mean, it’s beautiful, and when they start fucking him.... I’ll bet you a million guys have come watching that shit.”

I was ready to throw up.

“You should see him, he’s crying, and there’s tears, but the gag’s in, right, so all he can do is take it, and they just take turns, but you can see the condoms and the lube, you know? I mean, it’s not like—I mean, it couldn’t be real.”

But he didn’t sound completely convinced.

“And then one guy tries to bareback him, and you see these, like, huge guys come in and pull this idiot out of there, but then one of the bodyguards—and this guy’s dick is, like, *massive*.” He emphasized the word for me, touching his fingertips and thumbs together to give me an idea of the girth of the man’s cock. “He ends up fucking Chaz too.”

I took a few steps away from my friend, whom I had gone to high school with and played football with, because I really didn’t want to hurt him.

“I mean, it’s classic rape fantasy, classic gang bang, but the thing is... they didn’t tie him down. Usually they tie the guy up or use spreader bars or lock him in a swing or—”

“Go on,” I cut him off sharply.

“But this was different. They didn’t even want to put any marks on him. So they just held him, and everybody’s smiling the whole time and egging each other on, and we’ve

all been watching Chaz bottom and top for years, so it's just another film, right?"

But I knew even without seeing it that it was not.

"I mean, it can't be real, and come to find out later that the guy who Chaz went there with, who supposedly was taking him somewhere for a big surprise, that guy was his boyfriend in real life. And that guy, Owen something, he fucked Chaz in the movie too."

I nodded.

"So it was all staged, but fuck." He exhaled sharply. "It's so real and so totally hot, but suddenly after that, Chaz is just gone. There's no more movies, no pictures, nothing. And since then, Doran Lear's got nobody like Chaz. Nobody has his sex appeal or his body or anything. I mean he was gorgeous, no doubt about it, but he was also cute and adorable and wicked and wild—everybody wanted him. He was like this perfect combination of seduction and innocence and sweetness and heat. He was a big tease, and then he'd deliver, and when he had sex... fuck, Leo," he groaned hoarsely. "He was loud and expressive, and it was all, 'fuck me, do me, give it to me or I'm gonna die'."

I looked at him, and there was almost a sadness that crossed his features.

"Guys like that, who make you believe it, make you believe they want it—it's rare. Normally the acting is so bad and you know the guy's just sayin' the words, but with him it was different." He sighed heavily. "Like I said, I have everything the man ever made."

We were silent, and I found that as he stopped talking, I calmed.

"And now he fuckin' works for you putting up drywall."

“He does more than that,” I assured him.

“For how long?”

“Three years now.”

“Well, it’s been four since he made a movie. I wonder what he was doing for a year before he started working for you.”

“I have no idea.”

“Jesus Christ, Leo, you have a porn star working for you.”

But I really could not have cared less.

I had put an ad in the local paper for a driver, and Charlie had shown up. Everything he owned in the world, he had brought with him to the interview, and I had liked him right away. What I didn’t like was how jumpy he was around me. Finally, three weeks later, having thought it would fix itself, but no longer willing to wait, I had yelled at him and told him that I was done walking around on eggshells because it was my goddamn company, and he had better stop being scared of me because it was pissing me the hell off! Those huge chartreuse-colored eyes of his, his glorious cat eyes, got huge and round.

“Don’t be scared of me,” I ordered him. And I had snarled at him, which I knew was counter-productive, but I was mad. I had stood there, looming over him, and he was six feet tall, but I had three inches on him, so he still had to look up at me. “You make me feel like I’m a bad man, and I’m not. I’m one of the nicest guys you’ll ever fuckin’ meet. Ask my mother.” I was indignant.

“Your mother?”

“Yeah, my mother,” I groused at him, grabbing his bicep, nearly yanking him off his feet.

“Do you have any idea how big you are?”

I knew exactly how big I was. I had played football in high school, and when I blew out my knee in my junior year tackling a quarterback in the Sugar Bowl, my football career was over, but my engineering degree carried on. I graduated a year later and moved back to Nevada, to Easton, outside of Carson City, to get a job in construction.

It didn't take me long to realize that being gay in the construction industry was a tough sell. So I used the money I had saved when I got my full scholarship, took out a loan, and started Foster (for me) West (for him) Construction with my brother-in-law Paul. His marriage to my sister had not lasted, much to his regret, but his partnership with me had. I knew without being told that he hoped that one day my feisty little sister would take him back. They had divorced because they weren't happy, but I had never thought that was a good enough reason. Yes, Paul needed to communicate more. Yes, Theresa needed to be more forgiving of other people's faults, but I had never thought it was reason enough to split up a home or a family.

But what did I know?

Our loan was paid in full in two years, and we were in the black in four. After that, it was all smooth sailing except for my social life. I still didn't have one.

What I did have was my family, a strong circle of friends, and a professional network that was thriving. So having Charlie Ryder jumping at his shadow around me was annoying as crap.

I had dragged him to my truck, thrown him into the passenger seat, and told him that I would pulverize him if he tried to get out. When I slid in behind the steering wheel, his eyebrows were still raised.

“What?”

“I dunno, am I allowed to breathe?”

“You’re fuckin’ hysterical.”

But I saw a grin I had never hoped to see.

“What did I ever do to you to make you treat me like a fuckin’ leper?”

“It’s not you,” he promised me. “Though you did just manhandle me.”

“Because you don’t respond to anything else,” I barked at him. “I have done everything else I can think of besides knock you out.”

“Leo—”

“I can’t get through to you,” I told him, “I can’t get you to trust me, and honest to God, Charlie, if you don’t trust me, you can’t be here. Nobody works here. We *live* here. You get the difference?”

He had nodded.

“Whatever shit you’re carrying around, you gotta cut it loose, ’cause you can’t be part of the team if you’re gonna stand off to the side and just watch us. It won’t work.”

His eyes were searching my face, but I had no idea for what.

“Talk to my mother.”

“You were serious about that?”

I was always serious about my mother.

True to my word, I dragged him home to see Donna Foster. She took one look at him and decided that she was going to adopt him. It was fine with me—anything so he'd stop being startled, stop turning like a deer caught in the headlights whenever he didn't know I was there, and stop catching his breath all the damn time. My mother explained that I was a slob, that I ate like a frat boy, and that I didn't have a pet because I kept letting my plants die. I was good, she told him, inside and out, even if the outside needed a haircut.

Six months later, I suggested he take some self-defense classes, and you would have thought I came up with the cure for the common cold. I was told I was brilliant. But I knew that already.

I had seen a slow but steady change in Charlie Ryder over the past two years. His confidence in his work translated to an ease with clients that I liked so much that I moved him into the foreman position a year later. Even though he was young, twenty-three then, twenty-six, close to twenty-seven now, he had the respect of the men because he could do their job if he needed to. He could still get dirty even though he had never really been blue-collar like the rest of us. He was charming; he could finesse clients, whereas I ended up barking at people. He was sleek and gentle; I tended to yell. Paul wanted him to take on the liaison role between us and commercial customers, the larger scale clients, and put away his tool belt forever. It wasn't sales, it was wining and dining and schmoozing, and I wasn't sure that he would go for that. I had been secretly glad that Bill, another one of my guys, had taken a weeklong vacation, so Charlie had to fill in for him. I thought maybe he breathed better when he was outside. He was going to have to make a

decision soon, though, because Paul had offered him an important place in our company, and Charlie couldn't just draw out the decision indefinitely.

"Leo?"

Back in the present, my eyes flicked to Charlie's face, and I noticed that those stunning eyes of his were rimmed red and watering. I waited.

"He"—quiet cough—"your friend, he recognized me?"

"He did."

Charlie took a deep, shaky breath, leaning back from the table. "Do you want me to work through the end of the week, or just leave now or—"

"What're you talking about?"

He squinted at me.

I crossed my arms and waited.

"Leo, you can't, I mean, I... I've been talking to people."

Now I was confused. "You talk to a lot of people, Charlie."

He caught his breath.

"No, don't start that shit again."

"What shit?"

"The whole being afraid of me bullshit," I growled at him. "I've never done anything but be nice to you, asshole, so don't start getting skittish now. I don't deserve it."

He was stunned.

"I'm warning you." I pointed at him.

His hands came up in defense. "No, I know, you don't deserve—"

“And,” I cut him off, pointing at him, “I would have never even brought the porn crap up, but if you found out down the road that I knew, it would be like I was keeping something from you, and then you’d be wondering what kind of man I was all over again when you know already. So that’s why I told you I know, and it doesn’t have to go any further than this.”

He just stared at me.

“Speak,” I ordered.

“I’m just afraid that—”

“Afraid of what?” I growled at him.

“Not you!” he squeaked out, and it was funny, the noise, coupled with his denial. The timing, his words and mine, were strange, making it sound like he was lying.

“Charlie—”

“No, I swear, Leo,” he assured me, leaning forward, his eyes locked on mine. “Even at the beginning, I was never scared of you.”

“That’s crap. You used to all but jump out of your skin whenever I walked in the room.”

“It was never what you thought, not ever.”

But I sure as hell knew the truth.

“But beyond that, I—I...,” he stammered, “I’ve been talking to people and networking and—you can’t possibly want me to stay on and be, like, the one person people know in your company.”

“Why not?”

“I was....” He trailed off, raking his fingers through his short, thick hair.

I tipped my head at his hand. “I saw a picture of you with long hair and a goatee and what I guess could pass for mustache. Is that why you keep your hair short and shave everyday now, so you don’t look anything like Chaz?”

His eyes stayed on mine.

“Do you do it on purpose, or did you just this second figure out that you’re doing it?”

He cleared his throat. “No, I do it on purpose.”

I shrugged. “I can’t say I’m a fan of shaving every day”—I grinned at him, running my hand over the stubble on my face—“but I get keeping your hair short. That would be a pain in the ass to get plaster and paint out of it.”

He was staring at me like I’d grown another head.

“Are you done bein’ all weird about this? ’Cause I gotta stop at my folks’ place and drop off something for my dad and put in a can opener for my mother.”

