



HEAT STROKE

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TESSA BAILEY

HEAT STROKE

A Beach Kingdom Novel

by Tessa Bailey

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CHAPTER ONE

GOD SAVE HIM from confused straight guys.

Jamie Prince used the book he was reading to block Marcus “Diesel” O’Shaughnessy from view. Not an easy feat, considering Marcus was six foot five in a slouch and looked like he should be holding a championship wrestling belt over his head. It was Saturday morning, their lifeguard meeting was in full swing and the idiot wouldn’t stop making faces at Jamie across the locker room.

Marcus had been a fixture at the beach for the last three summers and the meathead never failed to get under Jamie’s skin, but life had been so much easier when their relationship was purely based on shit talking. It was one of his favorite pastimes and his above average IQ guaranteed that he basically slayed in a battle of words. Unfortunately, Marcus showed up each summer progressively confused about what *exactly* made his dick hard.

Jamie recognized the signs.

He’d been down this road before and fallen off the eventual cliff.

Sign number one. On Memorial Day weekend, also known as the day the Long Beach lifeguards begin manning their chairs, Marcus had walked into the locker room with a naked woman tattooed on his forearm. *Hello, overcompensation, you’re looking well.*

Sign number two. He wouldn’t leave Jamie the fuck alone.

Everywhere Jamie went, so went Marcus.

Which took a lot of effort, considering Jamie remained on the move almost every hour of the day in the summertime. During the rest of the year, he taught economics at one of the top college prep schools in the five boroughs. But the summer months were reserved for the family businesses. Beach and bar. He could almost always be found at one or the other, Marcus hovering somewhere in his periphery.

The nights Jamie bartended at the Castle Gate? Marcus played bouncer, checking IDs and escorting troublemakers out to the boardwalk by the scruff of their necks.

When Jamie's older brother, Andrew, made the lifeguarding schedule and assigned their chair numbers? Marcus always requested the chair next to Jamie's.

Those two signs were enough to know Marcus was peeking out of the closet and seeing a whole new, scary world. Jamie was *not* going to play his tour guide.

Unfortunately—and this was a *massive* drawback—Jamie kind of... maybe...didn't mind the idiot so much. God, how *ridiculous*.

With an inward groan of pure self-disgust, Jamie buried his face in *A Brief History of Time* for a moment and gathered his resolve, Andrew's voice going in one ear and out the other, summarizing a rescue on the beach yesterday and explaining what could be improved on for next time. Only when Jamie remembered why he didn't make friends with confused straight guys on the verge of self-discovery did he lower the book—

Marcus crossed his eyes at Jamie.

Jamie fought a reluctant smile.

He wiped it clean when he caught Andrew watching him.

"All right, everyone," said Jamie's older brother, slapping his clipboard against his thigh. "It's July Fourth weekend in Long Beach, so it's safe to assume everyone on the beach is tanked. You know the deal. Pretend you don't see the odd beer, but report the hard liquor. Radio in with any fireworks activity and we'll hand it over to law enforcement." He waved everyone forward. "Come get your chair assignments."

Jamie sighed and approached his brother, Marcus converging at the same time, rifling a hand through his mess of dark blond hair and causing his CrossFit-honed bicep to pop. He was obviously preparing to make today's case for being seated in the chair closest to Jamie.

Oh no. Not today. This whole weird friendship he was developing with Marcus needed to be nipped in the bud STAT. Jamie had almost *smiled* at him a second ago.

"Put me next to Rory," Jamie said, widening his eyes at Andrew. "Someone needs to make sure he's alert and not daydreaming about Olive all day."

As if summoned by the mere mention of his girlfriend, Rory sauntered over to join them with a faraway look in his eye. "Speaking of Olive, she did the cutest thing when I was driving her to school yesterday—"

“See what I mean?” Jamie tapped his finger on Andrew’s beloved clipboard. “Lives are at stake. I better stick close to him.”

“Jamie,” Marcus cajoled. “*Jamiiiie*. Admit you want to be near me.”

Jamie dug his thumb and forefinger into his eye sockets. “If I’m not back after my shift, it’s because I’ve drowned myself. Remember me fondly. Carry on the Prince name without me.”

Marcus stepped back and gestured to his physique. “You’re really going to pass up all this eye candy?”

What am I even supposed to say to that?

If anyone else said something like that to Jamie, he would cut them off at the knees. Or, more likely, Rory would deck him. However, Marcus was the one person on the literal planet that could make the asshole assumption that Jamie had the incessant need to ogle anything with a penis simply because he was gay—and not get punched in the throat. One look at his earnest smile and it was impossible to hold anything he said against him. *God*, it was annoying.

Sometimes it was easier just to lean into it.

Jamie sighed long and hard. “Actually, Marcus you make a good point.”

“I do?”

“Yes.” Jamie nodded at Andrew’s clipboard. “You have to put me as far as possible from Marcus or I’m going to be distracted all day. How can anyone do their job effectively with all that muscle drawing their eyes like a...a beacon of manliness? It’s too much.”

Slowly, Marcus crossed his arms, looking suspicious. “Wait a minute...”

Andrew feigned being conflicted, a favor for which Jamie would definitely be paying for at a later date. “We can’t have that. Jamie, take chair one. Marcus, you’re on twelve.”

All right, so Jamie’s mental fist pump wasn’t quite as enthusiastic as it should be, especially when Marcus’s linebacker shoulders deflated. He needed to distance himself, though. They still had two months left of the summer ahead and Jamie was beginning to grow way too accustomed to having Marcus around. Hearing his ridiculous...fine, *kind of* refreshing...take on everything. And he couldn’t get used to that. Marcus wouldn’t acknowledge *why* he wanted to be around Jamie and probably never would.

Jamie might only be twenty-six years old, but he didn't wait around for miracles to happen anymore.

"Wait. Before you go..." Marcus said, holding up a finger as he returned to his locker and took out a plastic cup of green juice. Holding the cup to his chest, Marcus waited for the rest of the lifeguards to leave before he approached Jamie again. "I made you this."

"What is it?"

Marcus tapped the lid with his finger. "Juice."

"I can see that. What kind?"

"Lots of greens for energy. Lemon, kale, parsley, ginger, spinach." He pushed it higher toward Jamie's mouth. "You have to work two jobs today."

Jamie ignored the ridiculous flip flop in his stomach and took a sip, expecting it to taste terrible. Somehow it didn't. "That's...really good. Thanks."

An exhale left Marcus in a rush, like he'd been nervous about Jamie's verdict. This was when Jamie should have broken eye contact with the big muscle head and turned to leave the lifeguard hut. Instead, he found himself hesitating because Marcus was back to frowning.

"You sure you don't want to sit closer today?" Marcus asked.

With a muttered prayer for the return of his sanity, Jamie shoved one of Marcus's shoulders. *Don't dwell on how solidly he's built.* Or how Marcus's eyes followed the action, as if entranced by Jamie touching him voluntarily.

"Relax, Diesel. We're both working tonight." He ignored Rory and Andrew's rapt attention. "I'll see you then."

Marcus's too-masculine face split with a grin. "Okay, Jamie."

*

MARCUS FLIPPED THE walkie-talkie end over end in his hand, humming the jingle from a car insurance commercial that had been stuck in his head for a week. This direction of the beach was mostly retirees and they never ventured deep enough into the ocean to cause any excitement, although the senior in the purple bonnet and matching bathing suit was playing Frank Sinatra a little loud on her portable radio.

He blew out a sigh and leaned back in his chair. After making sure no one was watching, he made his pecs take turns flexing—right, left, right,

left—but even that didn’t lift his mood. Or distract him from the person who seemed to remain front and center in his thoughts lately.

Jamie Prince.

Why couldn’t he stop thinking about Jamie Prince?

That was a mystery he was determined to solve and it required spending a lot of time with Jamie. How else was he going to figure out why Jamie popped into his head at the weirdest times? Like when he was soaping himself up in the shower.

Marcus cleared his throat hard and shot a glance at the closest lifeguard chair, as if the girl occupying it might hear his thoughts. He could *not* have that. This whole thing with Jamie was probably just a couple of wires crossed in his brain. Not an unusual occurrence for Marcus “Diesel” O’Shaughnessy, he’d tell you that much. He was famous among his family for missing flights, not because he’d overslept, but because *twice* he’d mistaken the flight number for the time of departure.

It got worse.

When he was enrolled in the Nassau Community College, he’d spent the whole first semester of his freshman year in the wrong classes. Why? Because he’d been following the *sample* schedule from the school website, instead of the one he’d gotten in the mail. He’d found it roughly six months later under a stack of *Men’s Health* magazines and promptly dropped out so he’d never have to explain what actually happened to anyone’s face.

Without college as an option, he’d spent the last half a decade training at the local CrossFit gym. But ever since getting his lifeguard certification and taking summers off from training to work the beach, he counted the days until summer rolled around. Every year, it got a little harder to wait for June when he’d walk into the locker room and see Jamie.

Marcus tapped his fingers on his thigh. So he had a man crush. Didn’t males get those on each other all the time? There were entire football stadiums of dudes wearing their heroes’ jerseys, chanting their names and mooning over them on flat-screen televisions. And Marcus occasionally jerked off while thinking of Jamie’s mouth. Or the way his dark hair sometimes fell over his forehead. Or the way his triceps winked when he slid a drink across the bar.

Same thing.

Sweat broke out across Marcus's forehead and it had nothing to do with the sun beating down on him from the cloudless blue sky above. This infatuation with Jamie...it wasn't the same thing as a man crush, was it? He might have gotten away with bullshitting himself at the beginning of the summer, but the more time he spent with Jamie, the more he kind of *needed* to be around him. Marcus couldn't explain it. If a day passed without him seeing Jamie, it wasn't complete.

"Jesus," he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. "Snap out of it, Diesel."

Thing was, Marcus had told himself to cut it out before. He'd ordered himself to start picking up girls and bringing them home again, but over the last few years, he'd just lost his enthusiasm for the dating game. Getting a chick's number used to be his sole mission in life and now he couldn't even spare an appreciative glance at the lifeguard in the next chair. And she was seriously hot. If Marcus's brother was there, he would be ridiculing him to no end for taking this long to run game on a girl.

Marcus caught her smiling over at him and gave a weak wave.

Why did waving suddenly feel unfaithful?

Okay. Pull it together, man.

Even if he was into dudes, which he *was not*...Jamie Prince was way out of his league. Not only did Jamie look like he could be on billboards modeling Armani underwear, he read books thicker than Marcus's johnson—and that was saying something. During the rest of the year, Jamie was an economics teacher. Yeah, the middle Prince brother was way overqualified to be working on the beach, and word among the other lifeguards was he only did it to make sure his hothead, ex-con younger brother stayed out of trouble. Although Rory had calmed way down since he'd gotten into a relationship. *Way* down.

Did that mean Jamie wouldn't lifeguard next summer?

Marcus swallowed a fistful of panic.

It didn't matter. First of all, totally not gay. Second of all, Jamie obviously didn't even want to be *friends* with him, let alone...other stuff that Marcus *definitely* didn't want to do.

So it was fine. It was fine.

Jamie's voice crackled over the walkie-talkie and Marcus's spine straightened. The public channel. He could hear it echoing from the chair

closest to his, too. “Andrew, this old hippie literally just rolled a suitcase of sparklers onto the beach and appears to be selling them. Should I congratulate him on his giant nuts or bring the man down on his head?”

Marcus laughed into a fist. Man, Jamie was funny. And smart as shit. He looked especially brainy when he wore his glasses, but when he was lifeguarding, he wore contact lenses. Which was nice, because nothing was blocking his eyes from view—

“I’ll call it in,” Andrew crackled back. “Keep him in your sights for now.”

“Roger that.”

Before Marcus knew what he was doing, he switched to a private line and radioed Jamie. “Hey Jamie.”

A sigh came back. “Hey Diesel.”

The loneliness he’d been bogged down in went away. Just like that. “You must miss me, right? The distance is killing you.”

“Yes, Marcus. ‘Morning without you is dwindled dawn.’”

“Is that from one of your brainy books?”

“It’s Dickinson.”

“Christ, Jamie. Always with dick on the brain.”

A long pause. “Why do I let you get away with that shit?”

Marcus frowned. “What shit?”

Another static-laced sigh. “Never mind. What do you want?”

“Let’s make a bet.”

“No.”

“Afraid you’ll lose?”

“Ha.”

Marcus should have said *never mind* and closed the channel of communication. Every time he was around Jamie, shit got more and more confusing. For instance, right now, his cock was hard as a fucking rock inside his red swim trunks and he refused to admit his boner had everything to do with the gruff, sarcastic voice coming through his radio. If he was hard for a *dude*...he didn’t know himself anymore. His father and brother sure as hell wouldn’t know him. They might not even *want* to know him. Not to mention his friends at the gym who worked out every day *specifically* so they could get laid easier. With *girls*. Girls seemed to be the

main topic of discussion everywhere he went. At home with his family. At the gym. On the internet.

Men who liked men were never in the mix. It simply wasn't discussed as an option among the people he knew. Ever. If he ever broached the subject, his friends would probably be weird about it. No, they *definitely* would. Everyone in his world followed the same pattern—work, lift, party, eat, sleep—he would be like a giant glop of ink on a white canvas.

Different than them.

Marcus's mother had passed away from heart disease when he was in high school. If she was still around, he thought maybe she would understand. She would love him no matter what—she'd always said as much. But confiding in his mother was no longer an option.

He didn't *have* any options, except to stop trying to spend every available moment with Jamie. As soon as this weekend was over, he'd chill. Start hanging out with his old friends again and force himself to talk to a girl or two. No excuses.

First and foremost, his dick needed to chill out. "Go down," he growled, adjusting it.

"What was that?"

"Uh..." Marcus cleared his throat. "I was just telling this lady to turn down the Frank Sinatra. I mean, I love Ol' Blue Eyes as much as the next guy...well, not *love* love, you know? Just a passing appreciation. But it's loud enough to wake him in his grave."

Nice cover, bro.

"What's the bet, Diesel? I'm intrigued."

"Uh yeah..." He rubbed his damp palm down the material of his shorts. "Pick a song."

"Any song?"

"Yeah."

"'Hallelujah' by Jeff Buckley."

"Christ." Marcus tipped his head back and laughed. "This is going to be fun," he said. "Mine is 'Baby One More Time.' Tonight at the bar, we compete to see who can get more customers to play their song on the internet jukebox. No bribery allowed."

Jamie was quiet so long, Marcus worried he'd had to go rescue someone. Or worse.

Someone was giving him a problem on the beach.

Marcus's pulse started to tick faster and faster in his ears. There was more than one reason he liked being close to Jamie's chair. More than one reason he bounced at the Castle Gate. Just in case someone fucked with Jamie. Marcus had heard the story about *the incident*. If someone bothered Jamie on the beach—or worse, harmed him—it wouldn't be the first time.

“*Jamie.*”

Still nothing.

Marcus stood up and prepared to jump down to the sand.

“Sorry,” Jamie came back, laughing. “The PD arrived. The hippie is giving me the finger.”

Marcus flopped back down into the chair and let out a shaky breath. “Are you in on the bet?” he asked, after he'd composed himself.

“What are the stakes?”

Don't do this. You shouldn't be doing this. “If you lose, you go with me tomorrow.”

Jamie scoffed. “Go with you where?”

“You only find out if you lose.”

“Ohhhh. So *this* is how murders happen.”

Marcus reared back. “Right. Like I'd let something happen to you.”

Idiot. He rapped on his forehead with a fist. *Too much.* Guys didn't say things like that to each other. His suspicion that he'd said the wrong thing was confirmed a moment later when Jamie spoke again. “If I win, Marcus...you have to stop this, all right?”

“Stop what? Being a natural born winner? I can't help it.” He rolled his eyes at himself even as he chuckled weakly into the radio. “Talk to you later, Jamie Prince. I gotta go crack down on an old lady.”

He switched off the channel before he could embarrass himself further. He dropped his head into his hands. No matter how hard he tried, no matter how much stress the truth caused him, though...he couldn't help but count the hours until the sun went down.

CHAPTER TWO

JAMIE ROLLED HIS eyes as “Baby One More Time” kicked off again over the Castle Gate loudspeakers. He’d been keeping a mental tally all night. Currently, the score was Jamie: five, Marcus: seven. And it was a testament to how loaded their customers were that no one seemed to notice the same two songs kept playing over and over again. Jamie caught Marcus grinning at him from his station at the door and gave him a look that said *the night is young, bitch*.

“Someone go fix the jukebox before I jab this cocktail stirrer in my fucking eye,” Andrew called from the other end of the teaming bar. His command received several drunken cheers from summer revelers. As usual, they were red faced, sloshed and showing no signs of going home. They were a different crowd than the one who typically patronized the Castle Gate during the rest of the year. These were Down for the Summer folks—or DFS’s as they were referred to by Long Beach locals. With no jobs to wake up for in the morning and apparently a yawning gap where their morals used to be, DFS’s typically remained in the bar until they were thrown out, and tonight would be no different.

During the summer months, after the Prince brothers ended their lifeguarding shifts at the beach, they went straight to the Castle Gate and started slinging drinks. Working the family bar their father had bought decades earlier was nothing new, but the bar’s success had become a lot more necessary because of the debt their father had left behind. Thankfully, because of Andrew’s relentless drive, the tone of the place *had* changed dramatically and money was coming in, long overdue bills were being paid. A seedier crowd that usually drew the attention of local law enforcement had been replaced with college kids and vacationers. So while the new wave of customers might be entitled and inexperienced, they’d started putting more money in the register and given the place a trendy reputation.

Their father would never see what it had become.

Jamie swatted away that disquieting thought and tipped a pint glass sideways under a steady amber stream, leaving it with just the right amount

of foam on top before he slid it across the bar toward a customer, accepting a twenty in exchange. Sitting beside *that* customer was an older man in a fitted gray T-shirt, a little salt and pepper in his hair. His gaze warmed when Jamie looked over, letting Jamie know he was interested.

There. Right there was his usual type. A mature gentleman who knew what he wanted, was secure in who he was and didn't mind everyone knowing.

In other words, the opposite of Marcus O'Shaughnessy.

Forcing himself to stop comparing Marcus to people—or thinking about him in *any* capacity—Jamie met up with Andrew at the register.

“Why couldn't the jukebox have gotten stuck on Journey or something?” Andrew muttered, his fingers flying over the touch screen. “Drunk people love Journey.”

No way Jamie was telling his brother about the bet. One, Andrew didn't like anyone fucking around on the clock and two, Jamie had no business engaging in a bet that could equal more time with Marcus. None whatsoever. “Yes. But drunk *girls* love Britney, and when girls are happy, so are the menfolk. It's basic math.”

Andrew eyeballed him while counting out singles. “Don't think I haven't noticed your favorite song is the other one that keeps playing.”

“Weird coincidence.”

“Sure.” His brother elbowed the register shut and left to return change to the customer, before lining up a row of tequila shots for another group. Jamie could feel Marcus watching him over the next half hour as he poured endless pints and so much vodka, any minute now the customers were going to start speaking in Russian. Rory returned from his dinner break in the bar's back office, Olive stumbling out behind him with a dazed expression. He picked her up by the waist and sat her down in a stool at the end of the bar, sliding a Coke in front of her. Jamie shook his head as Rory approached, his brother unable to stop glancing back at his girlfriend with each step like she might have disappeared.

“How was your dinner break?” Jamie asked dryly. “Did you actually manage to eat?”

Rory plowed a hand through his hair and winked at Jamie. “Oh, I ate.”

“Christ.”

His younger brother laughed. “Not exactly the sexiest soundtrack, but I worked with what I had.” Rory nodded at a customer and started filling the order, hitting the ground running as if he’d never taken a break. That was bartending. Like riding a bike. “What’s with the Buckley/Britney mashup?”

“How would I know?”

Rory snorted. “Give it up, man. The same two songs playing on a loop? This is the kind of puzzle that you’re usually determined to solve.”

Jamie pulled the handle on the Guinness and started building a line of pints of the inky black beer. “Why don’t you worry about the lecture Andrew is going to give you for hooking up in the break room?”

“It’s not hooking up. It’s Olive.” He shook his head on a laugh. “If it was just hooking up, I wouldn’t have to stop myself from proposing nine times a day.”

That was news to Jamie—and hell if his cynical heart didn’t twitch a little hearing it.

“Someday you will,” Jamie said, nodding briskly. “And she’ll say yes.”

“Yeah.” Rory scratched his chin, looking kind of bemused. “I think she might.”

“And you’ll beg me to be your best man and I’ll drag it out, saying ‘I don’t know, I’ll think about it,’” Jamie drawled. “Even though we both know I look the best in a suit and wouldn’t deprive anyone of seeing me in one.”

Rory’s eyes crinkled at the corners as he laughed. And in the distance, Jamie could see Olive melting into a blonde puddle while watching Rory laugh. Oh yeah. She’d say yes.

Jamie assessed his brother, taking note of how well rested he looked. How light. And *God*, he loved seeing Rory happy. When Olive showed up in the beginning of the summer, by way of Oklahoma, Jamie had been worried. Rory projected a tough image to the world—or Long Beach, as it were—and his prison record only bolstered the notion that he was bad news.

What the judgmental bastards didn’t know?

It was *Jamie’s* stupidity that had put his younger brother behind bars.

A memory of what happened on the beach six years ago caught Jamie off guard and the glass slipped out of his hands, clattering on the brass drain beneath the beer spouts. The sensation of gasping for air, the laughter...it

all welled up in his throat and ears until it drowned out the riot of voices in the Castle Gate. If the hands holding him underwater would just let him get a full *breath*—

“Hey.” Rory elbowed him, concern creasing his brow. “You all right?”

The present rushed back in like a slap to the face. “Yeah,” Jamie managed, righting the glass and continuing the pour. “Sorry. I’m great.”

But Rory was perceptive. He’d been there that evening on the beach and it had changed both of their lives. A few weeks ago, Rory had run into the man who’d given Jamie those shitty, lasting memories. The guy was back in Long Beach. Living there or visiting? Jamie didn’t know. But Rory’s encounter was probably why details of that evening had been popping up without warning more and more frequently lately.

When the happiness on Rory’s face started to ebb the longer he scrutinized Jamie, Jamie rushed to patch up the moment. He was responsible for two years of Rory’s misery. Two years of his brother stuck in a dark hole, facing danger day in and day out. Never again. Rory deserved to be happy now. Jamie would do everything in his power to make sure he stayed that way.

“Look, you know how I hate to lose a bet?”

Rory shifted on his feet, clearly suspicious over the subject change. “It’s more of an extension of the fact that you hate to be wrong.”

“Right. Which is so rare. And why I need your help.” Jamie made sure Andrew wasn’t in earshot. “I’ve got a bet with Marcus that I can get people to play more Buckley than Britney.”

“I knew it was some shit like that,” Rory said, accepting a fist full of money from a customer. “You’re not losing, are you?”

“I am, if you can believe it. I didn’t take logistics into account.” Jamie grimaced. “He’s way closer to the jukebox.”

After a moment of Rory staring at Jamie, he nudged Jamie toward the register so they could keep talking while he made change. “Hey...you know I’m in no position to give advice to anyone. Especially you, man. You’ve got your shit together in a way I probably never will.”

“Not true. Look at the responsibilities you’ve taken on here. You’re doing incredible.”

Visibly uncomfortable with the praise, his brother waved him off. “You’re putting a lot of energy into Marcus. You know?” Panic danced

across his features. “I see what’s happening. Last time—”

“I know what happened last time.” And he couldn’t handle hearing it out loud. Still. Maybe ever. “Rory. Come on, Marcus is just the asshole we put up with three months out of the year.” Saying those words left a taste of acid on his tongue and he had to pause. “What happened six years ago will never happen again. You have to trust me.”

“I do.” A tight smile spread across Rory’s face. “I do, man. You want me to ask Olive to go play some Buckley?”

“What are future sister-in-laws for?”

A few minutes later, Buckley’s voice crooned over the speakers, and despite the song’s darkly depressing meaning, not one tear was shed. Marcus caught his eye over the mass of bar patrons and made a jerk off motion in the air. Jamie feigned offense while pouring another drink. They both laughed—and it was too easy. Way too easy and dangerous to start having fun with Marcus when he was also nursing a low key attraction.

Low key. Sure.

The prick swaggered into the Hut every morning in gray sweatpants and no shirt, his free-balling cock swinging around in the right leg of his pants. He was loud, rude, unpolished and didn’t know Kerouac from karaoke. And yet, Jamie couldn’t help but wonder if Marcus would pay as much attention to him *in* bed as he did out of bed.

Right. Like I’d let something happen to you.

Marcus’s words drifted back from their walkie-talkie conversation earlier that day and an unwelcome warmth spread in Jamie’s middle. What would it be like if that protectiveness wrapped around him in the dark? Pressed the front of his body down, down into the mattress? What if he was the one who helped Marcus solve the mystery of what he really needed? If it wasn’t Jamie, it could be someone else.

A heavy weight dropped in his stomach, causing a hitch in his step while striding from one end of the bar to the other. Rory and Andrew raised their eyebrows at him.

“Baby One More Time” pumped over the loudspeaker and Jamie cursed, returning from his pointless thoughts.

“Jesus Christ,” Andrew groaned up at the ceiling.

Rory laughed, but there was still a line between his younger brother’s brow, his gaze bouncing back and forth between Marcus and Jamie. He was

worried.

Should Rory be worried?

Should *Jamie*?

Yeah. They should both be concerned—and admitting the situation had gotten this far was a cold bucket of water being poured over the top of Jamie's head.

Before Jamie could question why it felt so wrong, he leaned against the bar in front of the man in the fitted gray T-shirt with salt and pepper hair. The one who'd been not-so-subtly checking him out all night. "Hey," Jamie said. "Either ask me out or quit being creepy."

The man paused mid-sip of his gin and ginger. "Uh. Let's go out?"

Jamie took out his cell phone, punched in the security code and slid it across the bar. "Leave your number and I'll think about it."

Usually, Jamie took a lot of satisfaction catching men off guard. Or impressing them. Tonight he only encountered the smallest iota of gratification—and even that disappeared into the wind when Jamie looked over the man's shoulder to find Marcus watching the scene unfold, resembling a giant golden retriever who'd been kicked by his owner. It took every ounce of Jamie's willpower not to snatch the phone back before the man finished programming in his number.

"It's under Kurt."

"Great." Jamie's smile was tight as he took his phone back and left the guy looking flustered. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"I hope so."

Jamie couldn't concentrate for the rest of the night. He was way too aware of Marcus in the room. Where he stood, how irritable he looked. The worst part was knowing *why* he was perturbed, when even Marcus didn't know the cause himself.

Nothing I can do about it.

It wasn't until the end of the night that Jamie realized he'd forgotten all about the bet.

Marcus clearly hadn't. As he passed Jamie on his way out the door, he stopped and turned, looking uncomfortable. Like he didn't know how to act now.

"It's uh...Monster Jam. A monster truck rally. That's where I was going to make you go tomorrow, but..." He crossed his arms over his big chest,

obviously trying his best to sound casual. “Don’t worry about it, though. It was just a stupid idea. My brother bought tickets and had to back out. I can just sell them.”

Ten tons of bricks pressed down on Jamie’s chest. “You don’t want to go anymore?” He didn’t want to hear Marcus say no. He physically didn’t think he’d be able to stand it. What was wrong with him? “You won the damn bet. We’re going.”

Jesus. He’d had his way out. And he’d bypassed it.

“Really?”

Jamie sighed. “Yes.”

Marcus seemed taller all of a sudden as he backed out the front entrance of the Castle Gate, the Long Beach boardwalk lit up behind him. “See you tomorrow. Bye, Jamie.”

“Later, Diesel.”

Moron. You’re a fucking moron.

A moron who’d just agreed to attend Monster Jam.

CHAPTER THREE

MARCUS STARED DOWN at the phone in his hand, wondering if the last five minutes had actually been real. Or if this was like the time he tripped on the treadmill, hit his head and dreamed about dancing bananas. He looked at the clock. Five minutes until he was supposed to meet up with Jamie. That also seemed kind of like a dream, so no help there.

He reached down and tweaked his nipple.

“Fuck. Ow.” Rubbing the spot with the palm of his free hand, Marcus caught his reflection in the full-length mirror across the room, where it was leaned up against the wall. “Marcus O’Shaughnessy,” he murmured, rolling his shoulders back. “Entrepreneur at age twenty-four.”

Pride rolled through his stomach, but he didn’t have time to savor it now. He had a dat—a casual, low key, bro hangout that was completely not a big deal. Fine, he didn’t usually jerk himself off twice so he could stay mellow around his other guy friends, but there was no time to dwell on *that* either. He and Jamie were taking the train to Nassau Coliseum for Monster Jam, and Marcus was pretty sure if he was even one minute late, Jamie would use the excuse to bail and go read or some shit.

Or maybe call that customer from the bar.

Kurt, if Marcus had overheard the exchange accurately.

If Marcus scowled any harder at the mirror it was going to shatter. He snatched up the red Under Armour baseball cap hanging on the bedroom doorknob and fitted it backwards onto his head, heading for the door of his second-floor apartment. He was halfway down the stairs before realizing he’d forgotten his wallet and keys—again—so he jogged back up and retrieved them, locking the door and spinning on the heel of his boot toward the stairs. Crunched for time, he hustled toward the LIRR station, hoping the exertion would keep him from thinking about Jamie giving his number to the man in the bar.

No luck.

It shouldn’t be bothering him this much.

He definitely shouldn't have been kept up all night worrying Jamie had met up with the dude instead of going home after his shift at the Castle Gate. It was *none* of his business.

Marcus was so distracted by his thoughts, he didn't hear his name being called until the person was shouting in exasperation—and that person was his brother, Joey. On the other side of the avenue, his brother was smoking a cigarette outside the diner, a to-go cup of coffee in his hand. He was still wearing his Sanitation Department jumpsuit from his shift collecting the trash that morning. Running into his father or brother in their Long Beach neighborhood was not unusual. Why they even bothered to live in three separate apartments was beyond Marcus, since they came and went as they pleased in each other's homes.

Lately, though...Marcus had started wanting a little more privacy. Like right now. Still, he couldn't ignore his brother on the street or he'd have his balls broken over it for weeks.

With a growl, Marcus slowed to a walk on the sidewalk, throwing up a middle finger at his brother on the other side of the avenue. "I'll see you later, J. I'm late."

"Get over here, you mutt. Late for what?"

He plucked the tickets out of his back pocket and waved them at Joey. "Does bailing on me ring a bell?"

Joey blew out a cloud of smoke and grimaced. "You going alone?"

Marcus hesitated. For a split second—and that was all took.

"A girl, huh?" Joey called, raising an eyebrow. "It must be serious if she's willing to sit through Monster Jam for you. When do we meet her?"

"Never." Apprehension pressed down on Marcus's sternum and he backed toward the train station. "Go take a fucking shower. I can smell you from here."

Joey flipped him the bird. "Ahhh!"

"Ahhhhh!" Marcus yelled back.

As soon as he ducked into the shade of the LIRR overhang, Marcus stopped and pressed his back up against the concrete wall, pigeons rustling overhead in the rafters. *Breathe. Just relax. You're just hanging out with a friend.* Even if Joey ran into him with Jamie, there was nothing going on. Nothing ever *would* go on.

Marcus couldn't buy his own bullshit, though.

There was something about Jamie Prince that announced he was batting for the same team. It wasn't flashy or obvious or probably even intentional. There was just something about the knowing eye contact, the confident smirk, his clean shaven, well-moisturized skin. Joey would know, in no uncertain terms, that Jamie was gay. It wasn't like his brother and father hated gay people—lifestyles different than their own were just *other*. And they weren't comfortable with *other*. Not growing up and not now.

More than that, though, his family would never believe Marcus was hanging out with Jamie simply because he liked and admired him as a fellow human being. They would assume something else—and that *something else* broke Marcus out in a cold sweat. Because if his family called him out, he wouldn't be able to pretend that everything was continuing at the status quo anymore. That he didn't think about Jamie way, way too much.

Like basically nonstop.

“Hey.”

At the hesitant sound of Jamie's voice, Marcus's spine shot straight and he clonked the back of his head *hard* against the wall. “Jamie Prince.” He readjusted his hat and performed a quick check for any gaping wounds of blood. “What's the good word?”

“Are we just going to pretend you didn't just concuss yourself?”

“You caught me.” Wincing, Marcus leaned forward and braced his hands on his knees. “Jesus, that fucking hurt.”

Marcus peeked up to find Jamie observing him curiously through his glasses, arms crossed. Might as well admit Jamie looked extra nice today and Marcus had thought nothing could beat Jamie in red lifeguard shorts. But in jeans and a white T-shirt, Jamie wasn't just good looking, he was *comfortable* being that way. Most guys their age wore loose jeans. Jamie's weren't tight, but they were a size smaller than men typically wore. *Just* tight enough to make him kind of intimidating. As in, *I've made it easier to check me out—you're welcome*. His shirt was so lived-in, it had the opposite effect. Made him and the cut muscles of his arms look...touchable. He wore a ball cap, too, but his was facing forward and advertised the New York Public Library. Stray ends of his dark hair stuck out around the sides and made Marcus's fingers flex.

“Are you going to live, Diesel? We're going to miss the train.”

“Shit.” Marcus pushed off the wall and they started toward the platform. “You were worried about me a little bit there. You can admit it.”

“If you died, I’d miss the chance to cross Monster Mash off my bucket list.”

“Monster *Jam*—and I’ll make you another bet.”

“Seeing as how the last one worked out so well, how could I pass?” They reached the platform just in time for the train to arrive and stepped into the air conditioning, finding seats in the middle of the car. “Details, please.”

Marcus had never sat this close to Jamie before and he wasn’t sure what to do with his hands, so he folded them and wedged them between his knees. “If you *don’t* have a good time watching cars get crushed by big-ass trucks, I’ll...” Marcus tried to think of something Jamie probably wanted more than anything in the world and landed on it right away. “I’ll stop asking Andrew to assign me the chair next to yours.”

Jamie’s gaze shot to his. “You must be pretty confident.”

“Oh I am.” Marcus’s grin was short lived. “You can’t lie and just say you hated it, though. I’ll know if you’re lying.”

“No, you won’t.”

A prickle climbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, probably not. How about I won’t ask Andrew to assign us together on Tuesdays when the beach is quiet?”

Jamie shook his head on a laugh. “Fine. So what if I have the time of my life?”

Marcus leaned back and took a moment to consider. Honestly, he was going to make the stakes easy. Like, making Jamie wear his hat backwards on the ride home or something. But something else entirely came out of his mouth. “You have to help me.”

A few seconds ticked by, the train rocking around them. “Help you with what?”

“I, uh...well.” Marcus shifted in his seat, nerves making his pulse pop. “I got a call before I came to meet you, right? This real estate management company. My application to rent the commercial space on the ground floor was approved, which is crazy, because my credit score is like, not terrible but not spectacular. I sort of abused my GNC credit card trying to look this fucking good. Anyway, it’s a storefront. And I got approved.”

“What?” Jamie turned toward him slightly, his mouth opening and closing. “A storefront for what? What are you going to sell?”

Marcus unwedged his hands from between his knees, swiping his flattened left hand slowly through the air. “Juice.”

The train trundled loudly. “Juice?”

“Yeah. A juice bar. Right across the street from my CrossFit gym. When I saw the open space, it was actually the location that gave me the idea. Plus, I make good fucking juice, Jamie.” Marcus turned all the way in his seat, excitement making it so he couldn’t get his stupid mouth to stop smiling. “The storefront is really small. Maybe enough for a few high tops, but really people are going to take their juice to go. A whole day’s serving of fruits and vegetables in one hand. I’m going to call it the Main Squeeze.”

When Jamie’s mouth ticked up at one end, his gray eyes roaming over Marcus’s face, he was happier than he’d been when the phone call came in that afternoon. “Congratulations, Diesel,” Jamie said. “Your juice is good. I think people will buy it.”

“Yeah?” He cleared the earnestness from his voice and nodded. “Hell yeah they will.”

Jamie was *still* smiling. It was the greatest day of his life. “So,” Jamie said—and it was impossible to miss the slight hesitation in his tone. “What do you need my help with?”

“Um. You know, like, setting it up.”

“Setting what up? The tables?”

“Or maybe all of it?”

Jamie wasn’t smiling anymore. “Jesus Christ. Exactly how hard did you hit your head?”

Marcus gave him a cajoling look. “Come on, Jamie Prince. It’ll be fun.” He nudged him in the side. “Only the smartest of the smart could pull it off —”

“Oh God,” Jamie groaned. “Don’t do that. Don’t appeal to my superiority complex.”

“I have no choice. Everyone knows I’m a dumbass.” Marcus swallowed the lump in his throat. “I have the money saved, from working summers. My mom left me some, too, when she passed away. But I don’t have the smarts—”

“Who called you a dumbass?” Jamie interrupted, sounding pissed.

“*You’ve* called me a dumbass.”

Jamie’s Adam’s apple worked up and down. “If I have, I didn’t mean it.”

Marcus’s mouth spread into a smile. “You didn’t?”

“No.” Jamie bit down on his bottom lip, chewing on it as he studied Marcus. “You’re not a dumbass, you just have an uncomplicated point of view. Maybe everyone else is dumb.”

They both quickly faced forward in their seats again, breaking eye contact. In his periphery, Marcus could see the fast lift and fall of Jamie’s chest. Marcus’s own chest did the same, but he couldn’t explain why everything below his neck suddenly felt full to bursting. His body always did funny things around Jamie, but this...it was different. It was more. Something he could no longer ignore or write off as a dude crush.

“I’ll help a little,” Jamie muttered. “Just to challenge *myself*, though.”

“I know.” Marcus battled like hell against his smile, even though he wanted to pick Jamie up and toss him in the air like a pizza dough. “Thanks, Jamie.”

CHAPTER FOUR

JAMIE COULDN'T BELIEVE what was happening.

There he sat, in an arena full of drunk assholes who'd actually prepared *chants* for a *monster truck rally*. His boots were sitting in a sticky puddle of Budweiser, thanks to the man sitting behind them who'd spilled a whole tray of beer *before* the trucks even emerged to wreak havoc on perfectly drivable vehicles. It was so ever-loving loud, he could barely hear himself think. And he was enjoying the hell out of himself.

Marcus poked him in the shoulder. "Jamie—"

"Don't."

"You're smiling."

"No, I'm not."

In the center of the arena, a neon green monster truck spun its wheels, turned and prepared to launch itself off a ramp onto a line of Oldsmobiles. It had to be dangerous, but the crowd demanded no mercy. It had to be done. The audience would accept nothing less than utter destruction. Their sleeveless T-shirts said so.

