

Shore
THING
NOVEL

BAITING
Burke

JACLYN QUINN



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Baiting Burke

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Cover design by [Designs by Morningstar](#)

Editing done by Anita Ford

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The Shore Thing series has been an amazing ride, and I'm so grateful to all who took that journey with me. It's going to be so incredibly hard to say goodbye to these five best friends! They brought me more joy than I ever could've imagined. I've received so many nice messages from people who love the friendship these guys have. I am blown away by the love and support you've given me and them!

Thank you all so much!

CHAPTER ONE

“**T**his was a brilliant idea, Burke. You wouldn’t be sitting out here in this mess, while fucking Hurricane Danny pounds your car harder than a dog in heat, if you’d made sure those assholes left yesterday. But *nooooo*...you had to use some kind of asinine scare tactic, and now three idiots are accepting your challenge. Well, probably two idiots and one chickenshit who must have caved.” Scrubbing a hand over my tired eyes, I huffed with absolutely no humor. “And now you’re talking to yourself.”

I should’ve known they were serious yesterday at the restaurant when I’d overheard their brilliant plan to go surfing in this storm. Hell, it was my responsibility as part owner of Coral Pointe Inn and Oceanside Bar and Grill to make sure our guests left in one piece. And that didn’t mean a body bag.

My SUV shook with the onslaught of heavy wind and torrential rain, reminding me I shouldn’t be out in this damn storm. I twisted around, trying to see the inn parking lot through the back window from where I sat on the other side of the inlet. The rain pelted my window with such ferocity, it looked like one sheet of blurry, melting glass, but I swore I could still see a blob that looked like their car in the parking lot of the inn.

“Burke Russo, if you don’t respond and tell us you’re okay, we’re coming to look for you. You’ll have to explain to Mama Ashton why you made her favorite child go out in this weather.” *Ford*. I snorted, looking down at the walkie-talkie in my hand.

I pressed the button on the side of the radio and chuckled. “Don’t be bitter because I’m her favorite.” Hell, I was more concerned with Mama Russo finding out, and she was three thousand miles away.

“Burke, where the hell are you?” That time it was Cole. I could picture my best friends now. Cole was most likely pacing his mom’s living room while Noah lay on the couch concerned, his booted, sprained foot—from when a child’s toy wrestler took the big guy down—stretched out on the cushion. Then there was Levi...who, no doubt, had a scowl plastered on his face, pissed that I hadn’t told them what was going on so he could’ve talked me out of it or helped. Ford was Ford, cracking jokes to hide his unease about me not being at Levi and Sage’s yet. My best friends were predictable pains in my ass, but they were mine.

“The last few guests who were supposed to check out weren’t accounted for. Three morons who were talking yesterday about how cool it would be to surf in this.” Apparently, it wasn’t all talk.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell us sooner? We would’ve been out there helping you!” Levi shouted into the radio. *Do I know him, or what?*

“That’s exactly why I didn’t say anything. No sense for us all to be out in this. Besides, I don’t see them in the water.” Not that I could see the water too clearly from here, either, but I needed a minute before I went back out there looking for them.

“Where are you now?” *Fisherboy*. Just the cadence of Jared’s voice shook me harder than the raging fucking winds. “This could’ve been a hell of a lot faster if you’d just asked for help, Cave Dweller.” He had to open his damn mouth. I could think of a ton of creative ways to shut the man up—*nope*. *Don’t go there*.

“Why, so all of us could be out here, soaked to the bone? I should’ve made sure those guys left the second I heard their stupid plan.” I was going to kick myself for that one for a while.

“You still didn’t tell us where you are,” Cole said.

“I’m over by SandBar, sitting in my car in the fairgrounds lot. Thought maybe they’d stay away from the inn because I’d heard them yesterday. Their car is still in the inn lot. If something happens to them it’ll be my fault. The inn’s name will be dragged into it, I’m sure.” Fuck! Why hadn’t I kicked them out then? I didn’t give a shit if those thrill-seeking assholes rode Danny’s wet dick blindfolded, but if they got hurt, and the inn went down for it—

“Stay right there.” That damn sexy voice again, barking orders.

Fuck that. “I’m just gonna—”

“I said stay there, Burke.” Jared’s aggravation traveled through the radio and zipped right down my fucking spine. Getting the man riled up shouldn’t have affected me the way it did, but for the love of God, did he have to be so sexy when his cool, calm demeanor shifted into pure frustration? Ruffling the mellow fisherman’s feathers was my favorite past-time.

Gritting my teeth, I pressed my hand down on my cock, angry with the way my body reacted to his deep, Southern drawl. I jumped when a small branch smacked against my driver’s side window, reminding me this wasn’t the time to start an argument with the man who lived to drive me crazy. If he wanted to come out in this shit, so be it. “Fine,” I said, my jaw clenched so tight, I thought I’d crack a tooth. No doubt, those jackasses were getting a kick out of this right now.

Another strong burst of wind rocked my SUV as rain beat down hard on every window. I could’ve been at Levi’s right now, with my feet up on his coffee table and a beer in my hand. But, no, I had to be out in Satan’s sneeze, waiting on the bane of my existence to get his ass here so I could worry about four guys out in this storm instead of three.

I jumped when the passenger side door was yanked open and a soaking-wet Fisherboy landed in the seat next to me. Jesus, the man looked good in...water. I snorted to myself. Now was not the time to picture Jared in nothing but the stream of a shower dripping down his bod—

“What the hell were you thinking?” he snapped, a scowl pulling his brow and fire in his light eyes.

That was enough to kick the thought of him naked out of my head. Mostly. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I was thinking the inn will have bad press if something happens to those jackasses, and if I can prevent it, I damn well will,” I shot back, anger and fucking unwanted desire for the man next to me making my blood pressure rise astronomically.

“You should’ve told us. We could’ve covered twice the area in half the time.” A water droplet slid from his drenched, strawberry blond hair and made its way down the side of his face. I absolutely did not want to catch it with my tongue. Fuck, this man made me crazy in every sense of the word. When he waved a hand in front of my face, sarcastically spitting out, “Hello...anyone in there?” I reeled my reckless imagination back in.

Growling, I smacked his hand away. “Maybe I don’t want your help. Ever think of that, Fisherboy?”

A flash of something dangerously close to hurt darkened his expression. It was gone within seconds, replaced with his usual cocky grin he saved just for me. “Keep tellin’ yourself that. Must be exhausting to constantly pretend to be above human emotions.” He held my gaze, as if challenging me. My skin prickled, my hands clenching into fists so as not to grab the fucking man and show him the only *help* I needed from him. My cock swelled beneath the tight confines of my soaked-through jeans. Jared’s eyes dipped, zeroing in on my mouth. It took everything in me not to lick my lips and see if that intense desire focused on me had a taste. The windows fogged with every heavy breath released.

Something smacked against the side of my SUV, severing the connection between Jared’s scorching gaze and my sanity. “I’m going out to look again. Come. Don’t come. I don’t care.”

Jared snorted. “I’ve heard those words before, but I gotta tell you, your delivery is lacking.” The damn man winked before shoving his door open and forcing himself into the

crazy storm. Because of me. He was here because of me. That thought was the only reason I rushed to vacate my car and go to his side. The last thing I needed was another man added to the list of jackasses out in this storm because I didn't stop them.

"This is the last attempt to find those guys," Jared yelled over the wind. "If we don't find them in ten minutes, they're on their own."

The thought of something happening to those idiots turned my stomach, but Jared was right. Neither one of us could stay out there for much longer. I nodded in agreement then started walking toward the beach. Looking back over my shoulder, I watched Jared head toward SandBar. An uneasy feeling swirled in my gut, but the truth was, Jared knew this town and weathering these kinds of storms in Florida better than I did. Hell, in California I'd been more used to earthquakes.

There was no sign of those guys anywhere. My only saving grace was I didn't see any abandoned surf boards in the water or on the shore. Admitting defeat, I forced myself to head back to my SUV. Hand on the door handle, I was about to yank it open when a heavy body slammed into mine, pressing me between the car and their weight.

Jared suddenly disappeared, leaving my whole nervous system in a state of confusion. "What the hell was that?" I yelled.

Without answering, Jared rushed to the other side of the car and jumped in. *Right. Get out of the storm, Burke.*

Once closed inside the tight space again, with the only man on the planet who made me want to punch him and fuck him all at the same time, I asked again, "What the hell was that out there?"

Seconds ticked by between us, our breaths even heavier after braving the storm.

The corner of Jared's mouth ticked up, forming his signature cocky smirk.

“Burke”—we both jumped at the sound of the only voice I wasn’t used to hearing every day, which meant it had to be Hunter—“there’s no car in the inn parking lot. Maybe those guys left?”

That tore me out of the dangerous thoughts forming in my head. “Shit, of course they did.”

“That’s it. We’re going back to my house.”

Ignoring Jared, I spoke into the radio. “We’re back in my car. Fisherboy felt it necessary to come help me, even though I was fine on my own.”

“Uh, who kept you from getting hit in the head with a branch?” Was that the reason for the body slam?

“Whatever.” I internally cringed at my intelligent response.

“We’re going back to my house,” Jared said again, this time with a bite of determination and challenge.

There was no way in hell... “What the hell are you talking about? No, I’m not.”

Jared grabbed the radio from my hand with a look of sheer frustration, making my finger slide off the button to talk. He locked eyes with me, his jaw ticking under reddish-blond scruff, then pressed the talk button again. Without dropping his gaze from mine, he said to everyone, “My house is the closest, and it’s getting bad out here. His stubborn ass is going home with me. We’ll let you know when we get there.” After lowering the radio’s volume, making the voices on the other end seem miles away, Jared’s eyes delivered a message, daring me to argue with him. His voice was deeper and more menacing than I’d ever heard before when he said, “I’m not arguing about this one with you, Burke. Tomorrow you can go back to ignoring this fucking pull between us. Right now, I want dry clothes and coffee.”

He’d said my name. Something he rarely ever did since coming up with his incredibly annoying nickname of Cave Dweller. I wouldn’t admit how hearing my name fall from his lips sent a shiver down my spine. At least, I wouldn’t admit it to him.

Without another word, I started the car and drove to Jared's house. It only took two minutes to get there, even in the storm. He wasn't lying when he said he lived the closest to the fairgrounds. I pushed my door open and braced myself as wind and rain hit my face. I met Jared on the passenger side of the car, quickly locked the doors, then followed him to his front door. It was one of the older craftsman-style houses in Coral Pointe, but I remembered Aiden talking about Jared making updates a year ago, blending the old charm of the house with a few modern touches.

After the door clicked shut behind us, we were met with eerie silence in complete juxtaposition with the raging storm outside. I'd never been more aware of the man beside me than I was right then. For three years, I'd basically done whatever I could to avoid being alone with him. It figured that fate—or bad luck—had other plans.

Luckily, Jared's German Shepherd, Brutus, had a plan of his own to distract from the pulsing tension between us, running out of one of the rooms down the hall toward Jared and me. Except, instead of being excited to see his owner, the feisty dog came straight for me and stuck his wet nose right up my jacket and into my crotch. "Hey, stop that." I laughed, pushing his nose away and rubbing his back instead. I'd grown up around dogs my whole life. It was a wonder why I hadn't gotten myself one yet.

"Brutus, go lie down." Even giving his dog commands, Jared's Southern drawl didn't raise an octave. And, surprisingly, Brutus listened and sauntered off into the living room, leaving me alone with his owner again.

Jared set the radio down on a small entry table near the door. Shoes and socks came off first, followed by raincoats. Now I knew why the one I'd bought was so inexpensive. The damn thing was soaked through while Jared's coat had kept the upper part of his body relatively dry. Served me right for being cheap.

Jared seemed nervous all of a sudden, looking everywhere but at me. "I'll, uh...I'll get us some dry clothes. You should be able to fit those massive thighs in a pair of my basketball

shorts.” I swore I saw his Adam’s apple bob when his eyes finally landed on the lower half of my body. Hopefully, he’d be too focused on my thighs to see the problem growing a few inches up. My breath caught as his roaming gaze lifted, and yup...recognition dawned, his eyes practically stroking my cock. It took everything in me not to press the heel of my hand down on my erection to get it to cooperate. I cleared my throat and his eyes jumped up to meet mine, his golden skin flushing. “I’m not sure you’ll fit in one of my tees, but I’ll grab the biggest one I have.”

I needed to get back on familiar ground with the man. I mean, fuck, we’d been in this house for barely a minute and already my resistance was wavering. “I’m gonna take a leak.” Nothing said *this ain’t gonna happen* like retreating into the bathroom. I didn’t know my way around this old house but took a chance that it was down the hall, breathing a sigh of relief when I found it through a door on the left.

The door clicked behind me, effectively shutting out the tension and confused look in Jared’s eyes. I stared at myself in the wall-length mirror above the antique vanity. My clothes were soaked, my dark eyes looked tired, and my cock, the fucking traitor, still held stiff, waiting for relief. It wouldn’t come. Literally and figuratively. Nothing good would come from me giving in and taking what I wanted from the man on the other side of the door.

I yanked my wet shirt over my head and draped it over the side of the clawfoot tub. Standing in front of the toilet, my mind still focused on the fisherman, I absently pushed my jeans down my knees to release my cock—and immediately realized my mistake. Jesus, I wasn’t a toddler, for fuck’s sake. I knew how to piss without getting naked, but these clothes felt stifling against my body. I wanted them off. Because they felt disgusting. Not because of Fisherboy. Needless to say, the soaked denim was going to be uncomfortable to pull back up. I pushed that thought aside and pulled my dick out.

The second I finished my business, a bang on the door made me jump. Cringing, I pulled my soaked boxers and jeans back up, tucking my cock back in, and flushed the toilet,

quickly washing my hands. Leaving the waistband open when the pounding came again, I yanked the door open, the words, “Hold your fucking horses,” falling out of my mouth—and quickly dying on my tongue. I never thought gray sweats, a plain white T-shirt, and bare feet would turn me the fuck on, but there we were.

“Jesus,” Jared hissed, his gaze taking in every inch of my exposed torso and landing on the opening of my jeans. Goosebumps scattered across my skin, my mouth running dry from the fucking Sahara level of heat wafting off him.

“Don’t get any ideas, Fisherboy.” The words left my mouth as quickly as all my jabs at him usually did, but the way his expression shifted from want to pure anger caught me off guard.

“Don’t fucking flatter yourself, Cave Dweller. I don’t waste my time with assholes who are afraid to drop the tough man facade and own up to being vulnerable.” He shoved the clothes against my chest, walking away and mumbling under his breath once I grabbed them.

What the fuck did that even mean? My blood boiled as I yanked my jeans and boxers off and dropped them to the floor, then pulled the snug basketball shorts on, ditching the too-small tee. Anger drove me forward in search of the man who pissed me off like no other.

I found him in the kitchen, slamming cabinets, practically breaking his coffee mug on the hard surface of the granite counter. Brutus trotted over to Jared and rubbed against his leg, brown ears pricked in concern. Probably from sensing his owner’s change in temperament that rarely ever happened. Jared leaned down and scratched the dog behind his ears to soothe him. “I’m okay, buddy. Go play.” Brutus took off into the other room again.

The damn man went back to making his coffee, ignoring I was even in the room, and my blood boiled all over again. “What the fuck did you mean back there?” I whipped my arm out, pointing in the direction of the bathroom, even though he

was still looking at his coffee, rage coursing through my veins like scorching lava. Who the fuck was he to judge me?

“Pretty sure the words were clear. You’re just too fucking stubborn—or scared—to face the truth.” He opened the fridge door and grabbed the milk, slamming it shut hard enough to make the cereal boxes on top shake. I didn’t think I’d ever seen the man this pissed off.

I closed the distance between us in three long strides, fury fueling every step. “I’m not afraid of anything, asshole. Maybe you’re just too fucking stubborn to see there are no *truths* between us.”

Jared faced the counter, his hands flat on the shiny surface, huffing in derision. He stared at some imaginary spot on the cabinet in front of him, probably hating I’d hit the nail on the damn head. “You’re right, Burke.” *Yeah, that’s what I thought.* “I am stubborn. It’s my fucking persistence in thinking this game of cat and mouse will eventually end that keeps me from really telling you what I think of you.” He was talking in riddles, but he’d yet to face me.

“It’s your fucking delusion that makes you believe I give a shit what you think of me.”

Jared whirled around so quickly, I was forced to take a small step back. A strand of strawberry blond hair escaped the confines of the band holding the rest of his hair back. I flexed my fingers, resisting the urge to brush it away from his face. “Since you don’t give a shit, I might as well let it all out then, huh?” His hand landed on my chest, my bare skin engulfed in flames from that one touch. Shoving me back a step, he sneered. “I think you’re a fucking coward. I think you talk the big talk, but are terrified to walk the walk. You feign disgust and annoyance at seeing your friends in love, when in reality, you’re pissed they were braver than you in finding it.” He shoved me back another step.

My hands flexed into tight fists as I tried to rein in the urge to throttle him in the middle of his kitchen. “Did you ever think maybe I’m saving us both the trouble? You see happily-ever-afters where I see inconvenience.”

“Ah, there it is...”

“There *what* is?” My ears were ringing, every muscle in my body tensed and primed for battle. I wasn’t sure if I was pissed because he saw me all wrong or because he was right.

Jared snorted, shaking his head. “The same ol’ arrogance that radiates off you every time you pretend you’re not affected by someone else’s words. All that tells me is I’m right. You’re scared of me.” He moved in closer, his body heat hitting my skin like a vibration while he looked up at me and huffed. “And how fuckin’ sad is that?”

I swallowed hard, my veins pulsing like sparking livewires. He was wrong. I wasn’t scared of shit. He didn’t know me. He—

A guttural growl rumbled up my chest, my brain short-circuiting seconds before I slammed my mouth down on his. Pent-up rage drove my bigger body forward, stopping short when his back hit the counter and a small sigh left his mouth. I used it to my advantage, pushing my tongue inside his frustrating, constantly rambling, needs-to-shut-the-fuck-up, tastes-better-than-I-ever-could’ve-imagined mouth.

Letting need take over—because I wasn’t fucking scared—I closed my hand over his cloth-covered erection and squeezed. His breath stuttered against my mouth, his tongue falling right back into a wicked dance with mine. Jesus, why did he have to taste so damn good? Cool air hit my cock, followed by a firm, hot grip from a calloused hand. Jesus Christ, Jared fucking Boone was jerking me off, and I had no intention of stopping him until I shot my load.

Driven by the desperate need to come while not being a selfish asshole—no matter the outcome when the dust settled—I pulled back and pushed his shirt up and off him, flinging it somewhere in the room. My hand brushed the dusting of reddish-blond hair over his pecs and down his hard abs, my eyes locking on his, my breaths shallow and quick. He was waiting for my next move but his hand never stopped its delicious pull on my hard shaft. He was studying my face, challenging me without words to see what my next move

would be. When his thumb swiped over my slit, my resistance shattered into a million pieces. I shoved my hand into the waistband of his sweats and underwear and pulled his cock out, matching him stroke for stroke.

The sound of rapid breaths and hands mercilessly pumping filled the room. I couldn't tear my eyes away from Jared's. There was no turning back now. My orgasm was building in the base of my spine, my mind focused on one thing.

Grunting all too soon, my eyes still held captive by the same man holding my dick, I spilled over Jared's hand, some of it shooting onto his stomach as I twitched with my release. Jared followed, his head falling back with a groan of pure ecstasy. I gave in to the uncontrollable need and closed my eager mouth over his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing under my tongue.

“Hunter is back and declarations have been made. I repeat, declarations have been made.” Nothing pulled a man out of a sex-induced stupor—caused by the person who was determined to drive him fucking crazy—like hearing one of his best friend's voices over a walkie-talkie.

Followed by an ill-timed round of cheers.

While I still had Jared's softening dick in my hand.

Fuck.

CHAPTER TWO

We'd been in my house less than fifteen minutes yet, somehow, I had the evidence of Burke Russo's orgasm dripping down my hand. The last few minutes were a fucking blur. How the hell did we get here? I could already see Burke's silent freak-out in his expression, but I'd be damned if I was going to let him pull away now.

"Burke...Jared...you both okay?" I'd know that voice anywhere. I'd been friends with Aiden Rafferty for twenty-plus years.

Feeling eyes on me, I turned my head to see Brutus sitting under the archway of the kitchen, watching Burke and me with a cocked head. *Yeah, I'm just as puzzled as you.* I snorted, unable to hold back the laugh from the irony of the situation. I was going to be locked in my own home until tomorrow with the man who both drove me out of my mind with anger and turned me the fuck on like no one else ever had.

Sensing Burke was about to pull away, I said firmly, "I'm assuming as a chef, your favorite sense is taste?" His dark-stubbed jaw clenched as he focused on my mouth. If I was going to be stuck here with him all night, you could be damn sure I was going to make it memorable. Holding his menacing stare, I lifted my hand to my mouth, licking off every drop of the sticky mess he'd left behind then cleaned off my stomach in the same way. His breath stuttered, the brown rings in his eyes slowly devoured as his pupils dilated. I looked down, holding in the laugh at seeing his hand still wrapped around my dick. Scooping up some of my own release on my

fingertip, I slowly raised it to his mouth, holding it millimeters from his lips. I was throwing out the challenge, but the decision had to be his; the answer I was looking for lay in his next move.

He narrowed his eyes and pulled his brow together in a scowl. *Well, I guess that answers—*

The tip of my finger was engulfed in wet heat, my taste now sinking into the stubborn chef's tongue. I swallowed hard, realizing I'd prepared myself for the opposite response. I'd never been so fucking happy to be wrong.

“Burke? Jared?” It was Aiden again, but this time his voice was laced with concern. Shit, I'd forgotten about him.

“As far as I'm concerned, that was the appetizer,” I said in a low rasp to the big man still pinning me to my counter. “Just so we're clear.” I couldn't and wouldn't take anything from Burke he didn't want to give, but I sure as hell could let him know where my mind was at. I swore the slight nod of his head wasn't only in my imagination.

Reluctantly, I removed Burke's hand from my dick, watching in victory as his gorgeous face flushed once he realized I was still in his grip. I tucked my thoroughly sated cock back in and stepped around him, grabbing the radio I'd been given from the kitchen table. “We're here. Sorry we didn't let y'all know sooner.” I locked eyes with Burke as he pulled the shorts back up, unfortunately covering up that gorgeous cock of his. “We had some cleaning up to do”—I paused, the left side of my mouth lifting in a suggestive smirk that only Burke would see—“after coming inside”—I snorted when Burke huffed and rolled his eyes—“from the storm. It's a mess out there.”

“Glad you're both there safe, but you're breaking up a little.” I rolled my lips in, trying not to laugh. I wasn't completely sure, but that sounded like Levi. “Burke, you still have some explaining to do.” *Yup, definitely Levi.*

“We're all good here.” And just so I made myself completely clear to Burke, I added, “We'll talk to you in the morning.” I waited for responses then clicked my radio off.

Burke's was still on the table by the door, but the volume had been turned down some in the car. There would be no more unexpected, walkie-talkie cock blocks—especially in stereo from two radios—unless there was an emergency. I had one night to make sure Burke abso-fucking-lutely knew what he was going to lose when he inevitably denied this thing between us again. There was no doubt in my mind that, come morning, he would.

Silence surrounded us, making the ringing in my ears seem ten times louder. Finally, Burke huffed and turned toward the sink to wash his hands before going over to the fridge, yanking the door open. “Make yourself at home,” I teased, pushing down the twinge in my chest from feeling like he belonged in my kitchen. It wasn't real. I walked over to the sink and washed my hands as a way of removing my eyes from the sight of him.

“Didn't you go shopping before the weather got bad?” Burke frowned at the contents of my fridge.

“Yeah, but I wasn't expectin' to have company.”

“Whose fault is that?” He opened the fridge drawer and pulled out the packages of ham and cheese I'd bought, along with the mustard. We still had power, but who knew how long that would last.

“That would be yours, Cave Dweller. Next time, don't try to play the hero and go out into a hurricane looking for idiots you're not responsible for.”

Burke looked over his shoulder, that damn brow cocked again. “You mean like you did when you went out into the storm to find me?”

Well played. “Are you calling yourself an idiot?” How the hell had we gone from tugging orgasms out of each other to our usual digs like nothing happened? I'd be damned if he was going to pretend for the rest of the night that he wasn't just as affected as I was. “How do you do it, man?”

Burke opened and closed cabinets until he found the plates, then yanked open the drawers, stopping when he found

a knife. Then he grabbed the hard rolls I'd bought and left on the counter. "You're gonna have to be a little more specific."

"Something tells me you're not ready for how *specific* I can get." That got his attention. His hand froze mid-cut as if the knife was stuck in the roll. Those big, strong shoulders tensed, muscles flexing.

"If you think I'm letting you goad me into another round in the game of This is a Really Fucking Bad Idea, you're wrong." He went back to cutting the roll, his eyes focused like he was a surgeon performing a life-saving operation on the damn thing.

I leaned my back against the counter right next to him, crossing my arms. "Is that your excuse for kissing me first?"

He huffed out an incredulous laugh. "You know damn well you egged me on."

"I beg to differ, but if that's what you want to go with. So, you're saying you have no willpower?" I hadn't been egging him on earlier, but I sure as hell was now.

Burke stopped what he was doing, both hands braced on the counter. I watched the muscle in his jaw tick, resisting the urge to lean in and lick it. "I've got plenty of willpower, and just so we're clear," he said, throwing my words back at me, "it was a momentary lapse in judgment that won't happen again."

"Ah." I nodded. "Now I see what the rush is to make a sandwich."

He bristled, taking his hostility out on the mustard. "Yeah, I'm hungry."

"Maybe." I leaned in close and waited for those dark, stubborn eyes to look at me. "Or maybe you're desperate to wipe away the taste of me on your tongue. Won't change what we did." I watched his eyes grow darker, saw the movement of his throat as he swallowed hard. When he zeroed in on my mouth, it felt like a small victory.

As if coming back to his senses, his brows pulled together. "See? Goading me to make a move. Is this how the whole night's gonna be?"

If there was one thing I knew about this man, it was that he needed to get control back. And, reluctantly, I gave it to him. The next time his mouth was flooded with the taste of me, there would be no one to blame but himself.

Sighing, I straightened up and took a step away, grabbing my shirt off the floor and dragging it back on. “No.” I could tell by his expression he wasn’t expecting that answer. “Since we’re stuck here all night, the best thing for us to do is call a truce.” I held out my hand. “Neither one of us can provoke the other. I’ll stop giving you shit, but you can’t make me feel uncomfortable in my own home. We’re adults, right? We can make it through one night without screwing with each other.”

The corner of Burke’s mouth curved up in one hell of an enticing smirk. “Figuratively or physically?”

Well, shit. I snorted. “Both.”

The bigger man gave a quick nod and shook my hand, the warmth of his touch traveling up my arm. I kept a straight face, refusing to let him see just how much he affected me. I’d been better off not knowing how the man tasted. Now, all I wanted was to taste him again, run my tongue over every inch of him. I didn’t seem to be hiding my wicked thoughts well, if the look on his face was any indication. Releasing his hand, I took a step back, and he went back to making us both sandwiches.

It was obvious how much he loved preparing food. It seemed to be his go-to for dealing with any situation. I understood having a passion like that I could lose myself in. That’s what boating and fishing were for me. Hopefully, my shop, Bait and Switch, and my boat, my pride and joy Seas the Day, made it through the hurricane okay.

Quietly, we worked around each other. It was hard to ignore his big presence in my kitchen. I probably should have left the room, but I still hadn’t had my coffee and was pushing my luck with how long we’d have power. I poured us each a cup, adding delicious cream and sugar to mine while leaving his on the counter. “Want me to leave the cream and sugar out for you?”

Burke scowled and slid the coffee mug closer to him, like he had to protect it. I knew he took it black, but I'd be damned if I was going to be so transparent with things my mind had cataloged about him over the years. Why I had to fixate on the stubborn, irritating pain in the ass, I didn't know. My life would be so much easier if I could erase this pull toward him along with every little detail I knew about him—which now included his taste.

A sandwich appeared in front of my face, dragging me back to the man in my kitchen. I took it and walked into the living room, sitting in my favorite spot on one end of the sofa. Grabbing the remote control, I put *Vikings* on the TV, determined to use it as a buffer for as long as I could.

“Now we're talkin'” Burke sat down on the other end of the couch and took a bite of his sandwich as he stared at the screen.

“Seriously. How is Ragnar fucking hot even when he's dirty and covered in blood?” I wiggled my brows and Burke snorted.

“It pains me to agree with you, but I mean...” Burke waved his hand at the screen, as if that was enough of an explanation.

I chuckled. “At least I know I wouldn't have to fight you for Lagertha.”

“Nope. You can have her, and I'll take Ragnar.”

I put my feet on the coffee table, one crossed over the other. “Or I could just have them both. Being bisexual definitely has its benefits.”

“Greedy bastard.”

I laughed and took another bite of my sandwich. We managed to get in a few hours of *Vikings* before the power went out. Once again, we were surrounded by deafening silence, but this time, it was accompanied by darker rooms as daylight faded on the other side of the hurricane shutters.

I had no idea what Burke and I were going to do until tomorrow. Well, I had one idea, but I'd shaken on the promise

that I wouldn't provoke him.

Standing, I took his empty plate and stacked it on top of mine, grabbing a flashlight I'd left on the coffee table on the way to the kitchen. Brutus sauntered over, searching for crumbs around my feet, so I opened the cabinet and took out a treat, giving it to him.

This was going to be a long fucking night.

Wind and rain howled outside, pummeling the house as Hurricane Danny got even stronger than before. This old house could take it. It had been through countless storms since I was born, and it would see many more, if I had anything to say about it. Technically, the house wasn't mine, and as the days stretched on, it became more clear Grandpa wouldn't weather another hurricane season. The nursing home had assured me they had strong measures in place for situations like this, including generators. He was in good hands, but I hated being this far away from him.

I didn't go into my personal life much with the guys. Aiden knew my deal, and most likely, so did Sage and Cole—well, at least part of it—seeing as we'd all grown up here. They knew what my grandpa used to mean to this town. The once strong, vital, opinionated man who had helped make Coral Pointe what it is today, was now a frail eighty-seven-year-old who needed help with everything.

“Bring a bag of chips when you come back!” Burke yelled from the other room.

Goosebumps covered my skin, forgetting he was on my couch. I had been in this house for so long by myself. Too long. The man in my living room filled this space with more energy and presence than these walls had seen in years.

“You're lucky we called a truce”—I grabbed the chips off the counter and walked over to him, tossing the bag without warning—“or I'd tell you to get off your ass and get them yourself.”

“Man, I could get used to this. Jared Boone, struggling to bite his tongue and keep his word...for *hours*.” He tore the bag

open and took out a handful, making himself at home with his bare feet resting on the coffee table. Why did he have to have sexy feet, for fuck's sake? It was bad enough he was still shirtless.

Forcing my eyes to look anywhere but at the man occupying my couch, I busied myself by lighting a few of the candles I'd placed strategically around the room. "Yeah, don't hold your breath. The second this storm lets up, I'm tossin' your ass out." My breath caught as I turned around and found his hard stare on me. Candlelight draped him in a soft glow, the moment seeming more intimate than just two people waiting out a storm. I sat back down on the couch and pulled a pillow onto my lap like it was some sort of shield.

"Always thinking about my ass," he shot back, his words holding less bite than normal.

I cocked an eyebrow and studied him. "Breaking the truce already?"

Burke huffed while he chewed, and as he swallowed, I absolutely did *not* watch the movement of his Adam's apple. An image of earlier, his mouth on my throat, hit me like a tidal wave. Good thing I'd grabbed the pillow. "Nope. If I were breaking the truce, I'd tell you your choice of chips sucks."

I barked out a laugh. "Oh yeah? And what's the right choice, Chef Russo?"

"Kettle cooked. That's just a fact. Not these thin, greasy excuses for chips. They wouldn't even stand up to a decent dip."

"Give me the damn bag, if you hate them so much." I grabbed for it, but he was faster, holding them out of reach while stopping my hand mid-air.

Heat surged between us, the warmth of his grip seeping into my skin. I yanked my arm back, escaping the connection.

Burke set his hand on his thick thigh. I didn't miss the slight flex of his fingers as if he'd felt that reaction, too. "So, I already know you ruin your coffee with a gallon of cream and

sugar, you clearly have bad taste in chips... Please tell me you at least buy the right peanut butter.”

“I make my own.”

He pulled his head back in disbelief, eyes wide. “I’m impressed.”

I shrugged and bent my legs, pulling my feet up onto the couch. “It’s how my grandma always made it.”

“Were you close with her?” There was a sadness behind Burke’s eyes I couldn’t decipher. I knew nothing about the man’s family. In fact, I didn’t think he’d ever had family visit in the three years he’d been in Coral Pointe.

“Yeah.” I smiled, remembering the soft smile of one of my favorite people, an ache forming in my chest from how much I missed her. Burke’s dark eyes studied me in a way that made me feel exposed. I couldn’t deny, there was a part of me that wanted to have someone to share things with. Talk about memories of what life used to be like when my grandma and grandpa were in this house. I loved being here with them, more than I ever had my own parents or siblings. “So, is this what we’re doing now? Twenty questions? Because I say, let’s make it interesting.”

CHAPTER THREE

Burke huffed. “How so?”

I got up and went into the kitchen, grabbing a carton of orange juice and two shot glasses. On my way back, I snagged the half-full bottle of tequila off the bookshelf, then set everything on the coffee table. Burke opened his mouth to say something, but I held up a finger and walked over to the hall closet. I reached for the box I wanted up on the highest shelf, but it was pushed all the way in the back corner, slightly out of reach.

I was about to jump to try and get it when a warm body pressed against my back, Burke’s hand stretching over my head for the box. I breathed in a deep breath through my nose. Big mistake with Burke and his intoxicating scent surrounding me. He’d had the nerve to say I’d provoked him until he’d lost control? There was no way the jerk didn’t know what he was doing to me.

His hand came back with the game, his arm wrapped around me as he held the box in front of me. I refused to let him see how he was affecting me, even if my tenting sweats would quickly give me away. I sensed Burke looking over my shoulder and down at my predicament. Closing my eyes, I dragged in another calming breath. Snatching the box from his hands, I strode away from him and sat down on the couch. I took one of the dice out of the box, setting the game aside, then leaned toward the coffee table to make our drinks. My eyes flicked up when Burke came toward the couch, my mouth

quirking up in a victorious smirk when I saw the half-hard state he was in. At least we were having the same issue.

“What is all this?” Burke’s huge frame sat back down, and even though he was no bigger than before, his body seemed to eat up more of the couch this time.

“Twenty questions, hurricane edition. Pretty sure Aiden adds something else to this like grenadine, but this is all I got.” I poured the tequila in both shot glasses and topped them off with OJ, handing him a glass, then rolled the little cube in my hand. “Whatever number you land on, that’s how many questions the other person can ask you until you’ve answered twenty.”

Burke snorted. “And if you ask something I don’t want to answer?”

“You can pass by taking a shot.” I wasn’t sure this was the smartest idea I’d ever had, but... “What the hell else are we gonna do?” My mind went straight to what we’d done in the kitchen. By the half-lidded look he was giving me, his mind had joined me in that delicious memory. “To get this started, I think we both need to take a shot first.”

“Trying to get me drunk so you can have your wicked way with me?”

I held my glass up, one finger pointing toward the kitchen. “Been there, done that.”

He shifted uncomfortably and his neck flushed. “Fine. But I get to ask questions first.” He tossed back the shot and picked up the die, handing it to me. “Roll ’em, Fisherboy.”

I downed the liquor and dropped the cube on the couch between us. “Four.”

Burke set his empty glass down and gave me a wicked grin, rubbing his hands together like some evil villain in a kids’ movie. “Hmm...let’s see... Why do you like to drive me nuts?”

“Seriously? That’s your question?”

He shrugged and pulled one leg up on the couch to face me. “It’s a legitimate question.”

“With a pretty obvious answer.” I leaned in and said, “Because it’s so damn easy.” Sitting back, I ticked up a finger. “That’s one. Three more, Cave Dweller.”

“Lame answer.” He thought for a second. “This is harder than it looks when you’re put on the spot.” Laugh lines fanned out from the corners of his eyes as a genuine smile lit his face. It wasn’t like I’d never seen it, but it sure as hell was never directed at me. He stretched his arm on the back of the couch. “Biggest pet peeve?”

“Burke.”

“Yeah?”

I laughed as he stared at me in confusion. “That’s my answer. Burke.”

He gave me a look of derision. “You’re a fucking riot.”

I wiggled my brows and ticked up another finger. Who knew being locked up in a storm with Burke would be so entertaining? “Next question.”

“So you can insult me again? I’m pretty sure that breaks the rules of the truce.”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty sure that little stunt you pulled by the closet broke it first.” I stared him down, daring him to deny he’d purposefully pressed that big body of his against my back.

His mouth twisted to the side in a guilty smirk, but he didn’t deny it.

“Next question,” I repeated.

Burke sighed, his eyes landing on something across the room as he thought for a second. “Okay”—his gaze locked on me again—“do you believe in aliens?”

“Yes,” I said without a second thought.

Burke laughed, looking at me like I was crazy. “Seriously? Aliens? Like little green guys with big heads and black eyes?”

“Are you telling me that in the entire massive universe, we’re the only living beings? You’re not one of *those* people, are you, Burke?” Honestly, I didn’t care if someone believed or not, but giving him shit was too much fun.

He narrowed his eyes, his brow pulled in a scowl. “Insult me one more time and the truce is void, Fisherboy.”

A shiver ran down my spine. “All parts of the truce?”

I watched him swallow hard, his hand flexing on the back of the couch. “Next question.” He thought for a second. The way his eyes focused on me made me nervous, but I was the one who’d pushed him. “Worst fear.”

I gripped the back of my neck, unease settling in. This game had been my idea, but up until this point, I hadn’t taken it seriously. I reached for the tequila and filled both our shot glasses, adding a splash of OJ to them both, planning to dodge the question and prepare him for his round. Disappointment flashed across his face as I lifted the glass to my lips. I’d never admitted my biggest fear to anyone before, but there was something in the way he was looking at me that made me want to unload all the weight I’d been holding on my own for so long. Sighing, I set the full shot glass back on the table. “Losing my grandpa.”

Burke hadn’t been expecting that answer, if his wide eyes were anything to go by. “I just assumed...”

“That he was already gone?” It hit me then just how much of my life I’d kept from my friends. “No, he was in an assisted living for a couple of years, but a year ago he was moved to a nursing home about an hour away.” I laughed, feeling absolutely no humor in the situation. “I wanted him closer, but it was my parents’ decision. Something about the cost being more reasonable. Like we couldn’t afford better.” Shaking my head in disgust, I dropped my gaze to my lap. “Course, they’re not the ones traveling all that way to see him every week. Different countries all over the world? Not a problem. But taking time to visit him, knowing he doesn’t have much time left? Yeah, that’s apparently too difficult to squeeze in.”

“Shit.” A sympathetic expression crept onto his face, his big hand flexing into a fist on the back of the couch. “That’s fucked up.”

Instead of agreeing, I reached for the die and handed it to him. “Your turn to be under the microscope.”

“Great.” He sighed and tossed the cube onto the couch cushion. “Dammit.”

“Five. Nice.” I gripped my chin, trying to think of a good one and stay within the parameters of the truce. “Hmm...what should I ask... Oh, I got one. If you had to be trapped on an island with one friend, who would it be?”

“That’s easy. Ford.”

I drew my head back, not expecting that answer at all. “But the two of you are always ragging on each other the most. Aside from you and me, anyway.”

“If there’s one thing I know about Ford it’s that, no matter where we are, that man will find food.”

I barked out a laugh. “True.”

Burke held up his hand and bent his thumb in toward his palm. “Four more.”

“Okay, let’s see...” I tapped my fingertips on the back of the couch. “You probably get this question a lot, but inquiring minds want to know. Have you ever hooked up with one of the guys?”

Burke shook his head and laughed. “If I had a dime for every time someone asked me that... No, none of us have ever hooked up.”

“So you’ve never even had the urge to?”

He cocked an eyebrow, and that damn tempting mouth curled up in a sexy smirk. A mouth I now knew the taste of. “Is that your third question? Because this is a breeze.”

“No, asshole, that’s not my third question.”

“Since I’m a stand-up guy, I’ll give you a freebie. I can’t speak for them, but I’ve never had the urge to. We became like

brothers almost immediately and, at the time, I really needed that.”

“Why?”

“I said one freebie. That’s your third question.” His mouth lifted on one side in a cocky smirk and he reached for his shot, holding it up. “And here’s my answer.” He threw his head back, downing the liquid in seconds, staring at me as he refilled the small glass. This time he didn’t even bother to add the juice.

I narrowed my eyes and huffed, as if that would hide the effect he had on me. There was no way in hell he didn’t know what he was doing to me. Dangling the carrot, then yanking it out of reach the second I got too close.

I thought for a second. There were too many things that piqued my curiosity about Burke, but stupidly, I wished he’d tell me because he wanted to, not because I backed him into a corner with a stupid game. Still, I could have some fun, right? “Bottom or top?” Burke lifted his glass to his lips, but I quickly said, “Seriously? You’re too much of a prude to answer that?”

I did an internal fist pump when he lowered the glass again and scoffed. “There is nothing prudish about me. I like to fuck, and I’m damn good at it. That second tidbit of info was another freebie. You’re welcome.”

I had to resist the urge to press my hand down on my stiffening cock. “So, you’re a top.”

“There you go, not listening, as usual. I said I like to *fuck*.” Heat flared from his dark eyes, his gaze lowering to the pillow on my lap. He knew damn well what was under there. “I don’t care which side of the coin I’m on, so long as I get off.” When I continued to stare, he added, “I have no problem handing over the reins.”

Swallowing hard, I found myself stuck in his penetrating gaze. Visions of us flip-fucking on the living room floor invaded my thoughts. “Noted,” I forced out, hating the higher pitch to my tone, but hating his arrogant grin even more.

Clearing my throat, I rubbed my hands on my thighs and tried to think of another question. “What’s somethin’ you can’t do well?”

This time, Burke threw his shot back and slammed the empty glass on the table.

I snorted. “What was so hard about that question you needed an out?”

“Thinking of something I don’t do well.” The cocksure look he gave me was typical Burke. “It’s impossible.”

I laughed, shoving his leg with my foot. “You’re such an ass.” Heat surged straight to my cock when he caught my leg and held it there next to him. His half-lidded gaze reminded me he’d had three shots to my one—and that last one had been straight tequila. I didn’t think he was anywhere near drunk, but he was definitely feeling more at ease.

“We’re playing this game honestly, right?” He picked up the die and tossed it at me. “Your turn.”

I rolled the cube in my hand and let it go between us. “Shit.”

Burke pumped a fist in the air. “Six!”

“Whatever. Ask away.” I thought this game might have been a bad idea, but this was probably the most comfortable Burke and I had ever been around each other. Thank you, tequila.

“Hmm... What’s something you would erase from your mind so you could do it again for the first time?” Burke’s eyes darkened and his hand squeezed my leg.

Knowing exactly where his mind had gone, I glanced back toward the kitchen, turned to look at the big man taking up most of the couch...and lifted the shot glass, letting the smooth liquid slide down my throat. No way in hell was I answering that one the way I wanted. Judging by the look on Burke’s face and the flare of his nostrils, he caught the message loud and clear anyway.

“Next question.” I set my shot glass down next to his and filled them both, orange juice abandoned altogether.

He inched his body down a little on the couch, getting more comfortable. “What do you do to relax?”

I took the pillow I’d been holding over my lap and shoved it behind my head. Every muscle in my body relaxed from the alcohol. “Rub one out.” I could’ve said fishing or boating, but where was the fun in that? The answer I gave had Burke’s eyes zeroing in on my cock. I almost busted a nut right there when he licked his lips. “Next question,” I rasped out.

Burke sucked in a breath when he realized what he’d been doing. “Uh...” He scrubbed a hand over his five o’clock shadow, his eyes drifting over my shoulder in thought. “What’s something that creeps you out?”

I shivered at just the thought. “Clowns. Those fuckers are evil. I don’t care what anyone says.” Burke was cracking up. Damned if I wasn’t loving the fact that I was the cause. “I’m serious! They’re creepy as hell. Look at John Wayne Gacy!” Now Burke was wiping tears from his eyes. “That alone makes clowns a big ol’ *nope*.” I nudged his side with my foot and his grip tightened on my leg. “I guarantee, if you were ever stuck on an elevator with a clown, it would freak you out.” The jerk continued to laugh, and I couldn’t help but join in.

As the laughter faded, he said through deep breaths, “I’m tucking away that little nugget of information. Never know when it’ll come in handy.”

I rolled my eyes, sliding down a little more against the arm of the couch. “I should’ve taken a shot. Next question.”

“Fuck. This is getting harder with every drink.” He stared blankly at the coffee table until finally asking, “What’s a risk worth taking?”

Well, wasn’t that a loaded question? Why did it seem he was trying to set me up? I had a feeling he knew what my answer would be, but I’d be damned if I said my first thought out loud. Especially since he was the one fighting this thing

between us so fucking hard. So instead, I drank. Now we were both three shots in.

Candlelight cast flickering, amber shadows on the walls as the light outside completely faded. I zeroed in on his warm hand still gripping my calf, the calming brush of his thumb back and forth. My eyelids felt too heavy to keep open, each blink a concentrated effort.

The next time I opened my eyes, the room felt different. Darker. Empty. *Shit, I must have fallen asleep.* The big man who'd taken up most of the couch and all of my thoughts wasn't in the room.

I sat up and swung my legs off the couch, stretching out relaxed muscles. Light flickered from the kitchen, but I hadn't lit a candle in that room earlier. Slowly, I pushed off the couch and stood up, walking across the space to the other room. Burke was leaning back against the counter, holding a glass of water. The jug I'd filled earlier in preparation sat next to him on the granite.

"How long was I out?" My neck ached from the position I'd fallen asleep in on the couch. I gripped the back of it, massaging my sore muscles.

"Not sure. I just woke up, too." He gave me a sheepish smile. One I wondered if he even knew he was allowing me to see.

"Guess we both fell asleep before we got too drunk. You still feelin' it?"

Burke shook his head. "I'm good. You?"