He was still looking at me when I got up and pulled my knit cap out of the pocket of my heavy-lined, quilted, corduroy, beat-to-crap work jacket and pulled it down over my hair. I needed a haircut bad; my own thick, wavy hair was at my shoulders.

“Leo,” he croaked out, finally getting up, his eyes again locked on mine.

“What?” I asked, shivering. Even in the diner, it was still cold.

“Everything just stays the same?”

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“Are you gonna tell Paul?”

"If you wanna tell Paul, you can, but I really don't think it will matter to him. I think he'd see it as more of a selling point than anything else." I chuckled. "You know him; he loves a good story."

I hit his shoulder and dropped two twenties on the table, leaving Molly, our waitress, a twenty-five percent tip, and headed for the door.

"Wait." He caught up with me. "Leo, you—"

"Stop," I cut him off, grabbing him and pulling him out of the way of the stampede of people coming into the diner. It was the morning breakfast crowd, and it was survival of the fittest.

"Leo," he sighed, and I coiled the arm I had around his shoulders a little tighter, my mouth close to his ear.

"Let it go, Charlie. Whoever you were isn't who you are now."

He stiffened in my embrace but didn't move away. "You think I'm ashamed of what I did for a living?"

"Not at all," I assured him, fisting my hand on the open flap of his parka for a minute before dropping my hand off him. "Why should you be?"

He turned to look at me. "Then what'd you mean?"

"I meant that you seem to like what you're doing now better than doing porn, so the new guy you are now is the guy you really are."

He squinted at me. "Do you even know what you said?"

I thought about it a second. "Maybe." I grinned at him, wagging my eyebrows. "You want me to drop you at work before I go to—"

"No, I wanna talk to you some more."

God, talking, not my favorite thing.

"Bye, Leo!" Molly called out from the kitchen as I reached the front door.

"Thanks, Mol; thanks, Abe," I called to her father, who gave me the spatula wave from the other side of the grill. Stepping outside, I held the door open for Charlie and then for Jill Keaton, who reached up and patted my cheek as she went into the diner with her brood in tow. Her husband, bringing up the rear, I just laughed at.

"Dick," he muttered under his breath as he passed me.

"I distinctly remember saying maybe you shouldn't make a bet that big, Tom," I teased him, cackling.

He flipped me off at the door, cracking a grin. "At least I have kids, Foster."

"You have a baseball team, Keaton," I laughed, giving him the finger back. "And when you need that second job to put them all through college, I'll be here to give it to you."

I was kidding; we always went back and forth, so I was surprised when he suddenly jogged across the space that separated us.

"What?"

"I actually wanna talk to you about maybe helping me out on some contracts I have now. I don't have any electricians, and since that's your thing, I was thinking I'd call you."

"That'd be great." I smiled at him.

He put a hand on my shoulder. "Jill was pissed about that bet."

I nodded. “And I told you at the time, never bet on intrastate rivalries. Those always get weird. Anything can happen. Guys play harder when it’s a rival.”

“Next time I’ll listen.”

“No, you won’t.” I patted his shoulder, turning for my truck.

“Later. Nice to see you, Charlie.”

“You, too, Tom.” I heard my friend and employee say jovially in return.

I cranked up the heater in the pickup; January in Nevada was cold, not like the Midwest, but still cold, and I was not a fan of freezing. Charlie slid into the passenger side and locked the door, putting his gloved hands next to the heater.

“Next year I’m going to Hawaii or something,” I grumbled.

“Leo.”

I turned my head to look at him.

“Did your friend Brian tell you why I quit doing porn?”

I leaned back and put the keys in the ignition. “He told me what he thought, what a lot of people think.”

He nodded. “Has he seen it?”

“Yes.”

“Does he own it?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

He cleared his throat. “Did he show it to you?”

“I think he wanted to, but I don’t wanna see you having sex anymore than I wanna see Tom doing it, you know?”

I had meant for him to laugh, but he wasn't.

"It's called *Rough Love*."

"Yeah, Brian said."

"I think having 'love' anywhere in the title is the funniest thing ever."

I had no idea what I should say. He was staring straight ahead, but I didn't think he was seeing the strip mall we were currently parked in. I had a feeling he was looking at a whole other scene playing out in his head.

"Cause it had nothing to do with love." He started trembling ever so slightly.

"Charlie," I said his name softly.

"Did he tell you about it?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "After they fucked me, I just laid there, and they all took turns kissing me everywhere like all of us were lovers and it was part of it."

I wished I had been there to protect him, and I really wished he would stop sharing.

"That's not in the final cut of the movie, but Doran has the footage to show to the cops if I ever say anything. But really, who would believe that a porn star got raped, gang banged by a bunch of guys he'd been with in one way or another in a ton of other movies? I mean, how ridiculous is that? How could it possibly have been rape?"

My heart hurt. "Charlie—"

"And they all used protection, so—"

“It doesn’t matter,” I cut him off, hand on the back of his head. “They hurt you, and they should suffer for that, but that’s up to you, Charlie. You are the only one who—”

“I went to a porn convention in Vegas,” he interrupted me, and his voice sounded like I had never heard it before, flat and dead. “That’s why I was in Nevada in the first place. Remember you asked me when you interviewed me? ‘What brings you to Nevada, Mr. Ryder?’,” he repeated the question from years ago. “I think I told you I had gone to Vegas to gamble, but I lied. I was in Vegas to kill Doran Lear.”

I stared at his beautiful profile, the chiseled features, the high cheekbones, and his impossibly thick eyelashes. He really was just the most stunning man, and the outside was hiding an inside of hurt.

“I took the gun I bought before I left, right after it happened, and I was going to shoot Doran, but when I had my chance, when... I chickened out. And how could I not go through with it? I mean, he planned it, he’s the one who talked my boyfriend into it, and he filmed it all and sold it, and people buy it and look at it and see me as a whore—”

“Fuck,” I groaned, pulling him sideways against my chest, tucking his face into my shoulder. “It’s not your fault, Charlie. It’s not a bad thing to trust; you just gotta find the right people, you know? And I promise you that most of the people who watch that video think it’s staged. They think you’re hot, they don’t think you’re pathetic, because it’s all an act. Only you and the guys in it know what really happened.”

He shifted against me, turning, tipping his head back so his lips brushed over my throat, his hands clutching at my sweater.

“And maybe even some of the guys didn’t really know what was going on.”

His lips parted, and his breath was warm on the side of my neck.

“I bet your boyfriend had no idea. I bet he called and called after to find out what was going on, and then when somebody finally told him, most likely that Doran guy, he probably called and called again to tell you how sorry he was. Your phone rang night and day with him begging you to take him back. Am I right?”

He nodded, and I felt the tip of his nose under my chin and, a second later, a soft whimper, closer to a whine from the back of his throat.

“I’m glad you didn’t shoot anybody,” I told him, slowly realizing that I was looking at an empty passenger seat because all six feet of lean, muscled Charlie Ryder was in my lap. “Where’s the gun now?”

There was a quiet cough from him. “I buried it in the foundation of the Coleman house.”

I chuckled. “That’s awesome. Mrs. Coleman would find that very romantic.”

“You think she would?”

“Since she writes murder mysteries for a living, I’m gonna go with yeah.”

He sighed deeply.

“You’re gonna be alright,” I pronounced.

I felt him nod before he slid back over into his seat, and when I looked at him, I realized how flushed he was.

“Should I turn down the heater?”

Quick shake of his head before he looked out the passenger-side window.

“Charlie, look at me.”

Slowly, he turned.

“There’s no harm in needing someone to lean on once in awhile, so just know that you’ve got me and Paul and my folks and my sister Theresa and all the guys here just waitin’ for you to dump on us. We’re all here for you, so never think you gotta do anything alone.”

He nodded fast.

“I’m serious. And I don’t know if you’ve got someone special, I mean, I don’t see you dating, but you could be, and if—”

“There’s nobody but you, Leo.”

“Well, we’re all here for you, alright?”

He smiled suddenly and shook his head.

“What?”

“You never listen.”

“I always listen,” I grumbled. “People drive for miles just to dump their shit on me.”

He rolled his eyes.

“But please don’t retreat back into your man-cave bullshit because of this.”

“Christ, are you listening to yourself, Dr. Phil?”

I smacked his shoulder hard.

“For fuck’s sake, Leo!”

“I don’t want you to be the walking wounded, Charlie. If you need help with this, get it.”

“Nice attitude.”

“I don’t mean it to be anything but kind, and you know that. If I could just take it away, I so would. I—”

“No, I know.” He shook his head, gave me the curl of his lip that he did when something was so tedious that it didn’t even bear mentioning. “I just don’t wanna talk about it anymore.”

“Have you seen a shrink?”

“No.”

“Maybe you should.”

“It was four, almost five years ago now, Leo.”

“So what? You need to talk to someone.”

“I just talked to you. You’re the first person I ever even wanted to talk to about it.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know anything about how shit like this works. There’s a whole process of grieving, and—”

“Who says it’s grief?”

“Of course it’s grief, idiot.” I scowled at him. “You were one guy when you walked into the room and another guy when you came out. You gotta grieve for the guy who walked in.”

He looked like I’d hit him.

“Goddamnit,” I moaned. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Leo,” he croaked out before he turned and lunged at me, arms around my neck, face buried against me, his chest pressed tight to mine.

When I put my hands in his hair, stroking gently, I heard the deep sigh of contentment.

“If we’re late to work today, it’s your fault.” I smiled into hair that smelled like wildflowers in the summer and was like silk brushing across my cheek. The weight of him in my arms felt much too good to be okay. He was my friend, which meant that his category was set. He could not move, especially now that I knew the backstory.

“Okay.” He sighed deeply, lifting away from me. “Let’s go see your mother.”

Chapter Two

WE DROVE in silence, which was unusual for us, but I figured he had a lot on his mind, so I didn't press him. At my parents' large ranch house, I used my key and opened the front door. My father was still sick with the flu but obviously feeling better, as evidenced by the fact that he was sitting up in his recliner and flipping channels.

