

CHAPTER 3

CALLIE

*Berkeley, California
Winter, 2018*

I'd been walking fifteen feet behind her for at least two blocks. I wasn't sure if I was following her yet. When I caught a glimpse of her face as I turned onto Shattuck Avenue, I felt as if an invisible rope was pulling me closer to her.

She was wearing a soft leather jacket that didn't hide her athletic figure. Her black leather boots ended just below her knees. Her hair fell in wavy golden strands, ending a few inches below her shoulders. It crossed my mind that any sane man would crave her permission to run his hands through it.

I'd known my share of beautiful women. I never tried to meet any of them by following them down the street. So with every step, I thought about how to go about doing something I wouldn't have considered a good idea before that morning in early February.

I should have been hurrying to Chocolat to pick up a cake for Jackson. Chocolat sold a cake that resembled a big hockey puck and tasted of rich dark chocolate as sweet as victory and as smooth as warm butter. Of course, Jackson could have whipped up one for himself, but hell, it was his birthday. He shouldn't have to bake his own cake, even though I knew he would. I also knew Jackson's cake would be better.

But none of that was important anymore. I'd made up my mind. I was definitely following the golden hair swaying in front of me, trying out various openings in my mind. None of them seemed quite right. I needed something unusual to happen. Fortunately, it was an unusual day.

That morning it had snowed in Berkeley, California.

The inhabitants of this college town, many of whom had never experienced snow, were skidding around as if the half-inch of white covering the ground had converted the entire town into the world's most perilous skating rink.

Suddenly, her boots slid forward from under her and she went down hard on her bottom. She instinctively tried to break her fall with her right hand. When someone begins to fall backwards, it takes real discipline to implement the logic that your butt is harder to break than your wrist.

When she hit the ground, her purse snapped open and its contents scattered around her. The snow kept them from going very far.

I rushed over to offer assistance. I must admit that if she'd been a burly man rather than a gorgeous young woman, I probably would have just kept on walking, chuckling discreetly.

Still, once I was sure she was unhurt, I had to stifle a laugh. She'd gone down with a comical thud.

She looked up at my hands, outstretched to help her. Through her disheveled hair, I saw large sea-green eyes and the kind of nose that keeps a woman desirable throughout all stages of her life. Her skin was flawless, a shade of coffee, heavy on the cream.

I waited. Beautiful women aren't always all they're cracked up to be. Often, they can be as much of a pain in the ass as falling hard on a slippery sidewalk.

However, I immediately knew that she had much more than her looks. She exuded a wonderful mixture of determination and mild humiliation. While fully appreciating the awkwardness of her situation, she was determined to overcome it with dignity.

"I don't need help, thank you," she said.

She tried to rise and promptly fell back in the same spot again.

“Maybe not, but a bit of leverage never hurts,” I said.

“On the other hand,” I continued, nodding at the sidewalk.

A hint of a smile raised the corners of her full mouth. We’re all aware that it happens. But how and why? Was it some pheromone I breathed in? Was it the way she raised her eyebrows when she gave me that smile? How I did I suddenly become convinced that I would give everything I owned, fight hopeless battles, and suffer hardships just to see her smile like that once in a while for years to come.

She took my hands and I helped her to her feet. We both bent down to gather up the contents of her purse.

“Please, really. I don’t need your help,” she said.

I rose quickly.

“Thank you again.”

She turned and began walking away.

“It doesn’t snow much in Brazil either, does it?” I said to her back.

She turned around, staring at me with what I interpreted to be an expression of concern and confusion.

“Why would you say that about Brazil?”

“Well, I’m almost positive your hair is natural, but it’s obvious that you have some Latin blood. You speak English with a mild accent. It’s a Romance language, but it actually sounds more Russian than Italian or Spanish. Also, there’s a Rio Mardigra symbol dangling from that bracelet on your wrist.”

She tilted her head slightly.

“You’re very observant, aren’t you? Like some Sherlock Helmes detective.”

That’s how she pronounced it: *Helmes*.

“Did I also mention that a Brazilian Passport fell out of your bag?”

