



Diego's Secret

Bryan T. Clark

Cornbread Publishing Inc.

This work of fiction is just that—a work of fiction. Any similarities or references to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locations are intended only to give this fictional work a sense of reality and authenticity. Names, characters, and situations are the product of the author's imagination and used fictitiously, as are those fictionalized events and incidents. All trademarks, service marks, registered trademarks, and registered service marks are the property of their respective owners and are used herein for identification purposes only.

Diego's Secret

Copyright© 2018 by Bryan T. Clark

Published by: Cornbread Publishing Inc.
Fiction / Contemporary / Gay & Lesbian / M-M Romance

Cover art by: **Kristalynn Designs**

Cover content is for illustrative purposes only, and any person depicted on the cover is a model.

First Edition: May 1, 2018
ISBN: 0997056266
ISBN-13: 978-0-9970562-6-6

All rights reserved. This includes the right to reproduce any portion of this book in any form. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of international copyright law, subject to criminal prosecution and, upon conviction, fines and/or imprisonment.

WARNING: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyright work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. Anyone pirating our eBooks will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law and may be liable for each individual download resulting therefrom.

IF YOU FIND AN EBOOK OR PRINT VERSION OF THIS BOOK BEING SOLD OR SHARED ILLEGALLY, PLEASE REPORT IT TO: www.btclark.com

The heart has its own language.
—Rumi

Acknowledgment

In writing fiction, I believe I, as an author, have a profound responsibility to my readers to deliver a fictional story in which the truth still lies somewhere in the pages. Although **Diego's Secret** has a backdrop of Hispanic culture, immigration status issues, and a bit of Spanish language, it is not meant to be a representation of the Hispanic culture in general. Nevertheless, it was important to me, as a writer, to ensure that the book accurately portrayed the people and their beautiful culture, as well as some of the issues that one in the Hispanic culture might face. I would like to thank *Irene* and *Izzy* for being invaluable advisors to me on Hispanic cultural issues and for ensuring I was educated and got it right on the many important issues.

Chapter One

From the expansive entryway of the house, the sound of glass shattering echoed through the long halls. The heavy draperies in the office were still drawn from the night before. The house was cold—lifeless, as if the once-vibrant estate had been stripped of its soul and abandoned.

Winston's heart faltered in his chest as he attempted to draw a full breath. He would have screamed, like a lion in the jungle who has made his kill, if only he could breathe.

“Winston?”

He heard his name, followed by the sound of heels striking the Italian marble flooring. The steps quickened towards him, confirming that he was no longer alone.

“Winston . . . Are you okay?”

There was enough light in the study that Winston could see Ann the moment she appeared in the doorway. She stood still, her eyes scanning the room in search of him. She was his business partner, his closest friend, and the last person he wanted to see.

Obstructed by the giant mahogany desk, Winston's six-foot-two frame kneeled to pick up the remnants of what had been a Monique Lhuillier Waterford vase, a gift from Parker for their ten-year anniversary. A million crystal shards covered the Persian carpet that lay over the hardwood floor.

Ann stepped into the room. Her brow wrinkled in concern. “What happened?”

She must have let herself in the front door, which hadn't been locked in months. In the condition he had been in lately, someone could have held a party in the nearly six-thousand-square-foot house and he might not have known it. With every breath, he fought to hold back the

nausea that swelled in his throat. If allowed, his grief would take over his entire being with more ferocity than he could control. He couldn't let that happen. Breaking the four-thousand-dollar vase had been his only means to release the building pressure.

Avoiding eye contact with Ann, Winston carefully put the largest pieces of crystal into his palm. He used his elbow to keep his dog, Lucy, from stepping in it. "I dropped a vase." Under his breath, he added, "I pretended it was Parker and smashed it against the wall."

He had forgotten that Ann was coming over this afternoon to drop off some contracts that needed his signature.

"You dropped it?" She shifted her weight and leaned over the top of his desk.

Her Chanel perfume dominated Winston's space. It was her trademark; it was too much, overpowering. Picking up on her tone, Winston knew she wasn't buying his story. As his best friend since college, she would often say that she knew him better than he knew himself. Maybe she did, but she wouldn't get much from him today. "Yeah, I dropped it!"

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Ann's eyes bored into him, sending him scrambling for a better excuse. If he looked at her, she would press on. "No . . . I don't want to talk about it!" What could they possibly talk about that hadn't already been said? He should have told her to send the contracts by messenger. Putting a handful of broken glass onto a coffee table, he kept his eyes on the floor.

"Honey, I know you're hurting. I'm sorry I can't make it go away. I wish there was something I could say or do . . ." Ann's voice trailed off into silence.

The silence didn't work for Winston either. "I can't believe he left me. Gone, just like that!" The anger swelled in his chest. He was unsure of what had brought on the onslaught of

emotions he'd felt this last week. Until a week ago, he had thought he was doing well. Throwing himself into his work had mostly succeeded in distracting him from grieving the love of his life.

"He didn't leave you. Parker died!" The sorrow in Ann's voice came across loud and clear.