"I'm fine." Even better knowing he couldn't blame this heat between us on an alcohol-induced haze.

His large frame seemed to eat up all the available space in the room, just as he had on the couch earlier. Either that or I was hyper-aware of every inch of the man. Both. It had to be both.

I picked up the water jug and took a glass out of the antique-white oak cabinet. We stood there in silence, drinking the cool liquid, listening to the unrelenting wind and rain beat

against the house. I put my glass down and walked over to the window, peeking out through a small opening on the side of the shutter. “We’re gonna have some clean-up, that’s for damn sure.”

Turning around, I was caught in the man’s intense gaze again. His dark eyes roamed the length of my body, the soft, amber glow from the candle illuminating one side of his face. I swore I felt the path his eyes took, like the whisper of fingertips against my heated skin.

Burke set his glass down on the counter behind him, his hands gripping the hard granite on either side of his hips. Seconds ticked by until finally... “This is a bad idea,” Burke declared in his deep baritone, his hands dropping to his sides, fingers flexing.

I shrugged, like it was no big deal, but my heart was attempting to beat its way out through my chest. I sure as fuck didn’t want to know where it would land if it ever got free. “Probably.” Except, this wasn’t *probably* a bad idea. It was absolutely a bad idea, but I didn’t give a fuck.

He took a predatory step closer. “It’s only to pass the time, Fisherboy,” he added, cocking his dark eyebrow and crossing his tree-trunk arms over his chest. As if calling me that stupid nickname would solidify where I still stood. It didn’t deter me at all. I knew what this was, and I was here for it anyway. “A one-night thing...” Another reminder.

“Whatever you say.” Because there was no way in hell I was agreeing to that.

Burke’s stare throbbed with intensity as he groaned in frustration and shook his head. A whispered *fuck* left his mouth as he took two long strides across the kitchen. His big hands pushed into my hair on either side of my head and his mouth crashed into mine...for the second time since we’d walked in the door. He was fucking dominating the kiss this time, and I was the one trying to catch up.

A chair toppled over as I tried to move it out of the way without breaking the connection to Burke. The sexy man was ravenous and on a fucking mission. He tore my shirt over my

head and tossed it aside, his fingers immediately threading forcefully back through my hair to control the kiss. I missed the sting on my scalp when he slid his hands down, trailing goosebumps on the overheated skin of my bare back, and gripped my ass, lifting me with a strength I knew he had but never thought I'd experience first-hand. Immediately, I wrapped my legs around his waist and held on.

My world tilted, my back hitting the smooth solid oak table I'd built with my own damn hands. I sure as hell hadn't been thinking it would be used for this, but I was happy I'd built that sucker to last.

A primal, relentless beast released from within Burke—the cave dweller I always accused him of being—and now that he was out in the wild, he was taking whatever he wanted. Fuck if I didn't want that. The result of three years of pent-up sexual tension, breaking free from us both. It was about damn time.

His eager mouth and skillful hands were everywhere. I felt the wet heat of his tongue slide over my Adam's apple while he tweaked both my nipples, the move making me twitch with pleasure.

“You like that?” Burke's deep voice vibrated against the hollow of my neck, his fingers pinching and rolling my sensitive skin again.

An embarrassing high-pitched sound escaped me, and I quickly cleared my throat, determined to find my voice. “Yeah,” was all I was able to whisper. That was going to have to be good enough. The strong chef above me was scrambling every brain cell I had, and he wasn't even touching my dick yet.

With my back flat against the smooth table, there was nothing I could hold on to for purchase. The man devouring me didn't even have a hair on his head for me to grip. I'd been on even ground with him a few minutes ago—when my feet were actually touching the ground—but now I was struggling to do anything but lay there and let Burke wreck me in the best possible way.

Burke kissed down my chest, his tongue tracing a wet path from my belly button to the waistband of my sweats. An indescribable, guttural sound emanated from his chest right before he jerked the material down and off my legs. Holy shit, I was completely naked on my kitchen fucking table, laid out for Burke to feast on. The irony wasn't lost on me. But, instead of trying to take back control, I pulled each shaking leg up and planted my feet flat on the edge of the table, offering myself to him.

Burke bent over and shoved the shorts down his legs, his line of sight focused on the view mere inches from his face. Air rapidly pushed out through his nose, ghosting over my aching balls. His dark eyes locked on my hole, pausing long enough for apprehension to take hold in my chest.

“Second thoughts?” I rasped out, hating that I'd asked the question the second it fell from my lips. There I was, like a Sunday roast chicken ready to be stuffed as he continued to stare.

Burke's opaque eyes flicked up to mine, a huff leaving his kiss-swollen lips and a dark brown eyebrow arching. Jesus, the man was sexy, but I sure as hell wasn't going to say it. It was bad enough I was throwing all caution to the wind, knowing the hurricane damage wouldn't be the only thing to clean up tomorrow. I'd apparently dropped my self-control somewhere between the couch and the kitchen. No doubt, I'd be scraping it off the floor after Burke left in the morning.

The thought barely had time to register when Burke let out that damn growl again and surged forward. I groaned, releasing a string of curses as he sucked one of my balls into his hot oven of a mouth. He hooked my legs over his shoulders and his arms wrapped around my thighs, holding me in place. I had no choice but to lie there and let him take what he wanted. You wouldn't hear me complaining. I couldn't, even if I wanted to. My brain was the consistency of a side of mashed potatoes as I surrendered to the man devouring me.

He moved to the other side, his tongue and mouth taking me apart. I felt cool air hit my wet skin and lifted my head. All the breath left my lungs in a whoosh when my eyes locked

with his. Burke fucking Russo...had his head between my legs and intense determination in his eyes. Slowly, he held my throbbing cock straight up and slid it into his scorching mouth.

“Fuck,” I hissed, my head thumping back on the solid wood of the table. “Jesus Christ, Burke.”

His only reply was to hum and take me deeper, swallowing around the swollen head of my cock. The vibration zipped down my spine and my back arched off the table. I could hear him jerking himself off as he sucked me. I wanted to take over, make him lose control like he was doing to me, but I was helpless in the position I was in—and fuck knows, I didn’t want to do anything that would make Burke take his mouth off me.

I could feel my release building in the base of my spine, all too quickly, yet not fast enough. Burke’s strong grip wrapped around the bottom of my shaft moved in rhythm with his mouth. But when he pulled on my full sac with his other hand and hummed around my cock again, it was game over. Warning him did no good. Instead of pulling away, he picked up in intensity as I fell apart and released a string of curses, my body trembling as I came in his mouth. Either I was completely hallucinating or I really did hear Burke moaning as if I was the best thing he’d ever tasted; a delicacy sliding down his throat.

In a foggy, sex-induced haze, I heard him grunt, watching his hand as it flew over his cock from sheer tenacity. With a guttural moan, he shot his load, coating my balls and my completely satisfied dick. “Shit,” he whispered, his big frame jerking one more time.

I pushed my hands back through my sweaty hair. Aside from our deep, heavy breaths, the silence in the room was deafening. I prepared myself to see regret in his eyes, so when I was met with a crooked grin and a cocky glint in his brown orbs, all I could do was laugh.

“Well, fuck, Burke. You apparently know how to use that mouth for more than insults and tasting food.”

He huffed out a laugh and grabbed our clothes off the floor, tossing my sweats and T-shirt on the table next to my head. “You’d be amazed what I can do with this mouth, Fisherboy. Considering this is a one-night thing, I guess you’ll have to use your imagination.”

His words were like a fucking kick to the chest. He managed to remind me who I was to him while also pointing out what the deal was. One night only. Sex brought on by being trapped in close quarters for hours during a storm. And the fucked up part was, I’d known what this was going in, and I chose to let it happen anyway.

So, the only thing I could do was pick my pride up off the floor and make sure we both were on solid ground. “I think I’ll survive, Cave Dweller.” I could’ve sworn I saw a flash of annoyance in his expression. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t feel like a victory of sorts. I’d leveled the playing field again. All was right with the world. Balance was restored.

I used a napkin on the table to clean my stomach then stood up and grabbed my clothes, quietly putting them back on as if I didn’t feel his enormous presence behind me. What the hell did I say after a mind-numbing blowjob from the guy who’d made it his personal mission to avoid the pull between us for three fucking years? Schooling my expression, I finally turned and faced the man.

Burke hiked his thumb over his shoulder. “I’m just gonna take the couch tonight, if that’s cool.” At least he had the decency to look uncomfortable as he stuck his head back in the sand to avoid any real feelings or conversation.

“Yeah, sure.” My tone hadn’t been as nonchalant as I was going for, but damned if I would let him see an ounce of frustration on my face. I strode past him to the hall closet where the game had been and pulled out an extra pillow and blanket. Without another word, I crossed the room to the couch, dropped the bedding down, then looked at him one more time before awkwardly walking past him to my bedroom.

The next morning, Hurricane Danny was gone.

And so was Burke.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Megan, where the hell is the ribeye for table seven?” The kitchen staff grew insanely quiet as Megan’s hard gaze pinned mine.

“Burke, a word?” she calmly said, though anyone could hear the venom lining her words.

Instead of answering, I stomped back to the small office like the petulant child I was, closing us both in. “Make it quick. We’re busy as hell out there.”

Megan didn’t say a thing. She didn’t need to as she stood there with her arms crossed over her chest, her mouth pursed, and a pissed-off glare in her eyes. Damn, she was good at saying everything by saying nothing at all.

“Stop staring at me like that,” I snapped. Her only response was arching one perfectly shaped, chestnut eyebrow. “If you’re not gonna say anything, we need to get back out there.” The woman still didn’t utter a single word. The only other person who could make me squirm with unease from one look was my mom. I exhaled and sat on the edge of my desk, scrubbing a hand over my scruffy chin. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what, Burke? For being a pain in my ass the last two days? For snapping at your incredibly patient staff? Or for not telling me what happened with you and Jared during the other night? Because, in case you’re wondering, you’re being an asshole and have been ever since that night. And if you think you’re being slick by denying something happened with you and that sexy-as-hell fisherman, your ridiculous behavior

is screaming, *I kissed a boy and I liked it!*” She waved her hands emphatically in the air.

“What the hell are you talking about? I’m gay. All I do is kiss boys.” I cleared my throat. “*Men*. I kiss men. And I have no trouble finding willing participants. I don’t need the sexy-as-hell—” *Fuck*. “I don’t need Jared.” Because that statement didn’t add to the sexually frustrated, grumpy, teenage persona I’d adopted since leaving Jared fucking Boone’s house a couple of days ago. Too bad my sous chef knew me all too well. If there was someone in Coral Pointe I would admit was my match in the kitchen—hell, even in attitude—it was Megan Lanter. Like Jared, Cole, Sage, and Aiden, she was a born and bred Pointer. I’d known since the day we’d interviewed her that she was assertive enough to take my shit—and throw it right back at me. It was one of the reasons we worked so well together. It was also why I loved having her here.

“Like I said, you’re not slick at all, Burke.” She pointed to the closed door behind her. “You owe the staff an apology. It’s your own damn fault you’re too stubborn to admit you’re miserable. No need to prove it by being a grumpy jerk to everyone.”

A smartass reply was on the tip of my tongue, but when she shot me a look, daring me to say something sarcastic, I deflated. “I’m not miserable,” I mumbled, and for the first time since coming into the office, Megan’s scowl fell from her face.

She laughed, shaking her head, her hard stance finally relaxing. “Oh, honey, you’re the king of misery right now.” Hanging her head back, she groaned. “What am I gonna do with you?” She dropped her chin back down and planted her hands firmly on her hips. “You have to be the most hard-headed person I’ve ever met in my entire life.”

I smirked, sensing the tension leaving the room as my shoulders sagged. “You’ve never met my dad.”

Her brown eyes widened as she took a dramatic step back. “Two Burkes? God help us.”

I laughed, not bothering to correct her. I was the oldest son in an Italian family. It had been a given that I would be named after my dad's father, but I was the only Burke and damn proud of it. The alternative was a name only my parents and the older generation family members called me, thank fuck.

As if on cue, the phone in my pocket started ringing with a tone I'd set only for my mom. Lord knew I needed a warning bell before answering a call from her. Megan's face twisted in a grimace, knowing that sound as well as I did.

She nudged her head toward the phone I pulled out of my pocket, her eyes lit with sympathy. "You better pick up this time. You know it's not gonna stop until you do."

I looked down at the screen and huffed. "You do realize this is not gonna make my mood any better, right?" Don't get me wrong. I love my parents, but sometimes—most times—they had a way of pushing buttons they didn't even realize existed. Or, in my dad's case, sometimes he knew damn well the button was there and pounded on that thing like an impatient man repeatedly pressing an elevator button. Except the only thing elevated during his incessant lectures was my blood pressure.

"Yeah, yeah..." She backed toward the door, shaking her head. "Good thing I love you anyway." She left with a parting wink, leaving me alone in my small office, staring down at my mom's contact picture, my phone still ringing in my hand.

When the shrill sound stopped, hope bloomed in my chest—until it started all over again. I breathed in deeply, letting the air escape slowly as I geared up to answer. I love my mom with all my heart—my whole family, actually—but to say they could be a little much was an understatement. A huge one. We were Italian to the core. Family was at the heart of every single thing we did.

I clicked on the answer button before she hung up and tried again. "Hey, Ma."

"Burcardo Giovanni Russo, are you trying to send me to an early grave? Make sure your father buries me in red. It

compliments my flawless complexion. Although, I guess it won't matter...if I'm *dead*."

"Jesus Christ, Ma." I hung my head, rubbing my hand over the dark stubble of my buzzed hair, when I heard a gasp on the other end of the line.

"And now he takes the Lord's name in vain. Carmine! Get my red dress out of my closet!"

I couldn't help but laugh, picturing my mom standing in her kitchen, an apron wrapped around her waist and a hand pressed over her heart. She was barely five feet but knew how to make grown men cry with just a look.

"Sorry, Ma. Listen, I have to g—"

"Don't say it. Don't you say it. You said that two days ago. *Ma*"—she deepened her voice to a comical baritone—"I'm too busy and important to let you know I'm okay after a hurricane threatened to send me to the Land of Oz."

Another laugh burst out of me. Despite her dramatics, the woman was still one of my absolute favorite people in the entire world. "It was a tornado in the movie, not a hurricane. And that's not what I said."

"Close enough."

"I let you know I was okay." I picked at some lint on my pants, sounding like a damn child who got caught with their hand in the cookie jar. Thank fuck I was alone. The guys loved to rag on me after getting a phone call from Mama Russo. No one could make me fold faster than the daintiest of the Russo family.

"*Pfft*...barely. Would it kill you to call your mother and reassure her you're alright after a natural disaster?" Guilt washed over me for how I'd made her worry. "Are you eating okay? Is your house okay? Your business?"

"Trust me, I'm always eating okay." I exhaled into the phone and stood up, rounding my desk to slump my big body down in the chair. "I'm sorry. I should've called you back sooner. When I told you I was fine the other day, that also included my house and my business. But the carport at the inn

did have some minor damage, and there's a ton of cleanup. That's why I haven't been able to call you back." *Lies*. Not that what I'd say wasn't true, but there was a part of me that just didn't have the energy to deal with the pressure my parents usually put on me.

"And when you're done with all that, you're coming home for a visit? Your nonna misses you. We all do. You've only been home a few times in three years, Burcardo. The holidays are coming up fast and almost another year is gone." There was that guilt again, lounging on my chest like a fourteen-thousand-pound elephant.

"I know, Ma, but setting up a new business isn't easy. We're still working out some kinks. It's gonna take time and money to go back home. Both of which I have very little of lately. And I can't just leave the guys here to deal with my restaurant. You should see Ford in the kitchen."

"I'd like to say I can picture it, but seeing as I've never seen your kitchen and have only heard your friends' voices over the phone and was *privileged* enough to see what they look like in pictures...even though you trusted them enough to go into business with them...*without* consulting your family... I'm having some trouble, Burcardo." There was no point asking her to call me Burke. Although most of my family did now—at least the younger generation—my parents were adamant in using the name I shared with my grandpa, especially after losing him five years ago.

She was using every weapon in her guilt artillery, and damned if I wasn't feeling every well-aimed shot. "You know you're always welcome here, but it's not easy or cheap to travel across the country. It's not like Sacramento is around the corner." Honestly, if I'd asked the guys to go meet my family, I had no doubt they would make it work. My mom didn't need to know I'd never extended the invitation for reasons I didn't want to get into with her.

I missed my family, though, probably more than I let on. And despite the fact that I hadn't been home too much over the last three years, I talked to my parents, Nonna, and four younger siblings over phone or FaceTime a few times a week.

“You make time for family.”

I pressed my thumb and forefinger into the inner corners of my aching eyes, feeling a killer headache coming on. “You’re right, and I promise I’ll be home soon as I can.”

“Thanksgiving?”

“Ma, I can’t promise that. We’ve got three busy festivals from now until the new year, which means a surge in visitors. I can’t just dump that on the guys.”

“Try, Burcardo.” The disappointment in her voice was about as easy to swallow as store-bought frozen meatballs. I knew I could and should be making more of an effort to see them, but it wasn’t as easy as it used to be before we opened Shore Thing Management. Most people opened one business and ran with it. Cole, Ford, Noah, Levi, and I had had the bright idea—and the funds, thanks to Noah—to go all in from the start. Cole and Levi ran Coral Pointe Inn, Ford and Noah took over Shore Thing Tours, and Oceanside Bar and Grill—the inn restaurant—was my baby. It was no exaggeration to say the last three years had been overwhelming. So much so, that using the reason of being busy at work to explain why I hadn’t been home in a while wasn’t a lie. It just wasn’t the whole truth either.

“Are you sure there isn’t something you’re not telling us? You know, friendship is the perfect foundation for a long-lasting relationship, even if it’s with someone who isn’t Italian. Your father and I will get over the fact that you *still* haven’t introduced us yet.”

Leave it up to my mom to mention at least two of those reasons for my avoidance before we hung up. My knee bounced uncontrollably, tension building back up in my shoulders. *Megan better be ready for this. I warned her.* “I wish you’d get that idea outta your head. That’s never gonna happen. Besides the fact that I could never see any of them that way, they’re all taken.” *Jared isn’t.* Fuck, the biggest mistake I’d ever made was tasting him. I’d managed to go three years without touching the frustrating jackass. Now I

couldn't go three minutes without thinking about how he felt in my—

“A mother can hope. Is it so wrong for me to want my oldest son settled? Maybe some little ones running around?” She let out an audible, drawn-out sigh that felt like it landed on my chest with the force of a boulder falling from the sky.

“Ma, I gotta go. We're slammed today, and Megan's out there dealing with it alone.” Technically, she wasn't alone. She also could hold her own when it came to this place, but my mom didn't need to know that.

“Alright, I'll talk to you in a couple of days, Burcardo. In case you need some help figuring it out, that's two days from now. Pick up your phone and save your mama the trouble of pulling her red dress out of the closet.”

“Yeah, I will. I promise.”

“I love you, my little gnocchi.”

I closed my eyes and laughed softly into the phone. That nickname had a way of making me feel like my mom was wrapping me in a warm hug—while simultaneously making my face flame as hot as the grill in the restaurant kitchen. “I love you, too, Ma.”

“So, are you ever gonna tell us the goods?” Ford asked around a bite of pizza, giving me the same stupid look the rest of the guys had on their faces. We gathered at one of our houses once a week to talk business—which was really just an excuse to eat and drink. Tonight, the five of us gathered around my living room with three large pizzas and a couple of six-packs.

“How 'bout you talk to me without a mouthful of food.” I shook my head and sat back on the chair. “And if any of that pizza carnage falls outta that trap of yours and onto my floor, you're cleaning it up—after I kick your ass.”

“Yeah, yeah. You sound like a broken record. It's cute how you think that's gonna distract us from the original question.”

Ford waved a hand at me as if to say *get on with it*.

Even talking about answering questions brought me back to that night during the hurricane and the ridiculous game I'd played with Jared. Which ultimately led to replaying the sounds Jared made when I took him in my mouth...when he came...

"Oh, he's hiding something. No doubt about it." Cole reached forward and grabbed a napkin off the coffee table.

"I'm not hiding shit. Dumbass over here just doesn't know how to ask a question." *But Jared does*. Where was the tequila when I needed it? I couldn't get the damn man off my mind.

"Okay then." Levi cocked his dark eyebrow, a smartass smirk curling one side of his mouth. "Burke, what happened between you and Jared during the hurricane?"

"Well, let's see..." I scratched my chin in thought, feeling four sets of nosy eyes on me. "We ate. We drank. We slept. The end."

"So, the real question is," Noah said, leaning forward as he rested his forearms on his ridiculously long thighs, "what exactly did Jared give you to *eat* and *drink*, Burke?"

"Yeah," Ford chimed in. "And where did you both sleep?"

I didn't need the reminder of what I ate and drank that night. Hell, if I tried hard enough, I could still taste him. Frustrated, I pushed to my feet, ignoring their questioning looks—their all-too-knowing looks—and strode to the kitchen. I couldn't hide a thing from those assholes and it drove me nuts sometimes to have people read my every mood with complete accuracy.

"Sweetie, you know we're only joking, right?" I looked at Noah, who was leaning against the doorframe of the kitchen, his blond hair almost brushing the top of the frame, arms crossed over his chest, and concern in his eyes.

Turning around, I leaned back against the counter, crossing one foot over the other as if trying to prove I was cool, calm, and collected, even if I was anything but. I casually shrugged

one shoulder, huffing out a laugh. “Noah, I’m fine. You’re all making somethin’ outta nothin’.”

A sympathetic smile drew across his face, softening his eyes. “Are we?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to disagree with my own statement and admit the fucking thoughts I couldn’t seem to evict from my mind ever since the night I’d been alone with Jared. But doing so would only fuel their hairbrained ideas that Jared and I belonged together. Could the guy kiss? Fuck yeah. Was his cock long and smooth, its girth like it was made to fit in my mouth perfectly? Fuck yeah to that, too. Did the sounds he’d made when he’d come play in my mind like a bad song on repeat for the last few days? *Fuck...* Was he gorgeous when he’d finally let go...shooting down my throat...right before I’d jerked myself to the finish and shot all over him? Where was I going with this?

I shifted uncomfortably against the counter, refusing to physically adjust myself while Noah watched on, wearing a smirk that said he absolutely knew where my mind had gone. “Stop looking at me like that,” I grumbled, which only made him smile more.

Ford walked past Noah into the kitchen carrying a few plates. “No, I didn’t spill anything on your floor, so don’t even think it.”

Noah snorted, pushing off the doorframe as the rest of the guys came into the room. “I’m pretty sure that’s not what he was thinking about.”

Sick of the goddamn inquisition, I changed the subject with the first thing I could think of. “I talked to my mom yesterday.” All four of them cringed in sympathy.

“Let me guess...” Cole said, opening the fridge to grab some more beer for each of us. He handed me a bottle of Home of the Wave lager—made by none other than his fiancé, Aiden, at his local brewery—and said, “You did something to try and send her to an early grave, you awful son.”

“And you need to make more time for family, which she’s right about,” Levi chimed in, holding his hands up in defense when I shot a glare his way. “Hey, don’t give me that look. Not all of us are lucky enough to have that.” We all knew what he meant, knew he’d been dealt the shittiest hand when it came to his deadbeat parents. Marrying Sage, Aiden’s cousin, was going to change everything for him. Just being in a relationship with the feisty man had changed so much in our friend’s life for the better.

“She had to have thrown something in there about giving her grandchildren.” Noah took a swig of his beer then pointed the bottle at me. “Mama Russo never misses an opportunity for that.” The guys nodded in agreement.

“Is it my turn, *my little gnocchi*?” Ford attempted to pinch my cheek, laughing as I shoved him away. That was one thing I could’ve lived without my friends knowing, but one unlucky day with Mama Russo on speakerphone back in college unleashed well over a decade of teasing from these assholes.

“Get the hell away from me, jackass.” Despite feeling like I was under a microscope, I laughed as the tension drained from my shoulders and spine. If there was one thing I could say about my best friends, it was that they knew how to diffuse my moods before I had a chance to detonate.

They also knew that as much as my family drove me crazy sometimes, and despite living three-thousand miles away from them, I loved them unconditionally. Sometimes, I wasn’t sure my family could say the same about me. Although, most of the time, I don’t think they even realized what they were doing.

“In all seriousness, we get if you’re not ready to talk about what happened that night,” Cole said, squeezing my shoulder.

My mouth was open, ready to squash any ideas they had in their nosy heads, when Ford cut in. “We know you all too well to try and deny it, buddy.”

I glanced around the room, seeing the same understanding yet mischievous expression on each of their faces as they nodded their heads. If I knew anything about them, it was that they wouldn’t let this conversation drop that easily.

If they knew anything about me, they'd know I could do this forever. Stubborn was my middle name.

CHAPTER FIVE

I held up my phone with the picture of my grandpa's historic-meets-modern craftsman on the screen. "See, it's still standin'. There really wasn't much clean-up to do. I got the yard cleaned up pretty quickly and replaced the plants that didn't survive the wind last week. Your home is as sturdy and beautiful as ever." He'd forgotten I'd shown him already right after the storm, but I'd never let him know that.

"*Your* home," my grandpa said, his thin lips turning up ever so slightly into a smile.

"Well, yeah, for now, but you know what I mean." I pulled the phone back and tucked it in my pocket. The thought of leaving that place made a ten-pound stone sink in my gut. I'd been preparing myself for a while now. The house wasn't mine but, thankfully, the bait shop was.

"And Fred?" This time his lips twitched as he puffed out air through his nose.

Laughing, I dropped my chin to my chest. "I never should've told you about him." My grandpa was my best friend. I'd shared everything with him since I was little—things that happened in school, friends I'd made, fears I had, my bisexuality, and most importantly, how isolated I'd felt in my own home with parents and siblings who often forgot I existed—but telling him about Burke had come back to bite me in the ass more than once. The man had trouble remembering what he had for breakfast, yet pulled that name out every time I visited. Still, it cracked me up when he

referred to Burke as Fred Flintstone. “The cave dweller is still avoiding me. Shocking, I know.”

“Fool,” he whispered, his eyes getting heavy.

“Tell me about it.” Although, I guess I was a fool, too, for crossing that line with Burke.

“And Edward?” Seeing the hope in his dim eyes shattered my heart into a million pieces.

I thought about lying to him but instead shook my head. “No. I’m sorry, Grandpa.”

His gaze, deep with sorrow, dropped to his blanket as he exhaled a shaky breath. “Another fool.”

“Yeah, he is.” The sadness in my chest hardened from the intense anger surging through me. I would never understand my family. Hopefully, that meant I wasn’t like them, in any way, shape, or form.

“You know love,” he whispered. “My Angie knew love.” His eyes met mine again. “Maybe we loved him too much.”

I swallowed the baseball-sized lump in my throat, determined to hold it together in front of him. “There’s no such thing, Grandpa, but there are people who don’t appreciate it. Take it for granted.”

“Not you. I’ll take care of you.” His pale eyelids slid closed.

I stared at his peaceful face, his worries fading from his brow as he finally relaxed and fell asleep. “You always have,” I whispered back.

“Hey, Jared.” Gladys, one of the nurses, came into my grandpa’s room, a soft, sympathetic smile on her face. She took my grandpa’s hand, the juxtaposition between her dark, young complexion in complete contrast with my grandpa’s pale, weathered skin.

“Hey, Gladys.” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as I studied the man who’d once been larger than life.

“Do you have a minute?” When she gestured toward the door, my heart took a nosedive.

Squeezing his hand gently so as not to wake him, I whispered, “Love you, Grandpa.” Giving him one last look, I stood up and left the room. Smiling jack-o-lanterns, cute spiders, and dancing skeletons decorated the hall, feeling out of place for the ominous conversation I was about to have. “He’s not doing well, is he?” The tilt of her head let me know I’d said that as more of a statement than a question. She studied me with kind, understanding eyes. She didn’t want to say it, but she didn’t have to. “Yeah, I had a feeling. He’s been goin’ downhill pretty quickly. Sleeping a lot.”

“Yeah, he has. I’m sorry, honey. I know that’s not what you wanted to hear. I just want you to be prepared.” She squeezed my forearm gently, the gesture full of concern and sympathy.

I rubbed a hand over my heart, trying to ease the ache that was too deep to reach. “Yeah. Not what I wanted to ever hear, but something I’ve been preparing myself for anyway.” He’d been declining over the last few weeks, but I tried to fool myself into thinking he’d be fine. That he’d bounce back from this like he always had. Deep down, though, I knew my time left with him was nearing the end.

“I hope you realize how lucky he is to have you.” She paused, studying me as if she wanted to say more. “In the year he’s been here, I’ve never met any other family members. Is it just you?” That struck a painful chord. It must have shown on my face because quickly she let go of my arm and said, “I’m sorry. That’s none of my business.”

“No, it’s okay. They don’t deserve for me to cover for them. Yes, he has more family than just me, but I’m the only one who gives a shit.” Feeling like an ass for cussing in front of such a sweet woman, it was my turn to apologize. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to get so heated. He just... He deserves better from his family and it kills me that I can’t get them to see that.”

“Unfortunately, it happens more often than I’d like to admit. For some, I think it’s outta sight, outta mind. Breaks my

heart.” Her soft brows drew together as she looked back toward the room. “Not with him, though. He knows how much you love him, and that’s what sets his mind at ease. When he has the strength, you’re all he talks about. How proud he is of you and what a fine young man you’ve become.” She hesitated for a second, then said, “I hope there’s someone there for you, too.”

It pissed me off that the first face to pop into my head belonged to a man who was too stubborn to see what was right in front of him. Of course, I knew I had other people who cared about me. Aiden asked about my grandpa all the time—more than my own family did—and the rest of the guys would no doubt be there if I needed them. I realized then that the answer to that question was easier than it once had been. “I have people in my corner.” For reasons I couldn’t explain, I had a feeling that included the frustrating, hard-headed chef. I’d seen a softer side of him, on more than one occasion, even if he tried to act like emotions weren’t powerful enough to penetrate his high walls. “Thanks, Gladys. For everything.”

As I got in my truck, it hit me how grateful I was that Grandpa had been awake when I’d first arrived. I had this anchor-sized sinking feeling in my gut. An impending doom I didn’t want to look too closely at. It wasn’t easy going back and forth from the nursing home with it being an hour away. I never skipped a visit, but some weeks I could only get there once. From then on, though, I would make the effort to go a few times a week. Even if that meant closing the shop more often.

Fueled by pure anger racing through my bloodstream—an emotion I could usually calm pretty quickly until my family forced my hand—I called my parents on the way home. My dad answered after several rings and immediately my truck was flooded with the tropical percussion of steel drums. “Jared, can I call you back? We were just about to—”

“No, Dad, I need to talk to you now. Whatever you were about to do can wait.” I gripped the steering wheel so tight it was a miracle my hand didn’t cramp.

“Is this about your grandpa?” The question was more matter of fact than laced with concern. It also didn’t escape my attention that he’d referred to him as *my* grandpa instead of his dad.

“Yeah.” The pain in that one word splintered my composure. “He’s not doin’ well.”

My dad breathed a heavy sigh into the phone, but I couldn’t tell if it was from sadness or inconvenience. Rather, I knew the answer; it just made me sick to realize this phone call was obviously interrupting his day. “We knew this was coming, Jared. The man’s ninety years old.”

“Eighty-seven,” I corrected.

“You know what I meant. People don’t live forever.” It sounded like his hand covered the receiver as his muffled voice asked for two more margaritas.

“You do realize you’re talking about your dad, right? The man who raised you. The man whose hard work helped fund that nice little cushion you have to travel the world.” My blood boiled to a dangerous degree, regret pulsing in my veins for even making the call to begin with.

“Jared, your mother and I worked for our retirement, just like everyone else. And, let’s not forget, I’m his only child. Of course he wanted to make sure I was taken care of.” His clipped tone and lack of remorse sent a chill racing down my spine. Spoiling his son was one of my grandpa’s biggest regrets.

“The same way you made sure he was taken care of? In a facility far enough away from home that it makes it difficult for me to visit him as much as I’d like? As much as he deserves?” I blew out a deep, shaky breath, trying to calm myself before I said something I’d regret. “You both should be here. So should Vanessa and Kyle.”

“Getting home isn’t exactly easy right now. Turks and Caicos isn’t a car ride away. And your brother and sister have work. Do you think Vanessa can just push patients off on a colleague? Or Kyle can hand over a client’s ad campaign to

someone else? There's more involved with putting their jobs on hold than keeping fish on ice and turning the sign to Closed."

"Edward," I could hear my mom say, though she sounded distant.

That one landed exactly where he'd intended—straight through my heart, piercing my pride. I didn't bother correcting him about what bait actually was. I loved my bait shop—which was started by my grandpa and given to me years ago—loved the simple life I lived, loved Coral Pointe...and that had always been what my family saw as a weakness. "Message received. I'll let you know when he's no longer a burden to y'all." Without waiting for a response, I ended the call, my hands shaking as I gripped the steering wheel even tighter.

It was funny how quickly they forgot who paid for business school and medical school. It made my blood run cold to think my grandpa's legacy, his marina that he'd loved so much—the place where I'd had my first real summer job, and figured out a thing or two about my sexuality thanks to another summer employee—was sold in order to make sure his family was taken care of. He'd come to terms with the fact that my dad had no interest in running it. And, although I loved working at the marina, my heart had truly been set on the bait shop and was enough for me after I graduated high school. But what gutted me, more than anything else, was the fact that my grandpa knew they didn't care. They'd proven that with how they'd all left Coral Pointe once they received their cut of the marina money and never looked back. Not even to check in on him—unless they needed something.

The welcoming teal sign with a sand dollar adornment for Coral Pointe came into view, and I put my window down, breathing in the briny ocean air and letting it out in a sigh of relief. There was something about crossing that town line that eased all the anger and pain. Enough so, I never talked to anyone about what was truly happening. Pointers knew I was a simple prawn in a tank full of expensive lobsters, but no one knew how deeply the rest of Samuel Boone's shitty family dug their claws into him, just to keep an eye on the inheritance

they in no way deserved. And there was no way in hell I'd tarnish his legacy by revealing how quickly they'd forgotten him.

I pulled up in front of the older house I'd spent so many years in and killed the engine, sitting in blessed silence for a few minutes. It was a ritual I did every time I got home from visiting my grandpa. A cleansing of sorts, to keep all that pollution of negativity out of his house and at the curb where it belonged.

My phone chimed with a notification and I looked at the screen, seeing a reminder text from Noah about celebrating Hunter's new house and move to Coral Pointe. The city man had gotten a lot more than he'd bargained for since coming to this small beach town, but Noah and Logan had changed everything, giving Hunter a life he never knew he wanted.

As I got out of the car, I responded that I'd be there, then tucked my phone in my back pocket. Entering the house, I released another calming breath—until my eyes landed on the radio Burke had left on the entry table. It had been there for weeks; for reasons I couldn't explain, I hadn't moved it. I sure as hell wasn't examining why right then.

Quickly, I changed into some cargo shorts and a Jimmy Buffet tee, grabbed my keys, and headed over to the marina with Brutus by my side. I had a few hours to kill before I had to be at Hunter's new house, and there was nothing more therapeutic for me than being out on the water in my fishing boat. Hell, I owned a used, beat-up Ford truck just so I could afford to spend a pretty penny on the twenty-foot Boston Whaler. I'd put as much money down on the boat as I could, which was pretty much my whole savings, but after making years' worth of payments, this beauty was finally mine.

Once I hit the ocean, breathed in the calming breeze of the Atlantic, everything else faded away. Worries over my grandpa, anger toward my selfish family...all taken away on a gust of wind. Brutus perched in his usual spot, watching the wake of the boat, his tongue hanging out and not a care in the world. Now if only I could send thoughts of Burke away on the next big rush of salty air, I'd be in much better shape.

Instead, my gaze surfed the breeze headed for Oceanside Bar and Grill. The chill down my spine had nothing to do with early fall temperatures and everything to do with memories of what that man could do with his mouth. You know, that mouth that he'd made sure to remind me I'd never taste again. Insufferable nowhere near described the pain-in-the-ass chef.

When I'd met him a few years back, I was in no way prepared for the reaction I'd had toward him. Even more, I wasn't prepared for the reaction he'd had toward me. The guy wasn't even my type, for fuck's sake. I preferred my men hot, not hot-headed. In a matter of seconds, I'd seen the fire in his eyes turn from unquestionable want to stubborn denial. I had no idea what had gone through his head at that moment, but the flash of desire in his eyes had turned to stone so fast it gave me whiplash.

So, I wrote him off as a lost cause, until the next time I saw him. It was clear as fucking day he was attracted to me, but for whatever reason, that stubborn jackass relentlessly played the part of the completely uninterested. He wasn't winning any Oscars soon, I could tell you that much. In the beginning, I'd made getting under his skin a personal mission, but now I was having trouble removing myself from the situation. Maybe I would stand a chance if we hadn't tumbled over that line a few weeks back. If I didn't know the weight of his cock in my hand or how he skillfully devoured more than food that night...

But what pissed me off the most...the thing that made it impossible to forget anything ever happened...was the conversation we'd had. I'd confided in him, told him my worst fear, the heaviest weight on my chest. He now knew something about me that no one else did—and then he'd shut me out. God forbid he actually faced any real emotions. What the hell was so wrong with finding that one person who knew you better than anyone else? That one person who you could be completely vulnerable with? I stood by my accusation during the storm. The man could talk the talk but was so damn scared to walk the walk—even when the chemistry between us was off the fucking charts.

I glanced down at the time on my phone and cursed. I'd lost track of time, and now I had to rush home and shower because, if there was one thing I had control of in this whole fucked-up situation with Burke, it was to make sure the guy knew what he was missing. I was a simple man and viewed the world with as much clarity as I could. Aside from my family, stressful situations weren't my thing. But that didn't mean I couldn't have a little fun when it came to Burke. After all, bait was my specialty.

Burke

“YOU'RE SERIOUSLY gonna be able to fit everything in one U-Haul?” Levi eyed Hunter skeptically. His math brain was probably trying to work out how a man could *Tetris* his entire life in a box relatively the same size as a standard bathroom.

Hunter and Aiden were flying to New York in the morning, packing up everything of Hunter's in a U-Haul over the weekend, then driving back to Coral Pointe. Logan, Hunter's son, was staying with Noah. Noah absolutely adored the baby who'd become such a huge part of his life. Of all our lives.

If my mother could see their happy little family—two men, raising a child together in a loving, committed relationship—I'd never hear the end of it. It had taken her all of a week when I'd first come out to come to terms with my sexuality. My dad's disappointment only lasted long enough for my mom to threaten divorce if he didn't support their son. Of course, it would've never come to that. To his core, my dad loved his family, but it wasn't easy news to hear. My mom had quickly shifted gears, trying to find me a “nice Italian man” to start a family with. The picture in her mind had changed, but the end result was still one she pushed for every time I spoke with her.

My eyes drifted to Jared for the hundredth time that night. Something was off about him, but I couldn't figure out what it was. Not that it was any of my business. I'd done whatever I could to avoid him since that night at his house. Childish? Maybe. Necessary? That was what I'd told myself. The second

his gray-blue eyes met mine, I looked away and tuned back into the conversation. *Childish, it is.*

“Things are different now. I really just have to get my furniture and clothes. Everything else I need is right here.” The way Hunter looked at Noah was as if my friend hung the damn moon. I was the only one left in the group who’d managed to stay single and keep my sanity.

“Swoon.” Sage pressed his hand over his heart right as Levi laughed and kissed his temple.

“Has everyone in this group gone soft?” I shook my head, staring at each of my best friends as they leaned closer to their significant others.

Noah didn’t miss a beat. “Trust me. Hunter is anything but *soft.*”

Hunter laughed, kissing Noah. “You tell him.”

“Is that really so bad?” Jared’s steady voice broke through the noise in the room. It was the first time he’d said a word to me all night.

So, I replied with the first thing that came to mind. “Not being able to get it up? I wouldn’t know.”

I got the reaction I was after when Jared rolled his eyes and huffed. “Avoiding the question. How typical, Cave Dweller.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask Hunter if he had any tequila. Instead, I shot back, “Ask me something worth answering, Fisherboy.” The heated look he gave me shot down my spine, even if I was having trouble figuring out if the heat was because he wanted to rip my clothes off or throat punch me.

Jared shook his head, huffing in derision as he looked away and absently stared across the room. There was definitely something off about him tonight. It threw me that I knew him well enough to tell something was wrong, but I needed to let it go. Whatever was going on was none of my business.

I sat there and listened to everyone rag on each other, throwing out jabs, laughter filling the entire room. Yet, my wandering eyes kept drifting to Jared. The man was the epitome of a laid back, smalltown fisherman. His golden skin was sprinkled with freckles from days spent out on his boat or sitting in his chair outside of Bait and Switch with Brutus at his feet. Strawberry-blond strands of hair had escaped the elastic holding the rest of his wild mane back, falling every which way around his face. It drove me crazy. How could he stand it? My fingers itched to push the strands back behind his ears and hold them there until they cooperated. There was a reason I kept my dark hair buzzed short. I couldn't stand how out of control my thick, wavy hair was when it got too long. But Jared didn't seem to care if his wasn't perfectly pulled back.

I swore the man only had three variations of things in his wardrobe: worn-out tees, shorts with an overabundance of damn pockets, and faded jeans that had seen too many days in the sun. *And basketball shorts. Don't forget those.* I couldn't forget them, even if I tried. Not that I hadn't tried or anything. Nothing could wipe the memory of how those shorts brushed my hot skin as I'd pushed them down, took Jared in my mouth, and jerked myself until I shot all over— *Shit*. It really kept coming back to that. How the hell was I supposed to forget now that I knew his smell, his taste...could picture his naked body spread out before me, waiting for—

I jumped when the group erupted into cheers, everyone looking at Noah and Hunter in the kitchen. I'd apparently missed something because my damn mind had wandered again. Glancing one more time at the frustrating cause for my distraction, my skin prickled when I found those light eyes locked on me. Eyes that usually watched everyone else, taking in the scene, were now clouded with a heaviness, and damned if I didn't want to know the reason why.

Over the next hour, we all ate and drank around the huge island in Hunter's kitchen. Apparently, Noah had decided to move in with Hunter while my mind had gotten tangled in a Jared-shaped web.

Jared was the first to say goodbye to everyone, heading out the door into the faded light of early fall. I flexed my fingers at my sides, resisting the urge to follow him, but the attempt was pathetic. Ignoring the teasing looks from my friends, I headed out into the night behind the man who drove me crazy without even trying.

CHAPTER SIX

JARED

I took a much needed deep breath of cool evening air the second I stepped out of Hunter's house. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I'd gotten to the end of the driveway before I heard heavy footsteps behind me. Somehow, I knew—I just fucking *knew*—it was Burke.

“Jared, wait up.”

Screw that. The man hadn't talked to me in weeks, and although I'd left my house earlier feeling in control, ready to show him what he was missing, I just didn't have the energy. I'd known what I was getting myself into that night, but it still pissed me the fuck off that I even cared what he thought. So, I kept walking, not bothering to slow my steady pace. Today was not the day to mess with my head. Usually, I was successful at shoving my family shit to the back corner of my mind until they forced it back out, but today I couldn't seem to shake the anger and sadness overwhelming me.

“Jared,” Burke said, coming up alongside me, his heavy steps falling in sync with mine on the asphalt. “Didn't you hear me calling your name?”

“Yeah, I did.” I wouldn't admit how hearing him say my name instead of *Fisherboy* truly affected me.

“And you couldn't stop for a second?”

I huffed, shaking my head as I kept my determined pace in the direction of the inlet. “Is that how this works? I thought we were supposed to pretend the other didn't exist until you could convince yourself nothing happened between us. My mistake.”

Burke abruptly jumped in front of me, stopping me with his brick wall of a frame. With my hands in my pockets, I didn't have time to buffer the connection and bounced off the man's chest. Every cell in my body lit up, my muscles tensing so as not to show my reaction to the asshole in front of me.

"What happened back there?" He waved his hand toward Hunter's house. "You've been exceptionally pissy with me tonight." His dark eyes studied me as if he'd be able to tell what was going on by just looking at me.

"Believe it or not, Burke, my moods don't revolve around you." I pulled my hands out of my pockets and stepped to the side, attempting to go around him, when his words stopped me in my tracks.

"Is it your grandpa?"

All the air left my lungs in a whoosh. Even though I couldn't hide his failing health, I'd done everything in my power over the years not to bring attention to what was truly happening to my grandpa. To protect his pride by not letting the town see how his only child had abandoned him, along with the rest of his family. It was at that moment, standing in front of Burke on a dimly lit road in Coral Pointe, that I realized I was exhausted. Mentally and physically drained to the fucking bone. In keeping my family shit private, I'd also effectively secluded myself in my pain. But this man currently waiting for me to open up to him was not the person I needed right now. A man who somehow managed to make me feel more alone without even trying.

And the worst part was, I knew it wasn't all his fault. I *had* known what I was getting myself into that night. He'd been completely transparent with me, and I'd rolled the dice anyway, knowing damn well it was a game I couldn't win.

"Why do you care, Burke?"

The flash of hurt in his dark eyes caught me off guard. "Do you really think I'm that heartless that I wouldn't care?"

"I try not to think about you at all, quite honestly." Man, even I could admit I was in rare form.

“How’s that working out for you?” The cocky arch to his brow, and the slight twitch to his mouth as he tried to hold back a smirk, loosened my shoulders.

Despite the sour mood I was in, a soft laugh escaped. “About as well as you tryin’ not to think about me.” I narrowed my eyes and cocked a brow, daring him to deny it. We may have said one-night only, but memories last forever.

Surprisingly, he didn’t refute it, even if he didn’t admit it, either. Somehow that helped calm the anger I’d been feeling all day. “Is he okay?”

I was standing on a precipice I’d never found myself on before, not even with Aiden. No one knew my biggest fear except for the stubborn cave dweller blocking my path. I swallowed the lump in my throat, stupid decision made. “No, he’s not.” Jesus, why was saying that out loud to someone other than my family so freeing? If anything, I should’ve felt even more vulnerable, but relief washed over me for not carrying the weight on my own anymore.

“What happened?” The concern in his dark eyes was something I hadn’t expected to see.