She studied my face with great care, as if she were trying to make up her mind about something serious.

“You know,” I said. “If you’re not used to it, it’s quite dangerous out here. Perhaps I could help you reach the safety of a nearby coffee shop. We could wait out the blizzard. I’m sure the streets will be safe in about an hour.”

“So, you just want to try and pick me up.”

“I believe I’ve already tried to pick you up. Twice.”

“Twice was enough, I think. Goodbye now. Better luck with the next woman.”

“Wait, Calena.”

She turned again and displayed a disproportionate reaction of fear and anger.

“How do you know my name?” she said. “Is this some kind of test? Who sent you?”

“I have no idea what any of that means,” I said. “I glanced at the things in your purse when I bent to help you. I saw that name on a letter and I took a chance. No one sent me. You’re not wearing an engagement or wedding ring. If the thought of having a coffee with a man who is simply trying to get to know you better frightens you in that way, perhaps you should talk about it with me. Sometimes help comes when you least expect it.”

“So, you’d like to find out all about me. My terrible fears, my tortured soul.”

She shook her head from side to side.

“Americans,” she snorted. “And after I unburden myself, will you tell me all your hopes and dreams? In your apartment, perhaps?”

I grinned.

“I have a house,” I said. “And I’m not going home. At least, not until I’m sure I can see you again.”

“I’m sorry, but I have no interest in seeing you again. For the last time, goodbye. I must go now.”

“Stop,” I said.

She stopped.

“You can walk away, but there’s no chance you won’t see me again. I already know too much about you. I’m sure I want to know more. I will find you.”

“No,” she said quickly. “You can’t. Why would you do that? You don’t understand.”

“Forgive my bad manners. I know your name. You should know mine. I’m Michael Case. I’m sure you have good reasons to think that we can’t be friends, but perhaps you’re wrong. We wouldn’t be standing here talking if you didn’t want to talk to me. You’d already be gone. I also know that you can talk with me and nothing bad will come of it. I have resources you can’t imagine.”

Her eyes narrowed. Her next words came out very carefully.

“Believe me, there are reasons we shouldn’t be talking that you cannot imagine.”

She shivered slightly, even though the sun was already melting the snow. And, although I’d known her for only a few minutes, I hated to see it.

“Okay, I won’t push. May I suggest a compromise? Have one coffee with me. Just one coffee. If after that, you don’t want to see me again, I swear that you never will.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” she said.

I didn’t have to answer. It was clear that she’d already decided.

For the next four months we spent as much time together as we could. She had begun a career as a realtor and often had to attend seminars. I traveled as well. Whenever we could, we’d take walks, go to shows, or drive north to tour the wineries. We went sailing on Aram Cooper’s yacht a few times.

The one thing we never did was touch.

After we’d been together a couple of weeks, I thought I sensed something and I tried to kiss her. Her reaction was so dramatic that I never tried again. I waited patiently to know if she’d ever want to be more than my friend. Because that’s what she had become. Not only my friend, but my best friend. I could make her laugh about some foolish thing and then keep going, saying more and more until she collapsed with laughter so powerful she’d hold up her hands to make me stop, so she could catch her breath.

We didn’t talk about the past or the future. We talked about things we saw and felt in the moment.

Callie was in her late twenties and I was ten years older. Our minds intertwined on some subjects and we disagreed on others. Whenever we disagreed, we’d debate late into the night, respecting each other’s opinions while trying as hard as possible to prove each other’s arguments were completely ridiculous.

After a couple of months, she came to my house. She had wanted to see it ever since the afternoon that I mentioned I had a swimming pool in my backyard.

“A real swimming pool?” she said.

“A big one,” I said. “Olympic size. The solar panels keep the water very comfortable.”

“Can people see it, Case?”

Sometimes Callie called me Case, as Jackson always did in his lilting Haitian accent. Aram invariably referred to me as Michael. Callie went from one to the other with her mood.

“No one can see anything,” I said. “My house is at the top of the hills, just below the park. The security enclosures are one-way view only. You can see out as if they weren’t there, but no one sees in. Not even from the air. Aram comes to the house and if he gets an idea about SAM or anything else, he wants to scratch it down immediately. He’s not taking any chances after what happened three years ago. However, if you’re shy, I should tell you that Louie and Fred always monitor the areas outside the walls of the house.”