"What's the difference? He's not here now, is he?" She wasn't going to win. Not today. It was his right to be angry. These days, it was the only emotion that eased the pain deep within him. He wanted to lash out at someone or something, and today he had chosen the vase.

Picking up the last of the glass that he could see, he decided to save the vacuuming for his housekeeper. He was not a hundred percent sure that Monday was even her day, but he figured that he had cleaned up enough that Lucy wouldn't get cut.

Ann laid a folder on top of the cluttered mahogany desk and made her way around towards the window. With both hands, she peeled the heavy drapes open, sending a flood of light into the impressive wood paneled study.

"Jesus, what are you doing?" Winston shielded his eyes from the burst of light as if it was a gigantic fireball about to roll over him.

Stepping into his personal space, Ann stared at him for a second. Her lips pressed together as she fanned her face with her hand. "Are you drunk? It's one o'clock. Have you had breakfast?"

Winston took a seat behind his desk, attempting to put some space between them. The light buzz pulsating in his forehead said that she was right. As he thumbed through the stack of papers in the folder, she took her usual seat on the couch across the room. Without looking, he knew that she was staring, undoubtedly waiting for elaboration and penitence.

“Yes . . . No . . . No, I’m not drunk, and yes, I ate. I had a mimosa with my eggs, if that’s okay with you.” He closed the folder. He couldn’t remember a thing that he had just read. He would examine it again when Ann left. Right now, he couldn’t even focus on the clock in front of him. He was lost in a sea of hopelessness.

“Did it have any orange juice in it?”

“Ann . . . Please, I’m just not feeling it today.” He finally made eye contact with her. She was wearing the beautiful white and blue kimono that he had convinced her to buy last year when they were in Japan. She was easily the most beautiful woman he knew. Her brown skin was flawless; her need for makeup was minimal. The day they met, she had reminded him of a young Diana Ross, her hair thick and as black as coal. With her long lashes that framed her smoky brown eyes, she could have graced any magazine cover. At thirty-seven, she was that girl that women loved to hate and men couldn’t get enough of.

Winston sat behind his desk, staring out the window across the lawn and pool. There was movement. Either the gardener or the pool person was doing something in the yard. Sighing under his breath, he realized that he was a stranger in his own house. He remembered how, on the day after Parker’s accident, it had taken him hours to find Lucy’s dogfood. When he had finally located the fifty-pound bag in the garage, he had decided that keeping it there made no sense. Why wouldn’t you store it in the kitchen, where she actually ate? For the past ten years, Parker had taken care of everything: the bills, running the house, and Winston.

Devastated by Parker’s death, Winston was now lost in his own world, which Parker had created and managed. All Winston had been required to do was live in it. This had worked for them both.

“Are you listening to me?” Ann’s voice came out of nowhere. She was staring at him, her eyebrows arched. Her crossed legs revealed the red soles of her beautiful Christian Louboutin pumps.

Winston snapped back into the present, the last place he wanted to be. “What? I’m sorry.” Eyeing his empty champagne glass, he thought about offering her a mimosa. He was certainly ready for another. Adjusting himself in his chair, he forced a smile. “So, how’s William doing?”

Ann rolled her eyes. “Ugh, he’s driving me crazy with this new juice diet. He has juiced everything in the house. Last night, for dinner, we had what he called his ‘super meal.’ Apples, carrots, kale, and beets. Thank God he didn’t insist on sitting at the table and drinking it together.” She laid her arm across the back of the sofa as she turned to the window. The lines in her neck were beautiful as she stretched it for a better view of the gardener. “Hmm, he’s kind of cute. What’s his name?”

“Who?” Winston had no idea whom Ann meant. Was she planning to stay the entire day? Surely not. There had to be plenty of work at the office that required her attention.

Turning back to Winston, she smacked her lips exaggeratedly. “Is he looking for new clients? My lawn could use a good mowing.”

“Really? I don’t want to hear about what *your* lawn needs.” Although his thoughts were fuzzy, he would rather talk about work than his best friend getting her *lawn* mowed. “What’s going on with the Harper Gala? I was supposed to call Christian last week and finalize the count. Last I heard, there will be four hundred guests. Have you talked to the caterer about the veal?” The Harper Gala was one of the biggest who’s-who events they had landed since starting the business almost seven years ago. At the moment, it was just a blur to him.

Standing, Ann glanced at the young man outside before walking over to Winston's desk. "I talked to Christian last night. We're at six-fifty." She traced her fingers through Winston's tousled mass of black hair. "You need a haircut."

Winston's ink black hair against his steel-grey eyes often left people unaware that they were staring at him. Since his early childhood, people had incessantly reminded him of how beautiful he was.

"Six-fifty? The Corinthian Ballroom will only hold four-eighty-five!" Winston wiggled out from under her assault and sat up in his chair. Tapping on his laptop keyboard, in seconds he brought up the configuration of the Royal Peaks' six ballrooms. His eyes darted between the various pictures on the screen. "Can you call and book the Tuscan room instead? It holds eight hundred. We're going to need it after all. Damn it. I knew I should've booked that room in the first place! Why didn't you call me?" Winston was eager to focus on something other than his sorrow.

