

# At Piper's Point

Ethan Day



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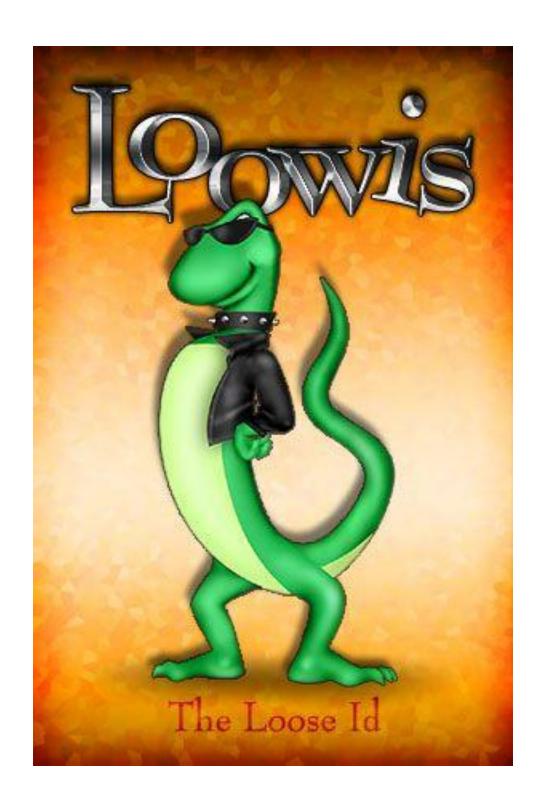
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## Chapter One

Cassidy peered up out the windshield to discover he was parked in front of Sadie's shack. He sat there as if he'd fallen into a trance at some point over the five-hour road trip, unable to recall when it was he'd pulled off the road onto the private drive. He stared at the house, a combination of neoclassical and Colonial Revival architecture, and his heart sank as he noticed the olive green paint.

The house at Piper's Point, a two-and-a-half-story Foursquare, had been built in 1901 by Sadie's father. It had always been white, gleaming in the sunlight like a beacon. It wasn't even that he disliked the color. The house just wasn't the way he remembered it, and his memories were all that he'd had to hold on to for so long. A little sting ripped through his gut, and he wondered for a moment if someone had intentionally wanted to make him aware of how much time had passed—that life had gone on without him.

Most, if not all, of the really *good* memories Cassidy had growing up occurred during the summers he'd spent here in this house with his grandmother. Ever since the judge had declared Sadie's will valid, the pull of her home had tugged at him all the way from Chapel Hill. He'd waited until the end of the semester to make the trip, since he'd missed enough work over the past year due to his legal troubles.

Cassidy surveyed the exterior, the railings, and square tapered columns that framed the covered porch and supported the second-story open balcony. The only things missing were the large ferns Sadie always had hanging from the porch. He'd expected the place to be in much worse shape. He opened the door and listened to the familiar crunch of the gravel drive under his feet as he got out of the car.

While the wood lap siding and shutters were freshly painted, all the trim around the windows and the posts and beams was newly scraped, waiting for a fresh coat. A large dormer jutted out of the bell-cast hip roof that made up the attic. When he'd been little, the windows seemed like eyes to him. This place had felt alive to him back then, but now it seemed like another house altogether—a stranger.

He thought about Sadie for a moment, remembering he should go through that attic and see what, if anything, he might be able to turn over to the island historical society. He grinned, realizing he was totally hoping he might be able to buy his way back into the good graces of some of the elders that way. It was very pessimistic of him, a quality he'd come to cling to the way a toddler clutches his binky.

"Marianne must've had someone over to work on the exterior," Cassidy said, noticing the shrubs that surrounded the foundation on each side were trimmed and

the sidewalk free of any debris. He shook his head, wondering why he was standing there talking to himself.

He could smell the freshly cut grass, and it dawned on him that had he arrived any earlier, his brilliant idea to stop in Corolla to buy supplies and groceries so he could hide out until his friends arrived at the end of the week would have all been for nothing. He took one last look at the house as he climbed back into the car.

The only person he'd spoken to since the court ruling had been Marianne Abbott. She was pretty much the only island Realtor and property manager, so she was who he'd called to get the house back in order. He'd definitely be having a word with her over this paint color. He had half a mind to insist she have the damned thing repainted. He closed the door and pulled around to the back side of the house, which was only visible from the beach.

He'd pull the car into one of the detached garage spaces later, ensuring he'd be able to fly under the radar and keep himself out of sight for the next five days. He unloaded his bags and provisions from the car and placed it all on the screened-in back porch next to the door. When he finished, he stood there, key in hand, but unable to make himself open it. As if being pulled back in time, Cassidy was once again like a teenager, dripping wet from the ocean, feet encrusted with sand, about to head inside for a large glass of Natalie's freshly brewed sweet tea.

Natalie had been like a second mother to him, as well as Sadie's best friend and housekeeper. He said them in that order, because to Sadie, that had been the order of their importance.

Cassidy took a deep breath, trying his best to blink back the burning in his eyes, desperately wishing he could once again bound through the door, listening to Sadie laugh as Natalie screamed, "You boys get off my clean floor with your sandy feet!" What he wouldn't give to find Sadie on the other side, her dyed dark red hair loosely bound with tendrils winding down her bare shoulder, one of the caftans she liked to wear having slipped down to expose it as she delicately held a lit cigarette in one hand and a glass of wine in the other.

Cassidy propped himself up against the back door for balance, losing the battle as a tear rolled down his cheek. He smiled, remembering her light rolling laughter, the joy it would always bring to those who were around to hear it, and that gave him the lift he required to continue.

He wiped his cheek on his shoulder as he pushed the key into the lock, feeling the notches grab slightly as it slid farther in. He took a deep breath and unlocked the door, pushing it open. For months, he'd been hoping to lay the last of his ghosts to rest once he arrived back at the Point. As he stood there, hovering in the doorway, he couldn't quite shake the feeling he risked waking up the ones he'd thought to have already rid himself of.

His mind flooded with memories as he breathed in the familiar light scent of jasmine from Sadie's favorite perfume, the mustiness that comes from old woodwork, pine-scented cleaner all mixed together with the salty sea air, telling him he was back, for better or worse.

Cassidy was back at Piper's Point.

\* \* \*

After Cassidy had finished unpacking the groceries, his clothes, and his toiletries, he went about the house, opening up all the windows not visible from the driveway. He'd noticed water sitting in the bottom of the large porcelain apron sink and wondered if Natalie had been coming to the house. He wasn't sure if Marianne had informed her he'd be arriving sometime this month, or if Natalie had kept a key and had been taking care of the place all these years—which was more than likely the case, considering Natalie wouldn't allow any old judge to scare her away.

Cassidy had been devastated when the judge ordered the property vacated until the legal matters had been settled. It had been an all-new low for him, as it had been her home for more years than it had Cassidy's. He thought it was wrong to force her to leave. Of course no one had believed it would take as long as it had to settle the will, and it shouldn't have.

Cassidy gave his father's lawyers credit for having strung things out for so many years. He suspected they were trying to wait him out, assuming he'd run out of money or tire of fighting Lionel and just give up. Lionel didn't have too high an opinion of Cassidy; that much was true. Fortunately, the feeling was mutual, so it was the one thing he wasn't losing any sleep over.

His mother didn't share her husband's opinion of their son but had never been much of an ally to him either. Lillian Winters seemed constantly irritated with her one and only son for whatever reason, as if it were all his fault for not playing along. It stung that she never had his back, as if what was good for the family should be good enough for Cassidy. He should just swallow whatever crap Lionel wanted to feed him and smile like an obedient little pod person.

The only room he'd avoided for the bulk of the day was Sadie's. But he finally ran out of chores, and when he couldn't procrastinate any longer, he walked up the stairs for the hundredth time that afternoon, this time stopping in front of the closed door to her bedroom.

He wrapped his fingers around the ornate polished-brass doorknob and slowly pushed the door open. Sunlight poured into the room from the two large windows and the single French door that led out onto the second-story balcony and out over the front of the property. It appeared deceptively cheerful to the naked eye, but Cassidy could feel Sadie's absence acutely, as if someone had sucked all the oxygen out of the room.

The disturbingly cheerful yellow floral wallpaper had browned slightly from the flood of natural light it had been exposed to over the years. The deco-era bedroom set, specifically the vanity, appeared incredibly lonely, sitting there as if awaiting the return of their mistress. Dust floated through the light as he let his gaze wander around the room. Everything was laid out the way he imagined it had been since the last time Sadie had breezed through the room. Cassidy exhaled,

#### 4 Ethan Day

realizing he'd been holding his breath, and he suddenly felt like Howard Carter opening Tutankhamen's tomb for the first time.

He cringed, remembering her vanity, and realized she'd be none too pleased over the mummy reference. *Sorry beautiful*.

Her vintage black velvet dressing gown lay draped across the upholstered chair that sat in the corner next to the closet door. The items on her vanity sat undisturbed, the sterling-silver comb and brush waiting as if she might come into the room any minute humming some song she couldn't fully remember despite having its melody stuck in her head.

The scent of jasmine hung a little heavier in the air in this room, and he closed his eyes for a moment, imagining he could hear her giggle as the gazillion gold bracelets she loved to pile on each wrist made that clinking sound that alerted anyone she was headed their direction.

He laughed a little, thinking about those bracelets, the way he'd loved the noise as a small child, only to despise it in his early teens—slightly embarrassed by the excess—eventually becoming grateful around the time he hit seventeen, as it signaled the alarm when he and Nate would be in his bedroom, tongues shoved into each other's mouth while they gave each other handjobs.

Cassidy had been too afraid to ask Marianne about Nate. Nate was not only a walking wet dream, like a young Robert Redford; as Natalie's son, he'd practically been like an older brother to Cassidy when they were little.

With his floppy blond hair blowing in the breeze, that dark, tanned skin, wide chest, and narrow hips that used to drive Cassidy to the brink of distraction. He'd spent hours mesmerized by the way the corners of Nate's bright blue eyes crinkled up when he smiled.

Cassidy walked over to her bed, sat down, and ran his fingertips over the little knobs of yarn that created the three-dimensional pattern on her bedspread. Nate was likely hell and gone from Hart's Island by now. He lay back on the bed and then rolled onto his side, pressing his face into the mattress, breathing in the scent.

"I fucking miss you, Sadie." He curled his legs up, wrapping his arms around them, going into a fetal position. There was no one else that would ever love him the way she had, which left him feeling empty and alone—like an orphan.

Cassidy rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, wide-eyed, as it fully sank in that he was truly alone.

He recalled the delight he'd always experienced being here with Sadie and the dread that came over him every year as the summer came to a close, signifying he'd have to return home to his parents. He could practically hear the music as if it was straining to pierce through the passages of time, pulling him backward to when he was a child.

"You'll never be truly alone as long as I'm around, kiddo," Sadie said, reaching over and ruffling his hair with her fingers.

Cassidy fell back onto her bed. The record player was spinning around as Doris Day belted out the lyrics of "Again," backed up by a big-band orchestra. He was miserable because the summer was almost over. "Why can't I just stay here with you, Grandma?"

"Because your father would never allow it, Cass." Sadie turned back, examining herself intently in the mirror. "And don't call me Grandma."

"Sorry." Cassidy moped as he watched her sweep up several chunky fistfuls of hair before shoving in a jeweled comb that miraculously held it all in place. "It's just not fair, damn it."

Sadie spun around to face him. "Listen here, kid. We'll have none of that kind of talk." She turned back to her reflection. "Christ Almighty, you go home speaking like that, and I'll never see hide nor hair of you again. I can hear your sanctimonious father already." Sadie picked up a tube of lipstick, then went about painting her lips a rich deep red. "He's eleven years old and cursing like a heathen. I knew allowing him to spend time with you would be a mistake."

Cassidy frowned, knowing full well his father was likely to say exactly that. "It's just..." Cassidy sat up, staring down at the floor feeling embarrassed. "I like it here better...than back home."

He didn't want to tell her that the other kids back in Charlotte didn't like him all that much. He was embarrassed enough admitting to himself that he had no real friends. At least none like Nate. The kids he went to school with were mean, to him and to one another. How could he admit to her, of all people, that being here on Hart's was the only time he didn't feel lonely? Everyone loved Sadie, and they all seemed to love him too because he was hers. He never had anything like that at home.

He rarely saw his parents, who were always traveling or going to stupid parties and charity events. He didn't understand why his own mother cared more about other people's kids than she did him. He didn't know how to make her love him more. He tried being good, doing everything he'd been told, but it had never been enough. He hated his father for always trying to keep him away from Sadie.

"I love having you here too, baby boy." Sadie watched him intently through the reflection in the mirror. "You're the kind of boy I always imagined I'd have."

Cassidy nodded, thinking she seemed a little sad as well. Nate stuck his head into the doorway.

"Quit your bellyaching, doofus." Nate grinned tauntingly. "Let's go outside and do something."

"Code for get into massive amounts of trouble," Sadie winked while attempting to appear disapproving.

Cassidy sneered. "Bite me, Floppy."

Nate smiled all toothy and then started gnashing his teeth as though he was ready to make good and cannibalize Cassidy.

Cassidy sprang up off the bed, taking off after Nate, who let out a whooping noise before tearing down the stairs.

Sadie laughed, cackling away as Natalie started screaming for the boys to stop making such a ruckus. Cassidy stopped just before exiting the room. He glanced over at Sadie smiling sweetly. "You sure are pretty...Grandma."

She picked up a comb and chucked it at him as he ducked out of the room and down the stairs while she screamed, "Rotten boy!"

\* \* \*

Cassidy stepped out of the shower; the scalding-hot water had helped to loosen his tight, achy muscles from the stress of the long drive. He opened the small window to allow the steamed heat to escape.

He began to towel himself off as he went back to stand in front of the vanity, running his hands through his thick, black, damp hair, which had a slight wave as it cascaded down, feathering across the back of his neck.

Cassidy was tall and lean, with a naturally dark complexion that made his sharp, angled features more masculine, like those of a European fashion model. He slipped on the thick black-framed glasses, which gave him an air of approachability he might not have otherwise had.

Cassidy had been acutely aware he was more to his students than a mere teacher. It was well known all over campus that he was starring in every coed's erotic fantasy and erecting more wood than Habitat for Humanity with regard to the homo student body. It wasn't something he encouraged in any way; it merely was the way of things and had been every bit as much of a hindrance as it had been an asset to him. The other professors and grad students in his department constantly gave him shit about it, as if he could never really be taken seriously due to the reaction he tended to elicit.

He was aware from a very young age that others had a tendency to stare when he came into a room. It unnerved him as a child, and he'd been a late bloomer in terms of sexual development, lacking the sophistication to understand the nuances of lust and desire until his midteens. In the moneyed world of his parents, rife with jealousy and envy, he either inspired hatred from some or festered false adoration from others who only wanted whatever they perceived he could give them.

He'd learned trust wasn't something to be offered with abandon, not to friends, colleagues, and especially not lovers.

He did his best not to dwell on those years and was thankful he'd had his summers on Hart's, as they provided him with solid examples of what friendship was truly meant to be. It made all the posers that much easier to spot, standing out much like plastic pink flamingos would on the well-manicured grounds of his father's estate.

He was a little on the thin side, with a wide, square chest and a long torso. His long legs and arms held a grace of fluidity about them that made one unable to imagine he'd ever gone through an awkward prepubescent phase. His hands were well manicured, with long fingers that might have been considered delicate had it not been for the knobbiness of the joints.

People were drawn to him in much the same way they had been to Sadie. She'd possessed an energy or electricity that subconsciously drew others to her. People often said they were energized, if not altogether excited, by her presence.

He exited the bathroom and strolled into the bedroom, grabbing the black briefs he'd tossed on the bed when unpacking his clothes earlier. Pausing for a moment, he stared at them curiously as he started to put them on, then glanced around the room. He shrugged and tossed them back onto the bed, wondering who the hell he was covering up for, before turning to exit the room.

Naked, Cassidy came down the stairs, passed the living room and the formal dining room, listening to the wood floors creaking under his feet. Almost strange, walking around the shack in the buff, and he enjoyed the wickedness, feeling as if he was doing something illicit.

He shook his head, irritated by the cluster fuck of different styles of furniture and periods of antiques. The living areas looked more like antique stores than cohesive rooms that flowed from any sort of design scheme. Sadie gave a whole new meaning to the word *eclectic*. She was a clutter bug, and despite the fact there were a lot of beautiful pieces of furniture within these walls, Cassidy had never believed that just because something was an antique meant it needed to be crammed in somewhere to be displayed.

He made his way down the center hall toward the kitchen. The house already seemed less stifling, thanks to the windows he'd opened, bringing in the light breeze coming off the Atlantic and invigorating the interior. The fresh air chilled his bare skin slightly as the mid-May temperature outside still sat in the low seventies.

He entered the kitchen—oddly, the largest room in the entire house. He thought it humorous, considering Sadie could barely boil water. He laughed, remembering her telling him not to be a little smart-ass whenever he reminded her of that fact.

"I didn't build the place. My father did," she would always say. "My mother wanted it this way."

A package sat on the huge island that Sadie had had installed back in the midnineties when she renovated the entire kitchen. Cassidy stood there, inspecting the white cabinets, thinking they were already a little dated. His gaze landed back on the package, and he let out a long sigh before walking past it and around the far side of the island.

He passed the small table and chairs that sat nestled up to the upholstered bench tucked into the small breakfast nook in the corner where he and Nate had eaten most of their meals, with Sadie and Natalie yapping away as they stood around the island. Removing the bottle of Stoli he'd shoved in the freezer earlier, he then emptied a liberal amount into the glass, listening to the ice make crackling sounds. Placing the bottle back into the icy depths that now sat nearly empty compared to the days when Natalie ruled the roost, he then kicked the door shut before picking up his drink. Cassidy took a sip from the glass and closed his eyes momentarily, enjoying the burn trickling down his chest. Eyeing the package again, he then turned to glance out the back door toward the empty beach below. He took another drink, concentrating on the blue water that appeared to endlessly stretch out across the horizon, bringing with it a sense of his own insignificance in the world. Strangely enough, he found comfort from that realization.

He set the glass down, removed a knife from the butcher block, took hold of the box, and sliced through the tape before pausing to take another sip from the glass. He let out an appreciative grunt and proceeded to unfold the top of the box. He removed a few fistfuls of shredded paper before reaching down into the box and removing a shiny silver urn.

He stood there, silently holding it for a few moments before tucking the urn under an arm, yelping when the cold metal made contact with his sensitive skin. He cursed under his breath from the shock as he grabbed the glass and headed for the back door.

Coming out onto the screened-in porch, Cassidy paused for a moment before opening the cabinet next to the door and removing a beach towel, thankful they hadn't been packed away. He sniffed it, deciding it didn't smell the least bit musty, as he pushed the screen door open with his foot. He crossed the paved courtyard and made his way down the slight hill, bare feet padding across the stone steps until he reached the sand.

The beach stretched out toward the west, the rolling dunes covered in sea oats and American beach grass forming a barrier between the ocean and the tree line. The woods and the natural curve of the shoreline created the private oasis that was Piper's Point. Once he decided on a worthy spot, Cassidy leaned over, placing the urn into the sand, then spread out the towel before squatting down, taking care not to spill any of his drink. He shook his head, thinking he was getting old after hearing his knees pop.

The sun felt incredible, warming his naked skin, though he began to wish he'd had the foresight to bring sunglasses. He scanned the horizon, seeing a few boats off in the distance as he lifted his glass and chugged the remaining vodka. The ice cubes poked into his lips as they tried to escape the glass.

He placed a hand on the urn, patting it as he laid back, stretching out onto the towel on his back. Cassidy smiled at the urn and then squinted up at the sky before shutting his eyes. "Welcome home, Sadie."

# **Chapter Two**

Cassidy groaned as something wet and cold dripped onto his stomach. His eyes jerked open as a man spoke.

"I said hello," the man repeated as Cassidy squinted, holding a hand up in an attempt to ascertain who was speaking.

He forced a grin, not unimpressed by the hunky guy standing over him in a wet suit that was rolled down to his waist. He was holding goggles and a snorkel in one hand and a set of flippers in the other. His dark brown hair was wet, and water rolled down his neck and chest. He looked a little like Josh Hartnett, on the more slender side, but his arms and shoulders were well muscled. Cassidy realized the stranger was leering at him in a most familiar way.

"What you got in the container?" he asked with a cheeky smile and overt comehither expression.

"My granny," Cassidy said in a slightly sarcastic tone, and propped himself up by his elbows. He laughed, imagining he could hear Sadie yelling at him to stop calling her Granny. "This is a private beach, you know."

"I did indeed know that." He grinned wider, nudging as if to draw Cassidy's attention toward his feet. "Though I must say you don't *seem* unhappy to see me."

Cassidy was a bit confused for a moment, feeling his eyes widen as he peeked down to see his hard cock, pointing up at him like a long spear over his belly.

"Jesus," he said, flinging sand into the air as he tried to cover himself with his hands.

The sexy interloper laughed as Cassidy sat up, grabbing the urn and placing it between his legs.

"Hardly an appropriate place to put Granny," he said.

Cassidy climbed to his feet, scowling at him as he snatched the towel up out of the sand and wrapped it around his waist while juggling the urn.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked, using the urn to once again camouflage his rapidly softening dick.

"Neil Mason." He held out a hand, only to laugh and take it back when Cassidy shot him a look that said he wasn't going to fall for that one. "Right, sorry."

They stared at one another for a few minutes. He wasn't quite sure what the hell to say at this point, considering Neil hadn't done the polite thing and turned to vacate.

"Would it be too much trouble..." Neil started, holding out his snorkeling gear. "I sorta got a little distracted and wound up a ways off course. I hate to bother, but I could really use some water."

The irritation was already dissolving as Cassidy noticed the guy was a little winded and worn, slightly hunched over as if he'd swum himself silly. "Sure, no problem." Cassidy nudged his head toward the house before heading that direction. "Where are you staying?"

"That obvious I'm a tourist, huh?" Neil grinned as Cassidy shrugged an apology. "On the western half of the island right on the beach—Bishop's Place, I think it's called."

Cassidy nodded, knowing exactly where that was as they crossed the courtyard to the screened porch. "You are a ways off course."

"Sorry I disrupted your nap."

Cassidy grinned, peering back. "It's getting a little late in the day anyway." He pulled on the screen door, listening to the squeak of the hinges as he held it open for Neil.

"This is a beautiful spot," Neil said, following Cassidy into the kitchen. "I'd been wondering who was lucky enough to live here."

Cassidy set Sadie on the island and opened the fridge. He pulled out a couple of bottles of water. "You should be careful snorkeling alone." He twisted off a cap and passed a water to Neil, who immediately downed half of it. "The currents around the island can be brutal."

Neil wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then smiled. "Like I said, wasn't really my intention. I apologize for the inconvenience, but—grateful for the hospitality."

Cassidy smiled as Neil took another quick swig. He held up his bottle in an apologetic cheerslike gesture before taking a drink out of his own bottle. "Sorry if I came off like a prick before."

Neil laughed, his gaze once again trailing down Cassidy's body. "No pun intended, right?"

Cassidy followed suit, feeling his face flush a little. "No extra charge for the peep show."

"That's good." Neil finished off the last of his water. "I left my wallet back at the house."

"Another one?" Cassidy asked, wiggling his bottle in the air. He grabbed another out of the fridge after Neil nodded. "Are you new to the island or just on a holiday?"

"Working vacation of sorts. I was supposed to be here for the summer, but I've decided to pack it in and head home at the end of the week."

"Too beautiful here for you to take on a daily basis, huh?" Cassidy said, immediately chastising himself for the flirty tone.

Neil laughed again. "No, I just don't really know anyone here. I was supposed to be renting the place with some friends—a couple. They decided to break up last week instead of vacationing with me." Neil glanced down at the floor, backing up a bit. "I didn't want to waste the deposit. Sorry I kinda got sand all over the place."

Cassidy took note of the kitchen floor, instantly feeling as if he were in trouble. He laughed, wishing Natalie were there to yell at him, and followed Neil back out onto the sun porch. That sudden stab of loneliness rumbled through his gut, and he became grateful for the company.

"Let me help you out of that wet suit," Cassidy said, placing his water bottle down on a table. "There's an outdoor shower across the courtyard you can use to rinse off."

"Thanks," Neil said, smiling as he began to push the wet suit farther down.

Cassidy placed a hand on Neil's shoulder to keep him from losing his balance and falling over. He was more than amply rewarded by the sight of Neil in skintight turquoise blue trunks that hugged the man's ass and narrow hips like a second skin and nicely contrasted with his tanned skin. He'd forced himself to look away when the wet suit pulled Neil's trunks down just enough to see the lighter skin from his tan line hiding underneath. Cassidy swallowed hard, doing his best to keep himself from losing it and sprouting another boner.

Hanging the wet suit up on a hook, Neil then followed as Cassidy led the way toward the outdoor shower, which consisted of a spigot attached to a pipe running up one side of the exterior wall of the detached garage.

"The water's probably pretty cold, but it'll get the sand and salt off of you," Cassidy said as he reached over and turned the faucet on.

"You look a little sandy too," Neil said with a sly smile as Cassidy yanked on the pull chain. Water hissed out of the showerhead, spattering onto the stone pavers that directed the excess water off into the grass.

Cassidy grinned, trying to look cool and not gawk as his guest stood under the spigot. Neil readied himself as he pulled the chain, cursing under his breath as he went about rinsing off as quickly as humanly possible.

Cassidy tried concentrating on the ocean, disturbingly distracted by his guest's nipples, which had gone rock hard under the cool water. He couldn't manage to exorcise the mental image of Neil's tan line from his mind, turning back with a smile as the water shut off and a dripping Neil walked over to where he stood.

"Towel?" Cassidy offered, holding up the one that had been tucked around his waist.

Neil blinked a few times, taking the towel as Cassidy took his turn rinsing off. He noticed that Neil didn't bother busying himself by doing anything other than ogling Cassidy as he stood under the steady stream of icy water.

Cassidy stood there, gaze locked with Neil's, both standing perfectly still as if in a man-trance. Cassidy finally released the pull chain, and both men moved silently toward each other, Neil letting out a moan as their mouths came together.

Their tongues intertwined in a slow dance for control as they snaked their arms around each other.

It was the last thing Cassidy had imagined happening today. As Neil's hand moved over his bare ass, roughly squeezing, he decided he really needed to start imagining days like this. While Cassidy slipped his fingers down into the front of those turquoise swim trunks, fondling the head of Neil's rapidly swelling dick, he let out a low groan of his own. His brain buzzed with sex, and he was suddenly thankful to be single.

\* \* \*

Cassidy lay back across the twin bed, smiling as he took in a sharp breath. The ceiling fan was spinning, almost whispering above his head as his body softly twitched while Neil's tongue worked up and down his cock. They'd fondled and fumbled their way through the house, backing each other up the flight of stairs and into Cassidy's childhood bedroom. He had slowly and proficiently sucked Neil off, and now the favor was most delightfully being returned.

He wove his fingers through Neil's hair, arching his back as he let out a long, deep moan of approval. He glanced down, not sure he enjoyed anything more than seeing his cock buried deep inside another man's mouth. His eyes rolled back in his head as Neil pulled back, running the tip of his tongue over the head before taking him all the way into the back of his throat again.

Cassidy panted heavily, desperately trying to catch his breath. The hair around his face was wet and sticking to his forehead. "Christ, Neil... Close... Gonna fucking blow."

Cassidy completely lost it when Neil moaned deeply, pushing him over the edge as he expelled hushed curses, holding Neil's face firmly between his legs, lightly thrusting until every last drop had been sucked out of him.

Cassidy's body fell limp, all tension evaporating out his muscles in an instant. "That was..."

Neil slid up Cassidy's body, licking and sucking his way back up to his mouth. Cassidy opened for him, tasting the salty tang of his orgasm on Neil's tongue. Their sweat-soaked bodies rubbed together, and Neil's third erection of the afternoon pressed into Cassidy's upper thigh.

Tearing his mouth away, Cassidy pushed him by the shoulders, as if holding him back. "Seriously, dude?"

"What?" Neil asked as he ground his cock into Cassidy's leg.

"You're like a cyborg or a Cylon—the Cockinator or something."

Neil laughed. "I can't seem to control myself. Getting you off is kind of addictive."

"So I'm like Neil-nip?"

"Apparently." Neil smiled as he leaned in and started sucking on Cassidy's neck.

Cassidy groaned as the nibbling and sucking shot sensations straight down between his legs. He tried to roll over onto his stomach, and Neil lifted his body slightly yet somehow managed not to remove his lips from Cassidy's neck.

Cassidy began clawing his way across the bed, dramatically inching his way toward the nightstand. "Must have water," he gasped.

Neil laughed and Cassidy grinned, feeling those hands seductively pressing into his back as he pulled his body farther away. He finally got close enough to snag one of the plastic bottles and wasted no time chugging it down.

"What the hell do you do for a living?" Cassidy asked, wheezing. "Porn?"

"I actually just sold my bed-and-breakfast back in Richmond, Virginia, to a conglomerate who buys up small but successful inns." Neil slowly ran his hand down the center of Cassidy's back. "They add spa facilities, turning them into more of a resort."

Cassidy grinned as Neil massaged his ass cheeks. "You just sold it? Were you tired of running an inn?"

"No, I loved it." His thumbs were pressing dangerously close to Cassidy's glory hole. "It was a lot of money. Part of the reason I came to Hart's was to see if this place might make a good location for a new inn."

Cassidy felt his eyes fluttering as Neil lightly ran a finger over his hole. "Jeez, man, you're insatiable." Cassidy grabbed the second bottle of water with the intention of passing it back to Neil. "Holy fuck!" Cassidy fumbled, dropping the water. He fisted handfuls of blanket as Neil's tongue pressed into his ass.

His mouth fell open, and he began pushing his ass back into Neil's face. "Fuck. Me."

## **Chapter Three**

Cassidy opened his eyes, immediately squinting from the morning sunlight filtering into his bedroom through the open windows. The temperature in the room was on the cool side, as he'd passed out soon after the trisexathon. He could tell he was alone, but was unsure if Neil had left altogether or was simply downstairs somewhere. Part of him hoped he was still around, feeling the throbby ache coming from between his legs.

He let out a faint whispery sigh and then smiled, not daring to move an inch. He lay spread-eagle on his stomach. A slight dewiness in the air left a dampness clinging to the bedding. He could tell he'd fallen asleep with his feet sticking out the bottom of the blankets, because they were freezing like two blocks of ice.

The sound of the waves drifted up the beach to the house, and a pang of nostalgia swept over Cassidy as he allowed his gaze to drift over the bedroom he'd stayed in every summer. The red-and-black-plaid wallpaper that ran around the bottom of the wall below the chair-rail molding was the slightest bit faded.

The seaside theme was on the masculine side, the matching brass portals that hung on the wall were in need of a good polish, and the painting that depicted the schooner crashing through the violent waves. He noticed the large black pirate flag with the skull and bones, and laughed at the poster of Heather Locklear in a bikini hanging next to the one for *Party of Five*. At the time, he'd convinced everyone he liked Neve Campbell, when in reality he'd had the hots for Matthew Fox.

The entire room was a giant time capsule. The sets of Judy Blume and Hardy Boys books were still lined up intermittently on the bookshelf with the random *Transformers* and *Star Wars* action figures.

"Jesus, Sadie, did you never throw anything away?"

Stupid question, he thought, wondering about his comics for a moment. He made a mental note to check the trunk at the foot of the bed later, since that's where he used to keep them. He chuckled thinking back to the books, wondering if his preteen doppelgänger had subconsciously mixed the Hardys in with good ole Judy, thinking it would butch things up a bit.

"A misguided attempt that would've been," he said, pondering whether anything was gayer than the Hardy Boys.

His chest began to ache at the realization that had he bothered to come back that last summer, this room would likely hold other artifacts of the boy he used to be. And *that* boy wouldn't have been quite the asshole either.

Not liking the direction his thoughts were heading, Cassidy quickly shifted his gaze toward the window while concentrating on his body. He winced suddenly, feeling his back protesting the lumpy twin-size boyhood bed. Cassidy made a mental note to crack open his laptop long enough to get online and order a new bed. Damn the shipping costs, he thought, knowing his body couldn't take the abuse.

Cassidy let out a light sigh as he grinned, feeling like a greedy little kid. Neil was perfect—exactly what he needed to fill the next few days before Ollie and Spence showed up. He wouldn't feel so alone in this house all by himself. Neil could keep him occupied and away from all the memories that permeated the air he now breathed.

Best of all, he'd be leaving the island and headed back to wherever he came from. No emotional entanglements with mutually beneficial, orgasmic good times. It was all he could handle in his current emotional state. He'd only shed himself of his last boyfriend a few months ago, not soon after the trial was finished.

"Teddy," he mumbled under his breath. He was a great guy—hot, sweet, great in bed—there just hadn't been anything deeper than what lay just below the surface. It had sucked all the way around, as Teddy seemed like the first guy in a long while who was genuinely saddened by the breakup, even though it had been a mutual decision. They'd both been aware there was a time limit on their relationship from the beginning, since Teddy was graduating and moving back to Kansas. It was a little sad to admit, but Cassidy found it refreshing going into a relationship that came with a preexisting expiration date. For once he didn't have to be the grim reaper. He'd been able to sit back and enjoy what they had for as long as they had it.

And Teddy had it—that pretty-boy-jock appeal. Very masculine and sporty looking, yet not the type you'd expect to find shoving the nerdy guy into a locker. Teddy had a sweetness about him. At twenty-four, he wasn't that much younger than Cassidy, but the maturity level wasn't there. It was almost as if Teddy hadn't ever had to deal with anything unpleasant, like he'd led a charmed life up until that point. It was the quality that had initially drawn Cassidy to him. Not innocent so much as uncomplicated, he thought. Considering how proficient Teddy was in the sack, he was under no delusions as to his sexual experience. Unfortunately, he just wasn't in love with Teddy. Cassidy was beginning to feel he wasn't actually capable of falling in love...or maybe he was simply afraid he couldn't stay that way.

"Dead inside," he mumbled, then laughed at the maudlin and melodramatic thought.

Cassidy pushed himself up onto his knees and crawled out of bed. He twisted from side to side, listening to his spine pop and crack like a bowl of Rice Krispies. He scampered around the corner into the bathroom off the hall, heading directly to the toilet to relieve himself. His entire body trembled and he let out a loud groan as his eyes rolled back into his head a tiny bit.

"Fuck yes," he mumbled once his bladder was finally empty. He grabbed a tissue from the fuzzy dispenser on the back of the toilet and did the obligatory shake before wiping himself dry.

Cassidy fumbled with the handle, flushing the toilet before stumbling over to the vanity. He flipped on the overhead light and squinted, taking a few steps back so he could fully take in his reflection. He started laughing, mildly grossed out by the dried semen on his chin. Cassidy shook his head as he snagged his specs off the counter. He put them on, enabling him to see close-up as he scratched at the crustiness with his fingernail.

"Cum slut," he said, giving his reflection a curt, take-that head nod.

A long shower and thorough brushing of his teeth and tongue had him feeling almost shiny and new again—well, fresh at the very least. He ran an electric razor over his stubble and massaged a tiny bit of lotion into his chin and neck.

He decided not to tempt fate by running around nude again. He pulled on a yellow pair of baggy cotton shorts, a formfitting V-necked undershirt, and added a thick pair of tube socks since he couldn't get his feet to stay warm. He smushed the elastic down around his ankles just before he headed downstairs.

After he entered the kitchen, he immediately busied himself gathering yogurt, an apple, and then slicing an English muffin that he proceeded to toss in the toaster.

"Good morning, Sadie," he said as he walked past the urn. "I apologize for leaving you alone your first night back, but I did things last night I'd prefer you never see, beautiful."

He winked at the urn and smiled, imagining her spouting off how she could probably teach him a thing or two, while arching her eyebrows.

His smile faded, as he began to feel cheated—not having her in his life now that he was all grown up. He knew it was silly to be talking to the urn as if it were some magical vessel directly linked to her spirit. But lame or not, it kept the more depressing feelings of guilt and abandonment at bay now that he was once again alone in the big, empty house.

He jumped, startled by the toaster, announcing the English muffin was good to go. He placed everything on one of the handled trays that he'd removed from the wall above the nook and carried his breakfast out onto the screened-in porch. He ran back inside, grabbing Sadie and his cell phone before finally taking a seat, grinning as he flinched, receiving a reminder of his shenanigans from the night before.

"The gift that keeps on giving," he mumbled, feeling his dick swell as he reached down and adjusted himself.

Cassidy bit a big chunk out of the apple as he picked up his phone, praying it wasn't completely dead. He'd not bothered to plug it into its charger the night before. He nodded, happy to see it still had a few bars left on the tiny battery symbol. He had three missed calls, all from Ollie.

Oliver Elliot could be best described as blond and bendy, only one of which was a naturally God-given attribute. An art major in college, he now made jewelry from home and sold it on eBay to pay his bills. The rest of his spare time was spent doing sculpture...and Spencer. Ollie had that Michael J. Fox syndrome, where despite the fact that his birth certificate attested to his twenty-nine years, he still looked like he was sixteen.

Cassidy punched in the appropriate codes to get into his voice mail while continuing to shovel food into his mouth. He gazed out over the beach below at the bright blue water, waves gently rolling up the sand as he squinted from the morning sun. He placed the phone to his ear, hearing the beep, followed by Ollie's singsong voice saying, "Hey, Cass, just checking in to see if you'd made it. Call me."

Cassidy deleted it and listened to the next beep. "Hey, Cass, it's just me again. Starting to worry a bit. You should've made it there by now. Call me so I know you're okay, okay?"

Cassidy grinned, shoving a spoonful of yogurt into his mouth as he punched buttons with his thumb, then placed the phone between his ear and shoulder in time to hear the last message, which concluded, "I suppose you're just not going to bother calling. Thanks for making me worry all goddamn night, by the way." Cassidy laughed hearing Spencer saying, "Someone kill me—" in the background. He heard Ollie telling Spencer to shut up as the message abruptly cut off.

He knew he was in deep shit as he let out a frustrated sigh. He snarled at the phone, contemplating whether or not he should postpone the guilt trip or make like a Band-Aid and get it over with now.

Finishing off the last bit of the yogurt before shoving the tray across the table, Cassidy then punched the numbers on the phone. He mentally prepared for the verbal onslaught and leaned back, relaxing into the seat as he waited while the phone continued to ring.

"You're alive?"

"Yeah, I'm so sor—Hello?" Cassidy inspected the display on his cell to see Ollie had hung up on him midsentence. "Son of a bitch." He punched the green Call button, resending the call.

"Hello, Oliver here."

"Was it really necessary to—Ollie?" Cassidy rolled his eyes, tossing the phone into his lap after seeing he'd done it again. "One more time, you little..." he mumbled as he snatched up the phone and tried again.

"Hello, this is Oliver, who's like the single best friend you've ever had, bitch."

Cassidy laughed, his irritation already dissipating. "Don't bitch me, bitch. What's with all the hang-ups?"

"What a loaded question that could be." Ollie sighed. "You should have called to let me know you were okay."

"I'm sorry, sugar bean." Cassidy grinned, knowing Ollie loved it when he called him that. It was usually foolproof when followed up with a rib tickle and a pat on the ass, but considering the long distance, he'd have to work with what he had. "You placed your phone number in every single compartment of my car with *emergency contact* scribbled over it. It wasn't likely you'd not be the first to know had there been an accident."

"That wasn't what I meant by okay, and you know it."

"I know, Ollie. It wasn't an intentional slight. I just...got distracted, I guess."

"You're depressed. I can hear it in your voice."

Cassidy felt a grimace pass over his face as he rooted around in the wicker chair. As much as he adored Ollie, he didn't love the fact he seemed incapable of getting anything past him.

Using his told-you-so tone, Ollie sang, "Your silence says it all."

"Oh shut it." He chewed on his lower lip. "Know-it-all."

"I told you to wait for us to come with you, and stop chewing your lip."

Cassidy sat up, trying to pinpoint the hidden camera. "I really hate it when you do that." He settled back into the chair, listening to Ollie laugh. "And you know why I needed a few days up here alone. I didn't want to cry with company. It's tacky."

"Nice. Like we're complete strangers." There was a pause followed by a huff. "Hear that, Spencer?" Oliver yelled. "We're not cryworthy!"

"You know how I feel about feelings."

"Yes, yes...so anti-emo! You and your yucky-love phobia. God forbid you allow a crack to form in that facade you call your life."

"Um, judgey much? Besides, cracks lead to..."

"Yes?"

"Bigger cracks?"

"You've had the emotional shit kicked out of you for years, courtesy of your twisted Ps. Honestly, Cass, we all get it—you have the inner strength of any character ever played by Sally Field. You've made your point, and I promise no one's going to judge you for having a bit of a meltdown, so just let go."

Cassidy scowled at the double standard. "Just judge me for *not* having one, apparently."

"It's okay, Cass. Just close your eyes and imagine I'm taking your hand. You're perfectly safe. You can let go. I won't let anything happen to you."

"Dude, that was like totally beautiful, man."

"Prick."

Cassidy was trying to hold back his laughter. "No, seriously, I'm writing this entire conversation down and e-mailing it to Lifetime Television this instant."

"You can go straight to hell, you...you pussy. It's not like I enjoy all this touchy-feely crap."

"Ew!" Cassidy squealed like a little girl. "Was it necessary to go there?"

He lost it, placing his hand on the table for balance, laughing his ass off as he heard a click followed by complete silence on the other end of the line.

"Ah...goodness." He settled back into the chair, laughing a bit more as he set his cell on the table. The burning behind his eyes stung as the pressure built up in his chest. "Shit," he whispered as a tear rolled down his cheek.

Cassidy knew full well he didn't want to be alone, but his desire not to be seen in this state was strong and far outweighed any discomfort he might suffer at the hands of loneliness. It wasn't that he really had anything against people becoming emotional. He was fine with it—hell, even good to have around in a crisis—as long as it wasn't *his* crisis.

He enjoyed being that voice of reason friends or students could come to when they felt their lives were spinning out of control. He loved being able to help, to make them feel better, to rescue them, for lack of a better word. He just wasn't all that good when it came to needing to be rescued.

He sat up, resting his elbows on his knees and placing the palms of his hands over his eyes. Instead of fighting it, he decided to let go after all, praying behind his eyes that he could get it all out if he did. The rational part of him knew with *every* fiber of his being that he had done *everything* humanly possible to help Sadie after the stroke. He'd tried to convince Lionel to let him take her, begged him to at least allow her to come back to Piper's Point and let Natalie care for her.

He'd even taken legal action when nothing else had worked, but he didn't have any rights since Sadie had never bothered to make a living will. It wasn't as if Lionel had abused her in any way a court would have been able to see, despite the fact he had indeed been abusing her. It had been pure spite on Lionel's end, like he'd been waiting for the earliest opportunity he could find to control her or at the very least have control over her.

Cassidy wiped his eyes, the sunlight and ocean view blurred by his tears. It had been the first time she'd *really* needed him, and he'd failed her. Cassidy couldn't rescue the one person he'd like to have saved more than anybody else, and he wasn't entirely sure he'd ever be able to reconcile himself to that truth. He observed the urn sitting next to him on the table, his own distorted reflection glaring back at him. Despite knowing there'd been nothing he could've done to return her to this place back when it would have mattered, it did make him feel the tiniest bit better knowing he was able to bring her home now.

\* \* \*

Cassidy surveyed the kitchen, contemplating what the hell he was supposed to do with himself. He'd already come to the conclusion that heading into town would be a crapshoot. There was a strong possibility that the locals might not be all that happy to see him. That they might feel he'd abandoned Sadie when she needed him most. He couldn't exactly blame them, considering he felt that with regard to himself.

He could hide out for a good week if he needed to. By then his friends would arrive and he'd have a buffer knowing most of the Hart's Island inhabitants wouldn't confront him while surrounded by outsiders

"Know your limitations," he said, figuring it best to keep himself busied with anything menial. "And gird your loins, for the natives are quite possibly restless—and out for blood."

He hadn't been down to the dock and boathouse yet, so he decided that might be as good a place as any to start. He ran up the stairs, stopping momentarily to rip off the socks as he went. He grabbed up a pair of sandals, then hopped down the hall on one foot while sliding one on, stopping at the top of the steps to tend to the second one.

He tromped down the stairs, making an awful commotion and smiling as he imagined Natalie yelling at the top of her lungs for him and Nate to quit stomping through the house like a herd of elephants.

He came busting out onto the front porch and down the front steps toward the trail that led into the trees to the small half-moon-shaped beach on the eastern edge of the property. It was very secluded, with a small dock and boathouse where they stored the *Tempest*, Sadie's modest sailboat, during the off-season. Cassidy wasn't quite sure why Sadie even had a sailboat, considering she never went on the water.

He'd never really taken to sailing—that was Nate's thing—though in truth he didn't mind it as long as he didn't have to do any of the actual work. That's what it always felt like to Cassidy. "Pull this jib. Grab that jab." Cassidy laughed, certain he wasn't using the correct terminology. "Bunch of jib-jab if you ask me."

He'd secretly thought Nate just enjoyed bossing him around. He was only a little over a year older than Cassidy, but man, to hear Nate tell it, you'd have thought the earth had been created in that one year. Cassidy sighed, stepping out of the tree line at the tiny beach. He grinned, walking toward the boathouse, remembering the way he used to try getting Nate mad enough to shove on him or wrestle him to the ground.

Cassidy hopped up onto the wood plank walkway and strolled over to the side door of the boathouse. "Anything I could think of to get you to touch me."

Cassidy laid a hand on the doorknob, closing his eyes, momentarily remembering the summer he'd turned sixteen. He'd expected to be relaxed, having yet another happy summer away from his parents, who deposited him on Hart's before leaving on their two-month annual vacation to wherever it was they'd decided to go to that year. The longer that summer wore on, however, the more frustrated Cassidy got.

It had been the last day of his next-to-last summer on the island. Lillian, his mother, had called, letting Sadie know the car they'd sent to pick him up would be there anytime. He'd come down to the boathouse to say good-bye to Nate. Part of him was glad to be going for once. Cassidy had been like a raw nerve, irritated and exposed the entire summer. He'd become so infatuated with Nate that he could

barely stand to be around him. At the same time he'd practically snapped anyone's head off who'd dared insert themselves between them.

Nate's best friend on the island, Jimmy Dobbs, had been at some baseball scouting camp for eight weeks of the summer. Cassidy had always liked Jimmy in the past, yet he found himself wanting to strangle the life out of him once he got back. He hated having to share his time with Nate.

Cassidy had begun to feel like a crazy person and had come to the conclusion that leaving might not be such a bad thing after all. He knew what he wanted from Nate, even though he couldn't bring himself to admit it. He'd also come to believe that Nate didn't share those feelings, but he discovered how wrong he'd been on the last day of what turned out to be the best summer he'd spent on Hart's Island at that point in his very young life.

\* \* \*

Cassidy yanked the boathouse door open and laughed as Nate jumped, practically tripping over his own feet.

"Asshole," Nate said. His muscles relaxed as he halted his attempt to cover up the bag of pot, lighter, and the thin pack of papers. He was wearing nothing but a faded pair of short khaki golf shorts and worn deck shoes. "Shut the door, dweeb."

Cassidy nodded as he stepped in and closed the door behind him. He maneuvered around the coils of rope and the pile of canvas sacks they sometimes used to fill with sand during the stormy season to prevent the boathouse from flooding.

He'd always liked it here, as it was one of the few places he could come to be alone with Nate. He walked around the canoe that was turned upside down and hanging from the posts. Cassidy watched briefly as Nate sprinkled the dried leaves onto the paper before he found it impossible to keep his gaze from wandering over Nate's wide shoulders and muscled back.

He was amazed that something so firm could still appear to be soft as silk as he watched the planes of tanned skin over flexing muscles while Nate fiddled with rolling the joint. Cassidy let his gaze wander down the slow curve of Nate's back and the tiny beads of perspiration forming there. He swallowed hard, imagining the way the skin disappearing down the top of those shorts might feel.

Cassidy rubbed his hand over his mouth, feeling the heat for the first time as he wondered whether Nate was wearing underwear. He could feel himself getting a boner yet couldn't manage to make himself stop ogling Nate as if he were a piece of meat. He'd been doing that all summer long and, despite his best efforts, couldn't stop now.

He practically shot off a load in his briefs watching Nate's tongue slide over the edge of the paper.

"You okay?" Nate asked with a slight grin.

Cassidy locked eyes with Nate, feeling his face heat up, fairly certain he'd just moaned out loud.

"Totally. Just came to say good-bye," Cassidy said, staring at the floor, humiliated yet still unable to not notice the way the sunlight was causing the blond hair on Nate's legs to glisten. "Where'd you get the pot?"

"Swiped off some tourist camping out on the beach." Nate turned, holding up the perfectly rolled joint as if were the finest achievement in his long and illustrious soon-to-be seventeen-year-old life. Cassidy shook his head at him.

"You ever?" Nate asked, holding out the joint.

"Sure," Cassidy said, not too impressed by pot, yet still taking a toke when Nate passed it over to him. He sucked the smoke into his lungs and held it in as he handed the doobie back.

Cassidy exhaled the smoke, and they passed the joint back and forth, neither one saying much of anything, just smiling as they watched each other take hits off it.

Cassidy was trying to maintain his cool despite his frustrations, which were now reaching a heightened state of desperation. Over the course of the summer, Nate had become the root of any and all things sexual as far as Cassidy was concerned. Despite being willing to give his left nut for five naked minutes with Nate, he no longer held on to any hopes he'd ever get the opportunity.

"Come here." Nate pulled Cassidy closer. "There's not much left, so we'll have to hot-box the rest."

Cassidy stared blankly into Nate's face.

"You don't know how to hot-box?" Nate shook his head. "What the fuck do they teach you ivy-bound prep-school kids anyway?"

Cassidy grinned, noticing Nate's gaze drop to his lips.

"I'll inhale and then blow the smoke into your mouth from mine."

Sweet Jesus, Cassidy thought. I have got to be the luckiest son of a bitch to ever walk the planet. "Cool." He nodded, trying to keep his cool, despite the fact his cock went instahard the second Nate explained hot-boxing to him.

Nate carefully held on to the little bit of joint that was left as he inhaled, causing the cherry to momentarily burn bright orange. Cassidy watched in anticipation as Nate smiled, closing his eyes while he held in his breath. Then, as if in slow motion, Nate leaned forward and pressed his soft lips to Cassidy's and blew the smoke into his mouth. Cassidy reciprocated by taking the smoke into his lungs, not daring to so much as move a muscle.

Cassidy exhaled as Nate was sucking in the last bit that was left, then dropped the tiny butt to the floor. He ground it into the plank with the bottom of his shoe as he leaned in, pressing his lips over Cassidy's once more.

Cassidy thought it was the drugs for a second, that he was merely hallucinating that Nate had indeed slipped his tongue into his mouth. He then

remembered pot made him hungry, not delusional. He opened his eyes momentarily, seeing the tiny bits of smoke escaping from between their lips as Nate forced his tongue in farther. Cassidy thought for sure both his head and his cock were about to explode as he opened up his mouth for Nate, who seemed to take that as a sign of encouragement, considering his hands were making their way around Cassidy's waist.

Cassidy concentrated on the sensations of Nate's tongue intertwining with his while Nate pulled him closer. The flavor and the light-headed effects of the pot mixed with their kiss and the heat from Nate's mouth set Cassidy's body on fire. He moaned as Nate pressed into him, grinding his pelvis into his erection, nearly making him shoot.

Nate pushed Cassidy away, glancing down between the two of them. "Already hard as a rock."

Cassidy was confused for a second, unsure if there had been a question in there or if Nate had simply decided this would be a great time to pause and state the obvious. He started to open his mouth in response, only to have Nate cut him off with another kiss. He finally allowed himself to touch Nate. He'd been holding off, afraid whatever spell had come over Nate would be broken should he make the slightest movement. Cassidy lightly slid the tips of his fingers over Nate's chest, feeling Nate react as he ran his pinkie over a hard nipple. Nate pressed his upper body into it, and as if instinctual on some level, Cassidy began massaging the warm, moist skin.

Cassidy moaned when the palm of Nate's hand pressed into his hard-on. He gently thrust into it, wanting more. He could feel Nate smiling through the kiss just before they heard the door swing open. They separated like two cats that'd just been doused with a bucket of water.

Sadie was standing at the doorway, mouth hanging open as both Nate and Cassidy froze in place. She let out an indecipherable little squeak before pulling the door closed, leaving them alone once again. Cassidy couldn't bring himself to look at Nate, and he could tell Nate had turned away from him as well.

Cassidy was mortified, yet half ready to kill Sadie for opening that damned door when she had. He knew he should care more about what Sadie might think about all this, but the only thing that was important to him at that moment was whether he'd ever get another chance with Nate.

He cocked his head to the side, wondering if he'd heard correctly, then peered over at Nate, who was now staring at the door as well. It sounded odd, like laughter, only not, or perhaps muffled? He caught Nate shooting a quick glance in his direction before they each began to walk toward the door. They froze again, each standing up straight as they watched each other, listening to Sadie really lose it on the other side of the door.

Nate shrugged, and Cassidy started to giggle, then placed his hand over his mouth. He knew it was probably the pot, but he too started to laugh. Nate watched him with this quirky half smile, shaking his head as he started to laugh also.

#### 24 Ethan Day

Cassidy pushed the door open to see Sadie doubled over, her long red hair cascading toward the ground as she held her belly. "I'm"—she tried to get out between laughs—"so sorry."

"I take it you're not upset?" Cassidy asked, giggling.

"My grandson, the homosexual!" Sadie yelled at the top of her lungs, beginning to lose it again.

Nate was frowning a bit now, and Sadie reached over and placed a hand on his arm.

"Don't worry, dear," Sadie said, wiping her eyes with the backs of her index fingers. "I won't tell your mother, so long as you roll me a joint."

Nate started to laugh as Cassidy's mouth fell open. "Grandma!"

"Don't look so goddamned shocked." Sadie stood up straight and smoothed out her caftan, bracelets clinking. "I haven't had a decent buzz in a decade." An irritated expression took over her face. "And don't call me Grandma."

\* \* \*

Cassidy stood in the doorway to the boathouse, still holding the door open, but unable to make himself go in. He could feel her presence enveloping him as he stared into the shadows. Shutting the door, he then turned slowly and made his way back up to the house, unsure he could ever be happy like that again at Piper's Point. He was beginning to think there might be too many ghosts here for that to ever be a reality.

## **Chapter Four**

Cassidy stared at the door off the upstairs hall that opened to a cramped flight of stairs leading to the attic. Folded arms and a plethora of excuses currently stood in his way. He knew it needed to be done. Sadie had been the pack rat to end all others, and he could only imagine the mess that lay at the top of the stairs just on the other side of that door.