I leaned over, kissed his forehead, and slipped him the iPad he'd been wanting. My sister's son Jeremy had showed him his the last time he'd been over, and my father had finally been bitten by the need for technology.

"Oh, Leo." He smiled up at me, hands on my face, pulling me down for a kiss on the cheek. My mother and her good Spanish upbringing had rubbed off on my father before I was born, so instead of being reserved and aloof like the rest of his family, he was demonstrative and loving. My father still walked with his hand on my shoulder when we went out and hugged me every chance he got. "Thank you."

"Enjoy," I said, heading for the kitchen.

"Where are you going?"

Was this a trick question? "I'm supposed to put up the can opener."

"Are you kidding?"

"No. Why?"

"I—oh, hello, Charlie. I didn't see you there. Nice to see you, son."

"And you, Joe." He smiled at my father, having finally given in to my father's insistence that he use his first name.

Mr. Foster was my grandfather, and my father did not want to be him.

“Leo, is that you?”

We all turned as my mother popped her silver-frosted, black head out of the kitchen.

“Mom.” I almost whined because I knew suddenly that I was caught in the middle of another one of their *things*.

“What? He said he would do it three days ago, and it’s still not done.”

“I’ve been sick!” my father snapped defensively, opening the box the iPad was in.

“And you can’t put up a new can opener that I had to buy because you broke the old one opening a huge can of queso?”

“It was for your brother,” he said, clearly exasperated. “None of us eat that crappy queso, and it only comes in that huge can when you go to Costco, and then what are you supposed to put the leftovers in?”

“Not the canister that holds the sun tea, Joe!”

“Then what else are you supposed to use?”

“You throw it out! It’s crappy queso anyway!”

“Which is what I said to begin with!”

She threw up her hands and turned her dark brown, flashing eyes on me. “Get in here, and put up the damn can opener.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I chuckled, walking by her into the kitchen, kissing her on the cheek when she tipped her head for me.

“My beautiful son.” She smiled up at me before her brows furrowed. “Do not take your father’s side; I’m going to outlive him.”

I laughed at her. She was adorable.

“Charlie!” she yelled at him. “Come kiss me already!”

“You don’t have to kiss her if you don’t want to,” my father assured my friend.

He moved fast to reach Donna Foster. No matter what my father thought, I knew clearly that Charlie was in love with my mother. The way he hugged her, sat and watched her cook, listened to her stories about growing up in San Juan and moving to Hawaii when she was fourteen—the man was enchanted.

She had been Donna Rios back then, before she went to college in Arizona and met my father, Joseph Foster. They had moved back to his hometown of Carson City, Nevada, after graduation so that my father could begin work for his father, my grandfather. But when my grandparents met my mother, there was suddenly a contingency on the understood offer of employment. No Puerto Ricans in the family. My father needed to marry a white girl.

Joseph Foster had always planned to go to work in the family insurance business, but when the stipulation became dumping my mother, everything went right out the window. My father loved Donna Rios more than anything. He was a slave to her smile, to her heated anger, and to her huge, compassionate heart. He loved to hold her in his arms, watch her blush when he kissed her in public, and walk down the street with her hand in his. She loved fiercely and possessively, and he wanted to have that for the rest of his life. He told them all to go to hell, moved a few miles down

the highway to Easton, and opened up his own insurance business.

He worked hard, and with my mother doing his marketing, in two years he had three others working for him. In five years, he had eight. When I was born, my grandmother came to the hospital and, the way my mother told it, took one look at me and told her husband and her son to bury the hatchet. She wanted to hold the baby.

I only heard about all the bad blood when I was older and never saw any of it when I was growing up. My grandmother always said that if my father had just married Susie Apelt like he was supposed to, that I would have had blue eyes instead of brown. I shook my head and explained that I wouldn't even be me without my mother, but she would just wave her hand dismissively like I was stupid. Of course I would still be me, just better. My eyes would be the right color. But it was okay; my mother didn't care, because she and my grandmother had become friends over the years. It was, my mother said, generational. My grandmother categorized her friends: my Korean friend Jean, my black friend Tanya, my grandfather's dear Chinese friend Tommy. It was ingrained in her to see the race of a person, just like it had never been ingrained in me to care. Now in their eighties, my grandparents spent a lot of time golfing and going on cruises. My parents had even joined them on the last one.

"Leo, did you eat breakfast?"

"Yes, Mom. We're on our way to a job site after this."

"Well then, let me make you some lunch."

"Mother, we don't need you to—"

"Are there any pasteles left over from the other night?" Charlie asked hopefully. She had called me at work to invite

me and Charlie, but we had been too busy to get away. Apparently he had not forgotten.

“Oh my God, you’re such a suck up,” I told him as I was smacked hard in the bicep. “Didn’t hurt,” I told my mom. “Did you hurt your hand?”

“No,” she sassed me, glaring, shaking out her fingers.

“You know, you should give the old man time to do these things for you,” I scolded her. “He likes to be your hero.”

“Then he should do things when I ask, as soon as I ask.”

“Mother, do you have any idea how demanding that is?”

“Did I ask you?” She shot me another look and pointed at the refrigerator. “Charlie, get the casserole dish from the bottom shelf. I’ll make lunch for you.”

She had emphasized the word *you*, which I had not missed. No one could have. “Wait.” I smiled at her. “C’mon, I’m sorry already. I want pasteles too.”

“Do you?”

The sarcasm was not lost on me. “Yeah, and I’m doing this for you, so could you feed me, too, please?”

She squinted at me.

“First-born over here, only son you got.”

Her grunt let me know I had her.

When we were ready to leave, I got my usual big kiss and hug from both my parents and told them to play nice. Charlie got a hug and kiss from both of them, too, and then we were back in the truck getting ready to go look at Mrs. Lewis’s bathroom to give her an estimate on the cost of renovating it.

"I wonder if they would look at me different if they knew what I used to do."

I turned to look at him, groaning as I did so. It elicited the smile I was after.

"Fuck, I know what you're gonna say."

"C'mon, is this how it's gonna be from now on? You going to worry what the teller at the bank thinks too?"

"No, but—"

"Give it a rest. Nobody cares."

"Someone will care, Leo. You're being naïve."

I didn't think so, but I had a thought. "Maybe ya need closure, huh?"

He was fiddling with his cell phone.

"Are you listening to me?"

"I wasn't, no." He smiled at me when he turned. "But I am now, g'head."

I growled at him.

His laughter, as always, diffused my irritation.

"Tell me what you said."

"I said, maybe you need closure."

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno. Did you leave anything there?"

"Where?"

"Where you used to live."

"In Miami, you mean?"

"You lived in Miami, and now you live here in Nevada?"

"I love Nevada," he defended the state. "And you're in Nevada."

It was a weird thing to say. "Okay, so did you leave—"

"I had a savings account with some money in it."

"Yeah?"

He coughed. "Yeah, and I know that Doran, since he was my producer, he had access to it."

"So it could be cleaned out."

"Could be."

"But maybe not."

"Maybe." He shrugged. "But there would be money from—"

"The film," I cut him off because bringing it up changed his face, and I didn't really like it. I wanted him back to how he had been before I had brought it up. I was still glad I had come clean with him about what I knew—any kind of secrets in any kind of friendship were destructive—but still. "But it's money from other stuff, too, right? Other stuff you did."

He nodded.

I took a breath. "Okay, so maybe you access the account and see what's in it, and if there's something still in there, then you close it and give the money to a place that helps people like a shelter or a counseling center of something. That would be sort of karmic, ya know?"

His eyes were heavy on me.

"Charlie?"

"You're really smart sometimes."

"Only sometimes?" I teased him.

"Yep. Definitely only sometimes."

He was quiet after that, so I guessed we were done talking about it.

Chapter Three

I WAS going to tell her that it couldn't be done, but Charlie interrupted me and asked for clarification.

"Like a grotto," Mrs. Lewis waxed on, using her hands as though she were doing the hula, making them fluid, presenting her boudoir. "I want it to be a sanctuary of plants and animals and light. Can we put in reflecting pools and a water wheel?"

In her bathroom?

"And butterflies?"

In her bathroom? Really?

"I was thinking of having a huge aquarium too."

She looked so hopeful, her eyes were so big and bright and looking at me and Charlie like we were the second coming or something. I was going to kill Paul when I got back to the office.

"Mrs. Lewis—"

Charlie cleared his throat. "How 'bout this: we enclose the area right outside the window and build a grotto that you can see every time you take a bath. You can fill the space with butterflies and put fish in the little man-made pond. We'll put in a filter system and door on one end so your husband can take care of everything."

Her eyes lit up. "Can I have a water wheel?"

"Yes, ma'am, we can put in an electric water wheel, no problem."

She clapped her hands. “Oh, Charlie, you’re so brilliant!”

He was.

“That was pretty good,” I told him as we were walking away from her house two hours later with a deposit of three grand. “The idea of spotlights in different places to create the feeling of being underwater was inspired. Of course, Mr. Lewis is gonna hate feeding the damn fish.”

“And leaving out the sugar water for the butterflies, because that’ll draw ants,” he chuckled. “And let’s not forget the heaters for the winter and the mister system for the summer. I mean, his electric bill is gonna go through the roof.”

“And when he sees the bill, he’s probably gonna have a stroke.”

“Probably.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “It’s just—”

“Can you drop me at the bank?” he cut me off.

“Sure.” I smiled at him. “You alright?”

“I’m great.”

I didn’t want to pry. I figured I had done enough deep-sea diving in his life for one day, so I let it go.

After I dropped him off, I drove back to the office to touch base with Paul and give him the check, which made him smile, then squint at the logistics of the “grotto.”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds,” I assured him.

“Lucky Charlie was there to save the job for you.” Ali smirked at me from her desk on the other side of the room. “Oh you of limited vision.”

"I guess, huh?"

"Yeah, creative you're not." She smiled indulgently.

Paul nodded, smiling.

"Screw you both."

"Hey."

I looked back over at Paul.

"Has Charlie told you yes or no yet on the liaison job?"

"No, not yet."

He grunted.

"You know he's probably gonna take it," I told him. "He just has to think everything through first. That's how he is."