"Done!" Ann held out her hand to stop his rant. "I already talked to Karen at the Royal Peaks, and after a couple of calls, she was able to get us into that room. The caterer is on board with all of Christian's requests. The veal is a non-issue. They got it."

Winston leaned back into his chair. "What about the wait staff? We'll need more. The guests will be waiting for their dinners for hours."

"Winston, I've got it under control. I'm not your secretary; I'm your partner. This is not my first party, you remember." Her voice was cold as she took a seat on the edge of his desk. "Look, I've not said anything to you before, but it's almost been a year since Parker died. I've been working my ass off—"

"Well, I'm sorry his death has inconvenienced you!"

“Don’t come at me with that bullshit. I loved him too. But I didn’t just lose him; I lost you. You haven’t been in the game since he died. The last couple of months, I thought you were doing better, as if your old self was coming back. Now, I’m not so sure.”

“But—”

Ann threw her hands up. “Let me talk! I get it, baby, I do. He was everything. Hell, I would have married him if my Wildebeest William hadn’t come along! But here’s the reality: he died, and he’s not coming back. It’s the shittiest thing I could say, but I love you, and I can’t continue to sit back and watch you disintegrate into a bottle of vodka. You’re not even a drinker.”

Fighting tears, Winston held his tongue. He knew that, when she was fired up, there was no stopping her. Only once before had he been on the receiving end of her wrath, and he had vowed never to let it happen again.

Ann continued, “I need you to take some time off, some real time. Let me handle the business. I’ll keep you up to date on anything important, but I need you to focus on you. See a doctor. Go on vacation. Go visit your mother in Montana and get to know your newest stepfather, what’s his name . . . *Cowboy Dick?*”

“Cal . . . His name is Cal Richardson.”

“Whatever. What I’m trying to say is you need to take care of yourself. The world has not ended, although you may feel like it did. The sun is shining, and the rest of us are alive, waiting on you to come back. You’re a beautiful man. You might want to start thinking about dating again.”

Dating was the last thing on his mind. At thirty-two years old, he didn’t care if he ever dated again. His heart couldn’t take it. Thinking about the past few months, Winston knew he

hadn't carried any of the workload. He had called Ann a week ago and said he was sick and was taking the rest of the week off.

"Yeah. I can't." The words came out of Winston's mouth before she was finished. "The Harper Gala needs us both. Perhaps after that."

"Bullshit! Who's the primary beneficiary for the Harper Gala?" Ann asked.

"Um . . . it's . . ." He was sure he knew this. If she would back off and give him a minute to think, it would come to him.

"You can't tell me one thing about one of the biggest events we've ever landed." Ann clasped her hands together. "Please, baby, let me handle this. Take some time and get yourself together. Come back after. Do it for me. Please."

Maybe she was right. Maybe he did need to take some time off. But he wasn't going to Montana. That was for sure. Winston tried to erase the thought of sitting in Montana with his mother and Cal.

That night, after a long, hot shower, Winston ran a towel through his hair as he stood in front of his bathroom's floor-to-ceiling mirror. Ignoring the trace scents of balsam and fir that permeated the room, he stared at the pale body in front of him. He turned to one side and then to the other. He was getting too thin. For being white, he once prided himself on his inherited round bubbly ass that now seemed to be disappearing. It didn't help that it was June and there wasn't a hint of a tan line anywhere on his pasty frame, not even a farmer's tan. Over the years, his youthful, athletic body and natural six-pack were getting harder and harder to maintain, but this last year, these last couple of months, everything about him was becoming harder to recognize. He ran his hand across his flat stomach and forced a smile at the mirror, almost as if he was

smiling at a stranger. He couldn't remember the last time he had smiled. *It may be time to join a gym.* Words forgotten as soon as he thought them.

Winston wrapped his robe around his body. Drawing the tie tightly across his abdomen, he glanced at the mirror one last time. Releasing an exasperating sigh, he tossed the wet towel on top of the hamper. It was only eight o'clock. There were four more hours before this day would end. A year ago, he and Parker would've been on one of their date nights, in the middle of a fabulous dinner somewhere down in Beverly Hills or West Hollywood. A chuckle escaped him. Parker would have been going on about the wine or the cuisine. Parker had been a true foodie, talking about food as if he were dating it.

Walking back into his office, Winston looked for the folder Ann had brought over. He would resort to his go-to means of making time pass: work.

After ruffling through the pile of papers on his desk several times, he realized that the folder she had dropped off wasn't there. His desk wasn't that messy at the moment. Actually, it was clean by his standards. He remembered laying the folder next to his laptop. He rummaged through the papers again, thinking he must have overlooked it. He wanted to review the numbers and check the caterer's order.