For as long as he could remember, any time Natalie had suggested Sadie get rid of something she no longer needed or had any use for, her first and only response had been, "To the attic!"

Cassidy opened the door and stood back, staring up the stairwell. He'd always made fun of her, he thought, as he flipped the switch on the wall, turning on the overhead light.

"That's why attics were invented," Sadie had always blasted back should there be any objections. "You'll thank me one day when I'm gone"—pointing up at the attic, she'd add—"for leaving you a treasure trove of goodies up there."

As Cassidy came to the top of the stairs, he took in a deep breath of stale, dusty air. He stumbled around, turning in a circle, and practically shit his pants. It was floor-to-ceiling, cobweb-covered, mountainous piles of God only knew what.

"You are such a fucking liar, Sadie." Cassidy mumbled, thinking what he needed was a match. "Treasure trove, my ass."

The enormous attic had so much stuff piled up that he wouldn't even begin to know where to start. Building a bridge over the Grand Canyon seemed less intimidating than this.

"Not to mention the dust."

His nose crinkled up just before he sneezed. His eyes widened, seeing all the dust he'd disturbed now floating through the air searching for a new home. A high-pitched squeal cut through the silence, and he stared down the stairs, hearing barking and growling coming from somewhere outside.

He took off, thankful for any excuse to vacate the attic. Reaching the foyer, he could hear multiple dogs growling and went over to the bay window, catching a glimpse of two large dogs trying to get at something next to the foundation of the house. He cursed under his breath and ran outside to investigate.

As he rounded the side of the house, he could see there were actually three large dogs, all of which looked a bit rough, according to his standards. Granted, he'd never been allowed so much as a goldfish by his parents, so he wasn't the best

judge. They appeared to be frothing at the mouth, trying to get at whatever was wedged behind the air-conditioning unit. He wasn't taking any chances since the hair on the back of his neck was standing on end.

He ran back toward the front yard and grabbed the coiled hose at the foot of the spigot sticking up out of the ground. He twisted the faucet handle on as far as it could go. When he turned around, the German shepherd-type dog stood about fifteen yards away growling at him.

"The fucking hounds from hell are now nipping at my heels," Cassidy mumbled as he quickly adjusted the water gun screwed onto the end of the hose to the Jet setting. He tried to keep his cool and not panic as the dog inched closer. He prayed his plan would work as he turned the hose on the dog, slightly relieved when it yelped and ran away.

He wasn't relieved for long, as it turned and started barking again. Cassidy squeezed the handle and advanced toward it, hoping he could force it farther away from the house. The dog turned tail and ran when he pelted it with a second blast of water, stopping once it reached the tree line, where it turned and continued to bark and snarl at Cassidy.

He moved toward the two still growling and scratching at the air conditioner, both of which yelped and ran once they were greeted by the sting from the jet of ice-cold water. Once reunited, the three-pack disappeared into the woods. Cassidy backed up toward the house, afraid to turn around since he could still hear them barking off in the distance somewhere.

He finally turned, exhaling. He'd been scared shitless. He laughed, shaking his head as he dropped the hose and bent over, placing his hands on his knees.

He heard a whimper and craned his head to peek around the corner of the air conditioner, half-afraid to discover what in the name of hell he'd just risked life and limb for. He squinted, trying to make out what the tiny matted mound of hair was.

"Please don't be a rat," he muttered as he inched closer, peering over the top of the unit, seeing whatever it was shaking in the corner, large glassed-over eyes gazing back up at him. "What the hell is it?" he asked, only to roll his eyes, realizing there was no one around to answer him.

It hobbled a little way out of the corner, and Cassidy could see that it was bleeding. He placed a hand on his tummy, feeling a wave of nausea come over him.

He pushed back his glasses that had slid forward a bit as he got down on all fours. "I really don't like blood, little...thing."

It hobbled a bit closer, sticking its head out into the light, laying its ears back.

"You look like a rat, dog," Cassidy said, speaking softly, which seemed to coax it farther out. He could see it was holding its back leg up.

"Shit," Cassidy said, immediately regretting it as the dog started to retreat. He didn't want to touch it, because it was bleeding, but he knew he couldn't just leave the little thing there to bleed to death. "You are a dog...right?"

He sat up and pulled off his shirt, then spread it out on the grass. He spoke softly again, gently patting the fabric. The runt inspected Cassidy for a moment, then glanced at the shirt. Finally, as if sensing Cassidy was probably its best shot at survival, it hobbled onto the shirt. The poor scrub was on the thin side, and it licked one of his fingers before settling onto its side.

"Smart little thing, aren't you?" Cassidy asked, wrapping it up in his shirt, being as careful as he could to avoid the injured leg. He took in a sharp breath when it yelped as he placed it in his arms. "Sorry, dude."

He went around toward the back of the house, walking as quickly as he dared while doing his best not to jostle the runt. Once inside the kitchen, he grabbed his keys and phone and snagged a few beach towels on his way to the car.

Gently placing it in the passenger seat, he then softly closed the door before hurrying around to the driver's side and getting in. Without much thought, he backed out of the garage and tooled down the driveway. He sat at the end of the drive, arguing with himself, knowing it would be faster to go right, but he'd have to drive right down the main drag and past the harbor, greatly increasing his chances of being seen. If he went left, it would take longer, but he could take mostly back roads, cutting through a residential area to get to the veterinarian's.

He watched his little passenger, who lifted its head on cue and peered up at Cassidy as if to say, "I gotta die because you've got a big name around here?"

He caught a glimpse of the blood and pulled his car out onto the road, making a right, doing his damnedest to think of anything that might keep his mind off hurling. He sank down in his seat once he reached town, keeping his face plastered to the road ahead in an attempt to avoid any faces that might recognize his.

The business section of town was relegated to twelve blocks surrounding the small harbor, consisting of mostly two- and three-story brick or stone-front buildings. The town hall was located on one end, and the world's tiniest hospital on the opposite side. There were several restaurants, all independently owned, a two-screen movie theater, one grocery store, and even a small eight-lane bowling alley. The harbor held a mix of pleasure and fishing boats along with a small ferry that used to be the only way to and from the island back in the day before they built the causeway back in the sixties. Now it took tourists around the island on a water tour.

The local newspaper, the *Hart's Gazette*, only came out twice a week, and in addition to the legal records maintained by the town hall and the historical society, was a good source for island history, as it had been around since the early eighteen hundreds.

There was pretty much one, maybe two of anything else such as lawyers, Realtors, judges, etc. The island had just over twelve thousand inhabitants, but that number could grow to well over fifty thousand during the summer when the mainlanders came over for holiday.

Cassidy had actually loved it when he was a kid. Everything used to seem so much simpler here—uncomplicated people living uncomplicated lives. He'd been

envious of Nate, who got to live here year-round, going to school with all the same people. Nate couldn't quite see the big bonus, but different strokes.

Now here he was, hunkered down in his car, terrified everyone held him responsible or at the very least thought he was weak or an unfit grandson for the great Sadie Hart.

"Not so uncomplicated now, huh?" Cassidy asked, looking down at the tiny brown fur ball that was probably bleeding all over his leather upholstery.

He managed to hold down another wave of nausea, scolding himself for thinking about the blood and feeling bad for worrying about his leather seats at a time like this.

"I won't hold it against you till you're better," he said, finally turning into the small parking lot.

He cut the engine, trying to decide the best tack to take once he got inside. Cassidy knew Dr. Downey. He pretty much knew most of the people on the island one way or another, but most of the residents knew Cassidy from the Founders' Day party Sadie had thrown once a year at Piper's Point. Dr. Downey had always seemed like a kind man, so Cassidy was just going to beg, prey on his sympathies, and pray he'd keep his mouth shut about his arrival on the island.

Once inside, Cassidy paused for a moment as he steadied his stomach from the antiseptic odor in the air. Luckily the waiting room was empty except for the girl who smiled up at him from the other side of the counter. Cassidy smiled back, not recognizing her and hoping she wasn't a native. She smiled, innocent as could be, even though Cassidy could tell she'd been sizing him up, much the same way he did any time a good-looking guy crossed his line of sight. She'd pushed back her pinstraight blonde hair with one of those white plastic headbands you'd expect to see on a tween. The pixieish Lolita wore a gray T-shirt that had *Downey Veterinary Clinic* written on the chest, and she quietly chewed her gum.

"Is Dr. Downey in?" Cassidy asked, bending over so she could see he had a wounded animal on his hands. "If you could hurry, I'm really...not good with blood."

She bolted up and out of her chair in a split second.

Cassidy decided she'd already pegged him as gay and not worth wasting what he assumed could be her considerable charms, as it was obvious to him she'd disabled her sex radar.

Written off for being gay, Cassidy thought, disappointed. Do the girls these days have no gumption?

"Do you need me to take the—"

"Dog?" Cassidy finished. He shook his head, not sure why, but feeling an odd sense of protectiveness come over him. "It's some kind of little dog. Was attacked by several mean-ass big dogs, and no, I'm okay so long as I don't look at it."

She nodded and picked up the handle of the seventies-era manila-colored phone and punched in a couple of buttons, smiling as she waited.

Cassidy surveyed the waiting room, the white walls, and plastic chairs, thinking the place had gotten stuck in a crack in time. He noticed the *People* magazine on the table with Brad and Angelina on the cover, thinking that was the only thing that ruined the seventies vibe. He glanced down into his arms, feeling the dog rummaging around as it let out a squeak.

"Hey, boss, we got an emergency out here. Yeah. Sounds like another victim of that pack of feral dogs. Sure thing." She nodded and placed the handle back on its cradle.

"What's the dog's name?" she asked, taking a seat and pulling out a form.

"I don't know," Cassidy said, as a man he didn't recognize stepped out of a door, pulling on a white coat. Cassidy took note of the short, wavy light brown hair and thick, full lips as the man came up behind the receptionist. He smiled at Cassidy, who guessed him to be somewhere in his mid to late thirties, maybe even early forties. He was not at all unattractive but not necessarily the type you'd notice right away if you passed him on the street. He had kind eyes and slightly bushy eyebrows that projected a sense of trustworthiness. It was something he took note of, thinking the vet might also be a mainlander import. It suddenly occurred to him that Dr. Downey was probably getting up there in years.

"Right," she said, shaking her head and nodding. "Well, what's your name, then?"

"Let's worry about the paperwork later, Sarah." He patted her on the shoulder while smiling at Cassidy. He reached over, swinging open a gatelike half door. "Come on back."

Cassidy did as instructed, then followed the man back to an examination room. He kept his eyes open just in case he was wrong about the vet's retirement and the old man was roaming around somewhere after all.

"I'm Dr. Downey," the man said as Cassidy followed him into a room, before gently setting his bundle down onto the table.

Cassidy gasped slightly, feeling the cool stainless-steel tabletop against his stomach, and for the first time realized he didn't have a shirt on. He glanced down, a little embarrassed to see he was wearing nothing but the sandals and the yellow sweat shorts he'd put on that morning.

"Cassidy Winters, right?" the vet asked as he unwrapped the bundle. "Sadie's grandson?"

Cassidy noticed the doc take a second long, lusty gander over his naked upper body. *He's a big ole Mo*. Cassidy vaguely remembered some talk of Dr. Downey having a son, yet he wasn't able to place the face.

"Yeah." Apparently he should know the guy, he thought, wishing he hadn't just peeked down at the table, seeing his white bloodstained shirt. "I'm sorry, I guess we've met?"

"Not really," the doc said as the dog licked his finger, causing him to smile. "Seen you around once or twice with Nate when you were younger. Years ago, back when I was off at college and would come home for summer break. Name's Ben."

Cassidy tried to concentrate on Ben's kind smile and did his best to avoid watching the man carefully pull, prod, and poke around on the dog. He placed a hand on the table, feeling an odd sense of sickening euphoria sweep over him. A cold sweat crept up his spine, and he tried to concentrate on what was happening to the dog. "Is it...going to be all right?"

"You don't look so good."

Rude much?

Cassidy was suddenly light-headed, and he blinked. He had just come to the conclusion he might need to take a seat in the chair behind him as the lights in the room dimmed.

\* \* \*

Cassidy opened his eyes, confused as he stared up at the fluorescent lights and foam drop-ceiling tiles. His stomach roiled, and his entire body was cold and damp. He glanced to his right seeing the underside of the chair he last remembered attempting to sit down in. Cassidy realized he was on floor. His forehead throbbed a little, and he jerked, startled by Sarah, who thrust a cool pack wrapped in a washcloth at him.

"I've got a soda and some chocolate here for you," she said. "It'll help to get your sugar up. You totally passed out, by the way."

Cassidy took the cool pack from her and placed it to his forehead, wincing a bit.

"Dr. D. managed to get to you before you cracked your head open on the floor, but you nicked your forehead on the table."

Cassidy could feel a bit of a cold sweat clinging to his body that lay stretched out over the cool tile. All he could see from his vantage point as Dr. D. came back into the room were his legs.

"How you doing down there?"

"Just...great, really." Cassidy was completely mortified. All he'd been lacking was a good fainting spell, placing the final nail in the coffin of his reputation as a spineless girlie-man.

"I told him what happened," Sarah said with a smile as she stared at Ben innocently. "And that you saved him."

Cassidy wasn't positive, considering he wasn't quite himself at the moment, but he could have sworn Sarah was trying to pimp the two of them out to each other.

"Sorry I forgot to tell you about that whole queasiness-around-blood thing he mentioned," she added.

Ben walked around the table and glanced down at Cassidy. "That would be useful information to have in the future, Sarah."

Cassidy realized she was likely in trouble. "Don't go blaming her." He tried to lift his upper body off the floor and sit up. "You should know better—telling a half-naked gay man he doesn't look very good."

Sarah laughed until Ben frowned his disapproval. He reached down and helped to pull Cassidy up and into a chair. Sarah placed the can of soda and a few Hershey's Kisses onto the stainless-steel exam table.

"Seriously," Cassidy said, with a half smile, "the shock of it almost killed me."

Ben grinned a little, and Sarah grinned a lot, obviously thinking she might not get fired after all.

Ben shook his head at her and shooed her out of the room. "I'm very sorry about all this."

"No biggie," Cassidy said, feeling slightly relieved Sarah might not lose her job simply because he was a big squeam-queen.

"So what gave me away?" Ben asked, placing the back of his hand over Cassidy's cheek.

Cassidy smiled, watching Ben's gaze drift down to his upper body again. "That."

Ben's gaze met Cassidy's, and his cheeks burned a light pink as he removed his hand and sat down in the chair next to Cassidy.

"Sorry, rude of me. Not used to sexy shirtless men stopping by the office with rescued..."

Cassidy stood up, surveying the room in a sudden panic, and quickly placed a hand on the wall for balance as he became a bit dizzy. "Whoa...shit."

"Okay?" Ben asked, already at his side, placing an arm around his waist.

"Where is the little guy?" Cassidy asked, fearing the worst.

"Fine!" Ben helped him back down into the chair. "She's fine, or will be. She's a little dehydrated and malnourished, in desperate need of some TLC and a good scrubbing, but other than that she'll be fine."

"So all the...blood?" He could sense his cheeks had gone ashen as he thought about the bloody shirt.

"Surprisingly little blood, actually. Probably the white shirt made it seem worse than it really was. She had a good-sized gash and a few scratches but only needed some stitches. She was lucky you found her when you did, though." Ben stood back up. "I'm going to keep her overnight, make sure all her tests come back okay, and get her rehydrated. You can probably take her home tomorrow."

"She's not really mine," Cassidy said with a little boy-like shrug.

"Right." Ben laughed. "I forgot in all the commotion."

"I wouldn't mind taking her, though." Cassidy looked down at the tile. "I mean, you know...until the owners could be located."

"Hmmm." Ben nodded, very serious all of a sudden. "Well, what happens if we're not able to find the owners? No one's reported a missing Yorkie, and from the condition she was in, I'd say she's been out there fending for herself for at least a week. Kinda surprised she lasted so long, actually. She's more than likely been dumped."

"That's okay." Cassidy tried on a blank stare, trying not to show he cared one way or the other. "She's welcome to stay with me as long as she wants." Cassidy shook his head, talking about a dog as if it were a houseguest popping down for a visit. It made him furious anyone could abandon an animal like that.

"It's been happening quite a bit," Ben said, as if reading his last thought. "The crummy economy, I guess. People drive over from the mainland and just let 'em loose. We believe that's how that pack of wild dogs got here in the first place, although they could have crossed the causeway on their own."

"Someone needs to find them before they corner a little kid off on their own," Cassidy said.

"We caught two of them, and they have yet to attack any people."

Cassidy shrugged. "That big German shepherd one sure tried coming after me this afternoon."

"I'll need to alert the sheriff to that," Ben said, watching as Cassidy nodded unhappily. "I take it you were hoping to hide out for a bit?" When Cassidy agreed he said, "I won't mention to anyone else you're back on the island, but I have a feeling Sheriff Larson will want to talk to you about the incident."

"Of course he will," Cassidy said. Great, now I'm involved in Doggy-gate. So much for keeping a low profile.

"Sorry." Ben frowned. "Now, back to you being ready to watch over our little furry friend back there..."

"He already gave it the shirt off his back, Dr. D.," Sarah said, peeking around the corner.

Cassidy pointed in her direction. "Exactly. What she said."

Ben nodded, showing he was in agreement.

"It was designer too. Prada or Dolce, I think," Cassidy added, as if that made the sacrifice all the greater despite it being a plain white undershirt.

\* \* \*

When he got back to the shack, Cassidy found a note that said: *Neil was here.* Where were you? scribbled on the back of a deposit slip for a bank he'd never heard of.

A phone number was scribbled below it, and Cassidy couldn't help but wonder what kind of a moron left a note on something that had their checking-account information on it in this age of identity theft.

Okay, so I'm obviously irritable, he decided as he let himself into the house, realizing he hadn't bothered to lock the door.

What kind of an idiot runs off and leaves their house unlocked? he thought, locking the door behind him. It was already dusk, and his stomach was still a bit queasy. Since Cassidy wouldn't let Ben call anyone to give him a ride, he'd been made to lie down on the small couch in the vet's office until the dizziness had completely subsided.

Cassidy had never passed out before and was a little surprised by the effect it had on his body. His entire day had been pretty much shot, and he was completely drained. So not like it looks in the movies.

He wasn't really hungry but forced himself to eat a couple of pieces of toast anyway. He didn't call Neil, as he was quite certain he wouldn't be up for another night of power fucking. He did try calling Ollie, thankful when Spencer picked up the phone, as it made for a much shorter conversation.

He was absolutely exhausted, and for the first time, happy to be in this house. Despite all the memories it held, which saddened him more than they comforted him, he realized that he was home. He sneered at the staircase, opting instead for the fluffy chaise lounge in the parlor. Cassidy lay down, tossing his glasses on the coffee table while yanking a throw over him with his free hand. He kicked off his sandals, snuggled into the cushions as he shut his eyes, and whispered, "Thank you, Sadie."

# Chapter Five

Cassidy sat up, eyes still half-closed as he tried to figure out what that noise had been. He relaxed a little, stretching as he yawned, and then curled up his lips, having caught a whiff of his underarms.

"Man stink."

He turned toward the front window, hearing the crackling noise again. He tried to focus through the haze, already craving coffee as he attempted to suss it out. It was a crunchy noise, and it was getting louder. Recognition swept over his face as he shot off the couch and sneaked over to the window, peeking out across the front porch.

He zeroed in on the pickup slowly crawling up the gravel drive, and he pressed his fingers into his eye sockets, attempting to rub the sleep out of them. He blinked rapidly as he focused in on the driver. "Fuck. Me. Shit."

He quickly ducked back behind the wall, already panicking before catching a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror hanging over the wood-carved fireplace mantel. A whimpered curse escaped from between his lips, after Cassidy saw his hair standing up on end.

He reached up and tried smushing it down, but it stood right back up whenever he removed his hand. He tried two more times, to no avail. Each time the hair sprang back up like morning wood. He then took note of his morning wood pitching a tent in yesterday's yellow shorts.

The crunching of tires on gravel stopped and he panicked, unwilling to allow this heinous vision to be Nate's new first impression of him. He ran toward the door that led into the foyer, cursing obscenities under his breath as he hopped on one foot, holding the other in his hands after stubbing a toe on the ottoman.

His eyes watered, but he continued to hop toward the doorway, refusing to give up. He heard the truck engine cut off and spun around, hopping backward as he peered out the window. He dropped his foot, knowing he'd need it to start running if he was to prevent this catastrophe. He turned just in time to walk into the doorjamb.

"Son of a cocksucker," he hissed, hand on his forehead as he took off running toward the kitchen, his free arm extended out in front of him to prevent yet another collision.

He came to the back door and turned the handle, trying to yank the door open with no success.

"What kind of an idiot locks their damn doors at night?" he mumbled as he frantically fumbled with the lock.

He froze as it suddenly occurred to him he should have run upstairs to the actual bathroom. He cursed under his breath, able to see the outdoor shower through the window. He never had been known for his precoffee cool head and clear thinking. Exhaling as he flung the door open, deciding it was too late to turn back now, Cassidy shot onto the back porch and ran out the screen door, practically tearing it off its hinges. He stopped suddenly, going back to the porch and shimmying out of his shorts as he grabbed a rolled-up beach towel out of the cabinet. He kicked the shorts off and ran like mad, sprinting across the courtyard.

He turned on the outdoor shower and whimpered as he dropped the towel, knowing how cold the water was going to be. He held his breath and jumped under the spray, furiously rubbing his body as he allowed it to completely soak his hair. He didn't have any soap, so he scrubbed his crotch and underarms as best he could while praying he wouldn't smell like day-old stale male. Taking full advantage of his now-decidedly genius idea of alfresco bathing, he aimed for the planting bed where all the runoff from the shower was headed and let out a deep groan as he took a piss.

He finally shut off the water and snatched up the towel, running back toward the house. Between his adrenaline and the cold water, he felt like he'd just downed half a dozen shots of espresso as he manically dried himself. He took long strides across the porch and back up into the kitchen.

Tossing the towel over his shoulder, he slicked his damp hair back off his forehead. He was trying to think of something for his morning breath while attempting to regulate his breathing, a result of his panicked antics. He took the towel and wrapped it tightly around, low on his hips. Opening the fridge, Cassidy heard what he hoped was the first knock on the door. He grabbed the OJ and quickly opened the carton, before taking a big swig. He was swishing the juice around his mouth and gargling with it as he heard another knock.

He swallowed and closed his eyes, taking a deep cleansing breath before slowly making his way through the house toward the front door. He smiled, seeing Nate's outline through the glass. He was staring out toward his truck, as if contemplating leaving. Cassidy paused, feeling a lump forming in his chest. The angst began creeping up on him until Nate turned back to face the door. Cassidy watched Nate's head bobbing as though he'd caught a glimpse of him. He felt the smile stretching across his face, and he quickly walked to the front door before yanking it open.

For several moments they just stood there smiling, all goofy, like they'd been transported back in time and were once again two awkward high school boys. Cassidy shook his head, realizing Nate was most definitely no longer a high school boy.

He was thicker, wider through the shoulders, and pretty much larger muscled all the way around. The crinkles around his eyes and mouth from smiling were deeper set, but the blue eyes and floppy blond hair parted to the side were exactly the same. Cassidy noticed Nate's gaze trailing up and down his body, and tingles ran over his skin as Nate finally spoke.

"Hi."

Cassidy smiled as if he'd said *I love you*. "Hi."

Nate laughed, nodding as he started chewing on his lip. He turned away for a moment, squinting as he looked across the porch, and when he turned back, Cassidy felt like someone had belted him.

"Wow," he mumbled under his breath.

Nate shook his head. "Been a while."

"Ya-huh." Cassidy nodded.

"Gonna invite me in?"

"Course."

Nate moved to come inside but stopped, watching curiously until Cassidy realized he needed to move out of the way so the man could get through the door.

"Sorry." Cassidy's cheeks flushed as he jerked his head, making room for Nate to pass.

Nate placed his hand on Cassidy's waist, leading him into the house. It was just like him, ever trying to take the lead. It should have bugged Cassidy, as it had been a very long time since he'd needed that from a guy. Instead he was entirely too caught up in the sensation created from the palm of Nate's hand on his bare skin to care about anything else.

"You look great," Nate said, pulling Cassidy into his arms and squeezing him up in a hug. "So sorry about Sadie."

"Thanks, Nate."

Cassidy relaxed into the hug for a moment, thinking it had come to an end too soon as they separated. They continued to stare at each other in silence. Cassidy wasn't sure what to say.

"You look great too, Nate," Nate finally said in a mocking tone.

Cassidy scrunched his face all up, feeling like a moron. "You do. Amazing, actually." He could feel his eyes rolling as he laughed a little. "Gee, buddy, you look like you work out," Cassidy added in a cheesy pick-up-line-like way.

Nate grinned, mildly sexed up, eyes practically glittering like sunlight on the rippled surface of the ocean. "Gonna bother even buying me a drink, or skip right to the fucking?"

Christ, is that an option? "I was just about to put on some coffee." Cassidy motioned toward the kitchen.

Nate nodded, half a grin lingering on his face as if he was still considering the possibility of sidestepping any and all formalities. "What happened to your forehead?"

"Huh?" Cassidy asked, slightly clueless as he reached up feeling the stinging sensation. "Oh...nothing...early-morning Pilates incident."

Cassidy led the way through the house as a chill ran down his back. He turned back and caught Nate admiring his ass out of the corner of his eye, confirming that, if nothing else, his instincts were still dead-on.

They entered the kitchen, and Cassidy smiled as Nate automatically snatched up the coffeepot and made his way to the sink while Cassidy grabbed the bag of fresh ground he'd picked up at the market in Corolla the day he arrived. A tinge of guilt sped through him as he remembered this had been Nate's home too. He'd grown up here, spent more time in this house than Cassidy had. He and Natalie belonged at Piper's Point every bit as much as Cassidy did.

He knew he should've already called Natalie and asked her to move back in, but planned on waiting until Ollie and Spence got there for emotional backup in case she was angry with him. He'd been counting on Natalie staying here while he was away during the school year anyway. He wondered if perhaps too much time had passed, or maybe there were too many painful memories here for her now? Cassidy knew he could board the place up, but this house was meant to be lived in. It made him sad to think of it being empty. It had always been so full of life.

Cassidy glanced at the urn on the table of the breakfast nook and thought how happy Sadie would be, having so many people staying over the summer. She always loved a houseful of people and all the parties—practically the whole island would show up. He'd wondered at times if she just couldn't stand being alone. Perhaps loneliness had been the only thing that really scared her. He could practically hear Ollie saying, *Hi*, *Apple*, *meet Tree*.

It cut at his gut a little, thinking about the way she'd been forced to spend her final years. He could feel his fists clenching. Yes, it had been a five-star-resort nursing home, but it wasn't Piper's Point, and Cassidy knew this was the only place Sadie had wanted to be. Lionel had known it too. At the heart of it lay some sick, twisted thrill Lionel received out of finally being able to control his mother. The son of bitch was a multimillionaire; he could have easily set her up here with Natalie and a nurse. He'd done it out of spite, which made Cassidy sick to his stomach.

Cassidy jumped slightly, feeling Nate's hand on his shoulder. "You okay, Cass?"

Cassidy smiled away the bitterness, forcing his body to relax. "Fine. How 'bout that coffee?"

Nate smiled yet maintained an air of concern as he pointed to the bag of coffee in Cassidy's hand. "You're sorta...um, holding things up on that front."

"Right!"

Nate jerked, obviously startled, and they both burst out laughing.

"Shit, I didn't mean to yell that so loudly."

"Give it." Nate held out his hand, and Cassidy passed him the bag, then watched as Nate scooped out the appropriate amount of grounds. "So where'd you go before?"

"Nothing really. I mean, nowhere." Cassidy shook his head, trying to shake loose the cobwebs. "I was thinking that I needed to call Natalie. This place belongs to the two of you as much as it does me. It's probably time you both came home."

Nate finished pouring the water in the coffeemaker and stood as if frozen in time for a moment. "Thank you for that."

Cassidy could see that he was getting a bit worked up when Nate placed his hands on his hips and turned away for a moment, softly nodding his appreciation.

"It's been...off, being back on the island and not living at the Point. Mom and I have done our best to keep the place up."

Cassidy smiled. "So you're the one who painted the new color?"

"Shit, you don't like it?"

"It's not that. It was just a bit of a shock—expecting one thing after all that time away and finally coming back to find another."

Nate cringed before grabbing two coffee mugs out of the cabinet behind him. "I'm sorry, Cass. I wish I'd taken that into consideration."

"I like it, though, Nate. Thank you for keeping her in such amazing shape." Cassidy leaned over, resting his arms on top of the island. "It's a beautiful color, and maybe it's a good thing—the same yet slightly different."

"Fresh start?"

"Yeah." Cassidy smiled, feeling his skin tingle as the aroma from the brew filtered in through his nose, filling his senses. "I hope you'll both move back in." Cassidy glanced over to the urn. "Sadie would've wanted that."

"Is that..."

"Yeah."

"So sorry, man."

Cassidy took in a sharp breath, then smiled as Nate handed him a steaming cup of joe. "She's back home where she belongs now."

Nate motioned toward the back door. "Maybe we could go outside and have a seat?"

"Sure. Please, after you."

Cassidy followed Nate out to the screened-in back porch, completely lost in how incredible his ass looked in denim. He cursed, nearly spilling his coffee as he bumped into Nate, who had stopped abruptly.

Eyes forward, asshole. "Sorry," Cassidy said. He looked up to see Nate staring at his yellow gym shorts, which were dangling from one of the ceiling-fan blades. Shit.

"Should I even ask?" Nate asked, appearing highly amused and taking a drink as he watched Cassidy snatch them off the blade.

"Please don't." Cassidy fidgeted, momentarily unsure what to do with the shorts, before tossing them across the porch and into the towel hamper. He laughed nervously.

"I think you'd be hard-pressed to get Mom to move back in." Nate took a seat at the table, which had been made out of salvaged planks of wood from old boats. "But if you're serious, I certainly wouldn't say no."

Cassidy sat across from Nate and watched as the guy he'd lost his virginity to stare out over the courtyard, seeming relieved at the thought of being back. Nate was at home here, like a fixture or part of the architecture, but Cassidy hadn't considered the possible weirdness of living here, just the two of them. Of course, Ollie and Spencer would be here by the weekend. But he couldn't guarantee they'd both want to spend every vacation they ever had for the rest of their lives on Hart's Island in order to keep Cassidy from dealing with any weirdness.

"Natalie doesn't feel at home here anymore?"

Nate grinned and leaned back into the wooden chair, stretching his long legs out in front of him. "It took getting thrown out by court order for Max to finally ask her to move in with him."

Cassidy nodded. "Of course." Maxwell Barnes owned the local hardware store and had been courting Natalie since the dawn of civilization. Natalie had been trying to get Max to propose for decades. *Hear that, Sadie. Natalie finally got her man.* 

"If that changes things and you don't want just me..."

"This is your home, Nate." Cassidy shrugged, thinking it did change things, despite the fact he wasn't sure how or why. "You don't require anyone's permission to be here. I'll put you and Natalie on the deed if that's what it takes to make you believe it. Probably not a bad idea anyway. That way Lionel can't ever get his grubby hands on Sadie's shack."

Nate sat up and leaned across the table, placing a hand on Cassidy's arm. "Thanks for that, but it's not necessary."

"I'm glad Natalie's happy, though. That's a relief. I was never able to muster up the guts to call and face her after the judge ordered a mandatory evacuation of the property until ownership could be determined. It's nice something good came from it."

"Oh, Cass, she never... Tell me you don't think Mom ever blamed you for one second."

Cassidy remembered he had coffee and took a big sip, intensely enjoying the burn as much as he did having something to camouflage his face. "Either way, all under the bridge now, I hope. I've invited a couple of friends down for the summer from Chapel Hill. They won't be here till the weekend, so as long as you won't mind the extra company?"

"Your house, your rules." Nate smiled but seemed to be fidgeting a little. "Boyfriend?"

Cassidy nodded, only half listening. "Well, they're boyfriends—to each other. I introduced them in a roundabout way."

"Sadie would love that." Nate chuckled. "A house full of men."

Cassidy laughed a bit in agreement. "She and I had that in common."

"I remember."

Cassidy knew exactly what had changed, seeing the nasty-dog way Nate was now watching him. *Dog*? He needed to go get the dog. Thank God for that little runt of a dog. "Well, welcome home, Nate." Cassidy stood up. "I assume you still have your key?"

"I do," Nate said, getting up as well, seeming not to know how to react to whatever was now happening.

"Great!" Cassidy nodded, then gave Nate a quick hug, trying not to think about how wonderful it was to have Nate's hand resting on the small of his back, just above his ass. "Well, I've got some errands to run, so..."

"I can come with." Nate was noticeably confused as Cassidy pulled away. "We've got eight years to catch up on, you know."

"We're roomies now." Cassidy slapped him on the arm, again trying not to think about how incredibly smokin' hot his body must be naked. "I'll grab some wine and a couple of steaks when I'm in town, and we can get drunk, swap stories, and braid each other's hair tonight."

"Are you sure? 'Cause..."

"Honestly, Nate, it's fine," Cassidy said. "You go get some, or all of your things, and I'll help you unload it later. I just have to pop over to Dr. Downey's to pick up my...this little dog I saved from becoming kibble to a pack of wild dogs yesterday."

"Okay, then," Nate suddenly agreed, finally letting it go. "You have a dog. That's great. I love dogs."

"Off to the showers I go," Cassidy said, heading back into the house. "Till tonight, then, roomie."

"Kay," Nate managed to toss out before Cassidy hopped up the steps and disappeared into the kitchen.

He smacked himself in the head as he set his coffee cup in the sink, whimpering as he managed to hit the bruised spot from his case of the vapors the day before at the vet's. *Roomie*? Cassidy wasn't sure what had happened to his whole "lying low" plan, but it had been officially blown out of the water. He weaved around the island and through the house, finally ascending the stairs. On top of everything else, he'd managed to somehow wind up living alone in this house with Nate?

"You suck at flying under the radar." He chastised himself under his breath. He ripped the towel off as he walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He shook his head and glared at himself in the mirror, knowing that legally, he might have the right to keep Nate from moving back in, but morally, he didn't have a leg to stand on. "Don't be an asshole, Cassidy."

He reached into the shower and turned the faucet on, realizing he actually liked the thought of Nate being here, and that really had him freaked. "Apparently quite a lot." Cassidy dropped his gaze down between his legs and eyed his rapidly swelling cock. "Sorry, dude, but we can't be going there. Nate isn't someone we can just break up with when things don't work out."

Cassidy sighed, rolling his eyes as he hopped into the shower, feeling his dick growing thicker as it continued on its destructive rise to power. Damn you and your wicked ways. He took the head of it in his hand and began to massage himself as the water ricocheted off his body. He let out a low groan, shutting his eyes and allowing himself to get lost in the waves of lust and pleasure as he whispered Nate's name.

# Chapter Six

"You have got to get here el pronto, damn it!" Cassidy yelled out while steering his car around a sharp curve, tires squealing. "I mean it, Spencer. I'm at DEFCON five or something!"

Spencer Reynolds had been one of the very first people Cassidy met when he arrived at UNC at Chapel Hill to begin his freshman year. He was the son of a Washington lobbyist and a work-from-home event-planning diva, who now referred to Ollie as *That Boy*. Spencer and Cassidy had bonded over growing up with cold, distant parents who held unrealistically high expectations no ordinary human could ever live up to.

"I thought you said it was as much Nate's home as it is yours?" Spencer asked, his voice coming over the car speakers.

"It is, damn it...but that really isn't the point here," Cassidy said while trying to keep his panicked, bugged-out eyes peeled on the road ahead of him.

"Well, what is the damn point?" Ollie asked, joining in the audio three-way.

"That I want to do slutty, desperately lustful, and debasing...things to him!"

"I'm not seeing the problem." Spencer laughed. "Have at it."

"With our blessing," Ollie added.

"Guys, this is Nate. Not some random guy I met at a coffeehouse or while jogging through the park. There are no take-backs or do-overs..."

"We get it." Oliver sighed, sounding bored. "Someone you can't fake it with for six to nine months."

"Lasting just long enough to get you through the school year," Spencer added.

Oliver laughed. "Before being unceremoniously dumped."

Cassidy scowled. "That's not fair."

"That's your MO to a tee," Spencer accused. "You did it all through college as a student and have continued the same destructive pattern now that you're teaching."

"I'm sorry, Cass, but we can't come early. We're having some much-needed alone time, *couple-only* alone time," Oliver said.

"This is not negotiable! I cannot stay in that house with him for another second by myself."

"You have got to calm down," Spencer commanded.

"You bitches owe me! You'd never have met if it weren't for me!"

"Oh puh-lease!" Ollie said. "You're seriously going to try using that!"

"When did you become such a drama queen, Cassidy?" Spencer asked, causing Cassidy's mouth to fall open as he glared at the console.

"Don't be lookin' at my man like that, Cassidy Winters," Ollie snapped. "And close your mouth."

"I hate it when you do that!" Cassidy searched over his console, then under the visors while attempting to keep his car on the road. There simply had to be a hidden camera.

"We aren't coming, not even one day earlier, damn it," Spencer said in an authoritative voice.

"But you're my best friends," Cassidy said, stunned as he steered the car around another tight corner and onto the main drag. "You're supposed to be there for me."

Cassidy listened as Ollie said to Spencer, "Baby, that was so butch."

He rolled his eyes, irritated that he was now being ignored by Ollie completely.

"Well, this is just silly." Spencer blew a disgusted puff of breath into the phone. "Surely even you can manage to keep your legs closed for a few fucking days."

Cassidy decided to ignore the snarky "don't count on it" that came from Ollie.

"When did you get so mean, Spencer?" Cassidy asked, cocking his head to the side as he heard what sounded suspiciously like lip smacking coming through the speakers.

"Sorry, Cass, but you've had hair on your balls for a long time now. Man up and stop whining like a little pussy."

Cassidy heard Oliver moaning softly followed by the sound of a zipper. He decided to ignore it until Spencer whispered, "Shit."

"I can't believe I've become part of your foreplay!"

It got dead quiet for about a half a second. "Don't be ridiculous," Ollie snapped.

"Screw it," Cassidy snapped back. "Just suck each other off already. I'll handle this all by myself."

"Okay," Spencer said.

"You'll be fine," Ollie added.

"We have the utmost—oh...fuck yeah—faith in you, buddy," Spencer managed to get out just before the click, followed by the car switching automatically back to music from the stereo.

"Rancid sluts." Cassidy punched the Off button for the stereo as he pulled into the parking lot of Hammond's Grocery. He found a parking spot, cut the engine, and then took a moment to massage his temples while taking several deep breaths, exhaling slowly.

"You can do this, Cassidy. The empire struck back, and you kicked its ass. Surely you can control your...light saber."

He laughed out loud at how ludicrous he sounded as he sat back in the seat. He noticed the sheriff's car parked behind him through the rearview mirror. "Shit." Why not just hold up a neon sign, Larson? Cassidy Winters is here!

Cassidy removed the keys from the ignition and opened the car door, realizing it didn't matter at this point how conspicuous the sheriff was. Obviously Ben hadn't kept his word, having turned into the town crier. Otherwise Nate wouldn't have shown up on his doorstep first thing that morning.

"Good morning, Sheriff Larson."

"Cassidy," Larson said, giving a curt nod in that professional procedural way. "Good to have you back at the Point. Everyone was very sorry to hear about Sadie's passing."

"Thank you." Cassidy nodded, feeling the instaguilt returning.

"We kinda expected to have you back a lot sooner, though."

Here it comes, Cassidy thought.

"Guess the whole legal mess with your father took its toll."

Cassidy leaned against the car, wondering if the sheriff was giving him an out. "It wasn't a pleasant experience."

"We're all relieved you came out on top."

Cassidy smiled, happy to hear that.

"So Ben Downey tells me you had a run-in with those damn dogs."

Cassidy nodded and went through the entire story again for the sheriff. He kept nodding and waving as other islanders would pass by, telling him hello. Two even interrupted the sheriff's interview to tell him how sorry they'd been to hear about Sadie. Cassidy tried to decide if they were being friendly on the outside while secretly judging him for not protecting her behind the smiles. It had been almost four years since Sadie died, yet it seemed to be as fresh in their minds as it was in Cassidy's. Like time had stopped and no one had been able to move on. Had they all been waiting to say good-bye too?

He liked to died when Mrs. Nichols told him he was too thin and that he wouldn't be fainting all the time if he'd put some meat on his bones. He'd passed out one time, and all of a sudden it was an affliction. "Thank you, Mrs. Nichols; I'm sure you're right."

Sheriff Larson closed his little notebook. "I guess that's enough for now, Cassidy. You call the station and let us know if you see those dogs again."

"You got it, Sheriff."

Using the exact same curt nod he'd used upon greeting Cassidy, the sheriff got back into his squad car, gave a little two-fingered salute, and drove off. As Cassidy headed toward the automatic doors of the store, he made a mental note to get some of those big green olives to go with the vodka. Something told him he'd most definitely need them before the week was out.

Hammond's Grocery had been built in the early sixties, and it looked it. Not that it wasn't well cared for, mind you, but the architecture and design of the building screamed Kennedy era. It had this screwy white roof that looked like a rolling wave. The entire front of the building consisted of glass panes, up to two stories high in the middle where the roofline curved up.

Cassidy waited for the doors to swing open, greeted by that familiar scent of aged linoleum, floor wax, and produce. The floors had that yellowed hue, yet they shined like new due to the high-gloss buff. Mr. Hammond insisted the employees get that beast of a machine out every couple of hours to polish them. Cassidy grabbed one of the minicarts, which were about half the size of the ones you'd expect to find at your local grocer's. People on the island usually stopped by the store two or three times a week as opposed to two or three times a month.

Of course, he'd probably have graduated high school never having seen the inside of a grocery store at all, if he hadn't spent his summers with Sadie. His parents paid other people to do those kinds of things for them.

Hammond's had always been more than an errand; it was a social outing. An hour in the grocery store could get you caught up on a month's worth of news across the island, which was why he'd stopped and purchased food before hitting the causeway. Cassidy thought it was neat when he was a kid. He actually still might think it was neat if he didn't feel as though he'd be the main topic of conversation over the coming weeks.

As he made his way through the aisles, Cassidy decided on one of those prepackaged salads that came with everything, including the dressing. He noticed that people kept stopping him. He'd thought it was sweet at first, hoping that maybe no one blamed him after all. But after fifteen minutes in the grocery store to pick up a handful of items, he was beginning to wonder. It seemed as if they were actually trying to prevent him from leaving—even Mrs. Taylor, who always smelled like Cheez Whiz and kept her gray hair tied up into a tight bun, was being nice. And everyone knew she didn't like anyone apart from her cats.

He'd finally managed to make it to the checkout, fumbling with the cash he pulled out of his pocket. He was counting it, hoping he actually had enough with him when something out of the corner of his eye grabbed his attention. Cassidy turned, and his stomach dropped, seeing Natalie's tan wood-paneled station wagon screeching into a parking spot. He watched as she flew out of the car, only to turn back remembering she forgot to grab her purse.

Natalie had always appeared small to Cassidy with regards to her physicality, with her pixie-cut dark red hair, and fingers like little sausages. She even had a "welcome to Munchkinland" chipmunklike giggle. But what she lacked in height she made up for in exuberance, possessing all things motherly in spades. Natalie was the antithesis of Cassidy's mother, who should have never had children. It would have been a true crime against humanity had Natalie not been a mom. If not for the fact they had the exact same eyes, one would never pick her out of a lineup as Nate's mom. He was like the Jolly Green Giant in comparison.

When she finally made it into the store, pushing on the automatic doors instead of waiting for them to open on their own, she paused for a moment, scanning the store as if to decide which way to go. Once their eyes met, that immediate rush of warmth that came off Natalie in waves slammed into him. It was one of the qualities that drew people to her.

"You, young man," Natalie said, pointing at Cassidy, tears already running down her rosy cheeks. "You get over here this instant and give me a hug."

Cassidy exhaled, allowing a short laugh of relief to escape as he slowly went to her. His eyes burned when she fell into him, burying her tiny face into his chest. Cassidy squeezed her tight, trying not to cry, considering everyone in the store was surely watching.

"I should be so angry with you for not calling me the instant you got back." Natalie sniffled, her voice muffled. She pulled away slightly, allowing her to fully inspect Cassidy.

Cassidy shook his head, taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry for a great many things, Natalie."

"Oh, you. Stop that nonsense right now. I won't hear any of it." Natalie reached up and pinched his cheek. "Such a dashing young man you've turned into, Cassidy Winters." She giggled as if embarrassed and turned to Mrs. Taylor, who was shuffling toward the exit. "Isn't he just so handsome? Like Tyrone Power."

"You're the slowest woman I've ever had the displeasure of assisting with intrigue, Sommers," Mrs. Taylor snapped, finally allowing her true colors to shine through as she gave Cassidy a once-over. "Looks a little thin if you ask me."

"Such a lovely ray of sunshine you are, Mrs. Taylor." Natalie giggled, seeming to know that would irritate the old woman more than returning the same grumpiness back at her. "You have a super day!"

Cassidy shook his head at Natalie as Mrs. Taylor mumbled something under her breath he was sure would make a sailor blush. "You're a mean little lady, Nat." Cassidy teased her once he believed the elderly woman was out of earshot.

Natalie examined him as if checking for any marks or bruises, making sure he was in the same condition he had been ten years before. She scowled a little at the bruise on his forehead and then wiped her cheeks, being careful not to completely ruin her makeup. "You are a sight for sore eyes." She nodded toward the cashier. "Go get your groceries. You're coming with me."

"Actually, I need to get to Dr...."

"No excuses, Cassidy." Natalie put on her serious face, which didn't come off as very intimidating yet was something anyone who knew her didn't say no to. "I'm not letting you out of my sight until we sit down and have a long talk."

Cassidy nodded in agreement, unable to deny her peaches-and-creaminess. He smiled when she giggled while softly clapping her hands. Being around Natalie had always been a little like being on antidepressants. No matter how foul your mood,

you inevitably wound up getting a bit of a contact high, a quality that Sadie liked to call proximital bliss.

As Cassidy paid for his food and gathered up his bags, he could already feel a slight shift in his little corner of the universe. There was a little more love for him to grab hold of should he need it. He was thankful to have it, as Natalie was the closest thing he had left to a parent.

His mother had never been very warm, too caught up with the societal expectations of being married to Lionel Winters. That's what he liked to tell himself, anyway. It just seemed to sit better than admitting she might simply be cold and unfeeling or that there might be something wrong with him, that he was unlovable.

"Come on, Peanut." Natalie beamed, grabbing Cassidy by the arm as if able to detect the slight sadness that had come over him. "Let's see if we can't put a little meat on those bones."

Cassidy grinned, liking the fact that someone found fault with his appearance.

\* \* \*

Cassidy sat at the small table, completely mesmerized by all the tchotchkes in the tiny kitchen of Max's little house on Ocean Boulevard. Everywhere his gaze landed, a glossy pink ceramic piggy was staring back at him. The lime green paint and wallpaper only made them stand out that much more as Cassidy surveyed the terrain, which he guessed hadn't been updated since the day Max moved into it. Cassidy had never been in Max's house before, so it was odd being there in the first place, but even stranger was the knowledge that Max was a ceramic-pig collector.

The house was what was referred to architecturally as a honeymoon bungalow, built around the end of the Second World War; well built but simple in design, with arched doorways, oak floors, and oversize double-hung windows. The wood-sided house had two bedrooms, a small formal dining room, and a cozy living room with dark-stained built-in bookshelves and a wood-burning fireplace. It was nothing like Piper's Point in terms of either scale or amenities, but Cassidy couldn't ever remember seeing Natalie as happy as she trotted around the tiny kitchen.

When she came from the mainland thirty-odd years ago, running away from an abusive husband, she was broke and eight months pregnant. She arrived on Sadie's doorstep searching for a job. Sadie's fourth marriage had ended only weeks before, and they wound up putting each other back together again.

His mouth watered as she set one of her large, fresh-out-of-the-oven homemade cinnamon rolls in front of him, along with a steaming cup of coffee. She was famous all over the island for her cinnamon rolls. The dob of icing she'd placed on the top was slowly melting and oozing down the sides.

Cassidy could feel his entire body having a physical reaction from the smell of it as he grinned at Natalie. "You're the devil, woman." He wouldn't exactly call it an aphrodisiac, though it did have that kind of effect on him.

She giggled and plopped down next to him at the breakfast table off the kitchen. "Mrs. Taylor was right about one thing—you could use a little fattening up."

Cassidy picked up the fork and helped himself to a large bite of the molten gooeyness, feeling like he might cream in his jeans as his eyes rolled back into his head. "So good," he managed to get out between bites.

"Those cinnamon rolls were about the only thing that could ever get you boys to sit still when you were little." She took a sip from her coffee cup. "At least some things haven't changed."

"Now I feel like I'm home," Cassidy mumbled between chews as he pointed at the pastry with his fork.

Natalie shook her head at him, beaming. "I'm so proud of you. Sadie would be so proud of you—an English professor." She got a little teary-eyed. "Both my boys turned out to be such fine men."

"Don't, Natalie." He set his fork down. "I don't deserve it."

"I'm only going to say this once more, Cassidy Winters. I know how difficult it was for you, not being able to do anything to help her. I know exactly how you feel, because it broke my heart not being able to put a stop to Lionel. After everything Sadie had done for me, taking me in and giving me a safe home to raise my child in. I had nothing, Cassidy—nowhere to go and no money to get there even if I had. She gave me a second chance at a life that led to far more happiness than I'd ever dreamed possible, and the one time she really needed my help, I wasn't able to."

Cassidy took another bite. He'd spent so much time fearing Natalie would be angry or blame him. It never occurred to him that she might have been experiencing the same desperation and guilt he had.

"It's like this weight pressing down on me, Natalie." Cassidy could feel his resolve slipping, and his shoulders slumped. "Any free time I had I'd drive down to spend with her."

"The nurses said you were there nearly every weekend sitting with her, squeezing in your homework while she slept and talking to her about school and classes when she was awake."

"I just wanted to try keeping her distracted. She wasn't able to communicate very well, but I could see it in her eyes—pleading for me to get her out of that place." Cassidy's vision blurred as the tears ran down his cheeks.

"That's how I know how strong you are, Cassidy," Natalie said, brushing her fingertips over his arm. "You still showed up week after week, knowing you'd have to witness that. A lot of people wouldn't have been able to do that."

"I was so close to graduating..."

"You got your degree in four years, didn't you?"

"My undergrad, yes." Cassidy nodded. "I was a wreck, but I kept pushing. Lionel had used my age and the fact that he didn't want me to quit my studies to convince the judge I wasn't in a position to care for Sadie. He actually used my

dream of being a teacher to convince the judge not to allow me to halt my education. The sick bastard practically had an aneurysm when I told him that I wanted to be a teacher."

"You told the judge you'd drop out of college to care for her?"

"In retrospect, it probably made me sound naive and immature, but I could tell the judge respected the fact that I was willing to do it. I just knew I could get her out of that place once I graduated. I kept telling Sadie to hold on a little longer and I'd get her back home."

"I believe you'd have done it too, Cassidy."

"Four days, Natalie." Cassidy's jaw set, as he felt himself getting angry. "I'd already petitioned the court for a new hearing. If only she'd held on for a little longer. I'll never forgive myself. I should have worked harder...been faster..."

"Oh, my sweet boy." Natalie got out of her chair and took Cassidy into her arms, holding him tight as he let it all out. "You can't save everyone. Sometimes you have to find a way to be content with the knowledge that you had the best of intentions. Wherever Sadie is, she knows how hard you fought for her."

Cassidy's muscles went limp as Natalie brushed the hair back off his forehead. She began to softly shush him as she rocked back and forth. He was embarrassed at the outburst, as it had been unintentional. Yet he also felt as if another tiny piece of the weight he'd been carrying had been chipped away. He wasn't so alone after all, and for the first time in a long time, Cassidy experienced a calming sense of relief wash over him.

The sadness was still there hanging over him, but perhaps a little more bearable. He explained to Natalie that he didn't have his PhD yet, so he wasn't actually a professor, even though he was able to teach. He still needed to complete his dissertation and go through the whole process of defending it, which had begun to feel like some insurmountable summit he'd never be able to reach.

A great many things began to make sense to him as Natalie talked about life on her end of the world. He'd always assumed Natalie had visited Sadie during the week because she wanted to avoid seeing him on the weekends. In reality, she had done it so Sadie spent less time by herself. She also admitted that she'd been distracted that first summer after Sadie's stroke. Nate had come home from school after his sophomore year and wasn't himself.

"He was very withdrawn and somber." Natalie's forehead scrunched up. "I still to this day don't know why exactly. I assumed a bad relationship, but you know Nate—never one to open up."

Cassidy smiled, wondering what this mystery man who'd broken Nate's heart had been like. Whoever the guy was, Cassidy hated him. It was beyond strange to suddenly feel like such a stranger to the guy he'd practically grown up with. He honestly knew nothing about the man Nate was today. It was as if Nate had been locked away in a time capsule for ten years and just released back into Cassidy's world.

"You know"—Natalie grinned—"he still to this day has never actually told me he's gay."

Cassidy laughed, feeling his cheeks flush with heat. "Considering you walked in on us in my bedroom that last summer..."

Natalie let her chipmunk giggle fly loose as she too turned as red as her hair. "Oh my. I suppose so. That was certainly a doozy of an eye-opener. I never again opened a closed door without knocking, let me tell you. Oh my, and Sadie was so damn calm about it."

"That's 'cause she'd known since the previous summer," Cassidy said. "She walked in on us kissing in the boathouse."

"No!" Natalie's face froze in shock. "That little floozy never said a word!"

"She said she'd keep our secret if Nate rolled her a joint."

Natalie squealed, slamming her arm onto the table. "Damn that woman—she knew I suspected Nate was smokin' the reefer, and told me I was being paranoid. Blackmailing high school boys. I could wring her neck."

Cassidy smiled at the way Natalie called it *the reefer*. "The woman could keep a secret like no other."

"She was a deviant—some sorta mobster."

"The way you two used to argue." Cassidy leaned back into his chair.

"We were so different, like sisters, on each other's last nerve one minute..."

"And laughing your fool heads off the next."

"I do miss her terribly." Natalie sighed. "She was my very best friend, you know."

"Mine too." Cassidy smiled.

Natalie nodded, not needing to say another word for Cassidy to understand exactly how much less their lives were, not having Sadie in them. Natalie forced another cinnamon roll on him, and he didn't have the heart to say no—or the willpower.

"I'm so excited to have my other boy back." She sat back down next to him, patting his arm. "I've been happy here, living with Max, but I must say I felt a little useless after Sadie and Nate were gone. You know I need someone to take care of."