As the monster truck revved its engine and gunned it toward the ramp, Jamie's hand shot out and gripped Marcus's naked lady forearm. "Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck*." The massive tires crashed down on the cars in a deafening crunch of glass and squeals of twisted metal—and it was so satisfying and weirdly cathartic that Jamie couldn't stop laughing. When he glanced over at Marcus, he was staring at Jamie's hand on his arm. He quickly took it back. "If you tell my brothers about this, I'll deny it."

Marcus was frowning at the hand Jamie had removed from his arm. "Where do they think you are tonight?"

"They weren't around to ask me," Jamie said, jerking back when an ancient Toyota pickup was smashed like a pancake. "It's Rory's night off, so he's with Olive trying not to propose before their one-month anniversary even passes. Andrew is working the bar."

The announcer's voice over the loudspeaker broke in, promising more bone crunching after a short intermission and the lights turned on,

illuminating Marcus's thoughtful expression. "Would you usually be on, like, a...date or something?"

Jamie narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"No reason. I just saw you slide those digits to Father Time at the bar last night. Maybe if you hadn't lost the bet, you'd be out with him."

"First of all, he wasn't *that* old."

Marcus snorted.

Jamie rolled his eyes. "All right, fine. I date older guys. It's easy."

"Why?"

"Because..." Christ, this was hitting way too close to home. And by home, he meant this so called *friendship* between him and Marcus. He'd gotten out the door with his self-respect intact tonight by telling himself he was only going to Monster Jam because he'd lost a bet. Not because the thought of hurting Marcus's feelings made him want to gouge out his eyes. Here he was again, though, trying to shield Marcus from the obvious truth. He didn't want Jamie as just a friend, no matter how he probably denied it to himself.

Jamie wasn't doing Marcus any favors by shielding him from reality. He wasn't doing *himself* any favors, either, by swallowing the truth of how hurtful it could be when someone refused to acknowledge him in public.

"I date older guys because most of them aren't scared. To be who they are. A lot of them are past that." Jamie exhaled slowly. "I'm never going to wait around again for some guy to figure himself out. Especially when they don't really want to. It's exhausting."

There was a flicker of discomfort in Marcus's eyes, before it was replaced with rapt curiosity. "Again? That's happened before?"

Jamie didn't answer, but he could hear the wheels turning in Marcus's head.

"Did it have something to do with the incident?"

"The *incident*." Jamie laughed, even though a crack formed straight down his middle. *The incident. The incident.* "Is that what people call it?"

They both had to stand so someone in their row could sidestep by with a tray of nachos. When they sat back down again, Marcus looked like he was chewing something distasteful. "Finding out what happened to you on the beach six summers ago is kind of like playing telephone. Most of the

lifeguards we work with now weren't there at the time. But I thought what happened to you was just some drunk idiots looking for a fight."

Just like the other night in the bar, Jamie could feel the hands. Sticky, clammy hands, dragging him toward the water. Too many of them to count or fight off. The police sirens. His brother being loaded into the back of a police car, because of Jamie. Because of his idiotic decision. He took several calming breaths and pasted a blank expression on his face. "Relax, Diesel. Let's just watch some cars get mutilated, all right?"

During the second half of the show, they didn't laugh as much, but the tension between them ebbed after a while, even if the groove etched between Marcus's eyebrows seemed to be permanent. When it was over and they'd left the stadium, they took a bus to the LIRR station and hopped on the line back toward Long Beach. The train was packed full of rowdy monster truck enthusiasts headed back to parts unknown, unfortunately, so Marcus and Jamie were forced to stand in the corner by the sliding door. At the next stop, even more people piled on, pushing their way into the crowded car—

And that's how Jamie found himself pressed against Marcus.

It was a slow progression. They were already inches apart, which was certainly too close for Jamie's comfort. Then inch by painstaking inch, the distance closed and Marcus hips nudged Jamie back against the tinted partition that blocked them from the seated passengers of the train car. Desperately trying to avoid eye contact with Marcus, Jamie's gaze cut to the side, toward the other standing commuters. All of their backs were turned. It was as if he and Marcus were really alone in the dim, rocking train car—and that was bad.

Really bad.

Marcus cleared his throat and shifted a little, but not before Jamie felt the other man's erection drag across against his belly. Due to their size difference, Marcus's bulge came to rest on Jamie's right hip, the heavy weight of it fucking with Jamie's head. Big time. Because before he could recite a list of nineteenth-century diseases and talk himself back from the ledge, Jamie's own body reacted, too. Not just to their proximity or the proof that Marcus wanted him.

No, it was a lot more than that.

It was Marcus's beer and bedsheets scent. He smelled like bad decisions that would feel really fucking good. It was the fact that he could hear Marcus's heart slamming up against his ribs, could see the pulse moving at the pace of machine gun fire.

It was the fact that Marcus made him laugh.

Made him feel good. About himself. About the world in general.

Turned him on with all that strength. All that size.

Fuck, Jamie was in need.

This was one of those times he wished for looser jeans. His cock pressed to the teeth of his zipper, making him bite down hard on his lower lip to distract from the pain. Vaguely, he registered the door on the opposite side of the train sliding open and more people piling on. And the bodies crowding the train forced Marcus closer. Closer. His forearm came up and rested against the partition by the side of Jamie's head and his dick dragged higher on Jamie's hip. Pressed tighter. Christ, it was huge. They were so close, he could unzip Marcus's jeans and stroke him off without anyone on the train knowing.

Don't do it. Just get through this.

Marcus moved his hips slightly and hissed through his teeth. There was no doubt he could feel Jamie's arousal on his upper thigh. What would he do about it? Would he move away and pretend this wasn't happening or would he—

Add pressure with his thigh. Jesus, that's what Marcus did. He flexed the muscle in his leg and moved it side to side against Jamie's hard cock. Their breathing turned shallow. Came faster. Marcus's warm breath rasped near Jamie's ear, the train rocking side to side just enough that they could probably pass off what was happening as an accident. A byproduct of a packed train. Good. They'd both need the excuse later.

But not now.

The train's lights flickered and dimmed as they traveled underground, the motion of the train pitching Marcus and Jamie forward and back, urging them together again and again. It wasn't just the train creating the much-needed friction, though. Not anymore. Marcus was rolling his lower body against Jamie's hip and Jamie felt the split second it wasn't enough for either of them. Marcus's hand twisted in the waistband of Jamie's jeans and

subtly tugged him sideways, once, twice, until their hips were locked—and their cocks ground together.

Marcus moaned into Jamie's ear, the sound swallowed up by the roar of the train.

Jamie couldn't regain control of the situation. It felt too fucking good. If he was honest with himself for once, he'd been hate-jerking to this moment for months. Fuck it, since *three summers ago* when the big, loudmouth had swaggered into the locker room and looked immediately startled to find himself checking out Jamie. Why couldn't Jamie keep away from someone who had bad decision written all over him?

That was a problem for another time because Marcus was using his grip on Jamie's waistband to rock them together. They were now openly dry fucking on public transportation, Marcus grunting into the space above where Jamie's neck curved, pumping his hips against Jamie's. Jamie's sac started to tighten and he knew much more of his cock grinding against Marcus's would make him come. *Can't do that*. He could *not* do that.

He also couldn't say the words to make Marcus stop.

Instead, he turned his head and sank his teeth into Marcus's stubble-covered jaw. "Go ahead," he rasped, licking the marks he'd left behind. "Blame it on the train. I dare you."

Marcus made a choked sound and stepped back as much as he could, which was only a matter of a couple inches. Enough that their lower bodies continued to brush together with the train's movements. Marcus dropped his forehead to the plastic partition beside Jamie's head and sucked in shaking breath after shaking breath. Jamie, also attempting to recover, watched Marcus with a growing weight in his chest.

"Marcus, listen to me. Everything is going to be okay. *You* are okay." Jamie swallowed and looked away. "Find someone who can help guide you with this. It...look, it just can't be me."

Thank God the train doors chose that moment to open, announcing their arrival in Long Beach. Jamie wove his way through the other passengers, his cock still digging into his zipper. Needing the man he could hear walking behind him along the platform. He found no relief for his condition in the hot July air, but he kept moving, descending the stairs in record time. He was about to cross the street when Marcus gripped his elbow and turned him around.

“Jamie...” The poor guy looked shell shocked. “I don’t know what just happened.”

“Yes, you do, Marcus.” Jamie centered himself with a slow breath. “Listen to me. We didn’t do anything wrong. There is nothing wrong about you.”

“Why does it feel like there is?”

A spike twisted in Jamie’s side hearing Marcus say what they’d done felt wrong. Stupid, so stupid, to take it personally. But he’d heard it before. He’d been blindsided and almost killed over someone feeling wrong about what they’d done. It cut so much deeper coming from Marcus and that scared the shit out of him.

“I have to go,” Jamie said. But he didn’t move.

Marcus took off his hat and twisted it in his hands, leaving his hair in disarray on top of his head. “Did you have a good time?”

That wasn’t an innocuous question and they both knew it. The importance of Jamie’s answer was proven in the way they both held their breath. If Jamie said he didn’t have a good time, Marcus would stop asking to have his chair assigned next to Jamie. He could cut the time they spent near each other in half with one word.

And he couldn’t do it. Because he would have been lying.

“I had a great time, Diesel.”

The last thing he saw before turning and heading home was Marcus’s face splitting into a grin—and the image stayed with him until the very last second when he fell asleep that night.

CHAPTER FIVE

“OKAY,” MARCUS MUTTERED under his breath, arranging the laptop on his coffee table at the perfect angle. “Might be gay. Might be gay.”

It would come as a surprise to no one that watching porn was one of his favorite pastimes. He’d always felt kind of awkward and bumbling while talking to girls, and porn was safer. No one rolled their eyes or laughed at him. Don’t get him wrong, he’d hooked up with a respectable number of girls, but they always seemed to evacuate the premises like it was on fire when he tried to have an actual conversation with them.

His go-to videos were bookmarked, but it had been a while since he’d watched them. Over a month. They’d been replaced at the top of his favorites list by juice recipes and fitness websites. *Clean eating. Drink Your Immunities. Calves That’ll Stop Traffic.*

Fuck, he’d gotten boring.

Marcus clicked on a video he’d watched upwards of a hundred times. Two men, one woman. She was on her hands and knees, servicing one of them with her mouth. The other dude thrust into her from behind, his mouth dropped open on a groan. Marcus wasn’t inspired to reach into his workout pants yet. No, his dick didn’t even get hard until he’d almost reached the end of the video and the two men leaned forward and kissed over the top of the woman’s head. It was hesitant at the start, like maybe it was the first time, but as the kiss deepened, both men started driving their hips faster, faster, their tongues sliding in and out of one another’s mouths, the woman moaning between them.

Marcus looked down to find his cock in his hand, the naked woman on his forearm flexing as he gave a tight stroke, root to tip.

Still, it wasn’t just right. He was swollen and aching, but his head wasn’t in it.

With a hard swallow, Marcus shoved himself back into the same sweatpants he’d worn to the gym that morning and scrolled through the videos. All the same. Two men, one woman. Every last fucking one of them. Had he ever truly focused on the woman or just the guys?

Admit the answer. Admit it.

He shook his head vigorously and slammed the laptop shut.

Marcus O'Shaughnessy wasn't scared of anything. He was six foot four and he could probably bench press a medium-sized gorilla. He'd been raised by sanitation workers and they were salty motherfuckers who'd passed on their balls of steel. His size had made him the target of countless scrapes growing up. Yet touching Jamie Prince had made him feel stronger and more himself, more *real* than his intimidating size or anything in his past.

Yeah, he wasn't scared of anything. But that.

The possibility that...maybe he didn't know himself at all.

Marcus closed his eyes and fell back against the couch, his callused fingertips moving over the bite marks on his cheek, remembering how he'd almost ejaculated in his pants when it happened. With Jamie pressed up against him on the train, he hadn't been worrying about his technique or if he'd maintain his erection—or if he'd crush Jamie to death—things he worried about when he occasionally hooked up with girls. Being with Jamie was like...*breathing*. In and out. Nothing else to worry about, except maybe having to stop.

God, he'd never needed someone more in his life as he had on that train. Until Sunday night, he wasn't even aware need could be focused so firmly on a *person* and not the *act*.

He draped his left forearm over his eyes, as if hiding his face might make his thoughts invisible. *It's just a phase. It's just a man crush*. Shit he'd been telling himself for what felt like forever. His mental denial of his attraction to Jamie made guilt spring up inside of Marcus. And he didn't fully understand why, but he felt as though that denial was fulfilling Jamie's expectations. As if pretending what happened between them was a fluke had the power to make Jamie sad, even though Jamie couldn't overhear Marcus's thoughts.

The guilt couldn't override his lust, though. It never could. Marcus's right hand shoved down the waistband of his sweats and took out his dick. With his left forearm wrapped tightly around his face to trap the thoughts, he put himself back on the train with Jamie, but this time their mouths were engaged. With his tongue fucking into Jamie's panting mouth, Marcus

reached between their lower bodies and jerked down the zipper that had been molded to Jamie's cock all day, driving him out of his goddamn mind.

"You advertising this cock?" Marcus growled as he started to beat Jamie off. "You want people to think it's available when it's not?"

Jamie smirked at him, but his dilated pupils and sweaty upper lip said he wasn't unaffected. "What if I am, Diesel? What are you going to do about it?" He propped his hands behind his head on the partition, tongue tucked into his cheek. *Christ, so hot. He's so hot.* "Convince me to make it unavailable to anyone but you, Marcus. Can you do that for me?" He angled his hips out. "I'll keep myself just for this mouth if you admit you like doing bad things with me. It'll be our little secret."

Marcus was already on his knees in the train car, closing his mouth around Jamie's cock, using handfuls of his tight ass to pull him deep, deep down his throat. The imaginary satisfaction in Jamie's moan tugged a very real spurt of come from Marcus's dick, lubricating his grip where it rode *quickerquickerquicker* up and down his shaft, filling his small living room with the sound of squelching flesh. Oh fuck. He loved this part. Making Jamie Prince moan.

Jesus Christ. He'd do anything to know what it sounded like in real life.

Not in real life. It has to stay in your head.

Even if he was brave enough to explore this part of himself...Jamie didn't want him. He liked older men. Men who knew exactly what they wanted. He'd said so.

Imaginary Jamie did want Marcus, though. *Focus on that.*

Jamie's fingers speared into Marcus's hair. He used his mouth, groaning as he fucked it and every once in a while, he brushed a thumb over Marcus's brow, letting him know he was doing it right. A good job. "What are we going to do with you, Marcus?" Jamie rasped above him. "When you finish me off, you'll still have that big tent in your pants, won't you? Are you going to pull my jeans down and push that huge thing inside me?"

"Yeah, babe," Marcus breathed, getting close to the end. "It is pretty huge."

Jamie slipped from his mouth and turned around, the sound of his belt clinking bringing Marcus to his feet, panting, unzipping his own pants. He looked around the train at all the passengers. "Right here in front of everyone?"

“Please, I can’t wait.”

Marcus growled, dragging the head of his cock through the split of Jamie’s ass. “Me either. I need you. I hurt all the fucking time—”

The sound of keys sliding into the lock of Marcus’s apartment door was like an atom bomb being dropped. He was so immersed in the fantasy, it took him a moment to believe it was real. No. If the person on the other side of the door had keys, it had to be his brother or father. *No no no*. His gaze flew around the room as if evidence of what he’d been thinking was visible. It wasn’t. Swallowing the golf ball in his throat, he stowed his protesting cock, got up from the couch and locked himself in the bathroom.

“Where you at, bro?”

Joey.

Marcus pressed his forehead against the closed door and released a long exhale. “I’ll be out in a second, asshole. You forget how to knock?”

“Since when does that bother you?” Joey called. “It’s not like you’ve ever got a girl in here or something.”

“Maybe one smelled you coming up the stairs and climbed out the window to escape.”

“I smell like an honest day’s work,” Joey said, the sound of his boots on the coffee table making Marcus roll his eyes. “Kickstarts a woman’s pheromones like a jumper cable.”

His cock was almost back to its usual size, but he gave it look that said *speed it along, bitch*. “What are you doing here?”

“Pop is bringing a pizza. The Mets are on.”

This was how he would die. From a brutal case of blue balls. Couldn’t a man get some peace and quiet to rub one out to a guy he was pretending he didn’t want to fuck more than life itself?

He didn’t even know *how* to fuck a dude.

Like, he understood the *logistics*, but it had been a solid *hell no* every time he suggested the back entrance to a girl. No help there. And if what happened on the train with Jamie was any indication, sex with him wouldn’t feel remotely close to being with a girl anyway.

Marcus cursed when he realized his dick was getting hard again.

He banged his head against the door.

“You okay in there, bro?” Joey asked. “Not for nothing, but you’ve been acting a little weird lately.”

“Weird?” Marcus’s head shot up. “Weird how?”

Joey laughed at Marcus’s too fast-question. “You’re never around, you avoid me on the street. What’s up? You got girl trouble?”

Marcus turned and leaned back against the door, glad he could finally answer a question truthfully. He sucked at lying. To everyone but himself, apparently. “Nope. No girl trouble.”

“Maybe you need a little in your life,” Joey said dryly. “I was already divorced by the time I was your age, man. You’re way behind.”

“I like being single.”

“Single means dating. When is the last time you were out with a woman? Or got laid?”

Christ. Same conversation every time. Not only with Joey or his old man, but with his friends at the gym. *Been out with any girls? You talking to anyone? Look at this girl I met on Tinder. You’d hit that. You know you’d hit that.* It never ended. The pressure never ended.

“Grab a beer,” Marcus said quietly. “I’ll be out in a second.”

A long pause. “All right then.”

The longer Marcus stood there in the dark, the more something became obvious.

He needed to stop this phony bullshit with Jamie. Right now.

Not because he *wanted* to stop hanging out with him. God knew that wasn’t it. His best memories so far of this summer involved the middle Prince brother. Walking with him toward their chairs on the boardwalk, just talking. Occasionally arguing. Watching Jamie work at the bar, making sure no one hassled him. The bets.

The train.

“Christ,” he whispered, twisting his balls to keep his erection down. “Don’t think about the train.”

He needed to stop the nonsense because he was doing Jamie a disservice. Jamie deserved someone who wouldn’t pretend his feelings weren’t real. Or that he wasn’t attracted to him. Marcus couldn’t even admit to himself that Jamie meant more than a friend to him. The idea of bringing Jamie around his family made him break out in a cold sweat. It wasn’t fair.

Jamie deserved better.

And Jamie might have been tightlipped about whatever had happened in his past, but even Marcus could deduce that Jamie had been down this road

before—and didn't want to go there again. That was his right and Marcus needed to stop foisting his infatuation on Jamie. There was even a possibility that Jamie's hesitation to be around Marcus had something to do with *the incident*, which frankly, was something Marcus couldn't even think about without wanting to commit murder.

Jamie had asked him several times to stop hanging around.

He finally needed to listen.

With a bowling ball in his stomach, Marcus unlocked the bathroom door and, ignoring his brother's look of concern, went to go drink his first of many beers.

CHAPTER SIX

EVERYTHING WAS OFF.

It was Tuesday morning and Jamie stood in front of his locker, waiting for Marcus's paw to grip his shoulder and shake him. Bring over one of his juice concoctions. Or shout, "Go ahead and check me out, Jamie Prince. I know you wanna." Jamie was waiting for *anything* really. It was so quiet in the Hut, you could hear the metallic zing of his hoodie being unzipped and hung on the hook. The other lifeguards chatted among themselves, but it was as though they could sense a disturbance in the force.

Marcus was being quiet.

The loudest motherfucker in the beach hadn't said a word since he walked into the Hut and there should have been a gospel choir singing praises inside Jamie's head. Instead, all he could hear was the rapid thudding of his own heart.

Jamie stripped off his shirt, folded it and placed it neatly on the top shelf of his locker, tossing the silver whistle around his neck. He'd been doing a pretty good job so far of acting like he wasn't shook over Marcus's sudden, monk-like presence, but he couldn't stop himself from leaning a shoulder against his closed locker and frowning over at the silent giant. *Look at me.*

If Marcus heard Jamie's mental command, he gave no indication. No, he performed his usual routine of doffing his sweatpants, revealing red trunks beneath. He kicked off his flip flops, losing his balance a little in the process and catching himself with a hand on the bench, before sniffing and lifting his chin like he'd meant to do it.

Why did that make Jamie's throat hurt?

Stupid. So stupid. Because it was pretty clear that one of two things was going on here.

One. Marcus wanted to pretend like that train ride had never happened, so he was ignoring Jamie and thus his own emerging sexuality. Avoidance: Helping curious straight men cope for thousands of years.

That brought Jamie to the second possibility for Marcus's sudden withdrawal. Perhaps what happened between them on the train had been an

experiment. Marcus's curiosity had gotten the better of him, it had been explored...and deemed inadequate. Yeah, wasn't it totally possible touching another man hadn't lived up to his expectations? Maybe he was embarrassed and didn't know how to tell Jamie it just hadn't worked for him.

Was this a hint Jamie should take?

Yes.

Of course it was. He'd been trying to get Marcus to stop playing his shadow since summer started. The big guy was simply giving him what he wanted.

So why was he so cold?

Marcus cut a blank look over at him and Jamie held his breath, waiting for Marcus to say something idiotic so they could get back on track and everything could go back to normal. But it never happened. Marcus returned his attention to the ground, quickly finishing a quick application of sunscreen before he turned and lumbered out of the Hut.

Rory shoulder-bumped Jamie on the way to the door. "You ready, man?"

"Yeah." Jamie cleared the cobwebs from his throat. "Right behind you."

"Everything okay?"

Jamie scoffed. "Okay? Did you hear how quiet it was in here? I'm starting the day without a headache for once," he lied, adding unnecessarily, "I'm fine. Let's go."

Narrator: But Jamie *wasn't* fine.

Friday rolled around and still, Marcus hadn't spoken a word to him. Every morning, they went through the same routine. Marcus strolled into the Hut at the last second, only making the barest touch of eye contact with Jamie, never saying a word. Never requesting the chair beside Jamie's. Nothing. Making the whole situation worse and less possible to shrug off, the other lifeguards were growing increasingly subdued, too. Had Marcus's brash asshole routine really been the heartbeat of the lifeguard station?

The notion was ridiculous.

Or was it?

Jamie's own heartbeat didn't feel the same, either. Nothing did. He'd been so fucking moody, his brothers had been avoiding him like the plague. None of his books would hold his attention, not even his favorite comfort

read, a book of essays by Emerson. It was time to start working on his lesson plans for the new school year and he couldn't focus long enough to write the date at the top of a notebook page, let alone incorporate the country's current administration's economic policies into his baseline teaching notes. And why was everything so itchy? The soles of his feet, his fingers, the back of his neck. There was a colony of red ants marching around under his skin and sitting still proved impossible.

Especially tonight. It was Friday at midnight and Marcus had been working the door of the Castle Gate since happy hour. He hadn't said shit to Jamie and Jamie was starting to get really annoyed. At Marcus. Then himself, for being annoyed when this was exactly what he'd wanted. Marcus to leave him alone.

What Jamie *needed* to do was call Kurt, the older gentleman whose number was programmed into his phone. Never mind that he couldn't even remember what the dude looked like.

Jamie poured a row of tequila shots for a group of girls. One of them had a silk, birthday girl sash draped across her chest and a phone attached to her hand. She snapped a picture of the neatly lined row of liquor oblivion and squealed. "Take a shot with us!"

Bartenders were asked to do this all the damn time. Drunk people never stopped worrying about being judged and thus, hated having sober people around to potentially catch them doing something regrettable. Ten times out of ten, Jamie declined. But his hand was suddenly being operated by someone else, sluicing golden liquor into a sparkling clean shot glass and tossing it back while the girls cheered.

Oh shit, the burn tasted good.

Too good.

Andrew was distracted by a boisterous group at one end of the bar or he probably would have given Jamie hell for imbibing on the job. Rory merely raised an eyebrow.

"Another?" Jamie asked the girls, already lining up glasses.

A few minutes later, he did it again.

After that, the night wasn't so bad *at all*. When Jamie glanced up and found Marcus watching him with a stony expression by the door, Jamie winked and Marcus looked away, his throat muscles shifting. He wasn't drunk enough to see Marcus upset—what the hell did he have to be upset

about, anyway?—so he took another shot. Whiskey this time. Huge mistake, but he'd worry about it tomorrow.

This simply wasn't how things were supposed to work. No matter how many times Jamie told Marcus to fuck off, he wasn't supposed to actually *do* it.

Jamie was in the middle of pouring a Guinness pint when Marcus went into the back office. A quick glance at his cell phone clock told Jamie the bouncing shift was over. Usually he hung out until the bar closed, nursing a beer or two. But this time, Marcus emerged with his sweatshirt, throwing an absent wave at the bar before disappearing out the door.

Gone. Just like that.

Jamie swallowed several times, but there was a fistful of nickels in his throat and he couldn't get them down. He took a fifth shot, but that did nothing to dislodge the heaviness. Was the train ride that bad? Or was it that *good*?

There. That explained why Marcus's silence was bothering him so much. Because he didn't have answers. Jamie thrived on having conclusions to all questions, so obviously being in the dark about what had driven Marcus away was unacceptable.

Thank God. It all made sense now.

Four o'clock in the morning rolled around before Jamie knew it. He wasn't *drunk* drunk, but he definitely wasn't sober, either. But unlike most nights when he had too much...he wasn't yearning for his bed. No, he wasn't tired at all. Wired was more like it. Anxious.

Rory had opened the bar that night, so Andrew sent him home to Olive early, leaving Andrew and Jamie to close. They'd just cleared the Castle Gate of all drunken revelers when Andrew came out of the back office, fingers perched on the bridge of his nose. "My keys are gone. Did you pocket them by mistake?"

Already knowing he hadn't, Jamie went through the process of patting his pockets anyway. "Nope."

Andrew took out his cell and hit a button. "Rory has the only other set." He sighed and hung up a moment later. "He's not answering. How am I going to lock up the bar?"

Jamie winced. "Diesel was back there."

His older brother groaned. This was not the first time Marcus had walked off with someone else's shit by accident. In early June, he'd picked up the wrong duffel bag in the Hut, not realizing it belonged to someone else until Jamie pointed out his red lifeguard shorts were riding up his CrossFit-honed bubble butt and the seam was about to burst.

He should have let it happen, Jamie thought wistfully.

Wistfully.

All right, that was quite enough. He needed to build a bridge over Marcus and walk across to the other side. That wouldn't happen until he got some answers...

And here was his chance.

"I'll go get the keys."

Andrew did a double take. "You're going to wake Marcus up at four in the morning?"

Jamie shrugged, avoiding his brother's hawk-like scrutiny. "Those are the breaks when you take someone's keys, right?" He tossed aside the rag he'd been using to wipe the bar, trying and failing to ignore visions of Marcus messy from sleep. "Hang tight. I'll be back."

On his way out the door, Jamie paused, watching Andrew climb onto one of the bar stools and rest his face in his hands. They all got their asses kicked in the summertime, working two jobs, so they could manage the mortgage on the house they shared for the rest of the year. Not to mention the mountain of debts their father had left behind. But Andrew bore the brunt of the workload, supervising the lifeguards and overseeing the Castle Gate...and he never let the strain show. Ever. Jamie was catching him in a weak moment, and knowing his stoic brother, he should just leave without prying. But he couldn't.

"You okay, A?"

A long pause, followed by a measured breath. "Yeah." Without looking at Jamie, Andrew waved him off. "Go."

CHAPTER SEVEN

MARCUS HEARD THE knock on his front door and immediately reached for the baseball bat under his couch. Although a bat would be totally ineffective against a ghost, wouldn't it?—and it *had* to be a fucking ghost, man. No one knocked on his door. His father and brother had keys and barged in whenever they felt like it.

Since coming home from the Castle Gate, Marcus had been unable to sleep. A lot like every other night this week, but tonight was worse, because Jamie had been drinking behind the bar. If he wasn't positive that Andrew would be with Jamie on the way home, Marcus would probably be lurking in the shadows of the boardwalk about now, making sure no one so much as looked wrong at Jamie.

Coming to his feet with the bat poised to swing, Marcus threw a guilty glance at the porn video paused on his computer. Had the ghost heard him ineffectively jerking off?

You're the idiot everyone thinks you are.

Marcus shook his head at his own ridiculousness and advanced toward the door, one quiet step at a time, fully prepared to move apartments first thing tomorrow if some old-timey ghost from the Great Depression era or some shit was on the other side of the door. "Uh...yeah? Someone there?"

A beat passed. "Open the door, Diesel. You took my brother's keys."

His heart climbed up into his mouth. "*Jamie?*"

"No, it's Paul Rudd."

Trying to breathe normally, Marcus eliminated the remaining distance between him and apartment entrance, twisting open the deadbolt and opening the door. He was so busy gulping down the sight of Jamie, Marcus forgot he was holding a bat. "How did you know where..."

Jamie rested a hand on the doorjamb, drawing Marcus's attention to his bicep. "We dropped you off in Andrew's car that night it was raining so you wouldn't have to walk. Remember?" He shrugged and sauntered into the apartment. "I just looked at the names on the buzzer. Pretty obvious Deez Nuts in 2A was you. Why are you holding a bat?"

Horror washed over Marcus until he realized Jamie was actually referring to the bat and not the erection springing up in his sweat pants. Sure. *Now* he gets hard. “Oh, uh...” Turning slightly, Marcus tried to shift his cock to one side and make it less noticeable. “I thought you were a ghost from the Depression.”

Jamie turned with a cocked eyebrow. “Bats don’t work on ghosts. Everyone knows that.”

“What does work?”

“You just have to ignore them,” Jamie said. “You’re well versed in that.”

“Does that mean I’m good at it?”

A smile tugged at the corner of Jamie’s mouth. “Yeah.”

Before Marcus could crawl toward Jamie on his hands and knees, complaining about how fucking horrible the last week had been, Jamie reached past Marcus and used his index finger to lift a set of keys off Marcus’s entry table, complete with a lucky rabbit’s foot and a four-leaf clover. “I’m going to get these back to Andrew.”

“Oh.” Marcus managed. “Okay.”

“You obviously have both sets, right? Since you got in to your place.”

“Yeah.” Christ. Jamie smelled so good. Coffee and books and whiskey. “Guess so.”

“Next time, remember, your keys are the only ones with a GNC discount tag and a Rick and Morty keychain.”

“I was wondering when I switched those for a rabbit’s foot.” *Let him go. Let him walk out. Don’t open your mouth again.* “That’s the only reason you came over?”

“No.” Jamie took a step closer to Marcus and it felt so *good* to have Jamie in his orbit, he stumbled back a step, his ass coming up against the entry table. “I came over here because I was wondering if you cut me off because—”

“Don’t say I cut you off, Jamie,” Marcus interrupted miserably.

Jamie kept going. “I was wondering if it was because you weren’t attracted to me anymore and had no use for me. Or if you *were* still attracted and that’s the problem.”

All right. So they weren’t pretending anymore. That scared the hell out of Marcus, not having that safety net of denial, but it was almost five

o'clock in the morning and they might as well have been the last two people on earth. Lying or hiding seemed pointless. Especially when he'd missed more than the way Jamie made his body feel. He'd missed his *friend*. Keeping the truth buried from his friend wasn't an option. "Well go ahead. Aren't you going to ask why I stayed away?"

"No, Marcus. I'm not." Jamie closed his eyes and laughed without humor. "Marcus, you have enough wood to fill a national fucking park. Safe to say you're still attracted to me."

Marcus looked down to find the front of his sweats tented to hell. He was so hard, the tip of his cock was standing straight out from his body, almost brushing against Jamie. And Marcus couldn't control the embarrassment. Talking about his attraction to another man was enough for one night. The physical proof was too much. Too exposing.

He could feel his ears turning red as he tried to push down his cock with the heel of his hand. Not helping. Nothing was helping, his flesh continuing to rise back up, thick and pulsing.

It was difficult to meet Jamie's eyes, and when Marcus finally managed to do it, he caught the tail end of Jamie's hurt, before it vanished. "This is why I've been trying to stay away from you," Marcus rasped. "Hurting you is the worst thing I can think of. And I don't...I don't want to *deal* with this. It's not who I thought I was. Or who my family and friends think I am.

"Before the train, I could...pretend I just wanted to be around you because I fucking like you. As a friend. And I do. That's one of the reasons I've been depressed and..." Marcus pressed his thumbs into his eye sockets. "You knew this would happen. It's why you told me to leave you the hell alone ages ago and I should have listened. I'm listening now."

"Only I don't want to be left alone as much as I thought I did, do I?"

Marcus's lungs emptied, his thumbs dropping away from his eyes. Had Jamie missed him? No. No, it couldn't be.

Jamie cleared his throat hard and stepped past Marcus, ready to walk out the door. "I have to go—" They both ceased all motion when Marcus's hand shot out and wrapped around Jamie's elbow. "What are you doing, Diesel?"

"I don't know."

A frustrated sound left Jamie. A moment ticked by where they just stared at each other, Marcus's chest huffing up and down like a locomotive,

the boner in his pants vibrating like a tuning fork, begging for the surrounding pressure of a fist, friction, *anything*. Marcus could see how torn Jamie was. Maybe he was even a little pissed off and Marcus couldn't blame him. He was a mess. A total fucking mess that *really* didn't want Jamie to leave, even though he'd just said out loud he didn't want to deal with his attraction.

A change came over Jamie, his manner going from frustrated to almost taunting. He faced Marcus fully and ran his tongue along the inside of his bottom lip. "Caught you in the middle of something, didn't I?" His eyes ticked past Marcus toward the coffee table. "How is that porn working out for you?"

"Not good."

The admission was barely out of his mouth when Jamie fisted Marcus's T-shirt in his hand and walked him backward toward the couch. They maintained eye contact the whole way, and Marcus was so wrapped up in it, he had no idea where he was until Jamie shoved him hard into a seated position on the couch. Jamie reached back and snicked the laptop closed before slowly drawing off his own T-shirt, giving Marcus long, breathless seconds to watch the lithe flex of tight ridges play out on his stomach, the roll of muscle just above the low-riding waistband of his jeans.

Before Marcus could speculate on what came next, Jamie's knees dug into the couch on either side of Marcus's thighs. He picked up Marcus's hand laid it flat on the center of his chest, before dragging it down, down, over his hot skin, the black, curling hair in the valley of his pecs, the hard stomach beneath. "You want me to stay? You're damn well going to tell me why." Leaving Marcus's hand resting on his denim waistband, Jamie leaned in and breathed coffee and whiskey against Marcus's mouth. Once, twice. Shaky. "Do you want my tongue to touch yours? Play with it a little?"

Jesus, he almost came in his sweats. Hearing those words out of Jamie's mouth, feeling Jamie's breath, their skin pressing together. It was sensory overload. His dick hurt like it hadn't in...ever. Minutes before Jamie walked in—and most of the week—he'd been trying his best to get aroused to straight porn, but he couldn't do it. Couldn't get off anymore without thinking of Jamie and now he was there, giving Marcus no choice but to let go. Let his body get what it needed.

"An answer, Diesel."

Openly panting against Jamie's mouth, he gave a jerky nod.

"Uh uh." Jamie touched his tongue to Marcus's upper lip and his hips jerked off the couch, a groan rumbling from deep inside him. "Say it out loud."

It all came out in a rush. "Yes. Please. I want your tongue."

Conflict rose in Jamie's eyes, but it cleared just as fast. Was replaced by an emotion Marcus recognized in himself. Lust. Jamie dipped his head, easing their lips together, gently letting his tongue slide into Marcus's mouth. It was like time suspended as it happened. Their tongues brushed and they both pulled back, breathing heavily. Fear that Jamie would change his mind caught Marcus around the throat and he shot forward to draw Jamie into a kiss, melting back into the couch cushions and bringing Jamie with him.

As if on autopilot, his hands lifted to squeeze Jamie's boobs. But of course, Jamie didn't have those. Marcus kind of wanted to curl up and die but Jamie only laughed, a puff of sound that bathed Marcus's lips in warmth. "I'm not a woman, Diesel."

"Just double-checking."

They melted back together. And kissing Jamie was *nothing* like kissing a girl—and he didn't miss that softness or the awkwardness or fear of crushing a human to death whatsoever. The scruff of Jamie's unshaven jaw raked over his chin, his cheeks as they deepened the kiss and the sensation was something he hadn't thought to fantasize about. But he sure as hell would now. Marcus knew without a doubt that the bristled proof of masculinity would be more than enough to make him hot next time he needed relief. The physical power and strength of a man—the full extent of how much that worked for him was mind-blowing.

Only when attached to Jamie, though. Marcus might be confused, but there was nothing confusing about his growing hunger for *something different* being assigned strictly to Jamie. Which was scarier? Having sexual cravings he wasn't familiar with? Or craving only one man?

Those thoughts scattered a second later and all Marcus could think was, *either way, I have great fucking taste*. Because Christ, Jamie knew how to kiss like nobody's business. And Marcus didn't want it to be anybody's business, unless it was his. Marcus was hit with a fair amount of jealousy as Jamie's tongue licked at Marcus's just long enough for him to mimic the

rhythm, then...oh Jesus, then Jamie consumed, suctioning his mouth to Marcus's and pulling deeply. So good. So perfect.

So perfect, in fact, it took a full minute of experiencing Jamie's technique to realize it was careful and practiced.

Marcus broke the kiss with growl. "You holding back with me, Jamie?"

Jamie looked dizzy, his breath coming in bursts. "Have to. I have to."

"Fuck that. Don't kiss me like you'd kiss someone else—"

Jamie dove in with a choked sound, and if Marcus thought he'd been ruined for life and women before, it was proven when Jamie's mouth moved unrestrained over his, no rhythm to speak of. Just lips colliding, tongues being brandished and sucked on, two sets of hands getting lost in two heads of hair. Lying full against Marcus's chest, Jamie groaned into his mouth, their mouths slanting across each other, teeth baring and nipping, before resuming the kiss in an increasingly frantic pace.

In need of air, they broke apart and Jamie was the sexiest motherfucker he'd ever seen, his hair all messed up, mouth swollen, eyelids heavy. "Wow," Marcus whispered.

Jamie's breath hitched and Marcus could feel the distance Jamie suddenly searched for. Had Marcus said something wrong? He wanted to ask Jamie to please not try to create some kind of wall, but then Jamie unzipped his pants and Marcus could do nothing but gulp, watching with hunger multiplying in his gut as Jamie reached into his jeans. "What were you doing before I got here, huh?" Jamie's fist moved in his jeans, his head falling back on an exhale. "Trying to convince yourself you don't need this?"