Nights were his worst times since Parker's accident. Darkness brought a hellish isolation in which their once-beautiful home became a tomb, an empty place that left him hollow. *Did Ann take the folder with her?* Sitting down in his chair, he logged into his computer and waited for the data to load. He hated this antiquated program. He reminded himself that he had to hire someone to create new software for them. Words flashed in red across his screen: *Failed. Try Again?*

“Goddamn it!” Winston cursed aloud. Lucy raised her head at the pitch of his voice. “Sorry, girl.” He watched her for a second or two before returning his attention to his laptop. Ann was right. He did need a break. Grabbing his phone, he leaned back into his chair. No messages, no texts, no updates on anything. A deep sigh escaped him. *Where could I go?* He vetoed each idea as quickly as he thought of it. No place sounded very interesting when he would be there alone. He could visit his mother. He hadn't seen her since the funeral. She and Cal had flown out as soon as they heard the news of the accident. His mother had stayed at the hospital with him, day in and day out, until the physician called a family conference.

“We've done everything possible,” he told them. “As a family, you need to start thinking about what Parker would want.” Words never to be forgotten.

Winston knew what Parker would want. They had talked about it a million times. The conversation was usually sparked by a television show or a news story.

Parker had been lying in his hospital bed for two weeks. He hadn't moved. The doctors and nurses had been hinting for several days that this decision was coming, but Winston had ignored them. Now, his mother, his stepfather, and Parker's parents, sister, and grandmother all sat staring at him as the doctor waited for an answer.

Was he to make this decision? To take Mrs. Leblanc's son from her, to cause a grandmother to outlive her grandchild? He had no proof that Parker would have wanted this; they had only laughed about not leaving one another on life support. *Goddamn, Parker, why didn't you write this down? You took care of everything but this. Goddamn you.*

Returning to the present, Winston walked into the living room and over to the bar. He had waited long enough for a drink.

Glass, ice, vodka, and a splash of cranberry juice for color. With his glass in hand, he followed Lucy down the hall to the back door. She needed to pee. Normally, he would just open the door and let her go out, sniff flowers, and patrol the yard—whatever French Bulldogs did.

As he trailed her outside, a delicate balance of cut grass and jasmine filtered through his lungs, sending a sudden lightness into his head. Blindsided by the sweet perfume, he wandered farther into the yard. He was sure it was star jasmine. Looking around, he spotted the aromatic culprit bordering the back of the pool.

He had forgotten how beautiful Thousand Oaks was. The town's mountain terrain was peaceful and isolated from LA's traffic, which was just what he and Parker had wanted when they bought the house two years ago. The place was surrounded by foothills. Parker had said that deer and mountain lions lived in the area, but Winston had never seen either.

Taking a seat in a double lounge chair, he laid back and peered up at the sky. It was too early for stars; the sun had barely set. He could visit his mother. How bad could a few days in Montana be? Who names a town Marysville? Could the name be any gayer? *Yeah, I'm not going to Marysville.* Nevertheless, Ann was right. *I need to take some time off, figure things out, shake this depression thing that's got me.*

Across the pool, up in the hills, glimmered the lights of houses. Looking at the closest house, he saw movement through the large windows, but he was too far away to make out anything else. He didn't know any of his neighbors, if you could call them that. Every house sat on at least an acre or two of property, ensuring privacy.

Taking another sip of his drink, he relished the warmth and calmness that the cocktail provided. It was nice, sitting here. He should have brought his phone with him if he was going to hang out . . . just in case.

Maybe I'll come out here tomorrow and lie out. Tomorrow . . . A lifetime away.

Chapter Two

Diego lay in bed, waiting for his older brother Rafael to come out of the only bathroom in their tiny, two-bedroom apartment in the predominately-Hispanic neighborhood in Maywood, California. Curled in the fetal position, his five-foot eight-inch body was nestled down in his twin bed. It was just past five-thirty a.m., and like clockwork, his eldest brother, Francisco, was yelling, his commentary likely heard by the other renters in the four-unit, two-story building in the heart of East Los Angeles County.

“Are you up?” Francisco yelled through the bedroom door. He spoke in Spanish as they usually did at home. “I’m running late. You need to take Rafael to school before you start this morning.”

Diego drew a long breath. He was exhausted. He hadn’t had a day off in three weeks. His gardening service, which the three of them had started after they arrived in LA eight years ago, was keeping him busy twelve to thirteen hours a day.

Francisco had left the business first, to open a garage where he did oil changes, minor repair work, and window tinting. About a year later, Rafael decided he wanted to go to the local college, so he too left the business and took a job working evenings at the Grind Coffee Shed.

Throwing off his blanket, Diego prepared himself to jump and go the moment Rafael came out of the bathroom. Wait too long and Francisco would be back in there.

While he waited, he examined one of his many landscape sketches pinned to the wall. The piece needed several changes before he would be satisfied, but that would have to wait until later.

When he heard the bathroom door's handle turn, Diego jumped out of bed. Meeting Rafael in the hall just as he was exiting the bathroom, Diego waited for his brother to get out of the way. Rafael stood a couple inches taller and was about ten pounds heavier than Diego, who, at one hundred and forty-five pounds, was the smallest of the three brothers. Rafael would seize any opportunity to demonstrate his machismo to Diego. It was too early for that bullshit.