"It is your way," he added with a wink.

"I never felt lonelier than I did when there was no one left to fuss over." Her brow furrowed as she thought back.

Cassidy reached over and squeezed her hand until she smiled. She shook her head at him and nudged for him to finish eating. He laughed, realizing she was probably itching to get the plate cleaned up and put away.

As Cassidy left Max's bungalow to pick up his new ward, Natalie promised to drop by in a day or two to check on them, and he asked her to bring Max over for dinner in the next few weeks.

"I'm happier than I can remember being in a very long time." They hugged for what seemed an eternity as Natalie teared up again, apologizing, though not meaning it. "You know, of course, the council elders are anxious to meet with you."

Cassidy groaned his disapproval at the thought of dealing with that mess.

"They want to discuss your role with regard to island politics and taking Sadie's place on the council."

Cassidy cringed at the realization he'd have to deal with it at some point. "Thanks for the warning." He didn't have the heart to mention to her that he wasn't planning on staying year-round and therefore probably shouldn't have a role in any of Hart's affairs.

As he got back into his car and backed it out of the skinny one-lane driveway, he waved once more at Natalie. He could see her beaming from the street, and once again, he exhaled his relief and whispered one more thank-you to Sadie.

# Chapter Seven

Cassidy looked down at his new ward, unable to believe it was the same little creature. Dr. D. had insisted she stay in the crate while traveling. Cassidy continued calling her Dog, for lack of deciding what to name the poor thing. Ben had instructed him to keep her from chewing and licking the stitches; otherwise she'd pull them out too soon. They were supposed to dissolve on their own, but he warned it would be itchy and to make sure to keep a close eye on her.

Cassidy had snidely hinted to Ben that he appreciated the fact he'd kept his word about not blabbing his arrival all over the island. He called Sarah into the exam room, and she confessed that she'd told her mother all about *the fainting*.

Of course she would have to be the daughter of Marianne Abbott, island Realtor, and gossip extraordinaire. He was wondering what he'd even been paying her for, considering it was Nate and Natalie who'd been taking care of the property.

He wanted to be pissed, but Cassidy assumed the poor child came by it honestly. Despite being irritated, he couldn't blame the girl, considering neither Ben nor he had bothered asking her to keep mum about the incident.

Cassidy reached over and slid his fingers through the grate, wiggling them. He was relieved the little thing was okay. Ben dosed her for fleas, worms, and rabies. They cleaned her up, and her matted brown, black, and silver hair had been buzzed short. She looked like Gizmo from *Gremlins* when her ears stood straight up. He smiled, feeling her cold, wet nose on his fingertips, followed quickly by her pink tongue, which curled up on the end as she licked away.

He'd been gone a lot longer than he'd meant to be and wound up having to go back to Natalie's since he'd managed to forget to grab the steaks and salad out of her fridge. Natalie had been delirious when Cassidy told her Nate was moving back to Piper's Point. She'd just about knocked him out of his chair, hugging him.

Cassidy had been equally astounded by Nate's infiltration of the island old-timers. Nate had set up a Web site that allowed all the vacation rental properties to be listed on one site. People could check out pictures, and he linked it to Google Maps. You could also book each individual property by day or week and pay for it all online in advance. He'd singlehandedly revolutionized the holiday and summer vacation industry for the island, which was now booked out three years in advance with a waiting list.

Each homeowner had the option of maintaining their own rental pages, or they could pay extra and let Nate do it all for them. It was amazingly intricate and had

bled over into a companion site that listed all the landmarks, historical sites, restaurants, and other businesses, which all paid a nominal fee to be included.

Nate had even been given a seat on Hart's city council. It was a little surprising, considering very few outside the families who originally settled the island had ever been given such an honor. Natalie had beamed talking about her boy, but Cassidy couldn't help but feel like she was the tiniest bit worried about Nate, though she never came out and said as much. Since Natalie was somewhat prone to worry, Cassidy decided to let it go without comment on his part. He'd seen Nate that morning, and the man seemed fine to him—damned fine at that.

Cassidy pulled his hand away from the crate to help steer the car around the long curve that went past the lighthouse and recreation area on the east side of the island. He cleared his throat and shifted slightly in the driver's seat as he tried to purge the memory of Nate's ass in Levi's that had somehow become newly burned into his brain. He remembered jacking off in the shower that morning. Imagining what it might feel like to once again have Nate's naked body pressing into his as the hot water rained down over him.

He wondered what that might feel like now, as opposed to the way it had when he was seventeen. Would it be familiar to him at all, or every bit as foreign and exciting as it had been the first time? Cassidy had no clue what he was doing back then. His sexual experience consisted of little more than the bit of gay porn he'd been able to download from the Internet. Well, that and the bit of experimentation he'd attempted on his own, locked away in his bedroom at night.

Cassidy's face burned slightly. He was a little embarrassed, despite being alone in the car with only his thoughts and a strange dog. He glanced out the window of the car, seeing the trees whipping by and let his mind wander back to the first time he'd ever been behind the wheel of a moving vehicle. It wound up not being the only lesson he'd had that day.

\* \* \*

It was late afternoon and unseasonably warm for early June along the coast of North Carolina. Nate had been giving Cassidy shit for being seventeen and still unable to drive. It hadn't seemed that strange to Cassidy, who was driven anywhere he wanted to go back in Charlotte. But considering the cow Nate was having over it, Cassidy finally told him to either teach him how to drive or shut up about it.

Nate agreed, but only after making a huge production over the fact that Cassidy would once again owe him for dragging him out of his pathetically pampered existence. Nate drove them inland in his old white pickup to the back roads in the forested part of the island where there was little to no traffic aside from the rare hiker or camper. Most of the vacation traffic on Hart's revolved along the coastline—the beaches, town, and harbor, and the campgrounds around the lighthouse. The only people who really ever came out to this part of the woods were local kids who wanted to screw, drink, and party.

Cassidy carefully steered the pickup down the one-lane dirt road. The radio was blaring Shania Twain's "You're Still the One," and they had the windows rolled down, leaving a cloud of dust kicking up behind them. Nate was drinking a beer he'd pulled out of a cooler tied down in the bed of his pickup and was laughing his ass off as Cassidy white-knuckled the steering wheel in a panic he would do something wrong.

Nate loved making fun of him, and the fact that Cassidy had spouted off, sounding like a PSA on teen drinking and driving, had given him plenty to work with. Cassidy never knew where Nate got the beer, but he somehow managed to occasionally come up with the stray six-pack. It wasn't that Cassidy was uptight, as he'd normally be drinking right along with him, but he did have a tendency to react badly under stress. Since Nate had all but threatened him with bodily harm should he so much as scratch his Caddy, as he liked to refer to his truck, Cassidy was anything but comfortable.

As the sun began to go down, Nate had him turn off the main drag, parking down a wooded lane that came to a dead end. They each got out of the truck, and Nate put the tailgate down. Cassidy was popping his knuckles and attempting to stretch his fingers, which were sore from gripping the hell out of the steering wheel for so long.

Nate pulled off his sweat-soaked *Friends* T-shirt and tossed it over the side of the truck. He hopped up and bent over the cooler, fishing out two beers. Cassidy's dick was reacting to the stimulus of Nate's tight-muscled upper body. As he stood back up and turned around, Cassidy all but drooled over the perfect V shape that led from his chest down into the front of his jeans. His skin glistened slightly, catching the light coming from inside the cab of the truck. Cassidy's head swam from the heat, and seeing Nate like that didn't help.

Cassidy had been back at Piper's Point for over a week now, and neither one of them had talked about their pot-induced kiss the summer before in the boathouse, which had been cut short by Sadie and her shitty timing. He'd come to the sad conclusion that Nate was going to simply pretend it never happened. It had merely been some awesomely weird combination of pot and the heat that made Nate kiss him the day he left the island all those months ago.

My kingdom for a doobie!

"Christ, it's hot out, Cass," Nate said, handing a beer over to Cassidy. "Aren't you hot?"

"Yeah." Cassidy opened the beer can and took a sip. He shook his head a little from the taste. He'd had it several times before but still didn't love the bitterness. He set the can down and pulled off his shirt as Nate jumped down next to him and leaned back into the truck. Cassidy wiped his face with his shirt and noticed that Nate was looking over his chest. Nate glanced back up at Cassidy and smiled, turning his head to stare out into the trees.

"You should come to the gym with me," Nate finally said, taking another sip of beer. "You've got a nice body. Bet we could get you cut like me in no time. Combined with that mug of yours, you'd be practically unstoppable."

"Really?" Cassidy asked, picking up his beer can and taking another drink. His cock swelled as images of Nate and him hitting the showers flashed through his mind. "That would be great, Nate. Thanks."

"It's quiet out here," Nate said.

Cassidy was staring up at the darkening sky but could feel Nate's eyes on him. Strange, he could always tell when Nate watched him. Cassidy reached up, slowly running a hand down his own stomach.

"I like it. It's nice," Cassidy said, turning around and bending over, resting his elbows on the tailgate as he sucked down more beer. "Peaceful."

"You do like it quiet, book boy," Nate said, stretching his back out. "We should get going."

"Oh please, Nate"—Cassidy hopped up and sat on the truck bed—"can't we stay awhile? We can lie back and watch the stars."

"Fine, for a bit," Nate said, peering over his shoulder as Cassidy scooted back.

Nate laughed when Cassidy made little cooing noises as he lay back in the truck bed. "The metal's still warm from the sun. Feels good."

Cassidy watched as Nate walked along the side of the truck and reached over to grab another beer out of the cooler. He pulled out an extra and walked to the back, then hopped up next to Cassidy. He set the cold beer on Cassidy's stomach, laughing as Cassidy jumped, grabbing for the beer.

"Fucker!" Cassidy punched him in the side.

A deviously sexy expression came over Nate's face as he lay down next to him. Cassidy's dick went rock hard as Nate put an arm behind his head. The faint light coming through the back window of the cab illuminated the muscles in Nate's chest and stomach as he stretched out next to Cassidy. He imagined himself reaching over to touch Nate, getting a little light-headed.

Cassidy closed his eyes, trying to control his own excitement, which was about to boil over. He bit his lip and begged the erection pushing up against his jeans to go the fuck away already. Cassidy slyly slid a hand down the front of his jeans, trying to adjust himself, in an attempt to conceal the erection. He could already feel the wet spot on his briefs from the precum.

Cassidy opened his eyes and ripped his hand out of his pants, seeing Nate sitting up watching him. His entire body flushed with heat, and he sat up. He scrambled across the bed of the truck and hopped down. He was completely embarrassed as he drank the last of his first beer. His hands were shaking, and beads of sweat began to collect under his arms.

Nate hopped down and stood in front of Cassidy, facing him. He grabbed Cassidy's face and pressed his mouth over Cassidy's, forcing his tongue inside. Nate pressed into his body, pushing Cassidy's ass against the gate.

Cassidy was a little stunned when Nate's tongue entered his mouth. He began to reciprocate, feeling Nate's erection grinding into his. He reached up, hands still shaking as he ran his fingertips over Nate's chest and nipples, amazed he was actually being allowed to do it.

He'd fantasized so many times over the past few years. He'd gotten his hopes up after the boathouse, only to feel them crushed after being back for a week and having nothing happen. Now here he was, chest about to explode as he tried to decide whether he was going to shoot in his pants or puke due to the nerves and butterflies that were wreaking havoc on his insides.

Nate pulled back, wide-eyed and breathing heavily as Cassidy examined his face. It took every bit of courage he could muster when Cassidy reached down, rubbing the palm over Nate's hard-on, which lay just on the other side of the denim. Nate licked his lips as he watched it happening. Cassidy pushed him back a little and dropped to his knees. Wasting no time, fearing Nate might snap out it at any given moment, he unbuttoned Nate's jeans and slowly pulled the zipper down, exposing the head of his cock sticking up out of his briefs.

Nate moaned, as Cassidy licked the head. He pulled the jeans and briefs down, freeing Nate's dick, listening to him take in a sharp breath as he slid his mouth over the head, slowly working his lips and tongue up and down the shaft like he'd seen the guys in the video clips doing it.

Cassidy was getting more excited, listening to Nate's moans, the way his entire body tensed when Cassidy did something he liked. He sucked and licked slowly, wanting to savor the taste of his precum in the back of his throat, the musky smell that made him hungrier and hornier than he had ever imagined he could be. He began lightly tugging on Nate's balls. He'd read about guys doing that in some of the erotic stories he'd found online. Cassidy was beyond pleased, considering it seemed to be doing the trick, as Nate became more vocal.

Nate ran his hands through Cassidy's hair, and he choked a little as Nate forced himself deeper inside Cassidy's mouth. He kept sucking, refusing to let anything stop him now. Nate's balls pulled up, and he could feel the head of his cock swell as Nate yelled out, shooting his load into the back of Cassidy's throat. Cassidy coughed, and his eyes watered. He hadn't been prepared for the orgasm and he tried to swallow while breathing through his nose.

After Nate finally stopped bucking, Cassidy fell back a little, sitting on his feet as he tried to catch his breath. He looked up at Nate, afraid he was going to start freaking out that he'd just let a guy suck him off. Cassidy could feel a little cum running down the side of his chin, so he wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. Nate was watching him with wide eyes, still breathing heavily. He knew Nate's fist was probably going to make contact with his face any second. He didn't care. It was fucking worth it if that's the way this was going to end. He could live off this night for decades.

Nate reached out with his hand and pulled Cassidy up onto his feet. He stood in the near darkness with his pants around his ankles and a still-hard cock.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Nate asked in shock.

"Internet porn and...bananas," Cassidy said, leaning back into the truck, feeling his cock throbbing in his jeans. He was already wigging out over the banana admission, thinking it would have been sexier had he lied and said he'd sucked lots of dick.

"Christ," Nate said, staring at his dick in amazement. He looked back up at Cassidy, who was adjusting himself. "Take off your pants."

Cassidy was frozen for a moment as his eyes widened. Nate moved closer with an expression on his face that told Cassidy to do what he said and be quick about it. Cassidy kicked off his sneakers while undoing his jeans, then yanked them down around his ankles along with his briefs.

Nate reached over and took Cassidy's cock in his hand while he stepped out of the pants. Nate ran his hands over Cassidy's chest before he leaned in and kissed him, thrusting his tongue into his mouth. He slid his hands down to Cassidy's hips and back over his ass, squeezing. Holding on to Cassidy's hips, Nate pulled away. Cassidy could make out the smile spreading over his face right about the time Nate turned him around.

Cassidy breathed heavily as Nate rubbed and squeezed his ass cheeks. He knew exactly where this was headed. His breathing became irregular as he remembered he'd tried out more than just a banana before, and it had hurt like hell.

He told Cassidy to spread his legs, and once he complied, he opened his mouth to protest just as the head of Nate's dick made contact with his hole. The head was slick, and Cassidy's knees buckled slightly as Nate massaged the sensitive skin. Cassidy moaned, surprised by the sensation and how much he was enjoying it. He was in sensory overload, beginning to smile as he listened to Nate spit. He could feel the warm saliva running down his ass, and Cassidy bit his lip to keep from making a sound as Nate repeated the action. He was just about to start praising Nate's efforts when he suddenly hissed in pain as Nate forced the head inside.

"Fuck, that hurts, Nate." Cassidy dug his fingers into the metal as the intense pressure increased. He wanted to push Nate off him as his ass was invaded.

"Shit, Cassidy, just...give it a sec. Ah, fuck, you feel so good." Nate continued to force himself deeper.

Cassidy's arms were shaking as he tried to breathe, doing his best to relax into it as Nate kept inching farther in. He exhaled as Nate let out a deep groan, feeling his pelvis pressing into his backside.

"Fuck," Nate said as he placed his hands on Cassidy's hips and pulled him back, bending him over more. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Cassidy lied, clenching his eyes shut as Nate started to fuck him. It hurt, which it never had when he'd imagined Nate doing it. He bit his lip, trying not to make any noise, for fear Nate would realize he wasn't enjoying it all that much.

"Fucking hell, Cassidy." Nate took one of his hands off Cassidy's hips and slowly slid it up the center of his back. Nate worked his cock in and out, moaning and saying Cassidy's name over and over again.

Cassidy loved hearing it. The more worked up Nate got, the more into it Cassidy began to get. Nate thrust all the way in as he tugged on Cassidy's shoulder, standing him up straight. Nate slid his arm around Cassidy's waist, trying to force his cock in deeper.

Cassidy twisted his upper body, throwing an arm around Nate's neck. They kissed. Nate smothered Cassidy's soft moans with his mouth. Cassidy's dick began to stiffen again as Nate pulled his mouth away. He was breathing heavily as he shoved his face into Cassidy's armpit.

"Fuck, you smell incredible," Nate groaned, then inhaled deeply.

All Cassidy could smell was the fact that his deodorant had stopped working, but Nate's reaction filled him with a renewed sense of lust. He found himself wanting Nate to fuck him harder, though he couldn't quite bring himself to say the words.

Nate bent Cassidy back over after he reached down, feeling Cassidy was hard. He picked up the pace, rubbing and massaging Cassidy's ass.

Cassidy reached down and started jerking himself off as Nate became faster and rougher. Cassidy's skin tingled, and his nipples went hard as something changed in him, like a switch being flipped.

"Fuck, Nate." Cassidy became more vocal, his breath now ragged. He held on to the tailgate for dear life as Nate continued to pummel him. His eyes rolled back into his head, and Cassidy knew he was getting dangerously close.

"You feel so good, Cass," Nate said, digging his fingers into his hips. "Do you like it?"

"Yes," Cassidy muttered, feeling his balls rise up. "Don't stop."

Cassidy pressed his forehead into the tailgate and groaned uncontrollably. He yelled out Nate's name, shooting hard, coming a little more each time Nate slammed into him. His ass clenched tight around Nate's cock as Nate let out a loud moan, unloading into Cassidy, who let out a whimper as the pain returned. Nate forced himself in with one last thrust, and Cassidy's legs gave out. Nate managed to keep him from crumpling into the dirt, propping him up on the tailgate.

"You okay, Cass?" Nate asked, trying to catch his breath as he pulled out. He went back to rubbing Cassidy's back as he tried to reach down with his free hand and pull up his pants.

"That hurt like a motherfucker," Cassidy managed to get out through a wheeze, still unable to move as if all the life had just been sucked out of his body.

"Shit, Cass...it sounded like you really got into it."

Cassidy lifted his sweat-soaked head, the hair stuck to the skin around his face. "It was the most incredibly intense..." He stopped to take a breath. "I've *never* 

shot a load like that before, and if I ever regain the strength and feeling in my legs...we're totally doing it again."

Nate laughed out loud, placing a hand over his chest. "You had me worried for a sec."

"Have you ever done that before?"

"No, man." Nate grinned as he reached down and rubbed his dick. "I've had a girl suck me once, and after you left last summer, I let a tourist suck me in the men's room at the campground."

"Help me get my pants on." Cassidy pushed his upper body up off the truck bed. "I feel like an idiot lying here with my ass blowing in the breeze."

Nate reached over, squeezing a cheek. "I'll help you get your pants on, Cass, but believe me when I say, as long as I live, I'll never forget how hot your ass looks bent over the back of my truck."

# Chapter Eight

Slowing his car around the final curve before reaching the private drive that led to Piper's Point, Cassidy groaned, feeling his erection throbbing between his legs. The desire he had to indulge in an encore was palpable as he cracked a window, hoping some fresh air might clear the sex-induced haziness out of his head.

"Christ, I'm in trouble," Cassidy whispered, somewhat thankful Nate no longer had that beat-up white truck. He heard the door to the crate clatter and turned to inspect Dog. "I saved your furry little ass, and now I think you're gonna need to help save mine." Cassidy shook his head as Dog cocked her head, perking her ears up. "Don't let Daddy do anything he's going to regret tonight."

Dog whimpered and lay back down in her crate, as if Cassidy had just asked the impossible. He turned off the road onto the gravel drive that cut a path into the trees. He immediately tensed, taking note of Nate's truck backed up to the front porch. He didn't have much time to fret over the consequences of Nate moving back in, wondering instead whom the pimped-out monster SUV belonged to.

Cassidy considered the possibility that Nate had a boyfriend who was helping him move his stuff back. Why hadn't Natalie mentioned that? "A boyfriend suffering from obvious inadequacies with serious insecurity issues," he said to Dog as he ogled the gaudy electric blue SUV with shiny chrome trim. He chastised himself for taking pleasure at the thought and continued to pull around to the back of the house. Like I really care.

Beginning to wish he could crawl into a hole, Cassidy cringed and his stomach dropped once he spotted Nate sitting on the screened-in back porch with Neil. He'd inconveniently forgotten all about Neil since coming home to find his note the night before. As he braked to a slow stop, Cassidy began to wax nostalgic, ready to trade in the pro-gay-marriage rights of his present for the good ole free-lovin' days of the past, when gay men could supposedly have anonymous sex and never have to see each other again.

Okay...awkward. He glanced down at Dog. "My life is rapidly spiraling out of control, little one."

Cassidy quickly went through all the ways he could possibly play this as he got out of the car and waved at the two men. The rotten smile on Nate's face had most definitely not gone unnoticed. He settled on the classic "que sera" approach, pulling Dog's crate out of the passenger seat. This only has to be as uncomfortable as I make it.

Plastering on a smile, Cassidy reached through the window, removing the canvas grocery bags from the backseat of the car with his free hand, and he made his way up toward the house. "Hello, boys."

Nate got up and held the screen door open for Cassidy. "How was your day, dear?"

Cassidy stopped smiling and shook his head. "Don't be an ass." He smiled once again as he turned to Neil. "I got your note last night. Sorry I didn't call. I had a day."

"Where do you find them?" Nate asked under his breath, smirking.

Cassidy brushed past him, setting the crate onto the table. *Like it's my fault I'm a hot-man magnet?* 

"Not a problem," Neil said, peering into the crate and jumping slightly as Dog barked at him. "I didn't realize you had a dog."

"I do," Cassidy said as Nate sat back down at the table. "Well, I didn't...but now I do." Pointing at Neil, he added, "And this one found me—came right up out of the ocean like a present from Poseidon."

"You always did like getting gifts," Nate said, taking a swig from his beer bottle and turning to Neil. "He tore right into 'em, never bothering to read the card."

Neil grinned. "Hopefully I'm the gift that keeps on giving."

"How *cute* is that?" Nate asked, using a tone that only Cassidy could read as annoyed.

Cassidy tossed the bag into Nate's lap a little harder than necessary, and he coughed from the impact. "Make yourself useful, and put those away."

Nate got up from the table, smiling in a way that made Cassidy want to clobber him. He took Neil by the arm, pulling him gently up from the table. "This isn't the best night for us to...hang out." Cassidy tensed, listening to Nate laugh from inside the house. "It's Nate's first night back home, and I've had two really long and very stressful days. You understand, don't you?" Cassidy led Neil to the screen door.

"Well, sure. I mean, yes, of course I do."

"Call or stop by tomorrow?" Cassidy held the door open for a now-scowling Neil.

"Okay," Neil said, turning to face Cassidy. He started to slowly move in for a kiss.

Cassidy leaned in and reciprocated, lips softly pressed together. He quite enjoyed the taste of Neil's mouth, which had a slight hint of the beer he'd been drinking. The kiss was soft and sweet, and Cassidy only pulled away after Neil started to get a little more aggressive than he was comfortable with.

"You are a good kisser." Neil grinned. His cheeks were slightly flushed. "But I never saw my night ending with a cold shower."

"Try a nice swim in the ocean," Nate offered from behind them, making enough noise with the chair to let Cassidy know he had no intention of offering them any privacy. "But you probably already knew that, being pals with Poseidon and all."

Smart-ass.

Neil glanced back at Nate for a moment. "I haven't stepped into something here, have I?" He reached up and ran his hands over Cassidy's shoulders as if straightening out his shirt. "Are you two...?"

"It's complicated," Cassidy said, laughing nervously as he resumed nudging Neil out the door. He wasn't sure it was complicated, but it was the best noncommittally vague answer he could come up with spur of the moment. "Sorry to blow you off like this last minute."

Neil shrugged as Cassidy watched him head toward the side of the house before stopping. His forehead crinkled up. "We didn't actually have plans, so...no big thing."

Cassidy raised his hands up. "Oh...you're right. Yay! I'm not a jerk!"

Neil laughed, but Cassidy could tell it wasn't genuine, as he appeared to be more interested in staring down Nate, who was staring back, before Neil disappeared around the side of the house.

Cassidy slowly spun around to find Nate holding Dog in his arms, chuckling as she licked his chin.

"Who's a sweet little baby girl?" Nate mumbled, baby-talking Dog, who obviously loved it, considering her little nub of a tail was going a mile a minute.

"What was all that about?" Cassidy asked, walking over to the table. He reached down and snatched Nate's beer off the table and took a swig.

Nate stared innocently at Cassidy and shrugged like he couldn't possibly understand to what Cassidy was referring. He returned his attention to Dog and scratched her chin and behind her ears. "I never thought I'd be a little-dog kinda guy, but she's a slice of irresistible."

Dog looked at Cassidy with what appeared to be a smile, along with what Cassidy assumed was a "can we keep him?" pleading in her eyes. Cassidy took another swig of beer, feeling a smile forming as Nate continued to baby-talk Dog before finally praising her for "barking at the mean old man."

Cassidy rolled his eyes as he turned and went into the house. He reminded himself that Nate used to intensely enjoy teasing and taunting him when they were kids, which was the best explanation he could come up with for that reaction. Of course he'd take any awkward situation and do his best to make it worse. "Shit head," he mumbled while searching through the kitchen cabinets until he found a bowl he thought would be small enough for Dog's water.

Nate walked in holding Dog, who seemed quite content, as if she'd been held by Nate all her life. "Well, he seemed...nice."

Cassidy sneered, placing the water bowl on the floor, realizing he had no clue whether Dog had been fed. "You're an asshole, and you and I are not going to

discuss Neil." Cassidy squinted, wondering where he'd left his glasses. "Do you think she's hungry?"

"Your glasses are hanging from your shirt there." Nate held up the dog and laughed when she got him in the nose with her tongue. "It's cool. Neil already told me all about how amazing the other night was. He went on and on about it... And on..."

Cassidy sighed, putting on his glasses. "I think I get it."

Nate shot a sideways glance at Cassidy. "It probably wouldn't hurt to give her a little something to eat." He leaned over and set her down, and she seemed peeved at having been relegated to the floor.

Crossing the room to the back counter, Cassidy then reached up and took a saucer from the cabinet and opened one of the small cans of dog food. Dog immediately went ape-shit, running around in circles as her claws clicked against the tile.

"I'd say she's hungry," Nate said, taking a teaspoon out of a drawer and handing it to Cassidy.

Their eyes met momentarily as their fingers brushed when Cassidy took the spoon. He scooped some food out, carefully inspecting her for a moment, trying to determine how much to give such a tiny dog. He shrugged and scooped out one more spoonful before passing the saucer to Nate.

Awkwardness settled between the two of them before Cassidy remembered he needed to marinate the steaks. He mentioned running into Natalie, as he went about busying himself with food prep, and their conversation eased back into a familiar rhythm. Nate jumped in, anticipating whatever Cassidy might need next. Like Johnny-on-the-spot, he'd show up at Cassidy's side to hand over whatever the item happened to be. Cassidy found it a little freaky but also enjoyed the familiarity of it, not to mention the convenience.

Sharing the same oxygen with Nate set off alarms and warning bells left and right. Every fiber of Cassidy's being cautioned him to tread carefully and to please not go grabbing for Nate's big...stick.

When Nate offered to do the grilling, Cassidy told him tomorrow night could be his turn to do dinner, to which Nate commented, "Deal."

Cassidy was still a tad anxious as the realization they were once again residing under the same roof began to sink further in.

"Is this weird to you? You know... Us...here?" Cassidy asked as they walked out the screen door and into the courtyard.

Nate handed over a cold beer after Cassidy set the plate with the steaks down. "Yeah...but due more to the fact that it feels so..."

"Not awkward." Cassidy nodded, fiddling with the controls on the large gas grill until the flames ignited.

"But at the same time...awkward?" Nate laughed, appearing to be as confused by it all as Cassidy was. "Should we hug it out?"

Yes, please. Cassidy laughed, liking any suggestion, no matter how cheesy, that included touching Nate in any way. "But if you call me bro, I'll have to kick your ass."

"Right, because *roomie* is way more nondescript," Nate reminded, causing Cassidy's cheeks to flush with heat.

"That was totally lame. Sorry." Cassidy cringed, remembering that morning.

They both smiled at each other awkwardly, and then Nate reached over, taking Cassidy into his arms. As they embraced, Cassidy's resolve began to slip due to the heat traveling between their bodies. Nate's felt incredible, and they still fit together perfectly, shoulders at just the right height for each of them to rest their chin on.

He did his best to convince himself that he was just becoming more acclimated to being around Nate, but he knew that was a lie. He was really becoming more acclimated to the idea that he wanted to have sex with Nate—badly.

\* \* \*

Cassidy was feeling good. He was a little intoxicated from the vodka and beer—not drunk, but filled with the warmth that accompanies alcohol. His face warmed, as he watched Nate's silhouette, lit in hues of gray from the moonlight as he stacked the pieces of firewood on the beach. Dinner had flown by as they started to scratch the surface of the things they no longer knew about each other. They left Dog closed up on the screened porch, and she'd barked several times, letting them both know she wasn't altogether happy about it.

Cassidy stared up into the night sky at the same canopy of velvety black and brightly lit stars he had been under so many times before as a boy. He smiled, momentarily shutting his eyes, allowing the familiar sounds of the waves to flood his senses. The wind whistled through the trees behind him, and Cassidy dug his fingers into the sand. He could feel the hard granules between his fingertips exfoliating the skin.

He had an undeniable connection to the bit of earth on which he now sat. It was deep in him, ingrained into each and every pore in an almost past-life kind of way—as if he'd been here many times before and would continue to find himself back here again and again.

Cassidy opened his eyes when he heard the artificial clicking of the lighter Nate used to start the fire. The noise sounded out of place, in much the same way Cassidy had been afraid he might be, coming back to Piper's Point. He no longer feared that anymore. He belonged here, despite not being convinced everyone else on Hart's would feel the same. Nate walked across the sand on his knees, taking a seat next him on the blanket they'd pulled from the cabinet on the back porch.

As the fire grew, Cassidy resented the intrusion of the light, which cut into his very own starry night. At the same time he enjoyed the heat it produced, warming the bare skin of his arms. A chill swept over him as he wiggled his toes into the cool, damp sand.

Dinner had been a success, Cassidy decided as he handed Nate his beer. Ease had been the overall feeling between them as the evening rolled along. Examining Nate further, he was once again taken aback by how handsome the man was. Even with the shadows cast from the golden-hued firelight, which could have made the chiseled features of his face come off as menacing, they couldn't mask the overwhelmingly good-natured spirit that was housed inside the muscled, masculine frame occupying the space next to him.

A smile spread across Nate's face. "I look good, huh."

Cassidy laughed, noticing Nate said it more like a statement than an actual question. He was also embarrassed, having gotten so lost in his own thoughts that he neglected to realize he'd been staring. Good-natured and massively egotistical.

"So good," Cassidy moaned, gently stroking his beer bottle as he lightly licked the cool glass rim before taking a quick drink. "I can barely control myself."

Nate laughed, shaking his head disapprovingly as he shoved Cassidy, nearly knocking the bottle out of his hand.

"So not cool, dude," Cassidy said in a mocking tone, cradling the bottle as if it were filled with precious nectar.

Nate smiled in a way that let Cassidy know he wasn't the least bit sorry.

"So, what happened to you? You're like Hart's very own golden boy. Businessman of the year or some such nonsense."

Nate choked a little as he tried to swallow. "Oh, nice... Nonsense, is it?"

"The Nate I remember couldn't wait to get the hell off this rock."

"Ah. That Nate, yes. Well, he got his wish." Nate stared into the flames of the fire, seeming a little more serious. "He drove west across the causeway, vowing never to look back."

"So what gives?"

Nate smiled slightly, starting to chew on his lip. "I suppose he made the mistake of looking back."

Cassidy turned away, thoughts of sucking on and nibbling Nate's lips arousing him. "To be honest, I didn't actually expect to find you here. I figured you'd be in a penthouse somewhere with a string of hot guys coming in and out of the revolving front door. You always talked about going to New York, conquering the world..."

"Christ, you make me sound so Gordon Gecko, or God forbid, like your father. How was it that I ever managed to get into your pants?"

"Wow." Cassidy glanced down at his wrist as if he were wearing a watch. "Only took us how many hours to work our way around to sex? And I don't have a father, by the way." He stared off into the night, wishing Lionel hadn't been brought up, as it instantly irritated him. "I knew you'd use your powers for good—lift people up, not shove them down. That's what got you into my pants. Well...that and the fact that I wanted to get into your pants."

Nate laughed. "And you teach English to a bunch of freshmen? I certainly don't recall any of my college professors looking like you."

"I'm not actually a professor just yet. Still have that tiny detail of a dissertation to finish."

Nate moaned an acknowledgment, seeming to remember the way that worked. "What's this dissertation about, anyway?"

Cassidy took a sip of beer, taking a glimpse at Nate's face as he said, "American masculinities, secret identities, and hero worship in the twentieth-century superhero genre."

"Of course it is." Nate grinned, losing the battle as he finally burst into full-on laughter. "You and your comic books, you big geek."

Cassidy felt his cheeks burning as he took another sip out of his bottle. "Fuck off."

"So damn sexy when you're pissed." Nate settled himself as he reached over, and clinked his beer bottle against Cassidy's. "Do any of your students actually pass your classes, or are they as distracted as I surely would've been?"

"Ha! Don't start trying to sweet-talk your way back into my pants now, Nate Sommers." *Unless you just can't seem to help yourself.* 

"That always was my least favorite thing about you, Cass."

Cassidy was confused. "What's that?"

"You always knew how gorgeous you were." Nate looked over at Cassidy. "Put the rest of us at a disadvantage."

"You weren't exactly beaten by the ugly stick, Nate."

"No, I know I'm a hottie."

Cassidy laughed. "And so modest."

"You've always been on this whole other level, though." Nate continued to stare. "You're the type that inspires, inflames, and then engulfs the rest of us mere mortals."

Cassidy could feel the words as if they'd pricked his skin. He lifted the glasses that had been sitting on top of his head and slipped them back on. He went back to the ocean view, trying to concentrate on the moonlight reflecting off the surface of the water.

"That doesn't actually work, you know."

"Huh?" Cassidy asked, clearing his throat. "What are going on about?"

"Those specs you still wear, like Clark Kent. They're not any better of a disguise on you than they were for Superman."

"Don't be ridiculous. I need them to see."

"You need them to read, Cassidy. You wear them like a mask whenever you feel embarrassed by how beautiful you are. The funny part is they never did prevent the whole world from turning to look whenever you'd walk by."

Cassidy took a big sip from his bottle, refusing to look at Nate, as he knew he might not be able to ever stop if he did. "It's getting late, huh?"

"I apologize if I spoke out of turn. Perhaps it's just the beer and moonlight making for a little nostalgia."

Cassidy tried a smile, but even he knew it wasn't very convincing. He wasn't ready or maybe just not willing to go down the road Nate attempted to lay out in front of him. Sex he could handle and welcome with open arms...and legs. But the yucky love stuff he was fairly certain he wouldn't be able to deal with.

"So why'd you really come back to Piper's Point, Nate?" Cassidy wondered again about the mystery man who broke his heart during college. For some reason he had trouble picturing what the guy might have looked like.

"It's my home. I guess it took leaving to make me recognize how much I loved it. What's really kept you away from Piper's Point, Cass?"

Cassidy knew he had a lot of good excuses, but he wasn't sure any of them were the real one. He'd never allowed himself to delve too far into that minefield, and he wasn't about to let Nate push him into it either. "What hasn't?"

Nate seemed to accept that answer, at least for the time being, and Cassidy experienced a tiny sense of relief over that fact, which he took as further proof there was more there, lying under the surface. He made a mental note not to go scratching at it.

"I'm glad you're here, Nate." Cassidy reached over and took his hand, giving it a squeeze. "You make it feel like being home again."

"Funny—I was just sitting here thinking the same thing about you."

They sat for a few minutes, never making eye contact. Cassidy could feel that theoretical cord he liked to imagine kept him tethered to Piper's Point, reeling him in a little closer to the ground below.

Nate yanked on his arm, a signal to move closer. Cassidy obliged by scooting over and leaned back into Nate, who wrapped him up in his arms and legs. Nate's body was warm, and Cassidy could feel the tension literally evaporating from his. He didn't know if or for how long he could keep Nate at arm's length, but he began to secretly not care. As much as the thought of free-falling into that reality scared the hell out of him, he couldn't deny it also excited him to the point of distraction.

# **Chapter Nine**

Cassidy stood next to the coffeemaker, impatiently waiting for it to finish spitting out the steamy black liquid. He yawned and smiled at Dog, who was snarfing down the food he'd laid out for her. He knew he shouldn't have, but he'd let her sleep in the bed with him last night. He reminded himself that Dr. Downey had cautioned to keep a close eye on her, and used that to justify it. She'd curled up and fallen right to sleep in the curve of his lower back.

Cassidy hadn't been quite as fortunate, lying awake for nearly an hour, despite the alcohol, which would have normally aided him in sleep. He had way too much going on inside his head to drift off, and he slept restlessly once he finally did pass out. His foot tapped in time with Keith Urban's "Sweet Thing" playing in the background from a small radio on the far counter.

He turned, hearing Nate walk into the kitchen, and his eyes were suddenly wide open. He swallowed and tried clearing his throat as Nate walked toward the fridge wearing nothing but a loose-fitting pair of gym shorts.

"Good morning," Nate said, pulling a carton of cream out of the refrigerator door.

"Is it?" Cassidy asked, absentmindedly watching Nate move around the kitchen gathering up mugs and the ceramic sugar container. His body was every bit as hot as Cassidy had imagined, and he had to resist his natural instinct to reach out and touch.

Nate was obviously puzzled as he reached for the coffeepot. "Isn't it?"

"Huh?" Cassidy asked, wondering what Nate's views were on friends with benefits. He shook his head, reminding himself it was Thursday. He just needed to retain control over himself for another day and a half. After that, Ollie and Spencer would be here to chaperone. "It is. Of course it's a good morning."

Nate grinned, so sexy yet slightly evil, as he filled a cup and passed it to Cassidy. He took a step closer, invading Cassidy's personal space, making him both uncomfortable and exhilarated at the same time.

"Would you prefer it if I put on a shirt?" Nate asked, exhibiting an air of heated sexuality while appearing as innocent as the day he was born, an art Cassidy had never perfected.

Cassidy blew out a puff of air. "Get over yourself." He'd done an excellent job sounding unaffected, despite becoming the slightest bit unhinged as Nate moved close enough to fog up his glasses with his breath.

"You let me know should you change your mind," Nate whispered, his lips inches away from Cassidy's.

Cassidy couldn't quite focus. "Change my mind?"

The corners of Nate's lips curled up as he leaned forward, milliseconds away from kissing Cassidy. The two men jumped, startled by Dog's single bark. Cassidy turned away, taking a drink from his cup and cursing under his breath as he scalded his mouth. He could see Nate turning away out of the corner of his eye as well and wasn't sure if he should be thankful or pissed at Dog. He then reminded himself to pick out a goddamned name already so he could stop calling her Dog as if he were some kind of twisted, homo Holly Golightly.

Cassidy glanced over at the urn, then mentally rolled his eyes imagining Sadie asking him what the hell he was waiting for—jump the man already. She never was one for asking too many questions, Cassidy thought. Leap first and worry about the consequences later. But Cassidy knew that wasn't the smartest thing to do. Especially considering how badly he wanted it. He'd not had this many spontaneous hard-ons since his teens, and Cassidy was fairly sure that to err with caution was the only way to go.

He'd never made any decisions about his love life without having seriously considered all the possible outcomes. He'd been lucky so far, in that no one had ever gotten hurt. And it most certainly never ended well for Sadie, who always jumped in headfirst, although she never complained either.

Cassidy became entranced by Nate, who slid his fingers just below the waistband of his gym shorts, scratching at an itch. He grinned as he held back the urge to ask if he needed any help.

They both froze, hearing a knock at the front door. They glanced at each other, and both made a move toward answering it as Cassidy followed Nate out of the kitchen. Cassidy could hear Dog's nails clicking on the hardwoods as she followed them. He caught a glimpse of Natalie through the glass on the front door, standing on the porch with several others. As he got closer, Cassidy was able to make out that the tall, lean gentleman was Jacob Pringle, and realized the council heads had made good on their threat to stop by.

Cassidy was instantly uncomfortable for one reason alone. Both Natalie and Nate were about to discover that his arrival on Hart's wasn't going to be permanent, at least in a full-time sense. He was already dreading the universal expressions of disappointment as he smiled when Nate opened the door.

The four council elders followed Natalie into the foyer as she hugged Nate, then made a beeline for Cassidy. His heart sank as she once again all but fell into him, squeezing and jiggling him about until he started laughing.

"So glad to have you home again," Natalie said as she pulled away.

His smile wasn't quite up to par as he avoided eye contact with Natalie. Jacob, whose prickly demeanor was standoffish yet never intentionally so, briskly shook Cassidy's hand.

"Cassidy," Jacob said with a quick nod and a smile that Cassidy knew from experience only appeared forced.

He was a bit shocked by how much older Jacob looked as Henry Abbott, the Hardy to his Laurel pushed past, grabbing Cassidy by the arms and shaking him excitedly.

"So good to have you back, Cassidy. So good indeed." Henry, shorter and quite round, had a full head of thick hair that Cassidy remembered as more peppered, but now was stark white.

Henry was a loud individual, much like his daughter, Marianne. They each had a laugh that could be heard from a block away.

Richard Hammond offered his hand along with a warm smile once Henry released Cassidy from his death grip. "Welcome back to Hart's, Cassidy."

As the reigning Hammond in control of the Hart's Island grocery-store dynasty, he was younger than his counterparts, having taken over the post along with the business back in the late eighties when his father retired.

The only remaining female member of the council heads was Edie Taylor. She was the Glinda the Good Witch counterpart to her cantankerous Cheez Whizscented twin sister with all the cats. They were like night and day, as Edie was very neighborly, unless you tweaked her nose. Cassidy remembered getting into big trouble once when, as kids, he and Nate stole one of her garden gnomes. They wound up having to pull the weeds in her flower gardens for a month as punishment, and Edie had a lot of flowers.

She'd no doubt taken note that each one of the men had pushed themselves in front of her as she gracefully took Cassidy's hand in hers. "Very glad to have you back, dear," she said quite genuinely, considering Cassidy had always believed she'd permanently tagged him as a ne'er-do-well ever since the gnome incident.

"Welcome back to Piper's Point," Cassidy said to all of them. "Can I get anyone coffee?"

They all erupted in pleases and thank-yous as Natalie pushed Cassidy to stay and chat while she went to take care of the coffee. Nate asked them all into the dining room before excusing himself to go put on a shirt. Cassidy was a little peeved when he came down fully dressed, leaving only him in less formal attire.

"I'm very sorry. I would have been a little more prepared—better dressed, at least—had I known you were all coming."

Edie smacked Henry in the arm. "I told you we should have called first." She trailed off, muttering something about the manners of a mule.

"Be glad you'll never have to suffer the ill temper of a woman," Henry said, scowling at Edie. "I envy you boys that."

It was all Cassidy could do to keep a straight face at Henry's attempt to bring up Cassidy and Nate's homosexuality. He could see Jacob was none too comfortable, as his eyes were slightly bugged out. Nate was full-on laughing, while Hammond was shaking his head in disbelief.

"I hope you'll forgive us. We're all just excited to have you back and for Piper's Point to once again have a caretaker." Jacob eyed the room in a manner that some would presume as taking stock of something he coveted, though Cassidy knew him well enough to understand he was merely impressed by the condition of the property.

"I think Nate and Natalie should really be credited with keeping her in such phenomenal shape." Cassidy smiled.

"I apologize for the indelicate way Henry attempted to broach the subject of...er, um, well... Nate of course knows we fully accept him and his...um..." Edie stumbled, her forehead crinkling as she attempted to find the words she appeared to have lost.

"I think I understand, and thank you. I appreciate your...support." Cassidy desperately tried not to imagine them all sitting around, arguing over the right way to bring this all up. He wondered if Nate had gotten the same awkward speech.

"We're very progressive." Henry nodded with a wide politician's smile.

The foursome all sighed as they eyed one another as if to say, *Thank God that's over*, obviously hoping they'd never need to discuss it again.

"My wife surely did like that *Will and Grace* program back when it was on the television," Jacob said, turning a little red. "God rest her soul."

Cassidy noticed Edie rolling her eyes.

Nate turned red as well, doing his best to not burst out in laughter. "That was an awesome program."

"I think it really raised awareness about your people," Henry said seriously.

"I'm going to go check on that coffee, folks." Cassidy smiled, doing his best to act natural.

Nate stood up. "Let me—"

"No, no," Cassidy jumped in, cutting Nate off. "You just have a seat there, buddy. You've been doing most of the heavy lifting around here for a while now."

Nate shot him a quick, you'll-pay expression as he sat back down at the table, scooping up Dog, who was already scratching at his legs for attention. Cassidy rounded the corner into the hall, mouthing, *Oh my God*, as he walked into the kitchen. Natalie was standing at the island, her hand on the urn as tears ran down her cheeks.

Cassidy cringed, wishing he'd left the urn upstairs this once.

"Still can't believe she's really gone." Natalie sniffled. "It's like it just happened, you know? Still so fresh in my mind."

Cassidy walked over and gave her a quick squeeze, refusing to allow her to drag him along with her today. He needed to keep his wits about him while he had a house full of people who were undoubtedly about to be very unhappy with him.

"I don't know how you've handled all you have and managed to stay sane, Cassidy."

"I did it for Sadie," he said matter-of-factly as she nodded, beginning to regain a little control over her faculties.

"Let's get that coffee so we can get on with this. I'm sure you have other things you'd like to be doing with your day."

"Yes, I do, in fact," Cassidy said seriously. "Setting fire to the attic being the first on my to-do list."

Natalie giggled, dabbing her eyes with a paper towel she dampened with cool water. "I haven't been up there since the nineties. The good Lord only knows how many skeletons are buried up there."

Cassidy laughed, remembering the way Natalie always teased Sadie about hiding the bodies of her husbands and boyfriends up there, calling her the black widow. Sadie always acted offended, but they all knew she secretly liked the idea of being a man-eater. Perhaps because, despite all her bravado, she had a soft heart hiding under all the makeup, too much jewelry, and brightly colored caftans.

Joining the rest of the council back out in the dining room, Cassidy realized they were all patiently waiting for everyone to be served and settled before wanting to dive in. The pressure built, and Cassidy wished they'd just get on with it already. He looked around the dining-room table at all the smiling faces and couldn't take it any longer.

"I'm not going to be staying on the island year-round," Cassidy blurted out in one long string of word vomit. He sighed, seeing everyone's expressions immediately change. Natalie looked as if he'd struck her, and Nate stared forward stoically, all traces of humor evaporated from his face.

"But Sadie assured us you'd take your place on the council when the time came," Jacob sputtered out. "She swore you'd do the right thing."

"I'm so sorry, guys," Cassidy said, finally taking a seat. Even Dog stared, wideeyed, as if judging him. "I have a job at the university. I just can't walk away and leave them in the lurch."

"So it's just temporary," Henry said, a smile starting to return. "Just until they can replace you?"

"Not exactly." Cassidy started to fidget, squirming slightly in his chair. "What I mean to say is, I really love teaching. I don't want to give that up."

"Of course not," Hammond said, as if understanding in some way, like he too had given up something in order to take his father's place. "It's not really as if Cassidy's a true islander."

Cassidy knew he meant it more as an excuse than an indictment, but it stung and stuck in Cassidy's chest all the same. Natalie shook her head, as if thanking goodness Sadie wasn't here to witness him turning his back on his birthright.

"Guys, I'll do whatever I can to make myself available to you when I'm back in Chapel Hill, and I'd really like it if the Founders' Day parties could be held here at the Point again, the way Sadie always did them." Cassidy glanced around the table, realizing he wasn't appeasing any of them. "And Edie, I was really hoping the historical society might help me go through the attic. I wanted to donate most of Sadie's things, maybe set up an exhibit dedicated to her at the museum?"

Edie suddenly appeared like she might spring out of her chair after hearing that suggestion. The historical society had been after Sadie for decades to hand over some of the Hart family heirlooms. Sadie had always scoffed, saying she wasn't about to let them rummage through the family archives, her other term of endearment for the attic. "All they want to do is dig up scandals and gossip."

"That's very generous of you, Cassidy." Edie cocked her head and licked her lips. "Are you sure about that?"

"There are things I'll want to keep, of course," Cassidy said.

"Of course." Edie nodded, a little glassy-eyed.

"Obviously, everything will need my approval before leaving the property. But in exchange for your help, I'd like to do something, and I think it would be nice for there to be an exhibit—a sort of tribute to her. I would of course assist financially with the project as well."

"I do think that's a very nice gesture," Henry said, though still not nearly as excited by the prospect as Edie was.

Cassidy sank back into the dining chair, feeling every bit as crappy as he had suspected he would. They each slowly got out of their seats, thanking Cassidy for his time and begging him to please really think things over. The seat vacated by Sadie was his, should he decide to stay on Hart's where he belonged, and all Sadie ever wanted was for Cassidy to take her place. They turned to leave after saddling him with more guilt and regret, as if he didn't have enough of that already.

Nate stayed seated as Cassidy showed everyone else to the door. Natalie gave him a hug before leaving, reaching up and taking his face in her hands. "Baby boy." A term of endearment Sadie had had for him. "I hope you really think this over, because it sure doesn't feel right to me."

Cassidy nodded. "I will, Nat." He felt small and selfish all of a sudden, even though he didn't believe he was wrong. He shut the front door and watched them all file into their cars before driving away. He could practically feel Sadie's disappointment slamming into his back as he turned around to find Nate standing there instead, still holding Dog.

"So you're just going to turn around and leave again?"

"I'll be back, Nate." Cassidy was sick to his stomach now, desperate for someone to see things from his perspective. "Summer and winter break, all the holidays."

Nate nodded, though somehow didn't appear convinced as he handed Dog over before grabbing his keys off the table by the front door. "I'm going to go in to the office. Got some work left unfinished from yesterday."

"Come on, Nate." Cassidy reached out to grab him. "I will be back."

"You know, I distinctly recall you saying something along those lines the last time you graced us all with your presence, and that was what, nine...ten years ago?"

Nate didn't turn around, glancing down at Cassidy's hand on his shoulder instead. "All this time I thought maybe..." He shook his head and shrugged off Cassidy's hand before walking out the front door.

Cassidy watched as he climbed into his shiny black pickup and drove off. He snuggled with the dog for comfort, who licked at his chin as if she could sense how horrible he felt. Cassidy lived with the guilt of choosing not to come back to the Point that last summer. Had he known Sadie would've had her stroke during his freshman year at college, he would've made a different decision. He'd give anything to go back and do that particular summer over.

Nate didn't even know the real reason behind that decision. He'd told Sadie that Lionel was forcing him to intern at the company, but that wasn't the truth. He knew that as mad as she'd be about it, she'd never call Lionel to confront him, as they'd ceased all communication years before. It was true that he'd interned for his father that summer, but he'd asked Lionel, not the other way around. Cassidy feared the truth behind that selfish decision would drive a wedge between Nate and him that time itself might not be able to erode.

He meandered back into the dining room and leaned over to place Dog back on the floor. He started to gather up the cups and saucers of barely touched coffee. "That went well," he said sarcastically, then let out a long sigh. He hoped the whole lovefest for the prodigal son wasn't over before it started, considering he was mentally flogging himself enough as it was. Most importantly, though, was whether Nate would ever look at him the way he had in the kitchen that morning—half-naked and intensely interested.

\* \* \*

"What the hell is the big friggin' deal?" Ollie asked as Cassidy walked barefoot in the grass. He watched Dog sniff around searching for the right spot to distribute her poo, while holding the cell phone to his ear.

"This place is beginning to sound a little too Waco to me. Honey!" Ollie yelled. "This island might be kinda culty!"

Cassidy could feel the corners of his lips curling up as he heard Spencer off in the background yelling back, "We'll stop and get a few cases of bottled water on our way, then. Just don't drink anything you haven't opened yourself, and it'll all be okay!"

"Ah, so just like a circuit party, then," Ollie said.

Cassidy burst into laughter. "There's a long history here, which goes back to a time when the Fourth of July was just another meaningless date on the calendar." Cassidy made little kissing noises once Dog finished her business, still keeping an eye on the tree line for the devil dogs as he walked back toward the house. "There

hasn't been a time in over two hundred years when there wasn't a Hart on the council. It's kind of a big deal here."

"And you just threw it back in their faces. I get it."

Cassidy heard a clicking noise and held up the phone to view the screen. He shook his head and placed it back to his ear.

"I didn't throw it in their faces. I tried to offer a compromise, but they want all or nothing. I want to fix things. I just don't how."

"You'll figure it out, Cassidy. It may not happen today or even next week, but you will figure out the right thing, and then you'll do whatever that turns out to be, because that's who you are."

"That was a really nice thing to say." Cassidy grinned.

"Well, you don't have to act like it's something that never happens. Sheesh. You make me sound like a shrew and a half."

Cassidy opened the screen door and let Dog scamper in, making a shushing noise at her when she started licking at her stitches. "What do you think a half a shrew would actually look like?" Cassidy shushed Dog for once again trying to lick her stitches.

"Um, someone who makes irritating shushy noises into the phone?"

"Really?" Cassidy laughed as he took a seat on one of the wooden chairs and leaned over to pick up the dog, who he'd neglected to mention thus far to his friends. "Not a short bitch?"

"Short as in tempered or vertically challenged?"

Cassidy leaned back in his chair, contemplating. "I'd have to say vertically challenged, as *bitch* already lends itself toward the indication of an individual's temperament."

"You two have the strangest conversations," Spencer cut in, startling Cassidy, who now realized what that clicking noise had been.

"Eavesdropping is way rude, dude," Cassidy snapped, shaking his head.

"I'm going with short, as in tempered," Spencer added, suddenly having an opinion now that Cassidy sounded pissy. "The short could merely be a descriptor as to how quickly said individual becomes bitchy."

"All right, you two," Ollie said in a holier-than-thou tone, as if he wasn't normally the instigator of all the drama. "We'll be there tomorrow before dark, sweet cheeks. So just hang on a little longer. I wanna be there in time to watch them strap you into the pillory in the town square."

"Oliver," Spencer said in a disapproving tone.

"Oh come on, honey. You've got a good arm, and despite being visitors, they may let us take part in the stoning."