Slowly, I blew out a deep, shaky breath, turning my focus to the right on the waves crashing on the shore in the distance. “He’s just sleeping a lot. Getting weaker every day.”

“And your family?” My head snapped back in his direction. His penetrating gaze and the tick in his chiseled jaw made me shift uncomfortably. He already knew the answer to that one.

“Where’s the tequila when I need it?” I tried to make a joke of it, but Burke didn’t seem to be buying it. Again, I blew out a deep breath, rubbing my clammy hands on my thighs just to have something to do with them. “They don’t care.” I raised my hands, making air quotes. “People don’t live forever.” Huffing in disgust, I added, “After all”—I used those air quotes again, even though I was paraphrasing—“putting their jobs on hold means more than keeping fish on ice and turning the sign to Closed.” Those words felt like acid on my tongue as they spilled out.

Burke crossed his muscular arms over his chest, a hint of anger flashing in his eyes. “They actually said that?” Damn, his voice had dropped like three octaves, I assumed from disgust.

“My dad did, yeah.” I scrubbed a hand over my face, the roughness from days’ worth of stubble scratching my palm. “Look, I appreciate you checking on me, but I’m fine. Just tired.” Tired of the whole situation.

“Why aren’t you letting your friends be there for you?” A line formed between his brows, his hard stare and ludicrous expectations striking a nerve.

“Is that what we are, Burke? Friends?” It was his turn to look away, trying to hide how uncomfortable that question made him. I let out a laugh devoid of any humor. “It’s been a long day. I’m gonna go home and crash so I can put this day behind me. Don’t follow me, Cave Dweller.” I was over my emotions being on display. That nerve he’d hit was suddenly raw and exposed, leaving me feeling defenseless. What the hell did he want from me?

I could sense his eyes still on me as I walked away, felt the tingle of awareness on the back of my neck, but I forced myself to ignore it. I had a bed calling my name, and luckily, it was one Burke had never been in. By the time I woke up in the morning, I would be ready to face another day the same way I always had. In a better mood and determined to hold on to the positive energy I usually surrounded myself with—and that energy did not come in a Burke-sized package.

“HEY.” I stopped in front of Noah, turning my attention to Logan when his little hand waved in front of my face. “Hey there, little man. Are you watching for your dad?” Logan smiled and cooed, wrapping his tiny fingers around my much larger index finger. There was no room for negativity when that baby smiled at you. He’d stolen the hearts of everyone in

this town and was definitely going to grow up with a group of protectors and so much love.

“Hey. Thanks for coming, Jared,” Noah said with a genuine smile before turning his attention back to the curve of the road the truck would be following at any moment. Hunter and Aiden had left New York at four o’clock that morning and drove straight through, stopping only long enough to piss and grab food. Seeing as it was close to eight already, the plan for tonight was to get all Hunter’s things in the house. Then he and Noah could deal with it tomorrow.

“You’d be the first one in line to help me if I ever needed it,” I replied to Noah, but that statement wasn’t sitting well with me, even though Noah helped anyone whenever he could. It was Burke, though, who’d noticed a few nights ago that something was bothering me. And it was Burke who’d followed me to make sure I was okay. I still didn’t know exactly how to process that one, so the best idea was to avoid analyzing it at all.

Noah tickled Logan’s belly, making the baby squirm. “It’s like this little guy knows his daddy is almost here. He’s wide awake. I know Hunter can’t wait to see him, too. He only texted every other hour over the last few days to see how we both were.” Noah rolled his eyes, but it was obvious he loved how much Hunter had missed them. “Here’s Cole. I think he’s just as excited as we are,” Noah said, waving to him.

I shoved my hands in my pockets, rocking back on my heels. “Considering Aiden’s in that truck, too, I’d say he’s a bit happy today.”

Cole’s expression said it all as he approached us, a wide grin plastered on his face. “Hey. Aiden just texted. They’re five minutes away.” His eyes cut to me for no more than a second before he added, “Burke’s on his way, with food, of course.” I assumed from the way they all studied me lately—like they were trying to figure out a riddle—Burke hadn’t told them anything. They weren’t blind, though. It was obvious the guys knew something had happened between Burke and me, but being the standup guys they were, they didn’t push for details—at least, they didn’t push me.

Noah laughed. “Of course. We can’t do anything in this group without food.”

“Nope,” Cole agreed. “Ford and Abe are stopping for some beer, and Levi and Sage will be here after Levi takes care of something at the inn. He’s on-call tonight.”

Snorting a laugh, I said, “I like how Aiden and Hunter can load up the truck on their own, but unloading it requires ten men.”

Cole and Noah laughed with me, Cole saying, “Well, we all know one of those men will be more concerned with making sure Noah and Hunter don’t have to deal with leftovers.” In unison, the three of us said, “Ford,” then cracked up.

“They’re here!” Noah’s face lit up as he watched the truck amble down the road. I couldn’t blame the guy for the happiness that rolled off him. Hunter and Logan had changed everything for him, adding more light to the glow Noah already radiated. “Logan, look. Daddy’s here!”

Hunter barely had the truck parked when Noah rushed down the driveway. As soon as Hunter’s feet touched the ground, he drew his family into his arms. Cole followed suit, wrapping his arms around Aiden as he kissed him. An unwanted ache formed in my chest as I watched the couples embrace. I’d always been a man who was fine on his own. Did I turn away opportunities for a little fun of the female or male variety? Hell no. But, I’d been happy living a quiet life, with Aiden as my closest friend, and a dog who wouldn’t even know how to cause drama. The chaos these men brought with them—in a positive way—was something I was still getting used to.

As if on cue, Burke’s black Expedition pulled up at the curb behind the U-Haul. I hadn’t run into him at all since Thursday night. Honestly, I was happy about that. I hadn’t been expecting him to be able to read me so well, and the fact that he did had left me unsettled.

We locked eyes over the hood of his SUV, and this strange urge washed over me; an image in my mind of him pulling me

close the way our friends just had each other. The thought was so ridiculous, I laughed, getting a confused look from Burke in return. Yep, I'd just looked at the guy and laughed, and although that hadn't been my intention, the frustrated gleam in Burke's eyes was so worth it.

As the rest of the guys arrived, we began bringing things inside, including the food from Burke's SUV. I set a box labeled "kitchen" down on the island just as Burke came into the room with trays of something that smelled incredible. There was one thing I had to give him credit for; the man could cook.

I still felt weird around him since the other night. It was going to take some getting used to, talking to someone else about how my family was treating my grandpa. I never, in a million years, would've thought that person would be the stubborn, frustrating chef.

"How is he?" Burke's deep voice rolled down my spine, his presence overshadowing everything else around me.

I shrugged. "The same."

"That's good, right? He's no worse than he was the other day?" I still didn't understand why he gave a damn, but his words from a few nights ago repeated in my head. *Do you really think I'm that heartless that I wouldn't care?* I'd offended him. We butted heads constantly, but asking him why he cared how my grandpa was had apparently been more harsh than anything else I'd ever said to the man. He'd almost looked crushed, and for a split second, I'd felt guilty for implying that he wasn't the sort of person to give a shit. Quite honestly, it still unnerved me that he did...that he continued to...but that wasn't exactly fair to him. Sure, he pissed me the hell off sometimes, but there was a small part of me that somehow knew he was the type of person to be there for you, no matter what. And, when it came down to it, he'd asked about my grandpa more in the last few days than my family had in years.

I sighed and leaned back against the cool granite, crossing my arms over my chest. "I guess that's all I have at this point.

Just taking it day by day. It's ridiculous, but every day he stays stable instead of getting worse feels like a small victory. It's not like he's getting better."

"It's not ridiculous. It makes perfect sense." His gaze held firm on mine, as if trying to show me how sincere he was.

"We got the rest of the food out of your car," Ford said, walking into the kitchen with his head down, gazing at the tray of food in his hands like it was precious. "This smells amazing. Is it eggplant"—he finally looked up, his eyes flicking from Burke to me and back to Burke—"parm? Am I interrupting something?"

At the same time I replied, "No," Burke responded, "Yes." I arched a brow at the man, seeing a hint of a smirk playing on his lips, and I couldn't help but let out a small laugh.

"Okay." Ford set the tray on the counter then pulled off the bag that was looped on his arm and set it down. "I didn't take you for the chips with pasta kinda guy, Burke."

Burke snorted in derision. "Of course, I'm not." His gaze returned to me. "Those are for Jared."

Jared, instead of Fisherboy. Interesting. "For me?" I laughed. "What the heck do I need potato chips for?" I looked in the bag at the Cape Cod Kettle Chips and laughed again, shaking my head.

"Correction, you need the *right* chips. Those greasy, thin excuses for chips you keep in your house should be against the law."

I snorted. "Against the law? That's not at all dramatic."

Burke held his hands up in front of him. "Hey, I don't make the rules."

I pulled out a container with some kind of dip in it. "And this?"

"Obviously, it's to prove my point. The only chips worth dipping are kettle chips." He crossed one arm over the other, apparently proud of himself, judging by the smug smile on his face.

“I have this strange feeling I’m missing something,” Ford said, still looking completely confused.

“That’s because you are, babe.” Abe slid his arm around Ford’s waist and looked up at the man he was obviously head over heels for. The two had lost touch after high school, but after fifteen years and a sneaky plan from Ford, they weren’t letting each other go ever again. It wasn’t often people had that kind of second chance, but those two didn’t take it for granted. “It’s clearly a private joke between Burke and Jared.”

In what world did Burke and I have private jokes? *In the same world where you let him suck you off on your kitchen table.* One look at Burke, and I knew by the way his eyes darkened that his mind had gone there, too. Jesus, this guy made me feel so off balance lately.

I knew what he was doing, even though he’d deny it. The last time I saw him, I’d been in a shit mood—which was completely out of character for me—and barely holding on to my emotions about Grandpa not doing well. The last few days had been hard as hell because the less I tried to think about what I was losing, the more I thought about it. I replayed my father’s words over and over again, trying to find even an ounce of concern in the last conversation we’d had. Painfully, I realized the only concern he’d had was about inconveniencing Vanessa and Kyle with their jobs and ordering another margarita.

“Hey,” Burke said, snapping me out of my thoughts. When I glanced up, I realized we were alone again. “Don’t let your mind wander into that shit tonight. If you’re not gonna tell everyone what’s going on, at least let yourself be in the moment with your friends. Take your mind off it for now.”

“Get outta my head, Cave Dweller.” Despite trying to show I was unaffected by his words, I gave the frustrating man a half-smile.

“But messing with your head is one of my favorite things to do.” Burke pushed off the counter and walked back outside to his SUV. I knew he’d meant that last statement as a joke, but it still landed hard on my chest. The man had been messing

with my head for years, but I'd had my fair share of messing with his, too, if only to stay on even ground with him. Talk about years' worth of foreplay.

I had to give it to him, though. As much as he disagreed with me wanting to keep everything about my grandpa under wraps, he respected my wishes. That went a long way in me trusting Burke like I never had before. Which was completely inconvenient considering I'd tried over the last few weeks to erase inappropriate thoughts of him from my mind. My attempt was as successful as trying to put orange juice back in an orange.

Let's face it. It made so much more sense to drink the juice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Apparently, my mind was too consumed with family drama, concern over Grandpa, and one giant, grumpy, insufferably sexy man. How else could I explain making the monumental mistake of running out of coffee? It was the one thing I always had in my kitchen. Hell, it was more likely I had a coffee pot warming than food cooking on the stove.

But there I was, sitting at a table in a decked-out Beachin' Bakery, a party store purple spider hanging above my head, drinking Teresa's house blend while annihilating a cinnamon roll the size of my head, complete with pumpkin-colored frosting. All in all, it wasn't a terrible option to choose if I couldn't drink a cup standing in my kitchen in nothing but my underwear. Something told me Teresa would frown upon that last part. Although, she was a bit of a harmless flirt.

There was no way I could face the day without a jolt to my system. Considering I couldn't take a shot of vodka before visiting my grandpa, caffeine was going to have to do. I'd definitely need the strong stuff when I got home, though. Within the last week, Grandpa had gotten worse. It felt like I spent every single day holding my breath, waiting for the heartbreaking inevitable. I'd reached for my phone a few times since last talking to my dad, but I couldn't stand to hear his rejection again. Not only was he and the rest of my family forsaking his own father, but they also refused to be any kind of support for me to lean on.

"Hey there, Jared." Jim, Aiden's dad, made himself at home as he sat down at the small table. "How ya been?" He

placed a coffee cup down on the table alongside a chocolate croissant.

“Same old, same old. How about you?”

“Can’t complain. Well, I could, but I won’t.” He sighed. “No, I won’t harp over the fact that Aiden and Willamina are drivin’ me nuts.”

I smiled at the name he’d used for his niece. If there was one way to get a rise out of Aiden’s cousin, Billy, it was by using her full name. Jim’s close call after having a heart attack brought his family closer together after years of Jim and Aiden being at war with each other over the future of the family brewery. That was what was supposed to happen, right? Family putting their stupid, prideful feuds aside and being there for one another when it was needed most? But dwelling on the morals and compassion my family lacked wasn’t going to change the situation. I chuckled and eyed his pastry as he took a bite. “Let me guess. You’re not supposed to be havin’ that croissant, right?”

“Bah.” He swiped his hand in the air, his face twisted in a harmless scowl. “One every now and then ain’t gonna kill me.” He narrowed his eyes and pointed a gnarly finger at me. “You’re not gonna go tellin’ on me, are ya?”

I didn’t bother mentioning that, in this town, secrets were next to impossible to keep. He knew the score; he’d lived here all his life. How I’d kept my family issues out of Pointer’s mouths all these years was still a mystery. “Your secret’s safe with me,” I said, then paused a second and added, “even though they fuss over you because they love you.” Hey, I wouldn’t rat the old man out, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t remind him of what he had.

Jim gave me a peaceful smile, his love for them obvious on his face as he nodded in agreement.

I missed every moment with my grandma and grandpa, including the times they’d scolded me. Deep down, I’d always known they’d reprimanded me because they wanted the best for me. Crazy as it was, there had been times when I was younger when I’d hoped my parents would yell at me. It was

better than being ignored. How pathetic was that? It boggled my mind how my dad turned out to be such a selfish bastard. Sure my grandparents had maybe spoiled him a bit too much, but they'd always been an example of what love and compassion should look like. At least in my eyes.

Jim's smile faded into something looking a hell of a lot like sympathy. "How's Samuel doing?"

People in town asked about my grandpa all the time, obviously knowing he'd been moved to a healthcare facility. It was the ugly stuff I kept close to my chest, including how my parents had moved him an hour away to, as they put it, *keep costs down*—aka, protect my dad's inheritance. "He's hanging in there. Sleeps a lot. I'm actually about to head there today. I can tell him hello for you."

Jim paused, his croissant frozen in the air an inch from his lips. He looked like he wanted to say something more than the words that ended up coming out of his mouth. "You do that. Tell him hello from everyone." He set his croissant down without taking a bite and pushed it to the side, clasping his hands in front of him on the table. "You know, Samuel and my pops were thick as thieves for decades. I always figured that's how you and Aiden became friends growing up, even though you were a few years apart."

Me and Aiden, but not Jim and my father. "Guess it skipped a generation."

Jim snorted. "Seems it did." His eyes shifted down, a small smile playing on his face. "I'll never forget how your grandpa reached out to me after Pops died." His expression hardened as he met my eyes again. "It sticks with you, when someone's willing to be there to hold you up at your lowest times." A vision of Burke immediately flashed in my mind, and I pressed a hand over my heart, feeling the ache pulse in my chest. "It takes a strong person to catch you before you hit the ground. I needed that then, more than I can say. This town will be heartbroken to lose a man like Samuel Boone, but we'll be here for you with the safety net when the time comes."

Jeez, who knew Jim Rafferty had the ability to make a grown man cry? I took a deep, shaky breath and forced a smile on my face. “Thanks, Jim.”

“That man is lucky to have you, son.”

Hearing him call me that hit a bit of a raw nerve. No matter how difficult things had been between Jim and Aiden, what had mattered most when shit hit the fan was the father-son relationship neither one of them was willing to give up on. Even back when they’d been at odds, they’d bicker every chance they got because it was a way to communicate, to stay relevant in each other’s lives, even if they weren’t communicating the right words at the time.

Of course, that inopportune moment when I was all up in my feels was when Burke had to stroll into the bakery. What the hell was he doing there, anyway? Didn’t the man insist on making everything with his own hands from scratch? I wouldn’t be surprised if he churned his own butter, for fuck’s sake.

When our eyes connected, it was like a bolt of electricity zapped my skin. Then, as if he was attached to the current between us, Burke headed straight for me. I shifted in my seat and schooled my expression. I’d had years of practice, after all.

He glanced at Aiden’s dad first. “Hi, Jim. How’s it going?”

“It’s goin’. Same shit, different day.”

Burke laughed in that deep way that traveled through every cell in my body. “Tell me about it.” His eyes shifted to me and held, like he was deciphering what mood I was in. “Any news?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Jim grunted and stood up. “Have a seat, Burke. I gotta get a move on anyway.” Jim gave me one last, sympathetic smile. “Remember what I said, Jared, and tell your grandpa I said hello.” He said goodbye to Burke and then grabbed his pastry and coffee and walked out the door.

“So, you’re going to see him today?” Burke asked as he dropped down into the chair across from me.

“Yeah, I am.” Tilting my head, I narrowed my eyes and said, “Are you seriously buying baked goods instead of making them? Tsk, tsk, Cave Dweller. Are you losing your touch?”

“Trust me, Fisherboy, my skills are just as impressive as they were a month ago.” He smiled facetiously and cocked a dark eyebrow. “As you well know.”

Well shit. Was he flirting with me? No way in hell. He was just trying to get a rise out of me like he always did. He had no idea his words provoked something else, thankfully hidden under the table, to wake up. We’d danced around that night plenty of times in the last month, but now he was just throwing it out there as if it was no big thing. I sighed casually and sat back in my chair, crossing my arms as I stared at him in amusement. “So there’s room for improvement?”

“Room for—” he sputtered before his jaw dropped and a wicked gleam sparked in his eyes. He leaned his large torso toward me over the table. “There you go again. Trying to goad me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you want a repeat performance.”

I shrugged a shoulder, pretending to be unaffected by him, even though my skin prickled with delicious memories of that night. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re fishin’ for compliments to boost that giant ego of yours. Word of advice, Cave Dweller.” I leaned forward and whispered teasingly, “You need better bait.”

Burke tapped two fingers on the table and sat back. “I’ll leave the fishing to you, Fisherboy. Seems curiosity about my baked goods was on your mind.” We both laughed, and damned if I didn’t feel lighter than I had five minutes ago. “To avoid any more cringeworthy puns, I’ll put your mind at ease. No, I’m not losing my *touch*. Shore Thing Management supports the small businesses of this town. That includes putting out some pastries every Monday and Thursday in the lobby with a note to check out Beachin’ Bakery.”

“That was a good answer, dammit.”

Burke barked out a laugh. “Sorry to disappoint.” His expression sobered a bit. “What time are you leaving to go see him?”

So much for feeling lighter. Sadness rolled like a boulder downhill, right back onto my chest. “In about ten minutes.” My eyes lowered to the table. I picked up a napkin and started anxiously tearing little pieces off.

“I’ll let you finish up then.” He stood and took a step then paused. “Come by the restaurant tonight, if you’re looking for a distraction.” His face flushed. “I mean, if you want to. Doesn’t matter either way. It’s just an option, if you’re looking for one.”

My eyes widened, a grin tugging at my lips. Was he nervous? “Just an option, huh?”

Burke muttered, “You know what I mean,” as he turned away all flustered and walked over to the counter.

I took a deep breath, gearing myself up for the trek to see my grandpa. It would take a minimum of four hours out of my day—the drive alone took me two hours there and back—but it was worth it. I refused to waste a single second I could spend with him.

A to-go coffee cup clunked down in front of me. I looked up, and damn near swallowed my tongue. Burke was sexy as hell, towering over me with a dark scowl that didn’t quite hit as menacing as I knew he was going for. Especially when he looked at me the way he was now. Like he’d forego the pastries for one more taste of me. Jesus, I’d lost my damn mind.

Burke pointed to the cup. “Coffee-flavored cream and sugar, for the road.” There was a slight twitch to the corner of his mouth before he strode out of the bakery.

I lifted the cup and took a sip, mixed feelings washing over me as the perfectly made coffee hit my tongue. He knew how I took my coffee? Nah, Teresa must have remembered. Still, Burke Russo was a fucking enigma I didn’t have time to figure

out right then. I sighed and stood up, ready to face the day ahead and couldn't help but smile.

“Have a good day, Jared,” Teresa called over to me, shooting me a knowing look.

Chuckling, I said goodbye to her and walked out the door, somehow feeling lighter again.

I STOOD OUTSIDE of Coral Pointe Inn, trying to figure out if going inside was a smart idea or a colossal mistake waiting to happen. The day had been long but uneventful which, oddly enough, I was grateful for. It meant my grandpa hadn't gotten any worse since the last time I saw him. Sadly, it also meant he'd only spoken a few words to me before falling asleep. Still, I'd sat there for a couple of hours in silence with him, watching the rise and fall of his chest.

I was exhausted by the time I got home, but I couldn't shut my brain off. Usually, after a day like that, I'd end up at Aiden's bar, sitting by myself and minding my own business, letting the chatter of the people around me drown out things I didn't want to think about. I actually couldn't recall a time I'd gone to Oceanside and took up a seat at the bar. Of course, I knew the underlying cause for that. The same reason I was standing outside the inn like an idiot now, watching the automatic doors open and close as people went in and out. “Jesus, what are you doing here?” I mumbled to myself. I blew out a breath, relaxing my hands at my sides. “It's not a big deal. Go in, and if there's a seat available, stay. No seat and you can go to SandBar, no harm no foul.” Yep, I was still talking to myself, luckily without an audience.

I blew out another unsettled breath, rolled my stiff shoulders back, then walked through the doors. My confidence flagged as I caught Cole's eye behind the service desk. He gave me a questioning look, but as I made my way to the entrance of Oceanside, that confused look turned into a knowing smile. With a small up-nod of my head, I tried to

look as casual as I possibly could, no doubt failing miserably. He nodded in return, then went back to whatever he'd been working on. I felt like I'd conquered level one of a fucked-up game where Burke was somehow the main goal.

The hostess was a girl, probably in her early twenties, I'd known from around town, though not well. "Hello, welcome to Oceanside Bar and Grill"—her eyes flared with recognition—"Jared." Her cheeks flushed a soft shade of pink as she smiled, curling a strand of brown hair around her finger. By the look she was giving me, she knew more about me than I did her.

"Uh, hi"—I glanced at her name tag—"Alyssa. I'm just gonna..." I hiked my thumb toward the bar after seeing there were in fact a couple of empty stools.

Her smile faltered a little, but she quickly recovered a bright, beaming...*flirty?*...grin. "Sure, no problem. Here's a menu. They may not have one behind the bar. Let me know if you need anything else. I'll just be over here." She held her phone up in front of her to show me the screen, tilting it from side to side. "Looking at the same old guys on Tinder."

Not knowing what to say to that, I responded, "Okay then. Good luck."

Quickly, I weaved through the busy restaurant and grabbed the first empty stool I saw, looking around apprehensively like I had a big old sign on my forehead giving away my reason for being there. Hell, I didn't even know my reason for being there. Besides, I was being ridiculous. Most of the locals who knew me ended up at Aiden's bar. Oceanside was a huge tourist spot for people looking for a dinner away from the steel drums and flowing drinks of SandBar.

I swept my searching gaze around the buzzing dining room but didn't see Burke on the floor. "Why are you even here? This is stupid," I muttered under my breath. Gripping the edge of the bar, I was about to push myself off the stool, when a deep voice stalled my escape.

"Leaving so soon? You just got here." Burke's intoxicating cologne flooded my senses as the big man stood behind me.

I swiveled on my bar stool to look at him, trying like hell to hold an air of indifference, even though the man made me salivate. I knew he didn't always work in the kitchen, just from conversations had in the past with the rest of the guys, but I was in no way prepared for the way he looked tonight. A black button-down strained over his muscular chest, the first two buttons undone, revealing dark tan skin. It was tucked into equally form-fitting dark gray pants—I'd bet money they made his ass look fantastic—complete with a black leather belt and shoes that looked like they cost more than my truck. "You keeping tabs on me?" Tension released its chokehold on my muscles, giving way for a confusing feeling of comfort.

Burke raised an eyebrow. "I keep an eye on everything that happens in my restaurant." He slid onto the stool next to me, smirking like he knew something I didn't. "Even when an employee of mine flirts with the customers. You know she's twenty, right?"

I stared at the guy like he'd grown a third eye until it finally hit me. "She wasn't flirting with me, and I'm completely aware of how young she is, asshole." The implication pissed me off, but then the evil man let out a small laugh.

"You should see your face right now." Burke leaned his big frame toward me, one hand on the bar and the other on the back of my chair, forcing me to hold my breath so as not to let his cologne seep into every dirty crevice of my mind. "And, yeah, she was totally hoping you'd rescue her from Tinder." He sat back, giving me more room to breathe, but those dark eyes held on me. "Is she your type?"

I snorted and faced the bar, holding my hand up to get the bartender's attention. "Can I get a Blue Moon on tap?"

"Sure," the guy responded.

I could feel Burke's penetrating stare trying to burn a hole into my temple, just so he could see what I was thinking. Unable to ignore it, I glanced his way and laughed. "You jealous?"

“So, she is your type then.” I watched his brown eyes narrow and darken, his strong hand flexing on the bar. Jesus, the man was sexy, especially when he was angry. That same look he was giving me now had fueled so many sarcastic digs from me in the past, just to see that line form between his brows and the muscles in his jaw twitch.

“Where in that sentence did you pull that assumption from?”

He huffed. “You didn’t deny it.”

“Funny, you didn’t deny being jealous, either.” Our eyes locked, neither one of us conceding until a glass of Blue Moon clanked on the wood in front of me. I shrugged a shoulder, finally looking away from the frustrating man. “I can honestly say I have no interest in her, nor is she my *type*.” My eyes drifted back to him, my mouth curling up in a snarky grin. “Brunettes aren’t really my thing.” I watched with satisfaction as his expression soured from the dig. “But if she were my type, I don’t see how that’s any of your business. One night only, remember?” One fucking hot-as-hell night I couldn’t wipe from my memory, no matter how hard I tried.

Burke leaned toward me, his hard chest brushing against my arm. “How could I forget?” The husky, deep cadence of his voice sent a chill skating down my spine. Seconds ticked by, my erratic pulse pounding to the beat of those four words as I got caught up in his intense eyes. “*Hours* of staring at a sexy man who made me hard as hell.” Did I just swallow my tongue? Yes. Yes, I did. Burke gripped my shoulder as he stood up, the heat of his hand branding my skin through the thin layer of cotton. “But then, I guess Travis Fimmel has that effect on people.”

My jaw dropped open as the son of a bitch barked out an obnoxious laugh. “You’re such an asshole.” I shook my head, unable to stifle the laugh bubbling up.

“It’s my superpower.” He winked at me, then got the bartender’s attention. “Anything he orders is on me tonight.”

My back straightened in surprise. “What? You don’t have to do that.”

His expression grew somber, sending a shockwave of unease through me. “Nothing like some amazing food and endless alcohol to make you forget a shitty day, right? I’ve gotta get back to work. Order dinner, Fisherboy. It’s not gonna break the bank.”

He slapped me one more time on the shoulder then weaved his large frame through the tables and into the kitchen, leaving me to sit there as his words sank in. Anyone else would interpret his actions as thoughtful and kind. Instead, they settled in the pit of my stomach like a massive stone. Tonight wasn’t about jealousy. It wasn’t about wanting to share the same space with the one person who could drive you fucking nuts and make you crave them, all at the same time.

No, tonight was about distraction; he’d said it that morning in the bakery, yet between the drive home from the nursing home and walking in the doors to this place, I somehow turned this into something else. The invite to come here was to take my mind off the shit storm that was my life. It was a way of forgetting for a while that I’d soon be losing the most important person to me. Tonight was about pity. Plain and simple. Jesus, I’d been dangerously close to thinking his invitation meant more than it actually did. That we were turning some kind of corner. It was a good thing Burke had no qualms about reminding me where he stood. It gave me the kick in the ass I needed to remind him where I stood.

With that thought, I pulled out my wallet and dropped some money down on the bar. As my feet landed on the floor, the bartender approached again, attempting to hand my money back to me. “The bossman said it was on the house.”

“Keep it. I’ve suddenly lost my appetite.” I forced a half-smile and tapped on the bar. “Have a good night.” I walked past the hostess desk, waving a quick goodbye to the girl behind it before she could say anything.

My eyes stayed glued to my feet as I walked through the lobby, avoiding any run-ins with Cole or Levi. The second the cool breeze hit my face, I dragged in a deep, cleansing breath. I’d dealt with family drama on my own for years. I didn’t need that hard-headed man to be my distraction.

No sense throwing a Burke-sized rock in the water now.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Three fucking days. That's how long Jared avoided me after walking out on my offer for dinner at Oceanside. Granted, it would've come off a little less douchey if I'd had time to actually eat with him—and hadn't given him shit about potentially hooking up with a twenty-year-old—but the place had been slammed that night. That was what I told myself, anyway. Truth was I *had* been jealous and was having a hell of a time locking it back down. Brunettes weren't really his thing? Fuck that. I didn't hear him complaining when I was sucking him off. Obviously, I *still* hadn't locked that infuriating jealousy back down. Our digs at each other were blurring the lines between sarcasm and foreplay.

Now, for some ridiculous reason, I was pissed off because I hadn't seen him in days. What the hell was happening to me?

There was no way he could ignore me now. At least, I didn't think he could. I had a feeling he'd be at Hunter and Noah's for dinner. Okay, so I may have not-so-subtly asked in a roundabout way whether or not he'd be there. Noah, one hundred percent, saw through my...*Tell me who's gonna be at your house so I can make sure I have enough dessert...*line of questioning. Because, of course, the jerk just gave me a teasing smile and told me the number of people instead of names. As far as I was concerned, his attempt at giving me shit actually confirmed Jared would be there.

But I still didn't know why I cared so much.

By the time I got to Hunter and Noah's house, I was gearing up for a confrontation with the fisherman who'd

absolutely baited me into being pissed off. He knew damn well walking out that night would make me twitch.

I knocked on the door before walking in, hearing laughter and voices already coming from inside. Carrying a plate of brownies and another plate of cookies into the kitchen, I quickly scanned the room as all eyes landed on me. No Jared to be found. I tried to school my expression, but there was no hiding shit from my best friends.

“Don’t look so happy to see us,” Ford said from the other side of the huge island, laughing at the narrow-eyed look I gave him.

“I see you every damn day,” I snapped, setting the plates down on the granite a little too hard, making my friends snicker. Apparently, I wasn’t hiding my annoyance as well as I thought I was. Jared had me all fucking twisted up, and I didn’t like it one goddamn bit.

“Was there someone else you were expecting to see, big guy?” Sage popped an olive in his mouth, his perfectly sculpted raven brows wiggling as he leaned back against Levi’s chest. My friend’s arms immediately wrapped around the smaller man as he stared in my direction.

“I sure hope you brought enough dessert,” Levi teased, his gaze drifting over my shoulder at the same time the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. *Don’t turn around.*

“What’s goin’ on?” Jared’s raspy Southern drawl behind me ran like fingertips down my spine. It took everything in me not to shiver or turn around and face the man.

“Our friends are a bunch of asshats. That’s what’s going on,” I grumbled. Losing the fight, I turned around, feeling a zing in the pit of my stomach when my eyes landed on him. He had his hair pulled back in that stupid way that made him sexy without even trying, a few golden strays falling into his face. I flexed my fingers at my side, itching to run them through those strands and tuck them behind the flushed skin of his ear.

Jared snorted and shook his head. “I’d say it takes one to know one, but then I’d just be insulting myself, too.” I felt a connection to the man in front of me, like there was a string linking my thoughts to his, dangerously close to letting him control me like a puppet.

“Now that Jared’s here, we can all start dishing out pasta,” Noah announced.

I could hear the clank of silverware and plates behind me, but my focus was taken hostage by the man in front of me. “Sure you’re hungry enough to eat, or will it be a repeat of a few nights ago?”

Jared tilted his head, quirking a blond, appraising brow while casually shoving his hands in his pockets. “What bugs you more about that night? That you were jealous of a kid because she had more guts than you to shoot her shot? Or was it because your charitable, good deed for the day was foiled by me not having a meal at your expense?”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I widened my stance, ignoring that small voice in the back of my head telling me to walk away. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you I wasn’t jealous.”

Jared huffed in amusement and shook his head. He took the few steps needed to close the gap between us, leaning so close I could feel his breath on my skin. “As many times as it takes for you to believe it.” Then the damn man smirked, winking at me before stepping around me to join our friends.

For the rest of the night, Jared and I stayed away from each other, leaving me with acid churning in the pit of my stomach. Cole, Ford, Levi, and Noah didn’t miss a fucking thing, staring at Jared and me like if they looked deep enough, they’d figure out what was going on. I was tempted to tell them to have at it so they could explain it all to me.

I REFUSED to believe that I was the only one who felt off-balance ever since the night of the hurricane. Bottom line was, Jared and I had fucked with our dynamic, and now everything

was different. Because damned if I didn't want to fuck with him some more.

After dinner, the group had the brilliant idea to play a couple of rounds of 25 Words or Less before dessert. Since Cole had to run to the inn up the road to check on something, that left Aiden as the scorekeeper while the rest of us split up into teams. Of course, my friends thought it was a great idea to have all the couples split right down the middle, including putting Jared and I against each other.

Ford held the card in front of him, biting his bottom lip as he thought of clever words to use as hints for the five things on the list that he needed Levi and I to call out. Aiden flipped the hourglass timer and Ford started barking out hints.

He'd gotten us to guess three of the five things before yelling out, "Gobble Kevin!" We all stared at him like he was out of his damn mind. "Gobble Kevin!" he said again, his eyes widening, his hand waving in front of him in a frustrated *come on* motion. "Gobble Kevin!"

"Say it one more time, moron," I yelled back as everyone else laughed. "You just wasted four words repeating yourself."

Ford threw his hands in the air. "I wouldn't have to repeat myself if you'd guess it."

"Time's running out! Give us something else!" Levi jumped in, clearly anxious from watching the sand slowly drift down the timer.

"Gobble. Kevin!"

"For the love of..." I dropped my head in my hands and groaned, hearing the other team crack up.

"Time!" Aiden said, tears of laughter sparkling in his eyes.

I glared at Ford through my own laughter. "What the heck is 'Gobble Kevin'?"

"Turkey bacon," Jared said matter-of-factly across from me, a smartass smirk on his face.

"Yes! Jeez! Was that so hard?" Ford responded, shaking his head at Levi and me in disappointment.

“Are you kidding me?” I looked back and forth between Jared and Ford, hearing Sage repeat *Gobble Kevin* through tears of laughter.

Ford held his hands up in defense, tilting his head and widening his eyes. “Hey, don’t be jealous because Jared and I are here...” He pointed two fingers at his own eyes then aimed them at Jared’s.

Jealous. There was that goddamn word again. My eyes shifted to Jared’s, catching the amusement wafting off him. “Maybe you’ll accept a meal from him then,” I muttered under my breath, instantly kicking myself as Jared’s smile faltered, confusion skewing his expression.

Fine. I was jealous.

Jared

TWO MONTHS ago I would have had no qualms about giving Burke shit and watching him stew in aggravation. Something about the way he was acting tonight was throwing me off. It bothered him more than I thought it would that I’d left the bar that night without taking him up on his offer. Truth was, I knew every moment I spent with him, every nice thing he did for me in the last couple of weeks, had the potential to make me think this thing between us was growing into something it wasn’t.

Yet, I found myself following him into the kitchen while our friends laughed and ate dessert in the living room. I cleared my throat awkwardly and waited for the big man to turn around from his task of making another pot of coffee. Big mistake. Having him face me, his dark, brooding eyes assessing me in a way that made me feel like I was standing naked in front of him, made the words I wanted to say stick to my tongue like honey. It was clear in the hard set to his jaw, the way he casually leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms, that he wasn’t going to help me out with this one.

I stopped right in front of him, mirroring his position while leaning back against the island. “So...” *Fuck, this is awkward.* “I didn’t leave the bar the other night just to piss you off or throw your offer back in your face.”

“Then why did you leave?” I could’ve sworn there was a layer of vulnerability showing through his tough-guy facade.

The question didn’t catch me off guard, but the genuine look of curiosity in his eyes did. I didn’t know how to answer him without showing too much of my hand. I glanced searchingly around the kitchen. “Noah’s gotta have a bottle of tequila somewhere around here.”

Burke snorted a laugh, but when our eyes met, all laughter died in both our throats. “And avoiding me the last few days?”

I reared back in confusion. “What? I wasn’t avoiding you. Do you really think we haven’t gone days before without seeing each other?”

Burke’s tan skin flushed and his shoulders relaxed, his big hand running over his buzzed head. “Well, shit...”

The moment grew awkward between us, my mouth opening as I searched for something to say. Telling him that he’d constantly been on my mind, even though I may not have seen him in person, showed *way* too much of my hand. I wasn’t proud of the fact that I couldn’t stop thinking about the man, no matter how much he made it clear he didn’t want anything more with me, but I’d obviously been on his mind too if he thought I was avoiding him. Honestly, the fact that he’d been even the least bit jealous when his employee had flirted with me threw me for a loop. I wanted to tell him to grow a fucking backbone and admit there was an undeniable connection between us.

Before the words left my lips, my phone rang. My heart dropped the second I saw the nursing home’s number on the screen.

I answered the call, my hands already shaking. “Hello?”

“Hey, Jared.” The gentle tone of the woman’s voice on the other end of the line immediately clued me in that it was

Gladys.

“Did he...?” I couldn’t finish the sentence, too choked up to even find the right words.

“He’s still with us, honey, but I think it’s best if you come here.”

“But it’ll be after hours by the time I get there.” Jesus, my heart was pounding so hard, I couldn’t even think straight. Who gave a shit if it was after hours?

“Don’t you worry. I’ll let you in. You need this as much as he does.”

“Yeah, okay. Thank you. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” After ending the call, I took several deep, trembling breaths, holding back tears I desperately wanted to hide from the man in front of me.

“Is everything okay?” Noah stood a few feet away with Hunter and Ford, holding plates in their hands, all three of them looking back and forth between Burke and I with concern etched on their faces.

I silently begged Burke not to say anything. The last thing I could handle was a ton of questions when all I wanted to do was run back home, jump in my truck, and pray I made it to the nursing home in time. Why the hell had I walked there?

“Jared needs me to give him a ride somewhere.” Burke’s words kept my feet frozen where I stood, until the urgency of the situation hit me again.

“I do need to leave, but I don’t need a ride.” I pushed past Burke, offering an apology for my abrupt departure on my way out. I didn’t have time to get into it right now. It felt like my heart was in my throat, fighting to stay down even though I was sick to my stomach.

I moved with heavy, quick steps out of the house, the necessity to get to my car pulsing in my ears. Halfway down the road, Burke’s black SUV pulled up, driving slowly alongside me. “Get in the damn car, Jared.”

“Burke, I can’t do this right now.” Every stride was fueled by the need to get home as quickly as possible.

“And I won’t let you do this alone.” My steps faltered, my legs no longer driving me forward. “No one should have to do this alone,” he said, his voice dipping to a gentle level I wasn’t even aware he was capable of.

Jesus Christ, every muscle in my body was shaking. I was in no shape to drive and Burke knew it. I knew it, too. Quite honestly, I didn’t want to do it alone, but my family wouldn’t be there for me. Silently, I opened the SUV door and got in. “Sunnyside Care Center in Taversville.”

Burke plugged the place into the GPS without a word then began driving toward the reality of my biggest fear coming to life.

CHAPTER NINE

I didn't know how the fuck I'd ended up there with Jared. I sure as hell wasn't the person people called when they needed a shoulder to cry on. Where was Noah when I needed him? The thought of Jared doing this alone, though, left a bad taste in my mouth. He could've brought Aiden, but when he'd left the house alone, I'd found my feet moving, giving me just enough time to let Aiden know what was going on before I'd jumped in my SUV.

Now, here I stood, awkwardly in the corner by the window of a sterile patient room, watching as Jared held his grandpa's pale hand in silence.

A slender Black woman entered the room, sympathy etched on her face as she gave me a kind smile then checked on Jared's grandpa. "You should talk to him, honey," she said softly to Jared. "He can hear you."

I saw the slight nod of Jared's head as he looked at the woman and then back down at the older man.

After she left the room again, I stepped forward, completely unsure of what I was supposed to do. "Maybe I should give you some privacy." I took a few steps toward the door.

"Stay." The word was said so quietly, I wasn't sure I'd heard him right, but when I looked back at Jared, his somber, pleading eyes were on me. "Please."

I nodded and leaned back against the wall at the foot of the bed. Now what the hell was I supposed to do? I crossed my

arms awkwardly, uncrossed them, rested my big foot back against the concrete wall, dropped my foot back down, rubbed the back of my stiff neck, crossed my arms again—

A laugh came from Jared as he watched me. “You okay over there, Cave Dweller?” The second the words left his mouth, Jared jerked his head toward his grandpa, eyes wide as he looked down at their joined hands. “I’m here, Grandpa. Gladys said you can hear me. Um...” He thought for a second then asked, “You remember Fred? Turns out he’s not a complete fool after all.” I saw the older man’s hand twitch around Jared’s.

Who the fuck is Fred? He’d mentioned his family members by name on the way over here. There was no Fred. Was there someone else in Jared’s life? Why did that make me unnaturally yet ridiculously angry and jealous...again? And where the hell was this *Fred*, anyway? Why wasn’t he here for Jared to lean on?

“Let him know you’re not alone.” The words were out of my mouth, hanging in the air between Jared and I as he stared at me in confusion. The nurse had said talk to him, right? Might as well make sure Samuel Boone knew *I* was there for Jared, not this so-called Fred. I waited for Jared to tell his grandpa, but when all he did was give me that dumbfounded look, I huffed and pushed off the wall. “Mr. Boone,” I said, looking down at the fragile man, “My name’s Burke. You should know, Jared’s got a whole group of people supporting him.” I glanced over at Jared, suddenly embarrassed that I’d opened my mouth at all. Hell, since I’d already put my foot in it... “People who care about him, who consider him family.”

Jared’s eyes widened again then landed back on their clasped hands. “That’s right, Grandpa.” He cleared his throat, his gaze nervously flicking to me then back at the frail man. “I’m not alone. It’s okay...if you wanna...if you’re ready...”

I realized I was holding my breath as I watched the two of them. Without overthinking it, I walked around the bed and gripped Jared’s shoulder, surprised when he reached up with his free hand and put it over mine. Okay, so I wasn’t great at this supportive shit, but I didn’t suck at it, either.

It seemed like we stayed in that position forever, yet it happened all too quickly. Jared's grandpa held on for another ten minutes before taking his last breath.

I'd never been there when someone had passed away before. I'd never known my mom's parents. They'd both died when I was little. But, when my dad's father—my namesake—passed, I'd been at my parents' home after saying goodbye to him in the hospital, lying in my childhood bed as I'd tried to come to terms with what was happening. I could've used the support of my best friends then, but I'd still been too stubborn to ask them to come home with me. The skies had opened up at one point, torrential rain pouring outside my window, and I'd just known...he was gone. As if sensing it at the same time, my sister Maria had texted me, letting me know she'd had the same feeling.

But this...

Jared didn't make a sound, just let my hand go so he could wipe the tears flowing down his cheeks. I'd never, in my entire life, hated people I'd never met, but rage built like a tornado inside me from watching Jared go through this without his family by his side. For Samuel Boone to leave this Earth, knowing there were people who should've been there but weren't.

It was close to eleven when Jared let me know he was ready to leave. The first thirty minutes of the drive home, we sat in silence. As Jared leaned his head against the window, I searched for something to say, but what did you say to someone who just lost their only *true* family? Nothing seemed good enough.

We both jumped when a familiar ringtone came through my car speakers. It was only eight-thirty in Sacramento, and my mom knew I would still be up at this hour on the East coast. "Shit, I gotta answer this. It's my mom and she's already tried calling twice. If I don't pick up, she's gonna send out a search and recovery."

Jared snorted. "You mean a search and rescue?"

“Nah, if I don’t answer, she’s gonna kill me herself.” I winked at him then pressed the button to answer the call. “Hi, Ma.”

“Bucardo, which do you think goes better with my red dress? My pearls or my emeralds? You know what? I’ll wear my pearls.”

Burcardo? Jared mouthed, his eyes wide with amusement.

I rolled my eyes but, knowing where this was going, quickly said, “Ma, my friend’s here with me.” I didn’t meet his eyes after calling him my friend. “He’s had a rough day.” The last thing Jared needed was hearing my mom joke about sending her to an early grave when he’d just lost the most important person in his life.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Her voice softened with concern. “Which one is it? Cole? Ford?”

“No, his name’s Jared. Ma, I gotta—”

“Hello, Jared!”

Jared smiled. “Hi, Mrs. Russo.”

“Just call me Mama Russo, like all of Burke’s friends.”

“I can do that.” Jared rolled his lips in, trying to hold in a laugh.

“I’m sorry you had a bad day. Anything I can do?” My mouth curled up in a half-smile, my chest warming from my mom’s ability to show kindness to someone she’d never met.

Jared rubbed his hands on his thighs, one of his knees bouncing rapidly.

“Ma—” I began, but Jared beat me to it.

“No, ma’am, but thank you. I...uh...I just lost my grandpa. I mean, he just...” He blew out a trembling breath and looked back out the window.

“Oh, sweet boy, I’m so sorry. *Burcardo*, did you make him some *pastina*? Of course, you did.”

I chuckled, rubbing my hand over my stubbled chin. “He’s not sick, Ma.”

“My son knows better than to watch someone in pain without making them comfort food.”

At that, Jared laughed again. “I can tell you, he definitely knows better than that. The first thing he does in any situation is make food. A lot of it.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

It was odd listening to my mom and Jared talk to each other. “We’re still in the car,” I said, hoping to end the call soon. “We just left the nursing home.”

There was a beat of silence on the other end of the line and then, “I see. So, you were with him, Burcardo?”