"I know, I hate that about him. He never just leaps, he always looks first."

"Yeah, that's so terrible." I squinted at him as he flipped me off.

"I'm putting through payroll for this week," Ali chuckled, punching keys on her laptop. "Anyone getting a bonus beside's Charlie and Dave?"

"Nope," I yawned. "Charlie landed the Keller job, and Dave made sure we came in under budget and on time. It was just them two."

"Alright, then." She smiled over at me.

I liked her face. It was a good face. Big, wide, blue eyes, permanent smirk, and freckles across her little button nose. I liked her holier-than-thou attitude, the way she would slave away for hours to find out where thirty-seven cents had gone, and the stream of sound when she was typing. I was glad she had taken Tae Kwon Do classes with Charlie so she could put any guy who was stupid enough to put his hands

on her without permission on the ground, and I enjoyed hearing her talk. I especially liked hearing her talk and seeing the reaction of others the first time.

“Christ, she talks fast,” strangers always said.

But I was used to it and followed it as effortlessly as I did her continually shifting train of thought. I pitied the man who ever thought he would win an argument with her or figure out what was going on in her brain. Not that there weren’t guys who wanted to. I would send her to the bank, and some stray would follow her back. Paul enjoyed scaring the crap out of her would-be suitors. We all enjoyed it. She worked in a construction office. Of course there was a gauntlet to be run if you wanted to date the girl.

“You know,” she began suddenly, and I looked back over at her. “You may be the most uncreative person I know.”

I scowled at her. “Are you done?”

She laughed at me and then asked if Ethan had gotten a hold of me.

I squinted at her. “Ethan?”

“Yeah,” she said hesitantly. “You know, your ex, Ethan.”

I knew who Ethan Hill was. I just had no idea why Ali would be asking about him after six years. “As far as I know, he’s in New York doing his—”

“No, he’s back,” she corrected me, her auburn hair catching the light.

But I had no idea why Ethan Hill would be back from New York. He had been on the cusp of getting everything his heart desired the last time we had spoken.

Ethan Hill was an up-and-coming lawyer at his firm of Mercer and Gould when he had been tapped by one of the senior partners to take over the New York office. They

wanted new blood there to shake things up, and the career-making promotion was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that he could not afford to give up.

He had run fast to catch his dream, and there was no time for anything else, especially love. Our relationship had already become a long-distance one when he had made the transition a year and a half earlier to work out of the office in Los Angeles, but we were still together, both of us working hard to stay that way. But the New York promotion had been the death of us. I understood why he left; he wanted to be lead corporate counsel for one of the largest real estate developers in the country. It made sense to me.

I had been proud of him, proud that his company didn't give a damn about his sexual orientation, that the only things that mattered were who he was and what he could accomplish. What had hurt was that he never, not once, asked me to go. I was never considered in the big picture of his life. The fight had turned out like I thought it would—why would he ask me to go to New York when I wouldn't even go to LA? But even as we were going through the motions, I knew the truth.

He wanted more than I could give. He was the World Series, and I was Little League. I wanted what my parents had, except with a man. He wanted the jet-set lifestyle that never held any interest for me. We had both made a mistake.

"He's back?" I was so confused. It made no earthly sense.

"I think he's just flying through, but—"

"Oh." I smiled because my world had tilted back to center. "Okay."

"So he wanted you to call him. I have his number if you want it."

I shook my head. "That's okay. I'm not some charity case he has to see just 'cause he's in town visiting his folks."

"Didn't sound like that was it," Paul assured me. "He seemed kind of anxious."

"You talked to him too?"

"Yep."

"So he's called more than once."

"Yessir, he did. I'm thinkin' he wants to see you."

But even as much faith as I had in Paul, my ex-brother-in-law and business partner, what the man didn't know about people could fill a book. Observant he was not.

"Hey, after I take Brian to the airport tonight, you wanna shoot some pool?"

"Actually, me and Stace and Roy are gonna hit the new bowling alley on Whitmore tonight. Why don't you come along?"

New bowling alley? Translation: meat market. "You lookin' for your next ex?"

"You lookin' for your next ex?" He parodied my voice, making me sound like a three-year-old. "No, smartass, just need to get laid. You should try it yourself."

I was actually giving it some thought.

IT WAS lucky I didn't actually make plans to take anyone out, because my sister called at a quarter to six and asked me to stop by on my way home and look at her garage door opener. Apparently "general contractor/electrical contractor" actually meant "slave to your family." I had just not read the fine print. Back when she was still married to Paul, I never got the handyman calls, but the divorce made her not want

to ask, even though it had been his house as well as hers for many years.

When I reached Theresa's house, there was another car in the driveway, an enormous SUV with all the bells and whistles that I had never seen before. Before I could knock on the front door, my niece Amanda came out with the cordless phone to her ear. She was crying, and when I bent to one knee, the six-year-old wrapped her arm around my neck.

"No, Daddy, Uncle Leo's here now. It's okay. He'll stop him."

Stop him?

I told Amanda to stay right there and bolted into the house. I heard something crash as I came around the corner.

He was big, the man who had slapped my sister and sent her to the ground. She had been standing beside the kitchen counter, and whatever she had been making her kids for dinner was all over the floor.

"Stupid bitch! I told you I would fix that for you!"

The only thing that saved his life was that I saw his hand. He had not made a fist.

"Who the fuck are you?" he shouted at me as I charged across the room.

I didn't answer. I just blocked the punch he threw at me and swung. He staggered back and then came at me. I took one to the face, and then another, but I landed my second blow. It threw him back into the refrigerator and from there onto the floor. He was out like a light. I turned in time to hear the yell.

Paul was there, holding my sister, having come, I was sure, when his daughter called him. Knowing I was there

had not altered his course. I would have yelled at her, asked her how stupid she was for bringing a stranger, a sociopath, into her home, near her kids, putting them all in harm's way. But not Paul. Paul, whom I never gave credit to for having a brain at all except in business, was holding my sister tight, pressing her to his heart, and telling her that he was there and everything would be all right. She was wrapped so tight around him it was a wonder he could breathe.

The police were there minutes later—apparently Paul had called them from his car—and I had Amanda in her room quietly watching Pokémon. Theresa gave a statement, I gave mine, and then Paul finished with his. They didn't question Amanda. They didn't need to. They took Brent Cussler—that was his name—out in cuffs now that he was awake.

When Jeremy got home, dropped off by another mother after soccer practice, I took him and his sister out for dinner so that Theresa and Paul could talk. It might just have been the trauma, but Theresa had not let go of Paul's hand, and since all he had ever wanted was for my sister to give him another chance to prove he could be a great husband, since even she admitted he was already the best father any kid could ever have, he was sort of in heaven. When I left, she was watching him install the garage door opener.

Chapter Four

I HAD to go home and change and wash my face and talk to Jeremy about how he should not blame himself that his mom got hurt. He was eight, so his guilt was acute.

“But if I had been there, I could have protected her.”

“You did,” I told him. “Who taught Mandy to call your dad if things were scary?”

“Me.”

“See.” I tousled his hair. “It’s okay.”

He nodded, leaned into me, and wrapped his arms and around my waist. “I love you, Uncle Leo.”

“I love you back,” I told him as I picked him up off his feet and lifted him over my head upside down. Immediately the giggling started, and Amanda called for her turn.

I took them for pizza at my favorite place, which was loud and noisy and had great food while also being completely kid-friendly. You had to love a restaurant where you didn’t have to worry about the decibel level as well as seeing people dressed up like cartoon characters. I was sitting on one side, Amanda and Jeremy on the other, when I turned, thinking it was the waitress, and found Ethan Hill.

What the hell? “Hey.” I smiled up at him.

He stood there, staring, as another man joined him with a hand on his back.

“Hi,” I greeted him, sliding out of the booth and standing, suddenly very pleased to be taller than both of them.

The stranger stuck out his hand. “Hi. I’m Aidan Ramsey, Ethan’s boyfriend. And you are?”

Ethan hadn’t even told the man who I was. Nice. “Leo Foster.” I took his hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

“And you, Leo. How do you know Ethan?”

“Old friends.” I forced a smile, stepping sideways so Aidan could see the table. “This is my nephew Jeremy and my niece Amanda. Wave,” I ordered them.

They waved like the good little trained monkeys they were.

“So what brings you to Easton?” I asked him.

“Oh, we’re getting married. We’re having the ceremony in Vermont in a couple of months, and I wanted to fly out and personally invite his parents, get their blessing and all that. I’m a romantic at heart.”

“Are they here with you?”

“Yes.” He beamed at me. “Apparently Ethan’s father loves this place.”

I could tell he didn’t. It was easy to read on his face that it was a little too working-class for him.

“They should be right along.”

Super.

I turned to Ethan and realized that his eyes were a mess.

“You didn’t call. I left a message with Paul, but—”

“I didn’t figure it was important,” I managed to breathe. “And it doesn’t sound like it was. Congratulations on your wedding.”

His jaw tightened, his eyes narrowed, and I saw how red they were.

“Oh, Leo!”

Ethan’s mother, Tiffany Hill, appeared at Aidan’s elbow, all big smile and immaculate make-up. She was gorgeous—anyone could see where Ethan got his looks from—and she had never, ever, warmed up to me.

“Did you meet my soon-to-be son-in-law?” Her smile went nuclear. “He’s a corporate tax attorney in New York. He and Ethan met at a bachelor auction. Isn’t that romantic?”

I nodded, taking a step back to lean around Aidan to take the hand of Ethan’s father, Mitch. Mitchell Hill had always liked me. He was an architect, I was a builder, and we had enjoyed our time together.

“Nice to see you, Leo.” He smiled, reaching up to pat my face with the hand that wasn’t grasping mine.

“And you, sir.”

“I heard you and Paul got the contract to build the new gym at the high school. Very nice.”

“Even better, we won the bid on your library project for the college. Nice atrium, by the way.”

“Oh, you liked that?” He chuckled. “It’s a little more fanciful than I normally do, but I enjoyed it.”

“I look forward to making it a reality for you.”

“And you’ll do a great job. You always do.”

Coming from him, it meant a lot.