"I'm hanging up now, asshole."

"Love you too," Ollie got out before Cassidy was able to disconnect.

"Sick," Cassidy said, shaking his head as he sneered at the phone. Dog jumped up, propping her front paws on his chest as she attempted to lick his face. Cassidy laughed as he tried to keep her from slathering him down.

"At least you still like me." Cassidy grabbed her and held her up in the air. "How 'bout a treat?"

Dog began wiggling furiously and panting in excitement as she tried to run a mile a minute despite being suspended in the air.

"You sure are a smart little thing." Cassidy grinned, impressed she already understood the meaning of the word *treat* in such a short amount of time. "Maybe Nate would like me again if I held him up in the air and offered him a treat?"

Dog again went ape-shit after hearing the *T* word, and Cassidy pulled himself out of the chair, laughing. "Okay, little one. Okay."

## Chapter Ten

Cassidy yawned, standing in the kitchen, coffee cup in hand, waiting for the brew to finish percolating. He scratched under the waistband of his black boxer briefs, not having bothered to finish getting dressed after his shower. Nate hadn't come home at all last night, and Cassidy hadn't slept for shit. He wasn't too happy about the fact he obviously cared more than he should as to what the great Nate Sommers's opinion of him happened to be.

He'd been so pissed by the time evening had rolled around that he called Neil and asked him over for dinner. Of course, by the time they made it through dinner and an old noir classic called *Laura*, which they had to watch on Sadie's tiny-ass thirty-two-inch television, Cassidy wasn't pissed anymore so much as angst ridden. He'd been secretly hoping Nate would come home and get pissed that Neil was there. At least then, Cassidy would have known whether the man gave a shit one way or the other.

They made out a little, but Cassidy's heart wasn't in it, and Neil wound up leaving after a bit of a row. He'd accused Cassidy of thinking about him all night, referring to Nate. When Cassidy tried to apologize, making an attempt to inform Neil things weren't likely to go anywhere between them, Neil stormed out of the house as if in some freaky jealous rage. He wound up calling Cassidy a little later and apologizing for the way he behaved, which Cassidy hadn't considered so bad, possibly since he knew his own motives hadn't been on the up-and-up. All poor Neil wanted was some lovin', while asshole that he was, he'd tried using the guy as jealousy bait.

Cassidy filled his coffee cup, then gently blew across the surface before taking a tiny sip. It wasn't like Cassidy to use people, at least not intentionally and with no regard for anyone else's feelings. He'd have to sit Neil down the next time they met up and make sure he understood they couldn't be anything more than friends.

He didn't know what the hell was wrong with him. He was acting weird, being all clumsy and awkward, and his behavior was beyond abnormal. He nodded to himself, figuring it had to be the stress of being back here. Confronting his failures in regard to Sadie and dealing with the pressure of expectations he hadn't seen coming his way.

Cassidy stood up straight, hearing the front door open and close. He started to fidget a bit, listening to Nate toss his car keys on the tiny table next to the front door. Running a hand through his damp hair, Cassidy leaned back against the

counter in an attempt to come off casual. He cursed a little under his breath after taking another sip, forgetting how hot the coffee was.

Nate sauntered into the kitchen, carrying some papers and a laptop case along with a pan covered with aluminum foil. Cassidy caught a whiff of that familiar scent and smiled, knowing Natalie had baked cinnamon rolls for them. He hoped that meant she wasn't upset with him any longer. Nate smiled while allowing his gaze to wander up and down Cassidy's frame.

"Hey there, girl," Nate said to Dog, who was running around in circles at his feet.

"Good morning," Cassidy said, wishing it hadn't come out sounding so much like a damned question.

"Not a bad sight to come home to." Nate set the pan down on the island and tossed the rest of his things onto one of the bar stools. He grinned playfully, back to his usual self as he walked over and stood right in front of Cassidy. Nate leaned in, smiling seductively as he placed a hand on the countertop next to Cassidy's hip.

Cassidy was frozen to his spot. When Nate's hand lightly brushed against his side, his heart beat at a slightly faster pace. Nate's gaze locked with Cassidy's, holding him there as if in a trance. Cassidy tried to regulate his breathing, thinking for sure Nate was about to lay one on him.

He was now close enough for Cassidy to feel his breath lightly brushing across his face. He noticed Nate's eyes dart down toward his lips, and Cassidy took in a sharp breath when Nate lightly licked his own lips. As Nate reached up with his free hand, reaching behind Cassidy's head, he knew this was it, the first time their lips would meet in almost a decade.

"Ow," Cassidy said, hearing a bonk as the cabinet door made contact with the back of his head.

"So sorry." Nate grinned, retrieving a coffee cup from inside the cabinet Cassidy was standing in front of. "You're kinda in the way, though." Nate pushed away and spun around to pour himself a cup.

Cock-teasing, motherfucking asshole! Cassidy rubbed the back of his head while scowling as he took another sip from his own cup. "I would have moved."

"I thought I could grab one without needing to disturb you." Nate's eyebrows arched as the man glanced down, checking out Cassidy's crotch.

Cassidy peeked down to see the front of his briefs was a little more swollen than it had been moments before. His face burned hot as Nate's intense gaze was averted thanks to Dog's scratching at his leg, demanding some attention. Nate took a quick sip before placing his mug down and bending over to pick her up. He scratched behind the pup's ears, and Cassidy watched as Nate eyed his dick a second time.

Nate laughed when Dog got a lick in, right on the lips, and Cassidy smirked, a little jealous. Nate wiped his mouth on the arm of his shirt while trying to love on the dog.

"Aw, I missed you too." Nate fired a gaze right into Cassidy's eyes after saying that.

"Decide to bring your work home with you?" Cassidy asked as Nate set the dog back on the floor.

"I've actually taken the day off." Nate picked up his coffee cup. "Was planning to get some of that trim painted on the exterior today."

"Oh," Cassidy said, watching as Nate reached across the island for the aluminum-wrapped cinnamon goodies. "Can I help with the painting?"

"If you like." Nate peeled the foil back, and the entire kitchen smelled like heaven.

Cassidy's tummy grumbled, and Nate turned, wide-eyed, having heard it as well. "Sorry."

"Grab some plates, will you?" Nate asked. "I don't want to risk giving you a concussion."

"Sure." Cassidy turned, shaking his head while trying to ignore the snark. You could at least pretend you didn't enjoy whacking me upside the head.

"You know, it really wouldn't take much to get this place ready in time for Founders' Day." Nate grabbed a knife out the drawer, cutting into the rolls.

"It's like a week away," Cassidy said.

"I know," Nate said, dipping his finger into the icing and sucking on his fingertip, "but you have to admit the house and grounds are in great shape."

Cassidy nodded, setting the plates down so Nate could place the still-warm rolls on them. "I was thinking." Cassidy leaned against the cabinet. "It seems like no one on the island has had a chance to really say good-bye to Sadie, me included."

Nate nodded, pulling out two forks and handing one to Cassidy. "You could combine them."

"Make the Founders' Day party a wake?"

"Why not, though I'd probably say tribute, not wake." Nate took a bite, making that same little moan he always used to after the first bite of Natalie's cinnamon rolls. "I think it would be fitting to have the first Founders' party back at the Point also be a tribute to the woman who actually started them in the first place."

"You don't think it's a little selfish?"

Nate smiled, swallowing another bite. "I think everyone will appreciate the gesture and the fact that we're focusing on her life. Funeral services always have an air of sadness. Don't you think Sadie would prefer having a party with everyone drunk as a skunk and dancing?"

Cassidy knew she would. "I guess the next day I could spread her ashes at the lighthouse."

"And let anyone who wants to show up for that as well."

Cassidy took a big bite of the dough bomb and nodded in agreement. "Will you come with me to spread her ashes?"

"Of course." Nate reached up, ruffling his fingers over the top of Cassidy's head, messing up his hair. "Don't be such a dweeb."

Cassidy shoveled in another forkful. He liked the idea and knew it would be something Sadie would approve. Nate patted the side of his leg, and Cassidy was relieved he wasn't mad at him any longer. Dog made a little snort, distracting them both as she politely sat there as if expecting to be given a bite. Cassidy could tell Nate wanted to give in, but he made sure with one look to nip that instinct in the bud. He rolled his eyes and reached over, snagging the bag of vet-approved jerky treats. He tossed it to Nate, who grinned and, for just a moment, resembled the carefree, high-jinks-fueled high school boy he used to be.

Nate set his plate down and opened the bag. He tore off a chunk, dropping it to the floor for the dog. He sighed, tossing the bag back onto the counter, and finished off the last of his coffee. He grinned all evil-like before reaching over and giving Cassidy a titty twister.

"Son of a..." Cassidy said, rubbing his now-bright red nipple. "That fucking hurt, asshole."

Nate dodged the fist Cassidy aimed in his direction and took off running when Cassidy tossed his plate on the counter and lunged at him. Dog started to bark, startled by the ruckus. Cassidy chased Nate out of the kitchen and up the stairs, barely missing him as Nate ran into his bedroom, slamming the door shut in his face. Cassidy tried pushing it open, but Nate was blocking it, laughing his fool head off.

"Fucktard!" Cassidy yelled, kicking the door with his foot, half pissed and half turned on due to his now burning nipple.

"Go put on some clothes, you cock-tease!" Nate yelled back. "We got chores to do."

Cassidy mumbled a few more obscenities under his breath as he turned, and made his way toward his bedroom.

Cassidy listened as Nate cracked his door open, whistling in a taunting manner. Cassidy refused to turn around, giving him the satisfaction. He reached back and tugged at the elastic waistband of his briefs, offering Nate a glimpse of his bare ass instead.

"Me so horny," Cassidy said, grinning from ear to ear as he heard Nate groan slightly before slamming his door shut again.

\* \* \*

Nate let out a sickening moan as he stood back, stretching while he watched Cassidy finish up the last little bit of trim around the French door that led into Sadie's bedroom. Cassidy turned just in time to see Nate wipe his brow with his arm. A tiny bead of sweat ran down from Nate's belly button, disappearing under the waistband of his paint-encrusted cutoffs.

"Man, it's hot up here today," Nate said, jarring Cassidy out of his own drool-fest.

Cassidy stood back, facing the door to check out his work. He'd been more than a little nervous about the khaki-mushroom color Nate picked out for the trim at first, but seeing the contrast against the olive green paint on the siding, he decided he was very impressed with it.

"I'd never have picked these colors," Cassidy said, sounding genuinely astounded.

"Please tell me there's a but coming?"

"I like it!" Thinking Nate wasn't too convinced, he added, "Seriously, Nate. I'm shocked, but I actually love it."

"Thank goodness for that," Nate said, obviously relieved. "Otherwise I'd have tossed your ass over the side of the balcony for waiting until we got half the damn house painted before mentioning it."

Cassidy laughed, squinting a bit from the afternoon sun. "That actually sounds more like something I'd do."

"Don't I know it. If I had a dime for every time we'd get halfway into something as kids only to have you start whining, saying you didn't want to do it anymore—"

"Oh sure," Cassidy interrupted. "Never mind that it was usually something that would've gotten us into big-time trouble!"

Nate laughed, a saucy smugness taking over his demeanor as if getting into trouble had been the ultimate goal back in the day. "I want a beer."

Cassidy scoffed. "Quitter! There are two other sides to this beast."

"Calm down there, Skippy." Nate winked, working a half smile. "No one said the whole thing had to be done today."

"Okay," Cassidy said, immediately caving after putting on a good show by initially protesting. His arm was about to fall off, and he was roasting under the full glare of the sun.

"You little shit." Nate poked him in the side, causing Cassidy to wiggle away. "You wanted to stop hours ago, didn't you?"

"No!" Cassidy opened the French door so they could go back inside, while trying to maintain a straight face.

Nate shook his head and went into the house. Cassidy followed, momentarily losing himself in Sadie's bedroom, feeling a slight stab of that same loneliness he'd experienced that first day back. He quickly went to close the door, leaving it cracked just enough to allow the wet paint to dry. He ran to catch up with Nate, who had already headed down the stairs. He marveled over Nate's sweaty, glistening skin, and all Cassidy could think about was licking the man from head to foot. The muscles in Nate's back flexed and undulated as he took one step at a time. His T-

shirt, tucked into the waistband, drew Cassidy's attention to the small of Nate's back and tight waist.

Every fiber of his being told him to reach out and touch, and Cassidy discovered that the temperature inside the house was no cooler than it had been outside. He swallowed, feeling how dry his throat actually was.

"That beer's not sounding so bad."

"That's the spirit," Nate said as they made their way down the hall toward the kitchen.

Dog was already on their heels, clicking along behind them as they each placed the paint buckets and brushes into the sink. Cassidy grabbed a beer and walked the dog out to the yard to do her business while Nate worked on cleaning out the brushes. He pulled his T-shirt off, using it to wipe his brow and the back of his neck. It was cooler in the shade from the trees, and his temperature had regulated by the time he went back inside.

Nate watched Cassidy from the sink, staring a little longer than necessary with his mouth hanging slightly open. Cassidy was feeling a little vindicated, not being the only one who was practically in heat from the sex haze hanging over each of them.

He made his way over to the pantry and scooped out some kibble, which he deposited into the dog bowl as Nate finished rinsing out the sink and shut the water off. He finished off his beer, tossing it in the garbage, and turned to find Cassidy standing behind him.

Cassidy handed his empty over. "You want another?"

Nate nodded, somewhat more serious than he had been before, when they were joking around. "What time are your friends supposed to get here?"

"Close to dinnertime," Cassidy said, opening the fridge and pulling out two more cold ones.

He turned around to find Nate standing behind him this time. Cassidy handed him a beer before twisting the lid off his. He turned the bottle up, taking a long swig, catching a whiff of his underarm. He lowered the bottle, smiling when he realized Nate had taken a step closer.

"I forgot you sorta get off on that, huh?" Cassidy asked, raising his arm again.

Nate shut his eyes, chewing on his lip as he inhaled deeply. Cassidy grinned, feeling a slight sense of power until Nate took yet another step, practically shoving his nose into Cassidy's armpit. His smile faded away when Nate opened his eyes. Cassidy saw the pure lust staring back at him, and found himself relieved when Nate removed the open beer from Cassidy's hand and turned away, setting both bottles down on the counter. A sudden awkwardness swept over him as he slowly lowered his arm.

The energy in the room shifted into something almost animalistic as Nate spun back around. Neither of them was smiling anymore as Nate came back and stood in front of Cassidy.

"Can you lift your arm again, please?"

Cassidy did as Nate asked, somehow feeling that despite his saying please, Nate would have attempted to force him had he not complied willingly. Nate rested his forehead on Cassidy's arm as he inhaled. His hand was sliding up Cassidy's other side, pushing his other arm up into the air. Cassidy's breath went a little ragged as Nate slowly made a move for the opposite armpit. Nate groaned so softly Cassidy almost thought he'd imagined it.

Cassidy's head was becoming a bit fuzzy as the heat pouring off Nate began to radiate into him. When the back of Nate's hand bumped Cassidy's cock, Nate took note of the physical reaction it caused. Within seconds, Nate's hand was shoved down the front of Cassidy's shorts. Cassidy's head rolled back as Nate took him into his hand, massaging the head. When Cassidy moaned, Nate once again took advantage by placing his open mouth over Cassidy's, thrusting his tongue inside.

Cassidy finally fully gave in when he lowered his arms, snaking one around Nate's neck and finding a nipple with the other. They were both full on, all systems go as the kiss deepened while they pawed at each other.

Dog let out a bark, but this time neither of them so much as flinched. Cassidy massaged Nate through the front of his shorts as his slid down his legs and came to rest around his ankles. Cassidy stepped out of his briefs as Nate roughly squeezed his ass.

Cassidy moaned through their kiss, and Nate reached down, grabbing the backs of his legs, lifting Cassidy off the floor. Nate turned and sat him on top of the island, and Cassidy sucked in a sharp breath as his ass made contact with the cool countertop.

Nate pulled away for a moment, and they sized each other up while trying to catch their breath. Cassidy reached over, running his hand over Nate's cheek. He glided his fingertips over an eyebrow before allowing his thumb to slide over Nate's bottom lip. Nate took Cassidy's thumb into his mouth, sucking it momentarily as his gaze drifted down Cassidy's naked body.

Cassidy removed his hand from Nate's face, propping himself up as Nate massaged his hard-on. Nate kissed, licked, and sucked his way down, starting at Cassidy's neck, then finding a nipple. Cassidy allowed his head to fall back, knowing he'd shoot for sure if he allowed himself to watch his cock sliding into Nate's mouth.

As Nate slowly worked his way down Cassidy's abs, the tiny hint of stubble dug into his skin. Cassidy held his breath, his entire body going taut as Nate's hot mouth took him all the way in.

"Fuck," Cassidy whispered, placing a hand on the back of Nate's head, urging him back down.

Nate growled as he sucked Cassidy, who wasn't quite sure whether this was a good idea, then decided he didn't care as Nate's tongue worked over the head of his dick.

Cassidy's eyes popped open, and he jerked his head back up, hearing a gasp and a thud. Natalie was standing in the kitchen one hand over her eyes, the other over her mouth with a basket of bread turned on its side at her feet.

"Holy shit!" Cassidy screamed, which triggered Nate's enthusiasm, and had him sucking more intensely, obviously misinterpreting the exclamation. Cassidy could feel his eyes rolling back into his head due to Nate's renewed vigor, so he kicked Nate hard in the gut, yelling out in pain as Nate uncontrollably clamped down a little too hard with his teeth.

Nate choked on Cassidy as Natalie squealed, "I'm sooo sorry!"

Nate stood straight up at his mother's voice, and Cassidy bumped one of the beer bottles while trying to hop down off the counter. Fumbling to grab the beer, he lost his balance and rolled off the far side of the island. Dog barked as Cassidy hit the floor with a thud while somehow managing to not spill a drop.

"Oh my goodness... I," Natalie mumbled as Cassidy poked his head up over the top of the island just in time to see her flailing about, eyes shut tight.

She slammed into the door, letting out a squeak as she spun around in a circle.

"Christ, Mom, be careful!" Nate said, scrambling to zip up his shorts while trying to kick Cassidy his clothes.

"Don't you mind me," Natalie said, finding the doorway. "Go back to doing... Oh goodness me."

"Shit," Nate whispered as Natalie tore down the steps, disappearing from view.

Cassidy was on all fours and naked as a jaybird, staring up at Nate while gathering up his undies and gym shorts. He was beyond mortified, and his entire body was already slightly stiff. His dick throbbed for all the wrong reasons as Nate helped him up off the floor. Cassidy covered his bits with the clothes in his hands but peeked down to make sure his johnson was still attached, relieved that, despite the teeth marks, he didn't appear to be bleeding.

"Christ, Cassidy," Nate said, taking a step forward. "I'm so sorry. Let me see it?"

Cassidy stepped back, holding up his hand up for Nate to stay back. "I'm fine." He twisted his body, listening to his spine crack a few times as he attempted to compose himself. "It's fine as well." He checked out his dick. "Slightly traumatized...and hopefully not scarred for life, but still attached."

"Oh God, I'm really... I mean, you kicked me so hard that..."

Cassidy smiled weakly while walking backward toward the hallway. "Right, exactly... I should...go."

"Let me help..."

"No!" Cassidy said, holding up his hands, inadvertently exposing himself. Realizing his error, he whipped his hands back, covering his business. "I'm fine... All good. Just going to go ice my crotch."

He turned and hobbled out of the kitchen, not realizing his ass was exposed, as all his attention was currently placed on his dick. He silently gave thanks that he wasn't currently strapped down, being medevaced to a hospital with his dick sitting in a beer cooler packed in dry ice.

As he slowly climbed the stairs, he looked upward and vowed in Scarlett O'Hara-like fashion, "As God is my witness, I shall never kick a man who's got my dick in his mouth again."

## Chapter Eleven

Cassidy pulled on a clean T-shirt when he turned around to find Nate leaning against the doorjamb, watching him.

"Come to finish the job?" Cassidy asked, gently tucking in his shirt.

"That question could be taken more than one way," Nate said, cocking an eyebrow.

Cassidy laughed as he shook his head. "It most certainly cannot."

Nate smiled, letting Cassidy know the message had come in loud and clear. "Feeling any better?"

"Well, I have a sinking feeling I'm going to be really sore come tomorrow morning."

"And for all the wrong reasons," Nate said, nodding with another please-forgive-me-for-almost-biting-your-dick-off expression.

There just really isn't a decent card out there for that one. Cassidy headed toward the door, patting Nate on the shoulder. "Look, Nate—"

"I get it," he interrupted. "The whole thing was a mistake. We shouldn't have been..."

"Fucking around?"

Nate sighed. "Something like that. I apologize for attacking you...in the multitude of ways I wound up doing so."

Cassidy brushed the backs of his fingers over Nate's cheek. "It's not all your fault, pit boy."

Nate burst out laughing, backing out of the doorway so Cassidy could pass. "Your friends showed up while you were soaking in the tub, by the way. They seem nice."

"They seem early," Cassidy said, praying Nate hadn't mentioned any of the events from earlier that afternoon as he suddenly remembered Spencer making some comment about only needing to keep his legs together for two days.

"Don't worry. I didn't say anything about—"

"About what?" Ollie yelled up from the bottom of the stairs. "Can you speak up a little? I'm finding it terribly difficult to eavesdrop from down here."

Ollie's naturally light brown hair was a little long on top, and the chunky cut had been streaked with various shades of blond. He had that California beach-boy look, which was only betrayed by his Midwestern accent.

He had a thing for vintage concert tees from the eighties and low-rise jeans, a combination he wore so often it had begun to feel like a uniform. Currently, he sported his newest find, a graphic Monkees twentieth-anniversary world-tour T-shirt. Cassidy never knew for sure which ones he bought because of the music versus the ones he thought were colorful, fashionable, or merely topical.

Cassidy started to laugh as Nate cocked his head to the side and said, "Now that one's trouble."

"You have no idea," Cassidy warned.

"I heard that!" Ollie velled back.

\* \* \*

Cassidy turned on the radio that sat on the counter. The Dixie Chicks belted out the chorus to "Cowboy Take Me Away," and he turned the volume down so it was more background noise, should the conversation take an unimaginable turn and come to a screeching halt.

Nearly unimaginable, considering Ollie is in the room.

Cassidy scooted behind Nate, going to the far side of the island, once again turning his attention toward prepping dinner.

Spencer came walking in from the back door, nodding. "It's beautiful out there."

He wore designer jeans, sandals, and a blue and white rugby shirt unbuttoned at the neck to show off one of Ollie's beaded amber necklaces.

Spencer looked like the perpetual frat boy from a well-to-do family, but he seldom behaved like one. He actually enjoyed playing sports and going to the gym, as opposed to Cassidy, who viewed it more as maintenance and Ollie, who viewed it more as a social outing. He'd taken the money he'd managed to pry away from his family and opened a small chain of coffeehouses called the Mo-Joe. Like Cassidy, he wasn't intent on world domination so much as being comfortable and attaining a certain quality of life.

The only time Spencer and Ollie argued was whenever Mr. Business Major attempted to help Mr. Art Major by butting into his jewelry-making business. The problem was the help was never solicited, and Spencer couldn't wrap his brain around the fact that his ideas weren't the only ideas. He always appeared to mean well, which was probably the only reason Ollie hadn't strangled Spencer in his sleep.

It had been no easy feat convincing Spencer to come to Hart's for the entire summer. He didn't like the thought of being so far away from his business, but Ollie had begged and pleaded, reminding Spencer that he did the bulk of his work at home now anyway. That, combined with the fact he could make it back within five hours in case of an emergency, wound up swaying him.

"So did you guys all meet in college?" Nate asked, setting his beer down as he inspected the head of lettuce on the cutting board.

"You could say that." Spencer smiled at Ollie, who was grinning like he'd been waiting for this topic to come up.

Cassidy rolled his eyes. "Yes, we all met in college." He was hoping the topic could die there as he watched Ollie lean down and give Dog a tiny piece of bread. "Will you stop feeding her people food?"

Ollie scowled. "I can't help it. She keeps staring at me with those big eyes."

"She found an easy mark." Cassidy shook his head.

"Which is why we don't have a dog," Spencer said with a pointed gaze at Ollie. "You cave entirely too easily. You need to learn how to say no."

"I thought you liked that about him." Cassidy grinned, licking a little marinade off his finger.

Nate laughed under his breath as Spencer's face flushed slightly. "That's different."

"Hypocrite," Ollie said, taking a sip from his bottle. "And to fully answer your question, Nate, Spence and I are both Cassidy cast-offs."

Cassidy dropped his spoon into the bowl he mixed the marinade in, and dramatically rolled his eyes.

"Spencer had been freshman year's model, and I was the sophomore edition. We were each voted off the island after our six-month contracts were up."

"Do you really have to say it like that?" Cassidy shook his head. "You make it sound so calculated."

"Truth hurts, huh?" Ollie grinned like he'd won something. "At the time, I was devastated, sitting alone at a bar and drowning my sorrows, in a total state of shock."

Cassidy let out a puff of air as he turned his attention to Nate. "He's so melodramatic. He was more than likely planning and plotting, indulging in some elaborate revenge fantasy."

"Then suddenly, I started laughing," Ollie said, raising his voice to let Cassidy know he didn't appreciate the interruptions, "realizing how much I resembled one of the ridiculously corny country-music songs I'd been forced to listen to for months on end. All of which I'd made fun of, mind you."

Cassidy shrugged. "And he wonders why I dumped his skinny ass?"

"As I was saying, I was sitting at the bar," Ollie continued, firing off another hateful look, which now had Nate amused, "when this hunky guy comes over." Ollie winked at Spence, who smiled back with obvious lust in his eyes. "He offered me a bottle of beer and his condolences."

"And we never looked back," Spencer added, reaching down to allow Dog to lick his fingers. "I was jealous as hell when they started dating, but it didn't take long for me to figure out I was jealous of Cassidy, not the other way around."

Cassidy set the platter of marinated tuna steaks on the counter next to the fridge. "That makes me feel all warm inside."

"My rebound boy turned out to be the real deal." Ollie reached over and squeezed Spencer's knee.

"And you all wound up being friends...how?" Nate asked, freezing when he turned, almost bumping into Cassidy, who jumped as if he'd been stung by a bee.

"We were sitting in the library together junior year, and the asshole"—Spencer pointed to Cassidy, who was awkwardly scooting past Nate—"comes up and plops down and starts chatting away."

"As if we'd all been BFFs since growing up in short pants together," Ollie interrupted. "Didn't even have the decency to pretend he was bothered by the fact his last two boyfriends were dating one another."

"Friggin' sociopath." Spencer held up his beer bottle in a cheerslike fashion, shooting Cassidy a faux-infuriated glare.

"Walked all over our fragile egos." Ollie picked Dog up off the floor after she scratched at his ankle.

"We'd both been waiting for the day he'd see us together and rue the day he'd let either of us go." Spencer nodded as he and Ollie grinned.

Nate laughed as he rinsed the freshly chopped lettuce, shaking the colander. "He was probably too busy taking all the credit for getting the two of you together."

"Nice!" Cassidy grabbed a chunk of carrot and chucked it at Nate's head, who managed to deflect it with his arm.

"He still does!" Ollie said. "Just the other day, he was calling us from his car, all in a panic after—"

"And we've been best friends ever since," Cassidy said, cutting Ollie off. "The end."

Nate directed a gaze toward Cassidy, as if slightly worried for his sanity. "He's always had a major hero complex—big-time comic-book geek back in the day."

"I do not!" Cassidy sneered at Nate.

"He's all blushy." Nate pointed at Cassidy. "He totally thinks of himself as the radioactive love bite that brought you into one another's lives."

"That makes complete and total sense." Ollie nodded.

"Complete load of crap," Cassidy mumbled. "So how do you explain all the other poor, unfortunate souls I've dated and dumped who didn't wind up dating each other?"

Ollie looked around the room, lifting Spencer's arm as if searching for something. "Will they be coming for dinner? Because I don't see any of them around."

"Ha...busted!" Spencer pointed at Cassidy.

"You're awfully pointy with that thing," Cassidy said, nodding toward his finger, which Spencer quickly made into a gun while making a clicking noise as if firing off a few rounds.

"All the others?" Nate asked, raising a brow as he tossed the salad.

"There weren't that many," Ollie said.

"One a year," Spencer blurted out, then laughed a little nervously as if having said too much. "But they last longer than six months now that he doesn't spend his summers sitting with Sadie."

The room got quiet, and Cassidy winked at Spencer, who appeared to be struggling to decide whether he should continue talking, digging yet a larger hole in which to bury Cassidy. He smiled, letting Spence know he wasn't upset by that last comment.

"So I keep trying people on to see if they fit?" Cassidy shrugged, hoping to keep the conversation away from the subject of Sadie. "And there were two guys that one year," he added, realizing that actually wouldn't be considered a bonus in this particular argument.

"At the same time?" Nate asked, wide-eyed.

"No...Jesus!" Cassidy leered at Nate as he reached for the bread. "So, fine. I'm not so good at being alone?"

"Poor Cass." Ollie pooched out his lower lip in an exaggerated pout.

Nate patted Cassidy's behind as he walked behind him, causing Cassidy to flinch a little, as he was still a little freaked out from nearly having his nub gnawed off. Nate sighed, looking guilty as he placed the bowl of salad in the refrigerator. Cassidy winked, offering a weak smile, letting Nate know he appreciated the comfort intended by the tiny act and went back to thinly slicing the baguette for bruschetta.

"So, Nate," Ollie said, turning his attention away from Cassidy. "What's your story? You been a big ole whore too?"

Cassidy tried not to laugh as Nate placed his hand over his mouth, attempting not to spew the beer he'd just drunk as he stumbled over to the sink. It was running down his chin as Ollie and Spencer made fun of him.

Dog let out a short bark as they all turned toward the front of the house, hearing someone knocking at the front door.

"I'll go," Nate quickly volunteered, turning off the sink. He wiped his chin with a paper towel as he rounded the corner of the island.

"Seriously?" Cassidy whispered after Nate disappeared from the room. He picked up the baguette that hadn't been sliced yet, and whacked Ollie upside the head with it.

"Ouch!"

"Shhhh!" Cassidy and Spencer simultaneously said as they each started chuckling.

"You want to know, don't you?" Ollie asked.

Cassidy scoffed. "Why would I care?"

"Oh puh-lease!" Ollie said, ripping the baguette out of Cassidy's hand and whacking him in the side with it.

"Ouch!"

"Shhh!" Ollie and Spencer said this time as they all started laughing again.

Ollie nudged Spencer with the bread, as if asking for backup. "Don't think for one second you can..."

The threesome turned, hearing Nate yelling Cassidy's name from the front of the house.

"Christ, what now?" Cassidy asked as he followed Spencer out of the kitchen with Ollie and Dog in tow.

\* \* \*

Cassidy froze as he walked into the parlor. He heard Ollie gasp before letting out a little laugh. Cassidy knew the blood had drained from his face, along with the smile that was once there. He glanced at Nate, who was standing somewhat defensively to the side with his hands on his hips.

"Hi, baby!"

Cassidy jerked his head toward Teddy, realizing he wasn't suffering from the delusions he'd been hoping for. "Wha—Um...hi?"

He listened to Ollie whisper, "Holy shit, this is gonna be good," behind him and began to long for the baguette.

Teddy sauntered over, grinning like he'd just discovered the cure for cancer before planting his lips on Cassidy's, thrusting his tongue right on in as if it still belonged there.

Cassidy made a noise that landed somewhere between an eek and a moan as he pulled away, smiling nervously. He held Teddy at arm's length. "What are you doing here, Teddy?"

Teddy shrugged, reaching over as he ran a finger down Cassidy's torso. "I was back home in Kansas, hating my life, not knowing what the hell I was going to do now that I graduated. I was missing you desperately, when it hit me."

"Who hit you?" Cassidy holstered the urge to reenact the scenario. Maybe he has a concussion—amnesia—and he forgot we broke up months ago?

"No, ding-ass, it hit me."

Semantics? Really! Cassidy fired a gaze at Teddy that he seemed to understand all too well. Please let his next words have something to do with falling space debris or having been beaned by a rogue baseball.

"I love you!" Teddy said in a eureka-like tone.

*Kill me now*. Cassidy laughed out of nervousness and a newly discovered *Fatal Attraction*-esque fear building inside him.

"And I've decided I'm not going to allow you to follow the same tired patterns of your past." Teddy shook his head. "No, sir. I'm not going to fade away into the background like all the guys before me."

Cassidy threw his hands into the air as he stormed into the living room. "There have not been that many guys!"

"Focus, dear," Ollie said, coming up behind Cassidy and patting him on the shoulder.

Nate let out a puffing noise and shook his head while walking over to the fireplace. His arms were folded and eyebrows arched as he paced back and forth in the background.

"I'm not letting you break up with me," Teddy said matter-of-factly as he dropped his bag and followed Cassidy.

"You already did let me," Cassidy said, becoming frustrated as his voice cracked. He cleared his throat and glanced around the room like he'd fallen into some sick, twisted episode of the *Twilight Zone*. "There are no take-backs in boyfriends!"

"Ex-boyfriends," Nate tossed out.

"Who's he?" Teddy asked, glaring at Nate, who was smiling in a taunting manner.

"That's Nate, Teddy." Cassidy took Teddy by the arms and shook him slightly. He raised an eyebrow as he allowed his hands to roam over Teddy's biceps. "Wow...you've really been working out."

"Yeah." Teddy grinned, getting that cocky smirk that always turned Cassidy on.

Cassidy continued, sliding his hands over his upper arms and shoulders. "It really shows. You..."

"Fo-cus," Ollie muttered under his breath.

Cassidy ripped his hands away. "Right, Teddy...you really need to focus. You can't just come back three months later and demand we get back together."

"Why not?"

"Not real bright, this one," Nate mumbled.

"Suck it, dude," Teddy said.

Cassidy glanced up at the ceiling. "For the love of all that is gay and holy."

"I know my rights," Teddy blurted out, only to realize himself that his statement didn't actually make sense. "Spencer and I talked a few weeks back, and it revealed this whole twisted pattern you've had."

Cassidy slowly turned, glaring at Spencer, who leaned against one of the columns separating the living room from the entryway. He quickly turned away from Cassidy, cringing slightly.

"Really?" Cassidy asked as if begging for mercy as he stared down Spencer.

Ollie burst out laughing, the only one in the room who appeared to be enjoying himself. "This is like the best vacation ever, honey." Ollie's greedy smile melted away as Cassidy cast a nasty smirk his way.

"Listen," Teddy said, forcing Cassidy back around to face him. "I realize now you've just been waiting for someone to fight for you. A guy with enough balls to stand up to you and say, 'No, I'm not going to let you push me away."

"Oh dear God," Nate said.

All five men jumped as the front door burst open from behind them.

"What the hell?" Cassidy asked, turning to see Neil standing in the foyer. He closed his eyes as a whole new level of dread swept over him. He whispered in a prayer, "Pretty please, let him just be out of gas."

"You listen up, Cassidy... Uh." Neil's forehead scrunched up as if he were searching for the right name. "Um, shoot."

"Jesus," Nate said, throwing his hands in the air as he stared Neil down. "You don't even know his last name!" Nate turned to Cassidy. "Is this Piper's Point or Dante's Cove?"

"Mel-ho's Place!" Ollie yelled, his smile fading as Nate glared, letting him know this might not be the best time to play Who's the Queen of Pop Culture?

"I want you to know that the other night was the most incredible evening I've ever spent with a guy."

Oh God.

"Who's this guy?" Teddy asked, his voice going up an octave as he made an attempt to sort of puff himself up.

"Teddy, please," Cassidy said, pressing his fingers into his temples.

"Who the hell are you?" Neil asked defensively.

"I'm the boyfriend."

"You have a fucking boyfriend?"

"Ex, damn it, ex-boyfriend," Cassidy mumbled.

"You fucked this guy?" Teddy asked, motioning toward Neil.

"This is way better than *Real Housewives*," Ollie said greedily before Spencer smacked him in the arm.

Cassidy sighed. "I'll take that aneurysm any time now."

Teddy's arms flew up into the air as if to say, *What gives*? "I turn my back for like a minute, and you fuck some other dude?"

"Hey, pal, it was more than just a fuck," Neil said, stomping past Spencer as he walked into the room and vehemently pointed his finger at Teddy. "It was transcendent!"

Oh. My. Lord. Cassidy couldn't help himself, despite trying to hold back a smile.

"Oh please, you're nothing but a stupid trick," Teddy said, shoving Cassidy out of the way and lunging at Neil.

"Screw you!" Neil locked arms with Teddy, and they began to wrestle. "You're yesterday's fucking garbage."

Spencer jumped in, trying to pull Neil off Teddy as Cassidy steadied himself. He stood there, mouth hanging slightly open, completely in shock.

"Careful, honey," Ollie said, climbing up into a wingback chair and standing over them with Dog under his arm, who was now barking her fool head off.

"You're all fucking nuts." Nate shook his head as he crossed the room. "You wanna try helping here?" he asked Cassidy as he tried getting between the two. "I think you each need to go back to wherever the hell you came from."

"You piece of shit!" Teddy screamed, taking a swing at Neil.

Cassidy came to, out of the haze he was in. "Cut it out, guys. This is stupid."

Neil shook Spencer off and reared back as Teddy's eyes widened. Nate managed to get his arm around Teddy's waist, pulling him away. Spencer grabbed Neil's arm as he turned back around, attempting to free himself.

Ollie stood on the seat of the chair, bouncing up and down with a bloodlusty expression on his face as he growled in a guttural tone. "Break his arm, honey!"

Cassidy, Spencer, and Nate all turned to stare at Ollie, somewhat astonished, while Neil and Teddy still struggled to get loose. Cassidy glanced back as Neil wiggled loose from Spencer. Teddy ducked, seeing Neil's fist coming his way, which instead made contact with Nate's chin, causing his body to spin around slightly.

"Nate?" Cassidy said, as all the commotion in the room came to a halt.

Cassidy watched as if in slow motion while a sort of drunken half smile spread across Nate's lips. His eyes rolled back, fluttering, just before he crumpled to the floor.

"Son of a bitch!" Cassidy yelled.

\* \* \*

"Ouch, damn it," Nate said.

"Sorry." Cassidy cringed and nervously fidgeted with the baggie of ice as he sat on the edge of Nate's bed.

"Just give it to me," Nate grumbled. He sat up, propping up a couple of pillows behind him. He sighed as he leaned back, inspecting his shirt, which had been ripped open and now missed a few buttons. "Ridiculous."

"I am so sorry," Cassidy offered again, handing over the ice pack while doing his best not to ogle the bit of naked chest exposed to him.

Nate snatched the ice from him. "Your friends are a pack of nutters, you know."

"A little difficult to argue at this point," Cassidy said, smiling with a shrug.

"Maybe if you had some friends you hadn't fucked?" Nate asked, acting superior.

Cassidy gave him a look that let him know he was unimpressed. "Hypocrite much?"

Nate blushed, as if just now remembering that they too were once an item. He rooted around a bit on the bed. "I'm gonna break that Neil guy's face the next time I see him." Nate pressed the ice against his chin. "What the hell, Cass? Is your lube laced with heroin?"

Cassidy laughed. "I can honestly say nothing like this has ever happened before."

"Great, so just in time for my face." Nate shook his head, hissing a little from the pain as he attempted to work out his jaw.

"You have been tweaking Neil's nose since you met him," Cassidy said.

Nate glared at him.

"Not really the right time to bring that up. I see that now."

Nate grinned, and Cassidy relaxed, thinking he might not be as pissed off as he was sure to have been were the situation reversed. They stared at each other for what felt like an eternity to Cassidy, who was no longer sure what to say. He finally broke their gaze and surveyed the room. It wasn't frozen in time the way Cassidy's old bedroom was.

Nate's was a grown-up's bedroom. It was nothing like he remembered, now painted in shades of mocha with a grayish French blue accent wall. Being a longer, rectangular-shaped space on the back side of the house, Nate's room had French doors that opened onto a small balcony that barely had enough room for two chairs and a table. But you could see the ocean through the tree line. Cassidy came to the realization that Nate had to have been living here with Natalie back before the judge ordered the property be vacated.

He wondered why Nate had never returned any of his phone calls as he admired the Stickley-style head and footboards that were well cared for, though obviously antique. Granted, he hadn't called but a few times over the years, but if Nate hadn't been truly angry with him, then why not call him back? Was it because of the mystery guy Natalie had mentioned? Nate must have really been in love with the guy if that were the case. Cassidy suffered a sting of jealousy at that thought.

The warm glow created by the amber-hued glass mission-style lamp shades had an oddly calming effect, and he pushed away the bad, angst-ridden thoughts. Cassidy wiggled his toes into the plush pile of the shag area rug, enjoying the feel and texture. The artwork consisted of black-and-white framed photographs of sand dunes, the lighthouse, and a smattering of miscellaneous architectural elements.

A thirty-two-inch plasma sat on top of the highboy on the opposite wall next to a framed picture of Cassidy and Nate posing on the beach when they were just kids. Cassidy sighed, longing for a life that was once again...simple. The TV had been muted, but the light in the room flickered as the pictures on the screen changed.

Cassidy wished he could lie down on the other side of Nate and go to sleep. He was exhausted from the day's antics and felt as if he'd been in a constant state of tension for days—like a hunted animal ready to bolt at the slightest hint of danger. A wave of loneliness swept over him, and Cassidy found himself dreading the thought of sleeping alone in his bed.

"Can I ask you a question?" Nate asked, pulling Cassidy back out of his thoughts.

"Sure." Cassidy lay back, stretching his body out. He caught a whiff of the suede duvet cover when he turned toward Nate. The scent of leather drifted up through his nostrils, traveling straight down his spine, and headed directly between his legs. He could feel his goose-pimply skin and exhaled slowly in an attempt to gain control over his senses. "Anything you want."

Nate raised an eyebrow as he attempted to hold back a grin, making Cassidy realize how leading that last comment was. The playfulness faded suddenly as he pulled the ice away from his jaw. "What is it really...bionic cock?"

Cassidy started laughing.

"Cause that was totally fucked-up, Cass," Nate said with a shit-eating grin. "I know you're gorgeous, but now you're inciting riots?"

Cassidy shook his head while letting out a belly laugh. He was thankful deep down that Nate was already joking around about it.

"Come on," Nate said, nudging his head toward Cassidy's crotch. "Whip it out already. If it lights up or something, I'll understand."

"You had it your mouth this afternoon," Cassidy said, feeling his face flush with heat. "You nearly bit it off, remember?"

"I do not recall any such thing." Nate shrugged. "Perhaps I have a concussion, a little amnesia or something?"

"I probably still have the teeth marks to prove it."

"You think?" Nate smirked, checking out Cassidy's package. "I should probably take a look, if that's the case. You could be making it all up, trying to take advantage of me in my fragile condition."

"Fragile, my ass." Cassidy squinted at Nate, unable to believe the nonsense that was flying out from between those very enticing lips. "Considering you never even got your clothes all the way off, if anyone was having trouble remembering the other's equipment correctly, it would be me."

"You damn well better remember it correctly," Nate said, puffing his chest out. "I'm the one who tapped that ass...back when it was still virgin territory."

Cassidy moaned deeply as he slowly ran his hand down his stomach toward his package. He started breathing heavily as his fingertips wiggled under the waistband of his jeans. "And you fucked me sooooo good...Tate."

Cassidy laughed as the rolled neck pillow beaned him in the face, ricocheting off onto the floor.

"Asshole," Nate said, flopping back down into the pillows like he'd been mortally wounded.

Cassidy sat up on the bed after hearing a light knock on the door.

"Come in," Nate yelled, nudging Cassidy playfully in the hip with the pad of his foot.

Spencer opened the door, allowing Dog to scamper into the bedroom. "I just let her out. I'm heading to bed and dragging my bloodthirsty little husband with me."

"Ashamed to show his face, I see." Cassidy smirked.

"I should hope so," Nate added.

"We wrapped up two plates and put 'em in the fridge, if you guys get hungry, and Ollie's set Teddy up in your room, Cass."

Nate squirmed a bit. "Why the hell is he still here?"

"Don't be an ass," Cassidy said.

Nate's mouth fell open, and Cassidy rolled his eyes, apologizing as he remembered Nate had been unconscious during that revelation. "He just came out to his parents, who were less than happy about it, and then used what little money he had taking a bus to get here."

"Of course he did." Nate nodded as he laughed at the ludicrousness of it all. "So we're now a homo halfway house."

"We assumed you wouldn't want anyone in Sadie's room other than yourself?" Spencer questioned with a shrug as he chuckled over Nate's objections.

"That's fine. Thanks, Spencer." Cassidy leaned over to pick up Dog. "We can sleep downstairs on the pull-out tonight, can't we, girl?" He laughed as Dog licked his chin, her nubby tail going a mile a minute.

"Night, guys," Spencer said, starting to close the door. He popped his head back in. "Sorry again for my totally innocent role in tonight's festivities. I figured Teddy would call, not show up on your doorstep. He seemed like he needed closure or..."

"It's all good, Spencer." Cassidy nodded. "You're a good friend for him to have right now."

"Oh yes... Thank goodness he has you," Nate growled as Cassidy punched him in the leg.

"And hey, since Nate has this big bed, you should just bunk in here if you don't want to stay in Sadie's room," Spencer said, turning to leave.

"G'night, Spencer," Nate called out as the door pulled shut. He smiled in an ornery manner at Cassidy as he rubbed his leg where he'd been punched. "That's probably not a bad idea, by the way. Lord knows that prepubescent 'roid-rabbit will be trying to sneak into your bed in the middle of the night otherwise."

Cassidy momentarily got lost in erotic flashes of his pretty-boy jock of an ex, who, while having had good-guy written all over him, became amazingly nasty in the sack once the lights went out. "He's really not a bad guy, you know."

"If you say so." Nate gave Cassidy a suspicious sidelong glance as if having just read his thoughts. "I'm just a little wary of your judgment at the moment."

Cassidy smirked, turning his attention to Dog, who sat politely on his lap as he scratched behind her ear. "Thinks he knows it all."

Cassidy laughed as Nate pushed him with his foot again. Dog jumped up, placing her paws on Cassidy's chest, and went about licking his chin.

## **Chapter Twelve**

Cassidy smiled, stretching as his eyes fluttered open. He smacked his lips as he gazed sleepily around the room, waiting for his eyes to come into focus. Remembering he'd slept in Nate's bed, he turned, smile fading slightly as he realized he was alone. He rolled onto his side and reached over, snagging one of the pillows Nate had slept on.

Shoving his face into the pillow, he inhaled deeply as he hugged it, taking renewed notice of the hard-on between his legs. He moaned, breathing in Nate's scent once more, intensely enjoying the feel of his erection straining against the warm, cottony fabric of his briefs. He acknowledged the fact he wanted Nate, and for once embraced the notion as opposed to chastising himself over it. Feeling a tiny bit of precum leaking out as he thrust his pelvis into the mattress, he decided there would be no more hiding behind his fears and objections. He was going to man up and own it.

Cassidy yelped, tossing the pillow when he heard the door clicking like someone was coming into the room. He sat up in the bed, breathing heavily as he stared, wide-eyed, at the bedroom door. Cassidy placed a hand over his chest, realizing the door wasn't actually shut and a breeze from the open windows caused the latch to click against the plate.

He started laughing once he noticed he'd chucked the pillow halfway across the room. Staring disappointedly down at his now-softening cock, he sarcastically said, "And you were going to man up and own it."

Cassidy's eyes widened as he kicked and tossed the blankets off, suddenly taking note that his dick was working. He yanked down his briefs, wiggling his hips, and thoroughly inspected the skin around the base. "My precious, precious." He smiled, falling back into the mattress, relieved his engines were once again firing on all cylinders. "Not so much as a bruise."

He shimmied back into his undies and got out of bed, stretching while adjusting himself in his briefs. The sunlight filtered in through the light sheers softly blowing in the breeze. He stumbled over to the highboy and patted Sadie's urn, which he'd placed there the night before. Cassidy hoped some of her fearlessness might somehow rub off on him. He squinted, trying to focus on the photograph of Nate and him as kids, then turned back toward the nightstand, spotting his glasses.

Crossing the room, he became aware of the fact he was oddly at home in Nate's bedroom. Putting on his glasses, he chewed on his lip, thinking maybe he should

just come clean with Nate and lay it all out on the line. He had feelings for him, and even though he wasn't sure how deep those feelings ran or whether Nate felt the same, was it really that big of a deal? Perhaps holding it all in was lending more weight to it than there should be.

"So what if we went out and it didn't work?" Cassidy asked, staring out the French doors across the beach below. Nate was family in a sense, and nothing could ever change that. "And if it did work?"

Cassidy started to imagine what it would be like to have Nate back in Chapel Hill with him when he heard the screen door snap from down below. He sighed, watching Teddy head across the courtyard toward the beach.

He turned and walked past the highboy, winking at Sadie, who he decided to leave right where she was. He spotted the photo with crystal clarity this time as he pulled on the jeans he'd tossed over the footboard last night. He slid the belt out of the loops and set it on the foot of the bed, deciding he would forgo his shirt as well. He had the oddest desire to leave something of his in Nate's bedroom, marking his territory in some weird way.

Aware of how badly he needed to pee, he headed for the door, prioritizing his needs. Pee, brush the teeth, and then find Nate so they could have a little talk, Cassidy thought.

Maybe some coffee first and then the talk?

Cassidy reached for the doorknob, feeling positive about the possibilities of his summer for the first time.

\* \* \*

Coming down the stairs, Cassidy cornered on the small landing and froze, noticing Dr. Downey and Nate in the living room talking. Whispering, to be exact, Cassidy thought, unable to tell what they were saying, yet aware of the obvious tension between the two. Ben was holding Dog, and the two were barely a foot apart.

Cassidy could feel a sickening sense of dread creeping into his gut as he quietly took another step down, freezing again the instant he heard the creak of the wood. Ben and Nate practically sprang apart, like kids caught doing something they knew they weren't supposed to be. That sense of hopefulness he'd woken up with faded to black as his chest began to ache.

He smiled, making an extra effort to hide his disappointment at realizing Nate and Ben were most definitely seeing each other. He even flashed back to the day he took Dog to the vet's, distinctly remembering not only the fact that Ben had mentioned Nate's name, but that his voice had been laced with a very distinct tone. It hadn't been mere idle curiosity as he'd imagined at the time. Ben had been pumping Cassidy for information.

"Hello, Doc," Cassidy said in his most convincing jovial tone. He reached out to take Dog from him. *You can't have Dog too, asshole.* 

"Just came to check on our little patient," Ben said, smiling cheerfully as he passed the dog to Cassidy while doing a horrible job at trying to mask the obvious tension in the room.

"She's doing great, by the way," Nate said with a nod.

Cassidy snuggled her up in his arms as Dog did what she did best by giving his chin a tongue bath. He eyed them both suspiciously as they stood in place smiling back at him. He resisted the urge to tell them to cut the crap already. "Wow, do I ever need coffee."

Ben and Nate laughed, obviously overcompensating by faking amusement, considering he hadn't said anything even remotely funny.

Nate's gaze flitted nervously from Cassidy to Ben and back again. "I think Ollie and Spencer are in the kitchen."

I get it. You want me to vamoose. "I slept great, by the way."

"I'm glad," Nate said, absentmindedly rubbing his bruised chin.

"Nate has the most comfy bed," Cassidy said, instantly feeling like an asshole as Ben appeared to shrink a little, despite keeping up the facade with his facial expression. He made his way out of the living room and down the hall toward the kitchen, hearing the whispers resume from behind him.

You didn't have to be such a jerk, as shole. Like it's Ben's fault you crawled out of the woodwork after all these years, wanting Nate back.

As if sensing Cassidy was beating himself up, Dog reached up and gave the underside of his chin one more lick.

Cassidy kissed the top of her head. "Thanks for the sugar."

He let out a disgruntled groan and spun back around, trying not to take it personally as the whispers ceased the instant he rounded the column. "We're all planning to make a day of it on the beach, Ben. There's plenty of food and drink to go around, if you'd like to join us."

Ben glanced at Nate, folding his arms as he turned to Cassidy. "Would there happen to be any liquor in those drinks?"

"Oh yeah!" Cassidy said, adding a very sarcastic laugh as he turned.

"I'd love to stay, thanks."

"Grrrreat!" Cassidy called back as he walked away, trying to purge the images he had in his head of drowning Ben in the ocean and feeding him to the sharks.

\* \* \*

Entering the kitchen, Cassidy found Ollie and Spencer standing around the island. He could tell by the expressions on their faces they'd come to the same conclusions regarding Ben.

"Tough break, dude," Spencer said, leaning on the top of the island with his elbows, coffee mug in hand.

Cassidy wandered over to the island, feeling deflated. "I did not see that one coming."

Ollie's eyes widened as he grabbed the coffeepot. "He's not even making an attempt to deny it. This can't be good... Oh wait, we aren't talking about me, so it's okay." He filled an empty mug that had been sitting on the countertop.

"We'd better never be talking about you," Spencer said to Ollie.

"It's a sign." Cassidy shrugged. "It's not meant to be."

Spencer shook his head. "If you aren't willing to go after him, you don't deserve to have him."

"I'm not a home wrecker," Cassidy said, leaning over to place Dog on the floor. He watched as she went about sniffing the floor for any hidden morsels of food. "I can't believe he'd blow me while having a boyfriend."

"Sweet!" Ollie pointed at Spencer, who had a grimace on his face. "You lose. I told you he couldn't keep it in his pants!"

"Damn it, Cass!" Spencer said, shaking his head in disappointment.

Ollie passed a cup to Cassidy. "If it makes any difference, while I couldn't really hear anything when I tried to eavesdrop, it did appear as if all wasn't well between them."

"Well, I'm not going to be the reason either of them use to jump ship." Cassidy took a sip of coffee, feeling the burn slowly make its way down into his chest.

"I realize you're not exactly used to needing to chase after a guy," Spencer said, standing up straight, "but I seriously think now would be the time to start."

"Thank you! That's it!" Cassidy said, a sense of relief washing over him.

"What's it?" Ollie asked, looking around the room with a "who farted?" expression.

"Spencer's right. I don't know how to chase after a guy because I've never had to." Cassidy took another drink, feeling a new clarity sweep over him, like his eyes were finally open. "That's why I suck at this. God, I feel so much better about myself."

"Really not the thing to be bragging about at the moment," Spencer said, straddling a bar stool.

"Yeah," Ollie said with a snort, "a little hard to empathize with you when you point out how easy you've always had it."

"I can't help it," Cassidy said, grinning. "I'm not an asshole. I'm just clueless."

Ollie sneered. "Can't you be both?"

"Quit trying to bitch-bait me. I'm having a revelation here."

"It's so not in my nature," Ollie sighed, "but I'll try."