“Louie and Fred?”

“Two of Aram’s private security team. They take shifts on the vid monitors watching two acres in every direction. They also keep an eye on external areas like the deck and the pool. Considering the electronic security in the house, the voice recognition sensors, the hidden panic buttons, the vids I can activate, I thought it was overkill, but Aram insisted on it.”

“So, no topless sun bathing?”

“Well, Louie and Fred are sworn to secrecy. And part of the deal was that I’d be the one to sign their checks. I’ve gotten them to close one eye once in a while.”

“I’ll bet,” she said. “I can’t believe you have a swimming pool in the hills. I’ve never heard of such a thing. How did you get around the zoning restrictions? The water laws? How is it possible?”

“It’s specially constructed. The water is one-hundred-percent recycled. Another advantage of the security enclosures. In addition to keeping Aram’s notes from prying eyes, they also gather condensation from the air, filter it, and feed it back into the pool as needed. There aren’t many people in Berkeley who have as much money as I do.”

“Aram has more money,” Callie said, with a knowing smile.

“Oh, yes. The city council likes their parks and monuments. Aram could probably buy a big chunk of the Berkeley Hills and turn it into an amusement park ride if he felt like it, but he prefers pouring his money into that floating Sausalito palace he calls a houseboat. That is, of course, whenever he gets away from his lab, which isn’t often.”

I smiled.

“You know, you’re one of the few people Aram actually likes,” I said. “I think it’s because you get along so well with Kristin.”

“Kris is amazing.”

“My, I love to swim,” she added, softly.

“So come and swim,” I said.

I let her daydream about the pool for a minute or two.

“I even stock bathing suits.”

I interpreted her expression.

“Of course, only for my close relatives and the truly needy,” I said.

“You don’t have any close relatives. Anyway, you can relax. I come fully equipped. I’m from Rio. I was born in a bikini.”

When I had the first of many discussions with architects and contractors and decorators, I told them that their most important goal was to integrate the house as much as possible into the surrounding neighborhood. Having said that, they had two other priorities: The house needed to be as comfortable as it was beautiful, and it had to be so beautiful that it would take a first-time visitor’s breath away.

When Callie saw the house, her expression let me know that not only had they had taken my instructions seriously, but they had succeeded beyond my imagination.

“Say hello and your name,” I said, as she crossed the threshold.

“Hello, Michael’s house. I’m Calena Lacerda.”

“And I’m Michael Case. Today’s code is *Shilo*. Calena Lacerda, A.K.A Callie, is my guest. Save in memory. There are no security restrictions on her.”

Aram’s program identified my voice and responded, “Understood, Mr. Case.”

I let her wander around, interfering only when her hand came too close to a canvas of swirling oils.

“Don’t get any closer,” I warned her. “If you do, a large group of heavily armed men will bang down the front door.”

“You’re joking!”

“Well, I could probably stop them.”

“No, I mean, you’re not telling me that’s the real one?”

“Incredible, isn’t it? It was a gift.”

We swam, and ate, and laughed, and swam again. All day, I fought desires and impulses. It was difficult to prevent myself from telling her how much I wanted her to stay with me forever.

Every day, I had bad hours when thoughts of holding her, kissing her, being with her muted everything around me. I was happy and miserable, both emotions coming within minutes of each other. It was only because I’d spent much of my life controlling my thoughts and feelings that I was able to hide my desire for her. It took a great deal of my concentration to make her believe that, if being her friend was all I could ever hope to be, that would have to be enough.

As for Callie, once in a while I caught a certain look, a quick glance. In an unguarded moment, she might move her hand towards my arm. There were times when I sensed small indications that she wanted more. She wasn’t a prude and didn’t tease me. It was obvious that she enjoyed my company, but she never crossed the line between friendship and intimacy. I wondered if she believed, as I did, that if we ever embraced, there would be no going back. She let me know, in a hundred different ways, that we could never be lovers.