“Please give me a call next week. I have some smaller projects I’d love to get your input on, and I’m thinking of finally putting in that that pool house you suggested to me a hundred years ago.”

“I would like that.”

He gave my shoulder a firm squeeze and then turned back to his family as I sat down.

“Nice to meet you,” I said to Aidan, and I smiled at Ethan and his mother. They were gone minutes later.

“That man,” Jeremy said thoughtfully. “The one who didn’t talk. He looked kinda sad.”

“Oh yeah?”

He shrugged. “But maybe not.”

My nephew was perceptive and sensitive, and I was there to make sure that no one ever berated him for it. “Hey, tell me about karate. How’s it going with that?”

AFTER dinner, we went for dessert, and I realized that my face hurt a little, so after ice cream, which made no sense to me in the middle of winter, I dragged them with me to the supermarket to buy something stronger than what I had at home.

“How ’bout this?” Amanda offered, holding up a box for me.

“He doesn’t have diarrhea, dink.” Jeremy rolled his eyes at her.

I chuckled, watching them and remembering how I had treated my sister, their mother, like an idiot every single day

of her life until she was old enough to hit me. It came with being an older brother.

Back in the parking lot, my phone went off, and it was Brian on the other end, reminding me that I was supposed to be driving him to the airport. Since it was a Friday night and the kids wanted to go, I called Theresa and got permission to take them with me.

“What did they eat?”

“Pizza.”

“What did they eat for dessert?”

“What makes you think I bought them—”

“Leo,” she said flatly.

“Ice cream.”

“It’s the middle of winter.”

“This is what I said.”

She let out a huff of breath.

“So, what, you gonna do their dad?”

“Oh my God, you’re a pig!”

But she didn’t say she wasn’t going to do him. “Yeah, you knew that.”

“Take care of my kids, jerk.”

“Big talker. Who’s takin’ them if you get hit by a bus, T?”

She hung up on me because that was the truth. My sister loved my parents, but she had named me in her will as legal guardian of her kids if, God forbid, both she and Paul should die. She did not want my mother raising her children; she felt that I would do less damage. It had made for a really fun Sunday night dinner.

Brian was surprised to see that we had company, but it was good, since it kept him from talking about or asking about Charlie. I was thankful.

By the time we were headed back it was late, well after eleven, and Amanda had passed out in her booster seat. Jeremy, who was as hardcore as I had been at eight, just kept popping back awake even as his eyes rolled back in his head. Once I turned the heater on, he was a goner.

When I finally made it back to my sister's house, I was just going to drop the kids off and get out of there—pleased to see that that Paul was spending the night—but both he and Theresa wanted to talk to me. I understood. She needed to thank me, and so did he. It made sense, but it lasted a long time. I finally staggered into my loft by three. I didn't make it past the couch.

Chapter Five

THE knock on the door woke me at five in the morning. I stumbled to the door, and there were Trey and Dave, two of the guys from my crew.

“You look like shit,” Dave assured me, passing me a large cup of coffee and a bag with a donut in it.

I just looked at him.

“Nice eye.”

No one had commented on it the night before so I was guessing that while it had been red, it had not been so noticeable. The day after, though, was when a black eye started looking pretty.

“Why are you here?” I whined, though I took the cup and the bag. The coffee smelled way too good to turn away.

“Because you insist on us doing charity work one weekend a month,” he snapped at me. “And it’s that weekend, dickhead, so get dressed so we can all get out there and freeze our balls off.”

Shit.

“It was your idea,” Dave bit out before he turned and muttered all the way down the hall to the door that led to the stairs.

I lived in a converted warehouse without an elevator. You had to climb three flights up to get to me, and the stairs were on the outside, uncovered. The homeowners association was trying to put in an elevator, but for only twelve tenants, the bill was kind of high.

“So,” Trey said, slurping his coffee, “let’s go, princess.”

My body hurt, I was tired, and I wanted to go back to sleep.

“And D’s right, really nice eye. What’s the story on that?”

“Fuck.”

He laughed at me as he walked into my apartment, and I went to get ready for the day I had forgotten all about.

WE MET the event organizers an hour later at six, and three hours later, even though we were working really hard, true to Dave’s prediction, we were freezing. But homes were built year round, and when they built in the middle of high summer, it wasn’t any more fun. I never understood what was wrong with picking one season, a nice one like spring, but it was not my place to question. I just had to do.

It never got any warmer, but we got covered in particle dust and drywall and paint. They fed us a boxed lunch that Dave wanted to shove up somebody’s ass because it might feed a second-grader, but not a full-grown man. He brightened a little when I told him I would take them, all six of them, out for steaks the minute we were done.

“How come Paul and Charlie and the others ain’t here?” And by others, he meant Levi, Freddy, Jace, and Ren. It was Trey who had asked the question.

“Because they worked the last stupid Saturday in December and you got to lay your ass in bed,” Ace answered. “Remember, douche, once a month we do this bullshit.”

“And I enjoyed it,” Bill told us as he swung the hammer, casting a smirk around, “laying my ass in bed. Not that sitting up here with you guys freezing my ass off ain’t a good time.”

“Nice of you to end your vacation early and join us,” I thanked him.

“Fuck you, Leo; I would’ve never heard the end of it if I didn’t show.”

Randy told him to shut the fuck up. Dave threw a tape measure at him, which was a bad idea on a slanted surface.

“Asshole!”

“Every construction company that participates has to send five guys plus a foreman to each event,” I told Trey, returning to the original topic, trying to be the voice of reason before tools started flying.

He grunted. “If Charlie was here, they would have fed us better.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He’s pretty,” he grumbled. “All the sponsor people are always all over him, especially the women.”

“And he don’t even like girls, just like you.” Dave was just so exasperated. “Damn waste of time.”

When we were back on solid ground another three hours later, I asked him what he meant.

“About what?”

“Before, when you were talking about me,” I told him. “What’d you mean?”

“What I meant, boss, was that if I was you, I’d get laid a lot more.”

"I do just fine, thank you."

"Girls cream their jeans just lookin' at you."

"Aww, for fuck's sake, Dave, why you gotta be so—"

"Women throw themselves at you all damn day, and you don't give a good goddamn!"

"Christ, what crawled up your ass?"

"I'm hungry!"

"Okay, honey, don't worry. I'll feed you."

He growled at me but grabbed me as he walked by, bending me in half, locking his arm around my neck, and putting me in a choke hold. "Now. I wanna eat now."

Everyone was laughing.

The Meat Cleaver was our favorite place to go after work. Ace called the others, the whole rest of the crew, and I was surprised that they all showed up except Paul, who was still making nice with my sister and Ali, who had a date.

"Screw you guys!" Dave roared across the restaurant, but it was fine, because with peanut shells on the floor along with sawdust, it was not a quiet place, and he could yell if he wanted to. It was nuts on game night and was, in fact, one of the rowdiest restaurant/sports bars around, which was why the guys loved it. I was hoping that after eating I could pay for dinner and duck out early, leaving them to drink the rest of the night away if they wanted. Between the fight, which had been short but painful, and the lack of sleep, I was ready to pass out.

When I saw Charlie starting across the restaurant, I raised my hand and waved. He looked startled for a second as he closed in on us. I leaned my head on my hand, smiling at him as the waitress put a Pepsi down in front of me.

“Not drinkin’ tonight, hon?”

“If I drink, I’ll fall asleep.” I smiled up at her.

“Long night?”

“Day, night, new day. You get the idea.”

“Oh, I do,” she said, patting my back before walking away.

“Hey there, boss man.” Charlie eyed me, making Dave get up so he could have the seat beside me.

“Hey back.” I yawned, and I could feel how gritty my eyes felt. I lifted my hand to rub them.

“Don’t do that,” Charlie warned me. “Your eyes are already watering, and they’re red, and what the fuck did you do to yourself?”

I chuckled. Why did people always ask that question that way? “I got hit in the face.”

“Yeah, I can see—will you look at me, please?”

I turned so I could.

“Holy shit, Leo,” he gasped, and I watched his lips part, saw his eyes get big and round.

“It ain’t that bad, it’s only the one eye.”

“They both look terrible.”

I shrugged.

His hands lifted but stopped, and I knew if we were alone that he would have touched me. He was worried—we were friends, after all—but I was all right. He didn’t need to get worked up. I bumped his knee under the table and would have moved back, but his hand was suddenly there, holding me still.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as I looked over at him.

“I”—he coughed—“need to speak to you.”

I waited for whatever it was.

“In private.”

“Bathroom?”

“No.” He smiled slowly at me.

“Uhm, the truck?” I teased him.

“No.”

“Awww, Charlie.” I gave him a big grin that I was not in total control of. “You wanna come home with me and talk?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “That would be perfect.”

“When I fall asleep while you’re trying to tell me something important, that’ll be great.” I laughed softly. “Just wait’ll Monday or—oh crap.” I was suddenly worried. “You’re not quitting, are you?”

“No,” he whispered, head down, eyes hooded, and he shook his head quickly.

“Okay.” I realized that the thought had upset me because not only would I be losing a man I counted on, but a friend as well. “Don’t leave, alright?”

His head snapped up and his eyes, his truly beautiful eyes, were on me.

“Okay?”

I noticed after a minute that he was staring at me a little too intently.

“What’d I say?”

“I promise.”

Promise?

“I won’t ever leave you.”

Me? “What?”

“You said don’t ever leave *me*,” Ace belched from across the table before he started on another hot wing.

“I did?” I looked back at Charlie.

“Yeah, ya did.”

“Huh.”

“And I promise, I won’t.”

“Does that mean you’re gonna take the job Paul offered you?” I asked hopefully.

He nodded, smiling sheepishly. “Yes it does.”

“Good.” I smiled at him. “Tell him Monday, okay? He’ll be so pleased.”

“Are you pleased?”

“Yes, I am.” I smiled back.

“Okay.” He exhaled, and I went back to trying to remain vertical.

After another hour, I was nodding off just sitting there. I did the jolt where you realize you lost time and told the guys that I had to go. Charlie had left the table, and I had no idea how long he’d been gone. But I said goodnight, paid the bill, called Paul again to tell him that he’d missed a great time, and staggered toward the door.