"So neither of you would have a problem coming in between two other guys?" Cassidy asked.

"No regrets, baby." Spencer shrugged.

"Is this the same speech that Teddy got?" Cassidy asked, causing Spencer to snarl up his lip.

"Let me just say," Ollie piped in, his head bobbing as he placed a hand on his hip. He pointedly locked eyes with Cassidy, "that if two people really love each other, ain't nobody gonna come between 'em."

"All of a sudden he thinks he's Madea," Cassidy said to Spencer as Ollie rolled his eyes. "No more *Housewives of Atlanta* for you." Cassidy cocked an eyebrow, mocking Ollie's 'tude. "You're getting a little too sassy for your own good."

Spencer laughed at Ollie. "You really are, gurrrl."

Cassidy laughed at Spencer, who always looked ridiculous whenever he tried to channel the sistas.

Ollie put up a hand and turned away. "Fuck you both...bitches."

Cassidy went to the back door, seeing Teddy sitting out on the beach by himself. He sighed as his mind went right back to thoughts of Nate, wishing he could turn back time and not have seen what he had when coming down the stairs that morning.

It wasn't going to be easy, trying to put this particular genie back into the bottle, but he knew he needed to try. Hart's Island wasn't like other places. It was a very close-knit community. There were consequences to a person's actions here, and Cassidy knew he couldn't play fast and loose with whatever was going on between Ben and Nate.

Considering he wasn't even going to be living here full-time, he also didn't feel he had the right to step in and muck up the water. He needed to make sure he left everything the way he'd found it, and not mess around with the natural order of things. Cassidy saw Spencer playfully kissing on Ollie and wanted to be all, Aw...how sweet. But considering he had a strong urge to hurl something at their heads, he decided he could make better use of his time by going out and making an attempt to figure out what the hell had gotten into Teddy.

\* \* \*

Kicking off his sandals, Cassidy bent over and picked up Dog before walking down the stone-paved steps and into the sand. The ocean was a little more active today, the waves rushing up the sandy beach a little farther and faster than they had been. The sun was breaking through the clouds as they rolled by, and Teddy seemed slightly mesmerized by the Mother Nature of it all.

Cassidy cleared his throat, alerting Teddy to his presence. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Hey." Teddy glanced back, as if he was particularly down in the dumps. "Just sitting here, thinking how beautiful this all is."

Cassidy sat down in the sand next to him, letting loose of Dog, who was slightly alarmed by the sand and the fact that her feet sank into it. Cassidy and Teddy both chuckled as she took a step, carefully lifting her paw and sniffing about before moving forward.

Cassidy crossed his arms, resting them on his knees. "Like she thinks each step might be her last."

Teddy nodded. "I get that."

"Your parents?" Cassidy asked.

Teddy nodded again. Cassidy wondered if he'd be able to get to the bottom of things, if all he was going to get out of him was a series of nods and grunts.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"They didn't throw me out or anything," Teddy said, pushing his sunglasses up onto the top of his head and squinting at Cassidy. "They sure as hell let me know they'd never accept it, though."

"I'm sorry." Cassidy sighed, putting his arm around Teddy.

"You should be, according to them," Teddy said. "They totally blame you."

Cassidy's mouth fell open. No way in hell was I his first trip to the rodeo.

"They kept saying I'd never be happy, never be able to fall in love or have a family of my own, and I guess I finally lost it. Yelling at them like a crazy person about how wrong they were. That I'd already fallen in love and that the only reason we broke up was because I graduated and had to move back home."

Cassidy began to understand how Teddy wound up on his doorstep.

"I know that when we met I said all that stuff about not wanting anything serious, that I'd be leaving at the end of the school year and we could only be together if you were cool with it being a casual thing." Teddy shrugged, reaching over to caress Cassidy's ankle. "But I really did fall for you, Cass."

They both started laughing when Dog pounced on Teddy's fingers, wanting to play. She barked until Teddy began to play along, running his fingers across the sand while she chased after them.

"And you don't think that this flood of feelings for me might have more to do with what's comfortable to you..."

Teddy started to puff himself up for his defense. "Just because I might be a little scared at the moment doesn't give you the right to tell me how I feel, Cass."

"You're right, Teddy, but I'm not telling. I'm just throwing some things out there to see if anything makes sense to you."

Teddy settled back down, though he didn't appear all that happy about doing so as he turned his attention back down at the sand. He continued to taunt Dog, who was never quite fast enough to catch his fingers.

"But I do want you to really consider that you might only be drawn to me now because you're craving the familiar. The ground under your feet has completely shifted on you, and your whole world has changed overnight. That would scare the shit out of anyone. Believe me, I know." Cassidy wondered if he wasn't also speaking about himself in regard to Nate. Maybe being back here, feeling as alone in the world as he did, he'd manufactured feelings that weren't really there.

"Perhaps having your parents say those horrible things to you might have also played a tiny part in that you really wanted to prove them wrong?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Teddy reached down and scooped up the dog, loving on her.

"And they are wrong, Teddy." Cassidy reached over, gently forcing Teddy to face him. "You may have to work a little harder to get it, but you can have everything a straight couple has."

"Just not with you." Teddy jerked his chin free, milking the drama. "I'll see about getting a job so I can earn enough for the bus ride back to Kansas. I'll get out of your hair as soon as I can."

Cassidy smacked him in the side. "I don't want you to leave, asshole. I actually think it would be great if you stayed for the summer."

Teddy got that glint of hope in his eye.

"As a friend, Teddy." Cassidy gave him the no-bullshit face. "Nothing else."

Teddy scowled, turning his attention back to the pup. "I don't know, maybe. I still need a job, though. I can't just live off you."

Cassidy slung an arm over Teddy's shoulder as he looked out over the ocean. "I'd like it if you could think of Piper's Point as your home. It's always been like magic for me. Maybe it could wind up becoming the same for you."

"Can it mend a broken heart?" Teddy asked, trying to guilt Cassidy a little.

"I don't think it's broken, babe." Cassidy winked as he stood up. "Bruised, perhaps, but not broken."

Teddy laughed a little after Dog managed to get in a couple of surprise licks.

"You want me to take her back in with me?"

"Nah, it's okay. I got her."

Cassidy turned to head back to the house, and Teddy called back, "Thanks, Cass."

"You're welcome, Teddy."

Cassidy slowly made his way back up the stone steps, meandering across the courtyard as he thought about all the things he'd just said to Teddy. A shudder crawled across his skin. The thought that his feelings for Nate might not be genuine frightened him. He paused for a moment before opening the screen door, listening to Ollie and Spencer laughing and flirting with each other inside the house. Cassidy was intensely grateful to have them here, despite having the constant reminder of how happy they were together shoved in his face. He hated himself for thinking that, yet there was truth behind it. It was one of those revelations he wasn't too happy to discover. It may have been part of who he was as an individual, but it certainly wasn't the best part.

Cassidy came back up the stairs to dig out his bathing suit, having left Ollie in charge of the blender, making a poor man's version of frozen sangria. The poor man's version being microwaved store-bought fruit concentrate as opposed to hovering over the stove boiling real fruit and sugar. Spencer was assembling kebabs to marinate in the fridge for later that afternoon, and the entire house vibrated and hummed from the blaring club music provided by Ollie.

It's like living in a Janet Jackson video, Cassidy thought, half expecting backup dancers to come flying out of the bedrooms as he cleared the last step. He caught a glimpse of some movement through Nate's bedroom door, which wasn't closed all the way. He froze, feeling as if he'd been gutted like a fish while taking a step back. He felt as if his eyes might bug right out of skull, seeing Nate and Ben hugging each other as they stood at the foot of the bed in nothing but swim trunks. Cassidy quickly averted his eyes as Nate noticed him standing there. He wasted no time crossing the landing, shutting his bedroom door behind him.

Cassidy placed his hand over his chest as he leaned back against the door. If these feelings were manufactured as a result of his loneliness, they certainly packed quite the punch. He took a few deep breaths before finally pushing himself off the door. Momentarily forgetting what the hell he'd come upstairs for, Cassidy stood clueless, in the middle of the room attempting to recall the ill-fated reason.

Total recall kicked in, and he started to unbutton his jeans, kicking them across the floor after they fell to his ankles. Inviting Ben to stay was supposed to be torturing to Nate, not him. He shimmied out of his briefs, trying to purge the image of them hugging each other from his brain. Cassidy walked over to the kid-sized bureau and rifled through the drawers until he found the black formfitting trunks.

Lots of liquor, he thought as he headed back out into the hall on his way to the bathroom to make a quick run through the shower. He didn't particularly care whether anyone happened to catch him in the buff. He wasn't going to tiptoe around all day worrying about what everyone else thought. *I'm having fun today, so help me—even if it winds up killing me.* 

\* \* \*

Cassidy opened the bathroom door, still adjusting the goods in the snug briefcut suit. He found Nate leaning against the wall next to the staircase waiting for him. A little smile formed as he watched Cassidy rearranging his bits.

"I don't particularly want to talk to you right now," Cassidy said, crossing his arms and taking a stance as if claiming one-half of the landing to be his territory.

Nate pushed his body away from the wall. "What did I do?"

"Don't play coy with me. You've got some nerve."

Nate stood there, arms wide open, as if he was genuinely confused.

"You really think I'm too stupid to figure out what was going on between you and Ben earlier?"

Nate's arms fell to his sides as his face pinked up. He fidgeted as if trying to buy a little time to figure out what excuse to go with.

Cassidy lowered his voice to a whisper, despite being doubtful anyone downstairs would be able to overhear, as the bass from the boom box in the kitchen vibrated the floor under his feet. "I can't believe you tried to have sex with me!"

Nate's mouth fell open. "You actually think..." He stopped and took in a deep breath. "Of course you would. You brought your harem with you!"

"Oh, that's rich!" Cassidy tossed an arm into the air.

"I mean really, Cass, exactly where was I going to fit in?" Nate practically hissed he was so pissed. "Going to pencil me in on Thursdays and every third Saturday? Maybe before you go accusing me of two-timing, you might consider shedding a few of the three guys you're currently juggling."

Cassidy was shaking, and he folded his arms in an attempt to prevent himself from reaching out to strangle Nate. He hadn't exactly planned the Neil thing, which could hardly be considered a relationship at this point, and he certainly hadn't encouraged Teddy to travel across the country for a reunite-ment. But the fact that Nate had the gall to start throwing out ultimatums when he himself was dating the local dog whisperer infuriated Cassidy. "You know what, Nate? You can't just insert yourself back into my life ten years later and start making all these demands on me."

"Demands? What fucking demands have I made? Suggesting you might want to chose one of us already and stop stringing the rest along?"

"Ha! You mean hurry up and pick you." Cassidy fumed, realizing on some level he wasn't even making sense any longer as they'd both supposedly agreed that they shouldn't be anything other than friends. "And you aren't even free to be picked!"

"Fuck you, Cassidy. Stop acting like you're starring in some foreign-language film—a French farce where you're cast in the lead as the ardent and steadfast boynext-door who goes home for a visit to find himself in quite the pickle as three hotties vie for his attentions."

Cassidy wasn't able to hold back the smile forming, despite chewing on his lip in an attempt to squelch it. "Why a foreign film?"

Nate thrust his arms through the air like a madman. "Like Hollywood would ever make that movie!"

Cassidy laughed, feeling a tug or maybe some type of old connection, realizing he'd known exactly what Nate had meant by it. "I just can't handle you putting all this pressure on me right now."

"Jesus, Cass, is your reality really that skewed, or is this some type of twisted game at playing hard to get?"

"That's not fair!"

"Well, you of all people should know life isn't fair. I need some air." Nate turned and headed for the staircase.

"I'm not the one playing games, Mr. Cock-tease one minute and Mr. Freeze the next." Cassidy smiled, watching Nate stop at the top of the stairs. "I mean, really...why now, Nate?"

Nate turned, shaking his head as if disgusted by the insinuation, although Cassidy thought he could spot a tiny glimmer of guilt peeking out from behind the mask.

"You really aren't very smart, huh." Nate strode across the landing until they were practically face-to-face.

Cassidy reached out, grabbing Nate's shoulder to keep him from advancing farther. He didn't know what the right thing to say was, and he was convinced that regardless, he was sure to say the wrong thing. He wasn't even sure what the fuck they were arguing about anymore. The only thing he did know was that he wanted Nate. Cassidy knew what he wanted to say, but he could feel the words sticking there in the back of his throat.

Nate reached up with both hands, and took Cassidy's face in them. He leaned in, pressed his lips to Cassidy's, and slowly slid his tongue inside. The kiss was soft and warm, practically inviting Cassidy in for more. It wasn't forceful, and there was no desperation behind it. To Cassidy, it was simply Nate giving a little piece of himself in perhaps the only way he knew how at that particular moment.

And just as quickly as it had been given, it was taken away as Nate pulled back, meeting Cassidy's eyes for a flicker of a moment before turning away and heading down the stairs without another word.

Cassidy stood there, mouth slightly hanging open as he reached up, and ran his fingertips softly over his lips. He really hated it when Nate did shit like that. "Emotional terrorist," he mumbled under his breath, half expecting to see an actual film crew of burly French men standing about wearing berets and smoking cigarettes. He found himself wishing he were seventeen again, figuring that back then, after a kiss like that, Nate would've had him naked and bent over something by now. He curled up his lips, overly aroused and agitated as he reached down, and readjusted himself in his trunks once again.

"Merde!" he yelled, starting for the stairs while moaning his disapproval.

# **Chapter Thirteen**

Neil came walking into the kitchen, towel and T-shirt slung over his shoulder as he held up both hands, declaring that he came in peace—this time. Nate was none too pleased to see him, and Dog barked exactly one time before laying her head back down on Nate's leg. Teddy didn't exactly jump through hoops either, while everyone else welcomed him heartily as they all tossed back another shot of vodka. They made an enticing little man-buffet, all circled around the island in nothing but swim trunks like they might be the hors d'oeuvres.

Cassidy smiled, thinking how much Sadie would love this. He could practically picture it—her breezing into the kitchen in one of those peacock-colored silk caftans, eyes widening as she brushed her hair back behind her ear, saying something like, "All this beefcake...for me? Cassidy, you really shouldn't have."

Ollie and Nate were sitting on stools while everyone else stood, waiting patiently for Spencer to pour another shot.

"What gives?" Neil asked as he took a spot next to Spencer. "It's gorgeous out. Why the hell are you all inside?"

"Cause we can't leave till the bottle is empty," Cassidy said, pointing at the vodka while holding back a smile as he briefly allowed his gaze to run over Neil's torso. He had a few mental flashbacks of their sexcapades a few evenings ago, and he quickly averted his eyes, fearing everyone might suddenly be able to read his thoughts. Damn Nate for getting him all worked up and walking away.

"And everyone must do their part." Ollie tapped the countertop.

"Yeah." Nate looked Neil over in a not-too-friendly way. "Pour Douchey here two of those bad boys."

"Why the hell is my nickname Douchey?" Neil asked.

"Because you sucker punched me." Nate nodded. "Which was a douchey thing to do."

Dog's head popped up, and she barked once more as if to say, Yeah!

"Quite the tough little wingman you got there." Neil downed his first shot and eyed Dog as he picked up his second shot. "I'll get you, my pretty."

Dog's ears perked straight up, and her head cocked to the side as Neil drank the second one, then slammed the shot glass down onto the counter.

Neil hunched over the top of the island toward her. "And your little dog too."

Dog's eyes widened a little, and she whimpered, spinning around in a circle before lying back down on Nate's lap.

"You scared her!" Cassidy chucked a lemon wedge at Neil, who snickered all evil-like.

"Way to go, shit head," Nate said as everyone else joined in giving Neil a hard time for frightening the poor, defenseless puppy.

"Okay, I'm sorry!" Neil yelled while trying to stop laughing.

"He has to take an extra shot for being such a jerk," Ollie insisted as everyone began to quiet back down.

"Fine," Neil said with a smug shrug. "I can handle it."

Nate chucked another lemon wedge at him, which smacked him right in the forehead.

Neil pushed a shot glass toward Spencer in a fill-'er-up manner as he eyed Nate. "Not cool, dude."

"No more fruit tossing allowed," Spencer yelled out, as if he were the official rule maker.

Everyone started to chuckle under their breath right before pelting Spencer with lemon wedges.

Spencer seemed less than amused as Cassidy tried to stop laughing, patting him on the shoulder in an attempt to console him.

"Whose bright idea was it to do vodka shooters, anyway?" Cassidy shook his head as Neil swallowed his last shot. He smirked, realizing no one was going to come out and take responsibility. "This has to be the single worst idea ever."

"I know!" Ollie grinned, doing everything but laughing maniacally while rubbing his hands together. "It's gonna be a wickedly interesting day."

"As I suspected," Cassidy said. "Any and all blame for what happens here today will be left lying on your doorstep, you little imp."

"Why do I feel like I've missed something?" Teddy asked, dipping a lemon wedge into the bowl of sugar. He squished up his face as he clamped down on the piece of fruit and sucked.

"Because you have, as usual," Ollie added.

"You're not alone," Neil said, doing a little dance as he too sucked on a sugared wedge.

Teddy frowned, tossing the rind onto the countertop. "Great, I'm stuck in the dark with Douchey?"

"If it makes any difference, I believe I'm out of the loop as well," Ben said with a quick wink.

"Thanks," Teddy said, standing there like an obedient golden retriever, as if awaiting praise from his master.

Amazing how quickly that one's feelings can be mended. Cassidy caught Nate watching him. He'd tried a couple of times to pull Cassidy aside after the little accusapalooza that went on earlier that morning, but Cassidy wasn't ready to listen. He wanted to feel good, not like shit, and was under the distinct impression that whatever Nate wanted to tell him would likely have the latter effect.

Spencer emptied the last of the bottle, doing his best to divvy up the remaining vodka equally between all of them. Cassidy was certain they'd all be completely hosed before the sun went down. There was a fridge full of beer, and Ollie and Spencer had made a vat of frozen sangria, which now sat in two large containers in the freezer. He'd already collected everyone's keys except Neil's, something he remedied immediately after finishing off his last shooter.

As everyone finally began to head outside, Cassidy held back, grabbing the mop out of the pantry.

"Come on, Cassidy," Spencer called back. "Leave that for later."

Cassidy laughed, imagining that later would produce zero cleaning, considering he already had a decent buzz going. "I'll be right out. I need to clean this up. I don't wanna come in later and find the dog hungover and passed out in the middle of the kitchen floor."

"Gotcha!" Spencer said, hopping down the step onto the back porch, pushing Neil out in front of him.

"You want me to take her out?" Nate asked, thumbing toward the west lawn. "To do her business."

"If you don't mind," Cassidy said, holding the sponge mop under the faucet as Nate spirited the dog outside.

"Come on, Ben-vet." The only way Ollie now referred to him. "You can fill me in on all the juicy island dirt." The volume in the room dropped dramatically as Ollie yanked the enormous boom box off the counter and exited the door with it.

"So you're like a vet, huh?" Teddy asked, following them. "What war did you fight in?"

Cassidy bit his lip to keep from laughing. *Thank God he's pretty*. He could actually form a coherent thought again, now that the decibel level had dropped. He circled the kitchen island, picking up all the fruit wedges. Upon further consideration, he decided it best not to attempt thinking, as it couldn't lead anywhere good. He mopped up the little bit of spilled vodka he found and rerinsed the mop, wringing it out before placing it back into the pantry.

Nate brought the dog back in, immediately ripped open the bag of pepperoniflavored dog treats, and tossed a chunk down on the floor for her. "She loves those things."

Cassidy nodded, wondering if it was good for her to have so many as he pulled the footstool across the floor and stepped up to open the cabinet above the fridge. He peered in, letting out an *aha* as he reached toward the back, fumbling for the cheesy plastic coconut cups he'd always admired when he was little.

"Christ, I haven't seen those in ages," Nate said, taking them one by one from Cassidy as he pulled them out.

"Sweet!" Cassidy snagged a box of neon bendy straws before climbing back down.

Nate rinsed out the coconuts, setting them to the side of the sink as Cassidy took one of the sangria containers out of the freezer.

"We broke up months ago," Nate finally said, taking the ice-cream scoop from the drawer and passing it to Cassidy.

Cassidy stood there watching him for a moment, licking the sangria off his fingers after removing the lid. He was wondering if this convenient breakup had happened around the same time he won his lawsuit, alerting everyone on the island that he'd most likely be coming back home.

"And no," Nate suddenly added, "it happened several months before I knew you'd be coming back."

Cassidy grinned as he started to scoop out the now-half-frozen concoction, unsure whether he liked the fact Nate appeared able to read his thoughts like that. "It doesn't really matter does it?"

Nate watched Cassidy suspiciously while Cassidy held back the urge to ask why things hadn't worked out between them.

"I thought we were both of the same opinion—that it would be a mistake for anything to happen between us."

Nate shut the water off, setting the last coconut on the cabinet for Cassidy to fill. "I guess—I mean, you're right. No reason to risk it."

Other than the fact I wanna lick all your boy bits. "Glad we agree. Now pop some straws in those coconuts. I need to maintain a certain level of intoxication if I have any hope of surviving this train wreck of a day."

Nate nodded, exhaling dramatically. "True dat."

\* \* \*

The sunlight was amazing, soaking into his skin as Cassidy and Nate joined everyone else on the beach. The warmth from the sand squishing up between his toes allowed some of the tension to drain out of his shoulders. A dance remix of Santana's "Smooth" was blaring out of the enormous boom box, sitting in the shade back along the tree line.

Huge blue-and-white-striped beach towels were spread out across the beach as Ollie came running like mad from the ocean. Spencer and Neil were catcalling at him from the water, where they were trying to splash each other.

Ollie screamed back in a shivering, shrill tone of voice, "Shrinkage!" He swiped one of the frozen cocktails from the tray Cassidy was holding. "That cold-ass water completely obliterated my buzz."

Note to self—steer clear of the water.

Teddy, who'd been huddled up with Ben after spreading out the last of the towels, came running up to Nate and Cassidy. "I got a job! A job! Ben just hired me to do...something!" Teddy grabbed a coconut cup and began slurping, not seeming to care that he had no clue what sorts of duties this job would entail.

Nate mumbled something under his breath as Teddy took off after Ollie, who'd gone to the designated sunbathing area. Cassidy smiled at Ben, who came over shaking his head, obviously feeling pretty decent considering he'd just made Teddy's day.

"He's really excited," Ben said, scratching his head. He was obviously a little confused by Teddy's reaction and slightly embarrassed by it.

"That was really good of you." Cassidy handed Ben a coconut. "He needed some good news." Cassidy was irritated Ben had done it, as it made hating the guy somewhat slippery in terms of his conscience. The man also filled out the pair of trunks Nate had lent him quite nicely. Cassidy caught Nate admiring Ben and his package as well. Two-timing ogler. Cassidy sighed, not appreciating it so much when he wasn't the one being ogled. He was doubly irritated realizing he'd have to be ridiculously friendly to Ben; otherwise everyone would be able to tell how intensely jealous he was of the man. "Thanks for doing that, Ben."

Nate took a drink off the tray and walked away, not saying anything. Cassidy wondered whom Nate was jealous of—Ben, who'd now be spending his days with Teddy, or Cassidy, who'd invited Teddy to live at the shack in the first place. He started to play Connect the Jealousy Dots in his head, until he realized too many of them led back to him. He smiled as if able to hear Sadie calling out to him, *No sense stewing over the bad stuff, baby boy.* 

Cassidy's entire body jerked, and he fumbled, trying not to drop the tray as Ollie let out a bloodcurdling shriek, pointing at the water, screaming, "Shark!" He immediately doubled over, laughing his ass off as he watched Neil and Spencer stumbling over each other as they panicked in an attempt to get out of the water. They yelled a multitude of obscenities once they figured out Ollie had just paid them back for calling him a wuss.

"It wasn't a big deal," Ben said, watching with a half smile as Teddy jumped around Ollie, who was less than enthused by his antics. "He's kind of helping me out of a tight spot. I had to fire my receptionist."

"You didn't!" Cassidy accused, wondering when Marianne would darken his door and point her finger, as it was sure to be Cassidy's fault.

"No—well, not only because of you." Ben took a sip and coughed a little, staring at his drink. "Jesus Christ." He wiped his eyes, which were watering slightly. "Sarah—wow, that's strong stuff—she sent a pet home with the wrong family. It was a mess."

"Didn't the person notice they had the wrong...?"

"Cat.'

"Yeah...they didn't bother double-checking before they got it home?"

"Apparently not." Ben took another cautious sip. "She was a fucking nightmare. Honestly, Cassidy, I'd have fired her after the fainting if I hadn't feared you might suffer the blame."

Great...Ben's a saint, and I'm an evil, cock-mongering man-whore. And please don't tell me the entire island's referring to it as the fainting. Sounds like a goddamned M. Night Shyamalan film.

He squinted, laughing as Teddy attempted to pull Ollie up off his towel to dance. Nate was laughing as well, now standing over by them as Ollie hurled one slur after another at Teddy.

"Teddy's a sweet guy." Cassidy gave Ben a sideways glance. "There's not a disingenuous bone in his body. He'll bust his ass to be the best damned receptionist you've ever had."

"Lucky for him I'm not the kind to take advantage." Ben started to walk away and then stopped without turning around. "I'm actually not too bad of a friend to have around either."

Cassidy sighed, snarling up his lip slightly as he followed Ben toward the others. His arms began to shake from holding the tray of drinks all that time. And Cassidy wondered how good of a friend Ben could actually be, considering he felt the need to go around advertising the fact.

Passing the tray to Nate, who placed it on the sand, Cassidy dropped to his knees on the towel next to him. Nate passed him a cocktail, which he quickly began to suck down, stirring the now-melting concoction with the straw.

"Puh-lease call off your ex-minion from hell," Ollie said as Teddy finally gave up and spun about, running toward the water. "Thank God. Peace at last!"

Cassidy sat down, nodding as Nate waved the sunscreen at him. "He wouldn't keep harassing you if you didn't insist on letting him know how annoyed you were by it."

"He's an idiot," Nate said, flicking the lid open and squirting some lotion into his hands.

"Overgrown freak of a man-child," Ollie said disapprovingly. "Honestly, Cass, I never could figure out what you saw in him."

"Wait, so you dated him too?" Ben asked, confused. "I thought that Neil guy was the one who punched Nate."

Cassidy took another big sip before smushing his coconut into the sand so it wouldn't topple over. "Well, Ben, I'm apparently the man-whore of Babylon, having fucked every man along the eastern seaboard."

Ollie burst out laughing as Ben turned red, obviously not having meant his question in the finger-pointy way in which Cassidy had taken it.

"Please pardon his sarcasm, Ben," Nate said, rubbing suntan lotion between his hands.

Ben shrugged, then lay back on his towel, propping himself up on his elbows. "I didn't mean it—"

"I realize that...now," Cassidy interrupted, forcing a smile. "Sorry. And Teddy's a good guy, very loyal. Not a mean bone in his body, unlike some people." Cassidy fired a nasty glare at Ollie, who stared back, mouth agape, all wide-eyed and innocent.

Cassidy jumped slightly, feeling Nate's hands land on his shoulders. "What are you doing?"

"I thought you wanted some sunscreen."

"Oh...right." Cassidy laughed, nervously eyeing Ben, who either wasn't paying attention or was doing a great job at pretending so as he stared out over the water.

Cassidy relaxed slightly, shutting his eyes as Nate began massaging the lotion into his skin. His fingers worked their way into the muscles of Cassidy's back, and as Nate's hands slowly slid down over the small of his back, his eyes popped back open. There was a definite reaction taking place.

"That's good, thanks," Cassidy said, wiggling away as Nate's fingers started to run just under the fabric of the drawstring waistline of the trunks.

"Would you mind doing me?" Nate asked.

No, sir, I mean, yes, sir... Oh hell, just bend me over and stick it in already. Cassidy slowly glanced over, half tempted to kiss him, half ready to kill the man. "Sure, just...um. I need a minute."

Nate smirked, obviously not disappointed by the prowess of his magic sex fingers. Cassidy shot Ollie the evil eye after hearing him laughing under his breath.

Ben's knees popped as he stood up off the towel. "Think I'll give the water a try."

Fuck...son of a mother, Cassidy thought. The last thing he wanted to do was make Ben uncomfortable. Why was it so damned difficult to convince his body to do the right thing?

"Should I just come over there?" Nate asked with a sigh, trying to act as though he was put out by it all. "I could just wiggle my way back between your legs—"

"Fuck off and die, asshole," Cassidy said, cutting him off. He growled at them both as Nate and Ollie burst out laughing. Rolling his eyes, he peeked down between his legs, thinking that uncontrollable boners weren't quite what he had in mind earlier when he'd wished he could be seventeen again.

\* \* \*

It was quickly approaching dusk as Cassidy caught a whiff of the kebabs that Nate and Ben were overseeing on the grill. His stomach grumbled, and he realized how hungry he was. The sun had fallen down below the trees, and the sky had a hazy orange tint, which reminded Cassidy of orange sherbet. He enjoyed the tingling sensation on his lips and skin from the alcohol. He'd managed to drink just

enough to maintain a nice buzz for most of the day, never getting full-on drunk and sloppy yet holding on to a yummy giddiness. Basically he loved everybody, and the world was full of nothing but sunshine and happy, half-naked men.

Teddy rinsed the salt water and sand off under the spigot, making shivering noises as he cursed under his breath. Neil set the table on the back porch with Ollie and Spencer, who were doing more kissing and giggling than they were anything else. Cassidy set Dog on the ground and waited until Neil stopped long enough to take a drink of beer and check out his surroundings.

Cassidy waved him over once he caught his eye. Neil grinned and Cassidy groaned, thinking the man was a little slice of man-heaven. He wasn't relishing the conversation he was about to have. He continued to walk with Dog over to the grassy knoll, which had become her designated poopie spot.

"What's up, sexy?" Neil asked, finally catching up to Cassidy.

"I thought that maybe, well, that we should probably have a little talk."

"That's never good." Neil cringed before taking a swig of beer. "I'm not usually a violent guy..."

Cassidy laughed. "It has nothing to do with that, though you really shouldn't go around knocking people out." Cassidy shook his head, wondering why the hell he was getting all big brother on him. "That's...not the point. Wow, this is harder that I imagined."

"Then don't do it," Neil said, all adorably pleading.

Cassidy placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm afraid I have to. As much as I'd love to keep you off to the side, waiting in the wings in case certain...things don't work out, it's not the right thing to do. I'm trying not to be selfish here."

"So you really think he's the guy for you?" Neil asked, glancing back at Nate, who Cassidy noticed was watching the two of them.

"I don't know. I think...could be? There's a lot of history there, and we might end up just being friends for all I know. But I'm pretty sure it's not fair for me to string you along while I figure that out."

Cassidy watched as Neil sorted things out in his head. He was staring at the ground, squinting a little before taking another swig from the beer bottle. Finally he nodded, and his gaze met back up with Cassidy's.

"I get where you're coming from, Cassidy, and I appreciate you considering my feelings and all. But if it's all the same to you, I think I'll stick around. Wait things out, see if you don't go changing your mind or anything."

"Obviously you're welcome here—as a friend, Neil." Cassidy gave Neil his most serious face so he knew this wasn't a joking matter. "I've made my decision, and it's highly doubtful I'll change my mind."

"I get it." Neil nodded, throwing in a little grin and a wink. "And I believe you truly mean everything you just said, but that asshole's bound to fuck things up."

Cassidy laughed, throwing his hands in the air. "I tried."

Neil gently poked Cassidy in the chest, smiling wickedly. "You did indeed. But you don't get anywhere in life throwing in the towel before the final bell rings."

Cassidy groaned, putting his arm around Neil, watching Dog continue to sniff around. "No more boxing metaphors, please."

Neil offered him his beer while reciprocating by placing his arm around Cassidy, who shrugged and took a swig from the bottle.

"Damn," Neil said, watching Dog take a shit. "I can't believe a turd that size could come out of such a tiny dog."

And just like that, Cassidy was laughing again. At the very least, he'd placed Neil on notice. If the guy happened to find him too irresistible to give up the hope that things might fall in his favor, there wasn't anything Cassidy could do about it.

# **Chapter Fourteen**

Spencer let out a groan as he leaned back in his chair, placing his hands over his stomach. It was now dark out, minus the light from the moon and the two white pillar candles burning on the table. A shaft of light cut across the slate floor of the back porch from the open door that led into the house. A light breeze passed over them as the sound of the waves from the beach below mixed with Carrie Underwood singing about smashing up her boyfriend's pickup, which drifted outside from the small transistor radio in the kitchen.

Cassidy was feeling no pain as a shiver came over him. He jiggled in his seat and agreed with the sentiments behind Spencer's groan. His feet were freezing cold, and he wished he'd had the foresight to grab socks when he'd run upstairs earlier to throw on a pair of jeans and a thin black cotton turtleneck. Teddy and Spencer were still shirtless but had pulled on jeans like everyone else. It still got a little cool at night despite almost being June. And the wind coming off the ocean had most islanders in sweaters or long sleeves come nightfall.

The entire table erupted in laughter after Ollie let out a loud heinous belch.

"Whoever thought up meat on a stick was a genius," Ollie said with a sigh.

Spencer laughed and then groaned again, rubbing his full tummy. "And my man sure does love a good stick o' meat."

"Who's sticking their meat where?" Teddy asked, grinning as he licked the rim of his beer bottle.

"The first person to mention hiding the sausage has to leave," Cassidy said, knowing all too well where the conversation was headed.

Ollie pointed across the table at Cassidy. "That would be you, dumb-ass."

Cassidy smiled. "The first next person, be-hotch."

"Pretty talk coming from the wannabe English professor," Spencer said.

"Of literature, not grammar." Cassidy picked his beer up off the table. "And Shakespeare used made-up words and phrases all the time, or at least received all the credit for having first used them in print." Cassidy stared down at his belly, which appeared slightly swollen. "Obscene was one, like the amount of food we just ate. He also penned dishearten, which describes my sentiment seeing at all these dirty dishes on the table." Cassidy leered across the table at Ollie. "And of course who could forget flaming youth?"

Ollie laughed and then chucked a half-eaten piece of bread across the table at Cassidy.

Nate pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. In a pathetic excuse for a British accent, he added, "Tis a miracle the great bard never latched on to *behotch*."

"Devil incarnate!" Cassidy lifted his foot, shoving Nate in the hip with it as he attempted to stack and balance dirty dishes. "Puking was another one, smart-ass. They weren't all laced with pomp and circumstance, you know."

Nate looked down at him lustfully as he intentionally bumped into Cassidy's chair on his way into the house. Ben got up and yawned as he followed Nate's lead by collecting some of the dirty dishes.

"Oh here," Spencer said with a drunken smirk. "Let me help clear the table." He stayed seated, not moving an inch until Ben stopped, glancing over at him. "No, really, I don't mind at all," Spencer added, still not moving a muscle as Cassidy laughed. "Well, okay, if you're sure you can handle it without me."

"Jerk," Teddy said, shaking his head as he and Cassidy got up to help.

An evil smile spread over Spencer's face. "Sorry, single fucks, but I need to conserve my energy for the bedroom later."

"You got that right, lover," Ollie added, turning to Neil, who appeared to have already passed out.

"You can get off your ass and help me get Neil to a couch," Cassidy said, chucking a napkin at Spencer, who frowned, obviously unhappy with his new assignment.

"This is the suckiest vacation ever," Spencer mumbled, still not moving. "Guests shouldn't be forced into labor."

"It's not a bed-and-breakfast, asshole."

"Somebody turn off that ceiling fan," Neil mumbled, staring up at the ceiling as he attempted to root around in his chair. "It's freezing."

They all glanced up, checking to make sure the fan was indeed off as they thought, then glanced back down at Neil.

"Dude's totally wasted." Teddy snickered as he walked around the table to grab Neil by the arm. "I'll get him to bed." He lifted Neil and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. As Teddy strode toward the door, he stopped in front of Cassidy. "If he pukes down my back, I'm killing him."

Cassidy nodded in agreement, thinking that seemed fair while hoping it wouldn't come to that. "It's on you if the man winds up dead, Spence."

"I'm good with that." Spencer stretched, winking at Ollie while puckering up his lips and kissing his biceps.

"My hero." Ollie laughed, reaching over and pinching Spencer's nipple, causing his entire body to twitch.

Everyone but Spencer got up and helped finish clearing the dishes from the table. Teddy eventually rejoined them, stating he placed Neil in his room with an

empty trash can to snuggle with. Not exactly the sexiest of mental pictures to be left with, Cassidy thought, thankful the man was still alive if nothing else.

Nate had started a pot of coffee, which he was now pouring into a thermal carafe. Ben and Teddy gathered up the mugs and headed back out to the screened-in porch. Cassidy had waited his turn for the tiny half bath off the kitchen, too lazy to attempt going all the way upstairs. He came back out to find Ollie was the only one left in the kitchen.

"Bout time," he said, dancing a little pee-pee jig before shoving Cassidy out of the way to get to the toilet.

"Damn it," Cassidy muttered, going back outside. "This place is still a wreck."

"Tomorrow, babe," Nate said as Cassidy sat back down. "I'm feeling good we managed to get the dishes to the sink."

"Looky what I found!" Ollie said in a happy singsong voice, hopping down the steps with a half-empty bottle of vodka.

Nate and Ben groaned as if in pain as Cassidy covered his eyes. "Well, for the love of all that is gay and holy, go put it back."

"Oh come on, you pussies." Ollie slammed the bottle onto the table with one hand, setting three shot glasses down with the other. He rummaged three more out the pockets of his jeans, smiling like a greedy child. "We can do shots and play Truth or Dare."

Cassidy's eyes widened. "Hell, no!"

"Okay, fine, you wussy... I Never?"

"No!" Nate chimed in, protesting right along with Cassidy.

"Well, how else are we supposed to get to know our new friends?" Ollie asked, unscrewing the bottle and sniffing the vodka.

"God only knows how old that is." Cassidy waved his arm toward the bottle.

"Exactly." Nate nodded as Ollie started filling the shot glasses. "Surely vodka goes bad?"

"Only when you drink it." Ben's head drooped down as Ollie slid one of the shots in front of him.

"Very good, Ben," Ollie cooed as he passed the remainder of the shot glasses around the table. "See there, it's already working. I like you way more than I did five seconds ago."

"He's pure grade-A evil." Spencer sat up, scooting his chair closer to the table before leaning over and planting a soft kiss on Ollie's lips. "But he's mine, all mine."

Ollie laughed when Spencer poked him in the side, tickling him. He lifted his own shot glass into the air and surveyed the faces around the table. "Down the cum hatch."

Cassidy rolled his eyes as Ollie, Spencer, and Teddy all knocked one back. Ben shrugged, following suit, and Nate smirked at Cassidy.

Nate picked up his shot. "You've got some really fucked-up friends."

Ollie winked at Cassidy, who knew on some level he was trying to get Nate and him so drunk that they'd uncontrollably maul each other the instant they got behind closed doors. That was Ollie's idea of a resolution to any problem. Highly inappropriate sex with the man you loved. As Cassidy drank the warm vodka, feeling it burn as it made its way down, he wasn't sure if sex with Nate would actually fix anything, but it sure would be fun finding out.

\* \* \*

Cassidy stood on the far side of the bed smiling, obviously lit as he watched Nate pull off his shirt and toss it onto the floor in front of the closet door. He turned away, trying to concentrate on the pictures on the wall. *Do not sprout a boner, Horny McGee*. His entire body was amazingly tingly, but he wasn't so drunk that he felt out of control or unable to communicate. He was a little sleepy and a whole lot turned on. But he knew that if he concentrated, he could keep control over his wanton, slutty libido.

Cassidy undid the buttons on his jeans, then pushed them down over his hips. Wriggling his legs in an attempt to get his pants off, he lifted the black turtleneck over his head, getting his hands tangled in the elastic wristbands as he attempted to pull them free. He started to laugh, realizing his head was stuck in the neck as well, trapping him. "Who turned out the lights?"

"You're drunk off your ass," he listened to Nate say while laughing at him. "Just hold still while I finish getting my pants off."

"Ah...the phrase every little intoxicated homo dreams of hearing."

"I'd prefer to not know how many times you've heard it, if it's all the same to you."

Cassidy laughed, liking it when Nate got jealous. He began turning his head around frantically in an attempt to get his bearings. He decided there was no need to wait for Nate, feeling he could free himself as he continued to wriggle around.

He was just beginning to feel hopeless, like he was caught in one of those Chinese finger traps where the more you struggled, the more hopeless your chances of getting loose became. He managed to pull one hand free with a grunt, then stopped moving altogether as he listened to Dog's nails clicking furiously across the wood floor.

"I feel like I'm falling," Cassidy got out just before he hit the floor with a thud. He started to belly laugh, hearing Nate lose it. "Dude, that fucking hurt."

"You idiot."

His pants were pulled loose from around his ankles.

"I told you to wait and I'd help you."

"I didn't need any help," Cassidy said as Nate's hand closed around his free wrist. "I almost got free."

"Difficult to believe, coming from the doofus lying on the floor." Nate helped him up onto his feet.

Cassidy decided not to struggle, holding his trapped wrist out for Nate, who jerked it loose. *Perhaps I'm worse off than I thought*. His head bobbed around a little as Nate yanked the turtleneck from around his neck. Nate stood directly in front of him in nothing but a pair of dark gray spandexlike boxer briefs, and Cassidy was feeling particularly good about it.

Cassidy enjoyed the seductive sense of security having Nate's hands around his waist, holding him up. His skin was still warm from lying out in the sun all afternoon, and for some reason that made him feel all sexy. He knew he was drunk, but as he stared into Nate's eyes, he struggled to remember why they'd come to the conclusion that having sex with each other was a bad idea.

Nate blinked, turning away momentarily, breaking the dreamy spell Cassidy had been under.

"Where's Dog?" Cassidy asked, trying to push away the thoughts that maybe Nate didn't want to fuck him because he wasn't interested.

Nate shoved Cassidy back onto the bed. "She shot under the bed when you started to fall."

Cassidy laughed again, feeling slightly dizzy as he hit the mattress, bouncing up and down a little.

"Take those trunks off," Nate said, turning to the dresser. "If you can even get 'em off."

Cassidy fumbled with the drawstrings until he got them untied, then lifted his hips and peeled them down. "You didn't mind them so much earlier today," Cassidy said, sitting up so he could take them the rest of the way off. "Considering the way you were checking me out."

Cassidy smirked, pleased with himself as a pair of jersey boxers hit him in the face. They fell down onto his lap just in time for Cassidy to watch a very naked Nate bending over to slip on a pair of the same.

Cassidy's eyes went immediately forward as he took a deep breath and stood, slipping on the undies Nate gave him. "There you be," Cassidy said, seeing Dog poke her head out from underneath the bed.

Dog scampered the rest of the way out, and Cassidy sat back down on the bed, bending over to pick her up. He could feel Nate crawling into bed behind him, letting the dog get a few licks on the chin in before he, too, scooted back.

"What do you think you're doing?" Nate asked, leaning back against the headboard with a smile as his gaze flitted back and forth between Cassidy and Dog.

Cassidy pretended to be unaware of what Nate was referring to while unable to tear his attention away from Nate's pecs and those mouthwatering hard nipples.

"Last night you said she'd be too lonely and scared to sleep in her own bed, being in a strange room," Nate said.

"And you caved faster than a politician in a public men's room." Cassidy snorted, laughing at his own joke.

Nate's eyebrows both arched as he pointed across the room to the fluffy dog bed he'd gone out and purchased for her. "You said it would just be that one night."

Cassidy scoffed as he started to root himself down under the blankets while still holding on to the dog. "Like you actually believed that nonsense."

Nate's expression said he wasn't going to budge, and Cassidy frowned. He looked down at Dog. "You know what to do."

Holding her up under his chin so Nate would be forced to see her face, Cassidy said in a cartoonish little-kid voice, "Please, Daddy Nate...don't make me sleep all alone on the cold hard floor."

"Please tell me you're kidding with this." Nate said, trying not to laugh.

"I promise to be good and sooooo quiet you'll forget I'm even here."

Cassidy nodded like she was telling the God's honest truth.

"This is the single most pathetic attempt—"

"Please, Daddy Nate...I'm just a poor little orphalan that some mean ole people dumped off at the side of the road—unwanted, unloved."

"You're an asshole, Cass." Nate folded his arms, trying to avoid the dog's big brown eyes.

"And when you wake up with morning wood and start thinking about how much you'd like to stick it into Daddy Cass's butt, I'll be right there to stop you."

Nate laughed, shaking his head as he reached over and patted her head. "I'm not sure that last one's much of a selling feature." He rolled his eyes. "This is a bad idea, letting her get used to sleeping in bed with us."

Cassidy smiled, watching Nate's face turn bloodred as he realized the way that had come out.

"I didn't mean it like that, so you can wipe that cocky grin off your face." Nate punched a few pillows and settled into the bed.

"Ha-ha! Way to go, Dog." Cassidy held up his hand for a high five, but Dog leaned forward and licked his palm instead.

"And you need to pick out a name for the poor little orphalan," Nate scolded. "Might as well be calling her Generic or Acme."

Cassidy let her loose to go find her own little spot to root into. "You don't think it's kinda cute—a little Holly Golightly-ish?"

Nate turned back, having started to reach over to turn off the bedside lamp. "Seriously, you've slept with practically every guy currently under this roof, and you're *seriously* going to make comparisons to a literary hooker?"

Cassidy rolled his head back, laughing as he placed his hands over his belly. "I can't help it, Nate. I keep thinking of names, but nothing feels right."

"Name her Sadie," Nate said, shaking his head like *duh...don't be stupid*. "There's been a Sadie in this house for as long as I can remember."

"I know. It just feels not quite right."

"How about Dasie?" Nate nodded, spelling it out for him. "That's Sadie, but sort of rearranged a little."

"And a little queer," Cassidy said, examining Nate as if seeing a whole new side of him.

"Well, I hate to state the obvious, but we are in fact homosexuals."

"I think we established that fact years ago, when you bent me over the gate of your pickup and redefined the term *tailgating* for each of us." Cassidy mushed the pillow with the back of his head, trying to get comfy and forget the fact he was still buzzed and still horny. "I'll think about it."

Nate sat up and peered down the bed at Dog. "What do you think, girl?"

Cassidy opened one eye and watched as Dog lifted her head, taking notice that Nate was talking to her.

"Do you wanna be my Dasie?"

She immediately ran up the bed, hopping onto Nate's stomach as she tried to lick his chin.

"That settles it," Nate said. "Her name is Dasie."

"Oh brother," Cassidy said, trying not to grin at the cheesiness of it. He could already hear Nate, spelling it out for everyone whenever people asked what her name was. He rolled over onto his side, turning away from the lovefest. "Get the light, you big queen."

He listened as Nate scoffed, muttering something to the dog. Cool air rushed over his back as the blankets fluttered right about the time the palm of Nate's hand made contact with his ass.

"Son of a..." Cassidy shot across the bed, rubbing his ass as he laughed. "You shit head."

The lights went out with a click, and Cassidy rolled over, now facing Nate, who settled back down into the bed. His ass cheek was on fire, and he could feel the reaction his dick had to the sensation. He was now really aching to have at it, smiling as he got an idea. Cassidy lifted an arm, taking a sniff, then pouting as he cursed his stupidity for having taken that shower before dinner.

He let out a grumble and reached up, snagging one of the longer king-size pillows, and dragged it under the sheets, wrapping his legs around it. He had a full-on erection straining against the fabric of the boxers and was doing his level best not to pounce on Nate.

"Let that be a lesson to you," Nate said, breaking the deafening silence.

Christ, you son of a bitch, if you wanna teach me a lesson, don't half ass it. A little follow through wouldn't kill you.

"What the hell..." Nate said.

Cassidy could see he'd lifted his head off the pillow as his eyes began to adjust to the dark. His mouth fell open because he heard it now as well. He gasped, as a very distinct long, low muffled moan came through the wall.

"Holy hell," Nate whispered.

They both burst out laughing, listening to a muffled voice followed by another long, deep moan.

Nate sat up. "There's some serious fucking going on in this house."

And it sure ain't us. The muffled voice started again, and Cassidy chuckled, saying in a deep gruff tone, "You like that dick, boy?"

He and Nate both lost it, as Nate tried shushing Cassidy, who added, "Oh yeah, daddy...you fuck my ass *good*."

They were both rolling as another moan vibrated through the wall. Cassidy started to keep pretty good time, adding his own dialogue whenever he heard voices. "Fuck my hot hole, daddy."

"Stop..." Nate was now sitting up, laughing so hard the bed jerked as he convulsed.

"Take it all, ass-bitch," Cassidy squeaked out, trying to keep from laughing long enough as he added, "I'm gonna ream that ass."

"Fuck." Nate fell back, racked with convulsions. He rolled up into a ball and fell onto his side. "Can't breathe." He punched Cassidy in the arm in an attempt to get him to stop, and finally grabbed him in a headlock.

"Oh yeah, fuck-stud..." Cassidy managed to get out before Nate silenced him by covering his mouth with his hand.

Nate continued to shush him as he tried to say stuff, despite being muffled. They each eventually began to calm down once Ollie and Spencer's big climax came to pass on the other side of the wall. Cassidy sighed, enjoying Nate's body pressing against his own. Nate's hand fell away from Cassidy's mouth, and the headlock morphed into an embrace as he snaked his arm across Cassidy's chest. Cassidy's stomach fluttered when Nate kissed the back of his neck as they spooned. Nate pulled him closer, tightening his grip. Cassidy could feel Nate's erection against his ass, and despite the fact his was aching for release, he didn't dare move. He wanted so much more, but as the sleepiness once again came over him, Cassidy decided he didn't mind waiting to get it. Closing his eyes, he knew he could wait an eternity as long as he could do it like that—wrapped up in Nate's arms.

# Chapter Fifteen

Cassidy came slowly down the stairs, rubbing his crotch, which was more than a little pissed at him for not having had the decency to rub one off the night before. He yawned, feeling his throbbing head fighting back as well—punishment for all the alcohol. Dog, tucked under his arm, wiggled a little, reminding him of her presence. He stopped as he got to the landing and looked down at her.

"Shit, that's right. You're named Dasie now," Cassidy mumbled, smiling briefly as her nubby tail began to wiggle.

His head started in with the throbbing again as he continued down the remaining stairs. Cassidy glanced into the living room at the sofa bed briefly before heading toward the kitchen, where he could get coffee and Ibuprofen. He stopped suddenly, as if something finally registered. He cocked his head to the side, taking two steps back for a second look. He could feel his eyes widening, which made him curse as it caused his head to hurt more.

Teddy was completely naked minus the hand resting on his ass. He was lying on his stomach, partially draped over Ben, who was not, as evident from his hard-on which had pitched a tent under the sheets.

I hate all men...who had sex last night, he thought to himself as he made his way down the hall. He took note of the answering machine and its pushy little blinking red light but decided he was in no condition to deal with whoever had the audacity to call before... He suddenly realized he had no idea what time it was. He shrugged and then noticed that the drawer he'd hidden everyone's keys in was open. He got a bit paranoid as he watched the blinking light and reached over and opened the drawer, trying to focus enough to count.

When he finally came to the conclusion that Neil's keys were missing, he punched the Play button on the machine, assuming the worst. He listened impatiently as the antiquated device from the dark ages of technology rewound the minitape. He caught movement coming from the drive as it clicked over, and he breathed a sigh of relief watching Neil's blue SUV slowly pulling away.

Asshole scared the shit out of me. He glanced back down listening to the beep. "Hi, Cassidy, this is Edie, and I was just calling to let you know that Cecelia Hodes and the rest of the historical society, along with a whole slew of volunteers, will be around bright and early tomorrow morning to get started on clearing out that attic of yours."

Fuck me!

"Since you mentioned having the Founders' Day party at Piper's Point again, which as you know, is coming up quickly, I figured it best to not waste a single day..."

Cassidy whimpered, pressing the Stop button. "No more, you wretched, evil woman."

Do—Dasie wiggled again, as if trying to tell Cassidy that she really needed to go. He nodded and continued toward the kitchen.

He stumbled through the door to find Ollie sitting at the island in a plain white T-shirt and oversize boxer shorts. He was wearing sunglasses and staring at the coffeemaker, which was just starting to drip, while pressing his fingers into his temples. It was as if he was attempting to psychically connect to the coffeepot. One foot was sitting on the rung of the stool, the other dangling as it hovered above the tile.

*All he's missing is the turban*. Cassidy kept walking, pausing momentarily when he reached Ollie. He pointed back toward the front of the house and opened his mouth to speak.

"Uh-uh," Ollie mumbled, holding up a hand.

Cassidy shrugged, in too much misery to care as he made his way outside, wishing the sheriff would catch those devil dogs already. He was too paranoid to let Dasie out by herself, but the fact that the sunlight was causing his skull to feel like it might implode had him tempted to leave her to her own fate.

He came back in after letting the dog do her business, to find that nothing had changed other than the level of coffee in the pot, which was still spitting out steamy black liquid. It was going to be a bitter, long-ass day, considering he now needed to get the house pulled back together because the stupid historical society would be showing up first thing in the morning. He could practically hear Sadie laughing her ass off while telling him that's what he deserved for letting Edie nose into the Hart family archives.

Cassidy went to the pantry with Dasie's bowl and filled it to the brim for fear he'd say fuck it all and go back to bed, forgetting to feed her later. He came back out to fill her water bowl and found Ollie still in his chair, but with a cup of coffee in his hand. A second steaming cup sat on the island waiting for him. He heard Dasie crunching her food and watched Ollie staring down at her as if she was killing him with all the noise. Cassidy opened his mouth to ask a question.

"Nuh-uh." Ollie held up his other hand this time while timidly taking another sip.

Ten more minutes passed as Cassidy chose one tiny chore at a time to accomplish. Picking up the paper towel lying on the floor next to the trash can was the first thing, and the pressure in his skull as he bent over almost killed him. Then he went through collecting the stray bottle caps. It felt like hundreds, though he was fairly certain there had only been five or six. He briefly considered gathering up the beer bottles that seemed to be everywhere, but decided against it. All the

clanking of glass might give him leave to crawl the mile or so to the lighthouse and hurl himself off the cliff like his great-great-granny Piper Hart was rumored to have done. Thus the name, Piper's Point.

It was assumed she either fell or jumped to her death after her disappearance, though her body was never discovered. Cassidy rubbed at his temple, momentarily wishing he were dead or at the very least smart enough to have not gotten quite so inebriated.

He thought about Sadie and Piper, about the stories of the Hart family legacy as they'd been told to him over the years. He absentmindedly picked up a warm, half-drunk beer bottle and made the mistake of emptying it into the sink. His eyes watered as his stomach soured from the smell, and he forced his thoughts back to Sadie as distraction. She had told him Piper had suffered from depression and would disappear from town only to be found at the Point, sitting on the rocks at the foot of the lighthouse, staring out across the ocean. He reached down and rubbed at his crotch, feeling slightly depressed himself; carefully attempting to massage the sore rocks between his legs.