Watching Jamie Prince touch himself was the hottest vision his eyes had ever been given the pleasure of seeing up close. And Marcus could no more stop his hand from creeping beneath the hem of his own sweatpants than he could live underwater.

"You've been watching the wrong shit and we both know it." Jamie used his free hand to shove the jeans down his hips—and there was his cock. It was...*wide*. Thick. Kind of like a soda can. It had an upward curve to it that made Marcus's own dick grow fatter in his fist. "Want to know what I watch? Want me to give you your own private show?"

"Yes," Marcus rasped. "Please."

Jamie looked Marcus right in the eye and started to jerk himself off in earnest, faster and faster with his mouth dropped open. Marcus thought Jamie was moaning, but it turned out to be him. Marcus's fist held his cock in a brutal grip, stroking it top to bottom fast enough to make his balls bounce painfully.

"You like that, don't you?" Jamie asked.

Moisture leaked from the head of his dick. "Oh fuck. *Fuck*. Yes."

"Let me see what's in your pants," Jamie said hoarsely. "Show me where all that frustration is coming from. It gets hard for different things these days, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Even when you don't want it to."

Sides heaving, Marcus nodded his head several times.

"It gets hard for *me*."

"*Jesus Christ*," Marcus moaned. "So hard, babe. I can't make it stop."

He wasn't going to survive this. His body was wrapped in flames and every muscle was taut to the point of agony. God. God, he'd never been this turned on or desperate for relief in his life, but at the same time, he didn't want it to end. Once it was over, he could only get back here by making hard decisions again. Again. Right now, he was already in it, no turning back and there was so much freedom in that, he could barely handle it.

Jamie leaned down and engaged him in a rough kiss that made Marcus thrust harder into his own grip. "Babe, huh?"

"Yeah," Marcus said gruffly.

Jamie stared at him with a line between his brows, before seeming to shake himself. He looked down at his own cock and Marcus followed his line of vision, memorizing the sight of Jamie fucking his own hand, moisture sliding down the head of his shaft. "Have you thought about tasting it?"

Marcus wet his lips. "When nothing else can get me off...that's what does it."

"No one's going to know if you think of it first instead of last, Marcus," Jamie said, kissing his mouth over and over, turning his mind to mush. "No one is patrolling your thoughts."

"You would know," Marcus muttered thickly. "You're in them constantly."

Jamie's chin jerked up. "We..." he started, for once without the right words. "I think we should stop."

"No." Marcus wrapped his free arm around the back of Jamie's lower body, dragging him close...and the feel of Jamie's erection brushing Marcus's lips was the most natural thing in the world. "Please. If we stop now, I don't know if I'll be able to start again."

"That's why we should stop," Jamie said, but his fingers were already tangling in Marcus's hair, his hips were already making subtle side to side movements, making his cock slide back and forth against Marcus's damp, open mouth. "Marcus..."

At that point, nothing short of a meteor landing on the roof of the building could have kept Jamie's piece out of Marcus's mouth. But the hesitancy in Jamie's voice is what made Marcus wrap his lips around the fat head sooner, finding the slit with his tongue and wedging it in, writhing around in the spot Marcus knew was sensitive as hell.

"Ah, Jesus. *Fuck!*" Jamie shouted.

Then? The dopest, hottest thing in the world happened.

Jamie got aggressive with Marcus. And yet another cog locked into place inside of him.

Oh shit. Okay, this is right where I'm supposed to be.

Fingers locked in Marcus's hair, Jamie pushed Marcus down lower on the couch, putting his mouth right on level with Jamie's lap. Marcus's ass was hanging off the front of the sofa, but he couldn't have cared less because Jamie was pumping all that swelled up thickness into his mouth, grunting the way Marcus did when he hit the bench press. And damn, Jamie was *getting it*. He honest to goodness wanted to congratulate Jamie on being the biggest badass on planet earth, but that would require use of his mouth and he definitely didn't have that.

Thank God. No complaints.

What he *did* have? Satisfaction. So much fucking satisfaction. He'd known for some time that making Jamie happy made him happy, but seeing the other man's face screwed up with a mixture of pleasure and pain lowered a sense of rightness over Marcus. Which was saying something considering his dick was ready to explode in his sweatpants.

Groaning around Jamie's driving cock, Marcus shoved down his own sweatpants all the way and took control of his erection, fisting the base and

stroking upward slowly, slowly, before beginning a series of rapid-fire jerks. He found a pace and quickly focused on what he could do for Jamie. The job he wanted most.

In Marcus's fantasies, he was more of a voyeur, watching himself and Jamie together. He'd never really let himself consider what the taste, the texture of a man's flesh in his mouth would be like and *Jesus*, it was instantly addictive. The shaft of Jamie's dick was smooth as it thrust between Marcus's lips, helmet tip dragging along his tongue, leaving salty leakage behind, as if he couldn't help it. Marcus looked up to see the sheen of sweat on Jamie's straining throat, his bunched stomach muscles. *Hot. So hot.*

Jamie's flesh swelled in Marcus's mouth and he let out a strangled sound, holding Marcus's head in place, movements turning disjointed. "You been hiding in this apartment, wishing a man could come ride your fucking throat, Marcus? Yeah, I know you have. Here I am."

Marcus moaned and felt the tide rise, low in his belly. Having Jamie using his mouth like he owned it was enough to push him close to his peak, but throw in that growly tone of voice he'd never heard Jamie use before and Marcus wasn't going to make it another thirty seconds without spilling. He continued to stroke himself with his right hand, wrapping the left around the base of Jamie's cock, tugging the girth toward his suctioning mouth.

"God, yes. Just like that." Jamie's fingers twisted tighter in Marcus's hair, his sac rebounding off Marcus's wet chin. "Suck me off like you've been dreaming about getting on your knees for years." He pushed deep and held himself halfway down Marcus's throat, forcing Marcus to breathe through his nose. "Maybe you've even been dreaming of getting bossed around a little, huh, Marcus?"

Jamie withdrew himself, allowing Marcus to suck down oxygen and he heard himself gasping, "Yes." Getting bossed around by Jamie Prince. Finally. A name had been given to the thing he needed without truly knowing the details. Until now. With Jamie towering over him, he just wanted to please this man. By any means necessary. He wanted to be *ordered* to do it.

Only about a split second passed before Jamie was back in his mouth, pushing, pushing, punching his hips. "Christ, you take me so motherfucking deep. *I can't wait anymore.*" Marcus looked up, they locked eyes and once

again that sense of belonging washed over Marcus. “Going to give it to you now,” Jamie rasped, riding Marcus’s mouth with rough undulations of his lower body. “Go ahead and enjoy it. Your secret is safe with me.”

A look of rapture passed over Jamie’s face and his entire body started to shake. Marcus groaned at the taste of Jamie’s spend as it traveled down the back of his throat. The taste, the front row seat to Jamie’s orgasm, sent Marcus into outer space, his belly twisting violently from the onslaught of relief. Marcus closed his eyes, but somehow the world was still Technicolor. *Holy shit holy shit holy shit.* It was the never-ending climax. Jamie’s cock jerked over and over in his mouth and Marcus memorized every spasm, every guttural curse from the man above him even as his own spurts of come rained down on his lap, probably getting on the couch but *who fucking cared? Life was grand and he was flooooooaaating.*

It seemed to take ages for Marcus’s body to readjust to life on earth. His equilibrium was shot and all he could do when Jamie pulled out of his mouth was flop his head back, trying desperately to fill his lungs. For several beats, Marcus was happy. Almost...giddy in a way. He felt like he’d just been fed nitrous oxide at the dentist—that’s how satisfied he was. And he hadn’t been that way in a long-ass time. Maybe ever.

Jamie stood, staring down at Marcus with a heaving chest. Marcus couldn’t read his expression, but he thought it might have been a mixture of concern and shock. He watched as Jamie turned to walk to the bathroom and—

Oh, so that’s where his come had landed. It was all over Jamie’s back and the top swells of his ass, which were visible above the back waistband of Jamie’s unzipped jeans. Those two tan humps flexed as he walked and Marcus almost got up to follow him. Just to observe.

But the moment Jamie vanished into the bathroom, Marcus’s perspective stomped into the apartment like a ten-ton elephant.

He’d just given a blow job.

This morning, he’d never given one. He’d been trying to do the right thing. Or maybe not the *right* thing, but at least what was expected of him. What was necessary. He’d been trying to put thoughts of Jamie out of his head. If he could just make it to the end of the week without caving and trying to get close to him, he could probably get to the end of the summer, too. Jamie would go back to teaching. Marcus would be busy with the Main

Squeeze. No time to worry or consider if his life would always be unfulfilled because he'd been born...gay. And didn't know how to live that way.

His family was small. Of the three of them, Marcus was the butt of the jokes. The one whose IQ was always speculated on when he did something dumb. When he told his father and brother about his fledgling idea for a juice shop, they'd not so subtly suggested he take the civil servant exam instead. To considering following in his brother's footsteps. *What are you, some kind of friggin' businessman now? I love you, bro, but you couldn't tie your shoes until you were ten. Let's be real here.*

Marcus sat forward and dropped his head into his hands.

Jesus, he could only imagine what they'd say if he brought home Jamie.

Jamie, who they should admire. He was smart as hell, a good brother, funny, he put up with Marcus following him around like a puppy dog. Jamie had this way of pretending to be exasperated with Marcus, but two seconds later, there he was agreeing to help with the Main Squeeze, because he was secretly caring. Yeah, Jamie was complicated and wonderful and...a little bruised up over the past, but that mostly made Marcus want to hug him. Like, all the time.

No way should anyone treat Jamie with anything less than respect.

Being ridiculed by his own family? Marcus would have a hard enough time with that. But if they did it to Jamie? His temper would scorch the goddamn earth.

Bottom line, Marcus had decided to pull back. Stop pursuing Jamie. It had been hard enough staying away when they'd only rubbed their bodies together on the train. This was *so* much further. Could he even go back to his old self now? Was that even possible?

Everything was moving too fast. One minute he'd been watching bad porn and the next he was a practicing gay man. What the hell was he supposed to do?

Jamie's hand landed on Marcus's shoulder without warning.

On reflex, Marcus shoved it off. Jamie stared back at him, holding a towel limply at his side and he was more vulnerable than Marcus had ever seen him. Come to think of it, he'd *never* seen Jamie vulnerable. But he snapped his guarded expression back into place almost immediately, clearing his throat as he found his shirt, yanking it down over his head.

Why couldn't Marcus find his fucking tongue to apologize?

Say something.

But he'd gone from the highest high to a place of total insecurity, where nothing in his future seemed clear anymore, so Marcus could only sit there, numb and kind of shell shocked as Jamie stopped with his hand on the doorknob, prepared to leave.

Several seconds passed.

"I'm so sorry, Marcus."

The door closed on Jamie's words, the sound of the door snicking shut echoing in the sudden hollow of Marcus's stomach.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GROWING UP WITH the last name Prince was ironic, because their household had been the furthest thing from a palace. When Jamie was just entering elementary school, he remembered some semblance of happiness between his parents, even if their fights had been loud enough to make the neighbors close their windows. Not unusual in their section of Long Beach. Those fights had steadily escalated throughout his youth, until they'd stopped.

Or until someone had put a stop to them, rather.

Jamie bit down on the disquieting thought and put his head down against the wind, trudging down the boardwalk. The weather was as off kilter as Jamie today, warm, sticky and breezy with a light drizzle to round it out. The beach had emptied early, vacationers piling into the bars off the boardwalk. Bad weather on a Saturday meant the Castle Gate would be packed, people seeking refuge in the cozy pub interior.

He couldn't bring himself to join his brothers at work just yet, though.

Yeah, he was pretty sure if someone knocked on the bar to get his attention today, he'd probably smash a bottle over their heads. Jamie needed a break from the loud. When he, Andrew and Rory were kids, there was only one place they could accomplish that. The house next door. That wasn't where Jamie was headed now, but it was the next best thing.

At the corner of the block, Spice came into view and Jamie could already see Jiya Dalal passing back and forth behind the floor-to-ceiling windows. On a street lined with coffee shops and bars, the restaurant stood out like a white stone in a handful of black sand. The eaves were held up by marble pillars and Bollywood music crept out whenever a customer opened the door, along with the scent of garlic and cardamom.

During their youth, Jiya had moved from India to Long Beach with her parents. One afternoon, when their parents were having a particularly bad fight, she'd pushed aside a wooden slat in the fence separating their homes and invited the three boys over to watch television in her garage. Mrs. Dalal had brought them Cokes with straws and told them they were welcome any

time. Looking back, Mrs. Dalal hadn't hidden her sympathy all that well. But they'd been too hyped on free soda to care.

Jamie loved Jiya like a sister. So did Rory.

Andrew was another story altogether.

Almost at the entrance of Spice, Jamie caught a glimpse of his reflection in one of the windows and shook his head. Whenever he made it to the Castle Gate, Andrew was probably going to send him home so he wouldn't scare off the clientele.

After dropping the keys back to Andrew last night and waiting for him to close, they'd driven home together in silence. Jamie could feel his brother sending him concerned looks, but he'd been too punctured full of holes to reassure Andrew. And he hadn't taken advantage of the few hours of sleep between dawn and his lifeguarding shift, either. Hence his corpse-like appearance.

How had he managed to fuck up so badly?

He couldn't even blame it on the alcohol, because he'd gone over to Marcus's apartment subconsciously hoping something would happen. No sense in denying it. Yeah, he'd been curious about Marcus's reasons for dropping their friendship like a hot potato, but he'd also wanted to poke Marcus's attraction with a stick to see what happened.

Now he knew. An absolute catastrophe.

Jamie was back in that place. That dirty, shameful secret place he swore he would never return to—and it was worse this time around. He'd done it to himself and in the process? He'd taken Marcus down with him and that was not fair. As much as it had felt like a slap in the face, he'd deserved to have Marcus push him away afterward.

Swallowing the guilt, Jamie stepped into Spice, winking at Jiya when she looked up with a happy hostess smile parked on her pretty face.

It dropped when she saw him.

"Whoa," Jiya said, weaving around two tables to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Who beat you with the ugly stick?"

"Me." He tried to smile, but it fell flat. "I did it to myself."

"That takes some skill."

Jamie shrugged. "I'm a man of many talents."

The words were barely out of his mouth before Jiya hooked their arms together and marched him toward a table, pushing him down onto a

cushioned chair. “Stay here. I’m going to tell my mom I’m taking my dinner break. You’re going to have kadai chicken. I’m going to have a salad, but I’m probably going to ignore it and eat half of yours.”

This time, Jamie’s smile was genuine. “Yes, ma’am.”

A few minutes later, a waitress replaced Jiya on the floor, allowing her to untie her apron, toss it on the table and plop down across from Jamie. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you, even looking like shit—”

First there was a gasp. And then Mrs. Dalal came out of nowhere. Had she unfurled herself from one of the heavy golden drapes that hung in the front window? “Mind your language in our place of business, Jiya.” The older woman laid a hand on her chest. “Hello, Jamie. You are here to eat and not just to distract my daughter, I presume.”

The familiarity of the scene had Jamie felt better already. “Definitely eating, Mrs. Dalal. It’s been far too long since I’ve eaten your food. I’m going through withdrawals.”

She inclined her head. “Are you still teaching?”

“Yes. Economics.”

“Does that challenge you?”

He hesitated. “Yes?”

Jiya snorted. “Now give her the real Jamie Prince answer.”

Jamie gave a slow wince. “Not much challenges me.”

Mrs. Dalal hooted and waved her hand between Jamie and Jiya. “Perhaps this dinner meeting should be about humility.”

“Ahh, you know I’m your favorite Prince.” Jamie gave Mrs. Dalal his best smile and watched her battle her own. “I still drink my cans of Coke with a straw because of you.”

Jiya’s mother was not a woman given to sentimentality and was already walking away muttering, leaving Jamie and Jiya trading a silent laugh across the table.

“So what’s going on with you?” She gathered her long black hair together and secured it with the thick scrunchie she always kept around her wrist. “Don’t tell me a good book kept you up late. You read classics and they’re not exactly riveting.”

“Agree to disagree.” He nudged her under the table with his foot. “Did you read the Amelia Earhart biography I gave you?”

Only two subjects tended to put stars in Jiya's eyes. One was Andrew, though she would probably deny it with her dying breath. *What? You're crazy. We're best friends.* The second subject that made her wistful was flying. Since they'd met as children, Jiya had always wanted to learn to fly a plane and never stopped saving up for lessons. Every summer, she had the same goal but never quite reached it with her tips for waiting tables.

"Yes," she sighed, patpatpat'ing the center of her chest with one hand. "I read it the week you gave it to me. Did you know she had her own clothing line? She put little plane propeller buttons on the jackets and everything." Jiya leaned forward. "Now stop changing the subject. You should be at work right now. Instead you're here, so there must be something on your mind that you can't tell your brothers. Which means it's about..." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Sex stuff."

Jamie gave her a golf clap. "You're good."

"I know." She shrugged and cozied her way back into the chair. "Spill."

He dragged his hands down his face. "I did something last night I shouldn't have. With someone I definitely shouldn't have."

"Better details, please. I'm giving up my break for this."

Jamie blew out a breath. "Marcus. The Castle Gate bouncer."

"*What?*" She screeched. "I didn't know he was an option."

Once again, Mrs. Dalal appeared out of thin air, this time holding two cans of Coke with straws in her hands. She inclined her head at Jiya and spoke to her in a cacophony of Gujarati before adjusting her shawl and strutting back to the kitchen. "I've been advised that I sound like a choking ostrich."

"Wow. So specific." Jamie took a sip of his Coke. Until the cold liquid slid down his throat, he hadn't realized he'd forgone food or drink all day. "Anyway. It's..."

Jiya widened her eyes. "It's what?"

Jamie laughed without humor. "I don't even know how to describe the situation. Staying away from each other is hard, but he's not ready to be out in the open. That's always my cue to cut things off and I never have a problem with that. But I can't this time. Or rather, I *couldn't* cut things off before." A sharp pain caught him in the jugular. "I'm pretty sure they've been severed after last night."

"Why?"

“He, um...” Jamie swallowed. “Got weird afterward. And he was *right* to be weird, because I knew better. I knew he wasn’t ready to go there and I stayed anyway, let things get out of hand. Worse than that, I was kind of...”

Jiya was leaning so close, she was almost halfway across the table. “Don’t stop now. These are the kind of details my intimacy-starved brain pines for.”

“I went kind of intermediate level on him and he’s as beginner as it gets.”

“Thanks for breaking it down into gamer terms.” Jiya propped her chin on a fist. “I might be clueless about sex, but I know Xbox.”

“Speaking of which, we haven’t played Minecraft in a while—”

“Ah. Points deducted for the subject change.”

Jamie picked up his Coke again, but didn’t drink from it. “I can’t do this again, Jiya.”

Her sassiness faded into genuine sympathy. “I know you can’t. And none of us want to watch you go through it again, either. You deserve someone who’ll walk with you in the daylight.”

“So does Marcus. And I should help him. He needs someone there for him while he goes through this. Someone whose been there.”

“You didn’t have anyone who’d been there,” she pointed out. “Back in the day.”

“No. And it was hard.”

“You fought it for a while.”

It had been a while since he thought of those eye-opening months in middle school when he’d wanted nothing more than to be like his brothers. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Marcus will learn to accept himself on his own. It’s not your problem. He’s not worth the trouble.”

Jamie shifted. “I didn’t say *that*—” He cut himself off when he noticed the impish light in Jiya’s dark eyes. “What psychology is this?”

“Ooh, I don’t know. I should stay out of it, but I kind of have a soft spot for the big golden retriever.”

“How dare you. Keep going.”

“Every time I walk past the Castle Gate on my way to work, he waves at me from the door and tells me what kind of mood the Prince brothers are

in. Like it's the weather forecast. 'Rory is brooding with a side of sarcasm' or 'Andrew is all business, Jiya. All business.'"

"He does that?" Despite himself, Jamie felt his mouth edge up into a smile. "What does he say about me?"

"It's more about the way he says it. Really, I can't believe I didn't see what was right in front of me," said Jiya. "He says, 'Jamie is constant.' But he says it like he's talking about baby Jesus."

Jamie tipped back his head and exhaled long and hard up at the ceiling. He wasn't constant last night. Marcus trusted him and he should have known to walk away.

"Take that with a grain of salt, though," she says breezily. "He also says he wishes our family restaurant served Italian food so he could come get a slice of pizza."

"Christ."

As if speaking about food had made it appear, the waitress showed up at the side of the table and set down Jiya's salad. Jamie was still inhaling the fragrant steam coming off his curry when Jiya stuck her fork in and got busy, ignoring her salad as promised.

"Isn't your mother going to give you hell over wasting a salad?"

"No, thank goodness. It might be hard to believe considering she just called me a choking land bird, but she's actually trying to get on my good side today."

Jamie took a bite of his chicken, sighing as the familiar flavors of tomato, onion, garlic and coriander invaded his mouth. "Why?"

Jiya shot some side eye toward the back of the restaurant. "My mother's friends are in town. And they're not here to soak up the Long Beach sunshine," she grumbled. "I've been set up on a date tonight with their son."

The fork paused between Jamie's mouth and his plate. "*What?*"

"Now who's the choking ostrich?" Jiya said around a bite. "I'm in my late twenties. This was definitely on the horizon." Her sigh held a touch of resignation. "I just expected a little warning."

"Does Andrew know?"

Jiya's mouth opened and closed. "I-I don't see why I'd tell him."

Jamie raised an eyebrow.

She signaled at him to keep eating. "Let's get back to Marcus."

He wanted to press, but she gave him a warning look. “You get to evade, but I don’t?”

Jiya smiled at him sweetly. “That’s how this friendship works.”

Jamie hummed. “Okay, so in one breath you tell me Marcus isn’t worth my time. In the next, you tell me you have a soft spot for him. What is that?”

“Obviously he is worth your time or you wouldn’t be spending it on him,” Jiya said matter-of-factly. “You’re too smart for that.”

“You make an excellent point.”

“And you remember how hard self-acceptance can be. You went through it yourself.” She set down her fork and folded her hands. “I’m looking at your exhausted, ugly face right now and I know you’re going to look like this until you stop feeling guilty about last night.”

“You’re trying to tell me I should help him.”

“I do *not* want you to have another situation like the last one,” she said. “But I think we both know Marcus is nothing like that”—she mouthed the word *fucker*—“you dated before. I think he’s worthy of a little guidance.”

“Why did I come here?”

“Because I’m the only one who can outsmart the smarty pants. And anyway, I’m giving you the answer you would have landed on anyway.”

Jamie snorted. “I’m not as nice as you think I am.”

“Yes you are. You just hide it well.”

CHAPTER NINE

MARCUS WAS SWEATING through his shirt.

Jamie was an hour late to work. Where was he?

This never happened. Jamie always showed up on time. He was constant.

What if it was his fault? He'd pushed Jamie away last night, made him leave and now he didn't want to look at Marcus's big dumb face.

Marcus had been counting the hours since Jamie walked out his door last night until they'd see each other again. Not that he had any kind of plan. Or had an apology rehearsed. He just wanted to get into the same room with Jamie, because everything righted itself, ten times out of ten, when Jamie was standing in front of him. It never failed.

Oh my God, what if he'd quit?

It was kind of common knowledge that Jamie didn't necessarily *need* to work in the summertime. He had a job at a prestigious private school in Brooklyn, was well paid and definitely didn't need bar tips or lifeguarding money. Maybe he'd just decided it was easier to stay home and read than to deal with Marcus and the confusion that came along with him.

"Hey, uh..." Marcus approached the bar for the nineteenth time in an hour. "Have you heard from Jamie yet?"

In response to his question, he got the Rory death stare and it was one of the rare moments lately Marcus remembered the youngest Prince brother had once been an inmate. "You asked me six minutes ago, man. I would have told you if he'd gotten in touch. Just so you'd stop asking."

"Should I go out and look?"

Rory sighed and plucked a red cocktail straw out of the plastic holder, starting to chew on one end of it. "Yeah, maybe," he sighed.

Rory looked like he wanted to say more and it made Marcus's stomach turn over. "What?"

"Nothing, I just..." Rory paused. "You know about what happened on the beach back when Jamie was twenty, right? Everyone does. The fight that got me arrested."

“Yeah. I just don’t know what it was over.”

“You’re not going to hear it from me, either.” A muscle flexed in Rory’s cheek. “Anyway, I saw the guy who led the fucking charge on the boardwalk a few weeks ago, when I was with Olive. He’s still in Long Beach. And I think I’m just overreacting, but I wish Jamie would get his ass in here already—”

Marcus was already weaving in and out of the early birds, jogging toward the door, his mouth drying up. *No. No no no.* If something happened to Jamie—if that fucker put a single finger on Jamie—Marcus would twist his head off like a bottle cap. Don’t be hurt. Don’t be hurt. *I didn’t mean to shove your hand off of me last night.*

With his heart slamming into his ear drums, he burst out the door.

And ran right into Jamie.

“*Jamie.*” Marcus didn’t think, he just wrapped his arms around Jamie and lifted him up off the ground, absorbing his warmth like a sponge. He was there. Right there. “You’re alive.”

“Not for long,” he wheezed. “I can’t breathe.”

“I’m sorry.” Reluctantly, Marcus set him down. “Don’t quit the bar.”

Jamie adjusted his glasses and swatted the wrinkles out of his shirt. “If I tried to quit the bar, my brothers would laugh at me.” He frowned. “Why do you sound surprised that I’m alive?”

Hanging out with Jamie must have been making him smarter, because Marcus’s intuition told him Rory wouldn’t like him telling Jamie what he’d shared. So he wouldn’t, even though he kind of wanted to kneel in front of Jamie, wrap his arms around the guy’s waist and confess every secret he’d ever kept straight into Jamie’s belly.

A totally normal impulse.

“No reason.”

After a moment of scrutiny, Jamie nodded and they were left staring at each other while a group of noisy college kids piled past them into the bar. “Well, I better get to work,” Jamie said. “I’m late.”

Marcus’s heart was still thundering in his ears, even though Jamie appeared intact. Mostly because Jamie didn’t look as amazing as usual. His eyes were a duller shade of gray and his skin seemed paler. Was he really okay? “Um. All right.”

He had no choice but to step aside as Jamie breezed past him, but the other man paused before he could walk into the Castle Gate, looking back at Marcus over his shoulder. "Could you—"

"Yes."

Jamie laughed quietly. "Could you hang around tonight? I want to talk. If that's okay."

"Why wouldn't it be okay?"

"What happened last night..." Jamie said quietly. "I was way out of line. I'm sorry."

A weight pressed down on Marcus's lungs. "I'm the one that made you stay."

Jamie's tongue touched to the corner of his mouth. "You didn't make me do anything I didn't want to do, Diesel."

Ah, shit. Bad time to get a hard-on. *You're at work, bozo.* "Oh."

They lapsed into silence again, but it wasn't remotely quiet in Marcus's head. *Jamie wanted me to suck him off.* That fact had already been obvious, but simply hearing Jamie say it was almost like being back on the couch in his apartment, mouth against mouth.

"We'll talk later, okay?"

Marcus nodded.

Jamie hesitated.

"You can see my boner, can't you?"

"Yup," Jamie confirmed. "Go walk it off before you come back into the bar."

"Okay, Jamie."

The next six hours went by at a snail's pace. Normally half of Long Beach would be on the boardwalk or eating at one of the open-air cafes. Tonight, they were all piled inside, creating an impenetrable wall of bodies between Marcus and the bar, which he did not like whatsoever, but he couldn't dwell on it while checking at least four hundred IDs at the door. The waitresses waded through the sea of people with trays over their heads, an abundance of beer was spilled on the floor and the Prince brothers didn't come up for air until at least two o'clock in the morning when the crowds finally started to thin out.

As soon as they were down to a few dozen stragglers, Rory peaced out from his post behind the bar, grabbed Olive off her reserved stool and

carried her into the back office, slamming the door behind them. Andrew started counting up credit card receipts and signaled for Marcus to stop letting in new customers, which he was more than happy to do. An hour later, they'd ushered the remaining drunks out of the bar, making sure they all had Ubers waiting—and then, silence.

Jamie poured a pint of Sam Adams and set it on the bar, gesturing at Marcus. "Have one while I finish up."

Andrew gave them both a look of speculation, but continued to count cash from the registers and make notations on a clipboard. Marcus was too curious about why Jamie wanted to speak to him to taste even one sip, but he made an effort to finish it. Rory and Olive came out of the back office after a while, Olive looking dazed, Rory seeming like he wasn't even remotely finished with her. Andrew shook his head and told them to go home.

"You, too, Jamie. I'll lock up."

Jamie glanced over from where he was combining two half-empty liquor bottles into one. "You sure?"

Andrew waved him off but watched Jamie and Marcus with interest as they walked out of the Castle Gate together a few minutes later.

"Jesus," Jamie muttered, stepping out onto the boardwalk, the wind picking up his hair and throwing it around. "I'm going to get the third degree from Andrew in the morning."

"Yeah?" Marcus gave a jerky roll of his shoulder. "What are you going to tell him?"

"Nothing you don't want me to say. Promise," Jamie said with a tight smile. "I'll tell them I'm just helping you out with the juice shop."

Marcus nodded his thanks, even though there was a pit of discomfort in his stomach over Jamie lying on his behalf. Having to hide something about himself because *Marcus* wanted to hide. "I sign the lease this week."

Jamie brightened a little. "Great. Do you...want me to come along?"

Relief made Marcus groan up at the rainclouds that still lingered above. "Would you? I've been having nightmares about reading all those tiny words."

"Sounds like I should be there," Jamie said dryly.

The tightness Marcus had been experiencing all day in his chest relaxed. That wounded look Jamie had gotten on his face last night when Marcus

pushed him away was no longer flashing in his head every two seconds. Jamie was still planning to help him with the shop and he already had a guarantee they were hanging out next week. Normally he would have been ecstatic. And he couldn't deny the anticipation of being around Jamie—it was there like a hot ripple in his gut. But before last night happened, he'd resolved to stay away. Because Jamie deserved better. Better than someone like Marcus who...God, would he deny a relationship with Jamie, if push came to shove? Could he hurt him like that?

“So,” Marcus asked, his voice sounding hoarse to his own ears. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

Jamie stopped at the railing of the boardwalk, bracing himself on his forearms. He started to speak but broke off on a huffed laugh. “I like reading about people having serious conversations, but I hate them in real life.”

Marcus leaned sideways against the railing, facing Jamie. “Is it serious?”

“Yeah,” Jamie muttered, scratching his chin. “Listen, Marcus. Like I said, I take full responsibility for what happened last night. You’ve expressed to me that you’re not ready for anything *close* to what we did, or at the very least comfortable with it. So that was all on me.” He adjusted his glasses. “You were trying to put some distance between us and I should have let that happen. It probably would have been for the best. But, um... you’re my friend. Or something. And despite whatever else is there between us, I...” He gave a long exhale. “Like you as a friend, too. Or something.”

It was the weakest admission in history and Marcus might as well have been ferried off into the sunset on a gondola. “I like you as a friend, too, Jamie Prince.”

“Okay.” Not looking at him, Jamie nodded. “Good.”

“Is that it?”

If so, they were *so* bringing it in for a hug.

“I wish that was it,” said Jamie, passing Marcus a sideways glance. “I was reminded earlier how hard it was for me when I realized I was gay and I didn’t have an example to learn from. So I just wanted to offer my help. You can take the offer now or in twenty years, okay? Your terms, Diesel. That’s how it should be.” He paused, maintaining eye contact with Marcus. “What I’m offering to you...it’s a serious thing. And I want to make it clear

that I'm on your side with no ulterior motive, so last night can't happen again. Sex convolutes everything."

Marcus narrowed his eyes slowly. "And convolutes means..."

"Complicates."

"Right." Brow furrowed, Marcus turned to face the ocean and attempted to absorb everything Jamie said. He was offering to guide him. To help Marcus make sense of his new needs and feelings. As a friend, only, though. Why did that make him feel hollow? It's what Marcus needed to happen so he could live the way he'd always lived. No major changes. Nothing that would label him as different. "What happened that day on the beach, Jamie? With the incident?"

Jamie's look was searching. "Why are you asking me that now?"

Marcus didn't even know how to answer that. Call it intuition. Maybe he was just more attuned to Jamie than...anyone he could think of. Or maybe he'd suspected since the day of Monster Jam that something more serious had taken place the day Jamie was assaulted. Bottom line, he wanted to know. *Needed* to know. "Please?"

Jamie's jaw flexed and he went back to staring out over the dark beach for several moments. All that could be heard was the sound of waves rolling up onto the sand, wind traveling down the boardwalk. Until Jamie spoke, his voice cutting through the humid night air. "His name was Chris. I met him at Bed Bath and Beyond when I was buying a new toilet wand, which should be the most embarrassing part of the story, but it's not."

Already Marcus was being hit with regret for asking to hear the story. He didn't want to think about Jamie in Bed Bath and Beyond with anyone unless it was Marcus. All those sheets and pillows and home fragrances. The scene was too intimate. He'd push through, but Jesus, he already hated Chris's guts simply for getting to be around Jamie in that setting.

"I'm not sure why I asked him out. I shouldn't have. He was staring at me, accidentally ending up in the same aisle as me at least five times—"

"That's pretty aggressive," Marcus muttered, crossing his arms.

"Says the guy who requests the chair beside mine every day."

Marcus grunted.

Jamie eyeballed him for a second and kept going. "I was younger and not as exceptionally wise as I am now. So I asked him out in the candles section, just to throw him off. To let him know he was being obvious. I

thought he'd say no and scurry off." His shoulders lifted and fell. "But he said yes. So we went out and...one thing led to another."

Misery was raining down on Marcus's head. "Like it did for us last night?"

"No. It was nothing like last night." Jamie coughed. "I could have taken or left him, to tell you the truth. Even though he was honest in telling me he'd never been with a man, I know now that he wasn't being authentic. He was being someone else." He glanced briefly at Marcus. "You're never anything but authentic. Never anyone but you. At least to me."

Marcus knew in that moment he was in love with Jamie Prince.

His heartbeat was being conducted like an orchestra and Jamie was holding the stick thing. Christ, he'd probably been in love with him since last summer. Or the one before. It was impossible to remember a time when he wasn't trying to find a way to get into Jamie's orbit. Jamie made him feel superhuman. Made him want to be responsible. To make the world a better place.

Jamie made him feel safe.

With his stomach in his mouth, Marcus made a choppy gesture for him to keep going.

"I didn't hear from Chris for a while. Maybe a week?" Jamie continued. "I wasn't anxious to go out with him again, either. It didn't feel right. And maybe he was trying to come to terms with himself, you know? I wanted to respect that. But he showed up drunk at my chair at the end of a shift and..." Marcus held his breath, watching Jamie's chest start to rise and fall, faster and faster. "A bunch of his friends were with him. He'd told them some story. That I'd come on to him and wouldn't leave him alone..."

Everything clicked into place. Why Jamie was uncomfortable having any kind of relationship with Marcus, a man who was battling his sexuality. Why he'd told Marcus more than once he couldn't be the one who introduced him to intimacy with a man. Jamie had done that and gotten burned.

"I'm sorry, Jamie." He swallowed. "Why would you offer to help me when this happened to you? Before, you said you couldn't. Why did you change your mind?"

"Because Chris and his friends gave me a concussion. They held me under the water and almost drowned me," Jamie said succinctly. "You

would rather saw off your arms than do that to anyone. Especially me, I think.”

The truth of what happened that day was so offensive that they took a moment to crystalize in Marcus’s brain. When they did, he went through several stages of grief in the matter of ten seconds—denial, pain, anger, depression, acceptance—and then he added his own. Rage.

Marcus turned away from Jamie and let out a roar, sending the ferocious sound down the dark, empty boardwalk, his hands clenched into fists at his side. He turned in a circle, looking for an outlet for the white-hot wrath and before he knew it, he’d kicked out one of the wooden rungs that made up the railing.

“Tell me his last name, Jamie,” he said through clenched teeth. “I’m going to kill him.”

“*Hey.*” Jamie shoved him from the side. “My brother went to prison for my fucking mistake. You think I could stand it if you went, too? *Enough.*”

“*Your* mistake? You didn’t do anything. You...” Marcus stopped to catch his breath. “Oh God, Jamie, I’m like him all over again, aren’t I?”

“No,” Jamie said firmly, cutting a precise hand through the air. “Weren’t you listening earlier? The two of you couldn’t be more different.”

“Except we’re both closet cases who want you too much to stay away.”

“Fine. Except that.” Jamie closed his eyes for a second. “Marcus, you’re a good man. You would never hurt me or lash out like that. Ever. The only thing you have in common with Chris is you’ll only be with me behind closed doors. And that makes me feel like I did when I was thirteen. Like I’m wrong. I respect myself enough to not let that happen again.”

The wind went out of Marcus’s sails. One minute, he was ruled by anger and the next, he was deflated and numb. “I hate myself for doing that to you.”

“I don’t even hate you for doing that to me,” Jamie said. He pushed off the railing and held out his hand to Marcus. “Friends, okay? We’re in the wrong time and place, but we’ve got being friends and I want to keep that.”

Marcus put his hand in Jamie’s and felt the dance of electricity climb his arm. “If I kissed you right here, out in the open, would it make up for anything? Pushing you away last night or not being ready for the real thing?”

Jamie's breath came out in a rush and he started to take back his hand, but Marcus held on. *Let go. You've done enough damage.* But Marcus was also painfully aware of the fact that tomorrow when the sun came up, things would start down a strictly platonic path with Jamie and he wanted one more touch. One last time. Wanted to show Jamie he respected and valued him, even if they were standing alone in the dark. At least they weren't behind a closed door.

"One time only," Jamie rasped, stepping closer. "Okay?"

Marcus ducked his head slightly and caught Jamie's mouth on a shared groan, their hips meeting and pressing at the same time as their tongues. He stumbled into Jamie, his hands tracking down the other man's back to grip his ass in both hands, jerking Jamie up against him. Groin slid along groin and rested. *Fuck.* Their tongues wrestled, heads slanting one way, then the other, Marcus's blood rushing straight to his cock. Stiff and aching as he was, though, the organ in his chest was in the most agony. It squeezed and gasped for breath. How could this be the last kiss when it felt like the beginning of everything? He couldn't get enough, *couldn't get enough*—

Jamie pushed at his chest and broke the kiss, falling back a step and panting. Marcus was in the same condition and battling the urge to dive back in for more. More. More. But Jamie must have seen the hunger in his expression, because he shook his head. "Come on. I'll get us an Uber, drop you off on my way."

In silence, he did just that.

And as Marcus stood outside his building ten minutes later watching Jamie drive away, he wondered how the hell he'd survive never kissing Jamie Prince again.