About four months after I met her, I was waiting for her at my house in the early evening. We had tickets to the San Francisco Ballet. She told me that she was showing a couple of houses in the hills and she'd meet me at my place for a drink before we left.

When I opened the door, she stunned me. She was wearing a clinging red dress with a plunging neckline. Her heels raised her so that her lips were almost even to mine. The only jewelry she wore was the diamond earrings I had tricked her into taking from me.

"We have time for a glass of wine," I said.

"That's good," she said, taking a small step down into the living room.

I poured two glasses of Cabernet from the winery I financed for a friend in Napa Valley. We didn't make money. He loved running the winery. I loved the wine he was capable of making whenever the grapes cooperated.

I turned to hand a glass to her and we froze. She was breathing deeply. Her jaw was set. She stared at me. I was puzzled and I smiled.

She said, "No."

Then she blinked slowly and evenly, as if concentrating on that small act could make her stop what happened next.

"I can't," she whispered. "I can't anymore."

I threw the glasses aside as she rushed towards me. She put her hands on the sides of my face, kissing me deeply. I discovered my fantasies about her had been inadequate. She tasted like desire. Pure, thrilling, uncontrollable.

I wouldn't let her mouth leave mine as I reached around behind her and opened the back of her dress. It fell to the floor. My breath caught in my throat when I saw she wasn't wearing a bra. I'd seen her in a bikini, but I was unprepared for her naked body.

She pulled her mouth away.

"Take off your shirt," she said, starting on the buttons.

Callie moaned. Everywhere I touched her was silken and firm. The thrill of being with her after I had wanted her for so long intensified the certainty that I had fallen in love with her the day I met her.

Because she'd been so distant, I felt I should be gentle, but Callie released something powerful within her. She pulled me against her and backed us against the wall. We kissed until we both needed more.

When I found a certain spot, she entwined her fingers in my hair and told me, "Yes, querida, hard, kiss me hard there. I need you."

We weren't simply making love. The pressure of her against me was primal. It felt as if we had discovered lovemaking, the joy and power of it.

"I can't wait any longer," she breathed through our kisses.

I tore off my clothes and kicked them aside. She still wore her heels. I balanced her weight as we joined together, as if we had rehearsed it a thousand times. We moved against each other, the rhythm of our muscles locked together. It was an eternity and only a short time when suddenly she cried out my name and her body spasmed, pulsing around me. A powerful release broke through her and I felt a great happiness rush through me. I knew that if her pleasure had come so strong and quickly, it could only mean that she had been with me in her mind all day. That was only fair. She had been in my mind for four months.

After the first waves passed through her, she relaxed and breathed deeply, making small grunting noises in the back of her throat.

Standing there, holding her, kissing her forehead, I thought, *This is the moment. Remember it.*

As she leaned against me, I was positive that she never would have let this happen unless she had fallen in love with me.

She felt me inside her, looked up shyly, and said, "You're not finished?"

I picked her up. Holding her against me, I kissed deeply and carried her towards one of the bedrooms.

"Finished?" I said, smiling down at her. "We've just started."

She laughed softly.

"Oh yes, yes, we have. Jump started, I'd say."

That night we played together, exploring each other. We cried out and we laughed. As the sun began to rise, Callie's head rested on my chest. Her hair tickled my cheek.

"You're sure this is what you want?" I said.

"I'm sure it doesn't matter," she said, raising her head to kiss me. "It had to be done. And now it's done."

She kissed me once again, this time more deeply.

"Don't worry, querida," she said. "My father used to say that worries are only the foolish part of imagination."

She smiled.

"It sounds better in Portuguese," she said.

"In that case, use the other part and imagine this," I said, pulling her closer.

Afterwards, she asked for some clothes so she could go home, a place that I'd never been. I began to argue, saw her face, and stopped. I had learned that when Callie was determined to do something, it was nearly impossible to change her mind. It was one of things I loved about her.

At the door, I kissed her goodbye. We made plans to see each other again. As she was walking away, she suddenly turned.

"Michael," she said. "Please, no matter what happens, you must promise that you'll forgive me."