The ride home was okay. I rolled the window down, and the icy air on my face made it impossible to close my eyes. I had never realized how much the stairs to my apartment resembled Everest until I was hiking them.

Inside, I was determined that this time I would make it past my couch. I really didn’t want to sleep in drywall dust, as it got itchy—was already itchy—so I shed my clothes and

hit the shower. I realized when the water ran cold that I had fallen asleep on my feet like a horse. Thirty-five suddenly seemed really old.

But I felt better when I got out and was flipping off lights when there was a knock. I didn't do the peep-hole check; I just opened the door.

"Leo."

And there I was, faced with Ethan Hill for the second time in two days.

"Hi." He smiled at me, shoving his hands into the pockets of his wool and cashmere trench coat.

"What're you doing here?"

He cleared his throat. "Can I come in?"

I stepped back, opening the door for him. He walked by me but didn't go to the couch; he stayed close as I shut the door and turned.

"Jesus, you look good." He smiled, looking me up and down before he suddenly frowned.

"What?"

"Who hit you?"

I shook my head. "It's a long story."

"I'd love to hear it," he said, his gaze back to raking over me once more. "And it's very caveman and kind of hot."

I realized that all I had on were a pair of sweats. Shirtless, sockless, and underwear-less, I was only one step from naked. "How did you know where I lived?"

"You had this place when we were still together, when I first moved to LA."

“Oh, that’s right.” I nodded, scrutinizing him. I had not realized it the other day, but he looked older, different. “What do you want, Ethan?”

He took a step closer so he had to tilt his head back to keep my gaze. “I just wanted to explain about Aidan.”

“What’s to explain? You wanted a guy just like you, and now you’ve got one. I get it; I don’t need you to run the movie.”

There had been a time when the look I was getting would have melted me through the floor. The vulnerability would have stirred me. The wisps of blond hair that fell forward into his eyes, the pale blue framed in golden lashes, the wide open face, and the way he bit his bottom lip.... I had been the man’s slave. I would have followed him anywhere if I’d only been invited.

And really, from the beginning, us, together, had been a mistake. I always thought he was too good for me, too smart, too pretty, too current, and too funny. The man was smooth sophistication, and I was like a bull in a china shop. But none of it had mattered, our differences, because Ethan loved me. For Ethan, it was more than just physical. He didn’t just love my body; he loved my mind as well. And I believed that for so long until even I could see that I was lying to myself. When he called to tell me it was over, I didn’t fight. The relationship had been dead when he first moved away; it was just that no one had the balls to pronounce it.

“Leo?”

Why on earth did he want to see me?

“Look at me.”

I hadn’t realized I wasn’t, so I turned my head, and hands were suddenly on my face. Without thinking I stepped

back, lifted free, his fingers sliding over my jaw as I left him and retreated to the couch.

“You’re angry.”

But I wasn’t. I was nothing.

“I just don’t want you to think I lied to you.”

“It was a hundred years ago,” I chuckled. “Why would you care?”

His eyes betrayed him, and they were all over me.

I squinted at him. “What is this, a fuck for old time’s sake?”

He came toward me as the doorbell rang. We both froze like we were guilty, which was ridiculous.

Knocking followed.

I went to the door and opened it without looking for the second time that night. It made sense that Aidan was there. Speaking seemed stupid, so I just moved out of his way so he could walk by me into the living room.

“What are you doing here?” Ethan asked him.

“I could ask you the same question.”

My ex gestured at me. “Leo’s not just an old friend.”

“From how you could barely breathe when you saw him, I didn’t think he was,” Aidan assured him, crossing his arms over his chest. “So what was your plan here, Ethan?”

I cleared my throat. “Did you guys maybe wanna go?”

“I wanted to talk to Leo.”

“Is that all?”

Was I the only one who was uncomfortable?

“I don’t know; I didn’t get that far.”

“If I can stay”—Aidan cleared his throat—“then I’m okay.”

What was he okay with?

“Really?” Ethan’s whole face lit up.

His boyfriend nodded slowly, and I finally got it. It had taken me a second because I was so tired. “I think you both need to—”

“Leo,” Aidan began.

The doorbell rang again. It was like I was having a party, and I was the last to know. I wasn’t even really that surprised to find Charlie there, smiling at me.

“Hey,” I exhaled, leaning on the door. “I thought we were talking tomorrow?”

“No, I—”

“Leo?”

I watched Charlie jolt and saw his eyes go hard, the muscles in his jaw cord as the door was opened wider and Ethan showed himself.

“Who’s this?”

“This is Charlie. Charlie, this is Ethan.”

“Oh.” My friend slowly smiled, relief flooding his face. “The ex.”

“Yes.” I nodded, opening the door even wider so he could see Aidan as well.

“Okay, now you lost me.” His head swiveled from looking at the other two men back to me as he awaited an explanation.

“This is Aidan, Ethan’s fiancé.”

“Really.”

I grunted.

“Huh.”

“That was my reaction.”

“Who—” was all Aidan got out.

“You had me worried for a second,” Charlie assured me as he walked between Aidan and Ethan, using his shoulders, muscling by them as he walked into my home.

“Worried about what?” I asked, turning to look after him, closing the door at the same time.

“That you’d brought somebody home.”

“Not that this is any of your business, but I—”

“Usually hook up at their places,” Charlie cut me off. “Yeah, I know, that’s why I was scared for a second because that would have meant something.”

“Why would you be—what are you doing?” I asked him as he shed his parka and dumped it on my couch, unzipped the heavy cardigan underneath, and then stretched his whole body, hands locked over his head, and made the noise that everyone makes when they’re doing it, that sort of purring, moaning, cats-mating-in-your-backyard sound.

“Are you drunk?”

“God, sometimes that just feels good, huh?” His grin lit his face and his eyes, and I totally understood how he had made money just sitting around letting people take pictures of him. Now that I was looking and really seeing, the man was simply incandescent.

“Go home,” I ordered him irritably.

“Nope,” he told me, turning, toeing off his sneakers, letting them thump to the floor before he wandered out of the room.

“Who is that?” Ethan asked me, and he sounded damn annoyed.

“I think he’s drunk,” I told him, “because he’s never acted—”

“I wanna talk to you.”

“About what?”

“About what? About us.”

“Us how? You’re getting married.” I indicated Aidan. Maybe *I* was drunk. Maybe I was still asleep in the shower and I only thought I woke up.

“He *is* getting married,” Aidan told me, “but as long as we’re both honest about what we want, Leo, the three of us can talk about things.”

Oh, hell no. I had never learned to share anything, least of all men in my bed. Screw that. I had some really good friends, Tyler, Sean, and Wade, who were a threesome, and it worked well for them. They had been in it for the last five years, and it was still thriving. I had asked Wade, whom I had known in college, how it worked, and he had said that it was all about respect and boundaries, patience and love. I was all for it, but I had enough trouble finding one person to like me enough to stay. God knew how I would ever find two.

“Hey!”

I looked back at Charlie as he walked into the room and found myself suddenly unable to breathe. The man had ditched his T-shirt and unbuttoned his jeans, and they were hanging off his hips, inviting and sexy and showing off my

favorite patch of skin in the world, the flat plane above a man's groin. I had no idea until that moment that all of him was smooth, golden perfection. He looked good enough to eat. The man had flawless skin, hard pecs, a flat, washboard stomach, narrow hips, and a tight little ass that I wanted to feel in my hands. He was trying to kill me standing there like a fantasy come to life. I licked my lips without thinking.

He saw me checking him out, and I could almost hear the purr from across the room. The dimples that I had always found cute and adorable somehow looked very, very wicked.

"What is going on with you?" I managed to get out, which was hard with my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth.

"I wanna talk to you," he said, gliding forward.

"You're gonna freeze to death."

"Not if I get in your bed."

"Charlie!" I was indignant. "Are you high?"

"No."

I cleared my throat. "Remember that time you drank too much NyQuil?"

He laughed, and it was a deep, sexy sound, and his eyes glinted in the low light. The man just glowed. Even in my homey but not fabulous loft, in the chilled air, in front of my ex and my ex's new man, Charlie Ryder was luminous.

"I, we, need to talk to Leo," Ethan said severely, pointing at my friend. "Get the hell out of here."

"You get out," Charlie told him. "And take your boyfriend with you."

His comment was funny on so many levels and sounded a little like the Wicked Witch threatening Dorothy. I couldn't control my snickering.

"Listen, you little shit," Ethan snarled at him, and I registered the anger, but I had no idea why. "I—"

"You left him; he doesn't belong to you anymore. You don't need him; I do. And if you look at me and look at you, who would you wanna fuck?"

It was dazzlingly mean, and though there was a part of me that liked it, there wasn't enough. I turned and rushed across the space that separated us, grabbed Ethan, and crushed him to me, face down in his shoulder. I would not let him get torn down; there was no reason for it.

"I love you, Eth. I always will. You will hold a little piece of my heart for the rest of my life," I said, leaning back to look at him. "But the time when we were gonna be in bed together is long past."

His head tipped up to mine. "Leo—"

"And you still know me well enough to know that it was never gonna be you and me with Aidan either watching or there too. That ain't me."

He nodded.

"So." I smiled at him, moving before he could hug me back, reaching for the door, opening it, and holding it open. "I wish you guys the best, okay?"

"Leo." My name sounded strange, desperate.

"Fuck, get out already," Charlie snarled at them.

"Will you sit down, please?" I told him.

He walked to the couch and flopped down hard, arms crossed, scowling, waves of irritation just flowing off him.

“Disgruntled is not hot,” I informed him.

“Oh my God, get them the fuck out!” he yelled at me.

To his credit, Aidan took hold of Ethan’s arm and led him from my loft. I closed the door behind them.

“Lock it,” Charlie snapped at me.

“No, ’cause you’re leaving in a second too.”

“The hell I am!”

I crossed the room to stand over him. “Charlie, I’m gonna frickin’ pass out, and—”

“Leo,” he cut me off softly, reaching up for my hand, taking it in his.