At that moment, it felt like he wouldn't.

CHAPTER TEN

JAMIE STARED OUT at the sparkling Atlantic, wondering—not for the first time—how the beach could at once be the most serene place on the planet *and* the most violent. He'd spent enough summers lifeguarding to know how much pleasure people derided from the sand, the surf, the sun. Families created memories around the base of his chair. Farther out, past the break, vacationers skimmed along the blue on jet skis or boats. In the blink of an eye, it could change, though. A storm could roll in, an undertow could begin without anyone knowing, a rescue might take place. A fight could break out.

Growing up, Jamie had been no stranger to altercations. His father owned a bar, for chrissakes, one that had been far rougher once upon a time. He'd seen his fair share of bloodied faces and drunken arguments. Blessed with their father's temper, Rory was constantly getting into scrapes at an early age, which meant Andrew and Jamie stepped in and threw their own punches when it was necessary to defend their younger brother.

Compared to what happened to him six years ago on this beach, those fights had been so innocent. Over dumb shit, like perceived slights. Nothing like the hate-fueled attack he'd experienced first hand not a hundred yards from where he sat. Jamie could still remember seeing Chris approaching on the beach and kind of being exasperated. Jesus, this guy again? There'd been little to no chemistry to begin with and an awkward amount of time had passed since they'd spoken. Why show up at his job?

That's when he'd seen Chris's friends—and he'd known. He'd known based on their disgusted expressions that this fight wouldn't be innocent, like the ones he'd grown up with. There were too many of them to fend off, they were visibly intoxicated and Jamie was their intended target. For the first time in his life, he'd been in danger. If Rory hadn't shown up and stopped them from raining blows down on Jamie and holding him under the water for longer and longer periods of time, their hatred could have been the last thing he ever saw.

Thank God it hadn't been. Thank *Rory*, really. He'd sacrificed his freedom to defend Jamie and that was a debt that couldn't be repaid. Every time Jamie got the notion to take a vacation in the summertime, to explore the world he read about in books instead of lifeguarding, he remembered that Rory had spent two years behind bars—and Jamie needed to be around to make sure it never happened again.

As he'd said last night, Marcus and Chris were nothing alike. Nothing at all. But Jamie couldn't help but feel like putting some distance between himself and Marcus had been the right thing to do for his family, as well as himself.

Jamie was so deep in thought, he didn't notice his oldest brother coming down the beach at first, even though Andrew's arrival might have been precipitated by two dozen feminine sighs of appreciation that took place around Jamie's lifeguard chair.

Jamie had known this encounter was coming. Which was precisely why he'd skipped breakfast this morning and snuck out the side door with a bagel in his mouth.

He should have known his brother would find a way.

With a sigh, Jamie leaned back in his seat and observed the arrival of the Prince elder. His ever present clipboard was carried loosely at his hip, Ray-Bans hiding eyes that were identical to Jamie's and Rory's. They never strayed to any of the girls fawning over him as he walked past on the beach. As usual, Jamie's brother was immune to any kind of attention, unless it came straight from a certain girl next door.

"Hey," Andrew said, coming to a stop at the bottom of Jamie's chair. "Talk to you for a second?"

Jamie smirked and hopped down from his perch. "Sorry I took the last bagel this morning."

"What? Oh yeah." Uncharacteristically distracted, it seemed to take Andrew a moment to regain his train of thought. "Jiya didn't make it for breakfast, either."

"Really?"

Andrew coughed into his fist. "Have you noticed her acting different lately?"

"Nope, same old Jiya."

"Huh."

“Oh, except for the blind date her parents set her up on. She was a little irritated about that.”

Andrew dropped his clipboard and it stuck straight up in the sand. He didn’t even appear to notice the pages flapping in the breeze. “Date? *Jiya?*”

That had been a pretty mean way to inform his brother of Jiya’s foray into the dating market, but frankly, Jamie couldn’t take it anymore. His brother had been infatuated with Jiya since they were kids and refused to make a move. Not to mention, his brothers were vastly different humans. Rory needed to be handled with kid gloves when he came to Jamie for advice. Andrew required a straight up kick in the ass.

And Jamie was in the perfect mood to give him one.

He still had Marcus’s whisker burn on his jaw and cheeks from last night and...fuck it, he was as raw on the inside as hamburger meat. Their conversation last night had taken a turn he didn’t expect and he’d been forced to relive that evening from so long ago. He’d gone home last night feeling like an exposed nerve, not only because he’d talked about Chris. Out loud. For the first time in years.

No, Jamie was exposed because he could no longer pretend he hadn’t fallen for Marcus. He missed him when they were farther than two feet apart. Even the distance from behind the bar to the entrance where Marcus checked IDs had stretched last night. And God, that had been before that kiss on the boardwalk. That completely unrestrained kiss that had given Jamie a glimpse of what a relationship out in the open with Marcus could be like, before ripping it back. Marcus might as well have branded him in the center of his chest.

While Andrew sputtered and tried to form a sentence, Jamie massaged the bridge of his nose and counted his breaths. What planet was this? Jamie Prince, scholar, was all twisted up and angst-ridden over a CrossFit enthusiast with a naked lady arm tattoo. This was bullshit.

And he couldn’t deny his heart squeezed every time he thought of the tortured way Marcus looked when he climbed out of the Uber last night.

Now, feeling eyes on his back, Jamie sighed and turned around, waving at Marcus where he sat in the closest chair, which he’d requested this morning from Andrew.

Marcus’s chest puffed up and he waved back.

This summer was never going to end.

Part of him—obviously his masochistic side—didn't want it to.

"Who is she going on a date with?"

"I didn't catch the lucky man's name."

"When was this?"

"Saturday night."

"And you're only telling me now?"

"It's Sunday." Jamie tilted his head to the side. "What would you have done about it, A? You can't play house with Jiya forever. It has always been the two of you. Andrew and Jiya. But...she genuinely thinks you're just friends. Why would she believe any differently when you've never asked her to be more?"

Andrew closed his eyes, his voice coming out strangled. "You know why I can't."

A chill settled on Jamie's shoulders and both of them looked around the beach on reflex, making sure nobody was in earshot. "The three of us are the only ones who know about Dad. That's how it's going to stay."

"Yeah? Wait ten seconds then look over at the boardwalk."

Jamie reared back with a frown at the unexpected order, but did as his brother asked, going about it casually as possible. It took Jamie a few beats to figure out what Andrew was attempting to call his attention to. Leaning up against the railing, there was a familiar man in a police uniform. Jamie recognized him from the bar.

He was watching them.

What the fuck?

Knowing something important was at play, Jamie ignored the sudden layer of clammy sweat on his skin and returned his attention to Andrew.

"What the hell is going on?"

Time ticked by and Jamie thought Andrew was going to keep the information to himself, but he eventually spoke. "I don't know. He's been hanging around the bar. Yesterday I saw him pass by the house."

"And you're only telling me this now?"

"It's Sunday," Andrew said, throwing Jamie's words back in his face.

They traded a smirk.

"You think it's because of Rory?" Jamie asked. "He's been staying out of trouble."

“I don’t think it’s Rory.” Andrew picked up his clipboard and consulted it, but Jamie didn’t think he was seeing it at all. “I think it’s—”

Jamie made a sound to cut him off. “It’s not.”

His brother only looked slightly reassured. He tucked the clipboard under his arm and circled around to face Marcus’s chair. “Please tell me I don’t have to worry about this thing between you and Marcus, Jamie.”

They weren’t talking about the cop anymore. That was obvious. “Relax. I’m helping Marcus achieve his dreams of entrepreneurial juicing.”

“Is that a sex thing?”

“Jesus Christ.” Jamie dipped his shoulder and nudged Andrew off balance. “He’s opening a juice shop called the Main Squeeze.”

“Which *also* sounds like a sex thing.”

“Good lord. You need to get laid, A.”

Andrew laughed, but there were shadows in his eyes. “Who has time for that?” He stabbed the air with a finger. “If you say Jiya, I’ll assign you and Marcus the *same* fucking chair for a month.”

“Oh...yeah.” Jamie cleared his throat. “Please, don’t. That would be torture.”

“Real convincing,” Andrew returned with a snort.

Jamie regarded his brother, taking note of the tension in his shoulders. It had been there when he arrived, but it was far more pronounced now. “Talk to Jiya. Tell her how you feel.”

Andrew was already shaking his head, his Adam’s apple coasting up and down. “These hands aren’t fit to touch that girl. And you know it.”

He didn’t give Jamie a chance to respond, but turned and walked back down the beach, once again ignoring his bevy of admirers and reluctantly giving in to a high five from Marcus as he passed his chair.

When Jamie climbed back into his chair a few minutes later, the cop on the boardwalk was gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARCUS FINISHED HIS set of dead lifts and dropped the weighed down bar, immediately throwing himself into a set of fifty pushups. He'd been at the gym going on two hours. The strain in his muscles wasn't enough to rid him of the constant sexual frustration, but it momentarily took the sting out of it. He finished the set of fifty and rolled over onto his back, staring up at the ceiling, rivers of sweat running down his temples.

"Way to be dedicated, bro!"

Marcus waved absently at the passing trainer, his lifeless arm flopping back down onto the mat. Hopefully he'd have enough energy to pick up a pen and sign the lease—it was happening in one hour. Jamie was meeting him at the building management office. Hence Marcus drilling his body with a two-hour workout.

Today was Wednesday. The last time he'd touched Jamie was in the wee hours of Sunday morning on the boardwalk—and he'd felt every fucking second of it. He'd finally caved and searched for the correct pornography, but even *that* hadn't helped. He just kept comparing everyone on his laptop screen to Jamie. *That guy is too blond. That one is too thin. Smiles too much. Moans too loud. Doesn't wear glasses.* Inevitably, Marcus would end up shutting the laptop and replaying the night Jamie came over on a continuous loop, stroking his dick and he erupted in his own hand with Jamie's name on his lips.

Christ, he had it so bad.

His stomach was in a constant state of chaos.

I have to stay away from Jamie.

I can't stay away from Jamie.

Marcus should be ashamed of himself. After that infuriating revelation about that evening on the beach, he should have no problem doing what was best for his friend. Jamie had been through some harrowing shit at the hands of someone who shared far too many similarities with Marcus. *No wonder* he'd tried to ditch Marcus so many times. *Of course* Jamie couldn't

have some secret relationship behind closed doors. It probably felt like déjà vu.

And the worst part? Hooking up with Marcus and keeping it quiet made Jamie feel used and dirty. Like there was something wrong with him—and Marcus couldn't abide that.

Yet he continued to be drawn to Jamie like a bee to the most beautiful flower in the garden, taking advantage of the nectar, the nourishment he got from being close to Jamie. He was like an addict who couldn't resist the pull of one more hit. One more hit.

"Get up, bitch." The toe of someone's sneaker caught him in the ribs and Marcus looked up to find two gym regulars standing above him, laughing. Marcus had trained these guys when they first started CrossFit and the three of them had become friends. They'd gone out drinking a few times and even had a barbeque together on the beach last summer, but Marcus had started ducking their texts of late. "Look at this lazy ass. Maybe you should switch to girly pushups."

And this was why.

Marcus's laugh lacked spirit as he sat up. "Just taking a rest. What's good, men?"

"Summertime is good," said Mark, rubbing his stomach and looking at himself in the mirror out of the corner of his eye. "Out-of-town girls. Enough said. Shit, you must know all about it. You probably get first pick of the Down For Summers with that whistle around your neck."

"Yeah, women go *crazy* for whistles. I can't peel them off." They didn't pick up on his sarcasm, responding with eager nods—and for once, Marcus felt like the smartest person in the room. "Anyway, I have an appointment —"

"Hold up. Any cute lifeguards you can introduce us to? Maybe a little blondie or something?" Mark elbowed the other guy, whose name Marcus couldn't remember, despite their numerous hang sessions. "Or have you banged them all already?"

The other guy snorted "Who cares if he's banged them?"

Nausea rolled in Marcus's middle. What would happen if he said out loud right now that he *did* know a cute lifeguard, his name was Jamie, and they'd be introduced to him over Marcus's dead fucking body? They'd likely back away slowly and next time Marcus came to the gym, no one

would act the same around him. They'd all know he was gay. Right now, in this moment, getting rid of these assholes didn't seem like a bad thing. At all. But it would be a massive life shift. His comforts would be gone. He'd walk around feeling exposed, the way he'd felt the afternoon Joey *almost* caught him meeting Jamie at the train station. Everyone he knew would think they couldn't relate to Marcus anymore, even though he was still the same man.

He was just fucked up beyond all recognition over a man named Jamie.

"I have to go. Good luck with the ladies," Marcus muttered, peeling himself up off the mat and lumbering on jelly legs to the locker room. He showered and yanked a brush through his hair, donning a pair of black mesh workout pants and a gray T-shirt. After a quick check of the clock, he realized the lease signing was set to begin in ten minutes, so he shoved his feet into a pair of size fourteen Chucks and jogged out of the gym with his duffel bag thrown over his shoulder.

Thankfully he didn't have far to go. The man who owned the building where the juice shop was located also owned two of the neighboring buildings, and the management office was in the ground floor of one of them. As soon as Marcus stepped out of the gym, he saw Jamie leaning against the building across the street, thumbing through his phone. The gym and everyone inside faded away and all he could do was stare. God, Jamie looked so good. They'd both gotten their shifts at the beach covered today so they could make the lease signing, and while Marcus had gone fitness casual, Jamie was wearing a bright white polo shirt and dark olive green khakis. Something he would wear to teach, maybe?

Marcus was so entranced, he almost walked into oncoming traffic.

A car barreled past blaring its horn and the next time Marcus looked up, Jamie was watching him with raised eyebrows. "Christ, Diesel," he called. "Try not to die."

The tips of Marcus's ears were on fire and probably fire engine red, but he put his head down and trundled the rest of the way across the street, anyway. "Hi Jamie. The office is locked?"

Jamie sighed and nodded, glancing over at the glass storefront with the words Han Management written across it in white script. "Yeah, there's a back in fifteen minutes sign hanging in the door."

"I guess we wait," Marcus said, nodding at Jamie. "You dressed up."

He looked down. “Not really, you’re just used to seeing me at the bar or on the beach.”

Marcus dropped his bag and posted up beside Jamie, his back resting on the wall of the building. “So this is the kind of getup you wear teaching?”

“No, I...” Jamie hesitated, his mouth twitching. “There might be a sweater vest or two in the mix. The occasional sport coat. It is a private school.”

“They call you Mr. Prince?”

“They better.”

Marcus grinned. “You pretend to be mean, don’t you? You give a lot of homework and make the tests hard, but when someone fucks up or fails I bet you give them an extra credit assignment. Huh?” He elbowed Jamie in the side. “I bet you say, ‘this is a one-time thing, Randall Jennings the Third’ and give them bored eyes, but you would probably give them the chance again, because you hate giving bad grades.”

It took Marcus a moment to realize Jamie was staring at him with his jaw on the ground. “That was all just a guess?”

“How close am I to the truth?”

“Eerily close.”

“Well, I don’t know much.” Marcus tapped his temple with his index finger. “But I know Jamie Prince.”

Jamie continued to look at him and Marcus could almost sense the racing of his thoughts. He opened his mouth to respond to Marcus, but the sound of flip-flops slapping the sidewalk interrupted whatever it was.

“Hello, hello, I’m Mr. Han.” Marcus and Jamie bumped shoulders as they turned to find a Korean man carrying a to-go bag closing the distance between them. “I went out to get some lunch. You don’t mind if I eat while we sign.”

Apparently it wasn’t a question.

They waited for Mr. Han to unlock the door and flip on the lights, before following him into the air-conditioned office. He ushered them into a conference room and got busy spreading out his Subway sandwich, potato chips and cookie. Then he sat down, took a bite and stood back up. “My empty stomach made me forget the lease agreement.”

Jamie and Marcus traded an amused look and waited for Mr. Han to return. Within seconds, he was back in the conference room with two copies

of the rental agreement. He slid one across the table toward Marcus.

Without missing a beat, Marcus passed it to Jamie, who adjusted his glasses and leaned back in his chair—and Marcus could suddenly picture him in thirty years, wearing a sweater vest and reading something smart beside a roaring fire. Would there be someone there with him? A man who wasn't afraid to acknowledge who he was and embrace it, consequences be damned?

The image made Marcus want to karate chop the table in half.

Mr. Han took another bite of his sandwich, pointing the six-inch sub at Jamie. "Is this your business partner?"

"I'm just here in an advisory capacity," Jamie said without looking up from the lease.

With an effort, Marcus shook himself free of the jealousy and nodded. "What he said."

"This says his working hours mustn't begin before nine o'clock in the morning, but our clientele will be freakishly motivated fitness enthusiasts, so we'll need that amended to six."

The landlord stopped chewing and started again. "I can do that."

"Why are you requiring a four-month security deposit?"

He shrugged. "I like security."

Jamie's eyes ticked to Marcus. "Was that stated in the advertisement or agreed to over the phone?"

"No."

Back to Mr. Han. "We can do *two* months."

Marcus watched with fascination as Jamie and Mr. Han eyeballed each other across the table, Mr. Han chewing slowly, Jamie seemingly bored with the proceedings. "Three months."

Jamie shrugged. "As long as we can write in a ten-day grace period on the rent."

"I suppose that's fair."

"Extermination services are included in the rent, I assume?"

Mr. Han took an extremely large bite of his sandwich, then shoved the remainder of it away. "Half the cost."

"Fine. But let's knock two percent off these yearly rent increases. The Castle Gate's rent goes up in smaller increments and we're on the busier end of the boardwalk."

“Oh, the Castle Gate, hmm?” Mr. Han looked impressed. “You have good sandwiches.”

Jamie grinned. “The best.”

Marcus pointed at Mr. Han’s lunch. “Are you going to finish that?”

Half an hour later, Marcus and Jamie walked out of the management office with two shiny sets of keys and a rental agreement tucked into a manila envelope. They walked in silence down to the vacant space Marcus had leased and stopped, their reflections staring back at them from the glass window.

“I want you to have a set,” Marcus said, pressing the ring of keys into Jamie’s hand, electricity zipping up his arm when their fingers brushed. “That was really something, Jamie. You’re just...really something, you know? I wouldn’t have thought to ask about the grace period or any of that stuff.”

Jamie looked down at the keys in his palm. “Andrew or Rory could have done the same. When our father—” He broke off for a beat. “When he left, we had to go over every line of the Castle Gate lease and figure out what wasn’t working. Getting a leg up on the landlord is kind of second nature now.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t do it. You did.” Marcus swallowed. “Thanks.”

They traded fleeting eye contact. “You don’t have to give me a set of keys.”

“Please take them?”

Jamie nodded once and stowed them in his pocket. “Should we go inside?”

Marcus shook himself out of the satisfaction-induced haze that had descended when Jamie accepted the keys and unlocked the door. “Hell yeah we should. The sooner we start planning the better. I—” As soon as he stepped over the threshold, he ran smack into a wall of heat. “Christ, the AC hasn’t been running. I didn’t think of that.”

“Is there a back door we can open?” Jamie asked, coming in behind Marcus and wincing. “This reminds me of the first and last time I went to Florida.”

They managed to prop open both doors and get some air flow, but considering Long Beach was hovering at a strict eighty-five degrees, the crosswind didn’t help much. “I’ll call the electric company and get the

power turned on. I won't have you working in here and getting baked, Jamie."

The words had flowed naturally off Marcus's tongue, but when he glanced over, Jamie was frowning at him. "You, Rory, Andrew." He shook his head. "What is it about me that brings out everyone's protective side?"

"Probably the fear of being without you," Marcus said without hesitation.

Jamie started. "I'm not sure friends say things like that to each other, Diesel."

"Maybe this friend does," he said, his stomach suddenly full of helium. "Maybe it means I'm your best friend."

The untrained eye wouldn't have noticed Jamie softening, but Marcus saw the strain lessen around his eyes, his lips parting just a hint. "Maybe it does."

Remember you could hurt him. Marcus transferred his attention to the ground as fast as he could. Why couldn't Marcus stop swimming to the deep end with Jamie when he knew he'd only swim back to the shallows afterward and leave Jamie feeling shitty? "So, uh..." He cleared his throat. "What do you think of the place?"

Jamie, who'd been watching Marcus steadily as if he could read his thoughts, took a walk around the small commercial space. Marcus turned in a circle, trying to see it through Jamie's eyes at the same time. There was an exposed brick wall on one side and that's where he envisioned the high tops. A long partition and counter was already in place from when it was a smoothie shop and it took up most of the space, leaving only a small area to order and wait. But Marcus's absolute favorite part was the ceiling. The original tin ceilings made the place modern and old fashioned all at once.

"It's great, Marcus," Jamie said from behind the counter. "Not so big that you're going to be overwhelmed—and what's here is quality." He ducked out of sight. "This must be a custom-fitted refrigeration system, because I can't imagine the last owners leaving it behind otherwise. It's a damn good one. Andrew is going to be jealous."

"I could go for some refrigeration right now," Marcus said, swiping at the perspiration rapidly forming on his brow, and gestured to his shirt. "Do you mind if I...?"

There was only a small hesitation from Jamie before he nodded. "I might have to do the same."

If Marcus thought the air was swampy and thick before, the heat tripled when both Jamie and Marcus drew their shirts off over their heads. They tossed them onto the counter at the same time, staring at each other across the store. A bead of sweat ran down the center of Jamie's chest, traveling over ridges of muscle and Marcus's shaft thickened.

You're going to hurt him.

"I was thinking, um..." Marcus forced himself to turn away. "I was thinking we'd have a refrigerator out here with energy drinks, water. Quick grab stuff for lunch."

"Yeah, I like that idea." Jamie's voice sounded gruff. "You should hang a mirror on the wall. Mirrors tend to attract your fitness brethren, don't they?"

Marcus turned with a smile. "You calling us vain?" He flexed his bicep and kissed it. "I gotta stay in shape so you have something nice to ogle on the beach."

That surprised a laugh out of Jamie. "Hey, you haven't said something like that in at least a week. I think we've turned a corner."

"I only ever said those things because I was trying to hide the fact that I ogle *you*." Marcus said, immediately wishing he'd been born with a working verbal filter. "Sorry," he muttered. "I just meant to say...I think I was trying to convince myself, too. That I was the guy everyone thinks I am." He held up his forearm. "Kind of like with this tattoo."

Jamie was silent for a moment. "What kind of guy does everyone think you are?"

"Loud, inappropriate. Kind of pervy."

"You think you can't embody those qualities and like men at the same time?" Jamie laughed under his breath. "Sometimes I think at least two out of those three characteristics is a requirement."

Marcus scoffed. "You're not loud or inappropriate."

Sex smoked in his eyes. "I am under the right circumstances."

"*Jamie*," Marcus groaned. "Please don't give me boner."

"You already have one."

"*Dammit*." Marcus approached the counter so he could hide his erection. Even with sexual frustration tightening around him like a full body

belt, he couldn't help but chuckle in response to Jamie's laughter. "So what you're saying is...I can be this exact person no matter what? I don't have to change?"

"No, there's no club uniform. We don't perform random searches to make sure your sheets are clean and your shoes are in season. You can gay your own way, Marcus. Some people live louder than others, but that goes for straight people, too."

Marcus took a deep breath. "I'm gay, Jamie."

"I know." They existed in the sharp, crystalized moment together, Marcus's heart going from a wild thunder to a steady beat. All the while, Jamie stood across the counter and anchored him with his constancy. Marcus was a ship tied to Jamie's moor.

At least until Jamie sucked in a breath, his eyes going wide. "Oh Jesus, where did that feather boa around your neck come from?"

"What?" Marcus's hands flew to his neck and found nothing, Jamie's laughter taking a few ticks to penetrate. "You think you're funny, do you?"

"It was pretty funny."

Jesus, Marcus hadn't been this light in a long time. Maybe ever. There was a rush of tingles coasting up and down his skin, his neck felt loose. The smile wouldn't leave his face. He'd said it. He said the words out loud and the world was still standing. "What do we do now?"

Jamie lifted a shoulder. "What do you *want* to do?"

"For today...I don't know if I'm ready to do more than say it." He reached for courage. "What step comes after that?"

"I don't know. There's no guidebook, Marcus." Jamie scrubbed at the back of his neck, measuring him with a guarded look. "Listen, I'm going out with Kurt on Friday night. Why don't you come with us?" Marcus's heart dropped straight down, through the floorboards and hurtled toward the earth's core, but somehow Jamie kept talking and time marched on as usual. "He can bring some friends and we'll all just hang out. You've got yourself psyched out over some wild, alternative lifestyle and you'll see, Marcus, it's just like hanging out with me."

"You're going on a date, Jamie?" Marcus managed.

"I'm willing to downgrade it from date to hangout so you'll come with me." Jamie exhaled hard. "Maybe...I don't know, maybe there will be

someone there that's able to do what I can't for you. Take it slow. Keep things undercover."

A war broke out inside of Marcus. One side was trying to be mature and take the death blow like a man. The other side was losing its shit. No. *No no no*. Jamie Prince didn't get to go on dates. Other men did not get to spend time with Jamie Prince. They didn't deserve him. What if they tried to touch him? Worse, what if Jamie wanted to be touched by someone that wasn't Marcus? Jesus. Christ. It was totally possible. It could happen. No, it *would* happen...

Unless Marcus stepped up.

Unless he grew into the skin that suddenly felt nine sizes too small and became what Jamie needed. It had never been more apparent that if Marcus stayed in the closet, he'd have to let Jamie go. Oh fuck, he couldn't do that. Jamie was going on one date and already, a noose was tightening around his throat.

But Marcus trusted Jamie. If Jamie thought spending time with other men who shared his preferences would help the fear of exposure subside, then he would do it. Maybe he'd learn a way to be Jamie's man. No, he *had* to learn. The only other choice was losing Jamie.

"Marcus, I'm proud of how far you got today. I'm *proud* of you." Jamie paused while that sank in—and it did—from the top of Marcus's head down to his feet. "There will be other opportunities like this. Whenever you're ready. You don't have to rush into anything—"

"I'll go."

After a beat, Jamie nodded once. "You're sure?"

Even if watching Jamie on a date was going to be absolute torture, sitting home and wondering what the hell was going on would be far worse. Plus, he didn't like Jamie riding the train alone at night, not that he would say it out loud and piss the guy off.

"Yeah, I'm sure." Marcus attempted a smile, but it felt sickly. "Wherever we're going, it's not going to beat Monster Jam."

Jamie's lips jumped at one end. "Nothing can beat that." When the silence stretched too long, Jamie picked up his shirt and came out from behind the counter. Static climbed Marcus's spine as Jamie passed behind him on the way to the door. "See you, Diesel."

Marcus swallowed hard. "See you, Jamie."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THEIR TRAIN HADN'T even arrived in Brooklyn yet and already the whole night felt wrong.

First of all, Marcus had shown up at the LIRR station to meet Jamie looking and smelling incredible, which had thrown Jamie off. Big time. Seriously, it wasn't even cologne that wafted across the train seat and made Jamie's groin tighten. Just shaving cream and laundry detergent and the beer Marcus had probably downed for courage on his way out the door. Until now, Jamie had been the sole keeper of Marcus's secret. But his sexuality wouldn't be a secret when they met up with Kurt and his friends tonight.

It also wouldn't be a secret that Marcus was...available.

Jamie was bringing a hulking, suntanned muscleman out tonight and essentially dangling him like a carrot in front of other single men—and... why? *Why* was he doing this again?

Marcus wasn't ready to have a relationship out in the open. Not with anyone.

And that's what Jamie needed.

He'd been out of the closet for a long time and he wasn't going back in. Not even for Marcus. The man didn't mean to make Jamie feel like an embarrassing secret, but he did. So they were going to be platonic friends. Jamie would help Marcus through this awkward time in his life, because dammit, he cared about the big jerk. In the meantime, Jamie couldn't put his own happiness on hold. Not for someone who might keep to the shadows indefinitely.

Even if he couldn't seem to make it a full five minutes these days without replaying that kiss on the boardwalk. Jesus, had anyone ever kissed Jamie like that? A soul kiss. That's what it had been. A once-in-a-lifetime, movie-quality, wrecking ball of a kiss.

If he wasn't thinking about the kiss, he was playing back conversations with Marcus.

I bet you say, “this is a one-time thing, Randall Jennings the Third” and give them bored eyes, but you would probably give them the chance again, because you hate giving bad grades.

I don’t know much, but I know Jamie Prince.

Apparently even better than Jamie knew himself.

“You look nice,” Marcus said, speaking for the first time since they’d met in the train station and walked in a two-man funeral procession to the platform, tickets in hand. “I was going to wear a T-shirt, too, but I wasn’t sure if I should have my tattoo visible.”

Jamie glanced over. “Why?”

Marcus pulled up the sleeve of his long-sleeved gray Henley to reveal his forearm. “I don’t know. Doesn’t it just make it obvious how confused I am?” His attention fell to Jamie’s mouth and the air between them grew heavy. “I mean, how confused I...was.”

Friends got hard-ons for each other, right? “You don’t have to cover up anything about yourself,” Jamie said in a hoarse voice, his lower body reacting painfully fast to the hungry way Marcus looked at him. “You wouldn’t be Marcus without that tattoo.”

“Yeah.” He flexed the muscle that made her dance. “I got this with my brother in the spring. He, uh...he’d been kind of nagging me to bring a girl home. Still is.” Marcus shook his head. “The tattoo only bought me about a week of silence on the subject. Not really worth having it for a lifetime.”

“You could add some clothes,” Jamie suggested. “Or throw in a robe and a baby and tell everyone she’s the Virgin Mary. Then you’re just being a good Catholic.”

Marcus laughed, breaking a smidgen of the tension between them. “My brother got a tattoo that day, too. On his chest. It says Honor.” His smile dipped. “He’s not a bad guy. Neither is my father. They’ve just got this idea of tradition and they think everyone should stick to it. Stick to *their* idea. Baseball, babies, Sunday dinner, finding a wife so you can complain about her at poker night. That’s the dream for them and they want me to have it.”

“My dad was like that, too,” Jamie said. “We never told him. About me.”

“No?”

Jamie shook his head. “It wasn’t a formal decision we made. It was just for the best. He probably would have found some way to take it out on my

mother.” He cleared his throat to get rid of the discomfort creeping into his chest. “I’m actually...glad he didn’t know. I’m glad he didn’t get a chance to decide that part of me is ugly.” A humorless laugh left his throat. “Jesus, I’m really making a good case for being out in the open.”

“Actually, it’s kind of helping. Right now, the future is this huge blank spot. I don’t even know enough to imagine what could happen.” He scratched the back of his neck and Jamie caught the scent of menthol and hops. “I’m sorry it didn’t happen the way it should have for you. But after everything, you turned into Jamie Prince.” He sent a lopsided grin in Jamie’s direction and Jamie tried not to be obvious that his heart was lodged in his mouth. “We should all be so lucky.”

Oh fuck. I’m going to kiss him.

Mistake or not, he didn’t have a choice.

Jamie wet his lips and Marcus’s eyes darkened. They leaned in—

And the wheels of the train screeched, the conductor’s voice coming over the loudspeaker to announce their arrival at Atlantic Terminal. They both breathed heavily into the scant space separating their mouths, but surprisingly, Marcus was the one to pull back. He closed his eyes for a moment, exhaled and stood, edging past Jamie to the aisle. Jamie followed, feeling like he’d been hit in the back of the head by a metal bat.

They walked in silence to the Lounge, a gastropub in Greenpoint that Jamie had picked because he thought Marcus would be comfortable there. There were flat screens on the wall playing sports in the front bar area, but they also had a pretentious cocktail list and clustered couches in the back. The best of both worlds. Kind of like Marcus.

Jamie tried to center himself as they walked through the busy establishment. The gastropub was an eclectic mix of Brooklynites. Sitting at the bar, there was a date between two women taking place. Beside them, young professionals sipped pints, still wearing suits and ties from their downtown Manhattan jobs. College students filled in the gaps, talking loudly to be heard over the music. The bartender signaled Jamie. Jamie pointed at the back of the bar and they were waved through the black drape that sectioned off the lounge.

The character definitely changed as soon as they were on the other side of the curtain. Grew darker, more intimate. Jamie battled the impulse to drag Marcus back out onto the street. For one thing, Marcus was frowning

with his body turned in toward Jamie, like a hired bodyguard. Second, he could see the pulse in Marcus's throat jumping around in a scattered pattern, so he knew the bluster was all for show. The guy was nervous. Maybe he'd suggested this hangout way too soon—

“Jamie. Hey.”

Jamie turned to find Kurt approaching and sensed Marcus tensing. “Hey Kurt.”

They gave each other a hesitant one-armed hug and Jamie stepped back, uncomfortable over even that small gesture in front of Marcus, which boded *really* fucking well. “This is my friend, Marcus.”

Kurt put out his hand instead of going in for a hug, correctly interpreting Marcus's mood. “Hey,” Marcus said, clearing his throat hard. “It's uh...nice to meet you, man.”

Jamie glanced over at Marcus in surprise. Marcus raised an eyebrow back at him. *I'm trying*, mouthed. *For you*.

Heart rattling in his ears, Jamie followed Kurt to the low couches where his friends were seated in a darker area lit with flickering candles. There was one man slightly younger than Kurt...and another guy who appeared *much* younger and wouldn't meet anyone's eyes. Everyone shook hands and Kurt gestured for Jamie to sit down—in a spot on the opposite couch from Marcus. Jamie and Marcus stared at each other for a heavy beat and they took their seats, watching each other across the stainless steel block serving as a table.

“So, I hope you don't mind,” Kurt said, sending an affable wave at the waitress. “I kind of read between the lines when you called and asked to bring your friend.” He nodded subtly at the younger man sitting to the left of Marcus. “My nephew, Adam, is in a similar situation and I thought they'd be made comfortable in each other's presence. He's not ready for anything serious, but I thought maybe they could form a friendship?”

Jamie gave a jerky nod, but his mouth had gone dry. *Stop, asshole. This is what you wanted*. He'd brought Marcus along for exactly this kind of interaction. There was virtually no pressure and Kurt's nephew was in the same boat. Struggling. Marcus could probably benefit from meeting Adam more that he could benefit from spending time with Jamie.

“Did I overstep?”

Kurt had obviously misconstrued Jamie's silence for disapproval, so he shook his head. "No, I think that was a great idea."

But five minutes later when Marcus and Adam starting talking, a chord of jealousy was plucked in Jamie's stomach and it resonated, growing louder. Louder. He tried to focus on his conversation with Kurt—something about Long Beach real estate prices—but every few minutes, Marcus would glance over at Jamie with an unreadable expression and he'd lose his train of thought.

Needing to do something proactive so he wouldn't ask to speak to Marcus outside and wear the fucking face off him with a kiss, Jamie ordered a round of drinks from the waitress. When he normally would have drunk a beer, Jamie put away a tumbler of whiskey in short order and asked for another one. Was it his imagination or had Adam and Marcus moved closer on the couch?

He was so preoccupied with what was happening on the other side of the table, Jamie barely noticed when Kurt laid a hand on his knee, without breaking stride in their conversation. It was almost conspiratorial, friendly, and Jamie was too focused on the proximity between Adam and Marcus to react. What was a hand on the knee when his stomach felt like it was being twisted in a fist?

From the opposite couch, Marcus's eyes snagged on Kurt's hand and his big chest heaved once. Twice. He plowed his fingers through his dirty-blond hair and stood abruptly, his shins hitting the coffee table and rattling the drinks.

The waitress arrived with their next round, blocking Marcus from view. With his labored breathing echoing in his ear, Jamie waited, waited for her to move, so he could see Marcus again. But when she moved after what felt like an hour, he was gone. Marcus was *gone*.

"Hey," Jamie shouted above the music, lunging to his feet and dislodging Kurt's hand in the process. He pointed at the empty spot beside Adam. "Where did he go?"

Adam's laugh was uncomfortable, probably because Jamie was yelling like a lunatic. "He asked me to give you this." Adam held out a fist full of crumpled money that somehow Jamie knew belonged to Marcus. Even before Adam said, "He wants you to get a cab home. No train, please, he said."

Jamie was hollowed out in one scoop.

Marcus had left.

“Fuck. I have to go. Sorry,” Jamie said, already jogging toward the bar area. If he hurried, he would catch Marcus. He *had* to catch him. His abrupt departure couldn’t really be over Kurt putting a hand on Jamie’s knee?

Oh yes, it could. It *absolutely* could. This whole night had felt wrong because he’d brought Marcus out in the company of a man who was interested in Jamie. Adam had potentially shown the same kind of interest in Marcus.

They’d sat there and watched each other attempt connections with other people—and it had been...wow. *So* shitty. If Jamie thought being kept a secret made him feel slimy, nothing compared to tonight. Sitting across from the man he’d fallen for and letting another man touch him, even in the smallest capacity. All while watching Marcus try. For him.

“Idiot,” Jamie gritted out, hating himself. “You fucking idiot.”

Jamie let out a sound as he burst out onto the street, frantically scanning the sidewalk in both directions for a giant in gray, but Marcus was nowhere. He was gone. Panic beginning to set in, Jamie shoved the money he was still holding into his pocket and took out his phone to call Marcus. It went straight to voicemail.

“Goddammit.” Jamie pulled up the Uber app and ordered a car, inputting Marcus’s building as the destination, instead of his own house. The ride seemed to take a million years and the entire way, Jamie couldn’t stop his brain from replaying the scene at the bar over and over. Marcus visibly shaken at the sight of Kurt’s hand on his knee, ripping at his hair. Leaving. God, Jamie couldn’t even imagine how upset Marcus would have to be to leave him in Brooklyn. He didn’t even like him being on the opposite end of the beach.

When Jamie reached Marcus’s building, he asked the Uber to wait. Rain had begun to fall in big, warm glops from the sky and Jamie ducked inside the humid building vestibule to escape it, pushing the wet hair out of his eyes. He rang the bell marked Deez Nuts twenty times and called Marcus again on the phone, but no one answered. Nothing. Where the hell was he?

Jamie’s entire body was an exposed nerve as the Uber navigated the streets of Long Beach toward his house. How the hell was he just supposed to go inside and pretend like everything wasn’t fucked up? Moving and

thinking and breathing required a concerted effort, because all he could do was exist in the horror of that same fifteen seconds, on a loop.

The Uber pulled up in front of the Prince house and Jamie swallowed heavily, managing a gruff thank you to the driver before climbing out into the now heavy rain.

Marcus was sitting on his steps.

Hoisting a bottle of Jack Daniels to his lips.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HE'D RUINED EVERYTHING.

Marcus swallowed a gulp of whiskey and it burned the edges of the pit in his stomach. The one that had been steadily yawning wider for over an hour.