"Sorry, *flaco*, for the smell. My stomach is jacked up." Rafael passed Diego without looking at him, heading back into their bedroom. "You got me this morning?"

"Yeah, I have to leave in ten minutes!" Diego shut himself in the cramped bathroom, pushing through the nasty stench his brother had left. He freed himself from his underwear as he stood over the toilet. *Ah, the feeling of relieving yourself after holding it for hours in bed.* This wasn't the first time; why he didn't get up and walk the five feet to the bathroom when he had to go was beyond him. As he thought about the day ahead, the door suddenly clipped him in his back. Francisco stuck his tatted arm in. "Need my belt." Grabbing the belt from the countertop, Francisco looked at him. "Hey, don't forget to go by and pay the rent. Rafael is short a hundred. Can you cover it?"

"No," Diego grumbled. That was a lie, but it was his knee-jerk response. He could easily cover it, but his older brother was short fifty to a hundred bucks every other month. Because Francisco had started the lawn company, he acted as if the income it drew was still his. Diego hated that, and it further pissed him off that Rafael went out on dates two or three nights a week. How much was that costing?

"Don't be a dick." Francisco's stout body jarred the door open a little more, hitting him again.

“Stop it!” Diego leaned back into the door, slamming it shut before tucking himself into his underwear. He splashed cold water on his face and hair and made quick work of brushing his teeth.

Tuesday . . . This would be his second day in Thousand Oaks. At least he wouldn't be pulling equipment in and out of the trailer all day. Mondays and Tuesdays were devoted to the two properties that he loved to work on.

It wasn't the usual cutting, edging, raking, and blowing eight houses per day, like he did the rest of the week. Instead, he got to maintain and work his magic on huge lawns with formal gardens. Creating a utopia for the rich. The fact that he was paid well to do it didn't hurt either. To tell the truth, Diego was enjoying the business more without his brothers. He spent his days alone, without having to listen to their idiotic caveman banter all day.

Diego knew that when Rafael was done with school, it would be his turn. He would love to return to school, maybe study landscape design. He had attended a workshop a year ago at the local community center where he first heard about the course of study. Several Latinos there had started out as gardeners and were now successful landscape designers.

“Come on, we got to bounce, *flaco!*”

“Alright, I'm coming!” Diego didn't know the exact time, but he knew they were running late. *How hard would it be to buy a clock for the bathroom? I'll stop at Dollar World and pick one up today, if I get a chance.*

Rushing out the door, he checked the trailer behind his truck, ensuring all the locks were intact and that his livelihood hadn't been stolen during the night. After a quick glance at the hitch and rear tires, he joined his brother in the crew cab of their 2001 Ford F150. Francisco had obtained the truck in a trade for their services several years ago, after threatening one of their

clients who couldn't pay his bill. Thanks to Francisco's mechanical skills, the vehicle ran as if she was brand new. Diego dreamed of the day when he could purchase the new truck he had been eyeing on the Chevrolet lot. It was his dream truck, all black with black rims and silver pin striping.

"Are you in Thousand Oaks today?" Rafael asked, as he lowered his window and extended his arm to get some air.

"Yes." Diego fired up the truck and watched the gauges, hoping that everything was okay. As the cabin filled with Katy Perry's latest single, he saw that everything wasn't. "I need gas—and coffee."

"Do it after you drop me off. I don't want to be late." Rafael changed the radio station. "Why do you listen to that white music?" he asked in English. Of the three brothers, Rafael spoke English most confidently.

Diego ignored the comment. Anything was better than that ranchera music he and Francisco listened to day in and day out. He said, "You won't be late. It's barely seven. What time is class?"

In Spanish, Rafael answered, "Eight . . . I can't believe you drink that crap at the station. It's not real coffee."

Diego swallowed as if the bitterness of stale gas station coffee was scratching the inside of his throat. "Well, I don't have eight bucks to spend on a coffee at the Grind, and I don't get it for free." He would never admit that the coffee at the Grind was actually good. His usual gas station coffee was much less tasty, but it worked. "Francisco said you're short this month. You know that I have to pay the rent tonight."

“Yeah, my check was short. I only worked four days last week.” Rafael settled on a station, and music filled the cabin. Threading his narrow fingers through his long, thick hair, he positioned Diego’s rearview mirror so that he could see himself. He raked his fingers through his brownish-red locks a couple of times and leaned back, apparently satisfied.

You’re full of shit, Diego thought. What about the last check, or the one before that? What did you do with your money? You spend it on food, girls, and beer, and then I have to make up the difference. Diego pulled away from the curb and merged the truck and trailer with the morning rush-hour traffic. Though he was a year older than Diego, Rafael was the least responsible of all of them.

“Did you save anything for Mom and Dad? Mom said Dad needed cash to fix their roof.” Diego already knew the answer, but he wanted Rafael to say it. Since arriving in the States, if the three brothers had done anything consistently, it was sending money back to Mexico to take care of their parents.

“I sent them something already.” Rafael’s voice told Diego he was lying.