“What’s going on with you?”

“Don’t you know? You must know.”

I reached for him, the hand he wasn’t holding going to his face before I could even think about it. “Baby, please tell me what’s wrong.”

His breath caught as he leaned into my palm, and I realized what I’d said. “Oh shit, Charlie, I—”

“Shut up,” he said, tugging on my arm, and I let him pull me down beside him before he lifted up and climbed into my lap. There was the smooth slide of his warm skin over my own slightly chilled flesh as he straddled my thighs and shoved the hard bulge in his jeans against my abdomen. “Just please lemme have you.”

“Charlie—”

“Christ, Leo, you’re so fuckin’ blind,” he said as he leaned back enough so he could put his hand down the front of my sweats and fist my hardening cock.

I pushed up into his hand, my eyes closing as my head fell back.

“Oh fuck yeah,” he groaned. “I knew you’d come apart in my hands. I knew all I had to do was touch you. I can’t wait to get in your bed.”

He thought he had me, and I would admit to myself that surrender was on my mind. But I was not a fun fuck for the evening no matter who it was, no matter how bad I wanted to be. I was surprised at the lust that was riding him, etched in every line; his trembling need was right there, no missing it. But if he wanted me, it was not going to be fast and easy.

Sometimes I thought that being big was a hardship. My size and my muscles, my quick, determined movements, scared some people, and I was sorry about that. But at that moment as I surged forward and gathered Charlie in my arms, lifted him, and held him tight, I was glad that I could.

“Leo, what’re you—”

“Stop,” I said, hand on his ass but just to hold him against me, the other on the back of his head, gently massaging as I began the walk toward my bedroom. “Tell me what this is all about.”

But he said nothing, just held on, content, it seemed, to be held pressed to my chest and carried in my arms.

I reached my bed and threw him down onto it, turning without waiting to see what he was going to do. I went to my closet and came back with drawstring pajama bottoms, which I wadded up and beamed him in the face with.

“What’re you—”

“You said you wanted to stay, right?”

“I do wanna stay,” he told me, “but I wanna do it naked, under you, with you buried inside me.”

It sounded like heaven. “You need to explain this all to me, because for me, you’re comin’ out of left field. What the fuck is this about?”

He got up and stripped out of his jeans, and I turned my head so I wouldn’t see his cock, which I was sure would be as pretty as the rest of him, bounce free.

“You can look now,” he chuckled.

The pajama bottoms that were nothing special on me had a whole different appeal on Charlie Ryder. Hanging off his narrow hips, they showed off the lines on the sides of his abdomen that led down to.... *God*.

“Jesus,” he breathed out, coming around the bed fast.

I stood my ground as he reached me, put his hands on my face, and gazed up into my eyes.

“Leo, my love, you cannot look at me like that, like you wanna fuckin’ eat me, and then expect me to do nothing about it.”

But I had stumbled on the word. “Love?”

His smile was breathtaking, and I felt my knees wobble.

“Caught that, did you?” He sighed heavily. “I can’t keep anything from you.”

“Charlie,” I whispered.

“Kiss me.”

I made a very primitive noise deep in my chest, and Charlie whimpered. I told myself I would just taste him—just once. What could it hurt?

I bent toward him and smiled. "Take it easy, okay? Don't hurt me."

His eyes suddenly filled as he inhaled sharply, and he nodded fast.

The man was so fragile, had already been broken once, shattered. That he was even willing to take another chance was astounding.

"Kiss me like it's the first time, okay?"

"It is the first time," I told him. "For us."

"Leo," he breathed out my name.

I leaned in and pressed my lips to his, gently, tenderly, not rushing him in any way. He whined in the back of his throat, and I felt his tongue slide over my bottom lip. I opened for him, and he surged up into me, his tongue thrusting deep as he wrapped his arms around my neck and pressed his warm, smooth skin to mine.

I thought I knew all about kissing. Turned out, though, at thirty-five, I finally got around to being on the receiving end of the kind of kiss you feel through your whole body. It was scorching. He tasted just as good as I knew he would, and when I slanted my mouth down over his, he sighed his deep pleasure.

My hands moved, one up into his hair, holding him still, the other to the small of his back. I didn't manhandle him or push; I was careful, not wanting to scare him. But the kiss got out of control anyway. Our tongues tangled, lips sucking, and when I felt his hands on my chest, pushing, I broke the kiss so we could both breathe.

We were panting hard, foreheads leaning together, the air between us hot and thick.

“Explain,” I got out.

He nodded.

“Charlie, how—”

“Shut up,” he ordered, clutching at me when I tried to lean back. Apparently he liked us this close. “I was really messed up when I got here three years ago, but then I found you.”

“Char—”

“Come here,” he said, his breath shaky as he eased back and led me to the bed. “Lie down with me.”

It was cold, so we got under my soft sheets and down comforter. Without thinking, I reached for him, and the look of absolute joy that filled his eyes, his smile, made my chest tighten. He snuggled up against me, arm across my chest, leg sliding between my thighs, and I tucked the comforter around him and under his chin. The way the man was notched against me, fitting easily, was like we had been lying in each other’s arms forever. It was natural, it felt right, and when he tilted his head and kissed under my jaw, I shivered with the contact.

“Like I said, three years ago, I was really messed up, and then I met you.”

“Oh, so you’re grateful,” I teased him. “Baby, you don’t have to sleep with—”

“Leo,” he growled at me, pinching my side, hard.

“Owww, shit,” I laughed, trying to squirm away from him.

“No,” he ordered, holding me still. “I was grateful at first, Leo, so thankful that you gave me a job and took a chance on me. I got the guys for my work family and your family for

my real one. You gave me a new life and security and safety. You've never treated me like I was stupid or young or anything but me. You've been a big brother and a boss and a father all rolled up into one. You've been everything I needed, and most of all, you've been the only person I've ever trusted to tell what happened to me, because you're the only person I cared enough about to let all the way in. I feel safe when I'm with you, and I finally figured out why that is."

"Cause you know I'm big enough to protect you." I offered the easy explanation, my voice gruff, hoarse with emotion.

"No," he said, hand on the side of my neck, his lips nibbling over my jaw. "I feel safe because I know you would never hurt me. I didn't think I would ever trust anyone again, but watching you, being with you, spending time with you day in and day out, I just did. You are a good man, Leo Foster, and anyone lucky enough to have you should keep you forever."

It was nice to hear.

"And so I decided that I was ready for you to see me."

"Charlie, I always—"

"No, you don't," he said softly, his hand sliding down my throat to my collarbone and lower, across my chest. "You see your friend; you don't see a hot piece of ass."

"Charlie, you're not just—"

"I'm a man, Leo. I'm not just your friend, and I need to get laid."

"Well, then you should go take care of that."

"What do you think I'm doing here?" He chuckled, and the sound was adorable. "Leo, you need to put your hands

all over me and kiss me and fuck me so hard and so long that I won't be able to walk."

"Baby, you just came to terms with—"

"No," he told me, and I realized where his hand was going when it slid under the elastic waistband of my sweats. "I just told you. Three years ago, I was working through things. When I was jumping at my own shadow and you told me to take karate or something—"

"God," I cut him off. "I feel like such an ass now for saying—"

"No." He sighed. "The fact that you were irritated and not treating me like I was gonna break, not trying to get me in bed—that was the best thing that could've ever happened. I was just one of the guys, and that's been amazing. It's been everything I wanted until now."

But I couldn't be what he needed. He really was just grateful.

"I'm not the same guy who had to sleep with the light on; I'm not the guy who was afraid to be touched or the guy who was sure that everyone knew what had happened to him. I'm not the guy who had to cut all his hair off so no one could ever hold him with it. I'm different now, and the main reason I'm okay is you, Leo. It's been so long since I've been scared or sad or angry or anything but content. I love my life, but lately I've realized that there's something missing."

"And what is that?"

"Your heart," he said, tracing a finger down the side of my shaft.

Oh God, it felt good, and my slumbering interest woke right up and was ready to play.

“And I know that I’m talking about one organ while I’m fondling another”—he smiled widely—“but the fact of the matter is that while I want to see love in those big chocolate-brown eyes, I also wanna see lust. I want you to want me.”

“Charlie, I think you’re just feeling gratitude for—”

“It’s not gratitude. You’re not a fuckin’ saint, Leo, and we both know you can be a total ass sometimes.”

“I can?”

He laughed at me, and the sound of it, really, was just pure unadulterated joy. “Yeah, you can, but that’s okay, ’cause so can I.”

Oh yes, he could. “Yeah, you can be a real dick.”

“Yes, I know,” he indulged me, “but that’s okay because it doesn’t matter. The important thing is that you make me feel safe, and you don’t know what that feels like, how great that is to not have to be on guard, to just trust.”

“Charlie,” I sighed.

“Wait,” he said, stopping me. “I don’t only mean physically safe, even though knowing you would never let anyone or anything hurt me is amazing, but it’s more than that. You never hurt anyone on purpose, and so I know if you decide you’re gonna love me that I’d be so fuckin’ lucky, ’cause you’d never stop unless I screwed it up, and God, why would I?”

I stopped breathing.

“And yeah, I want you to love me. That’s my plan, and that starts with you seeing me and wanting me and not being able to keep your hands off me,” he said as he wrapped his fist around my hardening shaft. “And I want this inside me.”

My hips shoved upward into his hand, pushing in only to drag slowly out.

“Doesn’t that feel good?”

I turned fast, and he gasped because I’d surprised him as I took his sweet face in my hands. “Baby, I’m so scared that what you went through—”

“Was four years ago,” he told me, wiggling closer, sliding a leg up over my hip. “And can I just say that my whole life, a lot of guys have tried to call me ‘baby’, and I’ve never liked it, but from you, hearing you say it to me... it’s so fuckin’ hot. I love it.”

I stared into his eyes. “I think we need to wait, Charlie. I think you’re a little mixed up about your feel—”

He leaned in, and the kiss he planted on me made my skin run with heat, curled my toes, and took my breath away. And when I felt the man shudder in my arms, it hit me like a freight train: he was having the same reaction to me.