Jamie was home safe. He'd made sure of it. He needed to get up and go home now.

There was zero chance that Jamie wanted him here. Not after he'd given Marcus the perfect opportunity to prove he was trying. Trying to grow into the man Jamie needed. Jamie had handed him the golden, one-time chance to *learn* and he'd done nothing but die a slow death on that couch the whole time. He'd squandered the help Jamie so selflessly offered.

And Marcus couldn't even say for certain he wouldn't walk out of that bar all over again.

No, he *could* say for certain.

He would.

Not sitting beside Jamie, letting another man have that honor, had been borderline impossible, but the hand on his leg?

Marcus made a miserable sound and took another pull of whiskey, ignoring the rain that dripped into his eyes when he tipped his head back.

"I'm going, I promise," Marcus announced, coming to his feet, pleased when the ground didn't sway. He'd only purchased the bottle of Jack after getting off the train in Long Beach, so he was nowhere near drunk. Give it half an hour, though. He'd do whatever it took to pass out and stop thinking about another man's hand on Jamie.

He descended the stairs and gave Jamie a wide berth where he stood at the end of the path, going around him. *Don't ask. Don't ask.*

"Marcus..."

"Did he kiss you?" His grip tightened around the glass neck of the bottle, because if Jamie said yes, Marcus was going to escape consciousness by slamming it down over his own head. "*Did he?*"

Jamie seemed to be struggling with his answer.

“That means yes, doesn’t it? *Jesus Christ.*”

“It’s not a yes, Diesel,” Jamie snapped, taking a step in his direction, his dark hair being plastered to his forehead by the falling condensation. “I’m just trying to figure out what control I’m giving up of this whole fucking mess if I start answering questions like that. And explaining myself to you. Where does that lead?”

A beat passed. Two. “Is that a yes?”

Jamie exhaled on an unsteady laugh. “What the hell am I going to do with you?”

“Anything you want,” Marcus whispered back.

The look Jamie gave him back said *that’s not true and you know it.*

“Was tonight really so easy for you?” Marcus asked, his voice rising, a hand swiping across his forehead to brush away the rain. “Pawning me off on another guy? Was it really that *easy*, Jamie?”

“*No.* It wasn’t.”

Marcus barely heard Jamie’s reply because of the sudden roar in his ears, carried forth by the memories. Jamie sitting too close to Kurt. Letting Marcus sit too close to Adam. “Do you think I’m going to be attracted to just anyone? Is that what you think?” He used his bottle to gesture at the house. “Your brothers are both hot and I’ve never *once* thought of fucking *either* of them. Not once.”

Jamie’s face screwed up. “For chrissake, Marcus.”

“Sorry, I was just trying to support my point.” The bottle sloshed at his side. “It’s just you, Jamie. It’s only you, since as far back as I can remember. So did Father Time kiss you or not? Put me out of my fucking misery.”

“No. Okay? *No.*” Jamie two-hand shoved Marcus back a step. “He didn’t kiss me. I ran out of the bar after *you*. I left and went straight to *your* building, *Deez Nuts*. I’ve been going out of my fucking mind, you don’t even answer your phone and now you think you can question *me*? I was...I was...”

Marcus felt his face split into a grin. “Worried about me?”

“Don’t you dare smile.”

Enough warmth spread in his chest, he was worried his heart might drown, but at least it would go happy. “Jamie Prince was worried about me.”

Jamie strode past him toward the door, already taking out his keys. “You should be worried I’m going to clock you with that bottle.”

Marcus floated behind him up the path. “Where are you going?”

“Inside.” Once Jamie got the door open, he paused. Without turning around he cursed under his breath. Head falling forward, he asked, “Are you coming?”

Not in a million years did Marcus ever expect to see the inside of Jamie’s house. It was nothing like he’d pictured, either. In his mind, Jamie was a king living in a palace, deigning to mingle with lesser men. But the space was homey, slightly outdated, signs of its male inhabitants everywhere, though Rory’s girlfriend’s influence was in places, too. Textbooks, sunflowers in vases sprinkled in among the kicked off sneakers and empty beer bottles.

The house was empty thanks to Andrew and Rory working the Castle Gate, and Jamie didn’t stop in the quiet kitchen. He tossed his keys onto the kitchen counter and headed for the stairs so fast, Marcus had to speed walk after him. He saw Jamie take a left and disappear into a room at the end of the hall, and with his pulse spiking like a football, he followed.

“This is more what I pictured,” Marcus said, entering the dimly lit room, rubbing his sweating palms on his rain-soaked jeans. “Black and white and dark wood and no dust on your desk fan and a Mac. I knew you’d have a Mac. No dishes anywhere. I knew you’d have no—”

“You’re rambling, Diesel,” Jamie said, sitting on the bed and bending forward to untie his boots. “Take a deep breath. It’s just me.”

“Just you,” Marcus said with a quiet laugh. “That’s like saying...*just* Noah Syndergaard.”

Having toed off his boots, Jamie straightened. “Except I’m less pitcher, more catcher.”

“Oh.” Understanding dawned and Marcus’s eyes widened. “*Oh.*”

Already, there hadn’t been a hope in hell of his dick staying soft in Jamie’s bedroom. After Jamie’s implication that he liked being on the bottom, Marcus’s cock was at such rigid attention, it threatened to bust open his jeans. He could only exist inside the fierce ache as Jamie stripped off his shirt and stood, taking slow, measured steps in Marcus’s direction.

“Why did you come here for?” Jamie asked, stopping right in front of him.

A shiver passed through Marcus and he had to close his eyes because having Jamie so close and so half naked in front of a bed was so overwhelming. "To make sure you got home safe."

"Why else?"

"If that guy kissed you," Marcus breathed unevenly. "I was probably going to break a bottle over my own head."

"That's probably not a healthy impulse, but sure." Marcus only knew Jamie moved closer because of the warm breath that fanned his neck. "What did you come here for?"

Marcus swallowed hard. "I wanted to be the one who kissed you good night, babe."

A pause. "Just kiss me?"

"No," Marcus rasped, thunder cracking in his bloodstream. "I came for all of it."

Jamie's palm coasted up under his shirt, his fingertips dragging in light circles around Marcus's nipples, before traveling down, down, lingering on the snap of his jeans...and then Jamie's grip closed around the bulge of his cock.

"*Oh Jesus, please,*" Marcus moaned, his legs very nearly giving way, teeth chattering a little. "You've never touched me there."

"Believe me, I know."

Marcus dropped his open mouth to the curve of Jamie's neck, struggling to breathe. "Tell me you've wanted to."

"I've *needed* to." Jamie started a firm massage, cradling Marcus's cock through his jeans and slide-squeezing it, base to tip. Up and down, up and down. "You think you were the only one jealous tonight? I thought you might make a friend, but you kept moving closer and I stopped being rational. You're the only one who does that to me, Marcus. I couldn't think straight with anyone else near you."

"I was just trying to get a better view of Kurt's hand," Marcus growled, rocking his hips into the perfect pressure of Jamie's touch. "I knew he was going to do it. Put his hand on my Jamie."

Jamie's eyes met his. "I'm sorry I let that happen." Keeping his attention locked on Marcus's face, he unbuttoned Marcus's jeans and tugged down his zipper, reaching in to draw out his full, throbbing erection. And there he was, bare and dripping in Jamie's hand, the beginning of nine

thousand of his most private fantasies coming true. “I’m going to give you the rest of that apology on my knees. I don’t give a fuck if that’s right or we should handle this differently. I just need you to look down at me eating your big, thick cock and know I never wanted anyone’s hands on me tonight but yours.”

Marcus heard Jamie’s speech like they were inside a tunnel, the words echoing and sounding almost unreal. Dreamlike. It wasn’t a dream, though. Jamie Prince was really dropping to his knees in front of him. Marcus’s knees gave out and he crashed backward into a dresser, rattling the cologne bottles and picture frames on top. Jamie didn’t laugh at him, though. No, his mouth was too busy closing around the head of Marcus’s cock, his tongue taking a lap around the smooth helmet, tucking into the underside of that ridge with a moan and rubbing, rubbing with the tip of his tongue until Marcus had to grab on to the base of his dick and pull out of Jamie’s mouth.

“Jamie, Jamie, please,” he panted. “I’m going to embarrass myself.”

Jamie’s expression was the hottest thing he’d ever seen. Patient. Yet extremely turned on. His eyes were glassy, cheekbones flushed, lips parted. Keeping his attention on Marcus’s face, he leaned in and placed a kiss in the center of his happy trail. “We have all night.” His teeth scraped across Marcus’s belly, causing a muscle convulsion in the lowest parts of his stomach. “If you come in my mouth now, that just means you’ll be able to fuck me longer later.”

“Oh my God,” Marcus wheezed. “You just said that. To me.”

Jamie’s upper lip curled. “Nobody loses here, okay? And nothing between us is embarrassing.” His tongue drew lazy circles around Marcus’s belly button. “Unless you knock yourself out with a bottle.”

“Yeah,” Marcus rasped. “Pretty stoked right about now that I didn’t do that—” His words broke off into a moan as Jamie’s mouth sank down, down—all the fucking way down—on his cock. “Jesus. *Jesus*.”

There was nothing pretty about the way Jamie sucked him off and Marcus *loved* it. Love didn’t even begin to cover his appreciation when Jamie choked and pulled back, letting Marcus’s length go with a smack of his lips. Then, mother of everything holy, Jamie spit on his cock to make it slippery and dove in for more, taking Marcus to the back of his throat, eyes shut so tight, enjoyment written on every inch of his face. Marcus’s thighs shook, hoarse groans rising up from deep down in his chest, one after the

other. Pleasure twined around the bottom of his spine like barbed wire, constricting, constricting, and words left his mouth without stopping by his brain first for permission to exit.

“Goddammit, Jamie, you make my dick hurt so bad. It hurts *all the time* and fuck, oh fuck that’s so good. Don’t stop, babe. Yes. Right there. *Right there.*” He pumped his hips in an increasingly fast tempo, moaning at the ceiling when Jamie accommodated every inch of him. “I’ve wanted to fuck that fucking mouth since I saw you three summers ago and you know it. You make me obsessed. You make me *crazy.*”

His mind hitched with worry when he heard the echo of his own words. Had he said too much? But Jamie only drew harder on his cock, jerking down Marcus’s jeans to his knees and reaching around to grip his bare ass cheeks. Until he had Jamie’s hands marking their territory with rough, molding squeezes of his backside, Marcus hadn’t been aware how badly he needed Jamie to touch him there.

“Please,” Marcus whispered.

Jamie paused his blowjob from heaven long enough to sink his middle finger into his own mouth. He continued to lick up and down the underside of Marcus’s shaft while letting his finger travel lightly along the split of Marcus’s ass. “This is what I think about,” Jamie said thickly. “Maybe it makes me sick, but I’ve wanted you to beg for my finger here. Wanted to watch you struggle against how much you need your ass filled. Wanted to watch you come as soon as I get knuckle-deep even though you’re trying so hard not to.”

The slick pad of Jamie’s middle finger brushed over the pucker of Marcus’s back entrance. At the same time, Jamie deep-throated his cock and there was no preparing for the onslaught of sensations coming from all sides. And more than his body responded to Jamie touching him there. Something clicked in his head, like a math equation finally making sense. A really sexy fucking math equation. That finger slid over his asshole again and the pressure in Marcus’s balls became unbearable, almost too heavy to hold back.

“*Jamie,*” he growled, his fingers twisting in Jamie’s hair. “*Please.*”

What was he asking for? Marcus could barely think straight, the pleasure being fed to his body was so intense. So long overdue. But somehow a thought pierced the lust crowding his brain. What if this was the

only night he ever got to spend with Jamie? Nothing had changed. Marcus still wasn't ready to come out and Jamie still needed to live life on his own terms. Out and proud. Tomorrow morning would come, the sun would rise and Jamie might view tonight as a bad decision. Or a one-time thing.

Marcus's throat tightened so fast he couldn't breathe. If those possibilities had even the slightest chance of coming true, he wasn't going to miss this chance to be everything—*everything*—for Jamie. Biting down on his lower lip and wrestling with the oncoming orgasm, Marcus pulled his cock out of Jamie's mouth and urged him to his feet.

Affection like Marcus had never felt before tugged in his chest when Jamie stumbled into him and laid his cheek on Marcus's shoulder, breathing heavily. "D'you need to stop?"

"God no." Marcus tipped up Jamie's face and their mouths locked, tongues twining slowly, before they both surged together and the kiss caught fire. Jamie reached for Marcus's shirt at the same time Marcus went to unzip Jamie's pants and their hands collided. They laughed against one another's mouths as Marcus backed Jamie toward the wall beside his bed. Having Jamie wedged between him and a hard place made a moan break from Marcus's mouth, and requiring skin-on-skin contact with every fiber of his being, he jerked his own shirt off over his head and went back to kissing Jamie, reveling in the hot friction of their straining chests. "I want to be inside you," he breathed, grappling with Jamie's zipper. "Help me get inside you."

Marcus reached into Jamie's jeans and took out his cock, stroking it in a tight grip, watching in awe as Jamie's jaw loosened on a groan. "Are you sure?"

"Never been more sure about anything," Marcus said, closing his mouth over Jamie's and kissing him hard. "I need you. I need you."

Jamie shoved his pants and boxers down the rest of the way, using his feet to kick them off and Marcus was hit with a wave of dizziness. Jamie was naked in front of him. All the way naked—and he was the hottest thing Marcus had ever seen. Smooth in some places, rough and covered in hair in others. Cut muscles and lithe limbs. Everything. He was everything. And he was fucking Marcus's grip with sexy hip punches, even as he groped for something on his bedside table.

A bottle.

While Jamie engaged Marcus's mouth in another seeking kiss, Marcus could sense him thumbing off the cap of the bottle and then liquid was being poured onto Jamie's cock, the ample moisture coating Marcus's palm and he knew. He knew what to do. It was instinct...and partly the porn he'd caved in and watched. With his lips still tackling Jamie's, Marcus let go of his man's cock and brought his fingers around back, sliding the middle and index between Jamie's firm cheeks. He might have felt out of his depth at that point if he hadn't just experienced how good it felt to be touched back there. If Jamie didn't tense and hold his breath, like he was waiting, needing Marcus to finger him. So he did.

He sank his middle finger inside Jamie and felt Jamie's dick swell between their bellies, felt the ripples of pleasure travel through the body he held pressed to the wall. And nothing had ever been more perfect or called to Marcus more clearly. *This is where I am. I'm all here.* Marcus anchored their foreheads together and continued to work his finger in and out of Jamie, eventually adding a second finger and swallowing Jamie's gasp with his mouth. He felt Jamie's hand move between their stomachs to beat them both off in one fist and the sight of it, combined with the feel of Jamie's tight entrance around his fingers, almost knocked him down.

"You're doing that so fucking good," Jamie said in a deep rasp. "Getting me ready for you, aren't you, baby?"

Marcus shook from head to toe. "Call me 'baby' again and I'm going to come."

Jamie shook his head. "No, you won't. You want to come inside me so bad, don't you, Marcus?" He touched his tongue to Marcus's. Once, twice. "I feel the way you're trying to stretch me. You're dying to slide in another finger and see how deep I'll be able to take your ten-inch dick." Jamie let go of his own shaft and stroked only Marcus's length *fastfastfast*. "Why don't you fuck me and find out?"

"*Condom,*" Marcus growled, bliss threatening to erupt inside him at any moment. Without waiting for an answer, he threw open Jamie's side table, thanking God they'd both been blessed in the anatomy department, because *hallelujah*, Jamie had a strip of Magnums. He tore one open with his teeth, moaning long and loud when Jamie took over and rolled it down Marcus's aching cock. "How? The bed, or—"

"Do what feels right."

“I want to be able to see your eyes,” Marcus managed around the heart beating in his throat. Without another thought about what he should do, he followed his instincts. Marcus used his lower body to push Jamie higher on the wall and angled his hips beneath him, leaving Jamie’s tight ass sitting on his lap—and the sweet pressure of it increased when Jamie slung his legs around Marcus’s hips. “Do you want to see my eyes, too, Jamie?”

Jamie’s eyes flashed and he caught the sides of Marcus’s face, bringing their heads together, anchoring him in the moment again. “More than anything.”

With their mingled breaths coming faster and faster, Marcus reached behind Jamie and guided his cock to where his fingers had been, breaching the tight space one inch at a time. Jamie latched on to Marcus’s lower lip and bit down, drawing blood, never breaking eye contact and everything inside Marcus grew, swelled, gravitated toward his man. *Need. This is what real need feels like.* “Jamie,” Marcus panted. “Oh Jesus, it doesn’t feel like I stretched you at all. Babe, if I hurt you, I’ll die. I’ll fucking die—”

Jamie cut him off with a kiss and slowly started to undulate his hips, pushing himself down on Marcus’s rigid dick with every deliberate movement. “You’re not hurting me,” Jamie choked out. “I swear to Christ, it’s the opposite.”

Marcus balls drew up tight and his vision wavered, but he didn’t move. His life was going to end right here and now if he didn’t explore the snug channel Jamie was offering him. But he couldn’t move until he was positive... “Are you sure?”

“Marcus,” Jamie said. “Think of someone else’s hand on my thigh.”

“*No.*” Marcus drove home with a growl. “*Mine.*”

“*Fuck,*” Jamie shouted at the ceiling, his thighs jerking tighter around Marcus’s waist. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

What happened next would be fossilized in Marcus’s memory forever. Even before reaching completion, he’d never been more whole. More satisfied. More himself. His mouth fastened on to Jamie’s and he fucked so much more than his first man.

He fucked his first and last love. He’d never been more sure of anything in his life.

Marcus used the wall and an arm around Jamie’s hips to secure him, then he took hold of Jamie’s cock in his free hand and beat him off between

their heaving bellies. He timed the pumps of his fist with the drives of his dick into Jamie's ass and *Jesus*, in addition to being the sweetest, snuggest pressure of his life, the movements were like breathing. Jamie's body flexed and grew shiny with sweat, his eyes fogging over, so masculine and gorgeous, Marcus could only marvel that Jamie was giving him the gift of himself. "I'm so lucky, Jamie," Marcus slurred, leaning in to lick his tongue over Jamie's collarbone, his neck, his stubbled jaw. "How am I so fucking lucky?"

Jamie pulled him down into a kiss, flexing his backside around Marcus's pumping dick, eliciting a growl from them both. "I feel how bad you want to bust, crammed inside me so tight. But you're waiting for me to pop off first, aren't you?" Jamie ground out, his breath stuttering every time Marcus rocked upward. "Feels like I'm the lucky one."

"Not for much longer," Marcus choked out, his thrusts coming faster, his hips acting of their own volition, his base, urgent needs taking over. "This tight ass is killing me," he said through his teeth, a sharp spike of urgency prodding him low, low in the belly. "I want to fuck it forever, but it's squeezing me too hard. Making me come."

"I'm coming, too," Jamie near-shouted, the hair on his inner thighs rasping the outsides of Marcus's hips. "Harder, baby. *Please*."

The endearment broke Marcus, cracking something open in his chest and creating a painful strain in his balls at the same time. Jamie cursed, his body jerking between Marcus and the wall, and Marcus felt the wet spurt of Jamie's orgasm creaming over his knuckles—and the proof he'd pleased Jamie catapulted him over the finish line like nothing else could. A roar built in his sternum and blasted out of him as he drove deep into Jamie's ass and released the pressure that had been living inside him for at least a century. "*Oh my God*," he bellowed, his open mouth on Jamie's shoulder. "Oh my God, Jamie."

Jamie's arms wrapped around Marcus's neck and although they were unsteady, they were strong. They kept Marcus glued together when he swore his completion—for once, absolute—would bring him to his knees.

"You okay?" Jamie asked, his breathing labored. "That was..."

"Don't tell me it was good."

Jamie raised a sweaty eyebrow. "You don't want me to tell you that was amazing?"

Marcus moaned. "It's going to make me hard again."

"Diesel, you are never not hard. This is a proven fact."

He waggled his eyebrows. "Lucky for you."

Jamie's lips twitched, but he didn't respond. Maybe Marcus had been wrong to imply this would be happening again? His pulse skipped, lead forming the lining of his stomach at the possibility this was a one-time thing. Something Jamie would be kind about in the morning but would almost definitely classify as a bad decision.

"What's wrong?" Jamie asked, his legs dropping from their perch around Marcus's waist. "You want to...talk about anything?"

"No," Marcus said honestly, dread still trying to battle its way into this perfect moment. He wasn't going to let it. Searching for courage, he reached down and twined his fingers with Jamie's. "Can I stay?"

Jamie shook his head. But he said, "Yes."

Marcus grinned and pulled Jamie toward the bed, but when he would have dived into the clean, white sheets, Jamie yanked him to a stop. "Whoa, *whoa*. Christ. Get rid of the condom first, would you?" he said, flicking a hand at Marcus's semi and the weighted latex hanging off the tip. "Is this a pretty good indication of how nasty your sheets are?"

Unable to wipe the smile off his face, Marcus grabbed a tissue and wrapped up the condom, dropping into Jamie's waist basket. Not bothering to hide that fact that he was ogling Jamie's naked body, Marcus bounded into bed and got comfortable in the sheets, gesturing for Jamie to join him. After a definite hesitation, Jamie started to climb in—

And Marcus pulled Jamie into a backwards bear hug, wrapping legs and arms around him so he wouldn't get away. "I'd clean my sheets for you, babe," he yawned into Jamie's neck.

It wasn't lost on him that Jamie didn't answer.

But Marcus was soaring so high on cloud nine—spending the night in *Jamie Prince's bed*—he could only close his eyes and surrender to the best sleep of his life.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JAMIE HAD APPARENTLY woken with the maturity level of a nine-year-old, because he was pretending to be asleep while Marcus plodded around the room getting dressed. Truth was, he'd been awake since before dawn, wondering what the hell to do about the two-hundred-and-fifty-pound man in his bed. The one holding him like a stuffed teddy bear.

Beneath the comforter, Jamie's cock woke up at the sight of Marcus's naked silhouette. It was outlined in the sunlit blinds, showing off... everything. His dangling dick looked like a someone had filled a sock with wet sand, and Jamie knew if he so much as rolled over, that thing would jump to attention like a boot camp soldier.

As for the rest of Marcus...it was beautiful, too. His hair was in disarray from bed, one side flat, the other in ninety-two directions. He looked softer in the glow of the morning sun, his mouth relaxed, eyebrows knitted together while he tried to find the neck hole of his T-shirt in the dark.

When Jamie's heart turned over in his chest for the tenth time since waking, he forced his eyes shut. The mature thing to do here was wake up. For real. Ask Marcus if he wanted some coffee. Compliment him once again on the fucking of a lifetime. Because yeah. That's exactly what it had been. Jamie was afraid to find out what Marcus could do with some practice. Okay, maybe afraid was the wrong term. More like salivating.

Which is why he continued to feign sleep.

Marcus wouldn't do the awkward morning-after dance. Jamie knew that without a doubt. He would probably wrestle Jamie into another hug and ask if they could sit together on the beach today. And Jamie would say yes. He'd say yes to anything right now that meant he could spend more time with Marcus.

Anything.

Bad. That was bad.

Case in point, it wasn't even eight in the morning and Marcus was leaving so no one would know he'd been there. Even now, Jamie could feel the warmth of the embrace he'd slept in dissipating, replacing itself with

cold. This is how he'd feel all the time if he gave in to the urge to see how a relationship with Marcus played out. So he forced himself to think of the ridicule on Chris's red face as he held him under the water, calling him disgusting names. It was impossible to picture that same expression on Marcus, but what if his family found out? When a man's back was to the wall, there were no guarantees.

And God, Jamie wasn't sure he could survive Marcus actively denying this thing between them. Because he'd been an idiot and let himself get in too deep, hadn't he?

Jamie tried to keep his breathing even as Marcus approached the bed.

"I'll see you at the Hut, Jamie," he whispered. "I wish...I could stay. I wish so many things. But mostly I just wish for you."

It was a wonder that Marcus couldn't hear the knocking of his heart. The creaking of the floor signaled Marcus walking to the door and as soon as he was gone, a rush of breath left Jamie and he couldn't haul it back in, no matter how hard he tried. He sat up on the edge of the bed and buried his head in his hands, vacillating between a wish to go back in time and keep Marcus at arm's length and wishing he hadn't pretended to be sleeping.

"I'm so fucked," he muttered, standing and snagging a pair of sweatpants from his drawer and yanking them up his legs, before putting on his glasses and heading downstairs—

Straight into an intervention.

Rory and Andrew were standing at the kitchen island with their arms crossed.

And he hated that the first words out of his mouth were, "Don't you dare tell anyone he was here."

His brothers exchanged a concerned look.

Andrew kicked out a stool. "Sit down."

"Fuck you."

Rory whistled. "Someone is gunning for my position as the family asshole."

Jamie trudged the rest of the way down the stairs and took a coffee mug out of the cabinet, dropping it onto the counter like a gavel. "Were you down here when he left?"

"No." Andrew tipped his chin at their youngest brother. "Rory saw him leaving through the upstairs window and came to get me."

“This isn’t half as catastrophic as you’re making it out to be,” Jamie scoffed.

“Oh no?” Rory drawled. “Remember what happened the last time a guy snuck out of here before sunrise?”

Pain lanced Jamie in the chest and the wind seeped out of him. “Rory,” he said, turning and focusing in on his brother. “I wouldn’t let anything like that happen to you again.”

“Christ, Jamie. I’m not worried about *me*,” Rory snapped, looking insulted.

“*I* am. I do.” Jamie shouted back. “I worry all the time about fucking things up again for my family. That’s why I’ve been so careful.” He fell into the stool Andrew had kicked out for him, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “Until now. I...I don’t know why the fuck I can’t just be *careful* when it comes to him.”

Andrew and his stern expression came to stand in front of him. “I can juggle shifts around at the beach, find someone else to work the door at the bar.”

Jamie laughed without humor. “That wouldn’t keep him away.”

“Want me to make him stay away?” Rory asked, grinding his knuckles on the island.

“If you go near him,” Jamie said, failing to keep his tone level. “I’ll light the goddamn boardwalk on fire. Do you understand me?”

A staring contest between Jamie and Rory ensued and Rory conceded victory by inclining his chin. “I’d say this problem is bigger than we thought, A.”

“I’d fucking concur,” Andrew sighed. “Jamie, we just don’t want to see you get hurt. There are so many men out there who’d be better for you.” He paused. “Find a way to walk away from this. Nothing stays a secret for long. You know that. I saw this coming because I’m close to you. But it’s only a matter of time before people start to speculate, Marcus gets nervous and...”

“And then it’s an instant replay,” Jamie said quietly, swallowing. “Without the whole attempted drowning and incarceration aftermath.”

“Don’t remind me about what happened,” Rory gritted out, plowing his fingers through his hair. “I can’t believe that piece of shit had the nerve to come back to Long Beach. I’d love to find him and—”

“But you won’t,” Jamie and Andrew stressed at the same time.

“You’ve got Olive now to think about,” Jamie said, watching Rory drain of tension instantly at the mention of his girlfriend. “And if you think getting burned by another man would hurt me, try getting in trouble again *because of me.*”

Rory gave a slight shake of his head, almost seeming confused. “You’re not really still feeling guilty about the time I served, are you, Jamie?”

“Every day.”

“Well knock it off,” Rory shot back.

“Another heartwarming family meeting, brought to you by the Prince brothers,” Andrew muttered, splitting a reproving look between them both. “Listen, Jamie, just think about—”

The door burst open and Jiya stood outlined in the sunshine, her dark hair lifted in a whirlwind around her face.

“Beautiful,” Andrew breathed. “God.”

“You’re not going to believe what happened!” Jiya squealed, dancing into the kitchen on her toes and executing a perfect pirouette.

“What?” Olive asked sleepily, padding into the kitchen in one of Rory’s T-shirts and rubbing at her eyes beneath her glasses. Their youngest brother turned to visible goo, pulling the drowsy blonde between his outstretched thighs and planting a lingering kiss on her temple. “What aren’t we going to believe?” Olive said again, around a yawn.

Jiya carefully laid down an opened envelope on the kitchen island and pointed at it, like it was a living thing. “Someone paid for my flying lessons.”

A beat of silence passed, before everyone sped into motion. Rory, Olive and Jamie got up to congratulate Jiya with a hug, while Andrew patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

“How?” Jamie asked, forcing suspicion not to show in his expression. “Was it your parents?”

“Probably.” Jiya was still dancing in place. “My mom has said no to the idea so many times, she probably can’t admit she softened, but there they were in yesterday’s mail. Maybe she still feels bad about forcing me into that terrible blind date—”

Jiya cut herself off and traded an uncomfortable, through-the-eyelashes glance with Andrew. “Oh, was it terrible?” Andrew coughed into his fist.

“I’m, uh...sorry to hear that.”

Jiya tucked her hair behind her ears. “Perhaps it wasn’t a love match, but at least now I have a starting point to go on. The next guy will either be better or worse and then I’ll have a date barometer. Is graphing my date experiences cruel or simply scientific?”

“Scientific,” Olive said, pushing up her glasses. “Definitely.”

Andrew tensed. “More dates?”

“When do the lessons start?” Rory cut in, widening his eyes at Andrew.

“In two weeks!” Jiya picked the envelope back up and held it over her head like she’d just hit Powerball. “I can’t believe it. I can’t *believe* it.”

With that, she danced back out the kitchen, leaving a vacuum of sound in her wake.

Jamie turned to Andrew. “You bought the lessons, didn’t you?”

His older brother stared after Jiya with his heart in his eyes for a moment before schooling his features. “Be at the Hut on time,” Andrew said, striding from the room. “We’ve got another busy day ahead.”

*

JAMIE WALKED DOWN the boardwalk, watching seagulls swarm a dropped breakfast burrito on the beach. At this time of morning, summer Long Beach was just beginning to come alive. Joggers trundled down the wooden planks in brightly colored gear, young people in pajamas walked their dogs, eyes glued to the cell phones in their hand. The sun drifted behind the remaining cloud cover, continuing to burn it off little by little. The scents of warm sugar and coffee and sunscreen mingled together, so familiar. And yet the way Jamie felt that morning was anything but commonplace.

A guy on a bike swerved around him, dinging the bell, but he barely reacted. Up ahead, the Hut beckoned, the same as it did every day. Marcus would be there. Even if he broke it off with the man, which he needed to—absolutely *had* to—Jamie still needed to act like last night never happened, for the benefit of their audience. For Marcus’s sake.

And he was in a panic at the mere idea that last night would never happen again.

That last night was it.

He'd never go to sleep again feeling...like nothing in the world could touch him. Like he was in the safest place on the planet. Like he could let his guard down.

Jamie's heartbeat started pounding double time the closer he got to the Hut. Bad. So bad. He'd always thought of Marcus as some kind of big, eager canine who wanted to play fetch, but the roles were reversed now. Jamie might as well be wagging his fucking tail in anticipation of seeing Marcus. Jesus, how had he let this happen?

He stopped for a moment to brace himself against the railing. To psych himself up. Breaking off this thing with Marcus was the only option. His brothers were worried—and Jamie had worried them enough for one lifetime. Caused them enough trouble and pain. He respected and trusted Rory and Andrew. If they were fearful enough to stage an intervention before their alarms went off, then Jamie needed to heed their warnings. It was totally possible he'd stopped seeing this situation with Marcus objectively.

I have to end this. It's already starting to hurt.

Seeing Marcus and pretending to just be friends, restricting their touches to behind closed doors...it was everything Jamie vowed he'd never do. Today marked the end.

With weight pressing down on his lungs, Jamie pushed off the railing and continued toward the Hut, already rehearsing his speech in his head. *Marcus, I care about you. I loved what we did together. But we have to stop this before it goes too far.*

Right. As if they hadn't leapfrogged over *too far* weeks ago.

When Jamie was almost at the Hut, some people came into focus and he slowed to a stop. A female dog walker was holding six leashes and each one had an enthusiastic dog on the end. All different breeds, barking and turning in excited circles. Labs, schnauzers, a cocker spaniel and a humongous Saint Bernard.

In the middle of them all stood Marcus, rubbing their fur and crooning to them in baby talk while the dog walker laughed. As Jamie watched, the Saint Bernard jumped and settled his paws on Marcus's shoulders, licking his face...and time seemed to play in slow motion. Marcus turned his face up to the sun and let out a booming laugh that echoed down the boardwalk,

stopping people in their tracks and kicking Jamie's heart into a million beats per second.

Marcus allowed the Saint Bernard to push him to the ground and then the entire posse of pups piled on, nuzzling Marcus with their wet noses and barking happily. In the center of them all, Marcus lay prone, chuckling at all the attention and Jamie could tell he was trying to give each dog equal attention and—

“Oh my God,” Jamie breathed, his pulse speeding fast enough to make him dizzy. “I’m in love with him.”

As if he'd shouted the words, Marcus sat up suddenly and looked around, brightening when he saw Jamie, waving briefly, before being wrestled back down by one of the Labs.

Now that he'd admitted his affliction out loud, love took root inside Jamie like one of those fast-motion botany documentaries on the Nature Channel. Roots wrapped around his insides and got cozy, filling every nook and cranny until he swore he was going to burst.

Somehow Jamie forced his feet to move in the direction of the Hut. He couldn't very well stand there all fucking day looking like he'd been struck by lightning, even though he had. His earth was definitely good and scorched.

The group of barking dogs, still drunk on Marcus's attention, were moving on just as Jamie reached the Hut. Marcus came to his feet slowly and searched Jamie's face, like he knew. Like he knew exactly what was coming and was bracing himself. “Good morning,” Marcus said, taking a half step forward, then retreating. “I brought you a juice. It's in the locker room.”

Jamie stomach flipped. “Thanks.”

Marcus nodded once and tried not to be obvious about checking their surroundings for eavesdroppers, but to Jamie, it was the most evident thing in the world. “I didn't shower because I wanted to smell like you today,” Marcus said in a thick voice. “Maybe not the best idea, but I couldn't help it.”

How much tighter could everything get? Jamie's muscles, his chest, his throat, it was like they were attached to a universal screw and it twisted, twisted the longer they stood there. “You're right, that's probably not a good idea,” Jamie said quietly. “None of this is a good idea.”

Marcus visibly held his breath.

“But I was thinking...” Jamie swallowed hard, no idea what words were coming out of his mouth, only that his racing heart refused to let him do anything but deliver them. “I was thinking if you wanted to *try* this, being my...boyfriend—officially—we wouldn’t have to tell anyone.” He could almost hear a pen scratching across paper, a proclamation sealing his fate. “Until you’re ready to tell your family. If...you’re ever ready.”

“*Jamie.*” Marcus let out his name on a shocked exhale, his head shaking slowly. “No. No, I can’t let you do that. I can’t. It would mean hurting you over and over—”

“You’re right, it was a stupid idea. Forget I said anything.”

Berating himself for being a giant fucking moron, Jamie strode past a gaping Marcus, only to be dragged to a halt after three steps. “Wait. Just wait. Jesus.” Marcus let go of Jamie’s arm and plowed his hands through his hair. “I’m not mentally equipped for this kind of shit. One second, I think you’re about to kick me to the curb and I’m going to have to spend all day trying not to cry like a girl, the next you’re...” Cautiously hopeful eyes scanned Jamie’s face. “Did you really mean it?”

“Take it or leave it, Diesel,” Jamie sighed, visibly bored but internally shaken by the heaven/hell he was offering. “We’re going to be late.”

Marcus’s throat worked. “Why are you doing this for me?”

Jamie was afraid love might overflow from his eyes, so he quickly looked down.

“I should say no,” Marcus whispered, coming close enough to heat Jamie’s shoulder with his breath. “I should say no to something that’s bad for Jamie.”

Jamie closed his eyes. “Is that what you’re doing?”

Marcus’s laugh was pained. “You think I could turn down a chance to be your boyfriend?” Ever so slightly, their fingers brushed, index fingers hooking together. “I know how hard it is for you to give me this, Jamie. I won’t let you feel wrong about this. It’ll be different than the last time, okay? I *promise*. I just need some time.”

“I know,” Jamie said, nodding. “I’ll give it to you. I want to give it to you.”

“Thank you.” Marcus’s body deflated against Jamie. Just for a second, before straightening and stepping away, leaving Jamie missing his touch

already. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too.”

And then Jamie counted to fifty before following Marcus into the Hut.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LIFE WAS AMAZING.

For the next week, Marcus basically went to bed smiling, woke up smiling, and he couldn't rule out the possibility that he smiled in his sleep. Why the hell wouldn't he? He had *his own side* of Jamie's bed. Jamie slept on the outside, Marcus took the inside half by the wall and it was just understood that they would fall asleep that way every single night.

Naked.

Marcus hurried through a set of pull ups, but one eye was on the clock and since he was trying to figure out how many minutes were left until he met Jamie at the Main Squeeze, he lost track of how many times his chin had touched the bar. Fuck it. Who cared?

He let go of the bar and swiped some sweat out of his eyes with a forearm, weaving through the equipment so he could shower off in the locker room. He took some extra time with the soap between his legs, because miracle of miracles, he was regularly getting his dick sucked by the smartest, sexiest, secretly kindest man on the planet now. And Marcus couldn't get enough of returning the favor. There was just something about the way Jamie seemed incapable of holding back when Marcus gave him head, riding his face like he couldn't get deep enough down his throat—

Marcus looked down at his inflating erection and cursed.

Honestly, he needed a cage for this monster. Were dick cages a thing?

He'd Google it later.

He flew through his shower and toweled off in record time, only stopping once to flex in front of the mirror. When he pulled the T-shirt that had spent the night on Jamie's bedroom floor over his head, he caught a whiff of Jamie and took a moment to bury his face in the soft cotton material. Christ, he loved Jamie. He could barely keep his feet on the ground, the love was such a buoyancy, carrying him from place to place.

And like every other time this week, when Marcus stopped to acknowledge how happy he was—how fucking *in love* he was—he was reminded that he was almost certainly going to blow this perfect shot with

Jamie. So many times this week, he'd looked across the pillow and wanted to say, "I'm ready. I want to tell my family. I want to tell everyone."

But insecurity and fear of the unknown would creep in, sinking their teeth in and he'd find himself swallowing the words on his heart. Trading them for *maybe tomorrows* and *one more day. I just need one more day.*

Jamie seemed just as happy as Marcus. Most of the time. When they met in his bedroom at the end of the night and there was nothing but their heartbeats in the silence, Jamie would smile. And the strain Marcus noticed around his eyes and mouth while in the Hut or behind the bar...it would cease to exist. Marcus would kiss him and lick the remaining tension out of Jamie's body until his boyfriend got that blissed out expression. The daytime hours only carried a feather's weight compared the two starved bodies rocking in the twisted sheets.