Diego’s attention was drawn to someone jogging on the sidewalk. He tried to leave at the same time every morning in the hope of seeing this jogger, whom he had nicknamed Mr. Legs. He had first spotted Mr. Legs about two months ago, jogging along Pomona Blvd. The man was tall and looked to be in his thirties or forties. The muscles in his thighs and chest danced every time he took a stride.

Diego would never forget the moment when he had first spotted Mr. Legs. Stopped at a traffic light, he had glanced over to the corner just as the man lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face. Mr. Legs’ deep and strained breathing had contracted and expanded his cut abs. He was beautiful. It was an image Diego had retained.

He had created an imaginary life for his mystery jogger. He was a banker with a wife and two kids. He jogged every morning. When he got home, his wife had breakfast on the table. They ate together, before he kissed his family goodbye for the day and left for work in his Mercedes.

Passing Mr. Legs, Diego took one last glance at him in his side mirror. The sight of Mr. Legs stretched the crotch in his pants every morning. He didn't know anything about the stranger other than the story he had made up for himself.

Right on time, at one o'clock, Diego pulled up to the gates of the Leblanc estate, put the truck in park, and got out to punch in the gate code.

He spent Monday and Tuesday mornings at another property, the Bernstein estate. The Bernsteins were congenial, but since Mrs. Bernstein had a standing two o'clock poolside bridge game every Monday, she insisted that he split the work into two days, returning on Tuesday mornings.

After spending the morning at the Bernstein estate, he always made a quick stop at a taco truck. There, he got four tacos to go and ate them on the drive over to the Leblanc estate, a one-acre, meticulously landscaped piece of property. Thankfully, Mr. Leblanc was adaptable and allowed him to split a full day's work on his estate into two afternoons to accommodate the Bernsteins.

Two years ago, Diego and Mr. Leblanc had walked the grounds for several days, planning the landscape remodel. Mr. Leblanc had just purchased the property. He wanted to give the entire landscape a makeover, so the two of them discussed what would stay and what would go. They debated and finally agreed that the pool shouldn't be the centerpiece of the yard. "I

want a yard full of color, flowers, things that draw your attention no matter where you are in it. I want a place where my husband can relax, where humming birds and butterflies come to hang out.”

Husband? It was the first time Diego had ever heard a man refer to another man as his husband. At first, he thought he had heard wrong or had mistranslated the word in his head, but Mr. Leblanc said it again and again. He was referring to his partner as his husband, his *amor*. Diego had tried to stay focused on what Mr. Leblanc was saying. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought Mr. Leblanc was gay.

Diego parked the truck in the circular driveway and checked his face, mouth, and teeth in his rearview mirror for leftover tacos. Yesterday, he had taken care of the lawn and planter beds. Today, he needed to trim and shape the bonsai trees and hedges and tend to the assortments of annuals and rose bushes carefully positioned around the grounds. He loved spring. The weather was warming, and everything was blooming.

There was not a soul around as Diego unloaded his equipment. Even before Mr. Leblanc had died last year, the place had been quiet, but now it was a different, eerie kind of quiet. Before Mr. Leblanc had died, Diego had had several conversations with him about the yard, discussing plants, trees and landscaping ideas and future projects. He had appreciated the kindness of Mr. Leblanc, one of the few clients who acknowledged his existence.

He had met Mr. Leblanc's husband twice—or maybe three times. Once as they were loading luggage into the trunk of their car—they said they were flying somewhere. London? Another time, the husband had asked Diego to move his truck so he could get his car out. Oh, and then the third time, Diego had seen the husband and a beautiful African American woman sitting by the pool, working on their laptops.

Since Mr. Leblanc's death, the property had been like an abandoned zoo: some of the animals were still present, just enough to show that there was life here. Direct deposits of three hundred and fifty dollars kept coming every month, so Diego kept working.

His phone vibrated in his jeans. It was a text from Francisco. *Don't forget to pay the rent.*

Surveying the yard, Diego stuffed his phone back into his pocket. The lawn needed fertilizer, the boxwoods that bordered the driveway needed trimming, and the willow trees in the middle of the driveway circle needed a good spring whack job. The willows in the back yard needed the same.

He worked for a few hours before pausing for a quick break. He headed around to the front of the house to retrieve the one-gallon plastic milk jug that he filled with tap water every morning. Pulling the plastic cap from the opaque container, he held it up and allowed the tepid water to ease his thirst. Afterwards, he checked the time on his phone: *4:18 pm.*

Shit. He had forgotten that he had to leave early to get to the property manager's office before six. He hurried toward the back yard to grab his tools.

As he rounded the side of the house, Mr. Leblanc's husband appeared at the back door. A little dog charged past him and ran at Diego. The man spotted him and waved dismissively. "Sorry about that. I thought you were gone. Letting her out to pee. Lucy, come back!"