Oh no... “Yes, I was with him. That’s what you do for friends.” Shit, this was going downhill. I could sense Jared tensing next to me, glanced over and caught the tick in his jaw as he looked back out the window.

“Mhmm... Yes. For *friends*.” Shit, I knew that tone. She always got that *this-is-interesting* lilt to her voice when her assumptions ran wild. I could feel when Jared turned his attention back to me, his stare boring into the side of my head in amusement. My face was on fire, which also meant my entire head was the color of a ripe Campari tomato, including the tops of my ears. “Well, you take good care of your *friend* when you get home, Burcardo. And make him some pastina.” Then she added, “I’m sorry, again, Jared. You let my son take care of you.”

Jared glanced at me, his mouth twisting to the side in thought before he replied, “Thanks, Mrs. Russo.”

“Mama Russo,” she corrected. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Thanks, *Mama Russo*.” He smiled at the screen, as if she could see him.

“Okay, Ma,” I rushed to say, desperate to end the call before—

“Bye, my little gnocchi. I love you.”

Jared's hand flew over his mouth, his laughter muffled as his wide eyes locked on me.

Fuck, I mouthed. "I love you, too." After ending the call, I pointed at the man currently roaring with laughter in my passenger seat. "You tell anyone about that nickname, and I'll *Fargo* your ass then toss you in the ocean as shark bait, Fisherboy." Even threatening bodily harm with a wood chipper didn't calm the man down.

Jared couldn't answer around the laughter rolling from him and the tears—this time happy ones—streaming down his face. "Oh my god..." He blew out a breath, still trying to calm himself down.

"Yeah, yeah. Get it all out now, asshole." No matter how hard I tried to contain it, laughter burst out of me, filling my car with a much lighter feeling than when we'd gotten in it. It hit me square in the chest that I would let my mom embarrass me a million times over if it meant taking the pain out of Jared's eyes. A thought I, in no way, wanted to look too deeply at.

Jared sighed and blew out another breath. "Please tell me...the guys...know about that," he said between hiccups of laughter.

"Unfortunately, they do. And they never let me live it down." I shook my head, taking a deep breath then releasing it as I leaned my elbow on the door. "Gotta love her, though."

"I don't see how you couldn't," he said, a smile still on his face as he finally calmed down. "She sounds great, Burke."

"She is. My whole family is, for the most part." I wasn't sure why I'd added that at part, but luckily, Jared didn't point it out.

Jared leaned his arm on the window, looking out at the world flying by. "You're lucky."

Shit. Well, that took a turn... Instead of agreeing, I said, "We're almost home."

We drove in silence for the last leg of the trip. It was after midnight when I'd finally pulled up in front of Jared's house.

Awkward silence surrounded us as we sat there in my car.

“Thanks, Burke,” Jared said softly, breaking the quiet stillness. “I have no doubt that I could’ve done it alone”—he glanced at me quickly out of the corner of his eye before dropping his gaze to his lap—“but I shouldn’t have had to and I’m grateful I didn’t.”

He grabbed the handle to open the door, but the words, “Wait, I need to come in,” jumped out of my stupid mouth. Jesus, I sounded like a vampire trying to convince him to let me in his home so I could suck his—*whoa, back up there, sir.*

“What? Why?” His brows drew together in confusion.

I waved my hand at the now dark screen on my car. “Do you really think Mama Russo isn’t gonna make sure I made you something to eat? I doubt you have pastina, but you have to have some kind of pasta.” Why was I so desperate for him to let me come into the house with him?

He shook his head with a laugh. “Uh, I think I can handle it, but thanks.” He pulled the handle, about to push the door open when I grabbed his arm.

“Trust me, if you don’t let me make you something, she’ll threaten to take that damn red dress out, and you don’t wanna go there.” I wasn’t making any fucking sense to him—the incredulous look he was giving me was pretty much a dead giveaway—but there was this undeniable pull telling me he shouldn’t be alone right now.

After another few seconds of me not backing down, Jared rolled his eyes. “I have no idea what that means, but fine. Whatever.” He wiggled his arm from my hold and got out of the car. I followed, a wave of *déjà vu* hitting me as we both entered his house and stood in the entryway.

I spotted the walkie-talkie on the side table, still there from the storm over a month ago. Immediately, my eyes shot to his kitchen and the solid wood table. Jared completely naked... Jared unabashedly bending his legs, feet planted on the edge of the table... Jared showing me *everything*... Me, eagerly taking what I wanted...

My eyes shifted to the man beside me, goosebumps racing across my skin from the intensity of his stare. He was picturing it, too.

But then he sighed, the sound cloaked in exhaustion. “I told you I can handle it on my own.” Because he always did, didn’t he? He turned his back on me and headed to the kitchen, Brutus suddenly appearing at his side. Jared reached down and pet the German Shepherd absently. “Go home, Burke.”

Fuck that.

I came up behind Jared as he reached for the fridge handle, swatting his hand away, then pointed toward the infamous table. “Sit.”

“Burke—”

“I said *sit*, Fisherboy.”

Something that looked a hell of a lot like heat flashed in his gray-blue eyes. “Fine. I don’t know what you’re going to make, though. I don’t have much seein’ as how I don’t really cook unless I absolutely have to.” Miraculously, the guy finally listened and sat down.

I opened and closed cabinets like I lived there. “You have to at least have ingredients for—”

“Gnocchi?”

I growled, narrowing my eyes at the man but secretly happy just to see his shoulders loosening and a genuine smile on his face. “Shark bait,” I reminded him and he laughed.

Jared leaned forward and scratched the dog behind his ears. “Brutus, go lie down, buddy. It’s late.” Instead of going into another room, Brutus plopped himself right on the floor at Jared’s feet, probably sensing his owner’s sadness.

I found a box of elbow macaroni in his cabinet—apparently I needed to give the man a lesson in choosing the right pasta. I often made my own at home, which was easier than people thought, but the box in my hand would have to do for tonight. I got to work, looking in his cabinets for more useful ingredients while the pasta boiled. Luckily, Jared had

butter, garlic powder, salt, pepper, and— “Kraft Parmesan? This hurts my soul. Mama Russo would not approve.”

“I told you, I don’t cook. And what’s wrong with it? Anything that’s been around for decades can’t be bad.”

“Uh, Miracle Whip. I rest my case.” When Jared’s only response was the quirk of his light eyebrow, I dramatically sucked in a breath. “Don’t say it. Tell me you don’t eat that shit.”

Jared shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t hate it, but I prefer mayo.”

I shook my head and turned back to the stove. “The things you learn about someone. Kraft parm, Satan’s cream, and coffee-flavored sugarshock... Next you’re gonna tell me you eat SpaghettiOs.”

“Actually...” he said, and I whipped around, ready to put my foot down on that one, when he snorted and shook his head. “Just kidding. Even I know where to draw the line.”

“You’re damn lucky, because all it would take is one phone call to Mama Russo, and you’d never eat that shit again.” I huffed and went back to making his late-night dinner.

It wasn’t going to be the best meal I’d ever made. Hell, it wouldn’t even come close to making the list of delicious things I’d made over the years, but all I cared about was getting something on a plate so the man didn’t go to bed hungry after a nightmare of a night.

His biggest fear had come true, and I had been there when it happened. There was no way either of us could’ve known a few weeks ago that we’d be in this situation now. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with guilt laced with a thin layer of homesickness. I wasn’t blind or heartless. I knew how great my family was, but unfortunately, that didn’t lessen the pressure I felt to be the first-born son they’d expected instead of the one they’d gotten.

I found plates in Jared’s cabinet and served us both some pasta. We sat in silence as we ate, the awkward sound of

chewing filling the room—until I had to open my stupid mouth.

“When are you gonna tell the rest of your family?”

He huffed in disgust, letting his fork clank down on his plate. “They don’t deserve a phone call.” He picked up the napkin from the table and wiped his mouth, as if the words had left a bad taste on his lips. Sighing, he tossed the crumbled napkin back on the table and shrugged one shoulder. “But I won’t tell them with a text because *he* deserves more than that, so I guess in the morning I’ll have to call them.” He picked his fork back up, pushing the pasta around his plate, then set it back down. “I’ll have to call the funeral home tomorrow. He already has a plot waiting for him next to my grandma, so at least that’s taken care of. And I guess I’ll have to see about catering something afterward.”

“Jared...”

“People in town are gonna wanna come back here after...”

“Hey.” I waited for his gray eyes to look at me. “Consider the catering taken care of.”

Jared pushed his chair back and got up, taking his plate with him. “You don’t have to do that. You’ve already done enough.” His plate made a loud *clunk* in the sink, no doubt with food still on it.

Jared stood silently, leaning back against the counter, his focus on the window but who knew if he was really seeing anything. The absent tone of his voice combined with the words he’d just said left an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. My chair scraped across the floor as I pushed back to stand up. Taking my plate, I set it on the counter then took his back out of the sink and scraped the food into the garbage. It took less than a minute to wash them both, my blood pressure rising with every swipe of the sponge. After drying my hands, I tossed the towel on the counter and leaned both hands on it.

“No,” I said abruptly, staring down at the granite.

“No?” he repeated.

I turned my head toward him. “Even though your family is shit, you’ve done this alone for years and that was your choice. Why?” I took the few steps needed to stand in front of him. Another moment of *déjà vu* swept over me, but I pushed it aside. “Why not let your friends in on what you’re going through? Why not be honest about the fact that you were the only person there for him?”

I’d known Jared for three years, and in that time, the only situation where I’d seen him truly pissed was the night of the hurricane. For the second time, anger he rarely ever showed darkened his eyes. And their stormy depths were once again focused on me. “Do you think I like keeping all this shit a secret? Dealing with this on my own?” His voice cracked, his eyes lining with tears that never fell. “I’ll be damned if all of Coral Pointe finds out the business Samuel Boone worked so hard to build, the one he *loved*, was sold so that his family could realize their dreams, only to have them abandon him the second the money cleared their bank accounts. There’s no way in hell I’m making it public knowledge that his only child, the son he loved so much, had been so spoiled by that love that he felt he’d somehow earned the right to my grandpa’s legacy. Without so much as checking on him to see how he was doing. And now he’s—” Jared bit his bottom lip, his eyes shifting away.

I did the first thing that came to mind and wrapped my arms around him. He was stiff at first, but then his muscles relaxed against my bigger frame and he gripped the back of my shirt. “Okay, I get it. I think I have the whole shitty picture now, and I get it. But now, though? We’re all gonna be here for you, and I’m catering the damn thing. Got it?”

Jared snorted a watery laugh and pushed on my chest, loosening my hold but still staying within the circle of my arms. “Got it.” I sucked in a breath when his sad eyes met mine, my gaze falling to his lips of their own accord.

As if reading my mind, Jared braced his hand on my chest, his voice a husky whisper. “We said one night and that night was over a month ago.” We stared at each other in silence until

he added, "I'll be damned if it happens again out of pity, Cave Dweller."

His words had the desired effect, snapping me out of my momentary lapse in judgment, yet there was something not quite right about them.

"Let's get something straight, Fisherboy. I don't fuck out of pity." The way his eyelids slid halfway closed, lust replacing the sadness from seconds before, was the reaction I was looking for. Anything to take that pain away. There was less than an inch between our mouths. All I had to do was take what I wanted.

But that wasn't what Jared needed. Still, I felt it necessary to make sure he knew where I was at, considering I'd just figured it out myself that very second. "The next time I have you naked, I'll make that perfectly clear."

I watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed hard and a shiver ran through his body. "The next time, huh? Pretty sure of yourself after we'd said it wouldn't happen again."

I took a few steps back, letting my arms fall so I was no longer touching him. "We said one night only. The way I see it, that still leaves the day wide open." I had no idea what I was saying or why, but somehow, I still knew the words were true. "I don't like being jealous." Yeah, I'd just admitted that out loud. "Seems to me the best way to deal with this is to get it out of our systems."

Jared snorted, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched me back toward the front door. "You're unbelievable."

"So I've been told." I gave him a cheesy wink, hearing his laughter as I walked out into the night. In the morning, I'd deal with the fact that I'd just told Jared I wanted him again, and that it *would* happen. For now, I left knowing he had a smile on his face, and I was responsible for it.

CHAPTER TEN

I'd sent out the Bat-Signal bright and early the next morning after Jared's grandpa passed, but let the guys know to meet me in the office at the inn, where Cole and Levi worked. We'd used that signal countless times over the years. Each time was when there was shit we just couldn't go through alone. And whoever received the signal via text, did whatever they could to drop what they were doing and be there for the one who needed them.

We'd all used it at one time or another, but this was the first situation it was sent out on behalf of someone else. They just didn't know that yet.

I unlocked the office, being the first one in, but the guys wouldn't be far behind me. Sitting down in Cole's chair, I put my feet up on his big desk. I'd be on them for the next ten hours in Oceanside. Might as well rest them while I could.

"What's going on?" Cole asked, walking into the room first, followed by Levi, who was giving me the same concerned look. "Are you okay?"

"Settle down, boys. I'm fine." I clasped my hands and rested them on my flat stomach. "Let's wait until Ford and Noah get here."

"So, you're okay?" Levi asked again, putting his bag down on his desk that faced Cole's.

"Yep."

Cole waved a hand at me, looking me up and down. "You're not hurt or anything?"

“Nope, not hurt.” See? Always there for each—

“Then get the hell outta my chair.” Cole pushed my feet off his desk just as Ford and Noah walked in.

“He’s clearly not in pain,” Ford said, “and still has the ability to piss someone off. That’s a good sign.”

I blew out a breath and pushed up from Cole’s chair. “Okay, maybe sending out the Bat-Signal was a bit overkill, but I gotta talk this shit out.”

Noah’s expression immediately switched from amused to his concentrated crisis-mode stare. “What’s going on, sweetie?”

“Did Aiden tell you about Jared’s grandpa?” I waited for them all to nod, then said, “Well, I’m not gonna go into detail about his family drama, but let’s just say, there’s a good chance he’ll be the only family member of Samuel Boone’s at the services. Which, I’m assuming, will be in a few days.”

Cole put his bag on his desk and sat down. “Aiden mentioned something about Jared’s parents and siblings living in other states. They can’t get time off or something?”

A shiver of disgust raced up my spine, leaving my mouth in an irate snort. “Like I said, family drama.” I could feel Ford’s eyes on me from my left, so I looked at him, snapping, “What?”

Ford sat on the corner of Levi’s desk, staring at me like I had three heads. “Who are you and what have you done with the *I don’t want Jared Boone* Burke we all know and tolerate?”

I arched my brow, crossing my arms over my chest. ““Know and *tolerate*?””

The right side of Ford’s smartass mouth curled up in a snarky grin. “I said what I said.”

Noah shook his head at our friend, gripping my shoulder. “Aside from that last part”—Noah’s eyes turned to me—“we’re all kinda wondering what’s going on with you two.”

“Kinda wondering?” Levi snorted, leaning an elbow on the arm of his chair, his legs pushing the swivel seat from side to

side. “We’re ready for you to stop being an ass and tell us what’s goin’ on, Burke. We’ve held our tongues, waiting for you to finally spill the beans.”

“You should know by now, Levi. I don’t spill food. It’s sacrilege.”

“Fine,” Cole chimed in. “Let the cat out of the bag—and we know you’re allergic anyway so none of that sympathy for the cat shit.”

Four pairs of eyes focused on me from men I considered my brothers. Why the hell was it so hard to just fucking say it? I exhaled and walked over to the corner, yanking an extra chair forward so I could sit down. “You all know my hang-ups. That lovey-dovey shit ain’t for me. My sister and brothers have that covered.”

Noah crossed his arms and leaned against the wall by the door. Man, I hated when he stared at me like that. I hated when they all did, seeing something I hadn’t even voiced out loud. I couldn’t hide anything from them, and they fucking knew it.

“You know you’re allowed to change, right?” Noah said. “You’re not that stubborn kid, who moved three thousand miles away from his family just to prove a point, anymore .”

Ford huffed. “No, now you’re just a stubborn, pain in the ass adult, repeatedly sabotaging himself. It’s painful to watch, man.”

I looked away from their probing stares, my knee bouncing uncontrollably before I abruptly got up. “Why stop now then?” I needed to pull this conversation back around to the reason we were there in the first place. “I’m not getting into this right now. The whole point of this meeting was to rally the troops. Jared’s gonna need support, and I’m not that much of an asshole that I won’t give it to him.” I flexed my fingers, anger and uneasiness warring inside my head.

As if in sync, their expressions softened, but Ford was the one who spoke up. “Of course. You know we’ll always be there for Jared. And we’ll always be there for your grumpy ass

because, for reasons we can't explain, we love you. You know that, right?"

"It always weirds me out when you're the one sayin' nice shit." I punched his arm as I walked by, still finding myself smiling at the dumbass. These were my people for a reason. My tense shoulders sagged, feeling like an ass for behavior I couldn't yet explain to myself, never mind to them. "Yeah, I know that."

"*And?*" Ford asked, dragging the word out, motioning to me as if there was something else I was supposed to say.

"*And*' what?" I strode toward the door, knowing exactly what he was waiting for.

"Come on, Burke, you can do it. Just four little words," Cole goaded.

Levi jumped in. "Repeat after me...I love you, too."

"It's really not that hard," Noah tacked on with a snarky smirk.

"You're all pains in my ass." I blew out a heavy breath. "I gotta start prepping for the day. I'm assuming you guys can tell your extremely better halves?" When they all agreed, I nodded and strode out the door, peeking my head back around the doorframe to add, "Right back at ya." As I walked down the hallway I yelled out, "That's four words!" hearing my best friends laugh as I made my way to my kitchen.

MEGAN TRULY WAS the best fucking sous chef a guy could ever have. Either that or she was tired of the day kicking my grumpy ass from lack of sleep. Whatever the reason, she told me she'd close up the place and to get the hell out of there. The previous night, I'd gotten home from Jared's close to one in the morning, tossed and turned for another six hours, then dragged my ass outta bed to meet the guys before their work days started.

If somewhere between Oceanside and home I'd found myself leaving dinner outside Jared's door tonight, no one would be the wiser. All the while, I couldn't stop my brain from thinking about him and what he was going through. On top of that, I had my best friends' words bouncing around in there, too.

My plan all those years ago to prove myself and stand on my own two feet had been life changing for me, but over a decade and a half later, I could admit part of that plan had backfired. Not every decision I had made turned out the way I'd thought it would. I was happy with my life in Coral Pointe, though. More so than I ever thought I could be. Still, there were some things I took for granted. Jared losing the only family member he had a relationship with brought some deep-seated guilt to the surface. I didn't see my family in person enough...hadn't hugged them in way too long. Tomorrow was never promised and my nonna was getting up there in age.

Trying to take my mind off it, I showered and pulled on sweats, dragging myself into my kitchen for a small dinner before I crashed. Within seconds, Jared and his situation lit up in my mind again. I grabbed my phone and dialed my mom's number, putting it on speaker.

"What's wrong? Is everything alright?" My mom's frantic voice came through the phone.

"Yeah, Ma, I'm fine. I'm home and just about to make a quick sandwich, actually."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "You're usually at the restaurant this time every week."

The fact she knew that, from three-thousand miles away, was fucking proof of how lucky I actually was. I pulled out a loaf of bread I'd gotten from Beachin' Bakery and began cutting into it. "We were slow and I didn't get much sleep last night, so I left early."

"Because you were with your *friend* Jared?"

"I'm gonna pretend you meant because I cooked him dinner. Which I did, by the way." Yanking the fridge open, I

pulled out some prosciutto, salami, provolone, and a jar of pepperoncinis.

She sucked in a breath, but I knew her all too well. “Burcardo,” she reprimanded, “I am the picture of innocence. I would never insinuate such a thing about my child.” She paused and then, “I’m assuming with a name like Jared, he’s not Italian?”

That hit a nerve. “What difference does it make? We’re just friends. Barely that.” My shoulders tensed again with the lie as my eyes slid closed. I took a slow, deep breath then released it. “Ma, I need to talk to you. Can we not beat the dead horse right now? I promise I’ll drag that carcass back out for you to kick the crap out of later.”

“That was a lovely image, thank you,” she said dryly. “What’s going on, honey? Something’s wrong. I can hear it in your voice.”

I slapped the lunch meat down on the bread like it had personally insulted me. “I offered to cater the gathering at Jared’s house after the funeral. He’s expecting most of the town to end up back there.”

“That was nice of you. I knew I taught my boy well. That’s a big job to handle, though, if most of the town will be there. I hope your friends will be helping. Lord knows the last thing Jared and his family need to worry about that day is whether or not there’s enough ziti.”

I froze with a piece of provolone in my hand. “It’s just Jared.” Resuming my assembly line, I grabbed the pepperoncinis next.

“I’m sorry?” I could picture my mom sitting straighter in her chair, her mama hackles rising.

“Jared will most likely be the only Boone there, even though there are other family members that should be supporting him right now.” I scrubbed a hand over my face and took my plate, slumping down in a chair at my kitchen table. “The thing is, Ma”—I hesitated sharing Jared’s situation, but my mom was so far removed from everything, and I

couldn't talk to the guys about this part—"his family doesn't care."

"Excuse me?" Her tone had dropped drastically to a level I only heard when she was beyond livid.

"He called and told them when his grandpa took a turn for the worse. They basically said people don't live forever and it was inevitable. That they were too busy to drop everything in their incredibly important lives to be there."

"I see." Only two words, but they dripped with venom.

"I've told the guys we need to rally around him. Who the hell knows why I think it's my place to decide crap like that. Truth is, Jared has this way of getting under my damn skin, and he does, every chance he gets. I was probably the last person that should've been in that room, but there was no way in hell I was letting him go to that nursing home alone."

She was silent for a second, then said, "It sounds like he's taken up residence under that prickly skin of yours."

"What?" I laughed, but the sound came out a little too high-pitched, bordering on hysterical.

"Built a condo and planted some trees." There was that lilt to her voice again.

"Ma..." I warned.

"Don't 'Ma' me. You can deny it all you want, but you're a hard-headed Russo. You make up your mind about something and that's that. Decision made. End of story. Newsflash, honey. Just because you think you've made a decision about this man, doesn't mean you're off the hook from big, scary feelings." She laughed softly. "You were there because you knew you should be, whatever the reason was."

I tried to come up with some clever, smartass response, but nothing came to me. Where was Ford when I needed him?

"I'll take your silence to mean you'll give that some thought." Not a question, but an order from my equally stubborn mother. "Now, eat your dinner and get some sleep. You're going to be busy the next few days, but because of you

that man won't be alone. He'll have people there for him. I have absolutely no doubt."

"Thanks, Ma." I tried to stifle a yawn but failed.

"Sweet dreams, my little gnocchi."

I ate my sandwich in silence which was the worst fucking thing to do. My brain went haywire with everything my mom had just said. So I made decisions quickly. So what? What the hell was wrong with making a confident decision and sticking to it? I'd done it my whole life, and every choice I'd made turned out to be the right one, for the most part.

I'd chosen to go to college—on the other side of the fucking country—instead of take over the family restaurant. Being the oldest son in an Italian family, that didn't go over well, but I'd done it anyway because back then I was still hiding my sexuality. Now, my brother, Salvatore, ran that place like a well-oiled machine. Honestly, he'd always wanted to. They didn't need me anymore, right?

And the choice to leave Sacramento had led me to four people who fucking got me on a level no one else ever had. People who also helped me realize that hiding a huge part of me was no way to live the rest of my life. So...decision made...the summer before sophomore year, I'd come out. I was the only queer person in our family, as far as I knew, but I'd stuck by my decision to be true to myself and it had turned out better than I'd expected. My mom challenged anyone in our extended family to give me a hard time—even if she still pushed for an Italian son-in-law and grandbabies I didn't know if I could give her.

Opening the business with my best friends? Best fucking decision, even though I hadn't consulted my family at the time. Truth was, I'd known they wouldn't be happy that I still wasn't moving back to take over the family restaurant, but that place truly belonged to Salvatore and he'd proven that enough over the years. I couldn't let their opinions sway me from something I really wanted. Didn't stop the guilt from settling in because I hadn't asked their opinions.

There was a common denominator in all those situations that I was reluctantly beginning to realize thanks to four pushy assholes willing to be brutally honest with me. I'd gone against everything my family wanted for me...who they thought I would be. No, my sexuality wasn't up for debate, but I'd told them with a chip on my shoulder, ready for a fight. Had I been trying to make a point? Break the mold my family thought I was supposed to fit into? Jesus Christ, I didn't know anymore.

What I did know, though, was I'd made my decision about Jared years ago, and it turned out to be...well, confusing as hell. It wasn't often I lost sleep over whether or not I'd chosen the right path. But Jared had caught me completely off guard. Here was this laidback, quiet—when I'd first met him, anyway—fisherman, with unruly, shoulder-length strawberry-blond hair, who was the furthest thing from the Italian son-in-law my mom hoped for. And I'd fucking wanted him the second I laid eyes on him. Given my track record, that would've made Jared perfect, just knowing he wasn't whom my family expected me to end up with.

And that was the crux of it, wasn't it? The reason I'd been so fucking confused over him for three years? Because here was this guy, who absolutely did not fit my parents' expectations or the type of person I usually went for, and I'd fucking wanted him. But was it for the right reasons? Was being with him just another way to break that mold? If there was one thing I knew about Jared from the start, it was that I wouldn't use him as a pawn. I wasn't *that* guy. We lived in the same town and knew the same people. So...line drawn. It was better just to stay away from him altogether. Right?

Yeah, I was still trying to believe that one because, instead, I'd jumped on this perpetual, twisted carousel of verbal foreplay with him, making him impossible to ignore but also impossible to forget. And to make matters worse, I now knew how he tasted, and I wanted more.

Groaning in frustration, I got up and put my dish in the sink, then headed down the hall ready to crawl into bed

embarrassingly early. The second my head hit the pillow, my phone dinged with an incoming text.

Were you at my house? Jared.

I wouldn't admit the warm feeling that settled over me. **How'd you get this number? Are you stalking me?**

Uh...you're the one that came here and left squirrel food in front of my door.

Damn. I hadn't even considered that. **Shit, sorry. Didn't think that through.**

Jared sent a photo of the completely intact, squirrel-free steak dinner. **Just kidding.** Another photo came through of Jared holding a different container. **Nice touch. Brutus loves carrots. He says thanks.**

Heat flooded my cheeks despite the fact that no one could see me. My phone pinged again.

His owner says thanks, too.

No problem. I was about to set my phone down on the nightstand when I got another text.

Night, Burke.

Jesus, was I fucking smiling? I quickly sent, **Night**, then tossed my phone down on the other side of the bed. I'd kept the man at arm's length for the last few years, and in the course of the last few days, he'd managed to—*don't say it*—get under my fucking skin, move into that stupid condo, and plant that obstructing tree. I had this persistent feeling I couldn't shake. A warning sign that my view was about to change, until all I saw was Jared.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I walked in my house, pulling at the suffocating tie around my neck the second the door closed. I didn't have much time considering I still had to make the food for the funeral. My body ached with the thought. Not that keeping my word about catering for Jared was an inconvenience, but I'd stayed up late the night before making cannoli shells, and today had just been a long-ass day. All of us had surrounded him for the morning wake. Afterward, I went to Oceanside to check on things and work for a few hours in the afternoon, then went back for part of the second viewing. Hopefully, my kitchen at home was big enough to make several trays of food because I couldn't interrupt their busy night at Oceanside to use the kitchen there. It was going to take twice the time at home, though.

The guys headed home the same time I did and were on their way over to help me. I'd only asked the four goofballs I called best friends and adamantly refused Jared's help. He needed time to unwind from the day, and my kitchen was way too small for nine extra men to share their skills with holes and cream. That would not help me make eclairs. Hell, just the thought of Ford in my kitchen made me cringe. The guy would probably eat half of the ingredients before we even got started. Maybe I should've asked the other half of our group to help me. Sage and Aiden had experience with making high volumes of food, and Hunter and Abe would keep everyone in check.

"Brilliant, Burke." I pressed my thumb against the pain at the base of my neck, rotating it as I tried to relieve some of the

tension tightening my muscles.

Seeing the time was already after eight, I dragged my sorry ass to my bedroom and threw on some sweats. Ten minutes later, the guys showed up, one by one.

Ford walked in the door and said, “There, there,” patting me on the shoulder with a sympathetic look. “That’s from Abe. I can’t for the life of me figure out what it means, though. I’m a freaking delight. Where do you keep your Kraft Macaroni and Cheese? I’ll get started.” The asshole winked at me, rubbing his hands together.

Glaring at the moron, I pointed toward the door. “Get out.”

Ignoring me, Ford snorted and slapped me on the back. “You better have beer.” He walked into my kitchen and helped himself to a bottle in my fridge. The other three walked in with pizzas in hand and followed suit, Noah opening a bottle of Jim’s Way IPA for me.

I blew out a deep breath and stared at all the ingredients and aluminum trays on my table. “Better get started.”

It wasn’t too chaotic, for the most part, but having to give directions for everything was slowing me down.

“How the hell do you fold this shit?” Cole stared down at the egg whites he’d just beaten to a foam in my KitchenAid mixer. “It’s not paper.”

“Just be gentle. Don’t stir.” I took the bowl with the egg whites and added them to the chocolate mixture he’d already made. “Fold.” Picking up the large rubber spatula, I demonstrated. “Gently...fold.”

I heard the front door close and handed the spatula back to Cole. “Now where the hell did Ford go?” The guys all shrugged and stuck to their tasks, concentrating as if I’d asked them to build some complicated machinery.

The front door closed again and in walked Ford, holding a blue scuba diving mask he must have grabbed from his car. He pulled the thing on, washed his hands, and said, “Now I’m ready.” Then he picked up the knife and began cutting the onions we needed for a few recipes.

We all stared at him and then lost it. I was still cracking up when the doorbell rang. “Who the hell is that? That better not be Jared. If he thinks he’s helping with this—” I yanked the door open and my jaw dropped. “What in the h—”

“Language, Burcardo.”

“Ma? Pop? What are you doing here?” The biggest smile stretched across my mom’s face, her hands immediately cupping both my cheeks.

“My sweet gnocchi. We’re here to help.” She pulled me into her arms, and I couldn’t resist hugging her back and breathing in her familiar scent, even though I was confused as fuck.

“You flew across the country to help me cook?” I looked at my dad incredulously over my mom’s shoulder.

He held his hands up defensively in front of him. “Don’t look at me. Your mother insisted you needed us to come early. Who am I to argue?”

I pulled back, shifting my eyes from my mom’s guilty expression, to my dad’s *what can you do?* shrug, and back to that guilty face. “*Early?*”

Sheepishly, my mom said, “Well, it was going to be a surprise next week, but I figured you could use the help, so here we are...for two weeks!”

My jaw dropped. “*Two weeks?*”

She pressed on. “Well, Burcardo, we decided if you couldn’t come to us, we would come to you.” Her eyes grew dark as she added, “And I’ll be damned if that boy goes through this alone. We may not be family, but a hug from a mama bear is like a balm for the soul, even if it’s not from his poor excuse for a mother.” The way her face twisted as she said the word *mother* was like she’d taken a bite of a lemon then spat that nasty, sour shit back out.

I didn’t know whether to be incredibly grateful they’d do something like this for me, or annoyed that I’d had no warning they were coming. When she hugged me again, the knee-jerk reaction of feeling ambushed fell away, replaced with warmth

spreading throughout my chest. They'd hopped on a plane because they thought I needed them. Hell, I *did* need them. And I'd literally been thinking the other night that it had been way too long since seeing them in person.

I whispered, "Thank you," swallowing the lump in my throat. I never cried and right then was sure as hell not the time to start. I glanced behind them in confusion. "Where are your bags?"

My mom waved a dismissive hand at me. "Oh, they're at the inn, which is absolutely lovely, by the way. We checked in first then made our way over here. That sweet woman at the front desk promised she'd keep it a secret that we were coming so we could still surprise you. She's a woman of her word."

Miss Margie. I hung my head and laughed, pinching the bridge of my nose. That woman had been like a mother to us all since the first day we'd hired her. It had been unanimously decided she must be protected at all costs.

A loud crash came from the kitchen, followed by Levi saying, "I'm okay!"

I hung my head back and groaned then turned for the kitchen, my parents right behind me. And there were my best friends: Levi looking guilty and standing next to a chair he'd somehow knocked over, Cole holding the same bowl of chocolate mousse that he'd apparently folded the shit out of, Noah with a fingerful of whipped cream frozen in front of his mouth, and Ford...staring wide-eyed at my parents through a blue scuba mask, a knife suspended in his hand over a half-cut onion.

I sighed, waving my hand at the people I considered family and made me question my life choices all at the same time as I said to my parents, "It's your lucky day. This scene right here sums up my friends in a nutshell...in under two seconds."

"Oh my," my mom whispered, then smiled wide and stepped into the kitchen. "I knew I liked you four"—she turned to me—"but it seems like your dad and I got here just in time."

I laughed, scrubbing a hand over my face. “Yeah, seems like it.”

My friends scrambled to find their manners—including Ford taking off that ridiculous mask—then introduced themselves one by one. My mom pulled each one into a tight hug and held on for at least five seconds each. A warm feeling of rightness settled in my chest for the first time in years. How had I never formally introduced my family to my *brothers*? I knew how. The word *stubborn* flashed like a neon sign in my mind. What do you know? The word *foolish* slid right in there with jazz hands, too.

I cleared my throat, clapping my hands together once before another insulting adjective could join the party. “Okay, we’ve got a lot of shit to do.”

I felt the light smack on the back of my head then watched my friends try to hold in their laughter. “Ma, I’m a grown man. If I want to curse in my own house...” One perfectly shaped, dark eyebrow arched as she looked a full foot up at me, and then her slender arms crossed over her chest. All that was missing were the words, *Try me, Burcardo*. I blew out a heavy breath, stiffening my shoulders for the reaction I was no doubt about to receive. “Sorry. We have a lot of *stuff* to do.”

My gaze flicked to the four assholes in my kitchen, each one with wide eyes and a dropped jaw—before they absolutely lost it.

“What’s so funny?” my mom asked in the stern Mom Tone she’d perfected over thirty plus years and six children. Abruptly, the guys swallowed their laughter, sheepishly looking at each other and then at my mom.

Ford cleared his throat. “Nothing. I mean nothing, Ma’am-a Russo.” His eyes slammed shut and he dropped his chin to his chest, his cheeks flushing.

“*Ma’am-a Russo?*” Cole asked, trying to hold in more laughter.

Ford blew out a breath and threw his hands in the air. “I was gonna say *ma’am*, and then I realized we always use

Mama, and I panicked!”

My mom’s expression softened. She walked into the kitchen and took Ford’s face in her hands. “No panicking or being nervous around me or Burcardo’s father. I tease because I love.” I opened my mouth, and without her even looking at me, she added, “Not with you, Burcardo. With you, I scold because I love.” She laughed and looked at the rest of my friends. “Gotta keep my little *gnocchi* in line somehow.” I didn’t miss the wink she shot them right before they busted out laughing.

“Great. This is just great,” I grumbled. “While you all have a good laugh, I’m gonna make ziti.” I practically stomped into the kitchen like a sulking child, but secretly loved how quickly my mom treated my friends like family.

“Try not to drop anything on the floor,” she called out to me. Then to them, she added, “He always had a mess to clean up when he was younger. I should’ve called him butterfingers, but *my little gnocchi* had a cuter ring to it.”

Ford cocked a judgmental eyebrow. “Is that so?”

I pointed my spoon at him. “Don’t even think about it.”

For the next few hours, we settled into a rhythm, mixing ingredients, filling pasta shells, and making salads. I watched my mom teach each of the guys something new with the patience of a saint. It was clear, even though I hated to admit it, that my decision to keep my two families separate had been a bad one. Seeing them interact, laugh, and talk as if they’d truly known one another for years—well, let’s just say, this Grinch’s heart may have grown a little. Damned if it didn’t make me wonder what else it had room for.

Jared

I STARED at myself in the full-length mirror attached to my closet door. I was a fisherman to my core. I didn’t do fancy unless it was a wedding or a funeral. Right now, I wished it was the former.

“What do ya think, Brutus? Think this suit says, ‘Who needs family? I’m fine?’ Or does it look like I’m trying too hard?” I ran my hands down the front of the dark gray material and tilted my head at my reflection. “Definitely shouts, ‘I’m uncomfortable!’” Brutus barked in response. “Yeah, I’m not liking it either, but it’s only for a few more hours, right?”

I glanced at the time on my phone then shoved it back in my pocket. I had to be at the funeral home in ten minutes. I’d been regretting this since the moment the funeral director had suggested it, but even though I’d be the only family member spending that quiet hour in the viewing room before everyone else showed up, I needed to do it for Grandpa. I looked down at Brutus again. Was it against the rules to bring a dog? Blowing out a breath, I shook the idea off, even though Grandpa loved Brutus as much as I did.

Horizons Funeral Home was only a few blocks away, across the street from our only cemetery, and even though I could’ve walked it, I took my truck to avoid any mishaps. I parked and got out, rolling my shoulders back to try to loosen the tension.

Being in that room alone, the sound of silence was deafening. This was going to be the longest hour of my life. As soon as I sat down in one of the chairs off to the side of my grandpa’s casket, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

We’re all outside, if you need us.

Seeing the message from Burke, my heart thumped out of rhythm and a lump tried its damndest to work its way out in the form of tears I wasn’t ready to cry. Quickly, that sadness was replaced with relief. Burke’s words a few nights ago came back to me. *No one should have to do this alone.* It didn’t matter that my parents and siblings weren’t here. More words Burke had said came back to me. Words whispered to my grandpa in his final moments... *Jared’s got a whole group of people supporting him. People who consider him family.*

Decision made, I sent out a response. Three simple words that weren’t at all simple to say. **I need you.** I didn’t know if subconsciously I meant I needed *only* him—the only person

who truly knew what this was doing to me—but I knew he'd take it as me needing everyone. Honestly, I was lucky for all of them to be there.

I could hear the door open and a group of people silently make their way into the viewing room. As I stood up and turned around, my eyes connected with Burke's and the breath I'd been holding left my lungs in a rush of air. I wouldn't admit to him that I wanted to be in his arms again, like I had been the other night when he'd held me in my quiet kitchen. It hadn't been about sex then; it had been about comfort I so desperately needed.

Turned out, I didn't need to admit anything out loud. Burke took several long strides to me and pulled me into his arms. I knew our friends were staring at us like we were an enigma, but at that moment, I didn't care. I held him back and tucked my face into the warmth of his neck, letting the first tear fall. It seemed like he held me forever in his strong arms yet released me all too quickly.

Suddenly, soft, small hands cupped my face, and I met eyes that were so much like Burke's. "I'm so sorry, sweet boy. You let Mama Russo take care of you." Surprised, I glanced in curiosity at Burke. He shrugged and gave me a gorgeous, almost shy half-smile. His mom's arms wrapped around my neck, pulling me down for the warmest, gentlest hug I'd ever received. I sucked in a breath and held her back, unable to release it without more tears flowing. Damned if I didn't hug the smaller woman back like my life depended on it. I had no idea why she was there. The reason didn't matter, anyway. That hug and the people surrounding me were everything I needed to get through the day. One by one, I was pulled into a comforting embrace, starting with Burke's dad—who had the same strong frame his son had.

I didn't have to go through it alone.

An hour later, as I turned away from the burial site, itching to get back to my grandpa's house—even though there would be people there for the next couple of hours—I froze, my eyes landing on a group in the back of the crowd. People who hadn't stood with me, who'd let me face, not just this day, but

the entire thing alone, even though they'd apparently been here. I watched some Pointers approach them with condolences and tears and hugs and I about lost my shit.

“What’s wrong?” Burke asked, looking in the direction I was glaring. “Don’t even fucking tell me...” he said in a deep, harsh tone only I could hear. I could feel the rest of the guys gather behind me. Burke’s parents came and stopped beside him.

“Okay, I won’t.” I laughed humorlessly and shook my head. “I gotta get outta here.”

“I’m coming with you.” One dark eyebrow arched, telling me without words this was non-negotiable. “We have to swing by my place for the food. It’ll give you something else to think about.” He took my keys out of my hand and turned to Aiden. “Can you drive his truck to his house?”

“Yeah, sure.” Aiden took my keys from Burke.

“Burke, I can just follow you,” I said. Again, he gave me that look, and I blew out a breath. My eyes landed once more on my parents, brother and sister, and their significant others, accepting people’s kind words as if they deserved them. “Never mind. Let’s go.”

I caught my dad’s eye, but instead of going over there, I walked away with Burke by my side.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I stood in the corner of the living room, in the house I'd lived in with my grandpa, watching my family work the room as if they belonged there. I'd asked them, on more than one occasion, to come see Grandpa before he passed, and that had been too inconvenient. Now, here they were, acting as though they'd had some big loss. Jesus, even my mom and sister managed to squeeze out a few tears.

"It's a wonder how that man isn't drowning in sweat over there. The lot of them, really." Irma, Coral Pointe's self-appointed queen of the Walkie Talkies—a group known for dropping a trail of gossip along their speed walking route every morning—stood next to me, giving my family a weird look.

Confused, I asked, "Is it hot in here? I can open some of the wind—"

She looked up at me with light blue eyes, her weathered hand cupping my cheek. "My boy, the only thing hot in here is your family's wheels spinning over there. I'm half expecting that father of yours to start cataloging the assets in every room." The small woman's gray hair barely reached above my elbow, but she wasn't one to mince words. Still, I was thrown off guard and it must have shown in my expression. "I know Halloween is around the corner, but stuffing all that wolves' fur into sheepskin costumes isn't a good look on anyone."

I peered wide-eyed down at Irma, meeting her earnest stare, taken aback by the unsolicited, but completely accurate comment. "I don't..." I almost denied it, almost defended the

self-absorbed people who'd broken Grandpa's heart. I glanced around the room, at the townsfolk Samuel Boone had respected so much and the family he'd loved with all his heart, despite it all.

Instead, I said, "I won't argue with you there. I'd like to keep that between us, though, if you don't mind." I gave her a small smile, even though I knew it wasn't hiding the ache in my heart. I glanced around the room again, some of that pain being replaced by warmth at seeing the amount of people who had truly cared about Grandpa. "He deserves so much more than making it known that his family couldn't care less about him, after everything he's done for them." I could hear myself still talking about him as if he were still alive. I imagined that would take some getting used to.

Irma squeezed my arm. "Not his entire family. Not the family that counts." She harrumphed as she faced the room, no longer meeting my eyes and brushing her hands down the front of her pink blouse. "I know I've created a bit of a reputation for myself, but Samuel Boone was a friend of mine since grade school. I won't tarnish the memory of that man. You should know, my boy, I'm not the only one with eyes in this town, but I'm also not the only one with a level of respect for your grandpa that surpasses any gossip worth spreading."

I leaned down and kissed her cheek, getting a flutter of a laugh in return. "Thank you."

She squeezed my arm one more time before going off to talk to a couple of the Walkie Talkies.

Awkwardly, I pulled at my tie, wishing I could abandon the suit in favor of my favorite worn jeans and Bob Marley T-shirt, or hide out in my bedroom where Brutus was. My eyes caught Burke's across the room and a rush of air filled my lungs, as if all I needed was to see him to feel like I could breathe. It was a dangerous place to find myself in. I'd managed to pursue the man while keeping him at a safe distance for three years. Now was not the time to crumble under the pressure of knowing his mouth fit perfectly with mine—of how desperately I wanted that right now. Wanted that comfort and to just forget for a while. I wouldn't really be

forgetting though, would I? I'd just be replacing heartache with confusion. Either way, I'd end up in this house alone tonight, and that thought sank like a rock to the pit of my stomach.

I wasn't sure why tonight would be so different than any other I'd spent alone. I'd been by myself for a long time now, but the word *alone* had a different meaning now. Heavier.

"You clean up well." My mom's voice pulled me out of my pathetic thoughts, catapulting me into another unwanted situation.

I shoved my hands in my pockets to keep from pulling my tie off altogether. "I have been known to wash the fish guts off when my work day is done."

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Don't be crude, Jared."

"This is one hell of a turnout for the old man." My dad looked around the room, puffing out his chest and sending a plastic smile to anyone who met his eye. As if the amount of people who had shown up for his father had any reflection on him.

"He was loved and respected in this town"—my eyes drifted to my dad—"even though his family abandoned him."

"Ugh." My sister shook her head, her eye roll rivaling our mom's. "Here we go again. I didn't come here for your holier-than-thou speech. Do you know how many patients I had to reschedule to be here?"

Spine stiffening, I lowered my voice so as not to draw attention. "Do you even hear yourself?"

"Can we not do this right now?" my mom said out of the corner of her upturned mouth while waving to someone across the room. "People are watching."

"When would be a good time to discuss how poorly you treated him? Let me know. I'll set aside time." My voice had come out a bit louder than I'd intended, my cheeks heating as the people nearest to us glanced my way. Like a pull I couldn't ignore, I searched for Burke, taking a deep breath in when his eyes met mine. He was still the only one who knew how shitty

my family actually was. I'd rather have any other bond with him than that.

"*You okay?*" he mouthed, concern etched on his face. I nodded in response then dropped my gaze.

Beside me, my brother's phone rang. "Work," he said, as if that was enough of an excuse to abandon the conversation and head out the back door, his wife following behind as she always did.

"We didn't come here to fight with you," my dad said, his voice low with a biting edge.

"Then why did you come here? You never even said goodbye to him." My voice trembled as I forced my emotions back down.

"What do you think today was? Wherever he is, he knows we're here." My dad's argument was weak at best.

"You do realize that means he also knew when you *weren't* there, right?"

"Jared, I'm not going to—"

"Everything okay over here?" Burke's deep voice was like a balm, soothing old wounds as it washed over me.

My dad's back straightened, obviously trying to make himself more comparable to Burke's height. There was no contest. Burke ate up the space beside me, filling this home the same way he had over a month ago during a raging storm. My dad sneered. "Thank you, but this is a private matter."

The dangerous gleam in Burke's dark eyes chilled me to the bone while bringing every nerve ending to life. "Then maybe it should be saved for, you know"—he motioned to the roomful of people who, thankfully, hadn't honed into the conversation yet—"when you're in *private*."

"I'm sorry, who are you?" my sister asked with an incredulous huff.