When Jamie offered to be his boyfriend in secret, Marcus had believed nothing could be better. And he couldn't deny this had been the best fucking week of his life. But holding himself back from kissing Jamie goodbye on the beach was getting harder. Almost unbearably hard. Another guy had been in the bar this week checking out Marcus's man and he'd almost ripped his skin off watching the guy ask for Jamie's number. Jamie had said no, but still. What Marcus wouldn't have given for the freedom to simply walk behind the bar and frame Jamie's face in his hands. Just press their foreheads together in front of everyone and breathe, the way they did in the mornings before Marcus got dressed and left.

What would it be like to take Jamie on a date? To hold his hand and not care who was watching? To have Jamie smile *all* the time and not just when they were alone? With every passing day, having that reality became more and more...necessary. Maybe even attainable. Being around Jamie made Marcus feel invincible. Confident in the man he was learning to accept—and really kind of like. Himself.

Soon, he promised Jamie in his head. *Soon.*

Marcus blew out a breath and left the gym, his heart roaring when he saw Jamie across the street waiting for him, posted up beside the door to the Main Squeeze. This week, most of their time together had been spent with their clothes off, but when Marcus managed to climb off Jamie for a few minutes, they worked on plans for the juice shop.

Jamie had called some of the food distributors for the Castle Gate and arranged daily fruit deliveries. The power had been turned on, air conditioners repaired and tested. Furniture had been delivered yesterday. They'd spent two nights painting the walls a bright yellow and setting up the juicers and other equipment Marcus had ordered online for a steal. Jamie had created inventory sheets and programmed the registers with prices. They'd commissioned a piece of repurposed wood for the sign and painted The Main Squeeze in bright, yellow lettering. One week to go until opening day and they still had some work to do, mainly perfecting Marcus's recipes, but it was really happening.

His throat hurt with emotion when he crossed the street and saw the weariness in Jamie's eyes before he saw Marcus and hid it. A group of young people were walking past on the sidewalk, leaving Jamie and Marcus hovering a few feet apart, when all Marcus really wanted was to throw Jamie down and devour him.

"Hey," Jamie said in a dry voice, tucking his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "How was your workout?"

Marcus made his pecs bounce—right, left, right, left and Jamie battled a smile. *Better*. "It was good," he said, taking the keys out of his workout bag. "You know, you can go inside without me. That's why I gave you the spare set of keys."

"Right. I'll do that next time," Jamie said without meeting his eyes, following Marcus into the Main Squeeze and closing the door behind him. "What's on the agenda today, boss?"

Finally out of view from the street, Marcus flattened Jamie up against the door with his body. "Taste testing," he rasped against Jamie's lips, relieved when Jamie's lids grew heavy, his mouth opening on a soft groan. "I'm going to start with you."

Jamie's hands came up, fingers curling in the neck of Marcus's shirt and dragging him down into a restless kiss. Marcus unsnapped Jamie's jeans to loosen the waistband so he could slide his hands into the back of Jamie's pants, kneading his ass cheeks with hungry hands. Where a week earlier he would have been hesitant to press his finger to Jamie's puckered entrance, he did it now without thinking, knowing a firm index finger *right there* would make Jamie moan into his mouth—and Jesus it did.

Jamie's moan. The most satisfying sound in the world.

With their mouths touching like this, the real world a million miles away, Marcus couldn't wait any longer to tell Jamie what had been on his mind basically nonstop. "I was thinking..." he panted, rubbing a circle around Jamie's hole with the pad of his finger, tapping it lightly once, twice. "I know you like when I'm inside you, but if you ever wanted to be inside me like that...I'm ready. I want it."

A shudder went through Jamie, making Marcus press their bodies tighter together so he could absorb it. Feel *everything* together. "You're ready to feel my fuck, baby?" Jamie asked hoarsely, rolling his hips and dragging their groins together. "Then I'll give it to you."

Marcus took both of Jamie's cheeks in his hands and held him still while he ground their cocks together, side to side, up and down, their strangled growls filling the dim juice shop. "I want to be the *last* man to feel your fuck, Jamie."

Jamie stiffened just a touch and if Marcus wasn't so turned on, he might have rammed his fist into the wall. Every time he brought up the future to Jamie, the same thing happened. Jamie swerved to avoid the topic—and what the hell choice did Marcus have but to let him? He hadn't offered Jamie a sustainable relationship, had he? No, he wouldn't even kiss him in broad daylight. So Marcus had no choice but to swallow his frustration when Jamie gave him a quick, final kiss and freed himself from where Marcus had wedged him up against the wall.

A veil dropped in front of Jamie's eyes, a casual smile lifting one end of his mouth. "Do you have the supplies for this taste test?" He shoved his hands into his pockets and paced farther into the shop. "I only have about an hour."

"Did Andrew call you in early?" Marcus tugged his cell out of his pocket and checked the time. "Your shift at the bar isn't until five."

"I'm not working tonight. There's a last-minute school faculty thing I have to attend. Kind of a business dinner, I guess?" Jamie shrugged. "Some of my fellow teachers want to discuss a change the school board just issued about the curriculum."

Marcus's stomach dropped. A whole night without Jamie? "Where is the dinner?"

"A Thai restaurant near the school." Jamie circled around behind the counter and opened the built-in refrigerator, taking out a container of carrots

Marcus had chopped earlier. “Actually, I’m kind of looking forward to it. I eat at this Thai place all the time during the school year. They have the best potstickers, but I can’t justify an hour on the train to Brooklyn just for potstickers. Tonight gives me an excuse.”

“You like Thai food that much?”

“Love it.”

It was on the tip of Marcus’s tongue to say they could get Thai takeout some time, but God, it already sounded so lame in his head. He should be taking Jamie out to restaurants. Jamie was going to eat his favorite potstickers tonight and Marcus wouldn’t even get to see his reaction. Would he smile around his first bite? No, not Jamie. He’d probably act indifferent. If Marcus was there, he’d nudge him under the table, though, until he *did* smile. “Um...” The night stretched out in front of Marcus like a black ocean with no sound. “What time is the dinner over? Can I see you afterwards?”

Weariness danced in Jamie’s eyes before he swallowed it up. “Yeah, I’ll probably be home before your shift at the Castle Gate ends. You know where to find me.”

A hollow cavity opened in Marcus’s chest. Yeah, he knew where to find Jamie. The same place he’d been finding him all week. Every night when the sun went down or everyone had gone to bed, he showed up at Jamie’s front door like a beggar. It wasn’t enough. He could see it wasn’t enough for his boyfriend and now it wasn’t enough for Marcus, either. “Come to my place,” he said, digging his key ring out of his pocket and searching for the spares to his building and apartment. When he found them, he cursed the clumsiness of his huge sausage fingers while struggling through the process of removing the keys off their little, silver ring. “Here.” Satisfaction filled in the hole in his chest when he folded the apartment keys into Jamie’s hand. “Come over after your teacher dinner. Wait for me there.”

Jamie’s expression was mostly unreadable, except for a spark of surprise he couldn’t subdue and Marcus lived for that spark. Wanted to drown himself in it. “Marcus...are you sure? I don’t mind meeting at my place.”

“You *should* mind. And I can see that you do.”

His boyfriend was silent for a moment while he stowed the keys in his pocket. “I’m sorry. Why can’t I just be cool about this? It’s only been a

goddamn week.”

“Because it has been so much longer than a week for us, Jamie.” Wow. He’d surprised Jamie *again*. Surprised himself, too, and he swore if he leapt right now, he could land on the roof of the tallest building. Was it a risk meeting Jamie at his place? Jesus Christ, yeah, it was. His brother and father had keys. Came and went as they pleased. But the risk was worth making Jamie happy. The risk was worth bringing the warmth back to Jamie’s eyes. “Will you come over and wait for me?”

After a beat, Jamie nodded. “Yes.” A smile breezed across his lips. “Now let’s juice.”

Marcus slapped a hand over his chest. “I thought you’d never ask.” He joined Jamie behind the counter, barely checking the urge to tuck Jamie’s ass into his lap. To kiss his neck until their zippers inevitably came down. There would be time for that later, though. In his bed. Jamie was going to be *in his bed*. “So, okay,” he rasped, taking a folded piece of paper out of his back pocket, laying it on the counter and smoothing the wrinkles with his flattened palm. “Been working on these recipes all week and I think this is the final menu.”

Jamie leaned down and scanned the page, reading off the names Marcus had come up with. “Hangover Cure, Fight the Flu, Berry Boost, Post Workout Replenishment...Sex Machine?”

“That one has pineapple in it.” Jamie gave him a blank look and Marcus’s jaw dropped. “It makes your spunk taste better. You didn’t *know* this? Do you have any idea how much pineapple I’ve been drinking for you, babe? Nice of you to notice my efforts.”

“Where did you come across this science?”

“The internet told me.”

“Of course it did.” Jamie shook his head. “Doesn’t matter anyway. I don’t have tastebuds in the back of my throat, Diesel.”

Marcus’s grin was so huge, it hurt his face. “Aww. You calling my cock huge? All’s forgiven.” He reached down to adjust his ever-present erection, giving it a little extra squeeze for being such a champ. “Hey, Jamie. Do they make dick cages? Is that a thing?”

Jamie slowly looked up from the menu. “A couple weeks ago, you were watching straight porn. What rabbit hole have you fallen down?”

“So it *is* a thing?”

“*Everything* is a thing.”

Marcus turned toward Jamie, leaning a hip against the counter. “Because I was thinking, someday when we start going out in public together, I’m going to need to get my wood problem under control.” He reached down and fisted his cock through his pants. “Any time we’re in the same room, it turns into the fucking Washington Monument. How am I supposed to take you anywhere respectable?”

Jamie’s gaze tracked upward from his hand, over his stomach, ending on Marcus’s face. “So your solution is a cock cage?”

“Well I *could* beat off before we go out...” He wagged his eyebrows. “But we both know I’ll just be hard again in fifteen minutes.”

“More like five.”

“You’ve now complimented my size *and* stamina. Is it my birthday?”

“Oh my God. You’re actually insane.”

Marcus reached over and traced his thumb along Jamie’s lower lip. “I’ve never been able to talk to anyone about sex. Not like this. Not without making stuff up or feeling awkward or even lying to myself. *You* do this for me.” He leaned in and kissed Jamie softly. “And Jamie?”

“Yeah?”

“You’ve got a nice big dick, too.”

A laugh puffed out of Jamie’s mouth. “Happy birthday to me. Apparently I need to start drinking pineapple juice, though.”

Marcus touched their tongues together. “Nah, you taste so fucking good, I assumed you were already drinking it by the gallon.”

Jamie moaned low in his throat. “If we don’t start making juice...”

“Say it.”

“Not a chance, Diesel.”

“Fine, I’ll take one for the team. If we don’t start making juice...”—he closed his hand around Jamie’s bulge, massaging it—“...*you’re* going to start making juice.” Marcus laughed when Jamie cringed. “Come on, you were thinking it. You’re gross just like me.”

“Jesus Christ, I *was* thinking it. You’re clearly rubbing off on me.”

“Literally.”

A laugh escaped Jamie before he could lock it up. He banged a fist on the counter, seemingly to make up for displaying his amusement. “Juice. Now.”

Marcus couldn't wipe the smile off his face. He'd made Jamie laugh and they were spending the night together at his place. Cock cages were a thing. All was right with the world. "Fine." He reached down and took some more containers out of the refrigerator. "Since I already know how to make these recipes, I thought I'd teach you. Just in case..."

Jamie raised an eyebrow. "In case what?"

Self-consciousness dried out his mouth. "In case you ever wanted to be here, helping me. I know you're busy and you've got seventeen jobs, but, uh...this place doesn't just feel like mine. It feels like ours—"

Jamie stopped his ramble with a hard kiss, before giving him a second softer one with just enough tongue to make Marcus's balls tighten up. "Show me how to make the juice," Jamie rasped. "I want to learn so I can help."

"Thanks," Marcus whispered, moving to stand behind Jamie, both of them facing the counter where one of the industrial-sized juicers sat in the midst of all the fruit and vegetable containers. "All right, let's start with the Hangover Cure. Beets, lemon, apple, ginger. Or *BLAG*. That's how I remember it."

"That's probably how it tastes, too."

Marcus laughed into Jamie's shoulder. "Maybe so, but it works." He put his mouth to his boyfriend's ear. "Just follow the recipe on the paper. Two beets, two apples, half a lemon..."

Jamie growled and moved back that crucial inch to settle his ass into the curve of Marcus's lap. "I assume you're going to have a laminated recipe list?" Jamie asked in a rough voice.

Marcus slid his hand along Jamie's hip, around to the flat of his stomach. "Discussing office supplies makes you hot, doesn't it?"

"God, yeah." Jamie stuffing the ingredients to the juicer. "Talk file storage to me."

They both laughed. "Add a little bit of ginger now. Like half an inch."

Jamie did as he was instructed, then Marcus's free hand guided Jamie's to the black plastic food pusher, both of them applying pressure and forcing juice out through the spout, a gentle whirring sound filling the space. "This is exactly like that scene from *Ghost*," Marcus said. "When Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore are making that ceramic pot."

Jamie's body vibrated against him and Marcus savored the proof of his laughter. "If I die prematurely, please leave Whoopi Goldberg alone. I don't need to be haunted by you in death as well as life."

"I'm Swayze in this scenario. And you never minded me haunting you, babe."

"No, I didn't." Jamie sighed. "There's a good mix of sweet and savory options on the menu, Marcus. The names are clever. You did a really great job planning it out."

"Thanks, Jamie," Marcus said, his heart nearly pounding out of his chest. "For taking juice seriously, even though it's just juice. For everything."

His boyfriend didn't respond, simply turning off the blender and pouring it into one of the disposable Dixie cups they were using while waiting for the branded supplies to arrive. Jamie turned, holding the cup to his mouth, and Marcus waited anxiously for the verdict.

"That's annoyingly good," Jamie muttered, licking a stray drop from the corner of his lips. "I thought the ginger would be overpowering, but it's invigorating."

"You talk pretty."

Amusement twinkled in Jamie's eyes. "You want a sip or are you sick of it?"

Marcus took the cup, plans forming in his head and making his muscles tighten. Making the fly of his jeans stretch to accommodate the growth of his erection. "Yeah, I'm a little sick of this recipe. I was thinking I could taste it a different way."

Jamie's chest started to rise and fall faster. "What way is that?"

Without taking his eyes off Jamie, Marcus lifted the other man's shirt and exposed his abdomen. He set down the juice and dipped his finger in, tracing a wet path from Jamie's belly button to the waistband of his jeans. Then he got down on his knees and licked it off slowly, so slowly, savoring the mixture of juice and man. His man.

Jamie's jeans were still unfastened from earlier, leaving only his zipper to tug down and Marcus did that now, before adding more juice to his fingertips. He used his teeth to pull Jamie's boxers down low and smeared the fruity-smelling liquid in the center of the low, muscular V of Jamie's hips. "Let me suck you down before you go out." Marcus closed his mouth

around the trunk of Jamie's cock through the material of his underwear, creating a wet spot with the condensation from his hot breath. "I want you satisfied if you're going to be away from me."

"Marcus," Jamie breathed, fingers threading into Marcus's hair. "That's not how this works. Not how *I* work. You've had me on the fucking edge all summer and I couldn't even *think* of letting someone else touch me."

"You're mine, Jamie," he growled.

"I know."

Marcus was on the verge of yanking Jamie's jeans down to his ankles when there was a knock on the door of the shop. He stood so fast, dizziness rocked him. And when he saw Joey on the other side of the glass, the disorientation only intensified. "Jesus. It's my brother."

A split second before Joey cupped his hands around his eyes and peered into the shop, Jamie dropped down behind the counter. Out of sight.

"J-Jamie, no," Marcus said, but when he should have pulled Jamie back to his feet and faced the music, telling his brother everything, he only stood frozen in place. "I didn't know he was coming. I'll just get rid of him, okay? Hold on. Just wait. Just hold on."

"*Marcus*," Joey called outside the shop, knocking again. "What are you doing? Come let me in."

"*Hold the fuck on*," Marcus shouted back, his pulse spiking, lungs full of cold air. When he looked down at Jamie, his pants had been refastened. Whereas mere minutes ago, Jamie had been smiling at him, laughing, telling him there was no one else, his expression was now shuttered. Distant. "Jamie..."

"Listen, I'll just go out the back door," Jamie said, plowing a hand through his hair.

"No. Christ, please don't do that."

"What's my other option?" Jamie asked without looking at him, before taking a visibly calming breath. "Look, I fucking knew what I was signing on for. It's...fine."

"It's not fine. It's the furthest thing from fine."

Silence ticked past as they stared at each other. There was another, louder knock on the door. And Marcus watched in horror as Jamie moved in a crouch to the back door and slipped out into the alley running behind the building.

That didn't just happen. That did not just happen.

With his blood pumping in his ears, Marcus walked in slow motion to the front door and used his key to let Joey in, though his hands were moving without his brain's consent, because his mind was fully occupied. *I should go after him. I should go after him. I just made the man I love sneak out of the shop we built together because I'm a fucking coward.*

"Hey man," Joey said, socking him in the shoulder. "Took you long enough. Did I hear you talking to someone?"

"No," Marcus answered, his voice hollow. "It's just me."

"Come on. I interrupted something dirty, didn't I?" Joey poked him in the ribs. "I knew this shop would be a freaking chick magnet. You're not even open yet and you've got women crawling all over the place. What is she, a blonde? Redhead?"

"There's no woman."

"Come on—"

"I said, there's *no fucking woman*, all right?" Marcus shouted, positive his heart was rupturing. All he could see was Jamie slipping out the backdoor into the sunlight. Over and over. "What are you doing? Why did you come here?"

"Easy, man," Joey said, rearing back, his expression wounded. "You haven't even shown me the fucking place yet. I just wanted to come see if you needed any help."

Marcus's head dropped forward, guilt needling him in the gut. It wasn't like Joey had hurt Jamie directly. That was on Marcus. "Sorry. Look, I'm... just stressed out."

Joey's hand landed on his shoulder in a rough squeeze. "All right. No big deal." He let go of Marcus and clapped his hands. "The place is even better than I expected. You done good, kid. What can I do?"

Numbness was rapidly spreading to all of Marcus's limbs, a product of his damaged heart sending his system into shock. A blessing. A curse, because he knew he didn't deserve to feel anything but pain. Where was Jamie? Was he okay? "I'm done here for the day, man," Marcus managed. "But thanks anyway. I appreciate you wanting to help."

Silence passed. "You sure?"

"Yeah," Marcus rasped.

Joey nodded and backed toward the door. The next time Marcus looked up, his brother was gone and several minutes had passed. He took out his phone and called Jamie, a weight dropping in his stomach when there was no answer. Jamie didn't pick up his next call, either. Or the one after that. Done. Was it over?

On his fourth call, he left a voicemail, though he suspected it was useless.

Hey, it's me. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I just wish so fucking much that never happened. Will you still wait at my place tonight, please? After your dinner? I know I don't deserve you to walk through my door or even listen to this message, but I'm a selfish, horrible prick and I'm going to be a mess until you're standing in front of me. I'm always going to be a mess until you're with me. So there it is. Please be safe tonight. Like extra extra safe. Okay? Bye.

Much later that night, Marcus sprinted up the stairs to his apartment and almost pulled the door off the hinges to get inside.

But Jamie wasn't there.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JAMIE GLANCED OVER at the white takeout container perched on the seat beside him and rolled his eyes. Might as well admit it. He was a glutton for punishment.

He was also late. Really fucking late.

The faculty meeting had gone on long, as they tended to do, conversation turning from school news to summer vacation plans to the challenges of raising small children of their own—and all the while, the drinking continued until Fran, their resident geometry teacher, had burst into tears and told everyone she'd left her husband and filed for divorce because of his *World of Warcraft* addiction. Of course, Jamie had been blessed with the extraordinary luck to be sitting beside Fran and was subsequently dragged to a neighboring bar to hear every sordid detail.

Before Jamie knew it, two hours had passed and he'd still had an hour-long train ride back to Long Beach ahead of him. There was no way he'd make it to Marcus's apartment before him—it was already one thirty in the morning—but he'd brought a peace offering. Not just for being late, but also for ignoring the man's phone calls.

Not answering had been an immature reaction, but sue him if sneaking out of his boyfriend's juice shop with a pair of blue balls hadn't stung his pride. Even now, the walls of his throat constricted thinking about how much he'd wanted the ground to open up and swallow him in that moment. There Jamie had been, after years of dating men openly and refusing to be ashamed of who he was...literally hiding behind a counter so he wouldn't get caught. His face still stung as if he'd been slapped.

Yet, he would go to Marcus tonight. For three reasons.

One, he'd meant what he said. He'd known damn well what he was getting into by dating Marcus in secret. He'd fucking *known*. Walked into it with eyes wide open.

Two, he'd promised to give Marcus time. As in, more than a week.

And three, goddammit, he loved the man.

Yeah, there was no denying love was the biggest motivator here. Every second of his night had been spent missing that giant son of a bitch. Okay, maybe a few minutes in the bathroom had been spent Googling cock cages, but most of the night had been about missing Marcus. Getting out of Long Beach for the night had been a good idea, however. While Fran detailed her husband's descent into the *virtual lifestyle*, he'd been putting the situation with his boyfriend into perspective.

Look how far Marcus had come already. It wasn't fair for Jamie to put any further expectations on Marcus when—in the space of a few weeks—he'd come out to Jamie, confessed his feelings and frankly, been an incredible boyfriend.

When they were alone.

So it smarted a little when Marcus fist bumped him in the Castle Gate, as a form of greeting. Or crept out of his house before the sun came up. He was *not* going to be sensitive about these things. Marcus needed to get comfortable in his own skin, and learning to embrace one's sexuality didn't happen overnight. Whenever Marcus showed up at his door with his heart in his eyes and kissed Jamie like it had been an eternity, Jamie remembered why he was putting himself through the hiding again. Living as if their needs and preferences were wrong.

Because Jamie cared like hell about Marcus and if he could just push past the hurt a while longer, it would be worth every second. Not like the first time around with Chris. Jesus, Marcus couldn't be less similar to Chris. Even if the creeping around put Jamie right back in that shame mindset, he had to believe it was temporary.

Please let it be temporary.

The train speaker crackled and a tired voice announced their arrival in Long Beach. Jamie picked up the takeout container and got off the train, pausing for only a beat on the platform before heading in the direction of Marcus's apartment. He hadn't listened to Marcus's voicemail yet and he did so now, cursing and picking up his pace when he heard the agonized message. Why hadn't Jamie just swallowed his pride and answered the calls?

When Jamie entered Marcus's building, he started to ring the bell, then remembered he had the keys. It didn't feel right walking into his apartment without at least knocking, but he used the building key to let himself up the

stairs. The smell of something cooking—was that pork?—was strong for almost two o'clock in the morning, but Jamie was too concerned about Marcus to question it. He knocked on the door as soon as he reached it—and it flew open to reveal Marcus in an apron.

Well. An apron, boxers, and nothing else.

“Jamie. You’re here?”

Jamie raised an eyebrow at the steam wafting behind Marcus in the apartment. “Marcus. You’re...cooking?”

He nodded as if in a trance. “Potstickers.”

“What?”

Marcus bent forward at the waist, bracing his hands on his knees. “You weren’t here when I got home and you wouldn’t answer my calls, so I was making you potstickers.” He glanced up at Jamie through one squinted eye. “This is my fourth batch. When I got it right, I was going to climb that drainage pipe that goes past your window and use them as a bribe to get in...”

Jamie’s heart rapped against his eardrums. “Is this one of those times the idea sounds better in your head?”

“Yeah,” Marcus sighed.

God. This man was going to be the death of him. “I, uh...” Jamie held up the takeout container in his hand. “I brought you potstickers from the Thai place, so why don’t we shut this operation down and avoid having to call the fire depart—”

Marcus’s huge body plowed into Jamie, wrapping him in a bear hug. “You’re secretly the most forgiving, most perfect, best at everything person there ever was. I know all about you, Jamie Prince. And I’m so lucky. I’m just so fucking lucky.” He squeezed tighter. “I’m sorry, too.”

“Don’t be.” Jamie said, wrapping his free arm around Marcus’s broad back. “Don’t make me potstickers and be sorry on top of it. I can only handle one or the other.”

“Okay,” Marcus laughed, backing away with obvious reluctance. “Easier said than done. Especially because you showed up looking like a sexy professor in that sweater vest.”

“If I take a blackmail picture of you in an apron, we’re even.”

Marcus grinned. “You got it.”

They closed the door and moved through the living room into the kitchen. When they reached the mess he'd made, Marcus flexed his muscles like a bodybuilder and posed in front of the mountains of pots and pans, allowing Jamie to take the promised picture.

"Come on, I'll help you clean up."

For the next half an hour, Marcus and Jamie cleaned up the disaster area, Jamie telling Marcus about the teacher dinner and Fran taking him hostage. Marcus filled Jamie in on everything that had taken place in the Castle Gate that night, including an impromptu breakdancing contest and Andrew throwing out anyone who raised their voice above a polite volume.

"Yeah," Jamie said, toweling off a skillet with a Monster Jam dishrag. "My oldest brother is going to be unbearable until he figures this thing out with Jiya."

Marcus smiled fondly. "That girl's a sweetheart. Brings me naan bread once in a while. It isn't pizza, but it does the trick."

"Yeah, she likes you, too," Jamie said dryly, placing the skillet in the cabinet. "She has an annoying tendency of being right even more often than I am."

"Impossible."

"You're just trying to get in my pants."

"Guilty as charged, babe." Marcus walked past Jamie, laying a smacking kiss on his neck and opening the takeout container Jamie had left on the kitchen table. "I'm going to need some sustenance first, though. I couldn't eat tonight for worrying."

Jamie swallowed. "I'm sorry I didn't answer the phone. I just needed to..."

Marcus had thrown a potsticker into his mouth, but he paused in the act of chewing now. "Needed to what?"

"Remember why the hiding is worth it."

The clock on the wall ticked out five seconds. "And did you? Remember?"

Jamie cleared his throat. "Of course I did. That's why I'm here."

Marcus exhaled long and hard, before tossing another pair of potstickers into his mouth, reminding Jamie of Popeye powering up with spinach. "I won't make us hide forever."

"I know."

His quick acknowledgement erased some of the shadows in Marcus's eyes. "Anyway, I want to show you off in that fucking sweater vest."

A laugh snuck out of Jamie. "Oh, the whole academic professional look is doing it for you, huh?"

Marcus's grunt sounded pained. "You have no idea."

"Marcus, I *always* have an idea. Your erection is the third member of this relationship."

"Yeah, but this one is *extra* erect," Marcus said matter-of-factly while reaching down to adjust the ridge tenting the front of his boxers. "You're not into the whole, uh...teacher-student thing?"

"No. I teach high school students and they're not just illegal, they're gross."

"What if I was a college student..." Marcus coughed into his fist, gaze cutting to the side. "Or something like that?"

"You've thought about this?"

"Only since I found out you were a teacher."

Jamie's cock stirred in his trousers, filling with that familiar, perfectly unbearable weight. "You've known for three years." When Marcus only looked at him with naked vulnerability, Jamie pushed away from the counter and sauntered closer. The picture of confidence when in reality, he was shaken by how badly he needed Marcus. How badly he needed to fulfill his man's needs. Make sure they were met. *Now*. Jamie was not the type to play a role, but he remembered the night he'd shown up at Marcus's apartment, ending up on the couch, with Marcus's mouth wrapped around his cock for the first time.

Maybe you've even been dreaming of getting bossed around a little, huh, Marcus?

Yes.

Yeah, Jamie remembered that. The rough, almost *relieved* confession. Jamie had been moving slowly with Marcus this week—as slowly as possible while still going at it like animals—but it seemed like Marcus was trying to tell Jamie he wanted more. Was he? Yes, he'd told him earlier that day he was ready to have Jamie inside him. Is that where he wanted this to lead? The possibility made Jamie's dick swell so hard, he had to grind his molars.

He untied the apron front around Marcus's neck and tossed it on the ground, remaining a foot away with his arms crossed. "Were you a problem student, Mr. O'Shaughnessy?"

Marcus's Adam's apple rifled up and down. "Yes."

"Why am I not surprised?" Jamie shook his head and let his attention drop to Marcus's protruding shaft where it fought to get free of his boxers, his own blood firing in response. "You wouldn't have gotten away with that in my class."

"No?" Marcus breathed, sounding winded.

"No." Jamie crooked a finger at Marcus. "Come here. I'll decide how to deal with your bullshit. It could be too late."

Marcus moved so fast, the kitchen table he'd been leaning on went skittering back, bumping the wall. His big body expanded and contracted on heavy breaths as he came to a stop in front of Jamie, hands at his sides. "Like this?"

"Hmm." Jamie circled around the back of Marcus slowly, the only sound in the kitchen his footsteps, Marcus's rasping breath and the ticking of the clock. "I'm still not sure how to deal with you, Mr. O'Shaughnessy," Jamie said, once he stood in front of Marcus again. "You'll need to pull down your shorts and show me the rest."

His boyfriend made a choked sound, his bulky frame shuddering. It turned Jamie on to a painful degree, watching Marcus move clumsily in his haste to pull down his boxers, letting them fall to his ankles, standing there in the stark light of the kitchen, his cock jutting straight out.

On display.

"Is this the source of our problem, Mr. O'Shaughnessy?" Jamie ran a fingertip up the veiny side of Marcus's cock and watched as the other man bit off a curse, sweat beginning to form on his upper lip. "Does all this pent up frustration make you act out?"

"Y-yes. Yes. I don't know."

Marcus reached for his erection, but Jamie snagged his wrist, squeezing. "Do not touch. Problem students don't get rewarded."

"Oh Jesus," Marcus said on a harsh exhale. "Oh fuck."

Jamie's eyebrow ticked up and yeah, maybe he'd never played this kind of game before, but damn, it was like putting on a tailored suit. Because it was Marcus and they were exploring something honest and when they were

alone, the world was narrowed down to just the two of them. And the two of them together was everything right.

“I don’t tolerate that kind of foul language,” Jamie said, stepping back and unfastening his pants, his movements slow so he could savor the way Marcus’s eyes eagerly tracked his progress with the button, the zipper. “Since you’ve got such a filthy mouth, I think we ought to find a better use for it. Get down on your knees, Mr. O’Shaughnessy.”

It was the most erotic moment of Jamie’s life, having Marcus fall to his knees, taking Jamie into his mouth and groaning around that first deep suck. Through the layer of lust obscuring his vision, Jamie took in the muscular slope of Marcus’s back, his tight, rounded buttocks and the boxers still in a tangle around his ankles.

“The hungry way you’re sucking me off, I’d say you *like* being a problem student,” Jamie said choppily, his fingers spearing into Marcus’s hair, hips rocking forward. “Maybe you’ve wanted to be my *personal* problem student, is that right?”

Marcus moaned loudly, his cheeks hollowing as he pulled, pulled and let Jamie go with a smacking pop. “Yes. Please.” He licked a circle around Jamie’s tip. “I only want to be yours.”

Jamie’s fingers tightened around Marcus’s strands. “A few minutes on your knees and you’re already giving correct answers. Maybe we’ve found the only test you excel at.” He pushed deep and held, groaning over the purposeful flex of Marcus’s throat muscles. *Jesus Christ*. He’d been reading the internet again. “It’s a good thing you only want to be mine, Mr. O’Shaughnessy, because I’m already growing very attached to this mouth.”

“You can keep it. *Please* keep it,” Marcus breathed, looking up at Jamie with heavy eyelids, both of his hands twisting around the meat of Jamie’s cock, jerking him off in a firm grip. God, he was beautiful. And male. Strength and weakness in one perfect package.

“That’s very generous of you,” Jamie managed around the lump in his throat. “What else are you offering me?”

“Me,” Marcus said, no hesitation. “All of me.”

Pulse jackhammering, Jamie eased his engorged cock out of Marcus’s hold and circled around to the back of him, going down on his knees on the kitchen floor, kissing the center of Marcus’s heaving back. The gravity of what they were about to do crashed down on Jamie and he could hear the

riotous knocking of his heartbeat echoing in his ears. It had never been like this for him. Never. This meant something. This *man* did.

Jamie continued to kiss a path along Marcus's bunched shoulders as he reached into his sagging pants pocket, taking out a small bottle of lubricant and a condom. After applying protection, he drenched his middle and ring finger with the liquid and slipped them down between Marcus's cheeks, pressing them to his tight ring of flesh. When Jamie noticed Marcus had stopped breathing, though, he started to take his hand away. "Marcus, we can—"

"No, please don't stop," Marcus said raggedly. "I'm just worried...I don't know how to make it good for you like this."

"What do you mean?"

His shoulders rose and fell. "You said you prefer the other way."

Jamie frowned. "Yeah, that might have been true in the past, but I prefer *every* way with you, Marcus. This...us. *Us* doesn't fall into a category. Or have preferences. Every part of it, every way is good. *Any* way I can be close to you is what I want. Okay?"

"I'm in love with you, Jamie."

Tiny explosions went off in every one of Jamie's nerve endings, firecrackers booming in his ears. Part of him was grateful Marcus hadn't turned around because he'd probably never appeared more exposed in his goddamn life. The rest of him wished they'd been face to face so he could witness those words on Marcus's lips. Nonetheless, an urgency rose inside of Jamie, so fierce it made his lungs burn. His body screamed for an anchor before it lifted off, so he leaned in and dragged his open mouth up the side of Marcus's neck, breathing in his ear. Just breathing. He stayed there for long, hot minutes while he worked slickness over Marcus's entrance, pressing one finger inside, then two. Adding more moisture and starting again until Marcus was moaning, his head falling back onto Jamie's shoulder.

"Oh fuck, I need you *now*. Please please please. *Fuck me.*"

"What did I say about language?" Jamie whispered, trailing his tongue down the knots of Marcus's spine. The skin under his mouth was taut from hours lifting weights and Jamie mentally admitted CrossFit had its advantages. Especially when he raked his teeth over the small of Marcus's back and the muscles in his boyfriend's bottom jumped, flexed, strained.

Heat stormed through Jamie at a rate he'd never experienced before, his cock so sensitive, he couldn't allow his fist around the throbbing flesh or he'd finish too soon. "Show me the *rest*, Mr. O'Shaughnessy."

Marcus's back heaved once, twice, then he slid his knees wider and tilted up his ass. *Goddamn*. He was perfect. Shiny where Jamie had been touching him—and Jamie couldn't help getting two handfuls now, kneading the hard mounds of Marcus's ass, letting his thumbs slide up the valley in between, one by one. With both cheeks squeezed tight in his hands, he dragged his tongue through that shadowed split, finding Marcus's tight breach with his tongue and worrying it with the tip, before splaying the flat of his tongue over the hole and stroking up and down.

"What the *fuuuuuuck*. That's so good," Marcus grated, his backside flexing against Jamie's face. "Don't stop. *Please*. Fuck me with that fucking mouth."

As if he could stop. Giving Marcus pleasure was addictive, and only when Jamie's tongue was moving in a figure eight pattern and Marcus was panting his name did Jamie finally pull away, getting in position behind Marcus. He guided his cock between Marcus's slippery ass cheeks and stopped when just the tip of his cock was inside of his man. "Is this what my problem student has been asking for?"

"God. Oh God." Marcus's thighs started to quake. "Yes, yes, yes."

Jamie drove his hips upward a few inches and watched precome spurt from the head of Marcus's cock, leaving a milky rope on the floor. "*Jesus Christ*," Marcus growled. "You feel so good. I knew, but I didn't know..."

One more pump and Jamie was fully seated and his body became raw, boiled hunger. The increasing pressure in his lower stomach shouted at him to take fast. Take hard. But instead of pushing Marcus's upper body down to the floor and fucking him until relief hit, he wrapped an arm around the breadth of Marcus's chest, held him tight and whispered his name. Marcus turned his head automatically and they fell headlong into a kiss that was broken up every few seconds by heavy, labored breaths.

"Marcus, look at me," Jamie said, their lips brushing as their gaze locked and he spoke the truth that was inscribed on his bones. "I'm in love with you, too." The confession sent a rush of exhilaration through him. "Not just because of this. Because of *everything*."

An exhale shook its way out of Marcus and they kissed hard.

And then Jamie dropped his forehead to Marcus's shoulder and thrust his hips.

Marcus shouted a curse and fell forward, catching himself on his hands. The second, third and fourth buck of Jamie's hips came in slow succession, his control almost snapping at the sight of his cock sinking into Marcus, stretching his flesh, Marcus pushing his ass higher in response, groaning like he'd been waiting decades for Jamie to *finally put it in*.

Lust made Jamie's eyelids heavy, but he saw Marcus reach for his own cock and grated, "Stop. I said no touching."

Marcus made a sound of disbelief. "Please, I have to. *I have to.*"

That custom suit of control Jamie had worn earlier was back on, the fit even more perfect. Loving Marcus and bossing him around was a tightrope he wanted to walk for the rest of his life. And now that he'd started, he wasn't sure he could stop. "Touch that big, dirty dick of yours and I'll stop." Jamie pressed a fist to the center of Marcus's back and his thick ass lifted even more, letting Jamie get deeper and now he was just going for broke, burying his cock between Marcus's ass cheeks as hard as he could, pumping and grunting in a way that almost made him unrecognizable to himself, but in the best fucking way. "Keep your hands where I can see them. My fuck is going to make you come all over the goddamn floor."

Marcus's fingers splayed on the floor, before his hands shot into fists. "It hurts. Ah God, it hurts so fucking bad. Jack me off, babe. Please please *just touch it.*"

"If I touch it, what will happen?"

"I'll come. I'll come."

Jamie leaned down and flattened his chest on Marcus's back, speaking in a rasp against his ear. "You're getting so much better at tests, Mr. O'Shaughnessy. Too bad you won't be able to sit properly in my classroom after I've worn you out with this cock."

Marcus moaned through his teeth, his lower body started to writhe back, meeting the drives of Jamie's hips hard. So hard that a wet smacking noise filled the room and their knees started to slip on the slick floor, two sets of legs and feet fighting for leverage, Jamie never ceasing his relentless taking of Marcus's ass.

"Jamie. Harder. Harder. Harder."

“Look down at your cock, baby,” Jamie rasped in his ear. “Is it getting thicker?”

Marcus’s head dropped forward and he growled. “*Yes.*”

“Is it swinging around, same way it does in your pants? Driving me fucking crazy wanting to get on my hands and knees for it?”

“*Jamie.*”

“One stroke.” Jamie licked a path up the side of Marcus’s neck and latched onto his ear, biting down. “Just one and then you better stop.”