Diego kneeled as Lucy reached him. Petting the dog, he snickered at the stupid pink ribbon on its collar as it rolled over, wiggling in the grass. *I guess it's a girl.*

He stroked the little dog several times before looking back up at the man, whose loose-fitting black gym pants and wrinkled white tee shirt hung on him like he was a ragdoll. His face lacked any emotion; his eyes stared right through Diego. Perhaps the blower had woken him. *Surely not. It's four o'clock.*

“Do you speak English?” The man remained in the doorway. “*Habla usted Inglés ?*” he repeated.

Diego's ears perked. The man's Spanish was good. “*Si, hablo Inglés.*” Standing up, Diego watched the little dog run off to do her business. He waited nervously for the man to say something. Anything would have been better than the silence that descended as the man's sunken eyes burned into him.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't sure,” the man finally replied in English.

Had you ever bothered to have a conversation with me, you would have known I speak English. Diego tried not to roll his eyes. He'd been rolling his eyes all of his life. It was his reaction to stupidity, but it tended to get him into trouble. In fact, when he was a child, his mother had often pulled his ear for the disrespect. Diego noticed that the man had a towel and a book in his hand.

Lifting his baseball cap, Diego ran his fingers through his long black hair, brushing the curls out of his face. The man made him nervous, just standing there.

Within seconds, Lucy reappeared, trotting up the walkway towards the house. She squeezed past her owner and through the door. “Have a nice day.” The man waved and shut the door without waiting for a response.

Diego shook his head. He didn't have time for weird; he had to get going. Quickly gathering his things and packing the trailer, he sped off in the hope of making it to the property manager's office before it closed.

Chapter Three

“I can’t believe I just stood there staring at him. Ann, he was beautiful.” Winston switched the phone to his other ear so he could hold it with his left hand. Popping his Lean Cuisine into the microwave, he set it to heat for three minutes. “I was heading out to lie by the pool. When I opened the door, *bam*, he was right there.”

“Was it that same gardener? The guy from yesterday?”

“I don’t know, maybe. He’s very attractive—and I love his broken English. His voice is deep, with a thick accent. Sexy!” A sudden heaviness in Winston’s chest caused him to lean against the counter. It was guilt. He shouldn’t be talking about this guy as if Parker . . . And there was another kick to his gut. “Hey Ann, can I call you back? My dinner’s ready.” It was as if a cut had been reopened, but instead of blood, it was pain rushing to the surface. He was learning to apply the compress quickly, to stop it before he bled out.

“No worries. I’m glad you agreed to take some time off. I wish you were going somewhere, but we can do baby steps. I’ll call you later this week.”

“Okay. Love you. Goodnight.” Winston quickly hung up before Ann could deliver her famous line: *Before I let you go . . .*

His stomach was in a knot, and the smell from his Chicken Alfredo was nauseating. One minute he was fine, and the next, the simple thought of Parker cast him into a sea of guilt. His mind jumped from Parker to the gardener, then back to Parker, and then again to the gardener.

In his denim jeans and a loose-fitting forest green long sleeve shirt, the gardener couldn’t have been more than five-seven or five-eight. Winston had found his deep voice and accent a sexy surprise. His hair was a midnight black and hung over his collar. Yet it was those dark

brown, almost black, eyes framed by thick black brows that made him most interesting. But, no doubt, he was young, a baby.

A ding from the microwave signaled that Winston's food was ready. He carefully removed the cardboard container that held his dinner. Tearing the plastic film from the top, he let steam billow out. As it cooled, he fed Lucy and went to make himself a drink. Standing in front of the liquor cabinet, he decided to give his liver a break tonight. A glass of iced tea actually sounded better.

With his dinner in front of him, he grabbed his phone from the counter. The thought came to him to check the gardener's website. There might be a picture of him there. *What was the guy's name? Gonzalez, Hernandez, Mendoza?* With his right thumb, he typed:

Gonzalez lawn care . . .one hundred and two hits. Too many to search.

Hernandez lawn care . . . Twice the number of hits.

Lawn service thousand oaks . . . one hundred and sixty-four thousand hits. Jesus.

Hot gardener los angeles . . . Naked girls in bikinis popped up. Okay, he was definitely not a female.

Hot male gardener los angeles . . . His screen quickly filled with pictures of guys holding clippers and pushing lawn mowers. *Hmm, this may be something.* He scrolled through the pictures. The guys were unquestionably hot, but none of them looked like his gardener.

After a half hour of searching through pictures of sexy male gardeners, he grabbed his room-temperature dinner and took it to the living room for an hour of CNN.

After the top of the news, his mind drifted. *Parker would be okay with me dating again, right?* It would be weird dating someone, being out with someone other than Parker. They were supposed to be together forever. In one of their private jokes, Winston had always said he wanted

to die first so that he could haunt the house and scare off any young men creeping around for a sugar daddy. *It's been almost a year. When is it okay to date again?* Was it wrong to think about dating? Was it cheating? He laughed under his breath. He couldn't believe his gardener was invoking such thoughts. He had thought about no one like this—not before Parker had died and certainly not after.

Winston took to his yard for the rest of the week. He made extensive use of the pool and the warm sun, working on his tan. The only time he had ever spent in his own yard was during BBQs, pool parties, or while having cocktails with Parker in the evenings. He had never lain out for hours by himself. Now, he was even napping out there.