"Where are my manners?" Burke held out his massive hand. "Burke Russo. Jared and I have known each other for what"—he dropped his hand when my sister didn't reach for it

and glanced at me, his brows drawn—“three years now? Yeah, I’ve gotten to know him pretty well.” He flicked an almost nervous look to me that was immediately masked with confidence when he met my sister’s eyes again. “Actually, I was there with him when his grandpa passed. No way in hell I’d let someone I care about go through that alone.” I rolled my lips in and dropped my chin, trying to hide my smile. “And you are?”

My head shot back up and, oh man, the way their mouths dropped open in offense said it all. Burke had managed to call them out for not being there for me and question their importance, all in one breath. If looks could kill, Burke would be crumpled on the floor.

My dad forced a smile but didn’t bother to hide the anger behind his eyes. Holding his hand out this time, he said, “Edward Boone. Samuel Boone’s *son*.” That last word was said as if it held any weight.

Burke stared at me, giving me a not-so-discreet look as if to say, *Is this guy for real?* I had to bite my cheek in order to keep a straight face. “Huh...you’d think I’d know that.” He gripped my dad’s hand, making my dad wince before pulling his hand away.

Around us, I could see the guys gradually moving closer, their ears perked to the conversation. Aiden shot me a look, concern marring his face. He knew I didn’t have a great relationship with my family, but I’d never actually told him the extent of it. I was hit with a sudden guilt, knowing he would’ve been there for me while being discreet. I should’ve trusted more in the friend he’d always been to me for the last several years.

Burke’s mom stopped in front of me, giving questioning looks to my parents before turning her attention to me. “Jared, honey, have you eaten anything?” Then with all the cool confidence her son also possessed, she looked at my mom and added, “He’s been through so much. The least this mama can do is make sure he’s holding up okay.” She spoke as if she’d known me for years, instead of someone she’d talked to once

on the phone and just met today, but her protective nature wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

“I’m okay, thanks...Mama Russo.” The way the smaller woman smiled from ear-to-ear hearing those words from me, you’d think I’d given her the moon. But what almost knocked me over was Burke’s softened gaze.

“Anytime, sweet boy.” Without a shadow of a doubt, I knew she meant it. Turning her attention back to my family, she said, “I’m Sophia Russo, Burke’s mom.” She smiled, waiting on them to formally introduce themselves, even though she obviously already knew who they were.

“Valerie and Edward Boone,” my mom announced. She looped her arm through my sister’s. “This is our daughter, Vanessa, and her husband, Cliff. Vanessa owns her own medical practice in the Houston area, and Cliff is a podiatrist.” Of course, at that moment my brother and his wife came back. God forbid my mom not have an excuse to brag about the accomplished children of the family. “Oh, and here is our son, Kyle, and his wife, Bethany. Kyle is CEO of a huge marketing firm in Los Angeles and Bethany owns a very successful, high-end clothing boutique.” The words “high-end” always seemed to be tacked on there, as if that boosted Bethany up a level...which was still ten levels above me.

Burke’s mom kept a smile locked on her face, but it looked like it took a lot of effort to keep it there. She waited another beat, but when my mom didn’t offer up any more information, Mama Russo’s left eye made the slightest twitch. “Did you say Boone? You must be related to Jared somehow. Distant cousins, perhaps?”

I looked away as a laugh crept up. Burke managed to keep a completely straight face when he said, “Ma, they’re Jared’s parents and siblings.” When she gave her son a wide-eyed look, he added, “I know, right? I wouldn’t have guessed it either.” Oh man, these Russos could rule the world if given half the chance.

She pressed her hand over her heart. “Oh! Oh my goodness! I didn’t realize...” The hell she didn’t. “Well, you

certainly lucked out. *Three* successful children. Jared's bait shop seems to be a staple in Coral Pointe. I've heard it's been around for decades, passed down in the family. I'm sure I don't have to tell you how much he loves that place. And can you believe that gorgeous boat he owns? You must be so proud." The woman was laying it on thick with info Burke must have fed her beforehand. "Imagine the hard work and dedication it takes to buy a beauty like that, not to mention knowing how to care for and drive that thing." Her mouth twisted to the side, a line forming between her brows. "Is it called driving if you're on the water?" She waved her hand, laughing. "Doesn't matter. What's important is what a fine man he is."

Burke

AS MUCH AS I loved watching my mom take Jared's parents down a notch or two, I needed to reel her back in before Pointers started to tune in. Talk about baiting. Every word that fell from her mouth dug deeper into the perfect facade Jared's family members were trying so desperately to keep intact.

I was fucking proud as hell.

"Ma, can you help me start to gather some plates? This day has been a long one." I nodded toward the guys, getting their attention. "Maybe if we start cleaning up, people will get the picture." Arching an eyebrow, I turned back to Jared. "Come on, I'm making you a plate. Don't think I didn't notice you haven't eaten." Before the man could argue, I faced his parents again. "*Lovely* to meet you." I could hear the guys snickering behind me when I used our code word for rude guests at the inn. "Being that this was your childhood home," I said to Edward, my voice no longer hiding the disgust toward them, "I'm sure you know the way out." Without much thought, I placed my hand on Jared's lower back and steered him toward the kitchen—and that damn table that had made several appearances in my dreams since the hurricane.

"Remind me never to piss your mom off," Jared said through a laugh. "That woman's sneak attack is impressively

stealthy and on point.”

“Just hers?” I motioned to a chair with a stern look. Jared really must have been tired because, instead of arguing, he sank down into the seat, scrubbing a hand over his red eyes.

“Yours was pretty impressive, too.”

“Man, you really are tired, huh? I think that was almost a compliment.” I took a plate and began filling it with food.

“Not ‘almost.’ Definitely a compliment, but most importantly, a thank you.” My hand holding a spoonful of ziti froze mid-air, my eyes drawn directly to his. “I was seconds away from airing dirty laundry right there for the whole town to hear.” He snorted, resting his elbow on the table as he propped his head up with his hand.

“No thanks necessary. It was fun putting them in their place. They may not know me, but I know all I need to about them.” That was an understatement. It had taken a boatload of self-control not to tell his family what I really thought about them.

Aiden walked into the kitchen holding some plates. “They’re gone. Pretty much stormed out after you both walked away.” He glanced at Jared uneasily. “I’m sorry, man. I didn’t realize how bad it was.”

Jared sat up straighter, lifting his head. “No, you have nothing to apologize for. If anything, I’m sorry for keeping you in the dark.”

“I think I understand why you did. After all the shit some of the people in this town put me through when I came back, I know the best way to avoid the firing squad is to hide the evidence. Although, in this case, I’m pretty sure the town would’ve sided with you.”

Cole had given us the whole story when they’d gotten together. Apparently, Aiden had a rough time when he’d moved back to Coral Pointe after being away for eight years. He’d tried for so long to convince his stubborn dad, Jim, to let him take over the small family brewery and bring it into the twenty-first century. Eventually, he’d given up, determined to

make something of his own. The result was SandBar, a very successful bar and restaurant on the beach that Aiden had started with his own two hands. I had mad respect for the guy. Like Pointers were known to do—especially the older generation—they'd somewhat taken sides, assuming Aiden had turned his back on his old man. A mild heart attack made the stubborn, older Rafferty pull his head out of his ass—and opened the eyes of the town, finally making them realize Aiden wasn't the enemy. They'd meant well, but without all the details, they'd been tough on him.

“It wasn't really about taking sides,” Jared said, staring at the table, his fingers rapidly tapping on the wood. “It was about—”

“I get it,” Aiden cut in. “It was for the same reason I didn't correct all those people when they were coming down hard on me. To protect him.” Aiden leaned back against the counter and exhaled. “Did they really not say goodbye to him?” I could feel the anger vibrating through Aiden's voice. I had no doubt in my mind, if he hadn't fixed things with his old man, and that heart attack had gone a different way, Aiden would've done everything in his power to make sure his dad knew he loved him.

“I wish I could say they'd been there...or had even called him.” Jared gave Aiden a sad smile. “Luckily, Grandpa knew I was there. He knew Fred was there for me, too.” His eyes met mine and something wicked flashed in those gray depths.

My hand stopped mid-air with his plate a few inches from him. Before he could take it, I pulled his food out of his reach. “I'm sorry, who now? *Fred*? If I recall correctly, I was there. I don't remember meeting *Fred*.”

Jared sat back in his chair, crossing his arms casually over his chest, a smirk lifting the corner of his mouth. “Yeah, I guess you don't know who he is, huh?”

“Sounds to me like someone's jealous,” Aiden teased, pushing off the counter and shooting Jared a knowing smile as he left the room.

“And to think, I actually liked that dickhead.” I huffed, my eyes once again meeting Jared’s. Fuck it. Time to wear that fucking emotion proudly, own it, because I *was* jealous. No sense denying what everyone already knew to be true. “Now, who the hell is Fred?”

Jared shrugged one shoulder nonchalantly. “Just a guy. Lives in a town called Bedrock.” He leaned forward and clasped his hands, resting them on the table as he locked his eyes with mine. “He’s pretty famous, actually. Even has a kid’s vitamin named after him.”

“A kid’s...? Wait, are you talking about fucking Fred Flintstone?”

“I don’t recall saying I fucked him...yet.” He cocked a light eyebrow, a spark of sarcasm in his voice. “Gotta admit, though, that caveman sure does know how to use that mouth of his. It might be worth exploring his other *talents*.”

Caveman...Cave Dweller... It hit me then what we were actually talking about. “Did you seriously tell your grandpa my name is Fred?” The thought rubbed me the wrong way.

Jared’s shoulders loosened, his eyes shifting away from me as he let out a soft laugh. “No. He came up with that nickname all on his own”—a flush crept up his neck and cheeks and he met my eyes again—“after I told him my nickname for you.”

Jesus Christ, this man really did know how to get under my skin. I sank down in the seat across from him and gave him his plate, still trying to work out if I was reading this situation correctly. “You told him about me?”

Again he shrugged one shoulder, pushing his food around on his plate. “He was my best friend. I told him about everything”—his mouth quirked to the side in a sexy grin—“minus the X-rated details.”

“Great. I’m sure his opinion of me was stellar, thanks.” Why the hell did that bother me so much? I hadn’t known the man, but the fact that I couldn’t prove to him I wasn’t an asshole—all the time—felt like I’d been cheated somehow. And how self-absorbed was that?

“He knew that you’re a good man, even if you’ve made an Olympic sport outta drivin’ me nuts.”

And, there it was. The reason it was suddenly so important that Jared’s grandpa hadn’t hated me. A part of me needed him to know I was a man worthy enough. Enough for what? The answer was staring me in the face—literally. Why was it so hard to breathe lately when Jared looked at me?

“Hey, we’re gonna head out unless there’s anything else you need.” Noah stood in the archway with Hunter, a sleepy Logan resting his head on Hunter’s shoulder. They’d asked Miss Margie to watch the baby during the services, stopping on their way here to pick them both up. He looked at me and then at Jared just as my mom came back into the kitchen, a soft smile gracing her face as she rubbed the baby’s back. I could see in her eyes how she’d already become attached to the little guy. Without prompt, Noah said, “Mama Russo, why don’t Hunter and I give you both a lift back to the inn? We have to pass by there on our way home, and Cole and Aiden are taking Miss Margie.”

“Oh, I was just going to...” She glanced my way, thankfully seeing something in my expression. She cleared her throat and set the blue kitchen towel back down on the counter. “You know what? That would be great. Thank you, Noah.”

Jared and I both stood up to say goodbye.

“Thanks, Ma.” I kissed her temple, truly grateful for the way she’d defended Jared earlier.

“Anytime, my little gnocchi.” She gave me a wink then turned toward Jared. “And you... You hold your head high. Nothing can diminish what you’ve accomplished or how much your grandpa loved you. I don’t care how hard they try; that family of yours will never spin their nonsense or self-righteous bragging into gold.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, hugging her back.

Pushing down the flutter in my stomach, I abandoned my jacket and uncomfortable-as-fuck tie, untucked the button-

down, and rolled my sleeves up, ready to pick up where my mom left off. Fifteen minutes later, the house was blissfully quiet except for the sound of me loading the dishwasher.

“I can do that, you know.” Jared stood in the archway after trading out his suit for sweats and a tee. Talk about *déjà vu*.

“It’s almost done. Go put *Vikings* on.” I forced my eyes to look away from the man before I did something stupid. I had no intention of going anywhere, at least for the next few hours. No matter how many times Jared insisted he was okay, the haunted look in his eyes said otherwise.

Jared snorted. “Do you ever stop telling people what to do?”

I gave him a cocky half-grin. “Why would I do that when I’m always right?”

The intensity coming off him in waves was hard to ignore, but I’d told the man I didn’t fuck out of pity. Making a move on him tonight would send the wrong message. Because wanting to taste him again had nothing to do with feeling sorry for him and everything to do with admitting I was sometimes...maybe...wrong. Okay fine, I’d been a raging jackass where Jared was concerned, but I wasn’t a complete idiot.

“Keep tellin’ yourself that, Cave Dweller.” His words felt like a smartass response to the thought I’d just had, even though there was no way he could read my mind. With a smirk, he turned and headed into the living room, leaving me staring after him. That nickname had a different impact on me now. He’d told his grandpa about me. I was Fred. A name I would kick anyone else’s ass for calling me. I smiled to myself and finished up.

When I went into the living room, Jared was sitting in the corner of the couch—the same one he’d sat in the night of the hurricane. Was I ever going to be able to be in this house without thinking about that night?

I sat at the other end of the couch, propping my feet up on the coffee table. Jared didn’t question why I was still there.

Instead, he put the show on where we'd left off and settled back into the soft cushions.

The next few hours flew by in comfortable silence—well, except for the sounds of Ragnar kicking some ass. Eventually, I looked at the time on my phone and saw how late it was. We'd sat there longer than I'd thought. Stretching my arms over my head, I said through a yawn, "I'd better head out before I fall asleep on your couch."

"Yeah, I'm gonna head to bed. I'm fucking beat." Jared and I both stood. I grabbed my jacket and tie from the kitchen then met Jared by his front door. When he pulled it open and I stepped out onto the landing, he said, "Thanks, Burke. For everything."

The sincerity in his voice was something I'd heard a lot lately. The laidback fisherman turned out to be a smartass to his core, able to jab back at me without blinking an eye. But he was also able to show emotion easier than I could. Whether he realized it or not, he didn't really need to dig deep to find strength. He stayed true to who he was, and there was nothing more admirable than that. Especially after meeting his poor excuse for a family.

"No problem." I forced myself to start walking to my car, even though every cell in my body was screaming at me to turn back around.

My hand gripped the door handle when I heard, "Burke," said a hell of a lot closer than the front door of Jared's house.

Turning around, I sucked in a breath seconds before Jared gripped the front of my shirt and yanked me down, slamming his mouth over mine. His tongue swept into my mouth, giving me a taste of what I'd been craving for weeks.

All too soon, he pulled away, flushed and panting. "Don't get too cocky. That kiss was for Fred." Winking, he put a couple of backward steps between us.

A deep groan rumbled up from my chest, my hand grabbing the man's worn tee as I dragged him back to me and took his mouth again. This time, I wrapped my arm around his

waist, holding him right where I wanted him. I took my fill, tasting every inch of his mouth, twisting and sliding my tongue with his until I was absolutely sure his flavor was irrevocably imprinted into my mind.

Hearing the voice in my head reminding me he was incredibly vulnerable right now, I reluctantly forced myself to pull away from the scorching kiss. Jared's lips were swollen and pink, his eyes half-lidded and glazed over. Considering my mission successful, I let him go.

“That kiss was for me.” I hopped into my SUV, staring back at him in my rearview mirror as I drove away. Jared lifted a hand to his lips and shook his head, but it was the smile on his face that stayed with me the rest of the night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I paced the busy kitchen, pots and pans clanging and chatter bouncing off the walls of the tiled room. My fingers dug in as I gripped my hips, impatiently waiting.

“They’re here. Over by the window,” Megan announced as she peeked through the small window on the swinging door leading to the dining room.

“Shit.” I rubbed the back of my neck and took a deep, shaky breath.

“Hey, it’s gonna be fine. This place is fucking kickass. They’re gonna love it.” Megan squeezed my arm as she walked around me and went back to helping the staff.

I rolled my shoulders back and inhaled again, releasing my breath slowly. “Here goes nothin’.” Before I chickened out, I pushed through the swinging door and made my way over to my parents’ table. I gave a warm smile to the server who’d just approached them to get their orders—I’d been known to intimidate my staff without even trying. Go figure. “Anna, these are my parents, Sophia and Carmine. Can you handle their drink orders? I’ve got their meals.”

“Sure thing. I’ll just put these drinks in and get you both some water and bread.” She gave them a friendly smile before walking over to the bar.

“Burcardo, this is breathtaking.” My mom stared out the window at what I had to admit was the most amazing thing about this place: The view. Waves crashed on the shore of Coral Pointe Beach as the sky melted into shades of burnt

orange, amber, and indigo against the horizon. We'd hit the jackpot a few years ago when it had come on the market. The inn and attached restaurant had been the catalyst for the entire business.

"Yeah, we're pretty proud of it. How was your day of sightseeing?"

"It was wonderful. Teresa is so sweet and those blueberry turnovers she makes are to die for. We're going to Rafferty's Tasting Room tomorrow to try some of the local beer people rave about. I hear Aiden, his father, and his cousin own that? Then, after that, we're going to shop for Halloween costumes for the Sunscreen Festival, right, Carmine?"

My dad shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He did not love Halloween or costumes, but he loved my mom. "Whatever you want, Soph."

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to see you that much."

My mom grabbed my hand and squeezed, affection radiantly shining through the smile on her face. "No, we understand. You weren't even expecting us to be here."

"Still, I want to spend time with you. I'm working to clear part of my schedule. It won't be easy with the festival coming up, but I'll do my best. Do you both want to look at the menu and I'll be back in a few minutes?" I was nervous. Why the hell was I so nervous?

"Sounds good," my dad responded, already perusing the selection with a shrewd eye.

I forced myself to walk away and give them a chance to look things over without the pressure of me breathing down their necks. I took one turn around the dining room to the other tables, introducing myself as the owner as I made sure things were running smoothly. Every table I stopped at, every smile I saw on the faces of patrons who'd just had something from my kitchen, sent a rush of pride through me.

The place had turned out exactly how I'd envisioned it a few years ago. Aged-oak planks, with dark honey and chocolate colors to rival the first pour of a well-built Guinness,

stretched across the room. Dark teal accents and beige upholstery brought in a little of the beachy vibe in juxtaposition with the rich brown tables and dark wood of the booths and chairs. With the help of the guys, I'd managed to blend inviting, cozy warmth with sexy elegance. My hands flexed with anticipation, anxious to get back to my parents' table. After about ten minutes, I'd made the loop back around to where they were sitting.

"What do you think? Do you want to start with an appetizer?" The silence I was met with sent a shock of unease down my spine. "What's wrong?"

My dad cleared his throat, sitting back in his chair. I caught the small tick to his jaw and immediately my back stiffened. "Well, I'm just confused here."

"Confused about what? I can answer any questions." *Keep your cool, Burke.*

My dad set the menu down, giving my mom a look across the table. I didn't miss her small nod in return. He turned indignant eyes back toward me. "You didn't want the family restaurant, and although that took some getting used to, we supported your decision." When I huffed incredulously, my dad bristled and tacked on, "Eventually."

"I'm sensing a 'but' coming..." Widening my stance, my arms crossed defensively, my muscles tensing as I tried to prepare for whatever the hell he had to say.

We stared each other down until he finally said, "*But* where's your family on this menu? Your heritage? Your traditions? You know those recipes by heart, yet there isn't a single thing on this menu passed down from either side of the family."

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose to try and ward off the headache I suddenly felt coming on. "It's a steakhouse, Pop. Typically, Italian dishes aren't on the menu at a steakhouse."

"It's your restaurant, isn't it? You can do any damn well thing you please." He jumped and sucked in a sharp breath.

Wincing, his eyes sprung to my mom as he reached down and rubbed his shin under the table.

She narrowed her eyes, glaring at him. “What your father meant to say is”—her gaze drifted over to me, softening ever so slightly—“we were just surprised not to see at least one family dish. Like some of the dishes you made for Jared the other night. But I’m sure everything on this menu is delicious.” Those eyes pinned my dad again in his seat. “Isn’t that right, Carmine?”

“Well, yeah, of course. I wasn’t implying they weren’t.” But he couldn’t leave well enough alone. “I just don’t get it. What’s so wrong with sticking to tradition?”

Although my dad and I had a pretty good relationship, and he’d always made sure all his kids were provided for, we also had a habit of butting heads. Most of the decisions I’d made over the years were “accepted” by him only after my mom gave him hell for not supporting me. He was as stubborn as they came.

“It’s not really for you to get.” I kept my voice down, even though I couldn’t hide the anger vibrating through it. “I should’ve known this would happen. This isn’t *Russo’s*. It’s Oceanside Bar and Grill. The menu here is mine to create, and I’ve done a pretty damn good job, if I do say so myself.”

My mom nodded quickly, sympathy etched on her face. “Of course, you have, Burcardo. You’ve done an amazing job. Let’s just start over.” Her eyebrow arched as she once again gave my dad the stink eye. “Your father is going to be on his best behavior or he can go order room service.”

“You mean takeout. Room service still comes from my kitchen, which apparently isn’t good enough.” This was not how I’d pictured this night going down, but I wasn’t sure why I was surprised. My dad had a habit of passing judgment first, then smoothing the rocky terrain with backpedaling and an obvious shove from my mom.

She leaned forward, her finger jabbing the air as she pointed at each of us. “Listen up, both of you. You’re going to push aside this childish behavior and we’re going to have a

delicious dinner. I'll be damned if either one of you ruins this night because you're both so hardheaded." She reached across the table and snatched my dad's menu right out of his hands. "Burcardo, we'll both start off with French onion soup. Then I'll have the salmon, and your father will have"—my dad opened his mouth to argue, immediately shutting it again after seeing the threatening look on my mom's face—"the prime rib, medium rare. Thank you."

She handed me both menus with a stern look. I gave a short nod then stalked back toward the kitchen, dropping the menus on the bar while trying to temper the storm brewing as my fingers flexed at my sides.

My hand slammed on the swinging door, almost catching one of the servers with a tray full of plates. "Sorry, Jeff," I grumbled, holding it open for him to pass through, my hand gripping the door so tight my knuckles cracked. I stomped through the kitchen, calling out, "Two French onion soups, the salmon, and a medium rare prime rib for table fifteen," as my eyes met Megan's, anger fueling every step until I was in my office. I paced the small space, hands clasped on the back of my head, but with the length of my stride, I took about two steps in one direction then bounced back in the other direction. It wasn't exactly conducive to letting off steam.

"That bad, huh?" Megan leaned against the doorjamb, her pitying expression adding more fuel to the fire.

"Of course, because how could I let him down and not make this place a carbon copy of *Russo's*? I mean, who the hell am I to choose my own damn menu in my own damn restaurant?"

Megan walked farther into the room and picked up the house phone. "Hey, Cole. Do you or Levi have a minute to stop in Burke's office before you leave?"

"What the hell are you doing?" I barked.

Ignoring me, she thanked Cole and hung up the phone. "They're both on the way."

“Why the hell did you do that? I’m fine. I just need a minute.” Even as the words came out of my mouth, I knew they were a goddamn lie. Any nervous excitement I’d had before my parents walked in was given a swift kick in the ass, along with any desire to go back out there and face them.

“Listen, Burke, you know I love you, and I’m damn good at being the buffer between you and the staff, but this goes deeper than that, and you know it. Vent, have a drink, hell, I’ll even close for you tonight if you want me to, but I don’t know the right thing to say here. Cole and Levi know you better than most and they’re right down the hall.”

“Actually, we’re here,” Levi announced, striding into the office with his hands in pockets, Cole right behind him. “What’s going on? Everything okay?”

“I’m gonna give you three some privacy. I’ll personally bring the soup to your parents.”

“Oh no...” Cole said under his breath, understanding dawning on both my friends’ faces.

“Thanks, Megan. Let me know when their dinners are ready and I’ll bring them out. I at least owe my mom that.” Once the door clicked closed, I walked around the desk and dropped down into my chair, leaning my head back as I pressed my eyes closed and tried to ignore the sympathetic looks from my friends.

“What happened?” Anger already laced Cole’s voice as both he and Levi sat down, just from the little bit he’d pieced together.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.” They both continued to sit silently and wait until I looked at them again. I huffed and leaned my elbow on the chair, my fingers grazing my five o’clock shadow. “What do you think happened? The menu isn’t good enough. Where are the family recipes? Where are the traditions? Why are you such a fuck-up, Burke?”

Levi sat forward, anger brewing in his dark eyes. “He said that to you?”

I laughed humorlessly. “No, I read between the lines.”

“Shit.” Cole shook his head. “I’m sorry, man.”

“Whatever. I’m fine. Doesn’t fucking matter anyway.”

“How many more times are you gonna say that until you convince yourself?” Levi was challenging me, and fuck if that didn’t piss me off more because they knew me all too well.

“As many times as I fucking need to until my parents go back home and I don’t have to see the disappointment in his eyes.” These men were my people, and because they’d already seen me at my worst, I let out a shaky breath. “Why did I expect a different reaction this time?”

“Because you know deep down he loves you. He’s just set in his ways.” Cole tilted his head, staring at me like I was something to figure out.

“What? What the hell are you looking at?” I barked.

Cole turned to Levi. “Does he look a little red to you? Round? Perfect for a pie in the fall?” Cole asked Levi.

Levi stared at Cole a second then nodded his head. “All he needs is a little cinnamon...maybe a scoop of vanilla ice cream.”

“What the hell are you both goin’ on about?”

Cole lifted a snarky eyebrow. “Hello, Apple. I see you didn’t fall very far...”

His point finally dawned... “Oh, fuck you. I’m not that bad! Not as bad as him!” I waved my hand in the direction of the dining room.

“*Right.*” Cole dragged the word out, winking while shooting me the “okay” symbol.

Levi sat back and propped one foot on the opposite knee. “Sage asked me to handle dinner tonight. Stouffer’s lasagna is good, right?”

Cole snapped his fingers, then pointed at Levi. “Oh! We’ve got a bottle of some random red blend from Christmas last year. Grab some store-bought cannoli, and you’ve got a feast,

my friend.” I rubbed a hand over my heart, biting my cheek so as not to tell them where they could shove their pasty cannolis.

“That’s a great idea. I mean, unless you want to bring that bottle over to Jared’s, Burke.” Levi folded his hands, resting them on his stomach. “I’ll make the sacrifice.”

“Levi, that’s just crazy talk.” Cole smirked. “Burke decided years ago he and Jared weren’t right for each other. Right, Burke?”

“I hate you both.” Fucking jackasses. Leave it to those two knuckleheads to zero in on the biggest thing occupying all my thoughts lately. Because that kiss a couple of nights ago—the one not provoked by the heat of the moment—had rocked me to my fucking core. So much so that I’d had to take care of the problem myself before I could fall asleep that night.

They both laughed, Cole saying, “No, you don’t. Being friends with us is one of the best decisions you’ve ever made.”

“I’m beginning to question all my life choices.” Billions of people in the world and I chose four dumbasses who had no problem calling me out on my shit. And then there was Jared... The choice I’d made back when we’d first met, that we weren’t right for each other, that I couldn’t fuck around with someone I’d have to see all the time after it inevitably blew up in my face? That choice to push him away, for reasons that didn’t even make sense to me anymore? Yeah, I questioned that life choice more than anything else right now. The real question was, could I change it, or was it too late?

A knock sounded on the door as Megan peeked her head in. “Their dinners are ready. Do you still want to take them out?”

I blew out a breath and stood up. “Yeah, I’ll do it, but if you could close tonight, that would be great. In this mood, I’m bound to scare the patrons away.”

“No doubt,” she agreed with a teasing smile then left again.

I pushed up from my chair and rounded the desk. Levi and Cole followed suit. “If I find out either one of you bought

lasagna and cannolis from the supermarket, I'll kick both your asses then toss you to Mama Russo...and she'll bring your scraps home and throw them to the rest of my family."

"He woke up today and chose violence," Cole said to Levi behind me.

"Seriously," Levi responded. "Like Sage wouldn't kick my ass first."

"Do you both have costumes for Sunscreen yet?" Cole asked.

"Ugh. I don't even want to think about it. My boyfriend has got some crazy couple costume idea planned that I'm not sold on." I glanced back at my friend, and although his face was blotched red up to his ears, the smile on his face said so much more. He loved that Sage could bring him out of his shell. Even more, he loved Sage so much, he'd do anything to make that man happy.

More and more lately I'd been tossing around the idea of having something like that with someone—not someone... Jared—but I still didn't know what the hell I was doing, especially where he was concerned. All I knew was, the man was on my mind constantly, and unlike a few months ago, it was getting easier to admit to myself that I wanted more with him. Problem was, it was a hell of a lot harder to tell him that.

"What about you, Burke?" Levi asked.

"Yeah, I've got an idea in mind." One that made me even crazier than I thought I was, but that was only if I had the guts to wear it. "Hundreds of people—half of them drunk—dressed up like God knows what... Can't fucking wait."

The Sunscreen Festival was a couple of days away and was one of our most successful. Halloween was a huge draw in general, but Pointers went all out for this one. Costume and pie-eating contests, candy spots for the kids to trick or treat, and of course, an adult beverage tent for the parents called Boos and Brews. They had to survive the chaos somehow, right?

Cole slapped me on the back. “That’s the spirit. I’m still trying to figure something out.”

They both walked with me through the kitchen, waiting as I grabbed both plates. Cole pushed through the door into the dining room, holding it open for Levi and me.

“Say the word and Cole and I will bring them their dinners.”

“Nah, thanks, though. I’m just gonna drop these off then head out.” I took one step when Cole stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

“For what it’s worth, we’re damn proud of what you’ve built here. We wouldn’t be half as successful without you in that kitchen.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, nodding in thanks. Cole and Levi walked around the far side of the bar to leave while I went to my parents’ table. I took a deep breath when I was one step away, refusing to let my dad see the effect his words had on me.

“Here are your dinners. Salmon for you.” I placed my mom’s plate down, giving her a smile I hoped conveyed that I wasn’t angry with her. Setting my dad’s plate down was another thing entirely. I dropped the friendly expression, his plate hitting the table a little more forcefully, though not enough to cause a scene. “And the prime rib.” Before any other words of disappointment could be said, I took a step back. “I’m headed out for the night. Your dinners are on me. Thanks for coming by.”

“Burcardo,” my mom said, a hint of remorse in her voice.

“Not now, Ma, okay?” I leaned down and kissed her temple. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” I glanced at my dad. “Have a good night.”

I didn’t miss the deep-set frown on my dad’s face, but the best thing for me to do was cool off before the subject was broached again. The middle of Oceanside’s dining room was not the ideal place to have that conversation. My drive home didn’t help at all. I was on edge, and no matter how much I

knew I needed to just let it go, something about tonight cut a little more deeply. Maybe it was because this time they were in my world, in my home, judging the decisions I'd made.

And maybe there was a small part of me that still wanted to hear they were proud of me, even if I'd taken my own path. Problem was, I kept looking for that approval, instead of realizing it was never going to come.

Jared

"HAVE you heard from any of them?" Aiden asked from behind the bar, his voice raised slightly over the den of people at SandBar tonight. I ate there at least twice a week, occupying my usual seat at the quietest spot of the bar.

I squirted some ketchup on my burger then put the top of the roll back on and pressed down. "Nope, thankfully. I was afraid they'd want to stay a bit, take over the house, but I haven't seen them since the funeral." Talking to Aiden about them had become a hell of a lot easier after realizing I should've been open with him from the start. Disgust with my family twisted his expression, instead of pity for my grandpa. But I couldn't shake this feeling under my skin; a vibration of unease that had made me toss and turn for the last couple of nights since I'd last seen my family.

"That's good, right?"

I took a bite, weighing my options before I answered, but I'd already gone the route of not being forthcoming with Aiden. "You'd think, but there's something I haven't told you."

"What's up?" His brows pulled together as he leaned his forearms on the reclaimed wood.

I glanced around to find most people who knew me were far enough away that they wouldn't be able to hear me, and those who were close weren't Pointers. Setting my burger back down, I geared myself up for saying out loud what I'd been dreading for months. Maybe even longer. Because saying it out loud made it real. "My grandpa let us know several years

back that when he was gone, he was gonna leave the house and the land to all of us.”

“Shit,” Aiden breathed out in understanding.

“Yeah. There’s no way I can afford to buy them out. Which means...” I picked a fry up, but dropped it back down, my appetite flagging.

I didn’t need to finish the thought. Aiden’s whispered, “No...” told me he’d gotten the message loud and clear.

“Yep. I’ve been tryin’ to come to terms with it. Tryin’ to figure out what I’m gonna do. I think that apartment above Beachin’ Bakery is free. At least for the winter. That’ll give me some time to come up with a plan. ’Course, things are gonna change for me financially, too. The house has been paid off for years, but my grandpa had automatic payments set up for taxes and I handled the utilities. Renting is gonna cost me more money every month than that big house, seein’ as how I’d be paying rent plus utilities.” I shrugged. “But I don’t think I can take my share of the money if they sell his house. I’d rather they keep every selfish penny than spend money from a sale I never wanted to make. He would’ve been heartbroken to find out his home was no longer in the family.”

“Fuck, man. I’m sorry. You think they’d really kick you out?”

I snorted. “In that location and the great condition it’s in after all these years? In a fucking heartbeat. I see my childhood in every dusty, weathered corner of that house. My grandma standing in her favorite room, baking cookies or making pies... My grandpa working in his garden... The two of them dancing in the kitchen without a care in the world... The house they loved and made their mark in, raised a child in... The house they made memories in...” I took a swig from my beer, letting the carbonation wash down emotions that were fighting to come out. “The house my grandpa left us so it would stay in the family... It’s worth a pretty penny and all my parents and siblings see are dollar signs, but to me, it’s...”

“Priceless.” he finished saying for me.

“Yeah. Stupid, right?”

“Not in the least.”

“I don’t need much. It’s just Brutus and me, minding our own damn business, you know? The biggest purchase I’ve ever made was my boat. Saved for a long time just so I wouldn’t have too many years of payments, but that also means I don’t have much of a savings left, either.” And it was becoming painfully clear that maybe I needed to let it go. Sell the boat and get another one when I was in a better financial situation. The thought alone killed me.

“Damn. You know, I asked my pop about your dad after the funeral. He said, and I quote, ‘That jackass doesn’t realize when people call him a *son* of a motherless goat, they don’t mean because the world revolves around him.’”

“‘A motherless goat?’” I barked out a laugh, shaking my head. “Yeah, it seems like more people knew about what was really happening than they’d let on. Which, let’s face it, is a fucking feat for Pointers not to say anything. I didn’t think they knew how to be discreet. Or maybe I just didn’t give them enough credit.”

“I think maybe that was their way of protecting you, oddly enough. You’re a Pointer, born and bred, and the only Boone who stayed.” He grabbed some glasses after a couple of people got up and wiped down the area, tucking the tips away in a jar for his employees.

I thought about what Irma said to me after the funeral and smiled, picking my burger back up. “Yeah, maybe.”

“They don’t always see the bigger picture, but where you and Samual are concerned, I think they do.” He tapped the bar in front of me then walked over to a couple of new patrons to take their orders.

I remembered a time when this town hadn’t been as protective of Aiden, even though he also was a born and bred Pointer. I wouldn’t blame Aiden if he felt a bit of residual hurt from the way he’d been treated for a while. A lot of Pointers

had been eager to pick sides when Aiden and his dad weren't getting along. More often than not, they'd sided with Jim.

Cole had stuck up for Aiden in a big way, though, twice. Once to Jim himself, and again when he defended the validity of their relationship. Both instances had been in front of most of the town.

A vice of envy tightened around my chest. To have someone publicly claim you as theirs—not their property, but their whole entire world—was something I'd never experienced before. To have someone who respected you and protected you, even if you could handle things on your own. Burke's words made an unscheduled loop around the track in my brain, circling back to me for the umpteenth time...*you shouldn't have to do this alone*. I'd never even considered how much I needed someone to be there for me until Burke opened that damn car door and barked his orders for me to get in. It was probably the first time someone had gotten pissed off at me because I insisted I was fine on my own. Hell, once my grandpa had gone into care, there wasn't anyone left who truly insisted on taking care of me.

But, as I watched Aiden smile down at his phone, obviously receiving a message from Cole, that vice of envy tightened even more.

AN HOUR LATER, I walked in the door to a quiet house and turned on the small lamp by the couch. The sun had already set, casting an array of shadows on the beige walls. I stood there in silence, taking in every picture hung with love, the comfy beige blanket my grandma had crocheted, breathing in the familiar scents that brought me back to my childhood. Those things held more value to me than they did my family. Hopefully, most keepsakes I'd be able to take with me, but it wouldn't be the same.

I'd kept as much charm as possible in that old house over the years. Mahogany crown molding matched the door frames

and base molding in every room. The original hardwood floor ran throughout the house except for the tile in the bathroom and kitchen. The house still managed to feel cozy...lived in. It pained me that some other family would be taking up this space soon, possibly changing everything, and I had no way to stop it from happening. Even worse, I'd have to face that family in town and remind myself it wasn't their fault they were in my home. How was that for a mindfuck?

The hours ticked by and I found myself staring at the ceiling above my bed, thinking about having to leave this place. The more I obsessed over it, the more my blood boiled. This was my home. It had been for years, ever since I'd moved in to take care of Grandpa after Grandma passed away. I'd been the one who'd been there. *I'd* been the one who'd fixed things around the house, made sure the bills were paid, took care of the yard... The idea that my ungrateful family could take all that away filled me with a level of anger I'd never felt before. Jesus, this wasn't me, yet they managed to throw off the peaceful way I lived my life just by being who they were.

I threw the covers off, yanked on some sweats, and made my way down the dark hallway to the kitchen. Grabbing a glass out of the cabinet, I filled it with water, my hand shaking as I drank half of it in one, huge gulp. Standing in front of the kitchen window, I imagined my view changing soon, trying to picture the center of town and what would most likely be my new view when I had to move out. Pressing a hand over my heart, I tried to reach the ache, tried to stem the anger running through my veins like hot lava. I couldn't stomach the thought of leaving, of losing this house after losing my grandpa.

Glowing headlights lit up the road and a familiar black SUV stopped right by the curb and parked. "What the hell?" I clunked the glass down on the table a little too hard. Pulse pounding, I made my way to the front door, my breath catching as his fist pounded on it.

Jesus, why did every moment I spent with this man feel like my defenses took a hike? Could it be a bad decision if you really fucking wanted it? Yanking the door open, we stared at each other, Burke breathing hard, his hands braced on either

side of the doorframe. He was so goddamn sexy. Dark, distressed denim hugged his massive thighs like a second skin. The tight black tee did nothing to cover up the curve of his peecs, leading to a hard, flat stomach I wanted to run my tongue down.

“I don’t fuck out of pity,” he said, repeating his words from the other night, the cords of his muscles flexing as he gripped the wood frame.

“So I’ve been told.”

“What’s your take on fucking out some anger?” The scorching need in his eyes and the rise and fall of his chest almost had me on my knees.

I swallowed hard but kept my expression neutral, my hand begging to press down on my growing erection. The sweats I was wearing—with nothing underneath—made no effort to hide it, especially when Burke’s dark eyes trailed down my bare torso and held firm on the tent forming under the soft material. Casually, I shrugged. “Depends.”

“On what?” Damn the man’s deep, raspy voice woke up every cell in my body. He was struggling to keep his composure, and wasn’t that a stroke to the ego?

I crossed my arms over my chest and lifted an eyebrow. “Are you angry at me?”

His brows pulled together, almost as if he’d taken offense to the question. “No. Why would I be angry at you?”

“Then don’t ask stupid questions. Besides, I have some anger of my own I’d be more than happy to fuck outta my system. Although, you do realize your brilliant one-night-only plan will go right out the window, right?” A second, then another passed between us until Burke pushed off the doorframe and stalked into my house, forcing me to take a few steps back.

“Fisherboy?”

“Yeah?” I breathed out, his mouth almost brushing mine.

“Shut up.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I managed to kick the door closed before slamming my greedy mouth over his. The surprised sound that slipped from Jared's lips took my unexplainable need for him and set it on fire. Calling him Fisherboy just slipped out, but after years of using the nickname, it had its own kind of intimacy to it.

I devoured his mouth, struggling to scrounge up some logical thought before it went right out the window. "We're not doing this in the kitchen again," I mumbled against his mouth. "I already have a hard enough time looking at that table without getting hard. I don't need to be popping wood over...wood." I huffed against his mouth as he laughed then moaned when his tongue snuck in and swept around mine.

Jared gripped the front of my shirt, never breaking our connection as he started walking backwards down the hall. I pushed him against the wall and ground my groin against his, slapping my hand on a picture by his head to stop it from falling off the wall. "Fuck."

Jared took that opportunity to press his lips against my neck and lick a long line up until he once again devoured my mouth. Finally, the frame felt secure. I pulled him away from the wall and pushed him toward his bedroom. His back glanced off the door frame, knocking a sharp breath out of him, but it didn't slow him down at all as he fisted my shirt tighter and spun us into his room. I kicked my shoes off, practically tripping on them when he turned us again, his back now to the bed.

Neither one of us asked the other where the anger was coming from. It wasn't what I needed right now and, apparently, not what he needed either. All I knew was there was a toxic rage vibrating under my skin, threatening the unexplainable calmness where Jared had taken up residence for weeks—longer, if I was honest with myself—and there was only one way I could think of to get him back where he belonged.

When he'd opened the front door in those damn gray sweats and nothing else, I almost came in my fucking jeans. He was beyond sexy, and for the life of me, I couldn't remember why I'd ever thought this was a bad idea. Now all I wanted was for those pants to be on his bedroom floor.

I curled my fingers into the thick waistband and shoved the barrier of material down, tearing my mouth away from his as I glanced down. "The second I saw you, I knew you were freeballing it." I wrapped my hand around his hard shaft, kissing his throat as he sighed in pleasure.

"Couldn't sleep. I just pulled those on to get a glass of water."

A deep sound rumbled up from my chest when I registered what he was saying. "Are you telling me you sleep naked?" I took in every delicious inch of him this time. My fingers skimmed down the hills and valleys of his abs, over golden skin, running the tips through the thatch of dark-blond hair at the base of his cock. Jared stepped completely out of his pants as he let out a deep sigh.

With rough hands, he pushed my shirt up over my head, letting it fall on top of his sweats. "Are we gonna compare notes on appropriate attire to sleep in or are we gonna fuck, Cave Dweller?"

I met his storm-gray eyes, absorbing the silent anger swirling in them, his plea to let go for a while, just like I needed to. He didn't want gentle; he wanted the Neanderthal he'd always teased me of being, and fuck knew, my control was slipping. Gripping him around the waist, I lifted him and

tossed him on the bed with a grunt. He bounced, a laugh escaping that made me feel like I was ten feet tall.

Jared leaned up on his elbows and waited, watching me with half-lidded eyes, his naked body laid out before me... ready. I opened my jeans, shoving them and my underwear down, removing every last piece of clothing in our way. His sharp gaze took me in from head to toe, but there was still that underlying plea, snapping any chance I had of claiming this was just about sex, because all I wanted to do was replace that anguish with mind-numbing pleasure.

I crawled over him, shoving him to his back, both of us groaning when I dropped my weight on top of him and settled between his legs. Arms shaking, my eyes crossed when his hips pushed up and the silky skin of his bare cock started grinding in a frantic circle against mine. From there it was as if something unleashed inside both of us. I grabbed both his hands and pushed them over his head, threading our fingers together as I pressed them into the pillow. "I need to be inside you. Push into you so hard you'll be begging me not to stop."

Jared bit my bottom lip, almost breaking through the skin, sending shocks of pleasure straight to my cock. "Maybe I need to fuck *you*. You'll be the one calling out my fucking name."

I spread my thighs underneath his, pushing his legs open while sliding our dicks together. Liquid leaked from our cocks and sweat slicked our skin, making the glide that much easier. "You got more than one condom?"

"*Fuck...*" he breathed out, his eyes fluttering closed as I thrust my hips. "There's a whole damn box in my nightstand." He pressed his heels into the mattress and punched his pelvis up again, the friction so good against my over-sensitized cock, my whole body shook.

"Then I don't see a problem." I devoured his delicious mouth again, the dance of wet tongues satisfying part of my craving, but I needed more. I dragged my mouth away from his and over his rough, stubbled jaw. I left a wet trail as I kissed down his neck to that damn Adam's apple I couldn't help but suck on. Jared's chest rose and fell, over and over

again, my name leaving his mouth on a whispered breath. But there was no way I was rushing this. My anger from earlier had simmered, taken over by a desperate need to know and savor the taste of his entire body.

I drew his taut nipple into my mouth, biting it hard enough to make him gasp, then soothed it with gentle swipes of my tongue. He was writhing underneath me, his grip on my head holding me to his fevered skin. Oh yeah...his nipples were definitely sensitive and I fucking loved it. I gave the other side the same attention, reveling in the sight of them both red and swollen, knowing I was responsible.

Working my way down his body, I tasted each indentation carved around his defined abs, traced the light line of hair under his belly button. I groaned, taking a deep breath in as I licked the crevice between his groin and thigh. The intoxicating smell of him—soap mixed with clean sweat—flooded my senses, unleashing a need for him that overwhelmed me. I needed more...scraped my teeth against the delicate skin of his inner thigh making him twitch, tasted the soft skin on the side of his knee as I worked my way down, then kissed every spot again on my way back up. I was seconds from taking that gorgeous cock in my mouth when he wrapped himself around me and flipped our positions.

“My turn,” he rasped out, before attacking me with the same delicious torture. By the time his talented mouth ran its course over my entire body, I was fucking trembling with need to be inside him.

When he was prone above me—hands and knees pressed into the mattress on either side of me, his mouth hovering above mine—I summoned my inner Neanderthal and sat up quickly. Wrapping one arm around his back while grabbing his thigh with the other hand, I lifted and spun him as I lay back down until we were in prime sixty-nine position.

“Jesus Christ, Cave Dweller!”