Ollie sat back in his bar stool, shifting in the seat, and Cassidy glanced over at Dasie, who continued to chow down. He wondered why Sadie felt such a kinship with a woman she'd never met—to the point she wanted her ashes spread at the very spot Piper had supposedly died. Was it merely that she'd been the reason the Hart family wound up with this particular parcel of land since it was Jeremiah's father who'd purchased it in order to build her a house closer to the Point?

The locals say that on the right night her ghost could still be seen standing at the edge of the cliffs, hair gently blowing in the breeze. Some kid had fallen and drowned back in the twenties, and an urban legend was born that Piper Hart lured people to the edge, only to push them to their deaths.

Sadie thought all the ghost stories were a load of bunk, and liked to say her granny probably faked the whole depression angle to get her hands on the prime piece of real estate. But maybe that was Sadie's way of trying to romanticize Piper, turning her weakness into the kind of strength the family was known for.

Ollie belched loudly, scaring the dog, which had her barking in terror. Both men winced, and Cassidy felt his headache ratchet back up a few notches as he surveyed the prime piece of filthy, dirty kitchen. He struggled for a moment to recall the train of thought, which left him with the impression he'd been on to...something. He shrugged, realizing it was gone, and decided a scalding-hot shower might be just the thing. He downed the last of his coffee and set the cup next to the sink, which, thanks to him, was not only overflowing with dirty dishes, but now stank of stale beer. He reached back down and rubbed at his crotch again. "My fucking nuts are killing me."

Ollie's eyebrows rose, poking up over the rim of his sunglasses. Cassidy nodded, deciding that was indeed all he really had to offer. He stumbled back out into the hall, leaving Dasie to her food bowl and Ollie to his coffee and meditation.

\* \* \*

The rest of the day went by in a haze. Cassidy tried calling Neil once, making an attempt at checking in on him, but had been forced to leave a message.

Ben vanished before Cassidy made it out of the shower, which he'd apparently stayed in too long, considering all the dirty looks he received over the next hour. It did actually help, making him feel a little better. Cassidy snuck back into Nate's bedroom, once Nate vacated it in lieu of a shower. He laid the man's pillow over his face while he beat off, which did more good than anything. His nuts still ached, but the rest of his body was a little more at ease.

As much as he was loath to admit it, Ben showing back up with jumbo-sized coffees and several boxes of sugary starched goodness was what really pulled everyone out of their funk. Ollie all but sucked him off when he spotted the to-go cups. A stranger would have assumed they'd known each other for years. Which jealous Spencer didn't even notice, as he was too busy snarfing down three doughnuts without appearing to have actually chewed.

Cassidy watched as Spencer constantly shifted around in his seat. All day long he'd get Nate's attention and mouth, *Ass-bitch*, while pointing at Spencer, causing them both to lose it. Their laughter never lasted long, as it inevitably brought about the return of the pounding inside their skulls.

It took at least three times longer than it should have, but by dinnertime the house was back in order and they were all slouched around the table on the back porch. Even Dasie seemed spent as she lay passed out on the slate tile next to the screen door. Nate and Teddy came out with a beer for each of them, which caused a series of groans all the way around.

Spencer hissed like a vampire as he backed away from the bottle. "Take it away, cocksucker."

"Don't be that way, Spence," Nate said, a playful expression taking over his face as he lowered his voice a little deeper. "C'mon, take it like a man."

Ollie choked on his beer, coughing as Spencer reached over to pat him on the back. Cassidy laughed so hard he nearly fell out of his chair. Ben shrugged as he and Teddy realized they had likely missed something yet again.

"Damn it, Nate," Cassidy said, beginning to settle back down and pressing a hand to his head as the latent throbbing started up again.

Nate took a seat next between Cassidy and Spencer, smiling like the cat that ate the canary.

"I think we need to eat again," Ollie said, forcing more beer down.

"And then a nap would be nice," Cassidy added, rubbing his eyes.

"The kind that lasts until tomorrow," Spencer agreed.

"Pizza?" Ben asked.

"And paper plates," Ollie suggested, watching Spencer's face contort as he choked a mouthful of beer down.

Teddy placed his now-empty bottle of beer onto the table and licked his lips. "I'm ready for another." He glanced around the table, the smile fading as if he could sense the older guys he was surrounded by were less than happy by the resilience of his twenty-four-year-old existence. "And now might be a good time to go get it."

As Teddy vacated his seat, Ben whipped out his cell phone. "Any particular toppings?"

"You're not getting dinner too," Cassidy said. "You already saved the day with breakfast."

Ollie smiled as if fondly remembering some far-off memory from his childhood. "For which I'm still eternally grateful."

"I'd love anchovies," Teddy offered, coming back outside, fresh beer in hand.

Spencer placed a hand on his stomach and belched as a slightly soured look came over his face. "I'm going to murder you in your sleep, Teddy, so help me."

Teddy got a "what'd I do now?" expression as he slumped down into his seat. Cassidy patted his shoulder.

Ben winked at Teddy as he punched keys on his phone. "I like anchovies too."

Teddy smiled again, perking right back up like an insta-inflatable blow-up doll.

"Tell Ricky to put it on my tab," Nate whispered as Ben nodded and said hello to whoever answered on the other end. "You remember Ricky, right?"

Cassidy nodded while wondering how many times Nate and Ben had ordered takeout together in the past. He then laughed at himself for getting jealous over takeout while remembering he didn't have any room to bitch about Nate's one ex when he currently had four sitting around the same table.

But should I really be penalized for being not only uncontrollably handsome, but the sweet, loving type of guy who just happens to maintain friendships with all his ex-boyfriends?

"Yeah," Nate said, as if on cue. "Of course you remember him. We kinda trade food for my services on the Web site."

"You have a Web site?" Teddy asked, starting to smile.

Cassidy smacked him upside the head. "Not that kind of Web site, you pervert."

Ollie and Spencer laughed as Nate shook his head.

Ben tossed his phone onto the table. "Forty to forty-five minutes."

"Enough time for a nap," Spencer said, getting up from the table.

Ollie hopped up, following suit. "Come wake us when it gets here."

"Um, sure." Cassidy wasn't relishing the thought of being saddled with Ben in such limited numbers.

"Say, Ben," Teddy said as if suddenly gifted with good timing. "Want to take a walk on the beach, and tell me a little more about my new job?"

Cassidy watched Nate's face, noticing the man either didn't care or had no clue that was probably code for *hey*, *Ben*, *want to go make out on the beach*? He noticed Ben quickly glancing at Nate before turning back to Teddy.

"Sure." Ben nodded, getting up and grabbing his beer off the table.

Cassidy watched as they left, pointing at Dasie as they cautiously stepped over her. She was unable to muster up enough strength to do more than crack open one eye. Ben kept the screen door from slamming, then followed Teddy across the courtyard toward the beach.

Nate was semi-stretched out, leaning back in his chair with his legs extended. He smiled at Cassidy and seemed to be in pretty good spirits. Considering how badly Cassidy was handling Nate's one ex, he was beginning to fear Nate wasn't harboring the same feelings. He left the impression he was cool and in complete control. Perhaps Nate's obvious physical attraction was nothing more than skindeep?

"What's going on in that twisted, sexy head of yours?"

Cassidy shrugged, realizing he was chewing on his lip. He instantly made himself stop. "I'm sorry I didn't keep in touch." Cassidy leaned on the table, watching Nate for any clues he might reveal through the expressions on his face. "I know I called a couple of times, but I shouldn't have just let our friendship, relationship, or whatever the hell it was just fade into the background. We practically grew up together, for Christ's sake."

Nate took another drink as sadness seemed to sweep over him. "I missed you too, Cass. I really did, but..."

"It's something I regret, one of the many things." Cassidy picked at the label on his beer bottle. "I never realized how much I missed you until I saw you standing on the porch the other morning."

Nate placed his beer on the table and he sat up. "Hell, Cass, I'm the asshole."

Cassidy was a little confused by that statement.

"You had so much going on. You were *exactly* where you were supposed to be, doing exactly what you should have been doing. Taking care of Sadie, trying to get her out of that home, and doing it all while going to school. It should've been me..." Nate trailed off, staring out over the yard as if trying to figure out the right thing to say. "I wasn't there for you, Cass. So don't you have any regrets where I'm concerned."

Nate finally turned toward Cassidy but didn't speak. Their gazes locked, and they stared intently at each other until Cassidy stood up. Nate appeared slightly stunned as Cassidy came around the corner of the table.

Cassidy placed his arms on Nate's shoulders and nudged him to lean back in the chair. He straddled Nate, who opened his mouth to speak.

"Whatever it is you want to say right now"—Cassidy placed his hands on either side of Nate's face, turning his head slightly before moving in for a kiss—"don't."

Cassidy stared into Nate's eyes for what felt like hours as opposed to the reality of mere seconds. He'd gotten lost in them, bewitched as he covered Nate's lips with his. It took everything he had not to let out a moan from the sensation of Nate's mouth opening up for his tongue. There was a tentativeness behind the kiss, as if they were both a little afraid of letting go. The heat from their breath, the wetness of their mouths created an almost electric familiarity that shot through Cassidy's gut. It transported him back in time—he was once again that seventeen-year-old kid who'd walked into the boathouse that summer day. The taste of Nate, the smell of his skin were both foreign and familiar at the same time.

Just as Cassidy began to really lose himself, Nate pushed him away. Cassidy moaned in protest as Nate gently pushed him back. Nate swallowed hard, obviously every bit as affected as Cassidy had been. Cassidy searched his face for some sort of clue as to what was going through Nate's mind.

"I can't, Cassidy," Nate said, his voice cracking as he lifted Cassidy off his lap so he could get out of the chair. He walked toward the house and stopped just in front of the steps. "Damn it." He placed his hands on his hips, staring out over the east side of the property. He took in a deep breath and exhaled, shoulders slumping slightly. "I'm sorry, but I can't do this right now."

With that he disappeared into the house, leaving Cassidy alone on the back porch. He slowly sat down in the chair, wishing he hadn't just done any of that. He was confused about why Nate had stopped, but the more he thought back over it, the more he realized that he'd wanted that kiss every bit as much as Cassidy had. You can't fake that kind of reaction, and Nate had definitely been affected. Now all he needed was the why.

Cassidy relaxed into the chair. His lips still tingled, and the taste of Nate continued to linger in his mouth. The sun began to set, signaling the day was coming to a close, and despite having been shot down, he was oddly confident in one thing—Nate Sommers wanted him as much as he wanted Nate Sommers.

Cassidy smiled, getting up from the table to head inside the house. "I can work with that."

# Chapter Sixteen

Cassidy stood staring out the kitchen door off the back of the house as the white tent was being erected. He'd gotten a glimpse of the similar scene happening on the west side of the house as he was coming downstairs from his shower. The detached garage was also being utilized as an unloading area for the contents of the attic, and Cassidy appreciated the precautions the historical society took in case of a sudden change in the weather.

Cecelia Hodes masterfully directed the action as people scurried around in all directions. Cassidy watched the scene unfolding before his eyes, continuing to flip-flop back and forth, deciding between elegant ballet or DeMille-like spectacle.

"This is providence, people!" Cecelia called out to her minions while clapping her hands. "We're embarking on a journey, standing on the precipice, ready to rewrite the history of Hart's Island with the treasures that lay just beyond that door." She spun around, motioning with melodramatic flair toward the door where Cassidy stood.

Cassidy waved and smiled while resisting the urge to deflate her moment by reminding them all there was probably nothing up there other than knickknacks, old throw pillows, and dust mites.

"Good morning, Mr. Winters!" Cecelia called out with way too much enthusiasm as Cassidy stepped out onto back porch.

"I told you to call me Cassidy, Cecelia." He shook his head as he leaned against the table, holding his coffee cup. "You used to babysit me, for Christ's sake."

"Leading by example, Mr. Winters," Cecelia said with a smile. "I want to make sure everyone treats you respectfully."

"Well, please cut it out." Cassidy cringed as he placed a hand over his stomach. "Every time I hear 'Mr. Winters,' I get sick to my stomach, half expecting to see my asshole father."

"Point taken," Cecelia said, obviously feeling uncomfortable. "Perhaps you might consider a change of name, then? You are also a Hart, after all." She swiveled back around on a spiked heel and yelled into the crowd, "Please address Mr. Winters as Cassidy!"

Cassidy rolled his eyes as she continued around the side of the house screaming it over and over again. He laughed to himself, wondering how the teenager who wore black nail polish, caked on smudgy eyeliner, and claimed to be a Wiccan had turned into Polly Prissy Pants. She used to refer to herself as Cee Cee, the demon goddess of smite, for crying out loud.

Cassidy would probably have been more frightened as a child when she threatened to smite him had he had any understanding of the meaning of the word at the time. As it was, he thought it was just some type of citrusy soda like Sprite, and he could imagine worse things than having soda dumped on his head.

Cassidy watched as the white tent was slowly raised, creating the familiar canopy that accompanied Sadie's Founders' Day parties. The islanders would all dress up in period clothing of some sort and descend upon Piper's Point en masse to drink and dance to the live music until the sun came up. Staring off in to space he thought about the remark Cecelia had made about being a Hart, and before he knew it, Cassidy was drifting back in time recalling the eve of the Founders' Day party just before his sixteenth birthday.

\* \* \*

Ornate multicolored Japanese paper lanterns blew softly in the breeze as the light emanating from them cast a warm glow across the courtyard covered by the white tent. Cassidy stood just under the center of it, directly below the highest point in the canopy, and giggled while spinning in circles, making himself dizzy.

He stopped, hearing Natalie shrieking at Nate like a banshee from inside the house. Nate was mad as hell that he was being forced into the "queer white tux" as he'd been referring to it for days. He laughed as Natalie threatened to smack Nate if he used that word one more time, followed by a door being slammed.

Cassidy tugged on the lapels, straightening out the jacket, rather liking his own costume, with the long black tails that hung down from the back. He felt like that Fred Astaire guy from the black-and-white musicals Sadie always liked to watch. There was something about the way it fit, forcing him to stand up straight—it made him feel more grown-up and classy.

Sadie whistled as she glided across the courtyard in a shiny silver and black flapper dress. Her dark auburn hair was all bundled up under the bone-straight, bobbed black wig, and her lips were painted bloodred. "My, you are quite dapper, Mr. Winters."

Cassidy laughed, slightly embarrassed as he bowed toward Sadie. "Why, thank you, madame."

"I'm no madame, youngster," Sadie said wickedly. "I'm a broad through and through. A flapper is a woman of ill repute."

Cassidy shook his head, amazed that his granny somehow managed to pull off ravishing at her age. "I sure hope I take after you, lady."

Sadie was instantly irritated. "You, my boy, are a Hart through and through, you understand me?"

"Yes, Gran—" Cassidy cut himself off midword and smiled wickedly right back at her. "I mean, Sadie."

"Land sakes alive, boy, you sure are a sight to behold. Another year and you'll be breaking hearts left and right, if you aren't already. The girls'll be fainting at your feet as you walk by."

"I know. It's almost sinful." Cassidy rolled his eyes at her, feeling awkward in his skin at the thought of girls behaving that way. It was bad enough Jennie Jones had been following him around since he'd arrived, never leaving Nate and him alone.

"You little smart-ass." Sadie grabbed him by the arm. "And be nice to that Jennie Jones girl tonight."

Cassidy groaned.

"She's cute. What's the problem?"

"Nothing, she's just annoying."

"I can't ever tell if you're just putting on a good front for me while ruthlessly chasing skirt when I'm not paying attention."

Cassidy fidgeted, pulling away from her, not knowing how to say the one thing he wanted to yet somehow never could.

"Don't go getting all teenagerish," Sadie said, grabbing his arm again. "You're fifteen years old, and this is probably the last summer I'll have with you before you turn into an asshole."

"You say that every summer," Cassidy said.

"The older you get, the more you'll discover the need to begin preparing yourself for the worst in advance." Sadie grinned, facing Cassidy as she reached up, cupping his face in her hands. "You're the only family I have that I actually like, kid. You keep that in mind, because you're the only one of the lot of them I'd be pained to lose."

"I love you too, Sadie." Cassidy smiled.

"You listen to me, baby boy—you're a Hart, regardless of the name on your birth certificate, and this place..." Sadie got behind him and hugged him as she turned him around in a circle. "Piper's Point and everything that you see before you—it's in your blood, dark red, pulsing through your heart and into those veins."

"Gross," Cassidy said, feeling nauseated from the image she planted in his head.

"Don't be such a girlie-man." She squeezed him tight. "You will go through that phase when I'm going to be the last person you want to be around. I'm a little surprised, but thankful you haven't managed to get there already."

Like right now, Cassidy thought as he rolled his eyes. He was thankful she couldn't see him doing it. Sadie always got so weird before the party. Like clockwork every year as he tried to squirm free. "I'm not a girlie-man either!"

She squeezed him tighter until he gave in and stopped fighting her, which was when she finally let him go. He'd figured that part out years ago. She never let go until he gave in, so he now struggled just enough to make it believable.

"You and Nate try not to drink too much tonight," Sadie said matter-of-factly, as if resigned to the fact she knew they'd find a way to get into the rum. "And for God's sake, don't go and get that Jones girl knocked up."

Cassidy's face went bloodred as he stared at her, mouth agape.

"Don't act so damn surprised," she said, placing a hand on her hip. "I was fifteen once, and I sincerely doubt boys have gotten more respectful since my day."

Cassidy felt a little naked, despite standing there in his tux, all the while hoping she was right. He'd been fantasizing about Nate since he'd arrived that summer and secretly hoped something would happen tonight once they got drunk. He wasn't altogether sure what he wanted that something to be, but he sprang a woody whenever he pondered the possibilities for very long.

Cassidy and Sadie turned toward the bandstand as the orchestra started tuning up their instruments. He chewed nervously on his lip and noticed she watched him intently. Sadie leaned in, kissing him on the cheek. She began rubbing at his face with her thumb, and he grinned, realizing she'd gotten lipstick all over him.

"I love you, baby boy," Sadie said, eyes sparkling like the strands of beads that hung down from all over her dress. "You know there's nothing you could ever do or say to change that, right?"

Cassidy nodded, feeling an ache in his chest, wondering how true that was. He was desperate to talk to someone, anyone about the things he was feeling, the thoughts he'd been unable to stop. He knew the way people acted about stuff like that, but no matter how many times he tried to convince himself that what he was feeling was wrong, something deep inside told him otherwise. It went right down to the bone, as Sadie liked to say. It felt too right to be wrong, yet every time he opened his mouth to speak the words, they seemed to get stuck down in his gut.

"Now don't go using that as a license to kill a hooker or anything," Sadie demanded with a sarcastic smile. "I don't want you becoming one of those rich, entitled white men who think life holds no repercussions for them."

Cassidy smiled. "I'm pretty sure you aren't supposed to talk about hookers in front of me."

"You're probably right," Sadie said as Natalie came barreling out of the house in a tizzy. "My goodness, woman, you have got to calm yourself down. Have a martini!"

\* \* \*

Cassidy was startled by a voice coming from behind him.

"What are you doing out here all by yourself?" Nate asked, standing in the doorway at the back of the house. He was dressed in faded khaki cargos and an untucked, short-sleeved blue plaid button-up. Cassidy was delighted to see it was only halfway buttoned up.

He reached up, wiping at his eyes as he turned around, suddenly embarrassed to be standing on the back porch crying.

"What's wrong?" Nate asked, quickly coming down the steps and crossing the porch.

"Just got a little lost for a minute." Cassidy started laughing, feeling his face really begin to heat up as he sniffled.

Nate carefully inspected his condition before that half grin began to form. "Lucky for you, I came along and found you, then, huh?" Nate placed his hands onto Cassidy's shoulders, giving them a little squeeze. "The guys are ready and waiting, if you still want us to help you go through Sadie's bedroom."

"I don't wanna do that by myself," Cassidy said, a little panicked.

"All right, calm down," Nate said, pulling Cassidy into his arms. "You don't ever have to do anything else alone if you don't want to. You're home now, remember—where you belong."

Cassidy rolled his eyes, feeling a smidge too emotional for this kind of talk as his eyes started to burn again. It wasn't lost on him either, the way Nate slid in that little dig about where it was he belonged. He squeezed Nate, to let him know he wasn't uncomfortable with the hugging, and then pushed himself away. "I'm okay, just got a little nostalgic seeing the tents going up."

"The Founders' Day parties." Nate cringed at the tents and nodded. "I hadn't thought of that."

Cassidy turned back around, taking in the scenery of the courtyard. "I was remembering the knock-down, drag-out you and Natalie had over that tux with the white jacket."

Nate started laughing. "I forgot about that."

"You really didn't want to wear that thing." Cassidy squinted as he faced Nate. "You were fucking hot in it too."

"Was I, now?" Nate asked, raising one eyebrow slightly.

"Most definitely droolworthy." Cassidy shook his head as he reprimanded himself for flirting. "Sadie in her flapper dress, telling me not to kill any hookers and not to get Jennie Jones preggers."

"What?" Nate asked.

"You had to be there," Cassidy said with a shrug.

"If you say so." Nate led Cassidy toward the house. "Like there was any chance your gay ass would get Jennie Jones pregnant."

"Hey." Cassidy shoved him as they walked into the kitchen. "She totally wanted my boner!"

Nate started laughing as Cecelia spun around, heading back in the direction she'd come from.

"Shit," Cassidy said, cringing as he watched her scurrying down the hall and out the front door.

"Considering you wanted my boner, I still stand behind my original statement."

"You wanted mine too!" Cassidy laughed, like that somehow made any difference. "I did have this whole plan that night involving you, a whole lot of rum, and the boathouse."

"So did I," Nate said.

"You did?"

"Oh yeah." Nate placed his hand on the small of Cassidy's back as they started climbing the stairs. "Unfortunately, the rum managed to be the only thing that had its way with either of us."

Cassidy scowled, thinking about what he missed out on that night. "Damn demon liquor."

# Chapter Seventeen

Cassidy sat on the stool at Sadie's dressing table, staring at the perfume bottles, beaded hair combs, and the infamous collection of gold bracelets dangling from the wooden pegs on her jewelry tree, that littered the top of the desk. He reached over and ran a finger over the gold hoops, taking the tiniest bit of comfort in the clinking sound they made as they bounced off each other.

He traced the wood grain with his fingertips before cracking open the long, skinny middle drawer. Immediately catching that unique scent of makeup when he inhaled, Cassidy closed his eyes briefly, remembering Sadie singing "Don't sit under the apple tree, with anyone else but me," to Nate and him while they rolled around on her bed as kids. He smiled at the umpteen tubes of lipstick, certain that were he to open each one, he'd find only the color red in varying shades—as if Sadie feared running out due to some apocalyptic event, hence her need to squirrel it away. God forbid she not be wearing lipstick.

He glanced up, watching Spencer, Ollie, and Nate laughing as they taped together boxes, and stacked them outside on the balcony. Teddy had already departed for his first day of work with Ben, and Cassidy still hadn't heard back from poor Neil. Cassidy picked up one of the tubes of lipstick and removed the lid. He held it up to his nose and breathed in that waxed-lotion scent. He wished he wasn't the one doing this. It depressed him to no end, being surrounded by all her things. Made him want to cry, wishing she'd walk through the fucking door already and say something highly inappropriate.

He watched the volunteers traipsing back and forth through the hall in the process of unloading the attic. He exhaled, feeling guilty for allowing any of her stuff to be removed. He knew on some level Sadie wouldn't have expected the door of her bedroom to be hermetically sealed, never to be of any use to anyone. But somehow that knowledge didn't make him feel any better about clearing out her things. He laughed, realizing she'd have expected him to put it all in the very attic he was currently allowing Cecelia and Edie to empty out.

A stab of sadness hit Cassidy again as his gaze made its way around the room. Not even the dusty yellow floral wallpaper could mask the loss of energy, as if even the air surrounding him was slightly stale. He hadn't experienced that since his first day back on the island. Even that had changed in the sense that he no longer believed himself as alone in the world as he had a week ago. Cassidy glanced over at Nate, knowing he was the biggest reason he no longer felt that way. He smiled

slightly when their gazes met for a flicker of a moment before Nate went back to taping up boxes.

Cassidy absently fiddled through the contents of the drawer, knowing his biggest problem was that he didn't want to say good-bye to Sadie. But he was quickly running out of things he'd be able to do for her and coming to that realization carried with it a growing sense of uselessness. He'd been fighting for her for so long now that he could barely remember a time when he wasn't. It had given him a purpose and drive he wouldn't have had otherwise.

It had also been a key component in his insane drive to get through grad school. He'd pushed himself to get farther, faster. Now his PhD was all he had left to fight for, which he found a little ironic. He was officially finished, minus his dissertation, but now feared that alone would no longer be enough.

There was also something about being back at Piper's Point that made him keenly aware of the fact that all those years of struggle had provided him with an ironclad curtain he'd been able to hide himself behind. He wouldn't be able to keep people at arm's length anymore and still be able to convince himself it was because he had more important things to fight for than his own happiness. For the first time, it really hit him that his entire world was about to change—drastically.

"Cassidy, I feel a little weird going through Granny's pantie drawer," Ollie said, peering into the open drawer of silky undergarments as he played with the hem of his black T-shirt that had *Blondie is a Band* written in hot pink letters.

"Don't call her Granny," Nate and Cassidy said simultaneously.

"That's a little creepy, you two." Spencer eyed them both suspiciously, looking very Abercrombie in his cargos and ribbed tee.

"We had it drilled into our heads," Nate said.

"She was the vainest woman I've ever met," Natalie said, standing in the doorway. "I put a pan of cinnamon rolls in the oven, dear." She stuck her cheek out so Nate could give her a peck. "This place is a madhouse."

Cassidy got up off the stool and went to her, giving her a long squeeze. "Please tell me you can stay, because I don't know what the hell to do with all her...this stuff."

"Of course I can stay," Natalie said, sliding her purse off her shoulder. "I almost did this myself on several occasions over the last few months. I just wasn't sure if I should. I didn't know if you'd be angry or upset with me. I was already terrified you'd freak out over the new paint color."

"That was a bit of a shock."

"I already said I was sorry," Nate reminded, holding his hands up like he was conceding the battle before it began.

Ollie not so subtly cleared his throat as Spencer muttered something about being none too happy he'd have to help finish painting the trim on the remaining two sides before the Founders' Day party that weekend.

"This is Ollie." Cassidy waved his hand at him and then scowled, motioning toward Spencer. "And this is Shrek."

Spencer snarled his lip up at Cassidy as he and Ollie crossed the room. Natalie of course swatted their hands away, giving them each a hug.

"Welcome to Piper's Point." Natalie grinned from ear to ear as she sized them up. "Oh my goodness, many handsome men have found their way into this bedroom over the years, but never so many all at once."

Cassidy laughed as Ollie practically preened as if she'd been referring to him alone.

"We're a little at a loss, Mom." Nate placed his hands on his hips, shaking his head at all the boxes they'd put together.

"I see that."

Cassidy helplessly surveyed the terrain. "I honestly don't know what to save. If there's anything you want, Natalie...by all means."

"Thank you, dear. I appreciate that."

"I want the historical society to take all the vintage clothes and hats, but I think most of that is up in the attic." Cassidy crossed the room and opened the wardrobe. "Would you think it bad to donate most of her clothes to a women's shelter?"

Natalie nodded, tearing up a little. "I think she'd approve."

"Please don't do that, Nat." Cassidy sighed as Nate went to her and hugged her. "I'm barely holding it together as it is today."

"Oh shoot, I'm sorry, it's just..." Natalie rubbed her eyes, letting loose her little chipmunk giggle. "I'm so happy to have you home, kiddo. You've always had such a kind heart, and I've worried that all the time you spent fighting with that man would somehow change you."

Cassidy smiled, seeing Nate wink at him before he nudged his head toward Spencer and Ollie. "I've had a few friends around who've helped keep my head above water."

Natalie smiled, all rosy cheeked. "Well, you both have a home here on Hart's. We owe you a debt of gratitude."

"Be careful telling Ollie things like that, Nat." Cassidy winked at her. "He's sure to collect—when you least expect it."

Ollie blew out a puff of air. "Stop that. She won't know you're joking."

"I certainly hope he's not." Natalie blushed a little. "I might not mind if he did collect."

Ollie gasped, trying to act shocked, despite sporting a huge toothy smile. "Saucy woman!"

"Mother, please," Nate scolded, placing a hand on his stomach. "I'm never going to be old enough to listen to you talk like that."

Natalie laughed, clapping her hands and doing a little dance at having embarrassed her little baby. Cassidy was beyond happy she'd shown up today of all days. He wondered if Nate had made a call, alerting her to the fact they'd be doing this today. That would be just like him, quietly trying to anticipate everyone else's needs while standing in the background, never attempting to claim any of the credit.

"Well, dear child of mine," Natalie said, helping Ollie empty one of the drawers, "if I can survive witnessing what you boys were up to in the kitchen Friday afternoon..."

Cassidy knew his eyes were wide as saucers as both he and Nate awkwardly averted their gazes. Cassidy was mortified once again as Ollie and Spencer were dying from laughter.

"I certainly hope you boys gave that countertop a good scrubbing."

"Kill me now," Cassidy mumbled, his face fully flushed with heat.

"Mother, really," Nate said, shaking his head as Spencer passed him a box.

"Oh my," Ollie said, wiping the tears out of his eyes. "I love this lady."

Natalie laughed, obviously enjoying herself as well as the effect she was having on Ollie. "I doubt that's what Sadie had in mind when she had that island installed."

I wouldn't count on it.

"On second thought, I wouldn't be all that surprised if that *was* what she had in mind," Natalie said, closing the top drawer of the bureau.

Thank you!

Nate walked into the closet and grabbed an armful of clothes still on their hangers and carried them out onto the bed.

Ollie sort of frowned. "I hate that I never got to meet her."

Cassidy nodded in agreement. "She would've gotten a kick out of you."

"What about me?" Spencer asked, removing a blouse from a hanger and folding it before placing it into a box.

Cassidy and Natalie looked at each other and giggled.

"She would have hit on you," Cassidy said.

"Nice," Spencer said, wiggling his eyebrows as if nothing else in life were more important than that.

Natalie subjected Spencer and Ollie to a barrage of questions about their lives together, what they each did for a living. She quickly commented on how lovely it would be to have one of Spencer's cafés on Hart's, as there was nothing else like it here. Not missing a beat, she brought up the fact that Hart's averaged around fifty thousand tourists a day. Cassidy could practically see Spencer's eyes glazing over as he imagined the revenue. She was also quick to remind Cassidy that the loft above the garage would make a wonderful studio for Ollie to work on his sculpture.

Cassidy nodded in agreement, sorting through a stack of papers and old bills he'd pulled out of the bottom drawer of one of the nightstands. He'd completely forgotten about the loft, as it hadn't been used for anything other than storage for as far back as he could remember. It really did get fantastic light from the large windows on all four sides. It had nice high ceilings and was large enough that he could have Internet installed so Spencer could sit up there and conduct his business while watching Ollie work, something Spencer loved to do.

"So why is it we've never heard anything about your grandfather?" Spencer asked, helping Nate unload another large armful of clothes from the closet.

"I don't really know much. He died back in the forties. I think Lionel was only like one or two at the time."

Natalie started to wring her hands a little. "She never told you much, did she?"

Cassidy was surprised by the question. "No, she didn't, actually. Whenever I asked, she'd offer up something vague like 'he was a good man' or 'you'd have really liked him."

"You're going to be so vexed with me. I just know it," Natalie said, fidgeting a little more as she crossed the room, heading toward the closet. "I meant to get it for you the day I stopped by with the council heads, but I sort of forgot after the news you weren't planning to stay. Then on Friday...and I think we all vividly remember what happened that time."

Ollie clicked his teeth together, making biting noises, and Cassidy shot him the evil eye, wishing he'd never told the little shit.

"What are you talking about, Mother?" Nate asked suspiciously as he stopped folding clothes.

Natalie vanished into the closet and began rummaging around. "Just promise you won't be angry with me."

"About what?" Cassidy asked, his ass slipping off the stool as he craned his upper body, trying catch a glimpse of what she was after. He hit the floor with a thud, scrambling to get himself off the floor as Ollie and Spencer snickered.

Natalie came out of the closet carrying a black lacquer box with art deco and Japanese-influenced detail. It had red wooden handles on the side and a silver medallion in the center of the lid. Natalie wiped the dust off with the sleeve of her shirt as she carried it over to Cassidy and held it out for him.

"She rarely ever spoke to me about your grandfather. I think it pained her to talk about him, even all those years later. His name was Samuel." Natalie sighed, turning to Spencer and Ollie. "But she called him Sam. We'd been drinking quite heavily one night after she split with her last boyfriend. That's when she showed me this box."

"Which boyfriend was that?" Cassidy strained to remember as he took the box from her and sat back down on the stool.

Ollie scoffed as if Cassidy was being insensitive.

"There were a lot of boyfriends," Cassidy snapped back. "It's a little difficult to keep them all straight."

"William," Natalie said. "But Ollie's correct. That's kind of beside the point, dear. She told me if anything happened to her that I was to get this to you. She didn't want Lionel to have it."

"What's in it?" Cassidy asked, half-afraid to open it.

"The things she kept of your grandfather's." Natalie took a few steps back as Cassidy ran his fingertips over the lid. "He was quite the hunk. She told me he was devastatingly handsome, with a swagger and a cocky grin. A charisma that rivaled her own, which both frightened and exhilarated her at the same time." Natalie walked over to the bed and sat down, gently brushing some dust off her slacks. "She said he was the only man she'd ever really loved. Straight down to the bone, she'd say."

"I don't understand," Cassidy said, cracking open the lid and peeking in. "If she loved him so much, then why never speak of him?"

"I think she missed him terribly. He died so young, so unexpectedly. She said he'd been taken from her before they'd ever had the chance to really begin. They never found his body, just the boat."

"The Tempest?" Nate asked.

Natalie nodded. "He bought that boat for the two of them. It's where they spent their honeymoon, sailing up and down the East Coast."

"But Sadie hated sailing," Cassidy said, surveying the contents—some letters and photographs bound in yellowed white ribbon, a red velvet-covered jewelry box, and an ancient gum wrapper, the inside of which was marked with Sadie's red lip print. Cassidy held it up for Natalie to see.

"From what I've been told, she used to love sailing."

"That's so sad." Cassidy picked up the pocket-size leather-bound book, running his fingers over the gold lettering. Cassidy turned it around so everyone could see it was a copy of William Shakespeare's the *Tempest*. "He must've really loved the play."

"He gave that to her. It was his pet name for her, always calling her his tempest. I've never read it, but she said it had something to do with Hart's Island and the way she fought so vehemently to protect it from outside influence or control. Sam's father, the original Lionel Winters, your great-grandfather, had made several attempts before the war to buy up land on Hart's. He wanted to turn the island into the East Coast vacation destination for the wealthy and privileged. Fancied himself the William Randolph Hearst of North Carolina, that one."

"At least I know my father comes by it honestly."

"And she wound up married to his son?" Nate asked, obviously confused.

"I bet Great-Granddaddy Hart loved that," Cassidy said, pulling a small bit of dried jasmine out from beneath the pages of the book.

"He most certainly did not like it," Edie said from the doorway, where she was eavesdropping. She had that glint in her eye everyone on Hart's got just before the gossiping began. "He threatened to cut Sadie out of the will after they got married. Old Jeremiah thought Lionel Senior was attempting to get Piper's Point by having Samuel seduce his baby girl. Of course your great grandparents on the Winters side were none too happy that their one and only heir had gone and married so far beneath his station."

"Like anyone would be able to seduce Sadie," Cassidy scoffed.

"If anyone ever had a shot in hell, it would have been Samuel Winters," Edie corrected.

"So they married on the sly?" Ollie asked.

"Got in a boat on a Wednesday, went to the mainland, and drove to Virginia, then came back on Thursday married." Edie smiled as if remembering it like it happened last week. "The news rocked the entire island, even for Sadie, who'd always done exactly as she liked, regardless of the consequences." Edie shook her head, trying to cover up her obvious jealously with self-righteousness. "But marrying that Winters boy—at the time it was scandalous, and Sadie going around saying things like she hadn't the strength to refuse him. That he'd promised she'd never again have to wear the same pair of nylons for as long as she lived, and how could any red-blooded American girl resist such temptation."

Cassidy could tell Edie had loved the drama of it all intensely. "Sounds pretty romantic."

"Oh, it was," Edie said, then straightened herself, "later, that is, after everyone got used to the idea—not that Sadie gave anyone much choice in the matter."

"I don't mean to sound simple," Ollie asked, raising his hand in the air like Edie was his schoolteacher. "Nylons?"

"They were in short supply during the war. We used do anything we could to make them last." She laughed, shaking her head. "Sewing up the runs with matching thread. It was a pain in the ass." Edie smiled, looking Cassidy up and down. "You remind me of him, you know—Samuel. He was a stunning specimen, truly made you weak in the knees when he walked by. He'd been a pilot in the war. Something else his father had forbidden him to do that he'd gone and done anyway. He was magnificent—a real hero."

Cassidy watched Edie with a raised brow, as it was painfully obvious she'd been in love with his grandfather. She took note of the accusation written all over Cassidy's face and quickly cleared her throat, excusing herself before disappearing into the hall.

"Stalker!" Ollie called out in a high-pitched shrill voice, accompanied by a *Psycho*-esque, squeaky sound effect to go along with his hand thrusting through the air like a knife.

Everyone laughed while Cassidy glanced back down into the box.

Natalie pulled herself up off the bed and walked behind Cassidy, squeezing his shoulder. "They only had a few years together, some of which they spent apart fighting over where they were going to live. A battle of wills that Sadie somehow managed to win. She was genuinely surprised by that fact. Samuel gave up trying to lure her away from her island and sort of succumbed to it...to her, she liked to think. She said that he saw past the girl who refused to put on an apron and couldn't make a decent cup of coffee had her life depended on it. That he'd fallen in love with her spirited nature and she worshipped him for never trying to break it."

There were several pencil sketches of Sadie's face lying underneath all the odd little mementos such as the Coca-Cola bottle cap and a random seashell. Cassidy carefully pulled them out; they'd yellowed and appeared to have become brittle. He passed them to Ollie.

"They're very well executed. Lovely composition," Ollie said, delicately holding one up by the corner of the paper. "Sadie was quite the babe."

There was an old record underneath everything else. Cassidy lifted it out of the box and smiled, reading the song title "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To" by Dinah Shore.

"She told me she gave that to him," Natalie said. "She laughed and laughed, as he was anything but amused by the insinuation."

Cassidy untied the ribbon that bound the square black-and-white photographs together. He smiled, surprised by the resemblance between himself and Samuel Winters. It made him a little sad, seeing Sadie all decked out in a long gown, so young, and beaming as if she were the happiest woman in the world wrapped up in his grandfather's tuxedo-clad arms, dancing. He wished he could have known her then.

"She told me she'd been too happy," Natalie said, tearing up. "That he'd been taken from her because she loved him too deeply, as if that in itself was a sin." Natalie sighed as she shook her head. "That he'd given up his other life in order to make her happy, and it had cost him his."

"God, Nat, surely she didn't truly blame herself?"

"I don't know, but I do think she'd have given him up had it meant he'd have a long, happy life otherwise."

"That's the saddest story I've ever heard," Spencer said, sitting on the bed holding the same blouse he'd folded and refolded God only knew how many times now.

Cassidy finished flipping through the photographs before passing them over to Nate. He untied the letters, then dropped them back down into the box and picked up the red jewelry box. It creaked as he opened it. He lifted the cottony padding to find a simple gold band and a tasteful diamond engagement ring tied together with a perfect little bow of ribbon. They were tasteful, unassuming. Cassidy replaced the cotton and shut the box, going back to the letters.

The envelopes had been addressed to Sadie. Cassidy noticed how precise the handwriting was as he carefully opened the one on top, sliding out the folded piece of paper. Cassidy cleared his throat as he unfolded it, examining the handwriting. His grandfather began to feel like more than just a story as he could now imagine him sitting down to write it. He was becoming real, a man who loved Sadie enough to give up the wealth and influence of his family to be with her. Cassidy smiled, feeling a new connection to his grandfather since he too had turned away from the Winters legacy without a second thought. He began reading the letter aloud.

## My dearest Tempest,

It has been over a week since I left you standing alone on our beach, and I have yet to hear from you. My father continues in his attempt to lure me back with excessive blustering and threats of disinheritance. It has become almost amusing in that it has had the opposite effect. I find myself daydreaming of a sleepy, simple life on the beaches of Hart's Island with you. How I wish we hadn't quarreled before I left, and yet I find myself still infuriated with you for not coming back to Charlotte with me. My mind retreats to darkness when I think you could love anything more than you love me. It's a sad occasion when a man must admit he is envious of the sand under your feet. I cannot hide my disappointment in the belief you are not as lost without me as I seem to be away from you.

I am driven to distraction, unable to think of anything other than the fullness of your red lips. How I long to have you back in my arms. This meager flesh that covers my bones burns red-hot, yearning to once again experience the way in which you give yourself over to me. The way you whisper my name haunts me. The long cascading curls of your dark red hair brushing against my cheek. I ache for you, Tempest. You've bewitched me, and I now believe myself to be ruined for any life that does not include you. I lay awake at night and like a siren's song piercing through the darkness, I imagine you standing on our beach calling up into the heavens above, Come back to me...come back to me.

Cassidy quietly refolded the letter, noticing the edges appeared worn beyond the typical wear and tear, as if it had been taken out and reread every so often. A warmth passed over him, and he found himself drawn to Nate in particular, who was staring at him. Cassidy couldn't move or even breathe as he was suddenly able to imagine the way Sadie must have felt whenever his granddaddy looked at her.

"That was—" Cassidy began, shaking his head, still unable to tear his gaze away from Nate's.

"Beautiful," Nate interrupted.

"I may need a cold shower," Ollie said, fanning his face with his hand. "Is it wrong that I'm so turned on right now?"

"Yes," Cassidy said with a grimace.

Natalie burst out laughing. She wiped her eyes as she headed over to Ollie, giving him a big hug. "I think you might be my new favorite person in the whole wide world."

Ollie smiled, giving Natalie the evil eye. "Don't go trying to drag me down that tearstained road, lady. I don't do puffy."

Natalie giggled again, as if she was as innocent as the day she was born. Cassidy knew exactly what she'd meant, as Ollie had been gifted with the ability to say just the right thing at the right moment, keeping the mood from spiraling too far down into the dumps.

Everyone got back to the job at hand, bantering back and forth, trying to keep things light. Cassidy tied the letters back together, though not with quite the same precision Sadie had. He replaced all the contents and closed the lid. Removing his glasses, Cassidy glanced at his reflection in the mirror, thinking he appeared a little worn around the edges. He pressed his fingers into his eye sockets in hopes of relieving some of the strain building up.

Cassidy wondered what losing Sam like that must have done to her. It had to have altered who she was, damaged her deeply. He thought about his relationship with his own father and what that change in her could've meant for Lionel at such a young age. Considering Cassidy's relationship with his father mirrored that of Lionel and Sadie's, it felt as if the forces of history were punishing them. That this horrible family curse had them stuck on some twisted loop, dooming them to repeat the same mistakes.

Cassidy didn't believe Lionel had ever liked his mother, and to some degree, Cassidy understood why. As much as Cassidy loved Sadie for her eccentric ways, her loud, boisterous spirit that overwhelmed nearly anyone else, he also knew it had embarrassed his father as a child. And it would have been an understatement to say she didn't exactly hide any disappointment she had in Lionel, who represented an elitist standard for which she had nothing but contempt. He became everything she'd been raised to despise, and he loathed her for keeping him from the Winters legacy his entire childhood. The fact that she'd been married so many times, not to mention all the lovers she'd taken up with after Sam passed away, didn't exactly help things.

Maybe his father would have turned out differently had Sam been there to shape him as Lionel grew up and developed into a man. Perhaps it would've made no difference and he'd have just wound up hating Samuel as much as he had Sadie. He sighed, realizing there was no point in sitting around all day playing what-if. He was happy knowing that at least for a little while Sadie had been loved. A tiny bit jealous, even.

Putting his glasses back on, he then went back to sorting through the papers he'd laid out on the desk, placing them into keep and shred piles. Every so often he'd feel the back of his neck becoming warm. He'd peer up into the mirror to find Nate watching him. A week ago he would have been unnerved by it. But in that particular moment Cassidy took comfort from it, even found himself missing it

whenever Nate would turn away. As he went back to sifting through the stack, he wondered if there'd ever be a next time with Nate. And if there was, would he somehow screw it up?

\* \* \*

The next few days wound up being more of a madhouse than Cassidy thought possible. He'd met with the council elders Monday evening, and both he and Edie assured them they'd be finished no later than Wednesday, ensuring Piper's Point would be ready in time for the Founders' Day party that weekend. Cassidy went over Nate's idea of inviting everyone who wished to attend to the lighthouse on Saturday when he'd be spreading Sadie's ashes. They all agreed it was an appropriate gesture, and while no one actually did, he couldn't help but imagine they all wanted to press him as to whether he'd changed his mind about leaving at the end of the summer.

The house had been crawling with a couple of dozen people for days working from early morning and well into the night as the contents of the attic were unloaded and displayed for Cassidy, Cecelia, and Edie to assess their importance. Cassidy had also asked Natalie to hang around, as she was the closest thing to an expert they had in regard to what had transpired over the last thirty years.

The goal at this point was merely to separate the items that might have any historical relevance from those that didn't. From there, what was left was divided into three separate areas—things that might have monetary value and could be sold to help fund Sadie's exhibit were taken directly to the historical society. The items that weren't of any notable value but might still be useful were packed up to be shipped to the shelter for battered women along with most of Sadie's clothes. The third and final area was trash. Cassidy was actually fairly impressed that precious little wound up in the trash pile, somewhat redeeming Sadie's pack-rat existence.

By Wednesday evening, both the attic and Sadie's bedroom had been emptied and sifted through, along with the loft above the garage, which Natalie had reminded him of on Monday. Any documents and photographs had been taken back to the attic. As part of the deal, Cassidy would have to sort through each shred of paper in order to approve what was acceptable to release to the historical society. The letters from his grandfather and anything else so personal in nature would never see the light of day outside the walls of the house in which they now resided.

Most of the heavy items, the furniture, and knickknacks had all been loaded up, including a few pieces from the house that Cassidy and the others agreed might hold interest, such as Jeremiah's Victorian claw-foot desk from the formal parlor, and Piper Hart's tiny pianoforte that had been sitting in the living room as far back as he could remember.

Cassidy knew Sadie wouldn't be happy he'd handed over her daddy's desk, but it was so bulky, almost intimidating, and he'd always disliked it intensely. He kept a few things from the attic—a carved oak desk from France, which had fat barley twist legs, that Cassidy wanted to use in the parlor to replace Jeremiah's desk, a

full-size Victorian sleigh bed that he planned to put in his old bedroom after doing a little redecorating. He fell completely in love with a set of midcentury modern iron patio furniture discovered above the garage, which he was determined to have restored.

He kept a small Egyptian-influenced, art-deco bronze lamp of a woman sitting on her legs and holding up a basket that held a frosted-glass globe. It needed to be rewired, and he doubted it would bring as much money as a result. They found a vintage portable Royal typewriter from the thirties that appeared practically brandnew. It had been kept stored in its original case, and he couldn't part with it, along with three Bakelite telephones, two black and one cream colored. None of them worked, but they were just like the ones you'd see in an old black-and-white noir film.

The pièce de résistance had been three wooden crates filled with leather-bound books. Cassidy had nearly wet himself, unable to imagine why anyone would have locked them away, yet quite grateful for their stupidity. His hand had been shaking as he reached into the first crate, as if afraid the books might turn to dust and crumble before his very eyes, were he to physically disturb them.

Cassidy nearly broke down after cracking open the first book and seeing the name *Samuel Winters* scribbled on the inside cover. Instantly sad for Sadie, Cassidy realized she must have put them away because they reminded her of him. He dug through the crate, seeing the names Hemingway and Melville, Twain and Poe, along with Virgil and Dickens. And that was in the first crate alone. It was like the Holy Literature Grail had fallen into his lap.

What had been more priceless to Cassidy was the knowledge that his grandfather had loved to read, the same way he always had. For the first time, Cassidy truly connected to the Winters side of his family. He was angry, feeling cheated for not having had the opportunity to meet his grandfather.

Cassidy had stood there looking over the books, thinking that as short as his life had been, Sam had loved and been loved in the way all people dreamed possible before life and ruined expectations caused them to give up and settle for what was easy and available. At no other point in his life had it been true, yet Cassidy was a little pissed at Sadie for not having shared any of this with him.

Despite all the personal discoveries he'd made, and perhaps because of them, Cassidy was relieved to have all the heavy lifting completed as the endless parade of people tromping through Sadie's shack mercifully came to a halt. Teddy had barely been around since starting his new job with Ben. Something told Cassidy they were likely doing much more intense training than Ben had ever done with any of his previous employees.

Nate had spent the bulk of Tuesday and Wednesday at his office, trying to catch up on some of his neglected work, and Spencer, Ollie, and Neil had been doing some island sightseeing during the day, while Cassidy had been kept busy, being pulled in one direction or another. Cassidy was a little bummed, as he'd been hoping

to take Ollie and Spencer around himself, but it gave them something to do and kept them out of the vortex of chaos that the Point had become.

As he crumpled into Nate's bed Wednesday night, more exhausted than he could ever remember being, he wondered if perhaps his age and the ruthless tempo he'd set for himself for the bulk of the last decade were finally catching up with him. Nate slipped his arm around his waist as he dragged Cassidy across the bed to where he lay somewhere between wake and sleep. Cassidy offered no resistance yet couldn't be bothered to help, more like a rag doll than an actual human being.

The heat from Nate's body burned into his back, relaxing him further, something he hadn't realized possible until that moment. As sleep came over him, now safely tucked away in Nate's arms as if nothing or no one could possibly get to him, Cassidy hoped there truly was a heaven. He wanted to believe that somewhere Sadie was also safely tucked away. That Samuel had his Tempest again. That only seemed fair, he thought, drifting deeper into sleep. It would almost make losing her bearable if it were true.

## Chapter Eighteen

Cassidy opened his eyes, still exhausted and feeling as if he'd just come to bed and lay down only minutes before. His mind immediately went to the amount of work still left, getting through all the Hart family documents, and he began to secretly hope it wasn't a complete history, taking into account the length of time his family had been on the island.

Neither Cecelia nor Edie had been too happy when they realized Cassidy wasn't planning on allowing them to go through the family documents, but Cassidy knew Sadie would expect a certain amount of discretion to be taken into account. It was somewhat laughable, considering Sadie's sordid history with men had been the talk of the island for the past fifty or sixty years.

He let out a long groan as he rolled onto his stomach, seeing Nate was once again already up and nowhere to be found. He smiled, feeling Dasie crawling up the mattress behind him, and he rolled over, giggling as she went to town trying to give his face a tongue bath. He noticed the top of the white tent out the open French doors, irritated that his view of the ocean from Nate's bed was still obstructed.

Cassidy quickly shoved all the Hart family history aside in his mind in order to make room for the full day's worth of party planning he had ahead of him. Despite Jacob and Henry assuring him that it was all planned, he somehow knew relocating everything to Piper's Point from the lighthouse grounds wasn't going to be as easy as they made it sound.

All Cassidy wanted to do was stay in bed. The past few days had emotionally drained him. He was even willing to ignore his own bladder to do so, if not for the fact he knew he didn't have a choice in the matter. He listened to the loud motor coming from somewhere outside the house, along with the occasional muffled voices yelling back and forth. Dasie hopped up onto his stomach and plopped down, sitting like the sphinx with her front paws stretched out across his chest. She then laid her head down, resting her chin on her paws as she stared at Cassidy, her big, pleading eyes saying, *I need to pee, and I'm hungry*, *Daddy*.

"Not you too?" Cassidy tried pouching his lower lip out to see if that would have any effect on the dog. He whimpered when she didn't so much as flinch. "Okay, you win. I'll get up."

She sprang up off his chest, bouncing across the bed in circles as he slowly pulled himself out of it. He once again cursed under his breath, able to hear the ocean but not see it as he slipped on his jeans.

\* \* \*

Cassidy followed the scent of Natalie's cinnamon rolls all the way into the kitchen, just in time to see Nate going out the door. Ollie sat in the breakfast nook with Spencer, Teddy, Natalie, and Neil.

"This evil, wicked woman continues to seduce me with dough and icing," Ollie said, rubbing his full belly while Natalie munchkin-giggled away.

"Want me to take her out?" Teddy asked, getting up from the table.

Cassidy handed the dog over. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

"Nope." Teddy winked as he headed out the door. "Ben let me off to help out here."

They all jumped slightly, hearing a loud bang coming from outside.

"What the hell..." Cassidy rushed out the back door, freezing in his tracks as he surveyed the courtyard.

Tables and chairs were being unloaded into the garage along with plastic-wrapped white tablecloths and racks upon racks of glassware in green plastic dividers. White paper lanterns were being strung throughout all the tents and Christmas-tree lights slung over anything else that would stand still long enough to be caught up in its web of green wires. Cassidy turned to his right to see the large stepped bandstand going up on the east lawn. The torches were being installed down the path to the beach as four men carefully carried half of the long bar down the steps. To his left, he noticed the first bar was already set up and ready to be stocked with booze.

"Nate thought you might be in need of a little break from tedium after dealing with Cee Cee and the historical society." Natalie placed her arm around his waist. "He and the council have taken over the party organizing. You can do as much or as little as you like, but they all wanted to do this for you and Sadie."

"Wow." Cassidy waved at Henry and Edie as they walked by arguing about exactly where the dance floor should be placed. Teddy weaved his way back through the maze of people with Dasie tucked under his arm like a football as Cecelia came chasing after them.

"Can we please pick up the poo until after the Founders' party?" Cecelia shrieked.

Cassidy and Natalie laughed as Teddy and Dasie both ran, wide-eyed and panicked, having been chased down by a fist-shaking Cecelia.

"I'll make sure it doesn't happen again," Cassidy yelled out as Teddy disappeared into the house.

"That woman is a menace," Natalie scolded. "Frightening that sweet little Teddy."

Cassidy did his best to keep a straight face, considering Teddy was anything but tiny. He'd immensely enjoyed seeing the big, muscle-bound hunk running like a little girl from the vicious demon goddess of smite. "She does have a tiny bit of a point, though."

"Nonsense. A little poo on the shoe never killed anyone." Natalie nodded curtly as she spun around to head back into the house. "Come in and eat some breakfast. You boys all need to go pick out your tuxedos today so Mrs. Tate and her quilting circle can make any necessary alterations."