He stayed outside until about five o'clock each day. The sun was doing his mind some good. With renewed clarity, he began mapping out his future and what it might look like with the love of his life gone.

By the time Monday rolled around, Winston had a routine figured out: breakfast first, then emails, morning talk shows, and then out to the pool. His phone, iPod, and book in one hand, and a bottled water in the other hand, he set up his lounge chair at the far end of the pool with the house to his back. With a view of the mountain in front of him, he rolled up his board shorts until they almost reached his pelvic area, exposing as much of his pale legs as possible. He nestled deeper into his lounge before picking up his book to read. Within a couple of chapters, his eyelids grew heavy, causing him to lay the bulky hardcover across his chest.

Winston realized he must have dozed off when the sound of a mower being fired up out front jarred him from his nap. His cute gardener was back. With this realization, he felt a light flutter in his stomach, followed with a concern as to how he looked.

Running his hand across his flat, sweaty stomach, he hated that he was so skinny. *At least I have somewhat of a tan going. It doesn't look that bad.* He repositioned his frame in the lounge for an even tan. He couldn't believe he was nervous and jittery over some guy—his gardener, no less.

It was about thirty minutes before Diego made his way around to the back. Behind the mower, he was wearing light-colored jeans and a V-neck black tee shirt. His baseball cap indicated he was a Dodgers fan.

Seeing Diego, Winston tried to breathe. The gardener was as cute as he remembered.

His eyes shielded by a pair of large sunglasses, Diego's head thumped to the buds in his ear. Wheeling the mower from the walkway to the far corner of the grass, he walked the length of the lawn before making a U-turn and heading back down. On his third pass, he finally glanced up. Seeing Winston, he came to an abrupt stop and turned off the blades of the mower. "I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone was back here."

Winston tried to play it cool. "How are you?" With a flurry of adrenaline rushing through his body, he released a concentrated breath. Winston couldn't avoid staring at the boot-cut jeans that molded themselves to the gardener's thighs. The man's small frame appeared solid, undoubtedly in shape due to the physically demanding labor of gardening. He was young, maybe in his early twenties. Winston's desire to know, touch, and understand more caused his eyes to linger, and an unintentional smile stuck on his face.

"Um, okay . . . I come back tomorrow. I cut it then, no problem." Looking down, Diego turned the mower completely off. Several short, jerky movements followed before his feet stilled behind his mower.

“No, that’s alright. You’re already here. I was about to go in anyways.” Winston slid his feet down onto the patio and slipped into his flip-flops. As he stood up, he inspected his surrounding area before remembering he hadn’t been wearing a shirt when he came out. He stepped onto the grass, closer to Diego. “I’m Winston, Winston Makena. I don’t think we’ve ever officially met.” Clumsily, he extended his hand to Diego.

Diego removed his work gloves before shaking Winston’s hand. “Hello. Diego. Nice to meet you.” Both held eye contact a little longer than normal as they shook hands.

Diego’s grip was strong, his hands slightly rough from working. Noticing the thick, long curls sticking out from under the gardener’s hat, Winston scrambled for his next words. His eyes darted down Diego’s jawline, which was strong, defined, and filled with tiny, dark whiskers that cascaded down his neck.

As he released Diego’s hand, the silence deepened between them. Winston swallowed, trying to moisten his throat. “Nice to meet—you.” Lost for words, he stood there for a second or two. “Okay, I’ll let you get back to work.”

“Okay,” Diego murmured.

With several long strides, Winston headed towards the house, where he was safe. He wanted to turn around and take one last look, but he didn’t dare.

Diego called out to him. “Sir, how is everything? The yard, is it okay with you? You like?”

Winston turned as Diego removed his sunglasses, revealing his eyes. They were piercing. The sunlight rendered them a warm cinnamon that made Winston speechless for a split second.

“Um, yes . . . The yard looks great. Thank you.”

“I come back tomorrow to mow.” Diego’s forehead furrowed as he used a yellow handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow.

The tenor in his voice fell onto Winston’s ears like a song. The deep thick accent, the slow drawl, brought his eyes to Diego’s full lips; lips any woman would kill for; lips Winston suddenly wanted to kiss. The thought of actually kissing those lips caused the corner of Winston’s mouth to twitch. “It’s fine. I’m going inside.” With the back door in sight, Winston retreated. Trying to control his breath, he exhaled slowly. His fantasy remained with him as he hurried to safety.

In the house, Winston fought the urge to go to the window and look. He couldn’t believe how he was acting—as if he was twelve. He took a deep breath as he moved to the window and closed the blinds enough to shield him from sight. Scanning the yard, he found Diego raking a small flowerbed, clueless that he was being watched.

As he observed the young man, a contraction in Winston's stomach told him, *You’re doing something wrong. He has to be straight. He looks straight. Damn, he’s cute. Okay, that’s enough. You’re being creepy.* Winston forced himself to move away from the window.

End of Sample

Buy Now