I’d caught him by surprise, a laugh blasting out of him when I replied in a campy Fred Flintstone voice, “Yabba Dabba Doo, Fisherboy.” Immediately, I pulled his hips down

and swallowed his cock, my finger brushing over the puckered skin of his hole. Laughter turned into a low moan emanating from his chest, his forehead falling to my thigh.

The goal was to feast on every inch of him and there was one spot I'd yet to run my tongue over. Spreading the perfectly round globes of his ass, I ran my finger around his twitching hole. I pulled my mouth off his cock and eagerly swiped my tongue along his rim, working my way inside to get him wet, tasting salty skin and *Jared*.

“Fuck, that feels good.” Jared gasped as I stiffened the muscle and breached his hole again, his inner, silky heat surrounding my tongue. I'd made a career of eating the finest foods, but nothing compared to feasting on Jared. He was a delicacy I'd denied myself for way too long. Damned if I wasn't making up for lost time.

Reluctantly, I realized I needed the supplies within reach before my control snapped. “Lube?”

“Nightstand with the condoms.” The raspy reply barely left his lips when he dropped his head and took me all the way to the back of his throat. I'd imagined shutting that snarky mouth up with my cock so many times over the years, but my best fantasies didn't hold a candle to actually feeling his lips locked around my shaft—and then he swallowed around the head and my whole fucking world lit up. My arms dropped like jelly to the mattress and my legs slid boneless out on the sheets, spread out like a starfish, all logical thought floating away. Jared pulled his mouth off my cock and laughed. “Can't multitask, huh?”

“Why is your mouth talking and not sucking?” He bit my inner thigh and my whole body jerked, both of us laughing. I knew it would be fucking fire when we finally gave in to the need to truly devour one another, but who knew it would be this damn fun? All the tension I'd been feeling when I'd landed on his doorstep was nowhere to be found, replaced with an overwhelming rightness of intimacy I'd never felt with anyone else.

“I’m two seconds away from making you come like this instead of fucking you.” He looked back over his shoulder, cocking a teasing light eyebrow.

“Lube and condoms. Right.” I stretched my arm, opening his drawer, my hand landing on the targets pretty easily. Jared sucked me back down, scrambling my brain. I managed to toss the box of condoms on the mattress then opened the lube, squirting some on my hand before flinging the bottle up by my thigh near Jared’s head.

I smacked his ass hard with the other hand, making him hum around my cock. “Get me ready,” I said, my voice strained. “You’re fucking me first.”

His mouth popped off my cock, shooting me that sexy look again over his shoulder. “Am I?”

“Yeah, you are, because I plan to be balls deep in this ass”—I pushed the tip of my slick finger inside him—“when we both come. You gotta problem with that?”

His eyes rolled back as they fluttered closed, his head lolling forward as I slid all the way in and brushed his prostate. “My only problem is that you’re talking too damn much. Let’s see if the button to shut you up is down here.” He hooked his arms between and underneath my thighs, pulling my legs up and my ass toward him, his elbows locking behind my knees as he went straight for gold with his tongue.

“Fuck, Jared!” Eating was supposed to be my specialty, but he went at my hole like I was his last fucking meal. I felt his stiff tongue push into me, his hands kneading my ass cheeks, and moans of pleasure vibrating from him like I was the best thing he’d ever tasted. Fuck that was hot.

It took me a second to get my bearings and remember I was supposed to be preparing him, too. I didn’t waste any more time and sucked his cock back down while sliding another slicked finger inside him. I felt his breath falter against my hole when I pushed all the way in and brushed my finger against that spongy spot inside him again. Jesus, the sounds he made...

Jared smacked my ass hard, whispering, “I can’t wait anymore,” against my skin. He spun around and grabbed a packet out of the box of condoms, tearing the foil with shaky hands. Suited up and lubed, he pressed a wet finger inside me, then another.

I pushed his hand away and grunted. “I’m ready. Get that fucking cock inside me.”

Lightning flashed in his stormy eyes, his hands pushing my thighs back toward my chest as he lined himself up. My eyes met his, trying to convey that I didn’t need gentle and slow. I needed him to fuck me, to fuck every frustrating thought out of my brain until all I could focus on was him.

He didn’t disappoint. Once he slowly popped past the ring of muscle, it was game on. Jared’s control slipped. His hips drew back and snapped forward, the head of his cock hitting my prostate with insane accuracy.

“Fuck!” I’d been with men who’d been afraid to fuck me, or who outright refused to fuck me. My size intimidated most or labeled me with some dominance bullshit. As if because I was a big guy, I didn’t need a stiff cock in my ass. I was supposed to be the one doing the fucking, right? Jared annihilated that ridiculous stereotype, driving into me with such force, I was struggling to hold off my orgasm. But I was determined to push inside him, too. Skin slapped against skin, sweat dripped down his temple, and every muscle in my body trembled with the need to come.

I reached a point where I teetered on the edge of control, my nerve endings sparking and my orgasm building in the base of my spine. It was now or fucking never. I wrapped my big thighs around him and flipped us, riding his cock while tearing open a condom and rolling it down my swollen, sensitive shaft, trying not to come as I slicked it with lube. Jared took that moment to grab my hips and slam up into me, hitting my prostate so perfectly I practically whimpered and almost gave in.

Almost.

Before I passed the point of no return, I lifted off him and removed his condom, tossing it on the floor. Gripping his thighs, I pushed them back toward his chest and slid into him. Slow at first, until I knew he was ready.

Then all hell broke loose.

I fucked him hard, unraveling the last remaining threads of tension. Aiming for his prostate, I nailed it over and over, forcing delicious sounds from him I could hear for the rest of my life. The thought immediately made my hips stutter, but one look down at the gorgeous man beneath me surged me forward again with one goal in mind: To make Jared fall apart so completely that the only person who would know how to put him back together again was me.

The base of my spine tingled and my muscles shook, but I refused to slow down even for a second. Jared's hand flew over his cock, his head pushed back on the pillow, mouth dropped wide open and eyes squeezed shut. He was so damn beautiful. I'd always known it, but as with a few other things in my life, I'd tried to deny his effect on me. Now it was impossible to see anyone but him.

"I'm gonna come," he rasped out, the words music to my fucking ears as my control began to slip.

"Do it. I'm fucking on the edge but wanna see you let go first."

His eyes met mine, held with such intensity as he shot his load all over his chest. His hole painfully tightened around my shaft with each pulse. A guttural groan rumbled up out of me, no longer able to hold back the ecstasy skyrocketing up my spine. My eyes rolled back in my head and I came with a roar, my body jerking uncontrollably until there was nothing left. I bonelessly collapsed on top of him, his come sandwiched between the two of us, but I couldn't seem to summon the strength to care.

After a few seconds, a laugh vibrated through Jared's chest, forcing me to lift my head and see what the hell was so funny. I leaned an elbow on the mattress beside him, resting

my head in my hand. “Care to tell me what the hell you find so funny?”

“You.”

“Me?” I couldn’t help but laugh back, even though I had no idea what we were laughing about.

In a moment of unexpected intimacy, his laugh sobered and his finger traced one of my eyebrows with a gentle touch. “I thought the night of the hurricane was unexpected, but damn, Burke, you sure do know how to catch me off guard.”

I snorted. “I’m pretty sure I caught myself off guard. One minute I was stewing with anger, wearing a track into my floor while pacing my goddamn living room, and the next, I was parking in front of your house, on a fucking mission. Literally.”

He laughed softly, studying me for a few silent seconds. “Any regrets?” Jared wasn’t one to hide his feelings, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen that level of vulnerability from him.

“Not in the slightest,” I answered honestly. We stared at one another for another second, the intensity broken by the rumble in my stomach. “Okay, maybe one regret,” I said laughing. “I skipped dinner.”

Jared’s chest vibrated against me in amusement. “Let’s get you fed, Fred.”

JARED STOOD in front of the fridge with those damn sweats hung low on his hips, and all I wanted to do was yank them down and plunge my dick back inside him. I shifted on the chair, the ache in my ass a welcomed reminder of the last couple of hours.

“So what happened that had you so riled up you landed on my doorstep?” He opened the fridge and pulled a few different kinds of deli meat out of the drawer, dropping them on the table. He narrowed his eyes and pointed down at the packages.

“I don’t want to hear a fucking word about my meat not being up to your standards.”

I snorted. “I think we already established I like your meat just fine.”

His mouth twisted to the side in an adorable grin as he shook his head. “You know what I meant.”

“Sure as hell do, but it bears repeating that my ass is gonna remember your *meat* for days.”

“Only days? I’ll make a mental note to leave a better lasting impression next time.” He grabbed random bottles of condiments from the door of the fridge, holding them with one arm while snagging the package of rolls off the counter with the other.

“Next time, huh?” I arched an eyebrow, crossing one arm over the other as they rested on the table.

Jared dropped everything down in front of me, pausing with the mayo in his hand, returning an equally challenging look. “I think we both know there will be a next time.”

The air felt thick between us as we stared at each other until finally we both grinned like fucking idiots. “Damn right there will be.”

There was no sense denying it anymore. I’d spent way too long trying to convince myself I was better off on my own. That Jared Boone was too small town, too calm, too laidback to ignite any sort of fire in me, right? That stubborn part of me tried to hold on to those excuses for years, even as the man proved to be more challenging than anyone I’d ever known. Because, to be honest, he scared the shit out of me. I’d never met someone like him before. Someone who had the potential to knock down all my walls. Someone who made me want to give up control, after years of using it as a shield.

“So what happened?” Jared slid a paper plate in front of me then began making his sandwich.

“Got any pepperonis?”

Jared rolled his eyes. “You know I don’t have any pepper-oh-whatsies. Stop changing the subject.”

I blew out a frustrated breath, scrubbing a hand over my tired eyes. “I’ve spent too many years waiting for my dad to actually be proud of something I’ve accomplished. And I mean on his own, not after my mom has to convince him he should be. I didn’t take over the family restaurant because it wasn’t what I wanted. I left home, came out, started a business with the guys, and every single one of those decisions was met with pushback from my dad. Tonight was no different.” I huffed and picked up the package of salami and opened it. “You know, I’d actually had this nervous excitement having my parents in my restaurant for the first time? I’m proud of that place and I’ve worked damn hard to make it what it is.”

“Even I can admit it’s amazing, but don’t let it go to your head.” He winked, making me laugh, then asked, “He didn’t like the food or something?” Jared took a bite, distracting me with the movement of his jaw before he swallowed and his Adam’s apple bobbed, still waiting for me to reply.

“I have no idea if he did or didn’t. After getting a lecture about my menu not representing the family, all I could do was bite my tongue and try to keep my anger in check. So, my mom placed orders for both of them, attempting to keep the peace, and I delivered their food to their table on my way out. I wasn’t hanging around to hear what he thought of his dinner, and if I’d stayed any longer, I knew I’d blow up at him right there in the middle of Oceanside.”

“What kind of family recipes? Italian food isn’t really on a steakhouse menu.”

“That’s what I said!” I shook my head, remembering my dad’s disappointed face. “Stuff like what I made the other day for, you know...when everyone was here.” *Way to remind him about that day, jackass.*

“Seriously? Those were family recipes? Okay, not for nothin’, but that food was amazing.”

Narrowing my eyes, I said, “You’re not helping.”

Jared laughed, shrugging one shoulder. “Let me ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“If it weren’t for all the other times you’ve butted heads with your dad, and you never had to feel like you had something to prove, would some of those recipes be on the menu?”

Well, fuck. When he put it that way... “I don’t know. Maybe.” I sounded like a sulking child.

“So...”—he let the word hang in the air for a second—“is part of the reason they’re not offered at Oceanside possibly out of a wee bit of spite?” He held his thumb and forefinger half an inch apart, squinting one eye. “Because, I don’t know if you know this about yourself, but you can be a tad bit stubborn. And by ‘tad bit’ I mean so fucking hardheaded you’d argue that snow isn’t wet all the way to your grave so long as you didn’t have to admit you were wrong.”

“Well, maybe that’s because snow *isn’t* wet. Once it melts to a liquid, it’s no longer snow.”

Jared curled his finger for me to come closer. When I leaned toward him, he said, “I rest my fucking case.” Snorting, he sat back, eyeing me with amusement. “I’m not saying your dad isn’t wrong. You’ve worked damn hard to make that place successful and the food is incredible. But maybe think about the real reason there are no cannolis on the dessert menu. Because they are outta this fucking world, and really, you’re just punishing us Pointers by keeping them to yourself.” He softened his speech with a small smile, his bare foot knocking into my calf under the table.

Jared was silent for a second, staring down at his sandwich. Finally, he said, “I can relate, though. I’ve never been the child my parents brag about to their friends. Never once heard the words *I’m proud of you* from either one of them. I’ve always been the disappointment they hadn’t expected, years after they’d had my brother and sister. I’m convinced there was a divide the second I was born. On one side were two *planned* kids who excelled at every fucking

thing they ever did, always striving to be the best, and on the other side was me, the inconvenient surprise. I've always been content finding happiness in the simple things, like my grandparents had. Vanessa and Kyle won awards and scholarships while I spent hours with my grandpa in Bait and Switch, learning about the things that brought so much light into his eyes."

He huffed and set his sandwich down, grabbing a napkin to wipe off his hands. "I'd always felt like they resented me for extending their roles as parents. Instead of jet-setting the world as soon as my brother graduated, they still had a seventh-grader who didn't live up to their expectations. And, trust me, I felt it." His eyes drifted, focusing over my left shoulder. "It's funny, it never occurs to me not to be proud of my life until they feel the need to point out all the ways they think I failed."

"Is that what made you so pissed earlier?"

Jared's eyes met mine, the sadness in them stealing my breath. "I've just been preparing myself to leave, and it really fucking sucks."

My back straightened and my heart pounded in my chest so hard, I swore he could see it. "Leave? You can't leave. Where the hell are you going?" I barked. He sure as hell couldn't move out of Coral Pointe. Not after the last few weeks. Fuck, not after the last few hours.

Jared grabbed my hand on the table. Reflexively, I weaved our fingers, my hold tighter than was probably necessary. "I meant leave this house, not Coral Pointe." The corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement, a smug smile forming on those smartass lips. "Gotta say though, that reaction was fucking epic. So worth the misunderstanding."

I couldn't even deny it. I'd had a moment of sudden panic at the thought of him leaving, and didn't that say a whole hell of a lot. "Yeah, yeah. Get to the point where you tell me why the hell you're leaving this house."

He stared down at our joined hands. Oddly, I had no desire to break the connection. "Because it's not mine; it's the family's."

It took me a second until his meaning dawned on me, my blood boiling as I processed what he was saying. “And they’d kick you out?”

Jared snorted, trying to pull his hand away, but I held on tighter. “They can’t sell it if I’m living in it.”

“Shit.” Suddenly, my issues with my dad seemed insignificant compared to the less than stellar family Jared was stuck with. Did my dad drive me absolutely nuts, making me feel like I had to constantly prove myself? Yeah, he did. But did I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that he loved me and would always be there for me? Hell yeah to that one, too. Constantly defending my decisions was exhausting, but even I could admit lately that not every decision I’d made over the years had been the right one. The proof sat across from me, his calloused fingers wrapped around mine, and a bone-deep sadness in his eyes I didn’t know how to take away.

“Exactly. It’s not what my grandpa would’ve wanted, but it’s all I’ve been able to think about for days.”

“Come here.” I tugged on his hand until he got up and rounded the table, stopping right in front of me. Still not close enough for my liking, I gripped his hips and pulled him down to straddle my lap.

“What are you doing?” The words were spoken in a raspy tone that shot straight to my dick.

“Helping you think about something else.” Pushing my hands into his hair, I yanked him down, sealing my mouth over his. He needed a distraction, to focus on something other than what he was losing. I held him there, sliding my tongue over his bottom lip. He opened his mouth on a groan, his hips rocking, pushing his growing erection against mine.

I slid my hands down his long neck and over his collarbone. His skin was soft against my palms, his nipples perking up the second I ran my thumbs over them. I leaned down and drew one into my mouth, feeling like a fucking king when Jared held my head there, a whispered, “Fuck yeah,” leaving his lips. Lips I needed to taste again. I pulled his

mouth back to mine, immediately shoving my tongue back into that hot haven. It still wasn't enough.

My palms slid down his chest and around to his lean back, feeling every muscle flex under my touch. My fingertips brushed the soft material of his pants before plunging underneath it. Gripping his bare ass cheeks, I pulled them apart, grazing my finger over his hole. I didn't know if he was too sore from earlier, so instead of pushing inside him, I massaged the fluttering rim. His breath shuddered against my mouth, his hips rocking harder. There was no way in hell he was thinking about anything but the feel of my finger circling his hole, or the way I pulled the front of his sweats down, releasing his hard cock and eliciting a small moan from him. I licked my palm and wrapped my hand around his hard shaft.

"Burke..." he whispered in desperation, trying to get closer to my finger while fucking his cock through my grip.

"I got you." The words came out so easily. Way easier than when I tried to deny wanting him. "Let go, Jared, of everything."

His head fell back, body jerking as he released onto my bare stomach. I kept stroking, kept running my finger around his rim, until the last shudder ran through him.

Finally, he brought his head back down, his eyes glazed over, rapid breaths leaving a gorgeous mouth that tipped up on one side. He licked his lips, sealing his mouth back over mine, but this time, the pace wasn't rushed. It was slow and sweet and absolutely annihilated any doubt I had left about this man, even though I wasn't ready to voice that out loud yet.

"What about you?" His words ghosted against my mouth as he tried to catch his breath.

I held his stare while lifting my hand to my lips, licking off every drop of his sticky release covering my fingers. "Now I'm satisfied."

Jared ducked his head, taking my mouth again, beginning that delicious dance of tongues all over again. Eventually, we came up for air. Jared grabbed a napkin off the table to clean

off my stomach. He stood up and tucked himself back in, the two of us giving goofy smiles to each other.

Without another word, he took my hand and led me back to his bedroom. I could have left, could've grabbed the rest of my clothes and gone home and no one would be the wiser. It hit me like a freight train right then and there that leaving was the last thing I wanted. I didn't give a shit who saw my car still parked there in the morning, or if the Walkie Talkies had a field day spreading the word. This was a decision I unequivocally knew was the right one.

So I let him undress us both, followed him willingly into the hot shower so we could wash each other, then fell into his bed. Wrapping my arm tightly around his waist, I pulled him back against my chest until there was absolutely no more room for doubt. As he sighed and melted back against me, I swore to myself I was going to do everything to help Jared keep his home. Was I making another hard-headed decision that would be difficult to follow through on? Possibly. But this time, the outcome affected him, not me, and there was no one in this world who could convince me that decision was wrong.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The rays of sun above the Atlantic Ocean didn't seem to have much luck peeking through the light gray clouds, which felt oddly poetic for the day ahead. The weather report didn't call for rain, but that didn't stop heavy gloom from parking itself above me. I tried to focus on the gentle rock of the boat as it did its best to soothe my soul, possibly for the last time. Brutus sat by my side in his doggie life jacket, staring at me with worried eyes, as if he could sense something was off.

I'd come to the hard realization over the last couple of days that I needed to stop dragging my feet and make a plan. Something I probably should've done years ago, but admitting I'd eventually need a new place to live was essentially facing a world without Grandpa in it. I hadn't been ready to do that then; I had no choice now.

I'd discreetly found out that morning that the apartment above Beachin' Bakery had been rented already, leaving me shit out of luck. Now I had to prepare for the possibility of having to widen my search and find a house to rent, which was going to hurt my wallet even worse. It occurred to me that Hunter and Noah had a rental now that Noah moved from his house into Hunter's home by the inn, but I vaguely remembered them talking about it being booked through the new year.

"I can find another boat. Right, Brutus? Things always have a way of working themselves out." Even if the path I was being forced to take wasn't one I'd planned on. I would still

have my bait shop, which thankfully had been switched over to my name years ago. Brutus would be there to keep me company, no matter where I landed. I had amazing friends who kept me grounded...and Burke.

Jesus. Burke.

The relief I'd felt when I'd woken up a day ago and realized he hadn't left after the amazing night we'd spent together was staggering. It was already hard enough to believe I'd had him in my bed at all, though there wasn't the slightest part of me that regretted it. Just when I thought I was over this game of cat and mouse, he went ahead and changed the rules.

Burke and I hadn't talked about what all this meant. I was still half expectin' him to push me away again. And that was the fucked-up part. I wanted to believe we'd turned a corner, but every single sexual encounter we'd had so far had spawned from heated words and pent up anger, either at each other or at our families. It confused the hell out of me, yet I wasn't willing to try and force a label on us yet—if there even was an *us*.

We hadn't seen each other since that morning. He'd been slammed at the restaurant yesterday and today wasn't looking much better. I'd been too busy trying to get my life together to focus much of anything else. There were small things the guy did, though, to let me know I wasn't out of sight, out of mind. That reminded me...

How exactly am I supposed to use a block of parm? Sending the text to him somehow lifted the heaviness off my chest.

I smiled down at my phone at Burke's quick response.
Ever heard of a cheese grater?

What makes you think I own one of those? It was the second thing he'd left outside my house since last I saw him. The first being a container of homemade sauce and pasta with a note that read: *I better not see cans of Spaghetti-Nope in that house*. Imagining the cute scowl on his face, I added, **Never mind. I'll just stick it in my blender. Pulverize the shit out of it.**

I barked out a laugh when he replied: **The hell you will!**

Man, it was just too easy. **Seems to be my only option, unless you have a better idea.**

I'll tell you where to stick it, Fisherboy.

My mood felt so much lighter as I stared at the screen with a goofy smile on my face. Glancing at the time and seeing I was running late, I blew out a sigh and reluctantly started pulling up the anchor.

As I guided the boat into the boat slip, I spotted a man in a button-down shirt and dress pants, looking completely out of place in the marina. *That has to be him.*

“Mr. Boone?” he said as he approached the bow.

“You can call me Jared.” I stepped onto the marina with Brutus at my side, mentally trying to prepare myself for this.

“Boy, she’s a beauty,” he said, looking the boat over. Were those dollar signs sparkling in his eyes? “If you’re ready, I’ll start taking photos and get her off your hands.”

Another big, cheek-puffing exhale, and I said words that tasted like acid in my mouth. “The faster she sells the better.”

It only took him about thirty minutes to take the photos and gather all the info he needed. The thought of selling Seas the Day was a hard enough pill to swallow. Using a broker just made sense if I wanted to make a decent profit while being mostly removed from the sale.

As I walked up to my house, my phone vibrated with an incoming call. The second I answered, his deep baritone came through the speaker and made its way down my spine. “You did not just DoorDash me a pasty cannoli. To my *restaurant.*”

I snorted, opening my front door. “Hey, if you’re not gonna add them to the menu, you should be forced to suffer with the rest of us.”

“Don’t be surprised when a singing clown knocks on your door.”

“Don’t you fucking dare.” I cringed at the thought.

He laughed into the phone. “I gotta go. We’re slammed.” He didn’t mention calling again or seeing him later. To be honest, how could I hold it against the guy if I couldn’t man up and say the words either?

“Talk to you later,” I responded, ending the call before things got really awkward. The guy still had me so fucking confused. He had to have heard the same buzz around town about the night he’d stayed at my place, but he didn’t seem to care what people thought.

Problem was, I still didn’t know what to think.

Burke

“BURKE, you have a guest in the dining room. Table five,” Jeff said, carrying a heavy tray loaded with lunchtime plates.

Immediately, hope flared that when I walked out there, Jared would be waiting for me. I’d been so crazy busy at Oceanside, I hadn’t been able to do anything other than leave him cheesy—pun intended—things on his doorstep or in his mailbox. I didn’t know how to do any of this, how to handle these pesky fucking feelings that were exponentially bigger than they had been two months ago. Nothing said *I can’t stop thinking about you* like aged cheese. Jesus, I was an idiot.

I pushed through the swinging door, glancing past the bar to table five. Guilt sucker punched me when I saw my mom sitting there by herself.

Quickly, I made my way through the dining room, smiling the second we made eye contact. She seemed to release a relieved breath and smiled back.

“Hey. I wasn’t expecting to see you today.” I’d needed time to cool off after the disastrous dinner the other night, but a nagging feeling gnawed at me, reminding me they wouldn’t be in Coral Pointe much longer. I needed to make more of an effort. At least, for her. I leaned in and kissed her cheek then motioned to the seat across from her. “Is he here?” The sour look on her face told me all I needed to know. I slumped down

in the chair, leaning my elbow on the table, and scrubbed a hand over my tired eyes. “Shocker.”

“You know he means well, Burcardo.” Her eyes narrowed and I suddenly felt like I was ten again, but I was standing my ground on this one. This time, his judgment pushed me over the edge.

“Does he? Is it really so hard to tell me he’s proud of me? To let me have just one moment to show him a piece of who I am without judgment? Hell, we could’ve talked about it later, in private. Instead, he snubbed me and my menu in the middle of my restaurant. A place I happen to be very proud of.” Shit. I hadn’t meant to say all that. I glanced around, anger still buzzing under my skin. Thank fuck, it didn’t seem like I’d drawn attention.

My mom reached across the table, her hand outstretched. I took her offered comfort, reminding myself this wasn’t her fault. She didn’t deserve to have to be the buffer between my dad and me. “He handled things wrong. You had every right to feel hurt by his reaction. Honestly, I owe you an apology, too. Neither one of us should have started that conversation here, and I’m sorry for that.”

“It’s fine,” I mumbled, biting my tongue from saying what I really wanted to. Things like *I should’ve known* and *I should be used to it by now*.

“It’s not fine, but you’re not completely innocent, and deep down, I think you know it.” She squeezed my hand then sat back in her chair. The server came over to take our drink orders. My mom glanced at me, her eyes hopeful when she asked, “Do you have time to have lunch with me?”

Temporarily pushing aside her last comment, I glanced at the time. “Yeah. Just give me a second to let Megan know.” Shifting my attention to my employee, I said, “Just water for me, Anna. Thanks,” then headed back to find my sous chef.

Megan, of course, had things under control in the kitchen. As I made my way back to my mom’s table, her words had taken hold and my back stiffened, preparing for another argument. I sat back down across from her and a frustrating

moment of silence ensued until I couldn't bite my tongue any longer. "What did you mean when you said I'm not innocent?"

She studied me for a second. "Your feelings were hurt, understandably, but how did you react?" I shrugged, my gaze dropping, because apparently my mom had a way of making me regress into a disgruntled kid. "You got angry."

That got my back up. "You just said I had a right to be angry."

"What I said was you had every right to feel *hurt*. And, in a way, so did your father, but instead of showing that...he got angry. Sound familiar?" Her dark eyebrow lifted in challenge.

I opened my mouth, ready to argue...then Cole and Levi's words came back to me about apples and trees and all that shit, and I deflated back into my chair. Reluctantly, I replied, "It's possible it sounds a little familiar."

A melodic laugh left my mom's mouth, her gentle tone soothing my hurt ego. "You're so much like your father. No wonder you butt heads all the time."

I snorted, looking out the window at the gray sky and crashing waves of Coral Pointe beach. "I'm not like him."

"Oh, my little gnocchi, it's as if God hit copy and paste. Both, so stubborn. You say you're proud of this place, as you should be, but when you don't include us in building something that means so much to you, your father takes that as a sign that we don't mean anything to you. Instead of telling you how it makes him feel, he gets defensive."

Unknowingly interrupting a tense moment, Anna approached us for our lunch orders. As my mom ordered a chicken Caesar salad and I ordered a burger, her words had nowhere to go except to sink in. I blew out a heavy breath, leaning one elbow on the arm of my chair until Anna walked away. "That wasn't my intention. I just...needed something that was..."

"Your own?" she finished for me. When I nodded, she huffed out a soft laugh. "Like moving three thousand miles away? Like opening a business? No matter how hard you

pound your chest in an attempt to declare your independence, your family will still be a part of you. For years, you've been on a mission to prove your decisions were your own...that you didn't need your family's input when it came to making choices about your life. To a point, I understand that. But, don't you see, Burcardo, that every time a new decision is made, without even a thought to your family, we feel like we've lost another part of you? It's not easy living across the country from my son." Her bottom lip trembled and all my defenses crashed to the hardwood floor beneath my feet. "It's not easy celebrating successes with you over a phone screen, especially when we'd had no idea they were even happening until they were all said and done. Somewhere along the way, we've made you feel like you couldn't meet our expectations, and so, you've shut us out. That was never our intention."

I leaned forward and took her smaller hand in mine. "Please don't cry." My face and ears flushed with heat, a combination of guilt and years of hurt marinating as I tried to think of the right thing to say. Finally, I just said what I should've said a long time ago. "I'll talk to him." The way her eyes lit up told me I'd done the right thing. "You shouldn't have to be the mediator between Pop and me. I know you love me, and it's possible I may have been a bit"—my gaze shot to the ceiling and I sighed—"stubborn."

My mom softly laughed. "I do love you, and so does your father."

I nodded once, letting her know I heard her. I couldn't leave this table again without taking that sadness from her eyes. Huffing out a laugh, I said, "You'll never believe what Jared sent me today." Her face perked up and there was that hopeful gleam in her eyes again. "A pasty cannoli from a place I've never even heard of."

Her expression fell as she shook her head. "All my hopes and dreams for you two, crushed in one sentence."

I barked out a laugh. "Don't worry. When I tell you why he sent it, your dreams will inflate again." Her eyes sparked with interest. "He said, and I quote, '...if you're not gonna add them to the menu, you should be forced to suffer with the rest

of us.” Her eyes softened, a proud smile spreading across her face. “He also may have pointed out that my actions could possibly be stemming from a little bit of spite.”

“I knew I liked him.” She eyed me mischievously, then said, “Seems to me like those roots have dug in.”

“What?” I said as I laughed.

“You’ll catch on soon enough.” She winked, smiling as Anna came to our table with our meals.

It hit me then, that instead of denying there was something going with Jared and me, I’d basically assured her to keep the faith. Warmth settled in my chest when I realized how easily the words had left my mouth, and there wasn’t a single part of me that wanted to deny it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I stood in my kitchen, leaning my tired ass back against the counter for support. I hadn't slept at all, tossing and turning as I tried to think of a way I was going to keep my promise to my mom. That look in her eyes haunted me all night, and her words... Fuck, I didn't realize how much my actions had hurt her...and my dad. I'd made a point to talk to them as much as I could—FaceTimes with the family when they were gathered for something, birthdays, holidays—I'd never missed a single one over the years, and every so often I'd been able to actually fly out there and see them all. But that wasn't the same as truly making them a part of my life, was it? I mean, fuck, they'd *just* met Levi, Cole, Noah, and Ford in person the other day. The most important people to me aside from my family.

My parents flew across the country to be here for me because I wasn't able to fly to them, and they knew I needed extra help. Hell, they flew here to support a man they didn't even know because, even through all my posturing, my mom could tell Jared was different. She could tell, with one phone call, that he needed people in his corner.

“Fuck, I'm such an asshole.” I scrubbed my hand over my face, my eyes half-closed from lack of sleep. I barely had a sip of my coffee when my phone started going off on my counter. Instead of saying hello, I barked, “You know what time it is, right?”

Noah laughed into the phone. “What's the matter, Burke? Late night?”

“Not in a tension-releasing kind of way, no.”

“So, you haven’t talked to Jared?” Noah asked. I would’ve given him shit or ended the call, but there was something in his tone that had my back up.

“No, why?”

“I just wasn’t expecting to see his boat for sale when I went down to the marina this morning. I wondered if you knew why he’d decided to do that. He loves that thing.”

Every muscle in my back tightened. “What do you mean his boat is for sale?” Jared wasn’t a man who gave a shit about frivolous things, but his home, his bait shop, and his boat were everything to him. What the hell was going on?

“Maybe you should talk to him.”

“Since when am I the person you call when something’s going on with Jared?” Because, apparently, I wasn’t the person he’d talk to when making a huge-ass decision like that. Jesus, why the hell did that bother me so much?

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe since you helped him plan his grandfather’s funeral and then spent the night with him?” The snark in Noah’s voice was clear as day.

I toed at a spot on my hardwood kitchen floor, oddly embarrassed to admit that he hadn’t come to me first. I thought things had changed between us, but apparently not enough. “I don’t know anything about it.” Shit, was I pouting, for fuck’s sake?

“I don’t think anyone did. Is he okay, Burke?” Noah’s voice had gone from light and teasing to concerned.

“I don’t know, but I’m gonna find out,” I grumbled into the phone.

It took me minutes to get dressed, brush my teeth, and head out the door, on a mission to find out what the hell was going on. As I walked over the bridge to the marina, I noticed a guy talking to a couple down by Jared’s boat. “Oh hell no.” There was no way that sale was happening until I talked to Jared. You’d think a drug deal was going down the way my heart thrummed and the fire in my veins grew to dangerous

levels. It wasn't any of my business. Jared hadn't made it any of my business.

I was going to make it my damn business.

"Can I help you?" I said as soon as they were in earshot.

"I'm sorry?" the man said, a fake smile on his face even though he was clearly confused.

"I said, can I help you? I pretty much know everyone in this town, so I was just wondering why there are three people I've never seen before standing in front of my friend's boat." *Friend's*. I snorted to myself at the inaccurate word but continued down the dock toward them.

"Sir, that's between the owner and I. I'm just doing my job." The man pulled his phone out of his pocket, his brows drawn together with a look of inconvenience.

"Well, there must be some kind of misunderstanding. This boat isn't for sale."

The man scoffed, looking at me incredulously. "Are you kidding me?"

I pinned him with a look that held all the anger and confusion I was feeling. "Do I look like I'm kidding?" I straightened my back to my full height, as if this man was actually going to try and fight me.

"Excuse me," he said to the couple. "I'll get this all straightened out." He had to be calling Jared. A small part of me knew I was going to be in deep shit, but I didn't care. I had a feeling I knew what was happening, and I'd be damned if I let him do this because of it.

It took minutes for Jared to arrive since his bait shop was by the marina. And boy did he look pissed. "What's going on here?"

"This man said your boat isn't for sale." The guy waved his hand at me while scowling at Jared.

"Burke, what are you doing?" Man, there was a fury brewing in Jared's eyes to rival his anger from the night of the hurricane. How was it I had a way of pissing this docile man

off like no other? And the twisted thing was, an angry Jared was a sexy-as-fuck Jared. If I couldn't clearly see he was about to hand me my ass, I'd pin the man up to the nearest thing and fuck him senseless. I didn't care if we had an audience.

"I could ask you the same thing. What gives, Jared?"

Mr. Boat Broker held his hand up as he interrupted my standoff with Jared. "I'm sorry, is this boat for sale or not?"

At the same time Jared said, "Yes," I barked, "No."

"Uh, I think we're gonna keep looking, but thanks," the other man said, his wife nodding her head in agreement. Then the couple walked around us toward the boardwalk.

Jared hung his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That's great." He lifted his eyes to me, his anger laced with a layer of frustration as he shook his head. "That's just great. Thanks a lot, Burke."

"Well, this was a waste of my time," the guy next to Jared said. "Listen, I don't need this kind of hassle. Give me a call when you're serious about selling." He walked around Jared, heading in the same direction the couple just had.

A beat of silence stretched between Jared and I. My pulse finally slowed as the threat of Jared losing something else he loved faded away. Jared's expression didn't change at all, though, making the smallest bit of remorse try to peek its ugly head out from my conscience. Before I let it weasel its way into this conversation, I shoved that sucker back down and widened my stance, ready for a fight.

"Do you know what you just did?" Jared finally asked, his too calm and steady tone sending a rush of unease through me.

Still, I held my ground. "Yeah. I stopped you from making a huge fucking mistake." And, because I was a smartass to my core, I added, "You're welcome."

Jared stared at me and huffed humorlessly, shaking his head in disbelief. "Is this all a joke to you? Do you think I'd sell my boat if I didn't have to? God, you're such an asshole sometimes."

My resolve was cracking as I looked at his pained expression. “What do you mean you have to?”

Jared turned on his heel and took a few steps away from me. A surge of hot anger shot through me. I grabbed his arm, stopping his retreat. “What do you mean you *have* to?”

Yanking his arm away, Jared glared at me, but the level of sadness in his eyes made my breath stutter. “My grandfather’s lawyer called. I’m meeting tomorrow with him and my family to go over the will.”

“That still doesn’t tell me why you have to sell your boat.”

“Because I’m about to lose my fucking home, Burke! Did you forget that? I need a fucking plan, and the boat is the only thing I have worth anything besides my shop.”

I took a step closer to him, my hands flexing at my sides. “Exactly. Your boat is one of the only things you love. You can’t just fucking sell it. You can’t give that up, too. Jesus, why are you so willing to let them walk all over you?”

“You’re unbelievable.” He leaned in, his eyes locked on mine. “You think you know me? For years, you acted like you didn’t give a shit. You think that makes you stronger-willed than anyone else? It makes you a fucking coward! You’ve messed with my head for too long. I’ll be damned if you’re gonna fuck with my heart, too. I’m a big boy, Cave Dweller. I can make decisions on my own. It’s none of your goddamn business.”

And, just like that, my rage morphed into a pain I’d never felt before, my voice eerily calm, even to my own ears, as I said. “Right. Because, God forbid, you let anyone help you through this. You’d rather let all this tear you apart from the inside out than let anyone see how truly fucked up your family is. *Jared’s so laidback. Jared’s calm, cool and collected...* all—the—fucking—time, right?” My anger spiked drastically. “It’s all bullshit! It’s a facade. A mask you fucking wear to protect who? Because the way I see it, the only people that mask is protecting are the ones who treat you like shit.

“Jesus Christ, I own a fucking inn, Jared! With people who consider you family! You have other options, but you refuse to see them. Maybe my decisions haven’t been great over the years, but you’ve made this decision out of complete defeat. Are you really gonna let your family take something else away from you? You call me a coward, yet you’re ready to throw in the towel before you even know if you’ve lost the fight!”

Seconds felt like hours until Jared finally said, “We’re done here.”

“Yeah, I guess we are.” As soon as the words left my mouth, and I watched him walk away, everything inside me screamed to stop him. My approach to all this may have been a bit overkill, but my reasoning was spot fucking on. He was making a mistake if he sold his boat. I had a feeling he wasn’t going to see that until it was too late. “Not my problem,” I grumbled to absolutely no one.

Yet, as I headed back in the direction of my house, I still had a heaviness sitting on my chest. I didn’t want to see him do something stupid, but just like Jared said...it was none of my goddamn business.

Jared

I RUBBED my clammy hands on my thighs and took a deep breath before entering the lawyer’s office. No matter how hard I’d tried to prepare for this, I still wasn’t ready to face losing the home I’d lived in for over a decade.

“Ah, Jared,” Harold Nelson said, holding his hand out to me. “It’s good to see you.” He motioned to the expensive-looking black leather chair to my right. “Now that we’re all here, we can begin. As per Samuel Boone’s appointment, I will be his personal representative today. As per his request, I’ve asked you all to be in attendance.”

I looked to my left and saw my parents sitting a few feet away from me. There was a divide between us and we hadn’t even started yet. It wasn’t until I heard my sister say something that I realized she was on the computer screen, as

was my brother, obviously from their prospective places of work. It didn't surprise me in the least that they'd found time to hear what Grandpa left them, even if it wasn't in person.

Harold sat down and put his wire-rim glasses on, staring at the papers in front of him. "Let's see here..." My patience was wearing thin while the older man tilted his head back so he could look through the bottom part of his lenses. I just wanted to get this over with. "Here we are."

He cleared his throat. "I, Samuel Edward Boone, being of sound mind..." I zoned out as he listed off things the estate had already paid for like my grandpa's funeral, any debts, and expenses. There was this ache deep in my chest, wishing my grandpa were here, instead of us sitting in a stuffy law office, listening to someone else read off his last wishes as if it was a grocery list. *Eggs, milk, and a percentage of my estate.*

I hated being in a roomful of people and feeling completely alone. I probably wouldn't have been able to bring anyone regardless, unless they were my spouse. It wasn't like a friend or...Burke belonged here. Not like he'd be here anyway, after the things I'd said yesterday. I was just so raw after getting the request to meet for the reading. Jesus, I didn't want to sell my boat. The thought practically crushed me, but I couldn't depend on other people to fix my life for me.

"Is this some kind of joke?" My dad's strong voice bounced off the walls, filtering through thoughts of Burke and regret.

Harold stared directly at my father and calmly replied, "I assure you, it's not. As stated in his Last Will and Testament, Jared Michael Boone has been named sole beneficiary of the estate and all insurance policies."

"What?" The word came out in a shaky whisper as I sat up straight in my chair. Loud, screeching bells went off in my ears as I tried to catch up to the conversation. There was no way the lawyer just said what I thought he did.

Harold reached across the desk, handing a copy to my father first then to me. My hand trembled as I reached for it. Then the man clasped his hands on his cherry-wood desk, his

expression hardening into the lawyer my grandfather had trusted for decades.

My father turned blue eyes, so like my grandpa's but without the slightest hint of his kindness, on me. My blood ran cold as he twisted his face in a sneer, the look so foreign to me it sent a sickening wave of unease through my body. I'd seen him turn his nose up at people with an air of self-importance; I'd even seen him putting on a pathetic act to try and prove he was a worthy son. What I'd never seen was the absolute disgust he aimed at me right then or the staggering level of pure rage that came along with it.

“Here you were, playing the loving grandchild, spending all that time with him and giving *us* guilt trips, when the whole time, this was your plan, wasn't it?” He scoffed. “Maybe you're smarter than I took you for.”

“What plan?” My skin prickled with confusion, trying to understand what he was implying, but I was still lost, my hand gripping the papers.

“Tell me, was he even in his right mind when he signed these papers? Oh, I know, you probably drew them up for him, right? Saved him the trouble of having to comprehend what you were having him sign away to you.” He shook his head, his face twisting in a threatening look of disdain, his eyes conveying all too well the loathing my own father felt for me.

“I assure you, Mr. Boone, Jared had—”

My dad barreled on, cutting the lawyer off. “It never occurred to me to check on this because there was no way my father”—he gave one dramatic, Celine Dion worthy pound on his chest—“would have cut me out of what I'm entitled to as his *only son*. You must have thought you were so clever, getting him to change his will.”

“I would never do that!” My eyes dropped to the papers again in disbelief, scanning words that still weren't entirely making sense. Words like *sole beneficiary* and *leave nothing...* I swallowed hard, an uncontrollable wave of confusion washing over me. Bickering and angry words swirled around me, but my eyes stayed glued to my grandfather's last wish.

The one sentence that had suddenly become clear through the fog of my emotions:

I leave nothing to my son, Edward Jonathan Boone, and my failure to do so is intentional. Holy shit.

I jumped when my dad stood up so fast, the chair he'd been sitting on teetered on the edge of falling over before it righted itself again. "Here's where you fucked up, Jared. I have ties to some of the best lawyers in the country. You can bet your ass we won't let you get away with this. The estate was to be split among all of us, but I can promise you something. When this is all over, you won't get a penny. I'll make damn sure of it." He turned his sneer to Harold. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer." He gave me a razor-sharp, parting glare before turning on his heel and yanking the door open, my mother rushing out behind him. My sister and brother argued in the background until the lawyer apologized and shut the online meeting down.

"What the hell just happened?" I stared wide-eyed at the door my parents just stormed out of, the palms of my trembling hands beginning to sweat.

When I faced Harold again, the corner of his mouth kicked up in a proud smirk. "Your father was just informed that Samuel declared the most important person in his life his sole beneficiary."

My pulse pounded like *Jumanji* drums in my ears as I looked down at my name listed as the only beneficiary. "I don't... When did he...?" I couldn't seem to even form the words I needed to complete a full sentence, never mind comprehend the sentence Harold just uttered.

"He knew you'd talk him out of it. The best route was to make sure you had no part in the decision." Harold handed me an envelope. "It's all here. Samuel wanted you to read it in his own words. Probably best to wait until you're ready and have some privacy. This is, no doubt, a difficult and heartbreaking situation to wrap your head around. Give yourself a minute to adjust to all this. If your father contests, it will prolong the

process in probate, but he won't win. That will and all of Samuel's last wishes are iron clad."

"Yeah, okay." Even as I said the words, I wasn't sure I believed them. The way I saw it, this could only end in disaster. Contesting the will would be one last fuck you from my dad to the man who had loved him so completely.

Unexpectedly, though, the man I admired, who'd felt the neglect from his son for so long, had finally taken his power back, even though it came after his death.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Staring at my phone wasn't going to make Jared suddenly feel the need to text me. Not after the way we'd ended things yesterday. Despite everything that had happened, I texted him to make sure he was okay, but he didn't answer. I thought the news I'd heard a few hours ago had to be a mistake, a miscommunication in the Coral Pointe Telephone chain. By the looks on the guys' faces when I showed up at Ford's for our weekly work meeting, including making sure we were ready for Sunscreen, I knew the chain hadn't gotten it wrong this time. Man, I wished they had because the alternative was Jared's dad dragging his son's name through the mud all across town this afternoon. All that dirty laundry that Jared had tried to hide for years was hung up for all of Coral Pointe to see—and the so-called villain in this story, was Jared.

“Do you think he's okay?” Abe asked, sitting on the arm of Ford's chair, his fingers running through the hair at the base of Ford's neck. “I could go check on him while you have your meeting.”

“Thanks, but I think if he wanted company, he probably would've asked Aiden for it when he spoke to him.” That left a sour taste in my mouth just saying it. Aiden was the one to break the news to Jared because he was also the *only* one Jared had talked to since leaving the lawyer's office. I knew I wasn't hiding my frustration well. Okay, I wasn't hiding it at all. I looked down at my phone again and sighed. Why did I say all that shit yesterday? The guy had already been going through

hell. This was exactly why I sucked at relationships. *Open mouth, insert entire fucking leg.*

Abe's heart was in the right place, but thinking about anyone being there for Jared, other than me, made me even more angry. It didn't help that I'd had a habit of watching my best friends the last few weeks, and unexpectedly felt an itch of jealousy. A month ago, I'd looked at them in sympathy, thinking those poor suckers were crazy for needing another person that much. So much so, they'd all practically settled down with their significant others. Hell, Ford and Abe had gone fifteen years without each other, and now they were attached at the hip. The fear of ever losing each other again had Abe leaving his life in Delaware and coming down here to be with Ford.

Yet, I couldn't make it work when someone lived in the same damn town as me. I'd pushed Jared away for so long, and now my skin fucking crawled at the thought of him not reaching out to me when he clearly needed someone most.