Marcus’s hand disappeared beneath him faster than the blink of an eye, his back flexing as he stroked himself. A moan broke from his throat, strangled and rife with frustration, before his hand slapped down down on the floor. “*Fuuuuuck.*” His hand smacked the floor again, once, twice, big body heaving. “I’m dying. I can’t. Faster please. *More.*”

Marcus’s back arched, his thighs sneaking wider and Jamie hips began to move in a blur out of pure necessity. Out of his dick’s need to be stroked *fastfastfast* so the mounting pressure in his balls would go the fuck away and Christ, there was no other place in the world he wanted to empty himself than inside this man. “*My fucking man,*” Jamie gritted into Marcus’s sweaty back. “Give it up for me.”

Jamie drove harder than ever before, pressing deep and holding while he licked the salt off Marcus’s back—and Marcus started to shake, his ass muscles tightening up around Jamie’s cock, blanketing Jamie’s vision with twinkling lights. “*Jamie. Oh God—*”

Over. It was over. Hearing Marcus say his name during his climax made Jamie’s own balls erupt, pleasure/pain ripping up his back. The rhythmic squeezing, the proof of Marcus’s pleasure, all of it thoroughly undid him and the incessant ache between his thighs ebbed in waves while he cried out, his mouth opened on Marcus’s rippling spine.

They collapsed sideways onto the kitchen floor, Marcus rolling over onto his back moments later after they’d both drifted back down to reality. He faced Jamie with a grin blooming on his sweaty face, totally unabashed in his nakedness. “*Damn, Jamie. You put it down.*” He raised his hand for a high five. “I thought you were going to make me call you Daddy.”

Normally Jamie would have rolled his eyes and said something sarcastic, but he’d literally never felt lighter, happier or more optimistic in his entire life. He watched himself return the high five in slow motion and

erupted into laughter. Marcus joined him. And there they lay for another twenty minutes, laughing on the kitchen floor with their dicks out like absolute lunatics.

Life couldn't get any better.

But it *could* get worse.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JAMIE WOKE UP with a bad feeling in his stomach.

He couldn't explain it. At first. But when he cracked an eye open and realized he'd fallen asleep on Marcus's couch and the sun was *way* past risen, panic crept into his bloodstream. Marcus was spooning him from behind on the plush, brown couch, both of them in their birthday suits. They'd fallen asleep watching a true crime series on Netflix and the screen wanted to know if they were still watching. Jamie's boyfriend snored gently in his ear, completely gone from the world. Completely unaware that they'd overslept.

Jamie's pulse kicked into high gear. He didn't want Marcus to wake up and find him there. He didn't want to see Marcus's panic. The glow from last night was too perfect, too fresh, and Jamie wanted to live inside the bubble of it as long as possible. If Marcus woke up and got nervous, feeling compelled to explain again that his brother and father had keys, the bubble would burst and Jamie would remember he was a dirty little secret.

Just for now, he reminded himself, easing out of Marcus's grip. *You love each other. Stay positive.* This was a unique situation and not some *pattern*. Jamie needed to remember that. But as he went around the living room and collected his clothes, dressing as quietly as possible, a voice in the back of his head repeated one word again and again. Wrong. Wrong.

Wrong.

Jamie shook his head resolutely and looked at Marcus, relieved when the sense of rightness rushed back in. That's all it took. Looking at the man, picturing his grin, thinking of the words he'd whispered in Jamie's ear before they fell asleep last night.

I need you. I've needed you forever.

Someday I'll bring you to fucking Thailand for potstickers, Jamie. Watch me.

I love you so much it's hard to breathe.

Reassured, Jamie shoved his feet into his boots and shot off a quick text to Rory, asking if he could come pick him up at the coffee shop down the

street. Ubers were scarce this early on Sunday mornings in Long Beach and he didn't feel like waiting. Rory would know Jamie had spent the night at Marcus's place, but hopefully he wouldn't lecture him again.

Jamie took a step toward the door—

And watched in horror as it opened.

A man stared back at him from the threshold and there was no doubt the man was Marcus's brother. They had similar features, but this man—Joey—lacked Marcus's amusement and earnestness. He stared at Jamie in confusion for a moment and was clearly poised to say something, but when his gaze landed on Marcus, who was sleeping naked, his mouth snapped shut. Understanding dawned in Joey's expression and red suffused his cheeks.

Jamie went into salvage mode.

Because shit. Shit. This wasn't good. And it was Jamie's fault for falling asleep and not leaving when he should have. *Goddammit*. Now Marcus was about to be outed before he was ready. It might even be traumatic for him—and Jamie couldn't let it happen. He had to do his best with this clusterfuck of a situation for Marcus's sake.

Jamie held up a hand and approached Joey slowly, tipping his head toward the hallway. *Can we talk?* Jamie mouthed. *Please?*

The red on Joey's face deepened, his expression nothing but a pure *fuck you* and Jamie should have cut his losses and left. He really should have. But he cared too much about the sleeping giant on the couch and this guy, Marcus's brother, had just been caught off-guard and the whole situation was a recipe for someone to get hurt. Namely, Jamie's boyfriend. And while Marcus had always been the protective one, Jamie was ready to fight to make sure Marcus came out in his own time, his own way.

Jamie closed the distance between him and Joey, dropping his voice low. "Look, if you'll please just step outside with me for a minute—"

"*You*," Joey returned, his voice just above a whisper. He jabbed the air in front of Jamie. "What the hell did you do to him? You're the reason he's been acting so fucking weird."

Several responses to that jumped to the forefront of Jamie's mind, but they all told a story that wasn't his to tell. What the hell was he supposed to do here? He walked out into the hallway, relieved when Joey followed him, although he still appeared shell shocked. "I'm Marcus's friend. I care about

him a lot,” Jamie said quietly. “And I get that walking in a-and being blindsided by something you weren’t expecting...I get how hard that is—”

“Don’t fucking talk to me like you represent *my* brother. I don’t ever know who the hell you are.”

Jamie shook his head. “I’m not trying to do that at all.”

“Oh no?” Marcus’s brother stepped closer, getting in his face. “Sounds like you are.”

Joey’s volume was increasing and the last thing Jamie wanted was Marcus to wake up to a full-on argument between Jamie and his brother. It was growing more and more obvious that Jamie couldn’t salvage this. Joey was angry and caught off-guard and ready to lash out. “If you want to calm down and talk about this, we’ll do it outside, but I’m not going to wake him up yelling about something that should be private,” Jamie said, turning and descending to the first floor. Was he disappointed or relieved when Joey followed, his footsteps thundering on the stairs? He didn’t know. But he would try and make whatever difference he could for Marcus.

As soon as they were outside, Joey caught Jamie’s sleeve and jerked him around. “Look, I don’t know what the hell is going on here, but you’re going to stay away from my brother.”

“You might want to ask him if that’s what he wants first,” Jamie returned, outwardly patient. Inwardly? Not so much. Possessiveness rolled around in his belly like marbles.

No one tells me to stay away from Marcus.

Joey cast a glance toward the building, his mouth opening and closing. “What is this? Some kind of phase or something?”

Anger caused red to trickle into Jamie’s line of sight. “See, that’s the kind of shit you should learn out on your own, before you talk to him.”

Joey bared his teeth and lunged, grabbing the collar of Jamie’s shirt in two hands. “Don’t you tell me how to talk to my own brother.”

“Let go of me,” Jamie gritted out. “And back the fuck up.”

Jamie tried to twist out of Joey’s grip, but the guy held on, giving Jamie no choice but to push him off—and that’s when Joey delivered a right cross to Jamie’s face. It was a *hard* punch, hard enough that his ears rang, almost drowning out the crunch of his nose’s cartilage. Dizziness hit Jamie and his knees buckled, dropping him to the ground so he could stare at the blood dripping from his face onto the pavement. So much of it.

Jamie laughed.

There was no humor in the sound, only self-disgust and more than a touch of hysteria.

Christ. Here he was again.

Right back where he'd been six years ago, except this time it was a sidewalk, instead of an ocean. "I really thought it was going to be different this time," he said, almost conversationally to Joey. "That's the definition of insanity, you know? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result."

His heart protested in his chest like a muffled bell. *Marcus is different. This is not the same.* But staring down at his own blood, Jamie was incapable of listening.

"Look, I-I didn't mean to hit you man. I just...how'd I miss something like this about my own *brother*? He's been lying to me and—"

The sound of tires screeching brought Jamie's head up and denial reverberated through his veins. How could he have forgotten he'd called his brother to come pick him up?

"Oh God. No, no, no." A vision of Rory being loaded into the back of a police car rocked Jamie and he staggered to his feet. At the very same time, Rory climbed out of his car where he'd left it haphazardly parked at the curb. "Rory, wait. *Rory, stop.*"

"Who the fuck is this?" Murder blazed in Rory's eyes, but Jamie managed to intercept him with both arms around his waist. "Did this piece of shit *hit* you?"

Jamie's greatest fear was coming true. He'd done it again. He was going to lose his brother a second time because of his own stupidity. They'd warned him, hadn't they? He didn't listen and now the hereditary curse of anger was taking hold inside Rory and when that happened, nothing could block its path. It raged like a wildfire.

Jamie almost flatlined with relief when Andrew climbed out of the car's passenger side—until Jamie saw his older brother was equally as pissed off as the younger one trying to get free of his grip so he could commit homicide. Olive sat inside the car, too, her eyes wide on Rory's back. Jiya was also in the backseat, and before Jamie could communicate with the women to stay in the safe car, both of them sprang into action, exiting opposite doors in a scramble of limbs. God, no. No. No. Everything was

spiraling out of Jamie's control, like a plane crash happening in slow motion.

"Olive, get back in the car, please," Jamie said through his teeth, holding a struggling Rory around the waist. "I won't be able to hold him back if that guy says something out of line to you."

"It's okay. I've got this," the blonde said breathlessly, taking hold of Rory's arm and wedging herself in between Jamie and his brother. Without wasting any time, she wrapped herself around Rory, climbing him like a tree and pressing their heads together. "Come back to me," she whispered against his panting mouth. "Your brother is okay. He's fine. We're all fine. Please, you can't get taken away from me."

Rory shook his head, the worst of the blaze dying in his eyes. "Olive," he said on an exhale a shudder passing through him. "*Olive.*"

"I know. You can control the anger. I believe in you."

Rory buried his face in Olive's throat and let her continue to whisper private words into his ear. Jamie was watching with a mixture of gratitude and fascination as Olive brought Rory back from the brink of violence when a door opened behind him and slapped shut.

"What's...what's going on?"

Marcus's voice burst something wide open in Jamie's chest. More than anything in the world, he wanted to save Marcus from the horrible, jarring effect of this moment, but he couldn't. He couldn't save either one of them. Their path had always been leading here and Jamie had been an idiot to even wish for a different one.

Jamie turned to face Marcus, momentarily forgetting his face was covered in blood.

But he remembered right away when Marcus—wearing only his sweatpants—stumbled back a step, a choked sound leaving his mouth. "*Jamie?*" He started to come in Jamie's direction, but Andrew stepped into his path, holding him off with a hand to his chest. "What happened to your face? Jamie, what...?"

Until that moment, Marcus hadn't noticed Joey standing off to the side, arms lifeless at his sides, complexion chalky. He did now. And Jamie watched helplessly as horror dawned in Marcus's expression.

"Did you do this?" Marcus took a rattling breath. "*Did you touch him?*"

Joey looked down at the ground.

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” Marcus growled, lunging for his brother. He was in mid-air when Andrew managed to catch him around the trunk of his torso, but Marcus was *fucking huge* and angry and Jamie’s brother might be as strong as a bull, but he wouldn’t be able to hold Marcus for long.

Jamie acted. No way. No *way* he was going to let this happen. Everyone involved here had arrived at this moment because of his actions. He’d known better. And he wouldn’t let an act of violence take place in his name. Not again. Already he was moving to stand in front of Joey, acting as a shield in case Marcus got free of Andrew.

The fight went out of Marcus almost immediately, tension pouring from him in a rush. “Look at him!” he shouted, plowing a hand through his hair, a sheen forming in his wild eyes. “Standing in front of your sorry ass. After what you did to him. *Look at him.*”

“My sorry ass?” Joey seethed, though he sounded less confident than before. “You’ve been sneaking around. Lying to your own family. I have to find out like *this*?”

“You’re right. I’m the sorry one.” Marcus’s voice was hollow. “I can’t even apologize anymore, can I? I’ve used them all up. I’ve used *him* all up.”
I have to get out of here.

If Jamie’s heart twisted one more degree, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to walk away. And he had to. He thought this time could be different, but there he stood on the street, people coming out of their houses in robes to watch the drama unfold. Drama centered on him and who he loved. Who he chose to be with. His fucking face ached. Blood soaked the front of his shirt molding it to his chest, and in that moment, he was stripped of everything he’d worked so hard to build after Chris. After that long-ago evening on the beach, Jamie was back to being the hidden shame, a thing to be revealed and apologized for.

“Jamie,” Marcus said, his tone hushed and full of gravel. “Come inside so I can fix you. *Please*. It’s killing me to see you bleed.”

Andrew turned to look at Jamie over his shoulder, a touch of wildness warring with concern in his eyes. “What do you want to do?”

Jamie cleared the rust from his throat. “I’m coming home.”

“*No*,” Marcus ground out, the fight reanimating him. He pushed against Andrew with more determination than before. “Don’t go like this.”

“*Enough*, Marcus,” Jamie snapped, the rope inside him frayed down to one tiny string. “It was always going to end like this—an instant replay. *Look at me*. You can see that I’m done. You *know* it’s done.” He used his sleeve to wipe the blood from his nose. “There’s no more pretending. It’s real now and I’m not limping in to collect my consolation prize. I’m sorry...I’m sorry it happened like this for you, but my arms are too tired to pick up the pieces now.”

Jamie walked away before a frozen Marcus could respond, but he only made it two steps before Joey said, “Let him go, man. We’re going to work this out. Huh? You got it out of your system now and you can go back to normal—”

Andrew turned and plowed his fist into Joey’s face, sending Marcus’s brother falling backwards onto his ass on the sidewalk. “My brother might have a prison record that prevents him from getting into more trouble,” Andrew rumbled, cracking his neck. “But I don’t. You want to go a round with me, motherfucker? Imply Jamie isn’t normal one more time.”

No one moved for long moments. Jamie couldn’t hear anything but the damaged beating of his heart and the breeze coming in off the ocean in the distance. Finally, he forced his feet to move, taking Andrew by the shoulders and propelling him toward the car, before any of the neighbors called the cops. Rory and the girls seemed to get the message, too, piling into the backseat with Jamie, although Jiya was staring at Andrew in the rearview mirror in shock.

“What’s wrong, Jiya?” Andrew said, a muscle popping in his jaw. “You didn’t know I had any violence in me?” He paused. “Well now you do.”

Andrew started the car and Jamie sensed in his gut that it wasn’t over. He was proven right a second later when Marcus appeared in the window beside him, taking up the whole thing with his bulky frame.

“Don’t go. *Don’t*.” He pulled on the door handle, biting off a curse, before pounding in the window with his fists. “Get out of the fucking car, Jamie.”

“*Drive*,” Jamie shouted, closing his eyes.

They did. With every block they drove farther away from Marcus, Jamie let the numbness take over, let it block the pain, the memories, the traitorous spark of hope that refused to be doused. He deadened himself as a means of survival.

And as much as he needed to, he didn't look back.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MARCUS WAS UNDERNEATH his bed. It was the only way to escape the light.

He couldn't remember when he'd oozed out from beneath the bedcovers and wedged his gigantic ass under the king-sized Ikea frame, but it had been the best decision of his life. Surrounded by darkness, he couldn't see anything. And nothing could see him. There he lay, his face in a puddle of his own tears, his boxers stuck to him from being worn a full week straight. Maybe he'd go for some kind of boxer-shorts-wearing world record. It would be his second title, since he was already going to end up in Guinness as *The Shittiest Human Being Alive*.

How long did he have to starve himself before he just *died* already? He'd stopped feeling hunger pains yesterday and now he was just an empty shell that didn't have the strength or will to move. *Just stop beating, heart. Please just stop beating.*

How could he live with the memory of Jamie's bloody face?

Even if Jamie had stayed and let Marcus clean him up and smother him in a mountain of blankets and make him soup, Marcus *still* wouldn't want to live just having seen Jamie like that. Hurt. Red soaking into his shirt.

It might as well have been Marcus who decked him.

Everything, start to finish, was on Marcus's head.

How could he? How could he ask Jamie to be in a relationship based on a secret? At the time, it had seemed like the only option, but now? As soon as Jamie had stepped in front of Joey to protect him, the big picture had become so clear. He was honestly worried about what his family would think of *Jamie*? They should be fucking worried about what Jamie thought of them. Everyone in this world should be worried about that. Jamie Prince was the best man alive and Marcus had broken him. Jesus, he'd looked so broken.

My arms are too tired to pick up the pieces now.

Marcus wrapped his arms over the back of his head and moaned, wishing the earth would just accept his decomposing body already. Did it want a fucking invitation? Oh my God, he couldn't close his eyes one more

time and see Jamie's injured face, it was like a knife twisting in his stomach over and over.

A familiar song came on, drifting from his television speakers to where he lay under the bed, haunting him. Moving only his arm, he picked up the remote and angled it toward the television, hitting stop and play, starting the movie over again. The same one he'd been watching all week since the morning Jamie left. Since the morning his world crashed down.

Marcus wasn't sure how much time passed between starting the movie again and hearing footsteps in the bedroom, because he drifted in and out of consciousness. But when his brother's face appeared, Marcus learned he had some life left in him. His lip curled in a snarl and the floundering organ in his chest started to rap against his ribs. At least his brother's eye was still a mottled purple. There was some justice in this world.

"Get the fuck out."

"Nope. *You* get out from under the bed." Joey's face screwed up. "For chrissakes, I'm a garbage man and I can barely tolerate this smell."

"Go home. I'm not moving."

Joey's face disappeared and a moment later, Marcus felt a hand grip his ankle. Then he was pulled unceremoniously out from beneath the bed, leaving a trail of sweaty filth behind, like a slug. As soon as Marcus's head cleared the frame, he flipped over and swept a leg under Joey, knocking him onto the ground.

Joey lay there wheezing for a second before raising a hand and letting it drop. "Fine. I deserve that."

Having used up all his energy, Marcus fell back against the bed. "I don't want to talk or get better. Just leave and let me die."

His brother considered him from his prone position on the floor. "You know I can't do that, right? You're my brother and I love you." He sat up and leaned his back against the wall. "I guess I, uh...didn't do a good job of letting you know that if you were too afraid to tell me about this guy."

"Call him by his name."

Joey nodded once. "Jamie. You were afraid to tell me and Pop about Jamie."

"Yeah, well, looks like I had a good reason for that. You..." Marcus buried his head in his hands. "You punched him in the face, Joey. Made him

bleed because of who he is. It's not the first time that's happened to him. I can't even begin to tell you how fast it was over once you hit him."

"Do you want to tell me?"

Marcus shook his head. "It would hurt too bad to tell you the story... knowing our story ended the same way."

"I'm sorry." Joey's voice was grave. "He tried to talk to me, tried to help...and I was too caught off-guard to listen. All I could remember was you acting off for weeks. For weeks. And my gut reaction was to blame him, but now I realize it was me. Dad. We're the reason you've been acting off. Not Jamie."

"No, all the blame is mine. I want all of it. I was too stupid to realize he was worth any reaction, any fallout. God, I'd fucking welcome some fallout right about now." Marcus swallowed and dropped his head back against the mattress. "He's so constant. He's put up with me for so long, maybe I didn't really think he'd go. But he did. He's gone."

Joey scrubbed at the back of his neck. "You love him?"

Amazing how this time last week, Marcus had been scared of his family finding out he was gay, now he couldn't confess his feelings for Jamie fast enough. "Yeah. I've loved him for years. He loved me, too, even though I didn't deserve it."

They sat without speaking, nothing but the sound of the movie playing in the background. He'd gotten to the end credits again. It would be time to start it over soon.

"I said some dumb shit, man," Joey said, finally. "Stuff I even knew wasn't true, like...I know you're not in the middle of some phase. I know that, Marcus. I was just pissed off and probably a little hurt that you kept me in the dark. Then all of a sudden these people I've never met before show up and *they* all know, too. We're family. Family is everything I got. Family is supposed to know the important shit first. And I just...I fucked up really bad. I'm sorry."

"Thanks," Marcus said, wishing he could feel anything but empty. "I appreciate that."

Joey cleared his throat. "Tell you the truth, I'm kind of glad that kid cleaned my clock." He indicated his face with a flourish of his hand. "It's a real draw with the ladies."

“Oh yeah? They’re going for the whole gets-his-ass-beat look these days?”

Marcus’s brother’s lips twitched. “Hell yeah, man. You should try it some time.” He waved a hand. “With the fellas, I mean.”

A puff of sound left his mouth. “Now you’re just trying too hard.”

They shared a smile, but Marcus couldn’t hold it longer than a split second. He heard the end credits roll on the television and picked up the remote, hitting stop. Start. When the familiar music played, he closed his eyes and let the misery pull him back under. He felt Joey lean beside him up against the bed but didn’t have the strength to acknowledge him.

“Can I watch this with you?”

Marcus nodded. “Sure,” he said, already slipping back toward unconsciousness. “He was always the real Patrick Swayze,” he slurred, his head lolling to the side. “I’m not even Demi Moore. I’m just one of the bad guys.”

Joey sighed. “No, you’re not.” He patted Marcus on the knee. “I’m going to try and make this right for you, huh? I owe you. Just hang in there.”

Marcus started to drift off with those words in his head. *Make this right. Make this right.*

Someone should tell Joey there was no way to do that. It was too late. All he had left of Jamie were the dreams, so he latched onto them now—Jamie grabbing him by the forearm at Monster Jam, laughing, telling him later at the train station that he’d had a great time. Jamie reading the commercial lease agreement for the Main Squeeze, his brows drawn together in concentration. Jamie showing up at his door with potstickers in a sweater vest. Kissing Jamie on the boardwalk in the middle of the night. Hearing his voice through the two-way radio while staring out at the ocean. Seeing him standing at his locker for the first time in the Hut...

His exhausted mind wandered back into blessed unconsciousness.

*

JAMIE GAVE NO outward reaction when the unfamiliar man took up residence by the front door of the Castle Gate, but his stomach dropped down to his knees. The guy was their new bouncer, wasn’t he? At breakfast that

morning Andrew had mentioned something about hiring a new doorman since Marcus had stopped showing up for work, but Jamie had been listening in a vacuum. Everything spoken in his direction for the last week got sucked up into a whirlwind of noise. Nothing would stick. *And goddamn you, Marcus*, for confirming it was the end of the world. Goddamn everybody for continuing on like they hadn't even hit a minor speed bump. Just goddamn everything.

His face ached. His teeth, his brain. But none of the pain had anything to do with the black eyes and swollen nose he was sporting. He knew that because he had the same ache everywhere else, too. In the dead center of his chest. In his bones. He was a walking pulsation of misery. Jamie stood behind the bar fulfilling orders while moving as little as possible. Moving made his legs feel like they were descending into quicksand.

Why was he so *angry*? Every time he picked up a pint glass to pour another drink, another stupid drink in a never-ending line of stupid fucking drinks, he wanted to smash it on the bar. Or maybe launch it like a fastball at the new doorman who didn't wave or smile at Jamie, didn't send him conspiratorial looks or play Britney on the jukebox to make him laugh. He wasn't Marcus. There would never be another Marcus.

"Johnny Walker on the rocks, please, and another pitcher of Miller Lite," a customer called to Jamie over the escalating din of the bar.

Jamie moved on autopilot, ignoring Rory's concerned looks as he fulfilled the order and made change, going to the next customer, the next, the next, and all the while he wanted to rage. Jump up on the bar and punt each and every bottle of beer. Or lie down and sleep forever. He wasn't sure. But the volatility inside of him was exhausting. Everything was just so exhausting and there was no comfort in sight. Andrew had offered Jamie the night off, but being home was worse. He kept waiting for Marcus to show up at the door.

Or he would sit in the bathtub with the shower raining down on his head, trying to purge what happened outside Marcus's building from his memory. *I've used him all up.*

Those words, spoken by Marcus, echoed in his mind most of all. Endlessly. They were so accurate and yet, if Marcus walked through the door right now, Jamie had no doubt he would probably crawl to meet him on his hands and knees.

Use me again. I don't know what else to do with myself.

Jamie turned his back to the bar and took a deep breath before approaching the next waiting customer. Just keep moving, going through the motions. That's all he could do. If love reduced him to this—a man who put his self-respect second—he could *not* cave in to the nonstop pain. He could *not* let the severity of Marcus's loss put him permanently out of commission. Move, move, talk, breathe, move.

"No way," Rory growled, coming up behind Jamie at the register and jerking his chin toward the door. "That motherfucker has brass balls coming in here."

"Who?" Jamie said dully. His breath ran short when he turned and saw Joey working his way through the crowd. Automatically, he grabbed Rory's elbow. "Don't you dare do anything, Rory. Promise me."

"Jamie, he *punched you in the face*. Now he strolls in here like..." Jamie's brother trailed off, his forehead wrinkling. "Is he waving an actual white flag?"

"Yeah," Jamie confirmed dryly. "Although it looks more like a napkin taped to a straw."

Andrew joined them at the register. "What the hell is that prick doing here?"

"My thoughts exactly," Rory said, crossing his arms. "The only reason I haven't jumped the bar yet is he looks way worse than Jamie. You've got a nice right cross, Andrew."

"Thanks."

The three brothers watched through narrowed eyes as Joey sidled up to the bar, still holding his makeshift flag aloft. "I come in peace," Joey said.

Rory snorted. "How about you *leave in pieces*?"

Joey sighed. "I just need to talk to Jamie," he said, red coloring the tips of his ears. "First off, I want to apologize. For the things I said in anger. Things I didn't mean or maybe...I wasn't clear on, but I am now. I'm sorry for hitting you. I'm really sorry about all of it, okay?"

The way he shifted on his feet reminded Jamie of Marcus and his chest gathered together like a fist, squeezing. "Thanks." Self-preservation had him turning away. "I appreciate the apology, but I have to keep moving. I have to get back to work."

“Wait.” Joey’s expression turned anxious. “Come on, man. I have to make this right. My brother is...broken. He won’t even get off the floor.”

“Don’t *tell* me this,” Jamie said loudly, his voice hoarse. “I don’t want to know. It’s not my problem anymore.”

“He just keeps watching *Ghost*, over and over. And the smell. Jesus Christ, the smell. We’re going to have to burn everything he owns.”

Jamie cleared his throat to camouflage the pitiful sound that climbed up his throat. Marcus watching *Ghost* on repeat, refusing to get off the floor. It was almost impossible to live with that knowledge. It flayed his skin. And more than anything, he just wanted to go live on the floor beside him. Side by side graves.

“Wait, but...” Jamie shook his head as the date occurred to him, reality creeping in past the gloomy haze that made up his current world. “He’s supposed to open the Main Squeeze on Monday morning. He has a huge stock delivery coming tomorrow.”

“No way it’s happening,” Joey scoffed. “I can’t even get him to eat or shower. No way in hell he’s opening a juice shop.”

“Yes, he is.” Jamie rapped a fist on the bar. “He’s opening that fucking shop. Do you know how hard he worked on those recipes? Finding all the right distributors? Painting and hauling garbage and creating cost evaluations?”

“No,” Joey answered simply. “I don’t know about any of it. You’re the only one who does.”

Jamie focused on inhaling, exhaling, but it was hard to do when he was thinking of Marcus on the ground. “That’s why you really came down here, isn’t it? This is about the shop.”

Joey didn’t deny it. “Look, I know I can’t ask you to get back together with Marcus. That’s between the two of you.” His eyes turned somewhat pleading. “But he needs something. A reason to get up and keep on fighting. Help me. I know you care about him enough not to let him lose this chance.”

Andrew bumped Jamie’s shoulder with his own. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, Jamie.”

“I know.”

Jamie thought back to the day on the train. When he and Marcus were on their way to Monster Jam. Marcus in his backwards hat trying so hard

not to look too long, sit too close...and failing. Always failing to stay away.

"What do you need my help with?"

"Um. You know, like, setting it up."

"Setting what up? The tables?"

"Or maybe all of it?"

"Jesus Christ. Exactly how hard did you hit your head?"

"Come on, Jamie Prince. It'll be fun." Marcus's elbow pressed into his side and lingered. "Only the smartest of the smart could pull it off—"

"Oh God," Jamie interrupted. "Don't do that. Don't appeal to my superiority complex."

"I have no choice. Everyone knows I'm a dumbass." Marcus looked down and Jamie's heart erupted, spurting blood all over the place. "I have the money saved, from working summers. My mom left me some, too. But I don't have the smarts—"

"Who called you a dumbass?"

"You've called me a dumbass."

Swallowing was impossible. Had he said that? Why? Jamie had the sudden urge to punch himself in the face. "If I have, I didn't mean it."

Marcus's grinned slowly. "You didn't?"

"No. You're not a dumbass, you just have an uncomplicated point of view. Maybe everyone else is dumb."

Jamie returned from the memory that must have been made a hundred years ago. Part of him had already been in love with Marcus that day on the train. Maybe all of him. He'd had so many opportunities to free himself of the hold they'd created on each other and he'd never been able to do it. After being kept a shameful secret and getting socked in the face—after reliving the past almost verbatim—Jamie should have had more than enough willpower to stay away now. If not for his sake, then for Rory's.

But he could see Marcus's optimism that day on the train, he could *feel* it. He could see Marcus painting the sign, see him chewing his lip while waiting for Jamie to give a verdict on a juice recipe...and Jamie knew if he let Marcus miss his opportunity, he would regret it. Forever. Could his heart handle one more spin through the blender?

He wasn't sure. But he couldn't stop himself from sliding toward the spinning blades.

“I have a key to the shop,” he said, clearing the rust from his throat. “I’ll help set the place up and get it running for opening day, but...it’s going to be just us. When it’s ready to go, I’ll leave and you can figure out how to bring him out of hiding.”

Joey was already nodding, relief passing over his face. “Fair enough. Thank you.”

“What can we do to help?” Rory asked, studying his knuckles. “Not that I don’t think this is bullshit.”

“We’ve got a few hours free the next two mornings,” Andrew said, nudging Rory. “We’ll come by then. In the meantime, why don’t you take the night off, Jamie? Sounds like you’ve got some work to do.”

Jamie nodded, already experiencing a traitorous rush of anticipation over being in the shop again, near something he helped create with Marcus. “I’ll use the office here to call the distributors and reschedule the deliveries.” He flicked a glance at Joey. “I’ll meet you at the Main Squeeze.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WHEN THE TEXT hit his phone, Marcus wasn't even sure what day it was.

There was some light creeping in under the sides of the bed and he heard a rumble in the distance signaling garbage collection. So...morning? Unless day was night now and vice versa. Who cared?

He dropped his forehead back down the ground—and his phone dinged again.

Without lifting his head, he reached over, dropped a hand on top of the device and slid it to a spot directly in front of his face, so he wouldn't have to move.

A message from Joey. Picture attachment.

Nothing new. He'd been getting ridiculous memes from his brother for over a week in an attempt to cheer Marcus up. When would he just give up?

Marcus sighed and opened the text, purely because he was going to have to rely on Joey soon to come over and write out the checks to pay his bills. Also he was running out of toilet paper and basic supplies, but since he was never leaving this apartment ever again, Joey would have to bring him groceries. Unless the universe finally accommodated him and let him die. Supplies would be irrelevant then.

It took Marcus a full minute for his delirious, malnourished self to realize what—no, who—he was looking at on the screen.

As if he'd been slapped by shock paddles, Marcus's entire body jolted and he whacked his head on the metal slat of the bed frame. Not that he felt it. Not that he felt anything but joy and agony, because Jamie was on his phone. Where had Joey gotten a picture of Jamie?

Marcus started breathing like he'd just run a marathon, his brain searching for details, soaking them in like a sponge. In the picture, Jamie wasn't looking at the camera. No, he was on his phone and pacing, one hand on his hip.

Fuck. *Fuck*, Jamie was so hot. That guy had really been his boyfriend?

Apparently Marcus's dick was still working despite the fact that he was half dead, because it filled with pressure as he perused the picture. His

tongue craved the taste of Jamie's shoulder blades, his neck, his mouth. *God*. His jeans. Those fucking jeans made his ass look like Sunday dinner and with all that sunshine surrounding him, a halo formed on his dark hair...

"Wait a minute," Marcus muttered, trying to sit up and ramming his head into the bedframe again. "He's at the Main Squeeze? Yeah...that's our shop."

Marcus army-crawled out from under the bed, the phone cradled in one hand. He stood up and immediately stumbled into a wall, stars winking in front of his eyes, dizziness refusing to loosen its grip. His stomach roared, loud enough that Marcus looked around to make sure there wasn't a ghost tiger in his apartment. And oh my God, there was one.

Ghost tiger. Twelve o'clock.

"You're hallucinating."

Marcus looked down at the phone in his hand again, sighing like a schoolboy over the sight of Jamie. Was he at the shop with Joey? No. No, that was impossible.

Maybe so, but he had to find out. He had to go there.

Which meant, he had to fucking pull himself together.

Jamie. He might get to see *Jamie*.

Swallowing hard, Marcus edged past the ghost tiger and backed slowly into the kitchen, keeping one eye on the beast. He grabbed a box of cereal out of the cabinet and shoveled several handfuls down his throat, chasing it with water from the tap. And thank God, the ghost tiger started to fade around handful number four.

He dropped the cereal box and started to jog for the front door, only to catch a whiff of himself, turn on a heel and sprint back to the bathroom.

It was too much to hope that Jamie was in the Main Squeeze because he still loved Marcus. Way too much to hope. But suddenly there was a one percent chance that something extraordinary was taking place and that was way more than Marcus had ten minutes ago. If he had one percent to work with, he would work the hell out of it. At the beginning of the summer, Marcus thought he'd had a zero percent chance with Jamie Prince and look what happened. He'd won him, even if it was just for a little while.

It was proof that miracles happened.

Marcus sped through his shower and dove into his clothing, finger combing his wet hair on the way out the door. Instead of turning in the direction of the Main Squeeze, though, he paused in the middle of the street, chest heaving...and he walked in the direction of his father's building. His pulse boomed in his ears, but he was grateful for the fear this time. It meant possibilities. It meant he was doing the right thing. The only thing.

He was owning himself.

Even though he had keys, Marcus buzzed his father's bell and climbed the stairs once he was let inside. His father stood at the door with a shaggy eyebrow quirked, raising it higher when Marcus walked straight past him into the apartment.

"Did Joey tell you?"

He shook his head, visibly confused. "Tell me about what?"

"That's definitely a no." Marcus's mouth dried up. "Dad, I have to tell you something important and I don't want you to say anything. Just listen and think about it and come find me later. Can you do that? You might say the wrong thing and I don't want that between us."

Marcus's father went to the dining room table and lowered himself into a chair.

God, what he wouldn't have given to have Jamie standing there with him. He would just give him that constant eye contact that said *I see you*.

"I'm in love, Dad. With a man named Jamie." The buckles that had been strapped across his chest for years loosened, one by one. "Being with girls never felt right to me. Never, not once. But I didn't know—I had no idea that I was gay until I met Jamie. And then a lot of things started to make sense. I've only ever wanted him like this. With my whole self. No one else. My heart doesn't care if he's a man or a woman, he's just Jamie." Marcus stopped to gather himself. "It might be too late for him and me... but it's never too late to be honest. This is who I am. I'm your same son. I just love someone you weren't expecting."

"I should have told you and Joey sooner, but I don't think anyone realizes how much pressure dudes put on each other. It's like never-ending. Getting laid, scoring phone numbers, does she have a friend. It never fucking stops. And you know something? I don't think women are desperate enough to sleep with a lot of us pricks in the first place. Most of

the bragging is just bullshit and posturing and...I finally realize that now. I've been scared of nothing. Being accepted? Maybe *I* don't accept them. I just want Jamie. I don't care who knows it anymore." He swallowed the knot in his throat. "I hope you can still love me, Dad. And if you can't? Tough shit."

Marcus and his father stared at each other across the dining room for long minutes, nothing but the sound of the foot traffic passing outside. The extended silence made Marcus's throat feel thick and parched, but he refused to be disappointed. Not in his father or himself. He would not treat the best thing that ever happened to him like a tragedy.

Assuming his father needed time to think their conversation over, Marcus turned on a heel and strode toward the door, pulling it open—

"Son, wait."

*

JAMIE STARED OUT the window of the Main Squeeze in disbelief.

Late last night, he and Joey had hung a Grand Opening sign outside, thinking it would attract some interest. It had—to put it mildly. There were at least fifty people in line. *Look what you built*, he said silently to Marcus, pride straightening his back. *You did this*.

"We ready to go, pal?" Joey said, coming up beside him, rubbing his hands together. "Finally got these recipes down, let's make some fuckin' juice, huh?"

"That wasn't the deal." Jamie backed away from the window. "I told you I'd get the place set up, then you're on your own."

"Marcus is on the way. Just help me out for the first few minutes," Joey cajoled, once again harpooning Jamie in the heart by reminding him of Marcus. "You don't want to be late opening on day one and sink this place with bad Yelp reviews, do you? *Come on*." He threw some shadow punches in the vicinity of Jamie's ribs. "Where's your sense of team spirit?"

"You've been napping on a crate for the last two hours."

"Ahhh. I was just resting my eyes."

Jamie snorted. Outwardly, he was keeping it together. He hoped. On the inside, he was in a panic thinking of Marcus walking through the door. How was he going to walk away again? He didn't know, but he had to find a way.

For now, though, he was stuck. He hadn't worked around the clock for two days to send the whole operation down the tubes in the eleventh hour. "All right, open the doors. You take the register, I'll juice. I'm giving you twenty minutes."

Joey whooped and stepped around Jamie, keys in hand. Jamie went to stand behind the counter, putting on his gloves and firing up the juicers. For the next little while, everything was a blur. One second, the shop was quiet, save the buzzing of the halogen lights. The next, it was brimming with CrossFit bros—and he'd been right about hanging the wall mirror. They were clustered around it like moths to a flame. There was a lot of ball busting, shoving and insults, too. If these were the guys Marcus was around at the gym every day, he probably felt a lot more than just pressure from his family to stay in the closet, didn't he?

Don't think about it now. Doesn't matter now. Joey called out the orders and Jamie's hands moved, taking out the fruit containers and scooping the appropriate amount into the juicers, plunging the food pusher into the chute and pulverizing carrots and apples and ginger. Just when he was pretty sure Joey would have to hop off the register and help him clear the backed up orders, Rory and Andrew sauntered in through the front door, shouldering their way through the crowd. Wordlessly, they watched Jamie for a couple minutes, then fired up their own juicers, all three of them leaning over continually to consult the recipe list.