“Charlie,” I panted as I broke the kiss, our lips still so close.

“I haven’t slept with anyone since that day, Leo,” he told me, his voice breaking. “I haven’t wanted to until you. I mean, four years ago I wanted to die, and it took me a year after that to get my head together enough to try and figure out what to do with my life, and the first man I met, once I chose living, was you. Isn’t that amazing? Don’t you think that’s fuckin’ amazing?”

His face, alight with hope, was what was amazing.

“Leo,” he sighed deeply. “Haven’t you been waiting for me too?”

I searched his face. “So we’re gonna do what, jump together?”

“Would you please just start with me? You already trust me, that’s the hard part, and it’s already done.”

“Yes, it is,” I agreed, smiling at him. “I just don’t want to scare you or hurt you or—”

“You can’t,” he told me, and I watched his eyes fill. “I trust you. Don’t you get it? I trust you, Leo Foster. You could tie me up, and I’m not gonna worry. I’ve been here, living in your world, for the past three years. I’ve seen you mad and happy and hurt and... I’ve seen it all, but never once, in all that time, have I seen what you look like when you’re in love. I wanna see that.”

He was my friend and my confidant and a man I trusted with the company that was my life. My whole future was tied up with him already. Why would I say no to more?

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but this is a first for me, too, Leo,” he told me, his eyes pleading, his bottom lip quivering. “I’ve never had anything that was all mine, just mine, but I really want that to start and end with you.”

I couldn’t take it anymore.

Rolling over on top of him, I pinned him under me to the bed. The sound he made, the moan of anticipation, made me want to ravage him. I held myself firmly in check.

“No,” he told me, his gorgeous eyes locked on mine. “I want to feel all the power that lives inside you, all the heat I know is there—don’t you dare do that, not give me everything. That’ll kill me if you hold back. I need to feel the weight of how it’s gonna be with us. If you’re not honest, then someday you’ll want to give that part, the urgency and the strength, to somebody else.” His voice dropped low. “I

don't want you to do that. I want every part, even if it's scary or ugly or demanding. I know Ethan broke your heart, and you've been hiding out too. Don't hold back. Give yourself to me."

My heart hurt. "God, Charlie, how do you know I'm worth all this faith?"

"Because it's all you've given me for three years, jackass."

"You're the jackass, jackass."

He grunted. "Nice comeback."

I bent and took rough possession of his mouth, and he arched up into me, whimpering in the back of his throat. There was no more thinking—we were too close, too hot, and when I pulled back, he tried to keep me there, biting down hungrily on my lower lip.

He was shoved back hard as I hurled the comforter off of us and crawled down the bed, yanking on the tied drawstring of the pajama bottoms that he was wearing. They were too big for him, and when the bow released, they slid from his hips. With a brush of my hand, his penis sprang free of the material, bobbing up and hitting my chin.

"Wow," I chuckled, and Charlie's face lit up like I had never seen.

"It likes you," he giggled.

"I can see that," I said before I bent forward and took his long, cut, beautiful cock down the back of my throat.

"Fuck!" he yelled loudly, one hand fisted in my hair, the other digging into the sheet, scrambling for purchase.

I smiled around the hot, velvet shaft in my mouth before I sucked from head to balls in one ravenous stroke and then

back. I missed nothing. I swirled my tongue across the flared tip, under the head, and down the thick, veined length over and over, taking my time, ravaging him, my hand, after long moments, finally closing around the base, pulling back only to suck him back inside, slowly but firmly, loving the taste of him, the smell, the feel of him on my tongue.

“Leo, I’m gonna come!”

I lifted my mouth, and the slippery saliva still coating his cock allowed me to stroke him hard and fast. He was writhing under me for seconds before his head lolled back, body jolting as he came, spurting over my hand, my wrist, and onto his sculpted abdomen.

“God, Charlie, you really do trust me.” I sighed, releasing him slowly, rising up off the bed to go to the bathroom.

I came back with a warm washcloth and a towel, and I cleaned him up gently, tenderly, and then covered him with the comforter so he wouldn’t get cold. I went to the kitchen after I dropped both cloth and towel into my hamper and brought him a glass of cold water.

“What’re you doing?” he asked when I put it down on the nightstand for him.

“Getting you some water.”

“Are you kidding? Leo, get in bed and fuck me!”

It was hysterical, and I was too tired not to laugh. He was so indignant, and his eyes were a blazing green fire, and God, he was gorgeous.

“Are you laughing at me?” He was incensed.

I flipped off the light and pounced on top of him, crushing him under me, the comforter between us as I

buried my face in the side of his neck, kissing hard, my bicep curling around his head, holding him tight.

“Leo.” His voice cracked on my name.

“We’re both gonna get tested, ’kay? Because I really want to taste that come next time and suck you dry. I would fuckin’ love that.”

“Jesus, Leo, I thought I was gonna die. You didn’t tell me that along with a body to die for you have the hottest mouth on the planet.”

I smiled into the hollow of his neck. “Yeah? You think I’m pretty?”

“Oh my God, Leo, all I wanna do is touch you every time I see you. Do you know what you do to me with those big, brown eyes and your beautiful lips and your hard, capable hands and your arms.... God, I dream about being in your arms every damn night.”

I moved fast, climbing under the covers, and grabbed him, wrapping him in my arms, molding his supple body to mine until we were completely entwined.

He was trembling as I rubbed my chin in his hair, my eyes fluttering closed, feeling my body sink down into the bed.

“Leo, I want you to fuck—”

“Enough,” I told him, my voice a deep rumble in my chest. “There’s never gonna be any fucking, Charlie Ryder. There will only ever be me and you fooling around or making love or whatever the hell else that involves hugging and kissing and just being together. This is a romance, baby. Nothing else.”

He tried to wriggle even closer as his mouth opened on the base of my throat.

"Tomorrow when we get up, I'll make you my world-famous spinach omelet, and you'll tell me all about your family, because I wanna know everything about you."

He nodded as he slid his leg over my thigh, nestling that much closer. "I went to the bank, you know, and there was a whole lot of money still in that old account of mine, Leo. I'm thinking I might get a call or even a visit from Doran Lear once he realizes I closed it."

"Well I'll be right here if he shows up."

"I know."

"And I can't wait to hear what you did with the money." I yawned softly, loving the feel of him in my arms. He fit so well, like he was made for me.

"I just did what you suggested. I donated it to a worthy cause."

"What?"

"A runaway shelter."

"Since you yourself were a runaway for awhile," I said, because it made sense.

"Yes."

"See, I know you," I said, because I did. I knew all about him, and that should have been my first clue that the man was supposed to be mine. Who else could I say that I was absolutely connected to?

"I know you know me, and that's just another reason why I need you to take a chance here. For crissakes, Leo, say you're gonna take—"

“Of course I am. I’m gonna sleep with you in my arms and hold you tight and keep you safe and hug you and kiss you and make love to you when I wake up in the morning. You’re not afraid to trust, and I’m not afraid to try. We both deserve a second chance, Charlie, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think I deserve you, but I want you. God, Leo, I want you so bad.”

“I’m glad.” I smiled into his hair. “Me too. And you deserve better than me, but you’re screwed, ’cause now you’re stuck with me whether you like it or not.”

“I like it. In fact, I more than like it. I love it.”

I squeezed tighter, and he let out a deep, contented sigh.

“I’m gonna kiss you all over in the morning,” I promised him.

“Good. I can’t wait.”

“In the morning.”

“Yes.” He sighed happily. “In the morning.”

FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

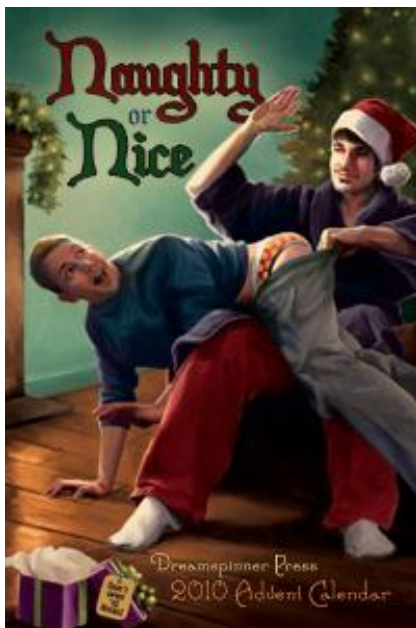
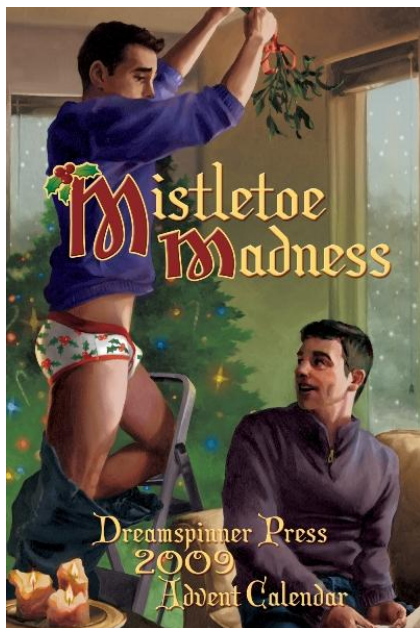
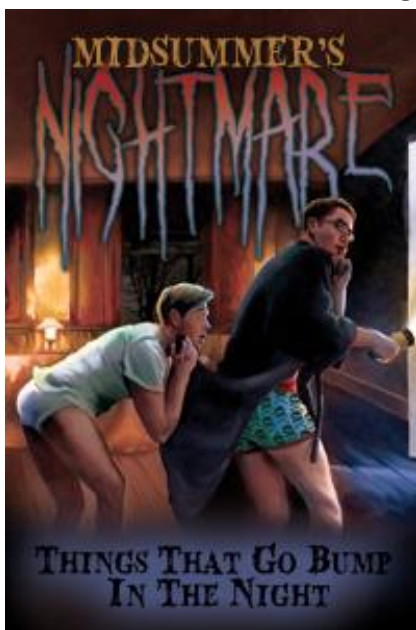


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MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) 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.

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