The room got eerily silent. I looked up and froze under the questioning eyes of my friends. "What?"

More silence until Noah asked, "You ready to tell us yet, sweetie?"

I opened my mouth, ready to deny, deny, deny, but the words wouldn't come. I scrubbed a hand over my face, exhaling long and slow.

"You know what?" Abe said standing up. "I just remembered I told my sister I'd give her a call tonight. I'm gonna go in the backyard for a bit." Abe leaned down and kissed Ford, Ford giving him a grateful look. I tried to convey the same look of gratitude as Abe met my eyes. He gave me a warm smile then headed out the back door.

The guys waited patiently for me to say something. Finally, I said, "Let's not pretend y'all don't know Jared and I messed around and get to the part where I'm confused as hell, yeah?"

“Start wherever you need to.” Levi sat forward, his forearms resting on his thighs, giving me his undivided attention, just as the rest of them did.

“I’m not proud of the fact that it took Jared losing his grandpa for me to get my head outta my ass.”

Levi nodded, but said, “If we’re being real here, how about admitting it happened weeks before that? It’s possible when he lost someone he loved, it brought out a side of you that wasn’t afraid to admit you give a shit, but give yourself some credit. He’s meant something to you for a while.”

“Yeah,” Ford chimed in, “you started the extraction of your head from your ass the night of the hurricane.”

I snorted, always able to depend on these jackasses for utter honesty. “Fine. Yes, something happened the night of the hurricane, but we’d said it was a one-night-only thing.”

Noah gripped my wrist gently and tilted his head. “You both said one-night, or *you* said it?”

I hung my head back, resting it on the back of the couch. “I did, but I think I pretty much knew by the time I left there I was full of shit.” Laughing humorlessly, I dropped my chin. “I’m willing to admit I was wrong.”

Ford ducked, blocking his head dramatically. “Is the sky falling? Did he really just say what I think he said?”

I barked out a laugh. “Shut up, asshole. I’m serious. My reasons for pushing Jared away don’t even make sense to me anymore. Yesterday, I said some things to him I didn’t mean, but I was just so fucking frustrated. Could you imagine if he’d actually sold his boat before finding out what his grandpa had done? Why couldn’t he talk to me before he made some drastic decision?”

Noah being Noah caught on to what I was saying pretty quickly. “You want to be the one he turns to.”

“Yeah,” I breathed out, sinking down into the couch. “It sounds stupid now that I hear it out loud.”

“It’s not stupid at all,” Cole said, nudging my knee from his spot on the floor.

“I can’t figure him out, but you know what happens when I set my mind to something. I fucked up yesterday, but I’m gonna make it right.” I smirked, feeling on more solid ground now that I had a goal.

“Who woulda thunk you’d set that stubborn mind of yours on Jared Boone?” Cole grinned, shaking his head.

I flexed my fingers, thinking back on all I’d heard that afternoon. One thing was perfectly clear to me... “I don’t give a shit if he’s not ready to admit where this thing with us is headed. I’m sure as hell not gonna stand by in silence while his family tears him to shreds. If he doesn’t know that by now, after all that’s happened between us over the last few weeks, he’s in for a rude awakening.”

“I gotta say, Burke, it looks good on you.” Ford lifted his feet up onto the coffee table, crossing one leg over the other while wiggling his fingers in my direction. “This whole growly, protective thing you’ve got going on for Jared... I never thought I’d see the day.”

I huffed. “Tell me about it. I’m not sure I recognize myself anymore.” Feeling completely flayed open with my emotional innards hanging out for them all to see, I pushed up from the couch. “We’re good with the festival stuff, right?”

“Burke...” Noah said as he stood up too and grabbed my hand.

“It’s all good, Noah. I promise.” I squeezed his hand back, knowing if I didn’t give him some reassurance, he’d worry all night, the big softy.

I said goodnight to them all and headed out. My mind started running through everything on my way home. I’d just admitted a whole hell of a lot to my best friends. The fact they’d known to give me space until I was ready to talk said a lot about how well they genuinely knew me. I didn’t need people questioning every decision I made; I got plenty of that from my dad, and occasionally from my mom. I needed people

who supported me, even if they thought my decisions were shit—without saying the dreaded *I told you so* if I fucked up.

I also needed to give the same space to Jared, no matter how fucking much I wanted to redirect myself to his house. I'd been the one to say one-night only, and now I was the one who kept showing up on his doorstep unannounced. Man, the tables had definitely turned. That last turn, though, had us saying some mean shit to each other. Things I wish I could take back.

I parked my SUV at the dark curb of my house and got out. It wasn't until my feet hit the walkway that I saw a shadowed form sitting on the concrete, leaning back against my front door.

"Jared?" The outside sensor light popped on like a spotlight as I got closer, making it harder to see him rather than easier.

"Yeah, it's me." He stood up and brushed the dirt off the back of his jeans, suddenly looking a little apprehensive when I stopped in front of him. "I shoulda called first."

"Or answered a text." I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath through my nose then letting it back out, kicking myself for not being able to curb the sarcasm when I was met with a wounded look. "Shit. Sorry."

The anguish in his eyes held strong as he studied me. "I don't even know why I'm here. I needed some air to clear my head, and somehow I ended up in front of your door. But this isn't who we are, is it?" He shook his head then dropped his chin to his chest, huffing out a laugh without an ounce of humor. "Why did I come here?" he whispered, more to himself than to me.

The thought of letting him walk away because he thought this wasn't who we were made the pizza sitting in my gut roll over like a runaway boulder. It slammed into me right then and there that I still hadn't shown him who I wanted us to be. He took a step to the side, attempting to walk around me, but I grabbed his wrist, turning my head to look at him beside me. His strawberry blond hair looked like he'd run his fingers through it a million times, strands falling around his face

haphazardly. A few days' growth covered his chin with light stubble, the memory of the brush of its rough texture against my skin coming back full force. Even on the half-lit walkway, the dark circles under his eyes were impossible to miss, yet he still took my breath away. I'd known him for years, but this was the first time I felt like I was truly seeing him.

"You know exactly why you're here." There was no way he could deny the sparks of energy that connected us, or the tangible pulse under my hand as I gripped his wrist. I wanted him here, more than I thought possible.

"Do I?" He searched my eyes with an intensity akin to longing, as if trying to find the reason there while preparing himself to still walk away.

I had no idea what he saw in them, didn't know if the desperate message I tried to convey or how much I wanted him there was clear in my expression, so I showed him instead. He came easily, practically sagging against me as I kissed him. I pushed my hands into the long strands of his hair, a move that was quickly becoming a habit. It wasn't a rushed kiss. Not one stemming from anger or challenge but from my need to comfort him any way I knew how.

When we finally came up for air, I leaned my forehead against his and closed my eyes, breathing him in. "I'm glad you're here. I'm sorry for the things I said," I whispered, my words shocking even me, but I knew they were true to my very core.

"I'm sorry, too," he softly replied.

"Let's go inside." I took his hand and led him into my house, motioning for him to sit down on the couch. I wanted him again, wanted to feel his sweat-soaked skin against mine like I had the other night, just to prove to myself that he was really there. But, even more, I needed him to unload the boatload of shit weighing him down. He didn't need a sexual release right now; he needed an emotional one, and I was damn well going to listen to whatever he needed to get off his chest.

I sat down on the coffee table in front of him, placing my hand on his knee to stop it from bouncing. “Talk to me.”

He snorted in derision, but I knew the aggression wasn't aimed at me. “You didn't hear the big news? I find that hard to believe.”

Not being one to beat around the bush, I responded, “I heard plenty, but not from you, and that's the only version I give a shit about.” There had been slight variations of the story floating around town that day, but the crux of them all was the same. Still, I needed to hear it from him.

Jared's light eyes shifted to the right over my shoulder, his bottom lip trembling. “He left me everything. Why would he do that? He never even said anything to me about it. I had no idea he'd changed his will.” His bloodshot eyes shot to mine. “You know I didn't. I've been trying to mentally prepare myself to leave that house ever since he moved to the nursing home. Fuck, I almost sold my boat yesterday until you came along, pounding that caveman chest of yours, and put a stop to it.”

“Yeah, well, I could've handled that better, but you don't have to convince me. I've seen it in your eyes plenty of times, what the thought of leaving that home was doing to you. He did it because he knew who truly loved him. He knew what was going on, Jared.”

He huffed. “It's bad enough that it now looks like I coerced my grandpa to change his will, but the things Aiden told me my dad said around town today while I was driving around, trying to wrap my head around all that had happened in that lawyer's office...” He shook his head, his eyes welling up with unshed tears. “Everything I'd tried to hide over the years was dumped out for the whole town to rummage through. It makes it look like I wasn't talking about it because I was scheming behind my family's back this whole time.”

I tapped the side of his lean thigh, getting him to look at me. “That's where you're wrong. I'm not gonna lie and say people weren't talking about the vile shit that bastard spewed, but they weren't buying it, either.” I squeezed his leg, leaning

my head down as I lifted his chin so I could look into his downcast eyes. “I know you think you protected Samuel by not letting everyone know what was really going on, but the people in this town aren’t stupid and they sure as hell aren’t blind.”

“I’m beginning to realize that. Irma’s comments at the funeral gathering should’ve been a clue as to how much the town already knew. She very creatively called them wolves in sheep’s clothing.” He laughed, but it never reached his eyes. “Jesus, Burke, you were right. I’ve been a fucking coward, and because I kept all that shit hidden, I have no proof that my family treated him the way they did.”

“First of all, I was not right. I was way outta line. Second of all, all they have to do is check with the nursing home to see that you’re the only one who was ever there for him. Third of all...” I said, taking a deep breath in, then letting it out, “I was a selfish asshole. I was pissed because, for whatever reason, I’d gotten it in my head that you should’ve come to me first. I guess the other night, it felt like we’d turned a corner. Apparently, hearing things about you secondhand now doesn’t feel so great.”

“I think the reason I didn’t say anything was because I knew you’d talk me out of it, and deep down, I knew I was being irrational, but I panicked.” Jared leaned his head back on the couch and shut his eyes. “Dad’s going to find the best lawyers in the country and contest the will. If he wins, my grandpa’s last wishes will go up in smoke. Shit, I don’t even care about the money. I care about the house and that he had the final say with his son, after all the years of him feeling like he wasn’t being heard.” A glistening streak of a tear slid down his temple and into his hairline. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. I should be able to grieve and come to terms with him being gone. I miss him so much. He was the only family I had that mattered.”

“Hey,” I said, waiting for him to lift his head and look at me, “you’re not alone. You know that, right? You spent years dealing with this on your own, but I can guaran-fucking-tee you, you won’t fight this by yourself.” I smirked, trying to

lighten the heavy atmosphere. “Say the word and I’ll unleash Mama Russo. She’ll make those assholes wear stone vests and tell them to take a stroll in the ocean.”

As I’d been hoping, Jared let out a small laugh. “I have no doubt.”

“We’ll all be there for you.” There was no way in hell I, or any of the guys, would stand idly by while Jared’s family vilified him and tore him apart in court. “Our group may not be related by blood, but we’re still a family.”

I could promise him that until I was blue in the face, but he wasn’t going to hear any of it at this point. What happened today was still a gaping wound, and no amount of reassuring him that things would work out would get him to believe that right now. So, I bit my tongue, preventing myself from outright telling him his pride needed to take a back seat and let us be there for him.

I stood up, dragging him with me. Silently, I took his face in my hands, brushing my thumbs over his flushed cheeks, then pressed my lips to his. The moment was more intimate than any other we’d had. Taking his hand, I led him out of the living room, but when I turned in the direction of my bedroom, he pulled on my hand, stopping us in the middle of my hallway.

I glanced back over my shoulder and caught the apprehensive look in his eyes. I was responsible for that look. I’d put up the wall between us over the last few years, and now he was having trouble seeing I’d already started taking the bricks down myself. Talk about giving someone mixed messages. My indecision was giving us both whiplash.

Turning completely to face him, I said, “You’re staying here tonight.” I couldn’t make it any clearer than that.

“Burke, I’ll be fine.” His red-rimmed, tired eyes said otherwise.

My jaw clenched and I swallowed hard, teetering on a similar precipice I’d found myself on once before with this man. I’d chosen wrong then. I refused to do that now. “Yeah,

well, I won't be fine. Not unless you stay here"—*say the words, Burke*—"and let me hold you, for fuck's sake."

Jared's eyes widened. Embarrassment washed over me, my skin on fire as soon as the ooey goey words tumbled out of my mouth. Adding a touch of profanity didn't make them any less sappy. "Don't look at me like that," I grumbled. Jared smirked in response, knowing damn well I was floundering in front of the fisherman. "I wasn't lying when I said the lovey-dovey shit isn't for me." Before that landed between us as one more jumbled message, I added a dose of raw honesty. "Meaning, I'm not good at it, not that I don't want it."

Jared tilted his head, a mix between amusement and *Who the hell are you?* playing across his face. "'Lovey-dovey'?"

"You know what I... The sappy shit..." I fumbled through my words and could feel the back of my neck breaking out in a nervous sweat. "I'm not good at...*shit*..." Until that moment, I hadn't been honest with myself about why those emotional, embarrassingly romantic words weren't for me. Truth was, I really did suck at it. Feeling like an idiot, I looked away from his shocked face, making a mental note to kick the asses of my best friends for making me want what they had but having no idea how to be that person.

Warm hands cupped my face, the heat against my skin startling me out of a moment of self-loathing seconds before he kissed me. This time when our mouths met, there was an urgency between us that surprisingly had nothing to do with anger or challenge, and everything to do with need.

Desperation clawed at me to get as close to him as I possibly could. Every swipe of his tongue against mine sent a shockwave of pleasure racing down to my toes. Maybe I wasn't good with words, but I sure as hell knew how to *show* him how crazy I was about him. I gasped against his mouth as it hit me square in the chest. I broke away from the kiss, my hands tangled in his hair, my eyes searching his. I was crazy about him. It was unfamiliar and scary as fuck, but that's what this was, right? This whole thing was foreign to me, feelings I'd never had before because I'd never let myself.

“What?” he whispered, his breath ghosting against my lips. There was that unease again as he stared into my eyes.

I shook my head and took his mouth again, pouring all the words I couldn't say into that kiss. It wasn't going to be enough, not if I wanted things with Jared to move forward, but it was enough for tonight.

Clothes were left abandoned on the floor of my bedroom. By the time the back of my legs hit the mattress and I turned on the lamp next to my bed, we were both naked and fighting for control. My lips traveled across the rough, stubbled terrain of his jaw, my tongue swiping a long path down his neck to the dip where it met his collarbone.

“Tell me what you want,” I rasped against his skin. “You want me to help you forget? Bury my cock deep inside you? Scramble that brain of yours so all you can focus on is the feel of my dick driving into that tight ass?” He shivered under my hands, goosebumps covering his skin. “Or do you want me on my back? Want to push that cock of yours into me and take what you need? I'll love it either way.” There was that word again. *Love*. Didn't matter what label I put on it right now. I'd do anything he needed me to, and I would love every damn second of it.

“Jesus,” he whispered, his hands flattening against my chest as he shoved me back on the mattress. He came down with me, blanketing my body. The weight of him prevented me from running away from emotions I'd dodged over the years.

The slow delicious thrust of his bare cock against mine, the heat from his warm, golden skin, his eager tongue tasting every inch of my mouth. He was fucking owning me right now, and there wasn't a cell in my body that wanted to shift the power dynamic. I wasn't lying; he could take whatever he needed from me and I would happily give it to him.

“Condoms...” he breathed against my mouth then dragged his lips and tongue down over the sensitive skin under my jaw, continuing its wicked path until he clamped over my nipple.

“Fuck,” I groaned out. I smacked my hand against the hard surface of my nightstand, until finally landing on the handle. Blindly, I rummaged through the drawer, striking gold when my fingers finally landed on the box. I tossed it on the bed then dove my hand back in and grabbed the lube.

Jared released my swollen nipple from his skilled mouth and grabbed the bottle out of my hand, sitting up as he straddled me. His storm-gray eyes were dark with lust as they swept down the length of my body. “God, you’re gorgeous.”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

His head jerked up, eyes zeroing in on mine, and the shock in them was evident. “Is this where we’re at now? Paying each other compliments and fucking each other until we black out?” Vulnerable didn’t even begin to describe the cadence of his voice or the expression on his face.

My heart thundered in my chest for a couple of hesitant seconds. “What if where we’re at is paying each other compliments and admitting this thing between us is bigger than either one of us expected?” I smirked, adding, “And fucking each other until we black out.”

Jared snorted, his fingers absently tracing the outline of my abs. A small smile lifted the corner of his mouth. “I’d say I’m completely okay with that.”

“Good. Me too.” It wasn’t a declaration of love, but it was a hell of a lot more than I’d allowed myself for years.

Jared picked up the box of condoms and took a packet out. “I want to take you.” He tore the foil, confusing the hell out of me when he rolled the condom down my hard cock. “My way.”

I grabbed his hips hard enough to leave bruises. “Hell yeah.”

Without taking his eyes off me, he squirted some lube on his fingers and reached around, opening himself up. My hands itched to take over, but he shook his head. “Palms flat against the mattress, Cave Dweller.” Right. He wanted to do this his way. His intense stare locked on mine as he slowly lifted his

body and carefully sank down on my cock, sliding it inside his tight hole. "Don't move." He flashed me a wink and teasing smile then began rocking his hips.

I tightly gripped the sheets, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as he rode me. I was desperate to touch him, and that amped up my need for him to unreachable heights. If I couldn't touch him with my hands, then my eyes needed to take in as much as I possibly could. I pried them open, my breath catching at the sight of him.

His lean torso rippled in rhythm with the rocking of his pelvis, his plump bottom lip caught between his teeth, his skin flushed from exertion. He really was fucking gorgeous.

With a groan, his hands landed on my chest. I wanted to touch him more than I wanted to breathe. His movements intensified, concentrating on nailing one particular spot in his body. I kept my fingers knotted with the sheets while his hands splayed against my chest to give him leverage.

His glassy eyes held me in a trance, dazed as I watched him chase his orgasm. His cock, red and swollen and untouched, bounced with each movement against my abs. Fuck, it was so goddamn sexy.

Little whimpers of pleasure left his mouth with every jab to his prostate. I may have been the one deep inside him, but he was fucking dominating me the way he needed. I couldn't tear my eyes off him, couldn't do more than let him ride to the highest heights, taking me along with him. A deep, low groan rumbled out of him, his breath stuttering as he spurted ribbons of white all over my overheated skin. Jesus Christ, he'd never once touched his cock. It was the hottest fucking thing I'd ever seen. Jared's body clamped around my shaft with every pulse of his cock, his body jerking from his orgasm.

A devilish smile curled his lips as he tried to catch his breath. On shaking limbs he lifted up, letting me slide out of him. My body tensed, my dick so sensitive, aching with the need to come. In seconds, Jared removed the condom, scooted down on the mattress, and took me into his mouth. I threaded

my fingers through his hair, frantically thrusting as I chased my orgasm.

He took it all, opened his throat, and let me take control. One final thrust coupled with the incredible sensation of him swallowing around the head, and it was game fucking over. I couldn't have stopped my barreling orgasm if I tried, and fuck knows I didn't try. My entire body clenched as I shot down his throat, giving the man everything he'd fucked and sucked out of me, the world going black for a few incredible seconds.

My body gave one more twitch as I pumped the last drops down his throat. Having no more energy, I sank into the mattress, thoroughly sated and panting.

“Fuck.” I licked my dry lips, trying to catch my breath.

Jared laughed, falling onto the mattress beside me, his chest rapidly rising and falling with each gulp of air. “I think it's safe to say we excel at fucking each other until we black out.”

I laughed with him, but the second I turned my head and met his eyes, I lost my breath again. I ran my hand through his sweat-soaked hair and leaned in, kissing him softly. When we parted, I managed to say in barely a whisper, “I think it's safe to say this thing between us is so much bigger than either one of us expected.”

He swallowed hard and rolled toward me, resting his head in the crook of my arm and his hand on my chest. “For fuck's sake, would you hold me already?” His lips drew up in a playful smile.

“You want the lovey-dovey shit, huh?” I teased back.

There was no mistaking the vulnerability clouding his eyes as his smile faded ever so slightly. “What if I do?”

I balanced on that precipice again, except this time the words came easily. “Turns out the lovey-dovey part may be for me after all.”

I leaned in and kissed him again, wrapping my arms tightly around him. It still scared the shit out of me, but there wasn't a

single part of me that didn't think Jared was worth it. Hell, practice makes perfect, right?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Jesus, what the hell is that?” Jared mumbled against my chest, jumping when the loud banging started all over again.

“Whoever is at my door right now obviously has a death wish. Otherwise they’d know not to come here at the ass crack of”—I lifted my phone and lit up the screen—“fuck, ten o’clock.” We’d fucked and sucked each other for hours during the night, shared a shower and changed the sheets at the first light of dawn, then passed out from bone-deep exhaustion. Luckily, I didn’t have to go into work until later that day. Jared could open his shop any time he wanted, and after yesterday’s shitshow, I was pretty sure everyone would understand why he needed to ignore the world for a while. Scrubbing a hand over my face, I cursed when the pounding sounded again.

Jared patted my chest and looked at me. Sleep-rumpled, his unruly hair framed his face, and his half-lidded eyes were still red and puffy from the day before. “I promise there’s a blowjob in your near future if you make them go away.”

I moved so quickly, his head slid off my chest and bounced on the mattress as he laughed. “Don’t have to tell me twice.” Walking over to my dresser, I pulled out boxers, sweats, and a tee and yanked them on.

When I faced Jared again, he rolled to his back, pushing his wild hair out of his eyes. “I’m tucking away that little nugget of information. The way to wrap Burke around my little finger is by way of sexual favors.”

My eyes trailed down the length of his body, half-hidden by the thin sheet that barely concealed his mouthwatering, naked lower half. His cock twitched under the layer of Egyptian cotton as if beckoning me to crawl under that covering and take what was mine.

Mine. He was mine. Honestly, he always had been on some level. My frustrating challenge. My occupier of thoughts. The tenant who'd taken up permanent residence under my skin. Just...*mine*.

“Sexual favors aren't what hooked me, but they're excellent incentives.” I watched his eyes darken as I leaned over him and kissed his delicious smile. “Be right back. Get that mouth ready.” I winked, loving the sound of his laughter as I walked away.

The banging started again as I strode toward the door, on a mission to get rid of whoever the hell it was. “I'm coming! Jesus Christ!” Yanking the door open, I froze.

“Burcardo, you're really trying to make me use that red dress, aren't you?” There my mom stood with my dad next to her. “Using the Lord's name in vain...again.” As if she never had.

“You're here,” tumbled from my mouth, my skin prickling with awareness that Jared was naked in my bedroom. *Please let him get dressed before he walks out here.*

“Nice to see you, too,” my father said. “Now, let us in the damn house.”

I opened my mouth, daring to even think of telling them to come back in an hour, but my parents were already pushing around me into my home. I gripped the back of my neck uneasily, watching them stand in my foyer while I had a gorgeous, naked man in my bed.

My skin prickled with awareness as my mom let out a soft gasp. There Jared stood in the hall, looking painfully unsure—and thankfully, clothed—with his hands shoved into the back pockets of his jeans. If it wasn't obvious why he was here, the fact that he'd just come out of my bedroom with disheveled

hair and the faint pink of beard burn around his mouth was pretty telling.

“Maybe we should have called first,” my mom said, not looking the least bit sorry. No, the woman had a self-satisfied smile on her face because, of course, she’d been right about Jared.

I huffed incredulously, scrubbing a hand over my stubbled jaw, the words *you think?* on the tip of my tongue. Instead, I grumbled, “That would’ve been nice.”

Helplessly, I made eye contact with Jared, apologizing without words for the Russo Invasion. The corner of his mouth quirked up as he shrugged and slowly walked toward us. Everything around me seemed to fade away with every step he took, every cell in my body singing as he closed the distance between us.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered when he stopped right next to me, looking overwhelmed and a little embarrassed.

“Don’t be,” he replied as he met my eyes. All I wanted to do was bring him back to my bed where he belonged, but—

“Jared, honey, we didn’t realize you were here.” My mom stepped up in front of him and cupped his cheek. “How are you?”

He laughed humorlessly. “I’m guessing you’ve heard?”

“About your poor excuse for a father embarrassing himself around town? We happened to be in the bakery at the time.” She let out a laugh of derision. “The man could use a lesson in discrepancy...and humility...and parenting.” Her eyes shifted to me with a twinkle of mischief, then to Jared she said, “Tell me, Jared, how skilled are you at planting seeds?”

“Uh...seeds?” He stared at her in confusion.

“I was just discussing with my son the other day about how he could use a big sturdy tree in his yard. Isn’t that right, Burcardo?” The woman gave me the vilest of innocent smiles.

My face flamed red hot when my brain—in front of my parents, for fuck’s sake—immediately thought of another kind of seed...that Jared and I had shared plenty of last night. Man, this was awkward.

“Maybe I should go,” Jared said, apprehension pulling his brows up.

Just as I started to say, “What? No...” my mom said, “I should go, too. How about you and I go get some of those delicious blueberry turnovers, Jared, and let these two stubborn Russos figure out their childish issues?”

Jared hesitated nervously then said, “I’m not sure the bakery is the best place for me to be after everything that happened.”

“Nonsense. You have nothing to hide from and nothing to explain to anyone, and you’re going to prove that by marching into town with a beautiful woman on your arm.” She winked playfully. “Besides, from what I saw yesterday, there wasn’t a Pointer there who believed that man’s BS.”

I snorted a laugh, “Ma...”

She shrugged her dainty shoulders, giving me her most innocent smile. “What? It’s the truth.” Hooking her arm through Jared’s, she motioned her other hand back and forth between my father and I. “Fix this. I’ll be damned if the loves of my life let pride get in the way of their relationship.” Holding steadfast to Jared’s arm, she led him out the door. He gave me one more apprehensive but amused look over his shoulder before the door closed, leaving me alone with my dad.

I gripped the back of my neck, at a loss for what to say or do. I’d promised my mom I’d talk to him, but I sort of thought it would be my choice when that would happen. I should’ve known my mom would jump at the chance to get my dad and I to talk things out. I didn’t blame her. We’d made things difficult for her for too long.

“How about some coffee?” Not waiting for his reply, I walked into the kitchen and grabbed two mugs out of my

cabinet. I heard him come into the room and pull a chair out to sit down.

“Nothing in it, please.”

“Yeah, I know.” I got the first cup going then leaned back against my counter and laughed. “You should see the stuff Jared drinks. It’s like cream and sugar with a splash of coffee.”

He snorted, accepting the first cup of coffee as I handed it to him. “I don’t know how anyone can drink it that way.”

“That’s what I said.” I shook my head and took the second cup of steaming black coffee off the Keurig and sat down on the other side of the table.

He focused on the cup in front of him, turning it in slow circles, the silence growing more and more awkward. Finally, he said, “Things are getting serious with you two, huh?”

I paused with my cup in front of my mouth, caught off guard by the question. Slowly, I took a drink to buy myself time and figure out how to answer that. *The truth, dumbass.* “Now that I’m starting to realize what an ass I’ve been, yeah.”

“Stubborn to your core.” He shook his head, his lips pressed together in a thin line.

Incredulously, I laughed, crossing my arms as I leaned back in my chair. “What can I say? I take after my dad.”

“*Pshh...*” He waved his hand at me, a line forming between his heavy eyebrows. “I’m not being stubborn if I want my son to care about his family. His traditions. His heritage. Don’t blame me for the decisions you’ve made.”

So we’re doing this. The chair scraped across the floor as I stood up abruptly, taking several pacing steps. I gripped my hips, attempting to get my anger back under control. “You know what, Pop? I don’t have a damn thing to blame you for because I don’t regret my decisions.” I stopped short in the middle of my kitchen. “No, I take that back. I regret one thing, but I’m trying to make it right now. I should’ve never pushed Jared away. And, although I’d like to blame you for that one, I take full responsibility for it.”

My dad pushed up from his chair, his face mottled red with anger. “Maybe I should be the one blaming you. Do you know how it feels when your son continually pushes you away? To make suggestions that turn into arguments because, God forbid, why should he listen to you? Why should he care if it feels like a personal insult when he excludes his family from something he claims is so important?”

I scoffed in disbelief. “Do you know how it feels when every suggestion given to you by your dad makes you feel like nothing you do is ever right? Do you know how it feels when you create something you’re so goddamn proud of, and *every single* time, you’re told how you can make it better? Because it’s never good enough, Pop, is it?”

He reared back, salt and pepper brows drawn together in a deep-set line. “I’ve never said that.”

“What do you think you did the other night? I felt like such an ass, especially in front of my staff, because I let myself get excited...nervous even...for you and Mom to see my restaurant. And what was the first thing you did? You tore apart my menu and told me what should be on it, without even so much as a word of praise. You think I don’t need that? To have my dad be proud of me for once without being told he should be?” My voice cracked on the last word.

My dad opened and closed his mouth, all hostility fading from his expression. “I told you it was a great place. I must have.”

“Uh, no. Mom did. You were too busy combing through my menu for things to complain about.” I sank back down in the chair, leaning both arms on the table. “I know you’re disappointed I didn’t take over *Russo’s*, but you can’t be so blind that you don’t see how much Sal loves that place. He always has, and he’s damn good at running it.”

His head reared back incredulously. “I know he is.”

“Have you ever told him that? Or has he only ever heard you complain that I didn’t take it over, as if I would’ve done a better job than him, even though you question every decision I

make?" My dad's scowl lifted, replaced by dawning recognition.

He dropped down into his chair again, scratching his five o'clock shadow as he thought for a second. "Well, I..." He huffed, hanging his head. "I don't know if I've ever said the words to him."

"Yeah, well, words are important, Pop. Especially when all they ever do is make you question yourself over and over again." I laughed humorlessly. "Until, finally, you're at the point where you firmly stand by every decision you make, even if deep down you have a feeling it's wrong, just to prove a point. Just to prove that you don't need anyone's input." I pressed my eyes closed and blew out a deep breath, opening them again. "And, maybe, because you feel like you always have something to prove, you start to make some decisions out of spite without even realizing it."

"What decisions have I made out of spite?" The question was defensive, but he also looked genuinely hurt and confused.

"Not you. Me." Damn, those words were hard to say, but I couldn't be a hypocrite by holding them back any longer. "When I first met Jared, I was immediately drawn to him. My decision to pursue him should've been my own, but instead, my immediate thought was, 'What would my parents think about him not being Italian or successful by some people's standards?' I won't lie, there was an appeal to being with him just because I thought you'd hate it. I second-guessed my attraction to him, I second-guessed my reasons for wanting him so damn bad, and ultimately, I pushed him away because I second-guessed my ability to make the right decision and potentially hurt someone Cole had known all his life. Someone I'd have to bump into all the time."

My dad looked offended. "Well, that's just ridiculous."

I snorted. "I know. Like I said, I have no one to blame but myself, and once I'd made the decision to keep him at arm's length, I stubbornly stuck with it." I tapped my fingers on the hard wood of the table, gearing myself up for my next difficult

admission. “I can honestly say, I didn’t really give much thought as to why I was adamant about my menu being completely my own. I was determined to come up with every recipe without input.” I laughed again, this time picturing sitting at Jared’s kitchen table while being scolded about cannolis. “It’s been brought to my attention that I most likely made that decision to make a statement. It wasn’t a conscious decision. I didn’t do it because I wanted to piss you off or insult you. I think I’d just gotten used to proving my independence. Proving that I could make my own choices, even if you weren’t proud of me.”

“Christ.” He scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. “I didn’t mean to make you feel that way. I’m so proud of all you’ve accomplished. Ask any one of our regulars at *Russo’s* who ask about how you’re doing. They know it all... College, your friends, your business. Heck, even your mom has boasted about how she’s waiting on you to give her a son-in-law and grandbabies. And now you’ve really done it. Do you think she’ll accept anyone other than Jared? I bet she proudly walked into that bakery holding his arm.” He laughed, but I was too busy swallowing the lump in my throat to join in. “She went Mama Bear for that boy before we even got here. Your friends, too.” He sighed, sitting back in his chair, the smile falling from his face. “Yes, I was upset you didn’t take over *Russo’s*, but only because...I felt like I was losing you. You didn’t need us anymore. Didn’t need me. You went off to college, found a new life, and never came back home. You left family recipes off your menu to make a statement, and trust me, you succeeded. I felt it, and it hurt like hell.”

That last remark hit me square in the chest. “I’m sorry. I may have been subconsciously thinking that at the time I made the menu, but I honestly was anxious to get your opinion... your approval...when you went to Oceanside the other night. It’s great to know you say all that about me to *Russo’s* regulars, but I’m the one who needs to hear it.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry about that.”

“Jesus, Mom’s right. We’re too much alike for our own good.”

“Your mother is right more often than I like to admit, but we don’t need to let her know that.” He laughed. “I’d never want to begrudge her the satisfaction of threatening to pull out that red dress of hers.”

“No, we can’t have that.” I laughed and felt like I could breathe again for the first time in a long time.

“Get over here.” He stood up and held his arms out. I got up and hugged him, letting some of the old wounds heal. My inner child had felt deprived of this for so long, but I tried to make the stubborn man in me believe this was a huge step in the right direction. Only time would tell.

When he let me go, I turned away and wiped my eyes. Must have gotten something in them. Dust. Had to be dust. I saw him wipe his own and chuckled. “You got dust in your eyes, too?”

He snorted. “Must be.” He glanced down at his watch. “How about we go rescue Jared at the bakery? Who knows how much of your future with him she’s already planned.”

“Oh, jeez. Yeah, let me just get changed and we can walk over.” I went down the hall to my bedroom, a huge smile spread across my face. I was ready to try and mend my relationship with my dad, as long as he was willing to put in the work, too. The fact that my mom was most likely sitting in that bakery with a smug smile on her face, proud to be there with Jared while ready to challenge anyone who might come at him, made warmth spread throughout my chest. I wanted her to go all Mama Bear to protect him and show him he wasn’t alone.

Most importantly, I just...wanted him.

Jared

BURKE, thankfully, hadn’t been wrong. The second I walked into Beachin’ Bakery behind Mama Russo, Teresa rushed around the counter and pulled me into her arms.

“Jared, honey, I’ve been so worried about you!”

Now, there were two things I knew about Teresa: One, she was a member of the Walkie Talkies, which meant the woman knew how to spread gossip as easily as spreading jam on bread. Two, she had one of the biggest hearts of anyone I'd ever met.

"Hey, Teresa." I hugged her back, softly laughing when she took longer than usual to let me go. "I'm okay. I promise."

She pulled back, still holding on to my shoulders. "Don't you worry. Edward Boone has always been and will always be an ass." It wasn't often Teresa cursed, her cheeks flushing as a result. "We all know how much you loved your grandpa. Seems like Samuel knew it, too. That's all that matters."

Although it was awkward talking about what had happened yesterday, I couldn't hide it. My dad had made everyone aware of my new financial situation in the worst possible way. Mama Russo was right; I could either hide and make myself seem guilty, or I could hold my head high and not let them break me. I knew what my grandpa would've wanted.

"Yeah, I guess he did. Shocked the hell outta me, that's for sure."

"The rest of us weren't surprised. Not one little bit. You took care of him for a long time. Now this is his way of taking care of you." She pulled me in and kissed my forehead. Smiling over my shoulder, she held her hand out to Burke's mom. "It's so nice to see you again, Sophia. I'm glad you came back after the debacle yesterday."

Mama Russo took her hand, giving Teresa a warm smile in return. "Are you kidding? One insufferable man will not keep me from those blueberry turnovers. At this rate, I'm going to be so addicted, I'll need Burke to mail me some every week."

Teresa beamed. "Don't you worry. You just give me a call and I'll overnight them to you."

"Thank you," Mama Russo said, her bottom lip trembling a little. "My son sure did find an amazing place to call home."

“We all love that big teddy bear.” Teresa gave Burke’s mom a wink, accompanied by a mischievous smile, before tacking on, “Isn’t that right, Jared?” I saw the playful twinkle in Mama Russo’s eyes as she gave Teresa the same wicked smile right back.

I snorted a laugh as I watched the interaction. “Your subtlety needs work.”

Teresa patted my cheek. “Who says I was trying to be subtle, honey?” With that, she walked back behind the counter and took the next customer.

My face flooded with heat as I felt Mama Russo’s knowing stare. I cleared my throat then waved my arm toward a table by the window. “Why don’t you have a seat and I’ll get our food? Do you like your coffee black like Burke?”

The look she gave me was a mixture between *Are you crazy?* and a teasing smirk. “You know how my son likes his coffee? Interesting. Unlike Burke and his father, though, I haven’t ruined my taste buds with bitterness. Vanilla latte, please.”

She left me standing there with my mouth hanging open and a laugh bubbling up from my chest. I didn’t think it was possible to feel this light after the events of yesterday, but there I was, smiling like an idiot in the middle of the bakery.

After getting our food and sitting down, my shoulders began to let go of the rest of the tension I’d been holding on to. Burke’s mom loaded me with stories of Burke when he was younger. I stored those puppies up for a rainy day, laughing as she told me about his cowboy phase. I tried to picture little Burke in a cowboy hat and boots, but it was impossible.

“I’m gonna need proof of that when you get home. The more pictures the better.”

She swiped a hand at me. “Oh, honey, I have them in spades.” After taking another bite of her turnover, she wiped her mouth slowly, gazing at me like she had so many things to say. “I hope the...events...of this morning mean that you’re giving Burke a chance?”

My face was on fire, knowing exactly what *events* she was referring to. I'd almost stayed in his bedroom, wondering if that was what Burke would want me to do. I hadn't driven to his house, so there was no neon sign announcing he wasn't alone. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I'd decided then and there, if I left his bedroom and it pissed him off or he tried to deny why I was there, I would walk out the door and never look back. I already had a family who treated me like crap behind closed doors and pretended to care about me in public. I didn't need the opposite from Burke. I deserved more than for him to want me behind closed doors and deny we meant anything to each other in public.

But he hadn't denied it. Okay, so he hadn't exactly said anything about it or kissed me when I approached him, but the way he looked at me made all the doubts and fears I'd had melt away. There was no anger, no hidden glances or posturing. The smile he gave me lit up his brown eyes in a way I'd never seen before.

But I didn't want to mislead Mama Russo; not when Burke and I hadn't really talked about what was going on between us yet. So, "We're still figuring it out," was all I said to her, giving her a soft smile to soften my avoidance of the question.

"I know he can be stubborn and insufferable sometimes, but half the time that comes from his need to prove something. I admit, I had a hand in that, and I only realized within the last few days how much." Sadness blanketed her expression as she glanced down at the table. "I'm not proud of that, but now that I know, I'm going to make a conscious effort to show him more support." She studied me for a couple of seconds. I wasn't sure what she saw when she looked at me. "I support this. *You*, I mean. I've no doubt that you can make my son happy while challenging him every step of the way. I'm also absolutely positive he can be the person no one else has ever been for you. A man who knows how to defend you, whether that be as the boulder in front of you or the rock you stand on."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and blinked back tears. "When Grandpa passed away, I had this sinking feeling that I'd lost everything. That I was truly alone. Burke was the one

who'd said no one should have to go through that alone. He was going to that nursing home whether I wanted him to or not." I snorted a laugh, shaking my head. "Man, he can be stubborn."

She gasped dramatically and put a hand to her chest. "*My son? Never.*"

I huffed in amusement. "The thing is, I didn't want to do it alone, and because he's so hardheaded, I didn't need to say it. All the years of him avoiding me faded away when he'd made the decision to be there for me through the hardest night of my life. Oddly enough, he was the only one who knew my biggest fear, and he was determined to help me face it." I shrugged, not able to meet her eyes. "Maybe one wrong decision and one good decision cancel each other out and we can start over."

"I think so," she responded softly.

As I took another bite of turnover and waited for my embarrassment to fade, my ears suddenly zeroed in on what was happening at the counter.

"Oh, Edna, stop," Teresa scolded, her eyes nervously landing on me before shifting away again. She clenched her jaw and whispered, "You know Jared doesn't have a deceitful bone in his body." She'd probably thought she was keeping her voice low enough that it wouldn't carry to me. Teresa always meant well, even if her execution could use some work.

The older woman harrumphed, having no intention of keeping her voice down while shooting me a snide look over her shoulder. "Money changes people, Teresa. Not to mention the time he's been spending with that Russo boy." *Oh no...* I glanced at Burke's mom and practically saw the steam coming out of her ears and the tick of her jaw. "That whole group is nothing but trouble."

Funny how Edna Lawry had come to that conclusion after Cole had called her out for spreading gossip about his relationship with Aiden without knowing the whole story. That woman lived on drama, storing it in her little gossipy cheeks before eagerly spreading nuggets of misinformation all around

town. She was lucky if her heart was one-fourth the size of Teresa's. And, to make matters worse, she'd been after Aiden's dad, Jim, for years but the smart man didn't give her a second glance.

"Excuse me," Mama Russo said to me, her jaw clenched and murder in her eyes as she stood up.

"Uh oh," I mumbled under my breath. This was either going to be a huge mess or wildly entertaining...or both. Considering the newest gossip was about me, and squirrely Edna had no trouble spitting those little nuggets of judgment everywhere she went, I crossed my legs at the ankles and settled in to see which way the coin fell.

"I couldn't help but overhear you mention Jared and the Russo boy being *nothing but trouble*. Care to elaborate?"

Abort, Edna. Abort!

Edna scoffed in righteous indignation. "I was having a private conversation with another *Pointer*."

Mama Russo laughed, the sound almost scary. "Yes, but you see, you made it my business when your private conversation was about *those* boys because they happen to be *my* boys...and also *Pointers*." She held her hand out. "Sophia Russo."

I sucked in a breath and sat up straight in my chair. The woman had barely known me a week and she was laying claim to me as if I were another son.

Edna looked at Sophia's hand then scanned her beady little eyes down the length of Burke's mom and back up, obviously making judgment of her. "So, you're the one responsible for the ogre? I guess I can see where he gets his manners from."

"Oh shit. What's going on?" I hadn't even seen Burke and his dad walk in the door, too enthralled by the trainwreck happening before me.

"Well, Edna had some choice words about you and I, and Mama Bear Russo came out."

Burke huffed, laughter lighting up his dark eyes. “This should be interesting.” He pulled a chair next to me while his father occupied the one vacated by his wife. Without looking down, Burke grabbed my mug and lifted it to his mouth. I could’ve stopped him, could’ve reminded him how I took mine light and sweet, but watching his face scrunch up in disgust was so worth the price of admission. “Seriously with that crap?”

I shrugged. “Serves you right for helping yourself. I didn’t tell you to drink it.”

His intense eyes met mine and I froze mid-laugh, my heart slamming against my chest. “I’m breaking you of that habit. A few mornings of making you coffee the *right* way, and you’ll never look back.” The man turned his attention back to the scene playing out, but I couldn’t focus on anything but the statement he’d just made—a promise of mornings spent together over coffee...hopefully after a very eventful night. A statement he made in front of his dad like it was the most natural thing to say. My heart thundered in my chest as I nervously looked over at Mr. Russo, catching his nod of approval before glancing back at his wife.

Burke’s mom, though being small in size, had Edna Lawry taking nervous steps back toward the door. “I dare you to insult my boys one more time.” My eyes widened as I watched the feisty woman take one earring out and then the other. Jesus, was she going to fight the squirrely gossip?

“What is she doing?” I whispered loud enough for Burke to glance back at me, and the pride and amusement I saw dancing in his eyes loosened my shoulders a bit.

“She’s amazing, isn’t she?”

“Now, you listen here.” Edna held her hands in front of her while still backing toward the exit, Sophia pursuing her with an almost maniacal glint in her eyes. “I don’t want any trouble.”

One dark, delicate eyebrow perked up—a look I’d seen her son give many, *many* times. “Then you shouldn’t have started any, dear.” Then the incredible woman pulled one sleeve up,

pulled the other sleeve up and, I kid you not, cracked her knuckles.

“Oh shit,” I mumbled in awe, eyes wide and glued to her.

“You’ve made your point!” Edna yelled, backing quickly out of the shop and down the street.

As if a switch was flipped, laughter replaced anger in Burke’s mom’s eyes. Her shoulders raised along with her eyebrows, excitement bubbling up when she said, “Does that make me an honorary Pointer now, too?” Applause and laughter erupted around her. Sophia held her skirt out and curtsied before coming back over the table. Her husband immediately got up and gave her the chair.

“That was incredible. Would you really have fought her?” I asked, completely in awe.

“Absolutely...*not*...but she didn’t need to know that. It’s all in the execution.” She giggled. “Serves her right. No one talks about my little gnocchi that way.” I busted out laughing when Burke blushed all the way to his ears. “Now she knows better than to talk about my little cannoli, too.”

My laughter abruptly stopped when I met her eyes. Burke’s whole body shook as he laughed next to me and said, “Your little what now?”

Her face lit up as she slid her hand across the table and waited for me to take it. “If I haven’t made it clear already, we’ve claimed you. So just get used to it, my little cannoli.” She squeezed my hand then picked up her blueberry turnover and took another bite, her eyes rolling back as she tasted the pastry.

I dropped my chin, swallowing the lump in my throat, but the Russos were determined to catch me off guard today. My fingers tingled under the table, warmth blanketing my hand. I shifted my gaze to Burke, floored by the depth of intensity in his eyes. I held his hand back, lacing our fingers together.

Even though I felt the sentiment he was trying to convey, I still needed to hear him say it. I also had something else I had to face, and I could admit I didn’t want to do it alone.

“Do you have time to come to my place for a bit?” I asked, squeezing his hand.

“Yeah,” he whispered back. “Let’s get outta here.”

He shocked me once more when he stood up, still grasping my hand. He looked at his parents, smirking almost shyly. “Jared and I are gonna head over to his place and then I have to work. I’ll see you later?” He leaned down and gave his mom a kiss.

His father nodded his head with an odd expression on his face.

I expected Burke to let go of my hand as we left the bakery, so as not to draw attention to us. Instead, the big man made sure to catch Teresa’s eye to say goodbye, getting a “Sweet baby Jesus,” in return as her eyes caught our clasped hands, adding, “It’s about time,” while nodding her head in approval.