Jamie had never loved his brothers more than he did in that moment. They didn't understand why he was helping Joey, the man who'd fucked up his face. They'd tried to save his ass from this awful depression he'd sunk into, but they'd showed up for him anyway.

"Thanks," he muttered around the lump in his throat.

Andrew and Rory gave him identical *whatever shut up* looks.

Jamie shook his head and reached under the counter to grab a fresh plastic cup to hold yet another hangover cure order when he heard a cheer go up in the shop. Without glancing up to confirm, he knew Marcus had just walked into the Main Squeeze and his stomach sank down to the floor. He wanted to soak in the sight of him, but he couldn't allow himself to do that or he'd eliminate the iota of progress he'd made toward moving on.

Who are you kidding, liar? You haven't even made an iota.

“Time to go,” he said to Rory and Andrew, wiping fruit debris on the legs of his jeans. Doing his best to appear casual, Jamie made sure all the orders were lined up so Marcus could pick up where he’d left off. But when he turned to leave his post behind the counter, Jamie stopped short, his heart climbing into his mouth.

Marcus blocked the exit and Jesus Christ, he looked like shit.

He’d grown a dark beard and lost weight.

His hair hadn’t been brushed.

His eyes were cradled by dark rings.

He was the most beautiful human Jamie had ever seen.

Behind him stood a man that Jamie knew on sight was Marcus’s father. It was there in the hard line of his jaw, the way he led with his chest. The guy was probably wondering who the hell Jamie was—and no way in hell was Jamie going through another hostile introduction with one of Marcus’s family members. He had to get out of there before questions got asked, but he wasn’t sure he could walk that close to Marcus without his true feelings showing on his face.

“Jamie,” Marcus mouthed over the noise, his eyes closing briefly. “Babe, your face.”

Had he called him “babe” in front of his father? Oh God, was he too exhausted or delirious to know what he was saying? Doing? “It’s fine,” Jamie said gruffly, pointing at the line of order tickers. “Start on the left and —”

He cut himself off when Marcus came toward him. Closer. Closer. Until their chests were an inch apart. All the noise in the shop dwindled to almost nothing and Jamie could feel everyone watching. *Everyone*. “I told my father about you,” Marcus said, his eyes roaming over Jamie’s face and hair. “I wish I’d done it weeks ago, Jamie. Told him about us. *Us*. Not just you.” He let out a shaky exhale. “Even if there’s no us, there’ll always be a you. The man I’m in love with. The man I’ll love forever.”

Jamie’s lungs seized, his hand shooting out to grip the counter. It was hard to rip his attention away from Marcus, but he cast a look around the room, at all the stunned faces staring back at him from the other side of the glass. At his brothers, Joey, Marcus’s father. Protectiveness toward Marcus swelled up inside him like high tide, clashing with the happiness that rose,

fighting to be acknowledged. No, though. No...it was too late for all this. Wasn't it?

"Let them watch, Jamie. Let them listen. I *want* everyone to know I love you. That feeling exists whether or not its approved of. Or disapproved of. It's real, it's *good* and it's the most important part of me," Marcus said, his throat working. "I figure I've got maybe a sliver of a chance here, so I'm taking it. You said your arms are too tired to pick up the pieces of what I broke? That's fine. Because I'm jacked as shit, Jamie. I'll carry us until you're ready."

A genuine laugh sailed out of Jamie before he could stop it. *Fucking Diesel.*

Marcus's breath released in a rush, a hand coming up to scrub at his chest. "Ah, babe. I didn't think I'd ever get to see you laugh again. Not up close." He quickly wet his lips. "Give me back the faith you lost in me. Please. I won't take it for granted again."

Jamie was on the verge of saying *yes, of course I'll give you another chance*. Saying yes, even though he'd been dead set on staying away from Marcus forever. When the man you love walks in and puts himself on the line in front of everyone for you, though? You don't keep your head up your ass. You pull it out and hold fast to the lifeline he's offering. And Marcus... was life. He'd become Jamie's life, despite how opposite they were. Despite the odds against them. He was so in love with the man standing in front of him. The man offering his heart and the life Jamie had promised himself. No way he wouldn't take it.

Before he could say anything, however, Marcus got down on one knee. And pulled out a ring box.

Everyone in the store had a reaction. Rory and Andrew flanked him, as if prepared to hustle him out of there like bodyguards if he said the word. Joey—and seemingly every CrossFit bro in the shop—either whistled or dropped their jaws. Marcus's father's lips twitched.

Jamie's eyes burned, as did the center of his chest. Oh my God. Was this happening?

"I wasn't sure what my father was going to say, but I didn't expect him to offer me my grandfather's ring. To give to you. And as soon as he said it, Jamie, I knew there was nothing I want more in this fucking world than to be your husband. I think I've been practicing for a long time without giving

it a name, you know? But I want to practice in front of the world now.” He opened the box and revealed a plain gold band, just a touch tarnished, but Jamie had a physical reaction to those perfect imperfections. Warmth spread through every inch of him, his heart rapping like a fist on a door. “Don’t just give me another chance,” Marcus rasped. “Give me the first, last and only chance you ever give another person to be your everything. If you do, I won’t just do better, I’ll do the best by you. Will you? Will you marry me, Jamie Prince?”

“Yes, Marcus.” Jamie swiped his forearm across his eyes, failing to keep his voice steady. “I love you, too and I’ll marry you. Tomorrow if you want. I don’t care if it’s crazy, I’m not me without you anymore. So can you please stand up now? It’s been over a week—”

Marcus didn’t just stand, he lunged, wrapping Jamie in a bear hug and knocking him back a step. Their mouths met and locked, Marcus’s fingers sliding into Jamie’s hair to cradle the back of his head as hoots and applause went up around them. Yeah, a few people left as Jamie and Marcus lost themselves in the kiss of a lifetime. But a lot more people stayed. The ones who mattered *most* stayed. And what Jamie and Marcus gained that day could withstand anything. Especially the test of time.

EPILOGUE

A few days later...

IT WAS QUIZ night at the Castle Gate.

Jamie was working behind the bar, but Andrew had just shown up to relieve him for a couple of hours. So he could have dinner with his future father-in-law.

Even saying that in his *head* sounded weird.

But looking out over the crowded bar and catching Marcus staring at him like a lovesick fool made it a lot less weird. Made it kind of fucking unbelievably fantastic, actually. *Damn right* he was marrying that man. If he'd let himself be more objective during their week apart, he would have come to the conclusion that being without Marcus just wasn't possible. It was hard to believe, but he'd fallen in deep, abiding love with the guy he'd once eye rolled and refused to take seriously. The guy had gotten under his skin. And that's exactly where Jamie needed him to be. Forever.

Jamie winked at Marcus and went back to serving customers. A few more minutes and he could join Marcus at the table he was saving. Something pretty damn close to excitement tugged at his gut. Since the morning Marcus had proposed, Jamie had been staying at Marcus's place. Joey and his father had stopped by a few times to have a beer, but most of the time, Jamie was on his way out to work, so they hadn't had time to get to know each other. But Joey and Mr. O'Shaughnessy couldn't have been more welcoming to Jamie. Joey even gave him an awkward, back slapping hug from time to time, which was hilarious, considering Jamie's eye still needed healing.

Was he dreaming? Sometimes Jamie wondered. A few weeks ago, he'd been trying to avoid his unlikely, closeted friend. Now they were engaged. And their families were not only accepting, they were supportive as hell, Andrew and Rory included. One look at Jamie's face after Marcus proposed and they'd taken turns shaking Marcus's hand, then went back to making

juice. Juice that had earned them five stars on Yelp and an insatiable customer base.

Yeah, business at the Main Squeeze was booming.

Jamie was so proud of Marcus, he was bursting at the seams.

He was so in love, he could barely see straight.

Life was...*incredible*.

Unable to help himself, Jamie cast another glance in his fiancé's direction, but Marcus was no longer alone. His father and Joey had just joined him, both of them raising a hand in greeting to Jamie. He waved back, contentedness settling on his shoulders like a wool blanket.

Andrew nudged him in the side. "Go."

Jamie surveyed the busy bar. "You sure?"

"Yeah, Rory is stopping by soon to give you a breather. I can cover until he gets here."

"Thanks."

Andrew clapped Jamie on the back. "Happy for you, man."

Jamie's throat pulled too tight for him to answer. He nodded and turned to leave, but he stopped short when he saw a familiar face passing through the crowded bar. It was the same cop that had watched them at the boardwalk a couple weeks ago. The same cop that Andrew had seen outside their house. Jamie and Andrew watched the man circle the bar, his eyes on the brothers all the while, before throwing them a salute and leaving the same way he came.

"Whatever it is, Andrew, we'll handle it. Okay?" Jamie said. "Together."

His older brother shoved a pen behind his ear and got to work pulling a pint. His smile was warm, but his eyes were distant. "Go enjoy yourself, Jamie. You deserve it."

Jamie meant what he'd said. They would handle whatever came their way.

As brothers.

But if the cop had walked out the door, nothing was coming their way tonight.

Jamie latched on to the reprieve and went to go join Marcus, Mr. O'Shaughnessy and Joey at the table, vowing silently to work on the

problem tomorrow. Tonight, however, was about the man who shot to his feet as Jamie approached with his heart in his eyes.

*

I, MARCUS O'SHAUGHNESSY, am marrying Jamie motherfucking Prince.

Life was sweet.

Better than sweet. For the last few days, he'd had to restrain himself from hugging random strangers everywhere he went. When he'd taken up residence underneath his bed, he'd thought life would never be worth living again—and now he was determined to live as long as possible so he could wring every drop of time with Jamie out of it.

Swear to God, Marcus had to concentrate on not flipping tables over, he was so alive and happy and invigorated. What man alive wouldn't be, knowing they got to wake up next to Jamie for the rest of their lives?

Marcus frowned.

No man alive, that's who. Except for him.

While weaving his way through the maze of tables and chairs, Jamie gave Marcus a secret half smile and Marcus's jealousy melted like candle wax. He didn't have to worry about things like Jamie finding someone else. Or not being good enough for Jamie. His fiancé loved him more than anything in the world—he'd told Marcus so, in those exact words. He'd been all mussed up at the time, too. Mussed up and naked and playing with Marcus's hair—

Marcus's cock started to swell and he let out a choked noise as the metal cage around his johnson prevented his erection from growing too large. Oh. Oh *Jesus Christ*. That felt terrible, painful and *amazing* all at once. Lust rippled through his abdomen and the blood in his head rushed south. *No, no. Don't go down there. There's no room at the inn.*

Jamie raised an eyebrow as he reached Marcus, his step slowing ever so slightly. "Everything okay?"

"Yes," Marcus managed, a trickle of sweat rolling down his spine. "All good."

You can't spend every moment of the day horny. This is an important night.

Control your dick.

The moment Jamie and Marcus sat down, a girl tapped the mic at the front of the room. “Who’s ready to take the quiz and win some money?”

Marcus watched Jamie out of the corner of his eye. This is when his fiancé would pretend he didn’t want to participate but ultimately wouldn’t be able to restrain himself from showing off his intellect. Which is why Marcus had deliberately invited his father and Joey to meet them on this particular night, at this exact time. Jamie was so freaking smart—so sue Marcus, he wanted to show off his man.

Marcus slid the empty answer sheet onto the table, along with a pencil.

“Oh.” Jamie adjusted his glasses, sitting up a little straighter. “Are we doing the quiz?”

“Yeah, why not?” Marcus leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, well aware that he looked like a smug son of a bitch. “Might as well, since we’re here.”

“I’m just here for the beer,” Joey announced, tipping his Budweiser to his lips.

“I like trivia,” Marcus’s father said, leaning forward. “Count me in.”

Jamie smiled and ducked his head a little. “Cool.”

“Okay, pencils at the ready! We’re starting with a film and television round,” the quizmaster announced. “Question one. *Never Say Never Again* was the final James Bond appearance for which actor?”

Jamie was already jotting down the answer. *Sean Connery*.

Marcus’s father sent him an impressed nod and Marcus’s chest inflated like a life raft.

“I’ve got the entire Bond collection at the house,” Marcus’s father said to Jamie, shifting in his seat. “You should come over and watch sometime.”

“Yeah,” Jamie said, having no luck subduing his smile. “I’d like that.”

“Can I come, too?” Marcus teased.

His father’s lips twitched. “Sure, if you bring over some of that juice.”

“Which one?”

“Sex Machine, of course.”

Marcus dragged a hand down his face, but a laugh snuck out. “Sorry I asked.”

“Question two!” Called the quizmaster. “In the TV series *Knight Rider*, Knight was aided by his car, which was called KITT, but what sort of car was KITT?”

“Trans Am,” Jamie and Marcus’s father whispered at the same time, before high fiving each other. Marcus’s heart tripped over itself. Happy, ambient music—the kind that plays at the end of movies—filled his ears and he was definitely mooning at Jamie, but he couldn’t help it. Didn’t want to help it, even though Joey was shaking his head and laughing at him.

“Question three! Which actress plays the character Oda Mae Brown in the classic nineties film *Ghost*?”

Marcus almost spit out his beer. “No way.” Jamie and he traded a stunned look. “Babe, I’m telling you, it’s a sign.”

Jamie tilted his head. “What kind of sign?”

“We should get married soon. Probably tomorrow, I’m thinking.”

He was waiting for Jamie’s signature eye roll, but instead, his fiancé lifted one shoulder and let it drop. “How about next week?”

Marcus stopped breathing. He grabbed the leg of Jamie’s chair and yanked it all the way over, leaning close enough that their foreheads were almost touching. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.” Jamie sucked in a breath. “Once the school year starts, my schedule will be tight and we’d probably have to put it off until next summer, so—”

“I want you to go back to work with my ring on your finger. I want everyone to know you belong to me.”

Jamie’s eyes did that melting thing they’d been doing more and more lately and it caused a matching sensation in Marcus’s chest. “I want that, too.”

“I want to pick you up at school and bring you to your favorite Thai place.”

“Done.”

“Then I want to bring you home and—”

“Marcus.”

But it was too late. Thinking about the trifecta from heaven—calling Jamie his husband, going on a date with Jamie, bringing home his man so they could fuck in the bed they shared—had caused Marcus’s cock to fill with unbearable pressure. He swallowed a guttural groan and willed his erection to subside, but he kept picturing Jamie with his head thrown back, moaning while Marcus sucked him off. And ouch. Ouch. The metal sides of

the cock cage bit into his hardening flesh and his life flashed in front of his eyes.

“Jamie,” he wheezed, pointing down at his jailed junk. “I have to get this thing off.”

“Get what off?”

“Cock cage,” he whispered. “I bought it yesterday. I thought it would be a fun surprise. I put the key that opens it on your key ring while you were in the shower.” He bit down on his lower lip and tasted blood. “You gotta spring me, babe. I’m dying.”

“Jesus Christ.” Jamie pressed his lips together. “Life with you isn’t going to be boring.”

“Not unless my dick falls off.”

“Everything okay over there?” Marcus’s father called.

“You guys over there picking wedding venues?” Joey chimed in, waving down the waitress. “You’re missing the quiz.”

Having his family within spitting distance should have been enough to lose his erection, but Jamie smelled too good and his hand was resting on Marcus’s thigh now—and it was hopeless. “Help me.”

“Okay, hang tight.”

“Bad choice of words, babe.”

Jamie plowed a hand through his hair and turned to address Marcus’s father and Joey. “I just remembered I have to count out my register in back. Forgot all about it. Marcus is going to help me so we can get back quicker.”

“Math,” Marcus offered in a strangled voice. “Going to help do math and things.”

“Right,” Joey said, smirking. “Take your time.”

Marcus’s father slid the answer sheet and pencil over in front of himself, cracking his knuckles. “Don’t you worry, men. I got this.”

Jamie stared after the paper longingly for a moment, then took Marcus by the hand and pulled him through the busy bar while Marcus tried not to limp. Some of the customers they passed did a double take over seeing him and Jamie holding hands, but that only made Marcus’s dick harder. *Damn right, he’s mine.*

“Ouch,” Marcus ground out, his cock fighting for freedom against the walls of its cage. “What if I die, Jamie? What if I don’t live long enough to marry you? How long would you wait to move on?”

“Enough with the crazy talk,” Jamie said, herding Marcus into the back office and locking the door. “I’d never get over you. I’d never move on. Now drop your pants.”

Marcus threw his back up against the door and groaned, his hands shaking as he undid his belt. “You’re making me harder on purpose.”

“We’ve gone over this. *Everything* makes you harder.”

“Everything *you* do.”

Lips twitching, Jamie shooed Marcus’s hands away and finished the task of unbuckling his belt and lowering the zipper of his jeans. When Jamie tugged down Marcus’s boxer briefs, he took a quick step back and observed the crime scene. “Oh...wow, baby. It looks like a bratwurst trying to fit inside a thimble.”

A laugh rushed out of Marcus, but that hurt, too, so he cut himself off with a whimper. “Jamie, please. Please. It’s the little gold key on your ring.”

Jamie’s eyes ticked up to his, and Marcus saw the arousal there. “What’s going to happen when we let it out?”

Marcus couldn’t form words. He was already so hard, he was in danger of cutting off his own circulation. Now Jamie was turned on, too? Marcus’s teeth bared themselves and he started to shake, his fingers tearing ineffectually at the tiny lock position on the base of the cock cage. “I don’t know,” he rasped. “It feels like I’m going to come as soon as it’s off.”

Jamie’s fingertips brushed over a section of exposed flesh on the side of Marcus’s dick, making his shaft jerk painfully, his eyes rolling back in his head. “I know I laughed at this idea, but...” Jamie reached down and squeezed the bulge growing behind his fly. “But I love it. God, I probably love it way too much.”

“Oh fuck fuck fuck. I’m sorry, Jamie.”

Marcus pushed off the wall and backed Jamie across the room, spinning his fiancé around and throwing him face down over the desk. He reached into Jamie’s pocket and took out his keys, his breathing labored as he searched for the right one. As soon as the golden key came into view, Marcus hurried through inserting it into the lock and twisting, moaning like a tortured animal when the metal loosened and fell off his cock onto the floor. *Clank.*

But the agony didn’t end there. Marcus’s body cried out for relief so loudly, he could only obey its demands. *Now now now.* He took a small

bottle of lube out of his pocket and set it on the corner of the desk, before he essentially ripped Jamie's pants and briefs down to his ankles, exposing the tight, bare ass that had occupied his fantasies for years. His hands climbed over the mounds of Jamie's cheeks and molded them roughly. "*Mine.*"

"Yours. That's right," Jamie breathed, his hands clutching the sides of the desk. "Now fill me up with what's *mine.*"

Licking his lips, Marcus drizzled lube in the split of Jamie's ass and used his fingers to massage the way in. Neither one of them could wait long, though, and within moments, Marcus was pressing his cock deep inside Jamie with a prolonged growl. "*Oh my God.*" He fell on top of Jamie and humped him like a fucking animal, the legs of the desk scraping on the floor. Within seconds, the base of his spine was tightening, tightening and he couldn't obey his mind's command to *slow down*. "Jamie it hurts. I can't hold it in."

Jamie's knuckles were white from gripping the desk. "Yes you can."

The sound of the smacking flesh got faster, louder. "No. No. I can't."

"You *will* wait." Jamie grunted from the force of Marcus's thrust. "Or I'll make you stop and put it back in the cage."

Marcus bit off a curse and slowed the pumping of his hips, even though it almost killed him. Christ, he loved when Jamie ordered him around when they were physical. *He loved it so much.* It made something inside him whole, made him aware of capabilities he didn't know he possessed. The connection between them burned hot at all times, but it was times like this, Marcus knew in his bones that his soul had recognized Jamie the first time they met. As the love of his life and the keeper of his lust—and his lust had tastes that continued to be revealed through Jamie's touch, words, presence.

Marcus's focused on his breathing and held back his release, using his mouth on Jamie's neck, dropping his hand to Jamie's thick cock, stroking him loose and fast, the way he liked it.

"Come for me, I love you, come for me," Marcus rambled brokenly, his loins protesting the delay, his inner thighs spasming, his hips pistoning faster, harder, unable to stop. The desk scraped across the floor and wedged up against the wall and Marcus didn't miss a thrust, practically climbing on top of Jamie to get deep as possible, fucking down into Jamie's tight entrance from above. Again again again. "You want to keep my dick in a

cage, fine. Do it. Lock me up. Just let me have this ass every fucking day. Say it's mine again."

"It's yours!" Jamie shouted, his voice breaking as he hit his peak, his body jerking and shuddering underneath Marcus, driving him out of his mind and past the breaking point.

Black spots danced in front of Marcus's eyes and euphoria battered him like a boat against the rocks, robbing him of every sense besides touch. He couldn't see or hear or do a goddamn thing but pump the pressure that had been torturing him into the man who created it every moment of the day. Just by existing. And as the frustrated weight in his lower body eased, eased, *eased*, the ever-present ache in his chest became more noticeable. It beat in his ears, his fingertips. It echoed throughout his whole body "Jamie, I love you. I love you so much."

Jamie turned face up and they breathed into each other's mouths for a moment. The future was written in his fiancé's eyes. Bold and big and happy. Real. Forever. "I was going to say you can keep my heart in a cage. But the truth is, I think it was in a cage before. Before I let myself love you," Jamie said, his throat working. "You turned the key and let it out. Now it feels...like it has so much more room to beat. Like it could keep growing forever because you're around to fill it up."

Marcus swallowed hard but couldn't quite clear the crowded feeling from his throat. He made a mental note to get on his knees later and thank God for sending him Jamie. For making him the kind of man who could make this incredible person happy. Thank God, thank God, thank God. "So..." Marcus brought their mouths together for a thorough kiss. "Next week?"

"That's right," Jamie said, his gaze roaming over Marcus's face. "Next week, we'll become Mr. and Mr. Diesel."

Marcus laughed into Jamie's shoulder, his heart so full it could explode. "When we're married, I automatically get the chair next to yours on the beach, right?"

"Every time." His fiancé's nod was jerky. "We'll write it into the vows."

Marcus grinned. "Thanks, Jamie."

Eyes suddenly serious, Jamie clasped the sides of Marcus's face and pulled him down into a hard kiss. "I love you, Marcus O'Shaughnessy."

It took a moment to gather himself. "I love you back, Jamie Prince."

THE END

Acknowledgments

There's something so romantic about a boardwalk. It seems like it goes on forever, doesn't it? All different kinds of people roam the planks. When you lean up against the rail and look out at the ocean, you can be anyone. A woman on the run, a barmaid waiting for her sea captain lover to return. So many possibilities. I took my daughter to Long Beach one afternoon last summer and the energy there really captured me—and that very same day, there was a real, live rescue! Lifeguards and whistles and sirens. The whole shebang.

That's where my fascination with lifeguards took on new life. What do these young, tan people get up to after hours, hmm? The rest is history. Almost. There's one more book.

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Stay tuned for Andrew and Jiya.

Curious about Rory and Olive's story?

Here's a little peek...

MOUTH TO MOUTH

The Beach Kingdom Series

Book One

By Tessa Bailey

CHAPTER ONE

GOD, I FUCKING hate summer.

Rory Prince shoved the ice pack against his throbbing eye and tried unsuccessfully to tune out the offensive early morning kitchen sounds. The scratching of his oldest brother's pencil across the table might as well have been an air horn pressed directly to the center of his forehead—and was *way* too efficient for nine a.m.

"Do you mind?" Rory muttered. "I'm in recovery mode."

"When are you not?" Andrew didn't even bother to look up from the two clipboards on which he seemed determined to make endless notations. "It's Memorial Day weekend and I have two schedules to organize. Sorry I can't accommodate your hangover." His pencil flew from one set of grids to another. "Where did the black eye come from?"

"Yes, I thought you only gave those out," Rory's other brother, Jamie, said from behind his raised, open book. "Who got the drop on you?"

"Some DFS's," Rory responded, shifting the ice pack, and his brothers hummed in acknowledgment, well aware that DFS stood for *Down for the Summer*. As in, those who didn't live year-round in Long Beach but showed up for three months out of the year to make hell for the residents. "Don't worry, he ended up with two instead of one."

Jamie sighed and finally lowered his worn-in copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*. "Aren't physical altercations a violation of your probation?"

Rory winked his good eye. "Only if I get caught."

Andrew tossed aside the pencil and flattened both hands on the kitchen table. "All right. I tried to give everyone at least one full day off every week

—”

“Jesus, man,” Rory deadpanned. “Don’t spoil us.”

“Look. We’ve got a bar to run.” Andrew massaged his eyes with a forefinger and thumb. Not for the first time, Rory noticed the new lines at the corners and the ice pack started to feel heavier in his hand. “I know it’s a lot, lifeguarding during the day and working behind the bar at night. If I could eliminate one of them for us, I would.” He dropped his hand. “Things are different than they were four years ago, though. We should be used to it by now.”

Things were different? Christ, what an understatement.

Rory, Andrew and Jamie traded long looks over the table, before quickly moving their attention elsewhere. A familiar pit took up residence in Rory’s stomach, but he filled it with cement and pasted a bored expression on his face. “Look, all I know is I’m not working Trivia Tuesdays at the bar.” He pointed at Jamie. “You herd the nerds this year.”

“As long as I can still participate in the quiz while serving drinks.”

Rory’s lips twitched. “God forbid you miss a chance to blow minds with your bottomless intellect.”

Jamie turned the page of his book. “What good is being a genius if I can’t make everyone else feel stupid?”

Andrew grabbed their attention with a knuckle rap on the table. “All right, so Jamie, you’re on Tuesday nights.” Their older brother made a notation on one of his clipboards. “I’m taking Sunday and Monday because the sports crowd is belligerent and Rory will knock someone out and end up back in a concrete cell—”

“More than likely,” Rory drawled, taking a few gulps of black coffee.

“We’re all hands on deck Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights—everyone works. So that leaves Wednesday night open.” Andrew speared him with a look. “You got it covered?”

“Sure. Wet T-shirt Wednesdays—”

“Nu-uh. Not happening.”

Rory smiled at his strait-laced oldest brother to let him know he’d been joking. “I think I’ve got it, man.”

With a nod, Andrew penciled in the final details to the Castle Gate schedule, hoisting it up like Moses probably held the Ten Commandments. “The next three months are going to be crazy, but when things quiet back

down in September, we'll have a lot less of Dad's debt to show for it. We're almost there. Play our cards right and this could be the year." He didn't meet their eyes. "Heads down and plow through, okay?" Finally, he ticked a look in both of their directions. "And let me know if anyone asks about him."

Rory swallowed. "Will do."

Jamie set his book down, which was as good as an agreement.

"Next order of business," Andrew started, trading a not-so-subtle glance with Jamie. "Mom's birthday is coming up in a few weeks."

"What do you know?" Rory drawled, his neck itching. "Damn thing rolls around at least once every single year. Same time, too."

"Are you going to come?" Jamie asked, shifting in his chair. "I don't think you realize how much she'd like to see you, Rory."

"You're right, I don't." He laughed without humor and polished off his coffee, softening his tone when his brothers looked disappointed. "I'll let you know, huh?"

Before anyone could respond, the back door of their kitchen opened and Jiya Dalal, the fourth member of their family, breezed in. "Morning, suckers," she murmured, flipping her wave of black hair over her shoulder. "Where's my coffee?"

On cue, Andrew abandoned his almighty clipboards and rose to pour her a cup.

Jiya wasn't technically related, but Rory loved her like a sister. She'd moved with her parents from India to Long Beach the summer before starting fifth grade. One afternoon, Rory and Andrew were playing catch in the backyard—while Jamie read in the shade of their cedar tree—when they noticed a somber brown eye watching them through a hole in the old, rotted fence. That's when the yelling started inside their house. Not just yelling. Angry, vile words meant to cause pain, coming from their father. In those days, their mother responded in kind, too. Before things had escalated.

Slowly, the fence board had slid to one side, revealing a girl Andrew's age, wearing a pink Punjabi suit—although he hadn't known what to call her outfit at the time. She'd waved all three Prince boys through, leading them without words to her garage where they'd watched cartoons on an old television set, Mrs. Dalal bringing them ice-cold Pepsi cans with straws stuck in the top. Jiya's English had only allowed them the most basic

communication back then, but eighteen years later, there was only a trace of her accent remaining and she could swear like a goddamn sailor.

Jiya slid over a large metal container from its place of honor on their counter and scooped cumin from its smaller compartment into the pressure cooker where Andrew had already started soaking the ghee to make khichdi, their morning staple ever since Jiya had taken pity on three starving men.

Knowing she would twist his ear like silly putty if he didn't get up to help, Rory stood, breathing through his nose when his brain lurched and smacked off the front of his skull. "Fuck me," he rasped, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I hate summer."

During the rest of the year, Rory worked the bar five nights a week. He made enough money to be comfortable and contribute to the mortgage he shared with his brothers. His customers were regulars. Friends. Locals. As soon as Memorial Day weekend hit, Long Beach transformed into a whole different animal. For one, lifeguarding season began, which meant waking up at the ass crack of dawn. Everyone on the beach was jacked for the time of their life, which meant they acted like idiots—and he couldn't even escape them at the end of the day, since they inevitably showed up at the Castle Gate at night.

"I *love* summertime," Jiya breathed, turning and leaning back against the counter. "My tips at the restaurant triple. By September, I should finally be able to afford the lessons."

As far back as Rory could remember, Jiya had wanted to fly an airplane, but slow season at the restaurant she ran with her parents always seemed to eat into her funds. Every year around this time, she said the same thing. *I should finally be able to afford the lessons.*

Rory glanced over at Andrew to find him staring at Jiya's profile, a frown marring his features. "Hell yeah." He moved around Jiya and elbowed Andrew. "That's great, Ji. Where are you flying us first?"

Andrew handed her a mug of coffee and she breathed in the steam, her dark eyes sparkling. "I'm thinking a pit stop in the Maldives before we hop over to Australia."

"Count me in," Jamie said, joining them at the counter to grate ginger onto the cutting board. "Let me know when to start packing."

“He’ll need three extra suitcases for his books,” Rory laughed, then winced when his cranium protested. “Son of a bitch. Today is going to suck.”

“There’s Advil in my purse.”

He almost dove for the leather satchel she’d hung on a chair. “You’re an angel.”

“True facts.” Jiya took an exaggerated breath, set her coffee down and the four of them fell into their usual routine of making breakfast. “What time do you have to be at the Hut?” she asked, referring to the squat, brick headquarters adjacent to the boardwalk where the lifeguards checked in each morning.

“Eleven,” Andrew answered, saluting the kitchen in general with the spatula. “Long Beach, your lives are in the hands of the Prince brothers.”

Rory dry-swallowed a painkiller. “God help them all.”

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRINCE BROTHERS lived, ate, argued and worked two jobs together, so there was no shortage of face time. Hell, they were never *not* in each other's faces. There'd been no formal discussion when deciding that morning not to ride to the Hut as a trio. It had gone unsaid they would find their own way there.

Did they love each other? Yeah. Would they have each other's backs in an alley, even if the odds were three against three hundred? Rory would already be searching the ground for a potential weapon. Did they need some space occasionally? Bet your ass.

While Jamie hopped on the bus, Andrew and Jiya had driven together in his pick-up truck toward the boardwalk. Hoping the late-May breeze would clear the vodka cobwebs from his head, Rory walked, instead of taking his motorcycle. The last-minute decision to hoof it had thrown off his morning routine, resulting in him forgetting his cell phone on the kitchen table, but judging from the packed avenues, he should be thankful he wouldn't have to battle for a parking space with a hangover.

At ten o'clock in the morning, there was already a traffic jam at every intersection, college kids staring at their smartphones at stoplights, the nasal voice of their navigation systems drifting out of the open car windows. A news helicopter circled above, probably feeding footage of the filling beach town back to a local station where a newscaster chirped to the audience. *This Memorial Day weekend is certainly shaping up to be the busiest yet, Bob!*

Andrew had been right about the last four years yielding big changes for the Princes. Their mother lived in Bayside, Queens now with her sister. Their father wasn't around anymore. It was just the three of them, back in the house they'd been raised, working to pay bills.

The more things change, the more they stay the same, though, right? The walk down National Boulevard toward the beach felt like it had been recycled from the four previous summers of his life. Wake up after a night of blurry, shit-faced memories, face the guarded disappointment across the

kitchen table, while nursing a healthy dose of his own. Fall into the same routine. Beach, bar, bed. Never changing. Never growing or taking on more responsibility. An actor trapped in the reruns of his own life.

What would he do if Andrew asked him to help manage the bar? Or hire and train this year's newest crop of lifeguards? Not that such an occurrence would ever take place, but would he be able to deliver on more, if asked?

Rory was distracted from his thoughts when a blonde walked past him on the sidewalk with her face buried in a book. "Jesus," he muttered. "The female version of Jamie."

When she'd gotten a few feet ahead of Rory, he was powerless to do anything but check out her ass. If there was one perk to summers in Long Beach, it was the abbreviated attire, and this girl was no exception. She wore little, white bun-hugger shorts and flip-flops, gracing Rory with a front row seat to the tight, side-to-side twitch of her backside. It was a superior tush. So superior, he shook out his right hand like it had been burned.

Shame he couldn't see her face. The forward tilt of her head caused short, blonde hair to curtain around her features as she speed walked to the corner, never looking up from her book.

Rory's frown deepened the closer she got to intersection. Traffic might be moving slowly, but the bus lane was wide open and he knew from experience how fast they flew.

"Hey." He cleared his throat and raised his voice. "*Hey.*"

She continued walking, face in book.

"Dammit." Rory gritted his teeth and started to run, not an easy feat considering he'd paired flip-flops with his sweatpants. But he had no choice to sprint, because she was five feet from the crosswalk and showing no signs of slowing down. He caught up with her just as she stepped into the street, wrapping an arm around her waist and yanking her back—

The East Loop bus barreled past blaring its horn.

"*Oh my God.*" She dropped her book—about fucking time—and dug her fingernails into his forearm. "Did that...oh God, that bus almost *hit me.*"

"You couldn't have made it any easier," Rory near-shouted at the top of her head, sounding winded. With her back plastered to his front, Rory could practically feel her shock wear off, giving way to a wave of trembling. He

heaved a sigh and lowered his voice. “Consider a switch to audiobooks, huh? Maybe?”

Her head tipped forward, presumably to look at her fallen book. “I didn’t like the narrator for this one.”

“Enough to get hit by a bus?”

A few beats passed. “If I say yes, will you start shouting again?”

“Yes.”

“Then...no?”

Realizing he still held the stranger in a death grip, Rory let her go in degrees to assure himself she was steady. The blonde turned around and blinked up at him through round, red-rimmed eyeglasses—and he experienced the most unexpected twist in his chest. He must have run harder and faster than he thought, because he was winded all over again. On a sucked-in breath, an odd sound escaped his mouth. A scrape of noise. What the hell?

This girl. She was fucking...*amazing*. She reminded him of a little sunbeam with summer-kissed skin and big features, especially those dove-gray eyes. Oh *fuck*. Her lips. They were parted slightly and inviting, the sun bathing them in a sheen.

Forget what he’d said about her being the female version of Jamie.

“Whoa,” she whispered.

Tell me about it. “What’s your name?”

If her widened eyes meant she was surprised by the sudden drop in his voice, she wasn’t the only one. “I’m Olive. Cunningham.”

“Olive.” For some reason, color climbed her neck when he said her name. “I’m Rory Prince.”

“Hi.” She smacked a hand to her forehead. “And duh. *Thank you*. For saving me from being road kill. If I had to die horrifically, I would have chosen a different book to be my last.”

Rory stooped down and picked up the fallen tome, making no effort to hide his perusal of her bare legs on the way back up. They were covered in goose bumps. “You’re making it sound like you hate this book...” he said, stepping close until she tilted her head back to maintain eye contact. “But you were lost in another world reading it.”

“I get lost in magazines at the dentist office.” He heard her swallow. “I just have a thing for words.”

“What else do you have a thing for?”

“Probably other stuff,” she whispered. “But I’m having trouble thinking of them right this second.”

“Why is that?”

“I almost got hit by a bus.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “Did you miss that?”

Rory couldn’t stop his grin. “Oh, I caught it.” Up ahead, he could hear the ocean and knew he needed to be at work. He would let down Andrew at some point this summer, no need to make it on the first day. But *this girl*. He was just supposed to walk away?

His grin faded. “I have to be at work soon. I’m lifeguarding today and we start at eleven. But I have a few minutes before I have to run.” He forced a concerned expression onto his face. “You look shaken up, sunbeam. We should probably get you a coffee and my number.”

A laugh burst out of her, loud enough to turn heads on the sidewalk. She slapped her hands over her mouth but continued to giggle behind them. The sound was so contagious, his own low rumble joined it and he couldn’t help but think, *there’s never been a morning like this. There’s nothing even remotely recycled about this.*

“I’m actually meeting a girlfriend,” Olive said finally. “It’s a study date.”

“I have great news. No one studies during the summer time.”

“I do.” With a smile that showed off the slight gap between her two front teeth, she pushed her glasses higher on her nose. “At the risk of sounding like a huge nerd, I’m taking a summer class at Stony Brook. I’m going to be a psychology major there in the fall and I want to be familiar with the course materials. And okay...” She blushed to her hairline. “I didn’t risk sounding like a huge nerd. That was full-on dweeb.”

Even though her enthusiasm was adorable, Rory encountered a kick of unease. He’d never been in a serious relationship, but he’d gone out with a lot of different kinds of girls...*once*. There wasn’t much that could intimidate him. He’d grown up poor and served hard time. But people with book smarts? Yeah, he had the look memorized. *That* look. The one that said they pegged him as being uneducated with nothing in his future but answering to someone else and making a working man’s salary for it.

On those extremely rare occasions Rory spent time with a book-smart girl, he didn't really give a shit when she gave him the look. The one that said, I'm going to enjoy tonight and never tell a single one of my friends about it. What did he care? He wasn't exactly planning on telling anyone, either. It was just a basic need being met. A diversion.

Olive didn't seem like a diversion. Not even a little bit.

He *really* didn't want her to give him the look.

"Uh, right." Rory winked at Olive, handed her the book and backed in the direction of the beach. "Look, no more walking without looking where you're going, all right, sunbeam?"

Her smile dropped.

"Don't study too hard," he said, punching the crosswalk button. Damn, walking away from a girl wasn't supposed to be hard, was it? His stomach felt like two stones grinding together. When he glanced back, Olive took a step toward him, then changed her mind and retreated. With a weird tightening in his throat, Rory faced the street again. The light changed and Rory started to cross—

"Wait!"

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