"Isn't Nate coming with us?" Cassidy asked, following Natalie back into the house.

"No dear. He already has one—make that two. Why he went and exchanged tuxedos at the last minute is beyond me." Natalie seemed slightly peeved by that. "Spencer appears to be about the same size as Nate, so perhaps all is not lost. I better go call Mrs. Tate."

Natalie darted out into the hall, and Cassidy blinked, startled by how quickly she'd moved. He padded softly toward the island, noticing someone had already fed Dasie. He poured himself a cup of coffee and tried rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He wanted to go back to bed and found himself somewhat irritable toward Nate as well. He didn't like waking up to find him gone, considering they'd barely had any time to talk the past few days.

He shook those thoughts out of his head, chalking it up to exhaustion and a lack of caffeine. He was certainly ready to spend some time with his friends away from this circus where his biggest decision could be made by pointing to a suit on a rack while uttering four simple words...

\* \* \*

"I'll take that one," Cassidy said as Mrs. Tate removed the tuxedo from the rack, rescuing it from the remaining unwanted, which were slightly sad in their appearance, hanging there all lifeless.

The older woman in her late fifties shoved the rack, sending it hurtling toward the back wall with no regard for where it might happen to stop. Neil was already finished, putting his street clothes back on behind one of the old cardboard set paintings from *Guys and Dolls*, now being repurposed as changing screens. Ollie, Teddy, and Spencer were all standing up on wooden boxes, as minions from Mrs. Tate's quilting bee fussed with hems, pinned crotches, and pleated jackets.

All this activity occurred on the stage in the high school auditorium behind the drawn red velvet curtain, which had definitely seen better days. Cassidy stepped behind one of the partitions and started removing his clothes. He watched over the screen as Ollie stepped down and went to stand in front of a mirror, so he and his seamstress could take a peek at her progress.

Cassidy pulled his pants up and buttoned them turning in time to catch Neil watching him. He cast a gaze at the man only to receive a shrug and a wink as if to say, *Don't blame me for looking*.

Cassidy tucked in his formfitting T-shirt and came back out as Ollie stepped back up on his box. Pulling on his own jacket, Cassidy walked over to the mirror as he and Mrs. Tate both nodded, realizing there wouldn't be much alteration required.

"Lady," Ollie said, snapping his fingers until the woman who was working with Spencer finally turned around. "I apologize as I don't think I ever got your name, and please forgive me for being rude, but could you please take care and watch where you're pointing those shears?"

Everyone turned, including the seamstress, who went bright red when she realized her hand rested on Spencer's thigh, and the tip of the intimidatingly long and sharp-ass shears were mere centimeters away from the jewels.

"Oh my," she said, ripping her hand away in a bit of a panic as Spencer watched with the slightest bit of fear in his eyes.

"Thank you," Ollie said, placing a hand over his chest, obviously relieved. "I apologize once again, but I've grown quite attached to the goods, and I'd certainly hate to go home with anything less than what I arrived with."

All the women started giggling away, turning as red as the velvet curtains while Cassidy stepped up on his box.

"As would I," Spencer muttered, breaking out in a cold sweat.

"Thank you for squeezing us all in last minute, by the way," Cassidy said. "Please excuse my friends' lack of a filter."

"Not a problem, Cassidy," Mrs. Tate offered, pinning up the hem of his pant leg. "We're all just so happy you're back home where you belong."

"No offense taken," said the girl working on Spencer as she smiled up at him with a gleam of lust in her eye. "That would indeed be quite a shame."

Spencer winked, obviously enjoying being flirted with, since the corners of his mouth turned up slightly.

Cassidy rolled his eyes and laughed as Ollie took note of said flirting as well.

"Not that I wouldn't be opposed to a little snip, snip for the man with a wandering eye," Ollie reminded as Spencer pursed his lips and laughed.

"Could you two be any more crude?" Teddy asked, shaking his head. "I doubt these ladies care to hear such things."

The women all laughed as the one working with Teddy, who looked like Aunt Bea from Mayberry, patted him on the ass. "If you had any idea the things we ladies talk about when you men aren't around."

"Well, still, ma'am," Teddy said, glancing down and watching curiously as she decided to cop another feel. "It's not very polite."

"It's Sir Gala-dud to the rescue," Ollie said.

"Please, boys." Cassidy shut his eyes, praying for mercy. "I'm begging you—can we please have a pleasant and peaceful afternoon?"

"Well, why invite us along if you wanted that?" Ollie quipped, winking at Cassidy.

"Sorry, Cass," Teddy said, scowling at the ground like a little freshly scolded kid. "It's just, I really like it here. Everyone's so nice and friendly." He glanced pointedly over at Ollie. "And I'd prefer not to have the entire island praying for my departure."

"Just me, then?" Ollie asked, cracking himself up until he realized Cassidy wasn't enjoying his snark. "Kidding!"

"I'm glad to hear you're enjoying Hart's, Teddy. That makes me happy."

"Not nearly as happy as Ben-vet," Ollie muttered through his teeth.

Neil, who sat on the floor, leaned back against the wall and burst out laughing. Cassidy assumed Neil must have gotten the same eyeful he and Ollie had Sunday morning after sneaking out of the house, hungover.

Teddy lifted his arms in a "what gives?" manner. "Now why even bring that up?"

"You're all done, my dear," Mrs. Tate said, standing up and taking Cassidy by the hand and gently shaking it.

"Because he just can't help himself, Teddy." Cassidy hopped down from the box. "He's like a monkey with an uncontrollable compulsion to fondle himself."

Spencer laughed, shoulders bouncing up and down until Ollie eyed him as a traitor.

"I need more coffee." Cassidy sighed. "Or a cocktail."

"If I were your boyfriend, I'd already be on my way to finding you one or the other," Neil reminded, as an orneriness took over his face.

Cassidy placed a hand on his hip, letting him know by the expression on his face that he didn't appreciate the insinuation.

Neil shrugged, mumbling, "I'm just saying."

Cassidy itched to get to his phone, as if he needed to prove Nate was willing to drop everything to come meet him. He chastised himself for allowing Neil to almost bait him into it. Nate was helping set up for the party in an attempt to give Cassidy some time away from the madness. The only problem with that scenario was Cassidy couldn't help thinking he wouldn't mind the madhouse so much, if it meant being with Nate.

Maybe he could take a break and come meet us for lunch?

Mrs. Tate winked at Cassidy before leading him over to the mirror. "You are a sight to behold, son."

Cassidy smiled back at her through the reflection in the mirror, and she reached up, fussing with his bangs. He was unsure why he'd been so tense all morning, but that one simple act somehow reset his entire internal temperament, and all the frustration sort of bled out him.

"So handsome," Mrs. Tate added. "Sadie would be so proud of the man you've grown into."

"Thank you for saying that, Mrs. Tate." Cassidy turned and reached out to give her a hug, cringing in pain, feeling several pins prick him in the sides and arms.

"Careful, dear," she said, helping him remove the jacket. "Now go take off your pants."

Cassidy looked her up and down. "Mrs. Tate, I'm shocked."

The women all started to laugh as the one working on Teddy said, "Stop flirting, Josephine Tate, and come help me finish up with this young man."

"Don't get fresh with me, young man." Mrs. Tate reached over and pinched Cassidy in the arm, turning a little red in the face. Cassidy yelped dutifully, making sure she was satisfied he'd suffered enough for his cheeky behavior.

She shoved him playfully toward the changing area as Ollie hopped down from his box to go change as well. As Cassidy removed his trousers, handing them to Mrs. Tate over the makeshift screen, he heard his cell ring. He grabbed his jeans by a belt loop and pulled the phone out of the pocket. Scowling, he realizing he'd forgotten his glasses. He held it out, squinting to see who was calling.

*Perfect timing*. Practically elated, he punched the green button and placed the phone between his shoulder and ear. "Hi, babe, what's up?"

"Did you order a bed?" Nate asked.

"Um, yeah...I did." Cassidy started to slide on his jeans, wondering why the hell Nate sounded so cranky.

"Well, it's here, and they want to know where the hell to put it."

"Oh, okay. Calm down, Nate." Cassidy zipped and buttoned.

"I don't want to calm down," Nate snapped. "I have enough to deal with today, you know."

"All right, I'm sorry. I'm finished here so, just tell them to wait, and I'll be there in ten." Cassidy scoffed, hearing the click on the other end of the line. "Jesus, overreact much?"

"What's the problem?" Ollie asked, putting on his last sneaker.

"The bed I ordered arrived today, and it's apparently the straw breaking the camel's back."

Ollie raised an eyebrow, getting up out of the chair. "When did you order a bed?"

"Last week—that next morning after I arrived. That old twin bed I slept on in my room did a number on my back."

"I hope it wasn't only the twin bed?" Neil said, smiling wickedly.

"No, you fuckfest freak of nature," Cassidy said under his breath to ensure the ladies couldn't over hear him. "You helped plenty."

Cassidy watched as Ollie eyed Neil as if seeing him from a whole new perspective. He shook whatever illicit thoughts he had out of his head and turned to Spencer, obviously relieved his husband had been too busy yapping away with Teddy and the women to have caught any of that.

"Does Nate know that's when you ordered the bed?" Ollie finally asked.

"Yeah." Ollie nodded.

"Shit." Cassidy began patting his pockets for his keys, before remembering he hadn't driven.

"Need a lift?" Neil asked, grinning.

"I'll be coming with," Ollie said to Neil, like he no longer trusted the man could behave himself.

"What about them?" Cassidy asked, pointing to Spencer and Teddy.

"Gotta go, boys!" Ollie yelled back as he pushed Cassidy toward the exit. "Call my cell when you're done, and I'll come back to get you."

## Chapter Nineteen

Neil slowly pulled his SUV up the drive, inching toward the front of the house. All the other delivery trucks were gone except the one with the new bed and a flatbed that was cram- packed with a wide variety of tropical plants and flowers in a multitude of sizes, all the way up to potted palm trees nearly fifteen feet tall. As they parked and got out of the monster truck, Cassidy noticed four guys unloading plants while waiting to be directed by Natalie and Cecelia. The men were standing there with armloads of foliage as the two women argued about what was to go where.

When he walked through the front door, Cassidy peered down the hall into the kitchen and spied Nate talking to someone Cassidy couldn't see. Nate turned, obviously none too happy to see Cassidy, which pissed him off. The least he could do is wait for a goddamned explanation before writing me off.

Ollie mumbled something about the delivery guys and Sadie's room, and Cassidy nodded, despite not really paying any attention. A somewhat nastier expression took over Nate's face, and Neil stood beside Cassidy and smiled at Nate as if he hadn't a care in the world. It appeared innocent, but Cassidy knew Neil was baiting Nate, and was half tempted to deck Neil right then and there for enjoying this a little too much.

"You wait right here," Cassidy ordered, as Neil held up his hands in an "I surrender" fashion.

Cassidy started toward the kitchen, then stopped as he came to the stairs, seeing Ben place a hand on Nate's chest as he leaned forward and peeked down the hall at him. Cassidy was instantly furious, seeing nothing but red. You've got to be kidding me with this shit!

Nate stared at Cassidy as if daring him to go ahead and say something about it. Cassidy smirked, even more furious when he saw Dasie dangling from Ben's other arm. Cassidy turned, shooting Nate a glare that said he'd best be following his ass if he knew what was good for him; then he stormed up the stairs thinking, Get your hand off my guy and keep the fuck away from my dog!

\* \* \*

Cassidy paced back forth, cursing himself as he surveyed the room for the location of his fucking glasses. Spotting them on the nightstand, he went over and snatched them up, before putting them on as Nate came into the bedroom.

"Shut that damn door," Cassidy said under his breath.

Nate stared blankly as he took it by the hand and shoved it, causing it to slam and vibrate the walls. "Anything else you need?"

"Yeah," Cassidy said, rounding the bed. "I *need* to know what the fuck has crawled up your ass."

Nate started to speak and then closed his mouth. Cassidy was sporting a cocky grin. He knew Nate didn't want to actually admit what was bugging him. They had each agreed they shouldn't risk being together, despite the fact all either of them had been thinking about over the past week was, in fact, being together.

"You fucking know why," Nate snapped.

"I want to hear you say it."

"Fine, you fucking asshole." Nate took a step forward, muttering between clenched teeth. "It hurt my little girlie feelings to realize you've been sleeping in the same bed with me out of convenience, not because you wanted to be there."

"I ordered that damn bed before I'd even laid eyes on you, you big, dumb ox," Cassidy fired back. "I've been sleeping in the same bed with you because I like being close to you—would very much like to have you a whole helluva lot closer, not that I haven't given you plenty of indication." Cassidy saw the tension draining out of Nate's face as they each took a few steps closer to each other. "What I can't figure out is why you'd give a damn whether or not I'm in your bed, if you don't want to be with me."

Nate reached out, taking Cassidy by the hand and pulling him into his arms. Cassidy sighed, feeling the heat coming off Nate's body. The man smelled so damn good, and the scent went directly from his nose to his dick. No one else had ever had that kind of a physical effect on Cassidy. The mere fact of Nate's being sent Cassidy spiraling into lust, triggering thoughts and desires he'd definitely experienced with other men in the past, but never so intensely.

He'd forgotten it was like this between them after being apart for so damn long. Cassidy couldn't hold on to a clear thought whenever they were close. It was as if something visceral, something deeply ingrained in his DNA, only surfaced with the smell and touch of this one man.

Nate started to rock back and forth while they stood locked in each other's arms. Cassidy couldn't think of anything other than being completely naked in the kitchen with Nate the other day. The way he took in Cassidy's body, like a man who'd been wandering through the desert for days and had suddenly found water.

The smell of sweat and paint mixed with excitement and lust, along with that new first kiss, searing the sensation of Nate's lips into his consciousness. Having Nate's hands on his skin and his cock inside the man's mouth—it was all there, instantly, whenever either of their planets became caught within the other's gravitational pull.

Cassidy could feel Nate's heart beating faster, knew he was affected as well, as the man breathed deeper and more frequently. He slid his hands down to Nate's hips, pulling their bodies closer and lightly grinding into him. He could feel Nate's erection pressing into his own, and he lost it. Damn everything else to hell and back again, Cassidy thought as he once again decided to make the first move.

Cassidy cocked his head slightly, leaning in only to pull away, never allowing their lips to fully come together. It was most difficult thing he'd ever done—denying himself by pulling away. He needed Nate to meet him halfway. As Cassidy moved in a third time, deciding it would be the last if Nate didn't make a move, he closed the gap, ferociously covering Cassidy's lips with his. It was pure desperation for the release they'd each been aching for. Cassidy ran a hand into Nate's hair as they continued to grind into each other. Nate's hands were on Cassidy's ass, pulling him tighter, as if he was unable to get close enough.

A white heat flashed through Cassidy as he lifted Nate's shirt. All he could think about was getting his hands on Nate's bare skin. More, wanting more, half-terrified he'd never be able to get enough.

Nate tore his lips away, shoving Cassidy back as he bent over, placing a hand on his knee for support. His other hand covered his mouth as if he was trying to hide the lust that was pouring off his body in waves. "We can't do this."

Cassidy felt the words as if having been physically struck by them. "What the fuck?"

"I'm sorry, Cassidy, but..."

"This is a goddamned joke, right?" Cassidy begged, so turned on that every pore in his body was screaming for release. "We're doing this now, damn it." Cassidy stomped his foot as he pulled off his T-shirt. "You can get naked the easy way or the hard way"—he could barely catch his breath as he started on his belt buckle—"but we're not leaving this room till we've fucked!"

"Please stop, Cassidy. I'm begging you." Nate was doing his level best to avoid seeing Cassidy's shirtless body by speaking to the floor. He held out a hand as if asking for mercy, as if knowing he wouldn't be able to hold out if Cassidy were to take off his pants.

"For Christ's sake, Nate." Cassidy tossed his hands into the air. "What the hell is your problem? Because frankly, the story coming from your body contradicts the one coming out of your mouth. And I'm beginning to get whiplash as you shift back and forth between the two speeds available to me at the moment."

"I can't settle for half of you—" Nate started.

"I'm here, Nate," Cassidy interrupted, patting his hands on chest, "desperate to give you all of me, every inch—to pleasure you in every way possible."

"Fuck, don't say that," Nate said, a pained expression taking over his face.

"The things I'd be willing to do to you—for you, at this precise moment..."

"I just can't, Cassidy, so let it go."

"That's not going to cut it, Nate! You're gonna have to muster up a little more than that if you expect me to back off."

"You're leaving at the end of the summer, so what's the point?"

Cassidy paused for a moment until a renewed determination came over him. He shook his head. "No, Nate. That's just geography. So unless you have something better," Cassidy said going back to his belt.

"I don't deserve you!" Nate screamed, his body beginning to shake.

Cassidy was completely confused. "I don't understand you."

Nate sighed, peeking over before going back to staring at the floor as if it physically hurt to see Cassidy like that and not touch him. "I came to see you in Chapel Hill, you know. Thanksgiving break of my sophomore year. It had been the first chance I'd had to get to you after Sadie had her stroke back in September." Nate rubbed at his crotch as he stood back up. "I'd been worried sick about you, knowing how devastated you'd be, especially considering you weren't able to come to Hart's the previous summer. I figured that alone was probably eating at you. It had been hell waiting, but Mom kept saying you were okay. I guess at the time you still thought you could convince Lionel to let her come back to the Point."

Nate straightened out his shirt and ran a hand through his hair. "As soon as my last class was finished, I jumped in that beat-up old pickup truck I used to have..."

Cassidy smiled, remembering that truck. He missed that truck.

"I was praying the damn thing would actually make the trip, and I drove practically nonstop."

"I don't understand. If you came then..."

"Mom had told me you were going to spend your break with Sadie in that elder-care facility. I was going to surprise you, drive you up there and stay with you both. I told Mom I'd be with you, that she should spend the weekend with Max." Nate's jaw clenched a little, and he still refused to meet Cassidy's gaze. "There I was, striding up the steps to the house you were living in at the time. Your front door—it had that large oval pane of glass, just like the one here at Piper's Point."

Cassidy remembered it well, having been one of the reasons he picked that house. Every time he walked up to that door, for a split second he was able to imagine himself back at Sadie's shack. Of course, at a certain point it became a constant reminder of his failure to get Sadie back home. It was the very thing that drove him to move and eventually buy the house he now owned, naively thinking Lionel would consent to allowing Sadie to come live with him at least. Back before he realized the extent of Lionel's loathing for her.

"I remember how nervous I was at the time, standing there on the front porch. I was surprised by that as I walked up to the door and raised my hand to knock." Nate repeated the action, lifting his arm as if to knock, his expression going blank, unreadable to Cassidy. "That's when I saw you."

Cassidy watched as Nate's gaze finally met with his. Cassidy grew the tiniest bit uneasy watching the change in Nate's demeanor.

Disappointment washed over Nate's face.

"You were on the sofa, straddling some other guy, kissing him." Nate swallowed and turned away. "I was in shock. I couldn't believe what I'd just seen. It dawned on me what a dumb-ass I'd been, assuming you wouldn't have someone. At first I only felt stupid, driving all night like some ridiculous knight in a white pickup, come to rescue the dude in distress."

Cassidy felt instantly guilty for having caused Nate pain. He was aware he'd not actually done anything wrong, but that wasn't the point. He remembered that first Thanksgiving alone with Sadie. Trying to keep the constant smile on his face, despite wishing he could curl up in the bed with her and cry. Wanting to apologize to her for not having visited that summer and for lying to her about it. Thinking he'd give anything to go back in time and make a different decision.

"It would have been nice to have had you there," Cassidy said, not intending to hurt Nate by saying it, though that was the effect his words had.

"And that's really it, Cass." Nate's shoulders slumped, and he seemed defeated. "More than any other time in your life, you needed a friend. People to help support you, help hold you up. And I ran away like some punk. Seeing you with that guy, who I assume was Spencer?"

Cassidy nodded blankly, not really remembering anything other than spending that lonely weekend with her, but knowing it was who he'd been dating at the time.

"I realized for the first time I was crazy in love with you. The contempt I felt for him...you, even as I got back in my truck and headed back to Hart's. I told Mom you'd wanted to be alone with Sadie, because I was too ashamed to admit the truth to her. I could've handled being around you and not being able to be with you, Cassidy. But having to stand on the sidelines, forced to watch you with someone else? That thought drove me insane. It made me sick to even think about it."

"Jesus, Nate," Cassidy said, nervously crossing his arms. "You should have said something. Things might have been different had you—"

"I couldn't handle the repercussions of what it would mean if I laid it all out there, only to have you not feel the same. Doing nothing seemed less final, since the possibility of an *us* still remained." Nate exhaled as if he'd unloaded a huge burden. He stumbled to the bed and plopped down. "It was selfish and cowardly, all those wasted years... I've not been able to *really* look myself in the eye ever since."

"You can't—shouldn't carry that around with you," Cassidy said. "You were what, twenty years old at the time? One stupid decision doesn't make the man."

"Even one stupid decision that I made over and over again, day after day, year after year?"

Cassidy knew he was right, but he also understood all too well the power that fear and denial could hold over a man, dooming him to repeat the same mistakes until he found himself in a rut so deep it seemed impossible to claw his way back out. "Do you think you're the only one with regrets?"

"Of course not. I just..."

"You want to know the real reason I didn't come to Hart's that summer before freshman year?" Cassidy asked, walking over and kneeling down at Nate's feet. "I lied to Sadie and to you. I told you Lionel was forcing me to intern with his company that summer. While I did do that, it was all me. I asked Lionel, made him think I was interested in the business, but I was even lying to him." Cassidy took a deep breath and placed his hands on Nate's knees. "I was screwing his VP. The guy was the father of one of my classmates."

Nate's mouth fell open slightly as he stared back at Cassidy in shock.

"I told myself that I was in love with him, in some lame attempt to justify what I was doing. But it had nothing to do with love. Deep down, I knew how much it would kill my father to know his son—someone of the Winters' caliber and breeding—was taking it up the ass. From a subordinate and one of his most trusted employees, no less." Cassidy sensed that same intense hatred crawling into his gut. "I hadn't realized how much I disliked Lionel until I finally accepted that fact."

"Jesus, Cassidy," Nate said, obviously shocked, as if seeing him for the first time.

Cassidy stood and sat next to Nate on the bed, not particularly caring for the change in Nate's demeanor. "I knew that would be the one thing that would hurt Lionel. Not because he cared about me, mind you, but the tainting of his reputation. What it would say to the world to have the fruit of his loins bent over his very own desk, begging to be fucked."

"I never knew you felt that way about your dad," Nate said. "All those summers growing up, you barely mentioned him."

"Is that so odd? Do most boys enjoy admitting that their father doesn't love them?"

"Hey." Nate held up his hands as if surrendering. "Mine was a monster, so it wasn't like I could've rubbed your nose in it. Not that I ever would've."

"Have you ever tried—"

"Nope," Nate interrupted, instantly pissed. "That sick fuck beat up on my mom—while she was pregnant with me. If I ever found him, I'd probably kill him."

Cassidy stared back down at the floor, nodding.

"I can't believe you of all people would've had sex with someone just to punish your dad." Nate appeared genuinely shocked. "It's not you."

"I went through this fucked-up *Cruel Intentions* phase during my senior year." Cassidy placed his hands on his lap to keep from fidgeting. "It made me feel powerful all on my own. Something I usually only felt when I was here with you. Not really my finest moment, I know."

"It's funny, because when I think back, I don't believe I ever truly bought that whole internship excuse. I honestly thought it was me," Nate said. "The sex had been so intense between us. I was afraid we'd pushed things too far the summer before and you just didn't want to see me."

"That summer with you freed something in me," Cassidy said. "I felt liberated. All the things I'd been hiding away deep inside for so long were loose. We broke the dam, and the subsequent flood of my sexual awakening was intoxicating. It was as if overnight I became this person that people noticed."

"People always noticed you," Nate said.

Cassidy shook his head. "Maybe so, but up until that point, I didn't fully understand what it meant—that I could use another person's desire for me to my own end."

Nate was obviously irritated when he got up off the bed. "I don't think I want to hear anymore."

"Nate, please, I've never told anyone else this stuff before."

"Maybe you should keep it that way." Nate paced back and forth now, obviously pissed off. "All this time I've had this image of the sweet guy I fell in love with who I turned my back on."

Cassidy shot up off the bed. "Well, I'm very sorry I'm not the right kind of pathetic for you."

"Don't put this off on me," Nate snapped back. "You're just pissed because I won't fuck you. You come back here, and I'm supposed to drop everything, including my pants, sprout a hard-on, and gratefully perform my duties?"

"This is insane! I'm being penalized for being attracted to you."

"Seems to me like I'm just convenient once again," Nate said, cocking an eyebrow.

"We can't keep having this same argument, Nate." Cassidy scooped his shirt up off the floor. "I'm sorry you fell so hard for me that summer. I'm sorry I've had a little too much sex in the past to be considered worthy of your apparently sainted cock." Cassidy wrestled his shirt back over his head, then pressed his hands together prayer-style, and bowed down as if worshipping Nate's dick. "Unlike you, Mr. Perfect, I'm a bit of a work in progress. My father has all the warmth of a serial killer, and my mother, for all intents and purposes, is a fembot. Christ! How long did Max keep Natalie at arm's length, for fuck's sake? And my grandmother was basically Hugh Hefner with a vagina! So it's not as if I've had a solid example of what love is supposed to look like!"

"It's supposed to look like me!" Nate screamed back. "You...asshole!"

"Oh, really! Well, next time, you might try mentioning that *before* an entire decade comes and goes!"

"Fuck you!" Nate wildly flung his arms through the air before storming out of the bedroom.

Cassidy chased after him as Nate started to stomp down the stairs.

"Yeah...well...I'd like that!" Cassidy yelled. "Since I'm nothing but a big whore!"

Luckily, Neil stood halfway up the staircase on the small landing, as if offering proof of Cassidy's sluttiness.

"I told you he'd do something to screw it up," Neil said smugly as Nate passed him.

Cassidy let out a squeak as Nate hauled off and punched him, knocking Neil back into the railing, where he seemed to hang momentarily before slowly sliding down onto his ass.

Cassidy jumped, catching movement out of the corner of his eye as the front door slammed shut downstairs. He turned, feeling the blood draining from his face as Ollie and two delivery guys huddled in the doorway of Sadie's bedroom.

The larger of the two pointed with his thumb. "Got your bed all set up."

Shit, fuck me now. Cassidy tried to force a smile.

"Should be, uh...good to go," the shorter, stockier one said, holding out a clipboard.

"Just sign the paper, and you can get back to all your whoring," Ollie added.

The two delivery guys nodded in agreement.

Cassidy refrained from strangling Ollie, considering there'd be witnesses. *I'm* not doing time over that bitch, despite all the pleasure it would give me to choke the life out of him. He took the clipboard, scribbled a signature, and passed it back. Ollie announced he'd show the nice men the way out, and they rushed past Cassidy as if unable to exit the premises fast enough.

They stopped to help Neil to his feet before scrambling out the door. Ollie shook his head at Neil, grabbed him by the arm, and yanked him down the steps, muttering something about getting some ice for his face.

Cassidy placed a hand over his eyes, rubbing them before walking into Sadie's bedroom. Despite the fact that her things were no longer in it, Cassidy couldn't shake the feeling that it was still her room. They'd scrubbed the entire room from floor to ceiling, but Cassidy could still make out the faint scent of jasmine that permanently clung to the plaster walls.

He went over to the bed, all set up on the modern platform with the leather headboard, and sat down. He'd forgotten he even ordered the damned thing. He covered his face with hands as he slouched over, resting his elbows on his knees. Showed up just in the nick of time.

That wounded Cassidy, made him feel betrayed to a certain degree. The way Nate reacted stung at his chest, which was tightening, making it difficult to breathe. He'd tried opening up, tried explaining what he was so afraid of, and found the thing he feared most staring back at him. Rejection and judgment from the one person he'd always imagined he could count on in the back of his mind, the one guy who was supposed to always be there for him. It wasn't right.

You can't pick and choose which parts of another person to love. It's all or nothing.

The giant black hole churning away inside his gut told Cassidy something he was no longer sure he wanted to hear.

"Hey there, whore," Ollie said.

Cassidy shrugged at Ollie, desperately trying to hold it together, despite feeling his eyes begin to well up. "I don't just want him for the sex. It's not fair that he accused me of that."

"I know, sweetie," Ollie said. "But try taking it a little easy on the boy. He's the only one of your exes who seems not to understand you're only able to communicate your feelings through your dick."

Cassidy started to laugh and then cringed as he rubbed his chest. He stood up and wriggled his upper body as if he'd just caught a chill. He shook his head and pushed past Ollie back out into the hall. Cassidy stopped in the middle of the second-floor landing, not sure where to go, yet feeling the distinct urge to vacate the area. He resigned himself to the fact there was nowhere to run that the feelings he was experiencing wouldn't be able to follow.

"You okay, Cass?" Ollie asked as Cassidy stumbled forward a few steps.

"Son of a bitch, I forgot I could feel like this." Cassidy placed a hand on the wall for balance. "It hurts to breathe, Ollie."

"You've kept everything bottled up for so long, it's a miracle you're able to function at all."

Cassidy continued to rub his chest and groaned at Ollie pleadingly. "I don't like it. Make it stop."

"It's just love, sweetie. It won't kill you. I promise."

"Love *totally* sucks ass!"

Ollie shrugged nonchalantly. "Perhaps I'm wrong. Maybe you're having a heart attack."

Cassidy glanced back up, hopeful. "You think?"

Ollie shook his head. "You're one sick bitch."

"I *know*," Cassidy said, smacking himself upside the head as he spun around and fell back against the wall. "I can't help myself, damn it." He sighed and slowly slid down until he was sitting on the floor, legs jutting out and hands lying limp and lifeless at his sides. "Tell me what to do?"

Ollie sat on the floor and placed his arm around Cassidy's shoulders. "I can't, babe. This is all on you."

"Damn it!" Cassidy chewed his lip for a moment. "Then go find Spencer and tell him to tell me what to do."

Ollie laughed as little Dasie came hopping up the steps, taking one at a time. Her nails clicked across the hardwoods as she scampered over to Cassidy. She gave his hand a lick before hopping onto his lap and curling up into a little ball, snuggling in.

Cassidy lightly massaged the scruff of her neck, she let out a tiny sigh, and the two men snickered.

"If only life were that simple." Cassidy smirked before resting his head on Ollie's shoulder.

"If only," Ollie said, squeezing Cassidy. "I doubt it helps, but I like you much better this way."

"Miserable and confused?"

Ollie laughed, despite being a bit more serious. "Human and fallible, as opposed to some shiny white beacon of strength and determination."

"But I really like being white 'n' shiny."

"Do you really?" Ollie asked. "Or have you just become so accustomed to needing to be that guy—all hard and full of determination—that you've forgotten there's any other way to be?"

Cassidy moaned, not sure how to answer the question. "I really hate you sometimes, but thanks for love-hating me. You're a good friend, Ollie—mostly."

"Stop with the excessive praise before I swoon." Ollie laughed, ruffling Cassidy's hair a little as they settled into each other. "I really do want you to be happy, which is why I call you on all your shit."

"I know that," Cassidy said. "But you do appear to enjoy it an awful lot."

"It's my free gift with purchase." Ollie winked. "Don't begrudge a bitch for taking pleasure from it."

Cassidy grinned when Ollie squeezed him again. "I'm scared, Ollie."

"I know," he said, patting Cassidy's head.

"I think he might be the only guy I can totally be myself with." Cassidy chewed on his lip and finally looked over at Ollie when he neglected to comment. "Tell me it'll all be okay?"

Ollie sighed. "But it—"

Cassidy frowned, cutting him off. "Just lie, damn it."

"Oh, in that case." Ollie cleared his throat. "Everything's going to work out, and you'll be happier than you ever knew possible."

It was quiet for a moment with only the random noise from downstairs and muffled voices coming from somewhere outside.

"Wow," Cassidy said, lifting his head to see Ollie was trying not to laugh. "You totally blew that line."

"Really badly," Ollie agreed.

"Pathetic." Cassidy placed his head back on Ollie's shoulder.

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Cassidy lay on the new bed in Sadie's room, trying to fall asleep as Dasie sniffed around the mattress. It was dark outside, and the chain from the ceiling fan

above his head clanked as the blades furiously spun in an attempt to cool off the room. He wasn't sure if it was the outside temperature or merely his stressed-out, overly angst-ridden body, but Cassidy was hot, unable to handle having more than a sheet for a cover. It was finally quiet outside, and the house was in a state of silent bliss.

Dasie continued to roam, lying down for a few minutes before getting up again and checking out the other side of the bed, as if to tell Cassidy they'd forgotten something.

"I'm sorry, baby girl." Cassidy reached out, wiggling his fingers, tempting her over to his hand. "It's just you and me again. He's not going to be joining us."

She went about giving the palm of his hand a tongue bath while he scratched behind her ear with his other. He'd heard Nate come back home about an hour ago. It was a guess, since there wasn't a clock in the room anymore and he'd been too lazy to reach down and pick up his phone off the floor to check the time. But it had to have been around ten thirty, as he hadn't been in bed for very long when he heard Nate's truck pulling in the drive.

Once again, the son of a bitch had pulled an all-day disappearance, something Cassidy was quickly discovering to be particularly frustrating. How the fuck are you supposed to work shit out if the other person pulls a vanishing act? His eyes burned from lack of sleep; he just needed to shut down his mind, which had been on a nonstop Indy 500-style loop of their stupid argument that afternoon. He was absolutely exhausted and resentful of the gnawing in the pit of his stomach from the knowledge that Nate was pissed at him.

Finally, Dasie settled for a spot near his feet, letting out a tiny sigh as she curled up in a ball. Cassidy smiled, thankful the runt had decided to wander into his yard that morning, even if she had made him faint. Each time Dasie produced one of her sweet little sighs, she reminded him that none of this crap was the end of his world.

Cassidy rolled onto his back and lifted his head, hearing the doorknob squeak as it turned. He laid his head back down on the pillow and watched as the door was carefully opened and closed. Nate tried shushing Dasie after she sprang up, frantically running in circles at the foot of the bed. Cassidy wanted to judge her for being so obviously happy to see the prick, but he couldn't quite manage it, considering his stomach was doing flip-flops, fluttering full of butterflies.

"Shit, I woke you, didn't I?" Nate whispered.

"No," Cassidy said, watching him hover at the edge of the bed, petting the dog. "I'm regrettably too upset to fall the fuck asleep. I hate feeling like you're mad at me, and I hate myself for being the kind of guy who can't sleep because you're mad at me."

"I'm really sorry, Cass," Nate said, crawling onto the mattress. He flopped down next to him. "You just said some things that took me by surprise. I guess I've had all these memories of you and me—ideas in my head of this romanticized version of who you are. Apparently I don't do so well when my imaginary world is contradicted."

Cassidy sighed, reaching up and rubbing his tired eyes. "I can't pretend to be something I'm not."

"I know that, and I'm sorry I took my own crap out on you. That wasn't fair." Nate sighed. "That's all I wanted to say. I didn't come in here to start a fight or get you all worked up again."

"Did you come in here to blow me?" Cassidy asked in a flirty tone.

"No," Nate said, laughing under his breath.

"Then blow me," Cassidy said, in a faux-huffy tone as he rolled over to his side.

"Asshole." Nate smacked him on the back as he got up off the bed.

Cassidy watched as he gave Dasie some loving. "Where you going?"

Nate pointed toward the door. "Back to my room, I guess."

"Well, get back in bed," Cassidy said, not wanting him to go but doing his best to play it all nonchalant. "The least you could do after being such a prick is not making me sleep in here all by myself."

Nate hemmed and hawed for a moment.

"And the dog can't settle into one spot. She keeps getting up and sniffing your side of the bed." Cassidy refused to look at Dasie, for fear she'd be staring back at him all judgey for using her in such a pathetic attempt to guilt the man into staying.

Cassidy grinned as Nate got back in the bed. The sheet ruffled about as cool air rushed down his backside. Nate rearranged some pillows, punching them. Cassidy lifted his arm so Nate could slide his through, backing into Nate's body as he pulled Cassidy toward him. They settled into each other, and Cassidy was beginning to relax for the first time all day. He'd barely seen the fucker in days, and when he finally did, they wound up in a screaming match.

Nate cleared his throat. "Are you naked?"

"Well, I wasn't exactly expecting company when I got into bed."

Nate took in a deep breath and held it before exhaling. "Okay."

Cassidy smiled as he wiggled back, trying to get closer. Nate pulled him tighter. "Don't worry; I'm too damn tired to attempt tempting you. You're quite safe."

Nate let out a low rumble of a laugh. "That's good to know. Not sure I can say the same for you, though."

"Don't tease the animals, you shit."

Nate squeezed him again, kissing the back of his neck. "Sorry, beautiful."

Cassidy shimmied onto his back and stared into Nate's shadowy face, able to make out a glint in his eyes from the diffused light in the room. Cassidy gave him a soft peck on the lips. "Thanks for staying." Cassidy went back on his side and

settled into Nate's body once again. Their breathing began to slow and regulate, each falling into sync with the other. Cassidy could feel that haziness filtering into his brain, right before he drifted off to sleep, feeling content.

## **Chapter Twenty**

Cassidy hung his tux on the hook protruding from the back of the closet door. The small walk-in closet was huge now that Sadie's forty years' worth of clothes had been removed. Cassidy had hung up a few of the things he'd brought with him that actually required a hanger. Being able to dress down had always been one of the things he'd enjoyed about island life as a child. No more neckties or blazers emblazoned with private-school crests; summers on Hart's meant loose-fitting cargos and strolling shirtless on the beach with sand between his toes.

He should have been getting dressed for the party instead of standing in the middle of the room wearing black socks and gym shorts. He could hear the musicians warming up their instruments, the clinking of glassware, and the yelling of the caterer, who'd been less than happy about the last-minute change of venue. The temperature was a little cooler today, and he was very much enjoying slumming it. Everything was more relaxed here; it was a low-key and less pretentious way of living. The tuxedo was a little out of place, despite the fact he was excited to wear it.

Thus far, the entire day had gone off without a hitch, beginning with the tiny parade that kicked off the traditional Founders' Day ceremony, including the usual impassioned speech delivered by Henry Abbott. The carnival had been much larger than Cassidy remembered, stretching from the town square all the way down to the harbor. Jacob Pringle seemed particularly proud, as ringmaster and organizer extraordinaire. Cassidy was inclined to agree with him.

Teddy in particular had a really great time. All day long he had practically bounced around like an excited kid, all bug-eyed and pointy. Cassidy had tried to tell him that this was one day, that the island, while having several festivals throughout the year, wasn't normally this exciting. But it landed on deaf ears. It had become painfully clear Teddy had fallen in love with Hart's. Cassidy was happy to see that Hart's was falling for Teddy as well. He wasn't sure how much Ben had to do with Teddy's enthusiasm, but it was obvious he was a contributing factor.

Ollie and Spencer had been equally impressed, though not quite as exuberant in expressing it. They'd been at their best with one another throughout the day's events. Each of them relaxed, laughing and flirting with one another. They were like a live-action commercial for Match.com, rife with opportunity for movie-montage-worthy photo ops. It had been about midafternoon before Cassidy realized that Ollie hadn't uttered a single catty remark. He wasn't positive, but he was fairly certain it was a new record for him.

He and Nate, while avoiding any serious subject matter, had slipped back into an ease with each other evocative of the history they shared. It was like old times to Cassidy, who was nearly intoxicated by the nostalgia of it all. Neil's presence was very much an open wound on the day, which everyone tried to ignore. Cassidy refused to cut the guy off, though, as it conflicted with his harmonious nature. It just wasn't in him to do, and the poor guy hadn't really done anything other than make the mistake of having sex with Cassidy. In addition, he didn't have any other friends on the island.

Cassidy continued to be racked with thoughts of sex and lust, while fearing the unknown of what would be were he and Nate to consummate again—and again and again. That was the one thing Cassidy knew for certain. If he and Nate started anything, it would burn so hot it might not even matter whether they wound up staying together. They'd likely neither one survive the explosion. Of course, the feasibility of this scenario was beginning to feel less likely to Cassidy. A weird cloudy funk settled over him, refusing to budge and leaving an ominous trace of energy behind. It made him feel like things that only days before had felt probable were no longer possible.

After hearing a grunting noise coming from the stairwell, he ventured out to the landing. Natalie was attempting to hoist a huge-ass potted fern up by herself.

"What the hell are you doing?" Cassidy asked as he quickly hopped down to relieve her of her armload.

"I want this to sit up here in the hall," she said, gasping for air.

Cassidy carried it up the remaining steps, seeing the wooden plant stand in the corner. "Why is it going up here?"

"This hallway needs some life. It's too drab." Natalie pointed as if ordering him to stop asking questions and do as she asked already. "That Cecelia all but ruined the entire party with her Castro-like need for autonomous control. I had to sneak back over early and rearrange the entire layout."

"Oh, Natalie, I'm sure it's all spectacular out there." Cassidy placed the fern on the plant stand.

"Now!" she made sure to remind him. "I've fixed it all. It was near disaster."

Cassidy wondered how long it would take for him to murder the poor plant. He glanced around at the windowless square that made up the large landing, and decided it wouldn't be long.

"Don't worry; it's not going to stay. It's just for the party," Natalie said.

You've been given a reprieve, Cassidy thought as he reached over and brushed his hand over the leaves. "Surely there won't be anyone straggling up here?"

Natalie shrugged. "It's doubtful, but either way it feels more homey."

The bathroom door swung open, and Ollie and Spencer came stumbling out clad in nothing but matching towels and smiles. They straightened up seeing Natalie, politely crossing in front of her and Cassidy on their way to their bedroom.

"Boys," Natalie said, cocking an eyebrow at them.

"Hi, Mrs. Sommers," Spencer said.

Ollie pointed at the fern. "That looks lovely there."

They scampered into the guest room that used to be Natalie's bedroom, and shut the door behind them.

Natalie shook her head, appearing somewhat jealous. "I bet that bedroom's seen more action in the past week that it did the entire thirty-odd years that I lived in it."

Cassidy's mouth fell open as he slowly turned to look at her.

"What?" she asked, all innocent.

Cassidy laughed nervously as he headed back into Sadie's bedroom. "I think you're channeling Sadie, and please don't ever use the word *action* like that again."

Natalie followed Cassidy into the bedroom. "You gay boys are all so squeamish whenever it comes to the lady parts."

Cassidy began to feel like his brain was hemorrhaging as he placed his fingers into his ears. "Ya-ya, la-la!" He was wondering when Natalie had become such an expert on homos, then decided he might not want to know after all.

Natalie giggled in delight as Cassidy shot her a dirty look. She flopped down on the bed, and Cassidy wondered how the hell he was supposed to get his pants on with her in the room.

"Oh goodness me, it's not like I've never seen you in your undies before." Natalie shooed at him with a hand. "Just go in the closet."

Cassidy rolled his eyes as he strolled into the closet. He pulled the door to before removing his shorts and slipping on his pants. He slipped his shirt off the hanger and pushed the door open with his foot as he slid it on.

"Are you boys going to be able to work things out?" Natalie asked.

Cassidy shrugged. "Maybe there's nothing to work out."

Natalie made no attempt to hide her disappointment with his attitude.

"Don't look at me like that." Cassidy frowned back at her. "He's your son! Why am I the only one in trouble?"

"Because, Lord help us all"—Natalie stared up at the ceiling as if saying a quick prayer—"between the two of you, you're better at getting things out into the open."

"Well, how the hell am I supposed to do that?" Cassidy shook the stress out of his hands before making an attempt at putting on his bow tie. "He storms out of the room midargument before we ever have the chance to get anything settled."

"You know why he does that, don't you?" Natalie asked, walking over and pushing his hands away so she could get at the tie.

"Because he doesn't like whatever it is he's hearing."

"It's more than that, Cassidy. He's always worried that there's a tiny piece of his father hiding deep down inside." Natalie sighed as she fussed with the tie, getting it just the way she wanted it.

"That's just crazy. Nate would never intentionally hurt anyone."

"You and I know that, but when he feels himself getting too angry, I think he runs for fear of losing control. I really hate that. He's never even met the man, and the bastard is still messing with my boy's head. It makes me so mad I could spit."

Cassidy smiled. "That's the Sadie in you."

"She made everyone a little stronger than they probably would've been otherwise."

Cassidy thanked her as he checked out her handiwork in the mirror. He glanced down at the floor for a moment, shoving his hands in his pockets. "But what if I'm not the long-haul kind of a guy? I mean, regardless of whether or not I love him...what if I'm not *for keeps*? I'll wind up losing him for good."

"I think you'll lose him anyway, my dear. He loves you too deeply, not that he'd ever admit it. I swear, you boys are so silly and pigheaded." Natalie walked over and sat down on the bed. "There's no magical combination that will guarantee a happily ever after, you know. You have to want it, work for it, and then nourish and cherish it once you get it."

Cassidy nodded as he chewed on everything she'd just said. He slipped on his shoes, before bending over and tying each one. He wanted to believe what he was hearing, but thought it sounded too good to be true.

"All I'm asking is that you talk to him," Natalie said, picking a piece of lint off her dress. "Once the party is over, and after you're done spreading Sadie's ashes at the lighthouse, sit my boy down and talk things over...please."

"I'll try, Natalie," Cassidy said, taking his tuxedo jacket off the hanger. "I don't know that it's gonna do any good, but I'll try."

Natalie beamed, clapping her hands. "That's all I can ask."

"Why the hell couldn't I have gotten a mother like you?"

"Don't be so hard on Lillian. She did what she thought was best for you. Lionel never wanted you to come here at all, you know. It was Lillian who insisted."

"Why does that not surprise me? He's a fucking sociopath."

"You're quite right, dear, but language."

"Sorry." Cassidy tried to hold back a grin, amused at being chastised by Natalie.

"I think your mother was very aware of her limitations. She sent you here because she wasn't capable of providing the home environment Sadie could. Lillian knew it was important for you to have that. From what Sadie told me, Lillian never was the motherly type, yet she wouldn't let Lionel send you off to boarding school. I think she did the best she was capable of doing for you, and made sure that there was someone like Sadie to pick up the slack."

"That's a nice fairy tale, Natalie, and as much as it warms me to think she loved me—in her own way—I would've preferred she actually loved me the way mothers are meant to."

Natalie held out her hand, and she pulled Cassidy down, sitting him next to her. "You'll always have me for that."

Cassidy nodded, hugging her and thinking how she might be the last bit of unconditional warmth left in his life. He wondered why he'd allowed all that time to pass, depriving himself of her company. As she squeezed him, Natalie let out a little grunt, and Cassidy promised he'd never again exile himself. From this point forward, he'd cherish it, protect it with as much determination as he had his relationship with Sadie, but this time around, nothing was going to keep him at bay.

\* \* \*

Cassidy walked out the back door of the house, smiling from ear to ear. It was lovely, he thought. Like something out of a movie. The entire courtyard and even the beach below glowed from the hazy light of the white paper lanterns, elegant torches, and the gazillion white Christmas lights. There were huge ornate chandeliers with white pillar candles hanging from the center of each tent. Tone-ontone white floral arrangements on the tables, mixed with thick, glossy green leaves and sprigs of jasmine, scented the air. And the large potted palm trees added an exotic *Casablanca*-like atmosphere.

Cassidy hadn't even realized he'd stumbled out into the middle of the courtyard until Nate took him by the arm. His heart stopped beating as he stared at Nate. Cassidy was completely dumbfounded and near-drooling. Nate wore that same white-jacket variation of black-tie dress that he'd fought so vehemently to avoid all those years ago. He was even more the picture of swagger and kneeweakening manly goodness at age thirty. Cassidy discovered it required a man to fully pull off the look.

Nate grinned, exhibiting even more brashness than usual seeing the way Cassidy ogled him. "I remember you mentioning you liked this tux on me."

This man is the devil. Cassidy swallowed, feeling very dry in the mouth. "And you just couldn't resist torturing me with it again, I see."

"Something I learned from Sadie." Nate cocked an eyebrow, killing Cassidy a little more with a cockiness that, while warranted, was somewhat punishing to the nerves. "Give them time to catch their breath, and you've lost them."

He smiled, feeling very much like he couldn't get his wind back. Deciding on distraction as the most sensible and ego-preserving retreat, he went back to surveying the terrain. He was amazed that so many people had given up their time to make this all happen, and he felt instantly rotten for not having done a lick of the work. Nate and a few of the other guys from town, including Nate's best friend from high school, Jimmy Dobbs, had come over and helped finish painting the trim, something Spencer for one was quite pleased to discover.

"It's beautiful, Nate." Cassidy spun around in a circle as the orchestra began to play and the first few partygoers rounded the corner of the house. "Thank you, everyone!"

He'd screamed it way too loud, but he didn't give a damn. He was moved beyond words. He hadn't seen many of them in years, yet they all still came to his aid, and it was like...magic. *This is all for you, Sadie*.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." Cassidy glanced around at all the folks standing about who'd helped over the past two days. "You've really outdone yourselves. Sadie would truly be honored. As for myself, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to properly thank you for all your help."

Nate grabbed him up in a hug, and once they separated, Natalie led Max over. Cassidy shook Max's hand, a little surprised when the man yanked him into a big bear hug. Max had always been a friendly sort but never offered much in the way of physical affection. He was frostier on top, his dark hair now peppered with gray and looked rather dapper in his tux. But he still had those bushy eyebrows, like fuzzy caterpillars, that used to mesmerize Cassidy as a child.

"You look fine, son," Max offered with a nod.

"I'm feeling pretty damn fine too." Cassidy shook his head, taking in all the sights and sounds. "Thank you for helping with all this, Max. I'm so grateful to—"

"Nonsense, son. We're family." Max interrupted, nudging his head toward Natalie. "Besides that, the drill sergeant here would be after me if I didn't help out."

Cassidy and Nate both laughed as irritation swept over Natalie's face. She muttered something as she reached over and pinched him in the arm. Max always loved teasing her, and he made a much bigger deal of it, hopping around as he rubbed his arm like it might fall off. She shook her head at him before walking away in a huff.

Max wiggled those caterpillar eyebrows. "Guess I better go make up and get myself a little smoochie."

Nate groaned as Cassidy yanked on his arm, insisting Nate take him around to each and every person who had given their time, so he could personally thank them. Cassidy was very happy to meet the lovely Mrs. Dobbs, who was young, pretty, and blonde. Jimmy had a Johnny Knoxville-type thing going on—even dressed up he appeared slightly disheveled. He knew it was ludicrous since Jimmy was and always had been straight as a pin, but Cassidy had long harbored a minute amount of jealousy over him. Jimmy had been a sight to behold in his baseball uniform. Well. Cassidy hadn't thought he was all that great, but he always noticed that Nate seemed to.

"Holy shit!" she squealed while incessantly clapping her hands. "I'm soooo excited to meet you!"

Cassidy chuckled under his breath and marveled at how quickly words spilled from her mouth, contradicting the cool blonde exterior that would have made her perfect for the lead in an Alfred Hitchcock film. She placed a hand on Cassidy's stomach. "I am Mrs. Dobbs," she said, rolling her eyes, "or Virgie, duh! I teach first grade, so I forget I'm talking to adults sometimes."

"Hello—"

"It's short for Virginia—I was named after my gran!"

She fanned her face, taking a breath, and Cassidy wondered if it was safe to once again attempt some sort of response.

"Well, it's—"

She gasped, placing her hand over her chest, cutting Cassidy off once again. "I'm genuinely touched at the way the entire island has rallied around you like this. It's so damn sweet, it makes my heart hurt."

Cassidy looked at Nate, who was biting his lip, obviously enjoying the fact Cassidy couldn't get a word in edgewise, while pretending to listen to Jimmy by nodding his head at regular intervals.

Cassidy patted her hand, which was still on his stomach, and she ripped it away, turning bright red as she threw her head back and laughed.

She pointed at herself. "So embarrassed. Didn't intend to fondle you!" More laughing as she took to fanning herself again.

"Not a prob—"

"Thanks for understanding," she cut in. "I'm just so delighted to meet you, as there are no *fun* gays on this island—at least none that I've found thus far." She wiggled her eyebrows as if to insinuate something. "I desperately miss my gays back in Cali!"

"She had a lot of gays in Cali," Jimmy tossed out, as if no one would believe her otherwise.

Cassidy assumed *Cali* stood for California, as she finally took a breath to grab a shot, clink glasses with her hubby, and swallow it down in one gulp. She slammed it on the bar and pointed tauntingly at her husband for beating him.

She turned her attention back to Cassidy. "Nate, as you well know, is gay, but he's the yucky boring kind—way too much like my husband, and let's face it, I didn't marry the man for his conversational skills and good shopping sense." Virgie leaned over, running her hand up Jimmy's inner thigh as if Cassidy might need the clarification.

Cassidy found himself amused by her as she continued for another five minutes like a rambling freight train. He liked her instantly, though he feared he might not be able to handle her in long intervals. *She sure as fuck isn't dull.* Nate eventually pulled Cassidy away, informing him that while Virgie was always chatty, that was somewhat of an extreme.

Cassidy wondered if perhaps she'd been holding out, waiting for the first random *fun gay* to come along, so she could purge herself like a newly unclogged drain. As Nate pulled him away so they could thank everyone else, he pondered

what qualities might constitute being a fun gay. He wondered if he actually was one, while secretly realizing she was probably hoping for someone like Ollie. He glanced back to the bar, watching her suck face with Jimmy, and knew exactly why he'd married her. He was beginning to get a little jealous, wishing he were somewhere sucking face like that with Nate when a light breeze brushed across his cheek. He caught a whiff of the jasmine, and he thought of Sadie.

You'd love this, lady.

The jasmine made him feel like she might come walking around the corner at any moment. And he loved that they'd placed Sadie on one end of the bar next to a full martini glass completely surrounded by flowers.

Nate was obviously irritated when Neil showed up at Cassidy's side with a martini. Neil became equally miffed when Nate took the second martini out of Neil's hand without offering so much as a thank-you. Cassidy suspected it wasn't really meant for Nate when Neil frowned, turning to head back to the bar. He prayed they wouldn't come to blows during the middle of the party, despite realizing how much Sadie would have approved of such a thing.

You always did love a good fight.

"I think she'd approve, yes?" Edie asked as she and Jacob Pringle strolled over.

Cassidy nodded his agreement. "I believe Sadie would have been as speechless as I was, when I walked out and saw it all pulled together. It's truly elegant. Thank you both for everything."

"When Henry comes along, attempting to use this to guilt you into staying—" Jacob glanced around as if suspecting Henry might overhear. "Well, I just want you to know we didn't all have ulterior motives."

Of course Henry would do that, the louse. "Thanks for that, Jacob. I'll never forget your kindness."

Edie rolled her eyes dramatically, hearing Marianne Abbott's ludicrously loud laughter rolling over the crowd, which had quadrupled over the last thirty minutes. "That woman!"