Burke huffed a soft laugh and squeezed my hand. “Yeah, it is.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Burke didn't know how much I'd needed his strong hand in mine as we walked to my house. As I opened the door, the sudden heaviness blanketing the atmosphere felt suffocating; a plain white envelope with my name on it, written in Grandpa's unsteady hand, waited for me on my coffee table. Last night, after all the shit that happened during the day, I hadn't been able to face reading my grandpa's letter, so instead, I'd ended up on Burke's stoop. But, now, with his hand gripping mine, it hit me that the truth was, I hadn't wanted to read it alone. I'd needed his strength, and after the fight we'd had and the things I'd said, I thought I'd lost the right to lean on him like that.

In so many ways over the last several weeks, he'd proven to be a more complex man than I'd given him credit for. Feeling how much I needed him now scared the shit out of me, but I wanted to take that leap of faith and move forward with him. Otherwise, what the hell were we doing?

"What's going on?" Burke asked. "Your mood's shifted drastically since we left the bakery." Before I could answer, Brutus rushed over, aiming his nose straight at Burke's crotch, but Burke caught his snout in time. Crouching down next to my dog, he scratched behind Brutus's ears and laughed. "Hey, buddy. We're gonna have to work on your overzealous greetings. Do you really have to go straight for gold?"

Jesus, seeing this big man get down to Brutus's level and speak so gently to my excited dog made warmth spread throughout my chest. Teresa was right; Burke was a big teddy

bear at heart. When he met my eyes, a gorgeous smile lighting up his whole face, I lost my ability to breathe...or remember my name.

“You okay?” He patted Brutus’s back one more time then stood up.

“Yeah. I’m just gonna let him out.” I gripped the back of my neck and exhaled a heavy, shaky breath. “Then can we sit for a minute? There’s something I gotta do and”—this was the moment I either tossed that fucking mask for good or continued to keep this gorgeous man at arm’s length—“I don’t want to do it alone.”

His hand slid into my hair while his thumb gently ran back and forth over my left cheek. “Then you won’t.” He started to take a step around me, but I couldn’t help but put a hand on his chest and press my lips to his. I didn’t deepen the kiss. There was something about the simplicity of it that felt more monumental than aggressively taking his mouth and devouring his taste. I wanted the heat and the passion, but I wanted quiet moments with him, too. Those moments where just knowing how he took his coffee or that he had a small birthmark on his inner, right thigh made me feel like what we had went deeper than sexual tension and years of foreplay.

“Thank you,” I whispered, blowing out another breath to prepare myself to read that letter. After letting Brutus out to play in the fenced-in backyard, I went into the living room. Seeing Burke sit in the same spot on the couch as he had the night of the hurricane felt like a full-circle moment. But, instead of taking up the spot I usually sat in, I grabbed the letter off the coffee table and sat right next to him. I couldn’t explain it, but I needed to feel him beside me to know I really didn’t have to do this alone. He angled his large body toward me, draping his arm across the back of the couch behind my head while resting his other hand on my thigh.

I hated how badly my hands were shaking as I opened the envelope, my vision blurring as I saw Grandpa’s shaky penmanship.

“Do you want me to read it to you?”

I hadn't even told him what it was yet, but apparently, I didn't need to. "Yeah."

Burke took the paper from me, holding it out in front of us both as he began in his deep baritone...

JARED,

Since you're reading this letter, I know my time with you has come to an end. You're probably confused as to why I made such a drastic change to my will, because that's the kind of man you are. It wasn't an easy decision to make. I've waited, hoping for even the smallest sign that I mean anything to my son. Even to be a tiny blip on his radar would've been enough to keep my estate as it was. But, within the last year, I've come to the realization that he'll never be the man his mother and I hoped he'd be. I'm not sure where we went wrong, but I have a feeling my soul will always wonder.

But, you, Jared... You brought such joy and love to our lives. You healed the part of my heart that blamed itself for the man my son has become. You are the man I'd always hoped my son would be. With you, I know I raised a man deserving of all the wonderful things life can bring. Although your grandma and I may have failed with your father, we redeemed ourselves with you. Because, we did raise you. And, while I can't take all the credit, I won't allow your parents to take any credit for the man you've become.

For years, you have taken care of me, loved me, without question, without ever wondering what you would get in return. So, now it's my turn to take care of you. Don't let them tell you otherwise or put pressure on you. Don't let them make you feel guilty for the best decision I've ever made. No matter what they say, I know, without a doubt, that leaving everything to you is the right decision. The house has always been your home, even before you moved in to take care of me. Now, I can move on with the knowledge and comfort that it will always be yours.

Live life to the fullest. Whether it be with Fred—

BURKE SUCKED in a breath and abruptly stopped reading, his voice cracking on the name my grandpa had given him. My heartbeat stuttered as I met Burke's somber eyes. I didn't bother to hide the tears streaming down my face. He cleared his throat and began again, his voice trembling with emotion.

WHETHER IT BE with Fred or someone else, open that heart of yours up to new adventures, new opportunities, and love. Promise me, above all else, you'll surround yourself with love.

I love you, my boy.

Grandpa

"WELL, DAMN," Burke said, turning his head away from me as he wiped his eyes. "I got dust in my eyes for the second time today. What are the chances?"

A laugh slipped out, surprising me that I could even tap into that emotion after the words he'd just read aloud. "Admit it. Cave dwellers have feelings, too."

Burke snorted out a laugh. "I'm tellin' you, that one feeling has been extremely overworked lately." He brushed the hair back from my face, his eyes softening. "He said everything you needed to hear, and he's right, you know." In barely a whisper, he added, "You're an amazing man."

"You're determined to catch me off guard today, huh?"

He shrugged one shoulder, the corner of his mouth lifting in an almost shy smirk. "Not intentionally."

I took the letter from him, staring down at the words my grandpa had written himself. Something else from him I'd always treasure.

"How are you feeling about all that?" Burke asked.

I blew out a breath that puffed my cheeks, releasing tension like a pressure cooker. "Determined." I locked eyes

with him. “I’m not throwing in the towel. I won’t let my family shit all over my grandpa’s last wishes or scare me into thinking they even have a shot at it. My grandpa’s attorney assured me they took all the necessary steps to ensure the will is upheld, including a medical report from his primary care doctor validating his mental capacity at the time the will was changed, plus two witnesses. I just have to trust that my dad has no recourse.

“I can tell you one thing for sure, though. Once this is all over, they won’t be a part of my life anymore. I only ever called with updates on his condition, and every time, it just felt like an inconvenience to them. Now that he’s gone, I have no reason to keep them in my life.” I shook my head and huffed in disgust. “How much do you wanna bet they suddenly want a relationship with me once all is said and done?”

I stood up, my nerves going too haywire to sit there any longer.

Burke followed me into the kitchen, leaning back on the counter with his arms crossed while watching me make a pot of coffee. After a minute of silence, he said, “I hate that I have to go into work soon. I don’t want to leave you like this.”

It was surprisingly easy to step in front of him and lean my weight against his muscular body. Too easy. His arms immediately wrapped around my waist, making the words I needed to get off my chest even harder. I was so damn tired of wondering, though, or trying to guess what all this meant.

“What are we doing, Burke? As much as I appreciate you being here for me, will you still be here when the dust settles? You say the lovey-dovey stuff *may* be for you, and after last night, I want to believe that eventually it *will* be, but I gotta tell you, I’m a little confused.” If I put myself all out there, he’d have no excuse not to answer, right? And then I would finally know. “I’m tired of chasing after people to give a shit about m—”

I didn’t finish my sentence, my mouth occupied by his hungry tongue. He pulled me closer, held on with a strength that was so goddamn sexy and felt so safe at the same time.

When he finally broke away, he pushed his hands into my hair and leaned his forehead against mine. “If you’ll have me, I’ll be here.” His eyes met mine and I was struck with the depth of vulnerability he was allowing me to finally see. “I’m so damn tired of fighting a battle I never should have started to begin with. Pushing you away a few years ago was a dumbass mistake, made by a stubborn Neanderthal who was too proud to admit how much he wanted you. I’m not sure the reason ever made sense outside of my own insecurities.” The corner of his mouth curled up in a sheepish smirk. “I know it’s hard to believe, but I can be a bit stubborn.”

I laughed, rolling my eyes while my heart thundered in my chest. “Oh, yeah. Impossible.”

“But, here’s the thing... I *am* a stubborn man, Jared. That’s never gonna change. So, when I tell you I’m not going anywhere...when I say you’re fucking stuck with me now...I damn well mean it. And your stubborn ass is just gonna have to accept that.”

I snorted. “That was damn near poetic.”

“I’m a man of many talents.”

I cocked a challenging brow, trying to hold a straight face even though a smile was fighting to break free. “So, are you sayin’ you’re gonna stop driving me fucking crazy?”

His hands slid down my back and landed on my ass, his strong arms pulling me even closer so I could feel his growing erection pressing against mine. “Oh, I still plan on driving you fucking crazy. I just can’t help myself”—he wiggled his dark eyebrows—“but now I can drive you crazy in more creative ways.”

“What *ways* do you mean?” I pushed my hips forward, sighing with how good...*right*...his cock felt against mine.

“Well, for starters, I’ll still have to deal with your smartass mouth, and I can gauran-fucking-tee you, I’m gonna give you shit right back, but shutting that mouth of yours up will be a hell of a lot more fun.”

“Oh, you think so?”

“Yeah, I do. And I’m sure as hell gonna fix that palate of yours. Fill this kitchen with things that are actually worth eating.” He slid his finger down the seam of my jeans, over my ass, and then back up, and I shivered. “As it is now, there’s only one thing in this house that makes my mouth water.”

“Why do I get the feeling it’s not something you’d serve to guests?”

Fire flashed in his gorgeous eyes as his fingers slid around to the button of my jeans and popped it open. He slowly pulled my zipper down, his deep timbre giving me goosebumps when he said, “The only person I’ll share that meal with is Fred.”

Burke shoved my jeans and underwear down to my thighs. I was so damn hard for him, my erection slapped back against my stomach. He switched our positions, pushing me against the counter, my hands landing on the cool granite. He pressed his larger frame against my back and buried his face in my neck.

“What are you doing?” I licked my lips, barely able to get the words out. “I thought you had to get to work?”

“Why would I go to work hungry?” Without warning, he dropped to his knees and spread my ass cheeks apart with strong hands, swiping his tongue over my hole.

“*Fuck...* Did you forget we’re in the middle of my kitchen in broad daylight, and you work at a restaurant?” I moaned as his tongue did wicked things, bringing every nerve ending to life. I wasn’t even sure why I was questioning anything while his mouth took what it wanted.

He laughed, his hot breath ghosting over my hole. “When has being in the kitchen ever stopped us before?”

“Good point, “I rasped out.

“Besides”—he smacked my ass hard—“this is a delicacy Oceanside doesn’t provide. Now shut the hell up and let me enjoy my meal.”

My eyes crossed, head dropping forward as he ate me out. I wrapped my hand around my throbbing shaft and used the liquid leaking out of the tip even though it wasn’t as good as

lube. I was so damn close already that it didn't matter. I could hear Burke open his pants, felt the grunt against my hole when he finally took himself in hand. Indecent sounds filled my kitchen. Burke's panting breaths and the needy sounds he made—while driving me fucking crazy in the best possible way—bounced off every wall. He was on a mission to make me fall apart. It didn't take long for me to give up the fight, defeat shooting out of my cock in white, liquid flags of surrender, hitting the cabinet in front of me.

He pulled his mouth off me, hissing, "Fuck," as he shot his load on the floor between my feet.

Burke slapped my ass again before standing up. "That was the appetizer, just so we're clear, Fisherboy," he said, using my words from the night of the hurricane that started it all.

"You won't get any argument from me, Cave Dweller."

"BURKE, table fifteen would like to have a word with you," Megan said with a strange look that I couldn't quite read.

I put my knife down, exhaling in frustration. I'd been behind the line since I came in, preparing something a little unexpected that I didn't expect my staff to magically know how to make. "That sounds ominous. And I was having such a good day." I reluctantly walked around the station, blowing out one more deep breath, then pushed through the swinging doors.

The second the table came into view, my pulse spiked and my hands got all clammy. "Hey, Mom..."—I leaned down and kissed her cheek then turned to my dad and squeezed his shoulder—"Dad. I wasn't expecting you...but I'm glad you're here."

I'd planned on telling them what I'd done...planned on inviting them for a do-over at Oceanside, but apparently, they'd had the same idea. I caught the emotional look in my dad's eyes and I squeezed his shoulder again. "Did Anna tell you the specials? I need time to add more entrées to the board,

get my staff on the same page, but it's a start...and a way to find some kind of middle ground. The Oceanside printed menu will stay the same, but I'll continue to build and rotate *Russo's Specials*."

My dad cleared his throat and put his hand over mine. "She did, and I can't tell you how much it means to me...to us."

"I should've done it from the start. Should've included my family while making one of the most important decisions of my life. Now I'll have everyone's favorites. I started with yours because, well"—I let out a nervous laugh—"I have plenty of steak to make Pop Russo's Steak Pizzaiola. I plan on adding Mama Russo's Gnocchi because, let's face it, gnocchi is your favorite, right, Ma?" I gave her a facetious wink and she laughed.

"Do you think I was born yesterday, Burcardo? I'm not walking into that one"—she grabbed my hand, a tear sliding down her cheek—"but I do love you. So much. Thank you."

I nodded and squeezed her hand back. "I'll add Sal's Chicken Piccata, and so on, but that'll take a little more planning."

My mom's eyes glistened with tears. "Burcardo, it's perfect. Your father and I really want to show you our support, too. Right, Carmine?"

He nodded with a determined set to his jaw. "Here and back home. I won't assume anymore that my kids know I'm proud of them. I've learned my lesson. After all, words are important."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Yeah, so are actions. I'll do better, too." Did I think it was all magically going to be easy between my dad and I? Not in the slightest. We were both stubborn, Italian men, after all. But I was willing to take the necessary first steps needed to heal our relationship if he was. If for no other reason, it was worth the smile lighting up my mom's face.

“Did Anna already take your orders? If not, I can.” This was so similar to the last disastrous night they were here, except this time, I felt more on solid ground with my parents.

“Not yet, but we know what we want,” my mom answered.

“Let me guess...two steak pizzaiolas?”

“Actually...” My mom gave my dad a look across the table, but I forced myself to hold my smile and have faith there wouldn’t be a repeat of the other night. “We’ll have Pop Russo’s Steak Pizzaiola and...”

“...the Chef’s Special, medium rare,” my dad finished. “We couldn’t decide because they both sound so good, so we’re sharing them.”

My dad was meeting me halfway. Relief...happiness... *pride*...on a level I’d never felt before overwhelmed me. I cleared my throat and nodded. “That can be arranged.”

An hour later, after my parents ate every bite of food on their plates and raved about their meals, I walked them out into the lobby of the inn. “Thanks for coming back. For giving this place a chance with an open mind.”

My dad slapped me on the back of the shoulder. “Trust us, it’s no hardship to have a delicious dinner cooked by our son.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that more than you know.” I nudged my head back toward the restaurant. “I’ve gotta get back to it. I’m working late tonight, but I’ve cleared my schedule as much as I could with the festival right around the corner. I want to spend some time with you before you go.”

“We’d love that, my little gnocchi.”

“I would, too.”

A HANDFUL OF HOURS LATER, I found myself outside Jared’s house, like I had so many times in the last two months. I knocked on the door, my pulse spiking when he opened it, wearing those gray sweats again and nothing else.

“I don’t fuck out of pity,” I immediately said, bracing my hands on the doorframe.

Jared widened his stance, crossing his arms over his defined chest, his head tilted to the side as he studied me. “So I’ve heard.”

“I’ve been known to fuck out of anger. I’ve even been known to fuck just from being in close proximity to a really sexy fisherman.”

Jared huffed in amusement. “I mean, why wouldn’t you? What’s a fisherman without good bait?”

I stepped into his house, closing in on him, but instead of taking steps back, he held his ground and grabbed my waist, his bare chest pressed against my T-shirt. “What’s your take on fucking out of necessity...because you just had a really good day and there’s only one person you want to share it with?”

He casually shrugged one shoulder. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“Am I the one you want to share it with?” There was a spark of apprehension in his eyes, one I knew would take time to make completely go away. Hell, I had no idea how to be in a relationship. All I knew was I really wanted to be there for the long haul.

“Every damn time,” I whispered against his mouth.

“Then don’t ask stupid questions. You do realize, though, that it sounds like a more-than-one night plan, right?”

“Fisherboy?”

“Yeah?”

“Fucking kiss me already.”

Jared closed his mouth over mine and I swore time just stood still. I wrapped my arms tightly around his trim waist as his arms hugged my neck. It was amazing how right all this felt once I stopped denying I wanted him.

Without warning, I was practically knocked off balance by one very eager German Shepherd, determined to weasel his

way between Jared and I. Jared laughed against my mouth then looked down, scratching the eager dog behind his ears. “Go lay down, boy. Trust me, he’s not gonna hurt me”—Jared shot me a wicked smirk—“unless I want him to, but that’s something else entirely.”

“Fuck yeah,” I breathed out then took his mouth again and backed him down the hall toward his room. Brutus bounced off our legs the entire way there, but when we got inside the bedroom, Jared told him to go lay down and carefully shut the dog out of the room.

Frantically, we tore at each other’s clothes, desperate for skin-on-skin. As soon as we were both naked, I pulled him down on the bed with me, blanketing his body with my bigger frame. The feel of his bare cock sliding with mine, his warm breath on my face, the look in his eyes that was a mixture of awe and fire... I never expected to have this man beneath me, staring at me the way he was. I never expected this tidal wave of emotions to wash over me, stealing my breath as I tumbled into something dangerously close to love.

I buried my face in his neck to escape the onslaught of feelings I didn’t really know how to express.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Jared cupped the sides of my head and lifted my face so he could look in my eyes.

I shook my head, embarrassed of the fact that I couldn’t control my emotions. Clearing my throat, I said in a raspy whisper, “Nothing. I’m good.”

“Are you sure?” His gaze landed on my neck, no longer meeting mine.

Fuck, I did a damn good job of confusing him, yet again. It wasn’t something I wanted to excel at. “Yeah, I’m sure, just... still getting used to having you in a place no one has ever been before.”

Thankfully, he met my eyes once more. “Oh yeah? And where’s that?”

“Inside me.” I groaned and dropped my head to his shoulder. I really sucked at words.

Jared laughed and reached behind me, grabbing my ass. “Have you forgotten I’ve been there before? Fuck knows I want to be again.”

I snorted, could’ve taken the easy way out and let him think that’s what I meant, but I’d done that for too many years. “I meant here.” I took his hand and pressed it over my heart, trying to ignore the rush of heat flooding my face with the cheesy words. “Under my skin...in a damn condo...planting trees I didn’t even know I wanted.”

But Jared didn’t laugh or take his hand away. Instead, he whispered back, “I want to be there, too.”

I eagerly took his mouth again, let him roll us both until he was on top of me. There was a difference between fucking someone and letting someone imbed themselves into everything you were. As he got me ready, opened my more-than-ready body, and pushed his sheathed cock inside me, I felt him in every cell. Felt him drive himself deeper into every single part of me, attaching himself to the point that I didn’t know where he ended and I began. It hit me that there was nothing weak about falling for someone. That jump was fucking terrifying, but when it was the right person...when it was Jared...I suddenly wanted to run toward that cliff and dive off the edge. It was the biggest trust fall of my life, but all I wanted to do was take the leap with this man. So, as my orgasm built and I let go of everything I had, as Jared called out my name and pulsed inside me, that’s exactly what I did.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Walking on the boardwalk had always been a source of comfort for me. Living in Coral Pointe...in paradise...was something so many people dreamed of and I lived every single day. I'd been content with my quiet life until a stubborn caveman made a ripple in the water. Now walking the boardwalk felt different...new...because I had that man walking beside me. Man, the tides had turned really fucking fast over the last few days, but I couldn't say I was at all sorry about it. Was Burke still going to drive me nuts? Absolutely and probably every chance he got. But our little jabs hit differently now. I had no doubt we'd still challenge each other, and honestly, that played a huge part in who we were to each other.

My phone rang in my pocket and I pulled it out, staring at the screen with a sudden unease.

"Who is it?" Burke stopped walking, putting a hand on my arm to stop me, too.

"My dad."

"You don't have to answer it. We have plans." The anger simmering in his eyes, in defense of me, was something I needed time to get used to, but man, I fucking loved it.

"He'll probably just keep calling and ruin dinner anyway." I blew out a breath before answering, "Hello?"

"Jared, I'm glad I caught you." *Huh? Where's the hatred in his voice?* "Listen, your mother and I were hoping we could

meet you somewhere. Maybe get a cup of coffee and talk? This feud in our family has gone on too long.”

“Why the sudden change of heart? I thought you hated me?”

My dad sighed. You know, one of those sighs that meant he thought I was being ridiculous. “We never *hated* you, Jared.”

I rubbed my chest to try and stop the ache. Maybe a year ago I would’ve tried to mend fences, but after everything that had happened, how did we move forward from here? “I don’t know, Dad. A week ago you made it pretty clear you wanted nothing to do with me.”

“Do you really think we don’t want a relationship with our son? Of course, we do. So much so that I’m not contesting the will anymore.”

“What?”

I could tell by the anger in Burke’s eyes he not only heard what my dad said, but he didn’t believe a word of it. Burke stood in front of me, vehemently shaking his head no. I got it, but there was a small part of me that wanted to believe I meant something to them. That money *wasn’t* more important than love and family.

My phone buzzed in my ear with another incoming call. I glanced at the screen, my brows drawing together. “Dad, hold on. I’m getting another call.”

“Jared—”

I didn’t hear the rest of what he said, accepting the phone call coming in. As soon as I said hello, the man said, “Jared, it’s Harold Nelson. I’ve got some news for you.”

My grandpa’s attorney. My fingers locked tight around the phone, and with the other hand, I put the call on Speaker so Burke could hear it clearly. Fuck knows I was confused as hell with the turn of events.

“Okay,” I finally responded, holding Burke’s gaze like a lifeline. I wanted this all to be over. I wanted to live my life...

the life I'd always loved...with one man by my side.

"Your father is no longer contesting the will." So, my dad was telling the truth?

"He just told me. I have to say, I didn't believe him."

"I don't blame you, but you can rest easy now."

"Did he give a reason why?" Burke suddenly asked.

Harold laughed. "Either there's something wrong with my hearing or your voice just dropped two octaves."

I cocked a brow at Burke who shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry, I'm not alone. So...*did* he give a reason why?"

"Money is what I gathered."

"Meaning?" I grabbed Burke's hand and gripped it so tight the man winced.

"Well, their lawyer reached out to me. I sent him a copy of the will along with the steps we'd taken to make sure the will met all legal guidelines. It didn't take him long to get back to me, and from the sounds of it, their lawyer knew they didn't have a case. It would've cost your father tens of thousands of dollars with a pretty low probability of actually winning."

"Son of a bitch," Burke whispered.

A rock sank like the Titanic to the pit of my stomach. Now it all made sense. "Thanks, Harold. For everything."

"My pleasure."

I took a deep breath then switched the call back to my dad. "Sorry, Dad. You were saying?"

He sighed into the phone again. That same sigh of inconvenience I'd heard all my life. "I was saying, I've taken the necessary steps to set this feud aside, so we can be a family again, by no longer contesting the will. I see no reason why you shouldn't meet me halfway." His tone had drastically changed from a few minutes before, most likely insulted that I'd put him on hold. And then he said exactly what I needed to hear to finally move on from all this. "You know that's what your grandpa would want you to do."

My grandpa's words, handwritten by him, came back to me. He knew they'd do this, and it was exactly why he'd reminded me not to let them make me feel guilty. "Gee, Dad, I wish I could find the time. You know how it is...not being able to find a spare minute for a parent. Well, it was good talking with you, but it's time for me to put the fish on ice and turn the sign to Closed." Burke rolled his lips in, holding in a laugh. I stared into the man's deep brown eyes and everything settled into place. "My family...the one actually worth a damn...is waiting for me. But, don't worry. I know it's next to impossible for some people to make time for family. So damn difficult, right? So, I'll make this really easy for you. Don't call me again. Don't come back to Coral Pointe. I'm fine here without all of you."

I ended the call, staring at the screen with a mix of emotions. The feeling that stood out the most, though, was relief, and didn't that say a lot?

"Are you okay?" Burke rubbed my arms. I sensed he wasn't quite sure if he should celebrate with me or mourn.

"I'm amazing, actually. You can't miss what you never had, right?" I huffed and shook my head. "The only time I ever talked to them was when I called them about Grandpa. Hell, I hadn't even spoken to them on a single holiday this past year. And you know what? I didn't miss them. Now that Grandpa's gone, the rope tied around me attached to all that weight I've been carrying finally snapped." I breathed in deeply then let it go. "I really do feel like I can breathe again. I guess there's my answer, huh?"

Burke leaned in and kissed me softly. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah." I slid my hand down, linking my fingers with his. We'd only held hands in public once before. Neither one of us were really the type to need that all the time, but right now, I needed his hand in mine, and he gave it to me, without question.

Burke

FORD COULDN'T SIT STILL next to me, his nervous eyes shooting warily to my mom and then back to me. "Oh my God, I feel like I'm being chosen for the Fellowship of the Cuisine." He rubbed his clammy hands on his thighs. "Do I stand? Bow? Kneel? Offer my surfboard as a weapon of protection?"

I barked out a laugh and slapped my best friend on the back. "I can't believe I'm gonna say this, but don't ever change, Ford."

The Sunscreen Festival started tomorrow night, so we'd blocked off an area of Oceanside, each and every one of my friends making time to have a big dinner with my parents.

"I love that, Mama Russo," Sage said to my mom, squeezing her hand. "Little bruschetta has a nice ring to it."

"And you can't have bruschetta without tomatoes," my mom added, patting Levi's cheek, who she'd dubbed little tomato because of how easily the guy blushed. She was in her element, giving each of my friends a nickname, which you could bet your ass I was going to use against them if I heard one more "little gnocchi" crack.

Noah was little fettuccine, of course because of his long stature, while Hunter was little rigatoni and Logan was dubbed little pignoli. Cole laughed at his name of little sambuca, and Aiden puffed out his chest at the name little whiskey. That left Ford and Abe.

"Of course, Mr. Yoga Teacher," she said to Abe, "you need a name that's as flexible and thin as you are. Hmm..." My mom tapped her lips in thought. "I know. You're my little spaghetti." She honest-to-God *booped* him on the nose, making Abe chuckle. Honestly, the fact that all my friends were letting her Mama Bear them meant more to me than I could say.

"And, you...last but certainly not least," she said to Ford. Narrowing her eyes, she studied him.

"Oh my God, I'm so nervous," Ford whispered to me out of the corner of his mouth.

My mom's eyes lit up and she held up a finger. "I've got it. Little eggplant!"

Ford's jaw dropped but the rest of us broke into hysterics. "Uh..."

She innocently asked, "What? No good?"

He laughed nervously. "You see, Mama Russo, there's this double meaning... That emoji... An eggplant being described as *little*... How do I say this?" His head whipped to me, panic setting in. "No, seriously, how do I say this?"

I slapped Ford on the back, laughing so hard I had to catch my breath. "Ma, stop messin' with him." Then to him, I said, "She has five kids and loves Facebook. She knows what it means."

Ford's head jerked back toward my mom as he said, "Oh, that was mean, Mama Russo," but immediately started laughing with the rest of us.

My mom shrugged her shoulders and giggled. "I couldn't resist."

My dad sighed and hung his head, laughing under his breath. "Sophia..."

She leaned down and kissed Ford's head. "Remember, I tease because I love. Okay, how about...little meatball?"

Ford pouted. "Why doesn't that make me feel any better?"

"Goes perfectly with spaghetti..." my mom singsonged.

Ford took one look at Abe then turned his head back to my mom with a goofy smile. "Sold."

I draped my arm on the back of Jared's chair, my foot already propped up on the bar under him. Within the last few days, I'd had a hard time giving the guy personal space. Before the hurricane, I'd gotten used to the fact that Jared and I would never be more than sarcastic assholes to each other. Now, there was no going back. After the way he'd just let go of his worthless family and claimed us all instead, something shifted in his demeanor. I could practically see he no longer carried that heavy burden of trying to keep his family

connected. The connection I had to him, though, felt stronger than ever.

“Is everyone ready for dessert,” my employee, Jeff, asked and immediately my back straightened. I caught his eye and the guy gave me a knowing smile as everyone answered a resounding *yes*.

Jeff handed the printed paper to Jared first, then walked around the table and dispersed them.

“Burke...” Jared said in a shaky, disbelieving voice as he stared down at the printed words. “Is this...?”

“A permanent part of the menu? Yup. I made these up in my office, but it’ll be added to the Russo’s Specials Board as a daily item.”

“Well, this is new. *Jared’s Cannolis?*” Sage teased, but I had only had eyes for Jared.

“That specials board used to mean something else entirely,” Ford scoffed, remembering how I’d threatened to put his eggplant and meatballs on there if he pissed me off.

“Yeah, well, now it’s a place of honor, which means your sorry butt isn’t going on it.” I nudged Ford’s shoulder, but when I turned back to Jared, I sucked in a breath at the level of intensity in his eyes.

“A place of honor, huh?”

“Yeah. You okay with that?” Jesus, it never even occurred to me that this was a huge fucking leap from *It’s never gonna happen* to *You belong on that board as part of my family...as part of me*.

The sexy smile that spread across his face and the happiness springing up in his eyes made me feel like a king. “I think I can handle that.”

“You *think?*”

Jared barked out a laugh then leaned in and kissed me. It was short and ridiculously sweet, if the cheering from the rest of those goofballs meant anything. “That’s the second time we’ve received a round of applause after kissing.”

I huffed, leaning closer to him so only he could hear. “We did a hell of a lot more than kiss that first time.”

Jared patted my thigh and wiggled his brows. “Trust me, my kitchen table remembers.”

“WE’RE JUST gonna walk around, Burcardo. Take it all in,” my mom—or should I say, Cruella de Vil—said, taking my dad’s arm. My dad would do most things for my mom, but putting on a T-shirt with black spots was about as close to a Dalmatian as he was going to get.

“Okay. Have fun.”

“That is the cutest damn costume I’ve ever seen, big guy.” Sage held his stomach, pulling my attention away from my parents while he laughed in front of Oceanside’s tent.

“What’s wrong with it?” I cocked a brow, planting my hands on my hips as I waited for the goofball to stop laughing. “I mean, you’re a pumpkin, for fuck’s sake. I didn’t think you were supposed to wear a costume like that after the age of five.”

Sage sighed as he calmed his laughter. Then he nudged his head, his eyes landing on something behind me. “It’ll make sense now that my man’s here, right, Levi?”

I turned around and looked at Levi’s shirt in confusion, then saw his flushed face and shy smile...and I busted out laughing. “You are not wearing a shirt that says *Peter Peter*.”

“Oh, but he is,” Sage said, wiggling his brows before Levi could even open his mouth. “My pumpkin eater is fine as hell. Wait, show them your accessory!”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Levi grumbled and pulled a plastic fork out of his pocket, but there was no denying the love in his eyes for the crazy, smaller man currently cracking himself up.

“What’s so funny?” Ford stepped under the tent and took one look at me. “Whoa. Now, there’s a look.”

I looked down at the orange potato sack I was wearing then pointed at him. “You’re one to talk, David Hasselhoff. Not very creative, if you ask me. You wear those red swim shorts every day.”

Ford locked eyes with me and straightened his brown, fluffy wig with one hand, holding a *Baywatch* rescue buoy in the other.

“Jesus, did you get two wigs?” I looked at him up and down and cringed.

He puffed out his chest...his *hairy* chest...only partially obscured by a red windbreaker. “No one insults The Hoff.” Ford tugged Abe to his side. “Right, baby?”

Abe huffed out a laugh. It was hard to take anything he said seriously with his neon pink 80s short shorts, blond curly wig held on his head with a teal sweatband, and bright yellow tank top. Especially with Team Yoga-Bendy printed on the front. “I love you, but your chest hair has taken on a life of its own.”

Ford finally noticed Sage...and then looked at Levi...and then back at Sage again and groaned, covering his eyes. “Oh, man! I can never unsee it!”

Sage busted out laughing all over again, doubled over with tears.

“It’s a good thing our little guy can’t read yet,” Noah said as he walked over with his family, looking at Levi’s tee.

“Well, aren’t you three stinkin’ cute,” Sage said, his laughter finally subsiding.

Noah’s Jolly Green Giant face lit up as he wrapped his arm around his farmer standing next to him with an equally lovesick look in his eyes. “Isn’t it great? I mean, how could we resist that cute little peapod costume?” He crouched down next to Logan sitting in the stroller. “Right, buddy?” He kissed Logan’s little fingers then stood back up, hooking his arm once

again around Hunter. “I’d let this man harvest my crops any day of the week.”

Hunter barked out a laugh along with the rest of us. “And you’re worried about our son reading Levi’s T-shirt?”

Noah’s goofy Cheshire grin melted into a deliriously happy, watery smile. “I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of hearing that.”

“Careful, Jolly, you’re gonna smear your face with those sappy tears,” I teased, but the thought of feeling exactly what he was feeling right then didn’t scare me as much as it used to.

“What’s going on?” Cole stepped under the tent and set one of the coolers on the ground, Aiden right behind him.

I snorted. “Did you and Ford shop at the same fluffy brown wig store?”

Cole shrugged. “Bob Ross without big hair is like Bob Ross without a painting palette.”

“What are you supposed to be?” Ford asked Aiden.

Aiden wrapped his arm around Cole’s waist, proudly wearing a garland of fake leaves. “Duh. I’m his happy little tree.” We all laughed. Aiden looked me up and down, a huge smile growing on his face. “Oh, wow. Is Jared gonna be Indiana Jones? ’Cause he’s sure got you whipped already.”

I put my hands on my hips and straightened to my full height. “Listen, I’m a man confident enough in his own”—I looked down at my outfit—“fake animal skin. Your words have no power here.”

“Damn, Cave Dweller. It looks good on you.” My skin prickled hearing Jared’s voice behind me and I turned around. “Or, should I say Fred?” The heat scorching in his eyes as he looked me over was hot enough to grill the hamburgers chillin’ in the cooler.

I arched an eyebrow as I took in what he was wearing. “What’s with you and Ford wearing things you already own?” Jared’s shoulders shook as he laughed, the fishing lures shaking on his hat with the movement. He had a Jimmy

Buffett tee tucked into his waist-high waders and hunter green fishing boots that came up to the middle of his calves. Brutus stood right by his side with his own fishing vest on.

Jared pointed to the blue ribbon on his chest. “I’ve never been the winner of a fishing tournament, though.”

I stared at the words printed in the center of the ribbon and read, “Biggest Stubborn Bass,” out loud. Then a wicked smile grew on the man’s face as he lifted his fishing pole—and everyone around me fucking lost it.

There was my picture, attached to the hook at the end of Fisherboy’s fishing line.

“Oh shit,” Ford said through peals of laughter. “He got you hook, line, and sinker.”

My jaw dropped, laughter I couldn’t hold back bursting out of me. Fucking hell, I was his hook, line, and sinker, wasn’t I? I scrubbed my hand over my face and sighed. “You’re lucky I love you, Fisherboy.” As soon as the words left my mouth, my jaw fell open again, my eyes blew wide, and I swore all the blood rushed from my body. The laughter surrounding me abruptly stopped, but the smile on Jared’s face grew even bigger.

“We should start setting up, right, guys?” Noah said, pulling our friends away as I stood there like a Smithsonian caveman exhibit in the middle of the Sunscreen Festival.

I swallowed hard, hearing a ringing in my ears as I stared and floundered in front of the fisherman.

Jared closed the distance between us, his face inches from mine. “Breathe, Burke.”

I drew in a deep breath, licked my dry lips, and flexed my fingers, trying to get back some semblance of control. “What just happened?”

“That one feeling of yours just came out in a big fucking way.” He studied my eyes for a second, searching for something I wasn’t quite sure I possessed but really fucking wanted to.

“Yeah, it did,” I said softly, still shocked I’d just said that out loud, in front of an audience. “I don’t have the right words...I never have the right words...except to say it won’t be with anyone else.”

His light brows drew together. “What won’t be with anyone else?”

“The person you open your heart up to...share adventures with. That spot is taken.” I hung my head and groaned, pressing my thumb and forefinger into the inner corners of my eyes, heat flushing my face. “Damn, that sounded so much smoother in my head.”

Jared cupped my cheek and made me look at him. “You really are determined to catch me off guard.”

I snorted and gripped his hip tightly with one hand. “I’m pretty sure I caught myself off guard...again.” Without overthinking it, I leaned in and kissed him...in the middle of the fairgrounds...surrounded by catcalls and cheers. When we finally broke apart, I said, “We need to stop before the bone under this get-up causes chaos in Coral Pointe.”

“Gives a whole new meaning to the name *Sunscream*.” We both laughed, still holding on to one another.

My fingers found the fishing line with my picture dangling from the hook as I lifted it up between us. “Are you gonna leave me hanging forever?”

“Where’s the tequila when I need it?” He laughed, wrapping his arm around my waist to stop me from moving away.

I pulled him tighter against my body and growled. “If you’re implying you need an out—” I didn’t finish what I was saying, too busy kissing Jared back...

When we broke apart again, Jared leaned his forehead on mine. “You really are gonna drive me crazy for the rest of my life, huh, Cave Dweller?”

“You better fucking believe it.”

He sighed dramatically. “Then I guess it’s a good thing I love you, too.”

He barely had the words out when I replied in a campy voice, “Yabba Dabba Do, Fisherboy,” before devouring his mouth again.

EPILOGUE

Seven months later...

“Okay, I wasn’t expecting to see that again.” I scratched my chin, staring in confusion at the wooden booth situated in Cole and Aiden’s backyard. “They don’t think that thing’s being used today, do they?” The bottom of the booth was painted a crisp white instead of red, white, and blue, but the sign at the top still proudly boasted the words *Kissing Booth*. “Because I ain’t kissin’ all you dumbasses, and I can kiss Jared any damn time I want without having to pay someone five bucks.”

“So romantic,” Jared said with a laugh, shaking his head.

I hooked my finger through Jared’s belt loop and yanked him against me. “Hey, you knew what you were getting into when you chose me.”

He rolled his eyes as our friends snickered. “God help me, I did, didn’t I?” Still, he leaned up and kissed me. “There you go. Free of charge.”

“Damn right it is,” I grumbled.

“Hey, wait a minute.” Sage put his hands on his hips and scowled. “Wasn’t it two dollars? I made the first sign for Cole. I clearly remember it being two dollars.”

Ford gripped Sage’s shoulder and sighed. “That’s the price of inflation, my friend.”

“Is it just me or does this feel like more than just a Memorial Day barbeque?” Billy, Sage’s sister, looked

speculatively around the yard.

“Yeah, since when do we use table cloths, real plates, and utensils for cookouts?” Abe agreed.

Ford waved his hand toward the tables. “And where are the chips and salsa and coolers of beer?”

Jared slowly turned to me, light brow arched as he studied me. “Almost feels like something a catered party would need.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I glanced over his head to the backdoor of the house, willing it to open.

“You slept at your place the past two nights and told me to meet you here today.”

“Yeah? So? I told you I wasn’t feeling well.” Seriously, where the hell were Cole and Aiden?

Jared cleared his voice then dropped its cadence, mimicking me. “*Man, I think I’m coming down with something. I better stay at my place a couple nights just to be safe.*” Jared faced me and stared right into my eyes, searching for the truth that I knew he’d see after so many months together. “Come to think of it, you sound magically better. No congestion to be found.” His jaw dropped, eyes widening in amusement. “And here I was worrying you wouldn’t get better in time for our trip to California, and your mom would be devastated.”

Sage gasped, pointing a finger at me. “I sent soup to your house because Levi thought you were sick!”

I smiled wickedly. “It could’ve used more salt.”

Sage’s eyes widened as he sucked in a deep breath. “Oh, you wanna tussle, big guy?”

I laughed, crossing my arms over my chest. “I’d like to see you try.”

Sage scoffed incredulously. “Levi will defend my honor, won’t you, Levi?” Sage batted his long, black lashes at his fiancé.

“Sure. If you don’t mind my face being rearranged. I’m sure our wedding photos will still be...breathtaking.”

I exhaled in relief when reinforcements finally showed up. “Oh look. There are Cole’s parents.” However, the business casual duds Cole’s dad was in and the blue dress Helen was wearing promised a whole heck of a lot more than baby back ribs and corn on the cob.

It was then Cole and Aiden came out of their house holding hands, both clad in black dress pants, Cole wearing a light blue button-down and Aiden in a deep eggplant. Luckily, all eyes left me and focused on them.

Sage was the first to put two and two together, bouncing on the balls of his feet and clapping his hands. “Cuz, is this what I think it is?”

“No, it is not a Saging party,” Aiden answered deadpan. Jim came out of the house behind him, dressed in his Sunday best.

“Oh my God, it *is* what I think it is, isn’t it?” Sage covered his mouth, already getting misty-eyed.

“Anyone gonna clue the rest of us in?” Ford looked completely confused, but his eyes lit up with recognition when the officiant stepped out of the house behind Jim. “No way! You’re getting married right now?”

“Yup,” Cole and Aiden said at the same time, looking at each other like lovesick fools. Fine, maybe not *fools*, but they both had big, dopey grins on their faces.

Jared wrapped his arms tightly around my waist and looked up at me with those blue-gray eyes that immediately pulled me in. “Tell me again how you’re not a big softy.”

“*Pssh...* Me? Soft? I think I’ve demonstrated over and over again that I don’t get soft. In the kitchen, in the shower, on your boat...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. We get the picture. You can do it on a plane. You can do it on a train. For the love of my ears,” Ford whined, “would you make sure I’m out of hearing range before you start listing off places you’ve defiled?”

While keeping my eyes on Jared, I reached out and covered Ford's face, pushing him away. "The list is too long anyway."

"Okay, I think everyone's here," Cole announced, smiling at Aiden as he shook their joined hands. "You ready to do this future Mr. Sullivan-Rafferty?"

"More than ready future Mr. Sullivan-Rafferty." Aiden led Cole over to the kissing booth and stood in front of it as the officiant walked around the other side.

Cole glanced nervously around at all of us and shrugged. "It felt like a full-circle moment to have our first kiss as husbands be next to the same booth we had our very first kiss as almost-boyfriends."

"Thanks to his mama," Helen proudly boasted. She loved taking full responsibility for that, even if her original plan had backfired that day.

Cole snorted. "In a roundabout way."

The officiant began the ceremony, with all of us—one big, happy, chaotic family—gathered around them. As Cole and Aiden talked about being each other's light so they could find their way out of darkness, I wrapped my arms around Jared's shoulders from behind. It wasn't so hard to imagine us up there, having something simple like this, with all of these people—plus my family in California—surrounding us. We'd gotten closer than I ever thought possible over the last several months. I rarely slept at home anymore—well, except to make food for a wedding on the sly.

All Jared's grandparents had wanted was for their home to be filled with love. I'd made it a personal mission to bring as much love and happiness into that home as possible on a daily basis. Our relationship was by no means perfect, and we challenged each other every chance we got. Somehow, that had only made us grow closer until it was impossible for me to see a future without Jared in it.

Jared's grandpa had wanted this for him. To surround himself with love and have new adventures. I couldn't imagine

a more worthy group of people than the ones watching on with tears in their eyes while Cole and Aiden promised each other forever.

“I hear you sniffing back there,” Jared said softly. “There’s no dust out here to blame this time, Burke.”

“I have a cold, remember?”

Jared laughed softly and kissed my forearm. I wiped my eyes quickly and blew out a shaky breath, but as Cole and Aiden kissed as husbands, damned if my eyes weren’t blurry again.

We all cheered and crowded in on the happy couple, one by one hugging them. The officiant offered to take a picture of our whole family. Once several photos were taken of our whole group and the newlyweds, Cole grabbed my arm. “Ford, Levi, and Noah, let’s get one of just the five of us.”

We wrapped our arms around each other’s shoulders and waists, ready to take a photo of the group of men who’d arrived in Coral Pointe together nearly four years ago. There would always be that bond with the five of us; a connection I’d have with my chosen brothers for the rest of my life.

But, as my eyes met Jared’s, a surge of love for him overwhelmed me. Sometimes I wasn’t sure how the hell I’d gotten here, but I was a stubborn man and there was no chance I was letting him go now.

“You’ve got a strange look in your eyes,” Jared said, his brows pulled together as he studied me.

I pulled him into my arms. “I was just thinking about that stubborn bass you caught several months ago.”

“Yeah?”

“You used some pretty powerful bait on that sucker.”

“Bait is my specialty, after all. Once I had that stubborn bass on the hook, there was no way I was letting him go again.”

“So, what you’re sayin’ is, I’m a pretty damn good catch.” I wiggled my eyebrows and dove in for a kiss.

Jared laughed against my mouth. “Uh, I think what I’m sayin’ is, I’m a pretty fucking awesome fisherman, Cave Dweller.”

I leaned my forehead against his and closed my eyes, breathing in everything that was Jared. “Thanks for not tossing me back in the water, Fisherboy.”

I felt a whisper against my lips seconds before Jared pressed a kiss against my eager mouth. My life had taken a pretty drastic turn since a hurricane stormed in and turned my world upside down. Damned if that tidal wave hadn’t made me realize I’d been Jared’s from the second I’d laid eyes on him.

Hook, line, and sinker.

The End.

Want more Burke and Jared? Be sure you’re [signed up for my newsletter](#) to receive your free Baiting Burke bonus scene!

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Sadly this is the end of the Shore Thing series...

but...

You never know...I might visit Coral Pointe again and take you all with me!

The best place to keep up with me and future releases is to join my Facebook readers' group:

[Quinn's Cove](#)

Reviews are always appreciated and really help to get my name out there! If you've enjoyed my books, please consider putting a review on Amazon and Goodreads. Thanks!

I'd love to hear from you! Here are all my SM links. You can find me on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Jenn, Annabella, Steph, Riley, Morningstar, Meredith, and Amanda! You've all helped me in one way or another whether it was letting me bounce ideas off you, letting me vent, or encouraging me when I doubted myself. It means the world to me. Love you all!