Cassidy laughed, seeing Jacob cringe over the social faux pas hanging on his arm. "Edie, dear, let's not allow things to get ugly."

"At least not quite so early," Nate interjected, coming back up behind Cassidy with a martini refill.

Cassidy smiled, happy at least that the Neil/Nate rivalry had been keeping his glass from becoming empty. "Thanks, Nate, but you don't have to keep—"

"Yes, I do," Nate interrupted, his expression letting Cassidy know that he didn't appreciate being forced into a competition.

Cassidy took the glass and shrugged, refusing to feel guilty over something he hadn't encouraged in either of them. *That's right, folks. Boys are dumb.* 

"Cassidy! Sweetheart!" Marianne called from behind him.

Edie muttered something under her breath that Cassidy desperately wished he'd been able hear.

"Have a lovely evening, dear," Edie said, yanking Jacob away with her.

"Are they dating?" Cassidy asked Nate as Edie pulled Jacob off into the crowd.

"I honest to God have no idea," Nate whispered. "But the entire island's buzzing to find out."

I bet they are. "Marianne!" Cassidy said, turning to face her. With any luck it'll take some of the attention off me.

"I swear, you are even more handsome, you sly devil!"

If any one individual should've ever come equipped with volume control, it was Marianne. She had one level, and it was loud. She was the world's biggest, as Sadie used to say. Any adjective you could think of to describe Marianne could almost always be preceded by *the world's biggest*, as she didn't do anything in a small way—the world's biggest gossip or the world's biggest flirt.

"Well, not half as fabulous as you, beautiful."

Her hair had been bleached nearly white. She was full figured and knew how to use it. She came off sweet as syrup, and for the most part, she was. But everyone knew to avoid being on her shit list, if possible, because she'd annoy the fuck out of you. She was the type to continue beating the dead horse till it was nothing but dust, and it made life simpler to avoid the drama.

"Can you believe Edie Taylor and Jacob Pringle are doing the nasty?" Marianne shook her head, making that tsk-tsk sound with her tongue. "Viva Viagra!"

Cassidy did his best not to laugh, while Nate just let loose. "Marianne, you are wicked." Cassidy smacked Nate.

"I can't help it, darling. I keep having this nightmare." She paused for dramatic flair. "It's like *Night of Living Dead* meets *Cocoon*." She pursed her lips up at Cassidy before doing the same to Nate. "Such a pity."

With that, she turned and headed over toward the next group of people, singling out someone else and squealing their name. *All she's lacking is the fake microphone and some ABBA to lip-synch to*. Cassidy couldn't believe the biggest drag queen he'd ever met in his thirty years had been born with an actual vagina.

"Is it just me, or is she a live-action, Technicolor dream sequence filmed in Cinemascope?" Ollie asked, sneaking up behind Cassidy.

"It's not just you." Nate exchanged his empty martini for a glass of champagne as a server passed by with a tray.

Ollie sighed, eyes widening in relief. "Thank goodness. I thought I was hallucinating, and it's a little early to be cutting myself off."

With that, Cassidy finished off the last of his martini. The orchestra began playing the old standard from the late forties "Again." Cassidy had always loved it, as it had been one of Sadie's favorites, and she'd break into the lyrics at a moment's

notice. He surveyed the empty dance floor installed on the east lawn under the largest of the three tents next to the band. He was half tempted to ask Nate to dance but thought better of it, as he'd made spectacle enough of himself.

In many ways, he was like Sadie, not really caring what other people thought of him. Unlike her, though, he didn't necessarily go out of his way to garner attention. And considering his antics over the past week and a half, all Cassidy wanted of this evening was to fly under the radar—way, way under the radar.

As if the fulfilling of a prophecy, Henry Abbott did descend on Cassidy, making good on Jacob's threat of jabbing at him with guilt worthy of a devout Catholic mother. He took it all in stride, smiling like the wife of a politician and trying not to be distracted by the fact Nate had hooked a finger into the right pocket of his pants. It was such an odd, minute act—almost possessive, yet it stung at Cassidy's chest, making him feel like he belonged with Nate.

He didn't think he'd have the strength to hold out much longer, giving in to whatever demands Nate might make on him just so they could be together. Cassidy didn't relish coming to that realization, but at the same time another part of him was already making the necessary excuses, ready to provide any justifications that may be required to secure a successful follow-through. Cassidy was hooked and he knew it. He didn't know what the final push might be, enabling him to freely fall into Nate's arms, but he hoped it would come soon. Something held him back. He just couldn't figure out what.

Nate continued to lead Cassidy through the crowd, shaking hands and welcoming all his guests back to the Point. It felt as if everyone on the island was there, and as happy as he was to see them all, Cassidy missed the friendly faces of his friends. He'd barely spoken to Ollie and Spencer, and he'd seen only the backs of Teddy and Ben as they went down to the beach. Nate and Neil continued to annoy each other, which was starting to annoy Cassidy, but he was aware that Natalie had been making an effort to always be within earshot, as if knowing he might become overwhelmed at some point and need her to help him make a quick exit.

He was standing with a group of people, making small talk while Nate excused himself to run to the bar. Cassidy decided he had to be hallucinating, having stopped midsentence, and slowly made his way around the mob of people that had closed in on him. He slowly but assuredly moved around his guests, making a beeline for his parents, who stood just off the courtyard area at the corner of the house. He was impressed by the set of balls his father had, showing up at all, let alone managing to pull off the air of stoic entitlement that oozed off the man who'd acted as though the world were meant to bow at his evil feet.

Lionel with his airs was enough to have Cassidy seeing red. That distinguished salt-and-pepper hair and the enticingly unassuming way in which he carefully examined his enemy—so relaxed, almost charming, putting them at ease just before cutting their legs out from under them. And his mother, Lillian, hanging off Lionel's arm like an expensive accessory. She was flawless, with her black hair and olive skin, perfectly made up—almost doll-like. Unlike Lionel, however, Lillian

wasn't able to or simply didn't care to mask the cool nature with which she viewed the world. Cassidy respected her for that. For some reason, being a bitch and owning it was less of an offense to him.

Cassidy hadn't been aware that the entire party had come to a standstill until Sheriff Larson took him by the arm, stopping him in his tracks.

"Take it easy, Cass," he said, with that stern we-don't-want-any-trouble expression all cops somehow managed to patent.

He wondered briefly if there was a class they all had to take while at the police academy—Intimidation 101? Cassidy plastered on a smile, glaring past the sheriff at his parents as he managed to pry Jake's hand off his arm. "Butt out, Sheriff."

Jake sighed and stepped aside, allowing Cassidy to pass as people began to move to one side or another, as if parting the Red Sea to allow him access to Lionel.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here?" Cassidy said, stopping just in front of Lionel.

"It would seem there's been some sort of gross negligence in that the announcement of my mother's wake has been misplaced."

"It was no oversight, you—"

"Who do you think you are?" Lionel interrupted, staring down his nose at Cassidy with an air of self-importance. "I have more of a right to be here than you ever could."

"Not according to the judge, as shole." Cassidy smiled tauntingly as he folded his arms.

"Cassidy, please, darling," his mother said, smiling flatly at the faces standing behind him. "You're making a scene."

"Amazing. It's amazing to me that despite everything you know about this man"—Cassidy looked Lionel up and down with complete contempt—"you *still* stand by him. I suppose money can buy obedience after all." Despite feeling it was true, he wished he hadn't said it, noticing the stung expression that washed over her face before magically vanishing again as the mask of indifference returned. "But allow me to be perfectly clear by informing you that the only thing in poor taste here is his presence. Please leave at once."

Lionel laughed slightly. "You actually believe you can keep me away from my own mother's—"

"Don't give me that shit." Cassidy laughed back, mocking, the way Lionel had just done it. "Like anyone believes you actually give a damn."

"You seem to have lost yourself, Son." Lionel visibly stiffened as if his patience had worn thin. "I am your father, and you will treat me accordingly."

Cassidy stood completely straight, making sure he conveyed once and for all through his body language that he wasn't going to be backing down from this fight any more than he had when it had come to ensuring Sadie's final wishes were honored.

"Eight years ago, you were arguably a father to me." Cassidy took a step forward, standing close enough to feel Lionel's breath on his face. "Today, you're just some *prick* who had my grandmother locked up."

Cassidy heard a slight gasp come from somewhere behind him along with the quick rustle of fabric and a few whispers before it went quiet once again. He could tell Lionel was seething underneath the surface. That he'd like nothing better than to backhand Cassidy for having had the impudence to speak to him in such a manner. Cassidy smiled, letting Lionel know he knew the man's every thought, practically daring him to go ahead and try it.

Lionel began to turn slowly, that coldness in eyes. "You'll regret this, Cassidy."

"A threat—how original." Cassidy took Lillian by the arm as she too began to turn away. He gave her a brief hug and quick peck on the cheek. "Good-bye, Mother. *You're* welcome here anytime."

As their eyes met for that brief flicker in time, Cassidy knew she understood that there was an alternative out there, if she ever decided to take it. Realistically, he knew his mother could hold her own, should she ever decide to leave Lionel. He just needed to make sure she understood she wouldn't be alone if it ever came down to it.

After they disappeared back around the side of the house, Cassidy turned, and a few people began to clap. The applause grew as it bled through the crowd, growing more vigorous. Hearing the yelping and whistling, Cassidy grinned, knowing Lionel likely hadn't made it to his limo just yet. He didn't believe it would actually affect the man other than possibly the embarrassment. But perhaps if nothing else, it would twist the verbal knife Cassidy had just plunged into his chest.

Henry Abbott slapped him on the back. "I think you just might turn out okay, after all, son." He let out a huge belly laugh as he and Jacob Pringle headed toward the bar.

Cassidy murmured a thank-you. His shoulder stung where Henry had slapped him, snapping him back into reality. He noticed Ollie and Nate heading his direction as Natalie scooted in, taking him by the arm.

"Are you okay?" She whispered the inquiry.

Cassidy nodded, despite feeling a growing sense of body backlash creeping up from his feet. He was startled by how angry he'd actually been.

"Good." Natalie glanced down. "You may want to unclench your fists, then."

Cassidy forced open his fingers, rubbing his palms over his hips. That feeling slowly continued up over his shins, creeping toward his knees.

"You might be a teensy bit pale," Natalie said, using her eyes to signal toward the back of the house.

Cassidy forced on a smile. "Perhaps I should take a minute or two?"

"Lovely idea, dear. Truly inspired."

#### 184 Ethan Day

Cassidy turned, realizing he must have appeared slightly mechanical in his movements as he briskly headed to the house. The feeling of darkness had made it all the way to his stomach, and the dread growing there as his body's reaction to all the rage threatened to take him over.

### **Chapter Twenty-one**

Cassidy stopped once he reached the upstairs landing. He needed to be alone, even if only for a moment, so he could get his head back on straight. He tried to make himself breathe regularly and stifle the sense of panic that gurgled up inside of him.

It had taken every ounce of control he could muster to keep from connecting fist to face during the entire altercation with Lionel. The images that had been flashing through his mind had been shockingly exhilarating as well as the stuff of nightmares. He'd never been a violent person, and the strong desire he'd felt—hell, could still feel—to pummel Lionel's face into a bloody mess was foreign to him.

Cassidy didn't like feeling out of control, and he stared at his hands, wideeyed, as he held them out in front of his face. They shook uncontrollably. Worse yet was the fact that it was now bleeding up from his fingertips into his arms and slowly over his shoulders, as if the shaking might take over his entire body. He was becoming genuinely freaked-out when he heard the creak of the stairs.

Nate quietly stepped into the shadows, taking Cassidy's hands in his. He pressed his lips against Cassidy's knuckles, exhaling a long, warm breath of air over them before pressing his cheek into them. Cassidy was a bit taken aback by the gesture, but more than a little relieved, as it calmed him.

"Nate, I—"

"Shhh," Nate interrupted.

Cassidy gasped when Nate's fingers brushed across his cheek and into his hair. Cassidy leaned into the touch, and Nate placed his forehead against Cassidy's. He guided Cassidy's hands down, pressing them to his chest. Cassidy could feel Nate's heart beating, his whispered breath across his face.

Without thinking on it too long, Cassidy cocked his head slightly and kissed Nate, whose lips were warm and so soft. He immediately opened for Cassidy's tongue. Nate tasted like vodka and olives, and Cassidy's cock went hard when Nate reciprocated by kissing him back.

Within seconds, a heated urgency came over them as their kiss deepened. Cassidy imagined himself like an addict, falling off the wagon after a long sobriety. Hands fumbled as they clumsily groped at each other. It was like the earth spun under his feet. When his back made contact with one of the closed bedroom doors, he realized it wasn't the earth moving after all. Nate ground into Cassidy's erection, groaning as he pulled on Cassidy's lip with his teeth.

Nate pinned him against the door until Cassidy pushed his body away, forcing Nate backward. They rolled along the wall, fighting for control as they continued to assault each other with their mouths. Cassidy's hip bumped into something that moved, and they separated at the loud crash.

"Shit," Cassidy whispered, attempting to catch his breath as Nate turned the overhead light on.

Dasie was barking her fool head off inside one of the closed off bedrooms. They each stared down at the shattered ceramic pot. Dirt and roots splayed across the wood floor from the plant, now lying on its side along with the wooden plant stand. Panic rose inside Cassidy, the way it did when they had been boys and he knew they'd be in trouble for roughhousing. He could tell by the expression on Nate's face that he was experiencing the same sense of dread.

Nate started to grin. "You're in trouble."

"Asshole." Cassidy shook his head as they both began laughing. "You always did blame me for everything."

Nate placed a hand over his stomach. "Cause you *never* got into any trouble. And it still wound up being my fault for not watching you more closely."

Cassidy chewed his lip as he wondered how to segue way back into the kissing and fondling. Damn it, Natalie, why'd you have to go and put a stupid fern there in the first place?

"Grab a sheet out of the closet, and we'll cover it up," Nate said.

"Like she's not going to just lift the sheet?"

"What was that noise?" Natalie called up the staircase.

They both jumped, startled as they shoved on each other to answer her already.

"Nothing," Cassidy yelled, punching Nate back.

"That's it," Natalie said. "I'm coming up."

They both panicked, staring wide-eyed as Nate called out, "Don't come up. We're coming down."

They pointed at each other, whispering frantically as they tried to tuck in their clothes and pull themselves back together. Nate hit the overhead light when they noticed her shadow hovering across the steps below. They shoved each other, fighting over who'd have to go first.

"What about the sheet?" Nate whispered as Cassidy pushed him forward.

"Fuck the sheet, moron. Get down there and quit stalling," Cassidy whispered back as Nate attempted to force Cassidy down first by tickling him.

"Are you boys coming?" Natalie yelled. "It's not as if half of Hart's isn't out on the lawn waiting or anything."

"Stop being a pussy and get down there and face her," Nate whispered as Cassidy shoved him down the first two steps.

"I just took on my evil father!" Cassidy pointed out in a hushed tone.

Nate stopped wrestling with him for a second as if mulling over that fact. He started to shake his head as their arms started flailing again. "I'm way more afraid of my mother."

"What in the heck?" Natalie asked, shaking her head at them as she stood on the little landing. "You two stop that roughhousing this instant." She turned, muttering something about them being grown men.

"Way to go, doofus," Nate said, shaking his head as if it had all been his fault. He turned to make his way down the stairs as Cassidy stood there, mouth agape.

\* \* \*

Cassidy glanced down, quickly fastening a button he'd missed as he stepped out onto the back porch. He hummed along to "As Time Goes By," which the band played while he smoothed out the shirt. He grinned, hearing Marianne Abbott's loud-ass laugh somewhere off in the distance. He walked out into the courtyard, happy to see the party was once again full steam ahead. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, and Cassidy headed for the bar, thinking he had quite a bit of catching up to do.

He was desperate for another cocktail as he smiled and helloed his way through the crowd. Spencer and Ollie were at the buffet talking to Neil, who was nibbling off a plate. Natalie tapped Ollie on the shoulder, and he smiled at her as they gave each other a quick hug. Cassidy ordered a martini from the bartender. He couldn't spot Teddy or Ben, but assumed they were still down on the beach somewhere.

He thanked the bartender and took a sip from his martini. He turned to face the crowd and froze, seeing Nate standing about six feet away staring at him. Cassidy lowered his arm, smiling nervously. He'd become aware of the fact that for the second time now, the crowd had separated, leaving nothing standing between the two of them. He wanted to be irritated that they weren't a more selfish and motley crew of stubborn as sholes who budged for no man. But he assumed they could all ascertain what he had—that whatever the hell Nate was up to, he meant business.

"Wha...what are you doing?" Cassidy whispered, feeling more uncomfortable than he had seeing Lionel standing back on the soil of Piper's Point.

"I know the timing here sucks, Cass," Nate began, nervously checking out all the people standing around watching. "But after seeing you take on Lionel like that, I don't think I can wait any longer."

"Try?" Cassidy asked, laughing until Nate gave him an unappreciative look. Christ Almighty. So much for flying under the radar! Sadie would be so proud.

Cassidy's face flushed with heat, and he twisted his neck slightly, feeling like his collar was choking him. "What can't wait, Nate? You're kinda freaking me out here."

"I need to prove to you that I'm not afraid, that I'm doing this in front of God and everyone, because"—Nate paused, as if searching for the right words—"you're worth risking my pride."

Cassidy's chest tightened as he realized where Nate was headed. He raised his martini glass, held the tooth-picked olives in place with a single finger, and downed the rest of its contents in one gulp. Absently, he reached back, attempting to find the top of the bar so he could rid himself of the glass.

"Aren't you *tired* of being on your own, Cassidy? Because I am."

Cassidy had been helpless, as if unable to turn away. Or are you just too chicken?

Nate placed his hands on his hips, and he glanced down at the ground, as if momentarily lost in his thoughts. "Hell, I don't even have the strength to fake being okay without you anymore. Do you?"

Cassidy opened his mouth to speak as someone removed the glass from his hand.

"How many years are we going to let pass us by before we get it right?" Nate asked, now looking him dead in the eyes as if attempting to discover the truth hiding behind them.

His persistent glare nearly stopped Cassidy's heart from beating.

"I've loved you since the time I understood what that actually meant."

Cassidy rubbed at his chest and shook his head, wishing Nate would stop.

"And I know you love me, damn it. It's written all over your face every time you look at me. It's as real as anything I've ever known before, and I've come to depend on seeing it." Nate took a few steps closer. "I've tried going it alone, tried being with others. But not being with you is the same as being alone. All there is for me is you, Cassidy."

"Wow, I..." Cassidy chewed on his lip, not really able to speak. No one other than Sadie had ever loved him like that—so strongly that it felt as though an eternity could pass and that love would still be there, waiting for him.

"I don't...know what else I can say. All I can do is promise to love you—be a hand to hold when things are good and a shoulder to lean on when life sucks. What else could you possibly want from another person? I'm *right* here, and I'm tired of patiently waiting for my moment to come along. I want it now. I want you now."

Cassidy could hear the whispering coming at him from all sides. Feeling a little conspicuous, he began to fidget, as even the music had lowered, playing softly in the background like the friggin' soundtrack in a movie. It was like roots had sprung up out of the dirt and wrapped around his feet and ankles, holding him to that spot, and the pleading in Nate's eyes was about to break him in two.

"Well, fuck!" Neil said, standing by the buffet as he glanced back and forth at the people standing next to him. "How the hell is anyone supposed to compete with that?" Nate forced a smile, shaking his head as he mumbled something about really hating that guy. Cassidy started to laugh when he saw Spencer smacking Neil upside the head out of the corner of his eye.

Cassidy finally peeked over at Ollie, who'd been staring so intently throughout the entire speech he'd practically bored a hole into him, silently pleading for Cassidy to jump already. Natalie stood next to Ollie, watching and doing her best to show no emotion. But the clenched fists and the fact she was muttering the word *please* over and over were a bit of a giveaway.

"I fully admit it, here in front of all the good people of Hart's, that I've been practically paralyzed with fear. But the thought of you saying no has held me back for far too long." Nate took a few steps closer, drawing Cassidy's attention back to the man standing before him. "So you tell me, Cassidy Winters, what are you waiting for?"

Cassidy could feel his brow furrowing, and he forced himself to stop chewing on his lip, as he could now taste a tiny bit of blood. "I guess...I'm waiting for it to all mean something."

Nate took the final few steps required to close the distance between them. "It already *means* something. You can run from it, even hide yourself away from me if you decide to, but it won't change the fact that I love you—I have always loved you and most likely always will. That's what it means, Cass, and that's supposed to be enough."

"It is, huh?" Cassidy reached over, taking Nate's hand in his, examining it as he turned it around in his own hand. He ran the pad of his index finger over the tiny blond hairs along the side and peppering the fingers just above the knuckles. Examining the lines and wrinkles etched into the palm.

"Damn right," Nate said, the corners of his mouth beginning to curl up. "So what do you say?"

Cassidy felt it, that electricity crackling between the two of them. Standing there under Nate's persistent glare, it was as if he were naked and out on display, skin almost raw. "I'd say my world just got a little clearer."

Cassidy leaned in, pressing his lips to Nate's. He quietly sighed as Nate cocked his head slightly and they kissed. He could feel his entire body filling up with relief, love, happiness, and any other good thing he could possibly think of. Nate's other hand slid up his arm as he heard Henry Abbott gruffly declaring in a half-relieved, half-disgusted tone, "I never thought I'd ever be so goddamned happy to see two men kissing."

"Just go with it, Grandpa." Ollie sighed, grabbing on to Spencer's arm. "Embrace the homo lovin'."

Both Cassidy and Nate started laughing, holding on to each other, foreheads pressed together as their eyes met.

"How does it feel?" Nate asked.

"Like I'm back where I belong?"

Nate reached up, and ran the back of his hand over Cassidy's cheek before placing it on his shoulder. "Was that an answer or a question?"

Cassidy cringed slightly. "No...sorry, just...guess I'm not used to being rescued."

"I think maybe we rescued each other."

Cassidy grinned as that last tiny piece of the puzzle finally fell into place. "I really love the way you think."

\* \* \*

"Wow," Nate said.

Cassidy grinned as he kissed and sucked his way down Nate's neck and over his collarbone.

"I still can't believe you said yes."

Cassidy slid his hands under the white tuxedo shirt, sliding it over Nate's shoulders and allowing it to take its rightful place on the floor next to the jacket and bowtie. He let his hands glide over the soft skin and hard-muscled terrain that made up Nate's chest and torso. His brain practically buzzed from the sights and scent of the man standing before him. It was already after three in the morning, and despite being completely exhausted, Cassidy wasn't going to let another night pass without having his way with Nate. He'd waited as long as he could.

"You did say yes, right?" Nate asked, grabbing Cassidy by the arms and pushing him away. "I didn't misunderstand you?" Nate searched Cassidy's face, waiting for confirmation. He grinned, sighing with relief when Cassidy nodded.

Cassidy leaned back in, lightly kissing and sucking on Nate's chin. The newly grown stubble prickled across his tongue, and he moaned in frustration as Nate repeated his actions by pushing him away once again.

"You didn't say yes just so we could do it, right?" Nate asked, finally having processed the obvious lust on Cassidy's face.

Cassidy sighed, frustrated as his cock painfully pressed against the fabric of his shorts and trousers. "Apparently not, considering you still aren't allowing us to do it."

"Oh, right. Sorry, babe." Nate pulled Cassidy's head back down to his chest, to the spot where Cassidy assumed was Nate's rough estimate of where he'd left off before the last interruption.

Cassidy went right for a nipple, ready to toss aside his original plan, which included the slow and methodical suckling of every inch of Nate's body, for a more direct and hopefully lust-inducing "take me now, sailor" approach.

Nate groaned in a husky voice as Cassidy clamped down with his lips, licking and playfully pulling on the nipple with his teeth. Nate's hand went into Cassidy's hair, pressing his face firmly into his chest. "Fuck, that feels good."

Cassidy moaned his approval, grateful he finally had Nate's full attention. Cassidy pressed his palm over the obvious protrusion in Nate's pants. He slowly massaged him while getting more excited as he considered all the places Nate was going to put it.

"Shit, Cassidy," Nate said, taking in a deep breath.

Cassidy smiled and made his way over to Nate's other nipple.

"We haven't even talked about where we're going to live." Nate's arms flew up into the air before falling down to his sides. "How is this all going to work?"

Cassidy stood, seriously biting his lip, not wanting to say anything he might regret. "I don't know, Nate. And right now I really don't give a good goddamn."

Nate cringed, obviously realizing he'd done it again.

Cassidy took Nate's hand and placed it over his hard-on. "Right now, this is the only thing I care about, honey."

Nate grinned as he took over massaging Cassidy through the fabric.

"Seriously, babe," Cassidy warned. "If you're unable to control what comes out of your mouth, I'll be forced to put something in it that will."

"You're right," Nate said, nodding as he undid Cassidy's pants. "My bad. Very sorry."

Cassidy groaned up at the ceiling as if begging for divine intervention. "I can't believe I have to beg my new boyfriend to fuck me."

"I wouldn't say *have* to." Nate shoved his hand inside Cassidy's briefs and wrapped those thick fingers around his cock. "But a little begging would certainly be a turn-on."

Cassidy's eyes rolled back, and his knees quaked as Nate squeezed the head, smearing precum down the shaft. "Shut up and kiss me, Nate."

Nate covered Cassidy's mouth with his, and Cassidy grabbed on to his shoulder for balance. He was seriously beginning to lose control over his limbs while Nate continued to slow-jack him. Cassidy closed his eyes, feeling that electricity begin to build from the persistent assault of Nate's tongue in his mouth. He moaned in protest when Nate pulled his lips away, but was unable to articulate his frustration. His head fell back, mouth agape as Nate sped up the tempo and pressure with his hand.

"Boy, I just don't think I can keep all the questions I have at bay," Nate said.

"Baby, please." Cassidy whimpered, feeling as if his sanity was slipping away. He opened his eyes, momentarily confused until he glanced farther down to find Nate on his knees. He almost shot right there, watching Nate jack him off while staring up at him from the floor.

"Guess you'll have to make good on that threat"—Nate shrugged—"and think of something you can use to shut me up."

Cassidy grabbed Nate by the back of the head, forcing his cock into Nate's mouth. As the wet heat enveloped his shaft, a smile slowly stretched across his face. "That'll do it."

Cassidy could tell by the amount of light in the sky that the sun would be coming up soon. He lay on his stomach, propped up on his elbows, while biting down on his lip. Nate's hands pressed into the small of his back, pinning him to the bed. He slowly thrust his dick in and out of Cassidy, who took in a sharp breath each time Nate's pelvis pressed into his ass.

"Fuck, Cassidy," Nate said in a breathy whisper and gyrated his hips as if attempting to go deeper.

Cassidy watched a bead of sweat drip off the tip of his nose and onto the mattress. "Fuck yes, Nate...just like that." Nate grabbed a handful of Cassidy's hair and pulled his head back while he continued to pump into him. "So close, baby. I'm gonna come."

Nate smothered the sounds of Cassidy's orgasm with his mouth. Cassidy could feel the wet heat shooting out between his body and the damp sheet as Nate forced his tongue farther down Cassidy's throat. Once Cassidy's moans subsided, Nate released his mouth and let go of his head.

Nate spread Cassidy's ass farther apart as he picked up the pace. His fingers dug into the flesh of Cassidy's rounded cheeks as he slammed into him with renewed abandon. Cassidy's entire body jerked from the force. His face clenched from the slight discomfort. He knew he was going to be feeling the effects of having his ass reamed like this all day long, and he smiled.

Nate let out throaty groans. Cassidy looked back at him over his shoulder, chewing his lip and screwing up his face to make sure Nate could see the effect his cock had on him. That was pretty much all it took to push Nate over the edge as he whispered, "Cassidy," in between moans and curses. He collapsed on top of Cassidy, gasping for air as his body continued to twitch. They were both drenched, and Nate's skin was slick and slippery against his. Nate slipped his arms under Cassidy, sliding his hands across his chest and squeezing him from behind.

"That was amazing," Nate said between breaths.

"I may not be able to walk straight for a week."

Nate laughed a little. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Not in any way I didn't thoroughly enjoy," Cassidy said, feeling immensely satisfied at having been fucked senseless, for lack of a better phrase. Every square inch of skin was on fire. Nate softened inside him, and Cassidy started to miss the sensation created by having that thick hardness invading his body.

Nate softly kissed his back between his shoulder blades. The warm air from his breath tickled Cassidy's skin. "Christ, Cassidy, I'm not sure I'll ever get enough of your body."

Cassidy grinned while stretching out his arms, which shook from the strain of holding up his torso while Nate had gloriously pummeled his ass. Nate ran his palm over Cassidy's side, gently kneading the skin. "You keep that up, and I'm going to get hard again."

"I don't give a shit." Nate laughed. "I'm willing to suffer the consequences."

"We've got to be at the lighthouse at eleven. Will we be forgoing sleep altogether?"

Nate sighed dramatically. Cassidy listened to the wet, sticky sound of their sweat-soaked bodies pulling apart as the cool rush of air moved over his back. He jiggled as a chill ran down his body while Nate rummaged around the room. He didn't want to move, knowing full well the sticky mess that lay in wait underneath him.

The bedroom door opened, and he finally groaned, getting up on his hands and knees. He cringed, then nodded, impressed by the amount he had blown, considering it hadn't been his first load.

"Damn, baby, now that's sexy," Nate said, coming back into the room.

Cassidy laughed, arching his back a little more. He glanced back as Nate closed the bedroom door and headed toward him with a damp washcloth.

"Fuck me, you little demon," Nate said, biting his fist. "You're an evil man."

Cassidy got up on his knees, pointing at the mattress. "Just look what you made me do, young man."

Nate covered Cassidy's mouth with his own as he absently went about cleaning him up. Cassidy mound when Nate got a little too attentive wiping off his dick. "There I go again."

Cassidy grinned, feeling slutty in the best sense as he watched Nate trying to wipe off the sheet the best he could. Nate shoved him, knocking him over onto the bed.

"Hey," Cassidy said, rolling out of the bed. "At least no one has to lie in the wet spot."

"Where you going?" Nate asked, appearing to be all torn up.

"To take a piss." Cassidy held up a hand. "Toss me that cum rag, asshole."

Nate shook his head pretending to be disgusted as he chucked the rolled-up washcloth at him. "You're a class act, Winters."

Cassidy snagged the wet rag out of the air and went for the door. "I'm classy where it counts, stud."

"And so trashy where it counts," Nate mumbled.

Cassidy decided to let that one go as he sprinted naked across the landing toward the bathroom. He cleaned up a little bit more, since Nate managed to get distracted during his attempt. He was so exhausted that he decided to play it safe by sitting down to pee. His muscles were already achy, and he groaned while relieving himself, thinking the piss was nearly as incredible as the orgasms.

When he yanked open the bathroom door, he froze. Ollie stood in the doorway of the guest room. Cassidy quickly covered his bits and then felt silly, considering Ollie had seen them plenty in the past. Deciding to go with his instincts, he kept himself covered.

"Please tell me Fuckfest 2010 is coming to a close?" Ollie asked, eyelids at half-mast.

"That loud, huh?" Cassidy tried a smile, but that only irritated Ollie more. "We're going to sleep now, yes."

Ollie spun dramatically, growling under his breath as he shut the door behind him.

Cassidy ran back into Nate's bedroom, thinking how nice a bedroom with a private bath would be. He walked to the bed, gazing at Nate's long naked body stretched out before his eyes. One would assume he'd already fallen asleep had it not been for the goofy grin plastered on his face. Nothing else about the man was goofy, though.

Nate reached out as if to say, *Get in bed already*, and Cassidy's cheeks flushed as he realized Nate was well aware he'd been staring. He quickly grabbed Dasie up off her little bed on the floor, despite her groans of protest. He climbed into bed, feeling slightly guilty for forcing Nate to move as they got under the covers. They went directly into spoon mode, Nate wrapping Cassidy up into his arms. Dasie stumbled like a little drunkard, still half-asleep as she waited patiently for them to settle before curling up into a ball against Cassidy's chest.

"Ollie read my ass in the hall for being too loud."

"Serves the little bastard right for last weekend," Nate said, reminding Cassidy, who instantly wished he'd thought of that before when it would have been useful.

Cassidy's eyes burned when he closed them from want of sleep. "Love you."

Nate nuzzled the back of his neck with his nose and chin, groaning a little. "Say that again, please."

All the muscles in Cassidy's body relaxed, like a slowly deflating tire. "I love you, Nate Sommers."

"Love you too," Nate whispered back.

Thank you, Sadie. Cassidy sighed, exhaling one last time before falling into the haze of sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-two

As they drove up to the lighthouse, Cassidy was a little taken aback by the number of people who were already there. The lighthouse had undergone a renovation about five years ago, right around the time Sadie had passed, and it gleamed in the sunlight, stretching 117 feet up into the sky. It had been repainted in thick horizontal black-and-white stripes, and someone had taken the liberty of setting up a podium and microphone next to the base.

Cassidy hadn't really planned on saying much, but as they got out of the car, he heard people already talking about Sadie, reminiscing over one experience with her or another. It struck Cassidy, who'd spent so much of his adult life up until that point concentrating on school and his course load, as strangely comforting that one person had touched so many in such a tangible yet personal way. One of the things Cassidy loved about being a teacher was that concept. Helping to shape or influence all those lives in some small way. Something Sadie had managed in a big way, but on a smaller scale.

Cassidy imagined exactly how satisfying that must have been, to mean so much to so many. *Not bad at all, Sadie Hart. Not bad at all.* 

Cassidy winked at Ben and Teddy, who squeezed his shoulder as they passed by, making their way into the crowd. Ollie and Spencer each gave him a quick hug, as did Neil, who hung on a little too long for Nate's taste.

"That'll do, pal," Nate said.

"Behave yourselves, boys," Natalie whispered as she took Cassidy by the arm and led him up to the front, where Max was waiting. The sun sat high up in the sky, and for once the usually strong breeze at the cliffs had dialed back and become almost tranquil. Cassidy could spot the old ferry making its way round the Point, packed with tourists as usual. There were larger ships off in the horizon, along with a stray sailboat or two. He breathed in the salty sea air, remembering the way Sadie used to, stepping outside with her cup of coffee every morning.

"That's rich Carolina air, baby boy. You breathe air like that for very long, and it becomes a part of you, makes you invincible like Mother Nature herself."

Cassidy shut his eyes tight for a moment, thinking she wasn't invincible after all, which still felt like a bit of a shock to him and everyone else on Hart's.

As different folks got up to speak, some brought up her outrageous and often shocking behavior, especially when taking into account the moral compass of the world during the first half of her life. They referred to her as a trailblazer, even though no one on the island ever acted as if they held that against her. Mainlanders would have wanted to crucify her, but the inhabitants of Hart's never did. One of the more elderly citizens got up, stating that her father, Jeremiah, often joked that Sadie was the son he never knew he had.

Sadie liked to say people were simply desensitized to it all, that she'd come out of the womb doing exactly what she liked regardless of who might have disapproved, and they just expected it of her.

Others spoke of her commitment to the island, saying Hart's had been the great love of her life. She had taken up the mantle of her father where the wealthier mainlanders were concerned. As they came in, trying to buy up property on the beach side of the island, wanting to build themselves lavish vacation homes, it had been Sadie's idea to change the city's building and zoning requirements, placing limitations on the size of homes allowed and creating an architectural and historical society that had to approve any new construction.

She made sure the locals maintained control over who and what moved into their neck of the woods. She didn't want any so-called blue-blooded robber barons moving in and taking control over her home, which was somewhat amusing considering her first choice of husband.

Cassidy finally decided to make his way up to the podium after everyone had finished and people began to look his way. He stumbled a little going up the carved stone steps, grateful he didn't drop Sadie, whom he'd been clinging to for dear life. He set the urn on the podium for safekeeping, as he no longer trusted his limbs to do their job.

He knew he hadn't her public-speaking skills, despite all the practice he'd received in the classroom. He wouldn't be talking about books in this instance, something he was painfully aware of as he bumbled once or twice as he tried to get started. Finally, he found the familiar faces of his friends and relaxed a little, despite noticing the crowd was much larger from his new vantage point.

He took a deep breath and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out the little leather-bound, pocket-size copy of *The Tempest*—the one Samuel had given to Sadie. He clutched it in his hand, feeling the soothing texture of the soft leather.

"I know I've been away from Hart's and Piper's Point for a very long time—too long." Cassidy stopped, surveying the faces before him. "I kept telling myself you'd all be upset with me for being unable to free Sadie from my asshole of a father. That any grandson of the great Sadie Hart who couldn't manage to bring her back home probably wasn't much of a grandson after all—not one worthy of the name Hart, in any case. I certainly wouldn't have blamed you, since it was something that was constantly running through the back of my own mind."

Cassidy leaned into the podium a little for balance, resting his arms on the top as he stared down at the book in his hands for a moment.

"I can say that after having been back on the island for such a short amount of time, it's become glaringly obvious that I really stayed away because I couldn't bear to come back here without her. I didn't deserve to come back without Sadie, and I honestly doubt I could have taken any pleasure in being here when she could not."

Cassidy noticed the nodding heads that appeared to offer their understanding, then glanced at the urn. "I finally did it, Sadie. I hope you can forgive me for having taken so long." He turned, staring out over the water, doing his level best to keep his wits about him.

"She loved this place and all of you so fiercely. I have no doubt she would have been capable of just about anything when it came to protecting her home. And for Sadie, Hart's was her home. Not just the Point or the shack, but the entire island. This place was part of her, like DNA—ingrained so deeply that I don't believe Lionel was truly ever able to separate the two. You could take her to the ends of the earth, and she'd still feel part of *this* place. I continue to feel her here—in the very air I breathe. Like her father before her, Sadie was Hart's."

Cassidy glanced over to Natalie, who clung to Nate on one side and Max on the other. "We all know she loved...a lot." Cassidy smiled, hearing a low, rolling laughter move over the crowd. "But it's this place where she met my grandfather, strolling down the beach one late summer's eve, that she loved most. I think he might be the only thing that ever came close to competing for her affection."

Cassidy's steely resolve was slipping a little, so he took a deep breath. Nate was squinting from the sun with that sexy half smile, and Cassidy managed to get hold of his senses. Natalie nodded and winked when their gazes met, as she stood arm in arm with Max.

"It makes losing her sting a little less to realize how much she meant to all of you. It was her wish to have her ashes spread here at Piper's Point. She would've been proud that so many of you came today." Cassidy grinned, doing his best to avoid direct eye contact by settling on foreheads, as he feared all it would take was one sad face to push him over the edge.

"She'd have gone on about making such a fuss. Lord knows she loved being the center of attention, but she'd have been proud. And I for one will never be able to thank you all enough for sharing this with me. I'm indebted to you and so grateful for your unconditional love and support. I don't think I could ever put into words what it means to me, but take it from someone who's lived only half his life on Hart's—cherish what you have here, for it's *everything* there is. If anyone out there doubts that for one second, all you have to do is leave it for a little while. You'll be surprised by how quickly it calls you back home."

Cassidy nodded, deciding he was finished, and slipped the little book back into his jacket pocket. He picked up the urn and smiled out over the crowd before heading back down the steps. As he made his way around the base of the lighthouse, he could hear the footsteps following.

Cassidy walked out to the edge of the cliff and unscrewed the lid on the urn. He dropped it onto the ground and took the base of the urn in both hands. He turned, twisting his body before spinning his torso, flinging his arms, and forcing the ashes to fly out, and shoot through the air.

He watched as the wind picked up, spinning and twisting the ashes as if giving form to them momentarily before they slowly drifted down the side of the cliff.

The tears were coming, and he didn't want to turn back and have anyone see him crying. The inhabitants of Hart's had seen enough of Cassidy Winters since he had returned to Piper's Point, and he didn't want to give any more of himself than he already had.

Nate came up from behind and wrapped his arms around Cassidy. "You okay?"

Cassidy nodded, sniffling a little, somewhat embarrassed for even Nate to see him that way. "I don't have anything left I can do for her."

"And what, you think you have to say good-bye?" Nate asked.

"Well, yeah, sort of. I mean, don't I?"

Nate laughed a little. "Hell no, Cass. She's going to live on inside you, certainly inside me. She brought you back to me. I don't ever intend to say my good-byes to Sadie Hart. I owe her entirely too much to ever do that."

Cassidy reached up, wiping his eyes as he smiled. Nate was right. He allowed his body to relax into his lover's, resting his head against Nate's shoulder. Cassidy stared into the sky. "I think we owe her everything."

### **Epilogue**

Cassidy craned his neck out as Nate turned his black pickup onto the newly paved drive leading to Sadie's shack. The large moving truck had backed up to the front porch as the movers carried items across the metal ramp that stretched like a bridge from the back of the semi to the porch. Cassidy hadn't been back since Christmas, as he and Nate had spent their spring break in a little hut on a private beach in Acapulco. He hadn't seen the finished product now that the eight-month remodel of Piper's Point was near completion.

"I know the office is done, minus you putting your stamp on it by moving your own stuff in there," Nate said.

Dasie, who had been curled up on Cassidy's lap, sat up and stretched her legs. She yawned before hopping up and placing her paws on the window. Her nubby tail began to wiggle.

"She always remembers it," Nate said, patting Cassidy on the thigh.

"She's a smart little bug," Cassidy said as they got out of the truck.

Cassidy placed her on the grass so she could go about doing her business. He could see the side of the new two-story porch they'd had built on to the back of the house, and he began to get excited. It appeared to be already painted, and even though it took up some of the courtyard, he'd been willing to sacrifice it. He loved the ocean view from the back and had wanted to add a porch that rivaled the one on the front of the house in size and scale, taking full advantage of the Atlantic Ocean scenery.

"Come on," Nate said, holding out a hand, having scooped Dasie back up into his other arm. "Let's go take a look at our new home."

Cassidy chewed his lip, shaking out his hands, nervous about seeing it now that it was done. He'd been having weird-ass dreams of his ancestors coming after him for disturbing the property. It wasn't too big of a mystery as to why, considering he and Nate were still sifting through all the family documents. But they had stumbled across one or two things. Discovering that Jeremiah had an older brother, Caleb, who'd drowned when Jeremiah was just a baby had been the biggest revelation. It explained why Piper Hart had withdrawn from reality and retreated to the Point. Cassidy now wondered whether Sadie had been aware of it. Considering his own grandfather had been lost to the sea as well, it would reveal the connection Sadie had to the woman she'd never met.

But on top of the fear of raising any family demons, he was also a little scared they'd risked changing the place so much that it wouldn't feel like home anymore.

Nate rolled his eyes and grabbed Cassidy's hand, yanking him back out of his head while pulling Cassidy along behind him. He knew Nate was happy to be back full-time and was grateful to him for traveling as much as he had over the past nine months of Cassidy's final semester at UNC. It was important for him to honor the commitment he'd made to the university and complete the last two semesters teaching entry-level English courses.

Considering all he really needed to complete his PhD was to finish his dissertation, which in theory, he could do anywhere, they'd made a deal that Nate would come back to Chapel Hill with him for the school year, after which Cassidy would return to Hart's for good. He knew he'd have to go back and forth a few times a year to meet with his faculty advisors and to make use of the library, but other than that, he was free as a bird.

They hopped up the front steps, then paused as the movers came back out to the truck to get another load. Cassidy followed Nate inside, a little sick to his stomach seeing all the disorganization—boxes stacked up and miscellaneous pieces of furniture crammed into the largest living area. It felt like an impossible task—putting the shack back together again. They'd taken full opportunity of having the place empty to have the entire inside repainted and the wood floors redone. He did get a little excited, seeing the freshly painted walls and the bright white trim, and the floors were amazing—all shiny like new.

"Come see your office," Nate said, pulling Cassidy out of the doorway so the movers could get past.

They'd turned the formal parlor into an office for Cassidy and set it up with state-of-the-art camera and mixing equipment so Cassidy could teach contemporary fiction as part of the university's online courses. He was excited he'd still be able to teach, and depending on how well it worked out, he'd possibly be able to add another course or two in the future. He knew he'd never be tenured doing things this way, but that wasn't what was most important to him, at least not anymore.

"Hey, guys!" Teddy said, a little lost, all tangled up in wires.

Cassidy tried not to laugh as he walked over and gave Teddy a hug. "Helping Max out, I see."

"I'm doing the wiring myself!" Teddy nodded as if he'd tasked himself with this one thing, and nothing and no one was going to get in his way.

"Hey, boys," Max said, climbing down from the stepladder. "How do you like your bookshelves?"

"Max made them all by his lonesome for Samuel's books," Nate said, grinning like a proud son, as Max had been somewhat of a father figure to him over the years.

"They won't get any direct sunlight here." Max opened one of the framed glass doors. "And I installed gauges on the side here to measure temperature and humidity on the inside of the case."

"They're beautiful, Max. Thank you."

"Not very fancy, I know." Max shrugged. "But they'll be somewhat protected, and you'll be able to see them and take them out whenever you want."

"They're perfect," Cassidy said.

"Ben here?" Nate asked.

"Later." Teddy tied a clump of wires together. "He's going to try closing up early, if he can."

"Where's Mom?" Nate asked Max.

"Should be back any minute. She just ran home to clean up a bit and grab some sandwiches for us."

"And I'm starving too," Teddy added. "Oh, and Neil called."

Nate growled under his breath, muttering something.

Cassidy shook his head, wishing Nate would get over it already.

"I don't have to like everyone just because you do," Nate reminded him.

Cassidy rolled his eyes. "You're quite right."

Teddy dropped the cords and reached over, taking Dasie, who went about licking his chin. "Neil said to tell you *both* welcome home and that he'd be down for the fourth."

"That's great news," Nate said with a fake ass-smile that had Max rolling.

Teddy pointed up toward the ceiling. "Ollie sent you a package, Cass. I set it up in Sadie's room for now. Figured it'd be safe in there."

"What is it?" Cassidy asked as Nate shrugged.

"Go find out," Teddy said.

Cassidy shoved past Nate and made a run for the stairs. He knew it was slightly childish in nature, but he did love gifts, possibly even more now than he ever had when he was a kid.

"Slow down, you cracker," Nate called after him as Cassidy clomped up the steps, taking them two at a time.

Cassidy laughed like a fool, enjoying Nate getting on to him as much as the thrill of the unknown surprise that awaited him. "I win!" He jumped up and down when he reached the second-floor landing, and pointed at Nate, who calmly strode up the stairs. "Loser!"

Nate wrapped an arm around Cassidy's waist as he topped the last step. He leaned in and kissed Cassidy, who made several groans of approval as their tongues teased each other. Cassidy let out a low, lusty laugh when Nate's palm pressed into the front of his jeans, massaging his dick, which was quickly reacting to all the stimuli.

Nate smiled, breaking off the kiss. He was obviously pleased by the effect he was having on Cassidy as he forced him back into Sadie's bedroom. "I'm glad we're finally home. Feels like you are as well."

Cassidy started thrusting against Nate's hand. "Home is where I hump your hand."

Nate laughed. "That's lovely. I'll ask Mom to needlepoint that on some throw pillows for us."

Cassidy leaned in for soft peck, then glanced across the room. His mouth fell open as he let go of Nate. "Wow, it's..."

He crossed the room, amazed by the construction of the metal sculpture stretching up from the floor. A base shaped like a tree trunk with roots that splayed out for feet supported six long, winding metal arms snaking up into the air. Smaller branches came off those, and it appeared to be made of bronze. Cassidy gasped when a breeze swept through the room, setting into motion the round hoops that dangled from the metal arms, causing them to spin.

He almost cried when he realized the hoops were Sadie's gold bracelets. They made soft clinking noises as they bounced off one another until the breeze dissipated, and the spinning ceased.

"That's seriously cool," Nate said, hugging Cassidy from behind.

Cassidy shook his head. "I can't believe he...never let on in the least."

Nate reached out and ripped off a card hanging by a string. He read the card aloud. "Family tree."

They both noticed the contractor's pickup pulling in the drive.

Nate stepped out onto the balcony and waved down, making sure he saw them. "We need to go find out when that jackass is going to be done."

Cassidy frowned when Nate took him by the arm and led him away from his tree.

\* \* \*

They came out the back door and crossed the courtyard. Cassidy's mouth fell open after he turned to take in the new addition to the back of the house. The porch was beautifully constructed, and if it weren't for the men in the process of painting it, he'd have thought it had always been there. It was an exact replica of the front with the exception of being two stories tall with a balcony accessible from the attic, which they'd turned into a master suite with their very own private bath.

The contractor, Tom Bailey, walked up, folded his arms, and smiled up at the porch. "She's a beaut, isn't she?"

Cassidy squinted as he examined the unpainted wood, and Natalie ran out the back door with Max trailing behind her. Cassidy pointed up at the sections of wood that were noticeably brand-new. "I thought you were using salvaged wood to build the porch."

Nate started laughing. "I told you to have it painted before he saw it, Tom."

Cassidy smirked, not appreciating Nate's comment. He'd have laid into him but good, had Natalie not saved his ass by strangling him in a hug.

"We did the best we could, Cassidy," Tom said, tossing his arms into the air as if he were being persecuted. "You wanted an *exact match* to the front. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to find spindles to match a hundred-year-old house?"

"Looks to me like you found some," Cassidy said, causing Tom to cover his face in his hands.

"Lord deliver me," Tom said.

Nate and Max held back laughs as Natalie ignored all the drama by hugging and kissing on Cassidy now that she'd finished with Nate.

"You boys stop this arguing at once," Natalie said, beaming, which did little to aid the severity of her threat. "I'm so happy you're back home where you belong."

"I'd be happier if you and your pack of thugs were finished and gone, Tom," Nate said, winking at Cassidy.

Tom rolled his eyes. "You can't rush perfection, guys. And I'll not have Sadie Hart coming back from the grave to haunt my ass for cutting corners on Piper's Point."

Max mumbled something about bullshit under his breath, which garnered him a smack from Natalie for the foul language.

"So how long are we talking here, Tom?" Nate asked.

"A few days at the most," Tom answered, nodding confidently.

Nate shot an unmistakable expression that screamed bullshit, which somehow managed to slide past Natalie's crass-o-meter. "You said that two weeks ago when I was here."

"I don't know what to tell you, Nate." Obviously the least of Tom's worries. "You know how things are on Hart's. It takes everything longer to complete here. Always has, always will."

Cassidy nodded. "I understand, Tom. I really do. I just hope you're done by the weekend."

Nate shook his head, obviously confused.

"I'll do my best, Cassidy, and thanks for being more understanding than your, uh... Well, than Nate here." Tom shifted back and forth from one foot to the other having inadvertently stumbled into a topic he obviously wasn't too comfy with.

"Not a problem in the least," Cassidy said, folding his arms. His gaze went from the men on ladders painting away back down to Tom. "I'm sure none of our houseguests this weekend will mind either."

Tom glanced at Nate. "You never mentioned having guests so soon."

"Well, they're friends of mine, Tom, so not really guests, per se. Maybe ten to twelve gay men, running around all oiled up in their little short-shorts." Cassidy started wiggling his hips and shaking his shoulders, gyrating in place as he did his impersonation of the thumpin' bass track of the club music. "Dancing around to the

techno music...and getting all excited by you and your guys. They do love big, beefy eye candy. I can see them all now." Cassidy pointed out to the courtyard. "Lounging in chairs, sipping cocktails while whistling and catcalling things like, *Oh yeah*, *daddy*, *stroke that*."

"All right, all right," Tom said, holding up his hands and scrunching up his face, appearing to get a little queasy. "You don't need to go getting all graphic. I catch your meaning. We'll be done before the weekend. I swear it."

Cassidy laughed as one of the older guys up on the ladder, who'd obviously been able to overhear, dropped his paintbrush and scrambled down to get it. He also took note of the younger guy on the second level of the porch who stared off into space as he chewed seductively on his lip, as if not minding that whole scenario all that much.

Tom walked back toward the garage, and Nate nodded, more than a little impressed. "I'm beginning to think I should have let you handle the remodel, babe."

"Ten bucks says the guy up on the porch finds an excuse to stop by this weekend," Cassidy said out the side of mouth.

"Cassidy Winters!" Natalie scolded as Nate started to snicker. "Idle gossip will not be tolerated, young man." She smacked Nate's hand away from Cassidy's ass. "Neither are idle hands, dear."

Nate turned three shades of red as Cassidy lost it. His ass had become the favorite resting place for Nate's hand over the past months, to the point neither one of them took much notice anymore whenever it found its way there.

"Maybe Mr. Painter Boy would make a nice new friend for Neil?" Cassidy whispered excitedly.

Max laughed as Natalie threw her hands up in the air in disbelief while Nate snarled up his lip at the mention of Neil's name.

"One could only hope," Nate muttered, glancing back up the porch to take a closer look.

Cassidy noticed Tom leaning against the garage door laughing and yakking away on his cell phone. Cassidy started doing the club music and dancing in place again. Tom got all frazzled, unable to decide which direction to run in order to escape Cassidy's version of evil charades.

Max chuckled as he turned to head back into the house. "You remind me more and more of your grandma every time I see you, Cassidy. A wicked lady, that one."

Nate, Cassidy, and Natalie all simultaneously said, "Don't call her Grandma!"



# Loose Id Titles by Ethan Day

As You Are At Piper's Point Dreaming of You Self Preservation

### **Ethan Day**

I am a gay man living in Missouri...I can hear the gasps already!! How very un-sheik of me, yes I know. It was here I was born, and here I have stayed.

The worst thing about being a romance writer is finding a real-life hottie that can live up to the fantasy I create in my head and subsequently thrust upon him before actually getting to know him. To all my past and future boyfriends, my sincerest apologies...I can't help myself!

I was the youngest of four children and the only boy, so needless to say, I was spoiled rotten. I've always had an extravagant fantasy life. When I played with my *Star Wars* action figures as a child, I liked to make up my own stories. Naturally, Luke Skywalker and Han Solo were totally meant for each other, and Princess Leia made a bitchin' wise-cracking fag hag.

I somehow managed to survive high school living in a small racist town in Southwest Missouri and emerged unscathed, realizing life was too short to pretend to be anything other than who I was. I was the little homo that could...so damn it, I did!

After a few stints in college, I eventually signed up for a Creative Writing course. I took the class because there were no tests. For once my scholastic laziness paid off, and I found an outlet for all the fantasies running amok in my head. It was love at first write, and I've been doing it off and on ever since.

Now I have decided it's time to un-barricade the doors and unleash my imagination onto the world. So very sorry, world!! With the help of the lovely and talented team at Loose Id, LLC, my fantasy life is now available for public consumption. I'm desperately hoping you're really, really hungry.

Feel free to visit Ethan on the Web at <a href="http://www.ethandayonline.com">http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ethanday/</a> or join his Yahoogroup at <a href="http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ethanday/">http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ethanday/</a>